

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 35

Who is Boethius and Why Do We Care?

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius...Does his name ring a bell? Let me help. He was born in Italy in the early 480's in the Anicii family. His dad was an important fellow: City-Prefect, Praetorian Prefect, and consul, all rolled into one. Does that help? Okay, probably not. So, we better go back and fill in some details. Then, we will figure out who Boethius was and what he had to say that makes him someone we should know.

We will begin by putting Boethius into historical context. Then, we will look at his major writings and see why some consider him one of the most influential thinkers in Western civilization.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most scholars consider Augustus Caesar the first true Roman Emperor. He reigned at the birth of Christ (from 31 B.C. to 14 A.D.). The Empire continued under a single Emperor until the reign of Diocletian in 284. But, Diocletian sculpted a new facet of the Roman Empire, which altered not only civilization, but ultimately the church as well. Diocletian divided the Empire into units for ruling purposes. A key dividing line separated the Empire into Eastern and Western halves.

About 40 years later, Constantine would bring the two halves back together as Emperor, ruling a united Empire. This unity, however, would not last. Constantine credited Christianity for his military feats and brought recognition to the church as the core Roman faith. He also placed himself as the ultimate ruler (*Pontifex Maximus*) of the church. During his reign, Constantine granted great privileges to the church, building great buildings in Israel (for example, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem), Rome (the first St. Peter's Basilica), and other places as well. Constantine founded the city of Constantinople, not only building great church structures, but also moving the Emperor's court there. While the Roman Senate remained in Rome, the Emperor's power had long since eclipsed the power of the Senate. For all practical purposes, Constantinople became the "New Rome" and the center of power during his reign.

For Constantine, the church was a unifying force for the Empire. He called and presided over the Council of Nicea, which clearly set out the doctrine of Christ as divine. Under Constantine, those who doubted the full deity of Christ (labeled "Arians") were not only excommunicated from the church, but were often sent out

of the Roman Empire into exile (A number of Arians would remain in the church over the decades, and the effort to totally eradicate the heresy never fully worked.). Constantine sought to use a united church to unite a kingdom, but the inherent traits that made an East/West division of the Empire so natural affected the church as well.

After Constantine died in 337, the Empire struggled to keep its unity through the reign of Theodosius the Great (378-395). Theodosius was the Christian Emperor who would proclaim Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Arian heresy was still bubbling forth in a number of places. Theodosius called the Council of Constantinople in 381 to clarify the issues at stake and declare orthodoxy for hopefully the final time. Still, a number of Arians would persist, especially among the Goths who lived both north of the Empire and in the Empire's border areas.

During these decades, both East and West had its leaders. Although the East was the ultimate apex of authority, the death of Theodosius brought a permanent division. From there on, the East would have its ruler, and the West would have its own as well. While the rulers often cooperated in administration purposes, they did not always get along!

For Christianity, there were several centers of strength and power in the church during this time (namely Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople). Just as the Empire struggled with division along East/West lines, the church itself lived with some of the same inherent divisional tendencies.

In the last few lessons, we've seen how the political infighting among the church prompted a recognition that ultimately two "Sees" or areas of authority became the centers of power for the faithful. Those were the Western See of Rome (where the ruler or Bishop carried the title of "Pope" or "Father") and the Eastern See of Constantinople. In the East, the Empire's strength kept the church under the authority of the Emperor himself. In the West, things became quite different.

The Western Emperors were often young, weak, and ineffective. Their shortcomings were not merely in administrative affairs, but more importantly, in defending the Empire as well. Notably, a Gothic General named Alaric invaded the Western Empire from the north. Alaric's invasion pierced all the way to the heart of Rome itself, with the city being sacked in 410. Subsequently, Rome and the Italian peninsula would suffer at the hands of various invaders. The African portion of the Western Roman Empire was also facing invaders called "Vandels."

As the Western Emperors failed to protect the people against the invading forces, the church stepped in to fill some key needs. Pope Leo, as we discussed last

lesson, personally went outside Rome and met with Attila the Hun and convinced him not to sack the city of Rome. Leo and the church not only sought to protect the people, but as the Empire failed to provide administration, the church met that need as well. Food distribution, education, and other core needs were often meted out by the churches working in harmony under the pope, rather than by the crumbling and ineffective government.

Leo's reign as Pope ended with his death in 461. During his reign, his efforts at protecting and providing for the domestic needs of people in the endangered Western half of the Empire did not preclude his equally strong efforts to maintain a unity of the church between both West and East. Before, during, and after the Council of Chalcedon (which we covered in another class as the final council explaining the four fenses of orthodoxy concerning Jesus as not only fully divine, but also fully human), Leo worked strenuously to keep a united faith that recognized his preeminence as the heir to Peter's perceived Apostolic authority over the church in doctrine as well as governance.

