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JAROSLAV PELIKAN

The Two Cities: The Decline and Fall of Rome as Historical Paradigm

“WE ARE REMINDED OF ANCIENT ROME”—so wrote Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*. He was speaking not only for himself, but for entire generations of thoughtful and critical observers as well, who, when confronted by a contemporary crisis, have drawn upon the history of Rome, and particularly the history of its decline and fall, as a paradigm—Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*; Edmund Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; the Founding Fathers of this Republic, in several issues of *The Federalist*; and above all, Edward Gibbon, in his account of “the triumph of barbarism and religion.”¹

In being “reminded of ancient Rome,” these eighteenth century thinkers, along with Marx and other later interpreters, were continuing a tradition of reflection on the decline and fall of Rome. The tradition began with those who were contemporary to the events. This essay, which continues and develops some ideas originally set down on the occasion of the bicentennial both of the Republic and of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*,² is an analysis of three sets of reactions by the church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries to the events of their times. Each of them represented an alternative way of coming to terms with the end of “Old Rome,” a distinct way of relating it to the rise of a “new city,” and thus a special interpretation of the nature and purpose of the historical process. Because the decline and fall of Rome has continued to serve as the historical paradigm for an understanding of how civilizations end, and because these three interpretations of it, albeit in a new and secular guise, still dominate so much of the philosophy of history, these three versions of the “tale of two cities” may serve also as an exercise in understanding the roots of our own ideas.

I

Probably the most evident response of Latin Christian writers to the events associated with the decline and fall of Rome was a resurgence of Christian apocalypticism, though in a chastened form. The spokesman for this chastened apocalypticism was Jerome. His words are no less eloquent and poignant for their being quite familiar.³ “For days and nights,” Jerome wrote in his *Commentary on Ezekiel*,

I could think of nothing but the universal safety. When my friends were captured, I could only imagine myself a captive, too. . . . When the brightest light of the

world was extinguished, when the very head of the Roman empire was severed, the entire world perished in a single city [*in una urbe totus orbis interiit*]. . . . Who could believe that after being raised up by victories over the whole world Rome should come crashing down, and become at once the mother and the grave of her peoples?

In a later description of the time when he wrote these words, Jerome said in a letter:

When I began to dictate [the *Commentary on Ezekiel*], I was so confounded by the havoc wrought in the West and above all by the sack of Rome [at the hands of Alaric in 410] that, as the common saying has it, I forgot even my own name. Long did I remain silent, knowing that it was a time to weep.

And again in the next letter: "My voice sticks in my throat; and, as I dictate, sobs choke my utterance. The City which had taken the whole world was itself taken." He recalled not only the prophecies of Scripture, but the Virgilian hexameter about the fall of Troy (*Aeneid* 2,363): "Stoops to her fall our ancient city, she the empress of the ages."

In these sentiments at the sack of Rome, Jerome was speaking in the accents of apocalypse. The events just before the sack, including Alaric's deal with the "semibarbarian" Stilicho, prompted Jerome to turn to the mythical figure of "the man of sin, the son of perdition" in 2 Thessalonians. According to that epistle, "he who is now holding it back [*qui tenet nunc*]" would begin to lose his hold, making it possible for the man of sin to appear. "He who is holding it back is removed," Jerome wrote in 409, "and yet we do not realize that Antichrist is near. Yes, Antichrist is near, whom the Lord Jesus Christ 'will kill with the spirit of his mouth [and destroy with the brilliance of his advent].'" "He who is now holding it back" was Old Rome, whose continuance was all that stood between mankind and the end of the world. The first important theologian of the Latin West, Tertullian, had declared in his *Apology* that "a mighty shock impending over the whole world—in fact, the very end of all things, threatening dreadful woes—is retarded only by the continued existence of the Roman empire," and in a later chapter of the same work, he made the striking assertion: "We pray for the delay of the end." That identification of Old Rome as destined to stand as long as the earth became the common property of Christians in the first four centuries.

It meant, however, that the awesome events associated with the sack of Old Rome in 410 could not evoke from a Jerome the simple recitation of the almost gleeful cry of the Apocalypse of Saint John—"Fallen is Babylon, Babylon, the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth." For one thing, the Rome that was now under siege and threat was in some sense a Christian city—not, therefore, the Old Rome, but a "New Rome." It is significant that in many of the passages just quoted, Jerome was speaking about fellow believers caught in the catastrophe of the city, notably a remarkable and heroic woman, Marcella, whose life and death he described in his Epistle 127. But the restraint on a simplistic apocalypticism had another source as well, one that was no less profound. Not only was Rome a Christian city, but Jerome was a Roman—not indeed by birth, since he came from Dalmatia, but by the deeper ties of language and cultural loyalty. The famous dream brought on by fever, upbraiding him for being a Ciceronian rather than a Christian—as a conse-

quence of which he swore never to own secular books again—must not be taken to mean that he cut himself off from his classical heritage. Despite this renunciation, the fall of Cicero's city to the barbarian Goths was for him, no less than for his pagan contemporaries in the Empire, a tragedy of major proportions. For, as he had said already in 393, in an allocution to New Rome, the city had “with the confession of Christ blotted out the blasphemy written on [her] forehead,” and had thereby become a “mighty city, mistress-city of the world [*urbis potens, urbs orbis domina*]” again. “By repentance,” he proclaimed to Rome, “you may escape the curse with which the Savior threatened you in the Apocalypse.”

