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Regnum Caelorum Terrestre: The Apocalyptic Vision of Lactantius

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Abstract:

The writings of the early fourth-century Christian apologist L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius have been extensively studied by historians, classicists, philosophers and theologians. But his unique apocalyptic eschatology expounded in book VII of the *Divinae Institutiones*, his largest work, has been relatively neglected. This paper will distill Lactantius's complex narrative and summarize his sources. In particular, I investigate his chiliasm and the nature of the intermediate state, as well as his portrayal of the Antichrist. I argue that his apocalypticism is not an indiscriminate synthesis of varying sources - as it often stated - but is essentially based on the Book of Revelation and other Patristic sources.

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The eminent expert on all things apocalyptic, Bernard McGinn, wrote:

Even the students and admirers of Lactantius have not bestowed undue praise upon him. To Rene Pichon [who wrote in 1901 what is perhaps still the seminal work on Lactantius' thought] 'Lactantius is mediocre in the Latin sense of the word - and also a bit in the French sense'; to Vincenzo Loi [who studied Lactantius' use of the Bible] 'Lactantius is neither a philosophical or theological genius nor linguistic genius.'

Despite these uneven appraisals, the writings of the early fourth-century Christian apologist L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius [c. 250-325] hold, it seems, a little something for everyone.¹ Political historians study Lactantius as an important historical witness to the crucial transitional period from the Great Persecution of Diocletian to the ascension of Constantine, and for insight into the career of the philosopher Porphyry.² Classicists and

¹ All dates are *anno domini* unless otherwise indicated.

² See for example Barnes (1981/2011), Digeser 2000, Schott 2008.

philosophers have mined his *oeuvre* to examine his ties to traditional Hellenistic culture, and for keys to reconstructing certain lost works. Theologians have worked to establish his place within the early Christian apologetic tradition. And Latinists revere him for the elegance of his prose - Lactantius was a highly regarded author during the humanist Renaissance, largely for the style of his Latin, which led Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to dub him the "Christian Cicero." The *editio princeps*, printed by Sweynheym and Pannartz at Subiaco in 1465, is one of the earliest incunabula. The nineteenth-century Episcopal bishop, Cleveland Coxe, stated that the Latinity of Lactantius could be returned to "often for the enjoyment of its charming rhetoric, and of the high sentiment it so nobly enforces and adorns."³ Lactantius is a fascinating writer on many levels. But his unique version of apocalyptic eschatology as expressed in Book VII of the *Divinae Institutiones*, his largest work, has been relatively neglected. This paper will distill Lactantius's complex narrative and summarize his sources. In particular, I investigate his chiliasm and the nature of the intermediate state, his ideas about the first and second resurrection, and his portrayal of the Antichrist. I argue that his apocalypticism is not an indiscriminate synthesis of varying sources - as it often stated or implied in scholarship - but is essentially based on the Book of Revelation and other Patristic sources.

There is but scanty biographical information about Lactantius, some from the author himself and the rest from the letters of Jerome, who was writing in the late fourth-century. Lactantius is thought to have lived ca. 250-325 and was born a pagan in North Africa, although his city of origin is unknown. He was a student of Arnobius, a rhetorician from the town of Sicca Veneria who was also a convert to Christianity. He established a

³ Introduction to the works of Lactantius in ANF.

reputation as a teacher of rhetoric (perhaps in Carthage) before being appointed to a chair in Latin rhetoric at Nicomedia, residence of the Emperor Diocletian.⁴

Lactantius was active at the critical juncture of the last Christian persecution and the acceptance of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. From the time of Nero to Diocletian, the upstart religion of Christianity had been sometimes half-heartedly persecuted, sometimes tolerated⁵. But in February of 303, convinced that the idea of “Roman unity and peace depended on universal worship of the traditional gods,”⁶ the reigning emperor Diocletian unleashed the most stringent and systematic persecution to date by “burning the scriptures and destroying the churches, depriving Christians of their civil rights, and compelling everyone to sacrifice to the gods or risk imprisonment, torture and death.”⁷ This has been appropriately titled “The Great Persecution.” As a counteroffensive, Lactantius penned *The Divine Institutes*, a treatise in seven books composed most likely between 304-313. This was not only a response to pagan criticism and persecution of Christianity, but an attempt to lay out for educated Romans the Christian position on the nature of God and man, the history of religion, ethics, the beginning and end of the world, the mission of Christ and the path to true wisdom. As Lactantius felt that appeal to the Bible would not convince educated pagans, he cites a variety of other sources, including the Sibylline Oracles, the Hermetic corpus, and classical authors (especially Vergil and Cicero), with Scripture “often on stage as a mute actor, there to confirm the validity of those lesser authorities” that are so often adduced.⁸

⁴ Bowen, 1-3. Ogilvie 1-2.

⁵ Beginning - according to Tacitus - with Nero blaming the upstart sect for the fire of Rome in AD 64. Other persecutions took place under Maximinius Thrax (ruled 235-238) and Decius (ruled 249-251), though none were pursued vigorously throughout the empire.

⁶ Digeser, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bowen, 20.

