

TERTULLIAN'S IDEAL CHRISTIAN:
The Ideals of Persecution and Martyrdom in the True Christian Life

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ABSTRACT

What mattered most to Tertullian was the fate of the Christian soul. During this early period in Christian history, the threat of persecution came to the forefront of Christian thought with a change in government leadership or opposition from other communities. To combat the fear of persecution and remain on the path towards salvation Tertullian saw a need for Christians to be distinct from other communities in Carthage. The development of this identity and why it may have been acceptable to the Carthaginian Christian community is the focus of this essay.

To address Tertullian's argument for the ideal Christian requires evidence to justify the ideal. Do events and attitudes from the past intertwine within the communities in Carthage and Africa during Tertullian's life? Is Tertullian's writing, much of which occurred between 196- 207 A.D.,¹ consistent with the reports of past writers? This information would allow for a sympathetic look at his writing and intentions.

The approach taken in this essay is to examine the development of Tertullian's argument in six parts. The first will briefly examine the arrival of Christians in Africa and some of the influences on the adoption of a retributive Christianity. The next part will review the challenges of developing a true Christian identity up to Tertullian's time. This section will conclude with an examination of the influence of Montanism on Tertullian.

¹ T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). 30.

The purpose of Part III and IV is to examine the causes of Christian persecution and who and what Christians would face during periods of persecution. Definition of Roman legal and social attitudes towards Christians will come from biblical and ancient writing. The goal is to see if these attitudes were still prevalent during Tertullian's period.

Part V will describe the contemporary environment of Christian Carthage. Definition of the relations between the Jewish, Pagan and Christian communities in Carthage will come from Tertullian's writing. What are his views of the three communities and how does he address these realities? What influences do the themes from the previous four parts have on this environment?

The final part of the essay presents Tertullian's argument for the ideal Christian. He argues for his ideal of the purpose martyrdom against the two other choices a Christian could make during times of persecution: apostasy or flight. This part of the presentation includes Tertullian's opponents, sources, and the inspiration for his ideal.

The general conclusion is that Tertullian's concern was for a Christian identity and the individual's soul. Tertullian's argument is for a Christian duty toward martyrdom (Tertullian, *Fug.* 14.3). However, the Christian world in which Tertullian lived fell short of the world Tertullian identified with in scripture.

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INTRODUCTION

The period in which Tertullian lived was an important time in the development of early western Christianity. The Carthaginian Christian church was trying to develop a sense of identity in the midst of challenges from unorthodox teachers and the persistent, though local and sporadic, threat of persecution.

What was important to the North African church of Tertullian was the personality of its church and community. They grappled with the notions of salvation and damnation: the role of persecution and martyrdom. They sought a true Christian identity through exclusiveness and righteousness in its membership. This identity developed through discipline or rigor and set it apart from the universality and inclusiveness of Rome. Tertullian writes of church unity between discipline and the common hope of eternal life. The ritual of baptism with water calls one to accept a Christian life of persecution: martyrdom chooses one for salvation.

Tertullian knew of persecution and sought to explain the reasons for it. To Tertullian, sacred writings and the unchanging attitude of the ancient world towards Christianity offered a need, and Montanism offered inspiration. Christians could develop an identity and earn salvation. Tertullian's true Christians were Christ's warriors prepared to do battle against the temptations of an evil and temporary world.

How did Tertullian develop and argue for these ideals? The focus of this paper is on Tertullian's argument and justification to define the ideal Christian to suit Tertullian's ideals of persecution and martyrdom.

PART I
ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN CARTHAGE

Rome destroyed the once great Punic city of Carthage in 146 B.C. thus ending the Punic Wars. Twenty years later C. Gracchus attempted to re-build Carthage. He founded a colony but this attempt ended in failure. Julius Caesar inherited this desire to re-establish Carthage. His purpose was to reduce the population of the *plebs urbana* at Rome² and through a *deductio* re-establish veteran soldiers in the Carthage area. Caesar's motivation was a vision of Carthage as a commercial center. After periods of delays (Tertullian, *Pall.* 2.1), more veterans settled and over time people of Punic descent began returning to Carthage.³ Octavian completed the re-creation of Carthage when he settled three thousand soldiers.⁴ He granted Carthage autonomy in 28 B.C. As a result the town of Carthage and surrounding colonies united allowing Carthage to become the chief city in the province. By the middle of the second century, Carthage was the third most influential city within the Roman Empire.⁵ It is within this diverse society that Tertullian's conception of the ideal Christian develops.

² T.R.S. Broughton, *The Romanization of Africa Proconsularis*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1929), 56.

³ Broughton, *The Romanization*, 57.

⁴ T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). 85-6.

⁵ Broughton, "The Romanization," 57.

Tertullian and the North African church conceived of the institution of the church as a protest against Roman idolatry. Because Roman piety was present in all aspects of Roman life this protest would at times pose severe spiritual and communal challenges for Christians in Carthage. It would also lead to differences between the Roman and Carthaginian churches. When Callistus became Bishop of Rome in 217, he envisioned the church as universal in its membership. Callistus' vision led Tertullian to see the church in Rome as being too lenient towards those Christians who would succumb to the temptations of Roman society.⁶

What was important to North African Christians was purity in church teachings and a high standard of righteousness in its membership.⁷ This required a discipline that set it apart from the inclusiveness of the Church of Rome. Carthaginian Christians grappled with notions of salvation and damnation: the role of persecution and martyrdom. Tertullian wrote of a common religious feeling within the Carthaginian church united through discipline and hope (Tertullian, *Apol.* 49.1). In *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* newly baptized converts anxiously await a true baptism with blood.⁸ In their belief that they were with the spirit, they waited for a judgment day and retribution on the pagan world.⁹

⁶ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 345-346.

⁷ Frend, *The Rise of*, 346-7.

⁸ "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas." In *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Translation by Herbert Musurillo. 1972. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁹ Frend, *The Rise of*, 347.

Influences on Retributive Christianity

The presence of a strong Jewish community in Carthage may have influenced the development of Christian retributive ideals. Judaism placed stress on dealing out retribution in the form of legal penalties to those who disobeyed God's laws. Forgiveness for disobedience came in the form of almsgiving and martyrdom.¹⁰ Good works or acts of merit built interest for the day of divine judgment. The Carthaginian Jews used the Jewish heretical term *Nazarenos* when referring to Christians not the pagan term *Chrestiani*.¹¹ North-African Christianity also placed significance to acts of merit during Tertullian's life. This allows for the possibility of a sectarian biblical- and legal- minded Jewish influence in Carthage.¹²

Development of Carthaginian Christian ideals of judgment and retribution may also have come from Carthaginian's pagan past. The cult of Baal-Hammon was at one time the dominant religion in North Africa.¹³ Cult members received divine direction in the form of dreams and visions. The cult's sacrificial rites evolved from human to animal victims up to the second century. The conquering Romans adapted the shrines and features of Saturn to reflect Roman piety. This alteration may have pushed some worshippers towards Christianity. It is possible that some of these new Christians had a profound belief in blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins along with a dislike for the

¹⁰ Ibid. 347.

¹¹ Tertullian, *adversus marcionem (books I- V) from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing and W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: From the Maccabees to Donatus*, (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 147.

¹² Frend, *The Rise of*, 348.

¹³ Broughton, *The Romanization*, 145.

Roman imitations of Saturn residing in the cities in Africa.¹⁴ Perpetua's battle with the Egyptian¹⁵ represents this opposition. Carthaginians long held nostalgia for the past and desired a return to "when Carthage was Carthage" (Tertullian, *pallio*, 11.1 [Thelwall])
But was there a direct influence or shared motifs?

Archaeology during the 19th century made significant strides into learning about the practices and devotees of the mystery cults. Since then scholars began the practice of making comparisons between these cults, Christianity, and the legal pagan religions of Rome. The results of these comparisons vary greatly from minimum influence to having great influences on the doctrines and ritual of the early Christian church. Comparative adoptions by Christianity occur in the post- Constantine era. However, there are significant differences of opinion regarding parallels between early Christianity and pagan cult.¹⁶

The question is whether the parallels are genealogical or analogical. Do the parallels occur from equal religious experiences? Looking for similarities and connecting them is not significant. A similarity between religions is not enough. Literary and traditional connections can only be real if they are possible.¹⁷ Human nature and situations can produce results, which are similar, but produce no bridge from one time or culture to another time or culture.¹⁸

¹⁴ Frend, *The Rise of*, 348.

¹⁵ The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 10.

¹⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian Vol., VIII*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 2- 6.

¹⁷ Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies*, 7.

Another consideration is that even if genealogical parallels occur it does not mean that the parallel began with the cult. Influence may have come from Christianity, especially if one considers the competitive pressure on cults to adopt Christian teachings in order to survive and appease devotees.¹⁹ The traditional common theme within all religion in Rome was the safety of the Empire. A *religio* was *licita* if its rituals did not offend Roman gods or its citizens.

Harmonization between the gods of Rome and those of a conquered people required a determination of whether the religion was *extera* (foreign) or *prava* (evil). In Roman Africa, the traditional cult of Baal-Hammon became acceptable using the name of Saturn and disallowing human sacrifice associated with his worship in Punic temples.²⁰ What is important for a religion to be legal is proof of ancestral usage,²¹ something that becomes significant in Tertullian's vision of the ideal Christian.

Arrival and Growth of Christianity in Carthage

The first solid evidence for Christianity in North Africa appears in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* in 180 C.E. How Christianity came to Carthage and North Africa is a subject of debate.²² Arguments that support Jewish arrival point to the lack of

¹⁸ Ibid. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.10.

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

²¹ Ibid. 11.

²² W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: From the Maccabees to Donatus*. (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 79

acknowledgment of special status for the Roman church in Tertullian's writing²³ and that the African church influenced Rome more than the Roman church influenced Carthage.²⁴

Despite a lack of evidence for Christianity in Carthage coming from Rome²⁵ the evidence of Jewish origin also remains historically inconclusive. For example, Tertullian uses the term *seniores*²⁶ but it is not certain whether his meaning derives from African or Jewish origins.²⁷ Tertullian's writing describes Christianity as being organized and widespread (Tertullian, *Marc*, 4.8.1) and considering that Carthage was a major Mediterranean port, it seems possible that the arrival of Christianity occurred early. The cosmopolitan nature of Carthage has led to the argument that its roots came from both Christian Jews and Christian gentiles who could have arrived from many locations. Smaller Christian communities may have eventually become one community.²⁸

Tertullian relates his belief about the origin of Christianity in North Africa in *de Praescriptione Haereticorum*. In the beginning, Jesus of Nazareth selected twelve apostles to teach and spread his teachings. Once this process began, the established apostolic churches brought forth other churches, which also became apostolic because they originated from the apostolic churches founded by the apostles. This link united

²³ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 80.

²⁴ Ibid. 86.

²⁵ Ludlow, Morweena, *The Early Church*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009), 86-7.

²⁶ Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 13.

²⁷ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 13.

²⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 67.

Christianity within a circle governed by faith and true doctrine. Those outside of this succession do not possess the truth of the Christian word (Tertullian, *Scap*, 151-61). However, Tertullian does not assert that the church in Carthage originated from apostolic succession. He instead argues *communia* with Rome because of a shared faith and doctrine.²⁹ The relationship between the church of Carthage and Rome exists through a similarity of creed and ritual practice (Tertullian, *Praescr.*20.10). Tertullian makes neither positive argument nor assertion for Carthage as an apostolic church founded from Rome.³⁰

An argument for a Greek gentile influence on the arrival of Christianity in Carthage is that both Rome and Gaul Christianity is rooted in Greek beginnings. The church in Rome was primarily Greek by the third century.³¹ During a pogrom that took place during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Lugdunum and Vienne Christians wrote to the churches in Asia and Phrygia in Greek telling of persecutions.³² The bishop in Lugdunum had a Greek name, Pothinus. The Carthaginian church may have similar origins: the liturgy of the Carthage church has kinship with the Eastern Church.³³ Tertullian's writing reveals a Greek connection. In, *The Passion of Perpetua*, Perpetua addresses the bishop and presbyter in Greek.³⁴ Specific topics such as baptism of heretics, shows and games,

²⁹ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 15.

³⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 66.

³¹ Ibid. 67.

³² Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 66.

³³ The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 13.2.

³⁴ The Martyrdom of Perpetua.2

and the veiling of virgins, which Tertullian wrote about, had an audience of Greek speaking Christians living in Carthage (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 36).

As mentioned earlier the *Acta of the Scillitan Martyrs* is the only evidence of when Christianity may have begun in Africa. This leads to the question of how widespread Christianity was at the time of the *Acts*. The origins of the martyrs and their use of biblical quotations, in the *Acta*, indicate a dissemination of Christianity. In the *Apologeticum*, Christianity covers the world (Tertullian, *Apol.* 7). Tertullian suggests in *Scapula* that if the governor continues persecuting Christians the result may be the destruction of Carthage because Christians have come to be present throughout Carthaginian society (Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.5). An example is the social diversity of the characters in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*.³⁵

³⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 273-75.

Part II

CHALLENGES FOR THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN NORTH AFRICA

Pagan knowledge of Christianity during Tertullian's life was based on rumor and hearsay.³⁶ One of the main characters in *Metamorphoses* a play written by Apuleius of Medauros depicts a Christian female as being a greedy lustful woman who despises the gods and disrespects her husband.³⁷ These types of misconceptions of Christianity are prevalent throughout the Roman world. Origen in *Contra Celsum* reveals a similar mindset in Asia (Origen, *Cels.* 6.40).

The question that Tertullian tries to answer is who counts as a real Christian. The Christian community was divided on the answer and sometimes subjected to ridicule from pagan observers. Part of the confusion stems from alternative teachers who present their own thoughtful version of Christianity. Their intellectual speculations were attractive everywhere and challenged the simple faith of Tertullian's definition of a real Christian.³⁸

³⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 273-75.

³⁷ Apuleius. *Metamorphoses* IX.14. In Barnes, T.D. 1985. *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 60.

³⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 64.

