

# Moral Character of the Book of Deuteronomy in the Exegetical Theory of Ambrose of Milan\*

David Vopřada

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## Abstract:

This paper examines Ambrose of Milan's exegetical treatment of the Book of Deuteronomy within the broader context of his biblical interpretation and pastoral theology. Ambrose perceives Deuteronomy as a cornerstone of moral instruction within the Pentateuch, shaping human life according to divine law. His analysis incorporates classical philosophical traditions, notably the Delphic maxim 'know thyself', to build a Christian understanding of self-knowledge and moral responsibility. The study focuses on Ambrose's interpretation of two passages, Deuteronomy 4:9 and 4:24, highlighting his use of allegory, moral exhortation, and Christological reinterpretation. This approach reflects his efforts to integrate the Old Testament into a Christian theological framework, emphasising continuity between Jewish scripture and Christian doctrine while adapting its message for a fourth-century Roman audience. The paper underscores Ambrose's innovative exegetical techniques, his blending of Greco-Roman and biblical traditions, and the enduring relevance of his insights for contemporary theological discourse.

## Keywords:

Ambrose of Milan, Deuteronomy, patristic exegesis, self-knowledge, allegorical interpretation

For Ambrose, the act of engaging with the Scriptures epitomises the core of divine presence and, therefore, an encounter that transcends mere comprehension of His will, offering a profound engagement with His divine essence. Moreover, in his letter to Sabinus, he articulates his vision of how this moment of biblical engagement unfolds, identifying it with the instance of God's perambulation in the Garden of Eden. Alongside the Book of Genesis and the 'Gospel,' he specifically mentions the Book of Deuteronomy, which for him represents 'the paradise in which the regulations of the Law germinate.'<sup>1</sup> It is hard to find a more fitting confirmation of the importance that the late fourth-century bishop of Milan attached to the fifth book of the Pentateuch.

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose, *Ep.* 33. 3 (CSEL 82/1: 230): *Et nunc deambulat in paradiso deus, quando divinas scripturas lego. [...] paradisus Deuteronomium, in quo germinant legis praecepta, paradisu:s Evangelium, in quo arbor vitae bonos fructus facit et aeternae spei mandata diffundit per universos populos.*

At the same time, it cannot be said that Ambrose regarded the Law as a reality to be lived by the disciples of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Ambrose firmly asserts that Jesus deprived the Jewish people of their heritage – specifically, the kingdom of heaven – and transferred it to the Gentiles. In this way, he also ‘seizes’ the Jewish sacred books, including the ‘Heptateuch’, which ‘Christian people can read’ to understand them, unlike the Jewish people to whom these writings formerly belonged.<sup>3</sup> In this way, he dispenses with the need to interpret the Law from a Jewish perspective. He uses the procedures he knows from Alexandrian exegesis, drawing primarily from (Jewish) Philo and Origen.<sup>4</sup> There is thus a shift in his interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy that corresponds to

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose’s biblical exegesis in general is studied, e.g., by Luigi F. Pizzolato, *La dottrina esegetica di sant’Ambrogio* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1978); Hervé Savon, ‘Le temps de l’exégèse allégorique dans la catéchèse d’Ambroise de Milan’, in *Le Temps chrétien de la fin de l’Antiquité au Moyen Age, IIIe-XIIIe siècles (Colloques internationaux du CNRS, 604)* (Paris: Éd. du CNRS, 1984), 345–361; Gérard Nauroy, ‘L’Ecriture dans la pastorale d’Ambroise de Milan’, in *Le monde latin antique et la Bible*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Ch. Pietri (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 371–408; Camille Gerzaguët, ‘Ambrosius Mediolanensis’, in *Preaching in the Patristic Era: sermons, preachers, and audiences in the Latin West*, ed. Anthony Dupont et al., A new history of the sermon 6 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 160–167; David Vopřada, ‘Christocentric biblical conception of Ambrose of Milan’, in *La conception de l’Écriture et de l’exégèse latine d’Origène à Lorenzo Valla*, ed. Valeria Ingegno (Turnhout: Brepols).

<sup>3</sup> Viktor Hahn, *Das wahre Gesetz*, Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie (Aschendorff, 1969); Gérard Nauroy, ‘Formes de l’exégèse pastorale chez Ambroise et Augustin. Deux lectures de la rivalité entre Jacob et Ésaü,’ in *Saint Augustin et la Bible. Actes du colloque de l’Université Paul Verlaine, Metz, 7-8 avril 2005*, ed. Gérard Nauroy and Marie-Anne Vanier (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 83–104; Gérard Nauroy, ‘Ambroise de Milan face à l’histoire de Caïn et Abel ou l’art du détournement en exégèse’, in *Caïn et Abel*, ed. Jean-Marc Vercruysse, Graphé 29 (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2020), 41–60. Ambrose understands ‘Jews’ more as ‘primarily literary characters that he encountered in his reading of scripture’: Maria Doerfler, ‘Ambrose’s Jews: The Creation of Judaism and Heterodox Christianity in Ambrose of Milan’s *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*’, *Church History* 80, no. 4 (2011): 752.

