

# AMBROSE'S LETTER V, 18 (70) ON MICAH AS A CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY TO CONVERSION AND PEACE, FALL AND PENANCE

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## **Abstract**

In circa 387 AD bishop Ambrose of Milan wrote an epistle (70 in PL 16; V, 18 in Faller's edition) to the priest Orontianus that was full of quotations from the book of the prophet Micah and allusions to it. In this letter Ambrose gives a spiritual interpretation of Micah as a testimony to the soul's conversion to Christ, the peace that it found, its subsequent fall nonetheless, and its new repentance that was mercifully accepted by God. In his application of Micah's book to the vicissitudes of the soul, Ambrose was inspired by Origen, whose *Commentary on Micah* is lost to us, but which can be partially retrieved due to the works of other Church Fathers who used it, notably Jerome. Ambrose's epistle, analysed in this paper, testifies to his pastoral attitude towards 'fallen' Christians who had gravely sinned after their initial conversion and baptism.

## **Key words**

Ambrose of Milan, Origen of Alexandria, Micah of Moresheth, allegorical interpretation, birth of Christ, soul, conversion, baptism, repentance

## **1. Introduction**

Ambrose of Milan devoted numerous works to explaining a part or an entire book of the Bible,<sup>1</sup> but his exegetical oeuvre comprises more than that. In his many letters too he sometimes discusses passages of Scripture. Thus he wrote a letter in which he incorporates extensive passages from the prophet Micah. He explains this Bible book allegorically as a testimony to the soul which first converts to Christ and finds peace in Him, but then turns away from Christ, goes on to do

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), *Patrology IV. The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, Westminster, MD 1988<sup>2</sup>, 153-165.

penance for this and is restored to grace. Ambrose's exegesis of Micah in this letter is the subject of this article.<sup>2</sup>

The letter is addressed to a certain Orontianus (also spelled Horontianus), whom Ambrose had ordained as a priest.<sup>3</sup> In 1933 J.-R. Palanque published an article on Ambrose's nine letters to Orontianus. He believes that the letter under consideration here is the first of the series and that Ambrose wrote this collection in the course of a few months around 387 AD.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Translations, content and structure of the book of Micah

Ambrose preferred to read the Old Testament in the Septuagint version.<sup>5</sup> Jerome's translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin was not yet available; he worked on the prophetic books in the early 390s.<sup>6</sup>

I will first briefly present the content of the book of Micah. After the heading, the first three chapters contain prophecies of doom. The prophet censures the idolatry practiced in Judah and Samaria, and

<sup>2</sup> I was introduced to this letter through my research into the early Christian reception and interpretation of Micah: Riemer Roukema, *Micah in Ancient Christianity. Reception and Interpretation* (Studies of the Bible and its Reception 15), Berlin 2019. Ambrose's expositions that are there scattered among the interpretations of other authors will be presented here as a coherent whole. In a slightly revised version this article has been translated by Anthony Runia from: Riemer Roukema, 'Ambrosius' brief V, 18 (70) over Micha als christelijk getuigenis van bekering en vrede, afval en boete', in: Anthony Dupont, Marten van Willigen (eds), *Ambrosiana Neerlandica*, Leuven, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> It is ranked no. 70 in the edition by the St. Maur Benedictines (Paris 1686-1690), which is reprinted in Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), PL 16, 1234-1241. It is numbered as no. 18 in the fifth book of Ambrose's letters in the critical edition by Otto Faller, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera 10. Epistularum libri I-VI* (CSEL 82, 1), Wien 1968, 128-141, to which I refer in this article. There are two English translations of this letter, but in the most recent of these the letter is catalogued as no. 45; see Henry Walford (transl.), *The Letters of S. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Translated, with Notes and Indices* (LoF), Oxford 1881, 412-420; Mary M. Beyenka (transl.), *Saint Ambrose. Letters* (FaCh 26), Washington, DC 1987 (corrected reprint of 1954), 231-241.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Rémy Palanque, 'Deux correspondants de Saint Ambroise: Orontien et Irénée', *Revue des Études Latines* 11 (1933), 153-163 (153-157).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Marius Anton van Willigen (ed.), *Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis De Ioseph*, Zoetermeer 2008, 108-110.

<sup>6</sup> See Pierre-Maurice Bogaert, 'The Latin Bible', in: James Carleton Paget, Joachim Schaper (eds), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible I: From the Beginnings to 600*, Cambridge 2013, 505-526 (515-516); Eva Schulz-Flügel, 'Hieronymus – Gottes Wort: Septuaginta oder hebraica Veritas', in: Wolfgang Kraus *et al.* (eds), *Die Septuaginta – Text, Wirkung, Rezeption* (WUNT 325), Tübingen 2014, 746-758 (749).

denounces social injustice and the activities of other, 'false' prophets. He foretells the destruction of Samaria, which was in fact carried out in 722 BC by the Assyrians, who then exiled the population of Samaria. Finally, in Micah 3:12, the prophet also announces the destruction of Jerusalem. The perspective changes in chapter 4, which talks about the nations that will come to Jerusalem to learn God's law. Then the war will be over and peace will reign in Jerusalem. Yet straightaway Micah proclaims the arrival of the Babylonians in Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity, but also the return to Jerusalem. Chapter 5 starts with the prophecy that Bethlehem, the house of Ephratha, will see the birth of a new ruler who will bring peace in Israel, but goes on to talk about the arrival of the Assyrians and the deliverance from their power. Once again the prophet then discusses the destruction of Israel's cities and God's vengeance against the nations. In chapter 6 the Lord takes Israel to court and reminds the human being to do justice, exercise compassion and 'walk' with God. This is followed by another stern passage about the iniquity among the people and about the subsequent punishment. In chapter 7 the prophet laments his 'soul' (himself) and the people for all the wrongdoing and distrust, but he nevertheless expresses his hope in God and expects his enemies to be ashamed. The chapter concludes with a eulogy on God's forgiveness and mercy.