Since the seventeenth-century, scholars have surmised that Lactantian apocalyptic contains elements drawing from a variety of traditions – Jewish, Christian, Greco-Roman and perhaps Persian. In the *Divinae Institutiones*, Lactantius cites the Pentateuch, Old Testament prophets (Amos, Joel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekial, Daniel) and Psalms, as well as other Jewish apocalyptic including 4 Ezra (early second-century), 2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch (early second-century) and Jubilees (second-century B.C.).⁹ New Testament scripture includes infrequent citations from the gospels, as well as the Apocalypse of John.¹⁰

One common source is the Sybilline Oracles, cited by Lactantius almost 60 times in the *Divine Institutes*. The writings of the Sibyl were frequently referenced in the ancient world from the fourth century B.C.¹¹ One of the most famous was the Sibyl of Cumae, who is consulted by Aeneas in the sixth book of Vergil's *Aeneid*. The most well-known collection of Sybilline writings was housed in Rome and acquired - according to legend - by king Tarquinius Priscus, early in Rome's history.¹² Interestingly, the most complete rendition of this story is found in the first book of the *Divine Institutes*. Lactantius writes:

*The seventh [Sibyl] was from Cumae, and was called Amalthea (or by others Herophile, or Demophile): she it was who brought the nine books to king Tarquinius Priscus, demanding 300 philips for them, and he mocked the huge price and laughed at the woman's madness; in the sight of the king she then burnt three of them and asked the same price for the remainder; Tarquin thought the woman madder still; when she burnt three more and still stuck to her price, the king was persuaded and bought the rest for 300 gold pieces.*¹³

⁹ Dates taken from Charlesworth 1983/1985.

¹⁰ Ogilvie, 96-108.

¹¹ Charlesworth 1983, 317

¹² According to Lactantius and Origen

¹³ D.I. I:6, 10-11 (translation Bowen and Garnsey, 70-71)

These writings were only consulted during times of crisis for the state, and no other literature held such authority in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁴ When the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill burned to the ground in 83 B.C., the original Sybilline books were destroyed, but the oracular writings continued to be produced.

The surviving collection of Sibylline Oracles consists of 4230 lines of Greek hexameters divided into 14 books.¹⁵ They date from the second-century B.C. to the seventh-century A.D and are a curious *mélange* of Jewish and Christian legend with Greek and Roman pagan mythology, all attributed to the Sibyl. The content is mostly eschatological: they are filled with predictions of disasters and tribulation that will visit the human race. They had been used by earlier Christian theologians including Tertullian (c. 155-240), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) and Theophilus of Antioch (d. 183-85). For Lactantius, the oracles represent the testimony of the pagan's own gods, and he uses them extensively to buttress his argument, especially the fifth and eighth books, which are the most vehemently Anti-Roman.¹⁶

Another late-antique literary phenomenon was the prevalence of Hermetic writings. These consist of discourses on religious and philosophical themes, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, an Egyptian sage who ostensibly lived in the sixth-century B.C. But in fact, they

¹⁴ Collins, 319.

¹⁵ Bowen, 17.

¹⁶ Noted in Ogilvie, 28. As an example, the following passage from the Sibylline Oracles Book 5, lines 162-178: "You will be among evil mortals, suffering evils, but you will remain utterly desolate for all ages yet, (it will exist, but it will remain utterly desolate forever), despising your soil, because you desired sorcery. With you are found adulteries and illicit intercourse with boys. Effeminate and unjust, evil city, ill-fated above all. Alas, city of the Latin land, unclean in all things, maenad, rejoicing in vipers, as a widow you will sit by the banks, and the river Tiber will weep for you, its consort. You have a murderous heart and impious spirit. Did you not know what God can do, what he devises? But you said, "I alone am, and no one will ravage me." But now God, who is forever, will destroy you and all your people, and there will no longer be any sign of you in that land, as there was formerly, when the great God found your honors. Remain alone, lawless one. Mingled with burning fire, inhabit the lawless nether region of Hades." (trans. John J. Collins in Charlesworth 1983, 397).

reflect mostly Neo-Platonic content and were composed in the second and third centuries A.D.¹⁷. Lactantius cites one in particular, called the *Perfect Discourse* (Gk. Λόγος Τέλειος), also known as the Latin *Asclepius*, which contains apocalyptic material.¹⁸

Lactantius also names the *Oracle of Hystaspes*, a collection of “prophecies ascribed to Vištāspa, the patron and follower of Zarathustra, whom the middle Iranian and part of the ancient tradition also identified with Darius’s father.”¹⁹ Lactantius is the primary witness for this text, which is not extant, although it is briefly mentioned by Justin Martyr (100-165), Clement of Alexandria, and in the *Theosophy* of Aristokritos.²⁰ Scholars debate whether this text was a Zoroastrian apocalypse, written in Greek, or a Jewish text based on some Zoroastrian material.²¹

Lactantius also cites classical poetry and prose, including Vergil, Cicero, Ennius and Lucretius, and invokes the poetic “Golden Age” when writing about the heavenly paradise. His eclectic synthesis was a first development in what would later become much more common, the “blending of biblical eschatology with elements of folk religion, occult speculation and late antique literary traditions.”²²

As we will see, other Church Fathers who shared similar views, especially on the millennium, include Hippolytus of Rome (170-235), Commodian (fl. ca. 250), Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130-202) and Victorinus of Petovium (died ca. 304). It is these disparate elements that make Lactantian apocalyptic both so intriguing and so baffling.

