As we now turn to the first example of a cento, we proceed chronologically. Hence, the first cento is Virgilian in nature. Our focus will be on what kind of biblical paraphrasis this is, what the cento form brings to the presentation of the biblical story, the story of Jesus in particular, and finally whether the centos bring forth interpretations, view points, dicta, texts or events unmentioned in the canonical Gospels. Thereby we are enabled to draw some conclusions as to how these texts came into being, and whether they in any way are analogies to the composition of the canonical Gospels.

5.1 A Lady and Her Cento

Tradition has associated Proba’s cento with Faltonia Betitia Proba—the grandmother of Anicia Faltonia Proba, known to us from Augustine’s letters—thus making the date of composition for her poem around 362.1 Her poem is the earliest and best known of the Christian centos. It is the earliest complete and extant Christian work we can be sure was composed by a woman.2 Proba is the only woman included in Isidore of Seville’s De Viris illustribus 18.22, and she is mentioned in his Etymologiarum 1.39.26 as well; these texts date from the end of sixth century. They read as follow:

Proba, wife of Adelphius the consul, the only woman placed among the men of the church; out of her concern for the praise of Christ, she composed a cento about Christ, put together of Virgilian lines. Her art we do not admire, but we praise her ingenuity. This piece of work is reckoned

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among the apocryphal writings [Proba, uxor Adelphii proconsulis, femina, idcirco inter viros ecclesiasticos posita sola pro eo quod in laude Christi versata est, componens centonem de Christo, Virgilianis coaptatum versu-cilis. Cuius quidem non miramur, sed laudamus ingenium. Quod tamen opusculum inter apocryphas inseritur].

Proba, the wife of Adelphius, therefore, made abundantly a cento from Virgil on the creation of the world and the Gospels. The content is composed according to the verse, and with the verses organized according to the content [Denique Proba, uxor Adelphi, centonem ex Vergilio de Fabrica mundi et Evangelis plenissime expressit, materia composita secundum versus, et versibus secundum materiam concinnatis].

The first text attests the ambivalent attitude towards Proba's work, while the second addresses the poem more precisely with regard to its content and principle of composition, namely an interplay between versus and materia, which corresponds to the rhetorical terms verba and res/sensus that the present study has unfolded as a key to understand cento composition. Proba's work is introduced (“therefore”) with a reference (25) to how grammatici considered centos: scraps from here and there in the songs of Homer or Virgil are put together to form a single body, a work of its own character, according to mos centonaris, to serve its own content. The reference to grammatici is worth noting since it suggests a didactic context for the poem.

Proba was a Roman lady of aristocratic background. Her family was among the highest-standing in the society of her time. Unlike many contemporary Christians she was not an advocate of celibacy and asceticism. She fitted herself comfortably into the traditional values of an aristocratic lady of the city. Previous to her cento, Proba had

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3 My translation; for Latin text see PL 83.1093.
4 My translation, for Latin text see PL 82.121.
5 Centones apud Grammaticos vocari solent, qui de carminibus Homeri seu Vergilii ad propria opera more centonario ex multis hinc inde compositis in unum sarciunt corpus, ad facultatem cuiusque materiae; this corresponds exactly to Ausonius’ description of the nature of cento composition; see Chapter 4.1. The description of mos centonaris is a quote from Tertulian, Praescr. 39.5 verbatim.
6 This is well argued by Clarke and Hatch, The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross, 101–2, 109–21. They also point out some minor details in her text as revealing of her social status, such as having Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (l. 477) speaking, in words taken from Aen. 6.609, about those who are sentenced to suffer in Tartarus for having treated their clients badly. See also Michele R. Salzman, The Making of a Christian Aristocracy. Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 163–4. For the role of Christianity among Rome’s upper class in the 4th century, see also Gemeinhardt, Das lateinische Christentum und die antike pagane Bildung, 131–52. One is tempted to ask if this...