Ambrose at the Well: *De Isaac et anima*

Written shortly after the *Expositio psalmi cxviii* which explores the union of Christ with the Church,[1] *de Isaac et anima* treats the union of Christ with the *anima*, a theme that may also be found in *de bono mortis*, although in a different way. According to the most recent research, the *Expositio psalmi cxviii* was written between May 395 and February 396;[2] *de Isaac et anima* and *de bono mortis* were written shortly thereafter (Lent 396).[3] Each of these works can thus be dated to Ambrose's mature years. Hence, one could rightly expect to find there both a developed discourse and an integration of some of Ambrose's best insights. In this article, the examination of *de Isaac and anima* presumes such an integration in the challenging,[4] yet engaging work he named *De Isaac et anima*;[5] a primary concern will be to describe the overall unity of that work, a project that may help to clarify Ambrose's intention.

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1. See *de Isaac et anima* 4, 17.

2. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e Paolino di Nola: per una più precisa datazione della *Expositio psalmi cxviii* di Ambrogio," in *Polyanthema. Studi di letteratura cristiana antica* offerti a Salvatore Costanza, Messina 1989 (Studi tardoantichi 7) 333-345.

3. G. Visonà, "Lo status quaestionis della ricerca ambrosiana," in *Nec Timeo Mori* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero 1998) p. 67, n. 136; see too, M. Zelzer, "Zur Chronologie der Werke des Ambrosius" in *Nec Timeo Mori*, p. 92.

4. See G. Nauroy, "La structure du *De Isaac vel Anima* et la cohérence de l'allégorèse d'Ambroise de Milan," *Revue des Études Latines* 63 (1985) 210-236, who calls it a text that is "bien déconcertant dès qu'on s'interroge sur l'intention de l'évêque de Milan" (p. 217).

5. This title is preferred to *De Isaac vel anima* (cf. M. Sanders, ... *'Fons Vitae Christus': Der Heilsweg des Menschen nach der Schrift 'De Isaac et anima' des Ambrosius von Mailand*, Altenberge: Oros Verlag 1996, pp. 14-15). Augustine used that title twice in *contra Iulianum* (1, 44 and 2, 12). A full bibliography can be found in Sanders, pp. 242-265, to which should be added: V.H. Drecoll, "Neuplatonismus und Christentum bei Ambrosius, *De Isaac und anima*," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 5 (2001) 104-130.

Most probably, this work was first preached and then adapted for publi-
cation.[6] Because of its complex, even elliptical character,[7] it is not always clear
to whom Ambrose was speaking. Yet the complex, even digressive style
depends less on his audience than on a choice that Ambrose made in more than
one work. Thus, in recent years, reference is often made to Ambrose's ma-
nierism ('maniérisme'), which is a way to describe one of the literary tendencies
of Late Antiquity and which is present when an expression is somewhat remo-
ved ('écarté') from ordinary speech, thus drawing attention to itself: "Il y a
maniérisme lorsque cet écart s'agrandit au point de devenir lui-même l'objet
proposé à l'attention de l'auditeur ou du lecteur: le pouvoir de susciter l'éton-
nement est devenu la principale vertu de l'écrivain."[8] G. Nauroy also highlights
this style as typical of Ambrose's time and relates it specifically to *de Isaac et
anima*.[9] If a reflection on Ambrose's style does not help to clarify who Am-
brose's audience was, that question still needs to be asked. If his sermons were
preached to newly baptized christians,[10] there is no reason to think that they
would have been the only ones present. More likely, his listeners were just as
varied as were the people of Milan.[11]

One indicator of a diversified audience is the interest that Ambrose shows in
those who are weak, a distinction that can only have meaning if there were also
some called strong: the weak are mentioned in three places in *de Isaac et anima*.
In the first instance, Ambrose says that the Word passes by those whose weak-
ness of heart does not allow them to receive his strength (*Is.* 4,33). Later, how-
ever, he imagines what a teacher would have to do to explain an obscure matter
to his hearers: he should lower himself to the ignorance of those who do not
understand, using everyday speech so that they might understand (*Is.* 6,57).
Finally, he says that the *anima* who has been made perfect is to intercede for

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6. On the oral basis of Ambrose's work in general, see the recent overview by P. Moretti,
Non harundo sed calamus: Aspetti letterari della "Explanatio psalmorum XII" di Ambrogio.
Milano: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2000, pp. 27-28. See, however,
J.-R. Palanque, *St. Ambroise et l'Empire romain*, Paris, 1933, p. 441: "aucun indice de parlé".

7. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," pp. 219-221.

8. H. Savon, "Maniérisme et allégorie dans l'œuvre d'Ambroise de Milan," *Revue des
Études Latines* 55 (1977) 203-221, p. 205. See also P. Moretti, *Non harundo* ..., p. 13, n. 11
who summarizes some examples of E.R. Curtius, (*Letteratura europea e Medio Evo latino*,
R. Antonelli, ed., Firenze 1992, pp. 303-334): "... come l'abuso di certe figure retoriche (iper-
bato, perifrasi, *annominatio*, metafora) e il gusto per ciò che è strano, arduo, virtuosistico
(procedimenti lipogrammatici e pangrammatici, carmi gigurati, *logodaedalia*, asindeti a zep-
pa, versi *rapportati*, schemi sommatori)..."

9. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," pp. 218-219.

10. G. Nauroy, "La structure...," p. 216, n. 31; M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus*'..., p. 15,
n. 45.

11. G. Nauroy, "L'Écriture dans la pastorale d'Ambroise de Milan," in *Bible de tous les
temps*, 2: Le monde latin antique et la Bible, Paris: Beauchesne (1985) 371-408, p. 379:
"... son public devait être aussi mêlé que l'était le peuple chrétien de Milan."

those who are weak so that they may be led into the dwelling of the bride (*Is.* 8,69). Hence, in spite of the appearance that this text might be too refined or difficult for just any audience, there is every reason to suggest a varied rather than an elite audience. H. Savon's remarks about allegorical exegesis are pertinent:

> ... les *infirmi*, les mal instruits, les débutants veulent que chaque mot ait un sens et ils seraient choqués et troublés d'entendre dire qu'il y a dans les 'Écritures divines' certain détails, comme cette *mola asinaria*, qui sont mentionnés *otiose*, gratuitement et comme au petit bonheur.
>
> L'exégèse allégorique n'est donc pas un luxe pour intellectuels un peu blasés. Elle répond à un besoin de la catéchèse. Elle est attendue par les auditeurs, ce qui lui donne plus de force pour pénétrer et pour modeler les idées et les sentiments du peuple chrétien.[12]

If the circumstances of the Milanese church indicates a varied group of listeners, one can also agree with the suggestion that those listeners could have included non-Christians along with Christians. G. Nauroy analysis of an image used in *Apologia David altera*, namely the three parts of a nut (the shell, the protective cover and the fruit), has been interpreted in relation to three kinds of listeners: pagans could listen to the liturgy as history; Jews who would understand the types of the scripture, and those already initiated as Christians would appreciate the explanation of the mysteries.[13] Augustine's experience, although he was a catechumen, would at least confirm that not all those who came to hear Ambrose were baptized Christians.[14] No one has yet demonstrated that Ambrose intended his words for pagans or Jews; even so, Ambrose knew that they would have been read by many. What he may have intended primarily for Christians was not without importance for a wider audience.

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12. H. Savon, "Le temps de l'exégèse allégorique ...," p. 345.

