



[Virgil, Eclogues IV.1-63](#)

The coming of a Roman Messiah

Name of the author: Virgil

Date: 40 BCE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Eclogues

Reference:

IV.1-63

Commentary:

The fourth *Eclogue*, often termed the “Messianic Eclogue,” celebrates the consulship of Asinius Pollio, a supporter of Antony and a patron of Virgil, who was made a consul in 40 BCE, and presided over the peace treaty signed by Octavian and Antony at Brundisium in the same year, providing temporary relief from their conflict following the defeat of Pompey in 41 BCE. Virgil’s poem looks forward to a brighter future under Pollio’s consulship, and hopes that it will be the start of the new Golden Age. The poem describes the prophesied birth of a baby boy, who will grow up to be a divine world leader. Some early interpretations, such as that by Wendell Clausen, suggested that the unidentified child might be the child that it was hoped would be born to Antony and Octavia. However, many more recent scholars are reluctant to attach a specific identity to the Messiah figure. This is the opinion of Karl Galinsky, who argues that the child is “no more than a symbol or personification of the new age.” (Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 92) Galinsky also warns against interpreting the poem as an explicit expression of Augustan propaganda, and suggests that the blending of eastern and western influences testify to the poem’s universality.

Some influences, such as the pattern of ages in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* are clear. However, the more complex question of Virgil’s possible Jewish influences has also been discussed at length. The possible familiarity of Virgil with Isaiah 7:14 (“the virgin... shall bear a son...”) and 11:6-7 (“the wolf shall live with the lamb...”) might be evident in verses 8 and 22 of this *Eclogue*, for instance (see Jan Bremmer, “Virgil and Jewish Literature,” p. 157-164). Recently, Nicholas Horsfall (“Virgil and the Jews,” p. 67-80) has supported the older assertion of, for example, Louis Feldman (see Louis Feldman, *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism*, p. 52-56) that the Asinius Pollio of the fourth *Eclogue* is in fact the same individual that Herod sent his sons to for education in 22 BCE (see Josephus, *Antiquities* XV.343). The year 40 BCE, in which Herod came to Rome for his official recognition as king, Asinius Pollio was consul, and it is of course this consulship that Virgil celebrates in this *Eclogue*. The argument is that Asinius Pollio is a Roman figure exemplifying cultural contact with Jews during the period in which Virgil was writing.

Another noteworthy comparison with this poem has been drawn with the third *Sibylline Oracle* – this is the only one which is early enough to have been used by Virgil. There are clear similarities between the miraculous events described in both texts after the birth of a promised child, such as the subjugation of lions and snakes (*Sibylline Oracles* III.980-987; *Eclogue* IV.19-25). While the *Sibylline Oracles* very much associated the coming of a Messiah and a new age with the destruction of Rome, it is possible that in the tense, unsettled environment of the end of the Republic, when the end of the present age was becoming a reality, Virgil chose to make a point of emphasising that Rome was still standing, still powerful, and would live to see the onset of peace and prosperity through a Roman Messiah (see Du Quesnay, “Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*,” p. 330). Karl Galinsky highlights the fact that Virgil’s approach to the new age of Saturn is unique from Greek and Latin writers up to his day in that he presents it very clearly in this text as happening in the *present* (Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 92-93). The first part of the poem in particular is explicit in its assertion that under Pollio’s consulship, which the *Eclogue* celebrates, begins this new glorious era. By verse 11, however, the tense changes to the future, and this is continued in Virgil’s later epic poem, the *Aeneid* (see [I.291-296](#) and [VI.792-794](#)), which anticipates the prosperity that Augustus’s rulership will



bring. For Galinsky, this reflects Virgil's moral attitude, which understood the Roman glory that begins at the end of *Aeneid* with the founding of Lavinium as a continuing process that will be ongoing, working towards a better, ordered civilisation. The epic's conclusion is by no means a representation of completion (Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 93). Indeed, the development of Golden Age ideology can be seen when one compares the first *Georgic*, where it is understood not simply as a plenteous utopia, but as a time on increased social order. Golden Age before Jupiter's reign is here viewed negatively, as a time which encouraged laziness and contemplativeness (121-146). The new Golden Age, on the other hand, will embody increased organisation.

Perhaps predictably, speculations in subsequent centuries that Virgil's words here actually prophesied the coming of Christ abounded. Constantine the Great in the late-fourth to early-fifth centuries used this text to prove that even pagans foresaw the coming of Christ, and Augustine in the fifth century quotes the fourth *Eclogue* in his letter to Nectarius, arguing that the one to vanquish sin (IV.11-15) will be Jesus Christ. Jerome in his late-fourth century letter to Paulinus of Nola, however, took a rather more negative view, insisting that just because Virgil's words imply the Christian saviour, this does not mean that we should assign the Christian label to the poet (For a detailed discussion of these and other Christian authors' usage of the text, see Stephen Benko, "Virgil's Fourth Eclogue," p. 670-681). As Philip Hardie points out, the fact that Virgil's words here were so easily applied to the Christian Messiah is testimony to his probably intentional ambiguity as to the identity of the 'saviour' child (Philip Hardie, *Virgil*, p. 21).

Essentially, the fourth *Eclogue* delights in the fact that the worst is now over, and the best is yet to come. Even though Virgil did not yet know the future Augustus, and honours Pollio in this poem (who incidentally was removed from his position before his consular year was completed), the idea that Rome's Golden Age will be embodied in one man is prevalent – although not explicitly stated – even at this early stage, and would have infused this *Eclogue* with new layers of meaning for those who read it in the post-Republican era.

Keywords in the original language:

- [bellum](#)
- [concordia](#)
- [consul](#)
- [deus](#)
- [fatum](#)
- [gens aurea](#)
- [iudex](#)
- [pax](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [abundance](#)
- [destiny](#)
- [glory](#)
- [Golden Age](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [Mark Antony](#)
- [Messiah](#)
- [Octavian](#)
- [peace](#)
- [prosperity](#)
- [treaty](#)
- [Troy](#)
- [war](#)

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