



[Paulus Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans III.8](#)

That Christ was responsible for the Pax Romana

Name of the author: Paulus Orosius

Date: 416 CE to 417 CE

Place: Stridon, Dalmatia?

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans

Reference: III.8

Commentary:

The Spanish Christian presbyter Paulus Orosius (385-420 CE) was a student of Augustine, and is best known for his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*. In the aftermath of the sack of Rome by the Visigoth king Alaric in 410 CE, Orosius's work attempted to counter claims that Rome had fallen due to imperial adoption of Christianity (a theory which pagan writers forwarded, suggesting that the traditional gods were no longer protecting the city). Augustine had also written his *City of God* in response to these criticisms, and it was on Augustine's request that Orosius composed his history (see, for instance, Augustine's *City of God* II.3, and his *Sermon* 296.9, which argues that two previous sacks of the city of Rome occurred even before Christianity was its dominant religion). The book was the first world history to be composed by a Christian author, and utilised the works of writers such as Livy, Caesar, Tacitus, Justin, Suetonius, Florus, and Eusebius. Orosius argued that Christianity had benefited the empire more than it had harmed it, and gives examples of disasters that had occurred long before Christianity had arisen in the empire. Part of his argument was to suggest that the sack of Rome had not actually been especially violent (see Fear, "The Christian Optimism," p. 9-10, and Jamie Wood, *Politics of Identity*, p. 151, who demonstrates the influence which Orosius had on the later account of the sack of Rome written by Isidorus of Seville). One of the most important aims of Orosius's work was to persuade his audience that Rome's history had always truly been intertwined with Christianity, even if it was not always consciously aware of this. As such, the present extract argues that it was Christ who was truly responsible for the Pax Romana, not Caesar. Moreover, Orosius comments on the idea that the entire world has adopted the law of the Romans, even preferring to accept them rather than resist with violence: "[they] preferred the laws of the Romans to their own arms."

We will turn first to the presentation of the Pax Romana, or Roman peace, in the present extract. Orosius, like other Christian authors before him synchronises the birth of Christ with the reign of Augustus and his bringing about of the Pax Romana (see, for instance, the anonymous [Commentary on Daniel](#); [Origen, Against Celsus II.30](#); [Melito of Sardis, Apology](#); see also VI.22.5-8 of the present work). This serves to enforce Orosius's message that Rome is an essential part of God's plan. As Andrew Fear remarks, Christ's birth being timed to coincide with the establishment of world peace is quite deliberate, and shows that the "Pax Romana...is a Pax Divina" (Fear, *Orosius*, p. 20). Peter Van Nuffelen discusses the influence upon Orosius of Ammianus Marcellinus, the famous Roman soldier and historian whose *Res Gestae* recorded Roman history from the accession of the emperor Nerva to the death of the emperor Valens in 378 CE, and was written only just over twenty years prior to Orosius's text (on Ammianus, Orosius, and Augustine's versions of history, and the latter two authors' aims at conceptualising a Christian empire within a universal historical framework, see John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, chap. 3). Van Nuffelen notes that one of the things they share is the suggestion, illustrated in the present passage from Orosius's work, that the present age knows peace. The difference is that Orosius attributes this explicitly to Christ, rather than Augustus. For Orosius, it is not Augustus's empire which "prepares the peace in which Christ could be born: it is the empire which is elected by God to *be prepared* for Christ" (see also VI.20.4 of Orosius's work). Van Nuffelen argues that for Orosius, it is God and the Church only who can claim agency in history; the peace and progress enjoyed by the empire is not due to its own efforts, but rather, the empire is merely a tool for God's greater plans (Van Nuffelen, *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*, p. 151). Indeed, VI.22.5 makes this explicitly clear, stating that the stable peace which Caesar had established prior to Christ's coming was itself "a servant" to him. Orosius argues that the widespread peace which is now enjoyed by the "whole world" due to Roman hegemony, even those presently inclined towards blasphemy (i.e. all non-Christians, a reference to the 'barbarian'



peoples), will be forced to recognise its true source as Christ, not the emperor.

