

Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *de Praescriptione Haereticorum*

Tertullian's *de Praescriptione Haereticorum* is one of his most important treatises with regard to the exegesis of Scripture. However, the hermeneutical principles he presented there were not part of a systematic and theoretical overview. They were specific to one context: what it was that could distinguish proper from heretical use of Scripture. In this paper I wish to examine those principles within the context of the treatise and to contrast them briefly at the end with what we find elsewhere in his writings, for, as Waszink has written, "[t]here is no one exegetical method in Tertullian."¹ That context will be classical rhetoric, and Tertullian's oratorical training will best explain the variety that is to be found in both his theory and practice of scriptural exegesis.

Timothy Barnes tentatively dates *de Praescriptione Haereticorum* to between 198 and 203,² simply on the basis that at the end of it Tertullian had announced his intention of writing against individual heresies,³ something that he did in *aduersus Praxean*,

¹ J. H. Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis," in W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken, eds, *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), p. 17.

² Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985 [rev. edn]), p. 55.

³ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 44.14 (CCL 1.224): "*De reliquo si Dei gratia adnuerit etiam specialiter quibusdam respondebimus.*"

aduersus Hermogenem and *Scorpiace*,⁴ the latter of which is dated to late 203 or early 204.⁵ Claudio Moreschini has made no comment about a possible date for this treatise in the introduction to his Italian translation,⁶ although in an earlier work he dated it to about 206, at the start of Tertullian's Montanist period.⁷ Jean-Claude Fredouille dates the work, which he prefers to title *de Praescriptionibus Aduersus Haereses Omnes*, to between 198 and 206, but this is not surprising given that he dates *Scorpiace* to 211 or 212.⁸ Dietrich Schleyer suggests that it was written between 200 and 206, in the years when Tertullian's attention was on paganism, before he turned his attention to questions of Christian ethics and asceticism.⁹

⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian*, pp. 40-41.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 34-35. See also idem, "Tertullian's *Scorpiace*," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 20 (1969), pp. 105-132. Cf. Giovanna Azzali Bernardelli, "De *Quaestionibus Confessionum Alibi Docebimus* (Tertulliano *Cor* 1,5)," in Jean and Michè Biraud (eds), *Auctour de Tertullien. Hommage à René Braun*, t. 2, Publication de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Nice 56 (Nice: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Nice, 1990), pp. 51-84 and idem, *Tertulliano. Scorpiace*, Biblioteca Patristica (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1990), pp. 10-11, who dates it to 212 between *de Corona* and *de Fuga in Persecutione*.

⁶ Claudio Moreschini, *Tertulliano. Contro gli eretici*, Testi Patristici 165 (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 2002).

⁷ Idem, *Opere scelte di Quinto Settimo Florente Tertulliano*, Classici delle Religioni, sezione quarta (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1974), p. 31.

⁸ Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*. Collection d'Études Augustiniennes Antiquité 47 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972), p487-488.

⁹ Dietrich Schleyer, *Tertullian. Vom prinzipiellen Einspruch gegen die Häeretiker*, Fontes Christiani 42 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), p. 10.

STRUCTURE OF *DE PRAESCRPTIONE HAERETICORUM*

In forensic practice and rhetorical theory, *praescriptio*¹⁰ was a special plea put forward by the defence in which questions of the competence of the court to hear a case or the competence of an opponent to present a case were raised.¹¹ This suggests that Tertullian consciously adopted a rhetorical strategy in presenting his arguments in this treatise. This position has been advanced by Robert Sider, who has offered evidence for a rhetorical structure to *de Praescriptione Haereticorum*. He argues that this text is an example of the way in which Tertullian could customize his use of the rhetorical parts of a speech to suit his needs.¹² According to him, we can discern an introductory section, in which he offered a pastoral exhortation to his Christian readers consisting of an *exordium* (1-7) and a *paremunitio* (8-14)—a clearing away of preliminary objections by anticipating them. In this instance Tertullian objected to the heretical interpretation of Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11:9 – “Seek, and you shall find.” Then follows the *propositio* (15) and the main body of proof (15-37), including a *partitio* (19).¹³ Although Barnes offers some

¹⁰ The term appears four times in Tertullian, *de Praescr.* at 21.1 (CCL 1.202); 22.1 (CCL 1.203); 35.1 (CCL 1.216) and 44.13 (CCL 1.224), as well as in the title.

