LACTANTIUS’ DE IRA DEI: AN EXPLICATION OF THE ARGUMENTS AND
STUDY OF LACTANTIUS’ TREATMENT OF GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

by

CAROLYN M. HARVEY

(Under the Direction of Erika T. Hermanowicz)

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Lactantius’ philosophical tract, De Ira Dei, discussing its arguments and arrangement. It also addresses Lactantius’ treatment of Greco-Roman philosophy, showing that while Lactantius is grounded in this philosophy he also goes beyond it into the development of his own thought. A close comparison between Lactantius’ De Ira Dei and Seneca’s De Ira is used to exemplify Lactantius’ treatment of Greco-Roman philosophy.

INDEX WORDS: Lactantius, Anger, De Ira Dei
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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my wonderful mother, Karen E. Conoán, for her inspiration, encouragement, and tireless editing, and to my husband Brian for his unfailing support of all my aspirations.
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INTRODUCTION

Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius was a North African rhetorician and Christian apologist who lived circa 240 – 320 C.E. Lactantius witnessed the evolution of Christianity into a politically acceptable religion under the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, and he participated in the active debate between this emerging belief system and the polytheism which continued to be predominant within society. When Constantine converted to Christianity, it was a little known and somewhat suspect religion, and though the members of his court were required to respect his choice, they were not quick to follow it. Christianity was still seen as a foreign and unrefined system of belief. Using his education and skills as a rhetorician, Lactantius sought to vindicate Christianity in the eyes of the non-Christian nobility by expressing Christian thought with eloquence and grace in the traditional, refined oratorical forms familiar to upper-class society.

Although Lactantius wrote both secular and religious works, only his Christian pieces survive. His most comprehensive extant tract is the Divinae Institutiones, in which he seeks to explain Christian beliefs to the pagans, and his Epitome is a summary of this larger work. The De Opificio Dei argues that the beauty, functionality, and upright stance of man’s body reveals that he is created by God. The De Mortibus Persecutorum discusses the gruesome deaths met by the emperors who persecuted Christians, and the Phoenix is Lactantius’ one surviving poem. The De Ira Dei, the
subject of this thesis, addresses the anger of God, showing that God should, can, and does have anger.

In the *De Ira Dei*, Lactantius deals with the philosophical question of whether or not God can be angry. If God is perfect, lacks nothing, and is truly whole in His being, could He possibly feel anger toward humans? Is He involved at all with humanity, did He create man, and is He concerned with human affairs? Should humans fear the punishment of a wrathful God? Lactantius writes this treatise to restore fear to religion, to show that God is provident and involved with mankind, and to disprove the Epicurean and Stoic proposition that God cannot have anger.

Lactantius believes that anger in God is good and necessary. He defines anger as “motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis”\(^1\) the motion of a mind rising up to correct faults. God uses anger to correct and prevent transgressions, thus enabling men to live in right relationship with each other as well as God, and ultimately to attain eternal happiness. Divine anger is correction, guidance, and ultimately, love. It is not, as the Stoic philosophers define it, rage, loss of control, vengeance, or repaying an injury. Instead, Lactantius argues that morally responsible agents in positions of power use anger to guide and correct their inferiors. “Surgimus ad vindictam, non quia laesi sumus, sed ut disciplina servetur, mores corrigantur, licentia conprimatur” (17.7). Divine anger is a positive force which results from God’s concern for human well-being and acts as a disciplinary agent which “et utilis est rebus humanis et necessaria” (17.21).

My first chapter provides a careful exposition of Lactantius’ arguments, proceeding methodically through the text and reconstructing the reasoning by which he

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\(^1\) 17.20. All Latin citations of *De Ira Dei* taken from *La Colère de Dieu*, trans. and ed. Christiane Ingremeau (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1982).
establishes the necessity of divine anger. I divide the treatise into five blocks, and demonstrate how Lactantius purposefully arranges each section to persuade his audience gradually of his claims. Topics prevalent in this discussion are the bundling of emotions, the deconstruction of atomism, the presentation of the Christian world view, Lactantius’ own definition and understanding of anger, and evidence for divine anger from non-Christian oracular sources. By carefully outlining and clarifying the progression of Lactantius’ treatise, I make his arguments more readily available to modern readers and provide a solid basis for further study.

Chapter One of my thesis carefully analyzes how Lactantius interweaves his thought at every opportunity with that of prior Greco-Roman philosophers, grounding his treatise upon the foundation constructed by these respected and revered authors. Chapter Two focuses upon the nature of the relationship between Lactantius and the philosophers to whom he refers. Lactantius makes deliberate choices to connect his thinking with certain philosophies while distancing it from others, and I show that these choices are largely made to appeal to his audience. He bases his material upon that of Cicero, Seneca, and Aristotle, while vilifying Lucretius and Epicurus, and leaving other Christian apologists and all contemporary philosophers completely unmentioned. He does this because his audience, the nobility of Constantine’s court, held Stoicism and Platonism in the highest esteem, Epicureanism in the lowest, and simply would have refused to consider the Christian apologists. These dispositions were simply a result of the conventions of the education which all nobles received, in which certain philosophies were praised, others disparaged, and others judged unworthy of consideration. I suggest that Lactantius avoids use of contemporary philosophy in order to prevent causing
personal offense which might have resulted in serious political ramifications for himself
and other Christians. Above all my thesis concludes that Lactantius’ heavy reliance on
non-Christian, Greco-Roman philosophy is completely natural and fitting, as this
philosophy was his background and the background of those he wished to persuade.

The second part of my Chapter Two is a close comparison of Lactantius’ *De Ira
Dei* to Seneca’s *De Ira*, through which I provide a concrete example for my previous
section’s discussion of how Lactantius relates to prior Greco-Roman philosophers.
Lactantius draws heavily from Seneca’s work and much of the *De Ira Dei* is a response to
the *De Ira* in which Lactantius replies to Seneca’s assertion that anger is always an evil,
purposeless, irrational force. Through careful reading of the texts I compare the two
authors’ positions on the definition of anger and its properties, its ability to be controlled,
its relationship to reason, and its role in correcting and preventing wrongdoing. On all
these points, Lactantius and Seneca disagree. Yet their disagreement stems from their
definitions of anger, for when they discuss “anger” they speak of two entirely different
phenomena. In many ways their intents are the same; they agree that the faults of an
inferior should be corrected by a superior, and “anger” which is self-serving, destructive,
uncontrolled and purposeless should be eradicated. In deviating so strongly from
Seneca’s definition and presentation of anger, Lactantius demonstrates that he is a
philosopher in his own right, drawing upon the material of his predecessors but also
going beyond it into the development of his own thought.
CHAPTER 1: EXPLICATION OF THE ARGUMENTS IN THE DE IRA DEI

*De Ira Dei* Chapters 1 – 6: Refutation of Stoic and Epicurean Positions on Divine

Anger through the Four Parameters Argument

In order to provide a methodical and complete explication of Lactantius’ arguments, this paper follows his progression of argumentation closely, addressing ideas in the same order as they are presented in the text. Lactantius begins by defining the problem. He observes that many people of his time, even some philosophers, believe that God does not get angry. He immediately proposes two reasons why people believe this, giving his formulation of the Stoic and the Epicurean treatments of the question. The Stoics believe that God shows only kindness to his creation and never causes harm to it in any way. “Benefica sit tantummodo natura divina nec cuiquam nocere praestantissimae atque optimae congruat potestati” (1.1). The Epicureans believe that God cares about nothing, and neither benefits nor harms. “Certe nihil curet omnino, ut neque ex beneficentia eius quicquam boni perveniat ad nos neque ex maleficentia quicquam mali” (1.1). Lactantius then stresses, as he does repeatedly throughout the treatise, the importance of refuting the belief that God is uninvolved with his creation, a belief which leads to the complete destruction of the foundation of human life, “ad evertendum vitae humanae statum spectat” (1.2). This must be proven false so that people are not misled by those who imagine themselves to be wise.
Unlike the philosophers, who attempt to ascertain truth by conjecture, Lactantius relies upon revelation. He states that the mind is surrounded by its shadowy home, the body, and the body keeps man from knowing the truth (1.4). Man can know nothing on his own. Lactantius cites Socrates to support this claim, noting that Socrates proclaimed he knew nothing except for one thing, that he knew nothing (1.6).

Lactantius lists the steps one must take in order to know the truth (in other words, to become a Christian), presenting Christianity like a mystery religion with levels of initiation. First one must disavow false religions, that is, abandon all belief in man-made gods. Second, one must profess belief in the supreme, provident God. The second step, Lactantius points out, is the subject of his treatise, which specifically refutes the belief that God cannot be angry in order to lead people to a better understanding of the true God. The final step in the progression of initiation is to know Jesus.

Turning to his second step, Lactantius states that he intends to confront those who hold incorrect beliefs about God. Again he defines the Epicurean and Stoic positions. The Epicureans believe that God is completely removed from mankind, neither helping nor growing angry at anyone. Undisturbed and quiet, He enjoys the benefits of His own immortality. The Stoics eliminate all anger from God, but retain kindness, believing that just as doing harm is unacceptable for a nature of the highest virtue, so doing kindness is beneficial.

Lactantius grounds his argument in the terms *ira* and *gratia*, anger and kindness. While Epicureans believe that God is subject to neither anger nor kindness and Stoics hold that God can be kind but not angry, Lactantius intends to prove that God can be both angry and kind. In order to do this logically, he sets up four parameters or possibilities:
God is both kind and angry, neither kind nor angry, angry but not kind, or kind but not angry. Lactantius defines his parameters carefully in order to provide a logical defense of his position.

He had stated earlier in the treatise that knowledge about God only comes through divine revelation (1.3), but he presents this argument for divine wrath differently. He arranges this as a philosophical question like any other debated by the schools -- is God theoretically capable of being kind and/or angry? This format allows the answer to be reached by reason, the common ground between Christians and non-Christians. There are four parameters, and the truth must lie within one of them.

Lactantius quickly eliminates the possibility that God can be angry but not kind. No one has ever argued this, he says, because it is neither reasonable nor in any way credible. It does not make sense to say that God can injure and do harm, but not do good. If the evils in the world do come from God, then there must be another from whom the good comes; if there is such a one, what would his name be? It is absurd to suppose that the best and greatest being is able to injure but unable to benefit. “Nemo extitit qui auderet id dicere, quia nec rationem habet nec ullo modo potest credi” (3.4).

Next Lactantius addresses the Epicurean belief that God is neither kind nor angry, but only happy and uncorrupted, because he cares about nothing. “Beatus est et incorruptus, quia nihil curat neque ipse habet negotium neque alteri exhibet” (4.2). Lactantius portrays Epicurean reasoning thus: it is unfitting for God to have anger, because anger is a vice. Anger and kindness are opposite sides of the same principle, so that he who has one must be capable of having the other. “Si habeat iram deus, habeat et gratiam” (4.2). Therefore, because God cannot have anger, He also cannot have
kindness. Lactantius explains that Epicurus extracts the virtue of kindness from God lest he be forced to admit that God can have a vice. “Itaque ne illi vitium concederet, etiam virtutis fecit expertem” (4.2).

This reasoning relies on the belief that emotions are interdependent, making it logically necessary for any being who is capable of one emotion to be capable of its opposite. All the emotions have one system, one motion. “Una est enim ratio cunctis adfectibus, una commotio” (4.12). This theory might be called the principle of the interdependency of emotions, and it mandates that emotions come in a bundle, and he who has one has them all. “In rebus enim diversis aut in utramque partem moveri necesse est aut in neutram” (5.9). Lactantius completely agrees with this proposition, writing in Chapter Five, “Qui ergo diligit, et odit, qui odit, et diligit . . . quod argumentum quia verum est, dissolvi nullo pacto potest” (5.13). He refers to the “reason and truth” of the interdependency of emotions (5.15), and clinches his argument in Chapter Six by saying “consequens esse ut irascatur deus, quoniam gratia commovetur” (my italics, 6.1).

Lactantius finds Epicurus’ reasoning to be sound in itself; his criticism is that Epicurus starts with the wrong premise. Instead of presuming that God cannot be angry, and therefore concluding that He cannot be kind, Epicurus ought to reason that because God undoubtedly is kind, He must be angry as well (5.16). Lactantius maintains that God’s kindness is a more certain premise, and one should always start with that which is more certain. “Cum sit promptius de certis incerta firmare” (5.17).

Also, Lactantius believes that to remove anger, kindness, and all action from God is essentially to say that God does not exist. God is not God if he is not compassionate, does nothing which man cannot, and has no will, action, or administration worthy of God.
By “administration worthy of God” Lactantius means providence, and here the argument becomes less about anger and kindness and more about providence and its antithesis, *apatheia*, freedom from emotion. Providence (*providentia*) is a critical term in this treatise, referring to the belief that God created man, and continues to be lovingly involved in his affairs. Epicurus argues that God is completely uninvolved in man’s affairs, and therefore has no reason to be angry, kind, or moved in any way. This uninvolvment is the primary belief which Lactantius means to overthrow. In short, he argues that if God cares for nothing, He does not exist. “Qui ergo totam vim, totam substantiam deo tollit, quid aliud dicit nisi deum omnino non esse?” (4.6) If there is no care and no providence in God, then there is no reflection or perception in Him. A being which perceives nothing, feels nothing, and does nothing – is nothing. It does not exist.²

Epicurus, however, did not teach atheism. So was he being deceitful to his followers, encouraging them to believe in the name of God but not the reality? Lactantius cites Cicero relating that Epicurus really did not believe in the gods yet never taught atheism because he knew that he would incur popular wrath (4.7). Lactantius claims to judge Epicurus more kindly, allowing that he erred through ignorance of the truth rather than an intent to deceive. “Sed non erat tam versutus Epicurus ut fallendi studio ista loqueretur, cum haec etiam scriptis ad aeternam memoriam consignaret, sed ignorantia veritatis erravit. Inductus enim a principio veri similitudine unius sententiae, necessario in ea quae sequabantur incurrit” (4.9). Furthermore, Lactantius argues,

₂ Lactantius equates emotion with motivation, whereas the Stoics, for whom *apatheia* is the ideal, do not. “To be free of emotions is not to be free of strong, determined, and intense motivation. It is merely clear-headed motivation that understands, according to the Stoics, the true value of things.” Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 186.
because Epicurus’ argument is illogical, no one believes it except a very few, only the wicked and guilty who do not wish to face the consequences of a wrathful God.