13. Cf. *Apol. David* 2,10,50; G. Nauroy, "L'Écriture ...," pp. 396-99.

14. Although his remarks do not refer directly to *de Isaac et anima*, see H. Savon, "Le temps de l'exégèse allégorique dans la catéchèse d'Ambroise de Milan," *Le temps chrétien, de la fin de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge (IIIᵉ-XIIIᵉ siècles)*, Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S. 1984, pp. 345-346: "On ne saurait pourtant en douter, cette exégèse était bien proposée au peuple dans la prédication. Augustin en est le garant dans ses *Confessions*, à propos d'Ambroise précisément. Bien plus, l'évêque de Milan répondait, ce faisant, aux désirs, voire aux besoins de ses auditeurs." Note also P. Moretti, *Non harundo ...*, pp. 29-30: "L'elaborazione retorica che Agostino riconosce in Ambrogio deve essere compresa alla luce dell'obiettivo fondamentale che il predicatore cristiano si pone: quello della trasmissione di una verità dalla ricezione della quale dipende la salvezza eterna del proprio ascoltatore. Nella produzione letteraria ambrosiana si può ritenere esemplificato il processo per cui una nuova coscienza estetica nasce dall'esigenza di comunicare efficacemente la verità a un pubblico eterogeneo.".

Much previous study of this work has tended to focus on Ambrose's sources.[15] Those studies—and others as well—have examined the form or the purpose of *de Isaac et anima*, as well as its coherence (or structure). The present article does not add new information to those studies. A recent work by M. Sanders provides a convenient and accurate summary of those opinions.[16] Her work convincingly shows the unity of *de Isaac et anima*,[17] and her analysis of the "parts" of the book is a valuable tool,[18] even if such an analysis does not, in itself, clarify Ambrose's intention.

Her characterization of this work in terms of a single theme, however, is less useful. What is problematic with trying to identify a single theme for this work is not merely the possibility of making tendentious choices of what to include or exclude.[19] Rather, the difficulty is more fundamental, insofar as such a project presumes that a single theme could sufficiently describe Ambrose's work; rather, a single theme will more likely turn out to be so general that it does not provide a very helpful interpretive key. A thematic reading of Ambrose appears to impose a system on his thought where it would be preferable to accept his other-than-merely-logical approach to speaking and writing.[20]

RELATIONSHIP: A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING

By giving this work the title, *de Isaac et anima*, Ambrose placed the focus on the relationship between Isaac (an Old Testament figure of Christ) and the *anima* (initially identified as Rebecca), providing both a starting point and a framework for his reflection. A significant part of his presentation of that couple will include some biblical wells (*putei*), whether from the book of Genesis or

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15. For the sources, both what they were or were not as well as their relative importance, the perspective defended by G. Nauroy is persuasively presented in "La structure ...," pp. 213-217.

16. M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., pp. 7-94, especially pp. 76-94. That summary is set within the elaboration of her own vision of how to identify the parts of this book.

17 M. Sanders, ... `*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., p. 98. Less persistent criticism of other positions would not have weakened the argument for her own proposal.

18 M. Sanders, ... `*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., p. 98.

19. M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., pp. 11-12.

20. G. Madec (*Saint Ambroise et la philosophie*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974, p. 306), although in a different context, notes accurately: "Il n'y faut pas chercher une logique d'ordre conceptuel: dans l'interprétation du Cantique des cantiques, de même, l'âme se présente successivement comme l'épouse du Verbe (Is. 6, 51) et comme le jardin où le Verbe se repaît de vertus (Is. 5, 48-49). Le jardin, le banquet, les épousailles: autant d'aspects d'un symbolisme exubérant de la fête et de l'allégresse qui caractérisent la fécondité spirituelle, par contraste avec les servitudes de la procréation charnelle."

from other biblical books. At the beginning of this work, however, the fountain
(*fons*) to which Rebecca came to draw (*haurire*) water holds his attention: *Bonus
igitur Isaac verus utpote plenus gratiae et fons laetitiae. ad quem fontem venie-
bat Rebecca, ut impleret hydriam* (*Is.* 1,2). The words, *ad quem fontem* (*Is.* 1,2),
suggest both the place where Isaac and Rebecca met,[21] and a depth to be sought
in their relationship. In that way, Ambrose prepares the listener for the interplay
between fountain (*fons*) and well (*puteus*) that will come later in this work.[22]
Therefore, his interpretation of that *fons* will add a dimension to his discussion
of the relation between Isaac and Rebecca. From that fountain Rebecca will draw,
for example, wisdom, charity, and virtue;[23] the fountain from which she draws is
Jesus Christ.[24]

At this stage, however, Ambrose will not pause for long by the well where
they met but will explore the identity of Isaac (*verus Isaac*) and of Rebecca
(*anima*) and "plumb the depths" of their union. He extends his reflection yet fur-
ther when he forges a link between the couple of Genesis and the lovers in the
Canticle of Canticles. Insights into how the relationship of Christ and christians
grows and flourishes will flow from that meditation.

De Isaac et anima is a very personal reflection wherein Ambrose invites his
readers *ad superiora* or *ad meliora*[25] and tries to facilitate their movement
toward that goal by making it more attractive.[26] The "something more" for Am-

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21. Gn. 24:62: *Isaac deambulabat per viam quae ducit ad puteum cuius nomen est viventis
et videntis* (Vulgate). *De spiritu sancto* may be the one place where Ambrose refers to this
text (1, 16, 166): *Sic Abraham deum, posteaquam puteum fodiit, emeruit, sic Isaac, dum ad
puteum deambulabat, venientem in typo ecclesiae accepit uxorem.*

22. Cf. *Is.* 4,26. Either Cant. 4:15 and/or John 4:5-6 could be at the source of the connec-
tion. Augustine summarizes concisely: *puteus erat; sed omnis puteus fons, non omnis fons
puteus* (*Tr.ev.Io.* 15,5).

23. *Is.* 1,2: *hauriret purae sapientiae disciplinas*; *Is.* 4,22: *tamquam doctrina moralis utilis
ad hauriendum*; *Is.* 4,26: *si vero haurire velis affluentiam caritatis*; *Is.* 4,26: *hausit de puteo
illo divina mysteria cognoscens*; *Is.* 5,43: *ut cognoscam mysteria tua, ut hauriam sacramenta
tua*; *Is.* 6,50: *anima hausit mysteriorum ebrietatem caelestium*; *Is.* 6,53: *praesentia enim verbi
hausit anima virtutem*; *Is.* 8,78: *vitae enim fons est summum illud bonum.*

24. *Is.* 8,79: *quia fons est omnium vitae Christus*; *Exp. Ps. 45* 5,1: *Ideo Abraham puteum
fodit, ut aquam qui quaereret inueniret, ideo puteum fodit Isaac, ideo Iesus dominus sedebat
ad puteum - erat autem ibi fons Iacob -, sedebat ad puteum, ut quaereres. fons ibi erat tibi
Christus.*

25. See, for example, how he speaks of being lifted up *ad superiora* (cf. *Is.* 4,44; 6,52;
7,57; 8,65; 8,71; 8,78), or his words about what is better *ad meliora* (cf. *Is.* 3, 15; 5, 49: *ad
meliora et optima*; 8, 77).

26. That comment will be clarified in the next section of this article. See L.F. Pizzolato,
"Ambrogio e la retorica: le finalità del discorso," in *Nec Timeo Mori* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero,
1998) 235-265.

brose is ultimately Christ, who is charity itself,[27] the fullness of the law,[28] and the palm of victory for the *anima*.[29] In the post- and pro-Nicene church of Ambrose, it is one more occasion to present the Son as the very center of history, of faith and of the everyday reality to the Church of Milan.

