Augustus as emperor on earth, Christ as emperor in heaven

Chromatius of Aquileia, Sermon 32.1

Name of the author: Chromatius of Aquileia
Date: 400 CE Dec 25th
Language: Latin

Category: Christian
Literary genre: Sermon

Title of work: Sermon 32
Reference: 32.1
Circumstances: Preached on Christmas Day (25th December)

Commentary:
Chromatius of Aquileia (who was born c. 355 probably in the Italian city of Aquileia, and died in 407 CE) is still relatively little known in comparison to other Christian authors of the fourth and fifth centuries, and until the recent work particularly of Robert McEachnie, has not received much scholarly attention. However, his sermons are a useful window into Christian and church identity in the later Roman empire in northern Italy during a transitional period. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, had died less than two decades before Chromatius’s birth, and the process of the Christianisation of the empire was still ongoing. Chromatius served as bishop of Aquileia, a busy port town on the Adriatic sea, from 388 and until his death in 407 CE (on the character of Aquileia, see McEachnie, Chromatius of Aquileia, p. 40-55). Due to Aquileia’s position as a trade hub for the empire, Chromatius was able to keep in regular contact with notable Christian contacts across the empire, such as Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Rufinus, and Jerome. Forty-three sermons (thirty-one of which are complete) are attributed to Chromatius, in addition to part of a commentary on Matthew. As Robert McEachnie argues, his writings demonstrate an attempt to solidify church identity by constructing a “history of heresy,” and marking his “orthodox” version of Christianity as “normative” (see McEachnie, “A History of Heresy Past”). More than simply unifying the Church, however, this enabled Chromatius to claim power more widely. With the Church having imperial support in Chromatius’s day, the establishment of a narrative in which the “true” Church was seen to come together against the “heretics” afforded credibility to the “orthodox” Church which Chromatius advocated. For McEachnie, this could give Chromatius, as bishop of Aquileia, “credentials as the most powerful man in [its] religious arena” (see Chromatius of Aquileia, p. 95-101, quotation at p. 101).

A significant part of Chromatius’s identity-forming rhetoric involved connecting the Jews with heretics, particularly the Arians, due to their mutual denial of the divinity of Christ (McEachnie, Chromatius of Aquileia, p. 101). Moreover, Chromatius also challenged the traditional dichotomy between Roman and “barbarian” identity. His sermons presented “barbarians” as deviant in terms of religion, but suggested that they could be saved through Nicene Christianity. This understanding had the effect of making those who rejected Christianity the uncivilised barbarians, rather than simply those who resided outside the Roman empire (see McEachnie, Chromatius of Aquileia, p. 112-117, 126-134). Christianity is shown by Chromatius to be the inheritor of the Roman conceptualisation of vice and virtue. McEachnie argues that the elite, particularly women, were targeted by Chromatius in his conversion efforts because their support of Christianity would furnish the Church with more wealth and power, thereby further solidifying its place at the heart of Aquileia. Ultimately, Chromatius “created an identity that defined Christians as the new Romans” (Chromatius of Aquileia, p. 16; on the issue of vice and virtue, see chapter 7).

The present sermon, concerning the birth of Christ, was preached at the turn of the century on the 25th of December at Christmas, which had begun to be celebrated in Rome at the beginning of the fourth century, and then gradually spread eastwards. The issues concerning identity briefly outlined in the above introduction appear in this sermon at various points. For instance, Chromatius argues that Christ was wrapped in swaddling rags at his birth because he was to “weave together” the different nations into one “robe” (i.e. Christianity), with disparate peoples uniting in their devotion to Christ (32.2). Moreover, the inn which Mary and Joseph are turned away from prior to Christ’s birth is interpreted as a Jewish synagogue, because in the same way all races meet at an inn, the synagogue, Chromatius argues, has become a place of numerous forms of unbelief (32.3). The focus of the extract
above, however, demonstrates Chromatius’s interest in the Roman census at the time of Christ’s nativity, which follows that of numerous other Christian authors both contemporary to him and earlier (see the Commentary on Daniel IV.9, John Chrysostom, Homily on the Date of Christmas 2, Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans VI.22, Aphrahat, On Wars V). For Chromatius, Christ’s incarnation “constitutes him the true Augustus,” who is superior to the Roman emperor in that Christ’s dominion covers both the earthly and heavenly realms (Vincent Vasey, “Chromatius of Aquileia,” p. 30).

