WORLDVIEW GUIDE

The AENEID

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For Robert Sloan
for helping to make Houston Baptist University
a place where Athens and Jerusalem
can truly meet

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INTRODUCTION

For 1500 years, Virgil's *Aeneid* reigned supreme. Whereas our self-conscious age has found greater solace in Homer's spontaneity than Virgil's sophistication, our ancestors found in the *Aeneid* a purpose, a pathos, and a profundity that moved them. It was Virgil—not in opposition to but alongside the Bible—who taught Christian Europe the shape of history, the cost of empire, the primacy of duty, the transience of fame, the inevitability of death, the pain of letting go, and the burden of adapting new strategies.

WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Although it is hypothetically possible Virgil could have read portions of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), it is highly unlikely he did so. Yet, despite his ignorance of the Hebrew Scriptures, Virgil offers in his *Aeneid* an eschatological view of history that bears a striking resemblance to that presented in the Bible.

According to the Judeo-Christian worldview, history is not haphazard but moves forward in accordance with God's just but ultimately benevolent providence. Like an Aristotelian plot, history does not proceed randomly but has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Furthermore, in the Bible, that end is revealed to be a good one; indeed, the power of Christian eschatology (Greek for "study of the end") is that it takes an initially bad event and uses it as the basis for a good end. The Church Fathers referred to this eschatological transformation of evil into good as *felix culpa* (Latin for "happy fault").

Thus, the Fall of Man, surely a bad event, gives way to God's outpouring of love in the Incarnation: when God became man and entered our fallen world. Likewise, the Crucifixion, perhaps the darkest day in human history, led to the victory of Easter Sunday. The *felix culpa* aspect of this turn is evident in the name the Church has given to the day Jesus was crucified: Good Friday. For Christians, the Fall marks the beginning of history, the Resurrection the middle, and the hoped-for Second Coming of Christ the end.

According to Virgilian eschatology, history also has a beginning (the Fall of Troy), a middle (the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus in 753 BC), and an end (the establishment of the Roman Empire by Caesar Augusts in 27 BC). Though the Fall of Troy was a terrible, bloody event that wiped out a city and a civilization, when it is viewed through eschatological eyes, it becomes a good event, for it leads, in the fullness of time, to the Roman Empire.

Virgil gives us a glimpse of this historical process when he comes to the Temple of Juno at Carthage in Book I. There he learns that Dido knew where to build her city because she was given a sign: the head of a warhorse. Attentive readers will take from this a symbolic key: whenever we see a horse in the epic, it represents the building of a city. So far so good, until we move on to Book II and discover that a horse (the fabled Trojan Horse) now symbolizes the fall of a city. At first it might seem that Virgil has lost thematic control of his epic, but he has not; from