

University of Nevada, Reno

**Reading Reverence: Literate Practice in Ambrose of Milan's *Expositio evangelii secundum  
Lucam***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
History

by  
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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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prepared under our supervision by

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## Abstract

Ambrose of Milan has long been heralded as the political mind behind the dramatic change in power play between the Church and the imperial seat of Late Roman government. However, after years of producing text, championing the cause against pagan strongholds in Roman culture, and instructing the Church in pious lifestyles, Ambrose's level of scriptural literacy is still ambiguous at best. Ambrose placed his intentions and abilities in scriptural literacy into question in his *Expositio evangelii secundum lucam*. His exegetical approach to Gospel of Luke reflects greater understanding of doctrines in vogue at the time than of the gospel. Ambrose's method of promoting doctrine without regard to scripture led to exegetical methods that would eventually shape the church into the entity that would launch crusades and entice the pious to pray at shrines.

## Acknowledgments

As with any journey in the world academic endeavors, mine has been helped along the way by a community of brilliant minds, kind souls, and wise words. I would especially like to thank my committee chair Dr. Ned Schoolman, who first acquainted me with Late Antiquity and who inspired a great curiosity toward the era. His teaching and mentorship have been an integral part of my course of study. Beyond that, he has used his skill in history as a positive influence in his work with the students at UNR in addition to more out-the box episodes, notably two very early morning drives out to a juvenile detention facility in the middle of the Nevada desert to give my high school students a sample of what it might be like to attend college. He has made a difference to many and I am grateful for his involvement in my efforts. Drs. David Rondel and Kevin Stevens have gone above and beyond the role of committee members. They have each gone out of their way to create individual learning opportunities for me and have graciously sat in discourse with me, making me feel a part of the scholarly conversation they each speak with such excellence. I am additionally grateful to Drs. Charles Tshimanga-Kashama and Barabara Walker, who have been an encouragement to me and whose time, insights, and kindness I have been positively influenced by. Beyond the many kindnesses offered to me by my committee and the history department at UNR, I cannot conclude an address of those in academia who have helped and inspired my aspirations without mentioning and thanking Dr. Scott Casper (now of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County). Dr. Casper has had a significant impact on my efforts, simply through his love for the work

and showing his students how enriching and exciting scholarship can be. I see his influence in my own classroom daily. I am thankful for his friendship and example.

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been on my mind as I've sat trying to coax eloquence out of slightly worn computer keys.

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## Terms and Abbreviations

Old Testament (O.T.)

New Testament (N.T.)

*De Virginibus* (On Virgins)

*De virginitate* (On Virginity)

*De institutiones virginis: (DIV)*

*Exhortatio virginitatis* (EV)

*Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam: Expositio*

*Explanatio psalmorum* (EP)

\*\*While the translator of the *Expositio* (Theodosia Tomkinson) retained Latin names when referring to books of the Bible, They are referred to here by the English title, in keeping with the format most frequently used in the corpus of research and historiographical works used in this project.

## Ambrose and His World

In the fourth century AD, Late Rome was in a period of drastic transformation. Ambrose of Milan was at the forefront of many of the more public changes of the time, and is famous for his rise to prominence, political acumen within the church, his strong push to Christianize strongholds of Roman culture, and prolific body of written works. The texts that Ambrose created offer a unique window into the relationship between church and empire within the microcosm of one man's writings. Although he is heralded as an author of moral treatises and famous letters, it is Ambrose's exegetical approaches that are under review here. This thesis examines how Ambrose utilized the Gospel of Luke to support the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, rather than executing a true exegesis of the text. This is evident in his neglect of literate practices with regard to scripture. The bishop approached scripture already holding the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity as sacred truth, and his methodology and interpretations of the gospel reflect that he was reading *into* the text with a fixed mindset, which explains his neglect of scriptural literacy. Ambrose made use of scripture to support his belief that virginity was the pinnacle of holiness possible to mortals, but simultaneously supported his points with examples that portrayed Roman ideals of womanhood and virtue rather than scriptural ones.

Such reckless practice of textual interpretation in a person of his standing had lasting implications for the church and eventually for Rome as a whole. This is most evident in Ambrose's bold approach to the emperor Theodosius, wherein he undermined the biblical concept of "rendering unto Caesar" when he refused the emperor entrance to

the church.<sup>1</sup> The broader impact of Ambrose's approach on the church supported the campaign of Athanasius, a church leader who had also written to promote virginity, and Anthony the Great (famed for his dedication and example of an early ascetic lifestyle). These two were known for encouraging the devout to commit to a life of chastity, which ultimately contributed to the popularization of monastic communities in Rome. Within his own city, Ambrose encouraged the daughters of Milan to take vows of virginity, which was an affront to Roman family structure. His commendation of married couples once again supported his pet doctrine, but undermined scriptural directives for the duties of the marriage covenant. As a man in his position, Ambrose's dismissive approach to scripture pushed forward the rising trend of creating and popularizing church doctrines without regard for the text the Church had designated as its foundational document. This trend shifted the structure and function of the Church, the general understanding of righteousness, and laid the foundation for future deviations from scripture that would manifest in movements like the crusades or inquisition.

### **Question and Background**

Ambrose of Milan has been examined as a pivot-point in the Late Roman Church by an impressive array of writers, ranging between the disapproving Jerome, and faithful Augustine, to the likes of Peter Brown and John Moorhead in the modern age.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:17

<sup>2</sup> Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London, Routledge, 1997); Peter Brown, "Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017 <https://www.britannica.com/Saint-Ambrose>. (Accessed February 18, 2018); John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and State in the Late Roman World*. (New York, Pearson Education Limited) 1999; Layton, Richard, "Plagiarism and Lay Patronage of Ascetic Patronage," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* Vol 10 (2002:) 513.

particular, Brown has recently written on Ambrose and highlighted his role as an imperial bishop, examining how he impacted change as a political player as well as how the church and state interacted with one another under Ambrose's direction.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, scholars (like Boniface Ramsey and Homes Dudden) have explored implications of Ambrose as an example of an educated and political individual serving in the role of bishop.<sup>4</sup> Susan Griffith and Richard Layton have delved into the bishop's reputation through the lens of Jerome, who was very clear in his disapproval of Ambrose's scholarship on the Bible. While there is a great depth of research that has addressed the work of Ambrose, the existing work of these great scholars also lead to further questions.<sup>5</sup> One area that has not been explored satisfactorily is the degree to which Ambrose's "Romanness" impacted the manner in which he approached scripture. That Ambrose was an educated and intelligent individual is not in question here; rather, how much did Ambrose's upbringing and background as a member of the highest strata of pagan Roman society influence his understanding of biblical texts and doctrinal teachings?<sup>6</sup> Additionally, as he took up the position of bishop, how did Ambrose' lack of expertise with biblical text impact his interpretation of individual excerpts? These questions have lent significant guidance to the trajectory of this project and will be explored in depth in the pages that follow.

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Saint Ambrose*, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of Saint Ambrose Vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Blackburn Griffith, "Ambrose the Appropriator: Borrowed Texts in a New Context in the Commentary on Luke," *Fifth Birmingham Colloquium on Textual Criticism of the New Testament*. (Birmingham, 2013): 199-225; Layton, *Plagiarism and Lay Patronage*, 489-522

The place of Christianity in Rome has long been a point of debate amongst scholars of Rome's decline. Sir Edward Gibbon has long served as a venerated sort of scapegoat in scholarly circles. He is heralded for his important work on the fall of the Roman Empire—a watershed movement he attributed to the Christianization of Rome; while receiving benevolent head-pats for the insights he overlooked (a risk run by every scholar pioneering a new field).<sup>7</sup> In spite of this, Gibbon has been met with a chorus of agreement from a variety of authors when it comes to insights in the influence of one culture on the decline of another. In the fourth century, the Roman orator politician Symmachus spoke adamantly about this issue, avowing that the loss of iconic Roman institutions to the Church would lead to the erasure of Roman entity. Ironically, while Symmachus was crying out against the rising tide of Christendom, the Church was undergoing a process of “Romanization” that would ultimately lead the entity that Diocletian had sought to purge and Nero blamed for Rome's troubles to a significant shift. This metamorphosis would lead away from the movement resulting from the world-shaking religion instigated by Jesus, twelve disciples, and the convenience of a global language and catalyzed by newfound ease of travel along Roman roads into something altogether different in nature. By the time the medieval era had dawned, the institution of the church would have already eased away from the grassroots movement abhorred by emperors and pagans alike. In fact, the church had changed not only in structure, but also in terms of biblical interpretation, access to scripture, perception of righteousness, and

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. (New York, The MacMillan Company, 1914).

approaches to salvation. Amid these changes, a pivotal shift in church leadership is visible in the appointment of Ambrose as the bishop of Milan.

As a young man, Ambrose proved his potential in politics early on and began a career in that arena. In 370 AD, he was appointed the governor of Emilia and Liguria. This appointment would prove to be life-altering for him and game-changing for the entire church. While serving in this position, Ambrose would have been aware of the conflict simmering in the church at the time. Ambrose was known to accept Christianity and even held an opinion in favor of the Pro-Nicenes in the Nicene/Arian controversy. The Arian and Nicene controversy revolved around the interpretation of the nature and substance of Christ, meaning whether or not he was subject to God The Father or equal with him. Nicenes avowed that Christ was one and the same with the Father, and were referred to *homoousion* Christians, *homoosion* referring to the belief that Jesus was as much God as the Father. Arian belief was referred to as *anomeanism*, meaning “not the same.” Four years later in 374 AD, the people of Milan found themselves reeling after the death of Bishop Auxentius (an Arian) and rifted over their views in ordaining a new bishop. The event resulted in sharp disagreement the camps of between Arian and Nicene Christians. Concerned over the potential for rioting, Ambrose went to address the mob that had formed, only to be drafted into the position of bishop himself. After his initial response of hiding himself away, reportedly declaring himself a philosopher rather than a theologian, and ultimately receiving the additional endorsement of the emperor Valentinian, Ambrose submitted himself to baptism and assumed the role of church leader. This event marked a significant shift not only in church hierarchy, but also in the

church's approach to scripture and doctrine. Peter Brown has commented that Ambrose's influence on the relationship between church and state in late Rome, particularly with regard to the famous incident of Ambrose's refusal to administer communion to the emperor Theodosius following the emperor's violent response to a revolt in Thessalonica that had resulted in a massacre.<sup>8</sup> That particular incident was monumental in the shift of power: a bishop who had essentially been appointed by an emperor turning to exercise power over an emperor was quite a shift. The appointment of *this* unbaptized governor to the position of *this* bishopric would change the way that Rome functioned, the church functioned, and leave a lasting impact on the world as a whole.

### **Political Climate**

Auxentius, Ambrose's predecessor had been an ardent supporter of Arianism and, the Arians wanted the next bishop to share their beliefs as Auxentius had. Naturally the Nicenes felt that they had not been well served by a bishop whose beliefs were inherently contradictory to their own and consequently wanted one of their own appointed as bishop. The conflict became so embroiled that Ambrose felt it necessary to attend to the incident as governor and attempt to calm the crowds. In the process of pacifying the masses, Ambrose became a candidate himself. As Ambrose's loose affiliation with Christianity did lean in favor of the Nicenes, they supported his nomination, and Arians felt that he would be more understanding to their position than somebody already

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Saint Ambrose (2017)

entrenched in church conflict. John Moorhead has suggested that Ambrose's unbaptized state may have made him a politically sound choice, as it may have made it seem as though he did not have strong affiliations with either the Arian or Nicene contingencies.<sup>9</sup> Ambrose resisted the nomination at first and (according to his biographer Paulinus) attempted to dodge the nomination by declaring himself a philosopher, ordering prisoners tortured, and even having prostitutes brought to his house in front of the mob demanding his leadership. But the Emperor Valentinian added his endorsement to this new position when he heard of the situation and Ambrose was compelled to comply. In a matter of days, Ambrose was baptized and installed as bishop in Milan.

As Ambrose grew in stature within the church as well as in imperial regard, he met with arguments much like those that Gibbon has since been treated to. Foremost amongst Ambrose's critics was Symmachus, who originated the cry echoed by Gibbon that Rome was fallen prey to the tide of Christianization.<sup>10</sup> Two instances of Symmachus' concern deal directly with Ambrose- the removal of the Altar of Victory from the *curia*, and the defunding of the priestly colleges of Rome; significantly including the Vestal Virgins. Both Ambrose and Symmachus had concerns regarding the virgins they served as advocates for; Symmachus because he feared losing yet another stronghold of Roman culture to Christianity, and Ambrose because he could not bear to have a pagan entity in competition with a Christian counterpart; no matter how similar they were in form and function. He was insistent that the Christian version of female service and piety be the

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<sup>9</sup> Moorhead, Ambrose (1999),3.