Having eliminated two of the parameters, Lactantius now needs only to refute the Stoic argument that God is kind but not angry. “Existimantur Stoici et alii nonnulli aliquanto melius de divinitate sensisse, qui aiunt gratiam in deo esse, iram non esse” (5.1). Again, Lactantius presents the argument charitably: because the Stoics perceive anger as a vice, they remove it from God. They believe anger to be a response to an injury or a perceived injury, but since God cannot be injured, He has no cause for anger. Here Lactantius presents the Stoic definition of anger, which he takes from Seneca.3 Stoics think of anger as a “commotionem mentis ac perturbationem” (5.2) which is like a violent storm that upsets the mind, makes the eyes gleam, the face redden, and the teeth chatter. If anger is so unbecoming to man, how much more unfitting it is for God. Furthermore, the Stoics reason, when man feels anger he is liable to act violently and cause destruction; if the greatest and most powerful being felt anger, would not the whole world be destroyed? If it is better for man to help than to harm, to restore to life than to kill, to rescue than to destroy, how much better it is for God, who excels in virtue, to do the same (5.7). Thus Stoics assert that God is kind, but not angry.

The problem with Stoic reasoning, Lactantius contends, is that it does not take into account the interdependency of emotions. If God is not angry with those who do wrong, then He does not love those who do right, for the love of good arises from the hatred of evil, and the hatred of evil arises from the love of the good. No one loves life unless he also hates death, and no one seeks the light while not simultaneously avoiding

3 Sen. Ira 3.3.
the dark. “Adeo natura ista conexa sunt ut alterum sine altero fieri nequeat” (5.11). So the Stoics, though they approach nearer to the truth than the Epicureans, err through improper reasoning, while the Epicureans are farther from the truth but more logical.\(^4\)

To summarize, Lactantius begins his treatise by proposing his question as a problem of logic. He sets out four possibilities, and by eliminating three arrives at his own conclusion: God is both kind and angry. By opening his treatise using the language of logic, a language shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, Lactantius entices the non-believers of his audience; if he had presented Christian revelation first, only Christians would have listened. Also, through this approach Lactantius grounds the question in the methodology shared by all the preeminent philosophical schools, and defends Christianity as a \textit{bona fide} philosophical rival to other well-respected schools of ancient philosophy.

\textit{De Ira Dei} Chapters 7 and 8: Human Superiority over the Brutes

Lactantius next presents a proof for the existence of divine anger based upon the proposition that man is superior to the beasts, a proposition he says no philosopher has ever countered. That there is something divine in man is demonstrated by his upright stance; all the other animals are prostrate to the ground and pasture, but man alone walks

\(^4\) However, the Stoics do believe in the interdependency of emotions. They believe emotions are the result of giving improper value to externals, and once this improper value is assigned, many emotions result. “The very same evaluations that ground one group of passions ground – given a change of circumstances or a different temporal perspective – the others as well. She cannot love without being liable to hate and anger.” Martha Nussbaum, \textit{The Therapy of Desire} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 398.
upright and beholds heaven. Lactantius holds that it is only in the knowledge and worship of God that man separates himself completely from the beasts, and he shows that every other aspect of man which might seem exclusive is indeed shared to some degree by the animals. For example, man uses language, but the beasts also have ways to communicate with each other and express emotion. They reason to some degree, constructing several outlets in their lairs to escape danger, and they plan for the future, as when bees store up honey for the winter. Man is different than and superior to animals, but the chief and only complete difference between the two is religion. It is vital, therefore, that man have religion. “Quare si ratio, si vis hominis hoc praecellit et superat ceteras animantes quod solus notitiam dei capit, apparett religionem nullo modo posse dissolui” (7.15).

Lactantius argues that in the absence of divine kindness and anger, religion is overthrown. If God is not moved by kindness to benefit His subjects, they have no reason to build temples, offer sacrifices, or diminish their property in worshipping Him, for to do so would be a bad investment. “Si enim deus nihil cuiquam boni tribuit, si colentis obsequio nullam gratiam refert, quid tam vanum, tam stultum quam templa aedificare, sacrificia facere, dona conferre, rem familiarem minuere ut nihil adsequamur?” (8.2) Lactantius’ view is practical, earthy: if God does not reward his

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5 Lactantius uses this belief frequently; see *Ira* 14.2, *Div. inst.* 2.1.18 and 3.10.11; *Opif.* 8.3. It is found also in *Cic. Nat. deor.* 2.140, *Leg.* 1.26; *Sen. Epist.* 92.30; *Ov. Met.* 1.85; *Min. Fel.* *Oct.* 17.2; *Cypr. Demetr.* 16.
worshippers for their obedience and sacrifice, then worshipping Him is foolish. He is not swayed by the idea that God should be admired and worshipped simply for His excellent nature. If God pays no regard to his subjects and disregards their sacrifice and worship, then He simply does not deserve worship. “Quis honor deberi potest nihil curanti et ingrato?” (8.3)

Conversely, if God does not punish man when he sins, what reason does man have not to break the laws whenever the opportunity arises? What motivation would man have to heed a god whom he does not fear? “Quod enim non metuitur, contemnitur, quod contemnitur, utique non colitur” (8.7). Lactantius declares that religion, majesty, and honor exist only when fear is present, and that there is no fear where no one is angry. Therefore, belief in an angry, provident God is necessary both to maintain religion, by which man is separated from the brutes, and to restrain wicked behavior, by which orderly human society is possible.

Succinctly, then, Lactantius’ argument for divine anger in Chapters Seven and Eight may be summarized as follows. Religion is destroyed if God is not angry, for then there is no fear, and there is no respect where fear is absent. If God earns no respect, then He earns no worship, and consequently religion is dead. This cannot be, because if religion is dead, then man is not superior to the beasts; and man is superior to the beasts. Therefore religion must stand, which means man must respect and fear God, and in order for this to happen, God must be angry.
Belief in an angry God curbs reprehensible behavior, for when people believe that God knows not only what they do, but also what they think, they are more apt to obey their consciences. “Multum enim refrenat homines conscientia, si credamus nos in conspectu dei vivere” (8.8). Lactantius acknowledges that because religion has the salutary effect of restraining faults, some people allege that it is merely a device created by wise men to curtail the behavior of their inferiors with some imaginary fear of “aliquis desuper terror” (8.10). Thus they charge that religion is false, and there is no divinity.

In dealing with this accusation, Lactantius first traces the history of atheism. He says that Protagoras, in the times of Socrates, was the first to doubt the existence of God, and the Athenians judged this disputation so impious that they banished him and burned all of his books which contained such statements. Because Protagoras said nothing certain, however, he does not demand refutation. There was also a certain Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene who postulated atheism. Lactantius says they did so only because they wanted to say something new, and being “minutos et inertes philosophos” (9.4), they disputed that to which all preceding philosophers had agreed.

The real challenge, Lactantius asserts, is in Epicurus’ claim that although there is a god, He is not provident, meaning that He did not create the world and is not involved in its affairs. Rather, Epicurus holds that the world is made up of certain minute and indivisible seeds, spontaneously formed with no divine plan. For Lactantius, to deny providence is to deny the existence of God, so when Epicurus claims that the world is neither created nor governed by God, he is really saying that there is no God. In Lactantius’ view, the very definition of God demands that He be provident: “Etenim, si
est deus, utique providens est” (9.5). If Epicurus admits that there is a God, he also
admits providence. “Cum autem deum esse professus est, et providentiam simul esse
concessit: alterum enim sine altero nec esse prorsus nec intellegi potest” (9.6). In order
to prove that God is provident, Lactantius embarks upon the longest and most complex
chapter in his treatise (Chapter Ten), fully admitting that it digresses from the question of
divine anger. “Magna haec et a materia quam proposuimus aliena quaestio est, sed quia
necessario incidit, debet quamvis breviter attingi” (8.10).

In Chapter Ten Lactantius deals with the Epicurean and Stoic treatments of the
creation of the world. He states that the Epicureans believe that the world is composed of
first principles coming together randomly (atomism) while the Stoics believe that it
suddenly came into existence by Nature, a force which has the power of production but
no consciousness. “Aut principiis inter se temere coeuntibus dicunt esse concretum aut
repente natura extitisse; naturam vero, ut Straton ait, habere in se vim gignendi et
minuendi, sed eam nec sensum habere ullam nec figuram” (10.1).

Lactantius first deals with atomism, approaching it rhetorically. He deconstructs
statements put forward by its proponents with constricting all or nothing questions,
absurd examples, and invective. He attacks Leucippus, the originator of atomic theory,
as a man who spoke things which even a lunatic would never utter. He accuses him of
inventing atomism simply to have something new to say, not wishing to agree to the
existence of four elements as established by the ancient philosophers.

The atomists claim that everything is composed of minute seeds. Lactantius first
questions the existence of these seeds, asking why no one has ever seen or heard them.
“Quis illa vidit umquam? quis sensit? quis audivit? Aut solus Leucippus oculos
The atomists claim that these seeds are too small to be perceived in any way, too small to be cut. Because atoms unite to form so many different objects in the world, they attribute varied shapes and textures to them, saying that some were smooth, some rough, others angular or hooked. Here Lactantius interjects a statement of incredulous disbelief, “Quanto melius fuerat tacere quam in usus tam miserabiles, tam inanes habere linguam!” (10.6) He hesitates lest he himself should appear equally insane in even engaging in such a foolish debate, but decides to reply as though to someone saying something: “respondeamus tamen velut aliquid dicenti” (10.6).

He criticizes the theory of the atoms’ method of joining, arguing that if they are soft and round they could not bind together, just as grains of millet cannot adhere together into a mass; yet if they are hooked, their hooks could be cut off, meaning that they would no longer fulfill the definition of atom (that which cannot be cut). Not only does Leucippus postulate that atoms form everything in this world, but he also believes that atoms unite to form countless other worlds. At this Lactantius laments, “Implevit numerum perfectae insaniae; nihil videtur ulterius adici posse” (10.10). Lactantius is not interested in discussing imaginary worlds, so he grants that Leucippus may rave with impunity about these, and focuses his attention on the world he can see.

If all things in this world are constructed of atoms, he asks, then what is the origin of the atoms themselves? Furthermore, if objects are formed by the random joining of atoms, why do birds need eggs, and trees seeds, and other living creatures coition? From this, Lactantius argues, it is evident that things are not composed of atoms, but that everything reproduces according to “suam legem ab exordio datam” (10.15).
Next Lactantius proposes several examples of natural phenomena which atomic theory is unable to explain. He questions the creation of fire from the striking together of steel and flint – if steel is composed only of steel atoms, and flint only of atoms of flint, how does fire come forth from them? In which substance were the atoms of fire hiding, and how could they be concealed in materials of such coldness? Likewise, how is fire generated from sunlight shining through a crystal orb? How does condensation occur, how does rain fall from clouds, how do atoms of water come from vapor? (While Lactantius proposes these examples to show the inadequacy of atomic theory, the reader cannot help but wonder how the author’s own cosmology would explain such phenomena.) Abandoning the discussion of natural phenomena, Lactantius turns to intangibles such as the senses, reflection, memory, and mind, and challenges atomism’s inadequate explanation of their composition. He asks how it could be possible for the random cohesion of atoms, a process without reason, to create that which possesses reason. “Quomodo ergo sine ratione coeuntia possunt aliquid efficere rationale?” (10.25)

Lactantius is convinced that reason and design are undeniably present in all things. He states that in the bodies of animals and men the utility and beauty of the arrangement of all the parts proclaim the work of a master designer. “Videmus enim nihil esse in omni mundo quod non habeat in se maximam mirabilemque rationem. Quae quia supra hominis sensum et ingenium est, cui rectius quam divinae providentiae tribuenda est?” (10.25) A statue, which is only an empty representation of man, takes much effort and skill to create; how much more skill and design it must have taken to create a living man. This marvelous feat could not have been accomplished by a random and unconscious conglomeration of atoms.
Even if, despite all the objections to atomism raised above, Lactantius concedes that everything in the world is indeed composed by the purposeless joining of atoms, one objection remains. Atomists are not atheists, but they must exempt the gods from atomic composition because anything composed of atoms is necessarily impermanent. The gods by definition are eternal, and therefore cannot be materialized by atoms. If it is possible that the gods are composed this way, then why not humans? Why not animals, or even inanimate objects? “Ergo si est aliquid quod atomi non effecerint, cur non et cetera eodem modo intellegamus?” (10.29) The possibility that one thing can exist without depending on atoms raises the potential for all things to do so. Lactantius ends his treatment of atomism by incredulously wondering that anyone ever gave voice to such ideas, and that there were those who believed them. “Nonne prodigio simile est aut natum esse hominem qui haec diceret aut extitisse qui crederent? (10.33)

Also arguing against the providence of God are those who believe that the world was created by impersonal Nature, a force which lacks perception and figure. “Sicut alii dicunt, natura mundus effectus est quae sensu et figura caret” (10.34). Lactantius argues that nothing can be created without intention and intelligence, least of all things which possess intelligence themselves. “Quidquid est enim quod habet rationem, ratione sit ortum necesse est . . . mundus autem, quoniam rationem habet qua et regitur et constat, ergo a deo factus est” (10.52). Humans have the power to manufacture certain things, but cannot create living beings or the heavens; therefore a source greater, wiser, and more powerful than man must have created these things. Who could this be but God?

Lactantius concludes that because the world demonstrates such arrangement, order, and
design, it could not have been created by any force except an intelligent and provident God.

He supports this claim by citing the wisest and most ancient of the philosophers, including Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno. Lactantius presents those who argue against providence as a small, misguided group far overshadowed by the majority of respected philosophers who believe in a benevolent creator. “Exceptis igitur duobus tribusve calumniatoribus vanis, cum constet divina providentia mundum regi sicut et factus est . . .” (10.47) He labels the atomist view of Leucippus as “empty fiction” (inane commentum) and those of Democritus and Epicurus “fluff” (levitatem), but he honors Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, and the rest of the philosophers who support providence as wise men (sapientes).

From all his arguments, Lactantius concludes that there truly is a God who created the world and remains involved in its affairs, and reproves those who claim that God is an invention intended to restrain men from sin. As the maker and ruler of the world, God deserves worship, and therefore religion is truly and rightly established.

Lactantius now ceases to directly refute philosophical beliefs opposed to Christianity. Chapters One through Ten may be considered critical, in that they focus on the refutation of Epicurean and Stoic doctrines which oppose the existence of divine anger. The rest of the treatise is creative, building and supporting Lactantius’ arguments for heavenly wrath.
De Ira Dei Chapters 11 - 16: Presentation of Christian Belief

Monotheism

In order to show that God has anger, Lactantius must first define God, and demonstrate whether He is one or many. His arguments for monotheism were given at length in the *Divinae Institutiones*, and after referring his reader to this fuller explanation, he briefly summarizes the main points. These arguments are common to Christian apologists of the time, and are not unique to Lactantius.

