

# Biblical and Pastoral Poetry

ALCIMUS AVITUS

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL ROBERTS

**Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus**, bishop of Vienne and a vigorous defender of Christian orthodoxy, was born into the senatorial aristocracy in southern Gaul in the mid-fifth century and lived until 518. The verse in *Biblical and Pastoral Poetry* was written in the late fifth or early sixth century.

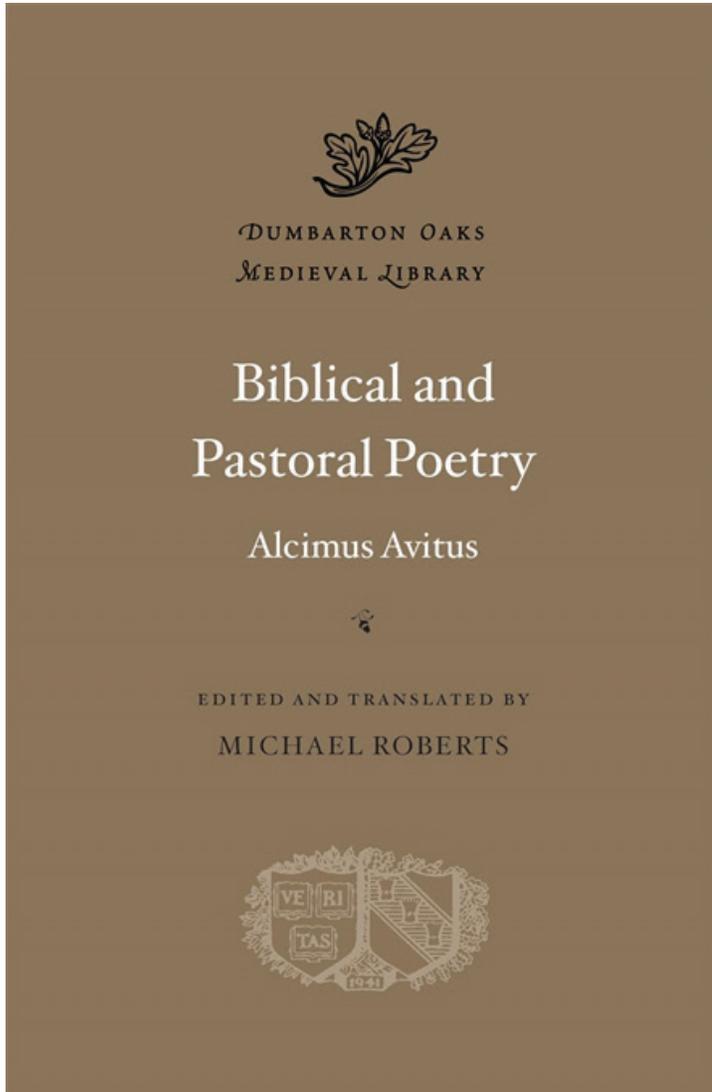
Avitus's most famous work, the *Spiritual History*, narrates the biblical stories of creation, the Fall and expulsion from paradise, the Flood, and the Israelites' escape from Egypt. He revitalizes Christian epic poetry, highlighting original sin and redemption and telling the history of Christian salvation with dramatic dialogue and rich description.

*In Consolatory Praise of Chastity*—a verse treatise addressed to his sister, a consecrated virgin—illuminates the demands of the ascetic life from the perspective of a close family member. Avitus seeks to bolster his sister's resolve with biblical examples of mental fortitude, constructing a robust model for female heroism.

This volume presents new English translations of Avitus's two extant poetic writings alongside the Latin texts.

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## SPIRITUAL HISTORY

## Prologus Alcimi Aviti episcopi ad Apollinarem episcopum

Domino sancto in Christo piissimo et beatissimo Apollinari episcopo Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus frater.

