

August 4, 2002
Seven Holy Youths of Ephesus

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the ancient stories of the Trojan War, Aeneas the Dardanian was a relatively minor character. From Homer, Hesiod, and Hyginus, we know something of his origins (fathered by the mortal Anchises and born of the goddess Aphrodite) and a bit of his part in the nine-years conflict that culminated in the fall of Troy. After that, however, the Greeks had no clear focus on the career of Aeneas. The older accounts varied with respect to his end, some saying he died at Pellene in Thrace, others at Orchomenus in Arcadia. In any case, the post-Troy days of Aeneas, unlike those of Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax, and other characters in that famous adventure, inspired no abiding theme for Greek theater or poetry. He had fought, after all, on the losing side.

This Greek uncertainty about the latter days of Aeneas invited the later speculation of the Latins, whose most famous account thereof comes to us in Vergil's Aeneid. According to this story, Aeneas and his companions escaped during the burning of Troy and, after a lengthy, circuitous voyage around various corners of the Mediterranean, finally landed on the western coast of the Italian peninsula, founding the city of Lavinium. They were the forebears, that is to say, of Rome.

When Vergil died at Brindisi in Calabria on September 22, 19 B.C., his Aeneid was not yet ready for publication, and he had left instructions with his literary executors to burn the manuscript in the event of his death. At the intervention of the Emperor Augustus, however, this did not happen. Convinced that Vergil's great epic version of the Trojan origin of the Roman people would inspire them to an heroic sense of their destiny, Augustus ordered the work to be published. There is every reason to believe that the Aeneid, which became a standard text in the teaching of Latin grammar and literature, served the intention of Augustus very well, prompting the Romans to assume the burden of political greatness that history had placed into their hands.

Because of the literary and political importance of this work within the century following its publication, no carefully educated, internationally cultured man in the Roman Empire would have been unfamiliar with the Roman story of Aeneas. Even those unable to read Latin would know Vergil's account

second-hand, as part of the officially endorsed mythology of the Empire. Vergil's story was certainly familiar, therefore, to the physician Luke, a truly cosmopolitan man of letters, whose style of historiography has often been compared to that of Herodotus and Thucydides.

In any case, the parallels between the Aeneid and Luke's Acts of the Apostles are many and difficult to miss. For instance, both epics begin in a doomed city (Troy/Jerusalem) and finish in Rome. Indeed, Luke, who accompanied Paul to Rome (Acts 28:13-16; 2 Timothy 4:11), seems to have a Roman fixation from the beginning. After noting the presence of Romans at Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2:10), Luke follows the movement of the Gospel relentlessly westward.

Moreover, one of the major steps in that progression is made at Troas, the site of the ancient Troy, where Paul receives the message that brings him to Europe (16:8-12). He will again visit Troas (20:5-6) on the journey that will at last take him to Rome (cf. Romans 1:15; 15:22-25). Going to Rome will be Paul's own carefully considered decision (Acts 25:16-21; 26:32), and, like Aeneas in Vergil's account, his Rome-ward voyage will include long delays (24:27 and the context *passim*), as well as a shipwreck (27:13-44). (At Rome, Paul will again think of Troas; cf. 2 Timothy 4:13.)

Before ever narrating the journeys of Paul, however, Luke sounds the Roman theme already in the ministry of Peter, whose baptism of the centurion Cornelius, the first official representative of Rome to become a Christian (Acts 10), is a crucial event in the whole mission of the Church and its movement to Rome. Just prior to that event, furthermore, Luke suggests its immense significance by describing Peter's healing of . . . Aeneas! Of the many persons healed through the ministry of Peter (3:7; 5:15-16), it is noteworthy that only Aeneas and Dorcas are named (9:32-41). In the case of Aeneas, the name suggests some connection to the Rome-ward motif of the book itself.

Thus, Vergil's older account of the Trojan survivor is now completed by the Gospel. The message of salvation goes to Rome, where Peter too (as Luke and his readers well knew) will finish his course (1 Peter 5:13). We are surely right in reading Peter's declaration to Aeneas as Luke's proclamation to the whole Roman world: "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you" (9:34).

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