This article will study these relationships, showing their role in articulating the unity of Ambrose's meditation in *de Isaac et anima*. Each significant element from the story of Isaac and Rebecca at the beginning of this book gives way to an interpretation that abandons the history narrated in the book of Genesis — but only after the biblical story has set the tone and provided the framework for the following reflection. In that first meeting of Isaac and Rebecca at the well, therefore, Ambrose will find a unifying principle and a practical basis for the process that he has set out to describe: growing participation in Christ, the source of life. Hence, as the title suggests, Ambrose has come to the well to draw "water" for his community: "what is a well of living water but a depth of profound instruction?"[30]

<div align="center">MORAL PERSUASION: DELECTARE</div>

A recent article by L.F. Pizzolato,[31] although it does not deal directly with *de Isaac et anima*, shows how Ambrose pays particular attention to pleasing discourse. As Pizzolato says, "E' veramente singolare l'importanza che Ambrogio attribuisce al *delectare*, che è la finalità che gli antichi autori cristiani—e non solo—guardano normalmente con maggiore sospetto."[32] Jerome found that such an approach was "inadeguata ad un maestro cristiano."[33] Yet, rather than being drawn to prove (*probare*) his positions by rational proof, Ambrose sought to dis-

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27. *Is.* 5,46: *caritatis itaque filius et ipse caritas est.*

28. *Is.* 4,30: *plenitudo legis est Christus. et ideo ecclesia, quae diligit Christum, vulnerata est caritatis.*

29. *Is.* 8,67: *ipsa caritas palma est; ipsa est enim plenitudo victoriae; plenitudo enim legis caritas est.*

30. *Is.* 4,21: *quid est enim puteus aquae vivae nisi profundae altitudo doctrinae?*

31. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica...," pp. 235-265.

32. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica...," p. 249. See the discussion that follows on the diverse appreciations of Jerome and of Augustine with regard to *suavitas* in speech.

33. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica...", p. 250: "Senza appello è, del resto, la condanna geronimiana della *suavitas*: *Daemonum cibus est carmina poetarum, saecularis sapientia, rhetoricorum pompa rhetorum. Haec sua omnes suavitate delectant.*" Jerome, *Ep.* 21,13.

play the pleasing quality of what he said and, through such delight, he wanted to bring about conversion, to attract his listeners to the goal he described.[34]

> La chiarezza dell'insegnamento è premessa indispensabile, ma ... scaturisce per lo più dalla stessa Scrittura: la finalità ultima resta il *flectere*, ma il *delectare* è il fatto peculiare che Ambrogio persegue.[35]

> *Moralis* è quindi quel discorso che tiene conto con dolcezza del dato della natura e, mediante l'insegnamento lucido (*docere*), lo indirizza piacevolmente ad un atteggiameto giusto: la *moralitas* coglie e rispetta i caratteri amabili della proposta della fede. Del resto, l'esortazione, che è tipica zona del *flectere*, deve avvalersi, per essere efficace, della proposizione di "premi o vantaggi", cioè deve puntare sull'amabilità del sacrificio richiesto."[36]

To read the *de Isaac et anima* with that perspective in mind is to recognize that, since Ambrose was not inclined to develop his topic in a primarily didactic or logical way, the lack of clear organization would not be an argument against its unity. His teaching was, as it were, based on the authority of the Scriptural text, often citing one text after another, thus demonstrating his conclusion by accumulation of texts rather than by discursive reasoning.[37] As Pizzolato says, "l'atto probativo, per Ambrogio, non è frutto di costruzione dell'esegeta ma di una semplice proposizione della delucidazione della Scrittura tramite la Scrittura."[38] That statement also applies to *de Isaac et anima*.

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34. "Ambroise et Jérôme représentent ainsi deux types d'évolution possible de l'exégèse origénienne. Ambroise conserve les *quaestiones* parce qu'elles ouvrent la voie de l'interprétation spirituelle, qui l'intéresse avant tout. Mais, du même coup, ces *quaestiones* apparaissent souvent chez lui beaucoup moins comme un effort pour arracher au texte ses secrets que comme un moyen de détourner "l'œil de l'âme" du visible pour le tourner vers l'invisible. L'exégèse se transforme en méditation. Ambroise prolonge évidemment beaucoup plus l'Origène des *Homélies* que l'Origène des *Commentaires*." (H. Savon, "Jérôme, Ambroise et le premier évangile," p. 225 in *Jérôme entre l'Occident et l'Orient*, Y.-M. Duval, ed., Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1988, 205-225.)

35. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica ...," p. 264.

36. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica ...," pp. 246-247.

37. P. Moretti, *Non harundo* ..., p. 63: "il punto di partenza può essere anche un termine apparentemente banale, il cui senso profondo sarebbe svelato dalle sue molteplici risonanze scritturali ... Altrove l'esegeta fa emergere il significato di un termine attraverso un puntuale 'confronto tra testi' oppure tramite l'uso sostitutivo' della concordanza, che consiste nell'affiancare al termine da spiegare una citazione dove un secondo termine è circondato da un contesto analogo a quello del primo, così che si chiarisca il primo sostituendo con il secondo."

38. L.F. Pizzolato, "Ambrogio e la retorica...", p. 256; cf. G. Nauroy, "L'Écriture ...," p. 407: "En dernière analyse, pourtant, l'*interpres* ... n'est qu'un médiateur, qui cherche par maints procédés ... à s'effacer pour ne pas faire écran, et laisse face à face en une sorte de dialogue direct le Verbe et le peuple chrétien;" and *idem*, "La structure ...," p. 226: "L'Écriture ainsi est son propre commentaire, et assurément son commentaire le plus autorisé."

If Ambrose was not inclined to teach by logical demonstration, he did none-theless give full attention to an engaging, varied style. He would introduce parenthetical remarks or ideas, use phrases or ideas from contemporary philo-sophy, set in contrast with the Scriptures, or criticize other ideas which he saw as less than or other than truly Christian. However, the comment of P. Moretti is entirely pertinent in this context:

> Per comprendere la sintesi operata da Ambrogio, a nostro parere, è necessario ... riconoscere la complessità del rapporto intercorso storicamente tra *Antike* e *Chris-tentum*, non limitandosi a definirlo in termini di conflitto o contrasto (*Einander-setzung*), ma riconoscendo l'*Ineinandersetzung* tra i due: una reciproca compene-trazione realizzatasi ... nell'effettiva quotidiana convivenza di pagani e cristiani e nella conseguente condivisione della mentalità dell'epoca in cui vivono.... [In that context] gli autori cristiani non sarebbero se non autore tardoantichi, per i quali la conversione al cristianesimo implica il riorientamento della formazione ricevuta nella scuola pagana.[39]

While often he may appear to digress, a closer examination shows inner con-nections that cannot be explained away.[40]

If there is anything like an "outline" of *de Isaac et anima*, it has been pro-vided by the texts he cites from Genesis and the Canticle of Canticles. P. Mo-retti, speaking of Ambrose's commentary on 12 psalms, confirms this ambrosian procedure, saying that one's initial impression is that beyond "un'ossatura di fondo costituita dai versetti dei Salmi commentati, i temi ... tendano ad accu-mularsi senza un evidente ordine."[41] The unity of a given work, therefore, is not to be found in the overall organization. As M. Roberts says, there is a "tendency for the discrete compositional units to cohere at a higher level of generality. We might notice here the analogous principle of biblical exegesis, by which spiritual and moral interpretation is given preference over the literal level of the narra-tive."[42] The fact that Ambrose only chose to include some passages from the stories about Isaac and from the Canticle helps to confirm that general point of view. Although Ambrose does not say what principle might have guided his

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39. P. Moretti, *Non harundo* ..., p. 17.

