

## = Christian interpretations of Virgil 's Eclogue 4 =

Eclogue 4 , also known as the Fourth Eclogue is the name of a Latin poem by the Roman poet Virgil . Part of his first major work , the Eclogues , the piece was written around 40 BC , during a time of temporary stability following the Treaty of Brundisium ; it was later published in and around the years 39 ? 38 BC . The work describes the birth of a boy , a supposed savior , who once of age will become divine and eventually rule over the world . During late antiquity and the Middle Ages , a desire emerged to view Virgil as a virtuous pagan , and as such , early Christians , such as Roman Emperor Constantine , early Christian theologian Lactantius , and St. Augustine ? to varying degrees ? reinterpreted the poem to be about the birth of Jesus Christ .

This belief persisted into the Medieval era , with many scholars arguing that Virgil not only prophesied Christ prior to his birth but also that he was a pre @-@ Christian prophet . Dante Alighieri included Virgil as a main character in his Divine Comedy , and Michelangelo included the Cumaean Sibyl on the ceiling painting of the Sistine Chapel ( a reference to the widespread belief that the Sibyl herself prophesied the birth of Christ , and Virgil used her prophecies to craft his poem ) . Modern scholars , such as Robin Nisbet , tend to eschew this interpretation , arguing that seemingly Judeo @-@ Christian elements of the poem can be explained through means other than divine prophecy .

## = = Background = =

The scholarly consensus is that Virgil began the hexameter Eclogues ( or Bucolics ) in 42 BC and it is thought that the collection was published around 39 ? 38 BC , although this is controversial . The Eclogues ( from the Greek word for " selections " ) are a group of ten poems roughly modeled on the bucolic hexameter poetry ( " pastoral poetry " ) of the Hellenistic poet Theocritus . The fourth of these Eclogues can be dated to around 40 BC , during a time when the Roman Civil war seemed to be coming to an end . ? ? Eclogue ? ? 4 largely concerns the birth of a child ( puer ) who will become divine and eventually rule over the world . Classicist H. J. Rose notes that the poem ? is in a sense Messianic , since it contains a prophecy ( whether meant seriously or not ) of the birth of a wonder @-@ child of more than mortal virtue and power , who shall restore the Golden Age . ?

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD , Virgil had gained a reputation as a virtuous pagan , a term referring to pagans who were never evangelized and consequently during their lifetime had no opportunity to recognize Christ , but nevertheless led virtuous lives , so that it seemed objectionable to consider them damned . Eventually , some Christians sought to reconcile Virgil 's works with the supposed Christianity present in them . Consequently , during the Late Antiquity and beyond , many assumed that the puer referenced in the Fourth Eclogue was actually Jesus Christ .

## = = History = =

## = = = Early interpretations = = =

The first notable person to be fascinated with the supposed prophecy of the Fourth Eclogue and its potential references to Jesus was Constantine the Great , Roman emperor from AD 306 to 337 , and he used part of it in an address he gave to the " Assembly of the Saints " , which was preserved by the Roman historian Eusebius in his work Vita Constantini . Constantine interpreted the entire work himself although he omitted a few lines that overtly reference paganism , such as the last part of line 10 , which names Apollo . Constantine assigned the roles of the virgo in line 6 to the Blessed Virgin Mary , the puer in lines 8 , 18 , 60 , and 62 is Christ , the lions in line 22 to the persecutors of Christians , and the serpent in line 24 to the Serpent of Evil . Constantine argued that the Assyrian flower in line 25 represented the race of people , i.e. the Assyrians , who were " leader [ s ] in the faith of Christ " , and that references in line 30 meant that " those who had borne hardships for the sake of God would perceive that the fruit of their endurance was sweet . " The emperor also

interpreted the reference to Achilles fighting against Troy in lines 34 @-@ 36 as a reference to Christ ( the " new " Achilles ) waging a war against the forces of evil ( the " new " Troy ) . Finally , Constantine proposed that the references to the Golden Age in lines 37 @-@ 59 do not refer the birth of a mortal child , but rather a being who " mortal parents have not smiled upon " : in other words , Jesus Christ , who , according to Christian scripture , " had no parents in the usual sense " .

Constantine 's primary religious advisor , Lactantius saw references to Jesus in the poem . In fact , he may have actually proposed the idea before Constantine , due to the confusion surrounding the publication date of his book , *Divinae Institutiones* ( The Divine Institutes ) ? felt that the poem referred to " the coming of Christ at the millennium " , and he argued that Virgil penned the poem in accordance with prophecies made by the Cumaean Sibyl ( the priestess presiding over the Apollonian oracle at Cumae ) concerning the birth of Christ . Likewise , St. Augustine believed Virgil was referencing Christ ; he assumed that the poet was writing poetically , since he was writing in the " shadowy " persona of an unnamed narrator , but he was also writing with veracity , since any traces of guilt " could be wiped away only by that Savior concerning whom the verse was written . " Echoing the sentiment of Lactantius , St. Augustine opined that the mention of Cumae in line 4 is a reference to the supposed Sibylline prophecy concerning Christ . Ultimately , St. Augustine felt that Virgil spoke non a se ipse ( " not from himself " ) , which is to say he prophesied the birth and coming of Christ , but did not understand what he himself was writing .

