"Let us Flee to the Fatherland": Plotinus in Ambrose's Theology of Ascent

Gerald Boersma
St. Bonaventure University
St. Bonaventure, NY

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" is Tertullian's well-known invective against philosophy.[1] Nevertheless, for most of the Christian tradition, Tertullian's antithetical rhetoric has functioned as an invitation to consider the import of philosophy in theological discourse. However, an ancient philosopher might be surprised by the distinction. "Is not philosophy inherently theological?" he might ask. For him, to philosophize is to initiate a process of purgation, ascent, and ultimately, union with the One. Ancient philosophy is, in Pierre Hadot's famous formula, "a way of life."[2] Philosophy begins with *metanoia*, a conversion through which one is turned round to the light. The erotic pull of the Beautiful, then, draws the soul to itself. This ascent necessitates *katharsis*, a purification or "spiritual exercise," so that the soul can strip off her material attachments and become fit to know—in a participatory and intimate sense—the Beautiful itself. The goal of the philosophical life is contemplative union with the One. Thus, in the Greco-Roman world, a spiritual, soteriological, and even an eschatological valence

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1 *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9 (CCSL, 1:193): "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?" This question was also the title of the Dominican Colloquium on Philosophy and Theology held at U. C. Berkeley on July 16–20, 2014, where I presented an earlier draft of this essay.

2 See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995).

animates the philosophical quest.[3] Our contemporary departmental bifurcation between philosophy and theology would, I think, leave our ancient philosopher slightly perplexed.

This backdrop to philosophy in the ancient world is significant when we consider Tertullian's question of "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" in the context of patristic theology, where philosophy already had an inherently spiritual overlay. How are Platonic philosophies of *ascent* adapted by the Church fathers? This article examines one instance of this engagement in a catechetical oration that Ambrose of Milan preached in (perhaps) 387 to his catechumens (possibly including Augustine) preparing to receive baptism.[4] I will argue that Ambrose adopts, but also transposes, Plotinus's philosophy of ascent to construct a distinctly Christian theology.[5]

In his homily entitled *De Isaac* Ambrose enjoins a *philosophical* life on his catechumens. His call to purgation, ascent, and union with Christ is suffused with Platonic images such as the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*, the metaphor of the soul as a charioteer from the *Phaedrus*, and the ladder of loves in the *Symposium*. It is also clear

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[3] This sentiment is wonderfully expressed in John Kenney's *Contemplation and Classical Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014). The first chapter ("Contemplation and Pagan Monotheism") describes the spiritual ambit of Plotinus's philosophy of ascent. The Greek philosophical context of Ambrose's preaching is well articulated in *Marcia Colish*'s *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) and Warren Smith's *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue. The Theological Foundation of Ambrose's Ethics* (New York / Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4] For the context and debate concerning the date of the composition of *De Isaac*, see Allan Fitzgerald, "Isaac at the Well: *De Isaac et anima*," *Revue des* Études *Augustiniennes* 48 (2002): 79–99, and G. Visonà, "Lo status quaestionis della ricerca ambrosiana," in *Nec Timeo Mori*, ed. Luigi F. Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi (Milan, IT: Vita e Pensiero, 1998) 67n136; see also M. Zelzer, "Zur Chronologie der Werke des Ambrosius," in *Nec Timeo Mori*, 92. It is unclear whether Ambrose preached *De Isaac* in 387, or even whether it was ever actually preached in its written form.

[5] Ambrose's appropriation and valuation of Plotinus is complex and is representative of the bishop's more general engagement with classical philosophy. Surveys of the breadth of scholarly opinion on the question of how to situate Ambrose's vis-à-vis his philosophical sources (principally Neoplatonic, Stoic, and Aristotelian) include Marcia Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 50, and Ivor Davidson, "Ambrose's *de officiis* and the Intellectual Climate of the Late Fourth Century," *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995): 314–15.

that Ambrose has modeled his sermon on Plotinus's exposition of the soul's ascent to the Beautiful. There is much in this homily that we could consider under the rubric of Jerusalem engaging Athens.[6] I will limit myself in this analysis to the very last two paragraphs of *De Isaac* (8.78–79), which Ambrose modeled after Plotinus's treatise *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6).[7] I will consider how Ambrose builds on the philosophy of ascent operative in Plotinus's treatise, but I will also note instances where Ambrose subtly corrects this Neoplatonic philosophy of ascent.[8] I will explore three major elements in Ambrose's theology