Alternative Teaching

Alternative Christian teaching achieved a great deal of success in Carthage (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 1.1-2) so much so that Tertullian saw a need to debate their positions and encourage those whom he sees as the faithful. Tertullian's position is based on scripture and faith. He argues that an honest exegesis of scripture leads to true Christian tradition (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 19.2). In *de praescriptione haereticorum* he distinguishes between the simple faith of his audience and those who endlessly seek for the truth. Christian faith is being put to the test either by what Tertullian calls heretical teachers or persecutors (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 2.8). These teachers seek to impair the rule of faith, which a real Christian accepts unquestionably (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 22.5). Scripture warns against the vanity of these teachers (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 4.1). The strength of Tertullian's position relies on two biblical texts: "seek and ye shall find" (Matthew 7:7 NRSV); "thy faith hath saved thee" (Luke 18:42); and a declared statement of faith.³⁹ This statement would include a belief in apostolic succession: Christ as the Word is the Truth from God; the apostles received this truth from Jesus; the apostles passed the truth on to the churches they founded; no one outside of this succession can possess the truth (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 20.1). Tertullian argues that because the alternative teachers and their followers are always seeking, they have not found faith nor do they believe as true Christians (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 14.10).

The challenge of finding identity was a daily reality for the Christian community because of the presence in Carthage of important unorthodox teachers, many of whom

³⁹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 65.

migrated from the East.⁴⁰ Tertullian tries to discredit them through his writings. *Adversus Hermogenem* was an attack against Hermogenes who was forced out of Antioch because of his teachings and took refuge in Carthage (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4. 24.1). Tertullian argues against the Valentinians, Gnostics and Marcionites. Sometimes he mentions enemies by name other times only groups.⁴¹ One teacher often referred to is Prodicus who is associated with Valentinus.⁴² Tertullian argues that Valentinus' followers such as Prodicus have distorted Valentinus' teachings. Tertullian's conclusion is that the Valentinians in Carthage are not only heretical to the church but also to the teachings of Valentinus.⁴³

Beginning of a Theological Debate

In the third century, the main centres of Christianity were Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch and Ephesus. By this time Christianity had a place on the religious map of the Roman Empire. Each of the empire's Christian centres had an ecclesiastical hierarchy and each centre reflected a slightly distinct interpretation of Christianity. These underlying differences created confusion during times of persecution and led to

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 80.

⁴¹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 82.

⁴² Tertullian, *adversus Praxean* from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 3.6 and Tertullian, *adversus valentinianos* from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 1.1.

⁴³ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 82.

divisiveness during times of peace.⁴⁴ Rome and Carthage had large Christian populations and the two centres were in close contact. Despite this association, each defined Christian ideals differently.⁴⁵

Rome's Christian community began to gain some support from wealthy Roman families by the late second century (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.21). Prosperity grew through ownership of property such as cemeteries and the benefits from pilgrimages to places with apostolic and martyrdom identification.⁴⁶ This is also the time when Rome began to claim ecclesiastical authority based on Peter's foundation (Matthew 16:18-20).

In contrast with Alexandria and Antioch's developing theological tradition Rome had difficulty establishing theological roots. This may have been a result of its ethnic diversity, changing its language from Greek to Latin, or focusing on universality and ecclesiastical authority.⁴⁷ Contemporaries of bishops of Rome such as Zephyrinus (199-217 C.E.) and Cornelius (251-53 C.E.) regarded them as unskilled theologians (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.2.1). The bishop Fabian (236-50 C.E.) had no training and was not even part of the clergy (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 6.29.3-4).

The Christian community in Rome was a mix of ethnic groups, which reflected a diversity of theological ideas. These ideas could have come with them when they emigrated west from the eastern Mediterranean. The diversity of theological thought brought with it the potential for confrontations that reached a crisis with the Monarchian

⁴⁴ Frend, *The Rise of*, 338.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 339.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 339.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 340.

controversies (200-230 C.E.) The controversies took place in Rome and Asia. The significance is the initiation of trinitarian and christological disputes that would be forefront in the Christian church for the next two centuries. The problem was to reconcile monotheism in the relation between the Holy Spirit, the Son and the Father (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.28.14).

Hippolytus of Rome (160-236 C.E.) blamed Noetus of Smyrna (c.200 C.E.) for igniting the Monarchian controversies by teaching that the Father was born, suffered and died as the Christ. Noetus immigrated to Rome after being driven out of Smyrna because of his teaching. Noetus saw no harm in thinking this way because he believed that it brought glory to Jesus; but as in Smyrna, the church in Rome also rejected him.⁴⁸ Despite this, his teaching found support in the Roman Christian community, and in other Christian communities in the Eastern Church. One disciple of Noetus was Praxeas who promoted Noetus as the logical choice to argue against Montanism, which was active in Rome and Carthage during this time (Tertullian, *Prax.* 7.1). Sabellius 220 C.E. was an important supporter of Noetus. He claimed the trinity as parts of one God the creator: the Son represented redemption and the Holy Spirit prophecy and sanctification.⁴⁹

The western churches of Rome and Carthage countered Monarchian teachings with the arguments of Hippolytus and Tertullian. Once the debate began a power struggle ensued that would redefine orthodoxy on a continuous basis. For example, the orthodox Hippolytus argued that the created Word became Christ at the incarnation, as a part of the

⁴⁸ Hippolytus, *Against Noetus* in *A New Eusebius* (ed. J. Stevenson: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 163-171.

⁴⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History*, 7.6 and J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longman Inc., 1972), 121-123.

Godhead, yet distinct from the Father.⁵⁰ With this argument he was able to divide the trinity into roles: “the Father commands, the Son obeys, the Spirit gives understanding. The Father is over all, the Son is by all, and the spirit is in all.”⁵¹ Hippolytus’ point was to show a distinction between the Father and the Son. His argument presents Jesus as a creation that is given divine power. This results in Hippolytus later being designated as unorthodox by Callistus the Bishop of Rome (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.12.16).

To Tertullian a metaphysical discussion about Christ’s nature was of a lesser importance than the continuing work of the Spirit. Jesus was savior and judge just as the New Testament tells us: he is the mediator between humanity and God. These ideas and the work of the Paraclete were what counted most to Tertullian. Christ is “a ray projected from the sun” (Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.12 [Glover]) as a form of God’s expression. Tertullian’s focus becomes clear when he lists Praxeas’ relegation of prophesy as being the most heinous of his attacks on the church (Tertullian, *Prax.* 1).

Hippolytus attacked Zephyrinus and Callistus for their moral and theological incompetence.⁵² He referred to Zephyrinus as a simpleton who had no theological input into the make-up of the trinity (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.2.1). Callistus may have been friends with Sabellius, who according to Hippolytus greatly influenced Callistus’ theology.⁵³ When Callistus became Bishop of Rome in 217, the church was undergoing a period of

⁵⁰ Frend, *The Rise of*, 345.

⁵¹ Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, in Frend, *The Rise of*, 345.

⁵² J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 430.

⁵³ Hippolytus, *Refutation*, 9.12.15-19, and Kelly, *Early Christian*, 123.

growth and wealth.⁵⁴ Callistus was a skilled administrator and had a vision of the practical necessities of the church.

The problem before the church was identity. Should it remain a community of the elect on earth burdened by the old Judaist laws or should it be open to everyone? The sacraments could provide a common bond under the auspices of a structured church hierarchy. Callistus urged the church to “Let the weeds grow along with the wheat.”⁵⁵ Hippolytus, who would not be the most reliable person to report on Callistus, indicates that Callistus believed the church had the earthly authority to forgive sins; thus, Callistus entered into communion with many people that the Gnostics and Marcionites would not accept (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.12.21). Tertullian was also indignant over Callistus. In *de pudicitia* he accused Callistus of allowing adultery and re-marriage in the clergy (Tertullian, *Pud.* 1). Tertullian became critical of the church: “it is the system of Christian modesty which is being shaken to its foundation” (Tertullian, *Pud.* 7 [Thelwall]) and by doing so a long dormant hostility between Rome and North Africa began to re-appear.⁵⁶

Rome’s rigorist minority expressed itself in honoring Peter and Paul as martyrs. With the increasing authority of the bishops of Rome and a lack of community strength these ideals were under challenge. In contrast, rigorists had always been the majority in Carthage. The church in Carthage was Christianity’s symbol against the secular world.⁵⁷ Instead of supporting the all-inclusive, universal ideas of the church in Rome, the Carthaginians sought purity within the church and promoted an exclusive membership of

⁵⁴ Frend, *The Rise of*, 345.

⁵⁵ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.12.20-26 (Mt. 13:30).

⁵⁶ Frend, *The Rise of*, 346.

⁵⁷ Frend, *The Rise*, 346

righteousness. Concern for them was redemption and punishment: the role of the martyr. They were people of the spirit awaiting the *parousia*. Tertullian described the Christian community as one united in faith, discipline, and hope (Tertullian, *Apol.* 49. 1).

Montanism

The first evidence of Christian persecution and martyrdom in Africa occurs in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*. This event took place during the reign of Commodus under the jurisdiction of proconsul Vigellius Saturninus 180/1 C.E. (Tertullian, *Scap.* 3.4). The *Acta* tell of a group of Christians who are obstinate in their beliefs and willing to die for their faith.⁵⁸ Their example would inspire some Christians to react in a similar way when under the threat of persecution.⁵⁹ The *Acta* also reveal that Christianity had spread throughout the African countryside. The names of the martyrs are common to hundreds of cities in Roman Africa.⁶⁰

Another event, which would incorporate many of the concerns and values of the Carthaginian Christian community, is related in the *Passion of Perpetua*. The *Passion* attempts to answer questions such as: What is a Christian? How should a Christian respond when threatened with persecution and possible martyrdom? Where do true Christian values lie? This document is contemporary to events that took place in

⁵⁸ “The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (trans. Herbert Musurillo; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 86-9.

⁵⁹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 62.

⁶⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 88.

Tertullian's Christian community.⁶¹ Ultimately, it reveals the eschatological hopes of all Christians.⁶²

Montanistic themes enhance the historical value of the *Passion of Perpetua*. Montanism had its origin in the east, as did other unorthodox groups such as the Valentinians, Gnostics and Marcionites. The 'New prophesy' gained popularity in Africa and Carthage, and almost came to be recognized by the Catholic Church. Victor the Bishop of Rome 189-199 C.E. saw the 'New Prophesy' as being truly from the Holy Spirit, and their prophets Montanus, Prisca and Maximilla as possessing the gift to prophesy (Tertullian, *Prax.* 1.4). The Bishop, however, changed his mind (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 8.2.3) and the dispute that followed lumped Montanus with other church rivals. Montanism asks: is it only ancient examples of prophecy that count? Why is new prophecy not held to the same level of esteem? Montanists saw prophecy as a gift from God to his sons and daughters as the last days were nearing: "... I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:14).

The purpose of the *Passion* is to emphasize the eschatological context of the church. Through their martyrdom the martyrs glorify God by receiving the Holy Spirit and fulfilling the promise He made. Their visions will be relived, as they are in the *Passion*. Perpetua converses with God on behalf of her brother Deinocrates; because of her intervention, his punishment is relieved. Those who respect the Montanist prophecy and visions will be in communion with the martyrs.⁶³

⁶¹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 72.

⁶² The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 14,16.

⁶³ The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 1.4,5.

Saturus' vision reveals a division within the Carthaginian church concerning the new prophecy and the result of not believing.⁶⁴ The martyrs enter God's presence ahead of the bishop and the priest. The impression is that only the martyrs can save them.⁶⁵ The martyrs are cooperative with their persecutors just as the Scillitan martyrs were. Saturus volunteers himself for martyrdom⁶⁶ and Perpetua guides the soldier's sword towards her throat.⁶⁷ Felicitas and Perpetua both overcame their fear for God's sake.

Despite Rome's condemnation, Montanism remained acceptable in Carthage. For many years after the *Passion*, Montanists were still a part of the Catholic Church; honor came to Perpetua as a Catholic, not a Montanist martyr.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Montanism was doomed because of Rome's decision and it left Tertullian with many doubts. Foremost among them were: Was it the word of Scripture or the word of Rome that had authority? How could the prophecy of the Paraclete not continue to be present in Christianity? When the church of Carthage left Montanism, Tertullian went in the opposite direction.⁶⁹

In *de fuga in persecutione* Tertullian would argue that a true Christian believed in the New Prophecy and that only a Montanist had the courage to face martyrdom (Tertullian, *fug.* 14.3) He began to separate those Christians filled with the spirit from

⁶⁴ Ibid. 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 13.1

⁶⁶ Ibid. 4.3.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 21.4.

⁶⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 79.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 83.

those who were of the flesh (Tertullian, *Prax.* 1.7). Tertullian continued to see the church as driven by the Holy Spirit not the Bishops.⁷⁰

The Effects of Montanism

The decade from 170-180 C.E. was a period of persecutions for Christianity. During these periods the belief that the end was near took on a sense of reality. This belief often led to the adoption of a rigorist Christian lifestyle in the form of fasting and abstinence to make the body ready for martyrdom and pure to receive the Holy Spirit.⁷¹

In the summer 177 C.E. Christians in Lyons suffered social and religious sanctions. They were not allowed to enter public places, which came under the protection of Roman gods (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.5-6). The mob began to seek out and assault Christians (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.7-8) and the city's magistrate ordered a number of Christians to a garrison in Lyons to await trial.⁷²

In the 160's, some Asian confessors such as Germanicus were defiant when faced with martyrdom (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.15.9). In the *Acta Carpi Carpus*, Carpus and Paplas offer themselves for martyrdom in order to hasten their departure from this world.⁷³ In contrast is the trial and martyrdom of Polycarp (69- 155 C.E.) in Smyrna. Polycarp was a victim of his faith and had not sought out martyrdom. When Polycarp heard of his impending danger, he withdrew from the city and placed himself in God's

⁷⁰ Tertullian, *de pudicitia*, 21.17, and Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 264-84.

⁷¹ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 216.

⁷² *Ibid.* 5-6.

⁷³ *Acta Carpi Carpus* in *In The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Translation by Herbert Musurillo. 1972. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3.

hands. Compared to the zealousness of Carpus, Polycarp showed a firm restraint in his dealings with the proconsul. He did not show any sense of self-importance nor did he prophesy. To anti-Montanists Polycarp was the ideal martyr, an apostolic and prophetic teacher (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.15-39).

In these two acts we see divergent forces at work. Is the gift of the Holy Spirit to be delivered through ecclesiastic hierarchy or through those of the spirit who offer themselves to the Lord?⁷⁴ Historically, periods of persecution had a divisive effect within the Christian community. This trend would continue with future persecutions. For example, the Novatian and Donatist schisms occurred after the Decian persecutions of 249 C.E. and the Diocletian persecutions 300 C.E.⁷⁵

In order to combat the effects of Montanism the ecclesiastical hierarchy appointed Apolinarius of Hierapolis (170-80 C.E.) as their spokesperson and defender (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16). To identify the origins and practices of Montanism, Apolinarius cites a source that identifies an event that involved Montanus and his priestesses in 172 C.E.:

There is, it appears, a village near the Phrygian border of Mysia called Ardabau. There it is said that a recent convert named Montanus, while Gratus was proconsul of Syria, in his unbridled ambition to reach the top laid himself open to the adversary, was filled with the spiritual excitement and suddenly fell into a kind of trance and unnatural ecstasy. He raved, and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the church handed down generation by generation from the beginning (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.3 [Williamson]).