¹⁷ Ogilvie, 33.

¹⁸ See especially *Asclepius III*, 24b-26b (Edited and trans. Scott, 340-347).

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Iranica (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hystaspes-oracles-of>). Accessed 10 March 2016.

²⁰ The relevant texts are cited in Hinnells, 127-133.

²¹ See, for example, Flusser, who argues not only that the Oracle of Hystaspes was a Jewish book - written in Greek and based on Zoroastrian material - but that chapter 11 and 13 of Revelation are based upon it. Werman concurs with this assessment.

²² Daley, 68.

Historiography

A brief summary of writings on Lactantian apocalyptic might begin with the early printed versions. The 1660 printing done in Leiden by Hackius and Leffen is comprehensively glossed. The first translation into English, from the late nineteenth-century collection of the *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, contains only very occasional notes on scriptural parallels and classical references. Wilhelm Bousset, in his classic and influential monograph *The Antichrist Legend*, published in 1896, noted similarities between the Antichrist portrayal of Commodian, Hippolytus, Lactantius, and Victorinus. He surmised that this is due to a common reliance on a Sibylline source.²³

The first comprehensive commentary specifically on Book VII of the *Divine Institutes* was completed by a Dutch scholar, van Rooijen-Dijkman in the 1960s, followed by a new translation into English with a brief introduction by Bernard McGinn in the late 1970s. McGinn states that “Lactantius not only summarized the essential elements of the ancient tradition of Jewish-Christian chiliasm, but also attempted to weave these together with a variety of other traditions concerning world judgment and renewal” and this syncretic viewpoint has been standard.²⁴ Other scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, including David Aune, David Flusser and Oliver Nicholson have steered away from admitting any direct reliance by Lactantius on the Book of Revelation.²⁵ But more recently, writers such as

²³ Bousset, pp. 81-82.

²⁴ McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, 18-19.

²⁵ See e.g. Flusser, 19-20: “It is even impossible to decide if, in writing the *Institutiones*, he [Lactantius] knew the book of Revelation.” See also Aune 1998, 592 where he states that it is more likely that Lactantius is dependent on the *Oracle of Hystaspes* or some Jewish source and not Revelation when discussing the two witnesses.

Charles Hill and Stefan Freund have suggested that Lactantius is more reliant upon scriptural and Patristic writings than previously thought.²⁶

Areas of Inquiry

In order to survive in the thick brambles of Lactantius's narrative and to more carefully analyze his line of thought, I have produced a "distilled version" of his apocalyptic scenario, included as Appendix A. In constructing this, I excised: passages where Lactantius quotes or directly paraphrases what others (philosophers/poets/oracles) have said; summaries or restatement of things that Lactantius has already stated himself; tangential information unrelated to his narrative (for example, when he assures the reader that he will reliably search all sources and present the information in its totality).

It is apparent that Lactantius is struggling to handle all the material and construct a lucid argument while interweaving and appealing to disparate sources. We must keep in mind the purpose of the *Divine Institutes*: as a defense of Christianity against persecutors, but also as an attempt to convert learned Romans by appealing more to pagan than scriptural sources. I will comment on four specific areas of Lactantius's thought: the nature of Antichrist, chiliasm and the intermediate state, the first and second resurrection, and parallels with the Book of Revelation.

I. The nature of Antichrist

At the end of the 19th century, Wilhelm Bousset posited a Patristic tradition of the double Antichrist - "one as a Roman emperor (the *Nero redivivus*) and another who

²⁶ See Hill, 41-42; Freund 2010.

appears in Jerusalem.²⁷ He especially names Commodian, St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) and Lactantius in this assessment. This tradition grows out of the attempt to reconcile the two beasts described in Rev. 13. The first beast rises from the sea and has ten horns and seven heads, one of which “seemed to have received a death blow, but its mortal wound had been healed.” This has often been interpreted as a reference to the Emperor Nero, who after a bizarre reign, stabbed himself to death in A.D. 68. After Nero’s death, a host of stories and legends arose in Christian and Jewish literature that he had come back to life, gone to the east, and would ultimately return to conquer Rome at the head of a Parthian army - the *Nero redivivus*, or Nero reborn.²⁸ The reappearance of Nero is explicitly named in both the 5th and 8th Sybilline Oracles, as well as by Commodian, in a curious work known as the “Carmen de Duobus Populis / Song of the Two Peoples.” Commodian writes:

De Persida homo immortalem esse se dicit/ A man from Persia claims to be immortal.
 Nobis Nero factus Antichristus, ille Iudaeis / For us Nero is the Antichrist, for the Jews he is.
 Isti duo semper prophetae sunt in ultima fine / These two are ever prophets in the very end.
 Urbis perditio Nero est, hic terrae totius / Nero is the destruction of Rome; he of the whole world;
 De quo pauca tamen suggero, quae legi secreta / I tell only a few of the secrets I have read about
 him. (vv. 932-936)²⁹

The second beast comes out of the earth with two horns “like a lamb,” and is identified as Antichrist proper. McGinn concurs with this assessment of Lactantius, both in his 1979 translation and in his 1994 monograph on Antichrist: “Lactantius does not call this king Antichrist, but applies to him so wide a range of the traditions associated with

²⁷ Bousset, especially pp. 182-88.

