

# AUGUSTINE'S HISTORIOGRAPHICAL METHOD

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## *Abstract*

Originally written to defend the church against charges of being responsible for the destruction of the city of Rome in 410 CE, Augustine's *City of God* has come to stand as a monument to theological reflection on the history of God's creation. Although not primarily a historian, Augustine made a significant contribution to the study of Christian history. He raises Scripture to become the source of the meaning of history and defines the only true history as sacred history. This article considers Augustine's critique of the Catholic Church, the meaning of history, the origins of the *City of God*, Augustine's views on philosophy and theology history, and the prophetic nature of biblical history.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The church has a history that dates back many centuries, and part of this record is found in the Holy Scriptures. The Christian faith is significant, comprehensible and historical. In examining the growth of the church from the first century to the fourth century, we discover theologians like Augustine of Hippo who left a significant mark on the history of the church in the fourth century, in particular. This is notable in his defence of faith against the Donatists, the British monk Pelagius, and especially in his writings in *City of God*.

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## 2 AUGUSTINE'S CRITIQUE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Augustine rejected the idea that “the power of the keys had been entrusted to Peter alone” (Frend 1991:222). Peter’s primacy was simply a matter of personal privilege and not an office. Augustine did not think in terms of any primacy of jurisdiction for Peter. For Augustine, Christ himself and belief in Him is the foundation of the church. Christ entrusted the church to the disciples, as they had to convey the message to all the people in the world. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). In Augustine’s thought the ecumenical council is the supreme authority. Augustine did not reproach the Donatists for not being in communion with Rome, but rather for a lack of communion which the apostolic sees as a whole. His view of church government was that less important questions should be settled by provincial councils, and more important questions by general councils. But he still had great respect for the Holy See in Rome. One of Augustine’s famous sayings is: “You have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you” (Kung 1995:72). The Donatist and Pelagian controversies had shaken the church’s theology, and under his leadership Augustine compelled himself to bring about changes.

When Augustine began to write *City of God* in 413, his intention was to defend the Christian Church against the charge of having brought about the destruction of Rome in 410. Rome’s misfortunes were not due to the growth in Christianity, as Rome had suffered numerous calamities and reversals prior to Christ’s birth. Her gods had not protected her then, and they did not protect her now, because they could not protect her: they were futile nonentities (Dyson 1998:xii). Outgrowing this initial purpose, the work evolved into a detailed critique of the political and moral tradition of Rome and provided a synthesis of Platonism and Christianity. It must stand as one of the most significant achievements in Western intellectual history. The destruction of Rome and the resulting problems provided the occasion for writing *City of God*, but were not the main reason for it: “[T]he catastrophe of 410 is not the real reason for the genesis of the work, but only a first stimulus” (Van Oort 1991:87). In fact, throughout the work Augustine rarely mentions the fall of Rome. His focus is on two loves and subsequently on two cities:

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love ... the one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, “I will love you, my Lord, my strength” (CD XIV:28).

This was not a new theme in Augustine’s writing, but here they are ordered systematically (Van Oort 1991:88).

For the time being, the two cities are mingled together in this world, sharing its resources and sharing its tribulations also (CD XI:1), for God causes His rain to fall upon good and evil men alike. They will only be visibly divided at the end of history, when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities is intimately associated with a Christian

historical perspective; it is not in any defensible sense a philosophy of history. Human history, properly conceived, is not like Livy's history, but like the Bible's history. Here, Scripture is normative: "These are writings of outstanding authority in which we put our trust concerning those things which we need to know for our good, and yet are incapable of discovering for ourselves" (CD XI:3). In the writing of this history, Augustine's view of revelation was limited by his human fallibility.

His earlier study of Manichaeism and neo-Platonism provided him with a dualistic model on which to base his concepts of the earthly and heavenly cities (Van Oort 1991:352). These two cities were absolutely antithetical to one another, and the main purpose of the work is to demonstrate this. His apologetic purpose in the first ten chapters of his work reminds the Romans that their history contradicts their claims, and that history should be judged in the light of the distinction between the two cities. Parallels with *City of God* are also found in Christian writers such as Ambrose, although in Ambrose it was an individualised internal spiritual antithesis. Similarities are also found in the works of Cyprian and Tertullian.

