Based on his 2014 doctoral thesis for the University of Queensland, Julian Barr provides a survey of Tertullian’s various and seemingly contradictory statements about the state of the „unborn child.” While aware of the ramifications for contemporary moral and political debate, Barr largely sequesters his study within the historical and rhetorical parameters of Tertullian’s own context.

One of the major strengths of this work is the way Barr closely analyses Tertullian’s writings in terms of classical rhetoric. Chapter one is devoted to contextualizing any given statement made by Tertullian on the topic of abortion. This is essential work for this (or any!) topic in Tertullian, because the ancient author has a tendency to affirm opposing positions in various works. Therefore, Tertullian’s occasion and rhetorical strategy must be understood in order to interpret him properly.

The remaining chapters further contextualize Tertullian by surveying his prior Christian sources (chapter two), his prior „pagan“ sources on medicine and the soul (chapter three), and then comparing him to „pagan“ or Roman views of abortion (chapter four). Barr concludes, „the gulf between Christian and pagan attitudes towards the unborn was not as wide as Tertullian would have had his readers believe“ (pp. 138–139), because numerous Roman sources condemn the practice of abortion. Even so, two differences remain between Christian and Roman views: first, „pagans“ denounced abortion because it threatened the family’s progeny, while Christians tended to view it as murder (which Barr acknowledges on p. 166); second, Romans do not announce the practice among their own which indicates that the practice was common enough to cause concern, whereas Christians writers always denounce the practice as if it were „pagan,“ and therefore there is no indication that many (if any) Christians actually accepted the practice (which Barr does not acknowledge).

Some additional secondary literature could have helped inform various aspects of Barr’s discussion. For example, Barr refers at times to Tertullian’s Punic culture (e.g. p. 10), but he does not know studies devoted to this subject. Likewise, Barr’s treatment of Tertullian’s rhetoric was stellar, and clearly benefited from the earlier work by Geoffrey Dunn, but even here there were some sources that could have further informed his analysis. One area where I disagree with Barr’s interpretation of Tertullian, and so wish that he had engaged more secondary debate is with Tertullian’s alleged conversion to Montanism. Barr does note how scholars now insist that any „conversion“ to this movement for Tertullian did not involve joining a schismatic group (p. 7). And yet to speak of „Montanism“ (rather than the „New Prophecy“ as it would have been known in the second and third century) in terms of „its claim to direct prophetic inspiration by the Holy Spirit“ as one „of the distinguishing features“ is unhelpful: many Christians (if not most in Carthage; e.g. Cyprian) believed in ongoing prophecy. Therefore, future studies of Tertullian should avoid claiming things like...

---


2 E.g. Frédéric Chapot, Virtus veritatis. Langage et vérité dans l’Œuvre de Tertullien, Paris 2009. Also, despite referencing the dispute between Dunn and Willemien Otten (on p. 41), Barr does not acknowledge their most recent exchange in Studia Patristica LXV (2013).


ke Tertullian „became a Montanism”, „Montanism was well established” in Carthage, and „there is no strong evidence from Tertullian’s corpus that he was ever at odds with Christians in Rome at all“ (p. 7), especially when the bishop of Rome was explicitly targeted by Tertullian in his alleged Montanist period (see *Adversus Praxean*, *De pudicitia*, *De ieiunio*, and *De monogomia*), suggesting that his dispute is not strictly an internal dispute in Carthage.3 Fortunately, Barr does not argue that Tertullian’s views on abortion were impacted by „Montanism,“ and so this does not detract from the central contribution of his monograph (his clearest statement comes on p. 70).

One final omission to note has to do with the relationship between the past and the present: I would recommend some engagement with works devoted to the historical development of Christian doctrine.6 I say this because of Barr’s conclusion: „Tertullian […] should not be employed in the rhetoric of today’s abortion debate.“ (p. 174) Barr is correct to caution the use of „passages from Tertullian so selectively, isolating them from their original context“ (p. 174), but his claim that Tertullian’s rhetoric precludes him as a source to inform Christian thought in later generations seems to me like a *non sequitur*. Barr finds abortion to be a minor aside for Tertullian, since the ancient author did not devote an entire treatise to the subject (p. 175), but this only begs the question since the lack of such a treatise most likely means that Tertullian’s Christian community agreed with his view that abortion was murder. Barr also points to Tertullian’s inconsistent view on the state of the early fetus, which I would think is in fact very informative for contemporary debates about whether „life begins at conception.“ In short, whatever one makes of ancient Christian views for contemporary doctrine, the widespread agreement of early Christians on this issue is certainly worth consideration. It should be acknowledged that Barr admits in the preface that his study focused on Tertullian „more by accident than design“ (p. ix), because his real interest is in the Roman history, not the development of Christian belief and practice. Therefore, this criticism does not detract from the value of his contribution to the discipline of history, but instead stems from concerns arising from altogether different forms of discourse, namely historical and constructive theology.

Barr’s work is a valuable sourcebook for the practice of abortion up until Tertullian’s time, and then it is a masterful treatment of Tertullian’s statements on the issue. Anyone interested in this topic in particular, or in matters pertaining to the body and ancient medicine in general will benefit from this work. Furthermore, anyone interested in Tertullian’s views can learn from this study because of how well Barr is able to navigate Tertullian’s rhetoric in order to discern some of his underlying thought.