<sup>4</sup> Philo’s influence on Ambrose is studied esp. by Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l’exégèse de Philon le Juif*, 2 vols. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977); Enzo Lucchesi, *L’usage de Philon dans l’oeuvre exégétique de Saint Ambroise: une „Quellenforschung“ relative aux commentaires d’Ambroise sur la Genèse* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977); David T. Runia, *Philo in early Christian literature: a survey*, *Compendia rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*. Section 3: Jewish traditions in early Christian literature 3 (Assen, Minn.: Van Gorcum, 1993), 291–311; Adam Kamesar, ‘Ambrose, Philo, and the Presence of Art in the Bible’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2001): 73–103; Gérard Nauroy and Michel Poirier, eds., ‘L’expérience d’une collaboration internationale pour « Sources Chrétiennes ». L’édition du *De Cain et Abel*’, in *Lire et éditer aujourd’hui Ambroise de Milan : actes du colloque de l’Université de Metz, 20-21 mai 2005*, *Recherches en littérature et spiritualité* 13 (Berne: Peter Lang, 2007), 181–184; Michele Cutino, ‘Réemploi de Philon d’Alexandrie et typologies épistolaires dans la correspondance d’Ambroise de Milan’, in *La correspondance d’Ambroise de Milan. [Actes du colloque international de Saint-Étienne et Lyon, 26-27 novembre 2009]*, ed. Aline Canelis (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 2012), 201–235; Gérard Nauroy, ‘La création de l’homme (Gn 1, 26) dans une lecture critique de Philon le Juif: l’Epistula 29 (43 M) d’Ambroise de Milan face au De opificio mundi’, in *Judaïsme et christianisme dans les commentaires patristiques de la Genèse*, ed. Marie-Anne Vannier, *Recherches en littérature et spiritualité* 23 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 87–108; Peder Borgen, ‘Philo of Alexandria as Exegete’, in *A history of biblical interpretation*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane Frederick Watson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 144–166; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, ‘Philo as one of the main inspirers of early Christian hermeneutics and apophatic theology’, *Adamantius* 24 (2018): 276–292; Paul M. C. Elliott, ‘Ambrose of Milan and His Use of Philo of Alexandria in His Letters on the Hexaemeron’ (Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (Ohio), 2018); Isidoros Charalampos Katsos, *The metaphysics of light in hexaemeral literature: from Philo of Alexandria to Gregory of Nyssa*, *Oxford Early Christian Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), recently also Victor Yudin, ‘Philo and Ambrose on Genesis 25 as Slavery in Passions’, in *The Fathers on the Bible*, by Nicu Dumitrașcu (London: Routledge, 2022), 93–109; Origen’s influences by Ernst Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung durch Taufe, Busse und Martyrerfürbitte in den Zeugnissen frühchristlicher Frömmigkeit und Kunst* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1973); Gertrud Chappuzeau, ‘Die Exegese von Hohelied 1,2a. b und 7 bei den Kirchenvätern von Hippolyt bis Bernhard. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Allegorie und Analogie’, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 18 (1975): 90–143; Hansjörg Auf der Maur, *Die Psalmenverständnis des Ambrosius von Mailand: ein Beitrag zum Deutungshintergrund der Psalmenverwendung im Gottesdienst der Alten*

the role of the whole Law in his interpretation of the biblical text. At the same time, in his interpretation of Psalm 118(119):172 (*loquetur lingua mea uerbum tuum, quoniam omnia mandata tua iustitia est*), he addresses, in the footsteps of Origen,<sup>5</sup> why even these ‘obscure books’ containing the sacred history of the Chosen People should be dealt with from the point of view of Gentile Christians. He regards them as the word of God, which, as a bishop, he is called to proclaim,<sup>6</sup> and as a preacher, he does not want to unnecessarily give away a single extra word.

Ambrose divides the biblical books according to their meaning into ‘natural,’ i.e., corresponding to natural philosophy, moral, and mystical. In doing so, he gives examples of two series, where the books of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Proverbs correspond successively to the ‘natural’, mystical, and moral content. Likewise, among the books of Moses, he attributes the natural philosophy to Genesis, where the origin of heaven and earth is contained, the mystical to Leviticus because of the ‘priestly mystery’ which it contains, and the moral to the Book of Deuteronomy, ‘in which human life is shaped according to the regulations of the Law’.<sup>7</sup> The reading of the Old Testament books (and specifically of Deuteronomy) thus takes on a moral significance in his approach, which is intended to aid the ability of language to avoid the ‘language of the world’ since it is through these books (as well as the historical books of the New Testament) that Ambrose’s audience is to satiate his ‘hearing’. Moral meaning then plays a vital role in Ambrose’s catechesis of the candidates for baptism, to whom he wants to address precisely the moral meaning as opposed to the mystical meaning, which is addressed to those already baptised.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of this Ambrose’s description of the book of Deuteronomy, I want to answer the following questions: if he claims that within the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy represents a moral doctrine, does Ambrose’s interpretation correspond to this, i.e. does he interpret this book in a moral sense? I am going to focus just on two verse clusters repeatedly used by Ambrose, both of them from Dt 4. This is due to the way Ambrose treats the biblical text: it is not an exegesis of whole passages, but instead of sayings from a relatively small number of biblical quotes, as appears evident from the list of quotations in the *Biblia patristica*.<sup>9</sup> This is also why I intend to study his use of Dt 4:9 and 24 to see how they are used by the Bishop of Milan. This inquiry then points to a more general question, but one that justifies the effort to explore the relationship between a book written sometime in the sixth century BCE and a late fourth-century Christian bishop, separated by nearly a millennium: what can we understand from the transposition of the text of Deuteronomy from the Jewish (post-)exilic period to the Christianised milieu of the late Roman Empire of the

