

## The Story of Then

This piece of fiction arises out of a way to use art – literature – as the introduction to my PhD project with the Taos Institute and Tilburg University (Humanities). The use of story is intended to offer some context to a very old Christian debate, which occurred between two church leaders in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE: Pelagius and Augustine. Central to the tension was whether or not the human species should be seen through the lens of *Original Blessings* or *Original Sin*.

The intention of the story is not to convince or sway the reader that one perspective was or is right. Rather, the use of fiction will hopefully allow the reader an opportunity to better appreciate a different time during the Christian church's history. It is by hearing a story that we might begin to imagine how *Then* was, in order to explore generative ways to better understand our *Now* ...

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The Rock burned – it wasn't supposed to. The dream for which we'd all longed, for which so many had been martyred, seemed tangible, touchable, and attainable. And now, it's fallen. Perhaps that's too dramatic, but there it is nonetheless.

The Rock fell and now we are all scrambling trying to understand its meaning? Is our fate to be like that after Jerusalem was torched? From that came such change. So many of us left the synagogue to follow the One, the Way, the Christ ... but wasn't that supposed to be the beginning of the New World? Wasn't *Revelation* the map that brought us – finally – to the Kingdom? Well, it's gone now and I can see it in his eyes. As he writes his *City of God*, there's a light gone and the Sin about which he has constantly warned us seems to have come to be. The Serpent is in our midst!

I have so many thoughts – they're varied and scattered – and I am not even sure why I am writing this. At one time, I might have been allowed to write a biography – when women like Lydia and Phoebe helped Paul build the church. But it seems like that moment – when gender was not a barrier – has come and gone like so much. When did it all change?

I know that there have been debates and arguments. Oh, such arguments! I wonder if the Christ would have approved of how rhetoric seems to have replaced parable? I wonder what he would think of the right and wrongs we have created? I wonder if I am simply romanticising a church that seems to be slipping away?

I also realise that I'm penning these words as my own lament. I've wrestled with trying to understand fully the thoughts and theology of the Bishop. In moments, he seems to demonstrate an openness to our – women's – thoughts and then it's gone. All too often the promise of acceptance becomes tempered. At one moment we are almost equals and then he sees the Fall,

the Serpent entwine the Rock and everything crumble. It's been like that since we all fled Roma and that has been the way since we arrived in Hippo. Sometimes I wonder to which Bishop I am speaking. I also wonder for which Kingdom does he long – Roma or the Promised One?

Am I getting ahead of myself? I have read, re-read, even asked Miriam to take a moment to edit – in between her own work with numbers – to see if this is the right way to record this moment. Because – trust me – this moment will change everything. Perhaps not the moment – exactly – but the completion of the *City* will set a course – I believe – that will reach well beyond his own intention. If I do not speak now, then I am lost to the Call to which I myself have responded.

Sin, the Garden, the Fall and the Rock, as far as I am concerned occurred in debates that I had wished would lead to agreement, not defeat for one idea and the idolatry – yes, I use that word most intentionally – of another. It's already begun: if we are all inherently sinful – even though Grace exists – then I fear what that means for us. What does a church built upon human brokenness mean when it tries to understand the Christos as one who loves all, not because of piety or privilege, but as fellow children of God?

If only the monk had softened, if only the Bishop had listened ... and I guess that is the story I will revisit for you ... I pray you will hear a tale that was grounded in creativity and dialogue, but which ultimately failed to reach a mutually acceptable way of seeing our human relation to our Loving Father. Perhaps you will begin to imagine new ways to continue a conversation that will eventually need to be explored once more – for all of our sakes ...

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As I continue to tell this tale, it feels important that you know something about us, our time and the way we write. I do not know if this will survive the years, but it is our tradition when we utilise speech or word to try to convince and to sway: not those with whom we are in debate, but those who are listening or reading. Whether a treatise or history, poetry or myth, there is always a sense of a competition in which one must convince or withdraw. Some might call this invective, but rhetoric has been what has served the Empire.

