Getting Perspective: The Divine Courtroom in Tertullian of Carthage’s *Apologeticum*

Meira Z. Kensky*

1 Introduction

In my book, *Trying Man, Trying God: The Divine Courtroom in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*, I engage in a full-length study of scenes of the divine courtroom in Jewish and Christian literature from antiquity. My central argument is that these courtroom scenes serve to invite readers to consider the question of divine justice, effectively rotating the courtroom scene: “The courtroom, rather than simply functioning on the narrative level with the reader as an additional spectator, is rotated so that the reader is in the judicial position, and it is the judge and the process itself which are being adjudicated. When man is tried, it is truly God who is on trial.”¹ This is true not only in terms of narrative presentation, but also in terms of courtroom imagery in rhetoric. In the *Ars Rhetorica*, Aristotle writes that “the object of rhetoric is judgment—for they judge the deliberations and the verdict is a judgment” (*Ars. Rhet.* 2.1.2). As I ask in my book, “If the reader is to be addressed as a judge even in epideictic rhetoric, how much the more so is the reader invited to take a judicial position when the rhetoric is specifically forensic?”² We see this dynamic in classical oratory, for example, in Isocrates’ *Antidosis*, when he adopts the fiction of a courtroom suit in order to defend his teaching, explicitly asking his audience to sit in judgment upon him (*Isoc. Ant.* 8). When authors utilize courtroom imagery, both in narrative and rhetoric, they are begging the reader to take a certain stance on the scene in front of them: a judicial stance.³

* Assistant Professor of Religion, Coe College.


2 Ibid., 9.

3 Narrative is found within apologetic literature, since forensic rhetoric properly includes a *narratio* (or *diēgēsis*) as part of its structure. However, a major difference between standalone narrative and narrative embedded in forensic discourse is the explicit presence of the author. As Loveday Alexander explains, “the authorial voice of the inscribed speaker will always be there to explain the narrative and drive home the conclusions the audience should
With regard to early Christian literature, I look closely at the way divine courtroom imagery appears in the letters of Paul, the Gospels of Matthew and John, the book of Revelation, and the non-canonical Apocalypse of Peter and the Visio Pauli. Then, as an example of an early Christian reader who did what these scenes asked and passed verdict on God, I examined the teachings of the arch-heretic Marcion of Sinope and the response to his assertions by Tertullian of Carthage, who makes an impassioned argument against Marcion that judgment is proper to God. Tertullian must “defend God from Marcion’s charges that the way God acts as revealed in the Old Testament is unjust, unreasonable, and not befitting the true God.”

To combat these charges, Tertullian engages in an apologetic strategy, attempting to vindicate God from the charges leveled at him by Marcion. To do this, he must convince the reader not only that Marcion is wrong but that God is a just judge. In a strategy fitting to apologetic literature, “even though God’s role as judge is being discussed, that is the point to be adjudicated before the court of the reader. This effectively rotates the courtroom, and puts the portrayal of God exercising judgment ‘on trial’ before the reader.”

Though my discussion in the book is limited to the Adversus Marcionem, Tertullian is an example of an author who is steeped in the imagery of the courtroom and of divine judicial activity. The writings of Tertullian are peppered with references to the divine courtroom and the mechanisms of divine judgment. Mentions of the divine courtroom are found in a wide swath of Tertullian’s writings over the course of his entire career, from the early Ad Nationes to the late Adversus Marcionem. They occur in all types of writings, including apologetic, deliberative, and exhortative treatises. It is not an overstatement to assert that the divine courtroom forms a foundational element of the way Tertullian conceives of God’s plan for the universe, and constitutes for him a set of images that he can call upon as an iconic proof-text for a number of different purposes. In what follows, I will build upon my previous research by examining the way the divine courtroom appears in Tertullian’s Apologeticum,