# Augustine, *City of God* II.16

That Rome's gods did not care for morality, and so did not provide it with adequate laws, meaning that the Romans had to borrow them from other nations

**Name of the author:** Augustine of Hippo
**Date:** 413 CE to 427 CE
**Place:** Hippo
**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Rhetorical treatise

**Title of work:** City of God
**Reference:** II.16
**Commentary:**

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was born in Thagaste, in the Roman province of Africa (modern Tunisia and eastern Algeria), to a Christian mother and a pagan father, a decurion who collected the town's taxes. Augustine's family name, Aurelius, is suggestive of the fact that his ancestors were freedmen of the gens Aurelia, granted Roman citizenship under Caracalla's edict in 212 CE. It is generally agreed that Augustine and his family were Berbers, an indigenous North Africam group, although they were completely Romanised, only speaking Latin at home (see, for instance, Miles Hollingworth, *Saint Augustine of Hippo*, p. 51). Augustine went at age eleven to school at Madaurus, a Numidian city several miles south of Thagaste, where he learnt Latin literature. He left for Carthage at age seventeen to continue to study rhetoric, and famously defected from Christianity to the religion of the Manichees for a portion of his life (he would later become a fierce critic of the movement). Between 373 and 374 CE Augustine taught rhetoric at Thagaste before moving to Carthage and then on to Rome. It was through Manichaean acquaintances that he met Symmachus, prefect of Rome, who was looking for a professor of rhetoric for the imperial court, a position which Augustine took up in Milan in 384 CE. It was in Milan that he came into contact with Ambrose, who was a great influence upon Augustine, and helped bring him back to Christianity. The famous story of Augustine's conversion in his *Confessions* (likely in the summer of 386) relates how he was inspired by Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, and he was baptised by Ambrose in Milan at Easter in 387. In 391 Augustine was ordained a priest in Hippo, made co-bishop in 395, and full bishop not long after. He remained there until his death. In addition to the *City of God*, Augustine is famous for his autobiographical *Confessions*, as well as numerous letters, sermons, apologetic, and exegetical works (for a detailed treatment of Augustine, see the classic biography of Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*).

The *City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*) is one of Augustine's most voluminous (consisting of twenty-two books in total) and well known compositions, taking him over a decade to complete. The first three books were published as soon as they were finished, and likely written no earlier than the end of 412 CE and no later than September 1st 413 CE, although it is possible that the first book circulated earlier on its own (see Othmar Perler, *Voyages*, p. 459). Books I and II are the only ones dedicated to a specific person, Marcellinus, a close friend of Augustine's and a *tribunus et notarius* under the emperor Honorius, who was martyred on the first day of September 413 CE after being accused by Donatists of taking part in a rebellion (on this, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 336-337). Evidence from Augustine's *Letters* and other works helps us with the dating of other books. Books IV-V were likely circulating by the spring of 415 CE, with VI-X completed by 417 CE (the same year Orosius finished his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, which was commissioned by Augustine. Orosius speaks of the first ten books of the *City of God* in his preface). The next relatively secure date is that of book XIV, referred to in Augustine's *Against Adversaries of the Law* I.18, written no earlier than 420 CE. Books XV and XVI utilise frequently Augustine's *Seven Questions Concerning the Heptateuch*, which he did not begin until 419 CE. Augustine summarises the *City of God* in his *Retractions*, a document re-visiting his works in chronological order and offering his thoughts on them (contrary to the implications of the English title, he does not "retract" from his earlier positions as such). By the time he wrote *Retractions* II.43 in 426-427 CE, the *City of God* was complete (for a brief overview of the publication schedule of the City of God, see Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's* City of God, p. 34-36). In a letter to Firmus (known as *Letter* 1A), Augustine suggests that certain readers in Carthage may have had incomplete copies of the *City of God* prior to its wider publication, and also gives information regarding the plan for its dissemination. Augustine suggests

that the twenty-two books be grouped into either two or five "codices," and then asks Firmus, who is given a complete copy of the text, only to distribute it to a couple of select individuals in Carthage (see Henri-Irénée Marrou, "La division en chapitres," p. 248).

Augustine composed the *City of God* in the wake of the Visigothic sack of Rome under Alaric on the 24th of August 410 CE. While our accounts of the event are mostly from the years following, and are written in polemical tone. Augustine first reacted to it in 410 in his *Sermon* 81, preached at Hippo, in which he offers a few details, but is evidently not entirely clear on the specifics. Here already he introduces some of the themes which will become central to the rhetoric surrounding the sack of Rome. The invasion of Rome by the Visigoths was a stark reminder of the empire's mortality, and as such prompted accusations that the prominence of Christianity had weakened Rome's military and political stability, draining Rome of its vitality and strength. Augustine responded in the *City of God* by arguing that rather than blaming the Christians, the Romans should look at their own moral failings, specifically their inflated sense of pride in their political and military structures which made them vulnerable, rather than making them strong (David J. Bobb, "The Humility of True Religion," p. 66). Contrary to Roman belief that Rome was the "Eternal City," Augustine argued that it was merely a fantasy built on demonic beings which hid the true Eternal City, that of God. Roman "civic" religion, which tied the people to the state, was bound up in false ritual practices and misplaced pride, which contrasted with the humility of Christianity. While Roman religion was believed to bind the state together, it was in reality a weak system built on deception. Augustine therefore devotes the first five books of the *City of God* to this theme, proving that Roman religion would surely be the root of Rome's downfall, and the empire could gain no support from the Roman gods in its time of suffering because they were not forces for good and beneficence, but rather morally corrupt demons.

