



[Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* VII.15.13, 17-19](#)

The downfall of the Roman empire

Name of the author: Lactantius

Date: 305 CE to 310 CE

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: *Divine Institutes*

Reference: VII.15.13, 17-19

Commentary:

Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325 CE) was a Latin rhetorician at the court of Diocletian, and while we have relatively little material to help us construct a detailed biography for him, we know that he was born in Africa in the mid-third century CE, and studied with Arnobius of Sicca, who also wrote an [apologetic treatise against the pagans](#) after converting to Christianity. Lactantius converted to Christianity and resigned from his post shortly before Diocletian got rid of Christian staff from his court and issued his edict against the Christians in 303 CE. After the subsequent Great Persecution under Diocletian, Lactantius's movements are quite uncertain. Some scholars have suggested that he remained for a while in North Africa, but others prefer Italy. We do know that following the persecution he tutored Crispus, the son of the emperor Constantine at Trier (Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire and the Making of Religion*, p. 79; for a concise overview of Lactantius's career, see Anthony Bowen, and Peter Garnsey, *Lactantius: Divine Institutes*, p. 1-6). Lactantius authored various items which are now lost. However, among his writings that are preserved are several treatises and his famous *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, in addition to the seven volume *Divine Institutes*, one of the earliest Christian responses to the polemical attacks of Porphyry (see Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Lactantius, Porphyry"). In addition to their apologetic function, the *Divine Institutes* also attempts a systematic account of Christian theology, and in this sense has been described by Schott as "a watershed in Latin apologetic literature" (*Christianity, Empire and the Making of Religion*, p. 80). Indeed, while Lactantius praises his apologetic forerunners Tertullian and Marcus Minucius Felix for their defence of Christianity, he comments that they ought to have written more concerning Christian doctrine. In books 1-4, Lactantius critiques traditional religion and philosophy, arguing that Christianity is the true form of both. He then moves to reflect on the Great Persecution in the fifth book, before discussing Christian lifestyle and worship in book 6.

In the seventh book, from which the present extract is taken, Lactantius argues that the tetrarchy had set in motion the events that would ultimately result in the end of the world. This book shows familiarity with various apocalyptic writings, including Jewish, Christian, Egyptian, and Iranian, influences from all of which can be seen in the present extract. Lactantius describes in a more detailed way than his predecessors the millennial kingdom which would begin with Christ's return, when the sinful would be destroyed, Satan defeated, and the faithful dead raised. The beginning of this end would be the dissolution of Rome. Our short extract begins with Lactantius listing the great empires which had come before Rome, all of which ultimately met their end. Rome, it is stated, is greater than all the kingdoms which have preceded it, but this means that its fall will be harder as it has much more to lose. The analogy of a tall building crashing down is quite emphatic about this point. Lactantius argues throughout the book that the Sibyls had openly declared that Rome would perish, and this is by God's judgement because Rome has despised God's name, "butchered justice," and slaughtered the Christians (see Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, p. 45). The persecution under Diocletian is therefore directly linked to Rome's demise. He does, however, believe that prayer might have the effect of stalling this decline, which is still inevitable, if God is properly worshipped in the city of Rome, the "sustainer" of all things (VII.25.6-8). However, Bernard McGinn argues that some Christians were uncomfortable with this conception, as post-Constantine's conversion, when the empire was understood as under God's protection, the idea that it would be destroyed seemed somehow disloyal to God (McGinn, *Visions of the End*, p. 25).

Lactantius refers to the Sibyl frequently in his work, and inspiration here for Rome's punishment and destruction is no doubt drawn from the detailed account in *Sibylline Oracle* VIII of the misery that Rome will suffer for her impiety and brutality (see verses 47-63, 95-140, 187-210). Elsewhere in the *Sibylline Oracles* we read further predictions



and descriptions of Rome's fate (see, for example III.350-364; V.155-178). He also refers to a prophecy of the downfall of the "Trojan nation" (i.e. Rome) in the *Oracles of Hystaspes*, which are a collection of prophecies ascribed to Višt̥spa (Latinised as Hystaspa), the disciple of Zoroaster (see Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, p. 366-368 for the prophecy Lactantius refers to). None of his writings are still extant, but have come down to us in the writings of authors such as Lactantius as well as Justin Martyr, who drew upon them in order to argue that the Christian truths which they profess had been prophesied long ago by pagan prophets and oracles (see Mary Boyce and Frantz Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism*, p. 376-377). The origin of the tradition is debated, with scholars having suggested possible Hellenistic, Jewish, and Iranian roots.

Lactantius is not alone in making the suggestion that the pagan prophets or authors foretold Christian truths. For example, the author of the *Oration of Constantine* XVIII-XIX argues that the Erythrean Sibyl, filled with divine inspiration from God, predicted Christ's coming (see also Augustine's *City of God* XVIII.23). Moreover, the *Oration* also joins a line of Christian interpretation of [Virgil's fourth Eclogue](#), which prophesies that a baby boy will usher in a new golden age. Indeed, in a similar line of thought to that presented by Lactantius in verse 17 of the present extract, the author of the *Oration* argues that Virgil disguised his prophecies about Christ in language familiar to his pagan audience so that he would not attract negative attention from Roman authorities. The Sibyls, however, Lactantius affirms, do not veil their condemnation of Rome in any sort of mysterious or ambiguous language, rather, they are quite explicit about its punishment and demise.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aegyptus](#)
- [antiquus](#)
- [Assyrius](#)
- [destruo](#)
- [gens](#)
- [Graecus](#)
- [Hystaspes](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [inimicus](#)
- [interpretatio](#)
- [iudicium](#)
- [iustitia](#)
- [magnitudo](#)
- [Medi](#)
- [Perses](#)
- [propheta](#)
- [regimen](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [rex](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [ruina](#)
- [Sibylla](#)
- [terra](#)
- [Troianus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Assyrians](#)
- [demise](#)
- [destruction](#)
- [divine judgement](#)
- [divine punishment](#)
- [Egyptians](#)



- [fall of Rome](#)
- [Greeks](#)
- [Hystaspes](#)
- [impiety](#)
- [kingdom](#)
- [oracle](#)
- [Persians](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [prophet](#)
- [Roman name](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Sibyl](#)
- [Trojans](#)

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