40. G. Nauroy, "La méthode ...": "Il importe donc de ... sentir et de suivre ce discours fluctuant, cette technique de la surimpression des images profanes et scripturaires, ce tissage en un réseau dense et subtil des sources les plus diverses, pour faire apparaître une logique et un dynamisme de la pensée ... qui sont ... parfaitement adaptés aux intentions d'Ambroise, en particulier à son souci de synthèse entre les deux pôles de la culture, l'Écriture et la philo-sophie païenne" (pp. 116-117). P. Moretti agrees with this position: *Non harundo* ..., p. 36: "... una costruzione consapevole, la quale ... risulta conforme al gusto proprio dell'estetica tardoantica." Ambrose thus clearly intended even these digressions (P. Moretti, pp. 51-61).

41. P. Moretti, *Non harundo* ..., p. 35.

42. P. Moretti, *Non harundo* ..., p. 50, n. 44 cites M. Roberts (p. 190), "The treatment of narrative in Late Antique literature. Ammianus Marcellinus (16.10), Rutilius Namatianus and Paulinus of Pella," *Philologus* 132 (1988) 181-195.

careful, conscious choices, his procedure is also in keeping with other examples found in Late Antiquity.[43]

If that perspective is accurate, however, why did Ambrose find it useful to begin so often with figures of the Old Testament, especially on themes or figures found in the book of Genesis?[44] Why would someone whose theology is so fully centered on Christ spend so much of his literary career writing books with Old Testament themes/figures in their titles? It can hardly have been the case that most of his readers were familiar with the Old Testament. Rather, Ambrose sought to show how the mystery of Christ was present in both. Even so, a fuller explanation may be found in a familiar facet of Ambrose's thought: his emphasis on the fact that the Scriptures (or scriptural wisdom) were prior in time and thus in importance and value to philosophical wisdom. That idea appears to have fascinated him since it meant that all philosophy was derived from and owed everything to biblical wisdom.[45] It need not be the case that opposition to philosophical or pagan culture is what is most important to Ambrose. Integration of classical and Christian culture as part of a process of appreciating the christian elements already found in the existing culture is more likely. Such a process would also do fuller justice to the presumed diversity among Ambrose's listeners. Thus, he would have been providing those whose cultural background or previous beliefs needed, not rejection, but development. That argument is persuasively presented in the recent book by P. Moretti cited above.

In *de Isaac et anima*, Ambrose could claim Christ as the source of true wisdom because he was already present in Isaac *in figura*.[46] The contrast between Scriptural wisdom and philosophy was explicitly drawn in *de Abraham*,[47] not in *de Isaac et anima*. However, *de Isaac et anima* presumes that its readers are familiar with *de Abraham* (*Is.* 1,1), which thus provides a context or background. Telling the story of Isaac gave Ambrose a practical starting point; uncovering the typology in that story began the process of looking for and learning

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43. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," pp. 218-219.

44. *De Cain et Abel* and *De Paradiso* in 375-378; *De Noe* in 378-384; *De Abraham* in the 380's; *De Jacob et vita beata* in 386-388; *Hexameron* in Holy week of 386-390; *De Joseph* in 387-388 and *De Patriarchis* shortly afterwards; *De Isaac et anima* in 396.

45. See G. Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974, p. 93, nn. 398.399 for a list of references... In *de Isaac* clear references to philosophers can be found at least in 1,1; 2,4; 8, 65; and 8,78. In relation to the Scripture-philosophy contrast, G. Nauroy ("La méthode de composition d'Ambroise de Milan et la structure du *De Iacob et vita beata*" in *Ambroise de Milan*, XVIe Centenaire de son élection épiscopale, Paris 1974, 116-153) summed up concisely: Ambrose's conviction is "que la culture païenne la plus spirituelle est issue de la Bible" (p. 127).

46. *Is.* 4, 22: *in figura per Isaac, in veritate per Christum.*

47. Cf. G. Madec, *Saint Ambroise* ..., p. 184, where, speaking of Ambrose, he says "Son originalité serait ... de prétendre que les philosophes ont tiré leur 'théorie' de la 'pratique' d'Abraham, conformément à sa thèse sur le plagiat de la Bible par les philosophes."

how to search for true wisdom; and identifying the mystery of the identification with Christ with *Isaac verus* called the Christian community to appreciate this invitation to perfection.[48] He likewise offered those who were not christian a chance to understand the christian message more easily. Seeking to move his listeners toward an appreciation of the fullness associated with Christ,[49] his efforts were occupied with making the Christian life attractive and thus with bringing about conversion through delightful speech.

Throughout this work, Ambrose's discourse is framed by the patriarchial source of wisdom and its fulfillment in Christ.[50] Time and time again Ambrose shows that he is not concerned so much with a logical exposition of a teaching about Isaac and Rebecca, but with the movement or the dynamic quality that such a relationship suggests. Likewise, the emphasis on the searching of the *anima*,[51] and the corresponding activity of Christ, whether as *rector*, *verbum* or *sponsum*, etc.,[52] make it clear that the goal of perfection is set within a relational context. Perfection is defined as participation in *caritas* of which Christ is the fullness.[53] Rather than a merely individualistic ideal, it was to be lived in the midst of the Christian community.[54] For all of those reasons, a more detailed appreciation of *de Isaac et anima* should focus on the relationships enuntiated in this book.

<center>SEVERAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ONE</center>

Unlike any of his predecessors, Ambrose recognized that the history of Isaac and Rebecca in the book of Genesis could be interpreted spiritually by using the lovers in the Canticle of Canticles to explain it and thus to deepen its meaning.[55]

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48. *Is.* 1,2; 3,7; 3,18.

49. *Is.* 4,30: *plenitudo legis*; 6,53.57 and 8,79: *plenitudo divinitatis*; 7,67: *plenitudo victoriae*.

50. See where Ambrose mentions the patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, even if not every inclusion is significant: *Is.* 1,1; 3,7; 4,20-4,22; 4,26; 5,45; 5,48; 6,60; 8,79.

51. *Is.* 5,38-5,44; 6,54.

52. *Is.* 5,38-39; 6,51-52; 8,65-66.

53. See the overview of G. Madec, "La centralité du Christ dans la spiritualité d'Ambroise" in *Nec Timeo Mori* Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1998, 211-217; cf. also T. Graumann, *Christus Interpres: Die Einheit von Auslegung und Verkündigung in der Lukaserklärung des Ambrosius von Mailand*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994.

54. *Is.* 6,57: *etsi tu perfecta es, aliae mihi adhuc redimendae sunt animae, aliae fulciendae*; cf. 8,69: *ergo quasi perfecta non pro se, sed pro aliis interuenit*, and 8,72.

55. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," p. 221, n. 48: "... Il est vrai que le rapprochement entre Rébecca et la fiancée du Cantique, qui va jusqu'à la surimpression des deux personnages, était

Ambrose's primary interest, however, is not found in the specifics of the biblical story. The Genesis story about Isaac and Rebecca is something like a spring-board, a point of departure; it provides an initial framework as well as images that Ambrose finds congenial to his message. Just as he cites the verses from Genesis selectively, so too with the Canticle of Canticles.[56] Hence, his intention was not to provide a verse-by-verse commentary on either book; rather, these texts provide him with a convenient guide for expressing his thoughts about growth in the Christ-Christian relationship. That procedure also allows his listeners to have a sense of the direction or the flow of his words.

