



## [Paulus Orosius, \*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans\* VI.22.5-8](#)

Christ's desire to be a Roman citizen

**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:**

VI.22.5-8

### **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, it is argued that paganism, contrary to traditional Roman belief, was damaging to Rome, and that it was only when the empire was united under one God that peace could truly flourish. Just as God was the sole ruler of heaven, the divinely chosen emperor was the sole ruler of the earth's dominant power (see II.1.4; VI.17.9).

In this passage, Orosius joins the various other Christian authors who interpret Christ's birth at the time of the Roman census ordered by Caesar Augustus (see [Luke 2:1-3](#)) as a deliberately timed event, and as part of God's great plan to confirm Rome as his divinely sanctioned rulership. Orosius's account, like that also given in the third-century [Commentary on Daniel](#) (see below) synchronises Christ's birth with the reign of Augustus. It is argued that God ordained Augustus whom he had "predestined for [the] great mystery" of helping to bring about Christ's incarnation by achieving peace. Orosius's work makes much of the synchronisation of Christ and Augustus, which serves to enforce his message that Rome is an essential part of God's plan. 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; for other early Christian connections of the *Pax Romana* with Christianity, in varying forms of argumentation, see, for example, [Origen, Against Celsus II.30](#); [Origen, Against Celsus VIII.70](#); Tertullian, *Apology* XXXII). In the chapters prior to our passage, Orosius praises Augustus at length, describing his achievements, and focusing on his bringing of peace (the closing of the gates of Janus is highlighted in this regard). Augustus's famous shunning of the title "lord" is mentioned in chapter 21 (see Suetonius, *Augustus* LIII), and in verse 5 of the present extract is interpreted as deference on Augustus's part to Christ, who was the true "lord of men."

Moreover, the designation of the Romans as "lords/masters (*dominus*) of the world" in verse 7 is a quotation from Virgil's [Aeneid I.282](#), in which Jupiter reassures Venus that the Romans are destined for a great future. As Fear suggests, it is possible that Orosius is simply displaying his knowledge of this classical text here. However, another



way of reading the quotation is that by recalling these famous words of Virgil in relation to the Roman census, which both asserts Caesar's primacy among men and connects this with Christ's birth, Orosius wishes to imply that a pagan writer (Virgil), and a pagan god (Jupiter) have prophesied Christ's coming (Fear, *Orosius*, p. 316). This interpretation sees Jupiter's words as being fulfilled in the census, which was itself part of God's plan for humanity (verse 6). This line of argument is not unique to Orosius's text within Christian writings. Indeed, the author of the fourth-century *Oration of Constantine* (possibly the emperor Constantine himself, but there is uncertainty) similarly draws directly upon the words of Virgil and the Erythraean Sibyl, interpreting them as prophecies of Christ. In chapter XVIII of the *Oration*, the author cites a poem attributed to the Erythraean Sibyl, which he claims features an acrostic referring to the nature and passion of Christ, reading "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, Cross." It is claimed that the Sibyl was filled with divine inspiration from God, and as such must be venerated as a blessed and chosen vessel that has transmitted Christ's purpose to humanity. This acrostic is also quoted by Augustine in his *City of God* XVIII.23, who similarly claims the Sibyl for Christianity (Lactantius in his *Divine Institutes* also makes numerous references throughout to various sibyls and their predictions, which he relates directly to Christ and his actions). In chapter XIX of the *Oration*, the author quotes Virgil's [fourth Eclogue](#) (*Bucolic*), which describes the arrival of a baby boy who will usher in a new golden age (for further discussion of the Christian use of Virgil's text, see Stephen Benko, "Virgil's Fourth *Eclogue*"). The author claims that out of fear of the Roman authorities, Virgil veiled the mystery of the Saviour in language familiar to his pagan audience, and that it was really the Christians, rather than the Romans, which the poet spoke of in the poem as being "a new ?????, *d?mos* (people)" (*Eclogue* IV.7 reads as follows: *iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto* "now a new generation descends from heaven on high").

Like Orosius, the *Commentary on Daniel* also views the census under Caesar Augustus as significant for Christianity. However, this is not in the same positive manner that Orosius and others understand it (for other interpretations of the census as a vital part of God's plan, see the commentary on John Chrysostom, [Homily on the Date of Christmas 2](#)). The probable third-century *Commentary on Daniel* IV.9 argues that the census had the effect of distinguishing between those who pledged allegiance to "a king of the earth" (these would take the name of "Roman"), and those who chose to follow the "king of heaven" (these would take the name "Christians"). The author of this latter text makes clear that Christians and Romans are both distinct and incompatible, which is vastly different from what Orosius is arguing. Orosius views himself both as a "Roman and a Christian" (see *Seven Books of History* V.2.6), and as stated above, one of the key messages of the *Seven Books of History* was that Rome's success was the ultimate fulfilment of God's plan (he was also proud of his Spanish heritage, and keen to point out what Spain had contributed to the Roman empire: *Seven Books of History* V.23.16). For Orosius, the census was a crucial aspect of God's plan to intertwine Christianity with Rome, and more specifically, with Roman citizenship, which is expressed through the unique claim that Christ himself was a Roman citizen. The statement in verse 8 that Christ "especially wished to be called a Roman citizen by the declaration of the Roman census list" indicates that Orosius was not aware—or simply chose to gloss over the facts in order to make his point—that prior to the edict of Caracalla (the *Antonine Constitution*) in 212 CE, which granted Roman citizenship to all free provincials of the empire, most would not have been Roman citizens just by virtue of being listed on the census. However, regardless of this, the identification of Christ as a Roman citizen is "a bold move by Orosius which turns the Romans into the new chosen race" (Fear, *Orosius*, p. 316 n. 355).