¹¹ See Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.6.72; 7.5.2-4. See Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion*, pp. 195-218, for an investigation into the different meanings attached to the word *praescriptio* in Tertullian’s works. See also Schleyer, *Tertullian*, pp. 105-152.

¹² Robert Dick Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26, 34-35.

comments about the content of the treatise, he does so without discerning an overall structure.¹⁴ Moreschini distinguishes the first fourteen chapters as an introduction, then some chapters culminating in the *partitio* in chapter 19, and then the chapters arguing the prescription in chapters 20-34. Chapters 38-44 contain another series of accusations against heretics.¹⁵

Refoulé offered a structure for the treatise that consists of an introduction (1-14), a main section (15-37)—divided into a statement on the question (15), a justification of method (16-18), *partitio* (19), *confirmatio* (20-21), *refutatio* (22-34), and other arguments (35-37)—, then accusations against the heretics (38 – 44.12), and an epilogue (44.13).¹⁶ This was followed by Schleyer in his recent German translation.¹⁷

Charles Munier, in a detailed examination of the rhetorical elements of the treatise, considers chapters 1-14 to be an *exordium*, chapter 15 to be the main *propositio*, chapters 16-37 to be the main argument, with a *diuisio* in chapter 19 that sets out the four main questions to be treated in the treatise and a *digressio* from 22.2 – 30.17, chapters 38-43 to be supplementary argument, and chapter 44 a *peroratio*.¹⁸

¹⁴ Barnes, *Tertullian*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁵ Moreschini, *Opere scelte*, p. 32, n. 1.

¹⁶ R. F. Refoulé, *Tertullien. Traité de la prescription contre les hérétiques*, Sources Chrétiennes 46 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1957), pp. 82-84.

¹⁷ Schleyer, *Tertullian*, pp. 223-227.

¹⁸ Charles Munier, “Analyse du traité de Tertullien de *Praescriptione Haereticorum*,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 59 (1985), pp. 12-33.

I think we can agree with Sider that chapters 1-7 are an *exordium*, in which Tertullian explained why heresy exists,¹⁹ and 8-14 are a *praemunitio*, in which he argued that the Matthean text on seeking and finding did not apply to Christians.²⁰ In chapters 15-19 Tertullian sets out the *partitio*²¹ in terms of his own position (15.3) of the point at issue (15.4): the question was whether heretics had any right to make use of the Scriptures and Tertullian's position was that they did not.²² Only Christians had the right to use Scripture. Heretics did not because they were not Christian. Hence, in the forensic debates between Christians and heretics, Tertullian was claiming that the heretics had no right to call the Scriptures as an expert witness for their side; this was something only Christians could do.

Tertullian knew how to construct an argument and the techniques for effective persuasion. A simple and ruthless logic that reduced issues to clear-cut choices and

¹⁹ For a discussion of how Tertullian understands *haeresis* see Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Heresy and Schism According to Cyprian of Carthage," *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 (2004) (forthcoming).

²⁰ This is so, with regard to the *praemunitio*, especially when one takes 9.6 (CCL 1.195) into account.

²¹ I have argued elsewhere that Sider is mistaken in distinguishing too clearly *partitio* from *propositio*, hence I believe that this section of *de Praescr.* runs from chs. 15-19. See Geoffrey D. Dunn, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Tertullian's *adversus Iudaeos*," (Ph.D. diss., Australian Catholic University), pp. 81-82; idem, "The Universal Spread of Christianity as a Rhetorical Argument in Tertullian's *adversus Iudaeos*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), pp. 3-4; idem, "Rhetorical Structure in Tertullian's *Ad Scapulam*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (2002), p. 52.

²² Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 15.3-4 (CCL 1.199): "*Hunc igitur potissimum gradum obstruimus non admittendi eos ad ullam de scripturis disputationem. Si hae sunt illae uires eorum, uti eas habere possint, dispici debet cui competat possessio scripturarum, ne is admittatur ad eas cui nullo modo competit.*"

foregone conclusions has always been the best debating strategy. Demonstrating that heretics were not Christians, even though they might appear to be, had been one of the points made in the *exordium*. The Christian is one who, taking the words of Mt. 10:22, perseveres to the end.²³ Those attracted to heresy abandon the Church and, according to 1 Jn. 2:19, those who leave never belonged, for those who belong continue to the end.²⁴ To be a seeker, as the heretics claim one must be, meant that one was not Christian.²⁵ Instead then of arguing with heretics about certain scriptural passages, given that to do so would seem to recognize their right to offer an interpretation and that interpretations on both sides would depend upon biblical passages excluded from consideration by the other side, Tertullian refined his central point at the end of the *propositio*: who has true Christian faith?²⁶ This was to be treated according to four questions: from whom, by whom, when and to whom.²⁷ I agree with Munier that these questions are central to the main exposition, although I do not consider 22-30 to be so much a digression as a

²³ Ibid., 3.6 (CCL 1.188): “... *nemo autem christianus nisi qui ad finem usque perseuerauerit.*”

²⁴ Ibid., 3.13 (CCL 1.189).

²⁵ Ibid., 14.10 (CCL 1.199): “*Cum enim quaerunt adhuc, nondum tenent; cum autem nondum tenent, nondum crediderunt; cum autem nondum crediderunt non sunt christiani.*” This is a fine example of rhetorical epanaphora (*repetitio*) – see *Rhet. Her.* 4.13.19; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.30 – and climax (*gradatio*) – see *Rhet. Her.* 4.25.34-35; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.55-57.

²⁶ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 19.3 (CCL 1.201): “*Vbi enim apparuerit esse ueritatem disciplinae et fidei christianae, illic erit ueritas scripturarum et expositionum et omnium traditionum christianorum.*”

²⁷ Ibid., 19.2 (CCL 1.201): “... *quibus competat fides ipsa, cuius sint scripturae, a quo et per quos et quando et quibus sit tradita disciplina qua fiunt christiani.*”

development of the second question,²⁸ and I do not think the fourth question is treated in 22.1 – 22.1 (which is still part of the second question) but in 35-37.²⁹

Of course, the whole argument was to demonstrate that since the heretics did not have Christian faith there was no point in arguing with them about the interpretation of Scripture. The *propositio* is considered in the main body of proof from chapters 20-37, which is mainly a *refutatio* of heretical arguments.³⁰ In it Tertullian demonstrated, supposedly without referring to the Scriptures,³¹ that true Christian faith comes from the apostles through those churches they founded to churches founded by apostolic churches.³² Heresies were deviations from this apostolic preaching.³³

²⁸ Even though Tertullian himself at 31.1 (CCL 1.212) referred to the earlier section as *excessus*, I think that it is more an *amplificatio* than *digressio*.

²⁹ Thus, the first question (*a quo*) is 20.1-5 (CCL 1.201-202); the second question (*per quos*) is 20.6 – 30.17 (CCL 1.202-212); the third question (*quando*) is 31.1 – 34.9 (CCL 1.212-215); and the fourth (*quibus*) is 35.1 – 37.7 (CCL 1.216-218).

³⁰ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 35.1 (CCL 1.216), would indicate that this is what he had been doing through the use of the verbs *prouocare* and *reuincere*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.1 (CCL 1.217). However, Tertullian's *historical* rather than *scriptural* argument about the activity of the apostles is based upon information known from the Scriptures.

