



[Ambrose of Milan, Letter XLI.26](#)

The emperor must protect the Church in return for Christ preserving the empire

Name of the author: Ambrose of Milan

Date: 4th CE

Place: Aquileia

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Letter XLI.26

Reference: XLI.26

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Ambrose and his *Letters*, please see the commentary on [Letter XXI](#).

The above extract is from Ambrose of Milan's *Letter XLI*, written to his sister, Marcellina, a virgin living in Rome. The letter contains a sermon delivered by Ambrose in the presence of the emperor Theodosius I, who sat within the church congregation, and essentially asks for the emperor's forgiveness of a group of Christians, who headed by the local bishop had destroyed a synagogue in the city of Callinicum, a city on the Euphrates. In order to contextualise our extract, a brief consideration of Ambrose's previous *Letter XL* is in order. In this piece of correspondence, addressed directly to the emperor himself, Ambrose claims that the report about the destruction of the synagogue came from the *comes orientis* (the "Count of the East," a title given to the governor of the Eastern Diocese). Ambrose urges the emperor, who had apparently decided that the bishop should restore the synagogue at his own expense, and commanded that the Christians involved be punished, to reconsider his decision. Ambrose was an influential figure even outside his own diocese, as illustrated here with his involvement in a case concerning Christians from Mesopotamia. In addition to refusing to perform the Eucharistic liturgy unless the emperor changes his mind, he argues that Theodosius is at risk of acting against Christ, and raises the point that the Jews had themselves burnt several churches during the reign of Julian the apostate. In order to warn Theodosius against taking the side of the Jews, Ambrose draws on the example of the emperor Maximus, who had issued an edict censuring Christians at Rome for burning down a synagogue (emperor of Britain and Gaul after usurping Gratian in 383 CE; he later invaded Italy and was defeated by Theodosius in 388 CE). The people, it is claimed, accused the emperor of becoming a Jew (*Letter XL.23*), and Ambrose interprets Maximus's defeat by the Franks and Saxons soon after as divine punishment. Theodosius ought not to make the same mistake, Ambrose suggests, and should not endanger his salvation for the sake of the Jews who denied and murdered Christ, and as such do not deserve to be avenged (*Letter XL.26*; Christians had been commenting on Jewish guilt for Christ's death for centuries, and viewed their suffering at Roman hands as punishment for this. See, for example, [Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5](#), [Origen, Against Celsus II.13](#), [Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History II.23.12-20](#)).

Although the tone of *Letter XLI*, from which our extract is taken, would initially imply that the order for the destroyed synagogue to be rebuilt at the Church's expense was still in force, chapter 27 shows that the order had in fact already been rescinded by the emperor, and that the information Ambrose gives is largely already known to Theodosius. For Liebeschuetz, this suggests that Ambrose's intention was to record the events in full for posterity ("Letters of Ambrose of Milan," p. 111). Moreover, Ambrose utilises these events to make a crucial point regarding the emperor's position within the Church and the empire's relationship with God. Ambrose connects the emperor's handling of the situation directly with his duty to ensure God continues to protect the Roman empire. As Neil McLynn comments, the lengthy letter shows how thoroughly Ambrose prepared his appeal to Theodosius, with the complex sermon organised meticulously to make clear his request of the emperor, and full of carefully chosen biblical material expounded upon to support his demands (*Ambrose of Milan*, p. 305). For McLynn, the passage above shows that Ambrose offers Theodosius "a role in the church that was anything but subordinate" (*Ambrose of Milan*, p. 306). This is true in the sense that the emperor is recognised as a rightful judge over those who have destroyed the synagogue, and his forgiveness is presented by Ambrose as something valuable and necessary. However, it is also made clear that his power is granted by God, and that he is essentially duty bound to keep the church safe in order to ensure continued favour from the divine. Ambrose uses scripture to support his insistence



that the emperor's success is not due to his own doing, but rather has been granted to him by God. Any increase in the emperor's glory must be understood as entirely God's blessing. Christ has entrusted the emperor with his authority and power, meaning that Theodosius must also accept along with this the task of loving and nurturing his Church.

Taking support from the gospel story of the woman anointing Christ's feet (Mark 14:3-9 and parallels), Ambrose instructs the emperor to honour and forgive everyone within the Church body, even the lowliest sinners. The Church, suggests Ambrose, requires all of its parts to work in harmony with one another (drawing on 1 Corinthians 12:21), and so if Theodosius punishes too harshly those involved in the synagogue incident (i.e. "those who have been taken in sin"), he risks damaging this delicate and unified body of which he too is a valuable part. Rather, he should "restore them to concord and give them rest," in order for them to be able to continue with their lives of devotion with a clear conscience. The suggestion is that were Theodosius not to forgive these Christians of their crime, then this would not only be an impious act, considering the blessing afforded to the emperor and his empire by God, but would potentially put the empire at risk. God's preserving influence is what enables the empire to flourish. Essentially, then, Ambrose utilises a rhetoric of power in order to demand from the emperor what he wants — he recognises Theodosius's power to make the Church subject to his legislations and judgements, yet reminds all the while that any decisions made against it could have an adverse effect on the empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [absolutio](#)
- [absolvo](#)
- [angelus](#)
- [caelestis](#)
- [concordia](#)
- [corpus](#)
- [custodio](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [gloriosus](#)
- [honoro](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [iustitia](#)
- [pax](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [virtus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [divine protection](#)
- [imperial judgement](#)
- [Jewish sin](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [synagogue](#)
- [Theodosius I](#)

Bibliographical references: Liebeschuetz, John H. W. G., [Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches](#) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005)

McLynn, Neil B., [Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital](#) (London: University of California Press, 1994)

Moorhead, John, [Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World](#) (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999)

Liebeschuetz, John H. W. G., "[Letters of Ambrose of Milan \(374–397\), Books I–IX](#)", in *Collecting Early Christian Letters from the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity* (ed. Bronwen Neil, Pauline Allen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 97-112

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[Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5](#)

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- [Read more about Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5](#)

Text

[Origen, Against Celsus II.13](#)

How the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem to punish the Jews for killing Christ

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Text

[Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History II.23.12-20](#)

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