We see that the perspective changes quite often. So far, no scholar has managed to detect a clear, convincing structure in this Bible book. Adam van der Woude tried to show that chapters 1-5 consist of a debate between Micah and his honey-tongued opponents, the false prophets who proclaimed salvation, which God's own prophet refused to believe and fiercely disputed.<sup>7</sup> Micah 2:6 or 2:6-7 does in fact show a trace of such a debate, but in general this view of Micah 1-5 is now no longer supported.<sup>8</sup> Rather, scholars today assume that redactors combined passages from various periods in the book of Micah. However, this view lay far beyond the ken of the early Church, and so of Ambrose too, and will be left out of consideration here.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Adam S. van der Woude, 'Micah in Dispute with the Pseudo-Prophets', *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969), 244-260; *Micah* (Prediking van het Oude Testament), Nijkerk 1977<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> See Johannes C. de Moor, 'Section Division of Micah 4-5 in Eight Dutch Bibles. Forcing an Interpretation on the Reader by Sectioning', in: Marjo C.A. Korpel, Paul Sanders (eds), *Textual Boundaries in the Bible. Their Impact on Interpretation* (Pericope. Unit Delimitation as a Guide to Interpretation 9), Leuven, Paris and Bristol, CT 2017, 143-154.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Johannes C. de Moor, *Micah* (HCOT), Leuven, Paris and Bristol, CT 2020, 13-24.

### 3. Ambrose's letter and his interest in the soul

In the introduction to his letter on Micah, Ambrose states that the Church not only numbers 'strong souls' who make progress – in faith, he means –, but also weak souls that relapse and then convert anew. In the Song of Songs Ambrose reads about the progress of a strong soul,<sup>10</sup> and in Micah about the conversion of a fallen soul. In the introduction of his letter he also mentions a question that Orontianus put to him. In Micah 5:1 the prophet says, 'And thou, Bethlehem, house of Ephratha'. In the Christian view, this text proclaims where Christ will be born, but Orontianus believes that 'house of Ephratha' means 'house of wrath'. How can it be that Christ is born in a house of wrath? Following on from this question, Ambrose wants to treat the mysteries (*mysteria*) of such names, and actually, as we shall see, he is then discussing much more than such names alone.<sup>11</sup>

Ambrose's focus on the human soul does not mean that he considers physical existence to be insignificant for Christians. But we do see that he was strongly influenced in this regard by the philosophical appreciation of the soul (*anima*, ψυχή) in antiquity. According to Plato, the immortal souls were planted from heaven into mortal human bodies.<sup>12</sup> These souls needed to live a virtuous life on earth in order to return to the heaven whence they came, sometimes after several reincarnations in a human body. Homer's books on Odysseus, who suffered great hardship to travel home to Ithaca after the Trojan war, were later allegorically explained as testifying to the human soul's return to its heavenly origin after passing through several lives.<sup>13</sup> In an adapted form the Jew Philo of Alexandria related this view to Abraham, who had to leave his father's house to go to the land that God would show him. In his allegorical interpretation Philo speaks of God's will to purify the human soul and to release it from the prison of the body.<sup>14</sup> When Ambrose discusses Abraham's call,

<sup>10</sup> For the early Christian, usually mystical explanation of the Song of Songs, including Ambrose's, see Richard A. Norris, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (The Church's Bible), Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge 2003; Jean-Marie Auwers, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (La Bible d'Alexandrie 19), Paris 2019.

<sup>11</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 1-2, ll. 2-17.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 41-44; *Phaedrus* 248CD.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. in the Pythagorean philosopher Numenius of Apamea (2<sup>nd</sup> century), Fragment 33 (ed. and French transl. Édouard des Places, Paris 1973), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Philo, *De migratione Abrahami* 1; 9; 53; *De Abrahamo* 66-72; 88 (ed. and English transl. Francis H. Colson, George H. Whitaker [LCL 261; 289]).

he immediately connects it with the irrational soul that must give up carnal temptations and pleasures, and concentrate on Christ and heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Around 245-246, in his commentary on the book of Micah, Origen of Alexandria interpreted various passages in relation to the souls that came from heaven and were destined to return there.<sup>16</sup> Ambrose undoubtedly knew this commentary and was inspired by it, especially in reading Micah as a testimony on the soul. But because Origen's *Commentary on Micah* is lost and can only be partially reconstructed – mainly on the strength of Jerome's commentary on this book (from 393)<sup>17</sup> – it is impossible to establish how far Ambrose derived his specific exegesis from Origen. In any case it was not unusual for Ambrose to explain a Bible book like Micah in relation to the human soul.

#### 4. Ambrose's interpretation of Micah

##### 4.1. *Micah 1-4*

We now come to Ambrose's spiritual or allegorical interpretation of Micah.

According to Ambrose, the name Micah means either 'who is like God?' or 'who is this?' In the case of the second option, 'who is this?', the answer is 'the son of Morathi' (Mic. 1:1). Ambrose explains Morathi (also Morasthi) as 'heir'. In his view, this heir is the Son of God (Matt. 21:37-38), whose co-heirs are the Christians (Rom. 8:17); this 'who-is-this' and co-heir of Christ has been chosen to receive God's grace, and in him speaks the Holy Spirit. For Ambrose, the fact that Micah began prophesying 'in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah' (Mic. 1:1) points to the development (*profectus*) of Micah's vision, because this group of names first mentions two evil kings, Jotham and Ahaz, and then a good king, Hezekiah.<sup>18</sup> In Ambrose's allegorical interpretation this means that the

<sup>15</sup> Ambrose, *De Abraham* I, 2 (CSEL 32,1). For Ambrose's knowledge of Philo's works, see David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (CRINT 3, 3), Assen and Minneapolis, MN 1993, 291-311.

