

The Holy Spirit, the Roman Senate, and Bossuet

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A clear recognition of the value and universal significance of the empire of Augustus is found in Nicolaus of Damascus, historian and counsellor to Herod of Judea. Towards 25–20 B.C. in his *Life of Augustus*, he linked the super-human wisdom of the Emperor who held sway over such a vast political system, on the one hand, with the size of the empire, the coexistence therein of various nationalities, and the peace that reigned within its confines, on the other.¹ This political and historiographic interpretation is, in essence, typical of provincial milieus in the Greek East, where imperial power was not slow to encourage similar attitudes. Some decades later, Philo of Alexandria would re-examine the reasons behind the imperial peace, the order that had been restored, the free development and safety of maritime trade, the great merits of Augustus that led to such diffusion of culture and freedom. The superiority of the monarchic regime was in fact seen in the light of its capacity to promote the peaceful and civilized development of life within the bounds of the empire and the coexistence of different cultural and historical traditions, among which the Judaic was particularly prominent because it was perceived as a stabilizing factor.²

It is within this perspective, naturally connected with a well-known general vision of universal history, that Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing towards 7 B.C., in the introduction to his *Roman Antiquities*, placed the Roman Empire.³ It succeeds Alexander's Empire in the sequence of worldwide powers, but in extent and strength it surpasses all its predecessors.

As might be expected, other less positive interpretations of the "world peace" brought about under Roman power are not wanting. These highlight the necessary

1 Nicolaus of Damascus, *F. Gr. Hist.* 90, F 126 (1–2); E. Gabba, "The Historians and Augustus," in F. Millar and E. Segal, eds., *Caesar Augustus: Seven Aspects* (Oxford, 1984), 61–63.

2 Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 143–47, 149; Gabba, *The Historians and Augustus*, 63–64.

3 A. Momigliano, "Daniele e la teoria greca della successione degli imperi," in *La storiografia greca* (Torino, 1982), 293–301; and *The Origins of Universal History*, *Annali Sc. Norm. Sup. Pisa*, ser. III, XII (1982), 533–60; reprinted in *Settimo Contributo* (Rome, 1984), 77–103. Cf. F. Fabbrini, *Translatio imperii. L'impero universale da Ciro ad Augusto* (Rome, 1983), 251ff.

surrender, or rather privation, of political freedom and the consequent intellectual and literary decline, above all in the realms of oratory and historiography. Such critiques were not confined to Roman political and cultural circles.⁴ Pliny, writing in his *Natural History* (XIV, 1-6), proposed a different explanation in historical and social terms for the intellectual decline of the first century A.D., a decline that must have been all too obvious to many living in the period. According to him, it was the very worldwide extension of human horizons brought about by Roman power, with the consequent growth of wealth, that favored a general slackening and corrupting and stunted the intellectual vitality which had previously been characteristic of a (Hellenistic) world divided into more limited and poorer states. In those states scientific inquiry and discoveries had been promoted by individual governments.

Such opinions and theories, however, are isolated and found only in a minority of cases. Though interesting, they are overshadowed by the reality of an ever more greatly defined and ecumenical empire. About the middle of the second century A.D., Aelius Aristides in his oration *To Rome* furnishes us with a suggestive reflection on the processes of social and cultural integration under the Roman Empire, a reflection that was of fundamental importance in historiographic development. The ultimate goal of Roman power was seen as the creation of a universal state that would coextend with the civilized world. Within this state the various components—political, social and ethnic—with their defined positions and the emperor at the centre, each element with its own rights and above all its own duties, merge into a true democracy.⁵

This was not abstract reasoning but rather theorization on an actual situation, and a quite widespread one at that. It is only a little later than Aelius Aristides, probably around A.D. 175/6, that Melito of Sardis, the Christian bishop, connects this estimate of the Roman Empire and its founder Augustus with the birth and development of Christianity. The text of Melito is found only in fragments preserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, and there may be some doubt as to the actual significance of the Bishop of Sardis' words given the Eusebian context and the effects of selectivity. All the same, the reasoning of Melito, taken overall, is clear.⁶ He noted the simultaneous birth of the new philosophy and the growth of the empire of Augustus and highlighted their synchronism. Along with this he pointed out the advantages that had accrued to the Empire from Christianity in terms both of greatness and splendor: the imperial respect for the new religion, which was in fact a recognition of the mutual growth of religion and imperial stability. This argument served to show that any divergent stance toward Christians on the part of the political power were temporary deviations from a

4 Anonymous *De sublimitate*, 44; Tacitus, *Dial. de orat.* 36-40; Senec., *Controv.* I, praet. 6. On the problem, cf. E. Gabba, "Political and Cultural Aspects of the Classicistic Revival in the Augustan Age," in *Classical Antiquity*, 1 (1982), 55-56; "Scienza e potere nel mondo ellenistico," in *La Scienza Ellenistica* (Naples, 1984), 16-18; E. Noè, *Storiografia imperiale pretacitiana. Linee di svolgimento* (Firenze, 1984), 9-13.

