

AMBROSE, PAUL AND EXPOSITIO PSALMI CXVIII

A. General introduction

Stimulated by the Arian controversy to explain the Christ's relation to the Father, writers of the fourth century turned quite naturally to Paul whose language about Christ and whose vision of Christ could clarify and solidify the meaning and the truth of the Christ's sonship. That is not a way of saying that Paul was previously neglected, nor is it a suggestion that the process was straightforward. Rather it suggests that, by the time of Ambrose, some passages from Paul's letters had become mainstays of the Christian teaching about Christ. It may also describe something of the process of Ambrose of Milan who, commenting on psalm 118, recognized Paul's emphasis on Jesus Christ¹ as capable of establishing Christ's place in the hearts and minds of his listeners and readers in a dynamic and positive way. No merely polemical document, his commentary sought to foster christian life and doctrine together by showing how Christian action and thought found their culmination in Christ. Thus Ambrose says:

"The first thing that we must do is to exercise ourselves in the warfare of life and mend our ways. When we have so set ourselves on the right course that the correction of error and the grace of purity are attained, then shall we come – in the proper order and way – to the acquisition of known doctrine. Morals first and then mysteries.... It is the same with the holy Church. At the world's beginning she was betrothed in paradise, then prefigured in the flood, proclaimed in the Law, and called through the prophets. She has long awaited the redemption of man, the grace of the Gospel and the coming of the beloved.... From morals she proceeds to mysteries."²

A few citations from Paul combine for a glimpse of Ambrose's use of Paul as a way to point to and stimulate his hearers to appreciate

¹ For example, in Col 1:19: "in him all fullness was pleased to dwell"; Col 2:3: "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"; Eph 4:10: "that he might fill all things".

² *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 1, 2... 5: *primum ergo exercenda est uitae militia, corrigendi mores. cum haec instituerimus ad cursum debitum, ut sit offensionis correctio, puritatis gratia, tunc ad studia percipiendae cognitionis ueniamus suo ordine et uia. prima igitur sunt moralia, secunda mystica.... ita ergo et sancta ecclesia, quae in primordiis mundi desponsata in paradiso, praefigurata in diluuiio, adnuntiata per legem, uocata per prophetas diu redemptionem hominum, euangelii decorem, dilecti expectasset aduentum... et a moralibus uenit ad mystica.*

Christ's role in their lives. Thus, he affirms that the end or fulfillment of the law is Christ³ and the fulfillment of the law is love,⁴ thereby setting the goal for Christian effort. Commenting on the very first verse of the psalm, Ambrose writes about the demand of fidelity in turning eagerly toward Christ:

"Who is undefiled (*immaculatus*)? Certainly not one who walks in any way whatever, but rather one who walks in Christ... Whoever walks in this way will not stray' provided however that he never goes back from this way. The Law is the way; and therefore, so long as he is undefiled, he must walk in the law of the Lord... He should not wait, rather he should keep going. Forgetting what lies behind and eager for what is before him [Phil 3:13] he should press on to his destination. He should make speed to his prize and exert himself earnestly to the end, for the end of the law is Christ [Rom 10:4]. There are many who wish to walk in the way, but not to the end. The Jews do not walk to the end, because they do not walk as far as Christ. The Manichean, who argues against the Law, does not walk in the way. But true faith walks there, for it accepts the Law and understands the fullness of the Law [Rom 13:10]."⁵

Three further texts complement one another in their description of the dynamic process to which a christian is to be committed: "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness*";⁶ "*forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead,*"⁷ "*I*

³ Rom 10:4: *finis enim legis est Christus*. Quotations or allusions can be found at *Exp. Ps.* cxviii 1, 8; 2, 36; 5, 23, 24; 8, 16; 12, 45, 47, 48; 15, 8; 16, 36; 18, 37; 20, 3.

⁴ Rom 13:10: *plenitudo enim legis caritas est*. *Exp. Ps.* cxviii 1, 8; 5, 20; 16, 44; 18, 37; 20, 56.

⁵ *Exp. Ps.* cxviii 1.8.: *Sed quis est immaculatus? non utique qui in quacumque uia ambulat, sed qui in Christo ambulat. ipse enim dixit: ego sum uia. in hac uia qui ambulat, errare non nouit, si tamen ab hac uia numquam recedat. est et uia lex, et ideo, dum immaculatus est, in lege domini ambulat; nec ambulare in uia hac desinat, ne immaculatus esse desistat. non declinet in dexteram aut laeuam, non titubet, non resistat, non expectet, sed ambulet superiora obliuiscens [Phil 3:13] et ea quae sunt priora appetens ad destinatum sequatur. ad brauium festinet, contendat usque ad finem; finis enim legis est Christus [Rom 10:4]. multi uolunt ambulare in uia, sed non usque ad finem. non ambulant Iudaei usque ad finem, qui non usque ad Christum ambulant, non ambulat Manicheus in uia, qui legem refutat, sed ambulat uera fides, quae et legem suscipit et plenitudinem legis [Rom 13:10] agnoscit.*

⁶ 2 Tim 4:7-8: *certainem certavi, cursum consummaui; reposita est mihi corona iustitiae*. One part or another of these verses is found at: *Exp. Ps.* cxviii 3, 3; 4, 27; 5, 26; 6, 30; 7, 3, 12; 12, 41; 20, 21.

⁷ Phil 3:13: *obliuiscens superiora et ea quae posteriora sunt adpetentes*. *Exp. Ps.* cxviii 1, 8; 2, 1; 4, 26; 5, 28; 15, 23.

