

FOREWORD

We are living in an age of theological retrieval, as Christians across all denominations are returning to the ancient church for wisdom that might help guide us today. In my assessment, Tertullian stands out as one of the more underappreciated sources for the work of retrieval, and Jordan Edwards's work helps fill that gap. As Edwards shows, Tertullian possessed an unwavering commitment to Christ and a life of holiness, along with a ready desire to engage the pagan ideas and heretical arguments of his day. These are virtues worth recovering and modeling in a modern age that is often at odds with Christian faith and practice.

But Tertullian's legacy is also complicated, and I think that complication is part of what makes him instructive. On the one hand, he was a prodigious intellectual, producing many different works on topics such as doctrine, ethics, and apologetics. Within those works, he displays rhetorical savvy and theological reasoning that is often inspiring. He can come across as brash, but even where readers may wince at his tone, they must still reckon with the force of his arguments.

On the other hand, we should not assume that the ancient church was populated with faultless saints. Christian intellectuals

like Tertullian were striving to be faithful to the received tradition while not always escaping inconsistencies in their own lives and logic. The question of how to categorize Tertullian's later allegiances has occupied scholars for generations, and this book does not pretend to settle the matter. But it helps us see the best of a complex figure and sift out the wheat of his theological contribution from the tares his faults.

The modern church can learn a great deal from inhabiting this tension: Tertullian is a Christian thinker too brilliant to ignore and too complex to embrace without qualification. Edwards helps us see Tertullian's important contribution without asking us to follow him into every possible error. He also shows how Tertullian's theological legacy cast a long shadow over the Latin tradition that followed him. There is little question that his works served the ancient church, but Christians who have come after him remain indebted to his legacy.

My hope is that readers will come away with a renewed appreciation for the enduring value of Tertullian's witness, and with fresh resources for the ongoing work of retrieval to which this age has called us. I also pray that we can learn to receive Tertullian's insights with gratitude, weigh his errors with discernment, and pursue the truth he sought with the same seriousness of mind and devotion to Christ.

Stephen O. Presley

Associate Professor of Church History

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

TERTULLIAN'S LIFE AND CONTEXT

In *Defending Christ*, Nicholas Thomas writes: “The magnitude of [Tertullian was] arguably unsurpassed in Latin Christianity before Augustine of Hippo.”¹ Yet Tertullian has often been characterized more negatively, leading many scholars to dismiss the majority of his influence on account of his personality, critical tone, and often harsh views.² He has been criticized for having an “explosive” or “pugnacious personality.”³ Perhaps even more memorably, Tertullian has been called, “not quite a psychopath, though paranoid!”⁴

However, these judgments miss his brilliance as a defender of the Christian faith and a Trinitarian theologian. Pierre de Labriolle

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- 1 Nicholas L. Thomas, *Defending Christ: The Latin Apologists Before Augustine*, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 103.
 - 2 For an overview of the reception of Tertullian throughout history, see Gerald Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian*, in *New Foundations Theological Library* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 8–31.
 - 3 F. C. Klawiter, “The New Prophecy in Early Christianity: The Origin, Nature and Development of Montanism AD 165–220” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1975), 248n2, 280.
 - 4 I am indebted to Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68, for this translation of B. Nisters, *Tertullian. Seine Persönlichkeit und sein Schicksal*, (Münster: 1950) 114. Trevett agrees with Nisters, stating that he may be right about his critique of Tertullian.

provides a helpful contrast when he notes, “admiration found its way through censures and scandalized looks. And it was for Tertullian’s knowledge that [this admiration] was especially felt... what prodigious erudition!”⁵ In spite of Tertullian’s admittedly brusque personality, he was competent in several ancient arts including philosophy, language, physiology, law, rhetoric, and literature.

Most of Tertullian’s biographical details remain a mystery. The scarce existing information provides a starting point to examine this polarizing Latin Father. Though the years of his birth and death are unknown, most scholars affirm that Tertullian lived in the late second to early third century.⁶ Tertullian wrote many of his works between the years 195–220 in Carthage, the prominent intellectual and cultural center of North Africa. In his work *On Illustrious Men*, Jerome wrote that Tertullian was the son of a Roman centurion, a presbyter in the Carthaginian church, and lived to a “decrepit old age.”⁷

However, not everyone agrees with Jerome’s picture of Tertullian. Timothy David Barnes instead proposes that scholars cannot accurately know much regarding Tertullian’s life.⁸ Barnes argues that Jerome conflated Tertullian with another individual,

5 Pierre de Labriolle, *History and Literature of Christianity from Tertullian to Boethius* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924), 57. Labriolle also provides a list of several others who praised Tertullian’s knowledge including Jerome and Vincent of Lerins.

6 Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God* xi, 1–3; see also Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1–2, 55–56; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9–10.

7 Jerome, *vir. ill.* 53. Translation used: Thomas P. Halton, trans., *Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, FC 100 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

8 Barnes, *Tertullian*, 1–59. While many scholars have accepted Barnes’ critiques, Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 10, does qualify Barnes’ claims regarding Tertullian’s status in the church. Rebillard instead argued, “Because Tertullian, in at least one text, clearly includes himself among the clergy, I see no reason to reject the information given by Jerome, and I accept that Tertullian was a presbyter. Such status would also have lent him more legitimacy when addressing

asserting that Tertullian was only a lay elder rather than a presbyter. Despite this disagreement, what scholars have not questioned was Tertullian's advanced education. This education is seen through his intelligent writing filled with its allusions and wit.

