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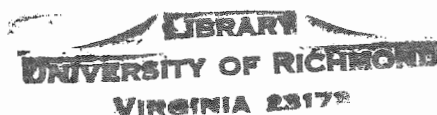
READINGS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

A Sourcebook

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should decree that this be done shall be punished by the payment of fifty pounds of gold. If his apparitors and accountants should obey him when he so orders and should not resist him in any way by their own recommendation, they shall be subjected to the punishment of cudgeling, and they shall also be mutilated by the loss of their hands, through which the monuments of the ancients that should be preserved are desecrated. [Leo and Majorian, 458]

1.6 The sack of Rome, AD 410

The sack of Rome, the "Eternal City," in 410 by Alaric the Visigoth raised many questions. Was Christianity to blame for halting the rituals which had kept the empire safe for centuries? Or was the sack the fault of pagans who refused to accept Christianity and so incurred the wrath of the Christian god? Was the Christian god punishing sinning Christians? Or was it meaningless to discuss the mysterious will of god in such terms at all? The following selections illustrate different points of view.

1.6.1 *The first shocking news*

The world seemed upside down to Jerome in the Holy Land when he first heard of the capture of Rome.

Jerome, *Letter* 127.12

[*Select Letters of St Jerome*, trans. F.A. Wright (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. 463]

While these things were taking place in Jebus [Jerusalem], a dreadful rumor reached us from the West. We heard that Rome was besieged, that the citizens were buying their safety with gold, and that when they had been thus despoiled they were again beleaguered, so as to lose not only their substance but their lives. The speaker's voice failed and sobs interrupted his utterance. The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken; nay, it fell by famine before it fell by the sword, and there were but a few found to be made prisoners. The rage of hunger had recourse to impious food; men tore one another's limbs, and the mother did not spare the baby at her breast, taking again within her body that which her body had just brought forth.

1.6.2 *Rome's place in God's plan: the Eusebian background*

For Eusebius, who wrote under Constantine, and for most other Christians enjoying the honeymoon after Constantine, Rome's existence had a place in a divine historical plan.

Eusebius, *Tricennial Oration: On Christ's Sepulchre* 16.4–6

[H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p.120]

16.4 At the same time, one empire also flowered everywhere, the Roman, and the eternally implacable and irreconcilable enmity of nations was completely resolved. And as the knowledge of One God was imparted to all men and one manner of piety, the salutary teaching of Christ, in the same way at one and the same time a single sovereign arose for the entire Roman Empire and a deep peace took hold of the totality. Together at the same critical moment, as if from a single divine will, two beneficial shoots were produced for mankind: the empire of the Romans and the teachings of true worship.

16.5 . . . But two great powers – the Roman Empire, which became a monarchy at that time, and the teachings of Christ – proceeding as if from a single starting point, at once tamed and reconciled all to friendship. Thus each blossomed at the same time and place as the other.

16.6 For while the power of Our Savior destroyed the polyarchy and polytheism of the demons and heralded the one kingdom of God to Greeks and barbarians and all men to the farthest extent of the earth, the Roman Empire, now that the causes of the manifold governments had been abolished, subdued the visible governments, in order to merge the entire race into one unity and concord. Already it has united most of the various peoples, and it is further destined to obtain all those not yet united, right up to the very limits of the inhabited world. For with divine power the salutary instruction prepares the way for it and causes everything to be smooth.

1.6.3 *Pagans blame Christians*

In the *City of God*, Augustine summarizes pagans' position and points to historical facts which could contradict their thesis.

Augustine, *City of God* 2.3

[*Augustine Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 50]

You must bear in mind that in mentioning these facts I am still dealing with the ignorant, the people whose stupidity has given rise to the popular proverb, "No rain! It's all the fault of the Christians." The well-educated who are fond of history are readily acquainted with these facts, but they wish to inflame the hatred of the illiterate mobs against us, and so they pretend not to know the facts, and do their best to support the vulgar notion that the disasters which are bound to fall on humanity during a

given period and over a given area are to be laid at the door of Christianity, which, in opposition to their gods, is being extended everywhere with immense prestige and unexampled popularity.

