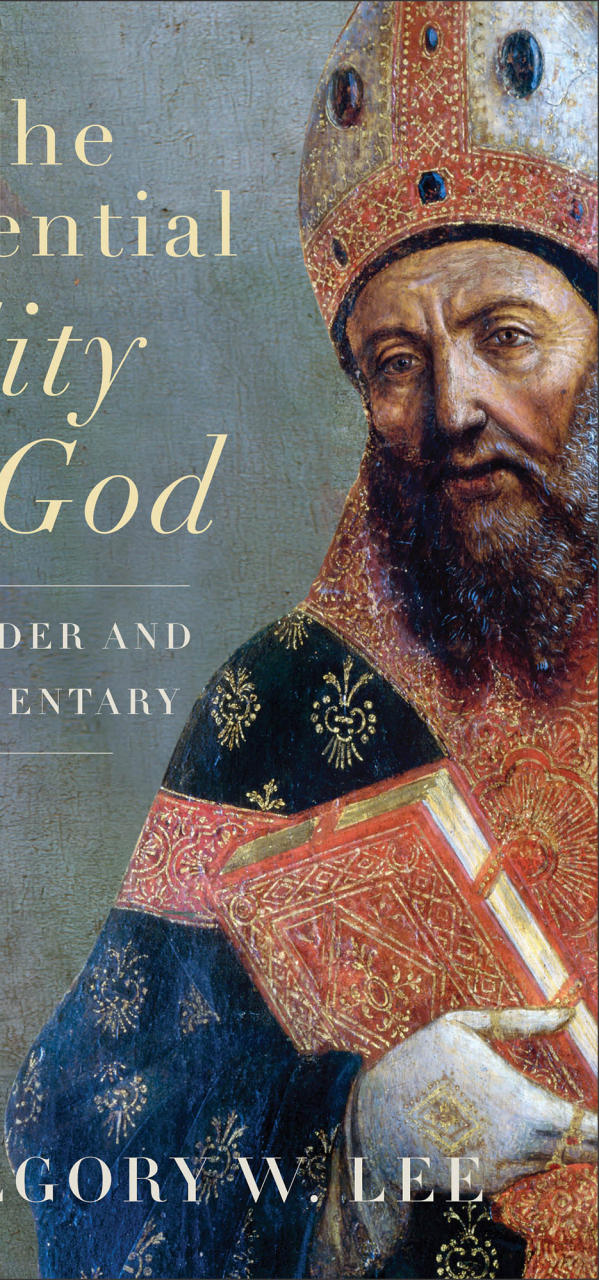
The Essential *City of God*

A READER AND COMMENTARY



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Introduction

City of God is arguably Augustine's greatest work, and it is the most important source for his understanding of church and society. After the sack of Rome in 410, many Romans despaired about the future of the empire. Critics blamed the devastation on Rome's conversion to Christianity. *City of God* is Augustine's massive response to these concerns, a theology of the Christian's relation to this world developed through an analysis of Roman culture, a commentary on Scripture, and a philosophy of love. It is the longest work defined by a single argument to have survived from Greco-Roman antiquity.[1]

Augustine's text has inspired over a millennium of political and theological reflection.[2] One of Charlemagne's contemporaries reported that *City of God* was the emperor's favorite book. Medieval theologians cited the text in disputes about war, slavery, political authority, and the relation between imperial and church rulers. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other reformers drew on the text for their treatments of the fall, their theology of political life, and their interpretations of historical events. In recent years, civic and Christian leaders have turned to Augustine's work for guidance in the midst of political instability.[3] As Western institutions suffer a crisis of trust, Augustine

1. James J. O'Donnell, "Augustine, *City of God*," written in 1983 on commission but never published, https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/civ.html. O'Donnell notes the difference between *City of God* and histories, collections of sermons, and other compilations that exceed *City of God* in length but do not require the coherence of design exhibited in Augustine's work.

2. For a survey of this history, see Michael C. Sloan, "*De civitate Dei*," in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollmann, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1:255–61. See also Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), ix–xi.

3. David Gibson, "Is Augustine the Patron Saint of the 2016 Election?," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 3, 2016, https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/augustine-patron-saint

encourages Christians that their ultimate hope resides in heavenly goods. He also reminds them that earthly institutions are necessary for earthly peace and that institutions require moral commitments to function well.

Despite *City of God*'s influence, it remains, for many, an intimidating and inaccessible book. The most obvious barrier is its size. In English translations, *City of God* runs over one thousand pages, leaving new readers to wonder whether they should tackle the whole text, and if not, where to begin. In addition to being long, *City of God* is highly digressive. Augustine veers from one topic to another, treating some subjects briefly and others in detail before changing topics again—sometimes back to the original subject, sometimes to something different and obscure. He does this with minimal explanation, leaving the uninitiated reader perplexed as to what he is doing. The reader may be left wondering: Why does Augustine treat the topics that he does? Why does he address them at such varying lengths? And what do these discussions have to do with one another?

Another obstacle is the scope of Augustine's project. *City of God* casts a vision of the universe from a Christian perspective, which involves an analysis of Roman history, culture, and society as well as a commentary on Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Augustine engages the entire literary world known to him as a Roman, and he recounts human history from Adam and Eve to heaven and hell. This narrative does not cover every time period or people group, nor does it detail each topic at equal length. But it is formally comprehensive, and for that reason alone it counts as one of the most ambitious accomplishments of Western literature.

Because of these challenges, many references to *City of God* quote it out of context and misrepresent Augustine's social vision. It is common, for instance, to contrast the two cities according to a distinction between the present and the future. In this reading, Christians are part of the earthly city now, but they will someday enter the heavenly city. The problem with this interpretation is that Augustine's two cities are concurrent realities. Both have existed among humans since the fall of Adam and Eve, and they will continue coexisting until they are separated from each other at final judgment. Moreover, Christians are not members of the earthly city. Citizenship in each city is exclusive; each person can belong to only one city at a given time. Christians reside in

-2016-election. President Joe Biden went so far as to quote *City of God* 19.24 in his 2021 inaugural address: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr.

the earthly city, but they are not members of it. Citizens of the earthly city become citizens of the heavenly city by converting to Christianity. To be sure, the cities orient themselves differently toward the present and the future. The earthly city hopes in temporal goods while the heavenly city hopes in eternal goods. But this is different from claiming that the earthly city exists now and the heavenly city will exist in the time to come.

The relation between the two cities determines Christians' posture toward the world. Augustine's defining image for this topic is pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*), a multivalent term that encompasses the ideas of exile, sojourning, journeying, and noncitizenship.[4] Like the Israelites in Babylon, Christians are warned not to adopt the customs of the earthly city or to forget their identity as citizens of the heavenly city. Yet they are also commanded "to pray for Babylon, *because in its peace is your peace* (Jer. 29:7)."[5] Life as an exile is not defined exclusively by resistance or insurrection. It also requires cooperation on goods that both the earthly city and the heavenly city depend on. Christians can support the social and political life of a corrupt order to the extent that it furnishes material blessings necessary for all people. They dissent from the earthly city when it promotes unjust or idolatrous ends. Though this perspective does not resolve the complications of participation in civic life, it establishes two core principles. Since Christians are not citizens of the earthly city, they should consider themselves outsiders to political society. Yet Christians have a stake in earthly peace, so they may cooperate with the earthly city on temporal concerns.