Augustine's approach to history writing is not, as certain philosophers think, an endless repetition of the same cycle of creation and destruction; nor is it the history of the glorious exploits of Rome or of any other empire. It is the gradual unfolding of the respective destinies of the two cities, in a linear, although not always straightforward, progression from the beginning of history to its end. History is not working towards some end or culmination in this world. The true destiny of mankind, whether it be damnation or salvation, does not lie within history, but beyond history (Dyson 1998:xxi).

### 3 THE MEANING OF HISTORY

Augustine's concern was the destiny of human beings. In his books he presents a large-scale interpretation of history: the battle between the *civitas terrena*, the earthly state, and the *civitas Dei*, the city of God. The great controversy between the world's state and God's state is the mysterious foundation and meaning of history, which is at the same time a history of salvation and disaster.

Augustine describes the origin and beginning of the two cities, then their progress through seven ages, and finally history's outcome and goal: "I shall treat of their origin, their development and their destined ends" (CD X:32; XI:1). It originates in a dispute between the angels and God, prior to the creation of humanity. This is the origin of the separation between God and the good angels and those who choose to follow the devil. The Fall (CD XI) initiates the two cities, where those who wish to follow the weakness of the flesh and those who live according to the spirit part company. There is a city of Babylon and the Catholic Church, so the city of God and the city of this world are different right from the beginning. Both world history and the history of individuals run in six periods, formed after the pattern of the week of creation, which in world history becomes a global week. As each day is followed by night, each epoch tends towards a period of decline before the emergence of

a new era. With Jesus Christ, the Lord of the city of God has appeared corporeally in the world: the God-man as the climax of world history.

Having paid close attention to the growth of the heavenly city (up to CD XVII) which “did not proceed on its course in this world in isolation”, by contrast Augustine describes the earthly city, Rome, as opposed to the heavenly city. It is an “alien sojourner” (CD XVIII:1). This city is entangled with the secular context and so they are treated together. The earthly city is epitomised by Babylon and is succeeded in time by Rome; one empire replacing the other, with the kingdom of the West superceding that of the East. During this time, the city of God receded into the background of the writer’s concerns only to become central in CD Book XVIII:1: “[T]he City of God developed not in the light, but in the shadow.” The restoration of the light was the new covenant signified by Christ’s coming. As Israel was susceptible to apostasy, she lost her status with only the salvation of a righteous remnant. In this regard, Augustine quotes Isa 10:20: “Even if the number of the sons of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, it is only a remnant that will be saved.” This led to the call to the Gentiles:

However, it would be impossible for the Gentiles to expect his coming to exercise judgment in the splendour of his power - as we now observe them expecting it - if they did not first believe in him as he came to submit to judgment in the humility of his patient endurance (CD XVIII:45).

Yet, only Israel can rightly call herself God’s chosen people (CD XVIII:47), while others could be counted among God’s chosen: “I have no doubt that it was the design of God’s providence that from this one instance we should know that there could also be those among other nations who lived by God’s standards and were pleasing to God, as belonging to the spiritual Jerusalem”; i.e. “all who are predestined for the City of God”. Hence the city of God is to have a universal character composed of pilgrims whose residence in the secular world is only temporary.

Augustine considers the church to be an early creation not dependent on the coming of Christ: “It has never failed to be foretold in prophecy from the beginning of the human race, and we now see the prophecy being fulfilled in all that happens” (CD XVI:2). There is a progression in Augustine’s view of salvation history which reached its highest point in Christ’s incarnation. The purpose of history is completed when “the number of the predestined saints [is] made up” (CD XIV:10). The eventual heavenly city will involve a return to its original pristine state (CD XXII:1). Van Oort (1991:101) states the situation quite succinctly: “Heaven is its origin, heaven its final destination.”

Augustine’s view of history is premised on a rejection of a pagan approach to history. This is based in the view that the world has always existed (CD XII:10-13). It relies on a cyclical view of history where the immortal soul “must proceed on an unremitting alternation between false bliss and genuine misery”. Referring to Ecclesiastes 1:9, Augustine claims:

And they want this to be taken as referring to those circular movements, returning to the same state as before, and bringing all things back to the same condition ... Heaven forbid, I repeat, that we should believe this for “Christ died once for all our sins”; and “in rising from the dead he is never to die again” ... “The ungodly walk in a circle” [Ps 12:9]; not because their life is going to come round again in the course of those revolutions which they believe in, but because the way of their error, the way of false doctrine, goes round in circles (CD XII:14).