Educational background

In the Greco-Roman world, any secondary education beyond the primary education of reading and writing was a privilege of the wealthy classes, though reading and writing was often limited to these classes as well. The goal of this secondary education was to shape and form the entire individual through training in the classics under a *grammaticus* (teacher) in the liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. This education was voluntary, so that children were not required to receive training in all of these disciplines. However, an education in rhetoric was essential for anyone wishing to serve in public life and was often pursued by wealthy young men.⁹ Everett Ferguson asserts that one "can hardly exaggerate the influence of rhetorical education on ancient culture and literature."¹⁰ Rhetorical education provided not only the tools of public discourse, but also the shared repository of examples and precedents from the classics.

An examination of his writings reveals that Tertullian was extensively educated, which also likely points to his belonging to an upper class of society. Tertullian cited pagan and classical sources with great frequency, often preferring to use the very texts his opponents cited for support to refute them instead. Eric Osborn has helpfully noted that Tertullian cited several different classical works for varying rhetorical purposes:

Christians on pastoral and disciplinary matters." While Rebillard's assertion does warrant consideration, most scholars continue to follow Barnes.

9 Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 110-12.

10 Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 111.

While his many citations serve different purposes, when taken together they show a positive attitude to culture: in the *apologeticum* [Apology] alone, Tertullian cites thirty different authors. Tertullian's literary formation begins from the richer heritage of Carthage rather than Rome and goes on to include Silver Age writers like Pliny, Tacitus, and Seneca. Still further, Homer and Herodotus are fundamental, while his extensive knowledge of Plato's writings is seen as a late growth from his controversy with Gnostics. Some writers he knows only from anthologies; many of his references are allusions rather than citations....His corpus of citations goes well beyond the requirement of style and exceeds that of any other early Christian writer. He is reluctant to acknowledge his debts, especially his supreme debt to Cicero; but unacknowledged citation was a common convention of his time.¹¹

This rich education helps make sense of statements seen at the beginning of this chapter regarding the quality of Tertullian's writings and his influence on early North African Christianity. At this time, only a small minority of the empire's population could read and write.¹² Possessing such an extensive range of knowledge and the ability to incorporate it into his own arguments made Tertullian an especially adept defender and daunting opponent. Tertullian, as seen in his writings, was quite apt to weave together numerous allusions from a wide array of Greek and Roman sources in support of his position. David Wilhite asserts that this use of such a variety of works, both literary and philosophical, further demonstrated a high level of education and training:

11 Osborn, *Tertullian*, 32–33. See also Barnes, *Tertullian*, 199 for a similar assessment of Tertullian's education. Barnes is especially impressed with Tertullian's familiarity with "three Latin writers of the 'Silver Age' who endured a long period of unpopularity: Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Juvenal."

12 As the next section will show, likely less than 10% of the western provinces were literate.

What is clear is just how much Tertullian shaped his arguments in accordance with his training as a rhetorician. In attempting to understand any of these writings, the modern reader must recognize how thoroughly rhetorical Tertullian is in his argumentation. Tertullian studied the best of classical rhetoric, such as can be found in Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and he employed their tactics of persuasion without hesitation.¹³

Tertullian's array of polemical works bears out this assertion, as he displayed a willingness to use nearly any means possible to persuade his audience of his point.¹⁴

Life in Roman Carthage

Since little can be known of Tertullian's life itself, an examination of Roman Carthage during his time provides many insights into his writings. For example, his wholehearted devotion to Christianity and rejection of worldly status becomes more profound as one considers his assumed economic and social status prior to his conversion. Familiarity with his educational background and exposure to Stoic thought offers depth to his efforts to redefine Stoic terminology for Christian use. Finally, the complex political and religious settings of third-century Carthage present the reader a window to see the challenges that the Carthaginian church had faced. These Carthaginian Christians were often despised by their culture and targeted by the government. They experienced an array of persecution even as they sought to love their fellow citizens and share a message of salvation. By examining and understanding the Carthaginian culture and setting, in which Tertullian lived and ministered, his writings come alive with a new vibrancy. This Father of the

13 David E. Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 118–19.

14 A polemical work is a piece of writing or a speech strongly attacking or defending a particular opinion, person, idea, or set of beliefs.

church sought to present a unique and different worldview than the one from which he came before he embraced the faith.

Social Status and Wealth

In the Roman empire, social standing was linked to one's class, which in turn was based largely on the possession of wealth. Along with the possession of wealth came other social benefits, such as literacy and education.¹⁵ While Tertullian sought to speak out against many elements of his culture, on a fundamental level, his education and even his ability to write came as a result of his economic and social standing.

The aristocracy, or patricians, made up the small percentage of wealthy nobility in the empire. On the opposite end of the social scale, the plebians were the commoners who made up the majority of the empire's population. Among the patricians, the classes were further distinguished by the senatorial, equestrian, and decurion orders. These orders were divided according to the amount of wealth one possessed, with special emphasis given to land ownership and familial ties. For example, the decurions were largely made up of the local aristocracy throughout the empire. While some of these decurions possessed substantial wealth and influence locally, they were still viewed as beneath those individuals belonging to the first two orders. In contrast, the plebian majority lived either near or even below a subsistence level. Some scholars have proposed that nearly 90 per cent of the empire made up this lower tier of society economically.¹⁶

15 For a helpful discussion of the Roman social orders, see Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 55–58.

16 Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 55–58. David J. Downs, "Economics, Taxes, and Tithes," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green, and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 156–60, helpfully points out that some earlier models depicting the divide between the upper classes and lower classes neglected a small middle class that was far above a subsistence level, though well below the wealth of the upper classes.