<sup>16</sup> See Roukema, *Micah*, 49; 69; 71-72; 159; 223.

<sup>17</sup> Roukema, *Micah*, 11-12; 228.

<sup>18</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 3, ll. 18-27. For details, see Roukema, *Micah*, 38-40. For Jotham and Ahaz, kings of Judah, see 2 Kings 15:32-16:20; however, Jotham is not described as a bad king there. For the good king Hezekiah, also of Judah, see 2 Kings 18-20. According to the Septuagint, Micah 1:1 reads, 'And the word of the Lord came to

tormented soul initially laboured (*laborabat*) under evil kings, but then underwent a process of conversion (*processus conuersionis*).<sup>19</sup>

Next, mainly alluding to Micah 4, he describes the condition of the soul in its unconverted state. For instance, he says that 'all its strongholds' (*omnis munitio eius*) were open to passions such as luxury and pleasure. He found the expression 'all its strongholds' in Micah 5:10 (5:11), where God says (according to the Septuagint), 'I will remove all your strongholds'. Ambrose goes on to say of the soul that 'its tower was dirty'. He reads about a dirty tower in the Septuagint version of Micah 4:8, 'and you, dirty tower of the flock, daughter Zion, to you the first beginning shall come and enter'. He connects this text with the tower in the midst of the vineyard of which Isaiah sings (Isa. 5:2). Ambrose explains, 'For the tower is dirty when the vine withers and its sheep wanders'. He derives the vine from Isaiah's song (Isa. 5:2) and he takes the sheep, which does not occur there, from Micah 2:12, where the Septuagint reads, 'like sheep in affliction, like a flock in the midst of their stall'. His commentary reads, 'But when the verdure of the vine or the sheep returns, it will grow bright; for nothing is dirtier than iniquity, nothing is brighter than justice'.<sup>20</sup> Ambrose then limits his double metaphor of vine and sheep to the wandering sheep. The translation of a longer passage may give an impression of the way in which he interprets Micah.

The sheep is recalled to this tower when the soul is recalled from its downfall, and in this soul returns the kingship of Christ, which is the 'beginning' (Mic. 4:8 LXX), for He is 'the beginning and the end' (Rev. 21:6) and the beginning of salvation (cf. Hebr. 5:9). Yet it has first been ruined because it has erred so grievously. It is then asked, 'Why have you known evil? Did you not have a king?' (Mic. 4:9 LXX). That is to say, you had a king to rule and protect you; you did not need to stray from the path of justice and leave the ways of the Lord, of Him who gave you sense and reason (*rationabiles sensus*). Where were your thoughts, your 'counsels' (Mic. 4:9 LXX) with which you could have foreseen injustice and warded off iniquities by the power planted in you? Why have the pangs of a woman in labour seized you (Mic. 4:9), so that you bring forth iniquities and conceive injustice?<sup>21</sup>

Micah of Morasthi in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, on what he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem'.

<sup>19</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 4, ll. 28-30.

<sup>20</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 4, ll. 30-37. Cf. Roukema, *Micah*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 5, ll. 38-49. Ambrose reads Mic. 4:8-9 according to the Septuagint, 'And you, dirty tower of the flock, daughter Zion, to you the first beginning shall

We see here that for Ambrose the soul once fell and must *return* to Christ. He does not explain when this original fall took place. We might think of the fall 'in Adam', but also of the original fall of the souls from heaven, as Origen, influenced by Plato, assumed in his *Commentary on Micah* and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Ambrose did not explicitly adopt Origen's hypothesis, but because he often worked fast, indeed hastily,<sup>23</sup> his choice of words may have been informed by Origen's commentary.

In Ambrose's exegesis, with a few words from Micah 4:10, the soul is exhorted, 'Act courageously (*uiriliter*) and come closer, daughter Zion, so that you may give birth'. Ambrose links this call to texts from Paul and the Psalms, 'For the pains of a labouring woman bring forth tribulation, and tribulation patience, and patience trustworthiness, and trustworthiness hope, and hope does not put to shame, forever'.<sup>24</sup>

Ambrose continues in this way, with all kinds of allusions to expressions in Micah 4 which he spiritually applies to the condition of the fallen soul that is called to conversion.<sup>25</sup> Strikingly, however, he does not refer to Micah 4:1-7, the passage that deals with the exalted mountain of the Lord, the peoples that flow to it to learn the law proceeding from Zion and the ensuing peace between the nations. Apparently, this encouraging section does not fit within his view of Micah 1-4, which he reads allegorically, but selectively, as prophecies addressed to the soul fallen into sin.

come and enter, the kingship from Babylon to daughter Jerusalem. Why have you known evil? Did you not have a king? Or did your intention (or: counsel, *consilium*) perish because pains as of a labouring woman seized you?' – In 'the kingship from Babylon' Ambrose couples 'kingship' to 'the first beginning', Christ, so that he interprets 'kingship' as that of Christ. He ignores the words 'from Babylon to daughter Jerusalem'.

