THE FUNCTION OF BIBLICAL MATERIAL IN THE HYMNS OF ST. AMBROSE

by

M.J. MANS

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the pastoral achievements for which St. Ambrose (ca. 339-397), bishop of Milan (374-397), is most famous is his creation of Christian hymns which he wrote for congregational purposes.\(^1\) His rhetorical style, even in these hymns, was rich in imagery derived from nature, Scripture, and classical sources, such as Virgil and Cicero.\(^2\) Although Hilary of Poitiers is credited with being the first to introduce liturgical hymns in the Latin language into the West, Ambrose developed the genre into a simple, highly poetic form, in order to capture the imagination of his congregation, and to communicate particular evangelical messages, thereby making it a very popular and useful medium. Because of this one can justifiably define him as the father of liturgical hymnody in the Western church.\(^3\) The real history of ancient Latin Christian hymns in the West, therefore, begins with St. Ambrose.

After the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), with Christianity ente-

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ing the Constantinian period, the changing task of the church and its exegesis emphasized the need for providing a solid biblical basis for specific answers to the contemporary Trinitarian and Christological problems, which had been formulated mostly in nonbiblical terms. In this regard St. Ambrose effectively used his hymns not only to propagate, but also to defend the Trinitarian concept against the Arians (especially the relationship of Christ to the Father), and the Christological truths. From the fourth century onwards, theological and pastoral orientation of patristic commentaries influenced the church, and consequently, of course, also St. Ambrose in his hymn writing, to use the biblical texts in service of orthodox doctrine, moral instruction, theological discovery, and spiritual guidance.\(^4\)

Influenced by Philo and Origen in his writings, St. Ambrose accepted a threefold interpretation of the scriptural text, i.e. literal, moral, and allegorical/mystical/eschatological.\(^5\)

In line with traditional practice, St. Ambrose uses biblical material in his hymns to interpret biblical events or particular biblical figures. In his interpretation he implements the above mentioned material to illustrate, or prove specific ideas. The material as employed by our hymnographer, however, more often than not lends itself to more than one function. St. Ambrose shared the classical heritage as part of his environment, and was a true Roman by birth and learning.\(^6\) In part he used this inheritance in the application of scriptural material to encourage the imitation of biblical examples,\(^7\) and to exhort the application of eternal values. In addition it also provided useful information for supporting his arguments, while didactically it furnished him with applicable warnings, meant for the true believer, of what to avoid in his religious life. This classical inheritance also facilitated instruction and enabled our hymnographer to teach his audience eternal values and biblical truths. It will become clear from this study that the conventional conception in patristic literature of biblical material as being mainly used for imitation, is challenged by the variety of additional functions revealed by St. Ambrose’s liturgical employment of this material in his hymns.

The purpose of this study is to concentrate on some examples in this regard that occur in the hymns of St. Ambrose, to indicate

\(^4\) Swift 1990 (n. 2) 30-1.
\(^5\) Swift 1990 (n. 2) 30.
\(^6\) Messenger 1949 (n. 1) 5; Raby 1927 (n. 2) 35.