

1 Critical Issues in the Study of Tertullian and His Writings

Tertullian, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, lived in Carthage (modern-day Tunisia) from circa 150/160 to 220 CE. He was a prolific author and the first to write Christian theology in Latin. Tertullian broached every possible subject in relation to Christian daily life, faith, and belief, in addition to articulating external dangers that threatened Christian communal identity in his time. His ultimate objective was to convince people that Christianity was the only true religion and that everyone should adopt it or, at least, admire it.

Among the numerous topics Tertullian engaged with, his approach to Jews and Judaism has attracted considerable scholarly attention. The relation of Christianity to Judaism is not solely his preserve but a central concern of early Christian theology as a whole. More specifically, the topic of the image of the Jews in patristic literature, and especially in treatises that stage disputes between Christians and Jews, has been at the heart of scholarly inquiry for centuries. Yet the conclusions drawn from such research must be regularly reassessed, as the scholars who deal with it are often influenced by their direct environment and tend to interpret early Christian attitudes according to the context in which they themselves live, through the lens of their own time.

This Element provides an opportunity to revisit the main features and issues in the study of Tertullian's personality and work, to consider how his approach fits within both the broader framework of early Christian literature dealing with Jews and the scholarship that seeks to elucidate the attitudes of early Christian authors towards Jews, and, finally, to examine anew the various ways in which Jews appear in Tertullian's writings.

1.1 Tertullian's Background

Direct evidence about Tertullian's early life is scarce, but some of his remarks, his style, cultural references, and language, alongside ancient sources and later traditions,¹ strongly suggest that he received a comprehensive Graeco-Roman advanced education in rhetoric and the liberal arts. This likely included training in Roman law, although the jurist named Tertullianus, sometimes conflated with him, appears to be a distinct individual with no connection to Christianity.² Tertullian's writings

¹ Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 53; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.

² For instance, Barnes, *Tertullian*, 24.

indeed reveal a command of classical literature, philosophical vocabulary, and juridical reasoning, all of which he employed in the service of Christian argumentation.³

Tertullian converted to Christianity in adulthood and at some point between 180 and 197 (likely around 193 CE),⁴ perhaps after being deeply impressed by the unwavering faith of Christian martyrs who chose death over renouncing their religion. It is also possible that, consciously or unconsciously, his choice to become a Christian was motivated by his opposition to the Romanisation of North Africa. Indeed, he found in God and his law a powerful argument allowing him to reject Roman culture. Christianity offered an affiliation that substituted for Roman citizenship.⁵ A paradox in his approach is that he opposed Roman culture while employing Roman tools against it, an inescapable reality given his Romanised audience. He therefore wrote mostly in Latin (his works in Greek are no longer extant),⁶ describing Roman daily life, institutions, and matters of interest by utilising Graeco–Roman cultural references and examples, although he also refers to eastern motifs familiar to his audience, sometimes deliberately avoiding examples from the Graeco–Roman world.⁷ Whatever his motivations for conversion, he became wholly committed to his new faith. He devoted his literary works to explaining Christian principles, providing apologetical texts, attacking opponents and heretics, and establishing himself as a spiritual and practical guide for the members of his new religion. His classical training, rhetorical skill, and sharp polemical nature all served the defence of Christianity. Later in life, he appears to have associated with the Montanist movement, a rigorous Christian sect that emphasised prophecy and moral strictness, though the extent of his alignment with Montanism and its impact on his theology remain the subject of debate.

³ Binder, “De la septième *Lettre*.”

⁴ The assumption is based on the dating of Tertullian’s works and varies according to the scholars’ different positions; while Harnack prefers to point to 197, the year 193 is taken as a convenient midpoint in recent scholarship (see for instance, Wilhite, *Tertullian*, 2, quoting Otto Bardenhewer; Bray, *Holiness*, 38).

⁵ Binder, “Tertullien face à la romanisation.”