<sup>22</sup> See Rom. 5:12 for the fall 'in Adam', quoted by Ambrose in his *Expos. Eu. in Lucam* IV, 67 (SC 45) and in his work on the death of his brother, *De excessu fratris* II, 6 (CSEL 73). For the fall of the souls in the beginning, see Roukema, *Micah*, 69; 71-72; 159; 223 (cf. note 17).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hervé Savon, 'Ambrosius von Mailand', in: Jean-Denis Berger, Jacques Fontaine, Peter Lebrecht Schmidt (eds), *Die Literatur im Zeitalter des Theodosius (374–430 n. Chr) Zweiter Teil: Christliche Prosa* (Handbuch der Lateinischen Literatur der Antike 6, 2), München 2020, 385-504 (455) about Ambrose's hastiness in his work *De Spiritu Sancto*.

<sup>24</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 6, ll. 56-58; Rom. 5:3-4; Ps. 31:2 (30:2 LXX).

<sup>25</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 7-8, ll. 63-80.

4.2. *Micah 5*

Chapter 5 starts with the passage on Bethlehem and the house of Ephratha that was the subject of Orontianus' question. How could Christ have been born in the house of Ephratha, which Orontianus believed to mean 'house of wrath'? Ambrose now paraphrases this meaning as 'house of one *seeing* wrath' and connects this with King Herod's order to murder the infants in Bethlehem-Ephratha (Matt. 2:16). Bethlehem means 'house of bread', which Ambrose sees as a reference to Christ, who is the bread that came down from heaven (John 6:33). He contrasts the wrath of the Slaughter of the Innocents with the redemption of all (*uniuersorum redemptio*) by Christ, who was born in the house of bread.<sup>26</sup> Ambrose sees an additional link with Rachel, one of the wives of the patriarch Jacob, who gave birth to her son Benjamin in Ephratha and subsequently died. He explains that in her death she already saw Herod's wrath (which refers to the Massacre of the Innocent), of which Jeremiah writes that she wept for her children. Ambrose also points to the apostle Paul, who came from the tribe of Benjamin and caused equally great grief to his mother (that is, the Church) because he persecuted her children (the Christians) before his birth – which must mean: his rebirth in Christ.<sup>27</sup>

So, images and scriptural passages tumble over each other, and we may suppose that Ambrose largely or wholly took these associations from Origen's commentary. The difference between Micah 5:1 LXX, which says of Bethlehem, 'You are few among the thousands of Judah,' and the quotation in Matthew 2:6, 'Bethlehem, house of Judah, you are *not* among the few,' is noted by Ambrose, but given no importance.<sup>28</sup> Significantly for what follows, he attaches another meaning to the name Ephratha besides 'of one seeing wrath', that is, 'made fruitful' or 'filled with fruits'.<sup>29</sup> But as we are particularly concerned with the vicissitudes of the soul, that will be our primary focus.

<sup>26</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 9, ll. 81-90. The assumed meaning of Ephratha derives from אַף (*aph*), 'wrath', and רָאָתָהּ (*rā'atāh*), 'she sees'. The toponym Bethlehem consists of בֵּית and לֶחֶם, 'house [of] bread'.

<sup>27</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 9-10, ll. 91-105. See Gen. 35:16-19; Jer. 31:15 (38:15 LXX); Matt. 2:18; Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 11, ll. 108-116. Ambrose translates the beginning of Matt. 2:6 as: *Et tu, Bethleem, domus Iudaeae, non es in paucioribus*, 'And you, Bethlehem, house of Judah, you are not among the few', which deviates from the usual Greek text, 'And you, Bethlehem, house of Judah, you are certainly not the least (i.e. among the rulers of Judah)'. See further Roukema, *Micah*, 131-135.

<sup>29</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 10, ll. 105-107. This meaning of Ephratha derives from פָּרָה (*pārāh*), 'to be fruitful'.



Ambrose believes that every soul that receives bread from heaven, or the bread of Christ – he means: in the Eucharist –, becomes a house of bread itself too. In other words, every faithful soul is a Bethlehem.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Christ is born in every soul that comes to believe, just as he was born in Bethlehem. In Micah 5:1-2 (5:2-3) Ambrose also reads that the proclaimed ruler – interpreted as Christ – goes forth ‘from the days of eternity (*a diebus saeculi*) [...] to the time of the labouring woman’. He skips a few words here, for the text says, ‘Therefore he will give them until the time of the labouring woman’. Evidently the words ‘therefore he will give them’ did not suit Ambrose’s purpose. The part he does quote he mystically relates to the beginning of eternity, that is, the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2), ‘for us’. Ambrose goes on, ‘When Christ comes to a soul, there comes fruitfulness, there comes birth’. In this way his exegesis incorporates Ephratha in the sense of ‘made fruitful’. Ambrose also declares, ‘the soul therefore conceives and Christ is formed in it’ (cf. Gal. 4:19). As a result, he says, other souls that see this soul, return (*reuertantur*) to the path of salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Ambrose’s spiritual, mystical reading of Micah 5:1 (5:2) implies that he sees *here* the moment of conversion and rebirth of the unbelieving soul. In his exegesis, therefore, the first four chapters of Micah deal with the searching soul, until the moment Christ is born in it. It is notable that, some seventy years before Ambrose, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that Micah treats Christ ‘propedeutically’ (προπαιδευσας) as the Word of God that came down from heaven, until he (according to Mic. 5:1) is born human in Bethlehem.<sup>32</sup> Most likely Eusebius borrowed this analysis from Origen and Ambrose too looked to Origen for his mystical interpretation of the birth of Christ in the soul, alluded to in Micah 5:1 (5:2), after the four chapters about its fallen state.

In Micah 5:4 (5:5) Ambrose reads, ‘And there will be peace for it’. But, he adds, the soul is also tried by temptations, and the proclaimed peace and tranquillity will only be proved when the soul shuts out all idle thoughts and subdues all rising passions.<sup>33</sup> Then will come ‘dew from the Lord’ (Mic. 5:6 [5:7]), that is, calm; then the

<sup>30</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 13, ll. 127-131. That Ambrose has the Eucharist in mind is shown by his reference to Paul’s statement, ‘for we are all one bread’ (1 Cor. 10:17), which occurs in his discussion of the Lord’s Supper.