II

But the chastened apocalypticism that characterized Jerome's interpretation of the events of 410 was not the only contemporary Christian reaction to the relation of Old Rome and New Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries. A considerably more dispassionate, almost (though not quite) matter-of-fact tone is audible in the accounts of these events by Eastern historians, notably Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen.⁴ Both these historians included in their accounts a paragraph on Alaric's sack of Old Rome, when, as Socrates put it, the barbarians had “burned the greatest number of magnificent structures and other admirable works of art,” and drew from it the appropriate moral lesson. “All persons of good sense,” Sozomen wrote, “were aware that the calamities which this siege brought upon the Romans were indications of divine wrath sent to chastise them for their luxury, their debauchery, and their manifold acts of injustice toward one another as well as toward strangers.” As they stand, these words seem to be little more than a parallel to the attacks on pagan Roman immorality that we find in Western writers from Tertullian to Augustine and Orosius and beyond.

Yet in Sozomen's narrative, such moralizing is sounded in counterpoint with another and more central theme. “When affairs were so helpless,” as a consequence of assaults from the Huns and other barbarians, “God gave manifest proofs of special favor toward the present reign [of the Christian emperor in Constantinople].” And to underscore the contrast between East and West, he continued: “Thus was the Eastern empire preserved from the evils of war, and governed with high order, contrary to all expectations, for its ruler was still young. In the meantime, the Western empire fell a prey to disorders, because many tyrants arose.” The defeat of enemies foreign and domestic by the royal house of Theodosius was a manifestation of divine mercy and a victory by God himself. In his explanation of the character and career of Theodosius, Socrates called upon a biblical prototype.

What is recorded of Moses in the Book of Numbers, “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men who were upon the face of the earth” [Num. 12:3], may now be appropriately applied today; for the Emperor Theodosius is “meek above all the men who are upon the face of the earth.” It is because of this meekness that God has subdued his enemies without military conflict. . . . For the God of the universe has granted this most devout emperor in our times supernatural aid of a similar kind to what was vouchsafed to the righteous in the past.

The biblical exegesis in this portrait of Theodosius is noteworthy, not only for its application to him of the word “meek,” which was the same Greek word used in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:5)—“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”—but also for the identification of the “most devout” Christian emperor with Moses. In this identification, as in his history as a whole, Socrates was patterning himself after his predecessor and the founder of Byzantine historiography, Eusebius of Caesarea.⁵ When Eusebius had taken up the task of narrating the “miracles more wonderful than fables,” of which he had been an eyewitness and to some extent even a participant, he worked out a full-scale typology, based on the life of Moses, by which to describe the emperor Constantine. Just as Moses, the future deliverer of his people, had been reared in the palace of Pharaoh and educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), so, according to Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*, Constantine “dwelt in the very home of the tyrants” until the appointed time came for him to emerge as the liberator. The victory of Constantine over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312 became, in the dramaturgy of Book IX of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* (apparently added in 315), a grand reenactment of the “song at the sea” recorded in chapter 15 of the Book of Exodus.

As in the time of Moses himself and of the ancient God-beloved race of the Hebrews, “he cast Pharaoh’s chariots and host into the sea . . . ,” in the same way Maxentius also with his soldiers . . . “went down into the depths like a stone,” when he fled before the power of God that was with Constantine.

“Like Moses, the great servant of God,” Constantine and his hosts celebrated the victory that God had granted to them also over the tyrant.

And so they entered into the Promised Land. Thus the decisive event in the history of Rome was, in the interpretation of Eusebius and of the Byzantine historians who followed him, the conversion of the emperor Constantine and hence of the Roman empire to the Christian faith. It was essential to that interpretation to hold to the legitimacy of Constantine’s claim to the imperial throne, for which God had destined him. Therefore, according to Eusebius, “Constantine, the most mighty victor, . . . reconquered the East . . . and formed the Roman empire, *as in the days of old*, into a single unified whole.” To Socrates and Sozomen too, it was no less essential that Theodosius be acknowledged as the legitimate Caesar. The theme of their histories, consequently, was continuity. “Continuity [*diadochē*]” was the word with which Eusebius opened his *Ecclesiastical History*, and it became a leitmotiv of the entire work. The lists of bishops in Eusebius served as documentation of continuity, as did his account of the “school of Alexandria,” founded by Pantaenus, who was followed by Clement, who was followed in turn by the wondrous Origen. Various scholars have commented on Eusebius’s propensity for discovering successions, not only in the hierarchy of the church, but elsewhere.