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[6] Colish contends that, when we consider the scope of Ambrose's corpus as a whole, what emerges is a portrait of an Ambrose "who is trying neither to prove the inferiority of philosophy to the Gospel nor to synthesize it systematically with the Gospel. . . . [who does not] reveal the slightest need to agonize or to fulminate over the relation between Athens and Jerusalem" (*The Stoic Tradition*, 50). I am in agreement with Angela Christman's assessment: "Ambrose reinterprets his classical sources through the Biblical text. . . . That is, the ideas which Ambrose borrows from Plato are, in the end, thoroughly transformed by and absorbed into a Christian reading of the Bible"; see "Ambrose of Milan on Ezekiel 1 and the Virtuous Soul's Ascent to God," in *L'esegesi dei Padri Latini dalle origini a Gregorio Magno*, Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 68 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000), 555.

[7] I have used the translation of *De Isaac* done by Michael P. McHugh in vol. 65 of the Fathers of the Church series (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972) and the Latin version found in CSEL 32. I have used the translation of Plotinus's treatise *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6) by A. H. Armstrong in vol. 440 of the Loeb series.

[8] The two most trenchant voices in the discussion of how Ambrose's draws from Plotinus have been Pierre Courcelle and Goulven Madec. Courcelle suggests that Ambrose envisions a complementary and symbiotic relation between Neoplatonic philosophy and the Christian faith, so complimentary that their difference becomes imperceptible at times. His many articles on this question are structured to highlight (in comparative columns) the many adaptations that Ambrose makes of Plotinus. See his "Nouveaux aspects du Platonisme chez saint Ambroise," *Revue des etudes latines* 34 (1956): 220–39; "L'humanisme chrétien de saint Ambroise," *Orpheus* 9 (1962): 21–34 and 122–140; "Anti-Christian Arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to Ambrose," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. A. Momigliano (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), 151–92; "Deux grands courants de pensee dans la litterature latine tardive: Stoicisme et Neoplatonisme," *Revue des etudes latines* 42 (1964): 122–40; and *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, *1968), 93–138. Madec contends that Ambrose is ambivalent in his use of philosophy and that he feels comfortable deploying all different philosophical schools as long as they articulate the truths that Scripture already speaks much more clearly. Madec is attentive to Ambrose's frequent invectives against philosophy and suggests that it is more accurate to understand Ambrose as borrowing literary flourishes*

of ascent that are explicitly adopted from *Ennead* 1.6 and then given Christian transposition by Ambrose.[9] First, Ambrose and Plotinus share a participatory metaphysic that frames their theologies of ascent. That is to say, both understand ascent within an ontology of radical dependence on God. Second, the manner of ascent entails purification to develop the ability to see. Finally, the response to the vision of the One is for Ambrose, as for Plotinus, a two-step movement of an impassioned desire for union with the ultimate Good accompanied by a rejection of all other goods.

Bernard McGinn describes *De Isaac* as "arguably the first great masterpiece of Western mysticism."[10] Mystical theology necessitates a participatory metaphysic that underwrites the genuine possibility of ascent. This participatory metaphysic expresses itself in the language of *dependence*. For Plotinus, the soul sees "[t]hat alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends (ἐξήρτηται) and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is the cause of life and mind and being."[11] Ambrose follows Plotinus closely: "[The soul] sees the good on which all things depend (*ex quo pendent omnia*), but which itself depends on none. There she lives and receives her understanding. For that supreme good is the fountain of life."[12] In both cases the soul

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from philosophical literature, rather than as adopting its substance; see Saint Ambroise et la philosophie (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974).

My present study comparing the last two paragraphs of *De Isaac* (8.78–79) in light of Plotinus's treatise *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6) is aided especially by Courcelle's "Plotin et saint Ambroise," *Revue de Philologie* 76 (1950): 29–56, and *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, *1968), 107–11, and by* Pierre Hadot, "Platon et Plotin dans trois sermons de saint Ambroise," *Revue des etudes latines* 34 (1956): 202–20.

