

Tertullian's Approach to Medicine and the Care of Souls

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In a substantial body of scholarship on the ancient history of medicine and healthcare, Tertullian of Carthage has been considered as one who attacked pagan physicians and urged his fellow Christians to regard disease as a test from God. Relying on some passages from his corpus, some scholars boldly claim that Tertullian had scant respect for medical science and rejected it. On the other hand, some have suggested that, given his hostility to paganism, astrology and philosophical investigation, Tertullian showed a deep knowledge of medicine and favoured it. Provided several possible approaches to his thoughts on medicine and medical treatment, a further interesting point to note is that his discourse closely linked with his creativity with medical metaphor. Tertullian's interest in psychagogy (a guidance of the soul) seems to have increased with time. In this paper, we will draw out how together both the concern for medicine and therapeutic language are producing a more holistic view of Tertullian's perception of medico-religious concepts. In the process, I shall limit attention to his early (197–200), and middle (200–207) works and to the intersections of the way of approaching to the health of the human soul and body.

Medical terms and the limited medical erudition in his early writings

Tertullian had only limited medical knowledge in the early days of his literary career, along with his respect for the medical profession. Indeed, in his early treatises (197–200), he was unfamiliar with technical terms in medicine. This is revealed not only by the paucity of medical terms in these works but also by the fact that he did employ them in the general meaning of the word. *Cauterio* is a term to designate an iron used for cauterising (see *Against Hermogenes* 1.2). But, in *Apology* (15.5) and *To the Heathen* (1.10.47 and 1.12.14), he referred to it as the wand of Mercury.

when Mercury, with his winged cap and heated wand, tests with his cautery whether the bodies were really lifeless, or only feigning death. (*To the Heathen* 1.10.47; ANF, trans. Holmes)

While the use of the term *intestina* as an anatomical one is taken from his later writings (see *On the Resurrection of the Dead* 4.4–6 and 60.2), it just means 'civil and domestic' in *To the Heathen*.

what terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! what pestilences, famines, conflagrations, yawnings, and quakings of the earth has history recorded! (*To the Heathen* 1.9.5; ANF, trans. Holmes)

It is worth noting that in his early treatises (*To the Heathen* 2.5.6 and *Apology* 22.5) he regarded the cause of disease such as 'pestilential winds' (*aurae pestilentes*) according to the conventional view of the phenomenon. Despite his readiness to apply the medical knowledge to the question, Tertullian often explained its cause differently in his early works: it's coming from demonic or divine ones (e.g. *Apology* 23.1–16 and 27.4–7). It does not seem unlikely that he would not display the erudition. Instead, he treated physicians with proper respect and placed confidence in their practice of medicine.

when one is in ill-health, you do not bestow your acknowledgments on the flannel wraps, or the medicines, or the poultices, but on the doctors by whose care and prudence the remedies become effectual. (*To the Heathen* 2.5.10; ANF, trans. Holmes)

A high regard for physicians is also explicit from the story of Aesculapius whose inadequate care stemmed from his avarice, and the subsequent punishment (by Jupiter) was sung by Pindar.

There is even one well-known lyric poet—I mean Pindar—who sings of Aesculapius, who was punished for his avarice by a thunderbolt because in his practice of medicine he did injury to people's health. (*Apology* 14.5; FC 10, 46) according to him [Pindar], he was punished for his avarice and love of gain, influenced by which he would bring the living to their death, rather than the dead to life, by the perverted use of his medical art which he put up for sale. (*To the Heathen* 2.14.12; ANF, trans. Holmes)

A code of ethics which this story implied resulted from his reasonable expectation for a proper care provided by a skilful physician. Because of his knowledge and praise for both medicine and physicians, he may evaluate the punishment by Jupiter as just and equitable for people's health. It is true that medicine was regarded by him as beneficial to the health of those to be cared for. But the lack of medical evidence in his early writings would lead to the inference that at an early stage his knowledge of medicine was limited and restricted by conditions.

Further commitment to medicine in his middle writings

Tertullian's references to medicine became increasingly frequent and extensive in the middle works. In the introductory part of *On the Prescriptions of Heretics*, Tertullian was attempting to distinguish the proper interpretation of the scriptures from the heretical one. He delivered an exhortation to the reader and gave the reason for the existence of heretics. Before raising an objection to the heretical interpretation in detail (on Matthew 7:7 and Luke 11:9), he claimed that heretics could be compared with fever.

In the case of fever, for example, to which its own place is assigned amongst other deadly and excruciating calamities for the destruction of man, we do not wonder

at its existence, for it does exist; or that it destroys man, for it exists for that purpose. [...] fever, rather than wonder at it we loathe it as an evil, recognized as such both from the reason of its existence and from its power; and so far as we can we take precautions against it, since we have not the power to annihilate it. (*On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 2.1–2; trans. T.H. Bindley 1914, 36)

Both heresies and fever exhaust and, in the extreme case, destroy life and particularly in those who are weak in their faith or body. He appealed to common sense that people should avoid it for their health and lives.

