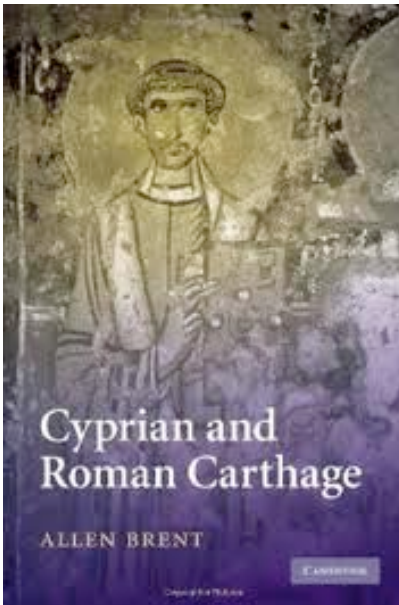


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Brent, Allen

Cyprian and Roman Carthage

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This comprehensive work by Allen Brent will take a prominent place in the study of the enduring contributions of the mid-third century martyr-bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, in the first part of the twenty-first century, as the massive work by the archbishop of Canterbury, E. W. Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (London: Macmillan, 1897), did for the first part of the twentieth century. No doubt there are other recent works that provide an overarching view of Cyprian's life, including J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London: Routledge, 2002), but this volume will provide the touchstone for all future work and research.

The opening one-page introduction makes the important point that the Cyprianic corpus is crucial to understanding events in the Roman Empire, as well as in the church, in the middle of the third century, since other available sources are scattered and fragmentary. Chapter 1 offers a compact overview of the man and the issues that he dealt with during his decade-long episcopate. This also sets the tone for what follows, in that we do not meet Cyprian standing isolated from the broader currents and philosophical, religious, cultural, and social realities of that time but as someone firmly located within, and also reacting to, this ethos and worldview. By intertwining analysis of Roman history, imperial coinage, funerary and public monuments, philosophical writings (especially Stoicism), and

available Christian sources throughout the book, Brent shows us how this shaped all that Cyprian was and did—as an upper-class Roman and Christian patron who used his position both in church and society to react to the situations that he had to confront, including the Decian and Valerian persecutions and the turmoil that this led to within the church.

Further depth analysis is provided in chapter 2, which deals with Cyprian's background in the city that had had a complex relationship with Rome: Carthage. Apart from obvious sources such as Cyprian's account of his conversion and the biography written by his deacon, Pontius, Brent delves extensively into the convoluted history of Carthage, including its destruction and reconstruction following the wars with Rome and how the city known to Cyprian had evolved around the defining of sacred space and buildings associated with governance and public entertainment. All this had a bearing on how Cyprian saw himself as the one duly appointed to uphold certain norms and principles within the space of the church and how, when someone like the presbyter Novatian, questioned the role of Cyprian (who had, with what he saw as legitimate grounds, left the city during the time of the Decian persecution), his understandable reaction, also shaped by his drawing from a Stoic worldview, was to reassert his authority over against someone whom he saw as having invaded his domain and tried to usurp his legitimate authority.

This meticulous analysis of what was happening when Decius ordered all those within the empire to offer sacrifice continues in chapter 3, where Brent considers historiography. Again, given that popular versions of Stoicism speak about a cyclic reality of decline and renewal, and recognizing that Rome had just celebrated its millennia, Brent draws on the expectations prevalent in Roman society regarding how the present could be transformed and unity achieved by the various components that went into the making of society sticking together in a cohesive manner. This was reflected by Cyprian's understanding of ecclesiology, which led him to uphold the status of Cornelius as the bishop of Rome and by not distinguishing between those whom he saw as schismatics and heretics, since both rebelled against the principle of unity. This stance regarding authority and unity was also reflected in Cyprian's dealings with those confessors who had suffered during the Decian persecution and were now claiming the right to ask Cyprian to readmit the lapsed to full fellowship in the church. One question still needs to be pushed: that of the certainty of salvation that those clamoring to be readmitted sensed was the exclusive prerogative of those who belonged. Given the wares available in the religious marketplace at that time, what aspects of Christology were deemed crucial and why?

