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The Healing Imagery and its Function in Roman North Africa

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Introduction

Looking at a substantial body of scholarship on the relationship between religion and health-related issues such as medicine, disease, and disability in late antiquity, some scholars will find that Christian writers in the Roman North African tradition made rhetorical use of medical terms, particularly healing imagery. It is also clear that, to some extent, they assumed that, through discourse with a rhetorical function, they would not only transmit knowledge and insights but also influence the way of life and thinking of their audience. Therefore, this paper will examine their responses to the North African tradition from the second century onwards, restricting ourselves to the authors in the second and third centuries, Tertullian and Cyprian. It then focus on the 'Plague of Cyprian', a major event in the region, and how the people of the time dealt with it. By examining how Tertullian and Cyprian perceived the medical profession as a healing entity at the time, I intend to clarify how images of healing influenced how people lived and thought.

I. Attitudes to rational medicine

From the various contexts of Greek medicine, I will select a North African tradition from the second century onwards to examine the responses of Christian writers. I will begin by identifying the attitudes of Christian apologists towards Greek medicine, which are sometimes seen as hostile to medicine.

Healing by natural means, i.e. by the therapeutic means of medicine, had become part of the cultural framework of the world into which Christianity was spreading. As this was the most widely accepted form of medicine, Christians had to clarify their position. While the inclusion of medicine in the general education curriculum attested to its cultural authority, it has also been argued that the degree to which medicine was accepted as a treatment for disease varied. Some scholars consider Tertullian (fl., 197–

220s) to have taken a stand against medicine in any form, while others consider him to have expressed a positive attitude towards its use.

It is generally accepted that the second-century apologists were theologians who sought a philosophical defence of the faith in the face of pagan criticism. They were also those who sought to reconcile Greco-Roman philosophy with Christian revelation. Since they were intellectuals educated in classical culture, their attitude to natural philosophy, which could not be separated from Greek philosophy, was indeed ambivalent. They hellenised Christianity by incorporating elements of classical culture into the Christian worldview while at the same time insisting that truth existed in pagan philosophy and could be used by Christians (see, e.g., Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 44; *Second Apology* 2,13). The leading example of anti-intellectualism among second-century apologists is Tertullian. He is the sort of theologian who would be expected to take an uncompromising position against the use of medicine for healing by Christians. He is best known for the following famous passage in which he argues that there is an absolute break between science and faith: "Quid ergo Athenae Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesia?" (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 7). It is interesting to note, however, that despite Tertullian's excessive use of rhetoric in denouncing philosophy, he has a good knowledge of medicine, as is shown by his extensive scholarship, and frequently uses medical concepts in his writings. It is true that he harshly condemns the physician (Herophilus) who allegedly practiced vivisection (*De anima* 10,4) and that he censures embryotomy (e.g. *De anima* 25,3-5; see Heyne 2011). Based on these local testimonies, it is sometimes assumed that Tertullian was hostile to medicine. However, this does not seem right. In his work *De anima*, in which these statements are included, Tertullian consistently shows his respect for physicians and medicine, citing Soranus (fl., 98–138) as an authority and using medical analogies positively to explain religious and theological concepts. It is difficult to accept the claim that Tertullian was hostile to medicine.

More importantly, Tertullian held medicine and physicians in high esteem. Because he saw medicine as a gift from God, he wrote: 'Let Aesculapius be the pioneer of the art of healing: Isaias mentions that he prescribed some medicine for Ezechias when he was sick, and so was Paul aware that a little wine was good for the stomach' (*De corona militis* 8,2: trans. E.A. Quain, in FC 40, 1959, 249). Elsewhere in his writings, he

repeatedly praises the art of healing. In *Scorpiace*, for example, Tertullian points out that pain inflicted by a physician is necessary to bring about healing.

> 5.6 For there are many who flee the protection of medical science, for many are foolish, many are afraid and falsely modest. And just as obvious is the severity of medical science owing to the scalpel, the hot iron and the fire of the mustard. Nevertheless, to be cut and burned and stretched and bitten is not evil on that account, because it brings useful pain. It will not be refused because it only brings sorrow, but because it necessarily brings sorrow it will be employed. 5.7 The benefit excuses the horror of this work. Further, the one howling and groaning and bellowing will afterwards fill up the same hands of the doctor with the fee and will declare [them] the most skilled and will then deny the cruelty. (*Scorpiace* 5,6–7: trans. G.D. Dunn, in The Early Church Fathers, 2004, 81)

Throughout this passage, Tertullian defends martyrdom, which brings eternal salvation, by analogy with the pain inflicted by a physician, which brings healing. Of course, Tertullian uses these statements about medical efficacy to denounce the 'heretics' ('gnostics and Valentinians') who oppose martyrdom on theological or ethical grounds. It is clear that this is based on the understanding that medicine benefits humanity. At any rate, Tertullian's consistently positive attitude to medicine is suggested by this active use of medical theories and terms as analogies for defending the faith. He did not always agree with the second-century apologists in this respect. How does Tertullian's approach to medicine compare with that of Cyprian (c. 200–258), the bishop of Carthage in the following period? Let us consider the case of the pandemic known as the 'Plague of Cyprian'.

