



Philosophical-theological critique of greed in the work *De Nabuthae* of Ambrose of Milan

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Abstract. The relevance of the research lay in the fact that a systematic analysis of early Christian criticism of greed allowed one to outline the origins of the Church's social ethics and to correlate the origins with contemporary debates on property inequality. The aim of the work was to reconstruct the philosophical-theological foundations of the condemnation of *avaritia* in the sermon *De Nabuthae* of Ambrose of Milan and to assess the contribution to the formation of the Latin patristic concept of property. The methodology was based on historical-genetic analysis of the text, comparative exegesis of Stoic and biblical concepts, as well as on socio-economic hermeneutics of the late imperial context. In the course of the research, it was found that Ambrose interpreted *avaritia* as a form of idolatry, which replaced the worship of God with the cult of things and destroyed the vertical relationship between God and man. Exegetical analysis showed that Naboth appeared as an image of a martyr for justice, while Ahab functioned as a symbol of corrupt state authority. The rhetorical devices of anaphora, antithesis, and apostrophe directed pastoral polemic at the magnates of Milan and appealed to voluntary restitution of illegally acquired property. The synthesis of the Stoic dichotomy "use – abuse" with the biblical motif of stewardship formed a programme of mercy, sacrifice, and justice, which was later developed in the scholastic concept of the social function of property. The research also demonstrated that the sermon incorporated ancient legal argumentation, legitimised ecclesiastical intervention in private property disputes. The conclusions obtained clarified the genealogy of the Latin critique of economic inequality and provided conceptual guidelines for further interdisciplinary studies of Christian economic ethics. The practical significance of the work lay in the fact that it clarified terminological and conceptual aspects of Ambrosian critique of greed and could serve as a source of reference material for further research on early Christian social ethics

Keywords: colonate; mercy; justice; Stoic dichotomy; biblical narrative; classical Latin philology

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Introduction

In the period of the late Roman Empire, Christianity had already become a state-forming factor after the edict *Cunctos populos* (AD 380), by which Theodosius I declared the Nicene Creed the only lawful confession. This decision legitimised ecclesiastical institutions, which in turn intensified competition between orthodoxy and various forms of Arianism, and also led to increased dependence of local communities on bishops as moral arbiters. The syncretic religiosity of the cities still preserved pagan elements, but the systematic closure of temples and transfer of the functions to Christian communities gradually transformed the public space into a theatre of theological-political polemics. The social structure of late Roman society demonstrated a tendency towards increased economic inequality and reinforced social stratification, tax innovations and agrarian crises stimulated the transition of small landowners under the patronage of large landowners, which led to a new format of dependence – colonatus. Christian leaders responded with the development of charitable practices and the preaching condemnation of greed, offering theological arguments in defence of fair distribution of resources. In this context, Ambrose's sermon *De Nabuthae* played the role of a moral manifesto directed against the abuses of landowners and officials of the city curia.

The life and activity of Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) were defined as a relevant subject of study, since the figure of this bishop combined the administrative competence of a Roman magistrate and the theological erudition of a Church Father, which determined the ability to form new moral and legal guidelines for the urban society of the late Empire. The intervention in tax and land disputes, support for socially vulnerable groups, and struggle against Arianism created a precedent of public influence of episcopal ministry, and therefore required careful analysis of the sources and motivations of this pastoral activity.

M. Edwards (2020) carried out editorial work on a comprehensive interdisciplinary study devoted to the philosophical foundations of early

Christian thought, with special attention to the reception of Greek metaphysics, ethics, and logic in the patristic tradition. The collection analysed the ways of adapting Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism in the context of Christian doctrine and exegesis. M. Fernández-Götz *et al.* (2020) analysed Roman expansion within the framework of critical archaeology, considering it as a form of systemic expansionist policy that combined structural violence with deliberate use of material objects to consolidate power. The authors applied the concept of the agency of things to rethink the functional role of infrastructure, trophies, and monumental representation in legitimising the imperial order. The study highlighted the shadow aspects of the Roman state mechanism, in particular its ability to undermine local identities under the guise of civilisational rhetoric. Within the study of the work *De Nabuthae* such approaches provided additional analytical foundations for interpreting Ambrose's critique of greed as condemnation not only of a personal vice, but also of a broader politico-social system based on inequality, appropriation, and symbolic domination.

M. Gassman (2020) studied the transformation of religious policy in the Roman Empire in the era of Christian emperors, focusing on the shift of the ideological centre from the traditional cultic order to imperial orthodoxy. The author analysed how emperors used Christianity to legitimise the power and centralise the religious space. The study showed that religion became an instrument of imperial control, integrated into the mechanisms of administrative governance. F. Schulz (2014) analysed the image of Ambrose of Milan as a Christian adviser at the imperial court, paying particular attention to the relations with the rulers of the late Roman Empire. The author proved that Ambrose not only carried out spiritual guidance but also formed a new model of moral control over imperial power. G. Todeschini (2024) studied the functioning of money as a metaphor and symbol in Christian thought from

the time of the Church Fathers to the twelfth century. The author analysed how financial images reflected moral-ethical notions of power, sin, justice, and mercy. The research revealed that money in Christian discourse appeared not only as an economic tool but as a bearer of theological symbolism, capable of forming normative conceptions of social order.

M. Vessey (2024) carried out a large-scale study of the works of Latin Christian authors of Late Antiquity, focusing on the relationship between literary form, institutional context, and theological content of the texts. The author showed how Christian rhetoric adapted classical genres to new pastoral and doctrinal tasks. J. Zachhuber (2020) studied the formation of Christian theology as an autonomous philosophical direction, which gradually displaced ancient metaphysics in the Late Antique period. The author traced the evolution of patristic thought from the Cappadocian Fathers to John of Damascus, analysing its conceptual innovations and methodological reorientation. The research demonstrated that Christian philosophy formed a new ontological paradigm, the centre of which was not substance, but the relationship between God and man. In previous studies, the main focus had been on the genre-rhetorical features of Ambrose of Milan's sermons and the significance in anti-religious and dogmatic polemics, while a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic content, aimed at condemning greed as a systemic phenomenon, remained insufficiently developed.