Augustine rejects this idea on the basis that “no man existed before the creation of the first man” (CD XII:18) and that “[t]he eternal life of the saints refutes them completely” (CD XII:20).

**With the help of the Bible and ancient historians, Augustine wants to achieve two things: first, to present numerous historical details with all possible parallels, analogies and allegories; second, to offer a meaningful overall view of world history as the great clash between faith and unbelief. So it is that Augustine created the first monumental theology of the history of Christianity. It had a deep influence on the whole of mediaeval Western theology and the theology of the Reformation, up to the threshold of the modern secularisation of history. Down to our own days, Augustine’s theology and style reminds many people not only of the meaning of history, but also of the meaning of life.**

Augustine wrote no historical works, either in our modern sense or in the sense in which “history” would have been understood in his time. In the established tradition of ancient historiography, authors generally stopped short of their own lifetime. The little historical material to be found in Augustine’s writings concerned very recent events; events he himself had taken part in and witnessed, such as the conference of Catholics and Donatists held under imperial supervision in Carthage in 411 CE.

His education acquainted him with the classics of Roman history, and he made use of these, especially of Sallust and the antiquarians Varro and Seneca (see CD Books VI & VII), in his own writings, notably *City of God*. But in secular historiography as commonly understood, he disclaimed interest. Concerning the Punic Wars, he commented: “If I were to recall and relate those calamities, I should turn into just another chronicler” (CD 3.18.1).

Augustine was also well acquainted with ecclesiastical history, especially through Rufinus’s Latin version of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical history* and Jerome’s version of Eusebius’s *Chronicle*. He was of course well acquainted with the history of the Donatist schism through the work of Optatus and his own research. Although Augustine’s interest in history was confined to what he needed for polemical purposes and what he needed to incorporate in his argument, he had a deep interest in theological questions about history, its meaning and relevance to God’s providence, and its place in the pattern of the economy of salvation.

#### **4 THE ORIGIN AND THE HISTORY OF THE TWO CITIES**

The origin and the history of the two cities are expounded by Augustine in the *City of God*. His periodisation of history was to exert an important influence on later historiography. In his view of *Heilsgeschichte* (Van Oort 1991:361), Augustine shows a similarity with Old Testament historiography. There is a certain progression in the different stages of the *Heilsgeschichte*; its ultimate goal is the completion of the city of God. Augustine shows that there is a fundamental antithesis between the citizens of the city of God and those of the earthly city. He points out to his Roman opponents not only that their own history contradicts their assertions, but especially that the course of history should be judged in the light of the antithesis between *civitas Dei* and *terrena civitas* (Van Oort 1991:93). Augustine arranges the actual history of the two cities in different ways.

First of all, it is noteworthy that he divides the latter according to the periods that emerge from the historical course of the city of God: the periodisation of the history of salvation determines that of world history. Moreover, he classifies the periods on the basis of Genesis 1: just as man was created on the sixth day, the sixth period is heralded by the coming of the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

The new person makes an appearance, in the final period, which at the same time means a total renewal.

**Only at the end of the work does his definitive approach to periodisation appear. It accords with the seven days of creation:**

**The first "day" is the first period, from Adam to the Flood; the second from the Flood to Abraham ... From that time, in the scheme of the evangelist Matthew, there are three epochs, which take us down to the coming of Christ; one from Abraham to David, a second from David to the exile in Babylon, and the third extending to the coming of Christ in the flesh. We are now in the sixth epoch ... After this present age, God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day ... whose end will not be an evening, but the Lord's Day, an eighth day, as it were, which is to last forever, a day consecrated to the resurrection of Christ (CD XXII:30).**

And all of this tends towards "that kingdom which has no end" (ibid.), the goal of the righteous which is the result of the triumph of the kingdom of Christ over that of Satan's realm. Here we note Augustine's dependence on the Matthean genealogical schema.

