BENEVOLENT WINDS AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD  
IN DE LAUDIBUS DEI OF DRACONTIUS  

BY  
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De laudibus Dei of Dracontius, dating from the last decade of the fifth century, is one of the finest of the late antique biblical epics. A celebration of the workings of divine providence and pietas Dei, the poem contains numerous commentaries and extensive amplifications of scriptural narrative. One of the more elaborate of these offers a reflection on the biblical account of the expulsion of Adam and Eve, the point of which is to emphasize God's provision for the fallen couple through his plan to have them dominate the material world despite their fall:

And so, God himself, mindful of his work, orders the two having left their peaceful home to tame the world and hold under their sway all that the world contains. Even what the soil puts forth in flower, what the green grass sprouts, what the crops put forth as ears of grain, what the tree brings out from its branches, what vines put out in buds, what pleasant places adorn with leaves that are like so many hairs, what springs send forth as rivers, what the ocean tosses about, what the sea's wave constricts as a strait, what it buffets as coastline, what the winds curl up, blowing with a howl on the unsteady surface of the sea, what the lands produce, what fire, water, and air do too: all these were provided to come into human uses, so that, like Christ, he who was made from dust might dominate all these and that all bodies, subdued, might serve bodies created in flesh.

This reflection on man's dominion and his being served by all material creation and the products of the four elements (l. 579), despite its abundant rhetoric replete with parallel phrases, corresponds to Gen. 1.28-30, which recounts God's blessing on the couple, his exhortation to subdue the earth, and his bestowal of plants and animals for food. All of this, however, is proclaimed before their sin in Genesis. An emphasis on man's subjugation of material creation after the fall, however, better suits Dracontius' aim of celebrating the continuation of God's care. By stressing man's dominion after the expulsion, the poet is praising God's provision for post-lapsarian man and softening the impact of his fall.
The commentary that follows this verbal amplification further reveals Dracontius’ purposeful manipulation of narrative elements. It responds directly to the reference cited above regarding the services of “bodies” (corpora) and observes that an incorporeal substance also serves man. Spiritus, the incorporeal servant, first manifests itself through the animating power of the wind:

A spirit, however, serves [man] without a body as wind. Wind drives the clouds; when heavier air is condensed it forms a cloudy sky: by this [wind] come showers and a clear sky. Wind nourishes fruits and causes ears of grain to sprout, grain which gentle breezes winnow with a summery breath. It plucks fruits and shakes flowers from trees. It both kindles flames with its breaths and mitigates the summer’s heat.¹

By his own emphasis Dracontius shows that he means to distinguish the spiritus, the incorporeal life-giving force manifested as the wind, from the simple material element, air, which he includes among the many and various corpora who are to serve Adam and Eve (l. 579). Wind is considered to be air animated by spirit, and because of this aspect of its nature it is able to help provide food and comfort for life in the world beyond Eden. This is another reflection on God’s benevolence by the poet, one that suits his general position on the pietas Dei through the continuation of praise for the divine care and provision for fallen man. Moreover, the motivation of this praise of the spirit manifested in the wind at this particular point in the narrative reveals a conscious manipulation of scriptural imagery. The wind plays no literal role whatsoever in the Genesis account of the fall of the first couple and their subsequent expulsion from the Garden. In that account, after the couple receive their sentences from God, we read only that “God drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and the flaming sword, which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3.21-24). There is, however, an exegetical tradition associated with the guardian cherubim that explains the inclusion of a discourse on the wind:

There are, both in the Israelite and Gentile tradition, watchmen (cherubim), which ‘keep guard,’ and there are cherubim that appear as the embodiment of the strong winds, which drive the clouds of the sky, the chariots of the Holy One...It would seem that in our verse [i.e. the expulsion account of Gen. 3.24] the two concepts are combined: the cherubim are referred to here both as guardians and as a symbol of the winds, as is shown by the words that immediately follow [namely the reference to the sword flame]...If the cherubim are actually