The inception of the fifth century marks a critical juncture in the history of both Christianity and Judaism. In the West, the political, economic and cultural disintegration of the Roman Empire culminated in the sack of Rome by a Gothic army in 410. The collapse of established institutions and beliefs compelled western Christianity to define its identity apart from the Empire. From the eclipse of Greco-Roman civilization emerged the ecclesia of western Christendom that would stand throughout the Middle Ages.

To the East, in Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia, a new definition of Judaism was emerging at the same time. The completion of the Palestinian (ca. 400) and Babylonian (ca. 500) Talmuds¹ concluded a process of transformation dating back to Titus’ destruction of the second Temple and of Jerusalem (70 C.E.). Before then Israel had defined its vocation in terms of dwelling in the Holy Land, organizing its life around the cultic system of the Temple. Like the sack of Rome, the destruction of the Temple was a catastrophe of profound symbolic significance to those who witnessed it. In the wake of the destruction and the failed wars of 132-35, the basic institutions of government, culture and faith in Israel were left in ruins. For centuries scholars in Palestine and Babylonia labored to create a Judaism that could survive the Temple’s destruction and Israel’s exile from its land. The Talmuds, together with the entire corpus of tannaitic and amoraic literature, comprise the blueprint of rabbinic Judaism as it was lived for the next millennium.

At the beginning of the fifth century, both western Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were turning on the pivot of two worlds, ancient and medieval. Both systems sought to respond to radical change. Each was impelled to reexamine its foundations.
Augustine (354-430) had been the bishop of Hippo for fifteen years prior to the sack of Rome. During this time he was actively engaged in the suppression of paganism and Christian schism in Africa. Confident of the Church’s ability to absorb dissenters, Augustine saw Christian ascendancy as the fulfillment of divine prophecy. The stunning sack of Rome, however, did not immediately strike Augustine as confirmation of the Church’s primacy. While institutions wrought by mortals were destined to suffer the fate of mortals, Rome was nonetheless the eternal city, the symbol of the civilized world as Augustine knew it. In his sermons and letters written in the immediate wake of the disaster, Augustine seems to share the dismay of the pagan refugees who fled to Africa from Italy. His eastern contemporary Jerome (ca. 345- ca. 420) expressed the widespread shock: “If Rome can perish, what can be safe?"

Both Christians and pagans were disturbed by the coincidence of the Christiana tempora and the sack of Rome. In the view of the pagans, evil had befallen Rome because the Christians suppressed pagan deities. Christians were appalled that the relics of Church martyrs purported to supersede the pagan talismans had proven less effective. They found themselves accused of provoking the disaster. As the leader of the African Church, Augustine was compelled to refute pagan accusations while offering reassurance to his own Christian community.

In De civitate Dei Augustine pursued the twin tasks of refutation and reassurance. At the same time, as a bishop of the Church he was occupied with the task of expounding Scripture. On 31 December 412, shortly before the first three books of De civitate Dei appeared, Augustine preached in Carthage on the text of Ps. 137 (Enarrationes in psalmos 136). This psalm’s imagery of exile provides the exegetical pretext for Augustine’s depiction of Christian peregrini who, like the Jews of Babylon, yearn for (the heavenly) Jerusalem. His verse by verse commentary on Ps. 137 adumbrates essential ideas subsequently elaborated in De civitate Dei.

It is hardly surprising that Ps. 137 also served as a potent exegetical vehicle for the rabbis. Lamenting the first exile from Zion and the torment of captivity, crying out for remembrance and retribution, the psalm spoke powerfully to the refugees of the second exile, many of whom found themselves in Babylon once more. In the course of generations of literary development, the rabbinic exegesis of Ps. 137 assumed the contours of Jewish belief attested in the medieval Diaspora.