

Only a century separates the writing of Virgil's *Aeneid* and the majority of the Christian texts. In their own way, each text tells the story of how history had been leading up to the time they were written: the *Aeneid* tells of the inevitable rise of Augustus and the Christian scriptures the inevitable coming of the Jewish messiah in the form of Jesus. Both texts speak of the place of humans in a broader cosmic conflict, in battles between the gods, and thus both texts not only spoke to the people of their day, but have continued to resonate with readers in the millennia since they were composed.

Aeneas, the protagonist of the *Aeneid*, is mentioned throughout Homer's *Iliad*. Early on, we learn that Aeneas is the son of the Trojan Anchises and the Greek goddess Aphrodite (2.820), and later Poseidon prophesies that "the might of Aeneas shall be lord over the Trojans, and his sons' sons, and those who are born of their seed hereafter" (20. 308-310). Relying on this prophecy, Augustus' family claimed descent from Aeneas as one means of legitimating their rule.

Throughout the *Aeneid*, it is clear that Augustus' victories and eventual rule had been foretold. In the clearest case, Aeneas journeys into the underworld and sees great Romans past and future, and is told explicitly to "Turn your two eyes/ This was and see this people, your own Romans./ Here is Caesar, and all the line of Iulus,/ All who shall one day pass under the dome/ Of the great sky: this is the man, this one,/ Of whom so often you have heard the promise, /Caesar Augustus, son of the deified, / Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold/ To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned."

In several of the Christian scriptures, we are told that Jesus was the son of Mary and the Jewish god YHWH, and the Christian writers linked Jesus with the Jewish Tanakh and the lineage of David. Throughout the Christian scriptures, we are told how Jesus' birth, life, and even manner of death was the fulfilment of prophecies.

In both the *Aeneid* and in the Christian scriptures, the genealogies are more fanciful than historical. Many classical writers have noted the four century gap between Aeneas and the founding of Rome, and many others have noted the gaps and inconsistencies in the genealogies presented in Matthew and Luke. Many commentators have also noted that many of the prophecies Christians applied to Jesus were initially applied to others.

For the early Christians, not only was Jesus the fulfilment of prophecy, he represented the end of history. Throughout his teachings, Jesus predicted the imminent end of this world and an ushering in of the kingdom of god. This kingdom would be ruled over by his disciples, and in this kingdom social roles would be overturned, with the poor and downtrodden exalted over the rich and privileged.

In many ways, both groups needed to legitimate their leaders. Augustine was the first real emperor of Rome, having inherited the empire from his grand uncle Julius. He needed a story to justify why he was the ruler of an empire instead of a Republic, and it was because the gods had decreed it. In a similar way, the Christians needed to explain why Jesus was the predicted Messiah, even though Jewish sources spoke of the Messiah as a military conqueror and not a crucified common criminal.

Not only did Augustus' and Jesus' lives overlap, but Jesus' death was wrapped up in the threats to the Empire that Augustus had ruled: Jesus was executed for claiming to be the King of the Jews.

For the past several years, I have read the great epics as the stories of people attempting to make sense of their place in the cosmos. These are great epics, worthy of being read as human documents encouraging each of us to ask deeper questions about how to live, the place of duty and personal desire, and our place in the cosmos. They need not be true in order to inspire one, and one need not bash one in order to esteem the other.

16 April 2014