The Phoenix

Lactantius (c. AD 250–325)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

The Phoenix

By an Uncertain Author. Attributed to Lactantius.

There is a happy spot, retired in the first East, where the great gate of the eternal pole lies open. It is not, however, situated near to his rising in summer or in winter, but where the sun pours the day from his vernal chariot. There a plain spreads its open tracts; nor does any mound rise, nor hollow valley open itself. But through twice six ells that place rises above the mountains, whose tops are thought to be lofty among us. Here is the grove of the sun; a wood stands planted with many a tree, blooming with the honour of perpetual foliage. When the pole had blazed with the fires of Phaethon, that place was uninjured by the flames; and when the deluge had immersed the world in waves, it rose above the waters of Deucalion. No enfeebling diseases, no sickly old age, nor cruel death, nor harsh fear, approaches hither, nor dreadful crime, nor mad desire of riches, nor Mars, nor fury, burning with the love of slaughter. Bitter grief is absent, and want clothed in rags, and sleepless cares, and violent hunger. No tempest rages there, nor dreadful violence of the wind; nor does the hoar-frost cover the earth with cold dew. No cloud extends its fleecy covering above the plains, nor does the turbid moisture of water fall from on high; but there is a fountain in the middle, which they call by the name of "living;

" it is clear, gentle, and abounding with sweet waters, which, bursting forth once during the space of each month, twelve times irrigates all the grove with waters. Here a species of tree, rising with lofty stem, bears mellow fruits not about to fall on the ground. This grove, these woods, a single bird, the phoenix, inhabits,-single, but it lives reproduced by its own death. It obeys and submits to Phoebus, a remarkable attendant. Its parent nature has given it to possess this office. When at its first rising the saffron morn grows red, when it puts to flight the stars with its rosy light, thrice and four times she plunges her body into the sacred waves, thrice and four times she sips water from the living stream. She is raised aloft, and takes her seat on the highest top of the lofty tree, which alone looks down upon the whole grove; and turning herself to the fresh risings of the nascent Phoebus, she awaits his rays and rising beam. And when the sun has thrown back the threshold of the shining gate, and the light gleam of the first light has shone forth, she begins to pour strains of sacred song, and to hail the new light with wondrous voice, which neither the notes of the nightingale

nor the flute of the Muses can equal with Cyrrhaean strains. But neither is it thought that the dying swan can imitate it, nor the tuneful strings of the lyre of Mercury.

After that Phoebus has brought back his horses to the open heaven, and continually advancing, has displayed his whole orb; she applauds with thrice-repeated flapping of her wings, and having thrice adored the fire-bearing head, is silent. And she also distinguishes the swift hours by sounds not liable to error by day and night: an overseer of the groves, a venerable priestess of the wood, and alone admitted to thy secrets, O Phoebus. And when she has now accomplished the thousand years of her life, and length of days has rendered her burdensome, in order that she may renew the age which has glided by, the fates pressing her, she flees from the beloved couch of the accustomed grove. And when she has left the sacred places, through a desire of being born again, then she seeks this world, where death reigns. Full of years, she directs her swift flight into Syria, to which Venus herself has given the name of Phoenice; and through trackless deserts she seeks the retired groves in the place, where a remote wood lies concealed through the glens. Then she chooses a lofty palm, with top reaching to the heavens, which has the pleasing name of phoenix from the bird, and where no hurtful living creature can break through, or slimy serpent, or any bird of prey.

Then Aeolus shuts in the winds in hanging caverns, lest they should injure the bright air with their blasts, or lest a cloud collected by the south wind through the empty sky should remove the rays of the sun, and be a hindrance to the bird. Afterwards she builds for herself either a nest or a tomb, for she perishes that she may live; yet she produces herself. Hence she collects juices and odours, which the Assyrian gathers from the rich wood, which the wealthy Arabian gathers; which either the Pygmaean nations, or India crops, or the Sabaean land produces from its soft bosom. Hence she heaps together cinnamon and the odour of the far-scented amomum, and balsams with mixed leaves. Neither the twig of the mild cassia nor of the fragrant acanthus is absent, nor the tears and rich drop of frankincense. To these she adds tender ears of flourishing spikenard, and joins the too pleasing pastures of myrrh. Immediately she places her body about to be changed on the strewed nest, and her quiet limbs on such a couch. Then with her mouth she scatters juices around and upon her limbs, about to die with her own funeral rites. Then amidst various odours she yields up her life, nor fears the faith of so great a deposit. In the meantime her body, destroyed by death, which proves the source of life, is hot, and the heat itself produces a flame; and it conceives fire afar off from the light of heaven:

it blazes, and is dissolved into burnt ashes. And these ashes collected in death it fuses, as it were, into a mass, and has an effect resembling seed. From this an animal is said to arise without limbs, but the worm is said to be of a milky colour. And it suddenly increases vastly with an imperfectly formed body, and collects itself into the appearance of a well-rounded egg. After this it is formed again, such as its figure was before, and the phoenix, having burst her shell, shoots forth, even as caterpillars in the fields, when they are fastened by a thread to a stone, are wont to be changed into a butterfly. No food is appointed for her

in our world, nor does any one make it his business to feed her while unfledged. She sips the delicate ambrosial dews of heavenly nectar which have fallen from the star-bearing pole. She gathers these; with these the bird is nourished in the midst of odours, until she bears a natural form. But when she begins to flourish with early youth, she flies forth now about to return to her native abode. Previously, however, she encloses in an ointment of balsam, and in myrrh and dissolved frankincense, all the remains of her own body, and the bones or ashes, and relics of herself, and with pious mouth brings it into a round form, and carrying this with her feet, she goes to the rising of the sun, and tarrying at the altar, she draws it forth in the sacred temple.

She shows and presents herself an object of admiration to the beholder; such great beauty is there, such great honour abounds. In the first place, her colour is like the brilliancy of that which the seeds of the pomegranate when ripe take under the smooth rind; such colour as is contained in the leaves which the poppy produces in the fields, when Flora spreads her garments beneath the blushing sky. Her shoulders and beautiful breasts shine with this covering; with this her head, with this her neck, and the upper parts of her back shine. And her tail is extended, varied with yellow metal, in the spots of which mingled purple blushes. Between her wings there is a bright mark above, as Tris on high is wont to paint a cloud from above. She gleams resplendent with a mingling of the green emerald, and a shining beak of pure horn opens itself. Her eyes are large; you might believe that they were two jacinths; from the middle of which a bright flame shines. An irradiated crown is fitted to the whole of head, resembling on high the glory of the head of Phoebus. Scales cover her thighs spangled with yellow metal, but a rosy colour paints her claws with honour. Her form is seen to blend the figure of the peacock with that of the painted bird of Phasis. The winged creature which is produced in the lands of the Arabians, whether it be beast or bird, can scarcely equal her magnitude.

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

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.