II. The Plague of Cyprian

While Christians in the second and third centuries had a positive attitude towards medicine, they also prayed for healing, exercised their gifts of healing and offered salvific care to the sick as far as they knew. According to the Apostolic Tradition, visiting the sick was one of the tests for any catechumen, measuring his readiness for baptism (*Trad. ap.* 15; 20), and feeding the sick was also a common duty of all believers (24). The various

practices of healing — caring for the sick and infirm, visiting the sick, praying and feeding them — can be said to have prepared Christians for the diseases that spread throughout the Roman Empire in the mid-third century, which I will discuss below. From several contemporary accounts, we can see how the infected endured and how Christians cared for them while suffering.

The plague, known as the 'Plague of Cyprian', is thought to have originated in Ethiopia in 250 AD and spread from Egypt through North Africa to Italy and Scotland. The impact of this epidemic was enormous, with a mortality rate higher than any previously known epidemic, and at its height in Rome, it is said to have killed 5,000 people a day (*Historia Augusta, Vita Gallieni* 5,6). Symptoms of this supposed plague included diarrhoea, sores on the jaw, constant vomiting, bloodshot eyes and, in some cases, missing limbs, and impaired hearing and sight (Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 14). In the ancient world, despite recurring epidemics such as the Athenian Plague (430–29 BC, recurrent), the Antonine Plague (166–72, recurrent), the Plague of Cyprian (250–c. 270) and the Plague of Justinian (541–749), almost all outbreaks were left to individual self-help. As a result, Cyprian reported from Carthage in 252 that '[m]any of us are dying in this mortality' (*De mortalitate* 15, in FC 36, 211), while his biographer Pontius described an even more desolate and terrible scene: 'Countless people were seized daily in their own homes by a sudden attack; one after another the homes of the trembling crowd were invaded. Everyone shuddered, fled to avoid contagion, wickedly exposed their dear ones, as if along with the person who was about to die from the plague one could also shut out death itself' (Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* 9; trans. M.M. Müller, in FC 15, 1952, 13). Not only Cyprian but also Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria from 247 to 264, reported horrors in Alexandria (Eusebius, *History*, 7,22,2; 7,22,6).

In these circumstances, the civil authorities invoked the traditional gods. They appeased their anger by offering sacrifices and reciting customary prayers, but there was little they could do to remedy the situation. This was because ancient societies had no organised programme for treating the sick regularly or in emergencies. In contrast, the Christian Church had established fairly systematic means of caring for the sick. Crucially, Cyprian, as the bishop responsible for directing relief efforts, called for a response to the crisis in his address to the Christian community. The plague that struck the city in 252 plunged Carthage into chaos. In the context of the first large-scale

persecution of the Christian Church during the plague, Cyprian called on Christians to help their persecutors and provide organised care for the sick throughout the city. He called for help from both the rich and the poor. The rich were asked to give their wealth, and the poor were asked to serve. He called for service without distinction between Christians and non-Christians. His work organising care for the plague victims continued until five years later, in 258, when Valerian's persecution led to his exile (Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* 9-11).

The charitable behaviour of the Christians and the clergy is consistent with the instructions for their role found in other sources. It seems to convey that the Christians' care of the sick was motivated by love, though not without an idealising purpose. However, other aspects also seem to be considered in Cyprian's testimony. Cyprian showed great sensitivity to the 'insecurities' of those he cared for.

> How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and everyone and examines the minds of the human race; [...] Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown. (Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 16; trans. R.J. Deferrari, in FC 36, 1958, 212)

Although he defines the plague as a bringer of death, Cyprian has in mind to examine and test their state of mind by asking a series of questions. How have Christians responded to the call to care for the needy? He seems to be concerned that this is a situation in which not only human weakness and susceptibility to sickness and death is tested, but also faith. Cyprian's attention was drawn to his concern for his audience, whose relatives and friends were sick and dying. They feared the indiscriminate transmission of disease. Cyprian sought to allay their fears. Indeed, Cyprian called on the whole of society to take care of the sick. Furthermore, this was to love even your enemies and also to pray for the salvation of your adversaries and persecutors (see Matt. 5,44, Luke 6,27, 28). As a result, those who nursed the sick and restored them to health

died themselves, bringing death upon themselves. Nevertheless, Cyprian believed that such deaths occurred because of great faith and were in no way inferior to martyrdom. So, this sublime love is, on the one hand, a concern for others and, at the same time, a concern for oneself. It seems to want to show clearly that the gateway to eternal joy is open.

III. The Physician as Healer

My considerations so far have shown that medical analogies were actively used because of the positive reputation of medicine and physicians and that caring for the infected during epidemics was prompted by the logic that the rewards of martyrdom would accrue not only to those who were cared for but also to those who cared for them. In other words, there seems to be a logic to the reversal of the suffering caused by the plague as a gateway to eternal joy. Let us now consider the idea of the physician as a caring subject in a situation other than a pandemic.