<sup>10</sup> Ambrose, "Letter 17: The Altar of Victory" *Early Latin Theology* (Louisville, The Westminster Press): 190-193; Symmachus, *The Letters of Symmachus: Book 1*. Translated by Michele Renee and Michael Roberts Salzman. (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature) 2011

only one allowed to thrive in Rome. His arguments seem couched in irony from scriptural standpoint, considering how little support there was for the arguments that he was making. In this new entity salvation was accessed differently and righteousness was measured by different means. The shifts in these hallmarks are easily visible when compared to the canon of scripture. However, the dramatic neglect of literate practices with regard to scripture may have some correlation with the types and limitations of multi-class literacy of the Late Roman Age.

### **Literacy and Education in the Late Roman Era**

The nomenclature of the *literati* or literate class in Late Rome was a thoroughly nuanced construct, with delineations made between those who were versed in the reading and writing of vernacular languages versus those whose literary endeavors fell specifically within the Latin language. As with all examinations of literacy within historical context, this paper must also begin with the disclaimer that the word “literacy” rivals “is” in terms of evading a legally binding definition. The term *literati* as it applied to upper class males like Ambrose might also serve as an indication that an individual had received a full Roman education and be versed in rhetoric, literature, and have the ability to read and create complex texts; while simultaneously referring to an individual who merely “had their letters” or the most basic level of signature literacy- being able to sign one’s name, but lacking the ability to read and interpret either simple or complex

texts of any kind.<sup>11</sup> It is significant that “literate” individuals in late antiquity earned the designation by being able to read and write in the Latin language. The term does not, however give any indication of the extent to which these individuals were actually functionally literate or making use of literate practices. The designation could have indicated the ability to sign one’s name, or read and write at a low level, leaving higher text inaccessible to the reader.

This study focuses on literature and literate practice across ecclesiastic divides in addition to defining literate practice. As Augustine might have assured anybody asking how he fared in his Greek studies, receiving formal lessons did not (and does not) ensure actual mastery of content. Likewise, it must not be assumed that formal education settings were the only place that learning occurred, as it is evident that individuals who would not have had access to formal education could read and write. Angelo Paredi wrote that while Roman education began with a grammar school that boys of Ambrose’s class would have attended until they were fifteen or sixteen, and then go on to study rhetoric with a private tutor until aged twenty or so. Through this education, Ambrose’s familiarity with Virgil, Cicero, Homer, Plato, and other great thinkers of the secular is explained. However, Paredi discusses the declining state of Roman education through the lens of Augustine who felt the tradition bred discord and memorization of vain and irrelevant fables.<sup>12</sup> Homes Dudden, who wrote earlier than Paredi, had pointed out that at

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<sup>11</sup> Individuals who “had their letters” might literally have memorized the alphabet and learned nothing more or have memorized certain phrases or simple words. They would not (for example) be able to interpret a legal contract or craft a complex oration.

<sup>12</sup> Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times*. Translated by Joseph Costelloe. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press. (1964): 21.

this time, the teachers and curriculum of Rome were wholly pagan. Because of this, many Christian families chose to send their sons to clergy as well for instruction in theology.<sup>13</sup> Ambrose seems to have received this service in the form of Simplicianus, would later mentor him as Ambrose stepped into the role of bishop.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this preparation, Ambrose felt himself unprepared for the task in front of him when he returned to his theological studies after serving as governor. “After he became bishop he experienced considerable embarrassment by reason of his ignorance of theology. He complained that he was called upon to teach what he had not learned...” and requested that Simplicianus continue his tutelage at that time.<sup>15</sup> Dudden does not specify what exactly is entailed with this theological lack- either in knowledge regarding the Bible, or if he was referring to Ambrose’s lack of enculturation within the church. These designations reflect the manifold instances of learning and literacy in Late Antiquity and open the way for further questions. If literacy was so widespread, then why is scripture frequently quoted or referred to out of context in documents generated from that time? Many scholars of the modern day would argue that this was simply how things were. However, it must be seen that it is outstanding for a well read, thoroughly educated individual like Ambrose of Milan to create commentaries that followed the lines drawn by preceding scholars like Origen, and even go so far as to interpret Judeo-Christian texts through a lens of Roman tradition but exhibited a significant lack of familiarity with scripture as a whole.

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<sup>13</sup> Dudden, *The Life and Times*. (1935)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Dudden, *Life and Times* (1935), 58.

In consideration of this paper's focus literacies within the church, it is imperative to include an exploration of "scriptural literacy," which refers to an individual's ability to read, interpret, write about, and understand scriptural texts, references, and allusions within the greater context of accepted scripture.<sup>16</sup> The canon of scripture underwent several changes prior to this. Most Christians accepted the books that now comprise the Old Testament (O.T.) as they had been in use within Judaism for some time and many held the distinction of having been referenced and quoted by the apostles and Christ himself. Following the death of Christ, a century of prolific writing within the church occurred. The twenty-seven books now comprising the New Testament (N.T.) were vetted on a stringent framework of evaluation, including intertextual corroboration, authorship, and utilization by early church fathers. The establishment of an established set of common literature was a centralizing gesture on the part of the Church. Doing so created a foundation of literature for teachers to and followers to refer to as they studied scripture. This was a body of texts regarded to be inspired by God; and sacred to those who adhered to it. In addition to the sacred nature of the text within Christianity (described as God-breathed in 2 Timothy 3:16 -17) departures from this common foundation on the part of Ambrose indicate either an ignorance of this establishment,

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<sup>16</sup> "Canonized scripture" is specified here, as it addressed a limited scope of literature for examination here. There have been many gospels, many apocryphal books, and several versions of the canon. For the purposes of this paper, the already canonized O.T. and the list of twenty-seven N.T. books canonized in Athanasius' *Easter Letter* are used, largely because they comprise the canon that Ambrose would have had at his disposal (pre-apocrypha). Inclusions of apocryphal books in his homilies and exegetical works are indicative either of his ignorance of what was or was not included by church authority, or that he was relying on the works of others (like Origen) who had lived prior to canonization of the N.T.

disregard for its standing as sacred text, or willingness to circumvent standards of church leadership and scripture itself.<sup>17</sup>

Just as *literati* holds varied meanings for exactly how adept an individual was at handling texts, their level of education or ability to read and write did not necessarily come bundled with a thorough knowledge and understanding of scripture. Christianity spread and hid in plain sight because the spread of doctrine through epistles combined with a distinct secret system of icons to facilitate the practice of Christianity prior to the Edict of Toleration. This is a wonderful example of a very specific literacy (icons, symbols, distinct vocabulary) that functioned by and large without the approval of the reigning elites (wealthy women aside). One would certainly have trouble tracking down a house-church without knowing how to identify a christogram or Ichthus emblem, which brings up an important point. Literacy, learning, and the transmission of literature all depend on more than one component to be effective. That a person needs to be able to read and write their intended message is an obvious component of communication through writing, but in order for their message to be received and fully understood, the recipient must also have a thorough understanding of the vocabulary and method of writing (this is why so many Christian symbols went unnoticed in plain sight under Diocletian- they were written for a specific audience). That is not to say that Christian texts were collected into the canon with the specific intention of misleading or veiling meanings but that Rome had a tradition of overlooking or misinterpreting some of the

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<sup>17</sup> "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteous, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every god work."

more nuanced communications of Christendom. These instances exemplify that audience is just as important as the author in the interpretation of texts.

When Ambrose undertook the task of writing a commentary on the Gospel of Luke, he became first an audience as he read and researched, and then shifted into presenting his conclusions as an author. As he read and worked with biblical texts, he had the opportunity to become increasingly literate within the scope of the gospel as well as the rest of accepted scripture. However, his writings reflect greater familiarity with other writers than with sacred texts in many cases. This may be a result of his spending more time reading extrabiblical texts than within the canon set out by Athanasius and makes the canon of scripture significant not only as a product of various instances of church authority for instruction in doctrine, but also as a diagnostic of Ambrose's level of scriptural literacy or utility, which contributed to his doctrinal issues and had lasting impacts on the church as a whole. Ambrose entered the bishopric as a product not only of Roman education, but also of Roman politics. Prior to that moment, he had little to do with the church and apparently even less to do with its foundational canon of literature. This should not be ignored in the dialogue regarding his study of scripture and the commentaries he generated. Just as use of the modern term "computer literacy," signifies a certain level of adeptness with technology, scriptural literacy has a connotation of mastery that goes beyond the individual's ability to merely read or sound out the text in question. If one had only the *Expositio* to look at, Ambrose's level of literacy with regard to scripture would remain ambiguous. He displays ample comfort with scriptural and moral topics and makes frequent references to books commonly explicated by early

church fathers, indicating that he had access to commentaries and even experts living at the time. However, his work frequently stays inside of the outline of topics laid out by Origen and Basil, rather than endeavoring to interpret less explored N.T. documents like James, Hebrews, or Revelation. In addition to this, Ambrose makes his familiarity with scripture proper dubious through his neglect of obvious references (for example, he neglects Rahab in his discussion of the women in Jesus' lineage) and offers unsubstantiated opinions that conflict directly with scripture, such as his thoughts on sexual intercourse within marriage, which contradict multiple biblical accounts from the O.T. as well as specific directives in the N.T. Because Ambrose's audience was so varied (he likely created the text from homilies originally prepared for use in the church, and then adapted those into the *Expositio*) it is difficult to say authoritatively that whether the root of his oversight was an intention to target and manipulate a specific group, or that the gaps in Ambrose's use of literate practice within scripture could be credited to his lack of study or overlooking scripture in consideration of his deficits and dependence on the work of others in that area. By comparison, Augustine had a similar upbringing and education, but his works display a familiarity and dexterity in his works that illuminate his points within the canon rather than overlooking it. In addition to offering a comparison of how the two authors approached scripture, Ambrose and Augustine exemplify how upbringing may or may not come into play in the biography of the adult. Augustine did not commit to Christianity until later in his life, and related an account of a fairly wild youth. Following this time in his life, Augustine became a devout Christian and his writing is shot through with scripture. Ambrose was raised in close proximity to

Christian culture in Rome, and came to the bishopric pure and ready to commit to a life of service and celibacy. In spite of what would likely be gauged as a more acceptable past, his writings lack the dexterity and agility within scripture as well as a passion for Christ evident in the writings of Augustine.

### **Scriptural Literacy**

For the purposes of this thesis, scriptural literacy has been assessed based on a series of specific implications. These standards fall into three main categories. First, the utility of scripture by the author in question's work must bear relevance to the topic that the quote was referenced in connection to; as well as being discussed as well as the greater context from which the quote was taken. In the Late Roman Era, references and direct quotations were frequently used to offer credence to a point being made in the author's work, but that point was not always in harmony with the context of the originating section of scripture or text. Second, the author's ability to discuss, describe, and intelligently debate the contents of scripture. Fallacies in logic were frequently substituted in where a cross-reference would have made a more effective point. While it is entirely possible that Ambrose was lowering the level of discourse to suit a particular audience, there is no great advantage apparent in intentionally creating a shoddy platform of logic for oneself.<sup>18</sup> Third, the author's writing shows understanding of the canon as a

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<sup>18</sup> If the level of literary discourse did indeed need to be lowered, it raises questions of if the lack truly was in the audience, in Ambrose, or in his application of literate practice. His subject matter and method of integrate issues that Church hierarchy was intimate (like Arius) indicates a

whole, meaning that exegetical texts, homilies, and other literary discussions acknowledge the greater body of scripture through intertextual references, allusions, quotations, or harmony of message with the rest of the N.T.

Robert Kaster's paper on the impacts of limited literacy in late antiquity opens the door to conversation on what the stratification of literacy could have meant in a number of situations. These instances include the impact of literacy on language (vernacular vs. Latin) as well as the linguistic and literary divisions the resulting within the church. Scriptural literacy in Late Antiquity is difficult to gauge from the perspective of a modern scholar. Kaster did an excellent job explaining the many different ways that individuals in Late Antiquity might have described themselves as literate, marginally literate, or even illiterate. He even brought Jerome into the conversation, citing how Jerome had referred to Rufinus as an illiterate author.<sup>19</sup> Literacy of the individual is difficult to gauge, as the individual in question might feel a mistaken confidence in their abilities, or merely be the "most" literate in a group of marginally literate individuals, or (like Rufinus) merely be unfortunate in having Jerome as an opponent. These treatments focus on audience as well as the ability of the author. If (like Jerome) the audience is assessing the literacy of an author based on their depth of knowledge as well as their ability to synthesize the texts of others. It is in this aspect that Ambrose created his most clear example of limited (at least in comparison to his knowledge of politics and rhetoric) depth of knowledge with regard to scripture as a whole. He did so by leaning on

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sophisticated audience, and his educational background should have left him capable of deeper textual analysis, indicating that lack was not in ability, but in practice.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kaster, *Some Consequences of Limited Literacy in Late Antiquity* Educational Resource Information Center (1990): 4.

biblical texts that had already been explicated at length by theologians such as Origen, Didymus, and Philo rather than analyzing for himself. Boniface Ramsey discussed this in his book on the political writings of Ambrose.<sup>20</sup> For example, *De Cain et Abel*, as well as *De Noe* both indicate a strong dependence on Philo, while *De bono mortis* correlates strongly to the works of Plotinus, with strong parallels in the discourse on the three kinds of death, primarily that of sin, mystical death, and natural death.<sup>21</sup> In addition to his dependence on the work of others in his explications and treatises, the majority of Ambrose's better-known works were ethical or moral treatises (most popularly on virginity) rather than the exegetical works brimming with intertextual references one might otherwise expect from one held up as an example by Augustine.