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*Kirche* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977); Hervé Savon, ‘Ambroise lecteur d’Origène’, in *Nec timeo mori. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant’Ambrogio. Milano, 4–11 Aprile 1997*, ed. Luigi Franco Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi, *Studia Patristica Mediolanensia* 21 (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1998), 221–234; Christoph Marksches, ‘Ambrosius und Origenes. Bemerkungen zur exegetischen Hermeneutik zweier Kirchenväter’, in *Origenes und sein Erbe: gesammelte Studien, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 160 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 195–222; Alexander H. Pierce, ‘Reconsidering Ambrose’s Reception of Basil’s *Homiliae in Hexaemeron*: The Lasting Legacy of Origen’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 23, no. 3 (2019): 414–444; David Vopřada, ‘Ambrose’s Access to the Greek Text of Origen’s Homilies on the Psalms in his Exegesis on Psalm 36’, *Adamantius* 26 (2020): 450–460.

<sup>5</sup> *Catena palestinensis* (SC 189: 464), but also Athanasius, *Exp. Ps.* 118. 172 (PG 27: 508C).

<sup>6</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps.* cxviii 22. 20 (CSEL 62: 497–498).

<sup>7</sup> Ambrose, *Expl. ps.* 36. 1 (CSEL 64: 70): *moralis in Deuteronomio, in quo secundum legis praeceptum uita humana formatur*.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose, *De mysteriis* 1. 1 (CSEL 73: 89).

<sup>9</sup> *Biblia patristica. 6: Hilaire de Poitiers, Ambroise de Milan, Ambrosiaster* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 2001).

late fourth century?

### Deuteronomy 4:9

Of the whole of Dt 4:9, Ambrose uses only the short dictum *Adtende tibi ipsi* (translating קִרְבְּךָ הַשְׁמֵר לְךָ), which allows him to graft the Christian understanding of spiritual progress towards perfection onto the Greek philosophical tradition of self-knowledge as the gateway to further spiritual progress. In doing so, he builds on Origen, particularly his interpretation of Sg 1:8(7) LXX, representing a significant breakthrough for Ambrose's understanding of biblical exegesis and his theory of spiritual realities sometime in the mid-380s.<sup>10</sup>

It shows its use, for example, in Book 6 of Ambrose's *Hexameron*, where Dt 4:9 (*Adtende tibi ipsi*) appears several times in connection with the Delphic command γνῶθι σεαυτόν. The verse appears here at the very end of the description of created nature, before the author moves on to the interpretation of the creation of man in Gn 1:26, in connection with Sg 1:8(7) LXX: *Nisi scias te, formonsa in mulieribus*<sup>11</sup> and the theme of self-knowledge associated in the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition with the Pythian statement γνῶθι σεαυτόν. Thus, even in the first group of sayings specifically concerned with self-knowledge, we find more than once Dt 4:9 in conjunction with Sg 1:8, which provide a mirror for interpretation.

The Septuagint translation of Sg 1:8 was first connected with the Delphic dictum γνῶθι σεαυτόν by Origen in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Origen thought that the seven wise men had taken the term from Solomon as the traditional author of the Song of Songs.<sup>12</sup> It is from Origen that Ambrose takes up the theme of self-knowledge, which can, of course, be traced throughout the Christian exegetical tradition in the context of Sg 1:8, and the inscription of the Delphic Oracle, and returns to it repeatedly.<sup>13</sup> Within Ambrose's *Hexameron*, however, the inspiration goes to Basil of Caesarea, who is the main inspiration for Ambrose's interpretation of Gn 1.<sup>14</sup> What makes Ambrose's exposition unique, however, is that he is the one who, for the first time in the Christian exegetical tradition, links Sg 1:8 and the idea of self-knowledge to Dt4:9.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen elsewhere in his work, for example, in *Expositio psalmi cxviii* 10. 10, where he develops the theme of the beauty of man found in his soul, which is in complete contradiction to being bound by earthly and temporal realities because they do not correspond to the preciousness of man/soul:

'Pay heed to yourself,' as the Law says. Pay heed to yourself, that is to your soul. Do not let worldly and mundane things trap you nor earthly things hold you back. Hasten with all your might to him of whose breathing you exist. 'A great thing,' says Scripture, 'is man, and a

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Dassmann, *Die Frömmigkeit des Kirchenvaters Ambrosius von Mailand: Quellen und Entfaltung* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1965), 137-138.

<sup>11</sup> In Ambrose's work, two readings of Sg 1:8 can be found: *nisi scias* and *nisi noscas*. Both variants probably stem from quoting the verse from memory.