5 J. H. Oliver, "The Ruling Power," *Trans. Amer. Phil. Soc.* 43/4 (1953), 871-1003; J. Bleicken, *Der Preis des Aelius Aristides auf das römische Weltreich*, *Nach. Akad. Wiss. Göttingen*, Phil.-hist. Kl. 1966, no. 7, 225ff.; Gabba, *The Historians and Augustus*, 67-68.

6 Eusebius, *H.E.*, IV, 26:7-11 (fr. I, 8; Otto, *Corpus Apol. Christ. saec. Secundi IX* [1872], 374ff.). Cf. E. Gabba, "L'Apologia di Melitone da Sardis," in *Critica Storica* 1 (1962), 469-82; F. Fabbrini, *L'impero di Augusto come ordinamento sovranazionale* (Milano, 1974), 202.

well-established principle. Accordingly, there was no reason to take adverse measures, not even in the circumstances of *The Apology*.

It would be wrong to underestimate this exegetical blend of history, politics, and religion in spite of its fragmentary nature. Certainly this initial synchronism did not posit any causal link between the two historical facts—the birth of the new religion with Christ and the beginning of the empire under Augustus—but served rather to cement the full loyalty of the Christians to the empire and its ruler and to demonstrate the benefits that the empire had derived from Christianity. The flowering of Imperial Rome in the period from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius was explicitly credited to the presence of Christianity. This concept would a short while later find support from the author of the *Letter to Diognetos*.⁷ The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that an imperial political structure is in perfect harmony with the Christian religion and fully supported and recognized as such, notwithstanding certain less positive eventualities.

The highly significant value of Melito's words is, by contrast, thrown into greater relief when seen in the light of Hippolytus' diametrically opposed view of the Roman world (*ad Danielelem* IV, 8–9) as the satanic counterpart to the heavenly kingdom. Here the most negative characteristic of the empire, even in comparison with its various worldly predecessors, lay specifically in its polyethnic and polyglot nature. The common appellation "Roman" or the imperial census (such as that of Augustus at Christ's birth) are seen as a mere masking process. Even more, such characteristics lead ultimately to war. Thus, the aim of the political structure is seen to be strife rather than universal peace and the coexistence therein of the various ethnic strands is taken as a sign of confusion rather than an indication of greater unity.

The implications present and in many ways already clearly expressed in the text of Melito were made more explicit by Origen. In his *Contra Celsum* (II, 30, circa A.D. 245) the synchrony between the birth of Christ and the unification of the empire through Augustus is presented as an event foreordained by God. The unification of a plurality of kingdoms under Roman imperial uniformity is seen as an indispensable premise to the spread of the new religion, insofar as it fulfilled the scriptural prophecy of general peace. Here, for the first time, the idea appears that the formation of the Roman Empire was part and parcel of the scheme of divine providence. The surmounting of political fragmentation is seen to coincide intentionally with God's implanting of Christian monotheism.⁸ This motivation is obviously of greater significance than that of political peace as a basis for the diffusion of the new religion. In any case, both these reasons represent a recognition on the part of Christians of the historic function of the Roman Empire in all its legitimacy, as foretold by God.

This politico-theological theory assumed the value of a fundamental principle for Eusebius in his thinking and interpretation of history. Or rather, it became more and more defined after the fateful date of 313, especially in the *Praeparatio* and the

7 H. I. Marrou, ed., *A Diognète* (Paris, 1951), 131–36.

8 E. Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig, 1935), 66; E. Corsini, *Introduzione alle "Storie" di Orosio* (Torino, 1968), 171ff. contains some important material on Origen VIII, 69–72, which replies to the objection by Celsus that a monotheistic cult would have upset the pluralism (ethnic, cultural, traditional, and religious) within the empire's confines.