*drive my body and train it.*⁸ Christian effort is guided by the imitation of Paul – insofar as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 1 Cor 4:16), the Word of God: “Daily reading should be our practice so that we might meditate on and imitate what we read.”⁹ “Day and night we should train, so to speak, in the gymnasium of the heavenly Scriptures... We must not fight like people who do not know what the fight is about or like people beating the air.”¹⁰ Christ and the imitation of Christ is Ambrose’s primary focus in what might be called the result of a kind of *lectio divina* within that community. Paul’s words help him to articulate that message in forceful, energetic terms. Commenting on psalm 118, 131 (“I opened my mouth and panted”), Ambrose shows how Paul leads along the way to Christ. He says:

You must understand what the ‘mouth’ is. It means your heart or inner disposition. The soul has a mouth, the soul has members. Open this mouth not only to Christ but also to the disciple of Christ, who offered his mouth to Christ to be filled. He says: “Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.” He is advising us to be imitators of him, just as he is of Christ. He who is holier than they opened his mouth to Christ; they who are lower than he opened their mouth to the Apostle.¹¹

This paper will explore Ambrose’s commentary on psalm 118, seeking to describe who Paul was for Ambrose and to identify the role that Paul (his experience, words, and thoughts) played in that commentary. Since it is a work which was written late in Ambrose’s life,¹² it should provide a good example of Ambrose’s mature thought: therein might one rightly expect to find Ambrose fully in control of his rhetorical, theological and pastoral skills. Ambrose’s

⁸ 1 Cor 9:27: *castigat corpus suum. Exp. Ps. cxviii* 7, 32; 11, 9, 14; 12, 28; 19, 19; 20, 52.

⁹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 12, 33: *Sit nobis ergo cotidiana lectio pro exercitio, ut quae legimus meditemur imitari.*

¹⁰ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 12, 28: *sit nobis tota die ac nocte exercitii usus in quadam caelestium scripturarum palaestra... nitamur non ut in incertum nec ut aera caedentes* [1 Cor 9:26].

¹¹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 17, 10: *Intellege ergo quid os sit, utrum cor an interioris hominis habitus. habet os anima quae habet membra. hoc os aperi non solum Christo, sed etiam Christi discipulo, qui os suum Christo implendum praebuit et ideo dicit: os nostrum patet ad uos, o Corinthii, cor nostrum dilatatum est* [2 Cor 6:11]. ideo imitatores nos sui esse debere admonet, sicut ipse Christi est [1 Cor 11:1]. qui sanctior est, Christo aperiatur os suum, qui inferior, Apostolo.

¹² Perhaps between May 395 and February 396. See 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.

commentary on psalm 118 is nearly 120,000 words, that is, three times as long as the commentaries of Hilary and of Augustine on the same Scriptural text.¹³

B. *Expositio psalmi cxviii*

Some fragments of previous commenaries of psalm 118 (from Origen, Eusebio of Caesarea, Didimus of Alexandria, Apollinarius of Laodocaea) are known to us.¹⁴ The commentary of Hilary of Poitiers has been handed down intact.¹⁵ Ambrose's *Expositio psalmi cxviii* was delivered orally, over a period of several months, and written down only later.¹⁶ The use of psalm 118 in the liturgy at this time appears conjectural.¹⁷ However, the liturgy was "le lieu de la christologie" (L.-M. Chauvet)¹⁸ and that had to be the original context for these sermons.

Ambrose's commentary was not only longer than other commentaries on this psalm or in this period in the West, but it was not composed as a part of a larger group of psalm commentaries – almost as if he had singled it out as deserving of special treatment. That fact does suggest that Ambrose had a particular reason for choosing to comment on this psalm.

For Ambrose to comment on a psalm which was fully focused on the Law,¹⁹ showing how it revealed Jesus Christ, may have been a project that was particularly significant for the well-educated people of Milan, a fact to which Augustine surely bears witness.²⁰ That fact

¹³ Hilary's commentary is about 44,000 words; Augustine's commentary is just over 40,000 words.

¹⁴ R. Devreesse, *Les anciens commentateurs grecs des Psaumes* (Studi e Testi 264), Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana 1970; M. J. Rondeau, *Les Commentaires patristiques du Psautier *IIIe-Ve siècles, I* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 219), Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium 1982.

¹⁵ CSEL 22, 354-544.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ L.F. Pizzolato, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, Introduzione (p. 9-51), Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera Omnia (SAEMO) 9-10, Milano: Città Nuova 1987, p. 21 where he suggests liturgical and monastic connections.

¹⁸ G. Madec, *Le Christ de Saint Augustin*, Paris: Desclée, 2001, p. 80.

¹⁹ Note that a study of all the various shades of meaning of "law" in this commentary is still needed.

²⁰ *Conf.* V, 14, 24; VI, 4, 6; VI, 5, 8. Cf. Pizzolato, *Expositio*, p. 24.

should not be allowed to obscure the presence of many other people of varied background, but the way that Ambrose personalizes his message, whether by direct address or in extended examples, to those who may have been people in leadership roles would make all the more sense if such people were among his listeners.²¹ For such as these, a meditation on the law would have been all the more pertinent insofar as it transcended the legalistic context of daily life and reached toward Christ.

It is at least clear that this commentary is not primarily polemical, even though erroneous positions of Jews, Manichees, Sabellians and Apolinarians are noted. Ambrose is more concerned with moving his listeners (or readers) to christ-like living than with a theoretical exposition of the meaning of the text or with the use of psalm 118 to further merely ecclesiastical purposes.

Hence, this commentary is constantly concerned with the perfection of love as found in Jesus Christ, with the mystery that lies behind the moral message, completing it, and with how to bring about truly Christian action and meditation. One could even say that his commentary seeks to integrate the christian with the human, the secular with the sacred.²² Such a project could not be limited to the well-educated who heard or read it.

This psalm of 176 verses was focused in a particular way on the law. Not unlike his predecessors, Ambrose was interested in the relationship *lex-Christus* and, especially, with the passage from the Law to Christ.²³ Ambrose was also fascinated by the meanings of the individual letters of the Hebrew alphabet – an interest that will soon wane,²⁴ as well as by the unity of the eight verses that followed each letter. These facts and the placement of this psalm at the center of the psalter (as he saw it) allowed him, from the beginning, to highlight its perfect splendor.²⁵ Thus, the eight verses in each of the 22 parts point to the mystery of the Resurrection.²⁶

The complex, elliptical,²⁷ even digressive style of this commentary depends less on who might have been his audience than on a

²¹ See, for example, *Exp. Ps. cxviii* the examples of soldiers and their general in sermon 5, the “tu imperator” of sermon 8, 41, the inclusion of *presbyter* and *episcopus* in 3, 15.