In addition to the sources cited above, particularly relevant in comparison is the interpretation of the census under Quirinius by Ambrose of Milan, who composed his Commentary on Luke in around 377 CE, and similarly to Origen in his commentary on the same Gospel text, argues that there was a divine mystery behind the level of detail which the Lukan evangelist gives in his description of the census. Ambrose claimed that the earthly census was merely a figure which represented the divine census, the census animorum. For Ambrose, the census described by Luke affected the whole universe, which Christ, not Augustus, has dominion over. He claims that this is why the evangelist termed it as the “first census,” indicating that it was the first census of souls, rather than simply a list of residents of the empire, of which there had been others previously (see Hervé Inglebert, “Christian Reflections,” p. 104). John Chrysostom also argued along similar lines towards the end of the fourth century CE (for further discussion of Origen’s text, see the commentary on John Chrysostom, Homily on the Date of Christmas 2). Chromatius follows this line of thought in the present sermon by interpreting the census spiritually and indulging in several parallels between Augustus and Christ, as well as the earthly and heavenly census, and the imperial poll-tax and the “heavenly interest in individual faith” (Inglebert, “Christian Reflections,” p. 104). Essentially, his logic is that Augustus’s census was actually carried out for Christ, towards his soteriological aims.

Firstly, Chromatius argues that it is only logical for the census of “the entire world” to be conducted when Christ was made incarnate, because it was ultimately for Christ that the human race needed to be counted. The administrative task carried out by the Roman government is therefore commandeered by Chromatius for a higher divine purpose – it is linked with Christ’s rulership over the whole of humankind. Like others before him, Chromatius synchronises the census with Augustus, and for this author there is significance in the fact that this emperor was the first to be given the name “Augustus,” as it allows for a comparison between Christ, the “true and eternal Augustus” (aeternus Augustus) and the Roman princeps. The latter merely has dominion over the earth, while Christ also rules in heaven over the angels. Chromatius also finds significance in the name of Quirinius (???????? in Greek), the Roman governor of Syria under whom the census was conducted. Chromatius explains that the governor’s name means “ruler,” which perfectly describes Christ. In both Augustus and Quirinius, then, Chromatius interprets the earthly scenario at the time of the census as reflecting the status of Christ. However, Christ, the Lord of Lords, will surpass the authority of these Roman rulers because unlike them he has authority over both bodies and souls. While the emperor’s census enables him to keep track of what is owed in tribute money, there is a deeper meaning to this “counting of heads,” as it is paralleled with Christ’s assessment of all those who are faithful to him. In this sense, he can be understood as collecting a “tax of faith,” i.e. devotion to him, which was most perfectly expressed by the martyrs who were killed for their confession of Christ’s name.

Chromatius’s symmetrical presentation of Roman power and God’s/Christ’s power is therefore a powerful illustration of the superiority of the latter, which has a heavenly dimension that surpasses Roman earthly rule. However, Chromatius, like others who treated the census before him (with the notable exception of the author of the Commentary on Daniel), does not view the empire negatively; rather, Roman actions are interpreted as the carriers of deeper mysteries which reveal God’s plan for human salvation.

Keywords in the original language:

- aeternus Augustus
- angelus
- anima
- caelestis
- caelum
- Caesar
- census
- Christus Dominus
- dominator
- dominus
That God inspired Caesar Augustus to conduct the census at the time of Christ’s incarnation.

- Read more about John Chrysostom, Homily on the Date of Christmas 2
Commentary on Daniel IV.9

Christian citizenship and Roman citizenship

- Read more about Commentary on Daniel IV.9

Text

Paulus Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans VI.22.5-8

Christ’s desire to be a Roman citizen

- Read more about Paulus Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans VI.22.5-8

Realized by:

Kimberley Fowler

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