First, divine power is by definition eternal and undiminishible. If divine power is distributed among many gods, it is thereby diminished and lessened. Since this is not possible, there must be only one God who holds all power. “Deus igitur unus est, in quo vis et potestas consummata nec minui potest nec augeri” (11.3). Secondly, the arrangement of the world demonstrates that there is only one God, for in the same way there is only one sun in the heavens, one mind in the body, one master in a house, and one pilot in a ship. “Adeo in unitatem natura universa consentit” (11.4).

From what source, then, did the idea of many gods come to men? Lactantius explains and advocates Euhemerism, the belief that all the gods were at one time men, the earliest and greatest kings and leaders, who benefited their people so greatly that eventually they were immortalized and worshipped as gods. “Hi omnes qui coluntur ut dii, homines fuerunt et idem primi ac maximi reges” (11.7). He cites Euhemerus and

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7 The same examples are found in Min. Fel. *Oct.* 18.7.
8 Euhemerus (late 4th century B.C.E.) wrote a novel called “Sacred Scripture” in which he suggests that Uranus, Cronos, and Zeus were mortal kings who earned the worship of their people by their beneficial deeds. The early Latin writer Ennius (239 – 169 B.C.E.) promoted the concept as fact in his *Euhemerus*, and the Christian writers (Min. Fel. *Oct.* 21.1; Arnob. *Nat.* 4.29) used the concept to explain away the divinity of the Greek gods.
Ennius, previous proponents of this view, and adds that Ennius even recorded the birthdays, marriages, offspring, governments, exploits, deaths, and tombs of all of these “gods.”

Lactantius frequently cites much non-Christian support for the idea of monotheism itself. Cicero admits that the public religion is false, though he is unable to discover the true one. Plato teaches in the Timaeus that there is one all powerful and incomprehensible God, and Hermes Trismegistus (whom Lactantius mistakenly believes, as did all writers of his time, to be the most ancient of the philosophers) says nearly the same thing. Socrates, Plato, Pythagoras, Antisthenes, Aristotle, Zeno – Lactantius gives authority to his argument by citing all these ancient and revered thinkers who agree on one power which rules the earth. “Longum est enim singulorum sententias exsequi; qui licet diversis nominibus sint abusi, ad unam tamen potestatem quae mundum regeret concurrerunt” (11.15).

Although all these philosophers admit to the supremacy of one God, they do not discuss methods of worship or what honors may be due to Him. This, Lactantius finds, is because they think He is unceasingly bounteous and unchangeable, needing no worship and never growing angry at anyone. Because they have no fear of God, they have no reason to worship Him. Thus Lactantius concludes that there can be no religion where there is no fear.

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9 The belief that Hermes Trismegistus was an ancient Egyptian prophet was disproved by Isaac Casaubon in the 1600’s, based on the fact that the Greek puns which exist in the text show that the text was originally written in Greek, and is not a translation from Egyptian. See Anthony Grafton, “Higher Criticism Ancient and Modern: The Lamentable Deaths of Hermes and the Sibyls,” in The Uses of Greek and Latin: Historical Essays, ed. A.C. Dionisotti, Anthony Grafton and Jill Kraye (London: The Warburg Institute, 1988), 156.
He then reminds his reader of the importance of religion to man, originally argued in Chapter Seven. Without religion man has no wisdom, for wisdom is the understanding of the divine nature, and if religion is removed man has no characteristics which completely distinguish him from the brutes.\(^\text{10}\) “Diximus religione sublata nec sapientiam teneri posse nec iustitiam, sapientiam quia divinitatis intellectus, quo differimus a beluis, in homine solo reperiatur” (12.2). Furthermore, Lactantius argues that without religion man has no justice, but lives “scelerate inpieque” (12.2), for unless God watches and punishes human behavior, man will steal, kill, and commit crimes whenever he believes his deeds will remain undiscovered or unpunished. The eye of the law is not omniscient, but God’s eye sees all. Therefore, unless man fears an all-knowing and wrathful God he will descend to a level of brutality lower than that of the brutes themselves. Fear of God is necessary to protect human society and to sustain and govern life. “Timor igitur dei solus est qui custodit hominum inter se societatem, per quem vita ipsa sustinetur munitur gubernatur” (12.5).

The World Created for Man’s Sake

Having established that the world was made by God, Lactantius next demonstrates that God designed the world for man, with everything in it arranged for human benefit. He enumerates at length aspects of the natural world and how they serve human purposes: fire for warmth and light, springs for drinking, earth for growing food,

\(^{10}\) In 7.6 wisdom leads to the understanding of religion (\textit{sapientia instructus est ut religionem solus intelleget}), while here it is religion which leads to wisdom. Lactantius believes that religion and wisdom are mutually dependent; in \textit{Div. inst.} 3.11 he writes that the two must go together for either to be valid. Lactantius does not define the terms \textit{sapientia} and \textit{religio} in this treatise, but in \textit{Div. inst} 3.8 he writes that virtue joined with knowledge is wisdom, and in \textit{Div. inst} 3.9 that virtue and knowledge are required for religion; thus wisdom and religion are composed of the same elements.
seas for commerce, stars for navigation. He cites all these examples to indicate that the
world is made for the sake of man. “Omnia enim quibus constat quaeque generat ex se
mundus, ad utilitatem hominis accommodata sunt” (13.1).

The Problem of Evil

Some people object that because natural phenomena benefit animals as much as
man, the world must have been created for their sake as well. Lactantius answers that
this is untrue because the animals are void of reason, and God has not labored for the
sake of the dumb animals; on the contrary, the animals themselves are made for man’s
use, as food, clothing, and labor.

Other people object that if the world is made for man’s benefit, then it should
contain nothing harmful to man, yet phenomena which are hostile and injurious to man
are found both on land and sea. They question “cur, si omnia deus hominum causa
fecerit, etiam multa contraria et inimica et pestifera nobis reperiantur tam in mari quam in
terra” (13.9). Lactantius presents and rejects the Stoic answer, which is that nothing is
truly evil, but that man has not discovered the benefits of things which seem to be
otherwise. Instead, he presents an answer which he says was not seen by any other
philosopher: evils exist so that man may have wisdom, and having wisdom, rule over the
earth, know God, and pursue eternal life. Suffering exists for a higher purpose, in order
to increase man’s wisdom and virtue and bring him closer to God. “Itaque nisi prius
malum agnoverimus, nec bonum poterimus agnoscere” (13.23). When God created the
world He breathed wisdom into man alone, giving him dominion over land and beast.
The whole nature of wisdom is in discerning between good and evil, so that without evil
there would be no use for wisdom. One cannot know the good without evil as a
comparison; one cannot choose good things for their usefulness unless rejecting bad things for their destructiveness. Good and evil are mutually connected and interdependent. “Invicem sibi alterutra conexa sunt, ut sublato alterutro utrumque sit tolli necesse” (13.14). Evils increase man’s wisdom, and without them he would not be a rational animal. Because of the wisdom they inspire, evils ultimately result in man’s dominion over the animals, his relationship with God, and the opportunity for eternal life.

Epicurus objects that if God is both all-good and all-powerful, He ought to prevent evil from entering the world. Epicurus proposes an argument with four possibilities: either God wishes to take away evils and is unable; or He is able, and unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able; or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and unable, then He is weak (*imbecillus*), which is not in accordance with the nature of God. If He is able and unwilling, then He is envious (*invidus*), which is also incongruent with the nature of God. If He is neither willing nor able, He is both weak and envious, and therefore not God; and if He is both willing and able, then why do evils exist? Lactantius notes that this argument has baffled many who would otherwise argue that God is both all-good and all-powerful, and has forced many to submit to Epicurus’ proposition that God is uninvolved in human affairs. Lactantius asserts that God is certainly neither weak nor envious. The answer to this formidable argument, he explains, is simply that God chooses to allow evils to exist in order to allow for a greater good, the refinement of man’s wisdom. There is more goodness and pleasure in wisdom than annoyance in evils, for wisdom allows man to know God, and by that knowledge to attain immortality. Thus for the small price of earthly troubles, a great gift is given, and therefore it is plain that all things, including evils, exist for human benefit.
Why God Made Man

If God made everything in the world for man, for what purpose did He make man himself? Lactantius declares that God made man as a priest of a divine temple, a spectator of His creation; man is made for God. Being close to God is man’s ultimate purpose. Just as God made the world for man, so He made man for Himself, and to support this belief Lactantius cites the intelligence, language, reason, prudence, and dominion over other creatures which are granted to man. The upright stance of the human body signifies that man, more than all the other animals whose bodily arrangements turn their countenances toward the ground, is created to look to the heavens and recognize his Parent. Man possesses intelligence and reason so that he might be able to know and appreciate the divine, and is endowed with speech to praise the Lord.

Since all these gifts are given to man so that he might know his creator, it is fitting that man should worship the bestower of these good things, and it is not fitting that he should injure a fellow worshipper of God. To ignore God or to harm another person is to live out of harmony with the divine law and the natural order. “Qui ergo aut deum non agnoscit aut homini nocet, iniuste et contra naturam suam vivit et hoc modo inrupit institutum legemque divinam” (14.6). Lactantius argues that man is made for the sake of religion and justice.11 “Unde intellegimus religionis ac iustitiae causa esse hominem figuratum” (14.4).

If man’s purpose is to love God and other people, then why does man sin, ignore God, and inflict harm upon others? To answer this, Lactantius reminds his reader of his previous statement that God allows evil to exist in order to make men wise, so that

11 cf. Cic. Leg. 1.28: “nos ad iustitiam esse natos.”
knowledge of good may be heightened through contrast with evil. “Sed ideo malum permisse ut et bonum emicaret” (15.2). He then fully develops his dualistic view of the world, in which everything is composed of opposing and connected elements: fire and moisture, light and darkness, warmth and cold, softness and hardness. Lactantius believes that nothing can exist without an opposite, and it is only through contrast that anything is defined and made possible. “Denique ipsum mundum ex duobus elementis repugnantibus et invicem copulatis esse concretum” (15.2). Man also is made of two opposing and connected elements, the body and the soul. While the soul is heavenly, eternal, and just, the body is earthly, mortal, and prone to evil. “Ergo alteri bonum adhaeret, alteri malum, alteri lux vita iustitia, alteri tenebrae mors iniustitia” (15.3). Thus it is through the body, through man’s earthly nature, that he is susceptible to sin.

**Divine Emotion**

When God sees man sinning, falling short of that for which he was made, He is roused to anger. If God is pleased when man obeys His laws, he must be displeased when His laws are broken. “Necesse est in utramque partem moveri deum, et ad gratiam cum iusta fieri videt, et ad iram cum cernit iniusta” (15.5). If God is moved to favor or anger, argue the Epicureans and the Stoics, then He must also be capable of every emotion, including those usually considered negative, such as fear, desire, envy, and grief. To be capable of one emotion is to be capable of them all. Obviously there are some emotions which an all-good, all-powerful being should not have, and yet according to this principle of the interdependency of emotions (which Lactantius finds sound) if God has kindness and anger, He must also be capable of every other emotion as well, including the undesirable ones. Some philosophers, therefore, deny every emotion to
God lest they should be forced to conclude that He is susceptible to negative passions. “Nullum animi motum esse in deo putant” (16.6).

Lactantius responds not by arguing that God is incapable of these undesirable emotions, but by showing that there is no reason \( \textit{materia} \) for them to exist in Him. Man has fear because he is liable to injury, but since God can not be hurt, He has no reason to fear. Man experiences sexual desire because he has a need to procreate, but since God is immortal He has no need to procreate and thus no lust. Instead of arguing that God \textit{cannot} have affections such as desire, fear, avarice, grief, and envy, Lactantius argues that He \textit{does} not, because there is no cause for them to exist in a perfect being, and thus “sunt aliqui affectus qui non cadunt in deum” (16.7). In this way he is able to argue that God has some emotions and not others while still meeting the logical demands of the interdependency of emotions. He creatively and effectively solves the philosophical dilemma which forced prior philosophers to argue against all divine emotions.

Having shown what emotions God does not have, Lactantius enumerates a few that He does. He explains that God does feel pity, for he has an occasion for this emotion when man cries out to Him in distress. “Habet igitur deus causam miserandi; nec enim tam inmitis est hominumque contemptor ut auxilium laborantibus deneget” (16.1). When man worships God or attempts to live in a way pleasing to Him, God has a reason to feel gratitude; indeed, if ingratitude is reprehensible even in man, how much more so it would be in God. “Nam si nihil est tam conveniens deo quam beneficentia, nihil autem tam alienum quam ut sit ingratus” (16.3). Finally Lactantius states that God has both occasion and capacity for anger. There are people in the world who are audacious and wicked, who pollute all things with their lusts, harass with slander, practice fraud,
plunder, perjury, and neglect of both human and divine laws (16.4). God observes these things and is righteously roused to anger. Furthermore, it is only through anger toward the wicked that God can be kind to the just, because if evil were allowed to remain unpunished, good people would always suffer injury while the evildoers would fear nothing. “Non est enim fas eum, cum talia fieri videat, non moveri et insurgere ad ultionem sceleratorum et pestiferos nocentesque delere, ut bonis omnibus consulat. Adeo et in ipsa ira inest gratificatio” (16.5). Therefore it is right and proper that God feels anger.

*De Ira Dei* Chapters 17 - 21: The Nature of Divine Anger

The first sixteen chapters of *De Ira Dei* lay the foundation of Lactantius’ case for the existence of divine anger. The argument from the four parameters (Chapters One through Six) proves that divine anger is logical, the argument for providence (Chapters Seven through Ten) shows that God is the administrator of the world and is emotionally involved with mankind, and the explanation of the Christian worldview (Chapters Eleven through Sixteen) establishes the nature of God and His creation. Chapters Seventeen through Twenty-One focus on divine anger itself. Here Lactantius defines anger, justifies and describes its existence in God, and discusses the circumstances under which it may be appeased.

First Lactantius demonstrates that divine anger does not conflict with or negate divine beneficence. He addresses the objection raised by Epicurus that if God does harm to anyone, He is not good. If this were true, Lactantius responds, then all laws which punish criminals would be injurious, and all judges who follow these laws would act wrongly. He warns that it is no small mistake to defame all censure, human and divine,
with the name of bitterness and malice. “Non exiguo falluntur errore qui censuram sive humanam sive divinam acerbitatis et malitiae nomine infamant” (17.6). God punishes evildoers, but this does not make Him injurious (nocens). Not to censure evil would be more injurious, for wicked people would trample the good and ultimately cause much more harm. “Ergo et deus cum malis obest, nocens non est” (17.7). Lactantius shows that God is good in Chapter Three, and here he defends that claim while adding the variable of divine wrath. Lactantius asserts that God punishes not to cause harm, but to bring men closer to Himself and others. His anger is reasonable, just, and wise, for by it faults are removed and wickedness is curbed. “Irasci ergo rationis est; auferuntur enim delicta et refrenatur licentia, quod utique iuste sapienterque fit” (17.12).

