

Biblical Christology, Pagan Letters: The Example of the Christian Cento „De Verbi Incarnatione”

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Through the richness of its legacy, ancient culture, not only that of Greece and Rome, found acceptance and recognition and was one of its achievements that was later used by Christians and others. The places where there was an encounter between two worlds – Christian and pagan – include literature, philosophy, and rhetoric. Christians made generous use of the legacy of their predecessors. After all, they were educated in pagan schools of rhetoric and assimilated Greek philosophical systems and read Greek literature. Just as Christ’s worshipers used rhetoric and philosophy to a certain degree in order to achieve their purposes, at a certain point ancient texts caught their attention.

Christian centos were born in this way. They were works in which the authors made use of the verses of pagan writing in order to express Christian messages. When doing so, they gave new meanings to borrowed words and situated them in a new context or simply adopted them. Virgilian centos are an example of this. Sixteen of them have survived to the present; four can be called Christian.¹ We will limit our reflections on Biblical Christology to the cento *De Verbi Incarnatione*. This is an anonymous work consisting of 111 verses of hexameter;² it is difficult to say with certainty when exactly it was written.³ This work can be considered to be theologically rich. In it, we will find Christological, Mariological,⁴ protological, hamartiological, and eschatological contents.

1 S. McGill, *Virgil Recomposed. The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity*, Oxford 2005, p. XV.

2 J. M. Ziółkowski, M. C. J. Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition. The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, New Haven 2008, p. 481.

3 The chronological range is quite large. All the Virgilian centos that have survived were written in 200–534 AD. Cf. S. McGill, *Virgil Recomposed...*, op. cit., p. XV.

4 On the topic of Mariology in the cento, see: *De Verbi Incarnatione*; cf. M. Gilski, *Mariologia centonów*, Wydawnictwo Scriptum, Kraków 2015, p. 195–208.

Critical editions of the following works by Virgil will be the basis for this analysis: the *Aeneid*,⁵ the *Eclogues*,⁶ and the *Georgics*⁷ as well as, of course, the cento in its Latin version.⁸

The aim of this article is to present the Biblical Christology presented in the cento, describe the inspiration of the centoist, and note the lexical layer of the texts, meanwhile exposing the analogies and differences used by the centoist to create his work.

1. The Day of the Birth: A Blessed Day – Luke 2:7

The first fragment I will analyze will be part of *De Verbi Incarnatione*: 46–51. In order to build it, the centoist used six verses from Virgil's *Eclogues* (he uses the same verse three times; namely, E. VIII, 17) and one fragment from the *Aeneid*.

Nascere praeque diem veniens age, lucifer, alnum,
nascere, quo toto surgat gens aurea mundo,
unde etiam magnus caelorum nascitur ordo:
nascere, ut incipiant magni procedere menses,
ne maneant terris priscae vestigia fraudis,
prospera venturo laetentur ut omnia saeclo.⁹

In its substance, the cited fragment refers to the day of the Redeemer's birth. It presents two important and interesting statements referring to Christology. Both these fragments focus on the effects of a miraculous birth. The first is finding *gentis aerae* on the earth (verses 46–47), while the second is the destruction of traces of old crimes bringing auspiciousness (verses 50–51).

The first fragment (verses 46–47) was written on the basis of E. VIII:17 and E. IV:9; the centoist uses the first of the verses mentioned here twice. Verse 8 from the *Eclogues* is said by the shepherd Damon. It is preceded

5 Virgile, *Énéide*, Les Belles Lettres, vol. 1: *Livres I–IV*, Paris 1977; Virgile, *Énéide*, Les Belles Lettres, vol. 2: *Livres V–VIII*, Paris 1993; Virgile, *Énéide*, Les Belles Lettres, vol. 3: *Livres IX–XII*, Paris 1987.

6 Virgile, *Bucoliques*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1992.

7 Virgile, *Géorgiques*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1995.

8 *Poetae Christiani Minores*, pars 1, Vindobonae 1888, p. 615–620 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 16).

9 *Poetae Christiani Minores*, op. cit., p. 618.

by a description of a bucolic landscape (the sunrise, a pasture, a shepherd supporting himself on a stick). It is the beginning of the song in which he laments rejection by a lover. At the lexical level, the centoist fully uses verse E. VIII, 17. Naturally, he brings a completely different meaning to Virgil's words in his work.

