Tertullian and the "Heretical" Origins of the "Orthodox" Trinity

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Tertullian's allegiance to the New Prophecy (later known as "Montanism") has often been connected only to his advocacy of ascetic "discipline," and considered irrelevant to his treatment of doctrine. In the treatise *Against Praxeas* he defends and articulates trinitarian belief, insisting on continuity between his recent defense of the Paraclete and the older Rule of Faith. This work indicates that monarchian Christians at Carthage were substantially the same as the "psychic" majority opposed to the New Prophecy. Thus what was to become "orthodox" Christian theology depended on the "heretical" New Prophecy at this particular place and time.

INTRODUCTION: TERTULLIAN'S DUAL *PERSONAE*

At times there seem to have been two Tertullians. In at least one sense there really were; although historians have sometimes tried to understand the complex figure of the first major author in Latin Christianity by conflation with a near-contemporary jurist of the same name, this Tertullian was not the same person as that ancient legal authority cited in the *Digest*.[1] The

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1. See T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study,* rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 22–29 and 325. See also the sketch of scholarly approaches in Laura Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity*, HTS 52 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 97–101.

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Carthaginian Christian apologist, connected both with the foundations of orthodox trinitarian theology and with the Phrygian "New Prophecy" later known as "Montanism," is nothing if not a *rhetor*; but adding the role of a lawyer to make sense of a character both brilliant and contradictory is less convincing than it may be attractive.[2]

It has actually been more common to interpret the complexities and contradictions of the one North African Christian writer by further separation, rather than conflation. Scholarship both ancient and modern has almost created dual theological *personae* out of the one historical *substantia* in order to deal with a thinker who came ultimately to be seen as both a pillar of orthodoxy and a promoter of heresy.

One traditional way of dividing Tertullians goes back at least as far as Jerome, namely to draw clear distinctions between an early, "orthodox," Tertullian and a late, "Montanist," one.[3] By positing a sort of epistemological break between two phases of his life, the "orthodox" Tertullian could be isolated chronologically, a sort of father of the church *pro tempore*. Yet this approach also fails historical tests; even Tertullian's latest works are "orthodox" in later theological terms, and are important to the emergence of that orthodoxy, despite also showing the clear influence of the New Prophecy.[4] For that matter, the idea of a transformation from orthodox theologian to heretical polemicist depends on the view that there were two quite separate churches or groupings, "Catholic" and "Montanist," across whose distinct borders one could clearly and definitively move. It seems far more likely that there was profound contention among and within a network of small communities at Carthage, rather than a clear "schism" between two.[5]

2. I note that "Montanism" is a term of late origin and unsatisfactory connotation. A brief summary of the development of this heresiological label can be found in Anne Jensen, "Prisca—Maximilla—Montanus: Who Was the Founder of 'Montanism'?" *SP* 26 (1993): 147–50 (along with the more controversial suggestion that Montanus was a secondary figure in the movement). I have attempted to minimize its employment, except when referring to conventional heresiological and scholarly use.

3. *Vir. ill.* 53.4; see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 42. This view seems to be reflected in the sequential presentation of the *opus* in CCL, with the *opera catholica* followed in a second part by the *opera montanistica*.

4. The influence of Tertullian on the tradition is often acknowledged; see notably Adolf von Harnack, "Tertullian in der Literatur der alten Kirche," in *Kleine Schriften zur alten Kirche* (Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1980), 1:247–81, and also E. E. Evans, *Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani Adversus Praxean Liber: Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), 23–30.

5. On this point see, notably, Douglas Powell, "Tertullianists and Cataphrygians," *VC* 29 (1975): 33–54; also (with some important differences) René Braun, "Tertullian et le Montanisme," *Approches de Tertullien* (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes,

Another interpretive approach has employed a subtler form of division to produce "parallel," rather than "serial," Tertullians. In this case, a pair of voices or characters is discerned according to topic: on the one hand, the Catholic theologian Tertullian, architect of the Western churches' doctrine of the Trinity; on the other, Tertullian, the peculiar Montanist ethicist. Tertullian the dogmatist begins to resemble the subject of his doctrinal writings: an eternal verity accessible through timeless reflection, rather than a variable and historical figure.

A clear distinction is thus made not only between ecclesial or theological groupings, but between theory and practice, or doctrine and discipline.[6] Since Montanism is often thought to have agreed with catholic Christianity as to theology, but to have differed from it on matters of ascetic practice, the more strictly doctrinal Tertullian seems to remain timelessly sound, in contrast to a disciplinary twin who tends towards increased sectarian idiosyncrasy. Historical and systematic theologians can thus make quite strong claims for the profound influence of the former Tertullian on subsequent Western trinitarian theology, without the apparent need to deal with the status of the latter as a "heretic," or even with the relationship between a given writing and Tertullian's movement towards the New Prophecy.

This study seeks to reconsider these pairs of Tertullians and some of the other distinctions they embody through consideration of the treatise *Against Praxeas*, which reflect the tensions already mentioned. The first main part of this study thus examines the treatise and its distinctive content, reviewing the influence or importance of the New Prophecy in its trinitarian argument. The second part considers the Carthaginian Christian community as reflected in Tertullian's writings, and attempts to suggest a different approach to issues such as the relationship between the New Prophecy and the Rule of Faith, the role of the Paraclete, and the respective places of *doctrina* and *disciplina* in Tertullian.

To question the usual interpretive categories in Tertullian's case is also to question those of "heresy" and "orthodoxy" themselves, and more particularly in this case those of "Montanism" and "Catholicism." The alternative offered here is not so much a different grand schema classifying Christianities and dividing individuals or works between them, but an attempt to pay closer attention to the specifics of theory and practice

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1992), 246–57; and William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism*, PMS 16 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 54–56.

6. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Montanism and Its Trinitarian Significance," *CH* 25 (1956): 104.

in one local setting—Tertullian's Carthage—among the variety of early Christian communities and theologies. Although I will suggest, as some others have done, that the New Prophecy was relevant to the development of Tertullian's understanding of God as Trinity, the precise meaning of such a conclusion may be found to have shifted somewhat along the way.

THE TRINITY AND TERTULLIAN'S *AGAINST PRAXEAS*

Interpreting Against Praxeas

Tertullian's most influential piece of writing on the trinitarian God, the treatise *Against Praxeas*, dates from well into the period of his clear influence from the New Prophecy.[7] Despite its influential place in the history of orthodox dogma, *Against Praxeas* is characteristically "Montanist," peppered with references to the Holy Spirit as "Paraclete," and naming the New Prophets, Prisca, Maximilla, and Montanus.

The difficulty of an apparently "heretical" work setting the scene for later trinitarian theology has been approached more or less in two ways, hinging on whether or not the influence of the New Prophecy is actually seen as relevant to Tertullian's doctrine of God as Trinity. Many commentators, pursuing the distinctions already mentioned, have tended to regard the trinitarian formulations of *Against Praxeas* as effectively free of such influence. Such conclusions assert more continuity than change between Tertullian's earlier, non-"Montanist," forays into trinitarian discourse and this work. In doing so they have recourse either to the supposed conceptual isolation of his doctrine from the New Prophecy or to the view that Montanism was itself doctrinally "orthodox"—or merely nondescript.[8] Either way, the New Prophecy is then seen as irrelevant to the Trinity, in *Against Praxeas* and elsewhere.

Conversely, there have been suggestions that the teaching of Tertullian's *Against Praxeas* really is different from his earlier thinking about God, and thus reflects the influence on Tertullian of the Phrygian prophetic movement.[9] If this were the case, the alleged changes could almost support a

7. That is, the second decade of the 200s; compare Barnes's judgment (*Tertullian*, 55), and that of E. Dekkers in CCL 2:1627–28.

8. Thus Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas*, 5; cf. Pelikan, "Montanism," 104. Pelikan seems more open to the idea of Montanist influence in his later and briefer discussion in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: 1. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 105.

9. B. B. Warfield traced this suggestion to the seventeenth century and Christopher Sand (*Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University

quite different, revisionist form of the "serial" distinction between Tertullians, wherein he moves from a catholic binitarianism to a Montanist trinitarianism. Given the undoubted influence of Tertullian's writing in the West, the New Prophecy could then be said to have contributed to the subsequent history of dogma.[10]

Such different conclusions already show that even careful comparison of *Against Praxeas* with Tertullian's earlier thought and writing has not produced incontestable results, and is probably insufficient to determine the question.[11] While the analysis of his theological development over time cannot be avoided, any approach to the progress of Tertullian's thought must consider not just its part in a longer golden thread of orthodox doctrinal development, but its place among the beliefs and practices that constituted the Carthaginian Christian community in the early third century.

Tertullian and Praxeas

The purpose of *Against Praxeas* is to oppose the theology of a teacher otherwise unknown by that name at least,[12] perhaps to be identified with the Roman bishop Callistus.[13] Yet the historical Praxeas is distant in space and time; despite the personalized nature of the charges made against him, his "real" identity is somewhat beside the point, and his *persona* functions in this text as a representative figure or rhetorical device through which local issues and persons can be addressed.

Press, 1930], 15 n.23). More recently, its advocates have included Friedrich Loofs, *Theophilus von Antiochen adversus Marcionem und die anderen theologische Quellen bei Irenaeus*, TU 46/2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1930), 119–22; and K. E. Kirk, "The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans, 1928), 157–237, particularly 214–15.

10. Perhaps in part through the so-called school of Hippolytus—a complex question of influence that cannot be pursued here. An impressive reconstruction of relations between Tertullian and the Hippolytan corpus has been made by Allen Brent: *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*, VCSupp 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1995). I am nonetheless inclined to favor the alternative view (including Tertullian's use of *Contra Noetum*) given by Manlio Simonetti, e.g., in "Due note su Ippolito," *Ricerche su Ippolito*, Studia Ephemeridis "Augustinianum" 13 (Rome: Institutum patristicum "Augustinianum," 1977), 126–36.

11. See Pelikan, "Montanism," 105.

12. The anonymous *Adversus omnes haereses* attributed (falsely) to Tertullian does mention him (8.4).

13. The identification is attractive if unprovable, and might make too much of combining Praxeas's obscurity and Tertullian's interest. See, for a recent renewal of this suggestion, Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church*, 525–35; and for a slightly different approach to Callistus's presence in the treatise, Ronald E. Heine, "The Christology of Callistus," *JTS* (n.s.) 49 (1998): 58–60.