Demonstratio Evangelica.⁹ The synchrony between the empire of Augustus and the Coming of Christ is explained as the mysterious will of God (*P.E.* I, 4:1-2). The surmounting of political and civil disunity under the Augustan monarchy is paralleled with the overcoming of polytheistic error. The teaching of Christ represented an unprecedented moral advance. The *Pax Augusta* favored the promulgation of the Gospel (*D.E.* VII, 2:22). Insofar as the empire had been ordained for this purpose by Providence in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the synchrony is often colored by a causal connection (*D.E.* III, 7:20-22; VII, 1:102; VIII, 3:14-15; IX, 3:5-6 and 17, 14-19). Both facts are taken as the realization of an inscrutable divine plan. The necessity to explain such favorable divine intervention in the scheme of human history is not touched on—or rather, it is avoided.

The continual appearance of this idea of a Providential plan is quite natural for the empire of Eusebius' time—especially after 313—a plan with which Christianity is not and cannot be in contradiction (as Meliton had seen); a plan moreover with which it well might coincided. The Christian empire of Constantine seemed to have brought about the terrestrial City of God (*De laud. Const.* XVI, 1-10).¹⁰

By the time St. Augustine wrote his *De Civitate Dei* the situation of the Roman Empire had changed drastically. A process of decay had been at work for some time, and the crisis of 410, with the taking of Rome by Alaric and the Goths, brought it to a head. Alongside the pagan claims of the Christian God's inability to defend Rome, in contrast to the protection previously afforded by the pagan deities, may be placed the doubts of the same Christians about the survival of the Christian Empire.¹¹ The glorious era of Constantine, when such reflections would have seemed incredible, are far distant now! St. Augustine is a stranger to the fascination and significance of the myth of Rome. He has nothing in common with the politico-theological thought of Eusebius (of which perhaps he was ignorant). He rejected and refuted the thrust of imperialism and thus the unifying and universal significance of the empires (the *regna* were nothing more than *magna latrocinia*, IV, 3-4). St. Augustine was well able to twist the Ciceronian arguments of *De re publica* to show that territorial expansions were based solely on oppression and injustice (XIX, 21),¹² and he even went so far as to doubt the worth of a necessarily bellicose universal empire by comparison with the peaceful coexistence of numerous small states (III, 10; IV, 15).

9 Some hints are already present in the previous *H.E.*, for instance II, 2, 5. The fragment of Melito is quoted in *H.E.* IV, 26:7-11. On this problem see the fundamental work of J. Sirenelli, *Les vues historiques d'Eusèbe de Césarée durant la période prénicéenne* (Paris, 1961), 388-411; see his commentary to the edition of *P.E.*, I (Paris, 1974); and F. Trisoglio, *L'intervento divino nelle vicende umane dalla storiografia classica greca e latina a Flavio Giuseppe e a Eusebio di Cesarea*, *A.N.R.W.*, 2/21, 2 (Berlin/New York, 1984), 1075.

10 H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine. A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Univ. of California Publications, Classical Studies 15 (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1976).

11 F. G. Maier, *Augustin und das antike Rom* (Stuttgart/Köln, 1955), 168-82; H. Hagendahl, "Zur Augustins Beurteilung von Rom in *De Civitate Dei*," *Wiener Studien*, 79 (1966), 509-16; F. Paschoud, *Roma Aeterna. Études sur le patriotisme romain dans l'Occident latin à l'époque des grandes invasions* (Neuchâtel, 1967), 234-75; P. Brown, *Agostino d'Ippona* (Torino, 1971), 300-15; S. D'Elia, "Storia e teologia della storia nel 'de civitate Dei'," in *La storiografia ecclesiastica nella Tarda Antichità*, Atti Convegno Erice 1978 (Messina, 1980), 391-481; V. Loi, "Il de civitate Dei e la coscienza storiografica di Agostino," *ibid.*, 483-503.

12 This denial, a necessary rebuttal of the pagan accusations, leads St. Augustine in Book IV into a long critical discussion of the Roman gods based on the writings of Varro.

Thus the Roman Empire could have nothing to do with the City of God, all the more so since St. Augustine is perfectly aware (though uncertain as to the extent) of the aging and decline of Rome's imperial power. It is natural at this point that any synchronism between the coming of Christ and the rise of the empire under Augustus that led to world peace, should be seen by St. Augustine as nothing more than chronological data, a chronology however, that he could not escape from, even without some form of explanation for its implications and causality (XVIII, 46).