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Comm. in Cant.* 2 (GCS 33: 141); see also Plato, *Alcib. I* 131ab; 133de; Jean Pépin, *Idées grecques sur l'homme et sur Dieu* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971), 202.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Courcelle, *Saint Amboise devant le précepte delphique*, in «*Forma futuri.*» *Studi in onore del card. Michele Pellegrino* (Torino: Bottega d'Erasmus 1975), 181-183.

<sup>14</sup> The γνῶθι σεαυτόν theme appears in the hexaemeral context also in Basil, *Hexameron* 9. 6 (GCS n.F. 2: 158) and Gregory of Nyssa, *De opif. h.* 29 (PG 44: 237D-240A); see also David Vopřada, *Mistagogia del Commento al Salmo 118 di sant'Ambrogio* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum «Augustinianum» 2016), 408-409.

<sup>15</sup> Pépin, *Idées grecques*, 203.

merciful man is a precious work. But who will find a faithful man?' Learn, O man, in what you are great, in what you are precious.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Ambrose uses Sg 1:8(7) in the *Vetus Latina* translation: *nisi noscas te decoram inter mulieres* in connection with the philosophical motif γνῶθι σεαυτὸν in the Book 2 of his *Commentary on Psalm 118*. He uses it in conjunction with the Latin translation of Dt 15:9: *adtende tibi, ne fiat uerbum absconditum in corde tuo* to Christian anthropology that understands man as created in the image and likeness of God, who must know himself if he is to continue on his journey.<sup>17</sup> The message of Apollo's oracle is so closely linked to the Christian understanding of the time that the philosophical knowledge of 'know thyself' comes from the fact that the philosophers 'stole' it from Moses as the author of Deuteronomy, a motif quite common in early Christian literature:

'Know your own self.' The pagans ascribe this maxim to the priestess of the Apollo of Delphi, as though Apollo were its author. However, we know that it was taken from the Book of Deuteronomy written by Moses long before it was engraved by the philosophers of Delphi.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, Moses has been ascribed an authority that surpasses the Greek philosophers based on the principle of *antiquitas*, that is, 'what is older is better'. The reading of Deuteronomy thus also has an apologetic significance, which places the doctrine put forward by the Christian bishop above the Greco-Roman philosophical and religious tradition, which it seeks to overcome.<sup>19</sup> In the *Expositio psalmi cxviii* 6, however, Ambrose repeatedly returns to Dt 4:9. He does not limit self-knowledge to the external world, nor the knowledge of one's own body and its senses, but to 'soul and spirit':

'Attend to thyself alone,' says Scripture. In fact, we must distinguish between 'ourselves,' 'ours,' and 'what surrounds us.' 'Ourselves' refers to body and soul. 'Ours' are the members of our bodies and our senses. 'What surrounds us' consists of our money, our slaves, and all that belongs to this life. 'Attend to thyself,' therefore, 'know thyself,' that is to say—not what muscular arms you have, not how strong you are physically, or how many possessions or power you have. Attend, rather, to your soul and mind, whence all our deliberations emanate and to which the profit of your works is referred. Here only is the fullness of wisdom, the plenitude of piety and justice of which God speaks—for all virtue comes from God.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 10. 10 (CSEL 62: 209): «*Adtende tibi,*» ut lex dicit; hoc est tibi, id est animae tuae. Saecularia te et mundana non teneant, terrestria non morentur. Ad illum tota intentione festina, ex cuius inspiratione consistis. «grande,» inquit, «homo et pretiosum uir misericors, uirum autem fidelem opus est inuenire» (Ps 137: 8). Disce, homo, ubi grandis atque pretiosus sis. English translation by Ída M. Ní Riain, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Vopřada, *Mistagogia*, 220-224.

<sup>18</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 2. 13 (CSEL 62: 27): «*Nosce te ipsum,*» quod Apollini Pythio adsignant gentiles uiri, quasi ipse auctor fuerit huius sententiae, cum de nostro usurpatum ad sua transferant et longe anterior Moyses fuerit, qui scripsit librum Deuteronomii, quam philosophi qui ista finxerunt. English translation by Ída M. Ní Riain, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ambrose, *Ep. 73*(18). 7 (CSEL 82/3: 38): *Nullus pudor est ad meliora transire.*

<sup>20</sup> Ambrose, *Exam. 6. 7. 42* (CSEL 32/1: 233): «*Adtende*» inquit «*tibi soli.*» Aliud enim sumus nos, aliud sunt nostra, alia quae circa nos sunt. Nos sumus, hoc est anima et mens, nostra sunt corporis membra et sensus eius, circa nos autem pecunia est, serui sunt et uitae istius adparatus. Tibi igitur adtende, te ipsum scito, hoc est non quales lacertos habeas, non quantam corporis fortitudinem, non quantas possessiones, quantam potentiam, sed qualem animam ac mentem, unde omnia consilia proficiscuntur, ad quam operum tuorum fructus refertur. Illa est enim plena sapientiae, plena pietatis atque iustitiae, quoniam omnis uirtus a deo est. Translated by John J. Savage, 255.



