

*Living in the Twilight of Empire: Lessons from the Life of Augustine*  
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Summary sentence (DCD X.32 [p. 344]): “And now, in fulfillment of the promise I made in the first book, I shall go on to say, as God shall aid me, what I think needs to be said regarding the origin, history, and deserved ends of the two cities, which, as already remarked, are in this world commingled and implicated with one another.”

## I. Background

1. Written in parts from 413-427. Title is from Psalm 87:3, which reads (from Augustine’s Latin text), “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”
  2. Emperor Constantine: gave Christianity legal status in the 300s.
  3. 410 Alaric and the Goths invaded Rome, but withdrew after three days. Nonetheless, this “successful” invasion demonstrated Rome’s vulnerability
  4. The complaint: Some pagans complained that the reason Rome had been attacked, and, for a few days at least, conquered, was because of Christianity—the pagan gods had been renounced.
  5. Order of the book:
    - a. Books 1-10: A refutation of the false teachings of the pagans
      - (1) Books 1-5: Refutation of those who worship the pagan gods for the sake of happiness in this life or the aggrandizement of the Roman Empire.
      - (2) Books 6-10: Refutation of those who worship the same gods for the sake of the happiness in the afterlife or the good of the soul.
    - b. Books 11-22: Demonstration of the truth of the Christian faith, by recounting the origin, the development, and the end of the two cities.
      - (1) “city of God”/“heavenly city” (symbolized by Jerusalem)
      - (2) “city of man”/“earthly city” (symbolized by Babylon, and sometimes called the “city of the devil”)
1. Basic Themes:
    - (a) Origin of the two cities
    - (b) Development of the two cities
    - (c) End of the two cities
  2. Two loves:
    - (a) “the love of God to the contempt of oneself”
    - (b) “the love of oneself to the contempt of God” (14.28)

## II. Key Themes: Augustine’s Criticisms of Pagan Thought

1. The Pagan Criticism:
  - (1) Christianity, by enlisting people in the service of “a higher and nobler country” (*ep.* 91.1), diminished citizen’s commitment to their city.
  - (2) Certain Christian teachings, like the unity of the human race as image bearers of God, and love for one’s enemies, and the importance of meekness and patience, tended to rob the city of its defenses.

Some said: Christians are better at praying for her enemies than fighting them.

### **Augustine's Response:**

- (1) Christianity does not destroy patriotism, but reinforces it by elevating it to the rank of religious obligation. Romans 13 teaches *submission* to the rulers.
  - (2) Christianity is compatible with many social orders, and actually serves the commonwealth by resisting immoral behavior and practices.
  - (3) Christianity does not renounce all use of force, or arms, but does teach that any such use, such as war, is carried out with a just design, and will avoid undue harshness.
  - (4) Christianity cannot be blamed for the injustices and fall of Rome, for Rome was full of injustices and wickedness long before Christianity became a world power.
    - “however admirable our adversaries say the republic was or is, it is certain that by the testimony of their own learned writers it had become, long before the coming of Christ, utterly wicked and dissolute, and indeed had no existence, but had been destroyed by profligacy.” (*City of God* II.22)
  - (5) The pagan philosophers rightly “emphasize the need for justice but are powerless to secure its performance.” (Ernest L. Fortin, “*Civitate Dei, De*”, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 198)
  - (6) Rome was never really a “republic,” for true justice will ultimately only be seen in the republic which is founded and ruled by Christ.
    - “But the fact is, true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ, if at least any choose to call this a republic; and indeed we cannot deny that it is the people’s weal.” (*City of God* II.21)
- Note: Augustine challenges the classical/pagan commitment to the earthly city.
  - In Western thought: Augustinianism is a bulwark against tyranny.

### **III. Key Themes: The Two Cities**

#### **1. History is really the story of “two cities”: the city of God and the earthly city.**

- A. The city of God exists partially here, but is only fully realized in the afterlife.
- B. The earthly city is earthly reality and is ultimately the whole company of the lost.
- C. Until the judgment, the two cities are mixed, and like wheat and chaff, they will ultimately be separated:

“In truth, these two cities are entangled together in this world, and intermixed until the last judgment effect their separation. I now proceed to speak, as God shall help me, of the rise, progress, and end of those two cities; and what I write, I write for the glory of the city of God, that, being placed in comparison with the other, it may shine with a brighter luster.” (*City of God* I.35)
- D. Striking: Augustine actually argues that one cannot discern a lot of God’s purpose by looking at particular human events. One can *always* trust that God is in control, but it is virtually impossible to move from (1) analysis of a particular event to (2) an affirmation of God’s particular purpose.

For Augustine the city or commonwealth is “a group of rational beings bound together by a common acknowledgment of right and a community of interests.” (*City of God* II.21.2)

## 2. The Origin of the Two Cities

- Ultimately, history begins with *one city*—the first couple dwelling peacefully and happily with each other and with God.
- The *second city*—really only comes into being with sin.
- The first man—Adam—contains within himself both “cities.”

