

## The Fate of the Soul in Induced Abortion in the Writings of Tertullian

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Tertullian was born into a society which accepted abortion, both in theory and in practice.<sup>1</sup> On his conversion, he was initiated into a new community, which had, for many years, condemned abortion as murder.<sup>2</sup> Adopting this insight, Tertullian used the legal word *parricidium*<sup>3</sup>, homicide, for the destruction of fetal life, by abortive means.<sup>4</sup>

"To prohibit birth is to accelerate homicide . . .  
He is man who is future man, just as all fruit is now in the seed."<sup>5</sup>

But if, regrettably, abortion was carried out, what was the fate of the soul of the aborted fetus? Two recent articles took for granted that, without baptism, such a soul could not be saved.<sup>6</sup> Another article anachronistically placed the soul of the aborted fetus in limbo.<sup>7</sup> While Tertullian did not deal expressly with the fate of the soul in induced abortion, he has left some data on which his mind can be read.

<sup>1</sup> Plautus, *Truculentus* 1. 2. 99; Ovid, *de amoribus* 1. 2. 13; Juvenal, *Satira* 2. 6; Aulus Gellius, *Noctes atticae* 12. 1; and Tacitus, *Historiae*, 5. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Didache 2. 2; The Epistle of Barnabas 19. 5; Justin, *Apology for Christians* 1. 27. 29; Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogus* 2. 10. 96. 1; Athenagoras, *Legation for Christians* P. G. 6. 969.

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the word *parricidium* in Roman Law is discussed by Jolowicz, "Historical Introduction to the Study of Roman Law", (Cambridge, 1939) p. 328.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have debated whether Tertullian did in fact condemn abortion before the fortieth day and to what extent he allowed therapeutic abortion to save a mother's life. Space forbids any comment here on these debates, but see Dölger, "Lebensrecht des ungeborenen Kindes", part 9, "Embryobeseelung und Fruchtabtreibung bei Tertullian", in *Antike und Christentum* IV, 1934, p. 37; Waszink "De Anima" (Amsterdam 1949) p. 326; J. T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History" contained in "The Morality of Abortion" (Harvard 1970) p. 13; a letter of 6th May, 1968 from Noonan to Cyril C. Means, Junior, quoted by the latter in "A Historian's View", in "Abortion in a Changing World" Vol. 1. (New York and London 1970) p. 22 and various articles referred to there; and González, "El aborto en San Agustín" (Salamanca, 1959) p. 221-8 (refutation of Dölger's article above).

<sup>5</sup> *Apologeticum* 9. 8. "Homicidii festinatio est prohibere nasci . . . Homo est et qui est futurus; etiam fructus omnis iam in semine est."

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Leeming, "Is their baptism really necessary?" in "The Clergy Review" 39 (1954) p. 77 and Peter Gumpel "Unbaptised Infants: May they be saved?" in "The Downside Review", (Autumn 1965) p. 420.

<sup>7</sup> Means, *op. cit.* p. 20.

*First, every fetus had a human soul.* Tertullian rejected the Stoic belief that the human soul entered the body at birth.<sup>8</sup> He rejected also the Aristotelian tradition, that the embryo was animated first by a vegetative soul, then by a sensitive soul and only at a later stage by a human soul.<sup>9</sup> Tertullian insisted that the soul was transmitted, from its father's soul to its mother's womb, at the very moment of conception.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, keeping the shape of the body<sup>11</sup>, the soul grew in size, but did not alter its essential substance. Tertullian drew the analogy of a nugget of gold or silver, which, when beaten by a goldsmith, altered its shape but not its substance.<sup>12</sup> He used that particular analogy for the soul after birth, but it seems equally valid for the earlier months. Any alteration in its substance would have implied some form of creationism, which Tertullian rejected.<sup>13</sup> So for every aborted fetus, there was a human soul.

*Second, the soul kept age with the body.* Tertullian refuted the idea that when a person died, his soul could grow older, outside his body. Could the soul go to school, serve in the army, carry on business and marry, all without its body? No! Since at the resurrection, the soul would enter the very body which it had left at death<sup>14</sup>, it was unthinkable to have a resurrected infant body, with the soul of an older person.<sup>15</sup> It seems fair to assume that if Tertullian had been asked about the soul from an aborted fetus, he would have given the same answer.

Modern micro-biology has thrown up a challenge to this view, by documenting the high natural wastage rate in the first few weeks of pregnancy.<sup>16</sup> But instruments of magnification sufficiently powerful to reveal this natural wastage, were not available in Tertullian's day, and his answer to such a challenge cannot be anticipated. Since, however, he insisted that for every aborted fetus there was a human soul, and since the soul could not grow old without its body, it seems to follow that the soul of the aborted fetus remained at the same age, until the resurrection. Tertullian stated in terms that all souls (martyrs excepted) went straight to hades.<sup>17</sup>

*Third, the innocence of infant souls.* Tertullian distinguished the *pristina corruptio*, which affected every soul (except Christ's) as an offshoot of Adam, from the sin brought about by contemporary satanic activity: —

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian "de anima" (hereinafter abbreviated to "an") 25. 2, and 26. 5.