What we are told about Praxeas and the origins of this dispute comes from the introductory section of Tertullian's work:

> For he was the first to import this kind of perversity to Rome out of Asia—a man who was generally restless, and puffed up with boasting of his status as a "martyr" . . . at that time the Roman bishop was in the process of acknowledging the prophecies of Montanus, Prisca and Maximilla, and because of that acknowledgement was offering peace to the churches of Asia and Phrygia. Praxeas, however, by maintaining lies concerning these prophets and their churches, and by advocating the decisions of the bishop's predecessors, forced him both to recall letters of peace that had already been sent, and to hold back from his proposal to receive the spiritual gifts.[14]

It is apparent that the New Prophecy was far from being a side issue in Tertullian's attitude. Yet the rest of the treatise is not explicitly concerned with Praxeas's political opposition to the Phrygian prophets and their followers, but rather with his monarchian theological teaching. According to Praxeas the one God had been manifest in different forms at different times, but not as distinct persons; hence "the Father himself descended into the virgin, was himself born of her, himself suffered, in the end himself was Jesus Christ."[15]

Tertullian somewhat ponderously narrates the impact at Carthage of Praxeas's activity as a version of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (cf. Matt 13.24–30), wherein his opponent's teaching had appeared some years before and then lain dormant as seed, being revived close to the time of writing. Before reaching the point in his narrative where the seeds of monarchian falsehood sprouted anew, Tertullian inserts one autobiographical detail: "Subsequently the acknowledgement and defense of the Paraclete separated us from the *psychici*"—using a favorite term for the mediocre Christians.[16] Thus Tertullian invokes allegiance to the Trinity (or at least to one person thereof) as the basis for his adherence to the New Prophecy itself. By contrast, the achievement of Praxeas was perversely binitarian: he both "drove out the Paraclete and nailed up the Father."[17]

Tertullian's close connection of Praxeas's opposition to the New Proph-

14. *Prax.* 1.4–5 (CCL 2:1159). Translations herein are mine, based on the texts given in CCL 1–2.

15. *Prax.* 1.1 (CCL 2:1159). I use "monarchian," rather than the modern term "modalist," as closer to the terminology of the dispute itself. David Rankin points out that Tertullian could also technically be seen as a "monarchian" but in a different sense: "Tertullian's Vocabulary of the Divine 'Individuals' in *adversus Praxean*," *Sacris erudiri* 40 (2001): 5–46.

16. *Prax.* 1.7 (CCL 2:1160).

17. *Prax.* 1.5 (CCL 2:1160): . . . *paracletum fugavit et patrem crucifixit.*

ecy and his monarchian doctrine of God has often been downplayed, supposedly more a piece of rhetorical opportunism than of theological substance.[18] This conclusion proceeds in large part from the conventional distinction between Tertullian's ethical and dogmatic interests; we might thus attribute the former accusation against Praxeas to Tertullian's sectarian *persona*, and the latter to his orthodox one. Yet the possibility raised by Tertullian's own account, that the two issues were actually far from incidental to one another, deserves to be taken more seriously.

The Trinity in Against Praxeas

Against Praxeas is not so much a single sustained thesis as a collection of related arguments that address a set of objections to the triune God.[19] Tertullian's main goal throughout is to allay fears that the real existence of a second divine person would undermine the principle of a single divine power or *monarchia*. In arguing thus he affirms and explicates his understanding of the *oikonomia* of God, which here means not the "economic" Trinity of later theology, but God's internal and eternal self-disposition, whereby Word or Son and Spirit are extensions or emanations of God's own being.[20] The existence of the visible and passible Son does not destroy the unity of God, but guarantees the necessary invisibility and transcendence of God the Father.

Tertullian's arguments touch on a range of exegetical points as well as philosophical issues. In particular, he interprets scriptural texts concerning the Word and Wisdom of God so as to apply them to Christ as an actual *substantia,* here meaning a person or something actually existent,[21] and conversely takes aim at interpretations of texts used by the monarchians to claim the personal identity of Father and Son.

18. See Pelikan, "Montanism," 106.

19. This summary is intended only as a sketch. On the trinitarian theology and particularly the vocabulary of *Adversus Praxean*, see the *magnum opus* of J. Moingt, *Theologie trinitaire de Tertullien*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1966–69); E. F. Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 120–39; Robert Markus, "Trinitarian Theology and the Economy," *JTS* (n.s.) 9 (1958): 89–102; and Kevin B. McCruden, "Monarchy and Economy in Tertullian's *Adversus Praxean*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 325–37, as well as the discussion in Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas*, 38–75.

20. Tertullian uses this Greek term (2. 1, 4; 3.1). The different understandings of "economy" in this early trinitarian theology are analysed by G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 2nd ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1952), 97–106.

21. See Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas*, 38–44; and René Braun, *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Institut études augustiniennes, 1977), 167–99, especially 182, 192–93.

Against Praxeas is not so much a strong articulation of trinitarian thought as such, but a robust defence of the transcendence of the Father, and of the real existence of the Son. Yet Tertullian's earlier forays into the same issue are even less distinctly trinitarian. There are certainly references to the three-fold nature of God in Tertullian's previous writings, but they are largely determined by context and controversial opportunity, acknowledging and making use of traditional triadic formulae to serve immediate rhetorical ends, rather than summarizing or serving any strongly trinitarian conception.[22]

The closest parallel to the discussion in *Against Praxeas* is in Tertullian's *Apology*, written about ten years earlier and prior to any sign of influence from the New Prophecy.[23] There he had argued for the identity of two persons of Godhead, and assimilated the language of "Spirit" in biblical texts and elsewhere to the Word or Reason of God, rather than to a third divine person: "We say that [the Word] was projected from God and generated by this projection, and has therefore been called Son of God, and called God from unity of nature. For Spirit is also God."[24]

In *Against Praxeas* references to the Holy Spirit in the divine "economy" do involve some modest clarification or development from those in the *Apology*. Yet Tertullian's concern in the relevant passages still centers on demonstrating the distinct existences of Father and Son, and his argument is still primarily expressed as a vindication of the doctrine of two persons (*Prax.* 13, 19, 22, etc.). Tertullian also continues to use biblical references to the "Spirit of God" in arguing for the separate existence of the Son, rather than taking them to refer to the third person of the Trinity.[25] The Holy Spirit is nonetheless presented, somewhat more fully than in earlier works, as a third entity whose reality is allowed or established by the same arguments for the possibility of a unity in multiplicity that allowed the real subsistence of the Son (e.g., *Prax.* 13.5).