Throughout this work Ambrose retains an interest in the relationship announ-ced by the title: between Isaac and the soul or between Christ and the Christian. That pair is presented in an increasingly dynamic way, taking on more than one form and situated in more than one context. The initial paragraphs of *de Isaac et anima* provide a basis for the rest of the book. Thus, the second paragraph of this book begins by introducing Isaac, Rebecca and the fountain in relation to one another:

> *Bonus igitur Isaac verus utpote plenus gratiae et fons laetitiae. ad quem fontem*
> *veniebat Rebecca, ut impleret hydriam ... descendit itaque ad sapientiae fontem ...*
> *ut totum vas inpleret suum et hauriret purae sapientiae disciplinas (Is. 1,2).*

These sentences could easily be a summary of the whole work insofar as Isaac has already become *Isaac verus*, the source of grace and joy to which Rebecca came; Rebecca, wanting to fill her "water jar," actively draws up the teachings of pure wisdom from that source; and the "fountain" to which Rebecca came is indeed profound and already identified in personal terms. Thus, her coming cor-responds to his going out into the field to meditate. It is a meeting, an encounter rather than just the activity of one person.[57] Also, the reference to the fountain (*fons*)—not yet linked to the wells of Genesis—introduces a dimension that makes this meeting something more than ordinary.

The genius of Ambrose, therefore, is not merely the fact of describing a rela-tionship between Isaac and Rebecca in a spiritual way. Rather has Ambrose found that the meeting at a well suggests that there is a depth to be explored and from which to draw nourishment. Its depth points to the specifically Christian dimension to this relationship. Hence, the fountain (*fons*) will be adapted to fit diverse contexts, whether in relation to Isaac, to the patriarchs, to Rebecca, to the *anima*, or to the wells of Genesis or a stretch of water in the Canticle. In

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favorisé par la tradition typologique qui, depuis longtemps, faisait des deux jeunes filles des figures de l'Église."

56. M. Sanders, ...'*Fons Vitae Christus*'..., p. 136: only 52 of 117 verses are cited. A study of the verses Ambrose omits—or of the criteria he may have used to select those inclu-ded—might be revealing, but such a study has not, to my knowledge, been done.

57. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," p. 229: "Sans cette rencontre ... il n'y a pas de progrès possible: c'est le première étape de la conversion."

every case, however, the overarching presence is that of Christ who will be iden-
tified at the end as *fons est omnium vitae Christus* (*Is.* 8,79).

Some further detail will be helpful for consolidating the meaning of the per-
spectives traced above. A discussion of the three interrelated and foundational
elements of this work, each of which will be transformed as the work progresses
will begin with the wells of Genesis.

1. *Drawing from the well*

Ambrose does not introduce the wells (*putei*) of Genesis at the outset, but
only later, when he begins to speak about moral, natural and mystical wisdom.[58]
Implicitly, by identifying these three kinds of knowledge with the wells of Gen-
esis, and thus placing them in a time that he holds as more ancient than the ori-
gin of philosophical knowledge, he has already made his point that all wisdom is
to be sought in the Scriptures.[59] Each time he establishes a connection between
the wells and these forms of wisdom, he cites a passage from scripture,[60]
reaffirming the fundamental importance and the value of scriptural wisdom. The
brief, elliptic quality of these paragraphs about moral, natural and mystical wis-
dom may indicate that Ambrose presumes that what he has written elsewhere is
already known (cf. *Is.* 4,17). It is more likely, however, that his interest is not
focused on triple wisdom at all but on the wells of scripture, opening the way to
appreciating the wisdom that the Jews choose to ignore.[61] If Ambrose can be
seen as providing any new insight in this work, it will at least be found in the
way he treats the wells of Scripture in relation to the meeting of the couple,
Isaac and Rebecca.[62]

Since he begins this section with a linguistic parallel between the actions of
Rebecca and Isaac,[63] no break in his interest in the relation that Isaac and Rebec-
ca typify should be presumed. In addition, what Ambrose wrote in paragraph
4,21 reinforces the connection between that relationship and the wells of the
Scriptures. In that paragraph, Ambrose introduced other biblical events connec-
ted to the wells of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, explicitly noting

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58. See *Is.* 4,20: *Fodit autem puteos Isaac...*

59. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," p. 229: "Ensuite, l'évêque de Milan montre que la triple
sagesse, prétendument inventée par les sages du paganisme, était déjà présent dans les livres
de Salomon..."

60. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," pp. 86-87.

61. *Is.* 1,2; M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., p. 36.

62. G. Nauroy calls the wells "le fil conducteur de tout le propos d'Ambroise," the "clé de
la lecture que nous proposons" "La structure ...," p. 235.

63. *Is.* 4,18 and 4,20: *Concepit autem Rebecca ... Fodit autem puteos Isaac...*, as M. San-
ders shows, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus'*..., p. 34.

that Jacob, Agar and Moyses all had experiences that took place at wells.[64] Hence, rather than interested primarily in the types of wisdom, Ambrose's focus is on the biblical material: "Il établit donc l'équivalence entre les puits et les sciences et, à chaque fois, il tire argument d'un texte biblique."[65]

Likewise, what Origen had explained in terms of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Ambrose refers to the wells themselves.[66] His thought about those wells is broadly applicable to all peoples, an echo of what he had said about Rebecca shortly beforehand. Whereas the wells are "fountains of the human race and especially fountains of devotion and of faith,"[67] Rebecca is called "sister" because she was linked to all, not just to one person;[68] and when she gives birth, she unites two peoples.[69] This pastoral overtones of this interest with joining all in unity will take on intercessory meaning when Ambrose addresses the need of those who have reached a certain perfection to reach out to win those who are weak (*Is.* 8,69). It also helps to integrate Ambrose's vision of the Isaac-*anima* relationship.

In the texts that relate to the categories of moral, physical and mystical wisdom, Ambrose describes the content of the wisdom to be drawn from many wells: what is drawn out is living water.[70] Thus, "les puits creusés par Isaac représentent la profondeur de la science contenue dans les Écritures."[71] Ambrose will link *puteus* and *fons* through scriptural citations (cf. 4,22 and 4,26), thus making the exegesis of the wells of Genesis a physical image of the source of all wisdom to which Christians are to come to drink.[72]

When Ambrose introduces the well of vision, without having spoken of it previously, one can find another indication that his attention is on the content of the well rather than on the structure of thought inspired by Origen. Hence, the

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64. *Is.* 4,21. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," p. 85: "Or Ambroise, immédiatement après avoir révélé le sens des puits, cite trois épisodes bibliques importants qui se situent près d'un puits..."

65. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," pp. 86-87.

66. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," p. 82: "Ces puits ... sont assimilés à la morale, la physique et la mystique."

67. *Is.* 4,21: *velut fontes quidam generis humani et specialiter devotionis ac fidei.*

68. *Is.* 4,19: *Quae non inmerito soror ... adpellatur, eo quod mitis atque pacifica anima communis magis pietatis quam specialis copulae nomen accipiat et quia universis magis quam uni se existimet obligatam.*

69. *Is.* 4,18: *simul plena pacis atque pietatis duos populos sua fide et praedicatione conectat.*

70. *Is.* 4,21: *quid est enim puteus aquae vivae nisi profundae altitudo doctrinae?*

71. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," p. 82; cf. *Is.* 4,26.

72. *Is.* 4,22 cites Proverbs 5:15: "*Bibe aquam de tuis vasis et de puteorum tuorum fontibus.*"

thoughtful and accurate analysis of Ambrose's relation to Origen,[73] as well as the parallel in Ambrose's commentary on Luke, does not provide much help in understanding Ambrose's purpose in *de Isaac et anima*. Also in *Is*. 4,22 the value of opening many wells is *bono ordine*. Hence, that effort will be fruitful insofar as one proceeds, step-by-step, into the exploration of their content and meaning. The reference to the clarification of one's vision, therefore, may be nothing more than an introductory comment or first step. His attention quickly passes to the other, more significant "steps" that follow this one.[74]

The uniting of the wells of Injustice and of Enmity suggests to Ambrose the uniting of what was divided in the flesh.[75] Does *Is*. 4,22 also recall the uniting of two peoples in Rebecca's womb (*Is*. 4,18) and the union of the exterior and interior man (*Is*. 2,3)? That is likely.[76] The well called Broad or Expansive (*Latitudo*) looks toward wisdom's goal where tranquility prevails over all that is foreign; at the well of the Oath God told Isaac not to fear because *tecum enim sum*. Yet, although this history is presented, there is little or no discussion of the meaning of the moral, physical or mystical wisdom. What appears to matter to Ambrose are the scriptural texts cited. The process of examining the wells thus deepens the awareness and appreciation of the Word of God; it also leaves the knowledge of the philosophers behind.

