Prudentius, Against Symmachus II.583-591, 608-620

The divine will behind Rome’s greatness, which wished to unite under one power numerous peoples

Name of the author: Prudentius
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Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic, Poetry and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against Symmachus
Reference: II.583-591, 608-620

Commentary:
For a general introduction to Prudentius and the two books Against Symmachus, please see the commentary on Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8.

The present passage is taken from the second book of Prudentius’s work. Although scholars have disagreed as to whether the two books were conceived of and/or composed as a single unit, or whether the first book came earlier (late in the fourth century, while the emperor Theodosius was still alive), it is more readily agreed that the second book, if not the first as well, dates to 402 CE (see the commentary cited above for further discussion of the debate over the dating of the text). The first book launches a polemic against the pagan gods more broadly, whereas the second book concentrates more specifically on the third attempt by the pagan senator Symmachus to persuade the emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius I, and Arcadius to restore the altar of Victory to the Senate House (on the details of this subject, see the commentaries on Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV 6.3-6; Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1.4-6). The present extract appears in a section of the book (lines 488-772) which responds to Symmachus’s Relatio III.9. Of the correspondence of Symmachus which survives, this third letter is the most famous, as it contains his request for the altar of Victory to be put back in its original home. In section 9 of the letter, Symmachus imagines that Rome herself addresses the emperors, pleading with them to allow her to conduct the rites and ceremonies of old, which have always ensured that Rome has triumphed over other nations, submitting them to her laws and keeping her safe from invasion. Accordingly, in the present extract Prudentius refutes these claims, assuring Rome that her success is attributable to the Christian God, not the pagan gods of old. Particularly relevant for our purposes, however, is that Prudentius proceeds to elaborate upon the fact that God specifically chose the Roman empire to gather in all peoples, and unite them under common customs and laws, and most importantly a love for a common true religion: Christianity.

The statement in line 586 that God wished “to bring into partnership peoples (populi) of different speech (lingua) and realms of discordant manners (cultus)” was observed by J. Bergman in his 1926 edition of the text to echo the words of Lucan in his On the Civil War (De Bello Civili, also known as the Pharsalia) III.288 (see Bergman, Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina, p. 464). Here, Lucan lists the numerous nationalities of the soldiers who fought in Pompey’s army during the battle of Pharsalus, observing that it is more multi-national than any other army in history. Prudentius’s words are also reminiscent of those of his contemporary Claudian, who in his On the Consulship of Stilicho (De Consulatu Stilicho) I.152-154 writes in relation to the Roman empire under Stilicho’s guardianship that “never had such diversity of language and arms met to form a united people” (my translation; the prominent army general Stilicho was half-Vandal on his father’s side, his mother being a Roman provincial. He was tactically married to the niece of Theodosius I, and appointed regent in 395 CE to the young Honorius, Theodosius’s son, who was too young to take on his responsibility of emperorship). Prudentius’s words here similarly emphasise the great unity of different peoples in the Roman empire, but for him, this is purely due to the will of God (see also the commentaries on Origen, Against Celsus II.30, and the third-century Commentary on Daniel IV.9, which also highlight that Rome’s bringing of numerous nations together under its dominion enabled the spread of the Gospel to a broader range of people). Prudentius makes this point also in his Peristephanon (Crowns of Martyrdom) II.421-432 (translation by H. J. Thomson, Prudentius, Volume II, p. 133, slightly modernised):

“You (Christ) might bring under one system of laws the customs and observance, the speech and character and
worship of nations which differed among themselves; the whole race of men has passed under the sovereignty of Remus, and usages formerly discordant are now alike in speech and thought. This was appointed that the authority of the Christian name might bind with one tie all lands everywhere.”

While Prudentius recognises at various places in his writings that Rome's victories are partly due to her armies, it is the Christian God who is behind them, ensuring their triumphs, even if the soldiers themselves were not aware of this at the time and attributed their success to the Roman gods (for instance, see Against Symmachus I.287-288, where Prudentius notes that Mars and Venus are credited). In line 588, Prudentius moves to consider what it is that constitutes a mos (manner, way of life, custom), the answer to which, he concludes, is found in a common love (amor) of true religion (religio). The crucial point here is that God's purpose was to gather all the peoples who could be moulded into a civilised society within a sole rulership: the Roman empire. In this sense, then, Prudentius's view is that Christianity is something which has been divinely marked out for Romans specifically. Although Christianity has been taken to numerous peoples through the Gentile mission of Paul, for instance (on this theme, see the commentary on Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8), these disparate peoples have all been consolidated under the Roman power. Indeed, at 816-822 of the present book, Prudentius asserts that there is a vast difference between that which is Roman and that which is barbarian, with only the former truly able to foster Christianity (for a similar sentiment, see also the commentary on Optatus of Milevis, Against the Donatists 3.3, where it is argued that Christianity is something granted specifically to the Roman people). In the more immediate context of Prudentius's comments here, it has rightly been remarked by Michael Brown that he wishes to make clear that Symmachus’s idea of what are appropriate mores for the Roman people (i.e. those which are faithful to ancient tradition) is flawed. Rather, what makes a civilised nation is the following of Christianity, which God has specifically gifted to Rome (“Prudentius’ Contra Symmachum,” p. 225).