Therefore, the aim of the article was to reconstruct the philosophical-theological foundations of the critique of *avaritia* in *De Nabuthae* and to specify its contribution to the formation of the Latin concept of just ownership. To achieve this aim, the study set the following tasks: to outline the historical background of the sermon's proclamation and its influence on the content of social critique, and to analyse the conceptual apparatus through which Ambrose justified the moral and legal fault of greed.

Materials and Methods

The source basis of the research consisted of a corpus of four patristic texts, each of which provided interpretation of different levels of theological-philosophical critique of greed. The main source was the sermon S. Ambrosii (1927) *De Nabuthae*, which was used in the edition entitled *De Nabuthae: A commentary, with an introduction and translation*. This academic edition contained the Latin original text, commentaries, and a parallel English translation, which allowed comprehensive analysis of the vocabulary, stylistics, and structure of argumentation. To reproduce the context of early Christian ethics, the treatise Clement of Alexandria (1885) "The Pedagogue" in the translation of William Wilson was used, which contained condemnation of material insatiability within the Alexandrian theological school. An additional opportunity to compare the biblical basis of Ambrose's critique was provided by Origen's work "Origen's Hexaplos: Which remain" in the edition of F. Field (1875), where variants of the Greek Septuagint were preserved, precisely the biblical narrative on which Ambrose based the sermon. "The Complete course of Patrologia" under the editorship of J.-P. Migne (1855) contained a selection of Ambrose's letters and treatises, from which additional rhetorical figures, *topoi*, and concepts related to the theme of greed were extracted. Only texts dated to the third-fourth centuries, which had attribution of authorship and thematic relevance to the analysis of *avaritia*, were included in the source base. Late medieval, apocryphal, and anonymous materials were excluded to prevent methodological distortion of the chronological and conceptual focus. The primary processing of sources was carried out in May 2025 with the help of digitised materials available in open digital libraries.

The historical-genetic method made it possible to reconstruct the socio-economic circumstances of Italy at the end of the fourth century. The philosophical analysis was aimed at identifying the influence of ancient ethics – Stoic and Platonic – on Ambrose's argumentation. The

comparative-theological method made it possible to trace the differences between Western and Eastern Christian traditions in the understanding of greed. The hermeneutical method made it possible to carry out a multifaceted interpretation of the key concepts of the sermon in the context of biblical allusions. The rhetorical-discursive analysis was applied to study the compositional structure of the sermon, its stylistic means, logical transitions, and methods of influencing the listener.

The institutional analysis made it possible to identify the peculiarities of interaction between church and state authority in the conditions of Late Antique Milan. The cultural-anthropological method provided the opportunity to understand greed as an element of collective mentality and moral representation of welfare, sacrifice, and the limits of the permissible within the Christian community. The narrative analysis was used to reconstruct the internal logic of the construction of the sermon *De Nabuthae*, in particular for the purpose of identifying rhetorical strategies of personalisation, typologisation, and mythopoetisation of the biblical narrative. The economic-historical method made it possible to connect theological critique of private property with the specific context of the decline of the fiscal mechanism, concentration of landownership, and the formation of colonate as a structural form of social dependence. The intertextual analysis made it possible to identify biblical and philosophical sources integrated into the text of the sermon and to trace how quotations, allusions, and reminiscences functioned as means of deepening the critique of *avaritia*.

Results

Ambrose of Milan in the context of the socio-ethical crisis of the late Roman Empire

Ambrose of Milan (approx. 339-397 AD) occupied a prominent position among the intellectual and ecclesio-political authorities of the Late Roman period. The multifaceted activity contributed to the formation of the main principles of the Latin theological tradition, the strengthening of the institutional organisation of the Church, and had a

significant influence on the transformation of social relations throughout the fourth century. Born in Trier (present-day Trier, Germany) into a senatorial family that linked career prospects with imperial administration, Ambrose had already in the youth mastered the corpus of classical education, which encompassed Roman law, rhetoric, grammar, dialectics and the literary heritage of antiquity (Colish, 2008).

This humanitarian-legal basis ensured rapid career advancement within the administrative hierarchy: first Ambrose held the post of advisor to the praetorian prefect, and around 370 Ambrose was appointed prefect of the provinces of Liguria and Emilia with the residence in Milan – one of the leading political and cultural centres of the Western Roman Empire. While holding the governor's post, Ambrose was not limited in carrying out purely fiscal-judicial functions, but consistently defended socially vulnerable groups – the poor, widows, orphans, veterans. In the administrative activity, Ambrose openly opposed the abuses of local magistrates, which manifested in corrupt practices and excessive tax pressure. Thanks to this stance, even before entering church service Ambrose had acquired a reputation as a principled defender of social justice, which significantly increased the level of trust in Ambrose among different strata of the population and strengthened the moral authority.

The confessional crisis in Milan following the death of the Arian bishop Auxentius in 373 triggered an exceptional chain of events: in December 374, during a popular assembly that ended in sharp dispute between supporters of Arianism and of the Nicene Creed, the people unanimously proclaimed the name of the governor Ambrose as a candidate capable of ensuring confessional reconciliation (Mercer, 2017) (Table 1). Despite the absence of baptism and clerical rank, the candidacy was supported by both camps, and Emperor Valentinian I sanctioned it, seeing in it a guarantee of stability. Within eight days Ambrose was baptised, successively ordained lector-*exorcista-acolyta-subdiaconus-diaconus*-presbyter, and enthroned on

the episcopal see of Milan. This unexpected transition from the world of state administration into the sphere of spiritual leadership testified to the

flexibility of the Late Roman elites, capable of integrating secular leaders into the church hierarchy for the sake of social peace (Colish, 2008).