That discussion gives way to other biblical arguments, where Ambrose finds the same teachings in the books of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Canticle of Canticles) and in the prophet Hosea (*Is*. 4,23). In referring to the books of Solomon, Ambrose has not moved very far from the discussion of the Canticle itself. Even though one can correctly describe two new series of triple wisdom, their particular place or role in this work would make it better to see paragraphs 4,23-4,26 as a unit.[77] Thus, paragraphs 4,24-4,26 interpret in greater detail what Ambrose affirmed in the 4,23: *Ut cognoscamus autem quia et Solomon ita hos interpretatus est puteos...* Each one is a presentation of the fact that knowledge should lead to the perfection of charity (*hoc est lumen cognitionis habere caritatis perfectionem*); each thus provides one more indication that Ambrose is concerned with *vera sapientia*, a remedy which cleanses worldly pleasures in its running water. Also in this section, the fountain and widsom are drawn together (*Is*. 4,24).

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73. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," pp. 85-89; G. Nauroy, "La structure ..." pp. 228-230; H. Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l'exégèse de Philon le Juif*, t. 1-2 Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977, I, pp. 71-77.

74. *Is*. 4,22: *A puteo igitur visionis aperire Isaac adorsus est puteos et bono ordine, ut eius putei aqua primum rationabile animae oculumque eius dilueret et foveret, quo visum eius faceret clariorem.*

75. Cf. *Is*. 4,32: *ut inimicitias animae et corporis solvat sublato pariete.*

76. G. Madec, *Saint Ambroise ...*, p. 243.

77. Cf. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," p. 80: "On a donc au total six séries, mais elles ne sont pas toutes sur le même plan, car la deuxième englobe la troisième et la quatrième."

The introduction of the biblical wells advances the understanding of *Isaac verus* (*Is.* 4,17) in relation to Rebecca who has now conceived (*Is.* 4,18) and in relation to a process that moves from wisdom in the books of Solomon (*Is.* 4,24-4,26), to wisdom in the Canticle of Canticles,[78] to wisdom who is Christ (*Is.* 4,30). Once again, the Genesis story has provided a point of departure for Ambrose; he draws (*haurire*) from its depths, seeking to teach what it means to seek wisdom in the depths,[79] to know doctrine in a profound way,[80] and, once found, to hold the Word tightly.[81]

Hence, with the introduction of the Samaritan woman (*Is.* 4,26), another meeting at a well is presented, a meeting with Christ at the well of Jacob. The texts from the Canticle (4:15) and from John (4:5ff) both use *fons* and *puteus* and Ambrose uses the occasion to indicate their connection. The comments he makes about the text from the Canticle emphasize the drawing of *caritas* from the depths of that fountain: referring to the Canticle of Canticles, he says: *si vero haurire velis affluentiam caritatis, quae maior et uberior est quam fides et spes, tunc tibi fons est*. In that context, the Samaritan woman, who draws *divina mysteria* from the well becomes an example of faith.[82] But Ambrose does not pause long by the well; his interest in the wisdom found in the Canticle of Canticles has once again identified its mystical meaning in drawing *caritas* from its depths. Hence, he moves on to a closer examination of the Canticle of Canticles.

Is. 4,27-4,29 will develop this thought further by showing that all three forms of wisdom can be found in the Canticle. *Is.* 4,30 will amplify that idea by applying it specifically to Christ. Hence, rather than merely two more series of triple wisdom, there is also a certain unity to *Is.* 4,27-4,30. In this context, Ambrose highlights the works of christians whereby *caritas* is embraced; that is also a perspective found in the Canticle of Canticles and culminating in Christ.

Hence, although it can be useful to see how many variations-on-a-theme there are in Ambrose when he mentions the three forms of wisdom, moral, physical and mystical, that list does not prove to be helpful for understanding what Ambrose is proposing in *de Isaac et anima*. What does need to be highlighted is the progression in his thought about how the scriptures—including these wells—help to understand true wisdom. In *Is.* 4,20-4,30, that is what Ambrose has proposed. True wisdom is mystical: *in mysticis caritas est, quia plenitudo legis est Christus. Et ideo ecclesia, quae diligit Christum, vulnerata est caritatis* (*Is.* 4,30).

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78. *Is.* 4,27-4,29; M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus*'..., p. 38.

79. *Is.* 4,21; 4,26; 6,56: *Itaque sine dispendio sui, quia etsi volet quis, non potest veram auferre sapientiam.*

80. *Is.* 4,21: *quid est enim puteus aquae vivae nisi profundae altitudo doctrinae?*; 4,26.

81. *Is.* 5,43; 6,50: *invenit et tenuit, ut postea non amitteret*; see too: 8,68.

82. *Is.* 4,26; M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus*'..., p. 37: "Sie ist nicht nur Symbolfigur der Kirche, sondern ebenfalls Wächter der himmlischen Weisungen, und ihr Glaube wird besonders betont."

Thereafter all reference to the wells of Genesis disappear from Ambrose's work. They have been linked to the Canticle of Canticles, not merely in the single verse where *puteus* and *fons* are cited together (Cant. 4:15), but by the broader framework suggested by moral, physical and mystical wisdom. But they have served the purpose of making the connection between the story of Genesis and the Canticle of Canticles tighter.

Even the references to *fons* in the rest of this work will be infrequent,[83] coming to a climax in the phrase of *Is.* 8,78: *quia fons est omnium vitae Christus.*[84] One could perhaps say that the initial meeting of Isaac and Rebecca has become more complex. Leaving the meeting place behind, it will be interpreted more insistently in relation to the text and to the language of the Canticle alone—at least insofar as the Canticle gives expression to the perfection of *caritas* found in Christ.

2. Rebecca: truly Hebrew

Ambrose's interest in Rebecca is not primarily historical. Within the first few lines of the second paragraph, she is identified as representing either the church or the *anima*. When Ambrose explains that this book will focus on the *anima*, rather than on the church (*Is.* 4,17), the scriptural reference is to Cant. 1:9 rather than to Genesis or to Rebecca. In both instances, Ambrose speaks of the *anima* in relation to what is prophetic and/or apostolic.[85] Hence, the *anima* is part of a wider perspective and a longer history than that of Rebecca. Including her by name at the beginning of the book, however, Ambrose's discourse can be firmly rooted in the biblical story, such that the scriptural dimension of *anima*, not a philosophical analysis, can predominate. At the same time, the story of Rebecca does set the context and the tone for what he will say about the *anima* in the rest of the book.

Rebecca's presence at the beginning is immediately tied to that of Isaac. Like the *anima prophetarum*—and unlike the Jews who chose to ignore the depths to be found there—, she came to draw water (*haurire*) at the fountain of living water, *Isaac verus* (*Is.* 1,2). In her thirst for divine knowledge, she came to fill

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83. Cf. *Is.* 4,31; 5,39; 5,48; 8,78 and 8,79.

84. M. Sanders, ... '*Fons Vitae Christus*'..., p. 101: "Am Ende der Schrift, *De Isaac* 78, definiert Ambrosius das höchste Gut als die Quelle des Lebens und *De Isaac* 79 nochmals Christus als die Quelle allen Lebens. Damit hat Ambrosius den Gedankengang, ausgehend von Isaak, dem präfigurierten Christus, dem *fons laetitiae*, hin zu dem in der Parusie erwarteten Christus, dem *fons vitae*, geschlossen."