²² Cf. Pizzolato, *Expositio*, p. 25.

²³ Cf. Pizzolato, *Expositio*, p. 16.

²⁴ Cf. Pizzolato, *Expositio*, p. 17; Ambrose notes a similar structure in two other psalms: 110 and 111.

²⁵ Prol. 1: *perfecti splendoris*.

²⁶ Prol. 2.

²⁷ G. Nauroy, “La Structure...” pp. 219-221.

pedagogical choice that Ambrose made. In his effort to bring the Christian message to people who were capable of understanding and who must have been interested in a detailed analysis, Ambrose chose to display all his rhetorical skill. His particular way of doing that has, in recent years, been described as manierism ("maniérisme"). Hervé Savon explains manierism as a way to overcome the distance between biblical words and contemporary culture: "cet artifice répond à un besoin bien réel: celui d'une communauté qui doit vivre quotidiennement de textes sacrés venus d'un passé lointain et d'une civilisation étrangère. [le mélange des genres devient] le moyen de rendre sensible le paradoxe du message à transmettre."²⁸ It was thus a way to use apparent contradictions in words or meanings to be resolved by heeping on a number of Scriptural passages, often one after the other, thus allowing a new meaning to bring delight to those listening. Such *delectatio* was thus intended to move, not by merely rational logic, but by inviting the listeners to enter into a different constellation of meaning.

In this commentary on psalm 118, the relationship of Old Testament figures (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, etc.) to Christ provides significant insights into the way that Ambrose finds Christ within the Hebrew Scriptures. He will speak of David, for example, as the true David or the true prophet²⁹ to indicate that it is really Christ who is speaking. Such a process allowed Ambrose to demonstrate that Christian understanding and wisdom was already present in the Old Testament, thus preceding the 'wisdom' of the philosophers. For Ambrose, philosophy was derived from and owed everything to biblical wisdom.³⁰ That perspective meant that Ambrose saw Paul's message as a confirmation of his own message, and that Christians were to press on beyond the moral message of the Scriptures to appreciate, understand and live the mystery of Christ's witness and of his passion and death. Paul helped Ambrose witness to the

²⁸ H. Savon, "Maniérisme et allégorie dans l'oeuvre d'Ambroise de Milan," *Revue des Etudes Latines* 55 (1977) 203-221, p. 203. 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 (iperbato, perifrasi, *annominatio*, metafora) e il gusto per ciò che è strano, arduo, virtuosistico (procedimenti lipogrammatici e pangrammatici, carmi gigurati, *logodaedalia*, asindetì a zeppa, versi *rapportati*, schemi sommatori)....".

²⁹ *verus propheta*: 8, 53; *verus David*: 14, 4; 21, 11. Never does Ambrose speak of *verus Paulus* in this commentary.

³⁰ See G. Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie*, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes 1974, 93, nn. 398. 399.

dynamic connection of Old Testament words and experiences as they were brought to fulfillment in Christ.

In the commentary on psalm 118, Ambrose will present that dynamic process, not primarily by an exegesis of the letters of Paul, but by selecting and including some of Paul's words (or experiences) to clarify and/or confirm the witness of the prophet David. A few, chosen texts point the listeners (or readers) toward the dynamic of christian living: reaching for the mystery of Christ. That activity was rightly an activity of the Church, and not merely focused on the individual christian: "When you pray, go into your room and pray to your father in secret with the door shut. That room of the church is the body of Christ; therein does the king lead her into the most profound mysteries."³¹

Thus, Ambrose's intention for this commentary may be related to progress in christian living, whether by the individual or by the church.³² That is also what he says, whether in the prologue "Just as little children begin by learning the alphabet, we too, by a sort of alphabet, may learn the art of right living."³³ or at the beginning of sermon 22:

"We have already stated (in prologue 1) that the one hundred and eighteenth psalm signifies the progress of one who, proficient in moral teaching, has put aside the childishness of an unchallenged mind and assumed instead the knowledge of advanced counsel and the age of mature prudence. ... progress is taken as the end of fault."³⁴

³¹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 1, 16: tu autem cum orabis, intra in cubiculum tuum et clauso ostio ora patrem tuum in abscondito. cubiculum ecclesiae corpus est Christi; introduxit eam rex in omnia interiora mysteria.

³² *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 17, 15: There is no doubt that here too "steps" signify the progress of the Church or of the soul (*non est dubium gressus hic quoque ecclesiae uel animae profectus significari*).

³³ Prol. 1: quem per singulas Hebraeorum digessit litteras, ut, quemadmodum paruulorum ingenia primis litterarum elementis adsuescunt discendi usum adsumere, ita etiam nos huiusmodi elementis usum discamus uiuendi.

³⁴ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 22.1: psalmo autem isto, hoc est centesimo octauo decimo, profectum hominis diximus significari, qui doctrinae moralis magisteriis eruditus deponeret omnem inexercitatae mentis infantiam, adsumeret autem ueterani consilii scientiam et prudentiae senilis aetatem.... hic ergo est profectus, finis ut culpa sit. Cf. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 9, 9: God's kindness is not ordinary but always looks for progress in discipline (*non ergo bonitas ista uulgaris est, sed quae semper disciplinae expectet profectum*); 17, 6-7: If you want to make progress, then learn from the verses that follow. 'The revelation of your words gives me light and gives understanding to little ones' [Ps. 118, 130] (*profectum quaeris? agnosce ex his uersiculis qui secuntur. "Manifestatio sermonum tuorum inluminat me et intellectum dat paruulis"*).