³² On the relationship of Carthage, a non-apostolic church, with Rome, an apostolic church, which Tertullian discussed in *de Praescr.* 36, see Michele Maccarrone, *Apostolicità, episcopato e primato di Pietro. Ricerche e testimonianze dal II al V secolo* (Rome 1976); A. A. R. Bastiaensen, "Tertullian's Argumentation in *De praescriptione haereticorum*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 31 (1977), pp. 35-46; Victor Saxer, "Autonomie africaine et primauté romaine de Tertullien à Augustin," in *Il primato del vescovo di Roma nel primo millennio. Ricerche e testimonianze*, Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche, Atti e documenti 4 (Vatican City 1991), pp. 173-217; Stefan Schima, "Tertullian und die Hauptkirchen,"

Finally there is a *peroratio* from chapters 37-45 in which Tertullian summarised his position and associated the heretics with pagans and with immoral conduct in an effort to stir the emotions of his readers against them.

PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS

It would not be going too far to say that for Tertullian a heretic was someone who misinterpreted the Scriptures while a Christian was someone with a correct interpretation. How does one distinguish a correct from an incorrect interpretation? The yardstick by which one measures an interpretation is the *regula fidei*.³⁴ This embryonic credal formula is presented in *de Praescriptione Haereticorum* 13.2-5. The *regula* is what was taught by Christ, passed on by the apostles, recorded in the Scriptures, and lived by the Church.³⁵

Österreichisches Archiv für Kirchenrecht 43 (1994), pp. 135-154; Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Peter and Paul in Rome: The Perspective of the North African Church," *Pietro e Paolo. Il loro rapporto con Roma nelle testimonianze antiche* (xxix Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma, 4-6 maggio 2000) *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 74 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2001), pp. 408-411; idem, *Tertullian, The Early Church Fathers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 14-15.

³³ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 29-31 (CCL 1.209-212).

³⁴ See Renato Uglione, "Regula-Disciplina apud Tertullianum," *Latinitas* 25 (1977), pp. 260-265; L. Wm. Countryman, "Tertullian and the Regula Fidei," *The Second Century* 2 (1982), pp. 208-227; W. M. Gessel, "Der Ternar. Glaubensregel, Tradition und Sukzession nach *De praescriptione haereticorum* Tertullians," in *Sendung und Dienst im bischöflichen Amt. Festschrift für Bischof Josef Stimpfle* (St. Ottilien 1991), pp. 139-154.

³⁵ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 13.6 (CCL 1.198); 19.3 (CCL 1.201); 20.9 (CCL 1.202); 21.7 (CCL 1.203). Here I must disagree with Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles," pp. 24-26, who argues that "... nowhere in

One is reminded of the sixteenth-century Reformation debate about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, although one must be careful, of course, not to interpret Tertullian in the light of later history. While the Council of Trent spoke of unwritten traditions and Scriptures, often interpreted as being a two-source theory of revelation,³⁶ it was at the Second Vatican Council that we find an expression of Catholic fundamental