A large part of Lactantius’ view of divine anger as just and righteous has to do with the natural, strict hierarchy which he sees ordering the world. He believes that anger is only right and proper when it is directed from a superior to an inferior. “Sed de his potissimum dico qui sunt nostrae potestatis, ut servi, ut liberi, ut coniuges, ut discipuli: quos cum delinquere videmus, incitamur ad coercendum” (17.16). In his culture, the male head of household had absolute power over his wife, children, and slaves, and Lactantius sees the duty of correcting and guiding these inferiors as concomitant with this power. He draws a comparison between this relationship and that of God to men; and just as God has absolute power over men, so He has a duty to guide and correct them. “Nam sicuti nos potestati nostrae subjectos coercere debemus, ita etiam deus peccata universorum debet coercere” (17.19). Anger and punishment directed toward one’s dependents are expressions of duty and wisdom. To demonstrate that this is true, Lactantius proposes the following example. Suppose that the slaves in a household
seized their master’s goods, killed his wife and children, and set the house on fire.

Would a wise master allow these insults to remain unpunished? If he does, Lactantius declares, he is neither wise nor kind, but inhuman and most cruel. This would not be called forbearance (*patientia*), but rather some sort of insensible stupor. Lactantius asserts that it is the same with God, and just as it is the duty of the *paterfamilias* to guide and correct his *familia*, so it is God’s place to do so for mankind.

Before defining anger himself, Lactantius presents and criticizes the definitions put forward by other philosophers. The Stoics, he says, did not even see a difference between right and wrong, and certainly did not discover the distinction between just and unjust anger. He quotes the Stoic philosophers Seneca and Posidonius, who say that anger is the desire of avenging an injury. “*Ira est, inquit, cupiditas ulciscendae iniuriae aut, ut ait Posidonius, cupiditas puniendi eius a quo te inique putes laesum*” (17.13). He quotes Aristotle as saying that anger is the desire requite pain, and Cicero that it is the desire to take vengeance.\(^{12}\) All these definitions specify a prior injury and the desire of avenging this injury as the impetus for anger. This type of anger, Lactantius asserts, is unjust. “*Haec est ira . . . iniusta, quae etiam mutis inest, in homine vero cohibenda est*” (17.14). It is found even in the beasts, and it ought to be restrained in man so that rage does not propel him to some great evil.

Since God cannot be injured, divine anger cannot be caused by a desire to avenge injury, as the philosophers think it must. “*Inlaesibilis est*” (17.14). So why does God become angry? Because God is just and good, Lactantius reasons, He must be displeased with evil, and moved with emotion when he sees evil practiced. He does not punish

\(^{12}\) Sen. *Ira* 1.3.1; Aristotle’s definition found in Sen. *Ira* 1.3.3 as well as Cic. *Tusc.* 4.11.
without emotion, as a judge in a court of law may be supposed to do. The judge is only following the law, not executing his own will. God, however, being good, is necessarily offended by evil. “Necesse est enim bono ac iusto displicere quae prava sunt, et cui malum displicet movetur cum id fieri videt” (17.17). Therefore it is not injury to Himself which arouses His anger, but rather a desire to teach man to avoid evil by preserving discipline, correcting morals, and suppressing licentiousness (17.18).

Finally Lactantius presents his definition of anger, now that all the groundwork for its existence in God has been laid. Anger is simply a motion of the mind rising up to correct faults. “Ira est motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis” (17.20). It is not rage, it does not seek revenge for injury, and it is in no way a fault. Anger is righteous, rational, and just, and because it is necessary for man’s well-being, it should in no way be criticized or taken away from God or man.

Essentially, Lactantius believes that anger is necessary to rouse a calm mind to punish faults. Yet why must God be angry in order to correct and guide his people? Is it not possible to correct offenses without anger? Lactantius first argues that no one who is good can observe wickedness and not react with emotion. A human judge in a court of law may be expected to punish without emotion, he admits, but it is not the same with God – for a judge, the defendant’s innocence is always a possibility, but God sees the crime take place. Also, a judge only follows the law, but God administers His own will. Finally, God acts as a father to his child; He is involved personally in the situation and corrects out of love and anger. God does not punish dispassionately because He is emotionally invested in mankind. He cares. Furthermore, Lactantius holds that it is not

\[13\] For the opposing Stoic view, see note 2.
right to remain calm in the face of evil. To do so shows either tacit approval of the crime or the laziness of a mind and spirit which wish to avoid the trouble of doing what is right. “Nam qui non movetur omnino, aut probat delicta, quod est turpius et iniquius, aut molestiam castigandi fugit, quam sedatus animus et quieta mens aspernatur ac renuit nisi stimulaverit ira et incitaverit” (18.3). He asserts that anger is necessary to rouse a tranquil spirit and quiet mind to punish.

Lactantius refers to a famous story in antiquity of a man named Archytas of Tarentum. One day Archytas arrived home and found that his chief slave had ruined everything on his estate. Feeling great anger, Archytas restrained himself and did nothing to the slave, for fear of losing control of himself. This story was accepted by most of the ancients as a praiseworthy example of the value of self-control, but Lactantius sees it differently. He upholds the value of self-control, but argues that while Archytas was right to restrain his fury in the moment of greatest passion, he should have returned later and given the slave his just punishment. Lactantius reasons that if by this example the other slaves on the estate learn that heinous transgressions go unpunished while little misdeeds incur penalties, they will commit only the most serious offenses, secure in their impunity. Thus out of Archytas’ refusal to punish arises the potential for greater wrongdoing and damage.

Not only does Archytas’ inaction allow for the practical consequence of further trouble, it also shows a personal failure to perform the duties of a master. In Lactantius’ view, Archytas had a duty to punish the slave because of his position as master of the

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14 This example of temperance became a commonplace in ancient moral philosophy; it is attested by Socrates and Plato, and found in Cic. Tusc. 4.78 and Rep. 1.59; Val. Max. 4.1; Sen. Ira 1.15, 3.12; and Ambr. Off. 1.21.
household. He holds that it is a fault not to correct the faults of slaves and children (and others under one’s power), because without punishment they will proceed to greater evil. “Servorum autem filiorumque peccata non coercere peccatum est; evadent enim ad maius malum per inpunitatem” (18.12). For this purpose, God Himself instilled anger in men, so that they might be roused to correct wrongdoing. “Ut libidinem prodendae subolis gratia dedit, sic iram cohibendorum causa delictorum” (18.10). Thus anger is actually a gift from God.

While Lactantius believes that anger and punishment towards one’s dependents are required, he also feels that anger towards one’s equals or superiors is unjustifiable. Those who do not understand the true purpose of anger are likely to use it to inflict injury upon any enemy, even those who are of equal or superior rank, and this is wrong. “Verum hi qui nesciunt fines bonorum ac malorum . . . irascuntur ergo etiam non peccantibus, irascuntur etiam paribus aut etiam superioribus” (18.11). God clearly is superior to everyone, and therefore His anger is part of His duty, His responsibility to His creation. If He allowed His mind to rest in an undisturbed state of tranquility, free from the anger which provokes correction and guidance, He would fail to fulfill His role as administrator of the world and parent of mankind.

Because God loves man and wants what is best for Him, He grows angry when He sees man succumb to his lower nature, and punishes in order to guide man toward ultimate happiness. To elucidate this, Lactantius explains the Christian perspective on the nature and origin of human wrongdoing. Man is given a soul, which allows him to be like God, to know God, to do what is right, and to attain immortality. The soul, however, is in constant conflict with man’s other nature, the body. The body is attracted to
pleasures, not virtue, and it is through the body that man succumbs to vices. “Sed quoniam compactus est, ut diximus, e duobus, animo et corpore, in altero virtutes, in altero vitia continentur et inpugnant invicem” (19.1). Because God has laid down a holy law instructing men to live innocently and kindly, it is only logical that He should become angry when men disregard this law. He grows angry because He loves mankind and wants each person to reach eternal bliss, but He knows that when men sin, they are less like the divine and hence further from immortality. Thus God’s anger results from His love and beneficence. This explains why good people often seem to suffer on earth, while the wicked prosper. Lactantius says that fugitives and the disinherited live without restraint, while those who are under the care of a loving master live more frugally and strictly. A life of earthly ease is apt to indulge the weak nature of the body, while difficulties hone virtue and make the sufferer more likely to reach eternal life (20.2).

Since God is the arbitrator and judge of His own law, He also has the ability to pardon. Lactantius suggests that if God gave just punishment to every offense immediately, there might be no one left on earth. “Adeo subiecta est peccato fragilitas carnis qua induti sumus; et, nisi huic necessitati deus parceret, nimium fortasse pauci viverent” (20.5). God knows that man has the potential to reform, and being of perfect patience, He offers many opportunities to repent. His anger is appeased not by sacrifice or costly offerings, but by an internal reformation of morals. Yet though the forbearance of God is very great and useful, He does punish the guilty, and does not allow them to proceed further when they have proven themselves unwilling to reform.

Interestingly, Lactantius does not specify how or exactly when God punishes. He writes the entire treatise to motivate his readers to live worshipful and innocent lives out
of fear and respect for an angry God who punishes wrongdoing, but he never resorts to
descriptions of the pain and torments which ought to be feared. He declares that God has
the power to punish both the living and the dead, but he does not delve into practical
manifestations of punishment. There is no fire and brimstone in the De Ira Dei, no
claims that certain earthly afflictions such as physical deformities or poverty are the
products of divine wrath. Lactantius simply proves that divine wrath exists and has
beneficial effects for mankind.

The final criticism of divine anger which Lactantius addresses is the claim that
God Himself in His precepts condemns anger by forbidding man to be angry. This is not
so, Lactantius responds, for it was God who gave anger to man, inserting it in his liver
when he was created. Yet while God is the source of anger, He also admonishes man to
control his anger, to forgive, and to be reconciled before the setting of the sun. “Non
igitur in toto prohibet irasci, quia is affectus necessario datus est, sed prohibet in ira
permanere” (21.5).

De Ira Dei Chapters 22 - 24: Divine Testimonies and Exhortation Toward Piety

At the end of his treatise, Lactantius uses Sibylline prophesies to support his
claims, restates the necessity of divine anger, and urges his reader to live a pious life. All
the prophets, he says, speak nothing other than the favor of God toward the righteous and
His anger against the ungodly. Yet because these testimonies are not convincing to those
outside of the Judeo-Christian system, he calls upon the divine testimonies of the Sibyls.
The Sibyls were female prophetesses or oracles who held an important place in the state
religions of the Greeks and Romans. Lactantius notes their authority and esteem in the
ancient world, citing Greek and Roman authors who refer to them such as Apollodorus,
Varro, and Fenestella. These are prophesies, Lactantius says, which his opponents can believe, or at least not oppose.\(^{15}\) “Ea igitur quaremus testimonia quibus illi possint aut credere aut certe non repugnare” (22.4). Furthermore, the testimony of the Sibyls was also respected by the Christians. Digeser writes, “As Lactantius’ many citations of Sibylline oracles demonstrate, Christians also tended to take seriously oracular pronouncements.”\(^{16}\)

The Sibyls provide prophetic support for many of Lactantius’ core points. They teach that God is angry, and that He rewards those who are good, but stirs up anger and rage against the evil and unjust (22.7). They admonish men to abstain from adultery and impurity, to bring up a pure generation of children, and not to kill, warning that God will be angry with those who spurn these commands (22.8). They speak of divine punishments, such as the flood which has already occurred and a great conflagration which will destroy the earth when men will have become incorrigible (23.5). (Lactantius also cites Ovid’s account of this in *Metamorphoses I*.) Finally, the Sibyls speak of God’s pardon, and that He will restrain His anger if men practice piety and love the wise, ever-living God the Father (23.8). Lactantius quotes these prophesies in their original Greek, citing the particular Sibyl from whom they originate. From the unassailable evidence of

\(^{15}\) Many Christian writers, such as Hermas, Clement of Alexandria, Justin, Athenagoras, Constantine, and Augustine, use the Sibylline prophecies to support Christian beliefs, especially when addressing a pagan audience. Lactantius was one of the strongest Christian proponents of these prophecies; Parke writes of Lactantius, “More than any other Christian Father he gives the impression of having devoted scholarly time and effort to placing the Sibyls in their historical context and extracting the maximum of religious instruction from their message.” H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, ed. B.C. McGing (London: Routledge, 1988), 163.

the ancient Sibyls, which is in full agreement with Christian reasoning, Lactantius asserts that the philosophers are wrong when they imagine that God is without anger.

To deny divine anger, he argues, is to remove that which is most salutary for human affairs, the very quality by which majesty, power, and authority exist. Here Lactantius revisits and develops the idea, first addressed in Chapter Eight, that without anger, there is no respect. “Ubi ergo ira non fuerit, imperium quoque non erit” (23.14). Take away anger from a king, and he will be disobeyed and eventually dethroned. Take away anger from a common man, and everyone will despise, deride, and injure him until he has nothing left. No government exists except by fear, and fear is roused only by anger. No one submits to the service of another except by compulsion -- no one can be subdued to the command of another except by anger and chastisement. Without anger there is no authority, and since God undoubtedly has authority, therefore He must have anger as well.

Lactantius’ final chapter is a beautiful passage urging his reader to worship God and live according to His precepts. God is Father and Lord, bounteous and severe, the source of all that is good. He created man, sustains his life, and offers him hope of eternal joy, and therefore He deserves man’s worship and love. “Deus nobis sequendus est, deus adorandus, deus diligendus, quoniam in eo est materia rerum et ratio virtutum et fons bonorum” (24.6). Man should lay aside earthly pursuits and pleasures, and meditate upon heavenly and divine things, which are everlasting. Pleasure does not make man eternally happy, nor does anything else of this world. Innocence and righteousness alone secure immortality, and those who defile themselves with sin cannot partake of this heavenly reward. Lactantius states that the time for argument and dissension is past, and
men must join together in unity to worship the Lord. “Discordiae dissensionesque turbulentae atque pestiferae sopiantur, quibus humanae societatis et publici foederis divina coniunctio inrumpitur dirimitur dissipatur” (24.12). God makes his temple in the hearts of men, and therefore men should cleanse the Lord’s temple of evil thoughts and light it with the brightness of wisdom. Lactantius ends his piece urging all men to trust that God is always in their hearts, and to live so that they may always enjoy His favor, and never fear His anger.
CHAPTER 2: LACTANTIUS’ TREATMENT OF GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

Lactantius associates Christianity with certain philosophers and intentionally disassociates it from others. He draws out the connections and similarities of Christian thought with that of Socrates, Cicero, and Seneca, while declaring it incompatible with the ideas of Epicurus. Furthermore, he never draws upon or even mentions the philosophical work of other Christian writers, the Bible, or contemporary philosophers such as Porphyry. This section will discuss the factors involved in Lactantius’ choices to accept, reject, or ignore the various philosophies at his disposal, and then demonstrate ways in which he utilizes certain philosophies to support his ideas while rhetorically deconstructing others.