In 476, the idea of a Western Emperor finally ceased. The Gothic/Hunnish/Scirian (we could start using the term "Germanic" by this time) tribal king named Odoacer overthrew the last Western Roman Emperor named Romulus Augustus. Ostensibly to curry favor and independence from the Eastern Emperor of the day, Zeno, Odoacer shipped all the regalia of the Western Emperor to Constantinople and claimed merely the title of King of Italy. Odoacer ruled from Ravenna.¹ Like most of the Goths, Odoacer was an Arian in his faith, and not an orthodox Catholic.

Here, we have the status of things when Boethius is born! Now, before we get more intimately involved with Boethius, we need to add just a few more contextual details of events that preceded his adulthood.

While Zeno rules the East as Emperor, Odoacer rules Italy as king. Zeno decides he wants a change, so Zeno throws his support to an Ostrogothic leader named Theoderic, prompting Theoderic to invade Italy and conquer Odoacer. Even though Theoderic is an Ostrogoth by birth and heritage, he had been reared with a "good Roman upbringing" in Constantinople. That being said, Theoderic was still an Arian in belief, like Odoacer and most other Goths. In 491, Zeno (Emperor of the East) dies and is succeeded by Anastasius.

¹ While Rome remained the center of the Church in the West, the city had lost its ruling status for the Empire. The Imperial court had moved its center from Rome to Milan in the end of the 300's. Then in 401 when Alaric besieged Milan, the imperial court moved to Ravenna, a town protected somewhat by marshes and lagoons.

During Boethius's early life, there was a real tension between Theoderic ruling in the West and Anastasius ruling in the East. Now, we pick our chain of history back up more specifically by discussing the life of Boethius.

BOETHIUS

Somewhere around 480, Boethius is born into a well-to-do and historically noteworthy Roman family. His family traced its Christian roots back for 100 years. The lineage included two popes, and even ties to Roman emperors. Boethius's father was of the ruling class in Roman society. Boethius himself received a top-notch education, which is apparent from his later writings.

While we don't have an exhaustive biography of Boethius, we know enough about his life to give us insight into his writings and faith. Boethius's father died when Boethius was a young boy. The leading Roman of the day, a consul named Quintus Symmachus, adopted Boethius into his family. Devout Christians, they faithfully oversaw the continued education and upbringing of Boethius. Ultimately, Boethius would marry one of the three daughters of Symmachus.

Symmachus obviously made a deep and lasting impression on Boethius, and not only by giving a daughter as his wife! Symmachus was a devoted Christian; Boethius grew up the same. Symmachus sidelined as a writer of history; Boethius would spend a great deal of his time writing as well (dedicating at least one book to Symmachus). Symmachus got highly involved in the theological controversies of his day (especially that of the nature of Christ, which was the basis of the Council of Chalcedon). Boethius would later write several books that confronted the same issues. Also, Boethius followed in his foster father's footsteps in the choice of career.

The career path for Boethius seemed destined for greatness. Like his foster father, he became a leading Roman citizen. In 510, while in his late 20's, Boethius received the prestigious appointment as the consul for Rome. At this point, Theoderic was ruling the Italian peninsula, and Anastasius ruled in the East. As his professional life continued to soar, his home life was fantastic as well. Boethius had two sons. Both were growing up with good sense and promise. Just after their teenage years, and really out of a desire to recognize Boethius their father, the two boys were appointed as co-consuls with their father. This occurred in 522, a year when Boethius was promoted to a significant position before King Theoderic himself.

Boethius must have impressed King Theoderic because the king soon installed Boethius as the "Master of Offices" in Ravenna, the King's ruling City. The Master of Office job may not sound like much today, but it was quite a huge

responsibility and honor. Boethius was the intermediary between King Theoderic and anyone who wished to see him. Boethius was responsible for maintaining discipline in the palace, dealing with foreign ambassadors, overseeing public entertainment, and much more.

Boethius was well suited for the job. His education and language skills allowed him to translate, negotiate, and draw up documents for the king. Life was great for Boethius, true? After the tragic death of his father at an early age, Boethius was adopted into a wonderful Christian family. He was smart, well educated, and successful. Boethius had a wonderful family of his own, with his sons in positions of note. Boethius himself maintained the confidence of one of the world's most powerful men. Boethius had a job that was one of fame, power, and honor. As if that were not enough, Boethius found time to write and produce some significant works that are still around 1500 years later. Who would ever guess his world was about to crash around him? But, the crash needs to wait for a moment while we consider some of the earlier "pre-crash" writings of Boethius.

