

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The City of God against the Pagans

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Book 1

Preface: The plan and argument of the work here undertaken

Most glorious is the City of God: whether in this passing age, where she dwells by faith¹ as a pilgrim among the ungodly, or in the security of that eternal home which she now patiently awaits until ‘righteousness shall return unto judgment’,² but which she will then possess perfectly, in final victory and perfect peace. In this work, O Marcellinus, most beloved son – due to you by my promise – I have undertaken to defend her against those who favour their own gods above her Founder. The work is great and arduous; but God is our helper.³

I know, however, what efforts are needed to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility which, not by dint of any human loftiness, but by divine grace bestowed from on high, raises us above all the earthly pinnacles which sway in this inconstant age. For the King and Founder of this City of which we are resolved to speak has revealed a maxim of the divine law in the Scriptures of His people, where it is said, ‘God resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble.’⁴ But the swollen fancy of the proud-spirited envies even this utterance, which belongs to God, and loves to hear the following words spoken in its own praise: ‘To spare the humble and subdue the proud.’⁵

Thus, when the nature of the work here undertaken requires us to say something of it, and as occasion arises, we must not pass over in silence the earthly city also: that city which, when it seeks mastery, is itself mastered by the lust for mastery even though all the nations serve it.

¹ Cf. Hab. 2,4; Rom. 1,17; Gal. 3,11; Heb. 10,38.

² Psalm 94,15.

³ Cf. Psalm 118,6.

⁴ James 4,6; 1 Pet. 5,5.

⁵ Virgil, *Aen.*, 6,853.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The City of God against the pagans***1 Of the enemies of Christ's name whom the barbarians spared for Christ's sake during the sack of the city**

For it is from this earthly city that the foes against whom the City of God must be defended come forth. Many of these foes have, indeed, become honourable enough citizens of the City of God when the error of their ungodliness has been corrected. Many, however, still burn fiercely against her with the fires of hatred, and are ungrateful to her Redeemer for His manifest blessings. They forget that they would not be able to wag their tongues against her today had they not, when fleeing from the enemy's steel, found in her sacred places the lives in which they take such pride. Have not even those Romans whom the barbarians spared for Christ's sake become enemies of Christ's name? The shrines of the martyrs and the churches of the apostles are our witnesses; for during the sack of the city they sheltered those who fled to them: both their own people and strangers.⁶ Thus far the bloodthirsty foe raged, but no farther. There, his savage fury acknowledged its limit, and those of the enemy who were merciful conducted thither those whom they had spared, lest others who did not possess a similar mercy might fall upon them. Indeed, whenever those savage men, who elsewhere raged in the usual fashion of an enemy, came to the place where what the rules of war would have permitted elsewhere was forbidden, all the ferocity with which they smote was curbed, and their greed for captives subdued.

In this way, many escaped who now bewail these Christian times and impute to Christ the ills which the city suffered. But the good which they received when, in honour of Christ, they were permitted to live: this they impute not to Christ, but to their own fate. If they had any right perception, they would rather attribute the bitter and harsh things which they endured at their enemies' hands to divine providence. For divine providence often corrects and destroys the corrupt ways of men by wars, and tests the righteous and praise-worthy by such afflictions of this mortal life, either conveying them to a better world when they have been proved, or detaining them still on this earth for further service.

⁶ Cf. Orosius, *Hist.*, 7,39; Jerome, *Epist.* 27,12f.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Book 1 Chapter 2*

Moreover, they ought to attribute it to these Christian times that, contrary to the usages of war, the cruel barbarians spared them in the name of Christ: either anywhere at all, or in those places – the broadest of places, chosen to contain great multitudes, so that mercy might be bestowed more largely – especially dedicated to Christ's name. They ought, therefore, to give thanks to God: they ought now to flee to His name in truth, in order to escape the punishment of eternal fire, seeing that so many of them made use of that name falsely in order to escape the pains of the immediate rout. For among those whom you now see insolently and shamelessly insulting the servants of Christ are many who would not have escaped that ruin and disaster had they not feigned to be servants of Christ themselves. And now, with ungrateful pride and most ungodly folly, they oppose His name in their impurity of heart, and so incur the punishment of eternal darkness, who once flew to that name with lying countenance so that they might enjoy a passing light.