At all events, the formation of every universal dominion (and Rome was the *pendant* of Babylon) respects and mirrors the will of God: unification means one single *societas rei publicae legumque* for the *orbis terrarum* and hence peace (XVIII, 22; V, 11). Therefore, there must be some explanation as to why the one and true God (and not the false pagan gods) should grant an empire to the Romans even before Christ's coming. The rejection of all theories of providentiality cannot erase the historical fact. St. Augustine finds himself in some embarrassment, above all after the crisis of 410 and the subsequent accusations of the pagans. The reason for Roman greatness is not and cannot be *nec fortuita . . . nec fatalis* (V, 1); that is to say, it is neither purely unintentional nor is it generally attributable to destiny.¹³ Since it is God who allots the *regna terrena* according to his reckoning, which is always just (IV, 33; V, 21), there must be some reason for the transfer of the empire to the Romans (V, 13). The motives are objectively obscure for St. Augustine. God's will is inscrutable: He alone knows the true and just reasons; we cannot fathom them (IV, 33; V, 19 and 21). This sense of impotence in penetrating the divine will that guides history is striking, but nonetheless St. Augustine makes an effort which has precise analogies with his attempt to salvage human free will in relation to divine prescience.

St. Augustine sought an explanation in human terms, an ambit of whose serious limitations he was fully aware, limitations that left any explanation substantially deficient (V, 19). Sallust's thoughts on the historical and moral reasons for the greatness and decline of Rome provided him with a starting point. (Sallust, by the way, must have appealed in his pessimism).¹⁴ Keeping in mind the fact that man's ethical behavior is not affected by God's foreknowledge (V, 10), St. Augustine proceeds, in a complicated passage, to distinguish subtly on various levels *amor laudis* and the desire to dominate. He posits the idea that the great civic virtues and the *boni mores* of a few isolated personalities merited recognition from God and the subsequent granting of an earthly reward (this in the light of their neither knowing nor worshipping God)—in effect, the Roman Empire (V, 12–21).

The difficulties in trying to reconcile such opposites are manifest. Imperialism and the will for earthly domination are nonetheless condemned, while the *virtutes* and the *boni mores* were not of long duration (as St. Augustine knows from his Sallust). They were, in fact, well diminished before the time of Augustus. This partial reappraisal of certain moments in the history of republican Rome fits ill with the Augustinian vision (and the author was well aware of it), offering him little in terms of clear interpretation.

13 St. Augustine sees fit to discuss astrology at length here, concluding the argument with an acceptance of the coexistence of divine prescience and human free will.

14 T. Orlandi, "Il 'de civitate Dei' di Agostino e la storiografia di Roma," *Studi Romani* 16 (1968), 17–29; "Sallustio e Varrone in Agostino 'de civitate Dei' I–VII," *Parola del Passato*, 23 (1968), 19–44.

Thus it was better to take refuge in trusting an incomprehensible divine scheme—incomprehensible but undoubtedly just.

In the politico-theological outlook of Orosius, the Eusebian theories are examined again in a manner significantly different from that of St. Augustine.¹⁵ Within the framework of a universal history guided by divine Providence, the great empires are seen to have succeeded one another in a geographical distribution corresponding to the four corners of the known world: Babylon, Carthage, Macedonia, and Rome. The process of centralizing subjugation, with the setting up of Augustus' monarchy and the subsequent peace (VI, 20 and 22),¹⁶ is seen by Orosius as the overcoming of political fragmentation at exactly the same time as the birth of Christian monotheism. Synchrony and the hand of God therein is not restricted to the idea of a peaceful prelude to the process of evangelization. Rather, the Roman Empire becomes an integral element in the realization of God's will and design. For Orosius, there is no longer any necessity to return to Roman virtues to justify God's granting an earthly dominion to them in the period before Christ's coming. In fact, his estimate of pre-Augustan Roman imperialism is underpinned with grave reservations.

In addition, according to his theory of sin, man lost every possibility of simple merit through original sin so that only the will of God can serve to explain his achievements. Whatever contribution is made in human terms to the divine plan, any action within history that leads to the Christian era is achieved in ignorance and is moreover subject to all the passions and selfishness of earthly existence and so is totally devoid of merit. On the other hand, events like the sack of Rome in 410 can have no particular relevance within this great universal context. The two planes on which human history unfolds, the natural and the supernatural, are distinct and yet in some way confused—at some points, indeed, coincidental one with the other. But in every case, the earthly power of the universal empire, passing through the hands of various nations

15 I follow the interpretation offered by Corsini (see above, n. 8), 85ff., 157ff. The main passages in Orosius are II 1; VI 1; VII 1. Very important is the commentary in Orosio, *Le Storie contro i Pagani*, ed. A. Lippold (Milano, 1976), I and II; good observations in Paschoud (see above, n. 11), 276-92 and in his paper "La polemica providenzialistica di Orosio," in *La storiografia ecclesiastica*, 113-33; F. Fabbrini, *Paolo Orosio, uno storico* (Roma, 1979). On the connection between St. Augustine and Orosius see R. Orena, *Rivolta e rivoluzione. Il bellum di Spartaco nella crisi della repubblica e la riflessione storiografica moderna* (Milano, 1984), Appendix 4, 271-98.