Tertullian refers to the work of physicians in denouncing 'heretics' in the *Scorpiace*, which I have mentioned above. In particular, in *Against Marcion*, in which he confronts Marcion (c. 85–160), whom he calls the 'murderer of truth' (interfector ueritatis), and attacks his deviations from the doctrine, he depicts Christ's work on earth as that of a preacher and healer.

> Here however in general terms I shall complete the course I have entered upon, explaining meanwhile that Christ is announced by Isaiah as one who preaches: for he says, Who is there among you who feareth God, and will hear the voice of his Son? and as a healer, for he says, He himself hath taken away our weaknesses and borne <our> wearinesses. (*Aduersus Marcionem* 3,17; trans. E. Evans, in OECT, 1972, 223)

Tertullian also favoured medical similes to illustrate divine dispensations to humankind. Thus, as in the *Scorpiace*, he used the portrayal of the divine physician as an extraordinarily kind and cruel one to defend the moral value and rewards of martyrdom. The physician's incisions and cauterisations restore physical health by producing beneficial pain. The physician also suppresses heat with greater heat to counteract the nature of the disease. These are reminiscent of the principles of Hippocratic assortment

and opposition to curing pain and disease, which were common in Tertullian's time. Likewise, God, the Great Physician, heals and grants eternal life 'through fires and sword and anything sharp' (*Scorpiace* 5,7; trans. 2004, 81–82). God also applies the same kind of principle of abolishing 'death by death,' scattering 'slaying by slaying', shattering 'the instruments of torture by the instruments of torture' and the opposite principle of giving 'life by removing [it]', helping the 'flesh by damaging [it],' and serving the 'soul by tearing [it] out' (5,9; 81). God accomplished this for our salvation by taking our sickness, caused by Adam, through Jesus Christ (5,10–12; 81).

Central to Tertullian's thought is the view of Christ and God as healer (remediator) and physician (medicus) of the sick (see, e.g., *Adu. Marc.*; C. Radler, 'The Dirty Physician', 2009). Explaining the synoptic topos found in the Gospels of Matthew (16:17), Mark (2:17) and Luke (5:31), Tertullian constructs Christianity as an analgesic. He then sees the Christian faith as an actual clinic for people in urgent need of radical treatment. And he conceives this treatment in a novel and subversive way. For here, God, the physician, restores through physically painful and harsh treatment. In the course of his treatment, Tertullian describes carnal defilement in detail in order to clearly deny any kind of pure, spiritual salvation. According to this framework of treatment and salvation, the unclean flesh of man is the same as the flesh of Christ, showing that the gross reality of all flesh accompanies it. Therefore, such a condition of the flesh becomes the core of the embodiment of Christ, bringing, as it were, a paradoxical message to the sick person and bringing healing.

Cyprian similarly describes Christ's mission on earth as that of the divine physician who healed the wounds inflicted on humanity by the fall of Adam, neutralised the ancient poison of the serpent and gave healthy people sound prescriptions to prevent the recurrence of disease (*De opere et eleemosynis* 1; trans. R.J. Deferrari, in FC 36, 1958, 227–228). Cyprian developed this system and gave the priests the function of physicians in the Church. Faced with the severe problem of the large number of apostates during the persecution of Decius, Cyprian encouraged the clergy 'to provide with salutary remedies' of penance for the lapsed Christians (*De lapsis* 14; FC 36, 69). Instead of cutting open wounds and removing contagious substances, the clergy should not behave like inexperienced physicians who treat festering sores with a gentle hand, allowing the poison hidden deep in the heart to spread. As a result, similar comparisons between

penance and physical treatment appear frequently in his writings (see, e.g., *De op. et eleem.* 3; *De lapsis* 15; *ep.* 31; *ep.* 55; *ep.* 59).

Concluding remarks

We have seen how Tertullian and Cyprian approached medicine in the harsh contexts in North Africa in the second and third centuries and how they used medical terms and images to communicate their views effectively to their congregations. Compared with the accounts of Galen in the works on the history of medicine in antiquity, it is fair to say that, except for the 'Plague of Cyprian', there are few references to Tertullian and Cyprian. Moreover, although the misconception that Tertullian was hostile to medicine is sometimes acknowledged (e.g. V. Nutton, *From Galen to Alexander*, 1984; *Ancient Medicine*, 2004), as we have seen, Tertullian develops a close relationship between medical knowledge and human salvation, as well as an affirmation of the identity of the physician and the process of salvation. In the case of Cyprian, on the other hand, he was confronted with the overwhelming prevalence of disease and its virulence. He was unable to offer his congregation the hope of physical healing. Therefore, it can be said that he is forced to focus on the spiritual gains. But what is interesting here is that, in common with both, the physicians, the agents of healing, are not only confronted with the filthiness and carnal reality of humanity but are also given the continuity of eternal healing through the presence of Christ, for example in the context of martyrdom or pandemics. By redefining the salvation of the suffering human being, without turning away from the physical reality, without turning away from the physician's treatment and pain, the role of the body in bringing salvation is given great importance by redefining the role of the body in bringing salvation.