2 That in no wars ever before recorded have the victors spared the vanquished for the sake of their gods

Many histories have been composed of the wars waged both before Rome was founded and after her rise and accession to imperial power. Let our adversaries read these histories and produce any instance of a city captured by invaders where the enemies who seized it spared those whom they found taking refuge in the temples of their gods. Or let them produce an instance of any barbarian lord who commanded that, when a town was entered, no one should be smitten who was found in this temple or that.⁷ Did not Aeneas see Priam before the altars 'drench with blood the fires that he himself had blessed'?⁸ Did not Diomedes and Ulysses 'slay the guardians of the topmost citadel, seize the sacred image, and with bloody hands

⁷ There are instances, however. After the siege of Tyre, Alexander spared those who had taken refuge in the temple of Hercules (Arrian, *Anabasis*, 7,24). After the battle of Coronea, Agesilaus showed similar mercy to the Theban hoplites who had fled to the temple of Itonian Athene (Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 19).

⁸ *Aen.*, 2,502.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The City of God against the pagans*

dare to touch the fillets of the virgin goddess'?⁹ Nor, moreover, are the words which come after these true; that 'henceforth, the hope of the Greeks dwindled and passed away'. For, even after this, they conquered; after this they destroyed Troy with fire and sword; and it was after this that they hewed down Priam as he sought sanctuary at the altars.

Nor was it because she lost Minerva that Troy perished. For what had Minerva herself lost first, that she was unable to prevent Troy from perishing? Her guards, perhaps? Exactly so: for when these were slain, she could be stolen. It was not, therefore, the men who were protected by the effigy, but the effigy by the men. Why was she worshipped, then, so that she might defend the fatherland and its people: she who could not manage to defend even her own guards?

3 How imprudent the Romans were in believing that they might derive any benefit from the gods who could not protect Troy

Behold what manner of gods they were to whom the Romans were pleased to entrust the protection of the city! O too great and miserable error! They are angry with us when we say such things about their gods; yet they are not angry with their own authors, to whom they paid a fee to teach them such things! Indeed, they deemed those very teachers entirely worthy to receive a public stipend and other honours. In the works of Virgil (who is read by small boys precisely so that, when their minds are steeped in this great and most famous and best of all poets, he may not easily be abolished into forgetfulness; as Horace says: 'New vessels long retain the taste of what they first contained')¹⁰ – in the works of this Virgil, then, Juno is introduced as hostile to the Trojans, and as inciting against them Aeolus, king of the winds, saying, 'A people hateful to me now sails the Tyrrhenian sea, bearing Ilium and her vanquished gods to Italy.'¹¹ Was it prudent, then, thus to entrust Rome, lest she be vanquished, to these 'vanquished gods'? But perhaps this

⁹ *Aen.*, 2, 166ff.

¹⁰ *Epist.* 1, 2, 69f.

¹¹ *Aen.*, 1, 67f.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Book 1 Chapter 3*

Juno spoke as an angry woman, not knowing what she said. What of Aeneas himself, then, so often called ‘the Pious’? Does he not speak as follows: ‘Panthus, Othrys’s son, priest of the citadel and of Phoebus, bearing in his hands the vanquished gods, and dragging his little grandson, comes running to my door, beside himself’?¹² Aeneas, too, therefore, does not hesitate to say that the gods were ‘vanquished’. And is it not clear that the gods were rather entrusted to him than he to them, when it is said to him, ‘Troy commends her sacred objects and her gods to you’?¹³

Virgil, then, speaks thus of the gods: he says that they were vanquished and commended to a man so that, though vanquished, they might somehow escape. Is it not madness, therefore, to suppose that Rome could wisely have been entrusted to such protectors, and that she would not have been sacked had she not lost them? On the contrary: to worship vanquished gods as rulers and defenders – what is this but to hold fast not to good deities, but to bad omens? How much wiser to believe not that Rome would have avoided that disaster had the gods not perished first, but rather that the gods themselves would have perished long before had not Rome protected them for as long as she could! For who, when he directs his attention to the matter, does not see how vain it is to suppose that she could not be conquered while under vanquished defenders, and that she therefore perished because she lost the gods who were her guardians? In truth, the only cause of her perishing was that she chose to have guardians who could themselves perish. When they wrote and sang of vanquished gods, therefore, the poets were not merely lying to serve their own purposes. Rather, they were men of intelligence whom truth had compelled to make confession.