There are two major arguments to the City of God: 1) that Christianity was not to blame for Rome's misfortune, and instead was a source of protection for its citizens, which had provided safe haven for Roman refugees in its churches; 2) because Rome is ultimately a/the City of Man, entirely earthly and doomed to eventually cease, the Romans should not be excessively troubled by its sacking, as the heavenly City of God remained eternal and untouchable, and within the reach of those who would fully turn their attentions to it. The work is essentially structured in two parts which meditate on these broader themes, the first (books I-X) offering a polemical attack on Roman religion and philosophy, which were products of the earthly city, and the second (books XI-XXII) detailing the City of God and how it relates to the earthly City of Man (for a schematic presentations of the structure and contents of the *City of God*, see, for example, Jean-Claude Guy, *Unité et structure*).

While the sack of Rome was not the sole inspiration for the theme of the *City of God*, the dramatic events of 410 CE provided a fitting point in time (indeed, the idea of two "cities" was already in his mind; see James O'Donnell, "The Inspiration," p. 75-79; for a treatment of Augustine's thought and its development, see Robert Markus, *Saeculum*). Essentially, Augustine sought to clarify that while Christians live in the material world, this is not their true home; they belong ultimately in heaven, and it is to this "city" that their full attention and devotion should be given (this ideology of course draws on the popular Pauline theme; see Philippians 3:18-21; also *Epistle to Diognetus* 5:1-10). This message was particularly apt, as following the invasion of Rome, there were numerous refugees from Rome residing in Africa, who felt displaced and longed to return to Rome. The first book of the *City of God* essentially implies that in a similar manner to these refugees, the Christian ought to maintain focus on the greater city, and keep perspective regarding the value of earthly pleasures. For Augustine, the City of God and the City of Man are two opposing realities in which the former's citizens love only God, while the citizens of the latter focus purely on themselves. This selfish pride is seen by Augustine as characterising the Roman people (see I.31, where he states that a lust for power was the most serious vice afflicting the Roman people, first beginning with just a few powerful individuals, and then spreading throughout the entire country). The stark difference between the two is demonstrated by Augustine through reference to the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, whose fateful conflict revealed the way in which the earthly city was divided against itself. Moreover, the biblical example of Cain and Abel demonstrated the conflict between the City of God and that of men (XV.5) (Bobb, "The Humility of True Religion," p. 70). Ultimately, Augustine claims, Rome's corrupt and false foundations will fail, and he asks of those who defend Roman religion to consider the basis of their religion in this regard. How have the Roman gods encouraged moral behaviour that is essential for life in general, and more so for political life? Have they discouraged vices such as lust, greed, and excessive desire for power? (II.6) On the contrary, Augustine argues that Roman religious rites are the very sources of the moral corruption of the people, as the immoral behaviour of the gods is imitated and glorified (II.4). Indeed, Roman religion debases its followers and drags them into debauchery (Bobbs, "The Humility of True Religion," p. 71).

Books I-V deal with the question of Roman state religion and its alleged benefits, with book I primarily concerned with issues relating to the sack of Rome, and books II, III, and V offering historical, polemical surveys to illustrate

"the moral bankruptcy of Roman religion," and show that Rome's success (particularly its military success) is not dependent on observance or neglect of Roman religion (O'Daly, *Augustine's* City of God, p. 80). Our passage comes from book II, in which Augustine seeks in part to demonstrate that Rome's fall at the hands of the Visigoths is not particularly unique, and therefore not attributable to Christianity, as the Romans have suffered prior to this when the Roman gods were more widely worshipped (this was not the first time this type of argumentation had been made; see in the third century and early-fourth century, for example, Cyprian, *Address to Demetrianus* V; Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* I.5). The fact that these gods did not prevent previous disasters make it unsurprising, so Augustine suggests, that they are of no help now. Moreover, these gods would be of little use anyway since they are morally deficient and built on corruption. In this perspective, our passage asks how Roman religion can be expected to protect its people when its very basis was flawed. As elsewhere in the work, Augustine utilises mythical and historical figure and events, which allows him to perform "a typological reading of history, in which recent and contemporary events can be interpreted by comparison and contrast with those of the past" (O'Daly, *Augustine's* City of God, p. 81). In the chapters immediately preceding ours, Augustine has argued that in the Republican period Roman practice was inconsistent, as there was no condemnation of immoral acts attributed to the gods, yet the Twelve Tables (on which see further below) forbade actors to vote or hold political office (II.11-13). In II.14, Augustine employs Plato to highlight the irony that Roman law is stricter than Roman religion, which reflects and encourages lust and flattery (e.g. through the deification of Romulus; see II.15). Consequently, our chapter concludes that Roman religion has no moral precepts, or it would not have had to rely on Greek laws (see O'Daly, *Augustine's* City of God, p. 82).

