SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND THE “HERETICAL” WOMAN: FIRMILIAN’S WORD TO THE CHURCH IN CARTHAGE

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This study concerns three people: two of them men of authority who were Christian bishops and the third, an unnamed Christian woman, whose claims to authority were presented as a problem. Her provenance, indeed her existence as an individual rather than as a literary device, is uncertain.

The account of the woman is given briefly in Epistle 75 of the Cyprianic corpus (bishop Firmilian of Caesarea to bishop Cyprian of Carthage) and it brings us into the debates about orthodoxy and heresy, the relation of charismatic to clerical authority, women and the sacraments and the process of defining the “heretical” woman. Firmilian’s little-studied presentation of this woman is of interest for the aforesaid things. I shall suggest that probably it was also a thrust in a debate about which we have almost no evidence. In this debate she was used as the foil for toleration. Her actions, as Firmilian described them, became reminders of unacceptable consequences if certain dangers were not acknowledged. “She” may even have been a composite of various stereotypes and projected fears with regard to the kinds of teachers and teachings she was used to represent.

I have inferred this element of propaganda in the letter. It is not made explicit in the text that the section devoted to her had as one of its functions being ammunition in a particular war about a certain view of spiritual authority. But I shall argue that in the war the battle lines had not been drawn as rigidly in some geographical areas as in others. In addition, this inference serves to plug a small hole in a remarkable gap of silence about the Carthaginian church situation.

Little attention has been paid to this account, perhaps because it appears as one element in one letter of a series in the Cyprianic corpus which addresses “greater” questions. In any case, scholarly consideration of second- and third-century Christian womankind has been “patchy”, despite attention to the stories and story-tellers of the Apocryphal Acts, to females and the feminine in Gnostic groups, to
women in the martyrlogies and the New Prophecy/Montanism, and despite much heart-searching about methodology when studying all things gender-related. Relatively few writers have trawled the extensive second and early third century material for an overview of what was happening to Christian women, including the catholic kind, in various settings, in this important period of self-definition for the church.

Cyprian of Carthage is associated with a corpus of 81 letters written and received between 249 and 258 C.E. (the year of his death). *Epistle 75* (no. 74 in some editions) is a long letter from Firmilian, written in 256 C.E. in reply to a letter from Cyprian (not extant). It contained a refutation of the views of bishop Stephen and the Roman Christians on the baptism of heretics, with Firmilian supporting Cyprian’s own view about the matter.

The main issue in the letter was whether or not heretics’ baptism conferred remission of sins and consequently whether re-baptism was necessary when they sought acceptance by the catholics. Firmilian told Cyprian of experiences and catholic decisions in his own region and it was in that context that he introduced the story of a Christian woman who had been in Cappadocia more than twenty years previously.

The unnamed woman had been active publicly in the late 230s

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