He is interested in the soul and the mind because, in the Platonic reception, he regards it as the guiding element (ἡγεμονικόν) governing the senses and the body, but also because in his view, only the soul is created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>21</sup> Wisdom, piety, and righteousness, these Christian variations on the classical Roman virtues, influenced nevertheless by the reading of Scripture, are found precisely in the soul, which is connected to God, in whom is every power or virtue (*virtus*), and of whom it is 'the radiance of glory and the image of the Father's essence'.<sup>22</sup> Man is great, according to Ambrose, precisely because of his soul, which is the image of God (and not the whole of body and soul), which man can recognise through his self-knowledge based in Ambrose on the quotation Dt 4:9, the Latin wording, *adtende tibi*, brings him to the second meaning of these words, namely the warning against the one who can destroy this image, the devil:

Know then, man, your greatness and see to it that you never on any occasion become entrapped in the snares of the Devil, so as not to fall, perchance, into the jaws of that dread beast 'who as a roaring lion goes about seeking someone to devour.' Take heed of what goes into you and what comes out. I do not refer to food which is absorbed and ejected, but to words and thoughts. Do not allow yourself to be led into concupiscence in regard to a neighbor's wife or let your eye be captivated by the beauty of a woman who passes by. Your mind and your conversation should shun being involved in the crafty ways of seduction. Deceit should be far from your thoughts and you should not indulge in slander against your neighbor.<sup>23</sup>

This warning, and at the same time the call to spiritual warfare, forms part of the moral level of the catechesis of the candidates for baptism, to whom the original discourses on the Six Days of Creation were addressed.<sup>24</sup> The spiritual struggle here is addressed to the candidates for baptism not long after they had been subjected to the scrutinies of which exorcism was a part, which, by its apotropaic function, was intended to purify and prepare them for the reception of faith in baptism. At the same time, the discourse takes place only a day before the baptism, during the Easter Vigil, of which the renunciation of the devil was and is a part. The aim of the moral catechesis was undoubtedly to prepare for life after baptism when the neophytes are attentive to the actions that proceed from their souls and minds, whether they concern words or deeds. The words of Dt 4:9: *Adtende tibi* here connect with Pauline motifs aiming at gaining the final reward in 1 Cor 9:24; 2 Tm 2:5: 'He has declared: 'Let him so stand so as to take heed lest he fall' and 'So run as to obtain the prize.' So struggle that you may often discover that the crown is awarded only to him who has competed according to the rules.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ambrose, *De fide*, 5. 7. 90 (CSEL 78: 249); *Expos. ps. cxviii* 8. 23 (CSEL 62: 164); *De exc. fr.* 2. 130 (CSEL 73: 323).

<sup>22</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 6. 7. 42 (CSEL 32/1: 234): *illa anima bene picta est, in qua est splendor gloriae et paternae imago substantiae*.

<sup>23</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 6. 8. 50 (CSEL 32/1: 241): *Cognosce ergo te, homo, quantus sis et adtende tibi, ne quando laqueis implicatus diaboli fias praeda uenantis, ne forte in fauces tetri illius leonis incurras, «qui rugit et circuit quaerens quem deuoret» (1 Peter 5:8). Adtende tibi, ut consideres quid in te intret, quid ex te exeat. Non de cibo dico, qui absorbetur et egeritur, Sed de cogitatione dico, de sermone adsero. Non intret in te alieni tori concupiscentia, non inrepat in tuam mentem, non rapiat oculus transeuntis feminae pulchritudinem, animus non includat, non sermo tuus temptationum machinas nectat, non in dolo prodat, non maledico proximum aspargat obprobrio*. Transl. by John J. Savage, 263.

<sup>24</sup> The moral character of the teaching of the catechumens and the candidates of baptism has been studied by David Vopřada, *Mystagogie Ambrožových křestních katechezí*, 45-46.

<sup>25</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 6. 8. 50 (CSEL 32/1: 242): «*Adtende*» inquit «*tibi*». *Sic sta, ne cadas, sic curre, ut ad brabium peruenias, sic certato, ut saepe decernas, quia legitimo debetur corona certamini*. Translated by John J. Savage, 264.

Despite the reception of God's grace in baptism, *adtende tibi* also refers to self-knowledge and, at the same time, concern for one's existence after the Fall, which is prone to injury in the spiritual struggle, where part of the concern for oneself is access to Christ the physician able to heal the wounds inflicted by the enemy. Thus, the command *Adtende tibi* from Dt 4:9 carries several valences: self-knowledge, warning against temptation, concern for one's spiritual health, including the wounds inflicted by the Adversary, but ultimately an eschatological focus on God, since the goal of *adtende tibi* is not to forget the baseline of the Christian life explicitly directed towards God:

Take heed that no unrighteous word lie hidden in your heart, for it creeps through your body like poison, bringing with it deadly infection. Take heed, lest you forget the God who made you, and do not take His name in vain. When you have eaten your fill, build a home for your habitation, abounding in flocks and in gold and silver, together with all that you possess in plentiful abundance. Then 'take heed that thine heart be lifted up and thou remember not the Lord,' as the Law states.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, however, Dt 4:9 also receives a concrete moral interpretation, which concerns the everyday life or situation of the audience to whom the Bishop of Milan presents his commentary. Dt 4:9 is used as a warning against temptation in the form of wealth: 'The poor man and the rich man should therefore take heed, because there are temptations for the man of poverty as well as for the man of wealth.'<sup>27</sup>