Few readers have the background to understand all the topics Augustine addresses. Even specialists have struggled to produce commentaries on *City of God* because of the breadth of learning required.[6] *City of God* demands

4. Sarah Stewart Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10–17. See also A. Lauras and H. Rondet, "Le thème des deux cités dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin," in *Études augustiniennes*, ed. H. Rondet, M. Le Landais, A. Lauras, and C. Couturier (Paris: Aubier, 1953), 97–160; Antoine Lauras, "Deux cités, Jérusalem et Babylone: Formation et évolution d'un thème central du 'De Civitate Dei,'" *La Ciudad de Dios* 167 (1954): 117–50; and Johannes van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study into Augustine's "City of God" and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities* (orig. 1991; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 131–42.

5. *City of God* 19.26.

6. For a history of commentaries on *City of God*, see Gillian Clark, *Commentary on Augustine "City of God," Books 1–5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–32. The second volume of this commentary series, covering Books 6 to 10, was published by Oxford University Press in 2024. Besides Clark's work, notable efforts include G. Bardy, ed., *La Cité de Dieu*, trans. G. Combès, Oeuvres de Saint Augustin: Bibliothèque Augustinienne 33–37 (Paris: Desclée de Brower, 1959–60); and P. G. Walsh, *De Civitate Dei (The City of God)* (Oxford: Aris & Phillips), which covers Books 1 to 16.

familiarity with ancient history, religion, and rhetoric alongside knowledge of Scripture, philosophy, and early Christian theology. Scholars typically concentrate on one or two of these areas, not all of them. Most studies of *City of God* are written for academics and assume facility with Latin.[7] Not many works exist for a general reader who wants to understand Augustine's basic perspective on church and society and why it matters today.[8] That is the gap this book seeks to fill.

The Essential "City of God" reflects the conviction that uninitiated readers can engage Augustine's work with the right support and that reading it is a spiritual exercise. My interest in Augustine began when I was a doctoral student at Duke University under the tutelage of early Christianity scholars Warren Smith and Elizabeth Clark. Their courses introduced me to the range of Augustine's writings: his anti-Manichean, anti-Donatist, and anti-Pelagian works as well as his treatises on Scripture, the Trinity, marriage, and sex. Yet we had little time for *City of God*, given its length, and I longed to learn more about it. I thus jumped at the opportunity to take a course on the work when it was offered by the medievalist David Aers.

Reading *City of God* cover to cover was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. I consumed much of it on the steps of Duke's chapel in North Carolina's resplendent fall weather. From almost the first paragraph, I sensed that this was the work where Augustine had synthesized his thought, that all his writings came to a head in this single volume. Unlike Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin, Augustine never wrote a systematic theology structured by

7. Important sources include Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God": A Reader's Guide*, 2nd ed. (orig. 1999; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); James Wetzel, ed., *Augustine's "City of God": A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and David Vincent Meconi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's City of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For earlier studies, see Dorothy F. Donnelly and Mark A. Sherman, eds., *Augustine's "De Civitate Dei": An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1960–1990* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Dorothy F. Donnelly, ed., *The City of God: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); and Christoph Horn, ed., *Augustinus, De civitate dei* (Berlin: Akademie, 1997).

8. Augustine, *The City of God ("De civitate dei"): Abridged Study Edition*, ed. Joseph T. Kelley, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2018) presents an abbreviated edition of the text with helpful study questions. Two books that present Augustine's political thought for a wider audience are Charles Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); and James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). For a stimulating series of lectures, see Charles Mathewes, "Books That Matter: *The City of God*," The Great Courses: Christianity, 2016, https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/books-that-matter-the-city-of-god.

doctrinal loci: the doctrine of God, the doctrine of salvation, and so forth. *City of God* offers instead a narrative of Scripture and human history. Though Augustine treats theological topics as they arise, they do not determine the shape of his work. *City of God* is structured by a story, one that forms readers' affections as they follow along.[9]

Augustine is best known for his *Confessions*, in which he recounts his wanderings and conversion as a tale of disorderly and orderly loves. *City of God* is the story of love on a grander, even cosmic, scale. Here the subject is not the individual person but the great realities of history and society: empires, wars, religious institutions, and political intrigue; angels and demons; Israel, Christ, and the church. The heavenly and earthly cities divide according to whether they love God or self, whether they prioritize heavenly or earthly goods. The contrast between these loves plays out in the histories of the two cities—whether in the violence, corruption, and idolatry of the earthly city or in the peace, love, and humility of the heavenly city. As I was reading Augustine's work, I found myself attracted to the virtues of the heavenly city and repulsed by the vices of the earthly city. *City of God* persuaded me, page by page, that love resides at the center of the universe because the world was created by God, and God is love. Arguably, this is the thesis of Augustine's entire corpus.

The force of Augustine's argument cannot be experienced in isolated snippets of his work. The reader must track the whole of his presentation, as with a novel in which the narrative is inherent to understanding its characters and their development. Still, it is not necessary to read all of *City of God* to grasp its vision. The reader can follow the main components of Augustine's narrative by studying extended selections. This book is an abbreviated and annotated edition of his work. It is long enough for readers to grasp Augustine's master argument but short enough not to overwhelm them. It concentrates on Augustine's social and political thought, the primary topic associated with *City of God*, while also including other material to provide a sense for the larger work. Several aids will support readers as they work through the text. As a theologian, I am primarily interested in Augustine's ideas and how they relate to our times. Though the book addresses other areas of inquiry, this material is instrumental to the larger goal of thinking with Augustine about the ideas he cared about. I suspect this is how he would have wanted us to read his work.

9. On Augustine, formation, and love, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

Biography

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagaste of Roman Africa and spent most of his life in the areas of modern-day Algeria and Tunisia.[10] His father, Patrick, was a mid-level Roman official who would become a Christian only toward the end of his life. *Confessions* says little about Patrick except to criticize him for caring more about Augustine's worldly success than his soul. Augustine shares much more affectionately about his mother, Monica, a devout Christian who prayed for him throughout his earlier years of rebellion. Scholars sometimes claim that Monica had Berber origins, with roots in an indigenous African population, though this designation is contested.[11] Whatever Augustine's ethnic background, he was legally and culturally a Roman, even as he was aware of his African identity and spoke Latin with an African accent.[12]

Augustine began his classical education in Madauros. He then took a gap year at home before continuing his studies in Carthage, the capital city of Roman Africa. His goal was to become a teacher of rhetoric. Augustine describes his teenage years as a period of self-indulgence. *Confessions* famously recounts an incident in which Augustine and his friends stole pears from a neighbor's tree, a story he uses to analyze the character of temptation and sin. Augustine also laments his sexual immorality, though he would eventually commit himself to one woman (whom he does not name) and remain faithful to her for over a decade. Their son, Adeodatus, would die as a teenager.

At the age of nineteen, Augustine came across a (now lost) text by Cicero called *Hortensius*, which inspired him to pursue wisdom. He first sought it in the Bible but found the text rhetorically inelegant, a judgment he would later attribute to pride. Augustine then turned to Manicheism, a dualistic religion

10. For biographies of Augustine, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new ed. (orig. 1967; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (orig. 1999; London: SCM, 2002); James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Ecco, 2005); Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversions to Confessions* (New York: Basic Books, 2015). This section is lightly revised from my "Augustine of Hippo," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 102–4.

11. John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 2nd rev. ed. (orig. 1954; New York: Alba House, 2001), 10–11; van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 18–21; Lancel, *St. Augustine*, 5–6; O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 116–20, 325, 374n618; Fox, *Augustine*, 23–24; Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghrib* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

12. *De Doctrina Christiana* 4.10.24; *Order* 2.17.45. For a modern reflection on these themes, see Justo L. González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

that caused him to question the authority of the Old Testament. Augustine became disillusioned with the religion when a celebrated Manichean bishop, Faustus, failed to answer his questions about it. Spiritually homeless, Augustine began exploring other philosophies in search of wisdom.

