

“We Are Called to Monogamy”: Marriage, Virginity, and the Resurrection of the Fleshly Body in Tertullian of Carthage

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Abstract:

Tertullian's four writings on marriage (two letters “To His Wife,” “Exhortation to Chastity,” and “On Monogamy”) have often disturbed his modern readers. In them, he does not applaud marital monogamy, but suggests that sexual intercourse and childbearing are ungodly, potentially damning enterprises. This paper aims to situate these treatises in conversation with his soteriology. It shows how these writings register tensions that emerge in his claim that the fleshly body will endure in the resurrection, but sexual desire will not. Sexual difference, it argues, is at once central to his soteriological equation, and yet one that exceeds his attempts to define it. Tracing Tertullian's view of salvation of the flesh, this paper in particular illustrates how his persistent coding of the flesh as feminine works to retain sexual difference, and leads to his promotion of “monogamy,” and not as we might expect, virginity, as the figure of the resurrected life. The paper reveals that when early Christian theorizing about the resurrected body not only had to negotiate the complexities that the sexually differentiated body implied, but also had potentially broad implications to authorize or undermine particular conceptions of gender roles as well as social and familial arrangements.

Available Open-Access Formats:
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McGill University Library and Archives

Bibliography:

Daniel-Hughes, Carly. 2017. “‘We Are Called to Monogamy’: Marriage, Virginity, and the Resurrection of the Fleshly Body in Tertullian of Carthage.” Pages 239–265 in *Coming Back to Life: The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Edited by Frederick S. Tappenden and Carly Daniel-Hughes, with the assistance of Bradley N. Rice. Montreal, QC: McGill University Library. Online: <http://comingbacktolife.mcgill.ca>.

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**“We Are Called to Monogamy”:
Marriage, Virginity, and the Resurrection of the Fleshly
Body in Tertullian of Carthage¹**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tertullian of Carthage has often offended the sensibilities of his modern readers. Over the last hundred years, scholars have at once acknowledged his place in the history of Christian thought, and simultaneously cast his writings as mired in inconsistencies, claiming that at times they even reveal the workings of an irrational mind, certainly a disagreeable personality (Osborn 1997, 5–6). Pierre de Labriolle’s (1924, 51) foundational study of early Christian Literature exclaims: “Tertullian became for the early centuries of Christianity a famous example of a lamentable falling away to which men of rare intelligence are exposed.”

Of all his writings his four treatises on marriage (or more precisely against remarriage), written in the order of two letters “To His Wife,” and the treatises “Exhortation to Chastity” and “On Monogamy,” have contributed to Tertullian’s unfavorable reputation amongst modern scholars. In the 1959 edition of the Fathers of the Church series, William Le Saint (1959, 41), charged with the task of introducing his readers to “On Monogamy,” seems to throw up his hands in exasperation declaring: “All of his Montanist tracts are characterized by a warped and exaggerated asceticism; in all of them Tertullian’s indignation is impressive, even when his position is

¹ The quotation in the title is a paraphrase of [Tertullian, *Mon.* 7.9](#). I am thankful to Fred Tappenden and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and editorial comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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impossible and his arguments absurd.” Troubling to Le Saint is that “On Monogamy” treats sexual intercourse and childbearing as ungodly, potentially damning enterprises, with little utility for the faithful (e.g., [Mon. 14.1-7](#)).² Le Saint states his preference for the more solid and edifying ground of Tertullian’s earlier work, “To His Wife,” which ends with a stirring encomium to Christian marriage: “Where the flesh is one, the spirit is one too. Together they pray, together they prostrate themselves, together they perform their fasts . . . such things Christ sees and hears and he rejoices!” ([Ux. 2.8.7-9](#)).³ In “On Monogamy,” while Tertullian insists that monogamy is good, he finally disparages the expression of a carnal bond between a husband and wife ([Mon. 5.7](#)).⁴

It is perhaps little surprise that Tertullian’s later two treatises on marriage “On the Exhortation to Chastity” and “On Monogamy” have either been overlooked by scholars, or labeled evidence of Tertullian’s suspect orthodoxy.⁵ Yet attempts to tie their contents to

² Latin: *Gratus esto, si semel tibi indulsit deus nubere* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1028). All references to Tertullian’s treatises refer to the Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, two volumes dedicated to Tertullian’s works (Dekkers et al. 1954). The embedded hyperlinks, however, take readers to either volumes 3 or 4 of the [Ante-Nicene Fathers](#) (Roberts and Donaldson 1885–1887). Readers will note that the CCSL and ANF numbering varies.

³ Latin: *Ubi caro una, unus et spiritus: simul orant, simul voluntantur, simul ieiuna transigunt . . . talia Christus videns et audiens gaudet* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 393–94).

⁴ For a consideration of the two letters to his wife, in view of his two treatises “On the Apparel of Women,” see Lamirande (1989), who reads both works as part of Tertullian’s catholic period.

⁵ More recently, scholars have seen in them an ascetic rigor that accords with this movement (for instance, Osborn 1997, 10 and 210–12), and has also supported dating this treatise toward the end of Tertullian’s literary career. A comparison of the treatises on marriage also shows that “On Monogamy” repeats and extends material in “Exhortation to Chastity.” For a helpful summary of Tertullian’s views on marriage in the recent volume, see Burns and Jensen 2014, 442–50. It should be noted, however, that the discussion there frames the differences among the treatises as reflecting the influence of Montanism on Tertullian’s thinking.