⁶ See Schöllgen, “Der Adressatenkreis” and further discussion of Tertullian’s mastery of languages here later on. Tertullian, *Spect.* 6.3: *Sed et huic materiae propter suauiludios nostros Graeco quoque stilo satis fecimus; Bapt.* 15.2: *sed de isto plenius iam nobis in Graeco digestum est*. Also Barnes, *Tertullian*, 253 (following Monceaux). Dunn, “Scripture,” 87.

⁷ Binder, *Tertullian*, 120, for example.

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1.2 Tertullian's Literary Output

1.2.1 Tertullian's Writing

An important characteristic of Tertullian's opus is that it is wide-ranging in terms of context. Readers can find throughout his texts more or less everything in which they might be interested. Within this diversity, Tertullian has a singular objective: to prove that Christianity must be everyone's obvious choice. The tools that he employs to achieve this purpose are of secondary importance to him. Such a principle leads to numerous contradictions. Tertullian might make a specific assertion in one tractate and contradict it in another.⁸ Sometimes this happens even within different sections of the same text. He can adore an idea, a group, or a place in one paragraph and abhor the same in the next. Consequently, it is almost impossible to definitively identify Tertullian's systematic position on any given topic (e.g., women, the Roman Church, Jews, etc.).⁹ His stance varies according to his mood, the specific circumstances under which he writes, the subject matter he addresses, and the audience he targets.¹⁰

Tertullian addressed various categories of people. Among his audiences, his primary public consisted of Christians in a time when Christianity was illegitimate and perhaps threatened in the Roman Empire.¹¹ Assessing the precise extent to which Christians were persecuted during Tertullian's life presents a challenge. If the works of the Church Fathers are taken as direct testimonies of their contemporary reality, it appears that persecutions were a very acute daily issue. Conversely, the stance of many modern scholars suggests that descriptions of persecutions were largely rhetorical devices aimed at attracting attention, fostering communal cohesion, and serving as literary constructs that do not accurately represent the facts on the ground.

However, given the existence of a few external non-Christian testimonies relating to persecutions, and considering that individuals like Tertullian converted due to the profound impression martyrdom had on them, it

⁸ On Tertullian's methods of argumentation, see, among others, Dunn, "Scripture," 92–93 and 98–99.

⁹ On rhetorical tools making it difficult to know Tertullian's thoughts, see, for instance, Wilhite, "Marcionites"; see as well, O'Malley, *Tertullian*, 173.

¹⁰ Rankin, *Tertullian*, 43.

¹¹ Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian," 26, question the fact that there was such an organised community that Tertullian could address and suggest that it is possible that even such a community of followers is Tertullian's literary construction, a community he could as well display in his struggles with outsiders. Osborn, *Tertullian*, 173–75; Daniel-Hughes, "Scriptures," 117.

seems that the reality lies somewhere between these two extreme positions: persecutions did occur, but they were rarer and less severe than how Christian authors often depicted them.¹² This conclusion is corroborated by Trajan's answer to Pliny (*Letter* 98), where the emperor recommends leniency in judgements of people accused of being Christians. Even if he did it in an exaggerated way, Tertullian wrote extensively about martyrdom and persecution, even encouraging the acceptance of death in some instances, though, as was his wont, in other cases he adopted different stances.

On the topic of persecution, his personal life poses some problems. Tertullian often addressed contemporary non-Christians. Whether this group read his treatises or not, it is likely that some were aware of this leader who championed the Christian cause. Nevertheless, he lived quite a long life, seemingly unchallenged by external threat as a Christian. Regardless, the very fact that he addresses the topic of persecution validates its relevance to his followers. When he addressed Christian audiences, Tertullian felt the need to comfort their members, encouraging them to face difficult conditions, mockery, physical or verbal assaults, trials, and repudiation by their former relatives and friends who did not adopt Christianity. Furthermore, he aimed to regulate their daily lives. What does it mean to be a Christian? What does a Christian believe? How should Christians behave? To explain all of this, to counter opponents and flawed interpretations, Tertullian composed guides on Christian behaviour and theological treatises.