²⁸ Bousset, 184; McGinn *Antichrist*, 45-54. McGinn shows that the Sybilline Oracle 3 and the Martyrdom of Isaiah (both late first-century) were early adaptations of the Nero legend.

²⁹ For the text, see Martin, 107; for the translation, McGinn *Antichrist*, 66.

Antichrist it is difficult to think of him as other than a first Antichrist in the manner of Commodian, though not a *Nero redivivus*.”³⁰

However, I disagree that Lactantius is positing a double Antichrist as described by the Sybilline Oracles and Commodian. Commodian specifically names the first evil figure as Nero:

*Meanwhile, Cyrus shall arise. It shall be his will to terrorize his enemies and liberate the nobility. He who had been put in command of the kingdom, and was known for a long time to have been preserved in his body for many years, shall return from the dead. It has already been revealed to us that this is Nero, who had flogged Peter and Paul in the city. From hidden places at the very end of the world shall he return, since he was reserved for these things. The nobility shall marvel that he is hated: for when he appears they will think that he is almost like a god.*³¹

In Lactantius, however, this first evil figure is not named. Lactantius describes how this figure will:

*...suddenly rise up...from **the furthest bounds of the north**, and after **destroying three of the kings** who will then be in occupation of Asia he will be taken into alliance by the rest and be made chief of them all. He will exercise an oppressive tyranny over the earth, making no distinction between human and divine, attempting things unspeakable and loathsome, plotting revolution in his heart to establish his own private rule, **changing the laws and authorizing his own**, with pollution, plunder, theft and*

³⁰ McGinn *Antichrist*, 67.

³¹ Exsurgit interea sub ipso tempore Syrus, qui terreat hostes et liberet inde senatum. Ex infero redit, qui fuerat regno praeceptus et diu servatus cum pristina corpore notus. Dicimus hunc autem Neronem esse vetustum, qui Petrum et Paulum prius punivit in urbem. Ipse redit iterum sub ipso saeculi fine[m] ex locis apocryphis, qui fuit reservatus in ista. Hunc ipse <se>natus invisum esse mirantur; qui cum apparuerit, quasi deum esse putabunt. [vv. 822-832, text Martin, translation Klein].

murder. Finally he will *change his name and move the seat of government*, and then the confusion and ruin of the human race will follow. (VII.16:1-4)³²

This seems more just like a bad ruler, or a ruler with whom Lactantius disagreed - not Antichrist. Elizabeth Digeser (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) gave a paper at the North American Patristics Society Annual Meeting in May 2014. In this unpublished paper, she suggested that Lactantius was describing the reign of Diocletian, who inaugurated the Great Persecution, and against whose actions Lactantius was writing. Lactantius is very harsh on Diocletian in another one of his works, *De Mortibus Persecutorum / On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, Chapter 7.³³ I agree with Digeser's suggestion. The description given by Lactantius matches very well the known facts of Diocletian's reign: Diocletian came from a northern region (Dalmatia); he defeated three predecessors (Numerian, Aper and Carinus) to gain undisputed control of the empire; he changed the administration from solo to joint rule, then established the tetrarchy; he adopted the title Jovius, and proclaimed himself the son of that god; he abandoned Rome as the major imperial residence, and established new administrative centers at Trier, Milan, Thessalonica and Nicomedia.³⁴

II. Chiliasm and the intermediate state

³² Tum repente adversus eos hostis potentissimus ab extremis finibus plagae septentrionalis orietur, qui tribus ex eo numero deletis qui tunc Asiam obtinebunt, adsumetur in societatem a ceteris ac princeps omnium constituetur. Hic insustentabili dominatione vexabit orbem, divina et humana miscebit, infanda dictum et execrabilia molietur, nova consilia in pectore suo volutabit, ut proprium sibi constituat imperium, leges commutet et suas sanciat, contaminabit diripiet spoliabit occidet: denique inmutato nomine atque imperii sede translate confusionem ac perturbationem humani generis consequetur (text Brandt, translation Bowen and Gamsey, emphasis mine).

³³ See the edition by Mary McDonald, 144-45.

³⁴ Scarre, 196-201.