Audience

Audience plays a determining role in the philosophies which Lactantius chooses to associate with Christianity and definitively shapes the arrangement of the treatise. Lactantius’ audience was the non-Christian nobility who attended Constantine’s court. These were the people who would be impressed by his classical style, his rhetorical devices and his reliance upon the models of Cicero. These were the people who knew the works of philosophers such as Plato, Cicero, and Seneca, the philosophers whom Lactantius engages. Lactantius never once mentions the work of other Christian thinkers or uses the Bible to support his points because his audience would not have been familiar
with, or swayed by, such authority. Furthermore, to use such Christian works would require his readers to accept immediately what he intends to persuade them to accept through his art of rhetoric. He uses strictly non-Christian support, including certain Greco-Roman philosophers and poets as well as the oracular testimonies of the Sibyls and Hermes Trismegistus.

In order to address the nobles at court, Lactantius draws connections between Christianity and the Greco-Roman thinkers whose work comprised the standard education received by, and indelibly imprinted upon, the minds of all nobles. This culture of education, paideia, was a defining element of the nobility in the fourth century A.D. The education which all nobles shared gave them a common language, a set means of communicating with standardized forms of expression. It gave them a power and dignity which they felt separated them from the uneducated man as far as man was separated from the animals.\footnote{Peter Brown, \textit{Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 39.} Peter Brown explains that the training of a young man was a process of initiation into paideia, “with all that the phrase still conveyed to ancient men of sharing with a select company the ineradicable imprint of a privileged, and hard-won, experience.”\footnote{Ibid., 37.} Lactantius is part of this elite nobility, a teacher of rhetoric to the children of Constantine the Great himself, and he writes his pieces within this tradition, modeling his work on the revered examples set forward by his Greek and Roman predecessors.

Lactantius approaches Christianity from the culture of paideia. He cannot be separated from it, because it is his background. Christianity as a religion can thrive without the context of Greek and Roman thought, and in fact many Christian monks
intentionally disregarded *paideia*, claiming to make divine wisdom available to the uneducated masses of the empire.\(^{19}\) Lactantius, however, does not distance himself from his own culture and background. He takes the seed of Christian revelation and plants it firmly in the soil of the Greco-Roman tradition, using the wisdom of past ages to nourish and develop his presentation of Christian thought. For Lactantius, Christianity is simply a continuation and extension of the thought he has known and accepted all his life.

**Purposes for Use of Greco-Roman Philosophy**

Uniting the pervasive and respected philosophies which were part of every school-boy’s training with the relatively new-fangled and mysterious Christian religion served several purposes for Lactantius. It lent respectability to Christianity, connected it to the dominant Roman culture, and fit it into the *status quo*—it presented Christianity as main-stream. This integration allowed Lactantius to present Christian thought to a wider audience, perhaps in order to proselytize, or perhaps more simply to discourage persecution.

Lactantius lived through the Great Persecution which began in 303 under Diocletian. He knew firsthand about the hard politics and deadly consequences of the public perception of Christianity. As he wrote the *De Ira Dei* in 313 - 314, Constantine had just come to power, the man much celebrated by history as “the first Christian emperor.” Yet the duration of Constantine’s power and protection was uncertain, and the threat of persecution was still very real. Therefore, the more Lactantius could place Christianity into the favor of those with power, the better the chances of avoiding further conflict.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 72 – 73.
This may also be why Lactantius chose to address only philosophies which were hundreds of years old rather than those being actively debated around him; it was much less dangerous to criticize dusty old books than to challenge living, breathing, politically influential philosophers. “Possession of a common culture had always muted tensions between conflicting segments of the governing classes. It now served to veil deep-seated, private divisions between Christians and non-Christians. *Paideia* was shared by both.”

By referring only to works authored by the respected philosophers of the past, Lactantius attempted to avoid conflict with the people around him.

It is also possible that Lactantius wrote this piece, which advocates divine anger and punishment, in order to justify imperial anger and punishment. Lactantius ostensibly only discusses the anger of God, and he never draws out a comparison between God as the all-powerful ruler of heaven and the emperor as the all-powerful ruler of Earth, but there are undeniable similarities in these roles. Both have complete power over their subjects; both have a fatherly duty to care for their subjects and act as judge and prosecutor. The order of heaven is reflected on Earth in the control over political chaos asserted by the emperor.

The decisions of the emperor were absolute and unquestionable, and there is no doubt that his anger could cause great danger, even to the nobles who were usually protected from the brutality which was integral to government in the fourth century A.D. The anger of the emperor or even one of his far-removed representatives regularly resulted in beatings, whippings, and deaths. Peter Brown writes that it was the job of the

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20 Ibid., 125.
emperor’s advisors to control the emperor’s anger;\textsuperscript{21} perhaps in Lactantius’ case, it was his job to justify the emperor’s anger.

In demonstrating the necessity of divine anger, Lactantius establishes anger as a proper tool by which a person in power guides and corrects his inferiors. Throughout the \textit{De Ira Dei} Lactantius affirms that it is right and proper for God to have anger, that it is anger which causes correction and allows men to live in harmony, and that anger is the duty of a superior who cares about his dependents. Anger is a manifestation of reason, and is not a wonton or random madness to be feared, but rather a necessary and beneficial force. Anger brings order, anger prevents chaos – all these justifications for divine anger apply equally well to the anger of an emperor toward his subjects. If indeed this is one of Lactantius’ purposes in writing the treatise, he is simultaneously advocating Christianity and a Christian emperor, and his use of entrenched Greco-Roman philosophies to support his claims would allow these ideas to be far more understandable and acceptable to society.

The purpose which Lactantius himself states for the treatise is to refute erroneous philosophical beliefs in order to lead people to God. “Haec habui quae de ira dicerem, Donate carissime, ut scires quemadmodum refelleres eos qui deum faciunt immobilem . . . quid sine ira deum esse credentes dissolvunt omnem religionem” (22.1 - 2). The value of Greco-Roman philosophy to Lactantius’ treatise is delineated in his very first sentence: “Animadverti saepe, Donate, plurimos id aestimare, \textit{quod etiam nonnulli philosophorum putaverunt}, non irasci deum (my italics, 1.1). The treatise is a continuation of the dialogue begun by the great thinkers of the past, such as Socrates, Chryssipus, Cicero,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 66.
and Seneca, with one major difference: Lactantius claims the authority of divine revelation.

**Revelation**

For Lactantius, truth is inaccessible through human conjecture; knowledge of the truth requires revelation. In his first paragraph, Lactantius is careful to establish that it is not through his own wisdom that he knows the truth, but rather through divine revelation. “Nec tamen nos adrogantes sumus ut comprehensam nostro ingenio veritatem gloriemur, sed doctrinam dei sequimur qui scire solus potest et revelare secreta” (1.3). He states that some philosophers erroneously believe that they can reach the truth through conjecture (1.4) and are like travelers who will not ask for directions (7.1). Then he quotes other Greco-Roman philosophers to support this belief, praising Socrates’ statement “I know only that I do not know” (1.6), and quoting Cicero’s lament that he is unable to discover the truth. “Utinam, inquit, tam facile vera invenire possem quam falsa convicere!” (11.10, quoting Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.32.91).

Reason is the common ground upon which all philosophy is based, and Lactantius’ reliance upon revelation does not mean that he discounts the role of man’s reason, and thus philosophy, in knowing God. In fact, Lactantius argues that man’s intellectual ability to recognize God is the one quality which sets him apart from the animals. “Quare si ratio, si vis hominis hoc praecellit et superat ceteras animantes quod solus notitiam dei capit, apparat religionem nullo modo posse dissolui” (7.15). Man’s reason resembles God’s reason – when man lifts his face toward heaven and contemplates the universe, he compares his features with God, and reason recognizes reason. “Homo autem, recto statu, ore sublimi ad contemplationem mundi excitatus,
confert cum deo vultum, et rationem ratio cognoscit” (7.5). Wisdom (sapientia) is the understanding of the divine nature, “divinitatis intellectus” (12.2), and it leads to religion (religio) which only man has. “Solus enim sapientia instructus est ut religionem solus intellegat” (7.6). Lactantius does not discount reason, because it is reason which allows man to receive and understand the revelation which makes knowledge of God possible. Lactantius believes that once metaphysical beliefs are established by revelation, they should be developed and understood through reason.

Most of the philosophers to whom Lactantius refers lived before Christ, and thus did not have access to revelation as Lactantius does. This may be part of why he limits the references of the De Ira Dei mainly to these philosophers, for he never has to confront whether or why these great thinkers, whose thought flows so easily into Christian beliefs, rejected revelation. He demonstrates that many of their beliefs are compatible with Christianity, and almost seems to say that had they known Christ, they would have been Christians. For example, when Lactantius quotes Cicero lamenting his inability to discover the truth, he adds a personal judgment of the spirit in which Cicero said this, sincerely and from the heart. “Quod quidem non dissimulanter ut Academicus, sed vere atque ex animi sententia proclamavit, quia veritas humanis sensibus erui numquam potest” (11.10). Lactantius clearly sympathizes with Cicero, who of course

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22 Lactantius is uncomfortably vague about his definitions of ratio, religio, and sapientia in this treatise. He never explicitly defines any of them – the definition of sapientia given above is a parenthetical comment rather than an authoritative definition. “Diximus religione sublata nec sapientiam teneri posse nec iustitiam, sapientiam quia divinitatis intellectus, quo differimus a beluis, in homine solo reperiatur” (12.2). This lack of definition is unsettling because much of Lactantius’ argument for divine anger hinges on these terms. He argues that ira is necessary because without it religio is dissolved, since no one would respect a God who does not grow angry, and without religio man has no ratio, and descends to the senselessness of the beasts. “Religione iustitiaque detractis vel ad stultitiam pecudum amissa ratione devolvimur vel ad bestiarum immanitatem” (12.3).
could not know the truth because he lived before Christ, before the revelation which makes knowledge possible. Lactantius continues that whatever could be known by human devices, Cicero knew, thus implying his belief that had Cicero known revelation, he would have recognized the same “truth” as Lactantius.

**Lactantius’ Sources**

In order to understand Lactantius’ relationship to the philosophies which preceded him, it is necessary to examine his sources. Lactantius wrote his works while he was in Trier and Nicomedia, and neither city provided him with access to a comprehensive library. The works to which he did have access include Greek oracular writings (Sibylline and Hermetic texts), the Latin poetry of Lucretius, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Persius, and Latin prose from Cicero, Livy (Book I), Sallust (*Catiline*), Seneca’s philosophical works, and Valerius Maximus (Book I). He also had the Bible (in anthology form) and the Christian apologists Minucius Felix, Cyprian, Theophilus, and Tertullian.

Like many of his contemporaries, Lactantius uses anthologies and “secondary” sources for much of his philosophical material rather than original texts. Ogilvie, who conducts a thorough analysis of Lactantius’ sources for the *Divine Institutes*, concludes that Lactantius knew Greek philosophers not from their own texts, but from secondary writers who had brought these Greek ideas into Latin. For example, Lactantius knew Plato not from Plato’s text, but through Cicero, Minucius Felix, and anthologies; he knew

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23 “quod adsequi potuit humana providentia, id adsecutus est” (11.10).
25 Ibid., 109 – 110.
Aristotle through the works of Cicero and Seneca the Younger. Although Lactantius usually refers to Epicurus when discussing an Epicurean idea, there is no evidence in the text that he had actually read Epicurus in the original Greek; most of the quotes are from Lucretius. He cites the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, but takes Chrysippus’ ideas from Cicero. So while Lactantius may cite Epicurus, Plato, Aristotle, and others, his main sources for these citations are the Latin writers Cicero, Seneca, and Lucretius. This is not to say that Lactantius did not know Greek for he uses Greek in his citations of oracular literature; it is more a reflection of the availability of materials in the cities where Lactantius wrote and the conventions of scholarly writing in his time.

Recognizing that the sources available to Lactantius are anthologies and secondary writers allows his readers to understand the body of material which he seeks both to refute and to use as a foundation for his own thought. Rather than debating with a particular philosopher, as he purports to do, he is arguing against what has become the accepted canon of that philosopher’s teaching. Therefore Lactantius’ reader should not expect his work to deal with all the nuances of the original texts to which it refers, but must realize that as a result of the training and resources available to him Lactantius utilizes generalities and anecdotes of the ancient philosophers which have come down through history in *florilegia* and the works of later writers.

“Golden Age” of Philosophy

Lactantius postulates what might be called a “Golden Age” of philosophy, when men’s ideas were nearest to the truth. This idealization of the past is a common tenet of the Roman culture, which greatly respected its ancestral tradition while holding a deep

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26 Ibid., 78 – 83.
27 Ibid., 86.
suspicion of new and strange ideas. Lactantius refers to the “philosophers of former times,” before Socrates, who all agreed on providence. “Cum sententiae philosophorum prioris temporis de providentia consensissent . . .” (9.1). He praises their treatment of Pythagoras when he questioned the existence of God – his books were burned, and he was banished, an example of how Lactantius feels those who do not believe in providence should be treated and were treated in this Golden Age (9.1). He traces the history of philosophy with the decline of the belief in providence: first there was the Golden Age, then Socrates and Plato; the Stoics and Peripatetics branched from these, and all believed in providence. Then came Epicurus (moving away from the Golden Age) who denied providence. Finally, after philosophy ceased to flourish, Diagoras and Theodorus argued for atheism merely to have something new to say (9.1 – 7). “Maluerunt contra veritatem id negare in quo priores universi sine ambiguitate consenserant” (9.7). Lactantius does not even mention contemporary philosophy; perhaps he considers it so far removed from the Golden Age that it is not even worth addressing. It is interesting that Lactantius postulates the history of philosophy as a decline from a Golden Age, because this is how poets and religions often perceive the world (e.g. decline from Adam and Eve in the Bible, decline from the Golden Age through the Silver, Bronze, and Iron in Hesiod or Ovid’s Metamorphoses) while philosophy itself sometimes postulates the opposite view, that man started out a brute and became more civilized (Lucr., De Rerum Natura v. 925ff.).