85. *Is.* 1,2: *ad hunc fontem sitiens currebat anima prophetarum*; 4,17: *huius equae similis aestimatur haec anima, hoc est propheticae vel apostolicae virtutis*; 4,18: *quid autem pariat prophetica atque apostolica anima consideremus et quomodo pariat.*

her water jug to the brim with the teachings of wisdom. Already endowed with heavenly mysteries, she sees *Isaac verus*, true source of joy and wants to kiss him (*Is.* 3,7).

The *anima* is defined by the Scriptures: she is living because Adam became a living soul: *anima est vivens, quia factus est Adam in animam viventem* (*Is.* 2,4). In fact, to be *anima* in the true and full sense of that word, it is necessary to be like Isaac and Jacob who were types of Christ.[86] Just as the book began by defining the *anima* as the Hebrew who cleaves to God (*Is.* 2,3: *Hebraeus significatur deo adhaerens*), it will end with an emphasis on what it means to be Hebrew: *nos igitur animae sumus, si volumus esse Hebraei de iis qui sunt socii Iacob, id est imitatores eius* (*Is.* 8, 79). Rebecca's relation to Isaac at the beginning of the book has thus been transformed. A soul is true to herself, therefore, if she wants to be a Hebrew—cleaving to God like those who were Jacob's friends or imitators. Rebecca's nominal presence may be limited, but her role in the relationship with Isaac as figure of Christ expands across this work to meet the concerns that Ambrose has chosen to address.

In that description, the activity of the *anima* stands out: searching and finding she is set in contrast to the body and called to rise above the temptations of the material world. Likewise, her physical actions are transformed through her encounter with Isaac. Who is the *anima*? She rises above the material world, separates herself from the desires of the flesh, and knows herself. The effort and the response as well as the continual movement of the *anima* are explained by the prior effort and movement on the part of the *verbum*. That relationship holds the center of this work not unlike the relationship of the ordinary Christian to the proclamation of the Word. At the beginning, a passage about Rebecca, although specifically applied to Isaac includes language that will be applied to the *anima* through the rest of the work.

> *ipse est ... qui veniente Rebecca ... exivit in campum abalienare. sapientis enim est segregare se a voluptatibus carnis, eleuare animam atque a corpore abducere; hoc est enim se hominem cognoscere* (*Is.* 1,2).

In *Is.* 3,7, Ambrose provides a contrasting interpretation of *anima*, both from the point of view of Isaac and of Rebecca. After that ambivalent interpretation, however, Rebecca is mentioned by name only twice (*Is.* 4,18; 6,55). She has become the *anima* fully, rejecting fleshly pleasures and rising up from the body (*Is.* 3,8: *quae eleuans se a corpore abdicatis luxurie atque deliciis voluptatibusque carnalibus.*); lifted up by Christ (*Is.* 5,44; 7,57) or, exalting Christ, she is also exalted (*Is.* 7,57). The interplay between raising oneself from the material world

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86. *De excessu fratris Satyri* 2, 100: *Imitemur etiam in Iacob typum Christi, sit eius in nobis aliqua similitudo factorum. Erimus consortes, si fuerimus imitatores*; *De Iacob et vita beata* 2, 5, 25: *Ipse autem est qui praefigurabatur in Iacob dominus Iesus.*

or from the body,[87] and being raised up by Christ (or by *caritas*) is often repeated. Thus does the *anima* cling (*adhaerere, tenere, inhaerere*) to God. Dramatizing her relationship with Christ (e.g., *Is.* 5,43: *tange ergo et fide tene et constringe fideliter pedes eius, ut virtus de eo exeat et sanet animam tuam*), Ambrose never loses a sense of the initial meeting in the *campum*, where Rebecca came to draw water (*ut impleret hydriam*) and where she met Isaac, *fons laetitiae* and *fons sapientiae* (cf. *Is.* 1,2; 4,26; 5,39; 8,78; 8,79). The goal of their relationship is that the *anima* may hold on to the *Verbum* and be transformed, finding *caritatis perfectio* (*Is.* 4,23; cf. 6,52: *perfectio virtutis*; 8,77: *perfecta caritas*) in that union.

Ambrose gave the Genesis couple of Isaac and Rebecca immediate, yet passing, importance. His interest was placed on the development of certain, chosen details, applying the typology of Isaac and of Rebecca to the relation of Christ and the Christian. As the details of the Genesis account fade, the description of the *anima* is carried forward by a commentary on selected verses of the Canticle of Canticles. The *anima* becomes the spouse of the Canticle,[88] reaching toward fulfillment in Christ, *plenitudo legis* (*Is.* 4,30), *plenitudo caritatis* (*Is.* 7,67).[89] That *processus*, however, is more fully described in relation to Isaac as Ambrose seeks to implicate his readers in the narrative that he describes.

3. Isaac, true fountain

Although the book begins with a focus on Isaac, it becomes immediately clear that Ambrose is more interested in Isaac as type than as an historical person.[90] The first sentence shows that Isaac will be treated as a type, prefiguring the birth and the passion of Christ: *cum in eo dominicae generationis et passionis figura*

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87. Among the verbs used, see *exire, ascendere, abducere, surgere, adsurgere*.

88. S. Sagot, "La triple ...," p. 109: "La seconde partie [of *de Isaac*], abandonnant le fil de la Genèse, conserve celui du Cantique..."

89. Thus in relation to the commentary on Luke, H. Savon notes: "Il est caractérisé, nous dit Ambroise, par le *stilus historicus*" (*Exp. Luc. prol.* 1, 3-4), c'est-à-dire que, de par sa composition, son objet et son style, il relève de la narration historique. Il est en effet moins consacré à l'énoncé de préceptes qu'à la description des événements (*Exp. Luc. prol.* 7, 109-115). Mais cette histoire est rédigée de telle sorte que les trois 'vertus' de la sagesse s'y trouvent renfermées. Ainsi l'*historia*, loin de s'ajouter comme un quatrième terme au groupe des trois sagesses ou de s'identifier à l'une d'entre elles, leur sert de commun support ou, pour reprendre l'image même d'Ambroise, de contenant." (H. Savon, *Saint Ambroise* ..., I, p. 71).

90. Cf. J. Cavadini, "Exegetical Transformations: The Sacrifice of Isaac in Philo, Origen, and Ambrose," in '*In Dominico Eloquio*': *In Lordly Eloquence*, P. Blowers, et. al., eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 2002, 43-49 where a similar conclusion is described for Abraham. Just how Ambrose's interest in Isaac is influenced by his anti-Arian concerns is a study yet to be done.

praecesserit. By the second paragraph he has become *verus Isaac*,[91] thus giving way to Christ.[92]

His role then takes on a rich series of titles, beginning with God the Word (*deum verbum*),[93] source of divine illumination and to whom the *anima* belongs (*adherere*; *Is.* 3,8-10). The Word of God actively seeks the *anima* (*Is.* 5,38-40), is found by her (*Is.* 5,40-41), and once found, is held tightly (*Is.* 5,43). The encounter between the *anima* and the *verbum* is richly complex, indicative, no doubt, of Ambrose's frequent meditation on that relationship.

From Rebecca's desire to kiss Isaac, Ambrose proceeds immediately to an explanation of the relationship in terms of the encounter of the *verbum* with the *anima*. After her prayer to the Father *ut mittat sibi deum verbum*, he explains the meaning of that kiss: one kiss is not enough; to kiss the word is to be illuminated by the light of the knowledge of God and to cleave (*adhaerere*) to God the Word; it is a spiritual experience whereby the spirit of the one is poured into the other.