The same works serve a second category of people that Tertullian addressed: neophytes or catechumens. For this group, in addition to the need to offer comfort and to explain a new way of life, Tertullian worked to reinforce their decision to embrace Christianity. As new adherents, they confronted unexpected challenges arising from their conversion. Moreover, attractive options still existed outside of Christianity. The Roman Empire offered, for example, numerous eastern cults that did not directly contradict Roman civic affiliation. Indeed, one could participate in such cults while simultaneously fulfilling the cult of the emperor, a practice incompatible with Christian faith.

¹² This is the conclusion that Ameling reached in his presentation, "Persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire: Rare or Regular?" See also, Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian," 25, and Shepardson and Fredriksen, "Jews and Christians," 214–15, esp. bibliography there on martyrdom as a means to shape Christian identity. Early Roman authors who mention persecutions are, for instance, Pliny the Younger, as cited here, Tacitus in his *Annals* 15.44, Suetonius, *Claud.* 25 and *Nero* 16.2; in Greek, Lucian of Samosata, *Pereg.* mocks the Christians and describes them imprisoned and tortured.

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Furthermore, Judaism, despite its many commandments, incorporated the same moral foundation as Christianity and remained appealing to individuals from a Graeco–Roman background as the very source of Christianity.¹³ It is true that Judaism was a *religio licita* (a legal religion) in the Roman Empire, but the prohibition against circumcising non-Jews rendered a full conversion of men impossible, even if men could still be “God-fearers.” In light of laws regarding circumcision, women were more inclined to completely embrace the religion of the Jews, and Latin authors do not conceal their contempt for such propensities to adopt Jewish customs or cults.¹⁴

Finally, given that loyalty to the *mos maiorum* is central to Roman citizenship, new converts might regret their infidelity. Tertullian dedicated the parts of his texts where he compares different cultures to the attention of new Christians, with Christianity always appearing as the obvious superior choice. He also denigrated other faiths and perceived heretics whose interpretations he viewed as flawed. In this way Tertullian hoped to maintain the new converts within the Christian fold and to convince them that they had made the right choice to embrace a religion of truth.

Tertullian’s third audience, or at least the one that he hopes his texts can reach, comprised non-Christians from a Graeco–Roman background – idolaters or pagans in his terms. He approached this group in two ways. First, he sought to counter attacks against Christianity. This orientation is especially prominent in his *Apology*, though apologetical arguments also occur in several other works. Tertullian makes clear to non-Christians that the members of his community are essentially like them; Christians participate in urban life, they shop in the same shops, eat the same food, bathe in the same places, adorn their homes with the same decorations, and share the same moral values, among other things (he often takes a different tact when addressing Christians exclusively). And if Christians are so similar to their neighbours, as he argues, they should not be despised or attacked. Instead, they should be admired for their commitment to higher moral behaviours and accepted as an integral part of the city. People have nothing to fear from Christians, who are of no threat

¹³ Cazenave, “Le traité,” 323–24, suggests that it may have been easier for Tertullian to address those who had already taken “half the journey” by believing in one God and showing an interest in Judaism, and to persuade them to embrace Christianity, which was better suited to their background and needs.

¹⁴ See, for examples, Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5; Juvenal, throughout his *Satires* (3, 6, 14, for instance); Seneca in several letters (e.g., 95; 108) includes attraction to Judaism within the fold of other foreign cults.

to their neighbours. Second, Tertullian addresses non-Christians for the purpose of proselytising. If Christians are simultaneously so perfect and so akin to their contemporaries, then converting to Christianity might be a judicious consideration.

Finally, Jews constitute the last group of people who might be interested in Tertullian's texts. Jews appear as protagonists in several works, are (indirectly) addressed in others, and are attacked directly in yet other writings. The question of whether Tertullian deliberately addressed Jews or expected his followers to convey his words to their Jewish neighbours, or whether perhaps Jews were merely another rhetorical asset in his toolbox, will be addressed in further detail below. However, each of these suggestions is plausible. Given that Jews are present in Carthage, that they share a monotheistic outlook, and that they are theologically closer to Christians than other neighbours might be, there may be reason to assume contact and exchange of thoughts between Jews and Christians. As is typical, Tertullian may admire Jewish manners in one text, and, a paragraph later, he might attack them for their stupidity in rejecting Christ, as will be expanded further.