Progress, development toward the fullness of Christ is a constant presence in this commentary as moral striving and mystical leanings are interlaced throughout the commentary – and, no doubt, throughout christian life. Such progress depends heavily on the gift of God, on the *iustitia Dei*, whereby pardon of sin is the primary joy of Christian *confessio*. Hence, very shortly after the text from sermon 22, Ambrose cites Paul's letter to Titus (3:4-5) to emphasize that such striving is the result, not of any justice we might claim, but of God's mercy.

III. Who was Paul for Ambrose?

A rapid overview of the experiences of Paul and the qualities in Paul that Ambrose emphasized will set the stage for a presentation of the way that significant parts of Paul's letters were integrated into Ambrose's message. As part of the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, he became the *vas electionis* (Acts 9:15), a title used in at least 6 paragraphs in this commentary.³⁵

"Paul, the divinely chosen vessel, the doctor of the Gentiles, says that he is the least, unworthy to hold the name of that office which he ranked higher than all the works he performed. He claims nothing for himself, but imputes all to the grace of God. Surely this is beautiful in a just man."³⁶

"Even the saints are in the shadow as long as they are in this body. They do not see perfectly, but imperfectly [1 Cor 13:9]. They know only in part. As Paul says, *Our knowledge is imperfect*. He, the instrument [Act 9:15] whose eyes Christ opened, whom he illuminated with his own grace, even he did not see face to face, but only a reflection as in a glass."³⁷

³⁵ *Exp. Ps. cxiii* 3, 18; 6, 32; 12, 41; 14, 24; 20, 16; 21, 11.

³⁶ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 20, 16: ille uas electionis diuinae, ille gentium doctor minimum esse se dicit, indignum eius officii nomine quod suis operibus praefererat nihilque sibi adrogat, sed totum gratiae dei deputat. hoc utique decet iustum. 20.16. Est ergo humilitas laboris et fatigationis, est et humilitas uirtutis atque propositi, quam et in secundis et prosperis et in otio positus tenet *iustus*. nullo scilicet fractus labore, nullius certaminis dubius euentu humilem omnibus affectum exhibet nec sua extollere studet, sed magis minuere operis sui pretium et meriti sui gratiam. audi iustum humiliantem se: ego, inquit, *sum minimus Apostolorum* [1 Cor 15:7]. ille uas electionis diuinae, ille gentium doctor minimum esse se dicit, indignum eius officii nomine quod suis operibus praefererat nihilque sibi adrogat, sed totum gratiae dei deputat. hoc utique decet iustum.

³⁷ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3, 18: omnes ergo etiam sancti in umbra sunt, quamdiu sunt in corpore: non perfecte uident, non perfecte, sed ex parte cognoscunt. ipse Paulus ait: *ex parte enim cognoscimus* [1 Cor 13:9], ipse uas electionis, cui Christus oculos reddidit et sua inluminauit gratia, non facie ad faciem, sed per speculum uidebat.

Chosen from the beginning (*Exp. Ps. cxviii* 6, 32), he became an instrument of grace. This choice of the teacher of the gentiles was also a sign of the choice of the gentiles in their very flesh or even a statement about humanity itself:

The sinful flesh of man was the property of the devil, but once we believed in Christ, our flesh began to be a chosen vessel. You know this from the apostle Paul who was sent to the Gentiles, for the Lord Jesus said to Ananias: "Go, for he is my chosen vessel. Rightly was the name of Christ invoked."³⁸

[The devil] would even have inflated Paul with pride. What Paul do I mean? The one who was made an apostle not by man but by Jesus Christ. [The devil] had very nearly deceived him, such that Paul asked God to take from him that torment of the flesh that so humiliated him. But the good Lord who wanted to make Paul stronger by means of his very infirmities, let him see the angel of Satan. In this way God overcame the devil by his own strategies.³⁹

Paul's experience of conversion was not always focused on that which happened on the road to Damascus. Thus, in a passage from sermon 3 of his commentary, Ambrose notes an inner change in Paul, from shame to confidence:

It is the same with Paul [as with David], who once said: "I hardly deserve the name apostle" [1 Cor 15:9] but later said: "All there is to come now is the crown of justice, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day; and not only to me, but to all those who have longed for his Appearing." [2 Tim 4:8] Here, the Apostle is confident; in the previous place he prays as one who is still ashamed. His later assurance stems neither from arrogance nor from insolence, but from the innocence of one whose conscience does not reproach him and who asks for payment from the master he serves.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 21, 11: uas diaboli caro erat hominis peccatoris; sed posteaquam in Christum credidimus, caro nostra coepit esse uas electionis, ut habes de apostolo Paulo, qui ad gentes missus est, dictum ad Ananiam a domino Iesu: uade, quoniam uas electionis mihi est. hoc utique decet iustum.

³⁹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3.36: Inflare uolebat et Paulum. quem Paulum? illum utique Apostolum non ab hominibus neque per hominem, sed per Iesum Christum [Gal 1:1]. et paene deceperat, ita ut stimulum carnis suae, qui se humiliabat, rogaret auferri [2 Cor 12:7-8]. sed bonus dominus, qui Paulum infirmitatibus uellet facere fortiolem, adhibuit ei angelum satanae, ut suis diabolus artibus uinceretur.

⁴⁰ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3,3: siquidem etiam Paulus, qui ante dixerat: *non sum dignus uocari Apostolus* [1 Cor 15:9], postea ait: *reposita est mihi corona iustitiae, quam reddet mihi dominus in illa die, iustus iudex, non solum autem mihi, sed et his qui diligunt aduentum eius* [2 Tim 4:8]. et Apostolus sibi pollicetur, hic autem uerecundius adhuc precatur, quod utique non insolentis adrogantiae, sed innocentis est conscientiae, ab ipso cui seruieris petere mercedem ...