“Montanism” fail to register the scant and polemical data for that movement (Barnes 1971, 17),⁶ or to consider how these treatises may reflect themes from across his corpus. In this paper, I read Tertullian’s four treatises on marriage together, mapping the shifts in his rhetoric between them not as inconsistencies, or as a product of his Montanist proclivities, but as reflecting a soteriology rooted in the claim that the fleshly body will endure in the resurrection, but sexual desire will not. Highlighting the connection between Tertullian’s soteriology and his treatises on marriage, I participate in recent approaches to his work which emphasize that the salvation of the flesh—“in all its sexually differentiated messiness and variety”—is a consistent theme across his corpus (Petrey 2016, 86–102; Dunning 2011, 124–50; Daniel-Hughes 2011; Glancy 2008 and 2010, 118–33; Burrus 2008, 52–57; Perkins 2007).⁷

I begin by outlining Tertullian’s understanding of the resurrection of the fleshly body in light of early Christian debates about salvation. His philosophical and theological commitments to Stoic materialism as well as to a cosmological aesthetic in which beginning and end converge ultimately give shape to his view of a sexed, but sexless resurrection body. Such a view makes sexual difference a productive part of his soteriological equation. Yet sexual difference also necessarily exceeds Tertullian’s attempts to manage

⁶ The epithet “Montanist” did not emerge in Christian discourse in fact until the fourth century, thus Tertullian never uses it (see Nasrallah 2003, especially 155–62 and, for a discussion of Tertullian’s conception of the prophetic, 129–54).

⁷ The quote is from Dunning 2011, 128. Dunning explores the tensions that emerge in Tertullian’s writing as the result of his commitment to working out the “salvation of the flesh” in terms of Paul’s Adam/Christ typology. Recent studies of Tertullian’s defense of the flesh move away from earlier discussions of his writing which considered his rhetoric (and disparaging comments about women in the *ecclesia* in particular) in terms of Tertullian’s misogyny (e.g., Forrester Church 1975; Lamirande 1989; Turcan 1990; Finlay 2003).

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its possible meaning.⁸ This problematic informs Tertullian's recommendation of monogamy and not, as we might expect, virginity (given his ascetic orientation) as the figure of resurrected life.⁹

Ultimately, Tertullian's writings on marriage illuminate how speculation about the resurrected body could be implicated in early Christian views of social and communal life. Such speculation was not an abstract enterprise. Resurrection operated as a means by which early Christians negotiated the boundaries of their communities in ways that served productively in their attempts at self-legitimation and the assertion of difference, as Claudia Setzer (2004) has shown. Speculation about the nature of the resurrected body, I demonstrate, also had implications for Christians' intra-

⁸ See also Dunning 2011 and Petrey 2016, who likewise highlight Tertullian's (and other early Christians') attempts to grapple with the instability of the sexually differentiated body. Feminists of difference, of course, argue that sexual difference necessarily escapes attempts to manage or contain it; see the note below.

⁹ Throughout the essay, I employ the terms "sexual difference" and "gender" somewhat interchangeably. The former reflects the complexities in Tertullian's rhetoric that the modern distinctions between sex, as pre-discursive or biological, gender, as cultural codes and behaviors, and sexual expression or desire, treat as separate. My terminological choice is informed by Dunning (2011, see especially 13–17), who utilizes Irigaray's concept of "sexual difference" as a heuristic category for reading early Christian texts, including Tertullian's. In this case, sexual difference, as Judith Butler explains, "is a border concept" with "psychic, somatic, and social dimensions that are never quite collapsible into one another but are for that reason not ultimately distinct" (Butler 2004, 186). A matter of bodies, psychic dispositions, and social formations, sexual difference might also be understood as a question that is posed repeatedly and without resolution (Wallach Scott 2011, 15–16). Gender, argues Joan Wallach Scott, might be understood in tandem with sexual difference as the "culturally and historically specific attempt to resolve the dilemma of sexual difference" (Wallach Scott 2011, 4). Wallach Scott's framing of these two concepts informs my usage of them in this essay.

communal debates about social and sexual practices, gender roles, and marital and familial arrangements in the here and now.¹⁰

II. ARGUING THE RESURRECTION OF THE FLESH

While early Christians variously proclaimed the resurrection of the dead, not all, perhaps a minority in the ante-Nicene period, insisted on the resurrection of the flesh (Walker Bynum 1995, 26). Tertullian ranked among this group as one of its most persistent and vehement spokesmen. Indeed, the resurrection of the flesh can be seen as a concern that permeates and animates all of his writings, as the vision of salvation promised by and symbolized in Christ's own sinless flesh. Tertullian, however, was aware that he promoted such a view in a competitive landscape in which other possibilities for what resurrection might entail proliferated.

All of Tertullian's writings that treat resurrection, "On the Resurrection of the Dead," "On the Flesh of Christ," and of course, "Against Marcion," are polemical in character and directed at Christians like Marcion, Apelles, and Valentinus, who (from Tertullian's perspective) were informed by a Platonic metaphysic that valued the spiritual over the material.¹¹ These writers, he complains, envisioned that in the resurrection Christians would obtain some better, glorious, ethereal body, abandoning their flesh in the kingdom of heaven. This perspective led them to conclude that Christ prefigured this glorified body, appearing on earth perhaps donning a star-like body or something comprised entirely of soul (for instance, [Carn. Chr. 6.1–13](#) and [15.1–6](#)).

Early Christian views of the resurrection picked up Paul's language where the apostle writes: "There are both heavenly and

¹⁰ In this way, Tertullian anticipates the theorizing about and experimentation with ascetic performance that dominated Christian culture in late antiquity, with its emphasis on the connections between the resurrected body and sexual renunciation (among other disciplines); see, for instance, Shaw 1998.

¹¹ On different Valentinian views of spiritual transformation, for instance, see Thomassen 2009.