16 Oros. VI 22:1-8. The Augustan Empire as prelude to Christ's coming is further proved on the basis of the coincidence of the Lord's Epiphany on January 6th with Augustus' entry into Rome in 29 B.C. (see Lippold's commentary, II, 461-62), along with similar cooccurrences with various entries of Augustus into the capital.

It is worth calling to mind here that out of such traditions comes the famous legend of the Ara Coeli, where Augustus receives the annunciation of the birth of Christ, savior, King of the world, from the Tiburtine Sibyl, while the heavens open to reveal the Madonna and Child. For an initial survey see *Mirabilia*, ch. 11, p. 28ff., and *Graphia Aureae Urbis*, ch. 32, p. 89f. in *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma*, ed. R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti (Roma, 1946), vol. 3; A. Graf, *Roma nella memoria e nelle immaginazioni del Medio Evo* (Torino, 1915), 244ff.; A. Monteverdi, "La leggenda di Augusto e dell'ara celeste," *Atti V Congresso Studi Romani* 2 (Roma, 1940), 462-70. The incident is depicted in the marvelous fresco by Baldassarre Peruzzi in the Church of Fontegiusta at Siena (1527): E. Carli, *La pittura senese* (Firenze, 1982), 78. The Albunean (or Tiburtine) Sibyl is shown in the mosaic paving of the Duomo of Siena with an accompanying script that links it to the birth of Christ; B. Santi, *Il pavimento del Duomo di Siena* (Firenze, 1982), 21, fig. 11.

and now resting with Rome, is seen as the legitimate manifestation of divine power on earth.

The interpretations of Augustine and Orosius are brought together in Bossuet's re-examination of history in his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*.¹⁷ It should suffice here to recall some of the passages central to the problem we are treating. The birth of Christ is the beginning of the seventh and most important epoch of universal history. Jesus came into a world completely pacified under the sway of Augustus (1:83–84), at a time when the arts, encouraged by the monarchy, were in full flower. The synchronism is not, however, extended to later consequences and developments in the explanation of events.¹⁸ Rather it might be said that while the prophets of Scripture foretold the Chosen People of the imminent arrival of the Messiah (1:225ff.), the way was also being prepared among the Greeks by an extraordinary convergence among their philosophers towards the idea of monotheism (1:227). At all events, there was a general turning away from idolatry in religion, though the final defeat of such practices was reserved for the Messiah (1:227–31).

Since divine Providence directs human history to its fulfillment in Christianity, it is only natural that the temporal succession of the empires should also be part of God's designs (1:381ff.). Moreover, such developments were, for the necessary accomplishment of the grand design, linked with the Chosen People. The unification of the Roman Empire by sea and land served as providential means to the promulgation of the Gospel, just as persecutions served to confirm the Christian Church. Even the collapse of the empire gave demonstration of the Church's majesty and underlined the judgment of God upon the empire's future concealed in the Apocalypse of St. John. Christian Rome was born from the ashes of pagan Rome. The prophecies of the Holy Spirit foretold the unfolding of God's plan for the Empire (1:386). But his will is not always revealed through prophecy. It is enough to know that empires come from the hand of God: He distributes and uses them as he pleases, in the time and manner ordained by him according to his designs for his people.

Bossuet's confirmation of the Augustinian difficulty in penetrating the divine plan, stops short of being an intellectual cul-de-sac. Corresponding to the supernatural actions of God (actions whose unchanging and eternal laws may yet be guessed at by man) there is the human plane under the sway of divine Providence. It is on this level that we can speak about the rise and decline of the empires and the causes of their progress and termination (1:387). These causes are qualitatively proportionate to the

17 All quotations are from J. B. Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, Premier Partie, Nouvelle Édition (Paris, 1763), vol. I. I have assumed the framework outlined by A. Momigliano, *La formazione della moderna storiografia sull'Impero Romano* (1936), now found in *Sui fondamenti della storia antica* (Torino, 1984), 93–101. I would also like to acknowledge the fine essay of Carlo Rostan, "Due concezioni di storia universale: Orosius e Bossuet," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 9 (1925), 217–37; 305–15. There are also some important passages in Rostan relating to Bossuet's arguments against the scriptural interpretations of Spinoza and R. Simon. The problem is fully discussed in C. Borghero, *La Certezza e La Storia, Cartesianesimo, pirronismo e conoscenza storica* (Milano, 1983), 147ff.

