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TERTULLIAN

The traditional account of Tertullian's life is based upon Jerome's *Lives of Illustrious Men* and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.¹ According to this tradition, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (c. 155-c.225) was a native of Carthage where his father served as a centurion of the proconsular cohort (*centurion proconsularis*). Educated in literature, rhetoric, and jurisprudence, Tertullian went to Rome where he practiced law. Some historians² equate him with a jurist, Tertullianus, whose opinions are recorded in two Roman legal digests.

Tertullian converted to Christianity before 197, perhaps inspired by the heroism of Christian martyrs,³ and then returned to Carthage where he engaged his considerable talents on behalf of the church. His marriage to a Christian is obvious from his treatise addressed *To My Wife*. His ordination as a priest is less certain: although Jerome referred

¹ Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 53; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.2.4.

² Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1953), 246.

³ Consider Tertullian's words: "For all who witness the noble patience of its martyrs of its martyrs, as struck with misgivings, are inflamed with desire to examine into the matter in question; and as soon as they come to know the truth, they straightway enroll themselves its disciples." Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5, trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1873; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 108. *Ante-Nicene Fathers* hereafter cited as ANF. See also Paul Monceaux, *Histoire Littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne depuis les Origines jusqu'à l'Invasion Arabe*, vol. 1, *Tertullien et les Origines* (Paris: n.p., 1901; reprint, Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 182; and Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 246-7.

to him as “presbyter of the church until middle life,”⁴ Tertullian classified himself as a layperson.⁵

Tertullian was the most prolific Latin writer until Augustine and composed works that are apologetic, polemical, and ethical in nature. After years of defending orthodox Christianity, however, he turned to Montanism, a Spirit-based movement, which Tertullian called “the New Prophecy” and which emphasized prophecy, ecstatic utterances and glossolalia, women in ministry, rigorous morality, and eschatological expectations. According to Augustine, Tertullian withdrew from the Montanists to found his own congregation of Tertullianists, creating yet another schism.⁶ The year and manner of his death are unknown, but Jerome reported that he “lived to an advanced age.”⁷

Recent scholarship has called into question much of what Jerome reported about Tertullian. Timothy David Barnes, in particular, dismantled Jerome’s life history of Tertullian and reconstructed a brief biographical sketch based solely on Tertullian’s own revelations.⁸ According to Barnes, Tertullian’s extant works covered a brief period from

⁴ Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 53, trans. Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1892; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 373. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* hereafter cited as NPNF.

⁵ “Are not even we laics priests?” asked Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7, trans. S. Thelwall, ANF 4:54. See also Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 12.

⁶ Augustine, *The Heresies* 86. Barnes, 258, however, concluded that Tertullianists were not members of a separate sect but simply the “Montanist party in Africa,” a position made tenable by the consideration that other Montanist factions, such as Priscillianists and Quintillianists, adopted the names of their leaders.

⁷ Jerome, *Ibid.*

⁸ Barnes, 57-9.

196 to 212, allowing a birth date as late as 170. Jerome's title for Tertullian's father, *centurio proconsularis*, was invalid; therefore, there is no proof of Tertullian's military extraction.⁹ Regarding the identification of Tertullian as the Roman jurist, Barnes not only discredited such speculation but also questioned Tertullian's involvement in any law practice. The insight to Tertullian's background is significant for Barnes because he sees Tertullian's conception of the Christian life as the *militia Christi* and his legalistic approach to Christianity not as the results of a military background and legal expertise but as fundamental religious attitudes arising naturally from the Christian predicament.¹⁰

Early in his Christian life, Tertullian wrote several apologetic works defending his new faith in the face of pagan and imperial persecution. In the *Apology*, Tertullian assumed the manner of a lawyer as he denounced Trajan's policy regarding the prosecution of Christians:

O miserable deliverance – under the necessities of the case, a self-contradiction! It forbids them to be sought after as innocent, and it commands them to be punished as guilty. It is at once merciful and cruel; it passes by, and it punishes. Why dost thou play a game of evasion upon thyself, O Judgment? If thou condemnest, why dost thou not also inquire. If thou dost not inquire, why dost thou not also absolve?¹¹

In other apologies, such as *To the Nations*, *The Soul's Testimony*, and *To the Martyrs*, he appealed for toleration of Christians, attacked pagan superstitions, rebutted charges of immorality, and claimed that Christians were good and useful citizens, not dangerous criminals.

⁹ Ibid., 11-2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22-9.

¹¹ Tertullian, *Apology 2*, trans. S. Thelwall, ANF 3:19.