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earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly body is one thing, and that of the earthly body another” ([1 Cor. 15:40](#)). The distinction between earthly bodies and heavenly or celestial bodies, with their attendant “glory,” suggests stark differences between bodies that exist in the heavenly and earthly realms. Indeed, Paul goes even further and states explicitly: “flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom” ([1 Cor. 15:50](#)). Defenders of the “resurrection of the flesh,” like Tertullian, wrestle mightily with this text (Moss 2011, 1002; Lehtipuu 2009). He spends nearly one third of his “On the Resurrection of the Dead” negotiating its possible challenge to his vision of material resurrection.

Over the course of his writings Tertullian not only insists on the biblical foundation for his views, he also strikes out against views that reject the salvation of the material flesh as the product of philosophizing. “Be wary of that Christianity produced from Stoic, Platonic, or dialectics! . . . With our faith, we desire nothing more except to believe!” he rails ([Praescr. 7.11–13](#)).¹² We should not, however, fall prey to Tertullian’s polarizing rhetoric. Early Christian theorizing about the resurrection in the second and third centuries was expressed in the intellectual landscape of Greek and Roman philosophy—including Tertullian’s own. Deeply informed by Stoic metaphysics, Tertullian holds fast to the notion that the material world furnishes evidence of divine providence, which deeply shapes his conception of salvation of the fleshly body.¹³

Tertullian’s soteriology relies on a Stoic notion of the convergence of opposites, argues Eric Osborn (1997, 67). In his cosmology, God is alpha and omega, both creator and judge, who stands at the beginning and end of all things (see [Apol. 48.11](#)). Tertullian links birth and death, creation and resurrection as

¹² Latin: *Viderint qui Stoicum et Platonicum et dialecticum christianismum protulerunt Cum credimus nihil desideramus ultra credere* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 193).

¹³ Moss (2011, 1008) outlines ancient Christians’ increasing interest in materialistic views of heaven, particularly how they inform the soteriology of Augustine.

bookends of the soteriological drama in which Christians all find themselves. “Resurrection” for Tertullian, explains Osborn (1997, 69), “simply repeats creation” in that “creation from nothing implies resurrection from death.” Tertullian’s theological aesthetics holds that God creates the world and restores it (Osborn 1997, 101).¹⁴ He argues that God enables redemption by means of his model Christ, who reestablishes divine likeness lost with the onset of sin.

III. IMAGINING THE PERFECTED RESURRECTED BODY

For Tertullian, then, resurrection is best understood as “change into changeless,” and not a new existence altogether. His vision of the resurrection stresses continuity and improvement over transformation, so as to preserve God’s providential role as creator of both souls and fleshly bodies. What God creates in the beginning, he insists, must endure in the end. Supported by Stoic physics, Tertullian repeatedly highlights the mutual interdependence of the soul and the body. For Stoics, material and immaterial substances cannot be distinguished in terms of corporeality and incorporeality. They held that all the cosmos was comprised of bodies acting upon one another—infused to greater and lesser degrees with spirit (see [Tertullian, *An.* 6.4-7](#)).¹⁵ Thus Tertullian imagines the soul as merely an invisible body, and the flesh as a more-dense and visible one. Though the flesh and soul are differentiated, they are deeply bound to one another. Tertullian concludes that in the final judgment soul and body will be reunited, altered not in substance, but in kind: they

¹⁴ For a discussion of the importance of justice in Tertullian’s soteriology, see Petrey 2016, 87–88.

¹⁵ For a survey of Stoic physics as it pertains to materiality, see Sellars 2006, 81–106. Sellars notes that despite their commitment to materialism, Stoics imagined some “entities” as incorporeal (asomatic), such as the meaning of speech. It should be noted as well that Tertullian’s encounter with Stoicism was eclectic and “opportunistic”; see Gonzalez 2013, 448 (citing Colish).

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will be the flesh and soul created by God, but improved by spirit, made perfect ([Res. 52.9–12](#)).¹⁶

Wholeness, integrity, and perfection define Tertullian's image of the resurrected body. In his "On the Resurrection of the Dead," he assures his Christian audience that the entire complement of their organs and limbs will endure, though their usage in the kingdom of God would be suspended ([Res. 62.1–4](#)). He mentions the digestive organs, stomach, entrails, and shining rows of teeth as parts that will be retained ([Res. 60.2–9](#)). God judges a person entire, he explains: "For God's judgment-seat demands the complete restoration of a person" ([Res. 60.6](#)).¹⁷ Likewise the kingdom of heaven demands integrity and wholeness. He turns then to the corporeal markers of sexual difference, the generative parts, womb, and testes, noting that they too will persist in the kingdom, but have no utility ([Res. 61.1–7](#)).

Tertullian's complete, ordered, and perfected resurrected body recalls an ancient aesthetic ideal that saw symmetry, neatness, and order as befitting the celestial realm (Moss 2011). But it is not an aesthetic of absolute sameness in Tertullian's view—for the corporeal markers of sexual difference remain. Yet Tertullian insists that desire, which moves the generative organs, will be eradicated in the resurrected state ([Res. 61.6–7](#)). Here too we see the influence of Stoicism, in this case in his account of the duplicity of the passions.¹⁸ Tertullian counts desire (*voluptas*) as a force that acts from outside the self, a source of disruption and impermanence, which even threatens the dissolution of soul and body.

In Tertullian's account of desire, we can begin to see how his vision of resurrected life could inform his larger concerns about his

¹⁶ See the discussion by Eliezer Gonzalez, who finds that Tertullian at points deviates from this perspective, imagining an embodied soul as the guarantor of continuity (Gonzalez 2013, 479–502).