Use of Philosophy to Support Christian Ideas

Lactantius intends to draw out the connections and similarities between Christian thought and the revered philosophical achievements of the past, and therefore he quotes
philosophers to support many of his ideas, such as those about providence, monotheism, creation, justice, and punishment. In general, Lactantius presents previous philosophical thought charitably and clearly, using its foundations to introduce and shape his own material. He finds ample support from the non-Christian philosophies of his ancestors to justify critical tenets of his Christian beliefs.

The key idea argued in the *De Ira Dei* is providence, the belief that God created man and continues to reward, punish, and care for him. Lactantius finds philosophical support for this idea from “the seven early philosophers who were called wise,” as well as Socrates, Plato, and other “summi philosophi” (10.47). “Est igitur divina providentia, ut senserunt hi omnes quos nominavi” (10.50), he concludes, confidently calling upon the authority of these revered sources. Furthermore, Lactantius asserts that if there is no providence, then there is no God, and argues that when Epicurus denies providence, he also denies the existence of God. To support this he cites Cicero, who relates that Epicurus did not believe in the gods, but declined to say so explicitly for fear of popular wrath (4.7). Lactantius cannot conceive how a non-provident god who is completely uninvolved with man could deserve man’s worship or respect, and he again quotes Cicero to elucidate this: “Deus, inquit Cicero, si talis est ut nulla gratia, nulla hominum caritate teneatur, valeat! Quid enim dicam ‘propitius sit’? Esse enim propitius potest nemini” (8.3, quoting Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.44.124).

Lactantius convinces the reader that the weight of Greco-Roman authority also argues for monotheism, citing Pythagoras, Plato, Antisthenes, Aristotle, Zeno, and the Stoics, all of whom “ad unam tamen potestatem quae mundum regeret concurrentur” (11.15). Euhemerism, which he uses to deconstruct polytheism, is itself a centuries-old
concept of Greco-Roman philosophy, and he cites support for it from many ancient sources. “Quod cum vetustissimi Graeciae scriptores, quos illi theologos nuncupant, tum etiam Romani Graecos securi et imitati docent; quorum praecipue Euhemerus ac noster Ennius, qui eorum omnium natales coniugia progenies inperia res gestas obitus sepulcra demonstrant” (11.8).

Lactantius argues that God created man, and notes that Chrysippus agrees. “Si quid est, inquit Chrysippus, quod efficiat ea quae homo, licet ratione sit praeditus, facere non possit, id profecto est maius et fortius et sapientius homine . . . Quis igitur potest esse nisi deus?” (10.36-37, citing Cic. Nat. D. 2.6.16, 3.7.17, 3.10.25). Lactantius believes that not only did God bring man into existence, but He also endowed him with a divinely created soul, and he cites Cicero’s statement that the soul must be made by God because it is not earthly. “Quae sola divina sunt nec enim invenientur umquam unde ad hominem venire possint nisi a deo” (10.46, quoting Cic. Tusc. 1.27.66). Finally, defending the Christian view that God created the world for man’s sake, Lactantius finds a parallel view from the Stoics. “Si consideret aliquis universam mundi administrationem, intelleget profecto quam vera sit sententia Stoicorum, qui aiunt nostra causa mundum esse constructum” (13.2).

Concerning justice and punishment, Lactantius cites Cicero and Plato to lend authority to his ideas. He quotes Cicero, “sed omnium quae in doctorum hominum disputatione versantur, nihil est proecto praesestabilius quam plane intellegi nos ad iustitiam esse natos” (14.4, citing Cic. Leg. 1.10.28) to propose that God made man for justice. He argues that sins must be punished, and refers to Plato also advocating punishment for the sake of preventing offense. “Ut ait Plato, nemo prudens punit quia
peccatum est sed ne peccetur” (18.5, citing Sen. De Ira 19.7). Thus, Lactantius verifies the authority of his Christian positions by using the names and quotations of previous non-Christian philosophers.

**Christian Issues Which Lack Classical Support**

There are times when Lactantius is unable to use philosophy to reinforce his conclusions directly. One of the more noticeable instances of this is in his definition of anger. In Chapter Five he formulates the Stoic treatment of the question, stating that the Stoics incorrectly believe that God cannot be angry because they think that anger is a “commotionem mentis ac perturbationem” (5.2) which is ugly and causes destruction. If that were anger, Lactantius agrees, God would not have it. He explains that the Stoics defined anger wrongly, and from there drew the incorrect conclusion. Lactantius presents the Stoic viewpoint very charitably and at length, but then concludes that they have considered the matter too little. “Sed in parte labuntur naturam rei parum considerantes” (5.8).

Prior to presenting his own definition of anger in Chapter Seventeen, he enumerates and renounces several definitions from various philosophers, including Seneca, Posidonius, and Aristotle, arguing that none of them is correct. After defining anger himself – giving it only one sentence – he immediately returns to discussing prior treatments of the word, quoting Cicero’s definition that anger is the desire for revenge, “ira est libido ulciscendi” (17.20) and commenting with disappointment that this is very similar to the other definitions listed previously, “non multum a superioribus distat” (17.20). Lactantius heavily relies upon Cicero to validate his own beliefs, and even Cicero fails to provide support on this issue. The placement of his comment is the
equivalent of a sigh of disappointment on Lactantius’ part, and of his resolve to forge new territory as the first person to put forward the “correct” definition.

The problem of evil is another instance in which Lactantius lacks philosophical grounding for his position. He reasons that evil exists in order to hone men’s virtue and thus ultimately to bring men closer to God; in this way it is logical that an all-good, all-powerful being can have the power to remove evil and yet refrains from doing so. He mentions several classical treatments of the problem, and renounces all of them, saying that neither Epicurus nor anyone else could see the truth (13.24), thus suggesting to the reader that the problem of evil was never satisfactorily solved before the advent of Christianity.\(^2\)

Philosophical citation is noticeably absent when the argument deals with what God feels, expects, or desires, because all such statements depend upon a uniquely Christian perception of divinity. When Lactantius makes his case for which affections God possesses and why, he references no classical support (16.6-7). He states that God wants men to be good and just (16.2), and expects men to reject the desires of the body (19.4), but omits any corroboration from philosophy. God can pardon under certain circumstances; He gave man anger and expects him to use it wisely, and His own anger is appeased by man’s reformation (20). Lactantius substantiates none of these concepts with references from prior thinkers. There is a noticeable contrast in Lactantius’ heavy reliance upon classical philosophy to reinforce some of his points, and the comparative absence of such references when he defends uniquely Christian ideas.

\(^2\) Ingreameau comments, “mais il est étonnant que Lactance ne mentionne pas, ici, l’origine stoïcienne de cette idée, essentielle que le bien et le mal son complémentaires.” Christiane Ingreameau, *La Colère de Dieu* (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1982), 310.
This is not to say that Lactantius abandons his dialogue with the philosophers in the last half of the treatise, which deals specifically with the Christian worldview; he still refers to the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition when discussing ideas dependent upon Christian belief. For example, when he finds no corroboration for his position on the problem of evil, he still remains in dialogue with the ancient system; in fact, he introduces the question by reviewing its treatment by the Academics and Stoics. “Sed Academici contra Stoicos disserentes solent quaerere cur, si omnia deus hominum causa fecerit, etiam multa contraria et inimica et pestifera nobis reperiantur” (13.9).

Sometimes when unable to draw upon the thought of previous philosophers to validate his ideas directly, Lactantius effectively manipulates and massages this thought to suit his purposes. For example, to demonstrate that God is actually more kind if He punishes the wicked, he recalls a story from Cicero which supposes that the slaves of the household destroyed all their master’s property, then shows that if the master allowed them to do so with impunity he would be acting inhumanely and cruelly to his own family (17.9, citing Cic. Cat. 4.6.12). The quote refers to human rather than divine matters, but Lactantius successfully employs it to prove a belief about God. By using well-respected philosophy to ground and enhance his material, Lactantius continually draws parallels between the wisdom of the erudite scholars of antiquity and the wisdom of Christian truth.

**Rejection of Epicureanism**

While connecting and drawing out the similarities between Christian belief and the philosophies of Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca, Lactantius treats Epicurus entirely differently, rejecting and scorning his ideas with vigor. Lactantius believes Epicurus to
be, in practice, an atheist. Epicureanism claims that the world is made not by divine providence, but by the random collision of atoms, and that the gods are not to be feared because they live in their own blissful isolation, entirely unconnected in any way to human affairs. This divine apatheia is the precise idea which Lactantius intends to overthrow in his treatise, so it is natural that he should forcefully reject its primary advocate, Epicurus.

Beyond this obvious explanation, there may be other underlying reasons for Lactantius’ spirited diatribe against Epicureanism. If Lactantius writes the piece to justify imperial anger along with divine anger, Epicurus’ refusal to postulate deities who act as guardians and punishers of their subjects might be equated with a refusal to accept the imperial power structure. If mankind does not rely upon an all-powerful heavenly presence for the enforcement of law and order, perhaps an all-powerful earthly leader is unnecessary, as well. Emperors, senators, and others in power are concerned with maintaining and justifying the power structure, and consequently would reject a philosophy which threatens this structure’s validity.

In fact, Epicureanism was out of favor in the fourth century A.D., commonly rejected and found almost exclusively in books. It was part of the standard philosophical curriculum, but it was not a vibrant, active philosophy by Lactantius’ time. Lactantius’ spirited debate with the Epicureans is the equivalent of a modern long and involved political tract from America which rails against the Tories. So why does Lactantius, along with other Christian writers such as Tertullian, Arnobius, and Minucius Felix, argue so vigorously against the “dead” Epicureans? In part, it may be to avoid conflict with the living and politically dangerous philosophers around them. By disproving a
system which is dear to no one’s heart, the Christian apologists make their points without risking the consequences of riling the powerful.

Furthermore, the Christian apologists are in good company when they attack Epicureanism. Epicureanism is part of the formal system of education, *paideia*, the common language which all nobles know and respect; and the attack of Epicureanism is an accepted practice within this system. Attacking Epicureanism is as standard as the declamations practiced by school-boys; it was a familiar subject upon which to practice one’s rhetoric. Stephen Casey writes, “For Lactantius the refutation of Epicureanism served principally as a technique or device of rhetoric to prepare the way for the presentation of his own Christian message. Just as Cicero, the model of Lactantius and of all Latin rhetoricians of the time, attacked Epicurus in the first book of *De Natura Deorum*, so too would Lactantius.”

Lactantius’ deconstruction of Epicureanism is more of a rhetorical device to shape and form his own material rather than a living debate with actual opponents of his faith.

**Rhetorical Treatment of Epicureanism**

Lactantius attacks Epicureanism with the full force of the rhetoric which he spent his life learning and teaching. His presentation is sarcastic, humorous, and biting, and often swept along with speed and power. For example, in Chapter Five, when asserting that Epicurus descended all the steps toward atheism but refused to take the final leap and admit to it, he writes, “huiusque pervenit sapientis hominis disputatio, cetera quae sequuntur obticuit” (4.13). His reference to Epicurus as a “wise man” in this instance is

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obviously sarcastic and jesting, setting the stage for Lactantius’ overall treatment of Epicureanism.

Lactantius’ rhetoric against the Epicureans becomes particularly vituperative in Chapter Ten when disproving atomism. First Lactantius accuses the atomists of intentionally inventing falsehoods “ne alienis vestigiis videretur insistere” (10.4), simply to have something novel to say. Then he asserts that it would have been better to be quiet than even to suggest such ideas. “Quanto melius fuerat tacere quam in usus tam miserabiles, tam inanes habere linguam!” (10.6) Invective is frequent in this chapter, as when Lactantius responds to Leucippus’ belief that everything is composed of atoms with “inplevit numerum perfectae insaniae” (10.10), berates Epicurus’ faithful follower Lucretius with “quis hunc putet habuisse cerebrum?” (10.17), and incredulously wonders at the stupidity of atomism with “nonne prodigio simile est aut natura esse hominem qui haec diceret aut extitisse qui crederent?” (10.33) Lactantius’ use of invective is well within the usual tools used by Greco-Roman philosophers in challenging an opponent’s material.

Chapter Ten is also rife with rhetorical questions. The Epicureans claim that the world is made of tiny seeds. Lactantius asks “Who has ever seen these seeds? Who has perceived them? Who has heard them? Do the Epicureans alone have eyes?” (10.3) Furthermore, he asks, “From where do the seeds themselves come? If all things come from these seeds, from where shall we say that they themselves originate?” (10.11) The Epicureans claim that atoms join without any type of divine plan or design; Lactantius asks how they then can account for the purposeful existence of everything in creation. He asks how atomism can explain the beauty, arrangement, and utility of the carefully
designed elements which compose the bodies of men and animals, each functioning in
harmony (10.22). All in all, Lactantius levels almost fifty rhetorical questions at the
Epicureans in Chapter Ten alone. The chapter is swept along by a tone of high pitched
frustration and indignation, and results in a rhetorically successful and emotionally
charged diatribe against the fallibility of Epicurean beliefs.

Another of the rhetorical methods which Lactantius frequently employs against
Epicureanism is to present short snippets from his opponent’s arguments, then easily
destroy each little statement one by one. With this approach he controls the material
being discussed and makes his points with speed and force. Chapter Seventeen contains
several good examples of this rhetorical approach. Here Lactantius uses short quotations
from Epicurus, each followed in quick succession with a dismissive response. “God,”
says Epicurus, “cares for nothing.” “Then God has no power,” Lactantius responds.
“He is incorrupt and blessed, because He is always quiet.” “So who is running the
world? Also, quiet is a property of sleep or death.” “If God does harm to anyone, then
He is not good.” “It is more harmful not to punish the guilty.” This technique allows
Lactantius to control his opponent by denying any opportunity for rebuttal.