Nuper quidem paucis homiliarum mearum in unum corpus redactis hortatu amicorum discrimen editionis intravi. Sed adhuc te maiora suadente in coturnum petulantioris audaciae durata fronte procedo. Iniungis namque ut si quid a me de quibuscumque causis metri lege conscriptum est, sub professione opusculi vestro nomini dedicetur. Recolo equidem nonnulla me versu dixisse, adeo ut, si ordinarentur, non minimo volumine stringi potuerit epigrammatum multitudo. Quod dum facere servato causarum vel temporum ordine meditarer, omnia paene in illa notissimae perturbationis necessitate dispersa sunt. Quae quoniam singillatim aut requiri difficile, aut inveniri impossibile foret, abieci ea de animo meo, quorum mihi vel ordinatio salvorum, ne dicam dispersorum reparatio, dura videretur. Aliquos sane libellos apud quendam familiarem meum postea repperi, qui licet nominibus propriis titulisque respondeant, et alias tamen causas inventa materiae opportunitate perstringunt. Hi

## DEDICATORY LETTER

## Prologue of Bishop Alcimus Avitus to Bishop Apollinaris

Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus, his brother, to his saintly lord and the most holy and blessed bishop Apollinaris.

It is true that at the urging of friends I recently compiled a few of my homilies into a single volume and incurred the risk of publishing them. But since you are still urging me to greater things, I am steeling myself to venture on flights of still more shameless boldness. For you are proposing that whatever has been written by me on any subject according to the laws of meter be dedicated to your name in the guise of a minor work. And indeed I recall that I have composed some works in verse in such numbers that, if they were brought together, the quantity of epigrams could only be contained in a not inconsiderable volume. But when I was thinking of doing this, maintaining the sequence of their subjects and chronology, almost all of them were dispersed in the pressing circumstances of that most notorious disturbance. And since they would be difficult to search out or even impossible to discover individually, I put all thought of them out of my mind. Even arranging those that survived seemed difficult, quite apart from the recovery of what had been dispersed. I did certainly find some books later with a friend, which, although they correspond to their own names and titles, yet also touch on other matters when their subject matter presents the opportunity. These, then, although

ergo, quia iubes, etsi obscuri sunt opere meo, tuo saltem nomine inlustrabuntur. Quamquam quilibet acer ille doctusque sit, si religionis propositae stilum non minus fidei quam metri lege servaverit, vix aptus esse poemati queat, quippe cum licentia mentiendi, quae pictoribus ac poetis aequè conceditur, satis procul a causarum serietate pellenda sit. In saeculari namque versuum opere condendo tanto quis peritior appellatur, quanto elegantius, immo, ut vere dicamus, ineptius falsa texuerit. (Taceo iam verba illa vel nomina, quae nobis nec in alienis quidem operibus frequentare, ne dicam in nostris conscribere licet, quae ad compendia poetarum aliud ex alio significantia plurimum valent.) Quocirca saecularium iudicio, qui aut imperitiae aut ignaviae dabunt non uti nos licentia poetarum, plus arduum quam fructuosum opus adgressi divinam longe discrevimus ab humana existimatione censuram. Quoniam in asserendis quibuscumque rebus vel etiam, prout suppetit, explicandis si quacumque ex parte peccandum est, salubrius dicenti clerico non impletur pompa quam regula et tutius artis pede quam veritatis vestigio claudicatur. Non enim est excusata perpetratione peccati libertas eloquii. Nam si pro omni verbo otioso quod locuti fuerint homines rationem redhibere cogentur, agnoscere in promptu est illud periculosius laedere quod tractatum atque meditatam, anteposita vivendi legibus loquendi lege, praesumitur.

they derive no light from my writing, will at least, since you bid it, be lent luster by your name. However shrewd and learned a man may be, if in the expression of his Christian belief he observes the law of faith no less than the law of meter, he can hardly be true to poetry, since the seriousness of his subject requires that the freedom to lie, which is granted to painters and poets alike, be utterly banished. For in the composition of secular poetry the more artistically, or rather, to tell the truth, the more improperly, a man has introduced falsehoods, the more skilled he is acclaimed to be. (I make no mention now of those words or names that we may not even peruse in the works of others, much less include in our own writings, which because of a transference of meaning are a very great convenience for poets.) Therefore, since in the judgment of laymen, who will attribute my failure to employ poetic license to a lack of skill or application, I have undertaken a task more difficult than rewarding; I have far preferred the appraisal of God to the opinions of men. For if there is to be a fault of some kind in setting forth any subject matter or even, where possible, explaining it, for a speaker who is a cleric it is more beneficial that the demands of correctness be met rather than those of stylistic display and safer to limp in a metrical foot than on the path of truth. Stylistic freedom does not acquit one of committing a sin. For if men will be made to render account for every idle word they have spoken, it is easy to see that what is chosen after consideration and thought and with preference given to the law of eloquence over the laws of right living is particularly hazardous and damaging.