Tertullian's work do we find a passage in which Tertullian declares with so many words that for him the whole of Holy Scripture is identical with the Rule of Faith. Therefore we shall, with the great majority of scholars, stick to the statement that for Tertullian the *regula fidei*... and Holy Scripture exist beside each other as autonomous magnitudes." (p.26) I believe that *de Praescr.* 19.3 (*Vbi enim apparuerit esse ueritatem disciplinae et fidei christianae, illic erit ueritas scripturarum et expositionum et omnium traditionum christianorum*) is such a passage. Even though Waszink is right to say that "... there are numerous things in Holy Scripture which can hardly be judged immediately by the norm of the Rule of Faith" (p. 26), the *regula* does not apply only to those scriptural passages about its specific content. I do not believe, as Waszink asserts, that the views of Armstrong and Flesseman-van Leer are opposed to each other on this point. See Gregory T. Armstrong, *Die Genesis in der alten Kirche. Die drei Kirchenväter*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Hermeneutik 4 (Tübingen: 1962) and E. Flessman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: 1953). Schleyer, *Tertullian*, pp. 158-159, 164-177, reminds us that for Tertullian faith has both a subjective and objective dimension. While the objective dimension of the *regula* is to be found in *de Praescr.* 12.4 (CCL 1.197); 13.1 (CCL 1.197); 20.4 (CCL 1.202) and 21.4 (CCL 1.202), the subjective may be found in 4.7 (CCL 1.190). As objective, the *regula* is *disciplina*, as on p. 169, Schleyer comments on *de Praescr.* 36.5 (CCL 1.217): "Diese Formulierung der *regula fidei* gibt so zu erkennen, daß der Glaube an Christus nicht von der Nachfolge Christi, die *fides* nicht von der *disciplina* zu trennen ist."

³⁶ Trent, *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* (8 April 1546): "... *hanc ueritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*..." On this debate see Gerald O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), pp. 196-200.

theology that reflects what Tertullian taught: that the Scriptures are the normative record of Tradition.³⁷ For Tertullian it was a simple matter; one must not interpret the Scriptures in any way contrary to the *regula fidei*.³⁸ As Timothy Merrill points out, Tertullian did not appeal to Tradition against Scripture, but by showing that heretics did not belong to the Tradition he could deny them the Scriptures.³⁹

Hence, the responsibility of the Christian was not to seek, for seeking was the activity of the person who had not found.⁴⁰ The Christian, who had sought and found the

³⁷ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965) 9: “Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other... Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.” (Eng. trans. from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975). The document goes on to acknowledge unwritten traditions as well as the Scriptures as being constitutive of Tradition. See Gerald O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 49 and especially his bibliography.

³⁸ Here I agree with Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles,” p. 24, that we must phrase this negatively rather than positively.

³⁹ Timothy F. Merrill, “Tertullian: The Hermeneutical Vision of de Praescriptione Haereticorum and Pentateuchal Exegesis,” *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987), p. 159.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 11.3 (CCL 1.196).

regula and believed in it,⁴¹ was instead to discern the *regula*'s true meaning,⁴² something that could not be done by consorting with heretics.⁴³

These points I have been making about Tertullian's principles come from the *praemunitio* of chapters 8-14. Indeed, it is here, with the comments he makes about Mt. 7:7/Lk. 11:9, that Tertullian offers us important comments about how to interpret a scriptural passage.⁴⁴

The first is that a passage must be read in its historical context.⁴⁵ With regard to Mt. 7:7, Tertullian's point was that the words of Jesus about seeking and finding were addressed to unbelieving Jews.⁴⁶ While he could deny that the words of Jesus had relevance to all people, Tertullian made the point that since they were addressed to the Jews they were not an *admonitio* for Christians, who had found Jesus already, only an *exemplum*.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.2-4 (CCL 1.195).

⁴² Ibid., 14.1 (CCL 1.198).

⁴³ Ibid., 14.8-9 (CCL 1.198-199).

⁴⁴ While Schleyer, *Tertullian*, pp. 88-91, considers Tertullian's understanding of Mt. 7:7, he does not make the point that we are being offered principles for the interpretation of Scripture.