Table 1. *The confessional crisis in Milan after the death of Bishop Auxentius (373 AD)*

Category of analysis	Arian faction	Nicene faction	The role of state power	Religious and political consequences
Social base of support	Mainly part of the military, representatives of the bureaucracy, officials arriving from the eastern provinces of the Empire	Urban majority, local clergy, educated strata, part of the trade and craft sector	Emperor Valentinian I maintained nominal neutrality but allowed the community to elect a bishop	Formalised victory of the Nicenes in the confessional conflict, further displacement of Arians from government and church positions
Theological position	Rejection of the fullness of Christ's divinity, Christ as the highest creation but not consubstantialis (of one substance) with the Father	Support for the Nicene Creed, Christ as true God from God, co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father	The authorities did not attempt to impose a specific doctrine but sought political stability	Confessional polarisation led to an increased influence of bishops as moral and political authorities in urban life
Behaviour during a vacancy	Actively promoted the candidate, exerted pressure, sought the support of magistrates	Organised prayers, public gatherings, demanded a pastor who would uphold Nicene teaching	The prefect of Milan, in the person of Ambrose, attempted to act as mediator	The election of Ambrose became a compromise, but later Ambrose was clearly distanced from Arian doctrines, which definitively changed the confessional situation in the region
Mechanism of election of the new bishop	Initially opposed the election of a non-confessional figure but lacked sufficient strength for open resistance	Public support for Ambrose's candidacy – a catechumen with the authority of a just administrator	Approved the election without openly interfering in the process	Strengthening of the model of charismatic episcopacy receiving power from below – from the community, not through imperial appointment

Source: compiled by the author based on J. Cheung (2022), A. Cady (2022)

In the new role Ambrose was devoted to theological study, systematic exploration of Holy Scripture and patristic exegesis, as well as to the works of Plato, the Stoics and the Christianised Neoplatonic tradition. The Latin treatises, sermons and pastoral letters were distinguished by strict logic, programmatic appeals to social responsibility and refined classical style, combining Ciceronian periodicity with biblical parallelism. As one of the first Western authors to develop Christian teaching on social justice, Ambrose consistently argued that material goods had to serve as a means of practising love of neighbour, and that the gap between

wealthy strata of the population and socially vulnerable groups constituted both a moral and political threat to the stability of the Roman state. In Ambrose's ethical teaching, central place was given to the analysis of the sin of greed, which in the tradition of Christian authors, including Clement of Alexandria (1885), Origen (Field, 1875) and Cyprian of Carthage (Migne, 1855), was regarded as a fundamental vice that destroyed the human capacity for love – both for God and for other people.

The biblical basis of Ambrose's exposition was formed on the ground of a consistent tradition encompassing different stages of sacred history:

from the story of the relations of Abraham and Lot, the prescriptions of Deuteronomy, the prophetic denunciations of usury – to the New Testament warnings of Christ against unjust enrichment and apostolic exhortations to avoid avarice as “the root of all evils”. The totality of these texts constituted the structural foundation of Ambrose’s theological discourse (Toneatto, 2025). By systematising these texts, Ambrose demonstrated that greed was not merely a private moral failing but a structural sin of society, which determined unjust redistribution of resources, generated usurious practices, initiated conflicts and destabilised imperial governance. In the assessment of the Church Fathers, formed between the second and fourth centuries, the close connection between greed and idolatry acquired fundamental theological significance, since it allowed socio-economic deviations to be regarded not only as ethical violations but as manifestations of deeper spiritual pathology. Such an interpretation was based on consistent reading of biblical texts, where the desire to possess was directly equated with idolatry. For Clement of Alexandria (1885), greed was a form of self-enclosure of the individual who chose the material limitation of things instead of God, while for Origen it meant rejection of participation in God’s gracious order. Cyprian of Carthage, for the part, emphasised that love of wealth obscured the capacity for sacrifice and therefore contradicted the very essence of Christian life. These reflections not only

fixed the theological inadmissibility of excessive enrichment but also gave theological legitimacy to social critique, since opposition to unjust ownership or insatiable accumulation was seen as a form of spiritual purification and restoration of the true hierarchy of values (Bucci, 2014).

The Fathers believed that when a person directed desire towards material goods, such people in effect “shifted the sacred centre” from the Creator to the created world, replacing the transcendent absolute with fragile earthly guarantors. Ambrose continued the line of interpretation formed in the early Christian tradition, pointing out that the refusal of wealthy persons to share the surplus constituted a functional denial of the divine mandate of stewardship of material goods, and thereby doomed such owners to severe eschatological judgement. The socio-economic circumstances recorded at the end of the fourth century reinforced the relevance of Ambrose’s denunciatory speeches. The western provinces of the Roman Empire were under the pressure of a number of interrelated factors – monetary inflationary instability, fiscal overload directed at covering military expenditures, degradation of transport infrastructure and barbarian invasions. The consequence of these processes was the progressive impoverishment of small landowners who, losing the ability to fulfil tax obligations, transferred the land plots to large latifundists or entered into patronal dependence upon these landlords (Table 2).

Table 2. *Structural parameters of socio-economic relations in the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century*

The sphere of social order	Characteristic manifestations at the end of the 4 th century	Institutional mechanisms of regulation	Socio-economic tensions	Long-term transformations
Agrarian relations	Concentration of land in the hands of senatorial families, military magnates and the episcopate caused the decline of free small landownership. Colonate turned into a hereditary form of dependence bordering on serfdom	Theodosius I’s edicts legalised the attachment of coloni to the land. Church land plots were exempted from part of the taxes, which stimulated the transfer of property under church patronage	Displacement of independent farmers from the market, growth of social inequality in the countryside, flight of peasants to barbarian frontiers, mass attachment to the land	Institutionalisation of agrarian dependence, formation of the feudal landscape of Western Europe on the basis of colonate

