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0521524954 - Tertullian, First Theologian of the West - Eric osborn

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OF THE WEST

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Tertullian of Carthage was the first western Christian to write an extended theology. A vigorous and humorous apologist, he defended Christians against the hostility of the Roman state. Within the church he gave great attention to the rule of faith or criterion of truth which he found in the gospel. His controlling canon declared the perfection of the divine plan for human salvation, in Jesus Christ, son of God, crucified saviour, but when this was applied to the lives of believers he was disappointed by Christian mediocrity. Consequently he turned to an account of original sin, the necessary fear of God, and apocalyptic hope.

A complex thinker, he has in modern times been rejected by both liberal Christianity and its secular critics, who in fealty to the Enlightenment believed that a passion for reason should lead to a quasi-mathematical system. The destruction of this belief by Gödel, Wittgenstein, Rorty and many others opens the way for an understanding of Tertullian's passion for opposites, contingency and rational argument.

Misquoted and misused, Tertullian now calls for sustained analysis and interpretation. This book offers a major re-appraisal of his theology and its influence on the shape of the western Christian tradition, particularly on Augustine.

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*To
James, William and Jeremy*

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Preface

Newness is more than a matter of timing. It is not enough, says Tertullian, to arrive early and stand at the head of a queue, as people did each day outside the baths in Carthage. An originator has to be original. The new miracles of Christ were followed by a long line of imitators; but the novelty of Christ was his uniqueness rather than his priority in time. In a humbler way, Tertullian himself is not merely first in an occidental queue. He is 'astonishingly original and personal'¹ and is able to do theology, that laminated fusion of argument and scripture, in a way which breaks new ground. Strikingly, he wrote his own kind of Latin. He liberated Christian thought from its Greek beginnings by analysing and developing biblical concepts.

Thinkers are 'divided according to traditions, each member of which partially adopts and partially modifies the vocabulary of the writers whom he has read'. Traditions begin from 'the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds with a talent for redescription'.² Tertullian was an innovator, and, in length of influence, he has outstripped the modern creators, like Darwin and Freud, by nearly two millennia. It is therefore useful to elucidate his final vocabulary, the words and meanings which continually recur in his arguments.³ Most of his words were not new, but the way he arranged them was. He purified a dialect, by framing a vocabulary which enabled him to challenge the opponents of his kind of Christianity.

¹ Jean Daniélou, *A history of early Christian doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, vol. III, *The origins of Latin Christianity* (London, 1977), 341.

² R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), 76.

³ Like any consideration of Tertullian's use of words, this study acknowledges the monumental work of R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum*, 2nd edn. (Paris, 1977).

Our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe . . .⁴

He did not see himself as an innovator, but as the defender of a gospel which had come through the apostles from God. Swept off his feet by the Christian scriptures (Clement of Alexandria had compared them with the songs of irresistible Sirens), he came to grief when he denied friction between his final vocabulary and any part of scripture. His writing was part of the effective history, as Gadamer puts it, of the bible. He makes it easy for his reader to find his final vocabulary by calling it the 'rule' and expressing it in a variety of striking terms: 'What in the end is for you the total disgrace of my God, is the mystery of mankind's salvation' ('Totum denique dei mei penes vos dedecus sacramentum est humanae salutis').⁵

There were three reasons why he was able to write such a sentence. First, he possessed the intellectual virtues of clarity and economy. He gave reasons and set out arguments. Interpreters with wide knowledge of early Christian thought⁶ have singled out his intellectual quality as pre-eminent. To this strength he added the rarer gifts of paradox, metaphor and wit, all necessary for a thinker who fashions a language. Second, he had a sense of the power of words, because Jesus Christ was for him a word-event; the living voice of the gospel carried him along. At creation, God who had always been rational became verbal and the place had never been quiet since. Theology was a lively matter, displaying 'the limitless wealth of the word of God in its interpretation in the world during its passage through history'.⁷ Third, he was engaged in vigorous controversy, where a kind of brilliance was needed. Most of what he wrote was directed against someone. He took on the Roman establishment, Marcion, Praxeas, indulgent bishops, Hermogenes and Valentinians; indeed he took on the world itself and insisted that things were going to be very different at the end. He did this because, like Paul, he was Heraclitean in mind and temperament – a message from God could not count on security but only on strife. To that divine Heraclitean word which ruled

⁴ T. S. Eliot, Little Gidding, *Four Quartets* (London, 1944), 39.

⁵ *Marc.* 2.27.7.

⁶ Like Karl Holl and Jean Daniélou.

⁷ Gerhard Ebeling, *The word of God and tradition* (London, 1968), 31.

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through all things he was committed; the possessive adjective ‘my’ preceded ‘God’ and ‘lord’ in his decisive statements.

