

**0240-0320 – Lactantius – Carmen de Passione Domini**

**A poem on the Passion of the Lord**

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blend the figure of the peacock with that of the painted bird of Phasis.<sup>2061</sup> The winged creature which is produced in the lands of the Arabians, whether it be beast or bird, can scarcely equal her magnitude.<sup>2062</sup> She is not, however, slow, as birds which through the greatness of their body have sluggish motions, and a very heavy<sup>2063</sup> weight. But she is light and swift, full of royal beauty. Such she always shows herself<sup>2064</sup> in the sight of men. Egypt comes hither to such a wondrous<sup>2065</sup> sight, and the exulting crowd salutes the rare bird. Immediately they carve her image on the consecrated marble, and mark both the occurrence and the day with a new title. Birds of every kind assemble together; none is mindful of prey, none of fear. Attended by a chorus of birds, she flies through the heaven, and a crowd accompanies her, exulting in the pious duty. But when she has arrived at the regions of pure ether, she presently returns;<sup>2066</sup> afterwards she is concealed in her own regions. But oh, bird of happy lot and fate,<sup>2067</sup> to whom the god himself granted to be born from herself! Whether it be female, or male, or neither, or both, happy she, who enters into<sup>2068</sup> no compacts of Venus. Death is Venus to her; her only pleasure is in death: that she may be born, she desires previously to die. She is an offspring to herself, her own father and heir, her own nurse, and always a foster-child to herself. She is herself indeed, but not the same, since she is herself, and not herself, having gained eternal life by the blessing of death.



## A POEM ON THE PASSION OF THE LORD

FORMERLY ASCRIBED TO *LACTANTIUS*

WHOEVER you are who approach, and are entering the precincts<sup>2069</sup> of the middle of the temple, stop a little and look upon me, who, though innocent, suffered for your crime; lay me up in your mind, keep me in your breast. I am He who, pitying the bitter misfortunes of men, came hither as a messenger<sup>2070</sup> of offered peace, and as a full atonement<sup>2071</sup> for the fault of men.<sup>2072</sup> Here the brightest light from above is restored to the earth; here is the merciful image of safety; here I am a rest to

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- 2061 The pheasant.  
 2062 Magniciem. Some take this as denoting the name of a bird, but no such bird is known.  
 2063 Pergrave pondus; others read, "per grave pondus," by reason of the heavy weight.  
 2064 Se exhibit; others read "se probat."  
 2065 Tanti ad miracula visus. [Deut. iv. 17.]  
 2066 Inde; others read, "ille," but the allusion is very obscure.  
 2067 Fili, "the thread," i.e. of fate.  
 2068 Colit. [Badger's *Nestorians*, vol. i. p. 122.]  
 2069 Limina, "the threshold."  
 2070 Interpres.  
 2071 Venia, "remission."  
 2072 Communis culpæ.

you, the right way, the true redemption, the banner<sup>2073</sup> of God, and a memorable sign of fate. It was on account of you and your life that I entered the Virgin's womb, was made man, and suffered a dreadful death; nor did I find rest anywhere in the regions of the earth, but everywhere threats, everywhere labours. First of all a wretched dwelling<sup>2074</sup> in the land of Judæa was a shelter for me at my birth, and for my mother with me: here first, amidst the outstretched sluggish cattle, dry grass gave me a bed in a narrow stall. I passed my earliest years in the Pharian<sup>2075</sup> regions, being an exile in the reign of Herod; and after my return to Judæa I spent the rest of my years, always engaged<sup>2076</sup> in fastings, and the extremity of poverty itself, and the lowest circumstances; always by healthful admonitions applying the minds of men to the pursuit of genial uprightness, uniting with wholesome teaching many evident miracles: on which account impious Jerusalem, harassed by the raging cares of envy and cruel hatred, and blinded by madness, dared to seek for me, though innocent, by deadly punishment, a cruel death on the dreadful cross. And if you yourself wish to discriminate these things more fully,<sup>2077</sup> and if it delights you to go through all my groans, and to experience griefs with me, put together<sup>2078</sup> the designs and plots, and the impious price of my innocent blood, and the pretended kisses of a disciple,<sup>2079</sup> and the insults and strivings of the cruel multitude; and, moreover, the blows, and tongues prepared<sup>2080</sup> for accusations. Picture to your mind both the witnesses, and the accursed<sup>2081</sup> judgment of the blinded Pilate, and the immense cross pressing my shoulders and wearied back, and my painful steps to a dreadful death. Now survey me from head to foot, deserted as I am, and lifted up afar from my beloved mother. Behold and see my locks clotted with blood, and my blood-stained neck under my very hair, and my head drained<sup>2082</sup> with cruel thorns, and pouring down like rain<sup>2083</sup> from all sides a stream<sup>2084</sup> of blood over my divine face. Survey my compressed and sightless eyes, and my afflicted cheeks; see my parched tongue poisoned with gall, and my countenance pale with death. Behold my hands pierced with nails, and my arms drawn out, and the great wound in my side; see the blood streaming from it, and my perforated<sup>2085</sup> feet, and blood-stained limbs. Bend your knee, and with lamentation adore the venerable wood of the cross, and with lowly countenance stooping<sup>2086</sup> to the earth, which is wet with innocent blood,