Table 2. Continued

Fiscal exploitation	The Empire supported the army and administration by means of a system of direct and in-kind taxes, which became an excessive burden for payers. Urban communities were collectively responsible, which demoralised the curial class	Law on collective responsibility of municipalities, accounting functions entrusted to local aristocracy; tax registers not updated, causing abuses	Mass bankruptcy of curials, flight of free peasants to barbarian lands or under the protection of bishops, demographic decline in the provinces	Destruction of the tax base, transfer of part of responsibilities to the Church, undermining of state control over regions
Structure of social hierarchy	A rigid estate-professional structure was formed, with hereditary service and prohibition of transitions between estates. The bureaucracy lost mobility, and the provincial elite distanced itself from the lower classes	Edicts on hereditary fixation of professions, legislative prohibition on leaving municipal duties, imperial decrees on estate boundaries	Alienation of the population from authority, formation of "two empires" – official and shadow (church, local), flights to barbarian kingdoms as a form of protest	Conservation of estate hierarchy into the Middle Ages, decline of civic identity
Urban economy	Cities lost the function as centres of trade and crafts. Due to rising taxes and loss of markets, the economy concentrated around consumption rather than production	Formal preservation of collegia as mechanisms of craft regulation, control of prices and supply volumes in cities, especially in the capital, reorientation towards gifts from authority	Destruction of economic initiative, shift towards natural economy, decline of infrastructure; reduction of monetary circulation	Transition from urbanised economy to rural-oriented households, city as residence of authority rather than economic hub
Migrations and demography	Significant resettlement of barbarian tribes who made treaties with the Empire and settled on its territory. At the same time, internal mobility of the Roman population was restricted	Administrative restrictions on movement; treaties with barbarian groups, integration of foederati into the army	Overpopulation of certain regions, conflicts between settled and newly arrived populations, ethnocultural contradictions	Change of demographic face of provinces, gradual barbarisation of the composition of the army and administration
Christian Church	The Church was turning into a parallel institution of power, capable of providing social functions no longer carried out by the state	Granting the Church property and judicial privileges, involving bishops in administrative decisions, formation of parish structures	Tension between church and municipal jurisdiction, conflicts over property concentration, clergy as new elite	Institutionalisation of the Church as the foundation of the future European medieval order

Source: compiled by the author based on M. Fernández-Götz et al. (2020)

At the same time, magnates, making use of official connections and influence over procurators, arranged purchase agreements, lobbied prefectural verdicts and, reinforcing ownership with legions of clients, de facto monopolised agricultural markets. The Church, having been strengthened after the Edict of Milan (313) and the Edict of Theodosius I (380), emerged as an alternative moral arbiter which could appeal to

the authority of Holy Scripture to counteract the excessive concentration of economic power. In this context, the sermon-treatise *De Nabuthae* became a textbook example of biblical exegesis in the service of social advocacy. The very plot was a compelling illustration of how private greed shaped the policy of institutions and led to the systemic destruction of law (Bergida, 2019).

The preacher stressed that the violent seizure of plots undermined communal solidarity, provoked divine wrath and threatened imperial integrity no less than external aggression. Ambrosian criticism of greed had a threefold dimension: theological – attachment to wealth Ambrose qualified as a concealed apostasy from the divine order, which deformed the image of God in man; moral-anthropological – material excess, in Ambrose's view, clouded spiritual vision, produced psychogenic effects of pride and cruelty, and reduced empathy towards the needs of neighbours; socio-legal – the accumulation of resources in the hands of a restricted oligarchy undermined the tax base, demoralised the administration and weakened the capacity of the centre to maintain infra-state unity.

It was precisely in view of these circumstances that Ambrose associated greed with a broad spectrum of social and even potentially geopolitical threats. In Ambrose's conception, moral vice acquired a structural dimension, threatening the integrity of the community and the security of the state. The pastoral activity of the Bishop of Milan testified to the desire for the practical embodiment of the proclaimed principles: the Bishop organised systematic grain distributions, ransomed captives, supported the renewal of urban space through the reclamation of neglected quarters, and also initiated the establishment of hospital-diaconal infrastructures for the support of the poor population. Moreover, the active participation in political conflicts – in particular the resistance to Empress Justina's attempt to hand over the basilica Porta Romana to the Arians, as well as the confrontation with Emperor Theodosius I after the massacre in Thessalonica in 390 – attested to the assertion of ecclesiastical authority as bearer of moral authority, capable of exercising control over imperial competence.

In sum, the life path and theological-social legacy of Ambrose of Milan illustrated the model of the bishop-statesman, who integrated classical legal culture, biblical-patristic exegesis and active civic engagement. the doctrine of the sin

of greed, which rested upon the combination of theological arguments, ethical anthropology and economic analysis, constituted a holistic project of Christian social thought, relevant both in the Late Roman period and in the wider tradition of Church teaching on justice, mercy and responsible stewardship of property in accordance with divine and human laws of justice.

The exegetical and socio-ethical structure of the treatise *De Nabuthae* as a condemnation of greed

The treatise *De Nabuthae*, delivered by Ambrose of Milan, is an example of a Late Antique moralising sermon in which the biblical narrative became an instrument of sharp socio-political critique. Ambrose brought into the central focus the story from the First Book of Kings about King Ahab's appropriation of the vineyard of the simple Israelite Naboth, and imparted to this ancient text a striking relevance for the inhabitants of Milan, who at the turn of the fourth century were experiencing a sharp increase in property inequality and the spread of corruption (Khodanych, 2023; Cathel, 2025).

The city, enriched by the presence of the imperial court and military command, saw great landowners and financiers rapidly accumulating estates, so the example of royal greed was intended to serve as a warning to the local elite. Already in the introduction Ambrose formulated the thesis: the sin of Ahab was a mirror for many rulers of the time, and thus the story of Naboth was a matter of urgent civic ethics, not merely a biblical illustration. Ambrose structured the sermon according to the five-part classical rhetorical scheme: thesis, narration, confirmation, refutation, conclusion. In the "narration" section, Ambrose retold the biblical story, emphasising the legal aspect of Naboth's act (Smetaniak, 2018). The vineyard had been received by its owner as an inheritance and was protected by a prescription that forbade the final sale of ancestral land. The private dispute between the king and the peasant thereby assumed the weight of a national religious-legal issue: Ahab encroached not only upon

another man's plot, but also upon the order established by God. In the confirmation section Ambrose presented a consistent argument against greed, outlining it both as an internal moral deformation manifested in the insatiable direction of the will towards accumulation, and as an external unjust act of appropriation that violated both ethical and legal order (Villazala, 2024). In the refutation section Ambrose polemicised with the proponents of the then widespread political discourse of state expediency, according to which the concentration of land holdings and resources in the hands of a limited circle of persons was justified by the strategic interests of imperial stability and administrative efficiency. Ambrose critically evaluated such a position, stressing that it concealed moral degradation under the rhetoric of the public good and in fact legitimised social injustice (Dressler, 1947).