⁷⁴ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 216.

The writer goes on to say how a division occurred amongst those who witnessed the event (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16). This report also helps to define the boundaries of what is accepted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The actions of Montanus went against tradition because the prophecy was ecstatic in nature. In an ecstatic state Montanus was not longer himself (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.17).

Before becoming Christian, Montanus had been a priest of Cybele.⁷⁶ Followers of Cybele lived a rigorist life in order to maintain a high standard of ritual purity. As Christians, Montanus and his followers saw their prophecy as a continuance of biblical prophecies. Montanus claimed that the Paraclete spoke through him. The message he and his prophets Pricilla and Maximilla received stressed the glory of martyrdom and the necessity of living a life of purity in everyday activities.⁷⁷ The Montanist confessor received the power to teach and forgive sins from the Holy Spirit (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16-17). What the confessor taught is that Christians must strive to glorify Christ through martyrdom. The reward for the martyr is sainthood and eternal life. In this sense the real birth of a Christian is when he faces martyrdom (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9).

Within Christianity the appeal of these eschatological ideals was a force lying in wait. Christianity's willingness to accept ecstatic prophecy (Athenagoras of Athens, *Leg.* 33) prompted a spirit of fanaticism in which martyrdom becomes a real desire (Tertullian, *Scap.* 5.1).

⁷⁶ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 218.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 218.

Montanism spread throughout Christianity.⁷⁸ Celsus describes the Montanist movement as widespread (Origen, *Cels.* 7.9) Over time; however, rival Christians began to win their fight against Montanism, which according to Eusebius was the result of Montanist corruption and unfulfilled prophecy (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.18-19). The years between 165- 180 C.E. resulted in a split between the church of the Bishops and the church of the martyrs (Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 41). Montanism took on the characteristics of a revolt many of which would be adopted by Tertullian to develop the ideal Christian.

Tertullian's writing defends Christian beliefs and way of life. His purpose is to convince others that he is right, no matter the subject. He sets a true case against a false one: either of paganism, unorthodox Christianity, or Christians lapsing into spiritual danger.⁷⁹ Tertullian's main concern is to define a true Christian. Christians have to make a sincere election of God: truth against falsehood and a modest life with no excesses. This was a period of persecution and the real threat of death; Christians would become confessors. Tertullian's role was to define the right choices and encourage their fulfillment.⁸⁰ Though Tertullian may have not been a convert to Montanism, he found inspiration in the "New Prophecy." Montanism encouraged Tertullian to express many similar views that he held.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 221.

⁷⁹ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 28,29.

⁸⁰ Ludlow, *The Early Church*, 89.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 91.

Influences on Montanus and Tertullian's Millenarian Eschatology

An Imperial letter from 160 C.E. reports Christians as the cause of an earthquake in Asia (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.13) According to Celsus, the Christian God had deserted and left them to the persecutions that followed. He asked Christians to reconsider their religious error because all Christians will face punishment (Origen, *Cels.* 8.69).

Montanus began his prophecy within this context of imminent danger. Montanus and his followers claim to be instruments of God and filled with the Holy Spirit.⁸² They have been elected to give courage to those who would face persecution (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4). Tertullian believed Christianity to be a revealed religion. He saw no reason to think that revelation would only belong to the apostolic age so he saw the "New Prophecy" as valid. This led him to support and promote Montanist ideals. Like Montanus, Tertullian recognized the Paraclete as a gift from God (John 14:16). The Paraclete's purpose was to counsel all Christians (John 16:13). The Paraclete preserves Christian doctrine from attacks by its enemies, and gave Christians the courage to face persecution.⁸³

Tertullian and Montanus's ideals find origin in the apocalyptic prophecies in earlier Christian texts. Scriptural influence for Montanus comes from the book of

⁸² Eppiphanius of Salamis. "Panarion." In *A New Eusebius*. 2013. Edited by J. Stevenson, 119. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, XLVIII. 11.9.

⁸³ Tertullian, *de fuga in persecution*, 14.3; Tertullian, *de resurrection mortuorum*, 63.7; and Tertullian, *de anima* in *Tertullian: Apologetic Works and Minucius Felix: Octavius*, (translated by Edward A. Quain, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, Inc.), 58.8.

Revelation.⁸⁴ Montanists prophesied that the end of the world is at hand and that a New Jerusalem would soon descend from heaven to begin a millennium of divine rule.⁸⁵ This kingdom would pre-exist a general resurrection by a thousand years. During the millennium period, Christian martyrs would inhabit the kingdom. Early Christians saw themselves the equal of the martyrs in their role as the suffering faithful. They also foresaw the second coming within their lifetimes.⁸⁶

Christian millenarianism is a variant of Jewish messianic ideals that included destruction of enemies through the actions of a messiah. The characteristics of a millenarian movement are: collective salvation for the faithful; a divine kingdom will be established on earth; it is imminent; the dispensation will be complete; and it will be the result of divine intervention.⁸⁷

Jewish and Christian eschatology involve the sudden destruction of the world that signals the coming of the messiah. Ancient Biblical prophecies are the basis of the development of this eschatological system. The Jewish religion and later Christian one used prophecy to strengthen themselves against the reality or threat of persecution.⁸⁸

Apocalyptic Prophecies

At the core of Christian belief is that the messiah came, suffered and died. His kingdom was spiritual. However, influence from their Jewish background and knowledge of

⁸⁴ Cohn, N. 1970. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 13.

⁸⁵ Eppiphanius of Salamis, Panarion, XLIX.1.3.

⁸⁶ Cohn, *The Pursuit*, 13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 13.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 19.

apocalyptic eschatology made it difficult for early Christians to accept this peaceful doctrine. In the Gospels, Jesus tells His disciples that the Son of Man will return and he will repay everyone for their deeds (Matthew 16:27-28; Luke 9:26-27). Some Christians began to see Jesus' return as the time when He would establish an earthly messianic kingdom (Mark 13:24-27).

During periods of persecution and oppression Christians bolstered their faith with the hope that the imminent messianic age would end the oppression and punish their enemies. This vision is a blend of Jewish and Christian elements and appears in the Book of Revelation.⁸⁹ As in the Book of Daniel, Revelation symbolizes the last world power, now Rome, as a beast. Another beast is symbolic of the pagan priests who demanded divine honor for the emperor. The saints and those who do not worship the beast will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years. At the end of this millennium resurrection of the dead and the last judgment will occur. The New Jerusalem will be let down from heaven and the saints will reside there forever (Revelations 13,19,20,21).

The Montanist movement can measure the level of acceptance of this prophecy by Christians. Montanus declared that he had the gift of prophesy as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁰ The 'Spirit of Truth' would reveal things to come: "When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into the truth; he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). Others soon begin to have visionary experiences like Montanus and believe them to be divinely inspired.

⁸⁹ Cohn, *The Pursuit*, 24.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 25.

Because the residents of the millennium were the martyrs, the Montanists lived an ascetic life and held onto a deep desire for martyrdom. When the persecutions in Lyon began, Montanism had spread through Asia into Rome, Africa and Gaul. In Carthage, Tertullian wrote of a vision of a heavenly Jerusalem in the sky waiting to descend (Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.25). The Montanists were following in the footsteps of the earliest Christians who based their beliefs on ancient prophecy and the Gospels (Revelations 22:6). By the mid-second- century a new thought developed that Christ would patiently wait until all peoples come to accept Christianity (2Peter 3:9). Christian apocalyptic writing came to be non- canonical.⁹¹ A growing number of Christians began to think of the millennium as a remote event. Still, others clung to the belief that it would come about.

⁹¹ Cohn, *The Pursuit*, 26.

Part III

CAUSES OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

In *Scorpiace*, Tertullian writes of a period of persecution. The passage confronts the issue of how a Christian should act during times of persecution.

Of some Christians the fire, of others the sword, of others the beasts, have made trial; others are hungering in the prison for the martyrdoms of which they have had a taste in the meantime by being subjected to clubs and claws besides. We ourselves having been appointed for pursuit are like hares being hemmed in from a distance. (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 1.11, Thelwall)

What kind of a world did Tertullian live in that would prompt such a description of terror? Was this real or part of Tertullian's conception of the ideal Christian?

Tertullian's ideal Christian addressed the choices of martyrdom, apostasy or flight. Scripture was authoritative for Tertullian and what it told him was that Christians were God's chosen people. Scriptural teaching foresaw hardship and reward to those who followed Christ. In this capacity, they should accept their lives as one of suffering.

The need for Tertullian's ideal Christian was a product of the ancient unchanging world in which he lived. Over the first two hundred years since its beginning Christianity had to battle rumors and social injustice. During Tertullian's

life there seems to be no change in sight. Tertullian is tenacious in his criticism of the treatment of Christians by authorities. There is evidence of the general nature and occurrence of persecutions that would include the laws of government and the official and unofficial system of prosecutions. Reviewing the origins of the context from which Tertullian writes adds a reality to his writing.

The following section will examine the question of what the legal status of Christians was up to the time of Tertullian. What was the attitude of government and other communities towards Christians? What was the root of the perceptions and fears of the pagan community?

Roman Legal System

Early studies of Christianity's status within the Roman legal system up to the time of Tertullian were represented by three opinions. First, there was a general law in the empire forbidding the practice of Christianity. Secondly, Christians suffered through police action, which led to arrest and punishment without a normal trial. Roman governors would use their *imperium* (authority) to maintain public order at their discretion. The justification for the governor's action was based on the premise that Christianity was an alien cult, which undermined traditional Roman religions. The fear was that a Christian presence might lead to apostasy by Roman citizens thus threatening the *pax deorum* (peace of the gods) and *institutum* (way of life) within the empire. The third opinion is

that specific criminal offences led to Christian prosecutions. This includes charges such as magic, infanticide, incest, and illegal assembly with the purpose of treason.⁹²

From these three opinions evolved two schools of thought, one based on a general law against illegal assembly, the other on the *coercitio* theory of a single crime.

General Law: Illegal Assembly

Studies into the administration of municipalities and provinces show Christianity as being a minor entity within the vastness of the empire. Because of this, it is improbable that Christianity would require a general law and any action against Christians would have been local and temporary.⁹³ Studies into the legality of Christian assemblies have shown that Christian churches either *de iure (in name)* or *defacto (in practice)* had property rights before the reign of Decius 249 C.E. except during local and temporary times of persecution. This also does not reconcile itself with the theory of a general law against Christians.

Proponents of the general law theory fall into two classes. First, a general law existed that had to be renewed with a change in leadership. This special law would have the status of an imperial edict and when renewed would carry much weight.⁹⁴ This would explain studies that show there were periods of non-persecution. Christian apologists also have indicated that many emperors did not carry on persecutions. Tertullian notes (Tertullian, *Scap.* 3) that there were no persecutions in Africa until Saturninus 180 C.E.

⁹² A.N. Sherwin-White, "The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," in *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays* (ed. Everett Ferguson, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 1.

⁹³ Sherwin-White, The Early Persecutions Again and T. Mommsen, *The History of Rome Vol., II.* (trans. William P. Dickson, London: Richard Bentley 2009), 3.

⁹⁴ Sherwin-White, The Early Persecutions, 3-4.

The second class of the general law theory considers Christianity as an act of *maiestas* (treason).⁹⁵ Tertullian's statements support the theory of Romans seeing Christians as *hostes publici* (*public enemies*) and *maiestatis rei* (*agents of treason*) (Tertullian, *Apol.* 28.2) However, the notion that Christians were accused and persecuted for treason is inconsistent with Roman actions such as those of Pliny who persecuted Christians for their name and obstinacy (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.2-4).

Coercitio Theory: Single Crime

The basis of this theory is the fear of national apostasy. Extensions of it suggest that Christians were seen as a nuisance and part of a recalcitrant group.⁹⁶ These charges were significant during Tertullian's time.⁹⁷

In Ulpian's *De officio proconsulis* Christians are associated with and generally considered *hostes humani generis* (*enemies of society*).⁹⁸ It was the pagan perception that Christians disliked humanity and that this tendency would lead to anti-social behavior and political disobedience.⁹⁹ Disobedience would have been controlled by police intervention and Christians could suffer coercion whether they were directly or indirectly involved in public disturbances. The weakness of this theory is the assumption that there was a police authority in the provinces. However, structured police administration existed only in capital cities.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁹⁶ Justin, *Apology*, 1.17 and Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 5.

⁹⁷ Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 5.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 5.

Serious offenders would appear in court before the provincial governor with *eloquim* (the charges) and their accusers. This procedure is described in Acts 19:23-41 when Demetrius the artisan aroused others against the teachings of Paul whom he accused of drawing people away from the temples and thus endangering their religion and incomes. The intent of the mob was to inflict punishment on Paul and his followers. However, the town clerk intervened and sets out the proper procedure for accusing others of crimes in Ephesus: “If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another” (Acts 19:37-38). The clerk urges the crowd to disperse because they “are in danger of being charged with rioting because there is no cause... to justify this commotion (Acts 19: 40). The custom among Romans was that an accused face his/her accuser.¹⁰⁰

Tertullian’s major complaint with the legal system is that Christians were condemned *accusatio nominis* (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.3). However, Christian prosecution for the most part followed the judicial system. For police to act it would be necessary that Christians perform a specific illegal action, for example large-scale political disobedience. However, Pliny persecuted Christians because they were *christiani* and not because they would not worship *di nostril*,¹⁰¹ something that could be construed as social or political disobedience.

With Pliny’s actions comes the suggestion that the charge against Christians may be more general than *coercitio*. This leads to the possibility of being guilty simply

¹⁰⁰ Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 7.

through association. Tertullian cites illegal association as one of many charges used against Christians (Tertullian, *Apol.* 38-39).