Augustine often refers to the city of God as Christ's body, yet he only rarely equates it with the church based in Rome. Moreover, as a man trained in rhetoric he was familiar with the scheme used by the Romans. Now he could apply it in his apology: the true city is not Rome, but the city of God. For Augustine Rome is the second Babylon, Babylon the first Rome. One empire took the place of the other. Thus a caesura in the history of the earthly city is indicated. But can the history of the other *civitas* be synchronised with this? Although Augustine's basic starting point is the course of the city of God as described in Scripture, he sees clear parallels between the two. At the end of

Book XVIII Augustine remarks that the city of God went its way in the shadows until the revelation of the New Covenant. The full light broke through with the coming of Christ. The city of God revealed itself even more clearly in Abraham; his lineage was, as it were, the *plantatio civitatis Dei*. From then onwards the history of the city of God was for a long time identical to that of Israel. This people received the law and the promise before all other nations. And yet Israel lost its citizenship in the city of God, especially after the Babylonian captivity. Instead of being the chosen people, the Israelites increasingly became enemies.

They became apostate and this apostasy was soon accompanied by the disappearance of their independent existence as a state. As the history of salvation progressed, the contents of the message of salvation became clearer. But at the same time an increasing unwillingness to accept salvation was made manifest. Augustine sees this repeatedly in the behaviour of Israel.

Due to this obstinacy each period in the history of the *civitas Dei* eventually experiences a decline. But again and again God makes a new start. This view of the history of salvation is reminiscent of a historiography in Israel itself, as it had been studied especially by Gerhard von Rad (cf. Van Oort 1991:99). And Augustine's view can be better understood if it is related to his division of history by analogy with the days of creation: each time night falls, thereafter God creates a new day. Thus Augustine saw the history of salvation as a process that starts over and over again. For him an immanent evolution is out of the question, but there is a continuing plan of salvation in which God acts creatively. An important aspect of the aforementioned should not be neglected, however. Augustine regards the appearance of Christ as a decisive event in the history of the city of God, but not as an absolute one. For salvation did not begin with the coming of Christ; it had been present throughout the history of mankind:

This mystery of eternal life has been made known by the ministry of angels from the very beginning of the human race ... all the precepts for the conduct of life which shape men's character and their piety and are contained in the Scriptures, but also the ceremonies, the priesthoods, the tabernacle or the temple, the altars, the sacrifices, the sacred rites, the festal days, and everything that is concerned with the homage due to God - all these were symbols and predictions that find their fulfillment in Christ, so as to give eternal life to those who believe (CD VII:32).

Belief in salvation through Christ has always existed.

Thus Abel was already justified, as were all the believers from the period of the Old Covenant and also those from the Gentile nations like Job. The church has existed since the beginning of mankind; long before the birth of Christ there was the earthly history of the city of God. Thus there is a progression in the stages of the history of salvation and there is one decisive event: the incarnation of Christ. Yet this event is not the termination of history. The purpose of history is to complete the number of those who are predestined.

Then the city of God will have returned to what it was in the beginning.  
Heaven is its origin, heaven its final destination.

## 5 AUGUSTINE'S VIEW ON PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Augustine was an apologetical historian. The *De Genesi ad Litteram* and the *De Civitate Dei* are certainly not the fruit of free inquiry into the meaning of creation and history (Keyes 1996:84). His method has been criticised as anti-historical because of the rigid theological system which controls it. His Christian creed is treated as true beyond question; and experience and the historical process, if they are not found therein, are made to conform to its prescription. It may be that Augustine is not intellectually or intuitively certain of the truth of every clause and subsection of the Christian creed. But he is willing to try to accept it complete, as a working principle.

His study of history is intended not to discover patterns or lines of development, but to demonstrate God's love everywhere expressed. He uses the great secular philosophies of antiquity as an intellectual quarry. As for canonical Scripture, he agrees with Irenaeus and St Athanasius that the Bible is the first and greatest historical source, but he will be found as ready to distort this to secure his apologetical purpose.