9 I use the word "transposition" to describe Ambrose's use of Plotinus. Similarly, Davidson has advocated for a "transformation theory" to account for how Ambrose draws on his philosophical background. Davidson situates Ambrose in the broader ambit of classically-educated late-fourth-century Latin theologians: "They aspire to reinvest the familiar classical genres with a new profundity, and thus to supersede them in their former state. Such deliberate transformation is not the work of unimaginative imitators or unscrupulous plagiarists with limited mental powers, but the vision of educated leaders who naturally turn to classical texts but now find that such texts greatly require an infusion of revealed truth" ("Ambrose's *De officiis*," 323).

10 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM, 1992), 203.

11 *Ennead* 1.6.7.10–12: "ἀφ΄ οὗ πάντα ἐξήρτηται καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸ βλέπει καὶ ἔστι καὶ ζῇ καὶ νοεῖ· ζωῆς γὰρ αἴτιος αἰ νοῦ καὶ τοῦ εἶναι."

12 *De Isaac* 8.78: "ut uideat illud bonum, ex quo pendent omnia, ipsum autem ex nullo. eo igitur uiuit atque intellectum accipit. uitae enim fons est summum illud bonum."

"sees" (βλέπει / *uideat*) truly stable Being and realizes its own instability. The key word animating both phrases is "depend" (ἐξήρτηται / *pendent*). For Ambrose all things are, literally, "hanging" (*pendent*) from the Good.[13] Ambrose follows Plotinus in maintaining that the triad of finite being, life, and mind are derivative from and dependent on the One.

Participatory metaphysics rejects a real relation on the part of God to the creature; he does not participate, but is participated in. Plotinus writes that the One "provides for all and remains by itself and gives to all but receives nothing into itself."[14] Similarly, Ambrose writes, "This it is that supplies to all things their being; itself remaining in itself, it gives to others but receives nothing into itself from others."[15] The phrasing of this quotation is remarkably similar: The One gives to all (*sumministrat uniuersis substantiam* / χορηγεῖ μὲν ἅπασιν) while remaining bound within his own being (*ipsum autem manens in semet* / ἐφ΄ ἑαυτοῦ δὲ μένον δίδωσι). The One gives but does not receive (*suscipit* / δέχεται).

The manner of ascent is the second element I want to consider. One ought not to be deluded by the images and shadows that comprise finite existence, asserts Plotinus. Instead, we ought to ascend to that reality which they image:

> Let us fly to our dear country. What then is our way of escape, and how are we to find it? . . . Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.[16]

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[13] See *De Isaac* 7.60: "bonum autem nullius eget, sibi abundat, mensuram et perfectionem, finem quoque tribuit omnibus, in quo uniuersa constant et de quo omnia pendent."

[14] *Ennead* 1.6.7.26–27: "ὃ χορηγεῖ μὲν ἅπασιν, ἐφ΄ ἑαυτοῦ δὲ μένον δίδωσι καὶ οὐ δέχεταί τι εἰς αὐτό."

[15] *De Isaac* 8.78: "hoc est quod sumministrat uniuersis substantiam, ipsum autem manens in semet ipso dat aliis, nihil autem in se ex aliis suscipit."

[16] *Ennead* 1.6.8.16–28: "Φεύγωμεν δὴ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα, ἀληθέστερον ἄν τις παρακελεύοιτο. Τίς οὖν ἡ φυγὴ καὶ πῶς; . . . Πατρὶς δὴ ἡμῖν, ὅθεν παρήλθομεν, καὶ πατὴρ ἐκεῖ. Τίς οὖν ὁ στόλος καὶ ἡ φυγή; Οὐ ποσὶ δεῖ διανύσαι· πανταχοῦ γὰρ φέρουσι πόδες ἐπὶ γῆν ἄλλην ἀπ΄ ἄλλης· οὐδέ

There are two elements in this paragraph that Ambrose engages and transposes. First, the ascent, for Plotinus, is not a journey to a far-off land for which one would need to fashion a means of transportation. Rather, the ascent is a return home (πατρὶς), we have a familial bond (πατὴρ) with that higher realm, we have a right of return and a natural desire to return, and it is a matter of claiming our divine birthright. Second, the ascent is achieved by turning within. Introspection is the *via* of ascent. Andrew Louth writes, "For Plotinus, the higher is not the more remote; the higher is the more inward: one climbs up by climbing in, as it were. . . . As the soul ascends to the One, it enters more deeply into itself: to find the One is to find itself."[17] All have this ability because of our true nature. But alienation from our true selves entails that many obsess about externals (feet, carriage, and boat) rather than perfect internal seeing.

