GOD IN EARLY LATIN THEOLOGY:
TERTULLIAN AND THE TRINITY

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He that goes about to speak of and to understand the mysterious Trinity ... if he reckons this mystery by the mythology of numbers, if he talks only of essences and existences, hypostases and personalities, distinctions without difference ... may amuse himself ... [T]here is no knowing of God theologically, and as he ought to be known, but by the measure of [experience].

Introduction

Although the Carthaginian Christian theologian Tertullian contributed significantly and even foundationally to the complex notion of God as Trinity, subsequent Christian tradition has struggled with his own complexity. An adherent of the ascetic movement called “New Prophecy,” later to be labelled the heresy of Montanism, his theology and his influence have been received with a certain caution. Typically the “orthodox” Tertullian of doctrine has been kept somewhat separate from the “heretical” advocate of various ascetic and idiosyncratic practices.

The tension between these roles as heretic and “Father” is most obvious in reading Tertullian’s treatise Against Praxeas (c. 215), his fullest exposition of God as Trinity but also one of his most “Montanist” writ-

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3 “Montanism” is a term that occurs only considerably later, and exclusively in the works of critics.

4 The fullest study of the theology of the treatise seems likely to remain that of J. Moingt, Théologie trinitaire de Tertullien (4 vols; Paris: Aubier, 1966–1969). A shorter account of Moingt’s exposition of key issues regarding the reconciliation of monarchia
ings. Against Praxeas was provoked by the (re-)appearance in Carthage of a monarchian theological tendency.\(^5\) Father and Son, the obscure “Praxeas” and his followers argued, were simply two ways of speaking of God, or two ways God was known at different times.\(^6\) God was really, and only, one; the same one God had been present on the cross and at creation.

In a treatise regarded as foundational to subsequent trinitarian doctrine, Tertullian’s understatement concerning the Holy Spirit is notable, not least because the New Prophecy itself made very strong affirmations about the present role and reality of that “Paraclete” (John 14:16 etc.). In fact this pneumatological understatement was not unusual for the time, but Tertullian’s lack of emphasis on the third person of the Trinity stems in part from the character of the monarchian controversy; both sides work with a logic that denies or allows the possibility of a third divine person largely on the basis of whether there could be a second, that is, anything of “number” in God. The Holy Spirit was thus more often implied than described in what was primarily an argument about the identity of Father and Son. However at one or two points Against Praxeas does take up that implication, and presents the real existence and personality of the Holy Spirit at least more distinctly than many other writings of the first two or three centuries of Christian thought, including Tertullian’s own earlier works.

Although the Holy Spirit is not a main subject of Against Praxeas, Tertullian also makes a link between his defence of God’s existence in three personae and his advocacy of the Paraclete. Since Praxaeas had rejected the New Prophecy and promoted monarchian theology, the defence of the Paraclete was not merely a theoretical matter.\(^7\) The two causes were apparently strongly linked in local controversy at Carthage,


\(^5\) “Modalist monarchianism” is a modern coinage. There is no indication that those attacked in Against Praxeas constituted a distinct grouping; this was a theological tendency at work within the same networks or groupings associated with the “Rule of Faith”—as was the New Prophecy.

\(^6\) The identity of “Praxeas” is unknown. Allen Brent’s restatement of the theory that it is a cipher for Callistus is attractive; see Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop (VCSupp 31; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 525–533. I will use the name simply to indicate Tertullian’s opponents and their views.