Augustine's developing career brought him from Carthage to Rome and finally to Milan, the Western imperial capital, where he assumed a prestigious post as its official orator in 384. There Augustine encountered the bishop Ambrose, whose allegorical interpretations of Scripture helped Augustine address Manichean critiques of the Old Testament. Augustine also discovered Neoplatonic writings that provided answers for his questions about God, evil, and the physical world. His new understanding of evil as privation, or nonbeing, would suffuse his later writings, including *City of God*.

After Augustine's intellectual doubts were resolved, his main hindrance to conversion was the desire for sex, which he believed he needed to renounce in order to become a Christian. "Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet."[13] After a serendipitous conversation about the emerging monastic movement, Augustine was inspired to follow a similar path but found himself incapable of surrendering his will to God. This interior battle culminated in a storied incident in a garden in Milan.

As *Confessions* recounts, Augustine hears a child's voice repeating, "Pick it up and read [*tolle, lege*]," and he interprets these words as a divine command to open a collection of Paul's epistles that he had with him. The first passage he happens upon, Romans 13:13–14, brings instant resolution and peace: "*Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires*."[14] This story of Augustine's conversion would inspire countless conversion stories in subsequent Christian tradition.

After this experience, and partly because of health concerns, Augustine gave up his position as rhetorician and retired with his mother and some companions to a country estate in Cassiciacum, where he wrote some of his earliest philosophical dialogues. In 387, he came back to Milan and was baptized under Ambrose. He then began a return journey to North Africa, where he intended to establish a monastic community. These plans were delayed when Monica became sick and died in Ostia, outside Rome. Her death is the last event narrated in *Confessions*.

13. *Confessions* 8.7.17.
14. *Confessions* 8.12.29.

In 391, Augustine was ordained as a priest in Hippo Regius, an important port city of Roman Africa, and in 396 he became the bishop of the city. This position involved preaching, administering the sacraments, overseeing alms distribution, and adjudicating legal disputes. He wrote his *Confessions* in the late 390s, and his writings thereafter would be marked by emphases on sin and grace. For the next decade and beyond, the chief controversy of Augustine's bishopric concerned the Donatists, a rival Christian community in North Africa. Augustine's campaign against them was the most significant context for his social and political writings. Another major controversy concerned Pelagius and his supporters, who prompted Augustine's most developed treatments of original sin and predestination. Augustine began writing *City of God* in 412/13, following the sack of Rome in 410. He died in 430, a few years after completing the work.

Background

City of God was produced at the decline of the Roman empire, following major shifts in the relationship between the empire and Christianity.[15] In the early 300s, Christians suffered Rome's most aggressive persecution of the church. This persecution occurred under the emperor Diocletian and was sometimes called the Great Persecution. Soon after the edicts against Christians were rescinded, the emperor Constantine converted to the faith. He and his fellow emperor, Licinius, then issued the Edict of Milan (313), establishing religious toleration and the legality of Christianity throughout the empire. Constantine promoted Christianity throughout his reign, though he stopped short of making it the official religion of the empire. His efforts earned the praise of Eusebius of Caesarea, the first church historian, who depicted Constantine as a quasi-messianic figure and conflated the conversion of Rome with the fulfillment of God's purposes in history. This theory of "Christian times" (*tempora christiana*) gained prominence in the late fourth century when the emperor Theodosius I established Christianity as the religion of the empire and banned traditional Roman religion. Though the prohibition

15. John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425* (London: Clarendon, 1975); Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Averil Cameron, "Christianity and the 'Peace of the Church,'" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *Origins to Constantine*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 538–51; R. Malcolm Errington, *Roman Imperial Policy from Julian to Theodosius* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

of Roman religion seems to have been unevenly enforced, this development spurred many Christians to interpret the Christianization of the empire as the mechanism by which God was drawing all nations to Christ. The empire represented the nations, so when Rome became Christian, the nations did too.

In 410, after years of aggression, the Visigoth king Alaric sacked Rome, pillaging the city and brutalizing its inhabitants for three intense days. For Romans across the empire, news of this event was devastating. Writing from Bethlehem, Jerome likened it to the fall of Troy and the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon.[16] Though Rome was no longer the imperial capital, it remained the symbolic capital of the Roman people. Rome had not experienced such an attack in eight hundred years. Questions soon arose as to the veracity of the Christian faith. Supposedly, Rome had enjoyed peace when it worshiped the traditional gods. Alaric's attack proved the gods were angry at the Roman people for abandoning them. Many aristocrats brought these objections with them from Rome to North Africa, where they fled for their estates in the area. This is the context in which Augustine encountered their criticisms and took up his pen.

City of God rejects the identification of the Roman empire with the people of God. It claims that, since the fall, humanity has been divided into two peoples, the earthly city and the heavenly city. By "city" (*ciuitas*), Augustine is not referring to an urban center or a town with walls but to a community of citizens that extends across generations and geographies.[17] Whereas the Romans associated cities with physical territories, Augustine's two cities span humanity from the time of Adam and Eve through the present day. What distinguishes them is not nation, dress, or custom but their respective loves. Both communities experience temporal goods and temporal evils. Temporal suffering is no argument against the Christian faith, which never guaranteed earthly blessing as the reward of worshiping Jesus. Since Christians hope in eternal, not temporal goods, they remain unshaken by the sack of Rome.

In developing this argument, Augustine advances a comprehensive critique of Roman society and a narration of the heavenly city from the beginning of human history to the end. *City of God* thus goes far beyond the original purpose of addressing objections after the sack of Rome. Given its significance

16. Jerome, *Letter* 127.12. For Augustine's reaction, see *Sermon* 397, "On the Sack of the City of Rome."

17. Clark, *Comm. 1–5*, 1. For background on the theme of the two cities in Augustine, see van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 199–359; and O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 57–71.

for Augustine's social thought, readers may be surprised to discover how little it offers in the vein of political theory. *City of God* says almost nothing about the nature and purpose of government or how it should be constituted (e.g., as a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a democracy).[18] Readers will find more concentrated treatments of politics in Augustine's letters, including his interventions in concrete situations.[19] *City of God* furnishes a broader, theological account of the world as humanity experiences it. Social reality is determined by people's loves, whether for God or for self, whether for eternal goods or for temporal goods. "Two loves, then, have made two cities. Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city, and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, made the heavenly city."[20] This is Augustine's enduring contribution to Christian political thought.

City of God is dedicated to Flavius Marcellinus, tribune and notary of Africa and Augustine's closest contact in high imperial office. This context is important for understanding the work. For multiple decades, Augustine was consumed with what scholars typically call the Donatist controversy.[21] This challenge arose in the early 300s following the Diocletianic persecution. One of the hardest hit

18. Clark, *Comm. 1–5*, 18–21. *City of God* 2.21 mentions these forms of government without expanding on them. *City of God* 19.14–16 is often cited in discussions about political authority, though this section does not concentrate on the topic. For recent discussion, see Eric Gregory and Joseph Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 176–95.

19. For primary sources, see Margaret Atkins and Robert Dodaro, eds., *Augustine: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For studies, see Robert Dodaro, "Between the Two Cities: Political Action in Augustine of Hippo," in *Augustine and Politics*, ed. John Doody, Kevin L. Hughes, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 99–115; and Joseph Clair, *Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

20. *City of God* 14.28.