In the case of reflections on Christology, the very reference (for a moment, let us omit to what exactly this verse refers) to *Eclogues* 4 can lead to associations that are not supported by facts. *Eclogues* 4 is an enigmatic work, because it does not specify to whom it is addressed. In this work, the poet refers to a child whose coming into the world was to begin *gentem auream*. It would descend from the heavens to the earth, inaugurate a golden age, and purify the world of crimes and misdemeanors in order to be later taken to heaven. One of the numerous interpretations of this work is Christian. Thanks to St. Augustine, Christ came to be recognized in the mysterious child.¹⁰

The centoist uses the motif of a kind of repairing of the world, and in his work, he uses it to directly refer to the Redeemer. In this Christian vision, the *Golden Age* begins as a result of the coming of the Logos to earth, victory over sin and death, and the redemption of each person.

The second fragment (verses 50–51) was written on the basis of three verses from Virgil's *Eclogues* 4; namely, 13, 31, and 52. With regards to its contents, verse 13 is coherent with the prophetic vision and presents one of the effects of the coming of the miraculous child whose birth would drive away all crimes (*vestigia sceleris*). Verse 31 refers to old errors whose effects will remain on earth for some time, until the child becomes an adult. Until that time, there will be the difficulties of work and war. Only then will the golden age shine in full.¹¹ Meanwhile, verse 52 presents the joy that is to come.

As has already been said, the sunrise described in verses 46–51 was to begin the dawn of a golden age on earth. This is directly related to the destruction of the traces of an old crime (*ut ne maneant terris priscae vestigia fraudis*) and the coming of well-being (verses 50–51). In our cento, the crimes described above are, of course, sins, but not in the individual and specific conception (the sin of our first parents is not the trace here), but in the universal and unitary dimension (the sins of humanity). Sunrise is to come to bring an end to these sins. The coming of Christ to earth will obliterate all misdemeanors.

¹⁰ M. Cytowska, H. Szelest, *Literatura Rzymska. Okres Augustowski*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, p. 76–77.

¹¹ S. Stabryła, *Wergiliusz. Świat poetycki*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1983, p. 84–85.

We should note that by choosing these and not other fragments, the centoist to a large extent uses the lexical layer of Virgil's work (there are few of his own additions); the significant coherence and similarities with respect to meaning and substance are especially interesting. This is all because of the ambiguity and the singular kind of universality that directly results from *Eclogues* 4.

2. The Day of Death and the Day of Salvation – Romans 3:6

The second fragment of the analyzed cento is verses 63 to 65. In order to build this fragment, the centoist makes use of five different fragments from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Ille dies primus leti primusque salutis
monstrat iter vobis ad eum. Quem semper acerbum,
semper honoratum cuncti celebrate fauentes.¹²

The main theme of this fragment is also day. This time, however, this does not refer to the birth of Jesus, but the day that indirectly but nonetheless preceded this event. We have the sin of our first parents in mind.

In the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, there is a verse that inspired the centoist; namely, verse 169 takes on the following form: "Ille dies primus leti primusque malorum."¹³ It served to create verse 63 of *De Verbi Incarnatione*. Already at first glance, the fragment allows us to notice differences in the use of one word. In his work, the centoist changed Virgil's *malorum* to *salutis*. As a result of this technique, the message of Virgil's verse is significantly changed.

Verse 169 of the fourth book of the story of Aeneas refers to the titular protagonist's love affair with Dido. After Aeneas' appearance, the queen of Carthage quickly falls in love with him. The verse under discussion should be read in the context of the consumption of their relationship in a cave. For the queen, "[t]hat day the first of death, the first of calamity was cause."¹⁴ This was all because of later events. Hurried by Mercury, Aeneas decides to leave

¹² *Poetae Christiani Minores*, op. cit., p. 618.

¹³ Virgile, *Énéide*, op. cit., p. 116.

¹⁴ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4, trans. H. R. Fairclough, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilAeneid4.html> (accessed February 25, 2020).

Carthage and end his relationship with Dido, who commits suicide amidst great despair and not being able to accept separation from her beloved.

As has been mentioned above, in the cento under discussion the author uses these words in reference to the day of the fall of the first people. For people, however, this is not the same as the one in which Dido sought shelter from the storm in a cave along with Aeneas as it is for her. This is a day that brought dual effects for humanity: on the one hand, the yoke of sin, and on the other, salvation. In his work, the centoist directly links together the fact of the existence of sin and the coming of the Redeemer. This allows him to call the day of the sin of the first parents a day of death (*letum*) and salvation (*salus*). Such a juxtaposition could lead to the conclusion that the author of *De Verbi Incarnatione* shared the belief that the incarnation of the Son of God could not have happened if not for the sin of Adam and Eve.