All this is not to say that Tertullian was consciously or deliberately binitarian at either of these points, but that there was a consistent concern on his part to assert and defend the real existence of the Son or Word. The central purpose or argument of *Against Praxeas* is not the abstract articu-

22. The reference at *Or.* 25 is a rationalization for a three-fold pattern of daily prayer; *Bapt.* 6 simply arises from the trinitarian baptismal formula.

23. Perhaps a little after 197; see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 33–34, 55.

24. *Apol.* 21.11 (CCL 1:124).

25. This is in contrast with Irenaeus who can, as Brent points out (*Hippolytus and the Roman Church*, 532–34), identify Wisdom with the Holy Spirit (*Haer.* 4.20.3). Yet Irenaeus also makes similar interpretive moves as Tertullian, identifying "Spirit" with the Son (3.10.2), with somewhat different interests and arguments in mind.

lation of Tertullian's understanding of God as Trinity, but opposition to a monarchianism (also) probably focused specifically on the relation between Father and Son.[26] In any case, there is a sort of development between the *Apology* and *Against Praxeas* in how clearly the place of the Holy Spirit in the divine "economy" is acknowledged. This change is in itself too modest to demand the conclusion that such clarity stems altogether from a new source, but it is real enough not to be dismissed.

The Paraclete's Proof

There is one feature of Tertullian's modestly enlarged exposition of the Trinity in *Against Praxeas* that is explicitly linked to the influence of the New Prophecy.[27] To support his argument for the possibility of an essential unity between distinct elements or persons in the godhead, Tertullian evokes a set of images, saying that "God produced the Word, as the Paraclete also teaches (*quemadmodum etiam Paracletus docet*), as a root produces new growth, a spring a river, and the sun a ray of light; for these also are kinds of 'projections' of those things from which they proceed."[28] Comparison with other references to the teaching of the Paraclete in Tertullian suggests he is actually attributing this three-fold image to an utterance of one of the New Prophets.[29]

The significance of this oracle and its influence has often been downplayed on the grounds that these are fairly obvious metaphors, at least partly gleaned from tradition, and could have been used without reference to the Paraclete's endorsement.[30] Certainly the ray of light metaphor had already been used in the *Apology* (21.12), although only as a basis for arguing the possible unity of two realities or persons—sun and ray—not of three. The two further images of plant and water, and the extension of all three metaphors to a third stage, are new elements in *Against Praxeas*.

26. Tertullian seems to be defending his position against accusations of teaching two Gods, rather than three: see *Prax.* 13.1; 13.5; 19.8.

27. The fact that many of the references to the Paraclete in *Against Praxeas* do not mention or refer to Montanus is irrelevant, *pace* Pelikan (see "Montanism,"105). On this see William Tabbernee, "'Will the Real Paraclete Please Speak Forth!': The Catholic-Montanist Conflict over Pneumatology," in *Advents of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current State of Pneumatology*, ed. B. Hinze and D. L. Dabney (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 97–118.

28. *Prax.* 8.5 (CCL 2:1167).

29. See *Pud.* 21.7; *Fug.* 9.4; *Res.* 11.2; *Exh. Cast.* 10.5.

30. The light metaphor is traditional, going back at least to Athenagoras, who speaks of the Holy Spirit as a beam of light from the Father as sun (*Leg.* 10). Cf. also Philo, *Gig.* 25–27. Those who hold different opinions about the relationship between Tertullian's and Hippolytus's works could press this point about originality and influence more strongly; see Simonetti, "Due note su Ippolito."

In the discussion following, these images are expanded within Tertullian's argument into more complex three-fold analogies for the three persons of the Trinity:

> For the Spirit is a third from God and the Son, just as the fruit is a third from the root out of the new growth, and the canal is a third from the spring out of the river, and the point of light is a third from the sun out of the beam: nothing, however, is cut off from the source from which it derives its properties.[31]

The context suggests, however, that the elaboration of the images must be taken as Tertullian's own, rather than as derived immediately from an oracle.

It is difficult to assess the metaphors or their alleged prophetic origin as evidence for how the New Prophecy influenced Tertullian's trinitarian theology. If a judgment depended on the belief that Tertullian could not have produced these word-pictures without the prophetic utterance, the case would not be particularly strong. It is possible to see the differences between earlier and later accounts as themselves organic developments, predictable shoots and fruit from an existing theological root, just as Tertullian's thought on the divine "economy" more generally seems to develop over time.[32] The relation between the imagery and the rest of the discussion is real, but not necessarily crucial. For that matter, the images themselves have also been judged as relatively unimportant, some commentators suggesting that they contribute little to the substance of Tertullian's argument.[33]

Yet such questions of how the influence of the New Prophecy is evident in Tertullian's evolving *doctrina* on that divine self-disposition have perhaps unreasonably displaced inquiry into how Tertullian himself presents the importance and role of the Paraclete and of the New Prophecy in this controversy. What is most striking is not necessarily any specific contribution exclusively attributable to the oracle and clearly external to

31. *Prax.* 8.7 (CCL 2:1168).

32. In a companion piece to this one, I will argue that Tertullian's development of the "economy" and of these metaphors actually do reflect concerns specific to this controversy; see "God in Early Latin Theology: Tertullian and the Trinity," in *God in Early Christian Thought*, ed. Andrew McGowan, Brian Daley, and Richard Norris (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

33. Osborn insists on their secondary character relative to the "intellectual metaphors" of Tertullian's work (*Tertullian, First Theologian*, 122–23). See also Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas*, 81–82, and Pelikan, "Montanism," 106–7. The point concerning original influence becomes sharper if Tertullian is believed to be dependent on the *Contra Noetum* of Hippolytus; see n.10 above.