Conclusion

The *De Ira Dei* is a philosophical tract which continues the tradition of the Greco-
Roman philosophers upon which it is based, and Lactantius’ sources, methods of
argumentation, and rhetorical style all follow the models established by these revered
authors. Lactantius’ audience is the non-Christian nobility, and because he shares in their
culture Lactantius naturally develops his Christian philosophy based upon the same non-
Christian icons of wisdom and learning which comprised the education and shaped the
mindset of his age. He effortlessly draws support from prior philosophers to validate most of his Christian beliefs, and even when unable to cite direct support he continually frames Christianity in the context of Greco-Roman philosophy. By connecting Christian thought with main-stream, respected philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca, and distancing it from the commonly rejected Epicurus, Lactantius presents Christianity as a socially acceptable extension of Roman culture.
CHAPTER 3: COMPARISON OF SENECA’S DE IRA AND
LACTANTIUS’ DE IRA DEI

One of the philosophical works to which Lactantius refers is Seneca’s *De Ira*, and a careful comparison of this work with Lactantius’ *De Ira Dei* provides a useful case-study by which many of the points raised in my previous chapter may be exemplified. Lactantius draws heavily from Seneca’s text, using its ideas to support his own when possible, but he also rejects some of Seneca’s assertions and independently develops his own ideas about the nature and usefulness of anger.

The comparison of Lactantius’ treatment of anger with Seneca’s is limited by differences in the goals of the two authors: Lactantius’ purpose is to address divine anger and to demonstrate that God has it; Seneca addresses only human anger, arguing for its extirpation. Because Lactantius primarily speaks of the existence of anger in God, his discussion is relevant to Seneca’s only as he relates the properties and usefulness of anger itself, but even a study limited to human anger yields several interesting and enlightening points for comparison.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger was the Emperor Nero’s tutor and confidant, and for a time he exerted considerable influence over the young ruler. Unfortunately he fell from the emperor’s graces and was forced to commit suicide in A.D. 65, charged with complicity in an imperial plot. He was a prolific writer and among his philosophical works are twelve treatises known as the *Dialogi*, of which the *De Ira* is one. Lactantius
treats Seneca as a Stoic, though not all of his ideas align with traditional Stoic views; Basore writes “while ostensibly an adherent of Stoic materialism, he shows the independence of an eclectic.”

**Definition and Properties of Anger**

The crucial difference between Seneca’s treatment of anger and Lactantius’ is in their definition of the term *ira*. Seneca sees anger solely as an evil, a force beyond control and without any good use which has only destructive results. While Lactantius concurs that human anger may be unjust and destructive, he also believes in a just type of anger which acts as the necessary motivator for deserved punishment, the good which rouses a calm and quiet mind to correct vices and bring about order and well-being. Both writers agree that correction of wrongdoing is necessary, but Lactantius purports that anger is required to motivate this correction while Seneca holds that anger is not even capable of such a motivation.

Interestingly, the leaf of Seneca’s manuscript (1.2.3) which would contain his actual definition of *ira* is lost, and Lactantius preserves his definition along with others which Seneca cited. Lactantius’ passage, in which he quotes directly from Seneca’s now lost text, reads “Nescisse autem philosophos quae ratio esset irae apparet ex finitionibus eorum, quas Seneca enumeravit in libris quos de ira composuit: ‘Ira est,’ inquit, ‘cupiditas ulciscendae injuriae aut, ut ait Posidonius, cupiditas puniendi eius a quo te inique putes laesum; Quidam ita finierunt: ira est incitatio animi ad nocendum ei qui aut nocuit aut nocere voluit; Aristotelis definitio non multum a nostra abest. Ait enim iram

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esse cupiditatem doloris reponendi” (17.13). The only part of this extant in Seneca’s text is the last definition, taken from Aristotle and repeated later in Seneca’s text at 1.3.3, “Aristotelis finitio non multum a nostra abest; ait enim iram esse cupiditatem doloris reponendi.” Lactantius’ wording is almost identical to Seneca’s, indicating that he probably worked directly from Seneca’s text. If Lactantius preserves the definition correctly, Seneca defines anger as “cupiditas ulciscendae iniuriae,” or the desire to take vengeance for an injury.

Despite the fact that Seneca’s formal definition is missing from the extant text of the De Ira, the remainder of his treatise paints a very clear picture of his perception of anger. As the desire of avenging an injury, it is born of injury, whether actual or intended, and is the desire to inflict punishment (1.3). It is a vice, and has no place with virtue (2.6.2). Anger is madness (1.1.1-5), and one has only to observe the changes it effects in a person’s appearance to recognize that it is insanity. The madman’s eyes blaze, his face turns crimson, his lips quiver, his hair stands on end; Seneca returns to the unattractive physical changes brought about by anger several times throughout his treatise, notably at 1.1.3-5 and 2.36, emphasizing the repulsion which ought to be felt toward this worst of emotions. Lactantius acknowledges this perception of anger in 5.2-3 as he writes concerning those who philosophize that anger is a “commotionem mentis ac perturbationem” which makes the eyes burn, the mouth tremble, the tongue stutter, and so forth.

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31 Ingremeau comments on page 333, “seule, la dernière définition nous est parvenue; les trois autres, qui ne sont connues que par notre texte, figuraient certainement dans la lacune de SEN. ira 1.2.3.”
32 All citations of Seneca’s text taken from Basore’s text cited above.
Seneca fills his description of anger with images of burning (1.2.1). He decries bloodshed and poisonings, the downfall of cities and nations, the slaughter of individuals and the decimation of entire populations because all are destructive consequences of anger. Lactantius uses Seneca's description as representative of the Stoic position, as continued proof that anger in the hands of a powerful person can pour out blood, overturn cities, and destroy peoples. "Et si homo qui habeat imperium ac potestatem late noceat per iram, sanguinem fundat, urbes subvertat, populos deleet, provincias ad solitudinem redigat" (5.4). Lactantius also admits that anger can have destructive results when used unwisely, with the potential for "aliquod inexpiabile facinus" (21.3).

Ultimately, while Lactantius does not deny that anger can be the insane, disfiguring, and destructive force which Seneca describes, he calls this the unjust anger, and postulates another type of anger which is just, rational, and necessary for human affairs. Lactantius defines this just anger as a motion of the mind rising up for the correction of faults. "Ira est motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis" (17.20). He holds that the Stoics simply did not see that this other kind of anger existed, and that is why they taught that anger should be completely eradicated. "Sed Stoici non viderunt esse discrimen recti et pravi, esse iram iustam, esse et iniustam; et quia medellam rei non inveniebant, voluerunt eam penitus excidere" (17.12).

The type of anger which Lactantius attributes to God in his treatise is simply not the anger which Seneca derides in his work; ira has completely different properties for the two authors. Lactantius especially writes against Seneca's belief that anger is never useful. "Deinde nihil habet in se utile" (1.9.1), Seneca claims. Lactantius strongly rejects this opinion, exclaiming that anger is so useful that it is a requirement for human
society, and therefore should not be forbidden to God or man. “Ira vero quae ad
correctionem vitiorum pertinet, nec homini adimi debet nec deo potest, quia et utilis est
rebus humanis et necessaria” (17.21). He reasons that if crimes are not punished even
greater evils will result, and this is why anger must not be forestalled. “Vitiosa est ergo
in peccatis irae suae cohibitio” (18.3). Finally Lactantius claims that God Himself gave
anger to man for the useful purpose of restraining vice, in the very same way that He
gave man desire for the purpose of begetting offspring. “Ut libidinem prodendae subolis
gratia dedit, sic iramcohibendorum causa delictorum” (18.10). Lactantius insists that
anger is useful both to motivate reform and to inspire respect. Although Seneca
ostensibly disagrees, this disagreement primarily results from his different definition of
anger.

Control of Anger

Seneca exhorts his reader to abolish anger entirely, as it is easier to exterminate
than to control. “Primum facilius est excludere perniciosa quam regere et non admittere
quam admissa moderari” (1.7.2). He describes a difference between anger and the initial
involuntary mental shock that comes after one perceives an injury; while everyone is
subject to the latter, it takes an act of will to accept this mental shock and fuel it into
anger. This is the Stoic concept of first beginnings, sometimes called prepassions or
propatheia, which precede emotions, but are not emotions themselves. For example,
Seneca explains, one might feel moved at the sight of a mimic shipwreck, but this is not
true sorrow; one might have an emotional response to reading the historical account of
Hannibal nearly sacking Rome, but this is not fear itself. “Sed omnia ista motus sunt
animorum moveri nolentium nec affectus sed principia proludentia affectibus” (2.2.5).
Seneca acknowledges that while perhaps the experience of the first beginnings of anger is inevitable, one should deny this first impulse and forbid it to develop into the full blown emotion. He holds that the initial burst of passion can be addressed in a roundabout way (3.39), and that discipline and intellect can conquer the passions (2.12).

Lactantius does not mention the concept of first beginnings, perhaps because it pertains predominantly to the control of anger, and such a fine distinction is not necessary since this is not his purpose. He does not agree with Seneca that anger is better eradicated than controlled; he believes that God gave anger to man and commanded him to control it and to use it to bring about just punishment. God does not instruct man to uproot anger, but rather to temper it. “Cum irasci quidem sed tamen non peccare praecipit, non utique evellit iram radicitus sed temperavit, ut in omni castigatione modum ac iustitiam teneremus” (21.6). Lactantius thinks that man’s anger can and should be controlled, since man easily becomes angry unjustly. “Possem dicere quod ira hominis refrenanda fuerit, quia iniuste saepe irascitur” (21.2). Because Lactantius defines a just and beneficial kind of anger which Seneca does not, he disagrees with Seneca that the emotion of anger should be extirpated. Furthermore, while Seneca believes that once anger is given rein it cannot be controlled, Lactantius states that control of this passion is possible, and therefore he is not driven to Seneca’s conclusion that anger must be destroyed entirely. Unfortunately, Lactantius does not enter into the long-standing debate between the Stoics and the Aristotelians about moderation of emotion versus eradication of emotion.33 He does not address what gives man the power to temper anger, when for Seneca it is so difficult.

33 See Sorabji, 194 – 207.
To exemplify their views on the necessity of controlling anger, both Seneca and Lactantius refer to an episode of a master refusing to punish a slave in anger, for fear of losing control of himself. In 3.12 Seneca mentions Plato refusing to let himself strike a slave in anger, and in 1.15.3 he quotes Socrates telling his slave that he would have beaten him except that he was angry. “Caederem te, nisi irascerer.” In both instances Seneca praises the restraint and control of the master, and urges his reader to emulate these examples. Lactantius describes a similar example in Archytas of Tarentum, who found his estate ruined by his chief slave and exclaimed that he would have killed the slave, except that he was angry. “Miserum te, inquit, quem iam verberibus necassem nisi iratus essem!” (18.4) Lactantius insists that while this story is generally held as a singular example of self-control, actually Archytas’ failure to punish would only result in further abuses of his leniency. Rather, Lactantius argues, Archytas should have given space to his anger in order to control it, then he should have punished the slave. “Ego vero laudarem si, cum fuisset iratus, dedisset irae suae spatium, ut residente per intervallum temporis animi tumore haberet modum castigatio” (18.7).

Seneca praises the master who refuses to beat his slave in anger and Lactantius criticizes him, yet in truth the two writers agree. Lactantius criticizes not Archytas’ attempt to control his anger, but his failure to give the slave his just punishment. Seneca also believes that the slave should be punished, and continues the narrative to include that Socrates postponed the punishment until a more rational moment. “Admonitionem servi in tempus sanius distulit, illo tempore se admonuit” (1.15.3). The two authors agree that punishment should be given, though not in a moment of irrational passion.
Relationship Between Anger and Reason

Seneca’s position on the relationship between anger and reason is interesting, for he believes that reason is both required for and destroyed by anger. “Cum sit inimica rationi, nusquam tamen nascitur, nisi ubi racioni locus est” (1.3.4). Seneca teaches that anger cannot occur without reason, for it is the reason and the will that allow the initial first beginning to develop into the true emotion. Therefore he believes that animals, which do not have reason, cannot be angry (1.3.6). Lactantius does not make the fine distinction between first beginnings and actual passions, and he does attribute anger to animals (7.7), but only unjust anger; he refers to anger which is simply the desire to repay an injury as the unjust anger which is found even in the beasts. “Haec est ira de qua superius diximus iniusta, quae etiam mutis inest” (17.14). Yet Lactantius agrees with Seneca that just anger does require reason; in fact, it is a motion of the mind itself (17.20).

Although Seneca believes that anger must be accepted by one’s reason in order to develop, he holds that once developed it overwhelms reason and sweeps it away. “Illa est ira, quae rationem transiluit, quae secum rapit” (2.3.4). While other vices incite the mind, anger destroys it. “Cetera vitia impellunt animos, ira praecipitat” (3.1.4). He states that if anger is capable of heeding reason, then it is no longer anger. “Nam si exaudit rationem sequiturque qua dicitur, iam non est ira” (9.2). Seneca mentions the athletic trainer Pyrrhus who forbade his students to become angry at their opponents because the anger would override their training and skill (2.14.3). Seneca believes that no other emotion is as capable of putting a man out of his mind as anger.
For Lactantius, the unjust anger follows this model; it can make a man “mentis inpos” (21.2) or out of his mind. But righteous anger is not only a motion of the mind, it is rational in itself, for it effects just punishment and removes crimes. “Irasci ergo rationis est; auferuntur enim delicta et refrenatur licentia, quod utique iuste sapienterque fit” (17.12). Lactantius holds that previous writers did not see “quae ratio esset irae” (17.13), the rational quality of anger. So Lactantius agrees with Seneca that anger which does not pertain to the equitable correction of vices can destroy reason, but because he goes beyond Seneca in postulating a type of anger which is a motion of the mind itself he concludes that rather than destroying reason, anger works in concert with reason to effect rational and beneficial results.

**Role of Anger in the Correction of Wrongdoing**

Seneca clearly advocates the reproof of error, arguing that those who do wrong ought to be set right both by admonition and force, by means both gentle and harsh, for their own sake and for the sake of others – but not with anger. “Corrigendus est itaque, qui peccat, et admonitione et vi, et molliter et aspere, meliorque tam sibi quam aliis faciendus non sine castigatione, sed sine ira” (1.15.1). In extreme cases he even advocates capital punishment (1.6.4), as does Lactantius (17.6). While Seneca believes in the correction of vices, he denies that anger is a useful agent in effecting this goal. He fears that anger takes joy in punishment and injures rather than benefits, yet the true purpose of correction is to heal the wrongdoer, even if it is done under the guise of harm. “‘Non aliquando castigatio necessaria est?’ Quidni? Sed haec sine ira, cum ratione; non enim nocet sed medetur specie nocendi” (1.6.1). He states that without anger crimes are more easily and justly abolished (1.13), and he who punishes without anger exacts a more
just and meritorious punishment (1.19.5-8). Furthermore, anger weakens before the correction is complete, subsiding before all the guilty are punished, and does not punish fairly because it is unbalanced (1.17). All of these claims follow from his interpretation of anger as a willful and irrational passion, forcing his treatment of anger’s role in punishment to be different from that of Lactantius.