### **Ambrose**

While Ambrose of Milan was not raised or educated for church leadership, Christianity and church structures were not be totally foreign to him.<sup>22</sup> He had been raised in a Christian home, and received a first-hand view of his sister's devotions, as well as the goings on of the church first in Trier and then in Rome. These instances provide a strong indication that Ambrose would have been acquainted with Christianity. However, he did not express an intimate knowledge of its workings, or pursue it actively for himself by seeking baptism, monastic opportunities, etc. As a governor, he would

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<sup>20</sup> Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose*. Routledge, London (1997), 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 56-57.

<sup>22</sup> Ambrose's sister Marcellina was a nun in Rome prior to his baptism. At that time monasteries were not commonly open or available to women, so females wishing to live a cloistered life often did so in their own homes or in the household of another family.

have had a view of the Church from an administrative perspective and would have learned early on of the sway Christians held on a city. Additionally, it was not uncommon for politicians of the time to have reason to deal with church issues either through the quieting of riots like Ambrose, or in resisting the ebb of pagan traditions, as Symmachus did. In fact, Ammianus Marcellinus points out that in 366 a riot had broken out following the death of a Roman bishop, rendering 137 dead.<sup>23</sup> Following an incident like this, it is no wonder that potential Church riots should pose a serious problem to those responsible for establishing and keeping peace within a city. It is to be expected that Ambrose would naturally keep tabs on church unrest in his role as governor, and work to prevent it once he took on the vestments of bishop.

### **Ambrose and His Influences**

Upon his initial ascension to the bishopric, Ambrose tasked himself with an intensive period of study both in scripture and the teachings of early fathers. He consulted with Simplicianus by letter and (it seems) in person and was mentored in the faith in that manner.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this mentorship, most scholars who write on Ambrose have a few names to suggest with regard to which authors had the most sway over Ambrose. While there is a great deal of variation on these rosters, Origen of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea both appear with high frequency. Jerome and his accusations of plagiarism are also not to be forgotten. Susan B. Griffith explored Jerome's accusations and has offered

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<sup>23</sup> *Ammianus Marcellinus, The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, 27.3.13 Translated by C.D. Yonge, (Dodo Press, 1911)

<sup>24</sup> Simplicianus would go on to be Bishop of Milan following Ambrose's time in that office.

up specific examples of texts that Ambrose “borrowed” from. These included Origen’s homilies on Luke, Eusibius’ *Quaetiones evangelii*, Hilary of Poitier’s Commentary on Matthew, and Basil’s work on Psalms.<sup>25</sup> Richard Layton adds to the discussion by bringing in Ambrose’s work on virgins. It may seem odd that Ambrose would borrow from other authors on a topic that he was so passionate about personally, but Layton draws an uncanny resemblance between Ambrose’s writings on virgins and Athanasius’s own treatise on the subject.<sup>26</sup> In payment for borrowing so freely from so many, Jerome chose to include Ambrose in his introduction to his own translation of Didymus, referring blatantly to the bishop as a jackdaw stealing the plumage of others. “Ambrose’s writings, he intimated, were not merely inadequate, but were also dangerous. The bishop flattered and charmed his readers, domesticating the original sources to soft refinement. Such efforts might be sufficient for the ‘childish’ who were content to play with the Bible, but did not hone the virile mind essential to ascetic progress.”<sup>27</sup> The ferocity of Jerome’s attack may have inspired more sympathy than condemnation for Ambrose. Griffith couches this conversation in Rufinus’ response, who felt that Jerome’s harsh treatment of Ambrose a far worse offense than Ambrose’s blatant plagiarism.<sup>28</sup>

Malice or intention aside, Ambrose was certainly not found at his best in his exegetical writings. Many have commented on the “bloodless” style of delivery in comparison to other writings. This may be for a number of reasons. First, his exegetical offerings are likely homilies that he adapted into text, meaning that his first audience was

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<sup>25</sup> Susan B. Griffith, *Ambrose the Appropriator*, 207

<sup>26</sup> Layton, *Plagiarism and Lay Patronage*, 513

<sup>27</sup> Layton, *Plagiarism and Lay Patronage*, 513.

<sup>28</sup> Griffith, *Ambrose the Appropriator*, 202.

the heterogeneous one filling the basilica, and that the readers of his *Expositio* were only a secondary audience.<sup>29</sup> Regardless, these texts are brimful with the thoughts of others and only seasoned with any scriptural dexterity on Ambrose's part. This dependence reflects a lack of scriptural literacy, or at least serious neglect of literate practice when it came to the Bible, with a stronger sense of comfort with the commentary and thoughts of his peers. The same behavior is easily observed in developing readers, who are more comfortable sounding out words, or even copying them down than analyzing, explaining, and relating them to real-world examples. Ambrose certainly did pursue holy knowledge with alacrity. However, his approach to his new position as bishop seems to have included a large quantity of secondary texts and passing references or brief quotations of text when it came to scripture proper.

At first glance Origen is a perfectly logical source of information for the newly minted bishop. He was the most prolific author on scriptural text at the time and was especially outstanding for his *Hexapla*.<sup>30</sup> Surveys of Ambrose's body of work clearly reflect the structural impact that Origen had on Ambrose. For example, the books of the old covenant that Ambrose did write exegetical texts or homilies on were often books that Origen had also explored. Ambrose leaned heavily on the work of Origen when he first came into his position as bishop, which presents as both an asset and liability for Ambrose. Origen was a prolific scholar and writer of exegetical texts on the Bible. His

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<sup>29</sup> This muddies the waters in identifying Ambrose's intended audience, as it is difficult to gauge if his writing is stunted because he did not take the time to modify his approach in transitioning homilies into exegetes. It does, however show that the targeted audience was within the Church in this instance unlike his more impassioned letters on political points.

<sup>30</sup> Famed translation of the OT in six languages side by side

translations and lengthy discussions of church issues would have been enormously useful to a church officer just recently transferred in from Rome's political and cultural machine. However, along with his bounty of words came a bounty of troubles. Origen was posthumously excommunicated (twice), which made him a potentially problematic source of information for the politically minded Ambrose.

Although his legacy would later be plagued with controversy, using Origen as a mentor may be an indication of Ambrose acting with the opinion of the Milanese majority in mind. Origen fell into the camp of those who supported the perpetual virginity of Mary, adding a voice to chorus Ambrose would soon headline. Discussion of Mary being referred to as the mother of God had occurred just recently at the Council of Ephesus, making scholarship on her perpetual virginity an area of interest for the hierarchy of the church. Beyond this, Tertullian had additionally been disparaged in the not too recent past for his argument against the perpetual virginity of Mary.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, the indication in his work is that Ambrose was relying on the writings of others as a significant source of his doctrine, as opposed to pulling directly from scripture.

Adding to the oddity of Origen as a choice for Ambrose as a mentor, Origen did to refer to the *homoousian* nature of Christ, but there has been extensive debate as to whether he personally held to Arian or Anti-Arian beliefs primarily because Origen's

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<sup>31</sup> Tertullian used his pagan education and excellence in literature to produce an impressive library of apologetic and moral writings himself. He made a point of using his pagan education to delve deeper into scriptural texts and meanings and makes a compelling comparison to Ambrose in this aspect. That is to say, that Ambrose and Tertullian had similar opportunities in education, and produced works geared toward their opinion of moral living in the church. However, it is Ambrose whose doctrines led to church constructs so drastically different from what was laid out in scripture as righteous living.

approach to theology was so ambiguous.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, many Arians claimed Origen as their own later on.<sup>33</sup> In spite of all this, Origen was clearly a template upon which Ambrose modelled himself. Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* precedes Ambrose's letter to his sister Marcellina condoning suicide in favor of losing one's chastity through rape. Other fingerprints of Origen's impact on Ambrose included a trine approach to teaching that included exegesis, spirituality, and what Henri Couzel has referred to as "speculative theology," referring to the strong emphasis on allegory in the writings of each author.<sup>34</sup> This approach is evident in the writings of Ambrose, who embraced the "speculative theology component" with great vigor.

While the Late Roman Era is renowned for widespread literacy and education in the upper classes, the terms "literacy" and "education" have narrowly defined meanings and fairly limited scopes. Ambrose serves as an excellent case study in how Roman education played into church functions specifically because he was an example of the quintessential educated Roman, whose writings, doctrines, and teachings display a distinct lack of comprehensive knowledge when it comes to the canon of scripture he was meant to illuminate and implement within the church.

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<sup>32</sup> *Homousian* refers to the belief that Jesus and God the Father were of the same nature. This belief is reflected in the Nicene Creed.

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Origin. *Origin, An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*. Edited by A. Greer. Trans. Rowan A. Greer. (The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle in the State of New York, 1997), 10

<sup>34</sup> Crouzel, Henri. *Origen*. (San Francisco, Harper and Row:1989),54.

With the Christianization of the Roman Empire came a surge in the distribution of scriptural texts, along with observable shifts in scriptural exegesis, or interpretation. Apostolic teachings had exhorted readers to interpret scriptural texts according to the other texts included in the canon. The account of exegetical or hermeneutical approaches prior to medieval interpretations is important because the earlier methods dictated what each sequential generation had to study in terms of inherited text and doctrines. Of particular concern here is the issue of Ambrose' exegetical "heritage." That is to say that the education offered by those who wrote the texts Ambrose used would almost certainly have held heavy sway on his beliefs. One challenge in the historiography of hermeneutics is that no single method encompasses an entire era or even generation. As Gerald Bray mentions in his book on Biblical interpretation, the Bible elicits responses that cannot always be clumped into one mainstream category.<sup>35</sup> Texts that lay religious foundations are often an integral part of the individual beliefs and lives of those who ascribe to them, making these texts personal and prone to personal interpretation. This makes the historiography of hermeneutics a tricky region of scholarship that is comprised of individual narratives woven together. Biblical interpretation is a key component in understanding the religious atmosphere of the Late Antique Era, but is generally overlooked in studies of literacy, culture, and church structure of the time.

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<sup>35</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Downer's Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 200), 8.

## **Methodology**

This thesis reviews Ambrose's presentation of Mary in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke using the method of historical criticism, which is the more traditionally known and expected method of biblical interpretation in the eras of canonized scripture. Historical criticism makes use of intertextual standards (using other sections of the Bible as commentary for interpreting the section under review). This strategy lends itself to assessing the level at which Ambrose was accessing multiple sorts and sections of scripture to support his doctrinal constructions on Mary—most specifically her perpetual virginity. Historical criticism depends on a presupposition of canonicity within scriptural texts. This approach works well for the purposes of this thesis as the question under review here is Ambrose's level of dexterity and literacy on the actual body of the canon rather than the veracity or historicity of scripture itself.

## **Redaction Criticism**

Ambrose is assessed in this thesis using redaction criticism to examine instances in which he seems to have overlooked or omitted notable biblical examples in favor of Roman character traits.<sup>36</sup> Redaction criticism looks at the way an individual interpreted a text (in this case the Bible) to identify how that person chose to integrate or omit sources in support of a bias or explanation they held before they approached the text itself.

Examples of Ambrose practicing editorial liberties with regard to texts or persons

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<sup>36</sup> Ambrose's praises for the women in Jesus' lineage is filled with language complimenting them for faithfulness to their husbands and contributing to their families through childbirth. This language aligns more accurately with the Roman concept of *pudicitia* than with 1 Corinthians 7:1-3 or Hebrews 11

pertinent to his subject include his neglect of Sarah's miraculous pregnancy and resulting birth of Isaac along with Hannah and her much prayed for child Samuel. However, additional instances of this trope did not support Ambrose's purpose in shaping the theology in his discussion of Elizabeth falling pregnant late in life. Neither would an inclusion of 1 Corinthians 7:1-3 have suited his purposes in his discussions of Elizabeth and Zachariah or Mary and Joseph.<sup>37</sup> For theologians and followers of his teachings, Ambrose's omissions have significant doctrinal implications. For scholars of Late Antique literacy, they leave questions as to Ambrose's level familiarity and understanding of the canon, as well as what exactly his intentions were with regard to the interpretations that he offered. It is in this manner that Ambrose becomes an enigmatic player on the stage of church hierarchy and Roman politics.

Beyond his selective approach to scripture, Ambrose's method of explaining scripture within the context of his favored doctrines made his writing episodic and difficult to follow. Rather than merely moving through scripture, Ambrose revisited certain topics (as will be seen with Mary and virginity shortly) multiple times, occasionally in instances that didn't readily merit a mention of chastity or the Mother of God. Whether or not Ambrose's omission of certain scriptural narratives, precepts, or standards was intentional in supporting these doctrines or not cannot be gauged by the modern eye. Regardless, his neglect of literate practice is reflected in the lack of intertextual supports for his theology and left him dependent on Roman structures and

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<sup>37</sup> "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband... Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." 1 Corinthians 7:3-5

traditions.<sup>38</sup> The resulting tendency to obfuscate scriptural texts with tangentially connected doctrines is manifested in writings that designate him more as a Christian moralist than as an exegete. It is the missing portions of scripture in Ambrose's assessment of the Gospel of Luke that leave his practice of literacy with regard to the canon of scripture as dubious at best.