In 2001, Charles Hill published his in-depth monograph on early Christian chiliasm.³⁵ Chiliasm or Millennialism - the terms are synonymous, the first derived from the Greek word for a thousand, and the second from the Latin word for a thousand - may be simply defined as “the belief in a thousand-year reign of Christ and his saints on earth between his second coming and the last judgment.”³⁶ According to Hill, a more detailed explanation might consist of:

1. the second coming of Christ, in majesty
2. the first resurrection, that of the just only
3. a general judgment, of the nations as a whole, not of individuals
4. a messianic kingdom lasting a thousand years
5. the second resurrection, that of all men
6. last judgment, of all persons individually
7. the eternal destiny - reward or punishment³⁷

There are many early Christian authors who are either ambivalent about, or silent on the subject of chiliasm. Hill proposes a “key” to their thought, taken from Irenaeus of Lyon: the doctrine of the intermediate state. This intermediate state is the “state or condition of the person, or usually more exactly, the disembodied soul in the interim between death and the eschaton.”³⁸ Hill’s thesis is that the nature of the intermediate state portrayed by a particular writer corresponds to that writer’s thoughts on chiliasm. Simply put, a subterranean intermediate state indicates a belief in an earthly millennial reign: a *regnum caelorum terrestre* [terrestrial kingdom of heaven]. This includes Irenaeus, Justin

³⁵ *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, 2001).

³⁶ Hill, 1.

³⁷ Hill, 5 summarizing Estévaó Bettencourt.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

Martyr, Tertullian, Commodian and Victorinus of Petovium. Writers who believe that the souls of the righteous are permitted immediate entry into heaven do not hold to millennial beliefs. They describe a *regnum caelorum caeleste* [celestial kingdom of heaven]. Most of the Apostolic Fathers fall into this camp, along with Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

Let's examine the view of Lactantius in this regard. His chiliasm is evident, as the millennial reign is described in great detail in the *Divine Institutes*:

At that time, those alive in the flesh will not die but will produce children without number during those thousand years and their offspring will be holy and precious to God; those raised from the underworld will be in charge of the living like judges. Other people will not be wiped out altogether; some will be left for God's victory, so that the just may triumph over them and put them into perpetual servitude. At the same time even the prince of demons, who is the fabricator of all evils, will be put in chains and kept under guard for the thousand years of heaven's control, when justice will reign on earth, in case he tries to start any evil against God's people. After God's coming the just will gather from all over the world, and after his judgment the holy city will be set up at the centre of the earth, and God himself will dwell in it with the just in control... Then the darkness that clouds the earth and blocks out the sky will be removed from earth, and the moon will take on the sun's brightness and not be reduced thereafter, and the sun will become seven times brighter than it now is. The earth will disclose its fertility and breed rich fruit of its own accord, the rocks of the hills will ooze with honey, and the rivers will swell with milk; the world itself will rejoice and all nature will be glad at being plucked into freedom from the dominion of evil, impiety, wickedness and error. Wild beasts will not feed on blood in this period, nor birds on prey; everything will instead be peaceful and quiet. Lions

and calves will stand together at the stall, wolf will not seize lamb, dog will not hunt, hawk and eagle will do no harm, and children will play with snakes. (VII.24:3-8)³⁹

As for the intermediate state, Lactantius finds agreement between Christian thought and Zeno the Stoic on the matter of the existence of the soul after death:

The existence of the world below was the teaching of the Stoic Zeno, with different abodes in it for the pious and the impious, the pious dwelling in areas of peace and delight and the impious paying their penalties in areas of darkness and ghastly pools of mud; the prophets put the same picture to us.⁴⁰ (VII.7.7)

Lactantius later mentions another Stoic teaching that the souls of the just return to heaven after death, but quickly counters that thought when he states that:

No one should think that the souls are judged immediately upon dying, however; all are

³⁹ Tum qui erunt in corporibus vivi, non morientur, sed per eosdem mille annos infinitam multitudinem generabunt et erit suboles eorum sancta et deo cara: qui autem ab inferis suscitabuntur, hi praeerunt viventibus velut iudices. Gentes vero non extinguentur omnino, sed quaedam relinquentur in victoria dei, ut triumphentur a iustis ac subiugentur perpetuae servituti. Sub idem tempus etiam princeps daemonum, qui est machinator omnium malorum, catenis vincietur et erit in custodia mille annis caelestis imperii, quo iustitia in orbe regnabit, ne quod malum adversus populum dei molitur. Post cuius adventum congregabuntur iusti ex omni terra peractoque iudicio civitas sancta constituetur in medio terrae, in qua ipse conditor deus cum iustis dominantibus commoretur...tunc auferentur a mundo tenebrae illae quibus obfundetur atque occaecabitur caelum, et luna claritudinem solis accipiet nec minuetur ulterius, sol autem septies tanto quam nunc est clarior fiet. Terra vero aperiet fecunditatem suam et uberimas fruges sua sponte generabit, rupes montium melle sudabunt, per rivos vinadecurrent et flumina lacte inundabunt: mundus denique ipse gaudebit et omnis rerum natura laetabitur erepta et liberate diminio mali et impietatis et sceleris et erroris. Non bestiae per hoc tempussanguine alentur, non aves praeda, sed quieta et placida erunt Omnia. Leones et vituli ad praesepe simul stabunt, lupus ovem non rapiet, canis non venabitur, accipitres et aquilae non nocebunt, infans cum serpentibus ludet ((text Brandt, translation Bowen and Garnsey).