But it will be more appropriate to treat of these matters carefully and fully in another place.¹⁴ For the time being, I shall set out, as well as I can, what I have undertaken to say of those ungrateful men who blasphemously impute to Christ the evil which they deserve to suffer by reason of their own moral wickedness. The fact that even such as these were spared for Christ’s sake they do not condescend to notice, and in the madness of their blasphemous wickedness they exercise their tongues against His name. They exercise those very

¹² *Aen.*, 2,319f.¹³ *Aen.*, 2,293.¹⁴ Bk III,2ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The City of God against the pagans*

tongues which used that name falsely so that they might live: those tongues which, in the places consecrated to Him, they restrained in terror. Then, they were kept safe and protected in a place where, thanks to Him, they were unharmed by their enemies; yet now they burst forth from that sanctuary as His enemies, cursing Him!

4 Of the sanctuary of Juno in Troy, which freed no one from the Greeks, and the churches of the apostles, which protected all who sought refuge in them from the barbarians

As I have said, Troy herself, the mother of the Roman people, was not able to protect her own citizens, in the places consecrated to her gods, from the fire and steel of the Greeks – who themselves worshipped those same gods. Rather, indeed, ‘in Juno’s sanctuary the chosen guards, Phoenix and the fell Ulysses, kept watch over the spoils. Here, at every hand, the Trojan treasure, stripped from the burning shrines and altars of the gods – bowls of solid gold, and looted finery – are brought together, great crowds of boys and fearful women stand about.’¹⁵

The place consecrated to so great a goddess, then, was chosen not so that no one might lawfully be led out of it captive, but so that captives might be imprisoned in it at pleasure. Compare, now, that sanctuary – not the sanctuary of one of the common or vulgar mob of gods, but of the queen of all the gods, the sister and wife of Jupiter himself!¹⁶ – with the memorial shrines of our apostles. Into the former were carried spoils stripped from the burning temples of the gods: not to be returned to the vanquished, but to be divided up among the victors. Into the latter, the possessions of the vanquished, even though found elsewhere, were brought back with honour and most conscientious scruple. In the former, liberty was lost; in the latter, preserved. In the former, bondage was enforced; in the latter, proscribed. In the former, men were forced into slavery as the property of the enemies who had overcome them; in the latter, they were conducted to freedom by the merciful. Finally: the temple of Juno was chosen by the fickle and insignifi-

¹⁵ *Aen.*, 2,761ff.

¹⁶ *Aen.*, 1,46f.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Book 1 Chapter 6*

cant Greeks as the scene of avarice and pride; but the churches of Christ were chosen, even by the monstrous barbarian, as places of mercy and humility.

Perhaps, though, the Greeks did after all, in that victory of theirs, spare the temples of the gods whom they shared with the Trojans? Perhaps they did not dare to smite or enslave the miserable and defeated Trojans who took refuge in them? Perhaps, after the fashion of poets, Virgil has misled us? No. On the contrary, he has depicted the usual custom of an enemy when sacking a city.

5 Of the account which Cato gives of the universal custom of an enemy when sacking a city

For as Sallust, a historian noted for his veracity, writes, Cato himself did not omit to mention this custom in the speech which he delivered to the Senate concerning the conspirators. 'Maidens and boys are violated; children plucked from the embrace of their parents; the mothers of families endure whatever might be the pleasure of the victors; temples and houses are despoiled; there is slaughter and burning; in short, all is filled with arms, corpses, slaughter and lamentation.'¹⁷ Had he here made no mention of the temples, we might have concluded that the enemy was disposed to spare the seats of the gods. Yet the Roman temples had cause to fear these horrors not from alien foes, but from Catiline and his accomplices: most distinguished senators and Roman citizens! These, however, were plainly abandoned men, and the parricides of their fatherland.