18 There is only a brief hint to the synchronism and to the imperial peace at the time of Augustus in Cardinal Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, ed. L. Venturini (Lucca, 1738), I, 3ff. (from Orosius). The argument that the Augustan Empire was ordained by God to spread Christianity is developed at length by Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, 1st Venetian ed. (Venice, Pitteri, 1732), 1:1–2.

role that men and nations were called to play according to the Divine program. Naturally God has reserved the right to intervene even on this human level. "The true science of history lies in the ability to bring to the surface both these secret dispositions that prepare the way in each period for great changes and the crucial combination of events which lead to their fulfilment" (1:388). Hence, it is necessary to understand the connections that link the two planes of history.

Of course, any study limited to those great historic events that determined the lot of the emperors is insufficient. One must arrive at a deeper understanding of the geniuses of nations, the characters of princes and outstanding men. Bossuet, researching these "secondary" causes, was driven to make certain choices. His thought persistently centers on those areas where the material available allows him to better define the institutions and the moral characteristics of a nation. On a human level, these are the qualities that can throw light on the reasons for the brief or lengthy reign by one nation rather than another over the universal empire—the vicissitudes of power. The case of Rome is reached after a measured description of successive empires: the Oriental, the Greek, and the Carthaginian (1:441ff.). Ancient tradition already saw the periods of Monarchic and Early Republican Rome as solidly grounded in a love of the fatherland and liberty, a certain plain style of living that spurned luxury, and a tenacious working of the land. They were qualities common to both Senate and people. Discipline, the harshness of military service, courage, and military organization were undoubtedly decisive factors in the history and progress of Rome.

But for Bossuet an even greater factor lay in the Senate's conduct of the political powers vested in it. His in-depth praise of the Senate extends over several pages (1:452-62) and quite naturally bears the stamp of Polybius and Livy. Of chief interest to our argument is the first text that Bossuet cites in support of his premise, one which really enables him to link the two planes of human history to the particular case of Rome. Bossuet says: "The holy Spirit was not reluctant to draw attention to this (that is to say, the central and positive role of the Senate in the Roman state) in the Book of the Maccabees (1 Macc. VIII) and to praise the great common sense and vigorous counsels of this wise body" (1:452). Bossuet is referring to the famous praise of the Romans in Maccabees Book I, which outlines and explains the decision of Judas Maccabeus in 161 B.C. to seek an alliance with Rome against Antiochus, King of Syria.¹⁹

The passage is notorious for a variety of reasons. Unless I am very much mistaken, it is used here for the first time (if only indirectly) in the context of the debate on God's designs for the Roman Empire. Since both Books 1 and 2 of Maccabees were and are considered as revealed texts by Christians, it is only natural to draw the conclusion that their fulsome praise of Rome, its Senate, and its expansionist policy, signified a full legitimization of the Roman Empire per se. This is a far cry from St. Augustine's recourse to the pessimistic history of Sallust to highlight the *virtutes* of a minority. For Bossuet, who isolates the passage from its historical context to give it a more general

19 M. Sordi, "L'elogio dei Romani nel I libro dei Maccabei," *Storiografia e propaganda*, Contrib. Ist. Storia Ant. Univ. Catt. Milano 3 (Milano, 1975), 95-104; A. Momigliano, "The Date of the First Book of Maccabees," in *Mélanges J. Heurgon* (Rome, 1976), 657-61, now in *Sesto Contributo* (Rome, 1980), 2:561-66. Momigliano's *Prime linee di storia della tradizione maccabaica*, 2nd ed. (Torino, 1931; reprinted: Amsterdam, 1968) is presupposed.

application, it was proof positive of a connection between secondary contingencies and the providential plan, comparable in worth to the very scriptural prophecies which he defended. In this case, divine revelation came down with direct emphasis upon a human political factor in the form of the great historical Rome.