In the case of verses 64 and 65 of the cento under discussion, which was written as a result of the amalgamation of *Aeneid* II, 388; *Aeneid* V, 49; *Aeneid* V, 50; and *Aeneid* VIII, 173 the inspiration from Book II (*monstrat iter*) is literal and is not significant. It is similar in the case of *Aeneid* VIII, 173, where we see nothing other than the use of the words of the author of the *Aeneid*.

It could be different in the case of *Aeneid* V:49–50, in which we can see a somewhat greater resemblance to the text under analysis. In this fragment, Aeneas refers to the death of his father. His memory reaches back to the day that would always be sad (*acerbus*) and dear (*honoratus*) to him.¹⁵ Anchises' son guarantees that he will make sacrifices everywhere and under all conditions in order to commemorate his father. It also expresses joy as a result of the new circumstances. He thanks the gods for allowing him to visit his father's grave on the first anniversary of the latter's death.

Apart from the lexical dimension of this fragment, the centoist also uses its context. He skillfully weaves the ambivalence expressed by Aeneas regarding his father's death in his reflections on the sin of our first parents.

¹⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid*, V, 49–50.

3. The Father and I Are One – John 10:30

The next fragment I will analyze will be part of the *De Verbi Incarnatione*, 35–40. In writing it, the author uses nine fragments from the *Aeneid* and one from Virgil's *Georgics*.

Nate, meae vires, mea magna potentia solus,
nate, mihi quem nulla dies ab origine rerum
dissimilem arguerit, comitem complector in omnis.
te sine nil altum mens inchoat: omnia mecum
aeternis regis imperiis, et, quidquid ubique est,
nulla meis sine te quaeretur gloria rebus.¹⁶

The first verse I would like to note is *Aeneid* I, 664 I, 664 (*De Verbi Incarnatione*, 35). In this text, the goddess Venus discusses this matter with her son Cupid. Her words are embedded in the context of the implementation of intentions regarding Aeneas and Dido. The aim of the gods is for the queen of Carthage to fall in love with her son. For this purpose, she makes use of Aeneas' brother Cupid, who taking the form of the son of Aeneas, Ascanius, came to the queen and made her love for the leader of those who had fled Troy grow. The words that interest us here initiate what the mother says to her son: "Nate, meae vires, mea magna potentia, solus."¹⁷ We notice that this verse has been completely adopted by the centoist. We immediately think of a comparison between the goddess Venus and God the Father, who addresses His "children" using words that express a mutual close relationship. However, in the case of the cento the words with which the Father addresses the Son have a completely different purpose than those Venus says to Cupid. The next verses of the text contain information about this:

nate, mihi quem nulla dies ab origine rerum
dissimilem arguerit, comitem complector in omnis.

Thanks to the verses quoted above, we discover the truth about the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, which is expressed not only in the

¹⁶ *Poetae Christiani Minores*, op. cit., p. 617.

¹⁷ Virgile, *Énéide*, op. cit., p. 31.

lack of distinctness (*nate, quem nulla dies dissimilem arguerit*), but also in the co-governing of everything (*comitem complector in omnis*).

De Verbi Incarnatione: 38 is marked by a kind of uniqueness. All this results from inspiration flowing from Virgil's *Georgics*, which in the first fragment of Book III's agricultural poem addresses the patron, the friend and protector,¹⁸ and thus a historical figure. It seems that the words *Te sine nil altum mens incohat*¹⁹ express the next part of the laudation of the friend, emphasizing his enormous influence on the author and his work. In his text, the author of the cento ascribes these words to God the Father, who in this way addresses the Son. In the cento and within the context of Christology, these words by Virgil allow us to once more discover the truth about the consubstantiality of the Father and Son.

The last part concerns reflections concerning Book IX of the *Aeneid*: 277, 278, 281, and 282. In particular the first two, which Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, says to Euryalus, one of the Trojan warriors: "From thee, heroic youth! Be wholly mine; Take full possession."²⁰

As a result of Aeneas' absence, there are consultations in the Trojan camp. They learn that Turnus along with his army are preparing to attack. The shared reflections lead those who are gathered to the conclusion and awareness of the necessity to inform Aeneas of everything. The road to Venus leads across the Italian camp, and two youths, Nisus and Euryalus, agree to perform this task. It is in this context that Ascanius directs the above-quoted words to them. This statement is preceded by joy resulting from the bravery of the young Trojans and the promise they would receive a decent wage.

These verses take on an absolute meaning because of who says them. Once again confirming the same essence of both, we also notice a community of activity. The Father does not act without the Son, and the Son does not act without the Father.

4. I Am the Way and the Truth – John 14:6

The last fragment I will deal with is 80–85 of the *De Verbi Incarnatione*. It arose from part 9 of the *Aeneid*.

