

SCALA GENTIUM

Reading God's Two Books with the Gospel of Matthew

The Last Age of the Cumaean Song

Unit I · Week 1 — the Prologue and Chapter I

READER

The student's book: the story, the Scripture, and the glossary in the margin where the eye already is. Nothing in this volume needs a teacher.

BEFORE YOU READ

How to Mark This Book

This book is yours to write in — that is what the wide margin is for. While you read, make four kinds of marks. They are not busy-work: everything you mark is collected and used on Day 3 and Day 4.

Underline any sentence that sounds like a proverb — a sentence that could be true outside the story. These feed the chreia and maxim exercises in Weeks 4–5.

Circle every name of a real person or place, to find in the History Companion.

? in the margin where you are confused. Confusion is material for Day 3, not a failure.

℣ (the hederā, the old printers' mark for a verse) wherever the Sibyl says she heard or sang something *too early and to no one* — you are tracking the story's refrain before being told it is one.

Read aloud. The story and the Scripture are written for the ear. The archaic register that looks hard on the page is easy in the mouth. Parent and student alternate by paragraph on Day 1.

THE MARGIN IS THE TOOL

Glosses sit out here, beside the line they serve. Read the gloss only when stuck; the story comes first.

A SAMPLE GLOSS

eclogue a short pastoral poem; shepherds speak, but the matter may be great

PROLOGUE

The Jar at Cumae

Hear me. I am all that is left of me to hear.

Hang a jar from the roof of a cave above the sea at Cumae. Put in it a little dust and a voice. That is the Sibyl now. In the evenings the boys of the town climb the path and throw stones to make the jar ring, and they call up to me: Sibyl, Sibyl, what do you want? And I answer them as I have answered them for a hundred years. I want to die.

They laugh, and run down to their suppers, and do not know that I am counting.

Once I was a girl, and a god stood in my doorway with the sun behind him and said, Ask. I stooped to the floor of the cave and took up a handful of dust and held it out to him. As many years, I said, as there are grains in my hand. And he gave them, every one. I did not ask to stay young. It was not folly. I was young, and the young do not know that youth can be spent. That was my whole sin, and it is my whole punishment, and I have had a thousand years to learn the difference between them.

So I count. A grain for a year, a year for a grain. I have counted down the ages of the world with the grains of my hand, and counted down my grains with the ages of the world, until I cannot tell the one count from the other. When the grains are gone, I shall die. When the count is done, the age is done. I do not know which will end first. I think they will end together.

I have seen Troy burn. I have seen Aeneas come up out of the sea with salt in his beard to ask me the road to his father among the dead, and I took him down that road and brought him up again. I have seen Rome when it was a village of thatch and quarrels. I carried nine books of my songs to its king and named my price, and he laughed at an old woman. I burned three before his eyes and asked the same price for six, and he laughed less. I burned three more and asked the same price for three, and he paid it, white to the lips, for what was left. Rome kept

Sibyl a prophetess; the Sibyl of Cumae was the most famous of the ancient world

Cumae a Greek city on the Bay of Naples, Italy's oldest Greek colony

the Capitol Rome's citadel hill and the temple of Jupiter upon it; it burned in 83 BC, in Rome's civil wars

gleaning what is gathered from a field after the harvest — scraps and leavings

Palatine the hill of Rome where Augustus built the temple of Apollo

those three for four hundred years, and then Rome's own fire took them, when the Capitol burned in a year of civil madness, and men were sent out to every city where a sibyl had ever sung, to gather what scraps they could and call the gleanings mine. It lies now in gilded cases under the feet of my god on the Palatine, and when the river rises or the earth shakes the priests take it out and read it and do not understand. What I burned, I burned. What I sold, they misread. What they gathered, I will not own. That is the way of books.

But one song I put in no book. I sang it to the wind off the sea, too early and to no one, and the wind carried it north, and a poet caught it. This was the song:

The last age of the Cumaean song has come.

The great order of the ages is born anew.

Now the Virgin returns.

Now a new child is sent down from high heaven.

They thought I meant Justice, the star-maiden who fled the earth when men grew wicked. I did not mean Justice. I meant a girl.

The poet was a good man, and he had a patron, and his patron was consul that year, and in the patron's house there was a cradle. So the poet carried my song to Rome and laid it in the cradle like a gift. *Begin, little boy*, he wrote, *to know your mother by her smile*. There were two cradles in that house, and then the fever came, and then there was one. The child who lived was wrapped in my song as in swaddling bands. His name was Gallus. Was the poet ignorant, or was he flattering? He was a poet. He was something of both and wholly neither, and he meant well, and meaning well has been enough to ruin many children.

I had not sung of Rome.

