Adherents of the New Prophecy and their opponents agreed that Christians must not provoke their own arrest unnecessarily; but did the Montanists also share the view, held by many within ‘mainstream’ Christianity, that prudent withdrawal in times of persecution was not only warranted but was God’s will? Or were Montanists adamant that, while Christians must not volunteer for martyrdom, they should at least not run away from it? Historians of the Montanist movement have traditionally claimed that Montanism strongly condemned flight during persecution as sinful. But, as this opinion was linked with the erroneous view which characterized Montanists as fanatics who invariably rushed into voluntary martyrdom, could these scholars have been wrong? How did pre-Constantinian ‘Montanists’ react to persecution of Christians, including of themselves, by non-Christians? Similarly, did pre-Constantinian adherents of the New Prophecy hide their Christianity in times when there was no overt persecution or did they really ‘flaunt their Christianity’ as has often been asserted by historians of the movement?

This chapter will examine the relevant extant literary and epigraphic data concerning ‘flight during persecution’ and, its corollary, ‘open profession of Christianity’ to determine whether or not Montanist attitudes and practices related to these matters were unique—or, at least, differed from the attitudes and practices of ‘mainstream’ Christians in the pre-Constantinian era.

1 See Chapter Six.
2 For example, see Schwegler, Montanismus, 65; De Soyres, Montanism, 93–94; Bonwetsch, Geschichte des Montanismus, 105–7; Belck, Geschichte des Montanismus, 35; Ermoni, “La crise montaniste,” 67. The view of these early scholars has been accepted by more recent writers, for example, see Barnes, Tertullian, 177, 183; Pelikan, Christian Tradition 1:101; Wright, “Why were the Montanist Condemned?” 17.
3 See p. 201 and n. 1 above.
I. TERTULLIAN’S ATTITUDE TO FLIGHT DURING PERSECUTION
CA. 196/7—CA. 208/9

Any discussion of Montanist attitudes to flight during persecution must commence with a study of Tertullian. Not only did Tertullian write extensively on the subject before his adherence to the New Prophecy, he is also the only person whose ‘Montanist’ writings have been preserved. Tertullian provides us with a ‘catholic’ and a ‘Montanist’ theology of martyrdom and persecution. An important part of both these theologies concerns flight during persecution. In order to understand his ‘Montanist’ attitude to this topic, it is necessary to see it in the context of the change which adherence to the New Prophecy brought to Tertullian’s theology of martyrdom and persecution as a whole.

The dominant theme in Tertullian’s treatment of martyrdom and persecution before his espousal of Montanism was his insistence that martyrdom is the will of God, whereas persecution is not. This apparent contradiction resulted from a highly sophisticated synthesis of his theology of martyrdom and his political ideology. In Tertullian’s opinion, the whole of Roman politics and society was corrupted by idolatry and, therefore, subject to demonic influences. Tertullian believed that demons, of whom Satan is chief, were responsible for deceiving humankind into worshipping false ‘deities’ and carrying out other wicked practices (Apol. 22). Consequently, he argued, Christians ought to live in isolation from the institutions of their Roman ancestors (Nat. 1.2.1). Although they must live in the world, Christians cannot be part of it (Mart. 2.1–8). A Christian-Roman Empire would be a contradiction in terms (Apol. 21.24). The rulers of this world are necessary, but they cannot be Christians as they have to be involved in activities (government, administration, and military service) which, because of their intimate connection with idolatry, are incompatible with Christianity (Idol. 17.1–19.3). In his Apologeticum, Tertullian claimed that “the Caesars, too, would have believed on Christ, if either the Caesars had not been necessary for the world, or if Christians could have been Caesars” (21.24; ANF 3:35). Rulers could become Christian—but only by relinquishing their office. Inability to be both rulers and Christians does not mean that rulers are necessarily evil. In fact, Tertullian pointed to many good rulers, some of whom were even favorably disposed toward Christianity (Apol. 5.3–4; cf. 22.7; 27.4). The incompatibility between political office and Christianity meant, however, that rulers, being pagans and, therefore,