What does Ambrose do with this text from *Ennead* 1.6? In the following quotation we see that, rhetorically, Ambrose's theology of ascent is in many ways nearly indistinguishable from that of Plotinus:

> Let us flee therefore to our real, true fatherland. There is our fatherland and there is our Father, by whom we have been created, where there is the city of Jerusalem, which is the mother of all men. But what is this flight? Not at all a flight with the feet, which belong to the body; for wherever they run, they run upon the earth and pass from one soil to another. Let us not flee either on ships or chariots or horses, which are impeded and fall, but let us flee with the spirit and the eyes and feet that are within.[18]

The parallels are, at first glance, obvious. Like Plotinus's, Ambrose's injunction is to flee to the fatherland because it is there that our Father is found. Likewise, for Ambrose, the flight occurs within. It does not

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σε δεῖ ἵππων ὄχημα ἤ τι θαλάττιον παρασκευάσαι, ἀλλὰ ταῦτα πάντα ἀφεῖναι δεῖ καὶ μὴ βλέπειν, ἀλλ´ οἷον μύσαντα ὄψιν ἄλλην ἀλλάξασθαι καὶ ἀνεγεῖραι, ἣν ἔχει μὲν πᾶς, χρῶνται δὲ ὀλίγοι."

17 Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

18 *De Isaac* 8.78–79: "fugiamus ergo in patriam uerissimam. illic patria nobis et illic pater, a quo creati sumus, ubi est Hierusalem ciuitas, quae est mater omnium. sed quae est fuga? non utique pedum, qui sunt corporis; isti enim quocumque currunt in terra currunt et de solo ad solum transeunt. nec nauibus fugiamus aut curribus aut equis, qui obligantur et cadunt, sed fugiamus animo et oculis aut pedibus interioribus."

require the external trappings of travel—feet, chariots, or ships.

The opening hortatory enjoinder, however, should give us pause. From the outset, Ambrose invites a contrast: this fatherland is the *most true* fatherland (*patriam uerissimam*). We certainly have a desire to return to this land (*patriam*) because we have a familial (*pater*) and originating relation to it. However, while Plotinus can properly speak of a "right of return" to the realm from which we have fallen, Ambrose does not suggest a return to whence we came. The emphasis for Ambrose is that we have been *created* by the Father (*a quo creati sumus*). As such, the ascent to the Fatherland is not a return to our own land, but a journey to a realm in which we have never been before. Our *created* condition entails that, if the ascent is to be successful, it will have to be received as gift rather than claimed as divine birthright. Further, in Ambrose's hands, Plotinus's *patria* becomes a *ciuitas*, with all the accompanying ecclesial and eschatological resonances that this implies. We are invited to identify this *patria* with that of the Apostle Paul: "But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal 4:26).

Ambrose alters the second element in Plotinus's mode of ascent—the injunction to turn within. Plotinus's urging brims with confidence. True beauty is already within. It needs only to be revealed. Through purification, one can find the beauty one seeks within. One arrives at the Fatherland by cultivating an "inner sight."[19] With ample preparation, the soul must become accustomed (ἐθιστέον) to gaze at the beauty within. Plotinus urges, "Go back into yourself and look."[20] Perhaps, what you see there is not yet beautiful? In that case, work away at it and make your inner self beautiful. Like a statue that needs work, maintains Plotinus, you ought to cut and remove the ugly while polishing and smoothing the beautiful: "[N]ever stop working your statue till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat."[21] With all the accretions, external loves, and desires stripped away, you will become at last "wholly yourself."[22] For Plotinus, to turn within entails that what

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[19] *Ennead* 1.6.9.1.

[20] *Ennead* 1.6.9.7–8.

[21] *Ennead* 1.6.9.