¹⁷ Latin: *Salvum enim hominem tribunal dei exigit* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1009).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Stoic view of emotions, see Nussbaum 2009, 359–401.

community's marital and sexual practices. Consider from the perspective of his sexual ethics his description of male orgasm in "On the Soul." The discussion here is aimed at establishing the codependence of soul and body at the very outset of human life. To make this case, he suggests that both soul and flesh are "discharged" at the moment of ejaculation, so that in conception neither part precedes the other, writing:

. . . in this established function of the sexes when male and female come together in their common copulation . . . the man being excited by the effort of both natures [soul and body], his seminal substance is discharged, *its fluidity coming from the body, but its warmth from the soul* In short, I put modesty to the test in order to find the truth, by asking whether we do not, in that heat of our desire (*voluptas*) when that potent fluid (*virus*) is ejected, feel that somewhat of our soul has gone out? Do we not experience faintness and prostration as well as the dimness of sight? ([An. 27.5-6](#), italics mine; Waszink 1947, 38-39).¹⁹

Tertullian asserts that orgasm is an effort of soul and body that unsettles the corporate unity. In a description of male arousal that anticipates Augustine's musings on this topic, seminal emissions are counted as an experience of psychic and somatic dissolution. Orgasm invites soul and body to "go out," with the present threat that repeated sexual encounters might make the recovery of the psychosomatic unity exceedingly difficult.²⁰ For a thinker who insists

¹⁹ Latin: *In hoc itaque sollemni sexuum officio quod marem ac feminam miscet, in concubitu dico communi . . . Unico igitur impetus utriusque toto homine concusso despumatur semen totius hominis habens ex corporali substantia humorem, ex animali calorem . . . Denique ut adhuc verecundia magis periclitur quam probatione, in illo ipso voluptatis ultimate aestu quo genitale virus expellitur, none aliquid de anima quoque sentimus exire atque adeo marcescimus et devigescimus cum lucis detrimento?* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 823).

²⁰ For a similar argument, made in relation to Augustine's work, see Miller 2007.

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on the intimate harmony of soul and body—Tertullian writes of baptism, “flesh is washed, so soul is cleansed” (*sed et caro abluitur, ut anima emaculetur*, [Res. 8.3](#))—we might better understand why he insists in “On Modesty,” another little-understood treatise, that fornication occupies a special class of sin, from which a Christian, once baptized, cannot be forgiven ([Pud. 1.20–21](#)).²¹

IV. TERTULLIAN’S SEXUAL ETHICS IN VIEW OF HIS SOTERIOLOGY

Given Tertullian’s view of the sexed, but sexless resurrected body, it is not surprising that he champions sexual chastity in his four writings on marriage as a corporeal discipline with the power to render changeable flesh unchangeable (Conybeare 2007, 433). In the earliest of these, the first letter “To His Wife,” Tertullian advances the cause of widowhood and tells his female audience that marriage and childbearing merely “weigh down their flesh,” while unmarried widows: “at the first angel’s trumpet they spring forward able to endure whatever stress or persecution without the heavy weight of marriage in their wombs or at their breasts” ([Ux. 1.5.3](#)).²² Widowhood, it seems, frees a woman’s flesh from the burden of its reproductive functions. Yet this view implies a further question: if widowhood anticipates the resurrected condition, then does not virginity prefigure it? Should, in other words, Christians rather be

²¹ This treatise, a response to the “lenient” policies of the Roman bishop on the repentance of adulterers, modifies earlier discussions in “On Patience,” which suggests that forgiveness of sins can be enacted in a second baptism; see [Pud. 1.6–10](#). In “On Modesty,” Tertullian argues that based on biblical laws, adultery and fornication represent such a grievous denigration of God’s law. But he claims that these sins (like idolatry and murder) were never absolved by the rituals of penance. For further discussion of penance in Tertullian’s writings, see Burns and Jensen 2014, 304–09.

²² Latin: *Ad primam angeli tubam expeditae prosilient, quamcunque pressuram persecutionemque libere preferent, nulla in utero, nulla in uberibus aestuante sarcina nuptiarum* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 379).

virgins than widows and in so doing live an embodied existence imitative of their future heavenly glory?²³

Tertullian's writings on marriage seem on first blush to reach this conclusion. In his second treatise on the subject of remarriage, "On the Exhortation to Chastity," Tertullian holds up different, recommended options for his Christian audience: perpetual virginity from birth, virginity after baptism, celibacy within marriage, and celibacy after the death of a spouse (i.e., widowhood) ([Exh. cast. 1.4](#)). (Divorce, even of a non-Christian spouse, and a second marriage are, conversely, treated as adulterous practices to be avoided by the faithful). Yet over the course of these writings, moving from "To His Wife" to "Exhortation to Chastity," and finally to "On Monogamy," widowhood and celibate marriage appear diminished in grandeur when compared with perpetual virginity. In "To His Wife," he proclaims widowhood the harder course when compared to virginity. It is, he notes, a mode of life in which women give up the comforts that they have known ([Ux. 1.6.2](#) and [1.8.2](#)). But in later treatises, he calls virginity "immaculate"—mimetic of Christ's own sinless state ([Exh. cast. 9.5](#) and [Mon. 5.6](#)). Widowhood and celibate marriage, on the other hand, result from the previous enjoyment of an "indulgence," the single marriage permitted Christians by God. "Give thanks," he exclaims, "that God conceded for you to marry one time" ([Exh. cast. 9.4](#); see [Mon. 3.10](#)).²⁴

Yet while Tertullian holds out perpetual virginity as exemplified in Christ's own sinless flesh, unlike his Latin successors Cyprian, Jerome, or Ambrose, he repeatedly insists that monogamy is the pattern established by God from the moment of creation and

²³ On the connection between virginal and resurrected flesh in Tertullian, see Petrey 2016, 93. It should be noted, however, that Tertullian also commonly evokes the steely flesh of the martyr as emblematic of the resurrected body, for instance [Ux. 1.5.3](#).

²⁴ Latin: *Gratus esto, si semel tibi indulsit deus nubere* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1028).

