

The New Levites: Priesthood, Celibacy, and Power in Late Antiquity

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In the late-fourth-century western church, two developments stand out with particular clarity: the emergence of a clear ideology of priestly identity (especially connected with the emergence of a requirement of sexual continence for the higher clergy) and a new piety surrounding the consecration of female virgins. Bishop Ambrose of Milan was a leading figure in both of these developments, and biblical interpretation played a key role in his presentation and propagation of ideals of clerical and ascetical conduct.

The aim of this presentation is to examine how Ambrose made use of the Old Testament figure of the “Levite” and the imagery associated with the Levitical priesthood. I will explore how the notion functioned both in his construal of clerical authority (especially in his treatise *De officiis*) and in his characterization of female chastity (especially in his *Exhortatio virginitatis*). While influenced by the previous work of Philo and Origen, Ambrose carried his interpretations in substantially new directions, specifically by applying the term “Levite” to Christian women.