21. For an overview of the Donatist controversy, see Richard Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2016). See also Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); J. Patout Burns Jr. and Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). On Marcellinus, see Madeleine Moreau, *Le dossier Marcellinus dans la correspondance de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1973). The word "Donatist" was an epithet that the followers of Donatus protested. Despite its contestation, it remains the most common term to describe Augustine's opponents. For further discussion, see Brent D. Shaw, "African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and 'Donatists,'" in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent*, ed. Malcolm R. Greenshields and Thomas A. Robinson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 4–34; and John Whitehouse, "The Course of the Donatist Schism in Late Roman North Africa," in Miles, *Donatist Schism*, 34–53, esp. 14–15.

areas was North Africa, where Augustine would become bishop. During the persecution, some bishops gave up copies of the Bible and other liturgical books to Roman officials. This act was called *traditio*, which literally means "to hand over" and is the root for the English word "traitor." These events occurred when churches might possess only one copy of the Bible, long before the invention of the printing press. *Traditio* was an insidious betrayal of Christ and his people.

After the persecution ended, a debate erupted in Carthage concerning a bishop named Caecilian, who had allegedly been ordained by at least one *traditor*. A group of Christians opposed the ordination on the grounds that it compromised the purity of the church. They installed another individual, Majorinus, as bishop of Carthage. He would soon be succeeded by Donatus, from whom the Donatists received their name. The Donatists protested the ordination of Caecilian before Constantine, who ruled several times against them. Those who remained in fellowship with Caecilian, the "Catholics," thus had the support of the empire, which would persecute the Donatists on the Catholics' behalf.

Augustine stepped into this controversy almost a century after it began, and he was firmly on the Catholic side. He wrote extensively against the Donatists, developed a vision for the universal church around the Mediterranean, and eventually enlisted the support of imperial officials to coerce the Donatists into Catholic communion. His most willing partner was Marcellinus, who was appointed to oversee a conference at Carthage against the Donatists in 411. This conference marked the victory of the Catholics over the Donatists. Augustine coordinated closely with Marcellinus prior to the proceedings to ensure this result. At the conference, Augustine distinguished himself as the leading theologian and polemicist against the Donatists, further cementing his relationship with Marcellinus.

Following the conference at Carthage, Marcellinus wrote Augustine a letter with questions about Christianity from Volusian, former proconsul of Africa and future prefect of the city of Rome.[22] One of these questions concerned the relationship between Christianity and the Roman empire. Does Jesus's command to turn the other cheek forbid the empire from protecting its territories? Marcellinus also asked Augustine to write a longer work in response to these questions.[23] Augustine replied with a couple of letters addressing

22. *Letter* 136. See also *Letters* 132; 135; and 137 for correspondence between Volusian and Augustine.

23. *Letter* 136.3.

Volusian's questions.[24] He then began *City of God*, identifying Marcellinus as the dedicatee of this fuller discussion.[25] Shortly after Augustine started the work, Marcellinus was killed in a political insurrection.[26] About fourteen years later, when Augustine completed *City of God*, he described it as the fulfillment of a debt (without mentioning Marcellinus).[27]

It is an awkward fact that Augustine dedicated his greatest political work, *City of God*, to the official who authorized persecuting the Donatists. During the Donatist controversy, Augustine developed Christianity's first major defense of religious coercion.[28] Some scholars have treated this theme as an aberration in Augustine's thought. In my judgment, this approach ignores the centrality of Augustine's campaign against the Donatists for his bishopric and how deeply it formed his political vision.[29] Augustine's defense of coercion illuminates several passages in *City of God* that we might otherwise gloss over, including Augustine's celebration of the ideal emperor in 5.24–26 as someone who stamps out false religion and patronizes Christianity. Augustine's perspective may seem offensive to modern readers who take for granted the separation between church and state. But Roman life fused civic and religious life to a great degree, and Augustine took much of this context for granted. He saw no problem with a Christian emperor ruling as a Christian and promoting the faith in political office. This is one of the challenges of applying Augustine's political vision

24. *Letters* 137; 138.

25. *City of God* 1.*preface*. *Letter* 138.4.20 seems to suggest Augustine's plans for this larger work.

26. Marcellinus was executed in September 413.

27. *City of God* 22.30.

28. See Peter Brown, "Religious Coercion in the Later Roman Empire: The Case of North Africa" (orig. 1963), in *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (London: Faber, 1972), 301–31; Brown, "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion" (orig. 1964), in *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, 260–78; Frederick H. Russell, "Persuading the Donatists: Augustine's Coercion by Words," in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 115–30; Brent D. Shaw, "Augustine and Men of Imperial Power," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 1 (2015): 32–61; and Peter Van Nuffelen, "Coercion in Late Antiquity: A Brief Intellectual History," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Christian R. Raschle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 266–85.

29. See Gregory W. Lee, "Using the Earthly City: Ecclesiology, Political Activity, and Religious Coercion in Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 41–63. See also John R. Bowlin, "Augustine on Justifying Coercion," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997): 49–70; and Michael Lamb, "Augustine and Republican Liberty: Contextualizing Coercion," *Augustinian Studies* 48, no. 1/2 (2017): 119–59.

today. Any appropriation of his thought has to reckon with the differences between his time and ours.

Composition, Audience, and Genre

Augustine wrote *City of God* during an intense season when he was also producing his literal commentary on Genesis, several treatises against the Pelagians, ongoing refutations of the Donatists, his expositions on the Psalms, his homilies on John, and his great work on the Trinity. From various writings, we learn that Augustine was constantly working (including evenings, Saturdays, and Sundays), unable to respond to everyone's requests of him, and repeatedly interrupted from writing *City of God* by time-sensitive demands.[30] Augustine composed his works by dictation, speaking his words to a scribe who wrote them down. He had access to limited sources, often quoted sources from memory, and did not always confirm historical or textual details.[31]

The composition of *City of God* thus proceeded in fits and starts.[32] Books 1–3 were released as a unit in 413/14, circulated widely, and celebrated by the vicar of Africa, Macedonius, who claimed he did not know what to admire in them more, "the perfection of the priesthood, the teachings of philosophy, the ample knowledge of history, or the charm of eloquence."[33] Others, whom Augustine does not name, plotted a critical response.[34] As to the rest of *City of God*, we know that Books 4–5 were completed by 415,[35] and Books 6–10 were completed by 417.[36] We have indications that Book 12 was written around 417, Books 14–16 were written around 418–20, and Book 18

30. For glimpses of Augustine's work schedule, see *Expositions of the Psalms* 118.24.3; *Letters* 13.1; 48.1; 98.8; 110.5–6; 118.1.1–118.1.7; 139.3; 162.1; 169.1; 213.5–6; 224.1–2; 246.3; 261.1; 2*.1; 23A*.3–4; *Revisions* 2.43; *Work of Monks* 29.37; and Possidius, *Life of Augustine* 19, 24. For additional citations, see "Augustine's Lack of Free Time," *Scrinium Augustini*, http://www.scrinium.umk.pl/cloud/details/184.

31. Clark, *Comm. 1–5*, 9–12. See also Harald Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, 2 vols. (Göteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1967); and James J. O'Donnell, "Augustine's Classical Readings," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 15 (1980): 144–75.

32. Bardy, "Introduction Générale," in *La Cité de Dieu*, Bibliothèque Augustinienne 33, 22–35; van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 62; O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 35–37.

33. *Letter* 154.2.

34. *City of God* 5.26. We do not know who these individuals were or whether they published their response.

35. *Letter* 169.1.