The bishop argued that a state founded upon injustice destroyed its own moral basis and ultimately doomed itself to internal degeneration. In conclusion, the bishop addressed landowners directly: return seized plots to heirs, limit rent to a quarter of the harvest, and establish permanent material support for landless families. Ambrose's exegetical approach went far beyond literal interpretation. Using the fourfold scheme of reading common in the Church at that time, Ambrose focused particular attention on the moral sense. By means of intertextual resonances the preacher linked the story of Naboth with the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law regarding land, with the prophetic condemnation of luxury in the Book of Amos, with the Song of the Vineyard in the Book of Isaiah, and with the Gospel parable of the murderous vine-dressers (Gemeinhardt, 2024).

Such intertextual connection shaped in listeners the idea that a just order of property ownership was not merely a social construct but an integral component of divine order. Accordingly, attempts to legalise private greed by using the machinery of the state, in Ambrose's logic, inevitably turned against political power itself, which thereby lost moral legitimacy. Of special

significance in this context, the author assigned to the figure of Naboth. In the Latin text of the sermon, the author deliberately used the verb meaning "suffered", whereas in the older Latin recension of the biblical text the neutral "died" had been used. This lexical modification reoriented perception: Naboth's death ceased to be merely the domestic consequence of a property conflict and acquired the characteristics of martyrdom. It was interpreted as a sacrifice for fidelity to God's law, to which the righteous man remained devoted even at the price of the life. Through this narrative, Ambrose created a typological parallel between Naboth and Christ, embodying in the Old Testament hero the figure of the innocent one killed for another's greed. In such an interpretation Naboth appeared as a martyr for justice, and the voluntary refusal to compromise with unjust pressure from authority became a foreshadowing of Christ's passion.

The psychological portrait of Ahab and Jezebel Ambrose constructed in the technique of contrast. The king's greed generated lies, false judgement, bribery of elders, and finally violence. One vice dragged behind it a whole chain of crimes. Ahab appeared as the embodiment of political greed, which invested personal desire with the force of state law. Jezebel, having organised a false trial, embodied structural evil: the institution appointed to protect justice was transformed into an instrument of robbery. In this way Ambrose demonstrated that the matter concerned not a private weakness but the collapse of public ethics, when the service of justice was replaced by the mechanics of profit. The central concept Ambrose made was precisely greed. Ambrose defined it both as an insatiable drive for possession and as the practice of unjust seizure.

In the sermon, there was a vivid comparison: passion was like thirst intensified by drinking – the more one took, the more one desired. The greedy person, Ambrose insisted, lost inner freedom and became hostage to external things. Here one senses the influence of Stoic thought on passion as disease, but the Christian thinker

added a soteriological dimension: attachment to the transient cut the person off from eternal blessedness. Key for the argument was the Stoic dichotomy “use – abuse”. Material goods were neutral; the moral value was determined by the manner of use. Wealth that supported those in need served love; the same property, when it only fed luxury and oppression, was transformed into sin (Goryacha, 2018).

From this followed a sharp condemnation of the royal palace adorned with the bones of the innocent: stones and jewels became as it were an inscription exposing the owner. The socio-economic critique of the third part of the work concerned excessive rents, usurious interest and the transformation of the rural periphery into extensions of urban villas. Ambrose recalled the old principle that private ownership must not destroy the common good. Ambrose proposed concrete measures: to limit rents to a quarter of the harvest, to return unjustly alienated plots, to regulate regular financial support for landless families.

Almsgiving here was not a chance act but an element of systemic reform. In the following paragraphs, the preacher moved to the theological anthropology of property. The land remained God’s gift, and man merely its steward. Naboth did not sell the vineyard even for generous compensation, since inherited land had sacred status. From this, Ambrose derived a norm: the right to own was subordinated to the obligation to practise mercy. Such a claim corrected the idea popular in Roman law of the unlimited right of property by natural law, and also demanded state intervention where excessive enrichment destroyed public peace. To reinforce the point, the bishop cited the Late Republican practice of annulling a “dishonourable will”, when the will of the deceased grossly wronged the relatives. Likewise, Ambrose said, civil authority must correct property injustice. Elijah’s prophecy that dogs would lick Ahab’s blood Ambrose interpreted as a symbolic illustration of self-destruction: passion to which one surrendered ultimately destroyed the person. Greed closed the heart and rendered it unfit to

receive God’s grace. Therefore, the story from Samaria turned into a universal warning: evil legitimised by power would have consequences not only in time but also in eternity. Naboth’s fidelity to the Law simultaneously bore christological significance: the righteous man killed for justice foreshadowed Christ, who accepted death for the sins of the world and overcame injustice by resurrection (Sidaway, 2021).

In this way, the biblical narrative became part of the drama of salvation, while rulers who followed Ahab appeared as antitypes of the King-Servant. Earthly authority, Ambrose stressed, had to reflect the divine order of selfless gift. Thus, the exegetical generalisation of the Bishop of Milan outgrew the bounds of a specific sermon and became one of the cornerstones of Latin social thought. In the conceptualisation of sin presented by Ambrose, greed was described as a process unfolding in three successive stages: initial captivation by imagined gain, gradual formation of inner dependence on material possession, and finally inevitable completion in the form of deep disappointment and existential dissatisfaction. Such a structure revealed the dynamic of vice as a destructive state affecting at once the will, reason, and capacity for spiritual orientation. Healing likewise appeared as a process: to acknowledge God’s primacy over all creation, to train in generosity, and later to enter into the joy of a heart freed from insatiability. Here is discernible a Stoic motif of constant spiritual progress, but the ultimate goal was not self-sufficient tranquillity but love that shares the received gift (Thomas, 2021).

In conclusion, Ambrose affirmed: as Naboth gained imperishable glory, so too each one who renounced unjust enrichment would inherit heavenly joy, while the blood of Ahab remained forever as a warning to those who privatised power and wealth. The small vineyard proved to be a universal lesson: property was destined for service, authority for the defence of the weak, wealth for the creation of solidarity. When these principles were ignored, greed destroyed not only the soul but also the civic order. Making use of the

biblical plot, Stoic ethics and a critical rethinking of Roman legal order, Ambrose created a coherent teaching that condemned greed as both inner disease and social danger, and called for just use of material goods.

