

# **A POEM ON THE PASSION OF THE LORD**

LACTANTIUS

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## LACTANTIUS

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FORMERLY ASCRIBED TO LACTANTIUS.

WHOEVER you are who approach, and are entering the precincts[1] 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[2] of offered peace, and as a full atonement[3] for the fault of men.[4] Here the brightest light from above is restored to the earth; here is the merciful image of safety; here I am a rest to you, the right way, the true redemption, the banner[5] 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[6] in the land of Judaea 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[7] regions, being an exile in the reign of Herod; and after my return to Judaea I spent the rest of my years, always engaged[8] 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,[9] and if it delights you to go through all my groans, and to experience griefs with me, put together[10] the designs and

plots, and the impious price of my innocent blood; and the pretended kisses of a disciple,[11] and the insults and strivings of the cruel multitude; and, moreover, the blows, and tongues prepared[12] for accusations. Picture to your mind both the witnesses, and the accursed[13] 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[14] with cruel thorns, and pouring down like rain[15] from all sides a stream[16] 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[17] feet, and blood-stained limbs. Bend your knee, and with lamentation adore the venerable wood of the cross, and with lowly countenance stooping[18] to the earth, which is wet with innocent blood, sprinkle it with rising tears, and at times[19] 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,[20] and to watch over your own safety. These memorials,[21] 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,[1] if the piety due, and gratitude worthy of my labours shall arise, will be incitements [2] to true virtue, and they will be shields against the snares of an enemy, aroused[3] 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[4] world, from the fleeting shadow of earthly beauty, the result will be, that you will not venture,[5] enticed by empty hope, to trust the frail[6] enjoyments of fickle fortune, and to place your hope in

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the fleeting years of life. But, truly, if you thus regard this perishable world,[7] and through your love of a better country deprive yourself[8] of earthly riches and the enjoyment of present things,[9] the prayers of the pious will bring you up[10] 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" soul to the heavenly regions,[12] 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.[1]

Of the following poem, on Easter, Dupin says: "It is attributed to Venantius upon the testimony of some MSS. in the Vatican Library." This writer became known to Gregory of Tours, who died about A.D. 595, and seems to have succeeded him as bishop, dying soon after. Bede quotes his verse on St. Alban,[2]

"Albanum egregium fecunda Britannia profert,"

but styles him "presbyter Fortunatus." He was the author of a poem on St. Martin, and another, *In Laude Virginum*. His works were edited by Brouverius, a Jesuit.