At the beginning of his work on baptism, Tertullian gave a picture of a female member of the gnostic Cainite sect whose ‘pestilential doctrine’ (*venenatissima doctrina*) was to try to deny the efficacy of washing with water. She avoided baptismal waters and was likened to a viper: ‘for vipers and asps as a rule, and even basilisks, frequent dry and waterless places’ (*On Baptism* 1.2; trans. E. Evans 1964, 5). His knowledge of snakes may be derived almost entirely from common sense at the time. It was against the threatening view of baptism that he continued to speak of Christians as ‘little fishes’ (1.3), being born of water, and of the water itself by reference to the passages from Genesis (1:1–2, 1:9 sq., 1:20, and 2:7). He insisted that water was a vehicle for the divine. But although he defined it as the source of life and maintained that the waters acquired healing power, this does not mean that he had been ignorant of a false teaching of ‘the violent action of a malignant spirit.’ He referred thus to those called as “esetic” and “lymphatic” and “hydrophobic” of those whom water has drowned, or has vexed with madness or fear.’ (*On Baptism* 5.4; trans. E. Evans 1964, 13)

Why have I referred to such matters? So that no one should think it over-difficult for God’s holy angel to be present to set waters in motion for man’s salvation, [...] If it is thought strange that an angel should do things to waters, there has already occurred a precedent of that which was to be. An angel used to do things when he moved the Pool of Bethsaida. (Cf. John 5:4 sqq.) [...] This example of bodily healing was prophetic of spiritual healing, by the general rule that carnal things always come first as examples of things spiritual. (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:46) (*On Baptism* 5.5; trans. E. Evans 1964, 13–15)

In fact we find the idea, quoting the passage of an indissoluble bond between the carnal and the spirit from Corinthians, that physical healing is not incidental and temporary but actually more stable, more prophetic than the view of those who are ‘strangers to all understanding of spiritual things’ (5.1; Evans 1964, 13) would suggest.

In *On Patience*, he dealt with the difference between the Stoic view of patience and that of Christian, the latter of which precedes and follows faith, thus being crucial to the hope of life eternal. Tertullian began with confessing that he was unworthy of the author of the treatise on patience. Despite the hesitancy, he expressed his eagerness to attain ‘the health of patience which I do not possess (*quam non optineo patientiae sanitatem*).’ For he

was 'ever suffering from the fever of impatience (*aeger caloribus impatientiae*).' (*On Patience* 1.5; FC 40, 194) He stirred the interest of his reader by using the analogy of medical ideas with the matter in question. Because of the continuity with this analogy, it is very likely that he is more inclined to be satisfied with the use of medical terms. After examining the nature of faith in connection with patience, he tried to convince his reader that impatience is fatal and original sin, that is, 'every sin is to be traced back to impatience.' (*On Patience* 5.21; FC 40, 202) Impatience is illustrated as an infection that Eve was caused by the breath (*spiritu impatientia infecto*) of the serpent. (*On Patience* 5.9; FC 40, 200) One cannot extinguish 'his wrath, his resentment, his harshness and bitterness, that is, his impatient disposition (*uenena scilicet impatientiae*),' as far as one adheres to 'the injury through a total lack of patience (*iniuriae per absentiam patientiae*).' (*On Patience* 12.2–3; FC 40, 214) Tertullian was clear that patience takes control of 'every aspect of a salutary way of life (*omnem speciem salutaris disciplinae*).' (*On Patience* 12.4; FC 40, 214) It is noteworthy that he included a therapeutic element in his account of the story of Job 2.

his wife [...] was urging him to improper remedies (*ad praua remedia*). How God laughed, and how the Evil One was split asunder, when Job, with perfect calm, would wipe away the discharge oozing from his ulcer (*inmundam ulceris sui redundantiam*) and, with jesting remark, would call back to the cavity and sustenance of his open flesh the tiny creature (*bestiolas*) that were trying to make their way out! (*On Patience* 14.4–5; FC 40, 218–219)

While the story of Job did not give the details of his medical condition, Tertullian did so. A comprehensive description of the course of the disease is of interest since it reveals his concern for medicine. The positive view is also evident in the metaphorical designation of God: 'if a pain, He acts as healer (*medicus*); if death, He restores life (*resuscitator*).' (*On Patience* 15.1; FC 40, 219) In so far as the problem is concerned, however, he always directed attention to the difficulty and importance of attaining patience. So from a focus on the bodily pains he arrived at a composite relation between spirit and flesh (14.3; FC 40, 218: 'we must practise patience in the spirit as well as in the flesh, in soul as well as in body') and the 'discipline' of Christian patience is expressed as his salvific message to those 'who believe in the resurrection of the flesh and of the spirit':

'let us [...] offer Him both the patience of the spirit and the patience of the flesh.' (*On Patience* 16.5; FC 40, 222)

In his another treatise written in the same period, his concern for the practice of prayer was discussed in conjunction with his knowledge of medicine. In *On Prayer*, Tertullian claimed that we should lower our voices when we offer our prayer: 'rather, it is the heart which He hears and beholds.' (17.3) He compared Jonah with the Pharisee who prayed with pride.