In the fourth century, the church was rapidly developing into a force that would have a significant role in shaping Late Antique society. With this in mind, some discussion of how this body of literature impacted the development of church doctrines and traditions must also be included in the historiographical discussion at hand. The manner in which Ambrose of Milan accessed and interpreted scripture had a direct impact on the way that doctrine developed, and consequently impacted the trajectory of the Church; specifically, that his promotion of scriptural interpretations and church constructs that were extra-biblical in many cases, and even counter-scriptural in some. For example, the promotion of abstinence from marriage, and even his thoughts on sexual relationships within marriage are topics that the authors of the Bible offered very different directives or examples of, as will be addressed later in this paper. Additionally, the perpetual virginity of Mary does not appear in scripture, but Ambrose contributed to the promotion and sustaining of this doctrine. The extent to which Ambrose accessed scripture is vital in understanding his writings, as well as the trajectory of the church

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<sup>38</sup> For example, Ambrose's perception of piety seems to be entrenched in the idea of purity- a concept he describes very much in terms of abstaining from sin-predominantly with regard to sexual activity in his commentary on Luke. The Bible does not define purity in this manner. Rather, purity in scripture is created through atonement (for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God). Ambrose's interpretation of holiness (particularly for women) seems derived either from *pudicitia* for married women, or the Vestal Virgins for the unwed.

following his time as bishop. The discussion here is equivalent to how much a judge understands and accesses the law codes they are responsible for interpreting and supporting. If Ambrose did not read, understand, and discuss scripture himself, then he was not truly interpreting it. The impacts of this lack on Ambrose's part is manifested in several of his writings, but most specifically in his doctrinal text *De institutiones virginis*, which reveals his deeper roots in Roman tradition (which can be easily seen when viewing the writings of Ambrose alongside of his secular adversary Symmachus) and somewhat flaunts his ignorance of the canon as a cohesive body of texts.

### **Eisegesis**

One method of interpreting scripture that is not frequently discussed with regard to Late Antique scholarship on the Bible is that of eisegesis. In eisegetical approaches, scriptural excerpts are chosen specifically to support a pre-formed argument rather than explicating the text as a historical document or source of doctrine. Whether or not this term was used to designate Ambrose's approach to scripture, the method itself is evident in his address of the women in Jesus' heritage—most specifically with regard to his presentation of these women as exemplars of *pudicitia* within a Christian framework. This is evident in his diligent effort to sanctify Tamar and Bathsheba through the end result of producing the Messiah but may very well be most remarkable in his expulsion of Rahab from his discussion of Jesus' ancestry.<sup>39</sup> Finally, his assessment of the text with

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<sup>39</sup> Concept of feminine virtue in the Roman cult of *Pudicitia*, wherein women displayed their virtue through a lifestyle that showed them to be a "one man woman".

regard to Mary's virginity specifically gears his writing towards supporting her remaining in a state of perpetual virginity in spite of her being portrayed as a righteous wife. As such, she would have been expected to fulfill the rites of the marriage bed. Additionally, she was portrayed as the mother of many children in canonized texts. Foundational documents, like codes of law, contracts, or sacred texts hold a stronger significance than basic informational texts, as they contribute directly to the worldview, morality, and standing in eternity of the reader. Basing the interpretation of these things commentaries alone or on fragmented presentation of the document creates bountiful opportunity for redaction criticism based on Ambrose's eisegetical approach.

### **Exegesis**

When Athanasius provided his list of the twenty-seven books now comprising the New Testament, he included books recognized based on authorship, utility by early church fathers, and cohesiveness with the Old Testament books already in use. These texts served as the foundational body of texts to which the church could refer for literature that was "...God-breathed and... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16) Familiarity with scriptural concepts would eventually grow to be both generally accepted and thoroughly widespread. However, without the ability to read and write themselves, many people in Late Antiquity were at the mercy of those considered "literate" when it came to holy scripture. This impacted Ambrose in a number of ways. With regard to Luke, his interpretation of the women in Jesus' heritage (most expectedly Mary, but with specific neglect of Rahab as well) could

go unchecked by intertextual accountability, as he was unlikely to be challenged on his doctrine due to his standing as bishop.

### **Scriptural Interpretation and the Canon**

In his *Festal Letter* for Easter in 367 AD, his letter, Athanasius acknowledged certain books that were useful for new believers to use as a study resource learning about how to live pious lives. However, he was adamant that only canonized scripture should be used for the creation of doctrine and condemned the use of apocryphal books.<sup>40</sup> The approved corpus was accepted and formalized at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD, and has been extensively explored, taught, spread, and debated since. There was clearly some deviation from the approved text, as exhibited by Ambrose's writings, as well as chastisements written by various Church leaders who felt that deviations from the canon were dangerous in terms of what doctrine emerge as a byproduct. These included Hippolytus, who wrote boldly against Noetus, who had trespassed in his interpretation of the nature of Christ. Hippolytus stated that "There is, Brethren, One God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures and from no other source."<sup>41</sup> Irenaeus also took issue with the Church's gravitation toward nonbiblical sources. He argued that apostolic authority was a serious thing, as they had been chosen by Christ to witness his

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<sup>40</sup> Athanasius, *Festal Letter*

<sup>41</sup> Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, Vol.5 in *From the Ante Nicene Fathers*, ed. James Donaldson and A Cleveland Coxe, Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, Alexander Roberts, Trans. J.H. MacMahon.(Buffalo, NY, Christian Literature Publishing Company), <http://newadvent.org/fathers/0521.htm>. Accessed April 28, 2018, 9

actions and teachings personally. He defended their trustworthiness as firsthand accounts and strongly opposed those who taught doctrines contrary to the teachings and writings of the twelve.<sup>42</sup>

Familiarity with scriptural concepts would continue to grow to be both generally accepted and thoroughly widespread. However, the sourcing of doctrine from scripture so strongly defended by these early church fathers would gradually shift from dedicated personal study to more “word of mouth” methods like oral tradition, liturgy, and (occasionally) hearsay. Without the ability to read and write themselves, many people in Late Antiquity were at the mercy of those considered “literate” when it came to holy scripture. However, even those who could read and write cannot necessarily be designated as literate sources when it came to the Bible.<sup>43</sup> While the frequency of departures from the canon of scripture by scholars would become the norm by the dawning of the medieval era, these departures were not always standard. Moreover, the creation and agreed upon contents of the canon were significant and meant to be approached with great reverence by those who participated.

The move towards establishing a canon was meant to provide the church with a collection of texts that were trustworthy, primary source accounts of the gospel narrative—beginning in Eden and ending in the New Jerusalem. Those who advocated for or participated in the canonization process believed that their work was Spirit-driven

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<sup>42</sup>Ireneus, *Ireneus: Against Heresies*. From: *Ante Nicene Fathers Vol. 1* (prudencetrue.com) Edited by Alexander Roberts, Accessed April 28, 2018, 3.5.1

<sup>43</sup> “Literate” here referring to the modern usage, specifically referring to an individual who could, read, write, listen to, or speak on content portrayed through text and otherwise show mastery of information through intelligent, informed discourse; their own writing.

anointed by God. Moreover, the identification of a common set of texts that were deemed trustworthy by a body of church leaders would have created a common foundation for the church's vast geographically and culturally diverse spectrum. The role of scripture in the development of the Church is not insignificant, and departures from that body of texts had an impact on the Church that would develop into the Holy Roman Empire, go on crusades, and seek "testimony" through torture in the inquisitions. Scripture was quoted and alluded to at length in these instances, but only in jumps and starts. The gradual shift from a persecuted body of believers to an institution that practiced such aggressions was sewn together with threads of scripture. This was a dramatic transformation in terms of social movement as well as in textual significance and interpretation. The dramatic end result mandates extensive examination from the community of late antique and medieval scholars. In spite of the very recent minting of the new canon, Ambrose was already reaching outside of it to pull quotes from books deemed apocryphal by the council.<sup>44</sup> Whether this was an example of his lack of scriptural literacy is debatable, but many of the points that he left unsubstantiated made using Maccabees and Tobias for example, could have also been supported by texts within the canon.

Why Ambrose chose the extracanonical source over the canonical one cannot be made clear, but it does raise questions regarding Ambrose's intention. His comment in Book One of his *Expositio* clarifies that he does believe that not all religious texts are good for the church body, saying that "Basildes, too, ventured to write a

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<sup>44</sup> This is yet another instance of Ambrose's questionable level of scriptural literacy, which could also indicate a strong dependence on his part on writers who had written homilies prior to the canonization of scripture.

gospel...Furthermore, there is said to be another gospel which is written according to Thomas. I know of another written according to Matthias. We read some, that they be not read; we read some, lest we be ignorant of them; we read some, not so as to accept them, but that we may repudiate them, and that we may know what manner of things they are in which these braggards exalt in their heart.”<sup>45</sup> Was he ignoring scripture on purpose? Was he simply more familiar with the extracanonical source? If so, when he began his studies upon becoming bishop, why does he exhibit deeper familiarity with the extracanonical text rather than actual scripture?

### **Philosophical Approach**

While discussion of gospel texts lends itself to soteriological exploration, large portions of Ambrose’s text were dictated by his teleological interpretation of the text, with particular creativity in the case of marriage. The idea of Telos is attributed to Aristotle in terms of refining and writing and is evident that the idea of Telos or purpose was inherent throughout scripture. In Genesis chapter one light was created and divided to distinguish night from day. Oceans were created to establish the firmament of land. Animals were created to populate the earth. Man was created to have dominion over the other living things, and woman was created to accompany man. Everything created in the account has a stated purpose- a calling to fulfill. The difference between the analysis given by Aristotle and the account told in Genesis is in the presence and participation of

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<sup>45</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio*, 17

God. Aristotle described what he saw and discussed his ideals but offered no impetus as to *why*. He observed a connection between form and function but did not go deeper to explore or define the actual relationship. This idea pervades scripture, expressed in the frequently voiced desire to please God; to attain righteousness, and to praise him in general. “I will praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” (Psalm 139:14) Ambrose grappled with this in his expressions allowance for marriage and fertility, frequently coupled with an exhortation to chastity regardless of, whether the audience be virgin or wed. This recurring sentiment in his writings establishes his understanding of the telos of marriage in the church, which was to create holy unions where procreation could occur without sin. However, his frequent reminders that chastity was the most holy of these holy states belied an underlying tint on his soteriology. Ambrose’s writings acknowledge redemption being possible through Christ’s death and resurrection, but his frequent endorsement of virginity runs counter to the text he was preaching on. If virgins were the most holy in his estimation, then his expression of tolerance towards marriage and its telos was undercut by a soteriological persuasion that did not agree with the text he was explicating.

### **Early Doctrines and their Impacts**

Early on in his service as bishop, Ambrose wrote his now famous *De institutione virginis (DIV)* and *Expositio*. These texts both promote the perpetual virginity of Mary, a doctrine which was pivotal in fixing the trajectory of the church on an extrabiblical course. More immediately, crafting a doctrine that focused on the nature of Mary gave

the church a unifying issue to focus on since the nature of Christ had previously divided the church into dangerously opposing camps. Meanwhile, virginity had long been a respected institution in both the church and Roman culture. In the church, chastity was grounded in both OT and NT books. In Roman culture, Vestal Virgins held a high place in society and it was believed that Rome's success depended on their effectiveness as priestesses of Vesta, predominantly in their diligent attendance to the sacred fire in the Temple of Vesta and retention of their chastity. Vestal Virgins had already made appearances in Christian texts at the time as well. Ariel Laughton has pointed out that while the Vestals were a clear stronghold of pagan culture to Ambrose, they were also an enticing example of what prominence might be held by Christian virgins as well.<sup>46</sup> She ensures that readers are aware of the letter Tertullian wrote to his wife encouraging her to remain single after his death (Ambrose wrote similar exhortations in his early treatise on widows) and referred to the Vestals as an example. He posited that if even the Vestals could remain chaste in honor of a pagan deity, then surely Christians could do the same in honor of their own faith.<sup>47</sup>

It must be considered that re-focusing the attention of Christendom onto the familiar ground of virginity, now portrayed as part of the nature of Mary; was a pleasant red herring for Ambrose, as it held potential to detract from existing Arian Conflict. While the amplification of the doctrine presenting Mary as perpetually chaste (and chastity as a hereditary trait) came at a suspiciously convenient moment in Roman

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<sup>46</sup> Ariel Laughton, "Virginity Discourse and Ascetic Politics in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan," PhD Diss., (Duke University, 2010), 201.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 221.

politics, Ambrose was certainly not the first to propose the concept, nor is this paper the place to explore the implications of the political convenience Ambrose may have garnered from his assessment and many treatises on virginity. However, what is pertinent in the analysis of Ambrose's display of scriptural literacy is his assessment of the Gospel of Luke and how his early studies may indicate that his level of scriptural literacy was not as high as it could have been potentially. Ambrose did not write his first commentary on an actual book of the Bible until roughly 386. He had already been bishop for twelve years by the time that he wrote *Expositio*, and based on the timeline of his writings and political endeavors, much of that time was dedicated to political battles promoting virginity and purging the senate floor of pagan altars. That, in addition to his extensive study of earlier writers would have left little time for actually exploring and explicating the canon of scripture. For the present, focusing on Ambrose's text and identifying his outside influences must suffice. For example, where the veneration of Mary came from when such practices are not evident anywhere in canon of scripture. They are, however; evident in the culture that Ambrose had been most acquainted with as a young man. Ambrose was raised primarily with his mother and sister in Rome; a situation where his social equals in his domestic realm where females in a city where female priestesses held a place of respect and matronly virtue was the diagnostic for Rome's moral virtue. Ambrose was primed to believe that virtuous women were a powerful attribute and that women lacking in it would be the downfall of the Church.