Economic injustice and pastoral rhetoric in the sermon of Ambrose of Milan

The treatise *De Nabuthae* recorded the moment when theological thought in the Western Roman Empire moved from rhetorical condemnation of individual abuses to a systemic understanding of greed as a profound spiritual disorder, which alienated the person from God, from the neighbour, and ultimately from the self. Ambrose of Milan considered the behaviour of King Ahab not only as a single violation of the rights of a small landowner, but as a symptom of the cult of things, which elevated a material object to the rank of an absolute goal and transformed the ruler into a servant of the own desire. For this reason, at the very beginning of the sermon Ambrose equated the king's longing for another man's vineyard with a pagan sacrifice: Abraham beheld God on the horizon, but Ahab saw only the shadow of the own craving, and this shadow demanded the sacrifice of human blood. Such a reading allowed the biblical text to be stitched together with the realities of Milan, where great landowners sacrificed the well-being of peasants for the expansion of the estates, and simultaneously lifted the problem out of the economic sphere into that of cult.

Ambrose explained the idolatrous character of greed through the structure of communion with God. Whereas in faith a person turned the gaze outward, perceiving good as a gift, in passion the people became enclosed, rejecting the giver and beginning to turn the world around personal profit. This shift, in the words, "built a shrine inside the heart" and set in motion the process of spiritual death (Colish, 2006). The first sign of such death was deafness to the prophetic word: Ahab, having heard Elijah's rebuke, bowed outwardly, but inwardly proved incapable of repentance. The bishop connected this with the

condition of contemporary rulers, who listened to liturgical texts but did not transfer these teachings into the practice of governance.

In the treatise, a medical metaphor appeared: passion acted like poison paralysing the nerves, so that the "dead spirit" still moved in a bodily shell but did not respond to the call of conscience. The next step the author outlined was the opposition between greed and mercy as two incommensurable programmes of life. Mercy, expanded human nature to the common use of goods, allowing one to see in another the image of a brother rather than a competitor, while greed contracted the heart and generated fear of loss, which provoked new seizures.

The Eucharistic motif in the sermon played a special role as an antithesis to avarice: in the liturgical act of breaking bread one saw not only the sacred re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice but also a normative model of social gesture, testifying to voluntary self-limitation and participation in the distribution of gifts as behaviour antithetical to accumulation. This argument was addressed to those who, while remaining formally practising, justified accumulation by reference to the "gift of providence". Ambrose stressed that a gift received without readiness to share became judgement upon the recipient and cancelled the benefit of the sacrament (Pierson, 2010). In the theological grounding of the hierarchy of mortal sins, the sermon occupied an early place in the Latin tradition. Ambrose did not yet use the later fixed list of seven sins but clearly named greed "the mother of lawlessness", since it shook the vertical of worship.

According to the structure of the first commandments, sins were assessed by whether the sins displaced God from the summit of values: greed turned creation into a new centre, thus equating it with apostasy. From this scheme, it followed that even adultery or murder had a derivative character, since such sins sprouted from the desire to appropriate another's property. In this way the author not only elevated the problem of economic injustice to the level

of cult but also set a method of assessing any moral act through the question: to whom is ultimate worship directed? In parallel, Ambrose proposed a positive programme focused on the triadic bond “mercy – sacrifice – justice”. Mercy was defined not as emotional benevolence but as voluntary distribution of resources; sacrifice meant the ability to limit one’s own consumption for the integrity of the community; justice demanded restoration of the rights of those who had become victims of coercion or financial pressure (Šarkić, 2009). Using the example of Naboth, the preacher emphasised that true sacrifice could also be passive: the peasant refused to break the law, even though the cost of resistance was understood. Thus, Ambrose proved that material loss endured in fidelity restored justice more fully than forced redistributions, since it passed into the eschatological dimension, where God recognised the righteous man as heir to imperishable wealth.

The immoral practices of the Italian nobility of that time gave the polemic its concrete content. The sermon mentioned speculative purchases of neglected estates, seizures of irrigation channels, imposed debt obligations and restrictions on peasants’ right to leave the estate. All these actions were presented as contemporary replicas of the biblical crime, since the actions caused “blood without innocent judgement”; what was morally significant was not the mere fact of killing but the destruction of livelihood. Directly before the wealthy hearers, Ambrose voiced the formula, “the earth cries out against you”, stressing that one’s own field became a witness that would not be silent on the day of final judgement. The rhetorical device of personal apostrophe compelled the addressees to recognise the own identity in Ahab’s character and project the biblical punishment onto the own future. In this context, the figure of the bishop acquired a socially prophetic expression. Ambrose emphasised that the Church did not claim confiscation of estates but reserved the right to name injustice and call for voluntary restitution (Villazala, 2024).

Such a stance distanced Ambrose from radicals who demanded violent levelling, while simultaneously undermining the idea of the absoluteness of private ownership popular among Roman jurists. The theologian argued that property rights, although established by civil law, were subordinated to the higher law of love. Subordination did not abolish property but placed it in the regime of service, where the title of owner was transformed into the title of steward. To achieve persuasive effect, the preacher used an elaborate system of stylistic devices. Repetition and anaphora fixed key theses: “greed kills”, “mercy gives life”. Rhetorical questions without answers interrupted the usual linearity of listening and forced the audience to continue the thought internally. The sharp antithesis “wine of blood and wine of joy” contrasted the festive cup of the rich palace with Naboth’s blood, emphasising the mutual exclusivity of the two ways of drinking.

Legal allusions to cases of annulment of unjust wills added practical weight to the argument, reminding listeners that even secular courts recognised limits to a proprietary will when it harmed the neighbour. Such compositional multi-layeredness translated the emotional impulse into a programme of action, offering ethical and legal routes of correction. The influence of the treatise *De Nabuthae* on the subsequent development of Western Christian thought was manifested in the formation of a number of conceptual directions: the consolidation of an exegetical model in which the righteous was identified as bearer of divine order, the deepening of the moral-legal understanding of property as a function of justice, and the reception of pastoral criticism of economic violence as a component of social ethics.

All these receptions proved that Ambrosian criticism of greed laid the methodological foundation for the social theology of the Roman Empire: from the early Christian community to the Scholastic theory of justice. Thus, in *De Nabuthae* greed was interpreted as a form of apostasy, which delivered the heart into slavery to things and engendered spiritual death, while its

opposite appeared as mercy, capable of restoring relationship with God and the neighbour. Ambrose described the vice within a not yet codified but already clearly hierarchical system of mortal sins, showing its generative role in the chain of unjust acts. Mercy, sacrifice, and justice were presented as necessary links of a single ethico-theological logic, calling upon the wealthy voluntarily to limit the desires for the sake of the common good. The rhetorical mastery of the bishop transformed the biblical plot into an instrument of pastoral denunciation of concrete economic abuses, and the treatise itself became a starting point for subsequent Patristic and Scholastic reflection on the social function of property and the primacy of love over the right of ownership.