Tertullian avowed in the *Apology* that “the oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; *the blood of Christians is seed.*”¹² Tertullian witnessed this phenomenon in Carthage during the persecution of Septimius Severus in 202. Famous martyrs during this period were the heroines of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, which Tertullian may have edited.¹³ If so, then he finished the story which Perpetua began and recounted her execution, closing with the words: “O most brave and blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen unto the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! Whom whoever magnifies, and honours, and adores, assuredly ought to read these examples for the edification of the Church”¹⁴

Tertullian’s polemical works attacked a variety of heretics and heresies, including Marcion, Valentinus, Praxeas and Monarchianism, and Gnosticism and Docetism in general. In *The Prescription against Heretics*, Tertullian utilized legal terminology to deny heretics the right to use the Scriptures, which only the orthodox Church had the authority to interpret. In defining the orthodox church, he affirmed the doctrine of apostolic succession. Moreover, he disdained heresies as the products of philosophy: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes

¹² Tertullian, *Apology* 50, ANF 3:55.

¹³ For a discussion of Tertullian’s possible involvement in the *Passion*, see Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy and “New Visions”: Evidence of Montanism in “The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas”* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 49-57.

¹⁴ *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 6.4, trans. R. E. Wallis, ANF 3:705.

from ‘the porch of Solomon,’ who had himself taught that ‘the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.’”¹⁵

Tertullian made a significant theological contribution in the treatise *Against Praxeas*, which he wrote after his adherence to Montanism. Little is known of Praxeas other than that he rejected Montanism and promoted Monarchianism. As Tertullian said, “By this Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome: he drove away prophecy, and he brought in heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father.”¹⁶ In refuting Praxeas’ Monarchianism, Tertullian utilized two significant terms in the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ: “substance” and “person.” According to Tertullian’s legal usage, it is possible for many persons to share one substance, or for one person to possess multiple substances. Thus, both the unity and distinction of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can be affirmed: the three share the same substance but remain distinct person. Similarly, in Jesus Christ, there are two substances, divinity and humanity, which belong to one person.¹⁷

Two other important aspects of Tertullian’s theology were his doctrines of the transmission of the soul and original sin. Tertullian’s doctrine of the soul, termed “traducianism,” affirmed that the soul was derived from the parents’ souls just as the

¹⁵ Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics* 7, trans. Peter Holmes, ANF 3:246.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1, trans. Peter Holmes, ANF 3:598.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 27, ANF 3:624.

body was derived from the parents' bodies. This understanding led to the notion that original sin was an inheritance passed on at conception.¹⁸

Tertullian's ethical works emphasized to the early church the importance of separation from pagan society and provided to later generations valuable information regarding the moral life and worship of his era. For example, *On Penitence* influenced the practice of penance in the developing church. Another example is *On Baptism*, which reveals details concerning the administration of that sacrament in third-century North Africa. Treatises such as *On Monogamy*, *On Fasting*, *On Modesty*, and the *Exhortation to Chastity* reflect the rigorism of his Montanist period. Throughout his writings, Tertullian limited women's roles in church leadership with one exception: women's right to prophesy, which reflected the Montanist emphasis on Spirit-led ministry.¹⁹

The reasons behind Tertullian's acceptance of Montanism remain a mystery to historians.²⁰ He offered no details in his extant writings, although his lost treatise *On Ecstasy* possibly contained such information.²¹ Jerome suggested that Tertullian was driven to Montanism by conflict with Roman clergy: "He [Tertullian] was presbyter of the church until middle life, afterwards driven by the envy and abuse of the clergy of the Roman church, he lapsed to the doctrine of Montanus, and mentions the new prophecy in

¹⁸ See Tertullian's treatises *On the Soul* and *The Soul's Testimony*.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Against Marcion* 8; and *Exhortation to Chastity* 10.

²⁰ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 76.

²¹ Jerome, *Ibid.*, listed among Tertullian's works six volumes *On Ecstasy* to which Tertullian added another volume *Against Apollonius*. See also Barnes, 253-4.

many of his books.”²² The unreliability of Jerome’s evidence that Tertullian was a priest, however, makes doubtful this motivation for Tertullian’s adherence to Montanism.

Tertullian, however, did have a possible connection to Montanism in Rome. In his treatise *Against the Valentinians*, Tertullian spoke of “our own Proculus, the model of chaste old age and Christian eloquence.”²³ This Proculus, most likely, was the one who defended the New Prophecy against Gaius, the representative of the Roman hierarchy, which rejected the movement. Tertullian’s reverence for Proculus indicated his alignment with his doctrine *contra* the Roman verdict.

