

SCALA GENTIUM

Reading God's Two Books with the Gospel of Matthew

The Sibyl, the Books, and the Poet

Unit I · Week 1 — History Companion

HISTORY COMPANION

Four spreads for Day 2: the Sibyl in myth, the nine books, the decade the poem was born into, and the poet who caught the song. The picture list at the back keys every image.

I

The Woman in the Jar

The Sibyl of Cumae is the most famous prophetess of the ancient world, and antiquity left her story in pieces — three above all, by three different hands and in three different keys. Ovid tells the bargain: Apollo offered her anything, and she asked for as many years as the grains of dust in her hand — and forgot to ask for youth. Virgil makes her Aeneas's guide to the land of the dead: the cave with its hundred mouths, the golden bough, the road down and — harder — the road back up. And Petronius gives the legend its bitter end: the Sibyl shrunk small, hanging in a jar, and when the boys ask what she wants, answering, *I want to die*. (Petronius gives the scene to a braggart at a dinner party — proof, at least, of how far the legend had travelled.)

THE THREE SOURCES

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV — the bargain of the grains

Virgil, *Aeneid* VI — the guide to the dead

Petronius, *Satyricon* 48 — the jar, and the answer

THE POINT

The story's Prologue weaves these three into one life. The threads are ancient; the weaving is the author's.



Michelangelo painted her old and still strong, bent over an open book. Notice what she holds: not a wand, not a laurel. A book.



The trapezoidal gallery at Cumae that tradition names the Sibyl's cave — cut through the rock toward the chamber at its end. The archaeologists read it more soberly, as a defensive tunnel; the Sibyl's claim to it is tradition, not proof. It is this place, even so, that the story's goat-path, cave mouth, and doorway remember.

II

Nine Books, Then Six, Then Three

The legend is best told in Dionysius of Halicarnassus. An old woman came to King Tarquin with nine books of prophecy and named an outrageous price. He refused. She burned three of the books before his eyes and asked the same price for six. He refused again. She burned three more and asked the same price for three — and the king paid, for what was left. Dionysius leaves the woman unnamed; it was later tradition that was sure she had been the Sibyl of Cumae herself.

Rome kept those three books on the Capitol and treated them as the most dangerous property of the state. A special college of priests guarded them, and no one opened them except when the Senate ordered it — in flood, plague, and prodigy.

They did not keep them forever. In 83 BC, in Rome's own civil wars, the Capitol burned and the three books burned with it — and what Rome guarded afterward was a replacement, gathered scrap by scrap from Italy and from the sibyls' cities across the sea, with no promise that every scrap was genuine. Count what the story has already shown you: the books Rome owned were bought dear, guarded jealously, read badly — and, in the end, not even hers. The song Rome needed was never in them.



The scene the legend fixed, drawn in the 1500s: six books already burning in the foreground, the same price asked for three. Everything Rome ever learned about the value of a prophecy, it learned here — too late.

SIDEBAR · WHAT A PRODIGY WAS

To a Roman, a *prodigy* was not a gifted child. It was a breach in nature — a rain of stones, an ox that spoke, lightning on a temple — read as a sign that the peace between the city and its gods had broken, and had to be repaired. That is when the Senate ordered the books opened — less to read the future than to learn the remedy.

SIDEBAR · THE FIRE OF 83 BC

In Rome's civil wars the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol burned, and the Sibyl's three books burned with it. The Senate sent for whatever Sibylline verses could be found — from Erythrae above all, but also from the towns of Italy and from private hands — and the priests who sifted the haul suspected forgeries in it. That patched collection is what Augustus, once he was pontifex maximus in 12 BC, moved to the temple of Apollo on the Palatine: “under the feet of my god,” as the story's Sibyl says — and “a gleanings,” as she also says, that she will not own. (Dionysius of Halicarnassus IV.62 tells both halves: the purchase and the fire.)

III

A Very Bad Decade

Rome, 44–40 BC, in five entries:



44 BC Caesar is murdered on the Ides of March, in the Curia of Pompey — the hall adjoining Pompey’s theater — and among the daggers are men he had pardoned.