In doing so, he focuses on the fact that 'enough' is enough for man, and therefore, in light of Prv 30:9 LXX, he should ask only for what is 'necessary and reasonable.' Nevertheless, the warning against too much wealth and pleasure belongs to the moral interpretation ascribed by Ambrose to the Book of Deuteronomy. In other words, from anthropology, Dt 4:9 brings him to the practical consequences of who one is before God, which is manifested in virtue appropriate to one's greatness.<sup>28</sup>

### Deuteronomy 4:24

The image of God as consuming fire in Dt 4:24 is undoubtedly the critical concept that leads Ambrose to use this Old Testament verse.<sup>29</sup> However, he applies it to several different realities. First, in his *Hexameron*, Ambrose interprets the words of Gn 1:14-15 about the two lamps that distinguish day from night, and he gives the example of theophany in Ex 3:2-3 in the 'flames in the bush'. Here, he takes the inability of the fire to burn the bush as a theological statement about God: 'The fire of the Lord gives light, but does not burn.'<sup>30</sup> But this contrasts precisely with the statement in Dt 4:24 about God as consuming fire, to which the bishop must respond:

<sup>26</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 6. 8. 50-51 (CSEL 32/1: 242-243): *Adtende tibi, ne fiat uerbum absconditum in corde tuo inicum; serpit enim sicut uenenum et letalia confert contagia. Adtende tibi, ne obliuiscaris deum, qui fecit te, et ne nomen eius in uanum accipias. Adtende tibi, lex dicit, ne cum manducaueris et satiatus fueris et domus aedificaueris et habitare coeperis et pecoribus tuis repletus fueris et auro et argento abundaueris et omnibus quaecumque tibi fuerint «in multitudine exaltes te corde et obliuiscaris dominum deum tuum» (Deut. 8:14).* Transl. by John J. Savage, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 6. 8. 53 (CSEL 32/1: 245): *Adtende ergo tibi, pauper, adtende, diues, quia et in paupertate et in diuitiis temptamenta sunt.* Translated by John J. Savage, 267.

<sup>28</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 10. 10 (CSEL 62: 208).

<sup>29</sup> כִּי יִהְיֶה אֵשׁ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְהָאֵשׁ אֵלֶיךָ אֲכָלָהּ הָיָא אֵל קָדָם: פ

<sup>30</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 4. 3. 9 (CSEL 32,1: 116).

Still, you perhaps may say, wherefore is it written: 'I am a consuming fire'? Your suggestion is a good one. God usually consumes only the sinful. Even in the retributions dispensed to men in accordance with their merits we perceive the nature of divine fire. It illuminates some and consumes others. It illuminates the just and consumes the wicked. It does not illuminate the same people which it consumes. Rather, its illumination is inextinguishable in the direction of its performance toward the good, whereas its power of consumption is mighty to punish the sinner.<sup>31</sup>

The answer to the objection in the form of Dt 4:24 is only a kind of excursus here, which Ambrose does not develop further. If God's attribute of 'illuminating some and burning others' distinguishes the 'righteous' from the 'wicked,' it is simultaneously a moral appeal, consistent with Ambrose's definition of the 'moral' character of the book of Deuteronomy. However, there is a certain tension here: although the 'consuming fire' consumes 'sins,' its purifying function concerns not only the action but also the one who does it when he 'burns the wicked'; from the level of action, the interpretation moves to the level of warning against punishment.

This moral dimension is also characterised by the use of Dt 4:24 in Ambrose's letter to Simplician, where he tries to give a Christian meaning to the provisions for the sin-offering in Lv 10:16-20. Here, he arrives at what might be called the 'unlawful fire' which was forbidden to be brought into the sanctuary and interprets it in a strictly allegorical manner on the model of Philo,<sup>32</sup> identifying it with various vices, that is, within the limits of the moral sense inherent in the allegorical exegesis.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, he contrasts this moral interpretation of the illicit fire with Philo's mystical interpretation of 'the only fire' capable of 'burning away the sins of man,' which in his interpretation is Jesus, as he employs several quotations from the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he includes in this series the epithet 'consuming fire' from Dt 4:24, which he interprets Christologically in the light of the citation of this verse in Heb 12:29 when at the same time he refers to the Christ of the Nicene faith, i.e., co-equal with the Father. If God is the consuming fire, so is the Son.<sup>35</sup> He notes above all the majesty which man perceives in fire, and at the same time understands fire as a sanctifying and illuminating element through which God often reveals Himself:

And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: "And the light of Israel shall be for a fire." So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: 'For our God is a consuming Fire,' as Moses said.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ambrose, *Exam.* 4. 3. 10 (CSEL 32/1: 117): *Ac forte dicas: Quomodo scriptum est: Ego sum ignis consumens? Bene admonuisti: non solet consumere nisi sola peccata. In retributionibus quoque meritorum colligimus diuini ignis naturam, ut alios inluminet, alios exurat, inluminet iustos, exurat inpios. Non eosdem quos inluminat exurit et quos exurit inluminat, sed inluminatio eius inextinguibilis est ad perfunctionem bonorum, exustio uehemens ad supplicium peccatorum.* English translation by John J. Savage, FoC 42: 133-134.