1.2.2 Tertullian's Works

Although dating Tertullian's works is a challenging endeavour, it is attempted here to introduce some order in his writings. Tertullian's relation to Montanism will be addressed in full later on. However, since scholarship tends to organise his works according to the extent to which they display features influenced by this "school of thought," it is necessary to take them into account at this stage in a preliminary way. The works are generally divided into three chronological periods: early period (pre-Montanist; c. 197–c. 206 CE; 18 treatises), transitional (Montanist; c. 207–c. 212 CE; 11 treatises), and late works (radically Montanist; after 215 or 217 CE; 2 treatises) (Table 1). In his *Tertullian the African*, David Wilhite suggests that a linear anti-Roman progression might provide another parameter for dating the works.

1.3 Critical Discussions around Tertullian's Work

1.3.1 Montanism

Montanist Historical Background

A central stumbling block in the study of Tertullian and his works is his relationship with Montanism. Beyond experts in early Christian literature, Tertullian is usually little known. His works have been banned from the regular educational curriculum of Christian leaders for centuries, a

Table 1 Overview of Tertullian’s works

Period	Title	Targeted audience	Approximate date	Content	Other details
Early period	<i>Apology (Apologeticum)</i>	Non-Christians	197–206 CE	Comprehensive defence of Christianity addressed to Roman magistrates	References specific imperial edicts and persecutions under Septimius Severus
	<i>To the nations (Ad nationes)</i>	Non-Christians	197 CE	Polemical work arguing against pagan beliefs and practices	Shares significant material and arguments with <i>Apologeticum</i>
	<i>On the testimony of the soul (De testimonio animae)</i>	Non-Christians (“You say you don’t believe in one God, but your very swear-words tell you otherwise”)	197–198 CE	Argues for the innate, universal knowledge of God present in the human soul	Often viewed as an appendix or follow-up to the <i>Apoloogy</i>
	<i>To the martyrs (Ad martyres)</i>	Christians	197–198 CE	An exhortation offering comfort and encouragement to Christians imprisoned and awaiting martyrdom	Living and contemporary issues
	<i>On public shows (De spectaculis)</i>	Christians	198–200 CE (or 196–197) ^a	Against attendance at public games and theatres	Reflects Christian attempt at separation from pagan culture

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Period	Title	Targeted audience	Approximate date	Content	Other details
	<i>On idolatry</i> (<i>De idololatria</i>)	Christians	198–200 CE	Addresses the pervasive nature and dangers of idolatry in various aspects of daily life	Likely a more Christianised and evolved rewriting of <i>On public shows</i>
	<i>On women's dress</i> (<i>De cultu feminarum</i>)	Christians	198–200 CE	Advises Christian women on modesty in dress and appearance, discouraging luxury and cosmetics	Living and contemporary issues
	<i>On prayer</i> (<i>De oratione</i>)	Christians	198–200 CE	A practical commentary on the Lord's prayer and the nature of Christian prayer	Living and contemporary issues; communal practice
	<i>On baptism</i> (<i>De baptismo</i>)	Christians (heretics?)	198–200 CE	A treatise explaining and defending the sacrament of baptism, its significance, and proper practice	Addresses early Christian controversies concerning the rite; against heretical ideas
	<i>To his wife</i> (<i>Ad uxorem</i>)	Christians	200 CE	Advice to his wife concerning remarriage should he die first	Living and contemporary issues; at this stage, Tertullian's position is still quite lenient; it will become more rigorous in further treatises
	<i>On repentance</i> (<i>De paenitentia</i>)	Christians	200 CE	Discusses the nature of repentance, particularly for sins committed after baptism	Living and contemporary issues