Often, to address the question of change, Ambrose will use the comparative tense when speaking about Paul, addressing a sense of growth or of development in Paul's experience. This passage from the seventh sermon provides a good sense of the dynamic movement toward greater charity – a familiar ambrosian theme:

Let us take the example of the Apostle Paul, how he wept for the sin of another, as he himself says: "When I wrote to you, in deep distress and anguish of mind and in tears." [2 Cor 2:4] Although he was grieved to the heart, he did not wish those whom he cided to be cast down. So he added: "It was not to sadden you but to let you know how much more love I have for you." [2 Cor 2:4 *ut sciatis quam caritatem habeo in uobis abundantius*] He wanted those who had gone astray and done wrong to be sad to the point of doing penance, but not beyond that to the point of wretchedness (*non usque ad maestitiam profundiore*). Rather he wanted the sadness of those he corrected to turn into joy for the one who had to correct. That is why he says: "If I have hurt you, who else could give me joy but those whom I hurt?" [2 Cor 2:2] So he chides them that their repentance might turn into salvation. He condemns them only in order to absolve them. He shuts them out only so as to receive them back. If he does not at once forgive it is only so that he can later set them free. Paul acted like this because as an expert in the Law he knew the precept of him who says: "Faintness takes hold of me because of the sinners who forsake your law."⁴¹

Paul, expert in the Law, interpreted that law as spiritual.⁴² That interpretation transformed the Law into Gospel, even as Augustine's understanding of the Scripture was transformed when he heard Ambrose's position. Ambrose thus acted as Paul did when he opened

⁴¹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 7.18: exemplum accipe Apostolicum. Paulus enim in peccato flebat alieno, sicut ait ipse: *nam ex multa tribulatione et angustia cordis scripsi uobis per multas lacrimas* [2 Cor 2:4] et cum ipse contristaretur, eos ipsos quos arguebat contristari nolebat. denique addidit: *non ut contristemini, sed ut sciatis quam caritatem habeo in uobis abundantius* [2 Cor 2:4]. contristari enim uolebat usque ad paenitentiam lapsos, non usque ad maestitiam profundiore, tantum ut eorum qui arguebantur maestitia gaudium fieret arguenti. unde ait: *si enim ego contristo uos, quis est qui me laetificet nisi qui contristatur ex me* [2 Cor 2:2]? arguit itaque, ut alleuet diuturnitatem maestitiae, quo paenitentia fieret in salutem; damnat ut absoluat, excludit ut recipiat, non ignoscit ut liberet. ideo talis Paulus, qui bene peritus in lege cognouerat praeceptum dicentis: pusillanimitas detinuit me a peccatoribus derelinquentibus legem tuam.

⁴² Rom 7:14: *lex spiritalis* *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3, 26; 5, 37; 7, 35; 8, 15; 15, 2.9; 17, 28; 18, 36; 21, 12.14; see also Eph 6:17 and Heb 4:12 where it is a question of the penetrating spiritual sword: *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 5, 25; 19, 38 and 13, 6; 15, 35.39; 18, 21 19, 38.

his heart to the Corinthians;⁴³ he sought to stretch the hearts of his listeners:

"To those who run along the way [of your commandments], the Apostle says: Be free, and do not harness yourselves with unbelievers." Speaking of himself, he says to the Corinthians: "We have spoken frankly to you, Corinthians, our heart has been opened." Of Solomon too it was said: "The breadth of his heart is as the shore of the sea." Notice the distinction: let the way be narrower (*angustior*), let the heart be wider (*latius*) so that it can support the habitation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴

Hence, Ambrose's Paul is a soldier who fights against spiritual powers,⁴⁵ an athlete that does not look back,⁴⁶ but runs the race so that he might receive the prize / the reward / the crown of justice.⁴⁷

"One who is to award a prize has to be a spectator at the games; so also no one is crowned without having taken part in the contest. God allows us to be tested many times, for – as is only right – he wants to award prizes fairly to those who play their part in the contest and not to those who sleep. Those whose heads are fit to wear the crown of flowers must first be covered in dust. Victory is the ornament not of soft and pleasure-loving people, but of those who are toughened by hard toil and diligent exercise.

He should make speed to his prize and exert himself earnestly to the end, for the end of the law is Christ. There are many who wish to walk in the way, but not to the end.. true faith walks there, for it accepts the Law and understands the fullness of the Law."⁴⁸

⁴³ 2 Cor 6:11: *cor nostrum dilatatum est*. Exp. Ps. cxviii 4, 27; 6, 31; 12, 13.50; 17, 10.

⁴⁴ Exp. Ps. cxviii 4, 27: denique currentibus uiam domini ait Apostolus: *dilatamini et uos et nolite iugum ducere cum infidelibus* [2 Cor 6:13-14] et de se ait: *os nostrum patet ad uos, o Corinthii, cor nostrum dilatatum est* [2 Cor 6:11]. ideo et de Salomone dicitur: *latitudo cordis eius sicut harena maris. et uide distantiam: uia sit angustior, cor latius, ut patris et filii et spiritus sancti sustineat mansionem*.

⁴⁵ Eph 6:12: *quoniam non est nobis conluctatio aduersus carnem et sanguinem, sed aduersus principatus et potestates, aduersus mundi huius rectores tenebrarum harum, aduersus spiritalia nequitiae quae sunt in caelestibus*. Exp. Ps. cxviii 3, 45; 8, 39.46.58; 10, 14; 11, 21.24; 16, 11; 19, 7; 20, 9; 21, 6; 22, 16.

⁴⁶ Phil 3:13: *ambulet superiora obliuiscens et ea quae sunt priora appetens ad destinatum sequatur*. Exp. Ps. cxviii 1, 8; 2, 1; 4, 26; 5, 28; 15, 23.

⁴⁷ See 2 Tim 4:7-8 (see note 5); 1 Cor 9:24-27 (see note 7); 2 Tim 2:5 (Exp. Ps. cxviii 10, 30; 8, 5); 1 Thes 2:19 (Exp. Ps. cxviii 15, 10).