Tertullian's prior thinking; it may be the mere fact that the Paraclete is credited with teaching this image, and is thus ascribed a role not merely disciplinary but doctrinal.

The New Prophecy and the Trinity

We have already noted the common judgment that "Montanism" was doctrinally similar or identical to emergent catholic Christianity, and only ethically idiosyncratic or sectarian. If that were the case, the presumption of theological sameness or blandness would render moot any question of supposed influence from the New Prophecy on Tertullian's trinitarian thought. Tertullian's own arguments are actually foundational to that view of doctrinal identity, for he insists that the Paraclete is not an innovator in *doctrina*, but rather upholds the Rule of Faith. And of course Tertullian's allegiance to the Rule predates the influence of the New Prophets.[34]

Less sympathetic writers among the ancients also tended to admit the closeness of the prophetic movement's doctrine to that of Christians who held to the "Rule of Faith"; Hippolytus (meaning here the author of the *Elenchus*) describes the "Phrygians" as generally orthodox, and only ascetically extreme, yet also notes that there were some who were monarchian in theology.[35] Although a clearer or more consistent association of the New Prophecy with monarchianism would certainly have drawn clearer criticism (including Tertullian's), the possibility of an early or even original tendency in this direction cannot be dismissed altogether.[36]

In any case, the alleged dogmatic similarity between the adherents of the New Prophecy and the wider "catholic" grouping at Carthage and elsewhere can be presented either with implied scholarly sympathy, making the New Prophecy "orthodox," or else less positively, presenting the New Prophecy as lacking originality or consistency. The possibility of a thin monarchian strand amidst a relatively "orthodox" fabric might support that second account, suggesting a dearth of dogmatic coherence in the prophetic movement.

34. *Jejun.* 1.3; *Pud.* 11.3; *Mon.* 2.4; and see further below.

35. See *Haer.* 8.19 (GCS 26:238).

36. See also Ps.-Tertullian, *Adversus omnes haereses* 7.2. Some commentators see the original Asian form of the New Prophecy as likely to have been characterized by monarchianism, either because it was a useful form of thought for working with the oracles of the New Prophets (Pelikan, "Montanism," 101–3), or simply because that view was typical of late second-century Asian Christianity (thus Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "The Asian Context of the New Prophecy and of *Epistula Apostolorum*," *VC* 51 [1997]: 416–38, esp. 432–33). See also the discussion in Tabbernee, "'Will the Real Paraclete Please Speak Forth!'," 106–9.

Yet it is quite misleading to wield the category of doctrinal "orthodoxy" for early third-century Christianity so as to suggest an entirely clear and coherent set of beliefs and practices, and still more misleading to assume the correlation of such thoughts and actions with one identifiable institution. Few tendencies or communities in third-century Christianity—whether defined in terms of geography, theological confession, ascetic practice, or distinct authority and organization—did not encompass a diversity of (other) elements of practice and thought along with their specific identifying and unifying traits. Comparison with other local situations such as those at Rome, in Asia, and in Syria suggests that the question of trinitarian belief was far from being settled within those communities otherwise defined, inevitably somewhat anachronistically, as "catholic."

Thus it is not necessary to conclude that the New Prophecy had no relevance to Tertullian's trinitarian thought simply because other Christians who revered the Phrygian prophets held different views, or because he had confessed the Trinity (if in a slightly less distinct form?) before he knew of the New Prophecy. Scholarly assessments of the New Prophecy that exclude the possibilities of an original or distinctive contribution themselves betray how the Phrygian movement has been over-defined and essentialized by its interpreters—such definition being achieved in part via the exclusion of its key third-century expositor, Tertullian, who for other reasons has been assigned to a different category in the history of dogma.[37]

Yet Tertullian's own theology is of course by far the most significant surviving "Montanist" articulation of a doctrine of God at any stage, unless we invoke a prescription against considering it as such. That it is also arguably original, or that other adherents of the New Prophecy might not all have argued in the same way, is beside the point. And if it is difficult to determine the extent of any new or distinct influence on him, this does not mean that Tertullian's adherence to the New Prophecy is irrelevant either to reading *Against Praxeas* or to its influence on the subsequent tradition.

To arrive at a more satisfactory answer concerning the importance of the New Prophecy for Tertullian's views, one rather neglected and one more familiar question might now be asked again, and in some closer relation to each another: first, what was the situation at Carthage regarding the different local tendencies and communities in relation to their belief about God? And second, how does Tertullian himself understand

37. René Braun points out that Tertullian's achievement involves "une conception originale qui porte empreinte de son puissant esprit" in "Tertullian et le Montanisme," 250.

the importance of the New Prophecy in resolving the conflict associated with Praxeas? By asking these more contextual questions we may hope to approach a more adequate conclusion about the importance of the New Prophecy in *Against Praxeas* and in the doctrinal discourse of early Carthaginian Christianity.

THE RULE OF FAITH AND THE NEW PROPHECY AT CARTHAGE

Simplices *and* Psychici

Since Praxeas had dissuaded the Roman bishop from recognizing the New Prophecy and the witness of the Paraclete, as well as having taught the identity of the Father and Son, Tertullian accused him of a complex impiety: that he both "drove out the Paraclete and nailed up the Father."[38]

It might not follow, however, that the refutation of monarchian teaching about the Father and Son would have vindicated the New Prophecy. If the doctrine of the wider "catholic" church on the Trinity and the views typical of the New Prophecy were identical, Tertullian's anti-monarchian salvo in *Against Praxeas* would simply have represented a doctrinal tactical alliance between different ecclesial tendencies; Tertullian and the followers of the Paraclete merely shared the common ground of the Rule of Faith for a time with the lukewarm *psychici*, contending together against those under the influence of Praxeas, before resuming their own struggles over ascetic practice.