⁴⁰ Esse inferos Zeno Stoicus docuit et sedes piorum ab impiis esse discretas et illos quidem quietas ac delectabiles incolere regions, hos vero luere poenas in tenebrosis locis atque in caeni voraginibus horrendis: idem nobis prophetae palam faciunt (text Brandt, translation Bowen and Garnsey).

kept under one common guard until the moment comes when their merits are tested by the supreme judge. (VII.21.7)⁴¹

This common place where the souls are confined is Hades, which houses both the souls of the pious and impious in separate compartments. Hill's thesis stands up well in the case of Lactantius, who clearly believes in a subterranean repose for both pious and impious souls, and an earthly millennial kingdom after the second coming of Christ.

III. The first and second resurrection

Lactantius presents his ideas on the first and second resurrection in VII.20:1-22:8 and 26:1-7. His narrative matches that found in Rev. 20 on many points. According to Lactantius, the first resurrection happens after the appearance and final defeat of Antichrist. The underworld opens and God delivers his verdict. In the first resurrection, though, only those well-practiced in God's religion [*qui sunt in dei religion versati*] will be judged by being reclothed in flesh and tested with a divine fire. Their good deeds are weighed against their bad deeds - those fully imbued with justice and ripe with virtue will not experience any pain, while those with excessive sins are burned. The just are granted immortality, while those with excessive sins are doomed to the same punishment as the impious who did not acknowledge God. During the millennial reign of Christ on earth, those raised from the underworld "will be in charge of the living like judges".⁴² Curiously, Lactantius makes no provision here for the pious living - all are put into servitude during the millennial kingdom!

⁴¹ Nec tamen quisquam putet animas post mortem protinus judicare: omnes in una communique custodia detinentur, donec tempus adveniat quo maximum index meritorum faciat examen

⁴² VII.24:3 - hi praeerunt viventibus velut iudices.

After the millennial reign, Satan is released from bondage and makes war upon all the people of God. God's final wrath is delivered, all evil is destroyed, and God renews the world. The just are "transformed...to look like angels, and they will be white as snow."⁴³ Then at last will come the second resurrection of the impious, and they are condemned to eternal punishment. They are "burnt for their sins forever with perpetual fire in the sight of the angels and the just."⁴⁴ I include a pictorial representation of these events as Appendix B.

IV. Parallels with Revelation

David Aune, David Flusser and Cana Werman (following Flusser) propose that, despite the similarities between Rev. 11:3-12 and Lactantius *Divine Institutes* VII.17:1-3 (discussing the witness(es) sent by God to prophesy and the defeat by Antichrist), both are most likely dependent on the lost Oracle of Hystaspes.⁴⁵ But it seems to me that there are so many direct corollaries between Lactantius and Revelation, that he actually was directly dependent upon it. In this, I agree completely with Stefan Freund, who pointed out five passages that contain marked similarities.⁴⁶

I. The prophet(s) sent by God - one in Lactantius, two in Revelation (D.I. VII.17.1-3 / Rev. 11:3-12). In both accounts:

- The prophet/prophets have the power to perform miracles, destroying their opponents and turning water into blood.
- An adversary arises who kills the prophet(s) and leaves him/them unburied for three days.

⁴³ VII.26:5 - transformabit deus homines in similitudinem angelorum et erunt candidi sicut nix.

⁴⁴ VII.26:7 - pro suis facinoribus in conspectus angelorum atque iustorum perpetuo igni cremabitur in aeternum.

⁴⁵ See n. 25 above, also Werman, 282-86.

⁴⁶ Freund, 2010.

- After the third day, the prophet(s) return to life and are taken up into heaven.

2. The coming of Antichrist, the second beast (D.I. VII.17.4-8 / Rev. 13:11-16). In both accounts:

- This figure beguiles people with signs and prodigies - making fire descend from heaven and commanding an image to speak.⁴⁷
- He is given power for 42 months.
- All who follow him must receive a mark.

3. The second coming of Christ and the defeat of Antichrist (D.I. VII.19.1-7 / Rev 19: 11-21). Again, in both accounts:

- Heaven is opened, and Christ descends accompanied by an angelic army.
- He appears as a divine avenger and king.
- His appearance is associated with a sword and flame.
- He defeats Antichrist in a bloody battle.

4. Although the narrative of Lactantius is much more detailed than that of John, the millennial reign (D.I. VII.24 / Rev. 20:1-6) accords in its basics:

- After defeating Antichrist, the returned Christ reigns on earth for a thousand years with the righteous elect.
- During this time, Satan is bound in chains.

5. The final defeat of Satan (D.I. VII.26.1-7 / Rev. 20:7-10)

⁴⁷ lubebit ignem descendere a caelo et solem a suis cursibus stare et imaginem loqui (VII.17:5)

- When the thousand years are ended, Satan is released.
- He gathers the nations to make war upon the just and the holy city.
- God causes fire to descend upon the devil and the impious; they are defeated and thrown into eternal fire

To these similarities noted by Freund, I would also add both authors' passages on the second resurrection and judgment (D.I. VII.26.5-7 / Rev. 20:11-15). All mankind is then judged according to their works, and the impious are condemned to eternal punishment.