All Bossuet's admiration for the Roman state could not, however, eliminate the harsh fact that the very greatness of the name "Rome," from the very beginning bore the seeds of its own destruction—that is to say, civil strife. Bossuet has no difficulty in showing the inevitable development of a military monarchy, the resultant loss of freedom (1:483), and thence the reasons for the decline of that same monarchic regime, based on force and violence (1:486).²⁰

The potential significance of the passage in 1 Maccabees, within the perspective of Bossuet's vision, quickly found a secure place in the framework of providential historical interpretation. For instance, it is embraced by the much maligned Rollin, who in his introductory description of the moral values inherent in Roman history and politics exactly reproduces the praise of the Roman Senate in Bossuet's very words.²¹ The idea is later confirmed in a total acceptance of the Roman people as a vessel for the fulfillment of the plans of Providence. Rollin combines the reasons outlined by Bossuet with the overall picture drawn by St. Augustine (and Orosius). Once more we find the theory that great moral qualities lay at the base of Roman development. But the historian acknowledges that these were neither widely diffused nor totally exempt from defect. The divine plan is often realized through a defective medium; even the evil passions of man may serve to bring the heavenly designs to fruition. Nevertheless, merits and virtue call for a reward. The *Preface* of Rollin closes, not without some contradiction, with a reference to the wise conclusions of Bossuet but also with a vivid appreciation of the *Considerations* of Montesquieu, which had just been published.

The argument founded on 1 Maccabees turns up again in Rollin's *De la maniere d'enseigner et de étudier les Belles Lettres*,²² precisely in a section of his outline of Roman history. Again Sallust's reflections in his *Bellum Catilinae* on the virtues that inspired the consuls and outstanding Romans are combined with the great praises bestowed upon the Romans by the Holy Spirit in 1 Maccabees. However deficient these

20 The revolt of the Maccabees was rather awkward for Bossuet, who upheld the total obedience of the subject as a definite duty toward his ruler and denied the existence of a just rebellion. The case of the Maccabees is presented as an exception that does not in any way authorize the revolt of subject against ruler. This particular rebellion forms part of the divine plan because God could not allow the race from which the Messiah was to be born to be exterminated. God chose his own means to save his people; *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture-Sainte*, new ed. (Brussels, 1721), 1:279–82. The same does not apply to human government; 2:91ff. On the other hand, the political wisdom, even of Gentiles and Romans, is praised by the Holy Spirit; 2:271–72 with reference to 1 Maccabees. Once the fine political order described in this text had changed, Rome lost its majesty and power.

21 *Histoire romaine depuis la fondation de Rome jusqu'à la bataille d'Actium* (Paris, 1739), 1:XXXII and LXXIV–LXXX.

22 New ed. (Paris, 1764), 4:144ff. The usefulness and providentiality of the Roman imperial unification for the spreading of Christianity were admitted by William Robertson, *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ's Appearance, and its Connexion with the Success of his Religion considered* (Edinburgh, 1755). According to his well-known negative judgment on the Roman Empire, Robertson saw that unification as the elimination of many free states, still untouched by the corruption, and as a general oppression of the mankind. Robertson quotes only sacred texts and for this reason (see n. 29) 1 Maccabees is not related.

virtues may be in terms both of motivation and goal (as they are accomplished for earthly glory rather than God), they yet merit some esteem when measured by the yardstick of civic rules and duties. The argument concludes with a reference to St. Augustine, *Epist. CXXXVIII* (an important source on the author's position in relation to Rome and the state). Naturally, in the coincidence of Christ's birth and the establishment by Augustus of a universal and peaceful empire, Rollin saw a clear manifestation of God's providential designs.

Bossuet's perception of a providential aspect in Chapter 8 of 1 Maccabees presupposes the book's canonical value as a matter of course. However, as we now know, 1 Maccabees (originally written in Hebrew) and 2 Maccabees (written in Greek) never formed part of the Jewish Canon. The complex process that led to the formation of the Jewish Canon had already been more or less completed by 200 B.C. with only the Book of Daniel being added after this date. The number of books within the Canon was fixed definitively towards A.D. 100 during the Synod of Jamnia. The two books of Maccabees were not included.²³ In a famous passage specifically relating to the history of the Canon, Josephus (*contra Apionem*, VIII, 37-41) declares "from Artaxerxes down to our own time, everything has been written down, but without receiving the same degree of belief as previous writings, because the succession of the prophets is no longer clear."²⁴ Josephus, who read 1 Maccabees in Greek, does not seem to deny to them a divine origin, but he does consider them of less value because of their later appearance in a time when the succession of prophets was diminishing. There is no doubt that in Palestine, as in Greece, there came a time when the history of the Hellenistic period was neglected and forgotten, the attention turning instead to the classical period.