⁴⁸ Exp. Ps. cxviii 18, 5: *qui uult dare praeium, debet spectare certamen, quia nemo sine certamine coronatur* [2 Tim 2:5]. *sinit ergo nos saepe temptari, uolens iuste praemia dare luctanti utique, non dormienti. non decet redimitos floribus corona, sed puluerulentos nec molles deliciis, sed labore exercitatos ornat uictoria*.

Paul, whose conversation transcends the present,⁴⁹ interprets the Scriptures in a way that leads to Christ. Thus does Ambrose speak of rushing impatiently *ad perfectiora* (*Exp. Ps. cxviii* 5, 13) and of learning to seek Christ from those who hold him passionately (*Exp. Ps. cxviii* 7, 36). Even the experience of misfortune recalls the glory that waits for us: "Whoever hopes for better things to come is not broken by matters of lesser consequence."⁵⁰ Likewise, the passage from milk to solid food is a familiar image in all of Ambrose's writings. "Under the teaching of the Apostle, the Corinthians improved so much that they, previously only able for children's milk, later abounded in all the riches of wisdom and understanding."⁵¹

Christ for Ambrose is not just culmination of the Law, but of everything. Hence, the passages that speak of Christ as "omnia et in omnibus"⁵² or as the one who "implet omnia"⁵³ on in whom "omnia constet"⁵⁴ all amplify the basic thrust of Ambrose's interest in moving his hearers toward Christ, the fullness of love and the end of the law.

IV. What was Paul's role in the *Expositio psalmi cxviii*?

Ambrose's use of New Testament texts is certainly not limited to those from Paul, nor does the number of citations from Paul's letters outnumber those from other New Testament texts. But Paul plays a significant part in Ambrose's exegesis of psalm 118. Is it possible to provide a description of the role that Ambrose gives Paul in his commentary on psalm 118? V. Hahn has written that Ambrose does

Exp. Ps. cxviii 1.8: ad brauium festinet, contendat usque ad finem; *finis enim legis est Christus* [Rom 10:4]. multi uolunt ambulare in uia, sed non usque ad finem. ... ambulat uera fides, quae et legem suscipit et plenitudinem legis [Rom 13:10] agnoscit.

⁴⁹ Phil 3:20: *nostra autem conuersatio in caelis est*. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3, 31; 6, 31; 8, 18; 9, 12; 12, 12; 14, 10.

⁵⁰ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 7,6: nam etsi illa acciderint, tamen grauius esse non possunt dicenti: *existimo enim quod indignae sint passionis huius temporis ad futuram gloriam* [Rom 8:18]. quisquis enim meliora sperat, numquam leuioribus frangitur.

⁵¹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 2, 32: in tantum doctrina Apostoli corinthii profecerunt, ut, qui ante non poterant nisi sicut paruuli lac solum bibere [1 Cor 3:2], postea in omnibus diuitiis abundarent cognitionis et uerbi; cf. too, *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 19, 21: quod euidentius expressit Esaias dicens: tribulationem super tribulationem expecta, spem super spem. ad perlactatos et abductos ab uberibus loquebatur, hoc est ad eos qui prima infantiae alimenta transissent cibo iam habiles fortiori [Heb 5:12.14].

⁵² See 1 Cor 12:6; 15:28; Col 3:9-11. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3, 20; 10, 17; 12, 25.27.

⁵³ See Eph 4:10. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 17, 9; 19, 36.

⁵⁴ See col 1:17. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 3, 20; 19, 41, 20, 2; 21, 12.

more than cite Paul; he thinks as Paul thinks.⁵⁵ That could suggest that to try to articulate Paul's role in a succinct way is something like trying to set a limit to the sea. However, some conclusions can be attempted.

Ambrose refers to Paul by name (or to Saul in *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 14, 6) or as the Apostle, a term that does not exclude its use for other apostles. His description of the liturgy of the Word in Milan identifies the place for reading from the Apostle: "First the Prophet is read then the Apostle, and finally the Gospel."⁵⁶ Just as the organization of the liturgy of the Word passed from prophet to apostle to Christ, so does the role of the apostle Paul hold together – as glue – Ambrose's efforts to unite the human experience he finds in David's words with the daily ideals he proposes from the life of Christ. Paul does appear to have a specific role in facilitating the passage from shadow to reality, from the human to the divine, from what is incomplete or imperfect to the all, the fullness or the perfection of Christ.

A "chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15) Paul's experience and his words are a stimulus to christian conversion because they identify the role that Christ had in Paul's life, bringing him to conversion and continually enhancing that conversion. Likewise, Paul's words on the life and person of Jesus Christ informed Ambrose's reflection, providing a dynamic thrust to the imitation of Christ, the end of the Law (Rom 10:4) and the fullness of wisdom and knowledge.⁵⁷ What is significant, however, is not just the fact that Christ is the goal of Ambrose's exegesis of psalm 118; it is what this pauline emphasis 'says' about his listeners and how he might have expected them to benefit from this exalted definition of Christ, already present in David's words. Yet, throughout this commentary, Paul is praised for his ministry to justice and for the crown of justice that he received. For Ambrose, Paul's ministry and experience are focused on justice.

What is the crown of glory if not the Church, who crowns Christ her head? What but the church is the joy of all the earth? ... Christ is not sought within this world, for he desired his own disciples to be above the world. What is the diadem with which Christ is crowned unless it is the crown of glory? Joseph had the crown of chastity, *Paul of justice*, Peter of faith. There are crowns for every single

⁵⁵ V. Hahn, *Das wahre Gesetz. Eine Untersuchung der Auffassung des Ambrosius von Mailand vom Verhältnis der beiden Testamente*, Münster in W. 1969, p. 514.