In fact the evidence of *Against Praxeas* and of other works of Tertullian from the same period suggest a quite different dynamic about the relationships between those respectively influenced by New Prophecy, the Rule of Faith, and the monarchianism of Praxeas. Some years prior to showing any clear influence from the New Prophecy, Tertullian in the treatise *On the Prescription of Heretics* famously invoked a sort of procedural rule against debating with teachers of error, arguing that contention over scripture with those who did not adhere to the Rule of Faith was pointless.[39] In *Against Praxeas* he refers again to the Rule and to the principle of "prescription," but then makes an exception:

> Still, despite that prescription, everywhere room must yet be granted also for further discussions, for the instruction and equipment of certain persons,

38. *Prax.* 1.5 (CCL 2:1160).

39. Tertullian refers back to this treatise (*Praescr.* 31) at *Prax.* 2.2; C. H. Turner, "Tertullianea I. Notes on the Adversus Praxean," *JTS* (n.s.) 14 (1913): 563.

> unless it seem that each error is condemned not after examination but by prejudice—and in particular this one, which supposes itself to possess unadulterated truth while it thinks it impossible to believe in one God, unless it says that Father and Son and Holy Spirit are one and the same.[40]

Tertullian's desire to proceed differently in this case and the identity of "certain persons" both demand some thought. Why would monarchian beliefs such as those of Praxeas deserve special consideration, rather than being ruled out of court like the claims of Valentinians and Marcionites?

Tertullian elaborates his point by speaking of the "*simplices*" or simpletons of the church, and the difficulty that they have because of Praxeas's teaching. The Rule of Faith, he says, brings over these of simple faith—"not to call them the thoughtless and stupid, who are always the greater part of the believers"—"from the many gods of the world to the one true God." In other words, these are somehow associated with the Rule, which had taught them monotheism despite their apparent intellectual limitations. Yet, Tertullian says, this simple majority does not yet understand that "it is necessary to believe [in God] as one, but along with his economy," and wrongly presumes that "the number and arrangement of the Trinity is a division of unity."[41]

This passage is very revealing. It is not only Praxeas of old, but these *simplices* themselves now who argue—clearly not so simplistically, despite Tertullian's abusive labelling—that "number and arrangement of the Trinity is a division of unity." The followers of Praxean falsehood are not a marginal group disturbing the doctrinal peace of the church; rather Tertullian implies that the majority of the Carthaginian Christians, notionally adhering to a Rule of Faith but somehow distant from its trinitarian element, are openly or latently monarchian. Thus although Tertullian's "prescriptive" logic could have allowed him to dismiss the "simple" without a hearing, he actually seeks to correct and instruct, rather than to exclude them. This is the most fundamental reason why "instruction and equipment" is a better strategy than "prescription"; for it is most of the membership of the church itself, as Tertullian understands it, that has fallen prey to this doctrine or is at least at risk from it.[42]

Across his writings Tertullian deals with just one other errant group via

40. *Prax.* 2.3 (CCL 2:1161).

41. *Prax.* 3.1 (CCL 2:1161).

42. In fact as Evans points out, the Hippolytan *Refutatio* says something similar about the Roman church (*Haer.* 9.12); Evans doubts this, but his skepticism involves the anachronistic view that the monarchians were a "conventicle."

the same strategy, that is, the strategy of pedagogy rather than prescription. This is how elsewhere he treats the *psychici,* that bulk of mediocre Christians resistant to the asceticism of the New Prophets. Despite the kind of personal "separation" he reported, Tertullian always deals with these in some apparent hope of persuasion (despite the polemics), and the assumption of a common interest or affinity gone wrong. The unavoidable conclusion is that the monarchian *simplices*—the majority of Christian believers—are actually the same mass of ethically-mediocre *psychici.* Both labels are apparently ways of speaking about most of those whom Tertullian (somewhat grudgingly) regards as Christians, however inadequate their actual faith or practice.

So the monarchian *simplices* and the "catholic" *psychici* were actually the same group, viewed from two different perspectives. This association of belief and practice sets Tertullian's attack on the binitarian blasphemy of Praxeas in quite a different light. If it is too much to say that Carthaginian Christianity, apart from the followers of the Paraclete, had lapsed into a sort of confessional monarchianism, it must at least be allowed that a certain tendency in the interpretation of the Rule—perhaps the sort of compromise on trinitarian theology represented by Callistus at Rome—was entirely real and even temporarily dominant in Carthage. This same group was identified with the more pragmatic approach to ethics and skepticism towards the New Prophecy that attracted the label *psychici* from Tertullian. Driving out the Paraclete and crucifying the Father were linked, and at one point in early third-century Carthage trinitarian belief might seem to have depended for its survival on "Montanism."

The Paraclete and the Rule of Faith

An argument has been made here for the identity of monarchian *simplices* and "catholic" *psychici* from the evidence of Tertullian's writings. There is a tension, however, between this apparent connection and the separation insisted upon at times by Tertullian, and all the more so many of his commentators, between the *doctrina* of the Rule of Faith and the *disciplina* espoused by the Paraclete. If these were really entirely independent matters, the practical identity in early third-century Carthage of the Christians of monarchian tendency and the moderate or "psychic" opponents of the New Prophecy could be seen as merely coincidental. Yet on closer examination, Tertullian in *Against Praxeas* and elsewhere firmly establishes the relation between the New Prophecy and trinitarian faith theoretically, whatever his thoughts at some other points about discipline and doctrine.