In addition to the vestiges of Roman culture preserved in the arc of the church's library, there is evidence of Rome's influence on Ambrose that becomes strikingly

apparent upon comparison with the letters of Symmachus, specifically with regard to female virtue (*pudicitia*), the role of virginity in his interpretation of scripture, his dependence on philosophers and preceding theologians rather than other scriptures. His politically charged response to pagan rivals all indicate a strong aversion to competition, along with a righteous edge to his anger.

The names of Symmachus and Ambrose have been linked in an ironclad bond through the centuries following their clash and epistolary exchange. Ironically, it is not their point of famed disagreement (removing the Altar of Victory from the *curia*) that brings their names together once more here. Symmachus was an ardent pagan and defender of Roman tradition as well as a famed orator and politician. This made him a natural opponent to Ambrose and figurehead for the argument against the Christianization of Rome. It is their point of commonality (Roman upbringing, education, and fierce defense of virginity) under review in this paper. The similarity in approach between Symmachus and Ambrose is significant because it shows a bond between Ambrose and the most unlikely of corroborators. Ambrose vocally sought to remove vestiges of paganism from the theater of Roman decision making, while (whether consciously or not) sewing its very nature into the Church. Symmachus, on the other hand, fought to restore institutions like Vestal Virgins and the Altar of Victory quite overtly. His concern with these mainstays was in preserving Roman culture from the Christianization he saw approaching as a threat to the culture he felt tasked with defending. Oddly, Symmachus' defense of the Vestal Virgins is answered in their resurfacing along with the Roman concept of *pudicitia* or feminine modesty and purity

within the Church as foundational structures upon which non-scriptural doctrines of the church were founded. In their letters to the emperor, both Ambrose and Symmachus claimed the issue of virginity as a support for their cause. Symmachus wrote that Gratian's actions in cutting off inheritance of property for pagan priesthoods would harm the city by undermining Vestal Virgins in particular, whose self-sacrifice in remaining virginal was to the benefit of Rome. He argues that they must continue to have a share in the harvests and prestige of the city, for how could a harvest be plentiful if the priestesses of hearth and home did not have a share in it? However, he argued that those who wished to see the Vestals cut off were defeating themselves and making martyrs of the priestesses "For virginity dedicated to public good grows in merit when it is without reward."<sup>48</sup> Ambrose demanded a copy of this letter from the emperor and published his own point by point refutation to Symmachus's claims. On the subject of virgins, Ambrose asserted that the same lack of inheritance fell on the Christian monks and virgins, only to increase their righteousness.<sup>49</sup> He additionally argued that the ornaments and honors of the Vestals made them gaudy in comparison to Christian virgins, who wore only a plain veil as a head covering. Once again in his address of virginity and righteousness, Ambrose neglected to refer to scripture as a source of righteousness, depending instead on the poverty and chastity as virtues on behalf of those for whom he spoke. The absence of scripture is remedied in the *Expositio*, but that did not necessarily

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<sup>48</sup> Symmachus, Relatio III, *The Letters of Symmachus: Book 1*

<sup>49</sup> In spite of Ambrose's claim, the church would benefit enormously throughout the medieval and later ages from properties donated by those committing to monasteries, usufructuary practices, and donations of land.

entail a commentary on scripture alone. Ambrose drew connections between the natural wisdom in scripture and the natural wisdom of philosopher as well as the gospels and heretics such as Photinus and Arius.<sup>50</sup>

### **Ambrose's *Expositio* and the Gospel of Luke**

Ambrose's choice of Luke to explicate out of the gospels was singular at the time, as it was far more in vogue for church leaders to write on Matthew or John. The Gospel of Luke is one of four synoptic gospels included in the N.T, the others being Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke is not the first among these, nor is the author (Luke) listed among the twelve apostles of Christ. Ambrose does not offer a clear explanation of why he chose the Gospel according to Luke above the other gospel accounts, which were written by two apostles and another famed author of scripture, but he does offer up some reasons in validation of deeper study of Luke's text. Among these were Luke's historical approach and his inclusion of natural wisdom and a threefold cord of imperative truths, being moral truth, rational truth, and spiritual truth.<sup>51</sup> In the bishop's estimation, these truths and chronological nature of book had much to impart in terms of spiritual growth and accounts of miracles.

Ambrose tends to approach scripture thematically, as he works his way through scripture. Consequently, certain subjects tend to resurface at various points in his commentary. This makes it difficult to trace themes across the course of his writing,

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<sup>50</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio* 1; *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ambrose, *Ibid* 12.

making certain subjects seem episodic and scattered. The actual narrative of the Gospel according to Luke begins with a priest (Zacharias) receiving word that his wife Elizabeth will soon bear him a son. This son would be John the Baptist, who would later baptize Jesus in the Jordan River. A more detailed exploration of Ambrose's thoughts on this will follow in the pages to come. The book ends after the death and resurrection of Christ, culminating with his ascension into heaven. Because the death and resurrection were the ultimate offering for sin, with Jesus acting both as the sacrifice and as high priest (see Hebrews), Ambrose introduced the book by pointing how it portrayed the priestly qualities of Jesus and was thus aptly represented by the traditional emblem of a bull or ox, which was the traditional temple offering for sin. (Hebrews 4:14-5:10)

Due to Ambrose's penchant for allegorical interpretations of scripture, his commentaries on actual books of the Bible give the best window into his actual use of scripture as he interpreted a holy text. Ambrose's assessment of Luke holds the distinctive reputation amongst scholars of the church as being his most historical approach, whereas his analysis of other texts follow a more allegorical trend.<sup>52</sup> This being the case, the *Expositio* seemed like the most likely of Ambrose's writings to showcase his literacy on scriptural texts, making it the most fair chance for him to exhibit his depth of knowledge and ability to draw intertextual connections with regard to the text. Because Ambrose is so frequently referred to as a precedent for Mary's perpetual virginity, the commentary is an excellent source for determining the way Ambrose approached her in the text he cited so frequently in his writings on the issue. To this end, the portions of text where Mary

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<sup>52</sup> Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, (2000), 90.

appears in the spotlight will be those under review here, along with assessments of Ambrose's discussion (or lack thereof) of other women mentioned within the canon. These sections include the bishop's commentary on the early chapters of Luke (specifically chapters one and two.) It is additionally of note to examine the prologue provided by Ambrose introducing his commentary of Luke and discussion of Luke as an author. Even in his prologue, Ambrose makes clear his early dedication to virginity as the ultimate form of purity, that Arius and his doctrine are significant detractors from the church, and that (while he might preach against them) he might still make use of pagan philosophies and literatures to make a doctrinal point.

### **Prologue**

In his prologue to the commentary on Luke, Ambrose chose to approach his subject methodically by assessing Luke's method of presenting the gospel account (in Luke's instance this meant a historical, chronological sequence). Ambrose then went on to address the gospel of Luke thematically, with a detailed analysis of Luke in conjunction with the four horsemen of the apocalypse along with a parallel drawn between the roles of Christ and the physical layout of the text beginning with a priest operating under the "old covenant" and ending with the redemption of man and the onset of the "new covenant". Beneath these points, Ambrose referred consistently and clear to an underlying foundation of a threefold philosophy, in this instance highlighting the philosophical threesome of natural, moral, and rational wisdom. After relating his scriptural interpretation to secular philosophy, Ambrose mirrored this structure in his brief assessment of the biblical books preceding the New Testament era in general,

followed by a focused look at the books of wisdom attributed to Solomon. This method of interpretation, starting from a cultural (usually Roman) touchpoint and then building scripture into a repackaging of commentaries already written by others tends to lean toward a set agenda responding to events of Ambrose' time (Arius is mentioned and railed against early on) which were already center stage in the church. While not blatantly stated as it was in his prologue, this approach can be traced in Ambrose' approach to the mothers of both John the Baptist and Jesus, who are credited with a blushing modesty familiar to those acquainted with the Roman structure of home and expectations of women based on *pudicitia*, but completely novel to those whose first acquaintance with biblical femininity came through accounts of the likes of Sarah, Deborah, Abigail, and the Shulamite in Song of Songs.

In his initial foray into Gospel of Luke, Ambrose was careful to focus on the fact the Elizabeth had hidden her pregnancy for five months. Ambrose explained that she displayed modesty regarding the pregnancy since she must have felt cautious to display evidence of intimacy with her husband in their advanced years, explaining that "...truly, when the ripe maturity of life has supervened, and the age is more suited to ruling children than producing them, it is shameful to bear the signs of intercourse, albeit lawful, for the belly to be weighed down with the burden of a different season, and to swell with untimely fruit.<sup>53</sup>" This explanation is offered in contradiction to the exploits of the young, who Ambrose accused of neglecting the rest taken even by the earth, sowing their seed too frequently and bringing shame from their overly frequent indulgence of

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<sup>53</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio*, 38

intercourse. With regard to this particular treatise, Ambrose offers no other scriptural support than Genesis 30:23, which reads “and (Rachel) conceived and bore a son, and said ‘God has taken away my reproach.’” While explaining that she must not have felt guilt over her pregnancy (having conceived by her husband), Elizabeth must have felt shame removed, having finally received the benefits of wedlock. Ambrose makes this explanation in relation to Elizabeth alone, referencing Rachel only in relation to the removal of reproach, reproach in this instance referring to the stigma a woman might in her community if she were not blessed with sons- a namesake and heir being the expected contribution of any woman in her marriage. In spite of this connection, the Rachel’s role as a childless woman up to that point is not discussed in the greater context of her family.

The choice of reference on Ambrose’ part acknowledges the shared experience of shame in at least two childless women across the texts of Old and New Testaments but neglects to take into account or make reference to other miraculous or unprecedented pregnancies that were long prayed for or prophesied of would have been familiar to readers of the Old Testament books. Sarah’s pregnancy late in life for example; is left untouched. (Genesis 21) The Shunammite woman who received a son as a token of thanks for housing the prophet Elijah goes unmentioned (2 Kings 4). Hannah, who also gave birth to a prophet (Samuel) following a miraculous pregnancy is heralded nowhere in the text. (1 Samuel 1:20)<sup>54</sup> Instead, Ambrose insists that Elizabeth must have felt

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<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that Hannah’s husband Elkanah loved her in spite of her apparent bareness. Indeed, he is quoted in 1 Samuel 1:8 saying “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?” Omission of this quotation on Ambrose’s part may have been intentional, wanting to continue unfettered promotion of celibacy as he had been doing, Regardless, the absence of Elkanah’s love of his wife regardless of her fruitfulness was significant. On one hand, he was negating Ambrose’s

obligated to hide evidence of her relationship to her husband perhaps (insinuated) out of respect for her husband Zacharias' position as priest.<sup>55</sup>

Luke described both Zacharias and Elizabeth as “righteous,” or in the Greek “δίκαιος” or “dikaios,” meaning to be without fault before God and obedient to the laws, or to be virtuous. When Ambrose had finished his discourse on the shame of any but the young to partaking in sexual relations in a marriage (and even then he was condemning of the practice when not absolutely “necessary”) he then excused Elizabeth from shame, as her pregnancy was permissible within the bounds of her marriage. In justifying her pregnancy, Ambrose created a dichotomy between his other teachings, and his justification of the women he chose to write about, who he argued had entered the marriage bed to bear children. This harmonizes far better with a fulfillment of Roman *pudicitia* than the chastity doctrine circulating in the Church at the time. However, in order for Ambrose to declaim Elizabeth's swollen belly as “fruit from another season,” or the young man's overabundance of “zeal” in endeavoring to beget children, he had to pull from the banks of his own opinion, or at least ignore the precedence of scriptural expectations in marriage. This inclusion seems odd in a book chosen for its merit as a historical account. One might expect to find such thoughts as those Ambrose was expressing in a commentary on the book of Acts, or Romans, both of which contain

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promotion of *pudicitia*, on the other, if Ambrose had acknowledged this section of the OT, he could have used it to support his endorsement of abstinence even within a marriage.