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 8.3 (CCL 1.193): "*Quando hanc uocem Dominus emisit, recordemur.*"

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.4-5 (CCL 1.193).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.16 (CCL 1.194). T. P. O'Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible: Language-Imagery-Exegesis*, Latinitas Christianorum Primaeva 21 (Nijmegen and Utrecht: Dekker and van de Vegt, 1967), p. 131, observes correctly that this was part of Tertullian's argument against endless searching (as opposed to actual believing). However, he goes on to say that Tertullian went on to produce stronger arguments to support this, implying something about Tertullian's belief in the inefficacy of Scripture. This is a point he makes on p. 134: "... but the rationalism which wishes simple and clear statements finally drives him to take refuge

The second principle is that the sense of one passage of Scripture must be determined by the true meaning of the words used, which is determined by the *disciplina rationis*.⁴⁸ With regard to the meaning of the word “seek,” one must use reason to determine what is being sought, when the seeking must occur, and the extent of that seeking.⁴⁹ One seeks until one finds and then one believes when one has found.⁵⁰ It is faith, not seeking, that is salvific for the Christian.⁵¹

In his *partitio*, when he outlined where he and the heretics differed, Tertullian made mention of another approach to the Scriptures that differentiated Christians from heretics. Heretics, he claimed, omitted certain books and passages and offered perverse interpretations of those passages they admitted, which tended to be the more ambiguous ones.⁵² The Christians accepted the Scriptures in their entirety.⁵³

increasingly in non-scriptural norms; in the rule of faith, in tradition, and finally, in the certitude which the Montanist Paraclete offered.” What O’Malley fails to appreciate with regard to *de Praescr.* is that in this treatise Tertullian deliberately avoided arguing with the heretics on the basis of the Scriptures because he did not want to seem to allow them to use it in debate (19.1 [CCL 1.201]). It is a question of audience. The Scriptures would be sufficient if his argument were with other Christians not with heretics who, by his definition, were non-Christian. In dealing with non-Christians one had to use other sources of argumentation.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *de Praescr.* 9.1-6 (CCL 195).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.1 (CCL 1.195).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.4 (CCL 1.195): “... *quaerendum est donec inuenias et credendum ubi inueneris...*”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14.3 (CCL 1.198), quoting Lk. 18:42.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.1-5 (CCL 1.200). What makes them perverse is their deviation from the *regula fidei*.

⁵³ Of course, this argument is open to the challenge that the canon of Scripture was still something of an open question in Tertullian’s time.

A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION

Heinrich Karpp has observed that Tertullian's rules of scriptural exegesis are occasional, often springing from the particular controversy with which he was dealing.⁵⁴ Hanson has noted that in some of his treatises Tertullian engaged in allegorizing, while in others he preferred to interpret a piece of Scripture literally.⁵⁵ The reason for this lies, as Waszink correctly observes, in Tertullian's rhetorical training.⁵⁶

We may take his attitude towards allegory as an illustration about this point. Joseph Trigg has written: "Tertullian initiates a distinctly Western approach to the Bible, one notable for its coolness to allegory and its keen awareness of ecclesiological issues."⁵⁷ Yet this is not the entire truth. Tertullian did engage in the use of allegory in some instances.⁵⁸ A rhetorical perspective helps us realize that Tertullian, engaged in combating opponents, used whatever method his opposition was not. Even the principle

⁵⁴ Heinrich Karpp, *Schrift und Geist bei Tertullian* (Gütersloh, 1955), pp. 21-29.

⁵⁵ R. P. C. Hanson, "Notes on Tertullian's Interpretation of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 12 (1961), pp. 273-279.

⁵⁶ Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles," p. 18.

⁵⁷ Joseph W. Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, Message of the Fathers of the Church 9 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988), p. 40.

⁵⁸ E.g., Tertullian, *adu. Marc.* 3.5.3 (CCL 1.513); 3.14.5 (CCL 1.526-527); 3.14.7 (CCL 1.527); 3.24.2 (CCL 1.542); 4.17.12 (CCL 1.587-588); 5.4.8 (CCL 1.673); 5.7.11 (CCL 1.684); *idem*, *adu. Iud.* 9.20 (CCL 2.1370); *idem*, *de An.* 35.2 (CCL 2.836-837); *idem*, *de Pud.* 8.11 (CCL 2.1296); *idem*, *de Res.* 37.4 (CCL 2.970).

that he enunciated—that the literal sense of a passage is to be adopted unless it made no sense, whereupon allegory may be employed⁵⁹—is itself not quite the absolute principle that Hanson, O’Malley, Osborn and Waszink assert,⁶⁰ but an even more relative one, applicable to the needs of the particular treatise.