LITERARY WORKS

Boethius loved to study and write. He had a special concern that as the Western Civilization lost its affinity for the Greek language, a number of important Greek works were also disappearing from the cultural knowledge of his day. Boethius worked hard to take old Greek classics and translate them into Latin, adding his own running commentary while he did so. Boethius worked especially hard to secure the works of Aristotle for the Western world. While still in his 20's working as the consul, Boethius wrote in his translation and commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*:

Though the duties of my consular office hinder my devoting all my leisure and full attention to these studies, it seems nonetheless appropriate...to instruct the citizens in the learning of a subject over which one has burned the midnight oil.²

Boethius actually planned on translating every work of Aristotle into Latin, but like many well-pronounced plans, that never came into fruition. Boethius did make quite a bit of progress, however, on the works of Aristotle that related to logic.

Boethius produced a second area of secular writings in addition to his Aristotelian works. These books centered on integrating Mathematics and Liberal Arts.

² *Commentary on Aristotle's Categories, II Praef.* (PL 64.201B; cf. S. Lere, *Boethius and dialogue* (Princeton, 1985), 21).

Boethius wrote a first set on arithmetic, a second set on music, a third set on geometry, and likely (we have it referenced but have no copy today), a work on astronomy.

For Boethius, these writings were part of his Christian worldview and faith. Boethius felt that Mathematics and logic were foundational to understanding the works of God and God himself. As people understood the nature of the world, Boethius believed they would begin to grasp the nature of the divine Creator of the world.

In addition to these scholastic works, Boethius produced several theological books pertinent to his day. Boethius wrote a book entitled, *On the Catholic Faith*. The book is a comprehensive approach to his belief system. The book begins by explaining the Trinity. From there, Boethius walks through pertinent parts of the Old and New Testament, setting out the significant events in God's actions with Israel as well as the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. From there, Boethius walks through the significant moments of Church History from Pentecost through his current day.³

These works are interesting for several reasons. First, Boethius uses logic in his analysis of the Trinity. With classic Aristotelian logic, Boethius seeks to explain how God must be one substance and at the same time, each of the three parts of the Godhead must be separate substances. Father, Son and Spirit are one and are pure form. In this way, Boethius was an early example of one who sought to reconcile faith with reason. He ends Tractate II with the urging to “examine with care these words of mine, and if possible, reconcile faith with reason.”

A second area of interest in these works revolves around the section, “*Against Eutyches and Nestorius*.” If we recall the Church History Literacy lessons on the nature of Jesus as human, we can remember the key events involving Nestorius and his Christmas sermon against calling Mary, the mother of Jesus, *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. This was the sermon that led to his ultimate excommunication and ouster as Bishop of Constantinople. Then, as the sage on the humanity of Jesus continued, Cyril of Alexandria used the excommunication of the Constantinople monk Eutyches to call what Pope Leo later labeled a “Robber Synod” to declare the heresy of Jesus as fully God, but not fully human in the orthodox sense.

Boethius approached the dehumanizing views of Nestorius and Eutyches from a logical standpoint. Using basic principles of logic, Boethius worked to explain that their views were not consistent with intellectual honesty. As we go into the

³ One might say that Boethius wrote and taught his 6th century version of Biblical Literacy and Church History Literacy!

middle ages, it is Boethius, as much as any other, who lays the foundation for using logic to understand not only the world, but the rigors of theology as well. It might serve us well to note that up to his time, the theological discussions often had the logic of Swiss cheese (lots of holes...).

BACK TO THE LIFE OF BOETHIUS

Now, we return to the thriving successful life of Boethius. He was at the top of his game. He was writing material that future Popes would read. He was providing translations of Greek classics that were perpetuating knowledge in a narrowing world. He had exceptional career and personal success. The year was 523 and life was great.

Then, Boethius's life fell apart, and it fell apart rapidly. His King Theoderic was having problems with the Eastern Emperor. We left off this history earlier in this class with Anastasius as Eastern Emperor. In 518, Justin (who reigned until 527) succeeded Anastasius. Theoderic was convinced that Justin was trying to bring down his reign. At this point, Theoderic was in his 70's and quite an old man, especially to still be king. Theoderic was not going to take any chances.