Prudentius drew heavily upon classic authors such as Virgil and Horace in his poems, and we see an example of this in line 589, where Virgil's Aeneid III.543 seems to be echoed. Prudentius is here imagining the peoples under Rome’s dominion as existing in harmony together, utilising an image of livestock working together under one yoke. In Virgil’s text, we find similar language (frena iugo concordia ferre) when the Trojans see four horses running on the shore of Italy, and Aeneas’s father, Anchises, interprets this as a premonition that while the Trojans will see war in their new land, they will also experience periods of peace, as horses can be yoked. For Prudentius, the use of this authoritative Latin author perhaps helps to add weight to his own argument in the eyes of a pagan reader, with Virgil’s text also making the point that peace was always in store for the Romans. For Prudentius, of course, this peace for the Roman people has always been part of God’s grand plan. As stated above, Prudentius sees a love of religion as being the key to unity and peace within the Roman empire. However, in the wider context of Prudentius’s argument against Symmachus in this book, we can perhaps infer an implied comparison here between the nature of Christian religion and that of the ancient Romans. Prudentius speaks of men’s hearts (cor) being united by their religion, which suggests something involving deep feeling and emotion, which echoes the sentiment of Christian teachings about the relationship between God and humanity, perhaps more than Roman religion typically did (at least in the eyes of Christian authors). For instance, Augustine argues that while the founders of Rome used their virtues well in their establishing and growing of the Roman state, enabling it to prosper, they lacked true piety and love for the Christian God, which is what could ultimately save them (see the commentary on his Letter 138.17). Essentially, Augustine understands the customs of pagan Rome as being adequate for the good of the state, but inadequate for a proper relationship with the divine. We can understand Prudentius in a similar way, with his emphasis on common love of religion reflecting his vision of a Christian Roman empire.

The second part of our extract is concerned with the legal unity which Rome brings, with Prudentius emphasising the benefits of a common legal system shared by all the citizens of the empire, including the right to marry anyone within it. As such, the statement in lines 617-618 regarding the uniting of different races into a single progeny must firstly be put into historical context in terms of Roman citizenship in Prudentius’s day (see Ralph Mathisen, “Becoming Roman,” p. 207). After Caracalla’s edict of 212 CE (the so-called Antonine Constitution) granted Roman citizenship to most free inhabitants of the empire, there were no longer any peregrini (subjects of Rome who did not have citizen-rights). Prior to this, marriage between a Roman citizen and either a peregrina or a peregrinus was not recognised by Roman law unless this privilege had been specifically granted to the peregrine community involved (see H. J. Thomson, Prudentius, Volume II, p. 57, n. a). Prudentius’s words here are also echoed once again by Claudian’s On the Consulship of Stilicho III.150-153 (my translation):

“It is she (Rome) alone who has taken the conquered into her bosom, and like a mother, rather than an empress, has protected humanity with a common name, calling those she has defeated to share her citizenship, and drawing together distant races.”
The wider granting of Roman citizenship which was put into place in 212 CE, therefore, can be understood as a vital part of God's plan for the Roman empire, by ensuring that a vast array of people can share a common name. This is something also emphasised by Augustine in his *City of God* V.17 (see the commentary on V.17, part one), who in one of the very few allusions to the Antonine Constitution, comments that it ought to have happened even earlier than it did. Augustine's argument is that if universal Roman citizenship, rather than violent submission, had been Rome's approach from the beginning, it would actually have been better in terms of the administration of the commonwealth. For Prudentius, the violence with which Rome introduced her law to other peoples is not the central issue as it is for Augustine. Rather, Prudentius's focus is the effect which Roman hegemony had upon the ability for Christianity to flourish amongst a large group of peoples who now share laws and ways of life. The Roman power's greatest success—albeit steered by God in pursuit of the wide dispersal of his word—is truly its triumphant joining of diverse peoples under one name, that of Rome.

Keywords in the original language:

- amor
- civis
- communis
- congenitus
- cor
- cultus
- discordo
- dissonus
- domo
- fraternus
- gens
- gloria
- imperium
- imperium Romanum
- ius
- lingua
- misceo
- mos
- nomen
- omnigenus
- patria
- populus
- regio
- regnum
- religio
- Romanus
- sanguis
- socio
- subiungo
- successus
- triumphus
- urbs

Thematic keywords in English:

- Antonine Constitution
- Christianity
- civilisation
- harmony
- marriage
nation
peace
Roman citizenship
Roman domination
Roman hegemony
Roman law
Roman people
Roman power
Roman religion

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Other sources connected with this document:  Text

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Text

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Origen, Against Celsus II.30

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Commentary on Daniel IV.9

Christian citizenship and Roman citizenship

Prudentius, Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8

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Augustine, Letter 138.17

Rome’s virtues as a state, and the citizenship of the heavenly commonwealth

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