LIBER PRIMUS

De initio mundi

Quidquid agit varios humana in gente labores,  
unde brevem carpunt mortalia tempora vitam,  
vel quod polluti vitiantur origine mores,  
quos aliena premunt priscorum facta parentum,  
5 addatur quamquam nostra de parte reatus,  
quod tamen amisso dudum peccatur honore,  
ascribam tibi, prime pater, qui semine mortis  
tollis succiduae vitalia germina proli.  
Et licet hoc totum Christus persolverit in se,  
10 contraxit quantum percussa in stirpe propago,  
attamen auctoris vitio, qui debita leti  
instituit morbosque suis ac funera misit,  
vivit peccati moribunda in carne cicatrix.  
Iam Pater omnipotens librantis pondere Verbi  
15 undique collectis discreverat arida lymphis  
litoribus pontum constringens, flumina ripis.  
Iam proprias pulchro monstrabat lumine formas  
obscuro cedente die varioque colore  
plurima distinctum pingebat gratia mundum.  
20 Temporibus sortita vices tum lumina caelo  
fulsere alterno solis lunaeque meatu.  
Quin et sidereus nocturno in tempore candor  
temperat horrentes astrorum luce tenebras.  
Actutum suavi producens omnia fetu

BOOK ONE

The Beginning of the World

All the causes of the manifold troubles of the human race,  
the reason why the span of mortal life is brief, our corrupt  
behavior, perverted from the start and oppressed by deeds  
not our own, but by those of our distant parents—though 5  
guilt has accrued from our part too—and the long continu-  
ance of sin once high status was lost, all this I will attribute  
to you, first father, who by sowing the seed of death de-  
prived successive generations of growth and life. And al-  
though Christ in his own person redeemed all that the hu- 10  
man race contracted in the blasting of its stock, yet because  
of the fault of its founder, who incurred a debt to death and  
transmitted disease and mortality to his children, the scar of  
sin still lives in mortal flesh.

Already the almighty Father by the weight of the stabiliz-  
ing Word had gathered together the waters from every 15  
source and separated out dry land, confining seas with  
shores and rivers with riverbanks. Already as the darkness  
of day retreated before the radiant light, a great many beau-  
ties were revealing their distinctive forms and bringing  
adornment to a dappled and multicolored world. Then the 20  
luminous heavenly bodies, sharing out the time between  
them, shone with alternating course, now of the sun, now  
the moon. In addition, in the nighttime the brilliance of  
stars moderated the oppressive darkness with their astral  
light. At once the earth gave birth to everything in alluring

25 pulchra repentino vestita est gramine tellus.  
 Accepere genus sine germine iussa creari  
 et semen voluisse fuit. Sic ubere Verbi  
 frondescunt silvae; teneris radicibus arbor  
 duravit vastos parvo sub tempore ramos.

30 Protinus in taetras animalia multa figuras  
 surgunt et vacuum discurrunt bruta per orbem.  
 Elatae in altum volucres motuque citato  
 pendentes secuere vias et in aere sudo  
 praepetibus librant membrorum pondera pinnis.

35 Post etiam clausi vasto sub gurgite pisces  
 respirant lymphis flatusque sub aequore ducunt,  
 quaeque negant nobis, illis dant umida vitam.  
 Nec minus in pelago vivescunt grandia cete  
 accipiuntque cavis habitacula digna latebris,

40 et quae monstra solet rarus nunc prodere pontus,  
 aptat ad informes condens Sollertia formas,  
 quodque hominum falso credit mens nescia foedum,  
 per propriam speciem natura iudice pulchrum est.

Ergo ubi completis fulserunt omnia rebus,  
 45 ornatuque suo perfectus constitit orbis,  
 tum Pater omnipotens aeterno lumine laetum  
 contulit ad terras sublimi ex aethere vultum,  
 illustrans quodcumque videt. Placet ipsa tuenti  
 artifici factura suo laudatque creator

50 dispositum pulchro, quem condidit, ordine mundum.  
 Tum demum tali Sapientia voce locuta est:  
 “En praeclara nitet mundano machina cultu  
 et tamen impletum perfectis omnibus orbem  
 quid iuvat ulterius nullo cultore teneri?