The Romans were intolerant of cults that were involved in anti-social acts. For example, the Bacchanals and Druids sacrificed humans in secret rites: Christians were suspected of similar acts. If a cult were synonymous with *scelera* (*treachery*), the cult would face a ban and membership would be a capital offence. Once a Christian confessed, they became a part of an outlaw group, not an individual. The charge was enforced by *coercitio* and the name alone could guide the magistrate to sentence the confessor as a malefactor.¹⁰²

Roman statutes provided a fixed guideline for governors to follow concerning *criminal ordinaria* (major crimes). But judgment of crimes *extra ordinem* (outside the normal) was left to the discretion of the governors, whose *imperium* allowed him to pass judgments over all non-citizens.¹⁰³

The Roman *cognitio* (inquiry) process gave the governors great freedom to determine between *criminal ordinaria* and *extra ordinem* during the first two centuries. Later in the second century, the empire began to centralize and codify the *criminal extra ordinaria*. Nero's persecution of Christians for the crime of *incendium* (arson) would have had no binding influence on provincial governors.¹⁰⁴

Tertullian mentions six governors in Africa who refused to prosecute Christians. This signifies that the solution to Christian persecutions lay with the *arbitrium* of the

¹⁰² Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions Again*, 9.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

governors. Because of this Tertullian writes to governors instead of the emperor in his apologies.¹⁰⁵

What needs to be addressed is why did Romans continue to be intolerant of Christians despite the fact that Pliny's investigation cleared Christians of (crimes) *flagitia*? Was it their refusal to worship *di nostri*? Though not *maiestas*, this refusal could lead to the charge of *contumacia*. For emperors such as Trajan the charge of *contumacia* (obstinacy) was a very serious one (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97). This type of disobedience leads governors, sometimes reluctantly, to punish Christians. The trials of Polycarp, the Scillitan martyrs, and Perpetua testify to these occurrences.¹⁰⁶ In the Scillitan Acts, the proconsul says: "Though time was given to them to return to the Roman tradition, yet they remained obstinate in their will."¹⁰⁷ This suggests that the official Roman policy was to grant a *locus paenitentiae* (a place of penitence), thus dismissing specific *flagitia* or *maiestas* from which Christians would not escape punishment.¹⁰⁸

Legalities of Persecutions

Was there a Law Against Christians? (The Legacy of Claudius and Nero)

In the *Apologeticus* Tertullian cites Nero as the *primum Caesariano gladio ferocisse* against Christians (Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.3). But did Nero's persecution of Christians have a basis in law? Sherwin-White, Ste. Croix and Barnes argue that such a law could not have

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History*, V.21 and Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 13 and *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*.

existed¹⁰⁹ simply because there is no evidence to support it. Rather than Nero acting on or initiating a law Frend points toward the emperor as setting a precedent “it would be dangerous... to minimize the long-term effects of the [Nero] affair. It put [Christians] on the wrong side of the state, and so it... afforded a precedent to which appeal could be made by any who sought to damage [Christianity’s] interests.”¹¹⁰

Rome was tolerant of foreign religions including Judaism.¹¹¹ The Emperor Claudius (41-54 C.E.) enacted ordinances for Jewish protection in Syria and Alexandria.¹¹² However, there were also periods of Roman persecution. In 39 C.E. and 49 C.E. Roman authorities expelled Jews from Rome. In 39 C.E. Rome responded to a civic uprising against Jews in Alexandria by offering their support to Jewish enemies. Because of their association with Judaism, Christians may have experienced the same tense relation with Rome.¹¹³

Claudius’ Edict

“All the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of *chrestus*, be banished from Rome” (Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4 [Hurley]).

Claudius issued two edicts: one in 39 or 41 C.E., the other, quoted above, in 49 C.E. Both edicts were directed towards the Jewish and Christian communities in

¹⁰⁹ J. Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto: Opposition to Christianity in the Roman Empire c. 50-250 AD* (trans. Gregory Carter. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 87.

¹¹⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 167.

¹¹¹ S.L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (London: 1951), 19-21.

¹¹² Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 88.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 89.

Rome.¹¹⁴ Acts 18:2 refers to the edict of 49 as occurring during Paul's evangelistic journey: "And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome." In Acts, there is no mention of Aquila and Priscilla being converted by Paul so they may be proof for Christians being in Rome in the 40's and Paul's epistles indicate Christianity as being established in Rome in the 50's (Romans 15:28-16:1).

The question is whether the edict of 49 affects Christians directly or indirectly. This discussion has two positions: First, the primary purpose of the edict was to control the disturbances between the teaching of Christian- Jews and members of the Jewish community. Secondly, the mention of *Chrestus* may be the result of the confusion Roman authorities had in naming Christians. Tertullian refers to this in the *apologeticus*: "Yes, and when it is mispronounced by you 'Chrestian' (for you do not even have certain knowledge of the mere name)" (Tertullian, *Apol.* 3 [Glover]). Since Suetonius does not explain who *Chrestus* is suggests that contemporary readers knew of him. *Chrestus* may have been an historical unknown messianic figure that authorities considered a troublemaker. However, that messianic expectations were high in Galilee and Judea does not mean that diaspora Jews in Rome had the same hopes. The edict may indicate a Christian presence in Rome during this period and that the disturbances over *Chrestus* may have been over Christ.¹¹⁵

Three scenarios emerge because of a Christian presence in Rome. The relevance of each scenario is that they point towards the start of opposition to Christianity in the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.100.

¹¹⁵ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 101.

first century. The first scenario is that Christians, through their evangelism, were responsible for the disturbances in Rome. This would make them direct targets of the edict but it would also have a profound effect on the Jewish community because of their assumed closeness with Christianity. The second scenario offers that Christians were not the instigators but they did had a role in the riots; the Jewish community reacts to messianic expectations, causes problems and Christians support Jewish unrest. The third scenario is that Christians were innocent victims of Jewish unrest; they suffered by association.¹¹⁶

The intent of the edict may or may not have been to free Rome of all Christians and Jews.¹¹⁷ Neither Josephus nor Suetonius suggests a Jewish-free Rome but rather a peaceful one with the expulsion of trouble-making Christians and Jews. However, this type of limited expulsion would have been difficult to enact. The administration, time and labor needed to sort out the troublemakers would create an even greater uproar than the edict itself. Luke's interpretation of the edict explicitly claims that "Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome" (Acts 18:2) and would also go against this type of limited action.

During the reign of Nero, Rome began to interpret Christianity as a sect of Judaism. This does not presuppose that Nero regarded Christianity as an independent religion, but there is a realization that Christians are followers of a would be messiah. The edicts of Claudius had no long term effect on Roman Christian relations in comparison to Nero's persecutions.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 101-2

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 101-2

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 105.

Evidence of Early Persecutions

Christian apologists describe Nero as the first to persecute Christians as a group (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.26.7). Christians delight in the fact that an infamous emperor such as Nero would begin Christian persecutions (Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.3).

Does Nero's persecution of a group of Christians in AD 64 mark a significant change in Rome's attitude toward Christianity or is there evidence of earlier opposition in Christian literature, imperial letters and the reports of ancient historians? (It is noted that the personal missions of some writers may influence their reporting. However, the reports and the message they advance influenced the development and promotion of Tertullian's ideal Christian).

Christian Literature, Imperial Letters and Ancient Historians:

Opposition found in Acts and the Pauline Epistles

Paul's *Letter to the Thessalonians* reports of opposition towards Christians and accepts it as a characteristic of being a Christian. Gentile Christians in Thessalonica suffer just as the first Christians and Jesus did in Judea (1Thessalonians 2:14-16). However, the opponents now are not Jewish or Roman authorities but fellow citizens.¹¹⁹

Paul's purpose is to console those who suffer by relating sufferings through time. Paul identifies Christians as God's chosen people.¹²⁰ To develop this idea, opposition and persecution against Christians began with the persecution of the ancient biblical prophets. By connecting the lives of the prophets, Jesus, and the suffering of Christians in Judea to

¹¹⁹ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 109.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 110.

the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul is trying to create a community for all Christians. He wants to create a continuum of Christian suffering, just as Tertullian would do later.

Paul tries to console the suffering with the hope of reward and retribution for those causing the suffering. This opposition is viewed by Paul as neither singular nor short lived; "... in spite of persecution you received the word of joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia; therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the congregations of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be consecrated worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering- since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who inflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us..." (2Thessalonians 1:4-7).

In Corinth, Paul again teaches that Christians are the divinely called and chosen. If the Romans had understood they would not have crucified the Lord of the world (1Corinthians 2:8). The context of the passage is to address potential Roman opposition towards Christians in Corinth.

His fears become real when Paul is brought before the Roman proconsul Gallio in 65 C.E. The offense is that Paul is inciting worship of a god that goes against Jewish Law. Gallio refuses to pass judgment because the charge is not a crime of wrongdoing. He tells the Jews to go and work it out amongst themselves (Acts 18:12-17). This excerpt shows that a Roman magistrate had the freedom to intervene as he chose when it came to conflicts between pagans, Christians and Jews. It is also an example of the fragile legal protection both communities could expect. Gallio chose to be tolerant towards the

Christians; instead, allows the beating of Sosthenes, the synagogue leader who brought up the charge (Acts 18:17).

Luke reveals that he was aware of the protection offered to the Jewish community (Acts 22: 3-5; 25-19). Despite the reluctance of local or regional authorities to become involved in resolving Jewish accusations against Christians, it does not mean that authorities had not opposed Paul's Christian audience.¹²¹

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul compares his suffering to that of other contemporary Christian leaders and fellow Christians who have suffered great labors, imprisonment, and beatings (2Corinthians 11:23). Paul refers to these types of punishments as something Christians must endure as servants of God (2Corinthians 6:4-5).

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Roman authorities persecuted all Christians just because they imprisoned Paul the evangelist. Paul foresaw that Christians would more often face popular opposition. He warned Christians to be careful in their dealing with outsiders and avoid being too aggressive in their teachings (Philippians 4:3-6). From this warning it seems that not all Christians faced the same type of opposition. Jesus, Paul and other evangelists had a special tense relation with Rome.¹²² This does not reveal what the average Christian endured simply because of being Christian.

Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostle reveal that before Nero, Christians evangelists were opposed on a large scale by pagans and Jews; common Christians met resistance from local and regional authorities; and the edict of Claudius may have been in reaction to similar Jewish- Christian activities. The notion that Nero was the first emperor

¹²¹ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 160.

¹²² Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 137.

to initiate persecutions against Christians is misleading. Paul is evidence because Roman officials with local, regional or empirical jurisdiction imprisoned him and others. Paul's letters present persecution and suffering as a part of the Christian life.¹²³

Imperial Letters:

Pliny's Letter to Trajan

In 112 C.E. Pliny, the emperor Trajan's legate in the province of Bithynia wrote to Trajan seeking advice on the prosecution of Christians. The letter to Trajan results in a general split by scholars on what it reveals about the legal status of Christianity. Those who argue that there was no law cite Pliny's doubt about how to deal with the repentant and accusers, and Trajan's response makes no mention of any law or edict.¹²⁴ Opponents of this position argue that Pliny's confident punitive actions indicate that there was a legal position against Christianity. This argument assumes that during this period of peace a Roman governor could or would not execute a large number of people unless there was a firm basis in law to do so.¹²⁵ Pliny's punitive actions may also suggest that the process of *cognitio extra ordinem* gave the governor wide discretionary powers.¹²⁶ Pliny's actions, supports the theory that the governor's authority of was broad and independent.¹²⁷

¹²³ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 142.

¹²⁴ Ibid.176.

¹²⁵ P. Keresztes, *Imperial Rome and the Christians: From Severi to Constantine the Great*, Vol. II. (Lanham: University Press of America), 1989 and Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 176.

¹²⁶ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 176.

¹²⁷ F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC – AD 337)* (London: 557).

Pliny's letter categorizes Christians who come before him into three groups: Christians who persist in asserting that they are Christian, those who deny being Christians and offer proof through sacrifice, and those who were once Christian but no longer are.

Pliny's letter offers two differing perspectives: one of Pliny's concerns is that the repentant are cleared of the allegation of being a Christian; on the other hand he is enthusiastic about punishing the obstinate Christians. His doubts arise because of an uncertainty on whether his practices are correct to determine guilt or acquittal:¹²⁸

“whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name which should be punished”(Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.2 [Walsh]). If there were a law or edict then this would have an influence on Pliny and Christian adversaries. Without a law, Pliny and other governors would be more able to react at their own discretion and their motives would have significant meaning.¹²⁹

During this period in Bithynia opposition towards Christianity came from three groups: *delators* within the populace, Roman imperial authority, and regional Roman authority. These three groups represent a wide range of means and motives for opposing Christianity.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 177 and Sherwin-White, *The Early Persecutions*.

¹²⁹ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 178.

¹³⁰ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 178.

Delators and Pliny

Pliny's letter reveals the relation between *delators* and the regional authorities. The *delators* instigate the procedure by accusing someone of being Christian. If the *delator* brought the accusation of *nomen ipsum* (his name only), it means the plaintiff had a great desire to see Christians punished.

If there were a law against Christians then the *delator's* assumptions would be correct. However, a law may not have been necessary. A precedent such as the fire in 64 C.E. would have been something Christian enemies could use to sway contemporary governors. With no law the provincial authority would use their discretion.¹³¹ What was unpredictable was how Roman authorities of a time and place reacted against Christians.¹³²

In Bithynia- Pontus plaintiffs had Pliny's support. In his letter Pliny states: "for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished" (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3-4 [Walsh]). Once Pliny begins prosecuting he reports that the accusations against Christians increase (Pliny, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.5).

In the Roman judicial system, private plaintiffs initiated prosecutions. In Bithynia prosecution turned to persecution. Pliny sought out the accused, which was against the custom, and something Trajan disapproved of: "Christians are not to be sought out" (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.1). By his actions, it is apparent Pliny viewed Christianity as a serious problem.¹³³

¹³¹ Ibid, 182.

¹³² Ibid, 183.

¹³³ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 184.

Central Roman Authority (Trajan's Rescript)

Pliny's letter to Trajan contained the following assumptions: Trajan knew of the Christians; and he knew of the trials against them. In response to Pliny, Trajan offers the following insights: it is not possible to lay down a general rule against them and whoever denies being Christian must provide proof (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.2)

There are three areas in which Pliny and Trajan agree: a person should be prosecuted for being a Christian; Pliny's 'test of disposition' was appropriate; and both believe that any accused who worships Roman gods has indicated that they are no longer Christian and therefore should be released. There are two significant differences between the two: Trajan advises Pliny not to accept anonymous accusations and not to seek out accused Christians (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.1-2).