36. Orosius, *Histories against the Pagans* 1.prologue.11.

was completed by 424/25.[37] And we are confident Augustine completed *City of God* by 426/27.[38]

City of God was written for an audience of elite Christians and non-Christians.[39] The most immediate recipients were a group of aristocrats in Carthage, including some who had come to Africa after the sack of Rome. Among them was Marcellinus, the Christian tribune and notary of Africa who had ruled against the Donatists during the conference at Carthage. One unnamed landowner from Hippo was vocally critical of Augustine.[40] Others were not Christian but open to the faith. Volusian, whose questions prompted Augustine to write *City of God*, was from a prominent Christian family and would receive baptism at the end of his life. Outside this circle, we discover a similar mix of Christian and non-Christian readers.[41] One catechumen, Firmus, was inspired to read all of *City of God* after hearing Book 18 read aloud on three consecutive afternoons.[42] Augustine urged him to finish reading the work and join the heavenly city. By producing *City of God*, Augustine sought to arm Christians against objections and to persuade non-Christians to become Christians. His audience helps explain the intensity of his polemic. Since most of his readers were Christian or Christian-friendly, he could caricature other Romans without fear of alienating his audience.

37. *De Trinitate* 13.9.12 refers to a completed Book 12. For Book 14, scholars rely on *Answer to an Enemy of the Law and the Prophets* 1.14.18, which was written no earlier than 420, and *Letter* 184A.3.5, which was written about 418. Books 15–16 exhibit dependence on *Questions on the Heptateuch*, which was written no earlier than 419. The evidence in Book 18.54 for its date of composition is complicated. See O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 313–14.

38. *Revisions* 2.43.

39. Gillian Clark, "Letters and the City of God," in *"Scrinium Augustini": The World of Augustine's Letters*, ed. Przemysław Nehring, Mateusz Stróżyński, and Rafal Toczko (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017), 181–202; Mattias Gassman, "The Ancient Readers of Augustine's *City of God*," *Augustinian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021): 1–18. See also Gassman, "The Composition of *De consensu euangelistarum* 1 and the Development of Augustine's Arguments on Paganism," *Augustinian Studies* 54, no. 2 (2021): 157–75.

40. *Letter* 136.3.

41. These individuals include Evodius of Uzalis and Possidius of Calama, both fellow bishops (*Letter* 169.1 and *Letter* 23A*.3, respectively); Peter and Abraham, probably monks who needed help addressing criticisms of Christianity (*Letter* 184A.3.5); Firmus, a catechumen reluctant to receive baptism (*Letter* 1A*, 2*); Darius, an imperial officer curious to learn more about the faith (*Letter* 230.4); and Orosius, a presbyter and the author, at Augustine's request, of a companion work to *City of God* (Orosius, *Histories against the Pagans*).

42. *Letter* 2*.3. This detail bears some irony, since Book 18 is twice the length of the other books in *City of God* and has been denigrated by modern scholars for being unstructured and disorganized. I have challenged this perspective in "Republics and Their Loves: Rereading *City of God* 19," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 553–81.

City of God is the culmination of the Latin apologetic tradition, a body of writings that challenged Roman religion and defended Christianity against critics. Many of Augustine's arguments can be found in earlier writers like Tertullian, Arnobius, and Lactantius.[43] Yet *City of God* is something of an outlier among Augustine's works. Although Augustine engages the Roman tradition in earlier texts, his writings as a bishop tend to focus on theological questions and draw heavily on the Bible.[44] In *City of God*, Augustine returns to his classical education to interrogate Roman history and culture.[45] This material composes much of Books 1–10, the first half of *City of God*.

The second half of *City of God*, Books 11–22, is largely an exposition of Scripture. These books resemble an earlier work called *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, which is a handbook for catechizing those preparing for baptism.[46] As Augustine explains in this text, catechesis should introduce newcomers to the whole storyline of Scripture.[47] Since the Bible is so long, teachers cannot dwell on every detail. They should concentrate instead on major moments: creation, fall, flood, the call of Abraham, and so forth. Each of these events should be explained with reference to Christ and the church, the body of Christ, so as to display God's love for humanity.[48] This love should, in turn, prompt readers' love for God and neighbor, which is the ultimate purpose of Scripture. *Instructing Beginners in Faith* provides two sample expositions that narrate the biblical story from Genesis through Revelation.[49] The structure of these expositions matches *City of God*'s narration of Scripture, though *City of God* expands hugely on the major moments. This suggests that *City of God* should be read not just as a work of apologetics but as an exercise in catechesis. Despite the length, complexity, and digressions of Augustine's work, his goals are simple: to persuade non-Christians of the faith, to instruct believers, and to encourage love for God and neighbor.

43. O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 42–56.

44. For Augustine and the Bible, begin with Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

45. O'Donnell, "Augustine's Classical Readings," 147.

46. Van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon*, 175–98; O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 298–306, which also stresses parallels with *True Religion*.

47. *Instructing Beginners in Faith* 3.5.

48. *Instructing Beginners in Faith* 4.8.

49. *Instructing Beginners in Faith* 18.29–24.44; 26.51–27.55.

Interpretation

Given the challenges of interpreting *City of God*, it is no surprise that scholars have differed in their interpretations of the text and its implications.[50] For the last several decades, studies of *City of God* have operated in the shadow of Robert Markus. As Markus argues in *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (originally published in 1970), Augustine once embraced a theology of *tempora christiana*, but he came to reject it in favor of a theology of ambiguity, even before the sack of Rome.[51] According to Augustine's revised perspective, Christians should not expect any events of final significance before the eschaton. The two cities are ideal types that do not correspond to real communities. No institution can be identified with the earthly city or the heavenly city. Nor does any historical event between the time of the incarnation and Christ's return bear ultimate importance for God's plans for the world. Indeed, Markus argues, Augustine envisioned a pluralistic "state" in which persons of divergent religious commitments could negotiate temporal affairs in relation to one another. He thus invited Christians to consider themselves members of temporal society and to promote temporal goods in which Christians and non-Christians have a common stake.

In recent years, many scholars (including me) have criticized Markus for rendering the two cities invisible and molding Augustine's theology into the image of political liberalism.[52] Augustine did not propose a third sphere of society between the earthly and heavenly cities, nor did he advocate for religious pluralism. Still, debates remain over many aspects of Augustine's political

50. On the history of the interpretation of *City of God*, see Michael J. S. Bruno, *Political Augustinianism: Modern Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

51. R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, 2nd ed. (orig. 1970; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); and Markus, "'*Tempora Christiana*' Revisited," in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 201–13.

52. For analysis of these issues, see Michael J. Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular,'" in *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's "City of God,"* ed. Mark Vessey, Karla Pollmann, and Allan D. Fitzgerald (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 311–26; and Robert Dodaro, "*Ecclesia* and *Res Publica*: How Augustinian Are Neo-Augustinian Politics?," in *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?*, ed. L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts, and M. Wisse (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2009), 237–71.

theology and how to appropriate it.[53] Some scholars believe Augustine was optimistic about the possibilities for political change, others that he was pessimistic. Some believe he had a negative attitude toward non-Christian political orders, others that he was more positive. Some scholars believe Augustine was so focused on heavenly reward that he cared little about this temporal life, while others consider his theology world-embracing. Given the scope and complexity of *City of God*, it is perilous for any interpreter to assume they have gotten him exactly right. There are, however, strategies for discerning his intent. The most important is to heed the structure of Augustine's work.[54]