55 Sed ne longa novam contristent otia terram,

profusion and took on beautiful clothing from the instant 25  
 vegetation. Plants bidden to grow without germination  
 formed a species; their seed was divine will alone. In this  
 way forests filled out with leaves, with the Word as their  
 nurturer; the tree from tender roots hardened in a short  
 time into widely spreading branches.

Soon many animals arose to take on threatening shapes 30  
 and brute creatures roamed the empty world. Birds  
 mounted on high, cleaving with rapid motion an aerial path  
 and in the clear air suspending the weight of their limbs by  
 the swift movement of their wings. Next fish, enclosed in 35  
 the vast ocean, inhaled underwater and drew breath below  
 the sea; moisture provided them the life that it denies to us.  
 There lived also in the deep huge sea creatures who found  
 their proper homes in hollowed-out lairs; these monsters  
 that the sea now rarely displays their creator Wisdom 40  
 endowed with misshapen shapes. But what the ignorant mind  
 of man falsely considers ugly, in its own kind is beautiful in  
 the judgment of nature.

And so, when with the completion of the universe all 45  
 was resplendent—the world brought to perfection in its  
 finery—then the almighty Father turned his countenance,  
 radiant with eternal light, from the height of heaven to the  
 earth, illuminating whatever he saw. His creation pleased its  
 author as he looked on, and the creator praised the beauti- 50  
 fully ordered world he had fashioned. Then finally Wisdom  
 spoke the following words: “See, now the universe is refined,  
 its construction outstanding in its splendor. And yet what  
 satisfaction can there be in a world that is full of every per- 55  
 fection but still occupied by no inhabitant? Instead, so that  
 long idleness not deface this new-formed land, let a human

nunc homo formetur, summi quem tangat imago  
 numinis, et nostram celso donatus honore  
 induat interius formonsa in mente figuram.  
 Hunc libet erectum vultu praeponere pronis,  
 60 qui regat aeterno subiectum foedere mundum,  
 bruta domet, legem cunctis ac nomina ponat,  
 astra notet caelique vias et sidera norit,  
 discat et inspectis discernere tempora signis,  
 subiciat pelagus saevum, ingenioque tenaci  
 65 possideat quaecumque videt; cui bestia frendens  
 serviat et posito discant mansueta furore  
 imperium iumenta pati iussique ligari  
 festinent trepidi consueta in vincla iuveni.  
 Quoque magis natura hominis sublimior extet,  
 70 accipiat rectos in caelum tollere vultus,  
 factorem quaerat proprium cui mente fideli  
 impendat famulam longaevo in tempore vitam.”  
 Haec ait et fragilem dignatus tangere terram  
 temperat umentem consperso in pulvere limum  
 75 orditurque novum dives Sapientia corpus,  
 non aliter quam nunc opifex cui est artis in usu  
 flectere laxatas per cuncta sequacia ceras  
 et vultus implere manu seu corpora gypso  
 fingere vel segni speciem componere massae.  
 80 Sic Pater omnipotens victurum protinus arvom  
 tractat et in lento meditatur viscera caeno.  
 Hinc arcem capitis sublimi in vertice signat  
 septiformem vultum rationis sensibus aptans  
 olfactu, auditu, visu, gustuque potentem.  
 85 Tactus erit solus, toto qui corpore iudex

now be shaped who will receive the impress of the highest  
 divinity and, endowed with high honor, take within himself  
 our profile in his well-formed mind. It is my pleasure to be-  
 stow on him precedence with his upright countenance over  
 the downward-looking, to rule the subject world in an eter- 60  
 nal covenant, to tame the savage, to give law and names to  
 all, to observe the stars and know the paths of heaven and  
 the constellations, to learn to distinguish the seasons by the  
 observation of signs, to bring into subjection the cruel sea,  
 and to possess with his unyielding intellect whatever he 65  
 observes. Let wild animals, despite their raging, be his ser-  
 vants, and beasts of burden, tamed, their fierceness set  
 aside, learn to endure his command; let bullocks, when or-  
 dered to be yoked, hurry in fear to their accustomed re-  
 straints. And so that human nature be still more exalted, let 70  
 him receive an upright countenance to raise up to heaven,  
 and let him seek out his own maker to devote to him with  
 faithful spirit a life of obedience in the long course of time.”