Far from Rome, in a country of goats and stones, there is a ladder. A man once lay down in the desert with his head upon a stone and saw it set upon the earth with its top in heaven, and the angels going up and coming down, and the God of his people resting upon it. When he woke he thought he had dreamed. He had not dreamed. The ladder was never taken up again. It is made of men. Every man is a rung, and every rung is fastened to the one below it by a single word, and the word is

patron a powerful man who protected lesser men — poets among them — in exchange for honor and service

consul one of the two chief magistrates of Rome, elected yearly; Rome named each year after its consuls

swaddling bands cloth strips an infant was wrapped in

begot fathered; the word that chains Matthew's genealogy, one name to the next

begot. It goes down through shepherds, and through a king, and through the king's sons, a few of them good and most of them not, and through the exile and the long road home, and then down into men whose names no one remembers but me. Eliud. Matthan. Jacob, who was named for the dreamer. No poet has ever sung of them. I sing of them now.

I know the number of the rungs as I know the number of my grains. I have been counting them together. It is the same count. There are not many left.

One day another hand will write the rungs down, one beneath another: a man who once sat counting coins at a table by the Sea of Galilee, and rose, and left the coins where they lay. He will begin as that people begins every count of its fathers, with the words that open the first book of the world. I have heard them already, as I hear everything: too early, and to no one.

So climb the path. Throw your stones. Make the jar ring, and ask me what I want, and I will tell you. Then I will begin.

The book of the generation.

CHAPTER I

Te Consule

Rome did not count its years toward anything. It named each year for the two men who held the consulship, and when the year ended it named the next, as though time were a road that ran nowhere. The year I mean bore the names of Gnaeus Domitius Calvinus and Gaius Asinius Pollio.

It was a year after many deaths. The proscriptions were not long past, when the names of Roman citizens were posted in the Forum and their heads were brought in for money. Perugia had been starved into surrender that winter, and then it burned. Men had fought for Caesar and against him, for his heirs and against them, and many had fought on both sides and buried friends on both. Pollio was one of these. He had served Caesar, and then Antony. He was writing a history of the civil wars and showed it to no one, the way a man keeps his hand closed over a wound.

He was hard, and honest as Romans reckon honesty, and he did not suffer fools. But he had protected a poet when no one required it of him.

The poet was from Mantua. When the veterans were paid in land, they were paid in his father's fields, and Pollio was among those who stood between him and the loss. His name was Publius Vergilius Maro. He was tall and dark and slow of speech, with weak lungs and the face of a countryman, and he was so modest that in Naples they called him the Maiden. When he read his verses aloud, men stopped eating to listen.

In the autumn of that year Pollio helped make a peace at Brundisium between Octavian and Antony, who had come near to war again. Antony married Octavian's sister to bind it. No one in Italy believed the peace would hold, and everyone needed it to. Out of that need the poet wrote.

He brought the poem to Pollio's house. It was a shepherd's song in its form, but its matter was too great for shepherds, and he said so in the

Te consule Latin: "in your consulship" — the phrase that dates the poem to Pollio's year, 40 BC

proscriptions public death-lists: names posted in the Forum; the named could be killed for reward

Perugia modern Perugia; starved and burned in the civil war, winter 41–40 BC

veterans paid in land discharged soldiers were given farms — confiscated from their owners

Mantua Virgil's home town in northern Italy

Brundisium port city (Brindisi) where Octavian and Antony made peace, autumn 40 BC

first line: *Muses of Sicily, let us sing of somewhat greater things.* He read it after the meal, when the lamps had been lit.

You have heard the words. The last age of my song was come; the great order of the ages was born again; the Virgin was returning; a child was sent down from high heaven. Then he turned to his host and spoke the words that bound the poem to that house: *te consule*. In your consulship, Pollio, this glory of the age will begin.

The men at the table were silent a while. Each heard in the poem the thing he most feared to lose or most hoped to gain. Some thought of Antony and his new wife. Some thought of young Octavian. None of them thought of a girl not yet born, in a country town of Galilee. None of them could have.

There were two small boys in Pollio's house that autumn. Quinctia, his wife, had their nurse bring them in, and the poet read the last lines over them. *Begin, little boy, to know your mother by her smile.*

One of them smiled. No one afterward could say which.

The fever came at the turning of the year. It went through the house as fevers did then, without warning and without reason, and it took the younger child. He was four days dying. Quinctia did not leave him. The physicians did what they knew, which was little, and the nurse prayed to the gods of the household, who did not hear her, or heard and did not answer, which is the same thing to a woman on her knees. On the fifth morning they washed him and carried him out. He was too young for the pyre; Romans did not burn a child who had not yet cut his teeth. They laid him in the earth. I will not give his name. A grammarian wrote a name for him four hundred years after, and the learned doubt it, and I will not lend my voice to either side. I will leave him the silence he was given.