[22] Ibid. Margaret Miles is attentive to the subtleties and ambiguities in Plotinus's injunction to "turn within" and rejects facile caricatures of his "dualism"; see *Plotinus on Body and Beauty* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999). See also Stephen R. Clark, "Plotinus: Body and soul," *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275–91.

one sees is identical with the one seeing. The subject-object distinction disappears: "For one must come to the sight with a seeing power made akin and like to what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty."[23]

Ambrose mitigates Plotinus's emphasis on the turn within. He writes, "This is the eye that looks upon the true and great beauty. Only the strong and healthy eye can see the sun; only the good soul can see the good. Therefore let him become good who wishes to see the Lord."[24] Note that Ambrose retains a clear distinction between the Good and the soul that sees the Good. Here we witness the most significant departure that Ambrose makes from *Ennead* 1.6: the soul does not have a mystical and unitive experience with its true self, but instead sees God. While Ambrose appropriates the Platonic adage that like is seen by like, God and the soul do not become coterminous; Ambrose does not eviscerate the Creator-creature distinction.

In Ambrose, something of Plotinus's profound interiority is still evident. It is not a journey of ships, or chariots, or horses. These are sure not to succeed in the journey. Rather, "let us flee with the spirit and the eyes and feet that are within" (*fugiamus animo et oculis aut pedibus interioribus*). Also for Ambrose, it is the "inner eye" that needs to be cleansed to see and to ascend.[25] There is an echo of the necessary purification of sight: "Let us accustom our eyes to see what is bight and clear."[26] However, Plotinus's recurring call to unveil the latent beauty within is absent in Ambrose. The "turn within" becomes, in *De Isaac*, self-examination rather than contemplative union of sight and the one seeing. One turns within to examine one's conscience, to see if continence and moderation and the other virtues inhabit the soul.[27]

For Ambrose, purifying the internal vision allows one to see outside and above oneself; the "turn within" is precursory to the

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23 *Ennead* 1.6.9.29–33.

24 *De Isaac* 8.79.

25 Ibid.: "illum oculum mundet."

26 Ibid.: "adsuescamus oculos nostros uidere quae dilucida et clara sunt."

27 Ibid.: "Let us accustom our eyes to see what is bright and clear, to look upon the face of continence and of moderation, and upon all the virtues, in which there is nothing scabrous, nothing obscure or involved. And let each one look upon himself and his own conscience; let him cleanse that inner eye, so that it may contain no dirt."

"turn above." So, for Ambrose, the Psalmist best expresses the love and longing of the soul to be joined with the Good: "One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and see the delight of the Lord and contemplate his temple" (Ps 26 [27]: 4).[28] The ascent is to One outside and above oneself. Peter had this vision when he saw Christ's glory, and he recognized it, saying, "Lord, it is good for us to be here."[29] Ambrose uses the Psalmist's desire and Peter's experience to nuance Plotinus's emphasis on the turn within. Ultimately, the vision of Beauty is not a turn within, but a turn above.

The final element to analyze in Ambrose's theology of ascent is his discussion of the soul's response to catching sight of the true and eternal good upon which all depend. Here too, *De Isaac* adapts and transposes *Ennead* 1.6. For both Plotinus and Ambrose, the response is two-fold. The soul both experiences an erotic longing for the Good it sees and, on this account, comes to despise all temporal goods. First, for Plotinus, the experience of eternal Beauty is a mystical experience. In a justly famous passage of the *Enneads*, Plotinus describes the soul that has ascended to the Good and has seen ultimate Beauty:

> If anyone sees it, what passion (ἔρωτας) will he feel, what longing (πόθους) in his desire to be united (συγκερασθῆναι) with it, what a shock of delight! The man who has not seen it may desire it as good, but he who has seen it glories in its beauty and is full of wonder and delight, enduring a shock which causes no hurt, loving with true passion and piercing longing; he laughs at all other loves and despises what he thought beautiful before; it is like the experience of those who have met appearances of gods or spirits and do not any more appreciate as they did the beauty of other bodies.[30]

The word "passion" (ἔρωτας) is used multiple times in *Ennead* 1.6. It is an intellectual ascent—an ascent of the mind—but it is described as a movement of the heart; it is an erotic pull to be intimate with the Good seen.[31] Plotinus maintains that the One is *desired* as Good, but

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[28] *De Isaac* 8.78.