The opinion that Eclogue 4 was a reference to the coming of Jesus was not universally held by early members of the early Church , however . St. Jerome , an early Church writer noted for translating the Bible into Latin , specifically wrote that Virgil could not have been a Christian prophet without having accepted Christ , and claimed that anyone that had accepted that Virgil was a pre @-@ Christian prophet was being childish . Classicist Ella Bourne , however , noted that the mere fact that St. Jerome responded to the idea is a testament to the belief 's pervasiveness .

= = = Medieval interpretations = = =

In the early part of the sixth century , Latin grammarian Fulgentius made a passing reference to the supposed prophetic nature of the eclogue , noting : *In quarta vaticinii artem adsumit* ( " In the Fourth [ Eclogue ] , [ Virgil ] takes up the art of prophecy " ) . Yet after this , the historical and scholarly record is silent until the ninth century . According to legend , Donatus , the bishop of Fiesole , quoted the seventh line of the poem to his friars as part of a confession of his faith prior to his death . During the same century , Agnellus , the archbishop of Ravenna , referenced the poem , noting that it was evidence that the Holy Spirit had spoken through both Virgil and the Sybil . The monk Christian Druthmar also makes use of the seventh line in his commentary on Matthew 20 : 30 .

In the eleventh century , Virgil began appearing in plays , such as one particular Christmas work wherein the poet is the last " prophet " called on to give testimony concerning Christ . According to Bourne , the play was particularly popular , and philologist Du Cange gives mention of similar play performed at Rouen . Virgil and his purported prophecy even found itself in the Wakefield Mystery Plays . Around this time , Eclogue 4 and Virgil 's supposed prophetic nature had saturated the Christian world ; references to the poem are made by Abelard , the Bohemian historian Cosmos , and Pope Innocent III in a sermon . The *Gesta Romanorum* , a Latin collection of anecdotes and tales that was probably compiled about the end of the 13th century or the beginning of the 14th , confirms that the eclogue was pervasively associated with Christianity .

Virgil eventually became a fixture of Medieval ecclesiastic art , appearing in churches , chapels , and even cathedrals , oftentimes depicted holding a scroll with a select passage from the Fourth Eclogue on it . In a similar vein , Michelangelo included the Cumaean Sibyl on the ceiling painting of the Sistine Chapel . According to Paul Barolsky , the Sibyl 's presence " evokes her song in Virgil [ i.e. the Fourth Eclogue ] , prophesying spiritual renewal through the coming of Christ ? the very theme of the ceiling . " Barolsky also points out that Michelangelo painted the Sibyl in close proximity to the prophet Isaiah ; thus , the painter drew a visual comparison between their purported prophecies .

This association between Virgil and Christianity reached a fever pitch in the fourteenth century ,

when the Divine Comedy was published ; the work , by Dante Alighieri , prominently features Virgil as the main character 's guide through Hell . Notably , in the second book Purgatorio , Dante and Virgil meet the poet Statius , who , having " read a hidden meaning in lines of Virgil 's own " , was allowed passage into Purgatory , and eventually Heaven . Bourne argued that this reference is proof enough that Dante , like those before him , believed Virgil to have been an unknowing Christian prophet . In the fifteenth century , a popular story concerning Secundian , Marcellian and Verian ? who started out as persecutors of Christians during the reign of the Roman emperor Decius ? emerged . The story claims that the trio were alarmed by the calm manner in which their Christian victims died , and so they turned to literature and chanced upon Eclogue 4 , which eventually caused their conversions .

= = = Later interpretations = = =

The French writer René Rapin ( 1621 ? 1687 ) was impressed with the potential connection between Virgil and Christianity , and used the Fourth Eclogue as influence , basing many of his lines in his own Sixth Eclogue , concerning two shepherds meeting with a sibyl near the Jordan River , on Virgil 's work . One of the more overt modern references to the Fourth Eclogue , Virgil , and Christianity , appears in Alexander Pope 's 1712 poem , Messiah . Bourne wrote that the work " shows clearly that [ Pope ] believed that Virgil 's poem was based on a Sibylline prophecy " . Robert Lowth seems also to have held this opinion , noting , by way of Plato , that the poem contains references made " not by men in their sober senses , but [ by ] the God himself " . In the mid @-@ 19th century , Oxford scholar John Keble claimed : Taceo si quid divinius ac sanctius ( quod credo equidem ) adhaeret istis auguriis ( " I am silent about whether something more divine and sacred ? which is what I , in fact , believe ? clings to these prophecies " ) .

= = Modern views = =

Many modern scholars contend that the seemingly Christian nature of the poem is due to Virgil referencing Eastern oracles , which may have been influenced by Jewish texts and prophecies . For instance , Robin Nisbet , after carefully analyzing the work , ultimately concluded that Virgil probably appropriated some elements used in the poem from Jewish mythology by means of Eastern oracles , and later adapted them towards Western ( which is to say , Roman ) modes of thought .