As first theologian of the West, he is one of those second-century writers who both absorb elements of philosophy into theology and also illuminate the relation between the New Testament and later creeds. His ideas have become more accessible in this century which has turned from systems to problems, from conclusions to argument. Tertullian’s perpetual argumentation (*ratio* is his favourite word) enables us to understand his conclusions. The specific aim of this book is to analyse Tertullian’s arguments and thereby clarify his meaning. Elusive and forever antithetical, he could be described as ‘the laughing Stoic’, were it not that he specifically disowned all schools of philosophy and appeared ‘like a meteor’.⁸

Meteors make few friends, so Tertullian presents a challenge to his reader. Since the Enlightenment, no ancient Christian writer has attracted more hostility.⁹ Many have been repelled by the rhetorical force with which he led his readers from theory to practice. This won his contests in the second century and loses them today. Few have seen how his metaphors created a new language. There is no alternative to extended analysis and the demands of analysis are severe. We begin from the claim that ‘if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters’.¹⁰ This is a strategy for getting hold of people’s fundamental beliefs, for learning their language, identifying their common concepts and the use to which they put them.¹¹ There is no way in which we can understand what any writer is saying if we neglect his final vocabulary, if we isolate a proposition from the arguments which define its meaning. If (as most have done) we take the proposition ‘it is credible, because inept’ away from the argument where it occurs, we cannot but reject it and play the common game of ‘telling men of straw that they have no brains’.¹²

⁸ Daniélou, *Latin Christianity*, 341.

⁹ Renan described his work as ‘un mélange inouï de talent, de fausseté d’esprit, d’éloquence, et de mauvais goût’. *Marc Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* (Paris, 1882), 456.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson, On the very idea of a conceptual scheme, in Davidson, *Inquiries into truth and interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), 197.

¹¹ Quentin Skinner, A reply to my critics, in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and context, Quentin Skinner and his critics* (Cambridge, 1988), 238.

¹² J. Passmore, The idea of a history of philosophy, *HTHS*, 5 (1965), 13.

Philosophers have continued to show, from Wittgenstein onwards, that meaning is inaccessible without context, language-game, final vocabulary, verbal constellation, dialect, universe of discourse or whatever imperfect name we choose to call it. The more useful theologians have said the same.¹³ That is why this book seeks to identify the final vocabulary which Tertullian created and used in different arguments. Such an analysis assumes that Tertullian is talking sense and sets out the way in which he arranges words.

The book begins with Tertullian's canon of truth, the perfection of all things in Christ. Then, before going further in exploration of his arguments, it examines those slogans which have classified him as an opponent of rationality: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' and 'Credible because inept.' There is little point in struggling with his arguments if he set no value on reason. These puzzles resolved and his predilection for reason established, his apologetic reveals an Heraclitean respect for opposites and a Stoic confidence in every soul's innate awareness of God. His longest dispute was with Marcion, who separated the just God of the Old Testament from the good God who sent Jesus. His conflict with Praxeas produced the first extended statement of trinitarian doctrine. The brief account of prayer indicates the central themes of his thought and his use of the bible is decisive and only rarely disastrous. His account of sin runs into his account of the church which he claimed should be the spotless bride of Christ. The marked difference between his treatment of Hermogenes' argument and Valentinian theosophy is worth investigation. His eschatology is highly developed and his expectation of the end is colourful and coherent. From his theology and his Stoicism comes an austere and provocative ethic.

Interpretation requires us, as Gadamer put it, to project our prejudgements against a text which destroys some and lets others stand. The process continues and nothing is secure. Fifteen years ago, I wrote that Tertullian 'never stops to think what his opponent

¹³ J. Daniélou, on the limits of philological pedigrees, wrote 'Words cannot be divorced from their contexts, and a change of context inevitably alters the sense of a word.' *Gospel message and Hellenistic culture* (London, 1973), 329.

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might mean'.¹⁴ Now I am mystified by the way in which he listens to what his opponent says. In his *apologeticum* he accepts the Stoic world of opposites and innate knowledge of God. He feels and redefines Marcion's antitheses and Praxeas' monotheism. Even from Valentinians, who are foolish enough to think that all other Christians are foolish, he takes important elements of trinitarian theology.

Our limited conquest of conceptual parochialism will depend on the range of our prejudgements, a respect for the text and the stamina of friends. Beyond La Trobe University and Melbourne, I am grateful to colleagues in Cambridge and Tübingen, Lille, Paris, Strasbourg, Leiden and Pamplona, who have asked different questions. Especial thanks are due to those who read and criticized the penultimate draft: Luise Abramowski, Michel Spanneut and Albert Viciano. Michel Spanneut has, in his books and articles, kept the Stoic influence before patristic scholars over the last forty years. Andrew Lenox-Conyngham and David Rankin have helped at many points. Margot Hyslop, senior reference librarian at La Trobe University, has found many books and articles. Ruth Parr of Cambridge University Press has guided the manuscript through the process of publication with understanding and intelligence. Once again, I am indebted to the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for the generosity which brought me back to Tübingen.