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confirmed in the sacraments.²⁵ In “On the Exhortation to Chastity” and “On Monogamy,” in particular, he argues that God set out this very law when he joined man and woman as two “in one flesh.” God repeated the pattern through history: did not the animals embark two by two onto the ark, Tertullian queries? Monogamy is imprinted into God’s cosmology—in Adam, monogamy was established, and in Christ, perfected, citing [Eph 5:32](#): “[he is] a monogamist in spirit, having one church for a spouse—this is the figure of Adam and Eve, which the apostle interprets as the great sacrament of Christ and the Church,” Tertullian explains ([Mon. 5.7](#)).²⁶ Even Christ’s virginity is a species of monogamy, its most perfect expression, improving on Adam’s carnal variety. Here Tertullian’s soteriology reveals itself in his treatises on marriage. Linking beginning and end, he indicates that monogamy must likewise apply to the resurrection, just as it was established in creation.

This theological presumption—that beginning and end converge—shapes his conception of the nature of a marital bond, and its endurance into the afterlife as well. In fact, we can even trace a shift over the course of his writings on remarriage on precisely this point. In “To His Wife,” his earliest treatise on marriage, Tertullian advises women to avoid remarriage because as widows, they are like the angels: “When Christians depart this world, no restitution of marriage is promised in the resurrection, because they will be transformed according to the character and sanctity of the angels” ([Ux. 1.1.5](#)).²⁷ Yet in his two later treatises on marriage, Tertullian threatens both women and men against remarriage, arguing that a second union would find them guilty of adultery, with serious

²⁵ Petrey (2016, 94) suggests that Tertullian gives a “faint” support of procreation.

²⁶ Latin: . . . *monogamus occurrit in spiritu, unam habens ecclesiam sponsam, secundum Adam et Evae figuram, quam apostolus in illud magnum sacramentum interpretatur, in Christum et ecclesiam . . .* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1235).

²⁷ Latin: *Christianis saeculo digressis <sicut> nulla resitutio nuptiarum in die resurrection repromittitur, translates scilicet in angelicam qualitatem et sanctitatem . . .* (Dekkers et al. 1953, 374).

implications for their salvation. He admits that Christ asserts that “in the kingdom of heaven we will not marry nor be given in marriage”—sexual relations will of course cease. But the bond established in marriage participates in a scheme that is not simply carnal, but one that inheres in God’s cosmological design. Its effects are necessarily spiritual as well.

In “Exhortation to Chastity,” a treatise aimed largely at the men in his community, Tertullian argues that men are obligated to observe feast days and prayers on behalf of their deceased wives (see Burns and Jensen 2014, 492–96). A man married a second time cannot fare well when offering prayers to God on the behalf of two wives, “one in spirit, the other in flesh” (*una spiritu, alia in carne*), before the *ecclesia* of perpetual virgins, dedicated widows, and monogamous presbyters (a surely idealized view of the Christian assembly). Shaming such a spectacle, Tertullian questions how such a man could ever declare his second marriage respectably chaste—it is inherently adulterous ([Exh. cast. 11.1–2](#)). In “On Monogamy,” Tertullian targets women in his community with a similar logic: even in death they will be tied to their first husband. They should assiduously honor a deceased’s funerary feast day, offering up prayers for him, and, of course, rejecting a second marriage, knowing that ultimately they will be rejoined to him in the final days. It must be so, Tertullian writes: “But if we believe in the resurrection of the dead, assuredly we will be connected to those with whom we will be resurrected so that we can exchange an account with each other” ([Mon. 10.5](#)).²⁸ Tertullian warns his audience: you will continue to be connected to your spouses in the kingdom. He explains that the consciousness of that earthly bond is translated to a “spiritual fellowship” (*spiritale consortium*) in the

²⁸ Latin: *Quid si credimus mortuorum resurrectionem, utique tenebimur cum quibus resurrecti sumus rationem de alterutro reddituri* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1243).

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afterlife, where Christians will reside in the very presence of God ([Mon. 10.5-6](#)).²⁹

There are multiple reasons why Tertullian promotes the concept of monogamy, even as we might anticipate, given his negative appraisal of sexual desire, virginity would occupy him more forcibly. The first reflects his social context: in his own day, second marriages were the common, and even anticipated practice among the new elites in the Roman colony of Carthage.³⁰ A close look at Tertullian's arguments against remarriage suggests that for this group virginity would simply have been the harder sell. (It is interesting here to note that one of the very few things we know about Tertullian's biography is that he was married [see [Ux. 1.1.1](#); see Conybeare 2007, 433]). We might consider, for instance, the practicalities that Tertullian has to address with his community in his effort to promote chastity and widowhood. Men, he admits, have need of someone to care for the house and children, distribution of clothing, and management of funds and supplies ([Exh. cast. 12.1](#)). Women and men alike feel the pressures of producing heirs, and ensuring the success of the following generations ([Ux. 1.5.1](#) and [Exh. cast. 12.3](#)).

Yet, and more to my point, Tertullian's promotion of monogamy resonates with commitments to a Stoic materialism and a theological aesthetics in which beginning and end come together. As we have seen, Tertullian shares with the Stoics a metaphysics in which all that exists is material and held together, structured, and ordered by greater and lesser degrees of spirit. Such a perspective works against a view of the resurrection as radical change, which would imply discontinuity between the cosmos God creates and the one he

²⁹ There is a tension here, for Tertullian also imagines women's chastity as a form of marriage to Christ. This tension would likewise appear in the writings of later church figures as well, who used the metaphor of Christ as a "celibate bridegroom" to promote ascetic life to women and men; see Clark 2008 and discussion below.