<sup>31</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 16, ll. 143-152.

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius, *Demonstr. Eu.* VI, 13, 21 (GCS 23); Roukema, *Micah*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 17, ll. 153-164. For his reading ‘And there will be peace for it’ (*et erit ei pax*), see Roukema, *Micah*, 139: Ambrose does not read, as in present-day

soul of the just will be ‘like a lion whelp amidst the flock of sheep’ (Mic. 5:7 [5:8]); this lion whelp is related by Ambrose to Christ, who shines forth in the just.<sup>34</sup>

In Micah 5:9 (5:10) the prophet says in the name of the Lord, ‘I will destroy your horses from your midst and demolish your chariots’. Without quoting this text, Ambrose writes, ‘For its chariots (i.e. of the soul) will be shattered, that is, the irrational passions and the impulses of the body’.<sup>35</sup> We see here that he implicitly associates Micah’s terms ‘horses’ and ‘chariots’ (ἄρματα, translated as *quadrigae*, chariots with four horses) with Plato’s myth in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, where the human soul is compared to a charioteer with two winged horses. One horse is good and noble, but the other one is inclined to evil and drags the charioteer down to the earth, where the soul suffers toil and strife. There can be no doubt that Ambrose borrows his passing reference to Plato’s myth from Origen’s *Commentary on Micah*.<sup>36</sup> In addition, he could also find this metaphor in Philo.<sup>37</sup> What matters to him is that the evil inclinations in the soul in which Christ is born, ‘that is, the irrational passions and the impulses of the body’, are eradicated. Using a Pauline expression he says that the situation ‘of conflict without, anxiety within’ (2 Cor. 7:5) has then turned into calm, within and without. Next, Ambrose also alludes to Micah 5:11 (5:12), where the Septuagint reads, ‘And there will be no answer-givers in you’, which in this verse refers to the removal of magic potions; the term ‘answer-givers’ (ἀποφθεγγόμενοι) can also be translated as ‘soothsayers’. Ambrose does not explain this, but he does write, ‘And there will be no one who gives an answer (*qui respondeat*) and resists the good will [...] for the obedience of the flesh will end all discord’.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4.3. Micah 6-7

However, then Ambrose shifts his attention to the ‘weak soul’ (*anima infirma*) that stumbles, like the people of Israel ‘according to the flesh’ (1 Cor. 10:18) and, ‘confounded by persecutions, separates

editions of the Septuagint, καὶ ἔσται αὐτῇ εἰρήνη (‘and there will be this peace’ or ‘and this will be peace’) but καὶ ἔσται αὐτῇ εἰρήνη (‘and there will be peace for it’).

<sup>34</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 18, ll. 165-168.

<sup>35</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 18, ll. 168-170.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 246-248. See Roukema, *Micah*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> Philo of Alexandria, *Legum Allegoriae* III, 222-223 (LCL 226); *De Somniis* II, 293-294 (LCL 275); *De Specialibus Legibus* IV, 79 (LCL 341).

<sup>38</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 18, ll. 170-174.

itself a little (*aliquantulum*) from the love of Christ'. Such a soul 'is ruined' – he had earlier used this term, *corripitur*, for the unconverted soul – and is unmasked as 'faithless, ungrateful and unbelieving', for 'although it had been freed from the vanities of the world, it has looked back and relapsed'. Such a relapsed soul 'is not required to offer gifts or sacrifice bulls' (Mic. 6:6-7).<sup>39</sup> It is striking that Ambrose does not quote Micah 6:6-7 literally. Had he done so, he could have referred to the first time that the term 'soul' (ψυχή) occurs in the book of Micah, where it is said on behalf of the contrite people, 'should I give my firstborn for (my) impiety, the fruit of my womb for the sin of my soul?' (Mic. 6:7). We can only guess why Ambrose does not quote this text, which he could have used to confirm his interpretation of Micah concerning the soul. Evidently he did not need this confirmation. But he does quote the next text as witness to the soul that has fallen back into sin, 'It has been told to you, human, what is good. Or what else does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and righteousness, love mercy and be ready to walk with your Lord?' (Mic. 6:8).<sup>40</sup> Ambrose explains,

But because this weaker soul has not kept these things, the Lord says, 'Woe is me, for I have become as one who gathers straw at harvest time and (something) like a grape in vintage time' (Mic. 7:1). When therefore the prophet in whom God spoke heard this, he said to this soul, 'Woe is me, O soul, for he who is full of awe (of God) is (gone) from the land' (Mic. 7:1-2), or, so speaks the Lord himself grieving for the future punishments of (our) sins and lamenting our transgressions.<sup>41</sup>

The reason why Ambrose reads in Micah 6 about the apostasy of the soul in which Christ was already born, must be that the Lord calls his people to account in a lawsuit at the beginning of this chapter (as we saw in § 2 above). Since Ambrose wants to explain the book of Micah in relation to the soul – albeit under omission of various passages –, he states that the *soul* is again called to account because it has moved away from Christ, if only 'a little'. Ambrose then talks

<sup>39</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 19, ll. 175-180; *corripitur* (l. 177) earlier in § 5, l. 41 (see note 21). In the Septuagint, Micah 6:6-8 reads, <sup>6</sup>By what means do I lay hold of the Lord, shall I entrust myself to my God most high? Shall I lay hold of him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? <sup>7</sup>Will the Lord accept (me) with thousands of rams or ten thousands of swollen streams? <sup>8</sup>Has it been told to you, human, what is good, or what the Lord requires from you? (What else) but to do judgment and to love mercy and to be ready to walk with the Lord, your God?