No translation can do justice to Tertullian's splendid Latin. While I have often consulted the translations listed in the bibliography, I have rarely left them intact and have never been finally satisfied. This general acknowledgement expresses a general debt; my special appreciation is extended to Evans's *Adversus Marcionem* which I have frequently followed with minor alterations.

Since it is forty years from the appearance, at Cambridge, of my first book on second-century Christian thought, it is my privilege to thank Henry Chadwick and to remember with deep gratitude A. Boyce Gibson and William Telfer, who first set my fallible feet on the way of exploration.

¹⁴ *The beginning of Christian philosophy* (Cambridge, 1981), 272.

Note on the text and list of abbreviations

TEXT

Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani, *Opera*, Corpus
Christianorum, Series Latina, I, II (Brepols, 1954)

TERTULLIAN'S WORKS

<i>an.</i>	<i>de anima</i>
<i>ap.</i>	<i>apologeticum</i>
<i>bapt.</i>	<i>de baptismo</i>
<i>carn.</i>	<i>de carne Christi</i>
<i>cast.</i>	<i>de exhortatione castitatis</i>
<i>cor.</i>	<i>de corona</i>
<i>cult.</i>	<i>de cultu feminarum, libri II</i>
<i>fug.</i>	<i>de fuga in persecutione</i>
<i>Herm.</i>	<i>adversus Hermogenem</i>
<i>idol.</i>	<i>de idololatria</i>
<i>iei.</i>	<i>de ieiunio</i>
<i>Jud.</i>	<i>adversus Judaeos</i>
<i>Marc.</i>	<i>adversus Marcionem, libri V</i>
<i>mart.</i>	<i>ad martyras</i>
<i>mon.</i>	<i>de monogamia</i>
<i>nat.</i>	<i>ad nationes, libri II</i>
<i>or.</i>	<i>de oratione</i>
<i>paen.</i>	<i>de paenitentia</i>
<i>pall.</i>	<i>de pallio</i>
<i>pat.</i>	<i>de patientia</i>

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<i>pat.</i>	<i>de patientia</i>
<i>praescr.</i>	<i>de praescriptione haereticorum</i>
<i>Prax.</i>	<i>adversus Praxean</i>
<i>puđ.</i>	<i>de pudicitia</i>
<i>res.</i>	<i>de resurrectione mortuorum</i>
<i>Scap.</i>	<i>ad Scapulam</i>
<i>scorp.</i>	<i>scorpiace</i>
<i>spect.</i>	<i>de spectaculis</i>
<i>test.</i>	<i>de testimonio animae</i>
<i>ux.</i>	<i>ad uxorem, libri II</i>
<i>Val.</i>	<i>adversus Valentinianos</i>
<i>virg.</i>	<i>de virginibus velandis</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ACW</i>	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>
<i>AKG</i>	<i>Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>ANCL</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Christian Library</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>Apoll.</i>	<i>Apollinaris. Civitas Vaticana</i>
<i>APQ</i>	<i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i>
<i>Aug.</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>BVSGW.PH</i>	<i>Berichte über die Verhandlungen der sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Philologische-historische Klasse</i>
<i>DK</i>	<i>H. Diels and W. Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i>
<i>EA</i>	<i>Etudes Augustiniennes</i>
<i>EL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Liturgicae</i>
<i>GCS</i>	<i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderten</i>
<i>Greg</i>	<i>Gregorianum</i>
<i>HTh.</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>HThS</i>	<i>History and Theory, Supplement</i>
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JThS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LCC</i>	<i>Library of Christian Classics</i>

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LCL	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
LongSedley	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, <i>The Hellenistic philosophers</i> (Cambridge, 1987)
MH	<i>Museum Helveticum</i>
MThZ	<i>Münchener theologische Zeitschrift</i>
NAWG	<i>Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen</i>
NThT	<i>Nieuw theologisch tijdschrift</i>
Orph.	<i>Orpheus</i>
PG	Migne, <i>Patrologia Cursus Completus . . . series Graeca</i>
PhJ	<i>Philosophisches Jahrbuch</i>
PhP	<i>Philosophia Patrum</i>
PP	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, <i>The Presocratic philosophers</i> , 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, 1983)
REA	<i>Revue des études augustiniennes</i>
REG	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
RET	<i>Revista española de teología</i>
RevSR	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
RHE	<i>Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique</i>
RHPhR	<i>Revue de histoire et de philosophie religieuse</i>
RIPh	<i>Revue internationale de philosophie</i>
RQ	<i>Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde</i>
RSLR	<i>Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa</i>
RSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
RThPh.	<i>Revue de théologie et de philosophie</i>
SC	<i>Sources chrétiennes</i>
Schol.	<i>Scholastik</i>
SCO	<i>Studi classici e orientali</i>
StPatr.	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
StTh.	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
SVF	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>
ThPh	<i>Theologie und Philosophie</i>
ThR	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
TRE	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i>
TU	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i>
TWNT	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i>
TyV	<i>Teología y vida</i>

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<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Other abbreviations follow the *Abkürzungsverzeichnis* of S. Schwertner (Berlin, New York, 1976)