Trajan stresses proper procedure and advises Pliny to follow the Roman legal procedure of *cognito extra ordinem*.¹³⁴ There must be a *delator* to bring up charges and anonymity does not require action. This step means that successful opposition to Christians would have begun within the local community.¹³⁵ This may seem as protection for Christians;¹³⁶ however, Pliny's letter and Trajan's reply indicate both agree that Christians because of their stubbornness and obstinacy deserve punishment (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3, 97.1-2). But does their exchange reveal the real motives behind Christian persecution?¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid. 186.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 186.

¹³⁶ R.L. Wilkens, The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) Saw Them, in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1 (ed. E.P.Sanders, Philadelphia: 1980), 28.

¹³⁷ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 187.

The Vices Theory

One of Pliny's concerns is whether it is the name or the vices associated to it that are deserving of punishment (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.2). He writes to Trajan that he has conducted an investigation into allegations of Christian vices.¹³⁸ Pliny reports that when Christians meet they partake of a *promiscuum* (common) and *innoxium* (innocent) meal. This alludes to the suspicion that when Christians gathered, they ate deviant and sinister meals, and that cannibalism was common amongst them (Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.5-6, 31).

Pliny stresses the commonality and harmlessness of the Christian meals. Because of Pliny's emphasis on the meal and by reporting it to Trajan, it is conceivable these rumors had previously influenced both of them.¹³⁹ Pliny had presumed that Christians were involved in criminal acts but now he emphasizes, *non in scelus* (non criminal). Pliny did not expect Christian innocence and by relaying this new information to Trajan indicates that Pliny thought Trajan would also be surprised.¹⁴⁰ It is proof that *flagitia* (debauchery) was not as important as thought.¹⁴¹ Pliny's letter in a sense was a defense of Christians against the accusation of *flagitia*.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Ibid.187.

¹³⁹ Ibid.188.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 188.

¹⁴¹ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, "Why were the early Christians persecuted?" In *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays* (ed. Everett Ferguson, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 31.

¹⁴² M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (Trans. A. Bedini, London: 1988), 61.

Despite Pliny's findings, rumors of debauchery persisted. The allegations were relevant during the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 C.E.) and the Christian persecutions at Lyons in 177 C.E. Both Fronto of Cirta and the Chief Magistrate of Cirta (210-217 C.E.) made similar accusations against Christians (Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.6 note 1742). Even after his own investigation Pliny still assumes an immoral connection to Christianity when he asks, "whether the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name should be punished" (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.2 [Walsh]).

Christian Obstinacy

Pliny's statement that such an obstinate group deserves punishment (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3-4) forms the basis of the 'Obstinate Theory.' The obstinacy of Christians enrages Pliny and substitutes for any lack of evidence to justify his persecutions.¹⁴³ Pliny's stance set a precedent for some Roman officials who may have been indifferent to the religious aspects of Christian trials but had difficulty dealing with Christian *contumacia* (defiance).¹⁴⁴

There are four arguments against the 'Obstinacy Theory.' First, the term *contumacia*, does not appear in Pliny's letter or in Trajan's response; secondly, the 'test' was for a repentant Christian only; third, it would be unthinkable that a Christian would face persecution primarily based on something that occurred during the trial; and lastly,

¹⁴³ Sherwin- White, A.N. 1964. "The Early Persecutions and Roman Law." In *Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*. Appendix V, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 779.

¹⁴⁴ Sherwin- White, *The Early Persecutions*, 13.

this theory does not explain why authorities were willing to prosecute Christians because of the *nomen*.¹⁴⁵

Ungodliness Theory

Pliny's letter reveals that through his legal dealings with Christians he had acquired some knowledge of them. He knew, for example, that real Christians would never curse the name of Christ nor sacrifice to the Roman gods or the emperor. Pliny had seen Christians refuse to worship the gods even under the threat of death (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3-5). Because of this knowledge he devised the 'Test of Disposition' intended for those who repent at their trial (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.1-2).

Pliny's test was not an effort to promote or combat ungodliness but rather to simply test the sincerity of the repentant.¹⁴⁶ Trajan and Pliny recognize the threat Christianity poses to their pagan cults but they also believed that people would repent if given the opportunity (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.10). In his letter, Pliny noted that the prosecutions have lead more citizens to worship the gods.¹⁴⁷

Pliny's letter and Trajan's support indicates that by 112 C.E. the regional authority in Bithynia- Pontus and the central authority in Rome were both aware of the Christian aversion towards the imperial cult and that ungodliness was attached to the Christian *nomen*.

¹⁴⁵ Ste. Croix, Why were, 18-19 and Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 2.3.

¹⁴⁶ Sherwin- White, The Early Persecutions, 700.

¹⁴⁷ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 193.

Theory of *Superstitio*

One part of Pliny's 'test of disposition' demanded that the repentant curse the name of Christ (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.5). Pliny's inclusion of this step points towards the Christian's most serious crime. Christians worshipped Christ *quasi deo*; that is their *culpa*e and *errors* (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96 .4,7,8).

Pliny believed that Christian *superstitio* posed a threat to the *pax deorum*. Pliny describes Christian superstition as *pravam et immodicus* (depraved and excessive). He sees this superstition as dangerous because of its continuing growth. He warns that the contagion has begun to spread not only to the cities but also to the towns and villages (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96 .9). Pliny viewed Christianity as the worst type of contagious *superstitio*. Because of this he was willing to punish Christians based on *nomen* (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.7).

In his rescript the emperor Trajan reveals that he believes that Christ is central to the Christian superstition. He also confirms that Christians can be accused and punished for the *nomen* only: "If brought before you and found guilty, they must be punished" (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.2 [Walsh]). The correspondence between Trajan and Pliny set a precedent regarding the treatment of Christians. Despite not being legally binding, Trajan's rescript helped influence future governors' decisions.¹⁴⁸

Context of Hadrian's Rescript

Hadrian wrote a rescript to Serennius Granianus in 123/124 C.E in response to questions regarding the treatment of Christians (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.8.7). Hadrian

¹⁴⁸ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 206.

addressed the letter to Minucius Fundanus, who succeeded Serennius Granianus as proconsul in Asia. The rescript shows that Trajan's earlier rescript had not established itself as precedent.¹⁴⁹

Hadrian's duty was to keep peace in the empire. His rescript is a reaction to potential unrest rather than being for or against Christians. The emperor expresses his concern that members of the public may be wrongly accused and that those who would profit through false accusations go unpunished.¹⁵⁰ Like Trajan before him, he was concerned with legal protocol and not about the treatment of Christians.¹⁵¹

Ancient Historians

Both Suetonius and Tacitus describe the Christian persecution of 64 C.E. in their reports of Nero. They refer to the character of Christians, public perception of Christians and Nero's punishment of them. Their reports can be seen as either a reflection of the times of Nero or the reports can be used to understand how people viewed Christians in the 120's, after the investigations of Pliny.

Reporting on the actions taken by Nero against Christians, Suetonius 70-130 C.E describes Christianity as an infectious wicked *superstitio* (Suetonius, *Nero*. 16.2). If one considers that Suetonius' contemporary readers lived in the year 120 this description suggests that some readers were either unaware of Christians or Suetonius was labeling

¹⁴⁹ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 207.

¹⁵⁰ T. D. Barnes, Legislation Against the Christians, in *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays* (ed. Everett Ferguson, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 37, note 59 and Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History*, IV.9.3. 32. Barnes, Legislation,

¹⁵¹ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 213.

Christians with his description.¹⁵² Tacitus 56-117 C.E. connects Nero's punishment of the Christians with the fire of 64. From Tacitus' report of the persecution of the Christians, it is not clear whether the description of Christians was his, Nero's or others.¹⁵³ Both historians offer explanations about who Christians are and how to regard them. The necessity by the authors to include this information suggests an effort on their part to enlighten readers.

Tacitus tells his readers that Pilate executed Christ and that for a time this wicked *superstitio* was held in check only to have it break out again (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44). Tacitus views Jesus as a criminal who was executed only a few decades earlier. That Tacitus connects Christians to the criminal Jesus suggests a stigma attached to the His followers.¹⁵⁴ In his letters, Paul views his persecution and that of other Christians as a natural part of being a follower of Christ. The difference between Paul's letter and Tacitus is the purpose of Paul's letter is to encourage Christ's followers, whereas Tacitus reveals and supports the notion that anyone who follows Christ is suspect.¹⁵⁵

Christianity as *Superstitio*

Pliny, Suetonius and Tacitus considered Christianity a dangerous *superstitio* that was gaining momentum within the empire. Pliny expressed his concerns about its growth to the emperor Trajan (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* 96. 9-10). Tacitus sees Christianity as repulsive and worries over the fact that it has spread from Judea into Rome itself. After

¹⁵² Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 218.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 218.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 219.

the death of Jesus it "... broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world flow together and become popular" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44 [Yardley]).

Tacitus along with other Greeks and Romans also regarded Judaism as a *superstitio* because the Jews worshipped one god in place of many deities. The Jewish God was all powerful and demanded exclusive devotion towards Him (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4). Judaism was prone to superstition, hated other religious rites, and considered it idolatry to make amends by sacrificing to other gods (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5).

To Romans the practice of worshipping one god was dangerous because it could make other gods angry. The emperor Domitian 81-96 C.E. worshipped one god, which brought on the wrath of the other gods and led to his downfall (Suetonius, *Aug.*) The emperor Augustus heeded a warning in a dream that he would suffer a similar fate because of his time spent worshipping one god at the expense of others. When it came to matters of religion a rigid adherent to rules guided Romans; all the gods needed to be satisfied.¹⁵⁶ The purpose of Roman religion was the notion of *pax deorum*; anything different was seen as hostile behavior. Events such as the fire in Rome could mean that the gods were angry from neglect.¹⁵⁷

There was a close link between power and the deities in Roman society. With this definition of *superstitio*, Judaism and Christianity were *superstitiones*. *Pax deorum* was the duty of magistrates, institutions and the courts. Those who are members of a *superstitio* would be punished if this peace were threatened.

¹⁵⁶ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 220.

¹⁵⁷ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 221.

Tacitus reports that the senate, during the reign of Tiberius (14-37 C.E.), punished thousands of people *superstition infecta* (infected with a superstition) who practiced *sacris Aegyptiis Iudaicisque* (sacred Egyptian and Judaic rites).¹⁵⁸ Tacitus also reports that an ex-consul, Statilius Taurus was accused of *magicas superstitiones*, by a Roman legate (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.59). This event evidences that anyone regardless of social status faced punishment for *superstitio*.¹⁵⁹

Judaism was legal, which offered it a limited form of protection. Jews did not have to attend the rituals that surrounded the Roman gods. The protection they received was the choice of the authorities under which they lived. Because of their early link to Judaism, Christians also enjoyed this type of protection. However, once Romans such as Suetonius, Tacitus and Pliny expose the differences between the two superstitions: Christian *superstitio* becomes more dangerous than the Jewish form.¹⁶⁰

Christian *superstitio* can be compared with the superstition of Nero. Nero was seen as ungodly and superstitious because he despised all religious rites except those directed to *dea Syria* (Suetonius, *Nero.* 56-7). This is similar to the superstitions of Judaism and Domitian. However, Nero was also obstinate in another superstition. The use of the word obstinate recalls Pliny suggesting that Christians deserve punishment because of their obstinacy (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3). Nero's superstition was to worship the image of a child who was not a god. This made Nero's superstition worse than his worship of *dea Syria* who was a goddess (Suetonius, *Nero.* 56).

¹⁵⁸ Tacitus, *The Annals*, 2.85 and Flavius Josephus, *Judean Antiquities*, 18, 3,4-5.

¹⁵⁹ Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 221.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 222.

In this same way, Christianity is more dangerous and deviant than Judaism: "... they were accustomed to assembly at dawn on a fixed day, and sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as a god" (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.7 [Walsh]). Another concern for the Romans was Christianity's evangelic ideals. While Judaism was more interested in preserving its identity, Christianity was interested in becoming universal.¹⁶¹

To the Romans, the Christian religion was immoral and threatened the structure of Roman society. Compared to a healthy relation between gods and men, the Christian *superstitio* was egotistical and asocial.¹⁶² Despite not believing that Christians started the fire and being sympathetic towards them because of the cruelty of Nero, Tacitus suggests that they should still face punishment: they are "criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44 [Yardley]).

¹⁶¹ Tacitus, *The Annals*, XV.44 and Pliny the Younger, *Complete Letters*, X.96.9.

¹⁶² Engberg, *Impulsore Chresto*, 223.

Part IV

PROSECUTIONS

The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* in 180 C.E. reveals a willingness amongst North African Christians to become martyrs. During periods of persecution eschatological hopes and visions intensified. It was God's judgment that mattered most (Tertullian, *Cor.* 12) as belief in the reward of martyrdom took precedence over theological disputes and the fear of Roman prosecutions.

Because Christianity was not defined as a criminal offense, local magistrates could not pass judgment on Christians. Local authorities could only arrest and dispatch the accused Christians to prison to await trial. The governor had the responsibility and flexibility to act or not act on criminal accusations not defined in Roman law.¹⁶³

Evidence of local authorities arresting Christian suspects appears in the case of Polycarp in Smyrna 155 C.E.¹⁶⁴ At Lyon in 177 C.E. local authorities and the tribune of the *cohors urbana* held a group of Christians in prison to wait for the judgment of the governor (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.8). Though there is no way of knowing how the Scillitan martyrs ended up before the governor, it also may be that local officials arrested them to await trial.¹⁶⁵

In general, trials came under the jurisdiction of a local official, an appointed *iudex* (judge), the emperor, or the Senate. The *leges publicae* (public laws) addressed crimes

¹⁶³ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, Chapter 10.

¹⁶⁴ "Polycarp," in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (trans. Herbert Musurillo, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972), 6.2.

¹⁶⁵ Sherwin-White, *The Early Persecutions and Engberg, Impulsore Chresto*, 263.

cited as illegal then instituted a trial system. This process tried those persons accused of committing illegal acts and punished the offenders accordingly. An informal process, *cognito extra ordinem*, addressed crimes outside this system. Any magistrate in charge of this type of trial could act alone or form a *consilium*.¹⁶⁶ Those presiding had the authority to dictate procedure, and impose punishment at their discretion.¹⁶⁷ Cases involving Christians fell into this category and exhibited the discretionary power of the governor; prosecutions, acquittals, and punishments all show variations (Tertullian, *Scap.* 4.3).