Orosius's conception of Rome's relationship with the barbarians is one of the most intriguing features the *Seven Books of History*. In what is sometimes termed as an overly "optimistic" view, he suggests that the invasion of the empire by barbarian peoples could in fact serve the positive function of gathering more followers for Christ. Indeed, Orosius argues that pagan Romans are the real threat to the empire's stability, not barbarians. In the current passage, invasion is not at issue, but the idea that those outside the empire are receptive to God's message (here carried via the medium of the Pax Romana) is very much present. In this sense, Roman expansion and subjugation of foreign peoples is not only represented as something which promotes universal peace under one empire, but more importantly for Orosius, something which aids the spread of Christ's message (Christian authors before Orosius had been highly critical of Rome's expansionist aims, arguing that Roman hegemony was fuelled by arrogant violence and brutality, quite the opposite of promoting peace. See, for example, the [Ocatavius of Marcus Minucius Felix XXV](#); Tertullian, *Apology* XXXV.12-17; [Arnobius, Against the Pagans I.5](#)).

A connection between Roman hegemony and the spreading of Christianity, however, is also made in the *Commentary on Daniel* IV.9, where it is argued that the bringing of many nations and languages together under Romans rule has the effect of enabling a new 'Christian race' composed of numerous peoples. Orosius understands the universal peace which foreign, formerly disparate peoples enjoy as being something uniting and worthy of celebration. Indeed, whilst previously there was discord (*discordia*), with not a single city, or, he exaggerates, even a single household able to maintain peace and common good, Roman rule had brought serenity. It was only a matter of time, however, until these nations which attributed their stability to Rome recognised its true source as being in Christ. The other important connection that Orosius makes in this regard is that between Roman hegemony, the Pax Romana, and Roman law. He argues that because the Romans had achieved peace where other nations had failed, the "whole world" now accepted Roman law as a peacekeeping tool, even favouring Roman judges to their own leaders. This vision is somewhat anachronistic of course, but as early as the first century CE (at least) we see cases of non-Roman citizens trying to get their cases heard by Roman governors.

Ultimately, the Roman empire is merely a vessel for God's peace, but while Rome is the agent of God's divine will, it is still an earthly kingdom which will eventually come to an end. This is illustrated quite poetically by Orosius; just prior to the passage of focus here, in III.8.1-2, the numerous wars in which the Romans have participated in are described, with the misfortunes of these conflicts described as "glow[ing] as if pressed down at noon from the entire sky" (translation by Roy Deferrari, *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, p. 88). In contrast, the present passage describes God as being like "the rising sun [who] pervades the day with light." The implication of this contrasting imagery is that Rome is declining, while Christianity is at its most "fertile beginnings" (Van Nuffelen, *Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*, p. 151).

Keywords in the original language:

- [arma](#)
- [Augustus](#)
- [blasphemia](#)
- [Caesar](#)
- [civis](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [discordia](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [gens](#)
- [Iesus Christus](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [impero](#)
- [infinitus](#)
- [inservio](#)
- [iudex](#)
- [ius](#)



- [lex](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [Parthi](#)
- [pax](#)
- [populus](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [provincia](#)
- [quies](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [serenitas](#)
- [terra](#)
- [tranquillus](#)
- [universus](#)
- [urbs](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Christ](#)
- [citizen](#)
- [incarnation](#)
- [nativity](#)
- [Parthians](#)
- [Pax Romana](#)
- [peace](#)
- [province](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman judge](#)
- [Roman law](#)

Bibliographical references: Deferrari, Roy J., [The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans](#) (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964)

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Wood, Jamie, [The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain: Religion and Power in the Histories of Isidore of Seville](#) (Leiden: Brill, 2012)

Van Nuffelen, Peter, [Orosius and the Rhetoric of History](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Commentary on Daniel IV.9](#)

Christian citizenship and Roman citizenship

- [Read more about Commentary on Daniel IV.9](#)

Text

[Origen, Against Celsus II.30](#)



How the unity of nations brought by Roman rule has enabled the spread of the Gospel

- [Read more about Origen, Against Celsus II.30](#)

Text

[Melito of Sardis, *Apology* \(preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.26.7-11\)](#)

Christianity has benefitted the Roman empire

- [Read more about Melito of Sardis, *Apology* \(preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.26.7-11\)](#)

Text

[Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius* XXV](#)

Roman success is due to ferocity, not religious piety

- [Read more about Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius* XXV](#)

Text

[Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* I.5](#)

Christianity cannot be blamed for past or present catastrophes

- [Read more about Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* I.5](#)

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