“ . . . in this first man, who was created in the beginning, there was laid the foundation, not indeed evidently, but in God’s foreknowledge, of these two cities or societies, so far as regards the human race. For from that man all men were to be derived—some of them to be associated with the good angels in their reward, others with the wicked in punishment; all being ordered by the secret yet just judgment of God.” (*City of God* XII.27)

### A. Key Scriptures: Scriptures Augustine uses

1. Psalm 87:3: “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.”
2. Ps. 48:1: “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain.”
3. Psalm 46:4: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, The holy dwelling places of the Most High.”

### B. Other “city”/“commonwealth” Scriptures:

1. Ephesians 2:12: “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
2. Hebrews 12:22: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels.”
3. Revelation 3:12: “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.”
4. Revelation 21:1-2: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.”
5. Revelation 21:10: “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”
6. Revelation 22:19: “. . . and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”

### C. Origin:

- \* the separation of the good and bad angels
- \* Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden

## 3. The Heart of the Two Cities: The Two Loves

\* *The City of God* XIV.28: “Of the Nature of the Two Cities, the Earthly and the Heavenly.”

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." [Ps. iii. 3](#). In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, "I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength." [Ps. xviii. 1](#). And therefore the wise men of the one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls, or both, and those who have known God "glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise," — that is, glorying in their own wisdom, and being possessed by pride, — "they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." For they were either leaders or followers of the people in adoring images, "and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." [Rom. i. 21–25](#). But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, "that God may be all in all." [1 Cor. xv. 28](#).

- "After having presented the two cities, the one founded in the material good of this world, the other in hope in God, but both starting from a common gate opened in Adam into this mortal state, and both running on and running out to their proper and merited ends . . ." (*City of God* XV.21)

#### 4. Development (Books 15 and following)

1. All of history is a history of the two cities:

"For this whole time or world-age, in which the dying give place and those who are born succeed, is the career of these two cities concerning which we treat." (*City of God*, 15.28, p. 478)

2. Cain and Abel:

Cain: the city of men—Assyria, Babylon, Rome

Abel: the city of God, then Seth, then Abraham, then Noah, then Moses, then David, then Jesus

Augustine relates Cain and Abel to Romulus slaying Remus in ancient Rome, and then says,

\* "The quarrel, then, between Romulus and Remus shows how the earthly city is divided against itself; that which fell out between Cain and Abel illustrated the hatred that subsists between the two cities, that of God and that of men."

3. The history of the world is the God's salvific work in history:

". . . each man, being derived from a condemned stock, is first of all born of Adam evil and carnal, and becomes good and spiritual only afterwards, when he is grafted [grafted] into Christ by regeneration: so was it in the human race as a whole." (15.1, p. 479)

4. The City of God enters a new epoch with the coming of Christ. Christ and his kingdom are the true fulfillment of the OT promises given to Israel.

## 5. The end of the “two cities”

A. The end of the city of God: the vision of God in the company of the saints.

The end of the city of man: eternal separation from the living God.

B. The end of the city of God is the removal of sin, the perfection of the body, and eternal presence with God.

“ . . . and along with the other great and marvelous discoveries which shall then kindle rational minds in praise of the great Artificer, there shall be the enjoyment of a beauty which appeals to the reason.” (*City of God* XXII.30)

“Certainly they shall have no greater joy than the celebration of the grace of Christ, who redeemed us by His blood.” (*City of God* XXII.30)

“But when are restored by Him, and perfected with greater grace, we shall have eternal leisure to see that He is God, for we shall be full of Him when He shall be all in all. For even our good works, when they are understood to be rather His than ours, are imputed to us that we may enjoy this Sabbath rest.” (*City of God* XXII.30)

## IV. Key Insights and Practical Application

1. Setting the temporal world in a different context
  - Relativizing the importance of the classical conception of the city, where all one’s needs are to be met.
2. Sovereignty of God over all of history: The history of redemption is the key backdrop for understanding of all of history.
3. The centrality of Love: The two loves as being the key determinants of one’s place in history.
  - This is hard to overestimate. Augustine’s point is that the state of heart determines which city one is in.
4. Christians can be confident that our lives have meaning, because the story of our lives takes place against the backdrop of God’s glorious and gracious plan.
4. Christians can be confident that there is an ultimate and glorious goal which leads us on throughout this life: the vision of God in the company of the saints.
5. Christians can be confident that while we might endure suffering and injustice now, that God, in the end is victorious, and all of our sufferings will be completely put aside and abolished when we enter into the City of God in its fullness.
6. Augustine’s concept of the *libido dominandi* is a rich resource for Christians today. Augustine’s notion that fallen man has a deep and virtually intractable desire to “dominate” others should encourage Christians to be cautious and circumspect about centralized and concentrated power. That is, given the deep human desire to control and dominate others, this truth alone should encourage Christians to seek to diligently and in principal limit the power and authority of civil rulers.

### *Where Augustine might be improved*

1. Augustine’s insight that only where Christ is worshipped and honored can true justice be found is not as fully explored as one might like.
2. One might have wished that Augustine would have attended more to what we might say the “nitty-gritty” of life in the world. How *is* one to act? How is one to parent? What *is* the role of civil government? Augustine was living in a very different time, where the notion of a *completely* secular civil government would have been a bit foreign to him.