In 112 C.E., Pliny, the emperor Trajan's legate in the Province of Bithynia wrote to the emperor seeking advice on how to handle Christians brought before him by the accusations of anonymous informers (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.5). In his rescript Trajan makes it clear that anonymous reporting or accusations were inappropriate (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.97.2). The emperor Hadrian in 122 C.E. expressed the same sentiments (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.9). Despite Trajan and Hadrian's call for formal prosecutions, the procedure remained flexible sometimes followed, other times ignored. At the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna and at the trial of Perpetua in Africa it was ignored.¹⁶⁸ In contrast, proconsul Valerius Pudens released a Christian because the evidence was based on an anonymously written accusation (Tertullian, *Scap.* 4.3).

The requirement to prove innocence also varied. In some cases, those who denied being Christian offered prayers to the emperor and cursed Christ, a 'test of disposition' as proof of repentance (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.5). Other proconsuls omitted this

¹⁶⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 145.

¹⁶⁷ Sherwin-White, A.N. 1966. *Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press., VIII.14.

¹⁶⁸ Polycarp, 9.1 and Perpetua, 6.1.

step after the accused denied being a Christian (Tertullian, *Scap.* 4.3). As seen in Polycarp and Perpetua replying yes to the question ‘*Christianus es?*’ was to admit guilt. What normally followed was an offer to repent. If that failed sentencing occurred.¹⁶⁹

The types of punishment dealt to criminals varied greatly depending on citizenship and social status. When it came to Christians punishments seem more arbitrary. For example, Pliny used his discretionary powers by sending Roman citizens accused of Christianity to Rome and executing non-citizens (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3). At Lyons in 177 C.E. the governor followed the advice of the emperor to behead citizens and send others to the beasts.¹⁷⁰ However, the governor in an attempt to appease the mob also sent Attalus, a Roman citizen, to the beasts (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 1.47).

In the second century the distinction between Roman and non-Roman citizens was replaced by *honestiores* (upper class) and *humiliores* (lower class).¹⁷¹ But Christians did not seem to follow the same rule. In the *Passion of Perpetua*, Perpetua and the slave Revocatus Filictia share the same fate.¹⁷² Polycarp, who seems from the martyrdom account to be a person of means, dies at the stake.¹⁷³ The martyrs at Scilli were beheaded despite having family names that would indicate low social status.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Polycarp, 9.1 and Perpetua, 6.1.

¹⁷⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 147.

¹⁷¹ Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 260.

¹⁷² The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 18.1.

¹⁷³ Polycarp, 11.1/ 6.1.

¹⁷⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 148.

Though mostly a place of transition, prison was also a type of punishment.¹⁷⁵ Christians who survived persecution sometimes had to spend time in prison (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.3). Classification for those who spent prison time is unknown; Christians refer to them as confessors. The more rigorous Christians were sometimes critical of this type of punishment. Tertullian, for example, ridiculed Praxeus' time in prison (Tertullian, *Prax.* 1.4). The variations of procedure, acquittals, and punishment all stress the freedom each provincial governor had when dealing with Christians.¹⁷⁶

The Role of the Governor

The role of the governor was to react, sometimes proactively, to disputes in order to avoid public unrest. If Christians were brought before him for prosecution there were three factors that may have influenced a decision to prosecute: the mob, public animosity, and succession.

Roman authorities were aware of the power of the mob. The ruling class feared it¹⁷⁷ and the emperor Claudius 41-54 C.E. was nearly lynched by a riotous mob (Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.43). The level of military protection that a governor had was limited, so at Christian trials the mob sometimes played a significant role. When the crowd in Smyrna demanded that Polycarp appear before them, an arrest followed.¹⁷⁸ In the *Acta* the proconsul is invited by Polycarp to discuss Christianity but the aggressiveness of the mob

¹⁷⁵ Garnsey, *Social Status*, 147.

¹⁷⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 148.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 160.

¹⁷⁸ Polycarp, 10.1.

prompts the governor to refuse.¹⁷⁹ The mob even organizes Polycarp's execution.¹⁸⁰ The governor has no choice but to allow this to happen because a Christian's life was not worth the risk of a potential riot.

On the other hand, if there is no mob incitement¹⁸¹ governors are shown to be reluctant to punish Christians. In *Perpetua*, the governor pleads with Perpetua to reform¹⁸² and in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* the accused are given time to reconsider their plea. In these accounts, in Biblical reports, and in Tertullian's writing it is the mob that not only steers the trials but also instigates action against Christians (Tertullian, *Apol.* 40.1).

Social violence against a group was more likely to occur in a city. Public executions of criminals were common during the games. Christians, at times, because they were seen as criminals became victims of the mob's desire for a spectacle. Mob violence may also have occurred after events such as earthquakes or fires that were sometimes seen as the result of Christian neglect of the Roman gods. The desires of the mob, however, were generally short lived; they would dissipate quickly and with it the danger to Christians.

Public animosity towards Christianity was another factor that would have influenced the decision to prosecute. Pliny, for example, had no doubt about how to deal with Christians whether they were publically accused, part of a *libellus* or informed on

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 10.1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 12.2.

¹⁸¹ "The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs," in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (trans. Herbert Musurillo, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972)

¹⁸² The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 6.

anonymously (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3). Hadrian's response to Fundanus reveals the emperor's animosity towards Christians and possibly that of the governor. Hadrian suggested severe punishment against those who falsely accused others of being Christian (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.9.3). The Roman senator Fronto attacked the moral fiber of Christians (Minucus Felix, *Oct.* 9.6) with the intent of discrediting political adversaries who may have been tolerant of Christians.¹⁸³

A change in leadership was another factor that might lead to a change in attitude towards Christians and potential prosecution. Melito wrote to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius concerning an edict from the new pro consul Servilius Paulus. The proconsul stated an active interest in making Christianity a legal offense. This, Melito argued, would allow "Shameless informers and coveters of the property of others, taking occasion from the decrees.... If these things are done by thy command, well and good. For a just ruler will never take unjust measures" (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.5 [Williamson]). Perpetua and the other Christians with her suffered martyrdom as a result of proconsul succession and a change in attitude¹⁸⁴; one proconsul might not be inclined to persecute Christians but another was willing to do so¹⁸⁵.

Christians were aware that persecution was possible. During peace or persecution, they lived at the mercy of the governor. The mob or a disaster could sway the governor toward persecutions. Because of these characteristics persecution tended to be local and random (Origen, *Cels.* 2.13) giving Christians opportunity to leave the area. However,

¹⁸³ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 161.

¹⁸⁴ The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 6.2.

¹⁸⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 163.

Christians had to be ready to confess their faith in case an escape was not possible. Within this atmosphere of fear, the church developed into a church of the martyrs.

Role of the Emperor

Christians came to realize that a governor's attitude and actions towards Christians might not reflect an emperor's. Because of the governor's discretionary power within the *cognito extra ordinem* it is difficult to assign times of persecution to an emperor. Unless the senate and the emperor decided to interfere, it seems that they were not directly involved in Christian prosecutions before or during Tertullian's life. Christian writers also make it difficult because they embellish the emperors' and the senate's consideration of Christianity in a form of Christian propaganda.

The true role the emperor played in the prosecution of Christians or other criminals was small when supported by evidence.¹⁸⁶ When the Emperor Nero came under suspicion of starting the fire in Rome, he responded by using Christians as scapegoats: "To dispel the gossip Nero therefore found culprits on whom he inflicted the most exotic punishments. These were people hated for their shameful offenses whom the common people called Christians" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44 [Yardley]). Romans came to view Nero as persecuting out of cruelty (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44) rather than punishing criminals. However, despite an emperor's involvement there was no legislation passed against Christians and his presence did not lead to similar persecutions outside of Rome. Future outbreaks of persecution would have no connection with Nero. Roman governors were empowered to punish Christians and required no approval from the emperor.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 151.

Part V

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN, JEWISH AND PAGAN COMMUNITIES IN TERTULLIAN'S CARTHAGE

The territory of Carthage covered a vast area and included a number of towns that extended as far as sixty miles inland.¹⁸⁸ Within the city of Carthage three communities co-existed, their differences and similarities defined by their religious beliefs.

In 197 C.E. the Emperor Septimius Severus 193-211 defeated the Parthians and his political rivals bringing peace to the Roman Empire.¹⁸⁹ In Carthage, the pagan community took an active part in the celebrations (Tertullian, *Apol.* 35.2, 35.11). However, the Christian and Jewish communities declined to participate because they saw celebrating and toasting the spirit of the emperor as idolatrous (Tertullian, *Apol.* 35.4-7). To pagans it may have seemed that Christians and Jews did not share in the spirit of rejoicing the emperor's victory.

The Christian and Jewish communities shared a number of characteristics that made the two groups different from the pagan community.¹⁹⁰ Jews and Christians did not take part in pagan festivals; they also set aside one day out of seven to worship their god. On that day no business took place as both communities assembled in their churches or synagogues. However, it was the differences between Christians and Jews that attracted the attention of Roman authorities and prompted the *genus tertium* (third race)

¹⁸⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 152.

¹⁸⁸ Broughton, *The Romanization*, 58 and Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 86.

¹⁸⁹ Tertullian, *adversus judaeos*, from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 7 and Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 88.

¹⁹⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 88.

designation¹⁹¹ of Christians. Though widely hated and often assaulted the Jewish community could seek protection from the law. Christians on the other hand could suffer assaults by enemies without fear of retribution (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.7.19).

It was an accepted Roman practice to allow conquered peoples to legally continue worshipping the deity of their fathers (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1). Once the distinction between Judaism and Christianity was enhanced through evangelic writing and the reports of historians such as Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, Christianity came to be seen as a *superstitio* with no legal status (Tertullian, *Apol.* 4.4). The differences between Christians and other communities isolated Christians but there were also differences within the Christian community that made them stand out and difficult to understand.

Tertullian writes of a woman who became ecstatic and received visions during a church service. When the service was over some of the assembly left but others stayed to hear her (Tertullian, *An.* 9.4). There were rival teachers within the Christian community whom Tertullian regarded as unorthodox. Tertullian referred to them as wandering exiles (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 42.10). Their presence added to the confusion of a true Christian identity.¹⁹²

Within this environment the lifestyles and beliefs of each group would have influenced each other. What was Tertullian's view of these influences? How did Tertullian respond in order to promote his vision of the ideal Christian?

¹⁹¹ Tertullian, *ad nationes Bk. I- II*, from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 3, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 1.8 and A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (trans. and ed. James Moffat, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 271.

¹⁹² Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 89.

Tertullian's View of Judaism in Carthage

What Tertullian has to say about the contemporary Jewish community is debatable. Some scholars argue that Tertullian's comments are based on recent events; others argue that they reflect apostolic times.¹⁹³ Barnes in *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* suggests that Tertullian lacked a real knowledge of Carthaginian Jews. Many of his comments about them are superficial. In *Idolatry and Corona*, for example, his descriptions of the Jewish community seem to be taken directly from the Bible.¹⁹⁴

Tertullian makes harsh comments about the Jewish community. He describes them as "the seed of all calumny against us" (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.14.2 [Holmes]) and argues that the synagogues are fountains of persecution (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 10.10). Tertullian views contemporary Carthaginian Jews and the Jews of scripture as the same people. As a nation Judaism persecuted Christianity's predecessors: the prophets (Tertullian, *Jud.* 13.19) who told of the coming of the messiah; the Christian Christ who in turn was executed by the sons of Israel (Tertullian, *Jud.* 8.18); and the apostles also suffered at the hands of Jewish communities (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 10.10). Tertullian is persistent in his portrayal of Israel as no longer the chosen people; his argument is that from the very beginning Christians suffered persecution and are the real chosen people (Tertullian, *Apol.* 7.3).

Evidence to support the successional rights of Christianity was available in the Jewish scriptures and early Christian writings. Tertullian used examples from the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, and the prophecies of the prophets to inspire the

¹⁹³ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 48.

¹⁹⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 92.

Christian community. The skill to do so was in the principles of hermeneutics.¹⁹⁵

Tertullian argued that unorthodox teachers misinterpret scripture (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 11).

In the same way he used his interpretation of scripture to argue that Judaism had outlived its identity (Tertullian, *Jud.* 1).

The God of the Old and New Testaments is the same. The Jews, however, are a difficult people so God appears harsh towards them. It was not God's law that is inferior, but the people. Just because the Jews do not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah is no reason to doubt God (Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.7.1, 3.8.1). For Tertullian the Jewish people are a stepping-stone that Christians can use for self-identity.¹⁹⁶ Judaism is ancient and unchanging, Tertullian claims (Tertullian, *Jejun.* 13.6). If Christianity displays any similarity to Judaism, it is not from direct derivation; the similarities may be analogical not genealogical.¹⁹⁷ In Tertullian's view because Christianity had replaced Israel as God's chosen people Christianity could lay claim to being an ancient religion and worthy of government tolerance (Tertullian, *Apol.* 21).

However, severing ties with the Jewish community presented a dilemma for Christians. An event that defined the danger of a separation between the two communities took place when Callistus, later to be bishop of Rome, disrupted a Jewish ceremony. In response synagogue leaders brought him before the Prefect of Carthage. The punishment for Callistus was banishment to the mines, which gives a clear indication of Jewish legal rights to assemble and worship (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.12.7). To totally reject Christianity's

¹⁹⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 91.

¹⁹⁶ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 49.

¹⁹⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 93.

Judaic roots might eliminate a level of respectability in the eyes of authorities. The link to Judaism provided protection and the opportunity to develop an identity.

Tertullian's View of Christian Challenges in Carthage

Tertullian's writing details the main challenges that Christians face from the pagan community and from within the Christian community. When Tertullian writes about Christians his concern is for their souls. At times, Tertullian exhibited extreme opinions concerning a Christian identity (Tertullian, *Idol.* 14.5) and it is apparent that Tertullian wished the Christian community to be distinct from other communities. Despite allowing some concessions Tertullian's idealism is guiding him towards a goal that the church is for saints, not sinners.¹⁹⁸

In *de spectaculis* Tertullian argues that Christians should not support the games because they are dedicated to the gods. To attend would subject a person to immoral and violent behavior (Tertullian, *Spect.* 24). Tertullian addresses two reasons why Christians attend: it may be that Christians attend the games in order to be invisible and it is also possible that Christians are driven by the enjoyment of attending (Tertullian, *Spect.* 1.1).

To be Christian, it is necessary to divide the secular from the divine. In *de idololatria* Tertullian suggests that it is all right to live with the pagans but not to err as they do: "Let us live with all; we are peers in soul, not in discipline; fellow- possessors of the world, not of error" (Tertullian, *Idol.* 14.5 [Thelwall]). Anyone who cannot separate the secular and the divine should not become a Christian. Jesus' disciples abandoned their security and comfort to join Him; Christians should do the same (Tertullian, *Idol.* 12).