⁵⁶ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 17, 10: prius propheta legatur et Apostolus et sic euangelium

⁵⁷ Col 2:3 is cited or alluded to in several places: *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 1, 16; 2, 27.29.32; 12, 4.

virtue. But only Christ has the crown of glory, with which the Church has crowned him.⁵⁸

Hence, it makes sense to seek to uncover the roots of Ambrose's understanding of justice as both a social experience and a theological category – every bit as interesting as later elaborations will be.⁵⁹ The citation from Romans 10:4, Christ is the end of the law, continues: for the justification of all who have faith.⁶⁰

"No one belongs to Christ unless he is a stranger to sin; no one belongs to Christ unless he shows that he is Christ's own servant... Who then belongs to God if not the person who can say: "My conscience does not reproach me" [1 Cor 4:4]? This is what Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ [1 Cor 1:1] could say because he was innocent in his conduct toward everyone. I however belong at one moment to God and at the next to sadness or to anger or to gossip. But whoever has many masters cannot say to the one Master, "Lord Jesus, I am yours." I think it was of those other masters that Paul spoke when he said: "For although there are so-called gods, either in heaven or on earth, for us there is only one God, the Father from whom all things have their being; and for whom we exist; and there is one Lord Jesus, through whom all things come and through whom we exist." [1 Cor 8:5-6] The apostle Paul belonged fully to the Word. Therefore he could say: "You seek proof of Christ who speaks in me." [2 Cor 13:3] That meant "I am of Christ;" and the Lord replied to him: "You are mine." Because he could truly say: "I am yours" he hears from the Lord: "You are mine." It was of Paul that the Lord, speaking to Ananias when he sent him to heal Paul, said: "You must go because this man is my chosen instrument." [Acts 9:15] Because Paul continued steadfastly as Christ's own, successfully fighting the good fight, he merited the crown of justice.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 15.11: Quae est autem corona gloriae nisi ecclesia, quae caput suum Christum coronat? quae iucunditas uniuersae terrae nisi domus populi christiani... non intra hunc mundum quaeritur Christus, qui supra mundum suos uoluit esse discipulos. quae est corona qua coronatur Christus nisi corona gloriae? Ioseph coronam habuit castitatis, Paulus *iustitiae*, Petrus fidei – singularum uirtutum coronae sunt -: solus Christus habet coronam gloriae qua eum ecclesia coronauit. in hac corona omnes coronae sunt, quia gloria non portio unius coronae, sed praemium omnium coronarum est.

⁵⁹ See McGrath, *Justitia Dei* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986) for an appreciation of justice beginning with Augustine. The gap in the study of justice prior to Augustine needs to be filled in: precisely with a study of justice in Ambrose.

⁶⁰ *Finis legis est Christus ad iustitiam omni credenti*, cited in *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 5, 23; 12, 45; 20, 3.

⁶¹ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 12.41: Non ergo est Christi nisi qui est alienus a crimine, non est Christi nisi qui potest semper se Christi seruulum demonstrare... quis ergo est dei

Paul, the just one, will receive the crown of justice after having fought the good fight of understanding that the law leads to Christ and to the reward of faithfulness to Christ: the crown of justice. "In your justice give me life. [Ps. 118: 40] The psalmist dares to say that life is true when it is lived according to the justice of God. That is what the apostles lived, or rather, what they live."⁶² Justice, for Ambrose, is life-giving, both in relation to apostolic choice and according to Christ's example. In that sense, it is one of the virtues, a way to live according to one's created nature;⁶³ in another place it is *confessio*, to recognize and name God's justice, that saves: Thus "Jesus, the one through whom all things exist and through whom we exist... came so that "our love might be formed in the paths of virtue... Then you will have progressed from confessing the truth to a knowledge of just and holy behavior."⁶⁴ Justice is also that trait in Christ that makes us the justice of God, as Paul teaches:

"Listen to what the Apostle said in today's reading: "He died once to sin." [Rom 6:10] Christ died once, for you the sinner; do not sin again after your baptism. He died once for all in general and for each one in particular – once, not repeatedly. You are sin, O man, therefore the almighty Father made his own Christ "sin." [2 Cor 5:21] He

nisi qui potest dicere: *nihil mihi conscius sum* [1 Cor 4:4]? ideo dicebatur Paulus Apostolus Iesu Christi [1 Cor 1:1]. quia nulli alii obnoxius tenebatur. ego autem nunc dei mei sum, nunc tristitiae, nunc iracundiae, nunc uerbi otiosi. et ideo qui plures dominos habet non potest uni dicere: domine Iesu, tuus sum. unde arbitrator etiam de huius mundi dominis dixisse Paulum: *nam etsi sunt qui dicantur dii siue in caelo siue in terra, nobis tamen unus deus pater, ex quo omnia et nos in illum, et unus dominus Iesus, per quem omnia et nos per ipsum* [1 Cor 8:5-6]. uerbi igitur totus erat Apostolus Paulus. ideo dicebat: *quoniam experimentum quaeritis eius qui in me loquitur Christus* [2 Cor 13:3]. ille ergo dicebat: Christi sum, et respondebat ei dominus: meus es. qui uere dicit: tuus sum, audit a domino: meus es. denique de ipso dominus ad Ananiam, cum mitteret eum ad sanandum Paulum, ait: uade, quoniam uas electionis [Act 9:15] est mihi. et quia perseuerauit Christi esse, quasi impleto certamine coronam meruit inuenire *iustitiae* [2 Tim 4:7-8].

⁶² Exp. Ps. cxviii 5.47: In tua iustitia uiuifica me. audet et dicit, eo quod illa uera sit uita quae uiuit secundum dei *iustitiam*, quam uiuebant Apostoli, immo quam uiuunt.

⁶³ Exp. Ps. cxviii 10, 15: ibi operatur, ibi ostenditur homo ad similitudinem et imaginem dei, ubi iustitiae, ubi sapientiae, ubi omnis forma uirtutis adsumitur. See too Exp. Ps. cxviii 10, 28. qui ergo iustus est, examine iustitiae suae credit, quia dei iusta iudicia sunt, uel secundum Graecum, quia iudicia dei sunt ipsa iustitia.