<sup>32</sup> Philo, *De fug. et inv.* 28.159-160 (PAO 3: 145).

<sup>33</sup> Ambrose, *Ep.* 3(67). 9 (CSEL 82/1: 23-24).

<sup>34</sup> Mt 1:11; 9:20; Lk 19:8.

<sup>35</sup> According to Ambrose, God is identified as 'fire' by Moses, Isaiah, and John the Baptist: see Jn 1:8-9; Is 10:16-17; Ex 3:1-6.

<sup>36</sup> Ambrose, *De Spir.* 1. 16. 144 (CSEL 79: 76): *Et Ezeias significat non solum lucem, sed etiam ignem esse spiritum sanctum dicens: Et erit lux Istrahel in ignem. Itaque prophetat eum in igne ardenti, quia in tribus istis generibus propensius maiestatem divinitatis advertimus, quoniam et sanctificare divinitatis et inluminare ignis et lucis est*



At the same time, however, he applies these statements about God to the Holy Spirit in the context of the current Cappadocian theological discussion of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, as presented by Basil in his *De Spiritu Sancto*, which was moving towards a creedal declaration of the divinity of the Holy Spirit at the Councils of Constantinople and Aquileia in 381. Here Dt 4:24 is given a new and specifically Trinitarian interpretation as part of the Christian discourse on God and his inner life. Then, in *De officiis*, when Ambrose interprets the statement of the Baptist in John 1:33 about Jesus who will ‘baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire,’<sup>37</sup> he moves to the *ignis ardens* in Jer 20:9, which allows him to develop not only the line of ‘fire’ but also that of ‘burning’ or ‘cutting’. From there he goes on to quote Dt 4:24 via 1 Cor 3:13,15: *Ego sum ignis consumens*. However, this verse is immediately linked to Jer. 2:13: *me dereliquerunt fontem aquae vivae*, which allows him to build on the contrast between fire and water in other passages quoted. The way he works with Dt 4:24 in this case illustrates Ambrose’s ‘fan-shaped’ method of working with the biblical text very well.

Concentrating on the non-essential was an essential theme for the ancient philosophical tradition. It is with this theme in mind that Ambrose interprets the 13th strophe of Psalm 118(119), whose verses begin with the Hebrew letter  $\text{ד}$ , which Ambrose interprets as ‘interiority’ or ‘fire from the depths’.<sup>38</sup> Under a plethora of Old and New Testament quotations such as Lam 1:12; Lk 12:49; and Ez 22:19-21, there is a cursory reference based on Dt 4:24 that ‘God is fire’.<sup>39</sup> More is not inferred by Ambrose at this point. However, the use of the verse suggests that the quotation is one that Ambrose is familiar with and uses as part of his spiritual focus on the non-literal, as elsewhere in this exposition where God is invoked as the coming ‘consuming fire’ to burn in the preacher’s heart.<sup>40</sup>

In his exposition of Lk 12:49-50: *Ignem ueni mittere in terram et quid uolo nisi iam accendatur*, Ambrose revisits his favourite theme of inwardness illuminated by the fire of God, with Dt 4:24 among other biblical quotations referring to fire or the process of burning (Jer 20:9; Ps 96[97]:1). Ambrose goes on to explain the verse from Deuteronomy at this point:

The Lord himself is fire, for He says: ‘I am the fire that burns without consuming.’ The fire of the Lord is light eternal. It is the fire that lights the lamps of which He says above: ‘Let your loins be girt and your lamps alight.’ We need to have our lamps alight for the days in this world are indeed night. Ammaus and Cleopas witness to this fire that the Lord sends into their heart when they exclaim: ‘Was not our heart burning within us, while He spoke to us in the way and opened the Scriptures to us?’ Here they show us very clearly what the action of that fire is and how it illuminates the heart.<sup>41</sup>

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*proprium et in specie ignis exprimi vel videri divinae est consuetudinis. Deus enim est ignis consumens, sicut Moyses dixit.* English translation by Philip Schaff.

<sup>37</sup> Ambrose, *De officiis* 3. 13. 103-110 (CCL 15: 192-194).

<sup>38</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 13. 1 (CSEL 62: 281): *ex intimis; ignis ex ultimis*.

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 13. 2 (CSEL 62: 281): *ipsum deum legerimus ignem esse*.

<sup>40</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. ps. cxviii* 3. 16 (CSEL 62: 49): *Veniat ergo ignis consumens*.

