

‘The Flesh’ in Tertullian and Clement¹

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The point selected for comparison is the evaluation of the ‘flesh’ in Tertullian and Clement. Since each man’s thinking on the question is quite complex and shows some development/variance, it is not possible simply to ‘line up’ two texts and show how they differ or converge. Rather, I will attempt to briefly present a number of texts from each author showing something of that range of his treatment. From this there follows the possibility of comparison between the ‘tonality’ evident in the selected texts from each.

Tertullian

The central text to which I refer from Tertullian is *de Bap* 5.7, in which he distinguished “image” from “likeness:” whereas “the likeness [becomes actual] in eternity, the image had its actuality in the [man God] formed.” Commentators differ in their interpretations of the “image” in this text; Mattei and Bray, e.g., render it as meaning “soul,” seemingly in an effort to make Tertullian consistent! Given the fact, however, that Irenaeus uses the term involved here – *effigies/plasma* – in a clear reference to the flesh, and the further fact of Tertullian’s reading of Irenaeus with regard to baptism, the clearest interpretation of the passage seems to refer the “image” to the flesh. Thus, the “image” is the flesh and the “likeness” is the Spirit which causes real sanctification and leads to eternal fulfillment.

Tertullian also deals with this issue in his Christological texts. In *Prax* 12, his thinking again parallels Irenaeus:

There was one in whose image he was making him, the Son’s in fact, who because he was to be the surer and truer man caused that man to be called his image who at that time had to be formed of clay, as the image and similitude of the true.

He seems to say ‘if you want to understand what the Creator had in mind in creating Adam, look ahead to Christ;’ in this, he accepts a positive evaluation of Christ’s flesh – and thus of Adam’s. It is probably that this passage involves an allusion to 1 Cor 15.45 and Christ as the “spiritual man.” In Irenaeus, Christ as spiritual man is clearly evident in the Transfiguration, when divinity shines through the flesh of Christ; thus, it was this flesh that God had in mind in creating Adam. Tertullian may have been influenced by this: Christ is the “truer/surer” man when the Spirit shines through his flesh.

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In *Res* 9, Tertullian writes:

The flesh, which God with his own hands constructed in God's image, which from his own breathing he made animate in the likeness of his own abounding life. . . . God forbid that God should abandon to eternal destruction the work of his own hands. . . . (Christ) loves the flesh.

He then proceeds (*Res* 10) to cite Isaiah 40.5: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Tertullian seems to argue that –given all that God has done for the flesh already – it will surely be raised. The context of the work – on the 'resurrection' – is important; given this positive evaluation of the flesh here, he is unequivocally arguing to the resurrection of the flesh.

In *carn* 19, Tertullian adopts the Aristotle/Galen theory of procreation, thus positing Mary's real contribution of the flesh in the incarnation.

In *de An* 40.2-4, Tertullian acknowledges the sinfulness of the flesh. Nevertheless, he insists that Adam's flesh is not sinful by nature; rather, the body is the instrument of the soul whose free choices are responsible for accrued sinfulness by its works. As such, the body shares in the soul's reward for cooperating with the good, just as it shares the soul's responsibility for rejecting the good. The key point is that Tertullian does not locate the flesh in opposition to the soul; he emphasizes the unity of the human rational creature and thus the unity of operation of soul-flesh.

Finally, in *Res* 49, Tertullian again refers to 1 Cor 15; he writes:

Though it is in the flesh that here the image of Adam is worn, yet it is not the flesh that we are enjoined to take off: and if not the flesh, then it is the life and manners. . . . the image of Christ must be worn here, in this flesh, and in this time of discipline.