<sup>40</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 19, ll. 180-184.

<sup>41</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 19, ll. 184-191.

about ‘persecutions’ which have confounded the soul. In his time the Catholic Christians were no longer persecuted by the authorities, although in a different sense they could be persecuted by their sinful proclivities. Apparently Ambrose took the term ‘persecutions’ from Origen, because in Origen’s time (the first half of the third century) Christians in the Roman Empire did sometimes suffer persecution for their faith.<sup>42</sup> This invariably led some believers to fall away in that they denied their faith in Christ to the authorities. Ambrose connects this problem of apostasy or relapse with souls that initially had come to believe in Christ because they saw the vanity of the world, but were unable to sustain this because they gave in to their former sinful inclinations. With the words of Micah 6:8 the relapsed soul is reminded of the required attitude to life.

In the words of Micah 7:1-2 Ambrose reads the voice of ‘the Lord’, who in gathering the harvest finds only straw and grape gleanings; by this he means disappointing, relapsed believers. Here for the second time we find the word ‘soul’ in Micah’s own text, and, as we saw above, Ambrose does quote the term here. He takes the text to mean that the Lord, speaking to a relapsed soul, complains that the pious person has disappeared from the land and that the Lord ‘grieves for the future punishments of the sins and laments our transgressions’.<sup>43</sup> It is not clear whether ‘the Lord’ refers to Christ or God the Father.

Alluding to Micah 6:15 and 7:2-7, Ambrose describes how the soul fares after falling back into the world. It is told that ‘it will not gather the fruit of its seeds’ and that ‘in losing the harvest it will find no support for itself’; ‘it will press the olive but have no oil of gladness nor drink the wine of pleasure’. It will find that ‘the deeds of the flesh are all full of blood, deception, cheating and fraud’ and consist of ‘empty shows (*ficta officia*) of affection’ (i.e. from those who hold executive offices) and that ‘those of its own house are its enemies’. On discovering this, ‘the soul converts (*conuertitur*) and begins to hope in God’. Realising that ‘the flesh is truly its enemy, it says to the flesh, “do not rejoice over me, my enemy, because I have fallen. I shall arise, for when I sit in darkness, the Lord will enlighten me”’ (Mic 7:8).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Peter Guyot, Richard Klein, *Das frühe Christentum bis zum Ende der Verfolgungen 1: Die Christen im heidnischen Staat* (TzF 60), Darmstadt 1993, 96-147, and Origen’s work *Exhortatio ad martyrium* (GCS 2).

<sup>43</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 19, ll. 189-191.

<sup>44</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 20, ll. 192-203. Micah 6:15a-c and 7:1-8 read according to the Septuagint, <sup>6:15</sup>‘You, you shall sow and not reap, you shall press the olive and not anoint yourself with oil, and (make) wine and not drink (it). [...] <sup>7:1</sup>Woe is me, because I have become like one gathering stubble at the harvest and like grape

For the first time Ambrose here explicitly says that the soul converts, although this turn can also be assumed for the birth of Christ in the soul, according to Micah 5:1. But clearly conversion for him is not necessarily a once-only event; hence he talked about a 'process of conversion' at the beginning of the letter.<sup>45</sup>

Yet even then – in Ambrose's interpretation – 'some power' may mock the soul and try to prevent it from returning to God. It is hard pressed by various evils, which are either apportioned to it by God as payment for its sins (*propter peccatorum solutionem*), or by the devil out of jealousy at its conversion (*propter inuidiam conuersionis*) and in order to call it back. The soul then says, 'I will bear the wrath of the Lord' (Mic. 7:9a), 'who either chastises a fallen one or assigns an (evil) power to wound it'; 'for' – as Micah's text continues – 'I have sinned' (Mic. 7:9b). 'Yet I will bear (this), until He justifies my cause' (Mic 7:9c, *donec iustificet causam meam*).<sup>46</sup> In Ambrose's words the soul says,

For if I do not confess (my sins) and do not pay the price of my iniquities, I cannot be justified. But when I am justified by paying double for my sins (cf. Isa. 40:2), He will lay aside his indignation and pronounce my sentence (*educet iudicium meum*), since my conviction has been satisfied.<sup>47</sup>

gleanings at the vintage, there being no bunch to eat the firstlings. Woe is me, soul,<sup>2</sup> because the pious one has disappeared from the land, and there is no upright person among humans. All go to law aiming at blood; they oppress, each his neighbour, with oppression.<sup>3</sup> They prepare their hands for evil; the ruler requests, and the judge has spoken peaceful words; it is what pleases his soul.<sup>4</sup> And on the day of inspection I shall take away their goods like a moth eating and crawling on a rod. Woe, woe, your punishments have come; now they will weep.<sup>5</sup> Put no trust in friends, and do not hope in leaders; guard yourself against your bedmate, so as to communicate anything to her.<sup>6</sup> For a son dishonours a father; a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; the enemies of a man are all the men in his household.<sup>7</sup> But as for me, I shall look to the Lord; I shall wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me.<sup>8</sup> Stop rejoicing over me, my lady adversary, because I have fallen, and I shall rise again. For when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall give me light'.

<sup>45</sup> For the verb *conuertor*, see Albert Blaise, Henri Chirat, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des auteurs chrétiens*, Turnhout 1954, 220, where it is regarded as either the passive of *conuerto* or as a deponent verb. Even if it is a passive verb, the translation (among others) given by the compilers of the dictionary is 'retourner sur la bonne voie', 'se convertir', with reference to Acts 3:19; 9:35; 26:18, where the Greek consistently has the active aorist of ἐπιστρέφειν, 'to turn (round)'. We may therefore not conclude that *conuertitur* should be translated 'it is converted' (i.e. by God or the Spirit).