With these words resourceful Wisdom, deigning to lay  
 hands on brittle earth, combined moist mud with a scatter-  
 ing of dust and began to frame a new body in just the same 75  
 way as in the present day a craftsman does, whose artistic  
 practice is to mold pliant wax into every configuration, to  
 shape faces with his hand or delineate bodies from plaster,  
 or to impress form on a recalcitrant mass. In this way the 80  
 almighty Father shaped the earth, soon to be brought to  
 life, and envisaged flesh in the supple mud. And so on the  
 highest point he marked out the citadel that is the head,  
 adapting the face with its seven openings to the sensations  
 of consciousness, with control over smell, hearing, vision,  
 and taste. Touch would be the only one that feels and passes 85

sentiat et proprium spargat per membra vigorem.  
 Flexilis artatur recavo sic lingua palato,  
 pressus ut in cameram pulsantis verbere plectri  
 percusso resonet modulatus in aere sermo.  
 90 Exim succiduum porrecto in corpore pectus  
 spargit ramosas post brachia fortia palmas.  
 Succedit stomacho medius, qui tegmine molli  
 inter utrumque latus foveat vitalia, venter.  
 Dividuam partem femur excipit, aptius ut se  
 95 alternum moveat duplicato poplite gressus.  
 At parte ex alia, fingit quam conditor unus,  
 occipiti submissa suo descendere cervix  
 incipit et vastos compagibus addere nervos.  
 Spina rigens crebris inter commercia nodis  
 100 diffundit duplicem costarum ex ordine cratem.  
 Pars interna novos vitae formatur ad usus,  
 naturale parant tegmen vitalia cordi,  
 massaque congestis pendens absconditur extis.  
 Additur et tenui pascendus ab aere pulmo,  
 105 qui concepta trahens lenti spiramina flatus  
 accipiat reddens, reddat quas sumpserit auras,  
 inque vicem crebro pellatur anhelitus haustu.  
 Dextra tenet iecoris vegetandum sanguine fontem,  
 quo clausum venae spargant per viscera flumen.  
 110 Lienis laevam sortitur regula partem,  
 qua crines perhibent unguisque recrescere sectos;  
 quae vivunt sensuque carent in corporis usu  
 nec abscisa dolent, hinc nunc augmenta resumunt.

judgment throughout the entire body and disperses through  
 every limb its native powers. The pliable tongue was en-  
 closed within the hollow palate in such a way that when con-  
 fined in that chamber and impelled by the tongue's pulsing  
 plectrum, the voice sounds out in articulate speech in the  
 agitated air. Next in progression downward, on the front of  
 the body the chest sends out branching hands on the end of  
 strong arms. In the middle below the esophagus comes the  
 belly, which between both flanks protects the vital organs  
 with its soft covering. Then the thigh divides into two so  
 that the body can more readily advance with bent knees and  
 alternating steps. But on the other side, as the work of the  
 same single creator, set below the back of the head the neck  
 begins its descent and attaches a web of sinews to the struc-  
 ture. The rigid spine, while joined together by multiple ver-  
 tebrae, sends out on either side the regular sequence of the  
 rib cage. The internal structure is shaped to meet the new  
 requirements of life: the vital organs provide natural protec-  
 tion for the heart, and its suspended form is concealed by a  
 mass of entrails. Lungs too take their place, to feed upon the  
 insubstantial air: by drawing the breaths they have received  
 in slow drafts they are reciprocally to inhale and to exhale  
 the air they have taken in, and respiration is to be driven by  
 the recurrent alternating intake of breath. The right side is  
 occupied by the liver, a spring that derives vigor from blood;  
 veins distribute through the body the stream that is con-  
 tained therein. The fixture of the spleen takes up the left  
 side, by means of which, it is said, hair and nails, when cut,  
 grow back; they live but have no physical sensation, they do  
 not feel pain when trimmed, but proceed to grow back once  
 more.

# Writings on Body and Soul

AELRED OF RIEVAULX

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY BRUCE L. VENARDE

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