18 S. Stabryła, *Wergiliusz. Świat poetycki*, op. cit., p. 109.

19 Virgile, *Géorgiques*, op. cit., p. 40.

20 Virgil, *Aeneid*, IX, 277–278.

Mortalem eripiam formam et praemia reddam
 fortunatorum nemorum sedesque beatas.
 non eritis regno indecores, nec vestra feretur
 fama levis mecum pariter considerare regnis.
 urbem, quam statuo, vestra est: intrare licebit.
 nusquam abero et tutos patrio vos limite sistam.²¹

The first words of the quotation (*mortalem eripiam formam*) come from the mouth of Jupiter when conversing with the goddess Cybele. He promised her that the ships with which Aeneas will swim to Italy will turn into nymphs. The above words express the god's intention of fulfilling his promise. Once again, only the literal, not contextual, inspiration is evident, as in our cento these words are said by Christ Himself (the words have been accepted, but the context of the statement has been completely changed) who in them mentions Himself and His mortality, which in this fragment takes on major theological significance. This is an expression of Christ's maintaining His human nature after death. It was not used only in order to fulfill His mission on earth. The second part of this sentence (*praemia reddam fortunatorum nemorum sedesque beatas*) refers to Book VI of the *Aeneid* and Aeneas' stay in the underground world; specifically, in Elysium. The natural, or happy, image of this land was used in the cento and is identified with the kingdom of heaven. Christ proclaimed that He would grant rewards and blessings to groves that are happy.

The following verses of the poem, 83 and 84, were based around fragments 572 and 573 of Book I of the *Aeneid*. In Virgil's text, this is said by Dido and these words are directed to the arrivals from Troy. In it, he expresses kindness towards Aeneas and his companions. He allows them to stay in his kingdom and promises them he would take care of them. He also calls the city he rules his city. By adopting the queen's words, the centoist places them in the subsequent part of the statement by Christ, who hands His kingdom over to people (*urbem, quam statuo, vestra est*). In this fragment, we can also find an elevation of human nature (*mecum pariter considerare regnis*).

²¹ *Poetae Christiani Minores*, op. cit., p. 619.

5. Conclusion

In 111 verses, the author of the cento *De Verbi Incarnatione* includes rich Biblical Christology. With the aid of Virgil's words and verses, he presents the main theological ideas concerning Christ; His birth; the heralding of the destruction of sin and the creation of a new order (*gens aurea*); the consubstantiality of the Father and Son; and the aim of Jesus' redemptive mission that was the salvation of humanity.

Because of the nature of the cento, the dual means of constructing verses is clear in the work of the author of the poem. On the one hand, we are dealing with inspirations of a literal type, or those in which only a word or verse are an aid for the centoist in constructing his own text. In this case, the centoist places fragments of Virgil's works in his poem and changes their meaning (Section 2). On the other in the Christological reflections there are those fragments in which apart from borrowing the literal level of Virgil's work the author also uses their context (Section 1). There are also fragments in which the centoist modifies selected verses and through the change of one word achieves the meaning he strives for (Section 2).

For the author of *De Verbi Incarnatione*, Virgil's works were a rather difficult base on which to work. This is demonstrated by the fact that he frequently constructs verses in the Christian cento by combining several lines from Virgil (which often come from different fragments of the text) as well as a small number of dyadic structures, although on the other hand this could be the expression of the author's somewhat greater ambitions in order to avoid the practice of borrowing several consecutive verses from a given text, which at the time was negatively perceived.²²

The centoist used the *Aeneid* and later the *Eclogues*, for the presentation Biblical Christology; he makes the least use of the *Georgics*. However, there is a lack of inspiration by specific Virgilian characters, nor are there direct similarities between them and the protagonists of the cento.

22 D. Piasecki, *Centony Homeryckie. Spotkanie tradycji pogańskiej z chrześcijańską*, Wydawnictwo Scriptum, Kraków 2014, p. 62.

Abstract

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This article presents the Christology of the cento *De Verbi Incarnatione*. Its main aim is to present the way in which the cento's author makes use of fragments of Virgil's works to create Christian theology in his poem. Does he only use the letters, or does he also use the context that appears on the pages of the *Aeneid*, *Eclagues*, and *Georgics*? In order to find similarities and differences between *De Verbi Incarnatione* and Virgil's poems, the following four fragments that present Biblical Christology have been subject to analysis: Luke 2:7, Genesis 3:6, John 10:30, and John 14:6.

Keywords: Biblical theology, Christology, cento, Virgil, De Verbi Incarnatione

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