<sup>55</sup> This opinion may touch on Ambrose's opinion on whether or not a priest should marry and beget children. Once again, scripture indicates that priests (such as Zacharias) could marry and have children and consider it a blessing. There was some discussion at the time surrounding this, as many church fathers (including the Apostle Peter) had been married with no conflict. Stringent prohibition of marriage in the papacy and priesthood would not come until later. However, due to Ambrose's political mindset, his known opinions chastity, and his own personal unmarried state, it is likely that he would have sided with those seeking to ensure that priests were chaste.

directives for holy living, while the Gospel of Luke is dedicated wholly to a historical narrative. The oddity of Ambrose's opinion nestled in an account detailing a sequence of events might have been counterbalanced by cross references to texts that dealt with other pregnancies or comments on marital expectations, but Ambrose was either unaware of those examples, or intentionally chose not to use them (an example of redaction criticism).

The O.T. book Song of Songs (which Ambrose referred to as an example of rational wisdom in the prologue to the commentary) speaks in detail of the intimate relationship within a marriage (specifically, that of Solomon and his Shulamite wife).<sup>56</sup> Because Ambrose tended toward the allegorical in his interpretation anyways, it's possible (if not likely) that he viewed this book as an allegory of the great love the Christ had for the church. Such an interpretation of that particular book was not uncommon. This makes it necessary to include other sections of scripture with which to compare Ambrose's *Expositio* to gauge canonicity. For example, Solomon's perhaps most well-known book of wisdom was the book of Proverbs, a collection of wise sayings with frequent focus on instructing the young man. Were Ambrose's assessment of what is appropriate within a marriage in accordance with this book of scripture, he would have accounted for Solomon's advice to the young man to remain faithful in his marriage all of his years; "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love."( Proverbs 5:18 and 19) He could have additionally considered

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<sup>56</sup> Ambrose *Expositio*, 11

how Jacob favored Rachel of Leah and loved. Had Jacob assessed his wives by Ambrose's criterion, Leah would have been the favored wife, and the children begotten by the maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah would have been superfluous. While the arrangement of plural wives bearing children by proxy through maidservants is clearly specific to the culture and time that generated the narrative of Jacob, it's imperative to recognize that if Ambrose's moral rationale is to be imprinted onto ancient scriptural texts, then the nations of Israel that generated from these unions (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher) would be illegitimate. Moreover, Ambrose's strong opinion on abstaining from "excessive" intercourse within marriage may well have ended Jacob's conjugal relationship with Leah after only a few sons, which opens up a whole new set of problems for Ambrose- if Jacob, who God had promised children to, had lived up to Ambrose's standard of righteousness, then it's quite possible that Judah would not have been born- a hiccup in the lineage of Christ that would have disrupted Ambrose's later commentary on the genealogy.

### **Ambrose and the Women of Matthew Chapter One**

In order to understand how Ambrose's presentation of Mary coincided with a decidedly slanted presentation of women in the Bible, it's important to examine his treatment of women whose accounts in scripture did not reflect the purity and piety evident in the life of young Mary. Ambrose gives ample opportunity to do this with his introduction of the women in the lineage of Christ. Ambrose's inclusion of these women

in his discussion of Jesus' family line was an overt melding of Luke 3 and Matthew 1. The variances in these two genealogies being a significant cause for discussion amongst theologians. Ambrose laid the foundation for his discussion in Book III of his commentary, pointing out that discrepancies in the genealogies may merely reflect different focuses on the aspects of Jesus' role as a priest and king, with Matthew focusing on the kingly role and Luke (the book attributed with displaying Jesus' co-occurring sacrificial and priestly natures) focused on the priestly heritage.

Referring to the lineage described in Matthew also opened up the discussion on women for Ambrose. One might wonder if his argument that the vessel of Jesus' infancy (Mary) was required to be sinless, might also apply to the ancestry leading to that point. Ambrose jumps at the opportunity with alacrity and began a routine of logical gymnastics that include dazzling feats like describing an act of prostitution as chastity and adultery as honorable because it produced the Root of Jesse several generations later. The women included in the genealogy provided in Matthew are a group of perplexingly "human" individuals. Individuals, no less, who have their least glorious moments recorded in sacred text for all of perpetuity to learn from and read. That particular roster included Tamar, who played the role of harlot in order to become impregnated by her father-in-law Judah. Ruth, who was a Moabite, and as such had a pagan upbringing, had a heritage of incest. She additionally defied the norms of modest women in her culture when she went alone amongst the men sleeping on the threshing floor after harvest to solicit Boaz's covering as husband. Finally, Ambrose addressed Bathsheba, who committed adultery with King David while her husband Uriah was away at war. She then colluded with

David to keep the resulting pregnancy a secret by notifying him rather than confessing to her own husband-who by all accounts was a righteous and valiant man who was faithful to the king. Ambrose did take a moment to reflect on Matthew's choices of inclusion. "Many may wonder why Matthew thought that the commemoration of the-as it seems to them-notorious woman Tamar...and why Ruth; why also that if the woman who was Uria's wife...when, in particular, he never mentions Sarah and Rachel, holy women."<sup>57</sup>

The incidents of Sarah's laughter at the prophecy of her coming child Isaac (Genesis 18:12, or that she charged her maid Hagar with taking her place in Abraham's bed (Genesis 16:3) are not mentioned, nor Rachel's lying to her father Laban about an idol she stole from his home (Genesis 31:34 and 35). The bishop's choice of these two as righteous in comparison Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba shows a different regard for what exactly comprises righteousness than that of the apostle Paul, who maintained that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)."<sup>58</sup> Peter added that Christ "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins might live for righteousness-by whose stripes you were healed." (1 Peter 2:24) James further encourages Christians to "Confess... trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (James 5:16) At no point in these writings is righteousness defined as purity. Rather, the

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<sup>57</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio*, 98.

<sup>58</sup> Ambrose does not mention the actual expectations of righteousness given in the canon in both the OT and NT- commonly known through the Ten Commandments and Levitical Law, but also reiterated by Paul in Romans 13:9, "You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

apostles point repeatedly to righteousness being dedication to God and repentance when sin does occur; not successful abstinence from sin. Departure from apostolic authors was a serious thing and put Ambrose squarely outside of the canon on this issue in particular. He additionally neglected the description of a righteous wife in Proverbs Chapter Thirty-One, which could have been used to support his points on righteous womanhood, had he been of a mind to use it. These oversights are unfortunate for the reader of Ambrose's Commentary on Luke who trusted in his contextualization of his comments, but also illuminate for modern scholars where Ambrose's idea of a pious woman was not rooted in scripture, but elsewhere.

A single (and consequently significant) omission from the women listed in the genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew from this procession in Ambrose's analysis is Rahab, who is listed in the text as the wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz, who was the husband of Ruth. The absence of Rahab is significant beyond being the only woman left out of Ambrose's comments on the women in Jesus' family line because Ambrose made such a deep point of why Ruth's status as a foreigner was significant in her marriage to Boaz. That is to say, that Ambrose made a point of emphasizing that the inclusion of foreigners in the line of David and the heritage of Jesus was significant because Ruth had forsaken the house of her father in order to enter the house of the Lord.<sup>59</sup> Rahab, who (as

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<sup>59</sup> The nuance of parallel vocabulary between Ruth's entering the "Lord's House" and words used typically used to describe a nun entering a monastic lifestyle should not be lost here. Ambrose had a reputation for encouraging virgins to abandon the matrimonial expectations of their families to enter a life of chastity. Noble families were reputed to keep their daughters home from Ambrose's public events for fear that he would persuade them to take the veil of Christ rather than the bridal veil that would propagate family life as well as bringing in dowries and networking opportunities.

a foreigner) entered the family of Judah before Ruth, is left unaddressed. However, unlike Tamar who merely “played” a prostitute, Rahab actually was one and is documented as such in the book of Joshua in an account that includes clear distinction of her valor and service to the Israelites in their quest to enter and establish their promised land. Ambrose spends several pages of his exegesis working to justifiably describe these women or their actions as righteous in and of themselves, with attention to Tamar and Bathsheba, whose actions merited a good deal of spin on Ambrose’s part in order to justify them through the framework of virtue and good works that Ambrose seemed to rely on so heavily. Tamar was excused for her actions by the end result- in her case the production of a male heir to continue the line of Judah. Ambrose embraced the fact that this birth resulted in twins with alacrity and felt that the double birth held great significance in terms of the kinsman redeemer, or Goel; a role outlined in Leviticus to ensure the continuation of a man’s family line if he died childless. In this instance his wife and nearest male relative (traditionally a brother) would marry and produce an heir to take his name, thus redeeming the widow from potential poverty and the family name from obscurity(Deuteronomy 25:5). Boaz’s marriage to a foreigner is significant in the narrative of redemption as a picture of Jesus as the kinsman redeemer for the church. This explains in part Ambrose’s fascination with the marriages and progeny of these women consistently end with their justification through their symbolic place in the redemption narrative, and the works of their child or their contribution to the lineage of Jesus. The strong focus on this rings more of Roman *pudicitia* than atonement for sin. For example, Tamar is presented as righteous because her actions led to the birth the Perez

and Zerah and the fulfillment of her role as a woman, not because she lived in accordance with the law or because her sin was atoned for through sacrifice.

His hard work in exonerating Tamar and Bathsheba while elevating Ruth put Ambrose in the position of displaying either a lack of biblical literacy, or executing a calculated omission. His use of intertextual cross references on this point were (as in many other cases in his commentary on Luke) limited largely to OT references, in spite of specific supports for Rahab's redemption existing in the NT books of Hebrews (Hebrews 11:31) and James (James 2:25). The authors of these books in particular described Rahab as a woman of faith who had been justified by her works, but Ambrose remained silent on her behalf. Instead, he chose to elevate Ruth, who (in his description) was honored primarily for her part in modelling how a foreigner might enter into a righteous path. Once again, Ambrose treats the documentary reference or "foreshadowing" between the OT and NT superficially. That is to say that where there was a blatant connection between the text he was discussing in Luke and the OT, Ambrose issued only a nodding acknowledgment that Boaz had gone through the process of a *goel* or kinsman redeemer, or that Rahab had become righteous following what was considered a life of sin.

Ambrose' understanding of the role of a pious woman in society was tinted largely by his enculturation and upbringing in Rome, where the role of an honorable woman was assumed to be a single set trajectory. He portrayed the women in Jesus' genealogy as righteous for their fertility and contributions to preserving the family line. He lauded their husbands (occasionally) for recognizing the righteous devotion of their

wives or co-parents of their shared children (Judah's response to Tamar's actions, for example) as though family life were the only manner in which a woman could distinguish herself.

### **Vestiges of Rome in Ambrose's Doctrines**

Prestige and honor in an upper-class woman of Rome was connected directly to the Roman virtue *pudicitia*, which was the honorable trait of being a "one-man" woman coupled with the matronly duty to bear children and create the ideal domicile. In order to protect *pudicitia*, women were under constant escort by a male relative. The only exceptions to this rule were Vestal Virgins, who wore the dress of a bride, virgin, and matron simultaneously and were allowed to walk out on their own in addition to attending events typically reserved for men. Outside of this one exception, womanhood in Rome was divided by into distinct categories, with a virgin's duty being to her father and a wife's duty to her husband.<sup>60</sup>

Biblical matrons fell outside of the Roman system of stringent categories, with tales of valor, wisdom, righteousness, and sacrifice much like those generally reserved for virgins or female martyrs by the Medieval Era. Deborah, for example, was a prophetess and judge as well as a wife. She stood beside Barak in battle, and led Israel to victory with him. (Judges 4:9) In the same battle Jael the wife of Heber apprehended Sisera, the leader of Canaan's troops and took his life with a tent peg before Barak

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<sup>60</sup> Widows formed a third category that held a deal more leeway for women depending on their social class and family situation. It is perhaps this "dangerous" ambiguity that led Ambrose to write his treatise on widows early on in hopes of curtailing any liberties or potential for remarriage by the bereaved.

arrived, thus securing the victory for Israel with her actions (Judges 4:22).<sup>61</sup> Abigail, who was described as beautiful and wise, contradicted her husband Nabal after he offended and sent King David and his men away in the book of 1 Samuel. (1 Samuel 25) Instead, she offered quality provisions and went herself to make peace with the warrior-king. David credited her with preventing him from putting blood on his hands, her own husband from sure death, and procured an honored position for herself in David's estimation; a fact that would later result in her marriage to him<sup>62</sup>. Paul was called upon in the book of Acts to raise the disciple Tabitha from the dead. The widows beseeching his action showed him garments she had made for them, and shared accounts of her kindness to them. Not once is her marital status or chastity mentioned. It is not uncommon for Biblical texts show women as intelligent, brave, wise, and benevolent in addition to righteous and pure. Marriage (or lack thereof) does not necessarily come into play in terms of what led to their being considered righteous. Ambrose makes little use of his opportunities in explicating the text of Luke to highlight the multifaceted nature of women in sacred texts with his discussion of virgins and wives in the NT and OT, which suits his culture, but coupled with his persistent elevation of women, it does leave one

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<sup>61</sup> Jael gave Sisera a drink of milk and promised to watch the tent door while he (fatigued by battle) slept hidden away. Once he was asleep Jael approached him and drove a tent peg through his temple and into the ground.

