

Sewing Fig Leaves: Stoic Allegory as a Locus of Power in Ambrosian Exegesis

This paper considers Ambrose's *de paradiso* in the context of the Stoic tradition of allegorical interpretation. Ambrose's *de paradiso* is a work of scriptural exegesis dealing with the creation and fall of Adam and Eve. It was probably written in 375 soon after Ambrose became bishop. This paper begins by considering the Stoic method of using allegory in interpreting Homer, Hesiod, and other literary texts in order to show that these texts are talking about Stoic physics. It focuses especially on Cornutus' *epidrome* and its use of etymologizing allegory to interpret Homer and Hesiod's writings. Current scholarship, like G.W. Most's "Cornutus and Stoic Allegoresis" and Keimpe Algra's "Comments or Commentary? Zeno of Citium and Hesiod's 'Theogonia,'" is used to provide a framework for discussion of the Stoic use of allegory. The paper then proceeds to discuss Ambrose's many and extensive borrowings from Philo of Alexandria's *Allegory of the Law* and *Questions on Genesis*. Ambrose's borrowings from Philo and other authors, like Basil of Caesarea, were widely acknowledged in antiquity, by Jerome among others, and in modernity. See, for instance, what David T. Runia says in "Philo and the Early Christian Fathers, "No Christian author ever made more extensive borrowings from Philo than Ambrose, bishop of Milan – they have been estimated as above 600 in number" (2009: 223).¹ H. Savon's *Saint Ambroise devant l'exégèse de Philon le Juif* will provide an overview of Ambrose's borrowings from Philo throughout his works. *De paradiso* is interesting not only because it is the only place in Ambrose's works where he openly mentions that he is borrowing from Philo, but because he provides a reflection on the nature of allegorical interpretation. He, moreover, makes several references to Jewish allegorical interpretation, like Philo's, contrasting its "carnal" character to Ambrose's Christian "spiritual interpretation," a common trope in early Christian literature (Drake 2013). Many of the instances where Ambrose

¹ David T. Runia, "Philo and the Early Christian Fathers."

borrowings from Philo are places where Philo is using Stoic etymological analysis of Hebrew names to provide a moral allegory based in the Jewish Scriptures. Ambrose, however, does not just repeat what Philo says, he also frequently supplements Philo's interpretation or provides an alternative interpretation with quotations from the New Testament. He thus attempts to show that what Philo takes as primarily about moral matters is in actual fact a prefiguration or allegory for things that Christ would accomplish or say. Ultimately, I argue that Ambrose, in borrowing from Philo, has a two-fold goal: to establish the validity of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as literary texts in their own right, capable of being allegorically interpreted, like Hesiod and Homer, and to show his, and Christianity's, superior place over Philo and Judaism in the tradition of allegorical interpretation. In so doing, Ambrose attempts, at the beginning of his career as a bishop and scriptural exegete, to defeat his predecessors in order to establish his own exegetical authority.

Bibliography

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