³⁰ See Daniel-Hughes 2014 for how debates over remarriage practices in Tertullian's community centered on differing interpretation of Paul's [1 Cor 7:1-40](#).

redeems.³¹ Rather, Tertullian holds fast to the notion that the fleshly body and the soul created in the beginning will endure in the end. What guarantees this continuity is a particular construction of sexual difference, figured in a hierarchical mode, an intransigent part of God's cosmological design (see also Petrey 2016, 88–90). Thus in "On the Soul," Tertullian explains that the difference between male and female is revealed in the flesh and the soul, as it was established by God in creation. He directly appeals to Genesis 2 as scriptural evidence of the naturalness and endurance of this gendered hierarchy, explaining:

. . . Adam was first (*prior enim Adam*), and the female was formed some considerable time later (*femina aliquanto serius*), for Eve came after (*posterior enim Eva*). ([An. 36.4](#); Waszink 1947, 52)³²

Adam's temporal priority and the subsequent completion of Eve's creation indicate their hierarchical relationship. Indeed, given the interdependence of soul and body (created at the same moment), Tertullian insists that sexual difference marks both soul and body equally.³³ It cannot be an accidental property of the flesh alone, discarded with the corruptible flesh at death, for such a view would imply that the fleshly body is not central to the soteriological equation. Nor can sexual difference be a property of the soul alone, imprinting the flesh, for again, that would complicate their interdependence. It must, therefore, be a distinction that obtains to

³¹ In distinction to the Platonists who differentiated between that which is immaterial and material, and who privileged soul as belonging to the former category, and body, to the latter.

³² Latin: *Certe et hic se primordiorum forma testatur, cum masculus temperius effingitur (prior enim Adam), femina aliquanto serius (posterior enim Eva)* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 839).

³³ The complexity of Tertullian's views on this point have led some scholars to overlook this passage and to suggest that the soul is "genderless." See, for instance, Forrester Church 1975, 100; Kuefler 2001, 228–30.

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soul and flesh alike ([An. 36.1–3](#)). Thus, sexual difference persists, even into the afterlife.

At this point, we begin to see why virginity, particularly female virginity—if understood as sexual impenetrability³⁴—would be potentially unsettling for Tertullian. Daniel Boyarin (1998, 122) states: “By escaping from sexuality entirely, virgins thus participate in the ‘destruction of gender’ and attain the status of the spiritual human who was neither male nor female.” Yet Tertullian does not hold out a soteriology in which the paradisiacal and eschatological states are defined by androgynous unity, or the transcendence of gender—a perspective that we find in more Platonically oriented thinkers, like Philo, Origen, or Gregory of Nyssa (on the latter, see Warren Smith 2006). As we have seen, he insists that sexual difference inheres in creation, and so too in the resurrection. Yet precisely how can sexual difference be retained in the resurrection, when, as Tertullian asserts, there is the absence of sexual desire and the genital organs will be stripped of their erotic content? What, in short, will be the indicator of that difference, the guarantor of that created order of male over female?³⁵ Tertullian’s attempt to grapple with these contradictory impulses, both to insist on the eradication

³⁴ Though Tertullian cannot make virginity entirely a characteristic of the body, for to do so would undermine the connection of body and soul (see Petrey 2016, 96). It is important to note too that this notion of virginity was not the only one operative in early Christian communities. Virginity could be understood as a discipline, available to women and men, and constructed as an office that one held. Charlotte Methuen (1997) has shown that in early Christian communities offices of women, married and non-married, retained a kind of fluidity, defined by a shared sense of purpose, and exhibited by their sexual chastity. Similarly, Susanna Elm (1994, esp. 181–82) has noted that even in the fourth century the category of “virgin” was variously understood; this class could be comprised of women who were once married but had taken a vow of celibacy (see also Methuen 1997).

³⁵ Sexual difference (at once about bodies, but that which exceeds it) shores it up and continually appears as, quoting Dunning (2011, 27), “an otherness that needs to be deferred or domesticated, insofar as it calls into question the dream of a single, divinely ordained fullness to human meaning.” See also note 9 above.

of desire and to maintain a gender hierarchy, finds him ultimately coding flesh as feminine so that the female bodies are freed from sexual signification.

V. FEMINIZING THE FLESH

When Tertullian writes about flesh and soul, the two constituents of the self, his terminology is commonly gendered. Often the soul takes the dominant, masculine role, while the flesh takes the passive, feminine role. The flesh is persistently coded as feminine, a receptacle, queen, priestess, bride, and sister (e.g., [Res. 15.1–8](#)). Commenting on Tertullian’s earliest letters on marriage, “To His Wife,” Catherine Conybeare (2007) remarks that Tertullian’s argument for Christian monogamous marriage likewise relies upon the gendered distinction between soul and flesh. While earlier scholars found in these letters a defense of Christian marriage, an argument for conjugal love (a view of marriage that Tertullian seemed to abandon in “Exhortation to Chastity” and “On Monogamy”), Conybeare instead identifies an underlying gendered logic—one that I have argued inheres in all of his writings on marriage. For Tertullian, marriage is a testing ground, a discipline for Christian men. “Wives are the ultimate in prospectively ungovernable property—the external demonstration of the desires of the flesh that must be controlled by the true philosopher Christian,” Conybeare (2007, 437) concludes. In promoting monogamy in “To His Wife,” Tertullian is not, ultimately, offering a compelling case for sexual expression, childrearing, or even sociability in marriage, but rather a “symbolic economy in which spirit represents the husband and flesh the wife” (Conybeare 2007, 439).