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2073 Vexillum.

2074 Magalia.

2075 i.e., Egypt.

2076 Secutus.

2077 Latius, "more widely," "in greater detail."

2078 Collige.

2079 Clientis. The "cliens" is one who puts himself under the protection of a "patronus." Here it is used of a follower.

2080 Promptas.

2081 Infanda, "unspeakable," "wicked."

2082 Haustum.

2083 Pluens.

2084 Vivum cruorem.

2085 Fossos.

2086 Terram petens.



sprinkle it with rising tears, and at times<sup>2087</sup> bear me and my admonitions in your devoted heart. Follow the footsteps of my life, and while you look upon my torments and cruel death, remembering my innumerable pangs of body and soul, learn to endure hardships,<sup>2088</sup> and to watch over your own safety. These memorials,<sup>2089</sup> if at any time you find pleasure in thinking over them, if in your mind there is any confidence to bear *anything* like my *sufferings*),<sup>2090</sup> if the piety due, and gratitude worthy of my labours shall arise, will be incitements<sup>2091</sup> to true virtue, and they will be shields against the snares of an enemy, aroused<sup>2092</sup> by which you will be safe, and as a conqueror bear off the palm in every contest. If these memorials shall turn away your senses, which are devoted to a perishable<sup>2093</sup> world, from the fleeting shadow of earthly beauty, the result will be, that you will not venture,<sup>2094</sup> enticed by empty hope, to trust the frail<sup>2095</sup> enjoyments of fickle fortune, and to place your hope in the fleeting years of life. But, truly, if you thus regard this perishable world,<sup>2096</sup> and through your love of a better country deprive yourself<sup>2097</sup> of earthly riches and the enjoyment of present things,<sup>2098</sup> the prayers of the pious will bring you up<sup>2099</sup> in sacred habits, and in the hope of a happy life, amidst severe punishments, will cherish you with heavenly dew, and feed you with the sweetness of the promised good. Until the great favour of God shall recall your happy<sup>2100</sup> soul to the heavenly regions,<sup>2101</sup> your body being left after the fates of death. Then freed from all labour, then joyfully beholding the angelic choirs, and the blessed companies of saints in perpetual bliss, it shall reign with me in the happy abode of perpetual peace.

#### GENERAL NOTE.

There is no MS authority for ascribing the above to Lactantius. "It does not, in the least, come up to the purity and eloquence of his style," says Dupin; and the same candid author notes the "adoration of the cross" as fatal to any such claim.<sup>2102</sup>

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- 2087 Nonnunquam; others read, "nunquam non," always.  
 2088 Adversa.  
 2089 Monumenta.  
 2090 Meorum.  
 2091 Stimuli.  
 2092 Acer.  
 2093 Labilis orbis amicos sensus.  
 2094 Auseris, an unusual form.  
 2095 Occiduis rebus.  
 2096 Ista caduca sæcula.  
 2097 Exutum.  
 2098 Rerum usus.  
 2099 Extollent. The reading is uncertain; some editions have "expolient."  
 2100 Purpuream, "bright, or shining."  
 2101 Sublimes ad auras.  
 2102 Note 18, p. 327.