Schematically, Isaac became *verus Isaac* and then took on the role of the *verbum*. The union between *verbum* and *anima* has both exterior and interior dimensions and is not without difficulty. For, recognizing her sinfulness, she enters into a brief dialogue with the *verbum* (4,13-4,15) and is told about the need for self-knowledge, self-restraint and care for others. Ambrose concludes this section with a summary statement suggesting a transition: thus he has described one dimention of the soul that *Isaac verus* loved and from whom he awaited offspring (4,16-4,17).

Returning to the story of Isaac, Ambrose recognizes Isaac's task of digging wells (4,20) and reflects on the meaning of that occupation. Rebecca has given birth (4,18), but the relationship to Isaac is merely a parallel phrasing: 4,18: *Concepit autem Rebecca* ... 4,20: *Fodit autem puteos Isaac* ... Now, however, the integration of another element of the initial paragraphs will begin in earnest, that of the *fons-puteus*. Just how this theme will be related to Isaac and Rebecca will be treated in section 3 of this article. What is, however, already noteworthy is the way that the name of Christ takes over the position that is initially given to Isaac: *in figura per Isaac, in veritate per Christum* (*Is.* 4,22).

By the middle of this book, the pair, *anima-Verbum*, will have given way to—or perhaps has been integrated into—a spousal image near the middle of the

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91. See also *Is.* 3,7 and 4,17.

92. Such a transformation is not surprising in a time when the understanding of Christ had become a matter of controversy. Ambrose continues to see his words as addressing that matter. See to *Is.* 5, 46: *caritatis itaque filius et ipse caritas est, non ex accidentibus habens caritatem, sed habens semper in substantia sua sicut regnum...*

93. Is there any significance to the fact that Ambrose only uses the expression *deum verbum* or *deo verbo* or *deus verbum* in paragraphs 8-10? That form is not found thereafter, replaced, as it were, by *verbum dei*.

book: *perducta igitur sponsa usque ad sponsi requiem nuptiale* (*Is.* 5,46). Earlier the *anima* was brought into the king's chamber (*Is.* 4,11); now the *anima* becomes spouse and is welcomed *requiem nuptiale*. Their spiritual quality of their union (*Is.* 3,7) is recalled in 6,51 (*bene soror, quia nuptiae spiritales sunt verbi atque animae*) as the *anima* gives the Son of Man a place to lay his head (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:59: cf. also *Is.* 27, 68), an image that takes on a spousal meaning in *Is.* 8,72: *ita ergo haec vel incumbebat in Christo vel supra ipsum sese reclinabat aut certe, quoniam de nuptiis loquimur, iam quasi tradita in Christi dexteram in thalamum ducebatur sponso.* Thus, Ambrose reflects on the mystery of Christ's marriage to the *anima*.[94]

In *Is.* 1,2, Rebecca's relationship was double: both to *Isaac verus*, and *ad fontem sapientiae*, thus making Christ both source and fulfillment (*Is.* 8,79). Christ is the fountain (*fons*), the fullness of the law (*Is.* 4,30), charity in his very substance (*Is.* 5,46; cf. 8,67) and the fullness of divinity resides in him *corporaliter* (*Is.* 6,53; 7,57; 8,79).

That spiritual union is, therefore, a relationship between the *verbum* and the *anima* that is oriented toward fulfillment. Whether the emphasis was placed on imitation of Christ (*Is.* 6,52; 6,55; 8,74), or on conformity to Christ (*Is.* 8,75; 8,79), their relationship will grow,[95] drawing strength from Christ,[96] and seeking perfection according to Christ's love,[97] so as to be able to minister to others, a theme that only comes to the fore once the *anima* has been described as reaching a certain perfection.[98] As bride, the *anima* in a public witness to Christ.[99] She puts on *caritas* (*Is.* 8,76); Ambrose will then discuss that love in various ways, all of which point *ad superiora*, the city of Jerusalem to which he recommends flight (*Is.* 8,78). He defines that flight as spiritual (*Is.* 8,79), making sure, as usual, that his sources be transformed into that which is clearly Christian.

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94. See the parallel to this text in *Is.* 4,27; other references to the relationship are found in *Is.* 4,14; 4,19; and 5,49. 6,51-6,52; 8,71-8,73.

95. *Is.* 6,53: *augetur amor et conceptus adolescit atque ex seminibus eius, quae quodam utero intellegibili susceperit anima, totam plenitudinem diuinitatis eius habitantem in eo corporaliter, ut legimus [Col 2:9], videre desiderat.*

96. *Is.* 6,53: *praesentia enim verbi hausit anima virtutem*; 7,57: *quia plena ut aequitas atque perfecta est et fulgorem de verbi lumine mutuata.*

97. *Is.* 7,67; 8,75: *caritas itaque nostra Christus.*

98. *Is.* 8,69: *ergo quasi perfecta non pro se, sed pro aliis interuenit.*

99. *Is.* 8,73: *sponsa per diem nubit, publice confitetur*; cf. 8, 75.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this book Isaac represents the *anima perfecta* or the perfection of human nature which, in fact, can only be found by being in Christ.[100] By the end, the *anima* is not identified with Christ as the *anima perfecta* but is related to Christ who is the *fons* to whom she first came, from whom she originated and towards whose fullness she reaches by self-knowledge, self-discipline and, especially, by the love which is lavished upon her by the Word. Thus the couple, Isaac and Rebecca, has been deployed throughout this work as a unifying thread. Their *relationship* provides the true "fil conducteur" of *de Isaac et anima*.[101] The meeting at the well (*puteus*) became a source (*fons*) on which Ambrose built his work: Christ could thus be identified in relational terms: as *fons*, as spouse, and as fulfillment.

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ABSTRACT : This article suggests that the unity of Ambrose's *de Isaac et anima* can best be described in terms of the couple, Isaac and Rebecca, types of Christ and of the soul. Ambrose interprets their encounter through the prism of the Canticle of Canticles and in conjunction with the wells that Isaac dug in the book of Genesis. In that way, Ambrose himself comes to the well, exploring the profound implications of the Genesis story or drawing wisdom from it as if he were drawing living water from a well. Isaac becomes *verus Isaac*, a type of Christ; scriptural wisdom is shown to be the source and goal of all knowledge; and the *anima* is seen on the difficult path to perfection through her relationship with the Word. Thus portraying Christ as present in the history and in the figure of Isaac, he invites those who came to hear him in Milan—as if they were the *anima*—into the very heart of the mystery of Christ.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article suggère que l'unité du *de Isaac et anima* d'Ambroise trouve sa meilleure illustration dans le couple d'Isaac et de Rebecca, modèles du couple que forment le Christ et l'âme. Ambroise interprète leur rencontre à travers le prisme du *Cantique des cantiques* et en relation avec les puits que creuse Isaac dans la *Genèse*. Ainsi, c'est bien Ambroise lui-même qui vient au puit, approfondissant les significations profondes des récits de la *Genèse* ou exprimant leur sagesse comme s'il en puisait l'eau. Isaac devient *verus Isaac*, archétype du Christ. La sagesse de l'Écriture est présentée comme la source et la fin de toute science, et l'*anima* est montrée sur le difficile chemin de la perfection, en relation avec le Verbe. Dépeignant ainsi le Christ comme présent dans l'histoire et la figure d'Isaac, Ambroise invite tous ceux qui viennent l'écouter à Milan – comme s'ils étaient cette *anima* – au cœur véritable du mystère du Christ.

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100. G. Nauroy, "La structure ...," p. 223-224.

101. G. Nauroy, "La Structure...," p. 235.