<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. Luc.* 7. 132 (CCL 14: 259): *est et idem dominus ignis, sicut ipse dixit: «Ego sum ignis ardens et non consumens»* (Exod. 3:2; 24:17; Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29); *ignis enim domini lumen aeternum est, quo igni illae accenduntur lucernae, de quibus supra dixit: «sint autem lumbi uestri praecincti et lucernae ardentes»* (Luke 12:35). *Et ideo quia nox est huius dies uitae, lucerna est necessaria. hunc ignem in se etiam Ammaus et Cleopas a domino missum esse testantur dicentes: «nonne cor nostrum ardens erat in uia, cum aperiret nobis scripturas?»* (Luke 24:32). *Euidenter itaque docuerunt qualis istius sit ignis operatio, qui secreta cordis inluminat.* English translation by Ída M. Ní Riain, 231-232.

The fire of the 'Lord' is explained as 'eternal light,' but using the image of Lk 12:39, the Old Testament verse is interpreted Christologically, where it serves both to affirm Christ's divinity and to establish a relationship between the hearer and this Jesus as Lord. This ability of Jesus to set hearts on fire and to penetrate the heart of man is then illustrated by the burning heart on the road to Emmaus.<sup>42</sup>

The identification of Christ with the consuming fire in Dt 4:24 also plays a vital role in Ambrose's exegesis of the critical passage in Lk 22:54-62, where Peter denies Christ and is forgiven by the gaze of Jesus, which brings a stream of tears to him. Here, the fire of Jesus' presence<sup>43</sup> creates a strong contrast with the coldness in which Peter stands during Jesus' trial in the courtyard, where he tries to warm himself and deny Christ:

Now let us consider when it was that Peter denied: 'It was cold.' At that time of the year, it could not have been cold; but a place where Jesus is not known is cold; it is cold where no one sees the light; it is cold where people deny Him who is a consuming fire. For the soul, not for the body, it was cold.<sup>44</sup>

For Ambrose, this coldness is a state of the spirit, not of the body, and only emphasises the state of man without Christ. To this is applied the theological statement of Dt 4:24, where the heat of the fire which illuminates and warms the interior of man, or rather his spirit, is all the more emphasised.

Finally, a summary and observations on Ambrose's use of Dt 4:24. It is indeed noteworthy that Ambrose overlooks the 'jealous love' but chooses only one of the images which is undoubtedly more attractive to him, namely fire. The aspect of God's love is certainly not absent from Ambrose's work, but I suspect that for the mentality of late antiquity, the idea of God as fire was more appealing than the idea of God as 'jealously loving'. There are reasons why Ambrose does not use this image: the problem of jealousy and love both involve emotions. In the case of a perfect God one would have to explain how these emotions occur in God, and this would be pretty difficult given the existing philosophical tradition of knowing God. At the same time, this use of Dt 4:24 is an eloquent example of Ambrose's way of working with Scripture: the author has a particular mental image, the fire that illuminates the inner man, which is so important to him, and he associates specific verses with it, which vary throughout his work. The Old Testament verse thus becomes more of a slogan, taken out of its original context and appropriated based on the formation of a late ancient bishop who had received a classical education. Specifically, Dt 4:24 is associated with the idea of divinity, with the knowledge of God in the interior or the mind, emphasising the interior's spiritual role in the Christian's life, which is not exhausted by external action.

## Conclusion

While this study of just two of Ambrose's quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy is just a probe into the usage of this Old Testament book by a Christian bishop of the late 4th century, some interim conclusions can be drawn. Ambrose is not concerned with the context of the book or the

<sup>42</sup> See Lk 24:32.

<sup>43</sup> Allan Fitzgerald, *Conversion through penance in the Italian church of the fourth and fifth centuries: New approaches to the experience of conversion from sin* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1988), 102-112.

<sup>44</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. Luc.* 10. 76 (CCL 14: 368): *Consideremus etiam quo in statu neget. Frigus erat. si tempus consideremus, frigus esse non poterat; sed frigus erat ubi Iesus non agnoscebatur, ubi non erat qui lucem uideret, ubi negabatur ignis consumens. Frigus ergo erat mentis, non corporis.* English translation by Ída M. Ni Riain, 337.

passage in which the quoted verse is situated. Moreover, he takes a singular image or theme from the verse that allows him to use it in his thought, formed by both the classical and biblical education he had received. His effort to use the Old Testament books and, specifically, that of Deuteronomy, to involve it somehow in his Christian reading of the Jewish scriptures can be recognised. It is evident that Ambrose employs the selected quotations from the Book of Deuteronomy primarily within a moral framework, aligning with his exegetical theory. However, his approach extends beyond mere moral exhortation or the application of ethical allegories. He reinterprets the text through a Christological lens, imbuing it with a ‘mystical’ dimension inherent to the Christological reinterpretation of Old Testament scripture. On the one hand, this application of Deuteronomy in Ambrose’s works and preaching can be perceived as unsatisfactory. However, on the other hand, it is still a kind of effort to keep the continuity of the history of salvation between both Testaments and to employ the heritage of the Mosaic Law in the Christian community of the Church of his times, in a radically different space, time, and culture. In this, expressly, Ambrose’s merit to the biblical scholarship can be acknowledged, as it still can, in a way, be inspirational for our times while we struggle to translate the message of the sacred books to the culture of our place and time that differs significantly from that of the original setting of the Book of Deuteronomy and all other books of the biblical corpus.

Assoc. Prof. David Vopřada, Ph.D.  
Catholic Faculty of Theology, Charles University, Czechia

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