<sup>62</sup> Abigail would have been the ideal example for Ambrose to hold up, being called a righteous wife in scripture. However, she married after the death of her cruel husband and chose to accept David's proposal of marriage. This proposal may very well have been an offering of covering or protection on the part of David, who clearly respected Abigail, but her absence from his biography moving forward is significant in terms of describing any intimate relationship between them.. While she was honored as the wife of a king and provided for within his house, his affections and principal concern amongst his wives was clearly Bathsheba. Ambrose's concern for the provision and protection of the widows he exhorts to remain unwed in other works may well have turned another way had he been familiar with the actions of righteous Abigail.

wondering if the omission might be due to a lack of familiarity with scripture or perhaps just dexterity in his approach to the canon.

### **Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke**

Once he had completed his prologue and analysis of Luke as an author, Ambrose turned his attention to the text itself, which begins with a narrative of how priest Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth learned of their forthcoming child (John) and some explanation of the time leading up to it. In this narrative, it is revealed that the couple is beyond traditional child-rearing years in age and that Elizabeth feels herself rid of reproach by her pregnancy. The bishop discussed Elizabeth and Zacharias only briefly in comparison to the treatise that he inserted into his explication of the text—mainly airing his thoughts on the proclivities of young men being unsuitable to the mature. “What was the reason for this concealment, if not modesty? For there is a prescribed age for each duty, and what is fitting at one time is unseemly at another...there are certain seasons prescribed for marriage itself, when it would be proper to attend to the begetting of children...”<sup>63</sup> His expansion on the text defies biblical context on a number of fronts, first and foremost that his opinion (for which he offered no scriptural support) directly conflicts with scriptural context. Furthermore, were one to search for a literary source from which Ambrose may have pulled this idea, authors such as Cicero and Livy with their examples of expectations of married women in the Roman world come closest, as discussed by Rebecca Langlands in her book *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*.

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<sup>63</sup> Ambrose *Expositio*, 38

Langlands points out that (based on her reading of Livy) the practice and cultivation of *pudicitia* fell to the women in a marriage, which indicates some agency over their role within their marriages even in the patriarchal structures of Rome.<sup>64</sup> Ambrose promoted the same sort of agency for women, but directed it toward crafting an atmosphere of chastity in their homes rather than one of dedicating oneself to their husband alone. These expectations were framed out in the Roman virtue *pudicitia*, a trait that would increasingly shape expectations on Christian women in a progressively Roman version of the church, which can be observed with regard to Mary in particular. Just as Ambrose's idea of feminine modesty had far more to do *pudicitia* than the Bible, he also neglected an arsenal of scriptural accounts of barren women who had conceived through miraculous circumstances in the O.T. These women included Sarah who gave birth to Isaac, the fulfillment of the prophecy that Abraham would father a nation (Genesis 21); Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1); the rich widow from Shunem who gave birth to a son after Elijah prayed on her behalf (2 Kings 4:8-37); and Rachel's two pregnancies (Genesis 30:23 and 35:18) were each scandalous in some manner according to Ambrose's assessment. Joseph was a much prayed over resolution to the barrenness of Rachel's womb, and Benjamin was born much later and was younger than his eleven brothers, indicating that Rachel and Jacob continued in their intimacy into what Ambrose would have considered their later years.

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<sup>64</sup> Rebecca Langlands, *Sexuality in Ancient Rome*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47.

This oversight on Ambrose' part was made in spite of Genesis chapters thirty and thirty-one indicating that Rachel was spending the night with her husband on a regular basis because he (Jacob) loved her regardless of whether or not she bore children. Ambrose is silent on all of these intertextual cross references and instances of women miraculously bearing children after their youth. He does, however discuss both Sarah and Joseph at later points in his commentary, leaving the reader to speculate as to how intentional his lack of intertextuality might have been. Ambrose kept his attention on Elizabeth and Zacharias in a sense, "But truly, when the ripe maturity of life has supervened, and the age is more suited for ruling children than producing them, it is shameful to bear the signs of intercourse, albeit lawful, for the belly to be weighed down with the burden of a different season, and to swell with untimely fruit."<sup>65</sup> He went further, explaining why Elizabeth must have blushed over her pregnancy, but should have felt no shame. "Yet she blushed for her age at giving birth. And, again, she rejoiced to be free from reproach; for it is shame for women to lack the rewards of wedlock, which is the sole reason for their marrying."<sup>66</sup>

Ambrose' address of holy women grew curiously more "Roman" as he approached the subject of Mary. Again, Ambrose shunned the idea of intimacy within marriage being acceptable, this time indicating that Mary was a paragon of purity due to her virginity, which he believed must have remained intact following the birth of Jesus. Yet again, Ambrose' address of a righteous woman is curiously dismissive of other

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<sup>65</sup> Ambrose *Expositio*, 38

<sup>66</sup> Ambrose *Expositio*, 39

regions of scripture while excusing trespasses of his own doctrine with justifications based on *pudicitia*. The bishop discusses redemption and forgiveness of sins, but consistently returns to exhortations that those wishing to be pure must not have sinned and must have avoided intercourse in particular. This presentation of purity insufficiently addresses the biblical narratives of forgiveness for sins and atonement through sacrifice. The traditional protests against Mary's perpetual virginity stand within scriptural text as well (other sections of scripture mention Mary in conjunction with other children described as her children, etc.)<sup>67</sup> but forefront in this study is Ambrose' selective interpretation of scripture without seeming to have read it all. For example, Ambrose puts a significant emphasis on virtue, but neglects with fruits of the spirit described in Galatians (Galatians 5:22). He describes Mary as a perfect example of Christian womanhood but avows that she remained chaste within her marriage which necessitates the precarious choice of raising up a woman as an example who did *not* fulfill the directives given to wives with regard to their husbands in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthian church(1 Corinthians 7). In this passage, Paul instructs the church on expectations for Christian marriage. He states first that if a single person can remain so without burning with lust, then it is better for them to do so. However, he added that if they "cannot exercise self-control" then it is better to marry than "burn with passion", the implication being that in Paul's opinion, marriage creates a framework in which intimacy and affection are exchanged as a holy and sanctified token of union. The author of

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<sup>67</sup>These mentions are numerous, but include Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55-56, and (perhaps most notable here) Luke 8:19. In his address of this section of Luke in his commentary, Ambrose

Hebrews adds that “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure...”(Hebrews 13:4) Scripture endorses marriage and intimacy within it, but Ambrose promoted chastity for wed and unwed alike without offering an answer to these points in the text that he was explicating. Additionally, scripture places no caveat on sex within marriage that pertained to age, as Ambrose does in his description of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

Oddly, Ambrose’ description of Mary’s righteousness has seemingly little to do with having been a sinner in need of redemption, and places her in a position defined more closely to a seemingly contradictory combination of the Roman concept of *pudicitia* and the college of Vestal Virgins, or priestesses of Vesta long established in Rome. In addition to this, as Ambrose created more texts or expounded on previous texts in greater detail on the subject of virgins within the church, it become apparent that his understanding of virginity had less to do with purity generated through sanctification and much more to do with the sort of sexual abstinence associated with the Vestal Virgins of Rome than the other women described in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ heritage. Many authors attribute Ambrose’s stance against the vestals as his version as a non-competition clause. Pagans might be left to practice as they pleased for a time, but their institutions must not compete or draw attention from the order of virgins Ambrose had worked so hard to establish. However, the existence and developing structures of these orders of virgins had no scriptural foundation or bearing. They would eventually be based on the structure provided by male monasteries (Antony) but within scripture there was no precedent for virgins. There were, however multiple exhortations for wives and husbands.

The celibate were to dedicate themselves to the work of the Lord, which Ambrose supports as well, with a hard-hitting and heavy emphasis on chastity being a source of righteousness. How he justified this in the face of existing scripture while simultaneously denouncing the vestal is either mystifying or a straw man. This shift carries much stronger connotation of the tales Ambrose would have been educated with regarding the pantheon of Greek and Roman deities and their mortal consorts than the narrative of grace and redemption in question here, once again illustrating that this particular educated individual was taught in the ways of Rome and was attempting to interpret biblical text through a Roman lens rather than a canonical one.

### **Mary as an Example of Purity**

Ambrose depended heavily on works and end-result-products of individual acts as a means of proving the purity of an individual. He proved this repeatedly not only in his assessment of Mary, but also in his representation of Tamar, Bathsheba, and Elizabeth. Mary and Elizabeth are both credited with the activities of the children in their wombs (John jumped in Elizabeth's womb when she greeted Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus). This assessment of purity echoes (once again) Roman *pudicitia* or abstinence for unholy living rather than sanctification through the crucifixion of Christ. Ambrose assumes that Mary must have been completely pure in order to give birth to the Messiah, but neglects to explain how John was able to baptize if purity was required to beget the

sanctity of the Savior (John 3:13-15).<sup>68</sup> Another instance of the bishop's departure from biblical examples of purity came later in his commentary, when he referred to Odysseus as a parallel to Jesus for resisting the temptation of the Sirens. In this instance, Odysseus bound himself to the ship and had his men plug their ears with wax so that they could not hear the song of the Sirens. Relating the temptation of Jesus (alone in the desert with willpower only and no physical restraints) shows a deeper reliance on cultural frameworks than an ability to quote or refer to scripture on the part of Ambrose. Beyond this, Ambrose neglected the concept of beauty from ashes, Rahab's redemption. If he wanted to make a point of Boaz marrying Ruth- Ambrose would have done well to acknowledge that Naomi and Ruth knew that it would be a miracle to find a righteous man who would wed a woman born of incest (Ruth/Moabitess) yet here Boaz; the son of a foreigner and harlot was in a unique position to put the tradition of kinsman redeemer into action and accept such an outlandish bride. Not only accept, but to wed and integrate her heritage into his own family line.

The redemption of Ruth, who was behaving herself quite well compared to the other women in Jesus' lineage, is a point that Ambrose really should have addressed with regard to a heritage of purity in the lineage of Christ. More specifically, he would have done well to explore implications of his doctrine of purity with regard to the redemption of Ruth with Boaz as her Goel. If Ambrose meant to insinuate that purity is the product of

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<sup>68</sup> When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John protested, saying that it was he who needed baptism from Jesus, who answered that John must baptize him to fulfill all righteousness. John's request for baptism indicates a knowledge that he was unworthy to baptize Jesus. If those performing righteous acts towards Jesus (like John and Mary) needed to be sinless in order to leave him untainted, then John's comments here should be points of concern.

a sinless life rather than the nature of a redeemed one, he would have done well to refer to Stephen or the Pharisees. Boaz was the product of an unclean union by Ambrose's standards. How could he then justify extolling Ruth if redemption had to come through somebody clean? Boaz was not clean, nor was Ruth by those standards. This meant that Obed, Jesse, and David were all doomed in turn. David might have turned things around based on most of his actions, but his union with Bathsheba out of all the women that he had a marital right to, the one bathing on the rooftop was the one with whom he fathered the future king Solomon. Not Abigail, who he had married and was described as both beautiful and wise. Not Michal, who had betrayed her father Saul in order to save David out of her love for him, but Bathsheba. The wife and betrayer of Uriah the Mighty Man.<sup>69</sup> The sequence of unions in the family tree that would eventually host Jesus had little to do with purity as an absence of sin or wrongdoing and everything to do with purity being a natural of redemption. Ambrose addressed this lightly but (as previously discussed) through the lens of *pudicitia* and tradition rather than a literary discussion of scriptural text.

The points of scripture that Ambrose neglected to consider or acknowledge before crafting his address of Luke limit the validity of his exegetical prowess. Likewise, there were sections that would have been an asset to his argument had he made use of them. For example, Dinah's brothers declaring her "spoiled." following her seduction or rape, depending on how the text is being interpreted. Regardless, mention of her situation and

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<sup>69</sup> 2 Samuel 23:8-38 explains that David had a small group of elite fighters. Men who were exemplary in their faithfulness to him as their leader, who were valiant in battle and who were examples of integrity and righteousness. These fighters (Uriah among them) are referred to in scripture as David's Mighty Men.

the impact on her family would have been a strong support to Ambrose's argument. Between *Expositio* and his other texts, Ambrose makes it clear that while sinners could certainly be redeemed, those who had not sinned or indulged in the blessings of the marriage bed were *more* pure. In this aspect Ambrose departs in nature from scripture when he defines virginity as purity and neglects sins of the heart like the lust of the eyes discussed by Paul.<sup>70</sup> The primary source (scripture written by first-hand witnesses like the apostles) would have been a strong foundation to his argument. Instead, Ambrose clung to the work of Origen, who was controversial figure in the church and would soon be denounced and excommunicated. The bishop's apparent choice to follow the writings of Origen rather than dedicating his time to developing a strong foundation of knowledge in the documents upon which his church was based are easily an argument for Ambrose' strength resting in traditional literacy rather than a thorough mastery of scriptural literacy.