Recently scholars have pointed to Tertullian’s commitment to the salvation of the flesh as indicative of his esteem for the material body, as notable in a culture context in which it was generally degraded as “shameful” (see, for instance, Perkins 2007). Yet such a perspective misses the ways in which Tertullian does not so much deny the “shameful” quality of the flesh, but instead he regularly trades on it, even embellishes it in articulating his view of salvation

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over opposing theories. Holding, as we have seen, a view in which the fleshly body is subject to the passions as well as an essential constituent of the self and site of God's redemptive work, the flesh is necessarily also registered as in need of discipline. Tertullian's vision of salvation *highlights* rather than undercuts the volatility of material flesh. "Removing fleshiness from the flesh" animates Tertullian's arguments for sexual chastity, along with fasting and the avoidance of entertainment and luxuries (disciplines that he also recommends in his practical treatises; see Conybeare 2007, 433).

In Tertullian's writings the "flesh is at once despicable and beloved" (Glancy 2010, 120). Emphasizing rather than diminishing its shamefulness, Tertullian renders Christ's act in bearing the flesh all the more magnificent, or all the more scandalous (Burrus 2008, 54). In doing so, Tertullian necessarily recites and repeats the connection between femininity and the flesh. Having gendered this component of the self as feminine throughout his writings, we find him also shifting its semiotic burden onto female bodies (see Dunning 2011, 147).³⁶ In his writings these bodies come more often to signify the need for God's salvation, rather than the possibility of it.³⁷

Despite Tertullian's pleas for chastity throughout his corpus, in fact, female flesh appears especially resistant to its pedagogic power. If men suffer from momentary "lapses" of the self in the moment of orgasm, for which chastity can provide a psychic and carnal barrier, a woman's role in the procreative process marks her so profoundly that Tertullian asserts that Mary, Christ's mother, emerged from the violence of birth no longer a virgin but a bride, deflowered by her own son, who opened her *vulva* when exiting ([Carn. Chr. 23.4-5](#); see Glancy 2008, 285-87 and Dunn 2007, 482-83).

³⁶ Earlier in the same chapter, Dunning (2011, 129) writes: "Tertullian's logic works to restrict the possible significations of female flesh, attempting to guarantee that the unpenetrated female body is not able to assume a representative function that might upset or endanger his gender hierarchy."

³⁷ For an elaboration of this part of my argument, see Daniel-Hughes 2011, especially 69-72, and on female virgins in particular, 93-114.

It is important to highlight at this point that Tertullian is constructing a category of “virginity” as one related to sexual status and bodily intactness, and in a social context in which the offices of virgin as well as that of widow were not uniform and often overlapped (Methuen 1997). Affiliation with these orders seems to have been flexible in practice, as were the duties and honors due women in them. Indeed, Tertullian himself complains about a virgin widow, that is a young unmarried girl, who has joined the order of widows ([Virg. 9.2–3](#)). Where our sources, such as the letters of Ignatius or church orders, highlight flexibility and overlap in these categories widow and virgin, Tertullian insists on firm boundaries: widows are the wives of one husband (echoing [1 Tim. 5:3–16](#)), whereas virgins are women who have never been married ([Virg. 7.32](#); see Methuen 1997, 292–93). The widow would diminish in status and even visibility in the writings of Tertullian’s successors, like Jerome and Ambrose, who figured the female virgin as the symbol of the church itself (for instance, Burrus 1991 and 1994).³⁸

In Tertullian’s ethical treatises, however, women’s claims to virginal status appear as something at best fictive and illusory, and at worse, a perilous threat to Christian salvation. In one telling instance in “On the Veiling of Virgins,” Tertullian argues that a virgin’s unveiled head, the sign of her “sanctity . . . actually puts her in danger of sexual slavery and degradation,” writes Mary Rose D’Angelo (1995, 148). Virginity, Tertullian asserts, is all too often a cover, an attempt to hide unwanted bastard children ([Virg. 14.6–8](#)).³⁹ Few virgins can actually uphold their vows. Appearing in public, with heads uncovered, a virgin is easily dissuaded from her chastity; he writes:

³⁸ As Burrus (1994, 31) notes, the exaltation of the virgin was enabled by her supporters, themselves often embattled clerics, whose proximity to and influence over chaste virgins served them rhetorically in the promotion of Nicene orthodoxy.

³⁹ A century later, John Chrysostom would cast similar barbs at the virgins *sunintroducuae*, who practiced their asceticism in spiritual unions with Christian brothers; see Leyerle 2001, especially 143–82.

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She is necessarily put to the test by public exposure, at the moment she is penetrated by undetermined, numerous eyes; titillated by pointing fingers; loved excessively and grows hot among embraces and ardent kisses. So her forehead hardens, so her shame wears away: it relaxes and in this way, she learns the desire to please in another way! ([Virg. 14.5](#))⁴⁰

The notion that a virgin, warmed by the admiration for her chaste state, would quickly crave carnal affection as well stands at odds with his claim in “On the Resurrection of Flesh” that Christians should look to the “many virgins wed to Christ” (*virgines Christi maritae*) as an image of their future sexless state in the kingdom of heaven ([Res. 62.6](#)).

In much of Tertullian’s writing, virginity is a mode of life in which men, and not women, appear as imitators of Christ: voluntary eunuchs, who exemplify “valorized virginity” (see Elliott 2008, 30–31; Dunning 2011, 145–47). Fashioning them in the image of Christ himself, Tertullian treats their chastity as patterned after his very own—albeit, Dunning notes, configured not in terms of bodily impenetrability, but in terms of “ungendered sexual purity” (2011, 149). Female virgins and widows, on the other hand, are described with gendered and domestic language, which readily subordinates them to Christ, rather than equating their chastity with his own. These women are not voluntary eunuchs: they are the *sponsa Christi*, brides of Christ (e.g., [Virg. 16.4](#)).⁴¹ Tertullian imagines the

⁴⁰ Latin: . . . *neesse est publicatione sui periclitetur, dum percutitor oculis incertis et multis, dum digitis demonstrantium titillator, dum nimium amatur, dum inter amplexus et oscula assidua concalescit. Sic frons duratur, sic pudor teritur, sic soluitur, sic discitur aliter iam placere desiderare* (Dekkers et al. 1954, 1224).

