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**TERTULLIAN'S PRINCIPLES AND METHODS  
OF EXEGESIS**

There is no one exegetical method in Tertullian. The more one studies Tertullian's intensive activity in the field of biblical exegesis, the more one reaches the conclusion that the whole of this activity cannot be summed up in a single formula without straining the sense of a considerable number of passages. If I am not mistaken, there are two reasons which prevented Tertullian from succeeding in constructing a unified exegetical method.

The first reason is that Tertullian, both on account of his character and of the situation in which he found himself after his conversion, was driven at once into a series of controversies which were as various as they were continuous. The debate both with the pagan authorities and with many forms of the Christian faith which he felt constrained to regard as faulty or even corrupt, remained for him throughout his life a living reality and even a necessity. It has often been said that in this entire activity the only vital element was Tertullian's own personality. But in saying this one loses sight of the fact that the critical controversy with Marcion on the one hand and the debate with the docetism of various sects of Gnostics on the other hand were unavoidable in that stage of the evolution of Christian doctrine, and that such controversies, be it less vehement and personal, occur equally in the work of his contemporaries.

With a certain amount of exaggeration for the sake of clarity, the second reason may be stated as follows: for the Christians in the western part of the Empire, exegesis in the ancient sense of the word — that is, a thorough interpretation based upon an examination of the question and a judgment as to which form of the various possible methods was best adapted to the case at issue — was not yet an immediate requirement before the Edict of Milan. In the given situation the first necessity was

the production of increasingly more effective forms of apology and the refutation not so much of interpretations regarded as faulty as of erratic doctrines in their entirety. It is true that a capacity for a clear and unambiguous interpretation of controversial passages from Holy Scripture was constantly in demand, but in the given situation there could not yet be any question of exegesis for its own sake. Yet even this primarily polemical activity required a familiarity with methods which had a long history in the Greek intellectual tradition; and it is for this reason that the Latin apologists were for almost a century greatly behind their Greek colleagues who, as Greeks, had been educated in this tradition. In the time of Tertullian there did not yet exist — a fact often overlooked — detailed commentaries on Vergil and Cicero that could be compared to the commentaries on Homer, Pindar and Demosthenes which were so important for the development of the technique of exegesis in general, and consequently also for Christian exegesis. The only really thorough form of commentary which existed in the Roman world of his time is found in the sphere of Law, its starting-point being the explication of the Law of the Twelve Tables and of the *edicta praetorum*, especially after the collection of the latter by Salvius Julianus; in fact, it is particularly this knowledge, and also the mental training which its perusal required, with which Tertullian was familiar.

From these statements and considerations it is evident, first, that Tertullian could not yet produce an exegesis of Holy Scripture for its own sake (in the Roman world this activity begins with St. Hilary and St. Jerome); secondly, that he drew upon the achievements of the Greek apologists and upon his own rhetorical and legal training. I want to observe here in passing that, in my opinion, the endlessly discussed question whether he was identical with the Tertullianus who is quoted in the Digest, or merely a solicitor, is not of primary importance for our theme. For here the essential thing is that at all events he had at his disposal that general rhetorical and legal training which led to the possession of the technique of the *genus iudiciale*. In this context the observation may not be superfluous that for a correct understanding not only of Tertullian's technique of debating but also of his exegetical methods Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* is much more important than the *Institutiones* of Gaius.

If I am not seriously mistaken, it is from this training, conferring as it did familiarly with a number of basic notions of Roman Law, that we may explain a leading principle of Tertullian's exegesis of Holy Scrip-