In the *Expositio* Ambrose declared that he focused his prologue of his commentary on Luke on the author's historical approach. Immediately following this statement, he launched into several pages of diligent connection making as he drew parallels between the tri-fold nature of wisdom ascribed to by secular philosophers, three types of wisdom in the OT, in Solomon's books of wisdom, and the four synoptic gospels. Within his first few paragraphs, Ambrose had (perhaps unwittingly) established his foundation of knowledge as secular, and affirmed his knowledge of the holy as being

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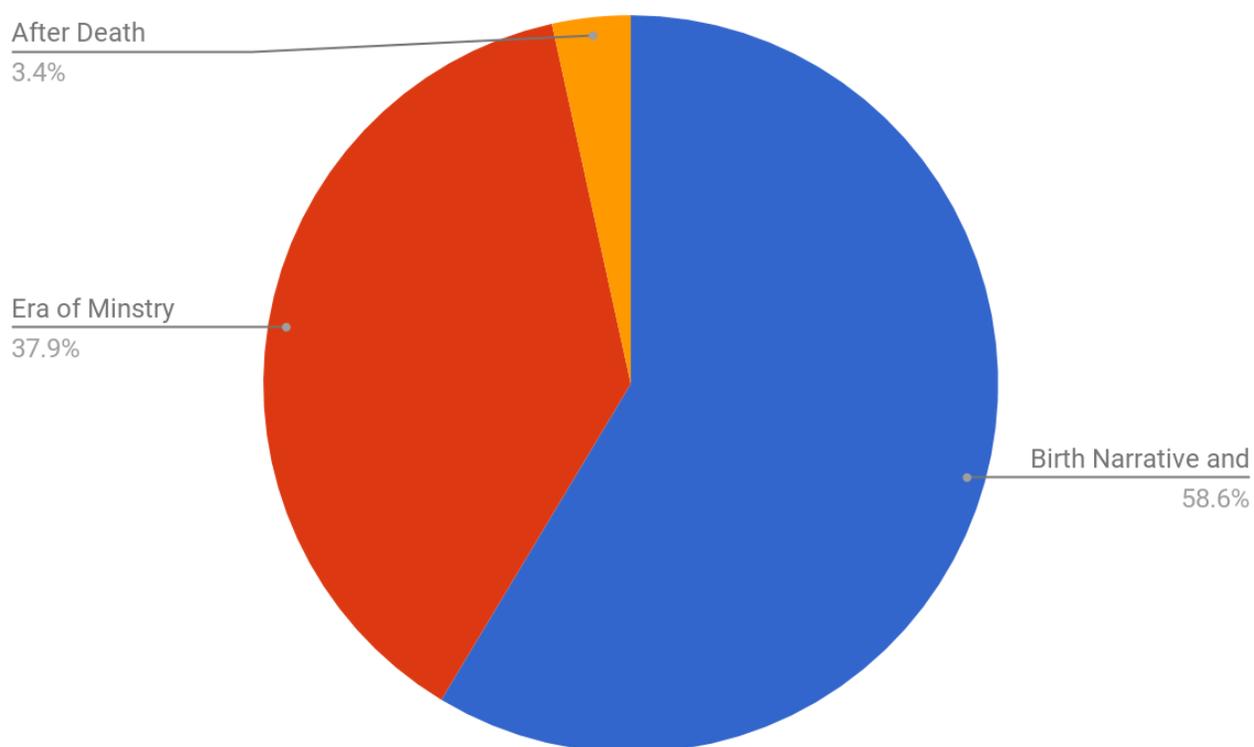
<sup>70</sup> Luke was not an apostle, but is believed to have been a follower of Christ close enough to have been in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus' arrest.

derived from texts written by contemporaries or recent predecessor rather than directly explicating biblical texts.

### **Mary in the Book of Luke and Ambrose's Discourse**

One area that Ambrose displays a stronger dependence on the work of others than on scripture is in his preoccupation with virgins, and with Mary in particular. The bishop exhibits a disproportionate emphasis on Mary in comparison to how frequently she is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. Although she is prominent in Ambrose's commentary on the book, Mary is only mentioned by name a total of eleven times in Luke. Four of these instances fall within the conversation between Mary and the Angel prophesying of her virgin birth. Two pertain directly to Mary's visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth, and three occur within the nativity account. The tenth instance of Mary's name coming up in the Gospel of Luke pertains directly to her visit to the temple with Jesus as a babe, and the final mention comes in chapter twenty-four, where "Mary" is mentioned as the mother of James. The multitude of women named Mary with sons named James leaves this particular mention open to multiple interpretations. Three further references occur throughout the Gospel of Luke alluding to Mary directly as Jesus' mother. While the first two references of this sort pertain again to Jesus' infancy and childhood, the third mention of Mary, occurs in chapter eight. This particular instance has been the cause of some significant controversy amongst theologians and scholars who maintain that Mary's virginity was temporal, this mention reading "...Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some,

who said, “Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You. But He answered and said to them, “My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21) In this instance Ambrose assumed but the traditional argument that “brothers” must have referred to the brotherhood of Christianity rather than a biological link.



#### Mentions of Mary in the New Testament

**Birth Narrative and Childhood:** Includes all mentions of Mary regarding the birth of Christ, in addition to the account of Jesus teaching in the temple as a child

**Jesus’ Era of Ministry:** Includes all mentions in the four gospels from the wedding at Cana through the crucifixion and resurrection accounts

**AD (Anno Domini):** Mentions of Mary following the resurrection account

The scandalous component here was the mention of Jesus' brothers in tandem with Mary being an indication that Mary had not remained a virgin following the birth of Jesus. Mary is referred to as a virgin in both Matthew 1:23 and Luke 1:27, but both of these references pertain to the birth narrative. She is also arguably referred to as a virgin in Isaiah 7:14 when the Isaiah prophesied to the "House of David" (Ahaz, in this instance).<sup>71</sup> "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14) Outside of the four gospels, and the OT prophecies regarding the birth of the Messiah, Mary is not mentioned again aside from a single reference in the book of Acts. This mention would have (once again) proved problematic for Ambrose, as Mary is brought up once again as the mother of Jesus, but with specific mention of his brothers as well. Ambrose would later offer discussion on Mary when he explicated chapter twenty-four of Luke; this time reaching outside of his chosen text to explain that Mary was given to John as a mother, and John to Mary as a son by Jesus as he hung on the cross. Ambrose was concerned that these final arrangements would inspire widows to take young attractive men into their homes and focused his attention there rather than the practical application with Christian concern and provision discussed later in the books of Acts and James.

In Book II of Ambrose's commentary, the bishop discussed (once again) the virginity of Mary, this time addressing the subject through the lenses of the Holy Spirit, followed by Joseph. Ambrose avows that the Holy spirit chose a virgin who was married,

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<sup>71</sup> Other mentions of Jesus' brothers include Matthew 13:55, Matthew 27:56; John 7:5; Mark 6:3, etc. Ambrose elaborates extensively in the prologue and first section of his commentary that Mary must have remained a virgin. However, these arguments are based more in his skill as a rhetor than in biblical literacy exemplified through intertextual supports and references.

or under the covering of a man, to protect her from shame, and to enlist Joseph in creating a defense against possible charges of fornication on her part. Ambrose goes on to comment that this situation (a married virgin) served to preserve her from accusation while assuring that some would doubt Jesus' paternity, but none would doubt her honor. "...that she should be seen as not having known a man; espoused, lest she whose swollen belly presented the sign of seducer be branded with dishonor of violated virginity. But the Lord preferred that there be some doubt concerning His Birth..."<sup>72</sup> Shortly after this, the bishop explained how Joseph was described as a righteous man in scripture and so must have known that having a sexual relationship with his wife would violate what Ambrose called "the Temple of Holy Spirit, the Mother of the Lord, the womb of mystery."<sup>73</sup> The doctrine supporting the abstinence of Joseph and Mary cannot be substantiated based on the canon of scripture, but was growing in popularity at the time. The assumption that these two righteous people failed to meet the requirements of a Christian marriage in terms of dedicating themselves to each other and not being apart at night except for an agreed upon time, balks in the face of NT writings that specifically addressed the undefiled marriage bed (Hebrews 13:4). How the arrangement of Mary's perpetual virginity serves the purpose of the cross is not made clear by Ambrose, but his frequent and adamant reiterations make it clear that he did place great store in Mary's virginity.

Because many of Ambrose's most strongly worded sections of text center on topics not addressed in scripture, or contrary to scripture, readers are left to conclude that

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<sup>72</sup> Ambrose *Expositio* 41

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid* 44

Ambrose is either pulling his doctrine from extracanonical sources, that he is willfully neglecting or ignorant of intertextual supports (lacking in scriptural literacy), or that he was working to support something that he personally felt was of value, and which then framed his reading scriptural texts. If a reader has only scripture and the *Expositio* as reference, Ambrose's adamancy regarding chastity and Mary's virginity is perplexing at best. Because the source of this doctrine is not clearly outlined within scripture or in Ambrose's texts, it is necessary to investigate outside contexts that might have caused Ambrose to hold virginity in such high regard. Among these sources are his other writings, his famed battle with Symmachus regarding the Altar of Nike and disbanding of the Vestal Virgins. The women in question served a pagan purpose in Rome as the only college of female priestesses. These priestesses enjoyed certain privileges not afforded to other women in Rome, but also bore the burden of Rome's success or defeat as a society. As the priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth and fertility, Vestals were celebrated and honored so long as crops were good and the economy booming. If these things suffered, Vestals were blamed for the shortfall, and their devotion questioned. These women were chosen in childhood and dedicated to serving for some time, and were released from their services with guaranteed dowries from the Roman State and a high rank in society. These incentives ensured that retired Vestals had a good number of suitors, but many of them opted to remain single, reluctant to give up the freedoms they enjoyed outside of matrimony.

Vestals were the best example of chaste, powerful, pious women in Roman society, and were likely the best touch-point Ambrose would have had for his discussion

of single women dedicated to surrendering their physical expressions of devotion to a husband in favor of dedicating their abstinence from that activity as a form of devotion and service to God. Ironically, Ambrose fought with all the mite his pen could muster in his letters to the emperor arguing to disband the Vestals. He was ultimately successful (to the great dismay of Symmachus) in eradicating the institution, but for all intents and purposes, seems to have instilled the church with their structure and purpose, redirected this time to prayer and holy works in the name of the Lord.

### **Conclusion**

The issue of Ambrose's utility of scripture is a complicated one. He was clearly able to read and write and had certainly had done so with regards to certain sections of the canon at an impressive level. However, his actual level of literacy with specific regard to scripture is ambiguous at best. Here was mind brilliant enough to place emperors beneath his command, which (in its secular role) had previously been an active participant in the political sphere of Rome. He wrote extensively on scripture, but his writings revolve largely around topics that would have been made familiar to him through the writings of others. His perception of purity resounds of Roman and Pharisaic approaches to the topic. His neglect of other holy women in the Bible foils to his attempts to elevate Mary and Elizabeth. Rahab, in particular could have been a compelling character for his discussion and was named in the same genealogy as Tamar and Ruth, who he did choose to discuss. The latter two issues (Ambrose's neglect of OT heroines and Rahab in particular) leave ample room for further discussion and future study.

If Ambrose had indeed managed to do in twelve years what his rabbinical counterparts dedicated their entire lives to with regard to only the first testament, while simultaneously waging a war against pagan strongholds in the church through a rigorous letter-writing campaign, quelling dissent between the Arian and Nicene Christians in his community, and writing numerous treatises designed to persuade virgins and widows not to marry, then it is possible that he truly did have the time and opportunity to build the biblical awareness and literacy needed to recognize his omissions in the areas discussed in this thesis.

However, since he was indeed engaged in all of the above and was additionally in the unenviable position of receiving training for service in the secular realm and being suddenly dropped into a culture that ran counter to his old one, it seems entirely possible that Ambrose may have very well prioritized his study to focus on more recent scholars. Being dependent on the likes of Origen and Philo would have given Ambrose a good beginning as he acclimatized to the church. Regardless, dependence on the work of others and cultural standards of the days rather than the primary source text would explain Ambrose's gaps in intertextual supports from scripture as well as his authoritative discussion of doctrines (such as Mary's perpetual virginity) that were not clearly staked out in scripture. Combined with his dedication to virginity, his definition of piety as "abstaining from sin," his appropriation of *pudicitia* as a Christian trait, and his close adherence to books that had already been explicated by others, it seems readily apparent that Ambrose based his doctrine and writings on sources outside of scripture. While this does not definitively categorize him as illiterate in terms of the canon of scripture,

exegesis is meant to investigate scripture and increase biblical literacy for both the exegete and their reader. The *Expositio* moved several steps away for both parties in this instance. What could have been a brilliant show of scriptural literacy and discussion of holy things was turned instead to Odysseus, and readers are steered through text reminiscent of Symmachus' defense of the Vestal Virgins (when not assigning *pudicitia* to the feminine contingent of Jesus' family line). It is consequently difficult to categorize Ambrose as being scripturally literate. It is, however, possible to say with confidence that he did not apply literate practices to biblical texts. Whether intentional or not, this move on his part changed the way that the Church functioned within the Late Roman Empire. It held significant sway in the Church and contributed to a trend that would create doctrines and movements in the coming Medieval Era that would defy scripture and remain a mark on the Church's records for centuries to come.

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