So, when the king's private secretary came in and ratted on a senator named Albinus, Theoderic got concerned. Senator Albinus was a close friend of the current pope (Hormisdas) and had helped bring the Eastern and Western branches of the church into a closer relationship. This relationship suffered a bit with the rise of Arianism by Theoderic, Odoacer, and the other great number of Arian Goths inhabiting the West. When the Pope and Senator Albinus closed the growing gap between East and West, they redoubled the churches efforts in the West toward orthodoxy. Of course, Boethius had already published on the orthodoxy of Chalcedon in ways that reaffirmed the East's strong view and opposed the king's Arian views (most likely, the king had no knowledge of this when he appointed Boethius to his high post).

Now, back to the story. The King's secretary came in and declared to the Theoderic that Senator Albinus wrote disparaging remarks about Theoderic to the officials in Emperor Justin's court. Without so much as a trial, the King condemned the senator for treason. Boethius came before the king in defense of the senator. Records of the events written a generation later set it out thusly, "Then Boethius the patrician, who was Master of Offices, said in the king's presence: 'Cyprian's [the secretary] charge is false. But if Albinus [the Senator] so acted, then I and the whole senate acted with one mind. It is false, my lord king.'"⁴ What Boethius was trying to say is, "The secretary is wrong. The senator

⁴ *Anon. Vales*, 85

did nothing that any of the senate, including me, would not have done.” The king took that to mean that Boethius was likewise guilty of treason, if not by action, at least by conspiracy. The secretary Cyprian then gets his position reinforced by others who come forward and accuse Boethius of protecting the senate over against the king (interestingly, when this story is over, Cyprian gets promoted from secretary into Master of Offices, the job Boethius had.).

The king has both the senator and Boethius arrested and imprisoned. The death sentence is passed on Boethius without him even getting a chance to speak in his own defense. Sometime between 524 and 526, between 1 and 2 or so years from living on top of the world, Boethius is executed.

It was during this last time in his life following his arrest that Boethius wrote his crowning achievement, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. This book is written in a dialogue/debate approach with Philosophy (as a person) coming to Boethius to discuss with him his predicament and what it means. The book is written as narrative, but it contains also 39 poems that are brilliant Latin in and of themselves. A number of translations into English exist, but the Joel Relihan version is highly recommended.⁵

Time does not allow an in depth study of this work, but it truly is a work of art and philosophy. Boethius struggles with understanding how to mesh his views of faith, righteousness, holiness, and his love for his family and life with his impending death that is ordered on faulty grounds. The struggle is slightly reminiscent of the book of Job with Philosophy playing the role of Job’s friends in challenging Boethius to understand matters beyond his own downfall.

In the end, when the debate is over, Boethius sets out his last words:

God also remains unchanged, looking down from on high with foreknowledge of all things; the ever-present eternity of his vision keeps pace with the future qualities of our actions, dispensing rewards to good people and punishments to the bad. Nor are hopes and prayers placed in God in vain; they cannot help but be effective, provided they are blameless. Therefore, all of you: avoid vices, cherish virtues; raise up your minds to blameless hopes; extend you humble prayers into the lofty heights. Unless you want to hide the truth, there is a great necessity imposed upon you – the necessity of righteousness, since you act before the eyes of a judge who beholds all things.

⁵ Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2001).

POINTS FOR HOME

What do we make of this lesson? We could talk about the huge impact of Boethius on the medieval world. After all, Chaucer, Dante, and countless others clearly read and carried a great deal of influence from the works of Boethius. We could similarly discuss how the churchmen of the Middle Ages took up Boethius's call to use logic in their theology to produce works that make a difference even today. We could show how Aquinas and others followed this charge to explain a greater understanding of God and our world.

I am suggesting some other points for home, however. God willing, our continuing work through history will illuminate the value of Boethius to civilization and the church. Instead, I suggest some simple lessons from his life:

1. Even in the tragic loss of a parent, God can bring joy to full life. After all, we do not merely pray to God as "Our Father in Heaven." He promises to be the ultimate Father. "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling" (Ps. 68:4-6).
2. When things are great, life is good and God is smiling, then bless the Lord with the fruits of your labors and bring him glory. But, when life grows bleak and storms rain injustice and misery, still know God is there, he cares, he hears your prayers, and he loves you. His wisdom is beyond yours. His vision sees the future as today. He loves you and will deliver you from all your troubles, one way or another! So you still bless the Lord with the fruits of your labors and bring him glory! (Read Psalm 42!)
3. When as a Christian you are facing your death, know there is a God who has already conquered it for you. He waits with you to bring you into his glory, where there are no tears, where there is no night, and where you will dwell with him forever. (1 Cor. 15:50-57).