The tradition referred to here is that related by Livy (*History of Rome* III.31-33), who narrates that the Romans borrowed the laws of the Athenian statesmen and judicial reformer, Solon, three-hundred years after the foundation of the city of Rome. Livy narrates in his *History of Rome* III.31.8-33.7 that an envoy was sent to Athens by the *decemviri* to copy the laws of Solon, and to observe the institutions, customs, and laws of other Greek States. This resulted in the creation of the Laws of the Twelve Tables (*Leges Duodecim Tabularum*), outlining the basic rights of all Roman citizens, with the first ten being completed around 450 BCE, and the final two in 449 BCE (Livy, *History of Rome* III.34.5-6; this tradition is also drawn upon by the fourth-century Ambrosiaster in discussions about the adequacy of Roman law; see, for example, Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans* 7.1, who claims that the organisation of law was something which the Romans achieved only through their adoption of Greek laws). Augustine goes on to claim that while the Romans deemed it necessary to borrow Athenian laws, they nevertheless tried to improve upon them. He next refers to Lycurgus, the legendary legislator of Sparta (whose *Life* was composed by Plutarch, but is mentioned by various ancient authors), who attempted to reform Spartan society by an appeal to Delphic oracle of Apollo. Lycurgus's function here is to demonstrate that the Romans, while having borrowed laws from Athens, were sensible enough not to do likewise from Sparta, as Lycurgus had only pretended to have the divine authority to lay down his legislation (Augustine also mentions Lycurgus in X.13, where an important contrast is drawn between the divine origins of the Law of Moses and the false divine origin of Lycurgus's laws). Augustine proceeds to critique Numa Pompilius, Rome's second king after Romulus, described as responsible for the establishment of Rome's religious rites which he supposedly received from the gods. Numa appears at numerous points in the rest of the *City of God*, with XVIII.24 even stating that unlike Romulus, who was deified, heaven could not find room for him because of the amount of false gods that he had acquired for Rome (see Mark Vessey, "The History of the Book," p. 20; for other references to Numa in the *City of God*, see III.9, 12; IV.23; VII.34-35).

Augustine's major point here is that no amount of Roman gods made any provisions for protecting their followers from "moral (*animus*) evils (*malum*), evils of life (*vita*) and conduct (*mos*)," which in some cases were so serious as to bring entire states to ruin. Instead of warning people away from such behaviours, the gods have actively encouraged them. The late-third/early-fourth century Arnobius of Sicca in his *Against the Pagans* VI.26 makes a similar argument to Augustine here, connecting the necessity of law with the inadequacy of the Roman gods, although for Arnobius it is the non-existence of the gods which prevents them from aiding their followers. He argues that the Roman people are so immoral because they have no real fear of their deities, and do not fear the consequences of their actions. For this reason, laws are necessary to attempt to regulate the Roman people, as they have no moral compass originating from their deities. This line of argument sees Roman law as a necessary crutch to counteract the immorality of the people, who lack guidance from the gods. As Augustine (like Arnobius) presents it, Roman law and its development was necessitated by the failure of the state gods, so much so that the founders of Rome were inclined to borrow a legal framework from the Athenians. Roman law as an institution is not directly the target of Augustine's criticism here, but his comments do offer an insight into the way that he conceived of its connection to Roman religion, and more broadly the failure of the Roman gods to guide their worshippers. This said, while denouncing the Roman gods takes up a significant amount of space in the *City of God*, it is not Augustine's main aim. Equally, he is not primarily seeking to offer a critique of Roman power and

institutions or their representation in the world. Rather, Augustine's defamation of Roman religion acts more as a precursor to his grander aim. Augustine presents history in the *City of God* in terms of cosmic battle between God and Satan, in which God intervenes to move earthly governments and political systems supportive of the Catholic Church against those which have aligned themselves with Satan. In this sense, then, the Christian Roman empire performs an important earthly function. However, the fact that Christianity was the official religion of the empire had no political implications rather, Christians ought mainly to concern themselves with the heavenly city, and not get too bound up in issues pertaining to earthly institutions. This of course did not mean that it was not necessary to take care of the empire and work towards it proper functioning. After all, Augustine argues elsewhere that much can be learned about the heavenly city from Rome, particularly the way in which its devoted founders and citizens focus on its growth and maintenance (see, for instance, the commentary on *Letter* 138.17).

Keywords in the original language:

- animus
- Apollo
- Atheniensis
- auctoritas
- civitas
- confingo
- confirmo
- constituo
- cultor
- divus
- institutio
- lex
- Lycurgus
- malum
- Numa
- regnum
- res publica
- Romanus
- Romulus
- Solon
- urbs

Thematic keywords in English:

- Apollo
- Athens
- eternity of Rome
- Law of the Twelve Tables
- Lycurgus
- Numa
- oracle
- Roman gods
- Roman law
- Roman morality
- Roman religion
- Romulus
- Solon
- Sparta

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