

Shepherding Love: Seeing the Song of Songs through the Eyes of the *Eclogues*

Vergil's *Eclogue* 4 was famously taken by early Christians as a prophecy foretelling the coming of Jesus. While the other *Eclogues* enjoyed less popularity among early Christians, they were still fairly influential among early Christian authors, including Ambrose of Milan. A Christian bishop in fourth-century AD Milan, he is particularly well known for his interpretations of the Song of Songs, a book of erotic pastoral poetry in the Hebrew Bible. Ambrose returned to the Song of Songs throughout his career in a variety of different works. Given the breadth of his engagement with this text, it is no surprise that his exegesis of the Song of Songs was foundational for later Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs.

Early Christian interpretation of biblical texts that were written centuries previous to Christianity poses interesting questions about the meaning of a text and the different viewpoints or generic expectations readers bring to texts: How does one understand what a poem written in a different time and culture meant in its own time? What does a poem mean in the time when it is being interpreted? What is the relationship between the two? This presentation will attempt to come to terms with Ambrose's understanding of the Song of Songs by examining Vergil's *Eclogues*, a text with many characteristics similar to those of the Song of Songs and with which Ambrose was familiar, to see what new light might be shed on the preconceptions about pastoral poetry that Ambrose brought to his reading of the Song of Songs. Among the similarities between the Song of Songs and the *Eclogues* are their pastoral character, erotic themes, dialogue, use of ekphrastic description, and a seemingly composite character, with both works apparently composed of disparate, seemingly disconnected poems. As a highly educated elite Roman, Ambrose would have been deeply influenced in his reading of Christian texts by his education in

the Roman literary canon, including the *Eclogues*. This presentation will investigate the possibility that when reading the Song of Songs, Ambrose would have heard something similar to the *Eclogues*. Some attention may also be given to Theocritus's *Idylls* in order to provide a fuller understanding of the generic expectations of ancient pastoral poetry. This paper will not aim to examine concrete adaptations or borrowings from Vergil's *Eclogues* in Ambrose's exegesis but will rather consider how his (and his audience's) prior reading of the *Eclogues* may have influenced his generic expectations for the Song of Songs and how that may have had a significant impact on his exegesis.