To draw out Augustine's narrative, this book attends closely to introductions, conclusions, transition sentences, and other structural clues. The beginnings and ends of sections are crucial for discerning the shape of the text. In 1.36, for instance, Augustine identifies several points he will cover next: the evils that Rome suffered before Christ, why God allowed Rome to grow, and the uselessness of the gods for benefits after death. The difficulty is that he does not indicate how long he will treat each topic, and he treats each topic at vastly different lengths. The reader might expect all three topics to be treated in the next book. But that is not what happens. Instead, Augustine treats the evils Rome suffered before Christ in Books 2–3, why God allowed Rome to

53. Besides texts cited above, see Oliver O'Donovan, "The Political Thought of *City of God* 19," in *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (orig. 1987; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 48–72; Rowan Williams, "Politics and the Soul: Reading the *City of God*," in *On Augustine* (orig. 1987; London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 107–29; Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Veronica Roberts Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's "City of God"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Mary M. Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine's "City of God"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Two influential texts that preceded Markus are Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1953), 119–46; and Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

54. This material is adapted from my "Republics and Their Loves." For other treatments of the structure of *City of God*, see Roy J. Deferrari and M. Jerome Keeler, "St. Augustine's 'City of God': Its Plan and Development," *American Journal of Philology* 50, no. 2 (1929): 109–37; Jean-Claude Guy, *Unité et structure logique de la "Cité de Dieu" de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1961); O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 72–95; John C. Cavadini, "Epilogue: The Architectonic Plan of *The City of God*," in Meconi, *COG*, 297–320.

grow in Books 4–5, and the uselessness of the gods for benefits after death in Books 6–10.

We might think of *City of God* as operating like a toggle list where each line represents content that appears only when the user clicks on it. Without clicking, the user cannot know how much will emerge. Sometimes the content is brief; sometimes it is quite long. It disappears when the user clicks again. The user can then proceed to the next line.

Book 19: The Final Good

- ▸ Varro's six categories of philosophy (1–3)
- ▾ The Christian response (4–20)
  - ▾ Categories 1–2 (4)

    Text
  - ▾ Category 3 (5–17)

    Text

    Text

    Text

    Text

    Text
  - ▾ Category 4 (18)

    Text
  - ▸ Categories 5–6 (19)
  - ▸ Conclusion (20)
- ▸ Appendix (21–28)

One gains the impression that Augustine began his work with a list of topics and little idea how much space each would require.[55] He proceeds methodically down the list, and he indicates when he is treating the next topic. But these cues are subtle and easily missed, especially when he digresses on minor points. When the reader misses the transitions, Augustine's text looks like a jumbled mess. This volume identifies the shifts, specifying which sections of *City of God* correspond to which topics. By observing where one section ends and another begins, the reader can track Augustine's argument instead of veering off course.

55. See Clark, *Comm. 1–5*, 7–9.

It is also important to understand where each section fits within the larger work. As Augustine explains, *City of God* is composed of two main parts: Books 1–10, which critique the Roman gods, and Books 11–22, which narrate the two cities across human history.[56] Each part is divided into sections. In the first part, Books 1–5 argue that the gods are of no benefit for temporal goods, and Books 6–10 argue that the gods are of no benefit for goods after this life. In the second part, Books 11–14 address the origins of the two cities, Books 15–18 address their development, and Books 19–22 address their ends.

Books 1–10: Against the gods
- Books 1–5: The gods are of no benefit in this life
- Books 6–10: The gods are of no benefit for the life to come

Books 11–22: History of the two cities
- Books 11–14: The origins of the two cities
- Books 15–18: The development of the two cities
- Books 19–22: The ends of the two cities

Though *City of God* generally follows a chronological sequence, there are some discrepancies between the order of the text and the order of the events recounted. While subtle, these discrepancies are illuminating. If we depart from the sequence of pages and track the sequence of events, Augustine's narrative appears as follows:

Earthly City	**Heavenly City**
Angelic/human origins: Books 11–14	Angelic/human origins: Books 11–14
Cain to flood: Book 15	Abel to flood: Book 15
Flood to Ninus: Book 16.1–11	Flood to early prophets: Books 16–17
Ninus to beginning of Rome: Book 18.2–26	
Beginning of Rome to time of Christ: Book 3	Later prophets: Book 18.27–44
Cessation of prophets to present: Book 18.45–54	Cessation of prophets to present: Book 18.45–54
Judgment: Book 20	Judgment: Book 20
Hell: Book 21	Heaven: Book 22

56. *Revisions* 2.43.1–2.43.2.

There are two unique sections in this narrative, both italicized in the table: Book 18.2–26, which traces the history of the earthly city from Ninus of Assyria to the beginning of Rome, and Book 3, which treats the history of the earthly city from the beginning of Rome to the time of Christ. These sections draw from different sources than the others, and they exhibit some oddities.

For much of his history of the two cities, Augustine relies on the Bible. Genesis 1–11 furnishes Augustine's account of both cities until the time of Abraham. The rest of the Old Testament provides Augustine's account of the heavenly city until the time of Christ. But Augustine cannot rely on the Bible alone for the development of the earthly city. There is too much other history to recount. Book 18.2–26 and Book 3 thus draw from classical and Christian authors like Livy and Eusebius. These sections receive far less space than the biblical material given the duration of history covered, and they treat the developments of the earthly city at varying length and interest. The material from Book 3 also appears at an unexpected place, not in the unit tracing the development of the two cities (Books 15–18) but in Augustine's earlier polemic against the gods.

These features indicate the special role these sections play in *City of God*. By narrating nonbiblical history, Book 18.2–26 and Book 3 substantiate Augustine's diagnosis of the earthly city. Together with Book 4, they detail the history of two offenses, violence and idolatry, both of which arise from a lust for earthly goods. Far from a private matter, this impulse spawns widespread devastation. Nations pursue conquest to secure earthly goods, and they fabricate gods for the same reason. The history of nations is one war after another, buttressed by false religion and incoherent ideology. Book 18.2–26 and Book 3 furnish evidence for a theological point: the lust for earthly goods destroys humanity. They also show that *City of God* is not a chronicle of Roman and Christian history. It is a narrative of human loves and an argument for their social consequence.

How to Use This Book

What follows is a guide for readers new to Augustine's work. First and foremost, this book offers an abridged edition of *City of God*. The selections focus on Augustine's social and political thought while also including other material that may help clarify the work as a whole. To the extent possible, I have included extended sections of text. This is because, in my experience,

students gain a better sense of the whole when they read continuous material, as opposed to isolated quotations. My goal has been to provide sufficient text to orient readers without overwhelming them. At the beginning of each book from which selections have been drawn, I provide a summary explaining the structure of the book and signaling important sections. The selections in this book are taken from the translation by William Babcock—a superb rendition for both accuracy and style—in the series The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, by New City Press. All other quotations of Augustine's work have, likewise, been taken from the editions in this series.

Along with the text of *City of God*, this book provides explanatory notes. These notes elucidate Augustine's arguments, flag important quotations, explain issues from the Latin, cross-reference other relevant passages, and offer guidance on his most challenging remarks. For ease of use, the notes sometimes repeat material from other aids in this book. My annotations have been coordinated with the original notes from the New City Press edition of *City of God*. As a rule, I have retained the New City Press notes whenever possible, moving or removing them only when this seemed appropriate for the purposes of the book.[57] I also follow New City Press for titles of Augustine's works. The two exceptions are *De Doctrina Christiana*, whose title does not translate easily into English (it is typically *On Christian Doctrine, On Christian Teaching*, or *Christian Teaching*), and *De Trinitate*, for which I simply prefer the Latin.