Seneca distinguishes between punishment (poena) and correction (castigatio), advocating the correction of wrongdoing, and condemning punishment as injurious and wrong. Seneca’s wise man is like a doctor, wanting to heal offenders rather than punish them (1.6). He quotes Plato’s “the good man does no injury” (1.6.5) and reasons that because punishment injures, it is not good. He holds that anger takes pleasure in punishment, and therefore anger is contrary to nature and not a quality of a wise man. Lactantius does not make Seneca’s fine distinction, and uses both poena and castigatio to refer to the proper treatment of wrongdoing. Yet while his terminology is not as refined, his meaning is the same: wrongs should be corrected using rational methods for the ultimate benefit of both the wrongdoer and human society. Lactantius does not advocate the willful vengeance of perceived injuries any more than Seneca, but because Lactantius mainly discusses the anger of a perfect being, he assumes that the punishment is not wickedly done for pleasure.

Lactantius carefully explains that punishment, whether divine or human, should be seen as beneficial rather than injurious. Perhaps in response to Seneca’s description of righteous correction (as opposed to punishment motivated by anger) “non enim nocet sed medetur specie nocendi” (1.6.1), Lactantius asserts that “deus cum malis obest, nocens non est” (17.7). He sharply rebukes those who call punishment injurious “non exiguo
falluntur errore qui censuram sive humanam sive divinam acerbitatis et malitiae nomine infamant, putantes nocentem dici oportere qui nocentes adficit poena” (17.6), and affirms the usefulness and necessity of punishment as a force which prevents further wrongdoing “evadent enim ad maius malum per inpunitatem” (18.12).

Both authors acknowledge that anger has the potential to cause fear in others and that this fear may spur proper behavior. Seneca, deviating from his usual position of complete intolerance toward anger, even suggests that sometimes anger must be faked in order to arouse the sluggish or those with whom reason does no good (1.14). This, however, is an anomaly; his prevalent belief is that although some say that fear is good because it scares the wicked, fear aroused by anger is no more good than fever, gout, or malignant sores, which also bring fear but are not good in themselves (2.12). Lactantius is the polar opposite of this, holding that anger is absolutely necessary for fear, and fear in turn is necessary for respect and authority. Therefore if a person does not have anger and thus inspire fear, he will have no power over his subordinates. “Ubi ergo ira non fuerit, imperium quoque non erit” (23.14). Remove anger from a king, he argues, and that king will be cast down headlong from his height; take away anger from a common man, and he will be despised, derided, and driven from all his property (23.10).

The key point of disagreement between the two authors concerning anger’s role in punishment is that Seneca does not believe that anger is necessary to motivate the reproof of wrongdoing, holding instead that duty is the proper motivation. If one’s father were murdered, he believes that filial affection would be the source of one’s desire to seek vengeance, not anger. “Pater caedetur, defendam; caesus est, exsequar, quia oportet, non quia dolet” (1.12.2). Seneca argues that the mind can be moved by something more
noble and powerful than anger (2.17.2). Lactantius never mentions this possibility; he believes that anger is necessary to move a quiet and peaceful mind to the unpleasant task of correction. “Nam qui non movetur omnino, aut probat delicta, quod est turpius et iniustius, aut molestiam castigandi fugit, quam sedatus animus et quieta mens aspernatur ac renuit nisi stimulaverit ira et incitaverit” (18.3). This is one of the major points of contention in the two authors’ treatments of anger, and it is interesting that Lactantius does not attempt to justify anger as the singular and proper motivator of correction. While agreeing with Seneca that it is one’s duty to correct one’s subordinates, he simply does not discuss whether or not duty is enough to motivate this correction.

Perhaps Lactantius fails to address this issue because he so strongly believes that the sight of evil necessarily evokes anger in a good man. Seneca raises the point that it is impossible for a good man not to be angry with bad men, then promptly rejects it (1.14.1), arguing that if the good man were always angry with evil, he would be forever angry. Furthermore, Seneca objects, the wise man will recognize how often he himself errs, and will thereby feel sympathy with the wrongdoer, trying to call him back from his error with a kind and fatherly spirit rather than with anger. Lactantius is unequivocal on this point: it is impossible and shameful for a good man to see evil and not be angry. “Non est enim fas eum, cum talia fieri videat, non moveri” (16.5). He believes that he who is displeased with evil is moved when he sees it practiced (17.17), and that there is no one who can calmly see anyone committing an offense (18.1). Lactantius allows that perhaps judges in a court of law should sentence without anger, because they did not see

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34 Sorabji explains on page 186, “To be free of emotions is not to be free of strong, determined, and intense motivation. It is merely clear-headed motivation that understands, according to the Stoics, the true value of things.”
the crime happening and they act not on their own authority but as representatives of the state, but specifies that he is talking about subordinates, such as children and slaves, those whom one has a personal duty to correct and guide (17.16). It is not right, he asserts, for the good man not to feel anger when he sees those inferior to him commit wrongdoing.

The primary purpose for which Lactantius advocates anger is the correction of wrongdoing. He believes that masters have the responsibility and duty to correct those beneath them, both for the well-being of the individual and the common good, and he believes that this correction cannot take place unless motivated by anger. Furthermore he holds that it is wrong for a good person not to grow angry at the sight of wrongdoing; to be unmoved means that one approves of the crime or avoids the trouble of reproving it. Seneca holds that wrongdoing should be corrected, but does not believe that anger should be associated with this correction, both because of the harm it might cause and its inherent deficiencies as a motivator. Again, however, this disagreement is also only a result of what the two authors mean by the term *ira*.

**Conclusion**

Ostensibly, the points of disagreement between Seneca and Lactantius are far weightier and more numerable than their points of agreement. Seneca defines anger as the desire of seeking revenge for an injury, while Lactantius defines it as a motion of the mind arising to the restraint of offenses. Seneca believes anger is completely irrational, the destroyer of reason and mankind, and better eliminated than controlled, while Lactantius argues that it is in accordance with reason, necessary for human well-being, and given by God. Seneca argues that even if anger has salutary effects it still is not good in itself, and it is neither a necessary nor a proper motivation for correction. Its salutary
effects make it good, responds Lactantius, and it is both necessary and proper in reproving vices. It seems the two writer’s stances could hardly be more disparate.

Yet it must be remembered that all of these contrasts originate from the difference in the definitions of the two authors. Comparing their ideas on anger is like comparing apples to oranges; though they both discuss *ira*, Lactantius’ specialized definition of “just anger” is not at all what Seneca rails against in his treatise. If one moves beyond their definitions and looks at their intent, the two writers are not so different. Both believe that anger can be an inhuman, disfiguring force, and that this kind of anger should be eliminated. Both believe that the correction of vices is necessary to human well-being and should be accomplished with reason and humanity. Thus, while in many ways the two writers agree in substance, their disagreement in terminology results in highly disparate treatises, one which advocates anger and another which condemns it.

The comparison between Lactantius’ *De Ira Dei* and Seneca’s *De Ira* creates a case study to examine Lactantius’ use and treatment of prior philosophy. He supports and enhances his material with the writings of Seneca, then develops his discussion beyond Seneca’s thought, rejecting ideas with which he does not agree and advancing his own. Lactantius dialogues with Seneca and engages him in debate; he demonstrates a solid understanding of the Seneca’s positions by enumerating them clearly, then challenges the ideas which he finds faulty and moves beyond them with his own declarations of truth. Through the development of his own thought, which is based upon the work of his predecessors but not limited to it, Lactantius establishes himself as a philosopher in his own right.
CONCLUSION

By presenting Lactantius’ progression of argumentation in the first chapter of this thesis, I provide a clear elucidation of his thought, contributing to Lactantian studies the first full English exposition and discussion of the De Ira Dei. By underscoring his approach and methodically following his thought, I outline and clarify his arguments for the righteousness and necessity of divine anger in order to expose his ideas to a wider modern audience.

I also impose my own divisions upon Lactantius’ treatise as a means of illuminating the cohesiveness and ordered arrangement of his argument. The first ten of his twenty-four chapters deal almost exclusively with prior Greco-Roman treatments of divine existence and anger. Chapters One through Six address the bundling of emotions, arguing that because it is impossible to have kindness without anger, a kind God must have anger. The treatise begins with an argument completely driven by logic, a language shared by all philosophers regardless of their religious beliefs, so that Lactantius may attract his target audience, the non-Christian nobility.

The next division, Chapters Seven through Ten, shows that God is the administrator of the world and is emotionally involved with mankind. Lactantius rhetorically deconstructs Epicureanism and its proposition that the gods are detached from earthly affairs in order to propound his own argument that God’s concern for His creation necessitates His anger. The first two sections of Lactantius’ work invite non-
Christians into the discussion and deconstruct the elements of prior Greco-Roman thought inimical to the defense of divine anger.

The second half of the *De Ira Dei*, Chapters Eleven through Twenty-Four, introduces Christian and prophetic arguments for the anger of God. Chapters Eleven through Sixteen establish the nature of God and His creation, and demonstrate the Christian view that God created the world for man and man for Himself, with man’s purpose being to know and serve God. Lactantius proves monotheism and solves the problem of evil with the argument that evils actually bring man closer to God, a greater good which justifies the presence of evil. He argues that in discriminating between good and evil man develops wisdom, and through this wisdom he is then able to rule over the earth, know God, and pursue eternal life. Thus, God sets both good and evil before man in order to ultimately lead man to the greatest good, immortality. In this section Lactantius elaborates his concept of God and his view of which emotions God has and which He does not. Lactantius artfully maneuvers out of the difficulty resulting from his acceptance of the bundling of emotions, showing that although logic demands that a being who has any emotion must be capable of all emotions, capability does not equal actuality. Even if God is capable of such negative emotions as fear, desire, envy, and grief, He has no occasion or reason to actually experience these emotions; thus God is capable of feelings which benefit mankind yet not constrained by those which diminish His stature.

All these discussions – revealing the nature of God’s emotions, determining whether He is one or many, solving the problem of evil, as well as the deconstruction of inimical Epicurean and Stoic beliefs and the logical argument from the bundling of
emotions – lay the groundwork for Lactantius’ presentation of divine anger in Chapters Seventeen to Twenty-One. He defines anger as a motion of the mind rising up for the restraint of faults, and compares this with many prior philosophical definitions. He clarifies that anger is only proper when directed from a superior toward an inferior, asserts that anger is the necessary and right force to move God to correct mankind’s faults, and shows that without fear of this anger man would degenerate to a state lower than the beasts. This is the pinnacle of the treatise, the height to which all else ascends: Lactantius proves the existence, nature, and necessity of divine anger.

The final section, the divine testimonies of the Sibyls found in Chapters Twenty-Two to Twenty-Four, act as a peroration “in the manner of Cicero,” as Lactantius says (22.2). Here he presents Sibylline support as testimony which his non-Christian audience can believe, or at least not oppose. The oracular, hortatory nature of this section leads well to his conclusion, in which he urges men to fear the anger of God and to live in such a way that they may never incur it. Lactantius’ arrangement, then, is orderly and logical, first engaging his non-Christian audience with a strong foundation in accepted Greco-Roman philosophical ideas, then presenting the Christian developments upon this system and finally showing how both systems together, along with pagan oracular testimonies, demand the existence of divine anger.

After elucidating Lactantius’ arguments in my Chapter One and highlighting the ordered arrangement of his presentation, my Chapter Two singles out one of the more prevalent themes raised by this discussion, Lactantius’ intimate relationship with Greco-Roman philosophy. Much of the previous scholarship on this topic views Lactantius as distinctly different from these philosophers, belonging to a realm of “Christian
philosophers” held to be completely removed from the genre of “Classical philosophers.” In truth, Lactantius defines his work in terms of Greco-Roman philosophy, even when in complete and irremediable disagreement with it. My studies reveal that Lactantius’ reliance upon and imitation of earlier non-Christian philosophy is completely natural and expected, both because Lactantius belongs to this system of erudition as a teacher of rhetoric, and because the use of entrenched and respectable earlier thinkers enables him to influence his audience through the common elements of paideia.

Lactantius’ vituperative diatribe against Epicureanism may also be viewed as a means of placing his treatise within the familiar bounds of paideia, for attacks on Epicureanism were an accepted practice within this system. In deconstructing Epicureanism, Lactantius follows the example set by his model, Cicero, using rhetorical questions, sarcasm, humor, and insults to convince his audience both of his point and of his persuasive skills.

While Lactantius certainly employed accepted Greco-Roman philosophies which were centuries old by his time to appeal to the non-Christian nobility, he may also have done so to avoid political conflict with his contemporaries. Furthermore, there is the possibility that as a member of Constantine’s court Lactantius intended this treatise’s proofs for the righteousness of divine anger to extend on an earthly level to the righteousness of the emperor’s anger, justifying it as a necessary force resulting in order and harmony.

My chapter three closely compares Seneca’s *De Ira* with Lactantius’ *De Ira Dei*, creating a case study to exemplify the points made about Lactantius’ relationship with prior philosophers in my previous chapter. Through careful reading of the texts I compare Lactantius’ views on anger with those of his predecessor Seneca, first pointing out obvious differences, then showing the often similar intent of the two authors. If Seneca had written about “a motion of the mind arising to the restraint of faults” which results in appropriate correction of an inferior by a superior instead of anger as an uncontrollable and destructive frenzy, his conclusions would have been more similar to those of Lactantius. The crucial difference in the two authors’ treatments of anger lies in each one’s definition of *ira*. Also, there is undeniably a difference in their views on whether or not anger is necessary to motivate correction or can be controlled without eradication, and Lactantius does not address Seneca’s concept of first beginnings or explain methods to moderate anger. Yet both believe that unbridled anger which is not used to serve a higher purpose is wrong, and agree that faults ought to be punished. My investigation of how Lactantius relates to Seneca’s *De Ira* reveals that Lactantius had read Seneca carefully and responded to him in his own treatise, borrowing from his thought where appropriate but also deviating widely from it when necessary.

My thesis explores Lactantius as a thinker in his own right and presents the *De Ira Dei* as a fruitful and self-justified work of apology which has value not only for preserving a compendia of otherwise lost references to previous writers, but also for the merit of its own thought and presentation. Lactantius does borrow from other writers, but he also goes beyond them in his thinking, most notably by proposing his own definition of anger. It is my hope that this elucidation of Lactantius’ thought and discussion of his
relationship to the Greco-Roman philosophers makes Lactantius more accessible to present day readers and contributes to a richer understanding of his *De Ira Dei*. 
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