

TESTE DAVID CUM SIBYLLA  
(Virgil's Fourth Eclogue: "Pollio")

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QUENTIN LISTER, O.P.

At a time when pagan Rome was perishing in the throes of moral decay, the great Virgil wrote of the dawning of a new age, a "golden age," heralding man's salvation. Long considered as a prophecy of our Savior's birth, this remarkable poem is now attributed to Virgil's contact with Hellenistico-Jewish sources, notably Isaías.

Sicilian Muses,  
Let us turn our lips to loftier lays.  
These wooded groves we sing,  
These lowly tamarisks will not do here.  
Our theme, our metaphor must suit a Consul's name.

Now the time of Cumae Sibyl's final song is set.  
Now the cycle of the heaven's spheres begins anew.  
The Virgin returns.  
The golden days of Saturn sweep upon us once again,  
And a new race is sent us from on high.

O spotless Lucina,  
Sister of reigning Apollo,  
Smile protectingly upon this babe  
Who even now is changing by his birth  
An age of iron to an age of gold.

Even while you, Pollio, while you are Consul,  
This splendor of our time shall visit us,  
And the glorious months begin to roll their course.  
Even while you are Consul,  
Shall every vestige of our wickedness  
Be made nought, freeing earth of all our fears forever.

His shall be a god's life.  
He shall see and be seen by heroic hearts  
Wandering in society of the gods.  
With his father's virtues he shall rule a world in peace.

To thee, child, shall earth yield without toil  
As first fruits: ivy creeping here and there, and ladies-glove;  
Indian lotus joined with smiling evergreen of Egypt.  
Unbidden, goats shall trundle homeward heavy with their milk.  
The flocks and herds shall now not fear the mighty lion.  
Thy very cradle, child, shall shower thee with flowers' caress.  
The serpent shall die;  
And the treacherous poison weed too.  
But fragrant Assyrian spikenard shall burgeon everywhere.

Soon shalt thou learn to read the praise of heroes.  
Soon shalt thou learn to read thy father's doings.  
Soon shalt thou come to say what virtue is.

Then, slowly the fields shall yellow with soft ears of corn;  
While from the wildest vines drop grapes in ruddy clusters,  
And the proud oak weeps tears of honeydew.

Yet shall remain some traces of our ancient crime.  
Enough to urge men once again to tempt the sea in boats,  
To throw up walls round cities,  
And carve furrows in the hills.  
Other Argonauts must come;  
And other Argos too  
Shall bear across the main our bravest men.  
There shall be likewise other wars,  
And great Achilles shall return to Troy.

At last when thou shalt be a man in years,  
The sailor shall withdraw from off the sea.  
No longer shall the pinewood ships ply merchant routes,  
But all land bear all things.

The soil shall not endure the harrow,  
Nor the vineyard bear the scythe.  
The sturdy plowman shall unyoke his pair.  
No longer shall sheared fleeces feign bright tints.  
The ram himself, while pasturing, shall change his woolly coat;  
Now with reddish purple color now with saffron weld;  
Scarlet next shall at its pleasure clothe the feeding lambs.

The Fates have chanted to their spindles,  
Spinning destiny's decisions,  
"Now begin this golden era!"

Forward to the greatest honors, child!  
The time is nigh.  
Jove's own offspring,  
Most illustrious,  
Brightest issue of the gods.

See how the world in anticipation is nodding  
To thee its tottering, vaulted mass.  
Behold the earth!  
Behold the sea's calm, coursing motion,  
And the heaven's depth!  
Is not all rejoicing  
At the coming age?

Oh, if my waning days be only long enough!  
If but the breath of my life stay  
To hail with song thy life.  
Neither Orpheus of Thrace with Calliope, his mother,  
Nor the singing master, Linus, fair Apollo's son,  
Should outdo me in thy praise.  
Yes, if Pan himself should challenge me in singing,  
And his own Arcadia judge,  
He should defer.

Come to us, little infant!  
Know thy mother with a smile.  
Ten long months she waits now for thy birth.

Come to us, little infant!  
Not til mother and father smile on thee,  
Canst thou press onward to a god's own banquet  
And to a goddess' love.