Pollio went back to his history of the wars. Whatever he felt, he set no word of it down that has come to us.

After that there was one boy left for the poem to be about, and so it was about him.

No one decided it. Grief decided it. The nurse could not bear to stop singing the lines, and so she sang them to the child who lived.

shepherd's song an eclogue: a short pastoral poem; shepherds speak, but the matter may be great

Muses of Sicily the muses of pastoral poetry (after Theocritus of Sicily)

pyre the fire on which Romans burned their dead

"had not yet cut his teeth" Roman custom: a child too young for teeth was buried, not burned

grammarian a scholar of language and old texts; here Servius, whose notes on Virgil (c. AD 400) record a name the learned doubt

Guests who had heard of the poem asked to see its child, and Quinctia, who could not bear the question either, showed them the son she had. His name was Gaius Asinius Gallus. Before he could speak he had been named the child of a golden age, and before he could stand he was standing in a dead brother's place.

I will be just to him, because there will be few in this tale who are. He did not ask for my song. It was laid on him by a good man in gratitude, fastened on him by a death, and taught to him by a woman who loved him and was mourning. A child has no defense against such gifts. They go into him with his milk.

But I have watched men longer than you would believe, and this I know of them. What a man is given before he is old enough to refuse it, he will defend until it kills him.

He came into my song through a door opened for another. He went through it before he could walk. It was the first place he took that was not his, and it would not be the last.

And far from Rome, unheard of by any poet, the ladder went on being made, one man fastened beneath another. Come down with me to one of them.

SCRIPTURE

The Two Books Open

Read aloud on Day 1 (Douay-Rheims):

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

— Matthew 1:1

This is the book of the generation of Adam.

— Genesis 5:1

The story you just began calls these “the two books.” The first book of the generation runs from Adam and ends in a flood. The second opens with these words of Matthew — and the Sibyl says she heard them “too early, and to no one.” This unit is the story of how the second book came to be written.

LAPIDE ON MATTHEW 1:1

“The book of the generation” is a Hebrew way of speaking — sepher toledoth, the roll of the begettings. Matthew, writing first and writing for the Hebrews, opens his Gospel as Moses opens the fifth chapter of Genesis: This is the book of the generation of Adam. The echo is deliberate. Moses gave the generations of the first Adam, whose book descends to death and the flood; Matthew gives the generation of the second Adam, in whom the generations ascend to life. And Christ is called son of David, son of Abraham — not of others — because to these two above all the promise was made: to Abraham, that in his seed all nations should be blessed; to David, that of the fruit of his body one should sit upon his throne forever. David is named first, though Abraham is elder, because “Son of David” was the title by which that whole people called the Christ they awaited. The genealogy is therefore not a list but an argument: it proves, name by name, that the promise was kept.

— Cornelius a Lapide · Translation: lapide.org

SCRIPTURE PAGE

Always read aloud, even by students who read the chapters silently.

Douay-Rheims the English Bible of the program; Challoner revision

COMMENTARY

Cornelius a Lapide, S.J. (1567–1637), wrote the great commentary this program draws on all four years.

Credit: every Lapide excerpt is condensed from the English translation at lapide.org and carries this line.

REFERENCE

Glossary — Prologue & Chapter I

Every gloss from the sidebars, gathered in one place.

Term	Gloss
Sibyl	A prophetess; the Sibyl of Cumae was the most famous of the ancient world
Cumae	A Greek city on the Bay of Naples, Italy's oldest Greek colony
the Capitol	Rome's citadel hill and the temple of Jupiter upon it; it burned in 83 BC, in Rome's civil wars
gleaning	What is gathered from a field after the harvest — scraps and leavings
Palatine	The hill of Rome where Augustus built the temple of Apollo
patron	A powerful man who protected lesser men — poets among them — in exchange for honor and service
consul / consulship	One of the two chief magistrates of Rome, elected yearly; Rome named each year after its consuls
swaddling bands	Cloth strips an infant was wrapped in
begot	Fathered; the word that chains Matthew's genealogy, one name to the next
Te consule	Latin: "in your consulship" — the phrase that dates the poem to Pollio's year, 40 BC
proscriptions	Public death-lists: names posted in the Forum; the named could be killed for reward
Perusia	Modern Perugia; starved and burned in the civil war, winter 41–40 BC
veterans paid in land	Discharged soldiers were given farms — confiscated from their owners
Mantua	Virgil's home town in northern Italy
Brundisium	Port city (Brindisi) where Octavian and Antony made peace, autumn 40 BC
eclogue / shepherd's song	A short pastoral poem; shepherds speak, but the matter may be great

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pyre	The fire on which Romans burned their dead
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