His account of the Rule of Faith suggests that the work of the Paraclete

in Carthage was not simply that of authenticating the new prophets themselves, or of convincing lukewarm Christians of the benefits of ascetic rigor, but rather of actually teaching the truth of the Father's and the Son's persons and being. Even though he sometimes downplays the place of the Paraclete in doctrine in order to defend the continuity between the New Prophecy and the ancient apostolic faith, Tertullian's own conception of the role of the Paraclete clearly encompasses the Rule. He invokes the temporal priority of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as one of its proofs, but not so as to leave the Paraclete on the margins:

> We indeed both in the past and all the more so now, as better instructed through the Paraclete who is the leader into all truth, believe in one God, but subject to this dispensation that we call the economy: that the one God has also a Son . . . who then, according to his promise, sent from the Father the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, as the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.[43]

These affirmations concerning the role of the Paraclete are now clearly presented as part of the content of that Rule. Although he also affirms continuity of belief, Tertullian claims a firmer and clearer understanding of the Rule through the work of the Paraclete, and places the Paraclete and that work within the Rule itself. Further, if the Paraclete is "sanctifier of the faith of those who believe"—not identified merely or specifically as adherents of a particular discipline *per se*—then those who hold to correct belief and those who receive the Paraclete's sanctification are the same. Others who do not know of the Spirit's sanctifying work apparently do not hold to that right belief—precisely what the other evidence confirms about the Carthaginian situation.

The new dispensation of the Paraclete is thus invoked both as source of true doctrine and as part of its content. Towards the end of *Against Praxeas* Tertullian writes that the Holy Spirit is:

> the preacher of one monarchy, but also the interpreter of the economy *if one accepts the words of his new prophecy*, and the leader into all truth which is in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to the Christian mystery.[44]

This is not a unique statement among Tertullian's writings. For him the Paraclete is that aspect of God's being that turns theory into practice, linking and unifying *disciplina* and *doctrina*. Belief in the Holy Spirit is not

43. *Prax.* 2.1 (CCL 2:1160).
44. *Prax.* 30.5 (CCL 2:1204); emphasis in translation mine.

merely a matter of acknowledging the arithmetic involved in the trinitarian economy of God; without the discipline of the Paraclete, the doctrine will have been absent also.

A not dissimilar crossing of the boundary between *disciplina* and *doctrina* is performed in the book *On the Veiling of Virgins*: "What is the Paraclete's area of responsibility but this: that *disciplina* is directed, the Scriptures revealed, the intellect reformed, the higher things approached."[45] The work of the Paraclete is here again clearly related to the understanding and exposition of faith, not merely to asceticism or other elements of practice. Or again in the treatise *On Monogamy*, of virtually identical date with *Against Praxeas*,[46] Tertullian is very clear about the continuity and stability of doctrine but gives the Paraclete a role in it:

> Moreover the Paraclete, having many things to teach fully which the Lord deferred to him will, in accordance with that precondition, first bears witness to Christ himself, as we have faith in him, together with the whole order of God the Creator, and will glorify Him, and will bring to remembrance things regarding him. And thus recognized out of this principal Rule, He will reveal those many things which relate to the disciplines. . . .[47]

Tertullian does assert the validity of the Paraclete's activity by pointing to its continuity with the Rule of Faith. It would be quite wrong, however, to imagine him teaching that the Paraclete has nothing to say about doctrine. Rather, the "witness" of the Paraclete in matters of faith is foundational for the disciplinary revelation that follows. Tertullian claims, in effect, that the witness of the New Prophecy to the triune God is distinctive enough to authenticate the Paraclete's disciplinary agenda.

Discipline and Doctrine

The idea that the role of the Paraclete was not doctrinal but disciplinary has often been linked with the view that "Montanism" was theologically orthodox or merely unoriginal. Tertullian himself seems to be the origin of the former notion, although we have already noted that his position has arguably been misunderstood, or at least exaggerated.

The trinitarian theology of the West has at times tended to extrapolate the place of the Paraclete, just as Tertullian himself admittedly does at some points in *Against Praxeas,* by a sort of mathematical analogy that

45. *Virg.* 1.5 (CCL 2:1209–10).
46. Between 210 and 213; see CCL 2:1627–28, and Barnes, *Tertullian,* 55.
47. *Mon.* 2.4 (CCL 2:1230).

centers on the *oikonomia* of God's self-arrangement or extension. Yet the confession of a true trinitarian *doctrina* for Tertullian was apparently more than drawing a further (third) implication from the possibility of multiplicity in unity.

The new third elements of those organic metaphors in chapter 2 of *Against Praxeas*—fruit, canal, and point of light—might be taken more seriously as a better expression of his own trinitarianism, for whose understanding the *fructus* of the actual experience of the Paraclete in *disciplina*, and not simply the confession of his existence, was necessary.[48] Tertullian's belief about the Paraclete concerns the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church, both for doctrine and for discipline. That Spirit is active both in confirming and strengthening true doctrine and in revealing the "many things" of a discipline that is equally part of the eternal will of God, but more recently made known. For Tertullian, a true *doctrina* recognizes the work of the Paraclete in the church, and a true *disciplina* proceeds from the confession of the one God revealed not only in Creation and in the work of Christ, but in the activity of the Spirit even in Tertullian's day. Whether this trinitarianism is quite the one understood as his legacy bequeathed to the tradition is debatable.

Tertullian does insist that the Paraclete is not the bearer of theological novelties; of course his critique of Marcion was founded on this same point, that God's truth did not arrive suddenly (see *Marc.* 3.2.1). Praxeas receives similar treatment as an innovator, having come along just "yesterday."[49] Tertullian is at pains to point to how the New Prophecy can actually be the old-time religion. Across the works in which he demonstrates the influence of the New Prophecy, Tertullian uses three strategies to argue this point. These can be demonstrated conveniently and more fully from the treatise *On Monogamy*.