Some of Tertullian’s writings indicate that his embrace of Montanism could have been due to his refutation of heresy.²⁴ Because heresies proliferated in Tertullian’s day, the Holy Spirit separated the seeds from the tares and “dispersed all the perplexities of the past, and their self-chosen allegories and parables, by the open and perspicuous explanation of the entire mystery, through the new prophecy, which descends in copious streams from the Paraclete.” Elsewhere, Tertullian summed up the work of the Paraclete as “the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the re-formation of the intellect, and the advancement toward the ‘better things.’”²⁵ The “better things” were, for Tertullian, the teachings of the Holy Spirit, who judged the heresies and led creation to maturity.

²² Jerome, *Ibid.*

²³ Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 5, trans. Alexander Roberts, ANF 3:506.

²⁴ J. G. Davies, “Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis LXIII*: A Note on the Origins of Montanism,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1955): 91.

²⁵ Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1, trans. S. Thelwall, ANF 4:27.

More than the fight against heresy, however, the call to discipline motivated Tertullian in his life and ministry. Tertullian was inclined toward moral austerity from the start, so the move to the New Prophecy did not require a major step. He approved Montanists' contempt for the world, rigorous discipline and asceticism, enthusiasm for martyrdom, and apocalyptic expectation, and he rejected the conformity to the world and lax penitential system of the Roman church. His rational nature disdained the imperfections among "psychics", or carnal Christians,²⁶ which did not fit his perception of the will of God. Furthermore, his activism produced an affinity for visionary, ecstatic phenomena in religious life. The Montanist world-view explained this period of continuing sin among Christians as an intermediate stage to be superseded by the new age of the Spirit. Tertullian responded and soon became the most ardent proponent of the New Prophecy.²⁷

Though extremely puritan, Montanism was orthodox when Tertullian joined the movement. The church in Asia Minor had excommunicated the sectarians, but, in North Africa, there is no evidence of schism between the Catholics and Montanists during the early decades of the third century.²⁸ Tertullian, even as a Montanist, was not estranged

²⁶ "We indeed, on our part, subsequently withdrew from the carnally-minded (*Psychicis*) on our acknowledgment and maintenance of the Paraclete." Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1, ANF 3:598. Tertullian derived the term "Psychics" from 1 Cor. 2:14: "But a natural man (*ψυχικὸς*) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (NASB). Peter Homes, ANF 3:383 n. 18.

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 820-1; González, 76.

²⁸ Douglas Powell, "Tertullianists and Cataphrygians," *Vigiliae Christianae* 29 (1975): 33-8, argued against a Montanist schism in North Africa and deftly interpreted Tertullian's pronouncements concerning the Prophets and the psychics to conclude that

totally from the Catholic community.²⁹ He remained faithful to orthodox Christianity and used the New Prophecy as a platform from which to continue his attack on paganism and heresy: “Tertullian the Montanist was Tertullian the Montanist catholic.”³⁰

Despite his adherence to Montanism, therefore, Tertullian powerfully influenced the patristic and later the medieval church as well as contemporary Christianity. He refined, if not created, Latin terminology capable of expressing theological issues. For his contributions, he has been named the “Father of Latin Theology.”

the Carthaginian Montanists “[o]riginally . . . formed, not a schismatic body, but an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* - not, indeed, content to be such, but prepared to be such while they strove still to secure the official recognition of that New Prophecy which they themselves obeyed.” See also William Tabbernee, “Remnants of the New Prophecy: Literary and Epigraphical Sources of the Montanist Movement,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 21, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989), 195-7.

²⁹ Tertullian addressed his Montanist treatise *On Flight in Persecution* (1.1) to “My brother Fabius,” who had opposed Tertullian regarding other questions and had not accepted the Paraclete. He also referred to a man who took a second wife as “among our brethren.” *Exhortation to Chastity* 12.6. See also Powell, 33-5. Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 176, suggested that Tertullian remained in the Catholic Church, “despite (or because of) his allegiance to the New Prophecy.” For an opposing view, see Paul McKechnie, *The First Christian Centuries: Perspectives on the Early Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 175; and idem., “‘Women’s Religion’ and Second-Century Christianity,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47 (1996): 427. McKechnie, in opposition to Powell, insisted that Tertullian and his own sect, the “Tertullianists,” split from the Carthaginian church in 206, assuming that Tertullian’s adherence to Montanism constituted a split from Catholicism.

³⁰ Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 69.

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