Discussion

In the conducted study, it was proved that Ambrosian criticism of greed was not limited to the moral condemnation of individual abuses but constructed a coherent theological-social doctrine, which interpreted private accumulation of resources as a structural sin capable of destabilising the imperial legal order and destroying ecclesial solidarity. Such an interpretation, compared with the data on agrarian concentration, fiscal crisis and the decline of the curial class, demonstrated that *De Nabuthae* functioned as a kind of “normative manifesto” of the Late Antique Church. The identification of rhetorical strategies (anaphora, the contrast “wine of blood/wine of joy”, apostrophe to landowners) showed that the sermon deliberately transformed the biblical narrative into a public instrument of social mobilisation, while the discovery of the threefold paradigm “mercy – sacrifice – justice” moved Ambrosian ethics beyond the boundaries of purely spiritual discourse, translating it into the sphere of legal demands upon property. The significance of the obtained results lay in the specification of the role of Latin Patristics in the formation of early Christian political economy: it was shown how Stoic and Platonic *topoi*, integrated into Ambrose’s exegesis, provided the theoretical basis

for later Scholastic doctrines of the social function of property, and also outlined the historical prerequisites of the medieval concept of the just distribution of goods.

M. Pardo (2022) considered the concept of hunger as a metaphor of spiritual dissatisfaction, emphasising the existential dimension of human need for divine grace. In the present study, however, the focus shifted from metaphysical hunger to systemic criticism of greed as a social and spiritual violation. Whereas for M. Pardo (2022) spiritual hunger was interpreted as a positive condition for growth in piety, in this study greed was instead represented as a form of distorted need, enclosing the human being in the material. Both approaches used exegesis of Ambrose’s works, but M. Pardo’s research concentrated on the anthropological experience of lack, while in this work the key point was criticism of the privatisation of goods and the moral destruction of social structure. Moreover, the present study engaged with a broader socio-historical context, which allowed *De Nabuthae* to be interpreted as part of a pastoral reaction to the economic practices of Late Antiquity.

Building on Cicero’s rhetorical legacy, I. Davidson (2025) explored how Ambrose shaped his pedagogical self-presentation, emphasising the rhetorical mechanism of *imitatio-aemulatio* in shaping pastoral argumentation. In the present study rhetorical means were also taken into account, but the role was assessed through the prism of socio-ethical impact, in particular the ability of the sermon *De Nabuthae* to construct normative ideas about the just distribution of property. The comparison showed that I. Davidson analysed classical patterns mainly in a literary dimension, whereas in this study the rhetorical form was considered as an instrument of theological criticism of economic inequality. I. Davidson’s research focused on Ambrose’s pedagogical authority and the construction of the “*persona magistri*”; whereas here the central place was given to the disclosure of the concept of greed as a structural sin deforming social relations. Ultimately, both

works confirmed the key role of classical tradition in Ambrose's stylistics, but the methodological vectors diverged: I. Davidson demonstrated literary continuity, while this study demonstrated the social-theological relevance of rhetoric for the regulation of economic behaviour.

The "paradox of value" stood at the core of J. Hengstmengel's (2021) investigation, in which Patristic definitions of the usefulness and rarity of material goods were systematically compared with the ancient tradition of political economy. The present study, however, focused not on the theoretical dilemma of value but on the practical evaluation of greed as a structural sin in the specific historical context of *De Nabuthae*. J. Hengstmengel paid attention to comparative analysis of the views of the Fathers of the Church, especially the Alexandrian and Cappadocian traditions, whereas in this study the subject was limited to Ambrose's sermon, which enabled an in-depth analysis of its socio-economic orientation. For J. Hengstmengel, the concept of value was interpreted mainly in an axiological sense and remained an abstraction, while in this study the category of value was transferred to the level of normative action, where mercy, sacrifice, and justice functioned as practical correctives of market relations. In addition, J. Hengstmengel applied a hermeneutic of the "paradox of value" to explain theological compromises about private property, whereas here property was considered through the prism of pastoral responsibility and legal limitation.

R. Grant (2013) regarded the "Ambrosian doctrine" as a synthesis of biblical law and Roman legal thought, emphasising the incorporation of the categories *aequitas* and *ius naturale* into Latin pastoral practice. The present study, however, shifted the focus to the critical function of these categories in relation to private accumulation of wealth, rather than the integrative role in legal theory. R. Grant described *De Nabuthae* mainly as an illustration of universal moral law, whereas here the text was interpreted as a response to specific economic abuses in Milan at the end of the 4th century. R. Grant framed Ambrose's ethics within

the coordinates of dogmatic continuity, while this research highlighted its social-regulatory potential, which envisaged limiting rent and restitution of property. R. Grant concentrated on the theological concept of *caritas* as an inner principle of justice, while in this analysis *caritas* was considered through the prism of public practices – almsgiving, ransoming captives, supporting the landless. Thus, R. Grant's research provided a dogmatic framework, while the present project deepened it with socio-economic content, demonstrating how Ambrose's synthesis of theology and Roman law was transformed into concrete mechanisms of protection for vulnerable groups.

For C. Lévy (2021), the key issue in the reception of Hellenistic ethics by Philo and Ambrose was the tension between the Stoic principle of *oikeiōsis* and the Platonic hierarchy of goods, a conflict that shaped the ambiguity of their teaching on passions. In this study, however, the previous philosophical discourse was subordinated to the analysis of pastoral practice, through which Ambrose transformed Stoic *topoi* in favour of social criticism of greed. C. Lévy situated Ambrosian thought mainly within comparative philology, while the present work emphasised the economic context of Milan and the normative consequences of the sermon *De Nabuthae*. For C. Lévy the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* was interpreted as a path to inner balance, whereas here the same concept was seen as a necessary condition for social service, restraining idolatry of wealth. Thus, compared with Lévy's philosophical reconstruction, the present study showed how Hellenistic ideas were turned into an instrument of pastoral regulation of property relations.