Another thing that feels important to share is that the church, the one from which I write and the one that any of can find in those first letters of Paul are ... the same, yet different? We are no longer pursued, murdered or ridiculed. Even more important to note is that there are few, if any, who are called to martyrdom. The irony is not lost on many of us that we now occupy the seats of authority that were once used to shackle and torture those of The Way.

I know what some have claimed the Monk was a martyr – but I do not want to get ahead of myself. I guess what you may need to know is that the church of my now, though hearkening back to the first, sits in a very different context. As such, it seems difficult – at times – to reconcile the two.

I have consulted with Miriam, before proceeding, and I have decided to try to do this differently. I know I am not objective, especially after the barbarians violated the Rock. I will – nonetheless – try to present the Monk and the Bishop as dispassionately as I can. If you are to learn what you need whenever you are reading this, it seems necessary to try to share our time with you, while attempting to remain neutral.

Theodosius I was Emperor when he arrived in Roma. As Emperor some even attributed the title of ‘the Great’ to him. I’m still not sure that he earned that. The Empire began to crumble around him and – after – it was broken into two: east and west. I do not presume to understand the ways of politics and how to balance matters of states with Goths and barbarians, but in hindsight it seems to me that we should have seen the plaster falling from the frescoes then. I have no doubt the Bishop would disagree: from his perspective, it was Theodosius who finally established the needed orthodoxy the church needed to be the Empire’s spiritual centre. To the Bishop’s delight, Nicaean Christianity was finally established and – as a result – less room was now made for others for whom Christianity might be other explained.

It was into this political reality and warring diplomacy that the Monk arrived. He was already known as a moralist and – if memory serves – there was initially concord between them. His exploration of Paul was exciting and it also highlighted the changing reality of the Church. It had been almost 100 years since the last martyrdom and almost 70 years since Emperor Constantine was converted during the Battle of Milan. The stories of Constantine having seen *Ἐν Τοῦτω Νίκα* blazing in the sky was enough for him to recognise in that sign that victory lay before him if he would but submit to the will of God. On that very day, his soldiers placed Christ’s  $\text{☩}$  upon their shields and the day changed everything. Even now – when that tale is told in house churches – I am not sure if the battle or Constantine’s deathbed baptism excites those new to The Way more! I wonder, sometimes, shouldn’t that worry me more?

As for Pelagius, however, people whispered that he had come as one of the old prophets from Britannia. He had come to assess the state of the Rock and already people were sympathetic to the message he brought. At first, it was challenging, but not ... critical? But that quickly changed. Already sects had appeared in Spain. They had about them a missionary fervour that some said had not been seen since before Milan – in fact some went so far as to claim that their zeal went to the very heart of the church. These were gossiping whispers in 380 ... they would soon become much more than mere whisper.

It is difficult to fully describe the church at this point. There were no barbarians threatening the Eternal City – Theodosius was able to create an illusion that remained well painted for too long. Already the church had made great strides – in fact some contended that the new age was Golden

because of the establishment of the church. Our early forbearers' structures soon found their way into the governance of the Empire. This merging of Empire and Christ's ministry was the sign for many that now the Kingdom was becoming and Christ would certainly soon reveal that which was promised!

For the Monk, however, such certainty and confidence was not the true teaching. Though at first he was less articulate, some already saw the beginnings of a Priestly revival. What does that mean, you might wonder if you were not here at the time?

It is the oldest tension the Bishop would contend. Of course he tries to make that clear, but his deference to Plato and Aristotle often seem more confusing than illuminating. I think Miriam explains it much better – at least for the newly baptised. In her own way, she could cut through all of the debate. For her it was as simple as 'who was in and who was out.' The Bishop believed everybody was invited and longed for Christ's message of the Father's universal love. The Monk, however, was never convinced of that (in the same way) and the ensuing debates were – even then – already demonstrating that the Good News could be wielded – with sad irony – like a weapon.