Chapter 4, dealing with political rhetoric and the religious policy put in place during the relatively brief reign of Decius, a time when the world was seen to be entering old age with all that this entailed, *senectus mundi*, indicates how the measures put in place were

not specifically aimed against the Christians as such but were more on the lines of calling the people of the realm to come together and reaffirm what bound them as a people as citizens under the rule of the emperor. How could an emperor function as the *restitutor* of the *nouum saeculum*? Brent analyzes the understanding of *supplicatio*, something led by the emperor with the participation of all his subjects, in the edict of Decius, which called for a public affirmation and sign of the unity of the empire's subjects through religious sacrifice, an act by which he sought the return of *pax* throughout the land. A massive and universal public demonstration of unity is one thing, but what about the underlying factors that wanted to place so much emphasis on the role of the emperor within the cult? The scrappy sources do not allow us to get into what ultimately motivated Decius, but the question still remains.

This leads to chapter 5, about the Decian persecution, how this was implemented, and the consequences for the church. How could Cyprian deal with the various categories of people who were impacted by what Decius ordered—those who willingly, even eagerly, offered sacrifice? those who bribed magistrates to obtain a certificate to say that they had sacrificed? those who got a substitute to sacrifice for them? those who fled rather than sacrifice? and those who refused and paid the price? Again, Brent does not remain with the Christian sources and report what they reveal but probes the religious and sociological outlook of that time, including examining cases of religious syncretism in art and literature. Were some of those who offered sacrifice doing so out of the conviction that they were participating in a civic duty, which they considered had no bearing on their religious preference? But what about those who were firmly convinced that doing this would violate their theological convictions?

Chapter 6 deals with the church of the martyrs, those confessors who had survived the consequences of their actions in refusing to offer sacrifice. Even when some of these were in prison, they had written certificates of peace (*libellus pacis*) where they asked for leniency for the lapsed by invoking the authority that they claimed was derived through suffering. Was this a request or a command? Taking this in the latter sense, Cyprian was faced with the dilemma of, on the one hand, not being seen as confronting those who had earned the respect of the wider community and, on the other, to uphold his authority and reassert his conviction that he would be the one to decide on the question of penance and readmittance. Brent shows how this dilemma led him to come up with a new understanding and redefinition of martyrdom, where confessors could not be seen to undermine church order. This had consequences not only in Carthage but also in Rome, where those promoting leniency, others affirming an unyielding rigorist position, and yet others talking about an appropriate penitential model all had to be dealt with. To top it all, just when the laxists under Felicissimus had been ruled to undermine the possibility of maintaining church discipline, the deaths caused by the plague, as well as rumors of yet

another assault on the church, this time under Valerian, forced Cyprian to make concessions. But this was not a blanket amnesty: on the question of the recognition of baptism offered by those whom he considered outside the boundaries of the church, Cyprian was resolutely unyielding, and this led to the great debate with Stephen, the bishop of Rome, which is the subject of the last major chapter.

Chapter 7 extensively documents the course of the baptismal controversy with Stephen. Brent examines this under the rubric of *sacramentum unitatis*—asking as to how something that seemed so obvious to Cyprian, namely, that those baptized “outside” the church needed to be baptized, not rebaptized, since according to him what was claimed to be baptism was no baptism at all. Brent retraces the events in Cyprian’s episcopate, including the conflict with the Novatians, and examines Letters 69–75 and the anonymous treatise *De rebaptismate*, which he sees as an accurate representation of Stephen’s position. My own work on this controversy, “...*baptisma unum in sancta ecclesia...*”: *A Theological Appraisal of the Baptismal Controversy in the Work and Writings of Cyprian of Carthage* (Ammesbek bei Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek [Peter Jensen], 1997), judged that this document, part of the vigorous pamphleteering of that time, led to an untidy and messy theory regarding baptism and the role of the bishop in the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

In scrutinizing the decisions taken at the councils held in Carthage during the years 254–256, Brent examines the enduring issue of the emergence of the “primacy” of Rome through the claims of an episcopal monarchy (and Cyprian’s earlier role in fostering the grounds for such a claim) and looks at the visual representation of various ecclesiastical leaders in the cemetery of Callistus in Rome, where we find a painting of Cyprian next to that of Cornelius. The acrimonious baptismal controversy ended without resolution with the death of Stephen in 257 and the martyrdom of Cyprian in September 258.

The unresolved and unanswered questions left behind have impacted many aspects of Christian doctrine down the centuries. While this is not a topic addressed in the book, the final one-and-a-half page chapter in the form of a postscript highlights Cyprian’s legacy—a legacy that, Brent notes, failed “abysmally” and “spectacularly” not only in the context in which Cyprian lived, wrote, and died but also in the centuries following. Is this too harsh? Are these judgments too hasty? These questions will linger long after one interacts with the superb analysis and important insights found in this book.