Classical forensic rhetoric taught orators how to argue for and against a particular matter depending on their position as prosecutor or defender. An example was how to argue the difference between the letter and spirit of a law.⁶¹ As Quintilian pointed out: “*In ea ut uterque suam interpretationem confirmat, aduersarii subuertit.*”⁶² If one’s opponent argued for the spirit of the law, one would argue for the letter of the law, and if one’s

⁵⁹ Tertullian, *adu. Marc.* 3.5.3 (CCL 1.513); idem, *de Res.* 20.1-9 (CCL 2.945-946).

⁶⁰ Hanson, “Tertullian’s Interpretation of Scripture,” pp. 275-276; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 161; O’Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible*, pp.145-158. O’Malley concludes by saying that “the application of, and attitude to allegory is very different from the one work to the other.” I agree with this. I would want to rephrase his next sentence: “His principle, that allegory obtains when the ‘literal sense’ results in nonsense, has its reverse side: allegory is not present where the Scripture is confirmed by actual events.” O’Malley is focusing on what is consistent in Tertullian’s approaches to interpretation. While this is true, I want to focus more on his ability as a controversialist to take the opposite tack to his opponent: if they supported allegory he upheld the literal and if they argued for a literal reading he wanted an allegorical one. Waszink, “Tertullian’s Principles,” p. 28: “And, if I am not mistaken, it is also for this reason that, whenever it is somehow possible, Tertullian wants to regard the literal sense of Holy Scripture as the only one.”

⁶¹ *Rhet. Her.* 1.11.19; 2.9.13 – 2.10.15; Cicero, *Inu. Rhet.* 2.42.121 – 2.48.143; idem, *de Part. Or.* 38.133 – 39.138; Quintilian, *Inst.* 7.6.1-12.

⁶² Quintilian, *Inst.* 7.6.2.

opponent argued for the letter of the law, one would argue for the spirit of the law.⁶³ The rhetorically trained Tertullian could do something similar with the Scriptures: if one opponent argued for allegory he would argue for a literal reading and if, on another occasion, another opponent argued for a literal reading he would argue for an allegorical one. The fact, as Waszink points out, that Tertullian most often favoured the literal over the allegorical was not, I am suggesting, because he himself distrusted allegory but because his opponents so often turned to it. Yet, the fact that his opponents so often employed allegory probably did mean that Tertullian was more inclined to be suspicious of allegory.

CONCLUSION

Thus, even the principles Tertullian enunciated in *de Praescriptione Haereticorum* about reading the Scriptures in their historical context and of understanding the meaning of words were not absolute ones, but relative to this treatise in particular. They were the ones that would be most effective in combating his opponents. In a different treatise, he could contradict them if that was what was required for winning his argument against that new opponent.

I am well aware that this relativizing of Tertullian's principles of scriptural exegesis will be contentious. It appears to make him an opportunist and a person without firm convictions. In response what I would argue is that he was a person of very solidly

⁶³ Waszink, "Tertullian's Principles," p. 23, refers to Tertullian, *de Cast.* (CCL 2.1013) and *adu. Marc.* 4.12.5-15 (CCL 1.569-572) where this actual rhetorical principle is applied.

held beliefs, among them the notion that the Scriptures were central to Christian life. The techniques by which he defended that position are what were relative. The method of hermeneutics was not as important as its results being in conformity with his appreciation of Christianity. As a rhetorically trained person he knew that a document could be interpreted in a variety of ways and was well equipped to exploit that. Tertullian was not in favour of either an allegorical or a literal approach to the interpreting of the Scriptures but whatever approach best refuted his opponents' position.