⁴¹ In later sources, the connection between virgins and brides would be embellished following early Christian reading of [Eph 5](#) and the Song of Songs; see Clark 2008, 13. Tertullian likewise draws on [Eph 5:31](#) (see [Mon. 5.7](#)), which would be utilized by later promoters of asceticism. Tertullian’s application of the “celibate Bridegroom” metaphor in “To His Wife” shares the logic of later Christian ascetic promoters who used the metaphor “to valorize

bliss of the chaste woman's better union, replete with the trappings of its fleshly form. "With [the Lord] they live; to him they speak; he is the one they take in hand day and night," he explains when writing about women who refuse carnal marriage ([Ux. 1.4.4](#)).⁴²

Even in celibacy, Christian women are pressed within the gendered scheme of the Roman household—a pattern that anticipates their glorified state in the resurrection. "Their bodies, sexually inactive, but gendered, are projected into the afterlife, scuttling all hopes for an androgynous *vita angelica*," Dyan Elliott (2008, 29) concludes. Indeed, here we see an example of how sexual difference escapes Tertullian's attempt to contain it so that he renders "the desire not to desire, or the desire for celibacy, as sexual" (Grosz 1994, viii). Though "sexually inactive," these female virgins are not desexualized, for they yearn for the affections of a celestial spouse, capable, it seems, of loving them in return.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Scholars in the last century saw Tertullian's four treatises on marriage as plagued by contradictions and an increasingly ascetic rigor. For in them, we find little support for the expression of carnal union, and instead, arguments that promote an end to sexuality and childrearing altogether. I have suggested, however, that "Exhortation to Chastity" and "On Monogamy" do not represent his abandonment of an earlier idealized view of Christian marriage found in the letters "To His Wife." Rather together these treatises register tensions

the institution of marriage while lauding (in a titillating manner) sexual continence" (Clark 2008, 1). While the metaphor proved fruitful in pastoral contexts, it could "collide" with eschatological speculation about the character of resurrected life, and thus, needed some controlling. Elizabeth Clark's analysis (2008) points interestingly forward to the ways that the tensions within Tertullian's writings emerge and inform ascetic theorizing and theologizing that would occupy Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁴² Here Tertullian writes about widows specifically: *Cum illo vivunt, cum illo sermocinatur, illum diebus et noctibus tractant* (Dekkers et al. 1953–1954, 377).

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inherent in his commitment to the salvation of the flesh, and to a theological aesthetic in which the pattern established in creation endures in the end. In pursuing this theological vision Tertullian does not eradicate sexual difference in favor of an “androgynous *vita angelica*,” which the promotion of female virginity (figured in terms of sexual impenetrability) might imply, but rather recites it by linking female flesh and shame. Such a link, finally, undermines the utility of virginity for him and finds him promoting monogamy to his community in its stead.

We better understand the passion with which Tertullian pursues this enterprise when we keep in view the presence of female virgins within his community. On three occasions, Tertullian complains that these virgins were casting off their veils in the *ecclesia*, insisting upon a place of honor in that context. Dedicating an entire treatise to the matter, “On the Veiling of Virgins,” he argues that these virgins no longer count themselves women and understand their virginity to place them above other women within the assembly ([Virg. 9.3](#) and [10.1](#)). Whether these virgins enacted an open challenge to Tertullian’s arguments, or whether he continually challenged these virgins because he understood their ascetic performance to unsettle his vision, we cannot ultimately be certain.⁴³ Perhaps these women understood their sexual chastity to have deprived their flesh of its sexual content, to even signify the glory of the resurrected life in the present—claims that certainly cut at the heart of the soteriological scheme Tertullian constructs. To remove the veil was to expose the possibility that by means of sexual chastity that link could be easily unsettled. To suit down this possibility, Tertullian insisted that the veil be signified as a marker of shame, of sinfulness, a status that they share with all women ([Virg. 16.4](#)).

⁴³ For a fuller version of the argument where I speculate that the virgins contested Tertullian’s theological vision, see Daniel-Hughes 2010, 2011, 93–114; for a similar reading, one that emphasizes how the virgins’ unveiling proclaimed a new gender status, which could unsettle ecclesiastical structures, see Upson-Saia 2011, 61–69.

Donning the veil, he imagines, these women perform not exaltation and glory, but rather subordination—and in so doing, shore up, rather than undermine, a creational hierarchy of male over female.

Virginitly occupies a complicated place in Tertullian's thinking. When it comes to envisioning a sexual ethics for his community in his writings on marriage the concept of monogamy serves him more readily. Unlike virginitly, monogamy easily retains the gendered language of husband and wife, of marital union, of a binary in which one side takes the lead. In this way, monogamy leaves intact the link between femininity and flesh, and concomitantly between masculinity and the spirit, upon which Tertullian's vision of salvation relies. As a concept, monogamy does not prohibit sexual renunciation, but rather enables it to fall safely with this gendered framework.

Monogamy, Tertullian explains, is a law established in creation that persists into the resurrection. So pervasive is it that virginitly and marriage are both species of it—one spiritual, and the other earthly ([Mon. 5.5–7](#)). Tertullian is keen to point out the power of this “law” for his Christian audience: he reminds them that they are bound to it from the beginning: modeled in the creation of Adam and Eve; illustrated in their sacramental life; founded in the mystical union of Christ and the church ([Mon. 5.7](#)). Monogamy provides the very pattern of a Christian's existence. This law will likewise apply when at the “first sound of the trumpet,” Christians look forward to the glorious existence that will be theirs in the resurrection.

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