What emerges is a relatively positive evaluation of the flesh. Especially when the influence of Irenaeus is apparent, Tertullian locates the 'image' in the flesh; he later, and more originally, moves toward focus on rational free-will activity. But even in this, there is the notion of the body/flesh cooperating with rationality in choices for good or for evil. This enables a quite straightforward acceptance of the flesh of Christ, and an unhesitating affirmation of the resurrection of the flesh: of Christ and of believers.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement takes up the "image/likeness" theme in *str* 2.19:

Conformity with the image and likeness is not meant of the body (for it were wrong for what is mortal to be made like what is immortal)

Clement places the image in the rational faculty, i.e., in that which makes possible the imitation of Christ. The shift that had begun in Tertullian's writings toward focus on free-will activity is fully evident in the Alexandrian stress on imitation. Whereas Irenaeus had affirmed the resurrection of Christ's flesh and argued back from that to the location of the image in the flesh, Clement is much more interested in 'imitation' and discounts any role for the flesh in the 'imaging.'

Nonetheless, there are indications of a positive evaluation of the flesh in Clement, especially *str* 4.26:

Those who run down created existence and vilify the body are wrong; not considering that the frame of man was formed erect for the contemplation of heaven, and that the organization of the senses tends to knowledge. . . . The soul of man is confessedly the better part of man, and the body is inferior. But neither is the soul good by nature, nor is the body bad by nature.

This is a rather positive evaluation of the flesh. Yet, it is notable that he seriously qualifies the affirmation. This becomes especially true in the immediately following passage in which Clement speaks of the Christian Gnostic's soul as "sojourning in the body" and as "about to leave the tabernacle." The flesh is something to be 'left behind.'

Similar tendencies are evident in Christological texts. In *str* 5.3, Clement refers to three states of the *Logos*: (1) immanent in the Divine Mind; (2) issuing forth in creation; and (3) becoming flesh. He posits the incarnate Word as the 'image of the Image.'

This consideration is carried further in the high priest allegory (*str* 5.6), in which the *Logos* 'puts off' the 'robe' of flesh before returning to the divine realm. Thus, though Clement affirms the reality of Christ's flesh, he does not appear to affirm the permanence of the flesh-taking. The prior 'sojourning' metaphor is apt: Christ 'put on' a very special/spiritualized flesh, and even this only temporarily.

In *paed* 3.12, this consideration is explicitly related to Phil 2.7. Clement posits the flesh "as a slave," but continues:

God has freed the flesh from corruption and, delivering it from its bitter slavery to death, has clothed it with incorruption, clothing the flesh with the holy ornament of eternity, immortality.

This appears to be an oblique affirmation of the resurrection of the flesh, which makes it an important text since Clement very infrequently even touches upon this doctrine. But whereas, the heterodox Gnostics explicitly denied the resurrection of the flesh, Clement can be seen to refer to it, even though radically minimizing it. A related reference may be in the *str* 5.6 reference to resurrection of the flesh; but if so, it is again quite oblique.

Finally, in *str* 7.2.7, Clement refers explicitly again to the flesh of Christ:

... after he had taken upon him our flesh, which is by nature subject to passion, he trained to a habit of impassibility.

Here, the 'specialness' of Christ's flesh is evident. As remarked by McClelland, the motive for incarnation appears to be less the saving of the flesh than its elimination – or at least its very radical transformation, so that it becomes quite different from anything that we know as 'flesh.'

Conclusion

The basic comparison possible is that of 'tendencies.' Whereas Tertullian maintained an affirmation of flesh as the "image" even while moving away from it, there is no trace of such affirmation in Clement. Whereas Tertullian tended to root 'blame' for evil choices in the will which are carried out by the flesh as 'instrument,' the flesh (in the form of the passions) come to be posited much more as opposed to rationality by Clement. But most tellingly, whereas Tertullian unhesitatingly affirms the resurrection of the flesh, Clement at best is extremely cautious in any such affirmation; he tends to see the flesh-taking of the *Logos* as temporary, and thus the 'imitation' of Christ as a 'sojourn' out of the flesh.

As mentioned in beginning this brief consideration, there is no firmly consistent position in either author; it is not possible to say that one represents a 'positive' evaluation of the flesh and the other a 'negative' evaluation. It does seem, however, that something was 'going forward' in the history of Christian reflection that involved a clear shift from the position on the issue represented by Irenaeus. In that movement, it seems safe to say that Clement represents a position of considerably greater distance from the original and more positive evaluation of the flesh than does Tertullian.