N. Lenski (2021) projected Ambrose's understanding of *servitus* onto the political imagination of Late Antiquity, focusing on how the status of the slave was turned into a rhetorical tool for teaching humility and hierarchy. In this study, however, the vector of analysis shifted, with the dominant theme being *avaritia*, while slavery was marked only as a derivative effect of resource disproportion aggravated by land appropriation.

In N. Lenski's work slavery served as a model of interdependence within the community, whereas in this study the key norm was the threefold scheme "mercy – sacrifice – justice", regulating economic behaviour of landowners. N. Lenski's method was predominantly socio-historical and aimed at reconstructing status categories, whereas in this analysis a theological hermeneutic was applied, revealing the moral grounds of redistribution of goods. N. Lenski highlighted the symbolic function of slavery in shaping pastoral norms, while here emphasis was placed on using the same moral paradigm to condemn greed in order to protect coloni and peasants from economic exploitation, which demonstrated the shared ethical core of both approaches despite the different social orientation – disciplinary and anti-proprietary.

To summarise, it should be noted that this study expanded the established interpretation of *De Nabuthae*, focused mainly on dogmatic or stylistic aspects, and shifted the emphasis to its social-regulatory and economic-critical potential. Unlike previous approaches, which treated Ambrosian ethics within anthropological, literary or philosophical perspectives, this work demonstrated that the sermon was a response to specific socio-economic challenges of Late Antiquity. Systematic comparison with the works of modern scholars showed that Ambrose's critique of greed had the character of a normative project, aimed at rethinking the function of private property in Christian society.

Conclusions

The study demonstrated that Ambrose of Milan's treatise *De Nabuthae* was not only an ethical-homiletic work but also a profound philosophical-theological reflection on the essence of greed as a structural sin. The author brought the problem of avarice beyond private morality, interpreting it as a form of idolatry that destroyed not only personal spirituality but also social justice. Based on the biblical narrative of King Ahab and Naboth, Ambrose formulated a normative context in which social abuses and appropriation

of another's wealth acquired theological weight. Through rhetorical and exegetical devices, Ambrose revealed the danger of accumulation as spiritual corruption, which distanced man from God and neighbour, transforming a man into both an object of desire and simultaneously a victim of the own passion.

An important result of the study was the focus on how in Ambrose's sermon the opposition of greed and mercy acquired the function of a diagnostic matrix for evaluating the behaviour not only of individuals but also of whole social groups. Greed appeared not only as an individual sin but as a factor of destruction of social order, deepening economic asymmetry, justifying violence against the poor and distorting religious life. Mercy was not an emotional reaction but a normative attitude presupposing distribution of resources, sacrifice, and restoration of justice. This allowed the sermon to be read not only as moral teaching, but as a project of Christian social thought aimed at overcoming inequality.

The identification of the triune interrelation between mercy, sacrifice, and justice outlined the core ethical content of the treatise, which had not only theoretical significance but also practical application in church governance and preaching activity. It was also established that theological criticism of property in the treatise was not reduced to a call for asceticism or renunciation of wealth but was rather directed at subordinating private property to the higher law of love. This approach made it possible to critically reconsider the concept of ownership in Roman law by introducing into it the criterion of responsibility before the community and God. This ethical vector, as shown, subsequently influenced Western Patristic and Scholastic thought, primarily in interpretations of the functional nature of property, the priority of mercy over legal title and pastoral responsibility for economic injustice. Through comprehensive study of the text, it was proved that the treatise *De Nabuthae* constituted a key link in the formation of Christian social ethics of the Late Antique era, with particular emphasis on the ethical-theological content of the concept of property.

The limitation of the research remained the fragmentary preservation of contextual sources regarding the specific economic situation of Milan's communities at the end of the 4th century, which made impossible a complete reconstruction of the social background of the sermon. However, reliance on Ambrose's own textual corpus and other sources of the period allowed a reliable interpretation of the ideological content of the treatise. In future, interdisciplinary studies of the reception of *De Nabuthae* in the Latin West from the 5th to 13th centuries may be promising, as well

as comparative analysis with traditions of Greek Patristics in reading the economic and moral aspects of greed.

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Анотація. Актуальність дослідження полягала в тому, що системний аналіз ранньохристиянської критики захланності дозволяв окреслити витоки соціальної етики Церкви та співвіднести їх із сучасними дебатами про майнову нерівність. Метою роботи було реконструювати філософсько-теологічні засади засудження *avaritia* у проповіді “*De Nabuthae*” Амврозія Медіоланського та оцінити їхній внесок у формування латинської патристичної концепції власності. Методологія ґрунтувалася на історико-генетичному аналізі тексту, порівняльній екзегезі стоїчних і біблійних концептів, а також на соціально-економічній герменевтиці пізньоімперського контексту. В ході дослідження було з'ясовано, що Амврозій трактував *avaritia* як форму ідолопоклонства, яка підміняла Богопоклоніння культом речей і руйнувала вертикаль боголюдських стосунків. Екзегетичний розбір показав, що Навуфей поставав образом мученика за справедливість, тоді як Ахав функціонував символом корумпованої державної влади. Риторичні прийоми анафори, антитези й апострофу спрямовували пастирську полеміку на магнатів Медіолана й апелювали до добровільної реституції незаконно набутого майна. Синтез стоїчної дихотомії «користування – зловживання» з біблійним мотивом управителя сформував програму милосердя, жертви та справедливості, що згодом була розвинена у схоластичній концепції соціальної функції власності. Дослідження також продемонструвало, що проповідь інкорпоровала античну юридичну аргументацію, легітимуючи церковне втручання в приватні майнові конфлікти. Отримані висновки уточнили генеалогію латинської критики економічної нерівності та надали концептуальні орієнтири для подальших міждисциплінарних студій християнської економічної етики. Практичне значення роботи полягало в тому, що вона уточнила термінологічні й концептуальні аспекти Амврозієвої критики захланності та могла слугувати джерелом довідкових матеріалів для подальших досліджень ранньохристиянської соціальної етики

Ключові слова: колонат; милосердя; справедливість; стоїчна дихотомія; біблійний сюжет; класична латинська філологія