6 That not even the Romans, when they captured cities, spared the vanquished in their temples

But why need our account review the many nations which have waged war with one another and never spared the vanquished in the seats of the gods? Let us consider the Romans themselves. Let us, I say, recollect those very Romans who in high praise are said 'to spare the humble and subdue the proud', and who preferred 'rather to forgive than to avenge a wrong'.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Catil.*, 51,9; although this is a mistake: the speech to which Augustine refers is Caesar's, not Cato's.

¹⁸ *Catil.*, 9,5.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The City of God against the pagans*

As their dominion grew broader, the Romans stormed, captured and overthrew many great cities. Let them tell us, then, what temples they were accustomed to exempt, to ensure that any who sought sanctuary there might be free. Did they do this, perhaps, but the writers of their annals say nothing of it? Would those writers, who with such great zeal sought things to praise, omit to mention what they themselves would have regarded as instances of outstanding piety? Marcus Marcellus, the esteemed Roman personage who captured the splendid city of Syracuse, is said to have wept before its fall, and to have shed his own tears before he shed its blood. Also, he took care to preserve the modesty even of his enemy; for before the victor gave the command to enter the city, he issued an order that no free person was to be violated. The city was, however, overthrown according to the custom of war. Nowhere do we read that this most chaste and clement commander gave instructions that anyone who took refuge in this temple or that should remain unmolested; and this certainly would not have been omitted by writers who could not pass over in silence either his weeping or his edict that modesty was not to be outraged. Fabius, conqueror of the city of Tarentum, is praised for having abstained from looting its images. Indeed, when his scribe raised with him the question of what he wished done with the many images of the gods which had been captured, he even flavoured his restraint with a joke. For he asked of what kind they were; and when word was brought to him that many of them were not only large but armed, he said, 'Let us leave these fearsome gods to the Tarentines!' Since, therefore, the authors of the Roman annals could not refrain from mentioning either the weeping of the one or the laughter of the other – neither the former's chaste mercy nor the latter's humorous restraint – would they omit to mention it if these commanders had shown such forbearance to any men, in honour of their gods, as to forbid slaughter or captivity in any temple?

7 That the cruelties which occurred during the sack of Rome were in accordance with the customs of war, whereas the acts of clemency which took place arose from the power of Christ's name

Therefore, whatever devastation, slaughter, looting, burning and affliction was committed during that most recent calamity at Rome,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46843-5 - Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans

Edited by R. W. Dyson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Book 1 Chapter 8*

all this was at any rate done according to the customs of war. What set a new and unprecedented standard in such affairs, however, was that the savage barbarians appeared under an aspect so gentle that the most capacious churches were chosen and set aside by them to be filled with the people who were spared. These churches were places in which no man was to be smitten, whence no man was to be dragged, into which many were led by their merciful enemies in order to be set free, and whence none were led away into captivity by cruel foes. Whoever does not see that this is to be attributed to the name of Christ and to the Christian age is blind. Whoever sees it but does not praise it is ungrateful. Whoever would begrudge such praise is mad. God forbid that any prudent man should impute this merely to the ferocious barbarians! For their minds, utterly savage and utterly cruel, were dismayed, bridled and miraculously tempered by Him Who long ago said through the prophet, 'I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless, my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from them.'¹⁹

8 Of the advantages and disadvantages which are for the most part common to both good men and bad

Someone will say, 'But why did the divine mercy extend even to the wicked and ungrateful?' What are we to suppose, except that it was held out by Him Who daily 'maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust'²⁰ Some, reflecting upon this, have repented of their ungodliness and reformed themselves. Others, however, have, as the apostle says, despised 'the riches of God's goodness and His forbearance by reason of their hardness of heart and their impenitent heart'. These have treasured up 'for themselves wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, Who will render to every man according to his deeds'.²¹ Nonetheless, the forbearance of God invites the wicked to repentance, just as the chastisement of God teaches forbearance to the good. So too, the mercy of God embraces the good, to cherish them, just as God's severity seizes

¹⁹ Psalm 89,33f.²⁰ Matt. 5,45.²¹ Rom. 2,4ff.