This book also includes essays on especially involved topics in *City of God*. The themes covered in the essays merit special attention because they arise several times in the work, they may be unfamiliar for new readers, or they raise challenges that cannot adequately be addressed in the notes. Examples include Augustine's treatment of Roman religion and his writings on war. Each essay is located after a book relevant to the theme. Though the essays treat these topics for their significance in *City of God*, they also sketch Augustine's positions in his wider corpus. For many of the topics, scholars disagree on how to interpret Augustine. In general, I avoid weighing in on these matters,

57. Apart from this introduction, unmarked notes are from the New City Press edition of *City of God*. I have marked my notes with the bracketed "[GWL]." In some cases, I have combined my notes and the New City Press notes into a single footnote, putting the latter in quotation marks and identifying them with the abbreviation "NCP." Alterations to internal text references have been indicated with brackets ("[ ]"). Minor typos have been corrected without indication, and titles, citation styles, and formatting have been updated for consistency throughout this volume. I have avoided altering the translation. My notes explain when something might be rendered differently.

directing readers instead to citations from Augustine's writings. I also list sources that have informed the essays and might encourage further research.

Finally, in the appendix I provide an outline for the entirety of *City of God*. The outline will help readers see how the pieces of Augustine's text fit together. It will also show which sections constitute Augustine's main arguments, and which are digressions that can be passed over. Readers can then discern the context for the selections included in this book. Those who want to tackle the entire work on their own can use the outline as a guide for the material not included here.

Here are some suggestions for new readers. First, read with an eye to Augustine's theological concerns. What is Augustine trying to accomplish with a particular argument? Why is he concerned about this or that point? What is at stake if a competing position prevails? How is he trying to shape his audience? Do not get bogged down in details. Readers can understand the gist of Augustine's arguments without grasping the minutiae. When a subtle reference is important, it will be highlighted in the notes. Readers will not stray far from Augustine's meaning if they can relate a given passage to love for God and neighbor or to the contrast between earthly and heavenly goods.

Second, do not take Augustine's descriptions of people, events, or practices at face value. As I mentioned above, Augustine is not always careful with his sources. Sometimes he misquotes them. Sometimes he depends on unreliable texts, repeating historical inaccuracies or trusting authors that modern scholars would not. At other points, Augustine recounts somewhat unbelievable stories of miracles or natural phenomena. Though he occasionally expresses doubts about these stories, he embraces the rare and fantastic more than many readers would today. These issues need not distract us from Augustine's theological insights.

This advice also applies to Augustine's depictions of his opponents. *City of God* includes some of Augustine's sharpest polemics. Like all controversialists, Augustine invokes evidence selectively, and he sometimes distorts points to his advantage.[58] Even the word "pagan," sometimes included in the title of Augustine's work, is a term of derision representing a contested perspective.[59] Those who worshiped the gods considered themselves to be respecting Roman tradition. From their vantage point, it was the Christians who invented new

58. Clark, *Comm. 6–10*, 7–9.

59. The longer title *City of God against the Pagans* is not original to Augustine, who simply called the work *De civitate dei*. See O'Daly, *Augustine's "City of God,"* 307–8.

ideas and despised what had served the Romans for centuries. It was thus the Christians, and not the "pagans," who deserved suspicion. In general, we should not assume Augustine's opponents would have affirmed his depictions of them, even if we agree with his conclusions.

Third, anticipate discomfort in your reading of Augustine. *City of God* includes some of Augustine's richest theological moments, displaying his conceptual and rhetorical gifts at the peak of his abilities. It also includes difficult, even disturbing, passages on several topics: women, rape, slavery, Judaism, original sin, and predestination, to name only a few. The essays in this book indicate the problem areas. In some cases, we can appreciate Augustine's remarks better by understanding his historical context. In other cases, contextual considerations will not mitigate the philosophical or moral difficulties. I have left it to readers to determine how to respond to these challenges—and to Augustine himself. Augustine offers much to admire and much to reject, and there is no simple strategy for deciding which response is appropriate in a given case. Indeed, the same applies for the Western Christian tradition as a whole, so much of which bears Augustine's imprint. It is perhaps best to see these challenges as tensions to engage rather than problems to solve.

Finally, appreciate the personal benefits of reading Augustine. Experiencing a classic work is like traveling to a foreign country. When we immerse ourselves in a different culture, we see how other people eat, talk, work, worship, and order their affairs. This provides fresh perspective on our own context, helping us perceive the distinctions and idiosyncrasies of our native environment. Immersive experiences do not dictate our responses to those experiences. Different travelers can encounter the same cross-cultural phenomenon and react to it in different ways. The same is true with ancient texts. Great texts offer enduring wisdom for our times, even when we differ on the implications.

City of God can sometimes feel like an alternate reality. It takes time to understand Augustine's universe: his concerns, his assumptions, his points of reference, his writing style and patterns of thought. Different readers will react differently to Augustine's writings, attending to disparate details, responding positively or negatively to the same argument, finding the same passage amusing or exasperating or both. This is why reading Augustine works best in community, whether it be a class, a book club, a Sunday school, or an ad hoc group of friends. We gain more from the text by welcoming others' reactions to it. Discussing our disagreements is an exercise in intellectual and personal formation, teaching us humility, patience, and respect toward those

with different perspectives. On this matter, we can learn from Augustine's approach to interpreting the Bible. As he contends in *De Doctrina Christiana*, since Christians' ultimate purpose in life is love for God and neighbor, this should be their purpose in reading Scripture too.[60] Though they should correct one another when they err, Christians should receive misinterpretations charitably. Misreadings can still promote love for God and neighbor, and there is no reason to castigate one another for minor mistakes. This is the spirit readers might adopt for reading Augustine as well.

60. *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.35.39–1.37.41.

History of the Romans

Gregory W. Lee and Avyi Hill

Augustine's many references to Roman individuals and events will make more sense with a basic overview of Roman history. This essay sketches the major developments as they figure in *City of God*, concentrating on how the Romans recounted their history and how Augustine interpreted it, even when scholars doubt the veracity of these events. Roman history is commonly divided into three major periods: the monarchy, the republic, and the empire.

The Monarchy (753–509 BCE)

The founding legends of Rome begin with Romulus and Remus, twins who were born of Rhea Silvia and Mars, exposed to die by order of their great uncle, suckled by a she-wolf, and raised by a shepherd. Romulus killed his brother and founded Rome (the traditional date is 753 BCE), becoming the first of its seven kings. During his reign, Romulus offered asylum to fugitives and abducted wives for them from the Sabines, a neighboring people. His successor, Numa Pompilius, was associated with peace and the establishment of Rome's religious institutions. Rome's final king, Tarquin the Proud (Tarquinius Superbus, of whom there is historical evidence), was deposed in 509 BCE after his son, Sextus, raped the noblewoman Lucretia. Tarquin's failed attempts to retake Rome gave way to the beginning of the republic.

According to a separate story, Rome's prehistory begins with Aeneas, a Trojan leader who escaped Troy as it was being destroyed by the Greeks. Aeneas journeyed to Italy, defeated the Latins, and settled in Alba Longa, the city that would found Rome. Romulus and Remus were understood to be descendants of Aeneas. Augustine's treatment of this period questions the veracity of these stories, stresses Rome's violence and idolatry, and critiques Rome's understanding of honor. (See 1.3, 19, 34; 2.17–18; 3.2–16; 5.18; 15.5; 18.24; and essay: "*City of God* 1.16–28: Rape of Christian Women.")

The Republic (509–27 BCE)

The early republic (509–287 BCE) began with the establishment of the consuls, two elected magistrates who ruled together for one-year terms and were advised by the senate. Soon after the establishment of the republic, the plebeians (common citizens) began a long struggle for equality with the patricians (privileged citizens). This Conflict of the Orders (494–287 BCE) resulted in many gains, including the establishment of tribunes to represent plebeian interests. During this time, Rome expanded to become the dominant power in all Italy. Rome was sacked by the Gauls in 390 BCE, the last time it would suffer such an attack until 410 CE.