Thus his intent was to present Christianity in such a way that it could be seen within a historical as well as universal framework, and subsequently be embraced as a definitive faith perspective as an alternative to Roman political leadership. For Augustine argues that human history itself has no ultimate meaning or significance. Temporal history is given meaning only through divine providence, and the events of this world are explainable only within the context of the concepts of redemption and salvation. Augustine's primary purpose in writing *City of God* was to articulate a fully developed Christian view of history.

He believed that God's plan could not be dependent upon the fate of any temporal state. Augustine views human history as a conflict between the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei*, not between one or the other of these two societies and the state. Augustine makes it clear that in human history the sphere of politics is autonomous. Politics belongs to the sphere of secular history and for Augustine the only true history is sacred history. In Augustine's thought the difference between secular and sacred history depends on the source of the narrative, that is whether or not the historical narrative is prophetically inspired.

## 6 INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

The church that nurtures its believers through the sacraments is not yet in heaven, but struggles and lives as a pilgrim within Christo-historical events. The fall of Rome in AD 410, which shook the Mediterranean world, led Augustine to think and write on the meaning of history. He was a theologian of history. Secondly, precisely in this way he aimed to offer a meaningful overall view of world history as the great clash between belief and unbelief, humility



and arrogance, love and striving for power, salvation and damnation from the beginning of time until today.

So it was Augustine who created the first monumental theology of history in Christianity. He had an influence on the whole of mediaeval Western theology and the theology of the Reformation. Up to the threshold of antiquity there was neither a philosophy of history nor a theology of history. Augustine no more intended that crude conclusion than he intended to condemn all sexuality. He was sure that the clue to the meaning of history was to be found in the Bible, not in imperial propaganda or in extravagant claims for the church. History is not the story of steady progress nor is it a repeating cycle of events ruled by chance or fate and ultimately meaningless. It is also not an advertisement for one institution, political or ecclesiastical. It is the story of two cities.

## 7 BIBLICAL HISTORY

*Historia* for Augustine meant the record of what has been done, either by human or by divine agency (*sive divinitus sive humanitas gesta*, *Gn. litt. imp.* 2.5 in Fitzgerald & Cavadini 1999:433). The Bible contained narratives concerning the Old and New Testaments. Biblical history was unique among other historical records in being divinely inspired, and in that many of its narratives of past events, as well as the Old Testament as a whole, were endowed with prophetic meaning.

Hence it could be interpreted on two levels, historically or prophetically, according to whether the interpreter's interest lay in the past or in the future. The origin of all history was Adam's fall. Augustine considered human life in the Garden of Eden as temporal but not, in the strict sense, as historical. Although time began with the creation of a temporal world, it became historical only with Adam's loss of his union with the Creator through sin. Human history was the record of human alienation from God through sin.

Biblical history, taken as a whole, was for Augustine the history of human salvation, beginning with the creation and ending with the final return of the Lord in judgement to gather his faithful from the four corners of the world. Augustine was sceptical about the possibility of interpreting divine purpose in secular history except with the aid of clues furnished by, and within the framework of, the scriptural narrative.

Augustine's anthropology surveys the sweep of human history from a Christian perspective. History begins with God creating and concludes with Christ, in whom all creation will be united and presented to the Father. Augustine is unable to speak of history without speaking of creation, incarnation and final unity in diversity in Christ. Nor can he speak of humanity while remaining reticent about sin and grace. Real history, the only history, is a drama involving all this. In this perspective the human person is utterly dependent on God and other humans.

## 8 CONCLUSION

While not a work of history in the terms in which we recognise it in the twentieth century, Augustine's *City of God* stands as an early contribution in the field of theological history writing. In this respect he goes beyond Eusebius. His ultimate concern is to demonstrate God's love to the world He has created and the ultimate triumph of the city of God over the secular (temporal) city. While the fall of Rome provides the occasion for *City of God* it is not the main reason for it. Augustine focuses on the political and moral state of Rome only to provide the basis for his discussion of the two cities, which emerge from the two types of love evident in the world, love of earthly power and love of God; both of which are proceeding towards a predetermined goal. The conflict between the two gives a clue to the meaning of history, and engages with the dissonance between the temporal and the eternal. The Incarnation of Christ is the turning point of history and provides Augustine with the hermeneutic on which he bases his work. He is conscious of his debt to earlier scholars, although he gave his own distinctive meaning and interpretation to history.

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