<sup>9</sup> an. 27. 1-4.

<sup>10</sup> an. 27. 6.

<sup>11</sup> an. 9. 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> an. 37. 6.

<sup>13</sup> an. 19. 1-2; Esser, "Die Seelenlehre Tertullian's", (Paderborn 1893) p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> an. 56. 5-6. <sup>15</sup> an. 56. 6.

<sup>16</sup> K. Rahner, "Schriften zur Theologie" 8, (Einsiedeln 1967) p. 287, English translation, Theological Investigations, vol. IX, 1972, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> an. 55. 5, 56. 7.

"In addition to the evil which mars the soul as a result of the machinations of the devil" (that is, satan's attacks at and after birth) "still another evil has previously affected the soul, and this is in a certain sense natural to it, since it flows from its origin".<sup>18</sup>

This *vitium originis* was not, for Tertullian, the equivalent of *peccatum originale*.<sup>19</sup> Because the soul was like a twig<sup>20</sup>, taken from the stem of Adam's soul, every new and independent "shoot" came to commit sin; *peccatrix autem quia immunda*<sup>21</sup>, and this could be washed away only by baptism.<sup>22</sup> But the soul was judged by God for its own misdeeds, not for its origin. Tertullian nowhere held that embryonic or infant souls were under the judgement of God. On the contrary, he included them with "those who by their age were necessarily pure and innocent"<sup>23</sup>. Although "born in Adam"<sup>24</sup> and with its natural faculties corrupted by the devil<sup>25</sup> the child under 14 was stated by Tertullian to be innocent of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>26</sup> He saw no inconsistency between implicating all mankind in the fall of Adam, and, at the same time, declaring children under 14 to be in a state of innocence. He censured Marcion as "reckless", for failing to distinguish between little children, who were innocent, and older boys, who were capable of judgement.<sup>27</sup> If from birth to puberty, the soul was not accountable for sin<sup>28</sup>, then *a fortiori* the unborn fetus was in a paradise of innocence.

Consistent with this view, Tertullian counselled the young to postpone their baptism until they could appreciate its significance.<sup>29</sup> This caused concern to some catechumens, who, knowing Tertullian's standing rule<sup>30</sup> that there could be no salvation without baptism, feared they might be martyred before they had been baptised. Tertullian took this "standing rule" seriously, but neither he, nor any of his interlocutors, expressed concern for unbaptised infants. Later generations, believing that without baptism even the infant soul would be forever damned, urged the baptism of the aborted fetus. Tertullian had no such concern. He regarded the formal administration of baptism, without corresponding faith in the candidate, as neither desirable nor necessary.<sup>31</sup> God rewarded or punished in response to

<sup>18</sup> an. 41. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Waszink op. cit. p. 454, Esser, op. cit. p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> an. 19. 6.

<sup>21</sup> an. 40. 1.

<sup>22</sup> an. 40. 1.

<sup>23</sup> an. 56. 8.

<sup>24</sup> an. 40. 1.

<sup>25</sup> an. 39. 1.

<sup>26</sup> an. 38. 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> adversus Marcionem, 4. 23. 5.

<sup>28</sup> an. 38. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> de baptismo 18. 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> de baptismo 12. 1.

<sup>31</sup> an. 41. 4; de paenitentia 6. 16-7; de resurrectione mortuorum 8. 3; de praescriptione haereticorum 36. 5.

the actual conduct of adult life, and did not hold the soul of the fetus accountable for its *vitium originis*. It was not under His judgement for sin. This conclusion stems not only from a logical analysis of Tertullian's other views, but, as will be seen in section four below, rests on his own plain statement about the innocence of infant souls.

*Fourth, the interim fate of the soul.* Every soul survived physical death<sup>32</sup> and, every soul (except a martyr's)<sup>33</sup> was conducted by an angel direct to hades.<sup>34</sup> Good and bad alike were there, although in separate places<sup>35</sup>; for the good it was a place to be desired.<sup>36</sup> All souls remained in hades, until the resurrection of the flesh<sup>37</sup>, then they joined again the bodies they had left at death. There is no apparent reason to distinguish the soul of the aborted fetus from Tertullian's general rule. All souls possessed their basic soul-substance from the very moment of conception. Tertullian condemned abortion as the destruction of the "future man", precisely because the essence of the whole man was present from the beginning of life.<sup>38</sup> Dealing with the objection that executed criminals were too bad to be in hades, Tertullian replied: —

"You must make clear which of the two regions of hades you mean: that of the good or that of the bad; . . . if the good, why do you hold the souls of infants and virgins and those who by their age were necessarily pure and innocent, to be unworthy of such a resting place?"<sup>39</sup>

If the soul of an infant, which had been subjected to satanic attack at birth, was entitled to be in the good part of hades, then *a fortiori* the soul from a fetus was entitled to be there.

