In the centuries following Christianity’s transformation from an outlawed cult to the official religion of the Roman Empire, epic poems based on biblical themes served to dress many of the events recorded in the two testaments in the vocabulary and literary style of the most respected pagan writers of the Golden Age. Biblical epics were meant to replace the “lying fables” of Greco-Roman literature with scriptural truth, while exchanging the crudeness of scriptural prose for the sublime character of classical verse. While the efforts to mix secular form with religious content may be said to have created a single new genre, the poets nevertheless produced a body of writings that vary immensely: from centones (“patchworks” splicing lines and phrases verbatim from the pagan poets in new arrangements to approximate a biblical event), to relatively faithful paraphrases, to liberal treatments that select and arrange the details from the scriptural source and introduce a running commentary on the events portrayed.

Modern critical response to the biblical epics has been more literary than theological, paying greater attention to narrative and rhetorical elements than to the treatment of religious questions. Few if any poems in the genre, however, can be considered as belonging exclusively to the domain of belles-lettres. The very act of versification forces even the most literal-minded poet to deviate in some measure from the vocabulary and syntax of the original scriptural text he is following, and such deviation requires the kind of choices that often indicate the poet’s exegetical preferences. When a poet employs, for example, tonans for God, or speaks of Hell as Avernus, the critic may deny that such usage is doctrinally significant, but when Eve is termed experti docta mali ‘she who learned evil by experience’, or even more strikingly, when the garden of Eden becomes allegorically the argumenta operum ‘elements of the works (of creation)’ and plantaria rerum, ‘seedlings of the universe’ then the questions of doctrinal implication and exegetical in-
fluence become important. Scholarly inquiry into this area, however, is incomplete even at the elementary stage of listing language parallels from the church fathers in the textual notes of modern editions. But even when source study reveals a greater number of parallels both theological and artistic, one still needs to determine precisely how a poet uses his religious tradition. Such a determination is especially important in the case of the freer biblical epics that appear to offer a melange of commentaries and descriptive embellishments. One such poem is the subject of the present study.

The *Alethia* of Claudius Marius Victor stands out as one of the freest redactions in the entire corpus of biblical epic poetry.4 Victor’s expansion of detail in presenting the Genesis story from the creation of the world to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the strikingly philosophical tone of the commentaries he distributes throughout his epic, enable readers to penetrate the rather complicated style. It provides a richly decorated and often novel presentation of the cosmic drama of creation, man’s fall, and the subsequent trials of his offspring. Victor expressly claims to have composed the poem for the enlightenment of the young,5 and although we know of him as a rhetorician and witness his penchant for late antique affectation, his poem also bears witness to a firm knowledge of the Genesis account and much of its exegetical tradition.6 A detailed analysis of Victor’s commentary suggests that this rhetor of Marseille participated in an environment that was intellectually active. His city had long been a cultural crossroad with potential for exchange between the Greek and Latin parts of the Empire, and between the Empire and the Jewish and Persian cultures of the Middle East.7

This essay offers a discussion of the theology of Victor’s presentation of the seventh day of creation, contained in *Alethia* 1.171-222:

The seventh day was witness to the fact that the great father had ceased—but only in the sense that he ceased adding to the numbers of kinds of creatures—and had taken his rest. And that day which witnessed a different kind of work was deservedly blessed. For even God’s ceasing and putting aside his labors is a thing full of power—an example for his children whereby they might acquire fitting rewards.

It is enough [for us] to have seen the Lord [working] six days. The seventh day gave an example of rest and bids people to expect this rest as a reward for life, to be bestowed forever after pious works have been performed. That day is also the one on which Christ, while he rested in the