¹⁹⁸ Dunn, *Tertullian*, 42.

However, the price of discipleship is a life of hardship. In *ad martyras* prison is an analogy for the Christian as a prisoner in this ignorant, sinful world. The only escape from this world is martyrdom or prison. Tertullian argues that Christians in prison are freer than the prisoners who inhabit the real prison of the world (Tertullian, *Mart.* 2.1-2). The world blinds the hearts of people and binds their souls. True Christians see the division between the world and the Christian life, just as those in prison denounce its impurities (Tertullian, *Mart.* 2.5) "... let us compare the life of the world and of the prison, and see if the spirit does not gain more in the prison than the flesh loses" (Tertullian, *Mart.* 2.7 [Thelwall]). Persecution leads to spiritual growth; the harder the trials "the stronger the hope of victory" (Tertullian, *Mart.* 3.2-5 [Thelwall]).

Though the prison is a place to train for victory over the devil, it is also the place of most intense temptation. The devil offers escape: "I shall tempt them, with defections or dissensions among themselves" (Tertullian, *Mart.* 1 [Thelwall]). Division between those who renounced their faith and those who upheld their beliefs during periods of persecution is what Tertullian feared. Tertullian's ideal Christian required an unwavering commitment to their faith supported by a unified church: "...let him (the devil) find you armed and fortified with accord; for peace among you is battle with him (Tertullian, *Mart.* 1 [Thelwall]).

The division becomes a reality when Gnostic Christians challenge the ideals of martyrdom. The Valentinians avoid martyrdom while the rest of the Christian community suffers persecutions (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 1.11). In *De patient* and *Ad uxorum* Tertullian was able to accept Christians avoiding persecution. Later, whether the result of supporting those who would die for their faith or Montanism, he argues in *De fuga in*

persecutione that to avoid martyrdom is to oppose the will of God (Tertullian, *Fug.* 1.1). Every Christian must be prepared to stand with God and against the devil when brought to trial. The Christian weapon is their faith; the symbol of the cross enduring; Christians have received the power from God to overcome the war against the devil (Acts 28:3).

In his efforts that Christians be different from other communities Tertullian also addressed the outward appearances of Christian men and women. Outward appearances are the initial perception that a non-Christian would use to begin to define what Christianity represents. Tertullian addresses the appearances of men in *Pallio* encouraging a distinctive costume and claims the Greek *pallium* as the Christian choice over the Roman toga. Women must not only be modest in actions but also in appearance.

In writing to Christians he stresses that fear of punishment is the foundation for salvation (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.2.2-3). A lack of modesty will lead to sin. Sins that Christians may fall into such as adultery may be forgiven once (Tertullian, *Pud.* 1.20-21) at baptism. To sin in such a way again would lead to exclusion from the church, only God could forgive such sins, not bishops (Tertullian, *Pud.* 1.21-17).

Tertullian's View of the Church

This is a period of a self-empowering church hierarchy and the development of a new attitude towards interpreting church laws and doctrine.¹⁹⁹ Within this context Tertullian's main concern is the maintenance of doctrine. Hierarchy of office derives from the apostles with the bishops being the heirs of succession (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 37). This

¹⁹⁹ Von Hans Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (trans. J.A.Baker. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 174.

gives bishops the authority to teach (Tertullian, *Praescr.* 32) but does not give a bishop the authority to alter this tradition. Tertullian does not want to see orthodox traditions replaced by bishopric authority.²⁰⁰ He describes episcopal authority as legal rather than being of dogmatic significance (Tertullian, *Pud.* 21.6).

In the *Fuga*, he refers to bishops as being leaders and as being of higher rank (Tertullian, *Fug.* 11). Significant to Tertullian is the laity who teaches. They are in no way subordinate to clerics and have their own spiritual authority. Tertullian envisions Christians as equal to all priests; (Tertullian, *Mon.* 12) any Christian put into a position to perform a priestly function may do so (Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17).

Tertullian's View of Pagan-Christian Relations

Within Tertullian's view of pagan-Christian relations is the underlying theme that martyrdom offers Christians the opportunity for salvation. Tertullian's ideal is to establish and maintain separation between the two groups. He is concerned with the legal treatment of Christians but he is also concerned with how the pagan lifestyle affects Christians. Most of Tertullian's writing concerned the negative effects of pagan society on Christians. *De Spectaculis* deals with whether a Christian should attend the emperor's games or shows. *De Idololatria* deals with all things idolatrous and the options Christians have to avoid them. *De Culta Feminarum II* addresses Christian women's behavior and dress.

By 197 C.E. Christianity in Northern Africa had increased to the point that pagans began to "proclaim aloud that the state is beset with us" (Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.7 [Glover]).

²⁰⁰ Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, 177.

Despite a significant presence, their treatment as a *genus tertium* was unlike the rest of society. For example, an accused criminal had a right to a defence that included an investigation into why the crime was committed. On the other hand, whether Christians pleaded innocence or guilt to being Christian there was no investigation. Criminals were tortured to confess. Christians were tortured to recant and immediately set free if they denied their Christian status (Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.13). Tertullian points out that in the face of persecution not all Christians had the same commitment to their faith; someone could deny but still claim to be Christian (Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.17).

Despite the fact that Pliny had disproved rumors of *flagita* (debauchery) Christians still faced charges of cannibalism, murder, and incest. They were seen as atheists, a charge Tertullian admits because Christians do not worship gods that do not exist (Tertullian, *Apol.* 10.2). He does suggest that the emperor is more Christian than pagan because God appoints the emperors (Tertullian, *Apol.* 33.1). Christians are accused of treason, a charge Tertullian often disputes (Tertullian, *Apol.* 30.1-4). Tertullian argues that Christians are an active part of Carthaginian society (Tertullian, *Apol.* 42.3) and despite not participating in many pagan activities Christians are not a separatist sect (Tertullian, *Apol.* 37,38,42).

Tertullian criticized the Carthaginian love for the games and satirized their opulent lifestyles (Tertullian, *Spect.* 6.3). However, he realized that these perceived weaknesses did not belong to the pagan community alone and that Christians were capable of behaving in similar ways. Ignorance, Tertullian argues leads to sin; the pleasure of the games sustains it and perverts the purpose of God's intentions (Tertullian, *Spect.* 2.1). Attendance at the games where blood would be shed is impious (Tertullian,

Spect. 3.1): “Blessed is the man who enters not the assembly of the impious” (Psalm 1.1). Like any other addiction or obsession, one can have an addiction to pleasure itself (Tertullian, *Spect.* 14.2). The place itself does not offend, but what occurs in it brings out the worst in people. Christians should not attend (Tertullian, *Spect.* 15.2) because in the arena God is forgotten and the Gladiator takes His place (Tertullian, *Spect.* 25.5).

Those attending the games sometimes call for the persecution of a Christian (Tertullian, *Spect.* 27.1). A Christian could go unnoticed in the crowd but he should remember the consequences of the Last Judgment. The only way a true Christian can escape the temptations of the pagan lifestyle is through martyrdom (Tertullian, *Mart.* 2.7). Staying away from the games may bring hardships today but pleasure will come to Christians in the future watching God’s judgment of their persecutors (Tertullian, *Spect.* 30).

Daily interaction between the pagan and Christian communities presented challenges for Christians. Their career choices had to be carefully selected to stay within the bounds of the Christian life. Tertullian warns against any activity that might threaten one’s salvation. He addresses issues he feels a Christian must be concerned with and the attitude they need to adopt in order to avoid the sin of idolatry (Tertullian, *Idol.* 1.1). Tertullian’s definition of idolatry includes any service that involves promotion of an idol (Tertullian, *Idol.* 3.4). The Lord has long damned not only the worshippers of idols but also those involved in their creation (Tertullian, *Idol.* 4.1).

Trade workers who are asked to construct temples or altars in honor of Roman deities must refuse. There will always be other options for Christians such as decorating homes (Tertullian, *Idol.* 8.1). The only educational practice that would be acceptable to a

Christian is secular study, which is seen as prerequisites to theological studies (Tertullian, *Idol.* 10.1). Professions such as teaching and business offer temptations; Christians can take part but they must be careful to avoid greed. However, any profession, trade or art that promotes the pagan cult is guilty of idolatry; the church will not allow anyone participating in idolatry to join nor will a member be allowed to participate in that type of business (Tertullian, *Idol.* 11.1).

Christians can obey the rules of government and remain true to their faith as long as obedience does not draw them into idolatry (Tertullian, *Idol.* 15.1). Military and public service required the swearing of oaths to pagan gods and emperors; because of this Christians were forbidden to join them (Tertullian, *Idol.* 18.1): “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord” (Matthew 5:34). In a society where the pagan community is the majority a Christian can avoid idolatry but to do so makes them distinct. For Tertullian, this is the choice a Christian must make: observe Christian laws, renounce sinful life styles or not be allowed in the church (Tertullian, *Idol.* 24.1).

The status of women was very different from men during Tertullian’s time. Men were more visible in society and more exposed to the temptations of the games and idolatry. Women, on the other hand were not continuously in public view (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.2.1). At issue for Tertullian is that women actively display modesty (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.1.2) “For since, by the introduction into an appropriation (in) us of the Holy Spirit, we are all ‘the Temple of God’ modesty is the sacristan and priestess of that temple....” (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.1 [Thelwall]). The basis for salvation is the fear of sin (Tertullian, *Idol.* 24.1). Appearances are important. The modest appearance of

Christian women must be on display: “Let us abandon luxuries.... Let us stand ready to endure every violence” (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.13 [Thelwall]). Worldly ornaments are an impediment to martyrdom; obsession of them must be overcome before a Christian can gain heavenly rewards (Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 2.13 [Thelwall]).

Tertullian’s Answers to These Realities

The desire for separation from the communities in Carthage may have led to a series of persecutions against Christians that began after the victory of Septimius Severus in 197 C.E. In response, Tertullian started to write to Roman authorities defending Christianity. Though he and many others had written with the same intent Tertullian’s tactics differed from past Christian apologists.²⁰¹

The logic behind writing an apology was to defend Christianity. Early Christian writers had addressed the Emperor because he was seen as the embodiment of justice. To Christians who felt that persecution was unfair, addressing the emperor seemed the last option.²⁰² Tradition suggested that the emperor was available to all his subjects.²⁰³ The apologists hoped that by addressing the throne a wider public might read their apology and discourage others from instigating persecutions.²⁰⁴

Quadratus of Athens wrote the earliest Christian apology to the emperor Hadrian (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3): Aristides and Justin Martyr followed him; Melito,

²⁰¹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 101.

²⁰² T.D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantine: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁰³ Barnes, *Athanasius*,

²⁰⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 103.

addressed the emperor Marcus Aurelius (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 26.5), and Athenagoras made appeals to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (Athenagoras, *Leg.* 1.1).

The problem these apologists had was that second- and third-century emperors either saw Christians as illegal or assumed their illegality²⁰⁵. The Apologists changed their strategy when it became apparent that persecution occurred not through the actions of the emperor but was the result of opposition from magistrates and pagans, and the discretionary powers of the governor. After Athenagoras' impirical address, apologists stopped addressing the emperor (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26).

Tatian defended Christianity in *Oration to the Greeks* and Miltiades wrote to the provincial governor (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 5.17.5). Two apologies that influenced Tertullian were Miltiades' *Defense Before the Rulers of the World* that aggressively addressed opposition to Christianity and Melito of Sardis *Petition to Antonius*, which declared that only bad emperors persecute Christians (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.9). Tertullian would coin and use the phrase *institutium Neronianum* (Nero's way of life) in order to negatively brand persecutions (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.7.8). Tertullian not only defended Christianity but openly attack pagan ideals and pursued the conversion of pagan intellectuals to Christianity.²⁰⁶

In his apologies, he combined material from Christian, Jewish and Pagan writings. He combined the themes of the Greek apologists to create an aggressive fusion of defense

²⁰⁵ Barnes, *Legislation Against the Christians*, 32.

²⁰⁶ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 102.

of Christianity and refutation of paganism.²⁰⁷ He would also turn to Josephus when material was needed (Tertullian, *Apol.* 18.5). One reason Tertullian used a wide variety of writers was to portray himself as an expert orator.²⁰⁸ Tertullian's audience is the educated classes, the group who would eventually lead to a Christian triumph in the Roman Empire.²⁰⁹

The characteristics of Tertullian's *Apologeticum* are its virtuosity and relevance to the Carthage Christian community's circumstances. City magistrates are addressed in the introduction and Tertullian describes how Christians were given no chance of defense at their trial in the *Secretarium* of the proconsul (Tertullian, *Apol.* 1.1). He would refute whatever crimes Christians were supposed to commit, pagans performed behind closed doors (Tertullian, *Apol.* 4.1).

The most potent effect of Tertullian's apologies was on the Christians in Carthage. Tertullian offered encouragement and Christians felt confidence in him to speak for them.²¹⁰ The world that Tertullian describes was their real world. In every province, soldiers protected the public against bandits. Sometimes the soldiers would take advantage of Christian vulnerability and practice blackmail on them (Tertullian, *Fug.* 13.3). During the celebrations of Severus' victory Carthaginians expect everyone to partake in the festivities. This was a time when Romans hunted down former enemies and the loyal public denounced and reported traitors (Tertullian, *Apol.* 35.11). Tertullian

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 107.

²⁰⁸ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 109.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 110.

²¹⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 69.

argued that just because the Christian community remained sober does not mean it was disloyal.

Christians did their part through prayer. They pray for peace and the welfare of the emperor (Tertullian, *Apol.* 32.1). To defend Christians, Tertullian goes on the attack. He notes that with every calamity that occurs the blame is placed on Christians (Tertullian, *Apol.* 30.3). Tertullian calls the Romans ingrates and threatens to withdraw Christian prayer support (Tertullian, *Apol.* 37.9). The pagan community does not understand the Christian community; their knowledge of Christianity comes from rumor and lies. The pagan community continuously harassed Christians without taking the time to learn about them.²¹¹

The truth is that Christians live in moral and chaste communities (Tertullian, *Apol.* 9.1). It is pagans who practiced human sacrifice and the Bellona priests, in Carthage, still mutilate themselves (Tertullian, *Apol.* 9.2). The Christians on the other hand, have a sense of purity in the way they live (Tertullian, *Apol.* 17.1); faith, discipline and hope unite them. They exclude anyone who breaks the church rules (Tertullian, *Apol.* 46.17). The ultimate recourse for Christians will come on the Day of Judgment, when the soul's future will be determined on whether it has embraced or persecuted the Christian name (Tertullian, *An.* 6.5).