So let us help them to recall the many and various disasters which overwhelmed the Roman State before Christ's incarnation – before his name became known to the nations, and received that honour which arouses their ineffectual envy.

1.6.4 A non-event?

Writing to silence pagan critics, Orosius, a pupil of Augustine, found it easy in 416 to play down the significance of the sack of Rome. Attributing the sack to God's anger, he suggested that disasters at least as severe had occurred before the Empire was Christian.

Orosius, *History Against the Pagans* 7.39–41

[*Seven Books Against the Pagans*, trans. I. W. Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 387, 388, 390]

7.39 Alaric appeared before trembling Rome, laid siege, spread confusion, and broke into the City. He first, however, gave orders that all those who had taken refuge in sacred places, especially in the basilicas of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, should be permitted to remain inviolate and unmolested; he allowed his men to devote themselves to plunder as much as they wished, but he gave orders that they should refrain from bloodshed. A further proof that the storming of the City was due to the wrath of God rather than to the bravery of the enemy is shown by the fact that the blessed Innocent, the bishop of Rome, who at that time was at Ravenna, through the hidden providence of God, even as Lot the Just was withdrawn from the Sodomites, did not witness the destruction of the sinful populace . . .

7.40 It was in the one thousand one hundred and sixty-fourth year of the City that Alaric stormed Rome. Although the memory of the event is still fresh, anyone who saw the numbers of the Romans themselves and listened to their talk would think that "nothing had happened," as they themselves admit, unless perhaps he were to notice some charred ruins still remaining.

7.41 . . . Because the judgments of God are inscrutable and we can neither know them all nor explain those we know, let me state briefly that the rebuke of our Judge and God, in whatever form it may take, is justly undergone by those who know and likewise by those who know not.

1.6.5 Augustine on the sacred significance of Rome

Augustine's monumental work, *The City of God*, offered a new interpretation of the sack of Rome. He rejected the popular Christian idea that the creation of a

Christian Roman Empire was an inevitable step in God's plan for human salvation, and that Christianity's success on the surface was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Instead he argued that neither Rome's distress nor Christian triumphs held sacred significance. The only event that mattered after Jesus' resurrection would be Judgment Day. In this way, Augustine disconnected Roman imperial history from salvation history.

Augustine, *City of God* 18.53

[Augustine, *Concerning The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 838]

That last persecution, to be sure, which will be inflicted by Antichrist, will be extinguished by Jesus himself, present in person. For the Scripture says that "he will kill him with the breath of his mouth and annihilate him by the splendor of his coming." Here the usual question is, "When will this happen?" But the question is completely ill-timed. For had it been in our interest to know this, who could have been a better informant than the master, God himself, when the disciples asked him? For they did not keep silent about it with him, but put the question to him in person, "Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the sovereignty to Israel?" But he replied, "It is not for you to know the times which the Father has reserved for his own control." Now in fact they had not asked about the hour or the day or the year, but about the time, when they were given this answer. It is in vain, therefore, that we try to reckon and put a limit to the number of years that remain for this world, since we hear from the mouth of Truth that it is not for us to know this. And yet some have asserted that 400, 500 or as much as 1,000 years may be completed between the Lord's ascension and his final coming. But to show how each of them supports his opinion would take too long; and in any case it is unnecessary, for they make use of human conjectures, and quote no decisive evidence from the authority of canonical Scripture. In fact, to all those who make such calculations on this subject comes the command, "Relax your fingers, and give them a rest." And it comes from him who says, "It is not for you to know the times, which the Father has reserved for his own control." [Acts 1: 6–7]

1.7 Rome becomes a Christian center

1.7.1 A martyr foresees Rome's Christian future

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–c.408) had a career as an imperial administrator in Spain before turning to writing Christian poetry about 395. His poem about the martyrdom of Saint Laurence (d.258) describes the transformation of the city of Rome into a Christian capital. After introductory remarks, Prudentius puts a prayer in Laurence's mouth (as he is being tortured to death) about Rome's Christian future.