Conclusions and Further Research

After spending the past year working on the subject of Lactantian apocalyptic, I now realize why it is so often glossed over. The complexity of his narrative, the variety of interwoven sources, and the purpose behind the *Divinae Institutiones* makes an analysis very difficult indeed. After investigating his ideas about the millennial reign and the intermediate state of the soul, the first and second resurrection, and his portrayal of the Antichrist, I conclude that his apocalypticism is not an indiscriminate synthesis of varying sources, but has close parallels with the Book of Revelation and other Patristic sources.

Future lines of research could include studying the later transmission and influence of Lactantius's apocalyptic thought, if any. By the late fourth-century, apocalyptic thinking had been muted. Christian scholars and exegetes held no uniform opinion as to how or even whether the Book of Revelation should be presented to the community. It was confusing, there was a danger of an overly literal interpretation, and as a polemic against Rome, it was somewhat of an embarrassment. Should the book be read literally or spiritually? Tyconius, a North African Donatist who flourished ca. 370-390, offered a

method for making allegorical sense of difficult texts, especially the Apocalypse. His *Liber Regularum* (Book of Rules) is the first treatise of biblical hermeneutics in the Latin West.⁴⁸ In it, he expounds on seven rules, or keys, for explaining scripture. For Tyconius, the law - that is, the Old and New Testaments - is mediated through seven rules or *mysticae*. These are "compositional principles of scripture encoded in the text itself which conceal or obscure its meaning."⁴⁹ The method of Tyconius ultimately points toward a more spiritual interpretation. The tribulation and death described in the Book of Revelation reveal the present spiritual reality of sin within the body of the church rather than the shape of future eschatological events. So, it is not for the "signs of the end times that one scrutinizes the Scriptures - but rather for the signs of what makes one united or separated from Christ now."⁵⁰

Tyconius is relatively unknown today, as his work was eclipsed by that of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who summarized the seven rules in his *De doctrina christiana*⁵¹ and made use of them in *De Civitate Dei*, especially book 20 where he expounds his thought on eschatology. Through Tyconius (reinforced by Augustine), literal readings of the Book of Revelation - and Patristic authors who subscribed to chiliasm, including Lactantius - fell out of fashion for the next seven centuries. Instead, the idea of recapitulation and a spiritual, moral reading prevailed.⁵²

⁴⁸ Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* (Notre Dame, 1988), 2.

⁴⁹ Paula Fredricksen, "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse" in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ at 3.30.42-3.37.56

⁵² see Fredriksen for an excellent discussion of this transformation.

Colin McAllister

Regnum Caelorum Terrestre: The Apocalyptic Vision of Lactantius

Appendix A: Lactantius *Divinae Institutiones* Book VII: 14-26.7 - summary⁵³

I. Introduction: the millennial structure of world history and the Millennial Kingdom (Chapter 14)

- Since all God's works were completed in six days, the world is bound to abide in its present state for six periods of time, that is, 6000 years
- At the end of the year 6000, all evil will be swept off the earth and justice will reign for 1000 years
- Just as original man was made mortal and imperfect out of earth, to live in this world 1000 years, so now from this earthly generation perfect man is being fashioned, to be given life by God and to be master in the same world 1000 years.

II. Wars and disasters at the beginning of the end times (15-16)

- [When God struck Egypt to free the Hebrews from slavery, as told in Gen. and Exod.] it was the foreshadowing of an event at the final consummation of time, when God will free his people from their oppressive enslavement to the world
- There will be portents over all the world
- Evil will increase and wars will rage everywhere
- Egypt will be the first to pay and will be covered with rivers of blood
- Rome will be razed from the Earth, and power will return to Asia
- After constant civil strife, ten rulers will share out the earth
- Then, an enemy of great power will rise up against them from the furthest bounds of the north, and after destroying three of the kings who will then be in occupation of Asia he will be taken into alliance by the rest and be made chief of them all
- He exercises tyranny over all the earth, changes the laws and authorizes his own, then changes his name and moves the seat of government
- Terrible things happen: earthquakes, floods, disease, famine, no clean water, no cattle, birds or fish, comets and a dark sun in the heavens, the moon changes colour, shooting stars descend
- Unknown stars appear
- The sun is overcast for good - no distinction between day and night
- The moon goes into eclipse for long periods and has an irregular orbit
- Seasons are confused: summer in winter or vice versa
- Years, months and days will be shorter
- Stars will fall in great frequency, so the whole sky will look blind
- Loftiest mountains will fall, and the seas will be unnavigable
- A trumpet will sound from heaven, as the Sibyl declares
- 90% of the human race will be finished off, including 2/3 of God's worshippers

⁵³ Sectional breaks taken from Freund, Stefan. *Laktanz Divinae Institutiones Buch 7: De Vita Beata* (Berlin, 2009). The translation largely follows that of Bowen and Gamsey, but I have freely paraphrased.