<sup>46</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 21, ll. 204-212.

<sup>47</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 21, ll. 212-216. The Septuagint reading of Mic. 7:9-10c is, 'I will endure the wrath of the Lord – because I sinned against him – until he justifies my cause, and he will accomplish my judgment and will lead me out into the light;

As we shall shortly see, for Ambrose this ‘satisfaction’ (*satisfactum*) is not the satisfaction that Christ gave to the Father with his sacrificial death for the sin of this soul, but the satisfaction which the soul itself has provided with its penance by paying doubly for its sins.<sup>48</sup> Ambrose then quotes from the conclusion of Micah 7:9, ‘he will lead me out (*educet*) into the light’ that ‘I may see his righteousness’, to which he adds, ‘and look to him as the source of joy (*ut [...] aspiciam delectationem eius*)’.<sup>49</sup> Alluding to Micah 7:10, Ambrose continues,

My lady adversary, that is, the iniquity of the devil, will see this light of my reconciliation, and she who now says, ‘Where is your God?’, will be covered with shame. She will see his mercy towards me, she will see his clemency.<sup>50</sup>

In an aside Ambrose also applies the critical question, ‘Where is your God?’, to Orontianus and the faithful in general, when he writes,

So let us not listen to him (the devil) when we meet with the troubles of the world, whether bodily pain or the loss of children or of other kin. I repeat, let us not listen to him when he says, ‘Where is your God?’ When we suffer from severe pain, we must guard against his temptations, (for) then he is trying to lead astray (*auertere*) the suffering soul.<sup>51</sup>

In Micah 7:15 Ambrose reads, ‘As in the days of your exit from Egypt you shall see miracles’, and 7:17 talks about nations that will lick dust like snakes trailing earth along. Alluding to these texts, he states,

The soul that does not heed its attacker and then sees God’s ‘miracles’, and sees itself in heaven, but the devil as a snake creeping on the earth, will therefore rejoice and say, ‘Who is a God like you, who take away sins and remove impieties?’ (Mic. 7:18a-c), ‘you who have not been mindful of your indignation’ (Mic. 7:18d), but have sunk our iniquities like Egyptian lead (Ex. 15:10) in the sea, and have graciously returned to (your) mercy (cf. Mic. 7:18e-19a).<sup>52</sup>

I shall see his righteousness.<sup>10</sup> And my lady adversary will see (it) and will be covered with shame, she who says to me, “Where is the Lord, your God?””

<sup>48</sup> For this, see Riemer Roukema, ‘Salvation and Victory by Christ’s Death and Resurrection in the Ancient Church’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 15 (2021), 304-326.

<sup>49</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 21, ll. 216-217.

<sup>50</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 21, ll. 217-220.

<sup>51</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 22, ll. 220-225.

<sup>52</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 23, ll. 226-232. ‘You who [...] remove impieties’ is my translation of *transferens impietates*. But the Septuagint has ὑπερβαίων ἀσεβείας, ‘passing

According to Ambrose, the words 'You who take away sins and remove iniquities' reveal God's grace in two ways: first, he forgives (*dimittens*) sins, second, he hides (*abscondens*) them. Following Origen, Ambrose reads this distinction in Psalm 32:1 (31:1 LXX), 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered'. God washes the sins of the soul converting for the first time in the blood of his Son; that is the 'doing away' or the forgiveness (*remissio*). But if the soul relapses and does penance anew, he hides these sins by virtue of its confession of guilt and its good works, and the impieties removed from the soul are charged to their cause, the devil.<sup>53</sup>

Ambrose explains that the soul gives thanks for this grace, which is twofold in the sense that the Lord, first, takes away sins and, second, removes iniquities and sinks them into the depths of the sea. He remarks that this last image may 'also refer to baptism, in which the Egyptian is drowned and the Hebrew rises again'.<sup>54</sup> By 'Egyptian' Ambrose undoubtedly means the sinful 'old man' and by 'Hebrew' the 'new man' (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10). With regard to baptism he goes on to say that

in the depths of (God's) wisdom and the abundance of (our) good works our former sins are covered up by the rich mercy of our God who, mindful of his promise that he made to Abraham (Mic. 7:20), does not allow a soul that is an heir to Abraham to perish.<sup>55</sup>

over impieties', which shows that Ambrose's translation is slightly inaccurate. According to the Septuagint, Mic. 7:15-20 reads, '15As in the days of your departure from Egypt, you will see marvels. 16And nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might. They shall lay (their) hands on their eyes; their ears shall be deafened. 17They shall lick dust like snakes trailing earth along; they shall be confounded in their enclosure; they shall be astonished at the Lord our God and shall be afraid of you. 18Who is God like you, taking away iniquities and passing over impieties for the remnant of his inheritance? And he did not retain his wrath as a testimony, for he is one that desires mercy. 19He will turn and have compassion on us; he will sink our injustices and all our sins will be cast into the depths of the sea. 20You will give truth to Jacob, mercy to Abraham, as you swore to our fathers in former days'.

<sup>53</sup> *Epist. V*, 18, 23, ll. 232-242. That this distinction derives from Origen is shown by his *Selecta in Ps.* 31, 1 (PG 12, 1301C), *Comm. Rom.* II, 1, 15-17 (AGLB 16) and *Fragmenta in primam epistulam ad Cor.* 26, 18-21 (ed. Claude Jenkins, *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 [1908], 366), where in Ps. 32:1 (31:1 LXX) he relates the forgiveness of iniquities to the grace of baptism and the covering up of sins to penance (*paenitentia*) after relapse.