[29] Ibid.

[30] *Ennead* 1.6.7.13–21.

[31] Lloyd Gerson captures the mystical character of Plotinus's ascent as follows: "The ascent does not end with acceptance of conclusions of arguments about the existence of Intellect or the One. The ascent, if it is to be successful, must

experienced as Beauty.[32] Considered under the auspices of the Good, a distinction necessarily remains between the desiring subject and the object desired. The desire for the Good is a rational pursuit that always preserves what Lloyd Gerson has described as a "residual duality" between subject and object.[33] However, when the One is considered as Beauty, this chasm is bridged. This is what Plotinus means when he speaks about "union" (συγκερασθῆναι) with Beauty.

Second, the rejection of all other beauties accompanies this longing desire for union with Beauty, but perhaps "rejection" is too strong a word. All other beauties are now evaluated in light of ultimate Beauty and are, on this account, "despised" (καταφρονεῖν). Finite achievements are scorned in light of the ultimate vision of Beauty: "The man who attains this is blessed in seeing that 'blessed sight', and he who fails to attain it has failed utterly."[34] This beatific vision is completely asymmetric with all other goals. Power, honor, and riches are of a different order: "For this [blessed sight] he should give up the attainment of kingship and of rule over all earth and sea and sky, if only by leaving and overlooking them he can turn to That and see."[35]

Ambrose envisions a similar two-step response of the soul: first passionate love for the ultimate Good and then a disregard for all other goods. Ambrose writes, "Love and longing for it are enkindled in us, and it is our desire to approach and be joined to it, for it is desirable to him who does not see it and is present to him who sees it, and therefore he disregards all other things and takes pleasure and delight in this one only."[36] In this quotation, Ambrose follows Plotinus in describing the passionate feelings evoked when the soul sees the Good on which all depends: the soul experiences (1) love (ἔρωτας / *caritas*) and (2) passion (πόθους / *desiderium*) to be (3) united (συγκερασθῆναι / *misceri*) with the Good. While Ambrose does not follow Plotinus in making the conceptual distinction between the

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consist in the construction of an ideal self in the incarnate individual. . . . So the ascent must include what can only be called a conversion experience"; see *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1998), 175.

32 Gerson writes, "[B]eauty is that aspect of intelligible reality that produces delight in the contemplator when contemplation is occurring" (*Plotinus*, 183).

33 Ibid., 189.

34 *Ennead* 1.6.7.33–34.

35 *Ennead* 1.6.7.37–40.

36 *De Isaac* 8.78: "cuius nobis accenditur caritas et desiderium, cui adpropinquare et misceri uoluptas est, quod ei qui non uidet desiderio est et qui uidet inest, ideo que alia uniuersa despicit, hoc mulcetur et delectatur."

ultimate Good and ultimate Beauty, he does, like Plotinus, distinguish between those who have not seen (*non uidet*) the Good, but only desire it (*desiderio*), and those who do see it and glory in it. Finally, as for Plotinus, so for Ambrose, the soul that has ascended to this vision disregards or despises (*despicit*) all other temporal goods on account of this greatest Good. Here Ambrose deploys the same examples as Plotinus: "Kingdoms are not comparable, nor riches nor honors nor glory nor powers."[37]

This close comparative analysis of the theologies of ascent in the last two paragraphs of *De Isaac* and Plotinus's treatise *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6) provides one example of an answer to the question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Given the already spiritual and theological character of philosophy in Neoplatonic thought, Ambrose finds a natural ally in Plotinus's injunction to ascend. Nevertheless, his distinct Christian commitments prevail. Angela Christman puts it well: "Ambrose weaves the phrases [of classical literature] into a tightly woven tapestry of scriptural quotations and images, the effect of which is that the meaning of the phrases derives no longer from their original classical contexts but from the scriptural texts Ambrose interprets when he uses these phrases."[38] Ambrose shows little reticence in not only borrowing, but then also absorbing and transforming Plotinus to construct a Christian theology of ascent. NV

[37] Ibid.

[38] Christman, "Ambrose of Milan on Ezekiel 1," 555–56.