No enquiry is made here into the custom of praying for the Christian dead<sup>40</sup> or the offering of the eucharist for the deceased on the anniversary of death.<sup>41</sup> Such acts may have given relief to a soul under the condemnation of God, but it seems clear that the soul of the fetus was, "*apud inferos*", in a state of either refreshment or suspended animation, awaiting the resurrection of its body.<sup>42</sup>

Tertullian has left no teaching about spontaneous abortion, but since he

<sup>32</sup> an. 51. 1; 53. 1; 55. 2; 56. 1.

<sup>33</sup> an. 55. 4–5. Tertullian put the matter differently before he became a Montanist — apologeticum 47. 13 and Waszink, op. cit. p. 554.

<sup>34</sup> an. 53. 6.

<sup>35</sup> an. 56. 8.

<sup>36</sup> adversus Marcionem 4. 34. 11–14.

<sup>37</sup> an. 7. 3; 55. 3; 58. 2.

<sup>38</sup> apologeticum 9. 8.

<sup>39</sup> an. 56. 8.

<sup>40</sup> de monogamia 10. 4; de exhortatione castitatis 11. 1. Saint, "Tertullian, Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage", (Westminster 1951) p. 144–6.

<sup>41</sup> de monogamia 10. 4; de exhortatione castitatis 11. 1. Saint, op. cit. p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> adversus Marcionem 4. 34. 12–14; de resurrectione mortuorum 17.

believed that the manner of death (martyrdom excepted) made no difference to the fate of the soul<sup>43</sup> the principles he laid down appear to cover natural abortion, and still-birth as well.

*Fifth, the final fate of the soul of the aborted fetus.* Reward or punishment in hades was a foretaste, for the soul, of its ultimate destiny, when reunited with its body.<sup>44</sup> Whether the *pristina corruptio* was purged, in hades, between death and resurrection, has been much debated. Certainly Tertullian did not use the word "purgatory", but some<sup>45</sup> have seen the concept in his works. Others<sup>46</sup> maintain that the underworld was not a place where the soul could or should be purified. Tertullian gives some support to both arguments<sup>47</sup>, but it is reward or punishment, on the basis of conduct, which is the central motif of *de resurrectione mortuorum*. Christians would then be forever with God, and the wicked condemned to eternal punishment. Tertullian offered no middle ground, no third choice.

Where then lay the eternal destiny of the soul and resurrected body of the fetus? Given a situation where there was no moral conduct to condemn, and on the analogy of its innocent *status* in hades, there can be only one answer—it would be counted with the saved. But in what body? Not the form in which it had been cut off from life. Under the influence of Ephesians 4. 13, Tertullian appears to have given such bodies and souls the status of *virii perfecti* in eternity:—

"Any soul, no matter what its age at death, stays at that age until . . . the promised perfect age will be realised, in accordance with the measure of angelic fulness."<sup>48</sup>

When did that take place? As a Montanist, Tertullian distinguished the first resurrection, for Christians only, from the final resurrection of all other flesh.<sup>49</sup> If the soul of the aborted fetus truly was innocent, it might perhaps share in the first resurrection, and so in the millennial reign on earth; Tertullian has left no guidance at all about that. However, it does seem legitimate to conclude that a new and perfect body would be provided for the soul of the fetus, at one or other of the resurrections. The soul would then lose the tender age which it had at death, and soul with body would go into eternity with angelic status.

<sup>43</sup> an. 52. 4, 55. 4.

<sup>44</sup> an. 58. 2-4.

<sup>45</sup> d'Ales, "La Théologie de Tertullien", (1905) p. 133; Bardy, "Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique" XX (1946) p. 164; Quasten, "Patrology" II (1953) p. 138; Piolanti, "Enciclopedia Cattolica" X (1953) p. 335; Shortt, "The Influence of Philosophy on the Mind of Tertullian", (1922) p. 46-7.

<sup>46</sup> Mason "Tertullian and Purgatory" J. T. S. III (1902) p. 598; Barnes "Tertullian, a Historical and Literary Study" (1972) p. 115; Bautz, "Das Fegfeuer" (1883) p. 54; Waszink op. cit. p. 592.

<sup>47</sup> an. 58. 2-3 implies that the interim rewards and punishments were to let the soul have some inkling of its ultimate destiny, so as not to keep in suspense, whereas an. 58. 8 implies that defects could be atoned for and cured before the resurrection.

<sup>48</sup> an. 56. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Waszink op. cit. p. 491-3.