In Constantinople, that continuity took the form of the name “New Rome.” “Having rendered it equal to imperial Rome,” Socrates tells us, Constantine “named it Constantinople,” establishing by law that it should be designated New Rome. As New Rome, Constantinople (according to the famous—or notorious—twenty-eighth canon of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451) “is honored with the sovereignty and the Senate, and enjoys

equal privileges with imperial Old Rome." So the continuity of "imperial Old Rome" lay now with "New Rome," the city of the most holy and God-fearing emperors. It was, the Byzantine historians were sure, providential that Constantine should have established New Rome just when he did, for he had preserved the continuity of the empire in the very nick of time. What fell to Alaric's marauding Goths in 410, by this reading of history, was Old Rome, not New Rome, and certainly not the Roman empire, whose continuity had been assured by the transfer. For them also, there were "two cities," not pagan Old Rome and an evangelized New Rome in the same location, but Old Rome and New Rome, both now Christian. The competition between these two cities in the millennium between the fall of Old Rome in 410 and the fall of New Rome in 1453 is a major theme of medieval history.

III

Yet the magisterial account of "two cities" to have been evoked by the events of the fourth and fifth centuries was, of course, Augustine's *City of God*, to which, in many ways, Gibbon was writing an answer.⁶ Augustine, in turn, was also writing an answer, not alone to the pagan critics of the church, who were blaming the catastrophe of 410 on the apostasy of Rome from the faith of her fathers, but to other Christians as well, including Jerome and Eusebius-Socrates-Sozomen. It was chiefly on Jerome and Eusebius that Augustine drew for the chronology of world history in relation to sacred history that underlies Book XVIII of the *City of God* (which is the closest he came to a universal history in the work). Even more important than this dependence upon these two writers is the implicit polemic against their interpretations of the events of the time.

For while Augustine in the *City of God* did pay his respects to Jerome's *Commentary on Daniel*, as a book "written with considerable care and erudition," he was in fact breaking quite sharply with its apocalypticism. An apt illustration of his difference from Jerome in the description of Old Rome is what Augustine did with the words from 2 Thessalonians discussed earlier. Although most patristic exegetes took "he who now holds it back" as a reference to Old Rome, Augustine was obliged to "acknowledge that I do not know what it means," but he went on to recite various conjectures. The first of these was the standard view, which he was willing to call "not absurd," but it is obvious that he found it less than satisfying. He seems to have been drawn more to the interpretation of what "now holds it back" as the presence of the wicked within the empirical church; but even this did not seem quite right, and he had to leave the meaning of the passage in doubt. What was not in doubt was the error of the chiliastic definition of the kingdom of God that so often underlay early Christian attitudes toward Old Rome. "Ridiculous fancies" was only one of the terms he used for such a definition. In a lengthy excursus, contained appropriately in Book XX of the *City of God*, he examined various interpretations of the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation, concluding that "it is about this kingdom militant, in which the conflict with the enemy is still going on, . . . that the Apocalypse is speaking." In the striking phrase of Hermann Reuter, "the millennium was transformed from an eschatological fact to a period of church history."⁷

Yet in locating the thousand years' rule of the saints immanently within this present history, Augustine was not adopting the Eusebian understanding of continuity between Old Rome and New Rome. Again, it is instructive to examine one specific item of interpretation: the Christian emperors. Augustine did indeed praise Constantine as a worshiper of the true God, and he attributed the successes and victories of this Christian emperor to the action of God. But he said all of this only after he had pointed out, a few paragraphs earlier, that the God who ruled human history had granted power not only to Augustus, but also to Nero, and that "He who gave it to the Christian Constantine gave it also to the apostate Julian," in accordance with His sovereign, but hidden, will. As for the Christian emperor Theodosius the Great, to whose grandson and namesake Sozomen and Socrates had addressed their panegyrics, Augustine, after reciting various evidences of the emperor's devotion to Christ and to the orthodoxy of the church (which made him, for Augustine, as Peter Brown says,⁸ "a model Christian prince"), climaxed his tribute with a description of the ultimate proof of the piety of Theodosius, namely, his willingness in 390 to prostrate himself in public penance before the discipline of the church after he had sinned—an incident about which Augustine would have known directly from Ambrose of Milan.

