This essay will argue that the author of *De Spiritualis Historiae Gestis* betrays a strong interest in the doctrinal implications of his work. He chooses to render in verse the most important scriptural events connected with original sin and baptism: creation, the fall of man, the flood, and the crossing of the Red Sea. In doing this he maintains a wholly Augustinian position, significant to his contemporaries because the Semipelagian controversy, which grew out of reaction to Augustine’s later anti-Pelagian writings, prevailed at the time and place of the poem’s composition.

This controversy centered on the question of the *initium fidei*, namely whether man in his fallen condition could make any independent movement toward the good or whether any such movement could only be the result of divine instigation. The overall tenor of the poem clearly emphasizes man’s depravity inherent in Adam’s fall, his spiritual weakness and helplessness, and his need of God’s grace even to begin to turn toward the good.

The poet first makes several observations which are supportive of the traditional Augustinian position against Pelagius. He begins by acknowledging the fallen human condition and the universal effects of the first sin, and then makes a detailed examination of Adam and Eve’s inability to reconcile themselves with God.

Book 1, *De Initio Mundi*, begins with a declaration of the fallen human condition:

Quidquid agit varios humana in gente labores,
Unde brevem carpunt mortalia tempora vitam,
Vel quod polluti vitiantur origine mores,
Quos aliena premunt priscorum facta parentum,
Addatur quamquam nostra de parte reatus,
Quod tamen amisso dudum peccatur honore,
Adscribam tibi, prime pater, qui semine mortis
Tollis succiduae vitalia germina proli.
Et licet hoc totum Christus persolverit in se,
Contraxit quantum percussa in stirpe propago;
Attamen auctoris vitio, qui debita leti
Instituit morbosque suis ac funera misit,
Vivit peccati moribunda in carne cicatrix.

(I, 1-13)'

This doctrine of the universal effects of the sin of the parent of our race
is, of course, not stated in Genesis, nor is it found at the head of any
other versification of Genesis before the Spiritual History. Its message
has much to do with both the Pelagian opposition to Augustine, which
turned directly upon the interpretation of original sin and its effects on
man, and consequently with the later Semipelagian opposition to him,
which acknowledged original sin but had some reservations about its ef-
facts. One can begin to understand the preface by remembering that
southern Gaul in the mid-fifth century, one generation before Avitus’
maturity, was the birthplace of Semipelagianism, the Gallican monastic
reaction to what was understood to be Augustine’s teaching concerning
the effects of the first sin, free will, grace and predestination. Placed as
it is before the poet’s vivid description of the creation of the universe,
the theme statement contrasts the evil of man’s original sin with the
good of God’s creation and serves to underscore the neediness of the
human condition at the beginning of salvation history.

Following an account of the creation and a description of the couple’s
happiness in paradise, Avitus turns to a description of Satan, the over-
whelming agent in their fall. He first speaks of his angelic nature and ex-
cessive pride, and describes Satan’s remarkable powers which remain
even after his fall. He sees into the future and reveals mysteries (futura
videt rerumque arcana resignat II, 54). He also instructs man in every
crime (quidquid toto dirum committitur orbe,/ Iste docet II, 57-58). But
it is his powers of temptation which seem truly invincible. He can
change his appearance at will and become like man or beast, winged
creature or something more becoming, such as a beautiful girl. He can,
says the poet, even appear as a quantity of silver or gold. He can use vir-
tually any appearance to deceive his quarry, even that of a holy man.
This strongly suggests that Avitus’ Satan is a creature much more
powerful and clever than his victims, and when the reader comes to
Avitus’ description of the temptation of Adam and Eve, he should be
prepared for the poet’s deliberate emphasis on the helplessness of all