⁶⁴ Exp. Ps. cxviii 20.57: Iesum, per quem omnia et nos per ipsum [1 Cor 8:6]... uenit, ut uirtutis semitis noster informaretur affectus, ut morum mansuetudinem conuersationis eius disceremus exemplo, ut aboleretur culpa per gratiam, et tunc a ueritatis confessione ad cognitionem iustitiae processisti.

made him man, so that he might bear our sins. The Lord Jesus died for me who am sin "so that we might become in him the justice of God." [2 Cor 5:21]⁶⁵

For Ambrose, therefore, the teaching of Paul is more than a practical way to call on his people to act rightly. With Paul he can affirm the inability of all to do anything apart from the grace of God (*Exp. Ps. cxviii* 19, 14) and trace the outline of a theology of kenotic justice revealed in Christ and lived by those who belong to the body of Christ. The one who searches out God's justices is the one who remains close to God. "The Apostle says to them "You who were far off have been brought close by the blood of Christ." [Eph 2:13] The blood of Christ is our justice. that is why he says to John: "Permit us to fulfill all justice."⁶⁶ Likewise is Paul present implicitly in this text where the justice of God is intimately related to the kenosis of Christ:

The just person chooses to be tested and is not afraid of temptation. For whoever has determined to keep the judgments of God does not fear temptation. Where was this decided but in the heart? There should we be rooted and fixed firmly [Eph 3:17], not floating nor carried along by every wind of doctrine [Eph 4:14]. Therefore, deep within our own heart, our breast, our own deepest self we decide so that the prophetic word may be given to us: 'the thoughts of the just are paths.' In these paths the just person walks securely and therefore says: 'Test me, Lord, and tempt me.' Here too in accordance with his own avowal, he who had sworn and determined to keep the judgments of God's justice, saying that he wants to be put to the test, because he believed that he had to submit to humiliation for the sake of Christ.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 18.42: Audis quid dixerit hodie Apostolus? peccato, inquit, mortuus est semel [Rom 6:10]. semel tibi peccatori mortuus est Christus; noli iterum peccare post baptismum. omnibus in commune semel mortuus est et singulis semel moritur, non frequenter. peccatum es, o homo; ideo peccatum fecit christum suum omnipotens pater [2 Cor 5:21], hominem fecit, qui peccata nostra portaret. mihi ergo peccato mortuus est dominus Iesus, ut nos in illo essemus iustitia dei [2 Cor 5:21]. cf. *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 6, 21

⁶⁶ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 20, 28: et ideo iustitias dei quaerentibus dicit apostolus: uos qui eratis longe facti estis prope in sanguine Christi. sanguis Christi iustitia est; denique ipse ait ad Iohannem: sine nos implere omnem iustitiam.

⁶⁷ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 14, 18: Iustus ergo optat probari, temptari non timet; qui enim statuit custodire iudicia dei, non timet temptationes. ubi statuit nisi in corde? illic enim radicati et fundati esse debemus [Eph 3:17], non fluitantes neque mobiles omnino doctrinae [Eph 4:14]. intus ergo statuamus in corde nostro, in pectore, in animo, ut fiat nobis illud propheticum: cogitationes iustorum semitae. in his semitis bene ambulat iustus; ideo dicit: proba me, domine, et tempta me. denique hoc loco auctoritati respondens suae, qui iurauerat et statuerat custodire iudicia iustitiae dei, probari uoluisse se dicit, qui humilitatem subeundam credidit esse pro Christo. See too *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 12, 6 where humility and justice are also interrelated: humilitas

The pauline theology of Ambrose in this commentary forms a fundamental part of the overall message that Ambrose seeks to give in these 22 sermons. Even though Ambrose has in some way reworked the original sermons into a single work, the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet have contributed variously to the overall theme described at the beginning of the last sermon: about the progress of one who, already instructed in moral teaching, has put aside the childishness of an unchallenged mind and assumed instead the knowledge of advanced counsel and the age of mature prudence (see note 29). Paul has guided this process, inviting the listeners to appreciate the fullness or perfection found in Christ, the spiritual quality of dedication in those who seek to imitate him, and the reward of that progress: the crown of justice. Thus, Ambrose has spoken of the athlete in spiritual terms: "You should show the struggles that your body has been in, so that you can say: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course.' Then the judge of the spiritual contest, having seen the evidence, will award you the crown of justice. For you have fulfilled the law of the combat."⁶⁸

V. Conclusion

This paper has focused on Paul and Ambrose. Hence, it has left more than a few perspectives untouched. Just how the mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs might need to be woven into this discussion – perhaps to the point of casting a shadow on the contribution that Paul made to Ambrose's commentary – has not been studied. Since the Song of Songs is more pervasive than are citations from Paul, such an outcome is indeed possible. However, the process which begins with a focus on Paul has had the advantage of not dealing directly with the structure of the commentary, but with some of its most significant themes. To continue this process by studying the relationship between Paul and the Song of Songs is

ergo, quae a domino est, plena iustitiae, plena est aequitatis, quia non exeunt mala de ore domini. denique qui humiliabatur a domino dicebat: humiliatus sum, et saluum me fecit," and *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 20, 56: sicut enim initium sapientiae timor domini, plenitudo autem sapientiae dilectio – lex enim sapientia, plenitudo autem legis dilectio –, ita plenitudo uerborum dei sapientia cognitioque iustitiae.

⁶⁸ *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 20, 21: ostende et cordis tui certamina, ut dicas: *certamen bonum certavi, cursum consummaui* [2 Tim 4:7] et uidens spiritalis iudex certaminis coronam iustitiae decernat, quoniam legem agonis implesti.

likely to uncover other riches that might be missed by some other method. No doubt, such a study would have to pay attention to a pauline text that is not mentioned in what has been written above, namely, 2 Cor 2:15.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ "We are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." *Exp. Ps. cxviii* 5, 7.16.34; 15, 14; 22, 17.44.