III. The Appearance of the Antichrist and the victorious intervention of God (17-19)

- A prophet is sent by God to convert people
- He has the power to do miracles and also torment those who do not listen
- Once he has converted many, a second king arises in Syria [Antichrist], who will wipe out the remnants of previous evil together with himself
- He kills the prophet and leaves him unburied
- But after three days, the prophet comes back to life and is swept into heaven
- The king will be a liar, setting himself up as God and demanding to be worshipped as God's son.
- Men adore him because he has the power to perform signs and prodigies, including fire to descend from heaven, the sun to halt and an image to speak
- He tries to overthrow the temple of God and pursue the just
- All who believe him are marked like cattle, those who refuse either escape to the hills or are killed
- He wraps the just in the writings of the prophets and cremates them
- He is given power to lay the world waste for 42 months
- The just escape to a mountain, but the impious man gathers a great army and besieges them
- The just cry out to God, and he sends a great king from heaven [Christ]
- At darkest midnight, on Easter, the centre of heaven opens, a sword falls from the sky, and Christ descends with an army of angels
- All the evil army is destroyed, only Antichrist escapes
- He flees, but often renews the fight only to be beaten again
- Finally, in the fourth war, he along with all the other evil princes and tyrants are condemned and delivered to punishment

IV. The resurrection of those who have known God, the judgment of the Son of God (20-23)

- The underworld will open and the dead will rise
- Only those well-practiced in God's religion [*qui sunt in dei religion versati*] will be judged - those who have not acknowledged God are already judged and condemned
- Those who know God [pious - *iustos*] are judged - their good deeds are weighed against the bad, resulting in either eternal bliss or condemnation
- God can grasp the incorporeal [i.e. soul] and effect it as he wills
- Holy literature [*sanctae litterae*] tells us how the impious will pay their penalties: they are re clothed in flesh and tested with a divine fire. It perpetually burns them and makes them feel pain
- The pious are also tested in this manner - those fully imbued with justice and ripe with virtue will not feel it, those with excessive sins are burned

- No one should think that souls are judged immediately upon dying - all are kept under one common guard [*in una communique custodia detinentur*] until the moment comes when their merits are tested
- The just receive the prize of immortality
- Those whose sins are exposed are buried in the same darkness with the impious
- Vergil and other poets were wrong: the dead will not rise again after a thousand years of being dead, but will be restored to life again to reign a thousand years with God
- God will come to cleanse the world of all stain, to revive the souls of the just in new bodies, and to raise them to eternal bliss
- But resurrection is not possible as long as injustice is in control - people are being killed in this generation, justice is hated and all who wish to follow God are attacked or forced to an impious worship of manufactured gods
- Resurrection is therefore bound to happen only once, at the removal of evil
- Men will not be reborn [*renascentur*] because rebirth is impossible - they will rise again [*resurgent*] to be endowed by God with bodies
- They will remember their former lives and all their actions
- They will have place among the goods of heaven
- They will enjoy the pleasure of untold plenty
- They will give thanks to God face to face because he has raised them to his kingdom and to life eternal

V. The establishment of the millennial reign of god on earth (24)

- The son of God most high and most great will come to judge the living and the dead
- When he has destroyed injustice and made his judgment and restored to life the just, he will spend a thousand years with men and will rule them with great justice
- Those alive in the flesh will not die but will produce children without number
- Those raised from the underworld will be in charge of the living like judges - the just put them into perpetual servitude
- The prince of demons [*princeps daemonum*] will be put in chains and kept under guard for the thousand years
- The just will gather and establish a holy city in the center of the earth - God himself will dwell there with the just in control
- The darkness will be removed from the sky
- The moon will take on the sun's brightness and not be reduced thereafter
- The sun will become seven times brighter than it is now
- The earth will become fertile - the rocks will ooze with honey and the rivers will swell with milk
- Wild beasts will not feed on blood, not birds on prey, lions and calves will stand together at the stall, wolf will not seize lamb, dog will not hunt, hawk and eagle will do no harm, and children will play with snakes

- People will thus live lives of great peace and plenty, and will reign side by side with God

VI. Sources and the dating of End-Time events (25)

- The change will happen at the end of 6000 years
- The timing is set forth by those who have written upon timing - they have searched in holy literature and in various histories
- The universal expectation seems to be for a maximum of 200 years more
- The slide into ruin will come soon, but no part of it seems to fit as long as Rome is intact

VII. Final destruction of Antichrist, transformation of the world and the final judgment (26.1-7)

- When the thousand years of the reign begin to end, the prince of demons will be set free
- He will gather the nations under the control of the just to make war upon the holy city
- A countless host of people will gather from all over the world, and they will surround the city and lay siege to it
- Then God's final wrath will come: He will fix the sun not to set for three days - excessive heat and great burning will descend upon the impious with clouds of sulphur, storms of hailstones and gouts of fire
- The people of God will hide for three days in the hollows of the earth - when they emerge the whole population of the impious will be utterly dead
- Then for seven continuous years woods will be untouched and no timber will be cut from the hills, there will be peace and quiet for evermore
- When the thousand years are over, God will renew the world, fold up the sky [*caelum complicabitur*] and alter the earth
- He will transform them to look like angels and they will be as white as snow, they will sacrifice to their lord and serve him forever
- There will be the second, public resurrection of everybody, when the unjust will be ejected into eternal torment
- Their lord will be arrested with his servants, and with him the impious will be burnt for their sins forever with perpetual fire in sight of the angels and the just

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