<sup>54</sup> *Epist. V*, 18, 24, ll. 244-248.

<sup>55</sup> *Epist. V*, 18, 24, ll. 248-251.

This explanation of Micah 7:19 in relation to baptism seems obvious. In fact, this text about sins cast into the depths of the seas was often interpreted in Ambrose's time and afterwards as an Old Testament testimony about baptism.<sup>56</sup> Yet this explanation is *not* obvious for Ambrose, and hence he writes that this text 'may *also (et)* refer to baptism'. Why do we see this hesitation in Ambrose? It is because his explanation of Micah finds a more suitable place for baptism in chapter 5, which he allegorically reads as dealing with the first conversion of the soul. In principle, an unbeliever who has come to believe in Christ is baptised after this first conversion. If such a person relapses and he or she is reaccepted into the Church after doing penance, baptism is not administered again. Ambrose reads about this readmission of a lapsed believer in Micah 7, and baptism does not really suit the context there anymore. So there is friction here in his allegorical interpretation of Micah. However, because the image of sins disappearing into the depths of the sea is clearly found there and the Church of his time recognised baptism in it, Ambrose admits that this explanation is also possible.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, Ambrose writes, 'and in this way this soul is called back', and he addresses a few personal words to 'his son' Orontianus, on whom he had once laid his hands in order to ordain him as a priest.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. The religio-historical context of Ambrose's interpretation of Micah

I end this essay with three remarks. First, we see how Ambrose interprets this Old Testament book spiritually or allegorically or mystically. The young Augustine declares that he was deeply impressed by Ambrose's type of exegesis in Milan, because it gave him access to the Old Testament.<sup>59</sup> As a Manichaean – which he was for some nine

<sup>56</sup> See Roukema, *Micah*, 212-215.

<sup>57</sup> It is notable that Jerome in his *Comm. on Micah* does not associate this verse with baptism, which he does do in his *Epist.* 69, 6, 9 (CSEL 54). Because Jerome's *Commentary* largely depends on Origen's (see note 17, Roukema, *Micah*, 11-12; 228), it is likely that Origen in his *Commentary* too did not simply explain Micah 7:19 in connection with baptism. This could also explain Ambrose's hesitation. See Roukema, *Micah*, 212-214.

<sup>58</sup> *Epist.* V, 18, 25, ll. 252-259.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *Conf.* III, 5-10, 9-18; V, 14, 24; VI, 3-5, 4-7; on this, see also Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, London 1967, 46-60 (esp. 49-50); 79-84; Roukema, *Micah*, 15-16.



years – he had learned that the Old Testament was inspired by a different God from the Father of Jesus Christ. In Ambrose, however, he learned how the Church read the Old Testament in a spiritual sense as a witness to Christ. Until far in the fourth century, therefore, the spiritual, allegorical explication of the Old Testament convinced searching souls like Augustine that the Old Testament and the books of the new covenant belonged together.

Second, it is worth mentioning in this connection that the Catholic priest and physician Angelus Silesius wrote in 1657,

Wird Christus tausendmal zu Bethlehem gebohren,  
Und nicht in dir, du bleibst noch Ewiglich verlohren.<sup>60</sup>

[Though Christ be born a thousand times in Bethlehem,  
And not in you, yet you remain lost eternally.]

This well-known mystical conception of Jesus' birth in the human soul, as in a spiritual Bethlehem, and as a condition for eternal salvation, derives indirectly from Origen and is also found in Ambrose.

Third, I have repeatedly referred to Ambrose's use of Origen's *Commentary on Micah*. Though this *Commentary* has been lost, we may assume that Origen also explained Micah in terms of the souls of Christians who had first converted to Christ but lapsed from their faith in times of persecution or for other reasons. The words in Micah 7:8, 'Rejoice not over me, my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me', gave every reason to do so. This did not entail that these souls deliberately bade farewell to Christ, but meant that, in the eyes of the Church, in their behaviour they were unfaithful to Christ in difficult circumstances such as persecution by the authorities or if, for instance, they were enticed into taking part in a heathen ritual or an illicit sexual relationship. What was the Church to do with such members? Reject them? Show them the door for good? Or restore them to grace after they showed consciousness of guilt and serious penitence? The Catholic Church opted for the last option, seceded churches like the Novatians for the first.<sup>61</sup> However, in Ambrose's time Catholic Christians in

<sup>60</sup> Georg Ellinger (ed.), *Angelus Silesius, Cherubinischer Wandersmann (Geistreiche Sinn- und Schlussreime)* I, 61, Halle a.S. 1895, 19. Most probably, for this view he was first of all inspired by Meister Eckhart, e.g. *Sermon* 101 about Wisdom 18:14-15, Georg Steer (ed.), *Meister Eckharts Predigten* (Meister Eckhart, Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke 4, 1), Stuttgart 2003, 334-367.

<sup>61</sup> On the Novatians, see for instance John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, Louisville, KY and London 2004, 240-241.

the Roman Empire were no longer persecuted by the authorities. Ambrose does mention the persecutions in this letter, but probably because he found the subject in Origen. In Ambrose's day lapsed Christians were above all those who had succumbed to heathen and other grave temptations and had thus forfeited their salvation. Ambrose's position towards these lapsed souls was that they could undergo a second conversion. In his view, God's mercy was so great that it also extended to Christians who had renounced their initial faith in Christ. However, according to the Church's insights in this period, they could no longer appeal to Christ's death on the cross, because the salvation and reconciliation thus effected was open only to those who converted for the first time. In contrast to what Protestants would later say, relapsed Christians had to obtain satisfaction themselves by confessing guilt, doing penance and performing good works. As a Catholic bishop, Ambrose endorsed this traditional view and practice.

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