The middle republic (287–133 BCE) was defined by Rome's expansion around the Mediterranean. In the western Mediterranean, Rome fought Carthage, the major power in North Africa, in three Punic Wars spanning 264–146 BCE. The First Punic War was the context for the general Marcus Regulus's heroic submission to torture by the Carthaginians. The Second Punic War began when the Carthaginian commander Hannibal besieged and conquered Saguntum, a Spanish city and ally of Rome. Hannibal was eventually defeated by the Roman commander Scipio Africanus the Elder. The Third Punic War ended when Rome razed Carthage in 146 BCE. Rome also secured the Hellenistic East through the three Macedonian Wars (217–168 BCE), among other victories.

The late republic (133–27 BCE) was dominated by internal conflicts. This era began when the tribune Tiberius Gracchus proposed reforms to redress economic imbalances between the landowners and the peasants. His proposals prompted severe opposition by the senate, and he was murdered, the first tribune to be killed while in office (133 BCE). His brother, Gaius Gracchus, also served as tribune and proposed reforms that resulted in his death (121 BCE). Some years later, a dispute between Rome and various Italians over their citizenship rights broke into the Social War (91–89 BCE), which devastated Italy and set the stage for decades of further conflicts.

Civil war soon erupted between Gaius Marius, a former consul, and Sulla, who had once served under Marius. In 88, Sulla was elected consul and given command to wage war against Mithridates VI of Pontus, who had massacred thousands of Romans in Asia Minor. When Marius conspired to have this command transferred to him, Sulla returned from Pontus, marched his army on Rome, and drove out his opponents. Marius escaped for a time to Africa. When Sulla pursued further campaigns in the East, Marius returned to Rome, became consul, and killed his enemies before dying in office (86 BCE). In 83 BCE, Sulla returned to Rome, killed *his* enemies, and became dictator. Marked by Sulla's use of proscriptions, this second return was especially brutal. The 70s BCE witnessed another civil war and then a slave revolt (73–71 BCE) led by the former gladiator Spartacus, probably with the support of peasants who had suffered under Sulla.

A couple decades later, following other internal conflicts, Pompey, Marcus Crassus, and Julius Caesar formed what is commonly called the First Triumvirate to rule the republic from 59 to 53 BCE. After Crassus's death, conflict arose between Pompey and Caesar. Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE. In the aftermath of this conflict, when Caesar's rise to power was assured, Marcus Cato (Cato the Younger) opposed him to the point of committing suicide. Later, Caesar established himself as perpetual dictator. He was assassinated on the Ides of March (March 15) in 44 BCE. After a period of turmoil, Lepidus, Mark Antony, and Caesar's grandnephew Octavian formed the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE. Octavian then ousted Lepidus from the Triumvirate (36 BCE), setting up a conflict between himself and Antony. After Octavian defeated Antony at the Battle of Actium (31 BCE), Antony escaped with his lover, Cleopatra, to Egypt, where he would commit suicide. Octavian assumed undisputed authority over the Romans under the name Augustus Caesar (27 BCE).

In *City of God*, Augustine reckons especially with the historian Sallust's depiction of the Romans. Sallust had praised Roman morality during the early republic and the period spanning the Second and Third Punic Wars (2.18; 3.16–21). According to Augustine, the oppression of the plebeians by the patricians better represented Rome's character. Augustine also stresses Rome's moral degeneration after the destruction of Carthage (1.30–31). These arguments advance Augustine's case that Rome experienced moral suffering before Christ. As for Rome's physical suffering before Christ, Augustine emphasizes the social and civil wars (3.23–30), especially the conflict between Marius and Sulla (3.27–29), and Mithridates's massacre of the Romans (3.22). Though Augustine does not detail the transition from the republic to the empire, he treats Cato and Julius Caesar at important points in *City of God* (1.23; 5.12). Regulus (1.15, 24; 2.23; 3.18, 20; 5.18), Spartacus (3.26; 4.5), and the siege of Saguntum (3.20; 22.6) also feature in notable sections.

The Empire (27 BCE–476 CE)

Augustus's victory marked the beginning of the empire. This era is commonly divided into two periods: the Principate (27 BCE–284 CE), in which an apparent commitment to republican principles was retained, and the Dominate (284–476 CE), in which even this appearance was generally disregarded. Augustine does not treat these periods in much detail; he cites very few authors after the republican period. Still, several events are relevant for his concerns.

In 64 CE, the emperor Nero blamed Christians for a great fire in Rome that he was suspected to have caused. By torturing and killing them, he aroused sympathy for the

Christians and exacerbated his own notoriety. The destruction of the Jerusalem temple occurred in 70 CE under the emperor Vespasian and his son, Titus, a general who would succeed him as emperor. The expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem and Judea occurred in 135 CE under Hadrian, following the Bar Kokhba revolt. Decius and his successor, Valerian, oversaw the first empire-wide persecution of Christians (249–60). Diocletian (284–305) established the Tetrarchy, in which four emperors ruled different regions of the empire, and oversaw Rome's most aggressive persecution of Christians. Constantine (306–37) was the first emperor to convert to Christianity. Except for Julian "the Apostate" (361–63), all of Constantine's successors were Christian.

Two major dynasties followed: the Valentinian (364–92) and the Theodosian (379–455). These were the main dynasties of Augustine's lifetime, and they feature in 5.25–26, where he treats the emperors after Constantine. Valentinian I (364–75) ruled the West as his brother Valens ruled the East (364–78). After the death of Valentinian I, Gratian ruled the West until he was usurped by Magnus Maximus in 383. In the East, Valens was killed by the Goths at the catastrophic Battle of Adrianople (378). He was succeeded by Theodosius I, the figure Augustine celebrates in 5.26 for his piety and opposition to Roman religion. Theodosius made Nicene Christianity the official religion of the empire in 380. In 391, perhaps under the influence of Ambrose, Theodosius issued a law closing the Roman temples and banning sacrifices. Theodosius was also the emperor who called the Council of Constantinople (381), from which Christians received the updated version of the Nicene Creed, sometimes referred to as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

During his rule, Gratian had recognized Valentinian II, Valentinian I's young son, as a junior co-emperor who would rule at the direction of his mother, Justina. Valentinian II was the emperor in Milan during Augustine's career there (*Confessions* 6.6.9). Valentinian II sided with the bishop Ambrose against Symmachus in a controversy over the restoration of the Altar of Victory to the Roman senate house (384). The next year, he capitulated to Ambrose in a conflict about the use of a basilica by Arian Christians (*Confessions* 9.7.15). After Gratian was killed by Maximus's associate, Valentinian II continued as emperor until Maximus invaded Italy in 387. This invasion is the reason Augustine and his mother Monica were delayed in Ostia, a port city outside Rome, from traveling back to Africa (*Confessions* 9.8.17). Valentinian II and his mother fled to Thessalonica for Theodosius's protection. In 388, Theodosius defeated Maximus and reinstalled Valentinian II as emperor of the West. Valentinian II died under suspicious circumstances in 392.

For a brief time, Theodosius ruled the entire empire, the last emperor to do so. After he died in 395, the empire was divided into east and west. Gothic and Germanic

invasions weakened the western empire until it collapsed under Romulus Augustulus in 476. The eastern empire continued as the Byzantine Empire until 1453, when it fell to the Ottoman Turks.

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