E. Bickerman has asked what possible interest could have been found in Judas Maccabeus once the Temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed.²⁵ According to M. Smith, who follows the line taken by Josephus, the very recentness of the books of Maccabees and Ben Sira may have been the reason for their exclusion from the Canon.²⁶ I would like to suggest that the praise of the Romans may also have played a part in their exclusion. It is worth remembering that when Josephus, in his *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, deals with the treaty between Judas Maccabeus and Rome, he does indeed recall Roman conquests but avoids any eulogy of the Roman state and its policies (XII, 414). The conclusion to which Flavius Josephus is elsewhere driven, that Fortune had passed to the Romans and that God, aligning himself with Rome, had abandoned his people (*Bell. Iud.* II, 360, 373; *vd.* I, 293 and V, 367-68, 396) served as an explanation for the Roman domination of the world (II, 390).²⁷ This view was, in a manner, verified by a small Pharisaic group that accepted submission to Rome.²⁸ At any event, the tragic

23 O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. R. Ackroyd (Oxford, 1974), 559-71, 576-79; E. Schürer, *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (Leipzig, 1909), 3:442-44.

24 L. Troiani, *Commento storico al "Contro Apione" di Giuseppe* (Pisa, 1977).

25 E. Bickerman, "La chaîne de la tradition pharisienne" (1952), now in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden, 1980), 2:256-59.

26 *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York/London, 1971), 148-49.

27 E. Gabba, "L'Impero romano nel discorso di Agrippa II (Ioseph. B.I. II 345-401)," *Rivista storica dell'Antichità* 6-7 (1976-1977), 189-94.

28 G. Alon, "The Attitude of the Pharisees to the Roman Rule and the House of Herod" (1961), now in *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem, 1977), 44-47.

situation that followed A.D. 70 could scarcely welcome the warm praise of the Romans in Maccabees Book 1, given that it reflected a totally different historic climate.

The exclusion of the two books of the Maccabees from the Jewish Canon presented Christianity with some difficulties and uncertainty in accepting the sacred character of these writings.²⁹ Even the positions of Origen and St. Jerome are fraught with contradiction and indecision. Nonetheless, it seems strange that St. Augustine would not have been aware (granted that Origen had no need of it) of what Bossuet would later note with such emphasis, that is to say, the possible force of 1 Maccabees, with its fulsome praise of the Romans, as a strong argument for the theory of providential intervention in the case of the Roman Empire. The silence of the Bishop of Hippo on this point and the absence of the text from his appraisals would therefore seem to be intentional. St. Augustine does not quote or in any way use a revealed text that would have forced him to recognize, in its precise description of historical and political motivation and military imperialism, all on the most concrete human level, the reality of a Roman dominion recognized and upheld by God. He would no longer have been able to couple with any coherence his negative view of Rome and the inscrutability of God's designs, given that in this case there is a direct indication of his reasons and intentions on the plane of human history. The decline of the Roman Empire would indeed have presented St. Augustine with certain complications. For St. Augustine, the canonical nature of 1 and 2 Maccabees is taken, *si sobrie legatur vel audiat*, with particular emphasis naturally on Book 2 by virtue of the exemplary significance of the martyrdom of the Maccabee brothers, Christians even before the Incarnation.³⁰

29 All the passages are found in A. Calmet, *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'ancien et du nouveau Testament* (Paris, 1724), 3:806–7; 875 (Commentary on 1 Macc. 8). The two books of the Maccabees are excluded from the Canon by the Protestants. Some echoes of the criticism of the two books standing in the Canon are found in R. Simon, *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (Rotterdam, 1689), 279–80 and 282–83 (controversy between the theologians of Louvain and the local Jesuit College); cited in Borghero, *La Certezza e La Storia*, 161. See also J. G. Clemence, *L'Authenticité des livres tant du Nouveau que de l'Ancien Testament démontrée . . .* (Paris, 1782), 45–46. (I am indebted for this reference to the kindness of Prof. Fausto Parente.)

30 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, II, 13 (on the Canon); *Contra Gaudentium* and *De civit. Dei*, XVIII, 36 (*passiones vehementes atque mirabiles*); *Sermones*, CCC–I: A. Momigliano, "The Second Book of Maccabees," *Classical Philology* 70 (1975), 81–88 now in *Sesto Contributo*, 2:567–68.