The dialectic at work in God's conferring of power on Constantine, the pious, and then on Julian, the apostate, was a characteristic of the historical process. For the relation between the City of God and the earthly city was, within this historical process, a dialectical one. "The two cities," Augustine wrote, "are entangled together [*perplexae*] in this world, and intermixed until the Last Judgment brings about their separation," and their history was a "checkered" one. There was likewise a dialectic in the history of the earthly city itself, as was evident in the history of Old Rome. Augustine could neither condemn Old Rome altogether nor commend it unequivocally. He paid tribute to Cato both for his personal virtue, which Augustine judged to have come closest in his time to the true definition of uprightness, and for his contribution to the Roman republic. God had, according to Augustine, granted to the Romans "the terrestrial glory of that most excellent empire" as a reward for their virtue; this was not the reward granted to the elect in the City of God, but it was a genuine reward nonetheless. And in the peroration to Book II, he called upon the Romans to "purge and perfect" their virtues by turning to the true God and forsaking their idols. On the other hand, it was the worship of these idols and the consequent excesses of ambition and vainglory that vitiated the peace and justice to which Rome claimed to be devoted; and if justice was undermined, what was a "kingdom" but a fancy name for robbery?

But Augustine's historical dialectic is no less visible in his description of the history of the City of God in time. Throughout most of the work, Augustine did not provide an empirical referent for the term *civitas Dei*, until in Book XX there came the identification of it with the church—or to be precise, the identification of the church as "the kingdom of Christ"—six times in one chapter alone. It was, moreover, the historical, indeed the hierarchical church to which he attached this identification. But this equation was only half of the dialectic. The church in the ultimate sense—as in Augustine's other writings, so also in the *City of God*—was the New Jerusalem, the company of the elect,

known only to God. To this City there belonged some who were not now a part of empirical, organized Christendom—as did Paul, even when he was a persecutor of the church—while others who were now pillars of the institutional church were in fact not members of the City of God, the true church. Augustine set forth this historical dialectic in the very first book of the *City of God*. Having replied to pagan charges blaming Christians for the fall of the City of Rome, Augustine continued:

Let these and similar answers . . . be given to their enemies by the redeemed family of the Lord Christ, and by the pilgrim City of Christ the King. But let this City bear in mind that among her enemies lie hidden those who are destined to be fellow citizens. . . . So, too, as long as she is a stranger in the world, the City of God has in her communion, and bound to her by the sacraments, some who shall not eternally dwell in the inheritance of the saints.

Whether the theme be apocalypse or continuity or dialectic, “we are reminded of ancient Rome.” If one could write the history of the interpretations of Rome and of its decline and fall in subsequent historiography and philosophy, one would at the same time have a valuable series of insights into how various societies have understood themselves. “An empire without end [*imperium sine fine*]” was Virgil’s (and Augustus’s) dream of Rome, a dream to which the events of 410 were a rude and cruel awakening. Yet in a deeper sense, the Roman empire has had an afterlife even more awe-inspiring than were the centuries of its military and political hegemony. For the dominance of Latin over the language and thought of Europe throughout most of its history; the pervasive influence of Roman law; the very use of such terms as “republic” and “senate” in our own political vocabulary; and by a curious twist, even the preoccupation with its decline and fall as historical paradigm, in which Old Rome was always the first of the “two cities,” whatever the second may have been—all these themes of the history of the West seem to show that Old Rome has in fact exercised its sway over greater territory and for a longer time than ever it did in the days of the Caesars.

REFERENCES

¹*Das Kapital*, part 7, Chapter 27; *The Wealth of Nations*, book 3, chapter 2; *The Federalist*, nos. 18, 41, 63.

²At the time of the two bicentennials, I dealt briefly with these issues in an article in *Harper's* for July 1976, and in response to a paper by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Lessons of History,” in Philadelphia on July 4, 1976.

³See Jean-Remy Palanque, “St. Jerome and the Barbarians,” in *A Monument to St. Jerome*, edited by Francis X. Murphy (New York: 1952), pp. 171-99, and the moving chapter, “Gathering Gloom,” in *Jerome*, by J. N. D. Kelly (London: 1975), pp. 296-308.

⁴Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr.’s, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) is an incisive analysis.

⁵On Eusebius, compare the recent studies of Timothy Barnes and Robert M. Grant, as well as the comments, still useful, in the English translations of A. C. McGiffert and of Lawlor and Oulton.

⁶“Divine Necessity and Human History,” the closing chapter of *Christianity and Classical Culture*, by Charles Norris Cochrane (Oxford: 1944, pp. 446-516), is still, in my judgment, the most provocative discussion of Augustine’s *City of God*, whether or not one accepts Cochrane’s interpretation.

⁷Hermann Reuter, *Augustinische Studien* (Gotha: 1887), p. 114.

⁸Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: 1967), p. 291.