The tone of voice, too, should be lowered; otherwise, what lungs (*quantis arteriis*) we will need, if being heard depends upon the noise we make! [...] how could Jonas' prayer from the depths of the whale's belly (*de imo ventre*) have made its way to heaven, up through the organs of such a great beast (*per tantae bestiae viscera*) from the very bottom of the sea, up through such a vast amount of water? (*On Prayer* 17.3–4; FC 40, 172–3)

It is very likely that Tertullian used his general knowledge of medicine for the explanation of Jonah' prayer. That Tertullian was ignorant of the works of his senior contemporary Galen may be confirmed by this passage in which he seemed to be unaware of Galen's commitment to the separation between the respiratory and the circulatory systems. In fact, despite his dependence on the other medical experts, Tertullian had not mentioned Galen's name in his corpus. At the same time, this hypothesis itself is circumstantial.

In *On Repentance*, Tertullian held that those who had repented once through baptism were not to sin again. His view of the forgiveness of sins was rather intolerant as he had given more demanding norm for his fellow Christians. For Tertullian, human beings have integrity in themselves as a composite entity of soul and body, based on his anthropological analysis of human nature. Therefore, sins should be defined both as corporeal and spiritual. (3.3; 4.1; 9.1) He likened the post-baptismal sins to the repeated disease: 'When a disease recurs the medicine (*medicina*) must be repeated.' (*On Repentance* 7.13; ACW 28, 29) Penance should serve as the purification both of these parts, thus being expected not only to purify themselves inwardly but also to confess their hidden sins in public. Thus, as far as the public act of confession is infinitely better than private condemnation and entails public humiliation of the sinner, it may also be suggested that medical care is illustrated as the one demanding severe pains.

They are like men who have contracted some disease (*contracta vexatione*) in the private parts of the body, who conceal this from the knowledge of the physicians (*conscientiam medentium*) and thus preserve their modesty but lose their lives. [...] 'Oh but it is a painful thing to undertake exomologesis in this way!' I should prefer to say that one suffers pain because one has sinned. Or, rather, when penance is to be performed, there is no longer any question of suffering, since it is become a means of salvation. It is painful to be cut (*secari*) and to be cauterized (*cauterio exuri*) and to be tortured by some medicinal caustic (*pulveris alicuius mordacitate*). Nevertheless, remedies (*medentur*) which are unpleasant justify the pain they give by the cure they effect (*emolumento curationis*), and they render present suffering agreeable because of the advantage which is to come in the future. (*On Repentance* 10.1, 10.9–10; ACW 28, 32–33)

He described vividly the operational details with which one can readily imagine the intraoperative pain and anguish without anaesthetic care. His familiarity with surgical

treatments is the best warrant of his exhortation to make public repentance which in turn purifies themselves inwardly. Although they had to face with the 'public exposure of themselves' (10.1), it permitted them to make 'present suffering' bearable for the sake of their future salvation. At the price of harsh medicine, they are to be saved in the future.

Concluding observations

The study conducted so far does not yield valid conclusions in clear terms, not least because the lack of time prevents me from presenting the detailed examination of his corpus. Nonetheless, results have been attained which may be considered as an indicative both of his attitude to medicine and medical treatment, and of his use of the medical metaphors to discuss the matter in question. Tertullian did seem to have a general knowledge of medicine in his early writings. It is rather obvious that he had a high regard for physicians and showed concern for the relation between the medical treatment and physical health. In his middle works, the use of medical metaphors became so prominent as to be repeatedly connected with Tertullian's interpretation of the scriptural texts that were used to give expression to his thought on the health (and the current diseases) of the human soul and the therapeutic relationship between body and soul. Medical terms are applied not only to one-to-one relationships of those in question and the medical equivalents—heretics and fever, baptism and healing, patience and health, and repentance and medicine—but also to the consistent framework for producing the salutary Christian soul. When viewed in this light, we appreciate his extension of the applications of the medical metaphors to areas which include a temporal aspect—change and growth—, and an implication of the fulfilment of salvation: the prophetic view of the healing (*On Baptism*) and the present suffering for the future salvation (*On Repentance*). Along with his pathological and surgical knowledge, Tertullian appears to have been making approaches to treatment of the soul and body and searching for the therapeutic strategy of the Christian way of life.