The mention of Macedonia, Babylon and "lesser kingdoms" in verse 7 of the above extract also illustrates an important feature of Orosius's history, namely, his acceptance of the historical framework of the *translatio imperii* ("transfer of rule"). This notion had become quite standard in Christian apologetics, which interpreted the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:31-45 as denoting four kingdoms which would rule the world in succession (see also, for example, [Cyprian, On the Vanity of Idols V](#), where it is argued that Rome is not special, and is simply another kingdom in a list that has arisen due to chance, not its own merit). However, the theory had also long been drawn upon by non-Christian authors. For example, Aelius Aristides's *Roman Oration* compares the Roman Empire to the previous Persian and Macedonian kingdoms (chapters 14-27), and then to the hegemony of Athens, Sparta and Thebes (chapters 45-50). The concept of *translatio imperii* is used to exalt the Roman Empire, which he claims will not follow the fate of previous kingdoms which ultimately failed in their attempts at hegemony; rather Aristides implicitly suggests that Rome is meant to be eternal (see also Velleius Paterculus, [The Roman History I.6](#); Justin, [Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XLI.1.1-9](#)). Christian writers usually interpreted the four kingdoms of Daniel 2:31-45 as the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. While Orosius accepts this in the *Seven Books of History*, Fear argues that he presents it slightly differently in order to place focus more firmly on the way in which his readers in the later Western Roman Empire would have understood history. In Orosius's wider presentation in the *Seven Books of History*, the Persian empire is collapsed into the Babylonian empire, which makes Macedonia the second empire in the list. He then puts Carthage, Rome's historical rival, in the usual place of Macedon as the third empire, and ends with Rome as the fourth (Fear, *Orosius*, p. 19).



Orosius's presentation of the four empires is also examined by Hervé Inglebert, who notes that Orosius synthesises the four empires and the four cardinal points: the empire of the East = Babylon (which also includes the Assyrian, Median, neo-Babylonian and Persian); the empire of the North = the Macedonians; the empire of the South = Carthage; and the empire of the West = Rome. This representation of the *translatio imperii* therefore becomes less focused on the Near-Eastern region, and more centred on the Mediterranean area (*Interpretatio Christiana*, p. 360-361, 364. However, Fear notes that in the present extract, Orosius's theory of the four kingdoms is stripped down, with only Babylon and Macedonia, in addition to "lesser kingdoms" being mentioned, and Carthage left out. This is perhaps because essentially, the crucial aim of this passage is to make clear that Rome is the "culmination of God's plans on earth" (*Orosius*, p. 316).

Hervé Inglebert states that in this passage, Orosius continues to demonstrate the "providential structural link between Christ, Rome and its empire" ("Christian Reflections," p. 105). The history of Rome is viewed, therefore, as always having been intended for Christianity, with Christ's incarnation being the culmination of this. However, for Peter Van Nuffelen, while Christ's nativity during the time of the Roman empire elevates its status above other empires, the other message running throughout Orosius's history is that this honour is qualified with the assertion that Rome is still not "exempt from the universal law that everything human decays," even that which is favoured by God (*Orosius and the Rhetoric of History*, p. 191). The sacking of the city of Rome, the reaction to which was the reason for the composition of the work in the first place, made this perfectly clear. However, ultimately, the fact that Christ is portrayed as having chosen to become incarnate as a Roman, wishing to be registered as a Roman citizen, sanctions and Christianises the Roman imperial state, and shows that for Orosius, the Roman empire is the embodiment of heaven on earth (Fear, *Orosius*, p. 21), and that the Roman people have supplanted the Jews as God's people.

Keywords in the original language:

- [apex](#)
- [Babylon](#)
- [Caesar](#)
- [census](#)
- [civis Romanus](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [fides](#)
- [genus humanum](#)
- [Iesus Christus](#)
- [Macedonia](#)
- [mysterium](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pax](#)
- [praedestino](#)
- [primus](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [professio](#)
- [provincia](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [scribo](#)
- [urbs](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Augustus](#)
- [census](#)
- [chosen people](#)
- [Christ](#)
- [incarnation](#)
- [nativity](#)
- [Pax Romana](#)



- [peace](#)
- [prosperity](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman prosperity](#)
- [Roman supremacy](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [substitution](#)
- [translatio imperii](#)
- [universalism](#)

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