43 BC The proscriptions: the names of Roman citizens posted in the Forum, and their heads brought in for money.

42 BC Philippi. The armies of Brutus and Cassius are destroyed, and both die by their own hands.

41–40 BC Perusia is starved into surrender through the winter, and then it burns.

40 BC The peace of Brundisium, sealed by a marriage: Antony takes Octavian’s sister. Whether it can hold, no one knows; that it must, everyone feels.

Hold the list in your mind and then read the poem’s opening claim again: *the great order of the ages is born anew*. When Virgil wrote that line, his readers had lived through five years of proscription, siege, confiscation, and war; few households had come through untouched, and many had buried their dead. Hope in Eclogue 4 is not décor. It is hunger.

SOURCES

Appian’s *Civil Wars*, Suetonius, and the consular lists carry the five entries on this page.

DISCUSSION SEED

Day 3, Movement 3 asks what kind of time Rome kept. This page is the evidence: five years each named, as public Rome named its years, for the consuls — a list of names, counting toward nothing.

THE MAP

Italy in the Year of the Consulship

The week's geography in one view. Find the four places — the student circled each of them while reading.



Cumae — the cave above the Bay of Naples; the oldest Greek colony on the Italian mainland, and the story's anteroom

Rome — where the three books lie on the Capitol, and the year bears the consuls' names

Mantua — Virgil's home town, whose fields were paid to the veterans

Brundisium — the port where the peace was made and sealed by a marriage, autumn 40 BC

MEMORY TIE-IN

The goat-path, cave mouth, and doorway of the memory walk are at Cumae: the palace the student is building stands on this map.

IV

The Poet, the Patron, the Poem

Virgil of Mantua. When the veterans were paid in land, the fields around Mantua went into the price, and the ancient lives of the poet say his father's farm went with them — and that Pollio stood between him and the loss. Scholars still weigh that story; the evicted farmers of the Eclogues are its echo either way. The same old biographers remember him tall, dark, often sick, slow of ordinary speech, and so retiring that in Naples they called him the Maiden — and they say that when he read his own verses aloud, no other voice could do what his did.

Pollio. Soldier under Caesar, then Antony; consul of 40 BC; historian of the civil wars he had fought in — a history read and quoted for centuries, then lost; founder of Rome's first public library. A hard man who protected a poet when nothing required it of him.



One of the oldest surviving manuscript portraits of Virgil: seated between his book-chest and his lectern, four and a half centuries after his death, in a manuscript of his own poems. The students' Eclogue lines were copied by hands like this one.

The four load-bearing lines

*Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.*

The last age of the Cumaean song has come; the great order of the ages is born anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new race is sent down from high heaven. — Eclogue 4.4–7

Whom did the poet mean?

The question the whole unit keeps open — and the readers have never settled it. Three readings have carried the most weight:

A child of Pollio's house — the answer late antiquity gave, and the reading the story's Prologue follows into the nursery, and into grief.

The expected child of the Brundisium marriage — the modern conjecture: hope pinned on a wedding sealed to stop a war.

No one — the literary reading: a figure of the age itself, born again like a child.

Others have been proposed — Octavian, a hoped-for son of Octavian — and the poem may be built to keep its secret. And then a fourth reading, which no Roman at that table could have given. The Church read the poem as unknowing prophecy: an oration handed down under Constantine's own name, framed as a Good Friday address to the assembly of the saints, expounds it as pagan testimony to Christ, and Dante made Virgil the guide who leads others to a country he cannot enter. Whether the poet meant it is exactly the question Lapidé answers in Week 5 — and the students will be given his page and left to discover it.

A NOTE ON THE THREE

None of the three is the poem's own answer. The first is a tradition of late antiquity, the second a modern historian's conjecture, the third a modern literary reading. The poem names no one.



A Roman mosaic of the poet with the Aeneid open on his lap — the book between history and tragedy, which is where this unit keeps him.

PICTURE LIST

Images, Sources, and Status

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