²¹¹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 112.

Part VI

TERTULLIAN'S ARGUMENT FOR THE IDEAL CHRISTIAN

“... for when the flame of persecution is consuming us, then the steadfastness of our faith is proved” (Tertullian, *Fug.* 3 [Thelwall])

Public or personal animosity, the desires of the mob, and a change in leadership were factors that created an unpredictable pattern of Christian persecution. The Christian position towards the purpose of martyrdom varied greatly from the time of the evangelists to Suetonius and Tacitus reporting of Nero's actions against the Christian community in Rome, until the time of Tertullian (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.1). The fact that the majority of ongoing persecutions were local and isolated suggests that many Christians would not experience action against them. It also points to the possibility that Christians when indirectly confronted with persecution could move to other areas. However, at a time when the name alone (Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.3) represented an obscene *superstitio* a Christian could not turn to the authorities for protection. Christians were alone and the fear of persecutions whether real or imagined could not be eased by time or distance.

When facing persecution Christians had to make one of two well-advised decisions both guided by Christian writing. They could accept arrest with the belief of reward: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad. For your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”

(Matthew 5:11-12). It seems clear that Jesus offers a great reward to those who accept slander and persecution for his sake. However, His other directive seems to disagree with the first: “when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...” (Matthew 10:23).

Martyrdom, Apostasy or Flight

Early Christian apologists promoted the idea that persecution was a blessing that offered the eternal reward that Christians seek. The defenders of Christianity stressed that Christians were ready at anytime to depart this world for the next. Aristides (125 C.E.) noted that when a person dies in sin, Christians lament, but when a righteous one dies they rejoice.²¹² Justin (110-165 C.E.) observes that Christians strive for truth living a life with God by obeying his commands and being ready to confess their faith publically (Justin, *I Apol.* 1.8). Tatian (110-172 C.E.) would include these same sentiments.²¹³ As committed as the apologists were to the purpose and rewards of martyrdom they also aggressively repudiated slanderous accusations made against Christians. Tertullian addresses this ambiguous state in *de patientia* by stressing patience in the face of slander: “Let us servants, therefore, follow our Lord closely; and be cursed patiently, that we may be able to be blessed” (Tertullian, *Pat.* 8.3 [Thelwall]).

Despite this advice Tertullian also continued to attack all slander against Christians. His strategy focused on pagan ignorance of Christians: “It is my regular custom, my lord, to refer to you all questions which cause me doubt, for who can better

²¹² Aristides. *The Apology of Aristides*. Translated and edited by J. Rendall Harris, 2004. New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 15.10.

²¹³ Tatian the Assyrian, Address of Tatian to the Greeks, *From the Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 6, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (ed. Peter Schaff Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 4.

guide to my hesitant steps or instruct my ignorance?” (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.1). This ignorance leads to the authorities not knowing why they condemn Christians (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.1.1). Nevertheless, Christians willingly accept the opportunity for martyrdom (Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.3).

Tertullian develops this theme to a level that may have seemed like fanaticism to the pagan community. He enhances the image, which early apologists began to paint, about Christian zeal for martyrdom. Christians are soldiers in the army of the Lord, and like soldiers, they do not want to suffer but realize a battle is at hand. The ultimate prize for winning this battle against evil is salvation (Tertullian, *Apol.* 50). Pliny cursed and condemned Christians for their obstinacy (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.3-4). On the other hand, this is the attraction of Christianity. People seek it out and want to become a part of its truth; they learn that being condemned by man leads to salvation (Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.15). The Christian community understands and rejoices at the thought of martyrdom (Tertullian, *Scap.* 1.1).

Tertullian plays on the lack of knowledge the pagan community had of Christianity by exaggerating the numbers and willingness of Christians to sacrifice their lives. In 112, Pliny expressed concern for the welfare of persons of every age, rank and sex, because of the spread of the Christian passion (Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* X.96.6). Tertullian reiterates these fears in 212, and just as he had enhanced the martyrdom theme of the early apologists, he now adds fuel to the Christian flame of fanaticism. Not satisfied with waiting to be arrested and prosecuted Christians will begin to seek and even provoke arrest (Tertullian, *Scap.* 1.1). The image of the fearless Christian desiring death becomes a weapon for Tertullian to stop Scapula’s hostility towards Christians. The

vision of thousands of Christians demanding death would be disruptive and disturbing (Tertullian, *Scap.* 5.2).

However, Tertullian knows that not all Christians have the same attitude towards martyrdom. Though fleeing from persecution did occur during this early Christian period, there is an understanding of the place and importance of martyrdom. To Tertullian, apostates who escape persecution are doing the devil's work: avoidance comes down to a weakness; acceptance shows strength of character or faith.²¹⁴

Opponents

Therefore those who think that they should flee, either reproach God with doing what is evil, if they flee from persecution as an evil; or they count themselves stronger than God: so they think, who imagine it possible to escape when it is God's pleasure that such events should occur. (Tertullian, *Fug.* 4 [Thelwall])

Contrasting Tertullian's ideals were opposition groups and individuals who argued about the necessity of martyrdom and the consequences of avoiding persecution. Both sides of these arguments would be the foundation for a later theological debate on the justification of avoidance. The importance of martyrdom and its role towards salvation met with opposition and variance. This divisive development in the church would only come to a resolution in the next centuries. During Tertullian's time this marked a significant difference between Tertullian, heretics and other church fathers. At issue was baptism and confessing oneself before God and man.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 167 and Tertullian, *de fuga in persecution*, 2.

²¹⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 167.

Gnostics held knowledge as being more significant towards salvation than baptism (Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 78.2). With this thought, baptism with water and a second baptism with blood ²¹⁶ seemed unnecessary. Basilides of Alexandria (138 C.E.) suggested that Christians “(for swear) the faith in times of persecution” (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 4.7.7 [Williamson]). This went in opposition with Jesus’ exhortation “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32). Justification for avoidance, however, would be hermeneutic. Heracleon (175 C.E.), a student of Valentinus argued for a distinction between verbal and true confession. A person’s inner belief is most important. Christians have no obligation to make a public confession, because it is impossible for a Christian to deny Christ: “For no one who is in Him will deny Him” (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.9). Heracleon would find a certain level of support from Clement of Alexandria (153-217 C.E.) who was uncomfortable with the idea of martyrdom.²¹⁷ Clement would define martyrdom as one of many ways of expressing knowledge of the true God (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.16). Abstinence and restraint of free will are equal to martyrdom; this would lead the way to seeing the ascetic and the martyr in the same light.²¹⁸

Peter of Alexandria who suffered martyrdom in 311 C.E. would later adopt Clement’s position. Clement argued that by allowing them to be arrested Christians shared in the persecutor’s sin and were responsible for their own deaths (Clement of

²¹⁶ The Martyrdom of Perpetua, 18.2.

²¹⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 168.

²¹⁸ Frend, *Martyrdom*, 266.

Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.10). Peter was in agreement with Clement “Hence neither is it lawful to accuse those who have left all, and have retired for the safety of their life....”²¹⁹ These developing thoughts from heretics and those inside the church were in stark contrast with Tertullian.

Martyrdom, apostasy or flight? During times of persecution this was the choice for Carthaginian Christians. Tertullian’s followers held to their ideal of Christianity and martyrdom. In order to retain this ideal, Tertullian develops arguments to counter those who would tarnish the ideal. Gnostics and Christians such as Clement who found some agreement in the martyrdom or apostasy question raised three objections: persecution originates from the devil; the righteousness of God’s will; and the Gnostic view of God as a murderer.²²⁰ Tertullian argues against these objections by addressing the most vital characteristic of the debate: Does God desire martyrdom? To answer this question Tertullian turns to sources on which the orthodox in the Carthage church placed the highest value.

The Old Testament and early Christian writers record a long list of Godly men and prophets who suffered violent deaths on God’s behalf. Their martyrdoms are recorded and the reward that awaits them (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 8.1): “The righteous perish... the devout are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous are taken away from calamity, and they enter into peace” (Isaiah 57:1-2). Christians, Tertullian argued, follow a spiritual succession from the apostles who in turn followed

²¹⁹ Peter of Alexandria, Canons, *From the Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 6*, (ed. Peter Schaff, trans. James B.H. Hawkins, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), Cannon XIII.

²²⁰ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 172-6.

the examples set by the prophets (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 9.1). Jesus' statement "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:10) applies to all who follow Him. Jesus established a rule about enduring persecution that Christians have inherited (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 9) and He predicted His disciples and future generations would suffer in His name: "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves... you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me" (Matthew 10:16-18).

The true Christian followers of Christ are of the same mind when it comes to what Tertullian calls the sacrament of martyrdom (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 9, 12). This is a strong statement for the exclusivity of the ideal Christian community. The writings of the disciples encourage all followers to avoid idolatry, be steadfast in faith and to endure martyrdom (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 12). The ultimate reward a true Christian can gain is through this sacrament, "... if you endure when you do right and suffer for it you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you may follow in His steps" (1Peter 2:20-21). To the followers of Christ, the commands from scripture were clear: the apostles who followed Christ were prepared to accept Jesus' command (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 15.1). As children nurtured from the apostolic seed the Christians in Carthage should do the same (Tertullian, *Scorp.* 9).

Tertullian's premise is that nothing happens contrary to the will of God (Tertullian, *Fug.* 1.2). Virtues such as patience strengthen one's resolve to overcome temptations and fulfill God's will by consummating martyrdom (Tertullian, *Pat.* 15.2). Patience is what Christ needed when He died for Christians (Tertullian, *Pat.* 16.5).

Patience has the dual role of overcoming thoughts of apostasy and defeating the desire to flee (Tertullian, *Pat.* 13.6).

Inspiration

Tertullian's position on fleeing from martyrdom changes over time. However, an expression of his real belief, of what a true Christian should do under the threat of persecution, seems waiting for inspiration. The question was: Is it better to flee than apostasize under torture? Tertullian at one point suggests it is permitted and normal to flee rather than succumb under torture (Tertullian, *Pat.* 13.6) but he later adds that this does not make it a good choice. Flight becomes the last resort for the weak; it is not what a true Christian should consider.²²¹

Flight from persecution posed a real problem to all Christians. To Tertullian, however, the dilemma of what to do with those who take flight helps him answer the identity question: What is a true Christian? To be Christian means obeying the will of God; there should be no leeway. A Christian called to martyrdom must obey or he or she is not a Christian: the weak should not be rewarded. They should be comforted for their weakness of faith not sent away (Tertullian, *Fug.* 15.2). Tertullian finds inspiration from Montanism.

The fearful can find counsel in the Holy Spirit who spoke through Montanus and the prophet urging martyrdom so “that He may be glorified who has suffered for you” (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4). At one time Tertullian was willing to accept Jesus' command to

²²¹ Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical*, 176 and Tertullian, *ad uxorem*, from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library in Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol., 4, Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, (ed. Alan Menzies. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 1.3-4.

flee in Matthew 10:23. However, with the importance of persecution as part of the Christian identity and the influence of Montanism, he re-examined his position. He now interpreted Jesus' exhortation to the apostles to flee execution as specific in its direction and isolated in time. The apostle's future actions were in direct opposition to Jesus' command (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9). The result is a specific and local event (Tertullian, *Fug.* 6.1) no longer applicable to Christians who have long drifted apart from Jews (Tertullian, *Fug.* 6.2).

Jesus prompted his followers to bear their crosses (Matthew 10:38). This is not a call to the weak but to the strong. Jesus exhibited the contrast of the weakness of the flesh and the willing spirit²²² traits that we all possess. The strength comes from the Holy Spirit. It is up to us to choose; if a person runs, he does what he wants not what God wants (Tertullian, *Fug.* 8.3). The apostles acknowledged Jesus' prompting, and did not flee (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.1): "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1John 4:17-18). True Christians are those who listen to the Spirit (Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4). Tertullian defines fleeing as being unworthy of a soldier of Christ. Martyrdom occurs because of God's will: Why provoke His anger (Tertullian, *Fug.* 10.1). This applies especially to church leaders (Tertullian, *Fug.* 11.1).

The reference to priests, deacons, and bishops suggest a growing problem: "when persons in authority themselves- I mean the very deacons, and presbyters and bishops- take to flight, how will a layman be able to see with what view it was said, Flee from city

²²² Tertullian, *Fug.* 8.1 and Mt. 26:41

to city? Thus, too, with the leaders turning their backs, who of the common rank will hope to persuade men to stand firm in the battle?” (Tertullian, *Fug.* 11.1 [Thelwall]). The clergy ignores the laws of scripture and urgings of the Holy Spirit; they are unwilling to die for their sheep (John 10:11).

The church as a body defies God’s will by bribing officials, the equivalent of fleeing (Tertullian, *Fug.* 12.5). Christians cannot serve both God and money: “who will serve mammon more than the man whom mammon has ransomed?” (Tertullian, *Fug.* 12.6 [Thelwall]). Tertullian’s solution to questions concerning persecution and martyrdom suggests a harsh life for ideal Christians. Tertullian’s Christianity is not an all-inclusive church. Instead of fleeing or bribing, he urges all Christians to rely on faith and imitate the lives of the apostles (Tertullian, *Fug.* 14.1). If a person is afraid of suffering and persecution, he cannot be with the Christ of a true Christian (Tertullian, *Fug.* 14.2). The ultimate answer lies in the comfort of the Holy Spirit “they who have received Him will neither stoop to flee from persecution nor to buy it off, for they have the Lord Himself” (Tertullian, *Fug.* 14.2).

CONCLUSION

Tertullian’s arguments for the ideal Christian find support from the Old Testament and early Christian writers but he finds inspiration from Montanism. Does he expect anyone who wants to be a Christian to be like the Montanist, especially in the face of martyrdom? It could be that is what he envisions. But in his vision of the ideal Christian only Montanists have the fearlessness and willingness to fulfill what Tertullian argues is a Christian duty toward martyrdom (Tertullian, *Fug.* 14.3). In reality, ordinary Christians

flee and apostatize. Even the church pays protection money. The Christian world in which Tertullian lives falls short from the world Tertullian identifies with in scripture and so do his ideals of persecution and martyrdom:

The question at hand is persecution. With respect to this, let me in the meantime say, that nothing happens without God's will; on the ground that persecution is especially worthy of God, and, so to speak, requisite, for the approving, to wit, or if you will, the rejection of His professing servants. For what is the issue of persecution, what other result comes of it, but approving and rejecting of faith, in regard to which the Lord will certainly sift His people? (Tertullian, *Fug.* 1, [Thelwall]).

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