One is to downplay the novelty of the New Prophecy as such, depicting the Paraclete as "restorer more than innovator."[50] Another is to claim biblical warrant for a deferred element of revelation, based on John 16.12 (*Mon.* 2), provided the point is in accordance with the Rule of Faith.[51] Finally, this sort of deferred revelation is often couched as a matter of *disciplina* rather than of *fides* (*Mon.* 2.3–4), the distinction being used as a means of assuring continuity and stability of Christian teaching.

48. On this point see further McGowan, "God in Early Latin Theology."
49. *Prax.* 2.2 (CCL 2:1160).
50. *Mon.* 4.1 (CCL 2:1233).
51. Tabbernee speaks of an element of "progressive revelation" ("'Will the Real Paraclete Please Speak Forth!'," 103).

Commentators have often taken these rhetorical strategies at face value without considering the other evidence for Tertullian's views.[52] In another work from the same period, the treatise *On Fasting*, he does point out that "psychic" objections to the New Prophecy are made not on doctrinal principle, but for the sake of ethical accommodation:

> These take issue with the Paraclete; because of this the New Prophecies are rejected: not that Montanus and Priscilla and Maximilla preach another God, nor that they separate Jesus Christ, nor that they overturn any particular rule of faith or hope, but that they openly teach that one should fast more often than marry![53]

This passage has usually been read as though it indicated commonality of doctrine and distinctiveness of practice; that the *psychici* had no cause for complaint on theological grounds, and thus had to appeal to their different stance on issues such as marriage. We have already seen, however, that both these assumptions are highly questionable; not only are doctrine and discipline closely related in these debates, but the *psychici* might well (in their guise as *simplices,* as it were) have held views about the nature of God at odds with those Tertullian attributes to the New Prophets.

So in fact this passage from *On Fasting* actually demonstrates the distinctiveness of the *doctrina* professed by adherents of the New Prophecy, compared to that of others at Carthage. Tertullian indicates that the objectors attack on the grounds of the New Prophets' insistence on extensive fasts and on the exclusion of remarriage, but also that if they had made theological complaint, it would have been about preaching "another God" or about the "separation" of the divine persons—both statements describing a trinitarian theology from a monarchian standpoint. Tertullian says that the *psychici* were more concerned about defending their physical indulgence than their theology, not that they had no doctrinal differences or qualms regarding the New Prophecy.

There is every reason to believe this doctrinal argument has to do with the same trinitarian debate revealed in *Against Praxeas*, where the distinct subsistence of the Son (and perhaps also that of the Paraclete) offends the monarchian Christians. *On Fasting* thus confirms the substantial identity of the Carthaginian *psychici* and the *simplices*, as well as further demonstrating Tertullian's understanding of the distinctive trinitarianism of the New Prophecy.

52. A notable exception is David Rankin, who recognizes the Paraclete's doctrinal role for Tertullian; see "Tertullian's Vocabulary," 5–6, n.1.

53. *Jejun.* 1.3 (CCL 2:1257).

CONCLUSION

Did the New Prophecy influence the doctrine of the Trinity? It may still seem that the influence of the Paraclete was not necessary to the influential formulations of *Against Praxeas* concerning the "economy" of the triune God, or the language of *personae* and *substantia*. The similarity of Tertullian's trinitarian teaching to that of other writings connected with the tradition of the Rule of Faith, and indeed his own earlier ones, could seem to make the more distinctive elements of *Against Praxeas* ultimately irrelevant, and the context in a particular Carthaginian dispute beside the point.

Such a conclusion can really only be drawn, however, if certain elements of *Against Praxeas* are taken so far out of Tertullian's context that his own understanding is ignored or erased, in still another instance of division or distinction—sundering the historical Quintus Septimius Florens of Carthage from the Tertullian of dogma. Of course "Montanism" and trinitarian theology could have existed without one another, and at most points did. At this crucial juncture in early third-century Carthage however, in this piece of writing and for this complex theologian, they did not. For Tertullian—and if he was right, for the Carthaginian church as a whole at one point of history—defense of trinitarian faith actually depended on the followers of the Paraclete.[54] That true faith authenticated the New Prophecy for its adherents, who were the effective witnesses to that faith and to the Paraclete, and that set of circumstances was necessary to the contribution Tertullian's writings were to make to tradition.

Tertullian himself has been described as a "Montanist Catholic."[55] There is a certain retrospective truth in this combination of anachronisms. To use terms more meaningful in his time and place, he was a Christian who adhered to the Rule of Faith, and pursued its lived significance, theoretical as well as practical, under the aegis of the New Prophecy. In early third-century Carthage, he was ecclesially marginal precisely because he was doctrinally orthodox. This combination was necessary to the specifics of his trinitarian contribution, later as much as then.

We should also acknowledge the irony that Tertullian is a major contributor to some of the categories that fail to do his own work justice and which have sometimes rendered the life of the early Carthaginian church

54. Thus T. D. Barnes: "Tertullian helped to rescue the Catholic Church from theological heresy precisely because he was a Montanist" (*Tertullian*, 142).

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

more opaque. Not only was his contribution to the construction of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" enormously significant, but the more specific distinction between *doctrina* and *disciplina* both undergirds others' separation of theology from ethics in his thought, and adds to the whole Western tradition's struggle with the relationship between theory and practice. It is therefore not later categories alone but even some of his own that may prove inadequate to deal with the theological and ecclesial tensions of the early third century. Tertullian himself is a remarkable personification of their limitations as well as of their force, and in some respects author of his own disjuncture.

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