

ADVOCATING CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN THE AGE OF SEXUAL RENUNCIATION

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## ***Introduction***

As is true for all aspects of Christian theology and practice, Christian marriage has not remained a static institution since its genesis. Christians have subscribed to dramatically different ideas about what Christian marriage should look like and debated whether there should even be Christian marriage at all. During the second century in particular, many Christians began advocating the renunciation of marriage, a move shaped by apocalyptic and eschatological thought as well as a perceived ambivalence toward marriage in the New Testament. The early Church Fathers Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) and Tertullian (160-220) therefore faced the same problem: what to do about marriage?

Both pagan converts to the new religion of Christianity, Clement and Tertullian were especially concerned with how to be Christian within their pagan environments. Their works stand out as prominent examples of the ways in which early Christians tried to understand how Christian life both conformed to and was distinct from the social and sexual mores of their non-Christian neighbors. To this end, marriage proved to be particularly challenging. Since Israelite culture and Hebrew scriptures as well as the larger Greco-Roman culture highly valued marriage and family, Christianity inherited rich traditions of marriage from the cultural environments in which it emerged. The New Testament texts and rise of apocalyptic thought, however, encouraged the early Christians to consider how – or whether – to embrace, theologize, appropriate, or reject values from Jewish and pagan cultures alike. As strong tendencies toward asceticism and sexual

renunciation developed within many early Christian communities, debates about the body soon surfaced, particularly with respect to sex and marriage.

Marcion, Tatian and the Encratites, and various “gnostic” groups<sup>1</sup> represent just a few of the better-known Christian individuals or groups who, generally speaking, rejected marriage, sexual activities, and/or “traditional” families in favor of absolute continence in the second century.<sup>2</sup> Both Marcion and Tatian, for example, argued that all baptized Christians should fully abstain from sexual activities.<sup>3</sup> Marcion believed that the present world is subject to the Creator God of the Hebrew scriptures but that Christ came to save humanity from this realm; followers of Christ, then, should reject marriage as part of their efforts to escape this current, visible world.<sup>4</sup> Tatian, on the other hand, believed that baptized Christians would not be able to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they engaged in sexual activities; based on his understanding of Adam and Eve’s union, he contended that “human beings must abandon married intercourse, the most clear symptom of Adam’s frailty and the most decisive obstacle to the indwelling of the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> See David Hunter for an explanation of the generic term “gnostic” as well as some similarities of the beliefs held among Valentinus and other gnostics. David Hunter, Trans. and Ed., *Marriage in the Early Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging the diversity of Christian beliefs and practices, Peter Brown cautions that the types, ideals, and goals of sexual renunciation varied across different communities. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*, 88. For an discussion and comparison of Marcion and Tatian’s theologies, see Brown, 86-94.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller summary of Marcion’s theology and how it affects his views on marriage, see Brown, 88-90.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 92.

different theological reasons, then, both Marcion and Tatian advocated sexual renunciation.

Moreover, Marcion and Tatian attracted a number of followers. For instance, Christians following Tatian's teachings are generally called "Encratites," a term derived from the Greek *enkrateia*, "continence," since they argued all Christians should fully abstain from sexual intercourse, meat, and wine.<sup>6</sup> To engage in these activities, and especially marriage, "was to contribute directly to the cycle of mortality" rather than escaping it.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, gnostic groups, wanting freedom from the body and the passions, also believed salvation through Christ was an "escape from this material world;" marriage was irrelevant and "sexual activity (as a prominent aspect of physical existence) was something to be transcended or repudiated."<sup>8</sup> Thus, there were many Christians in the second century who both "favored sexual renunciation and wished to impose this on others."<sup>9</sup> These ideas did not exist only on the fringe of Christian society; apocryphal writings such as *The Acts of Paul (and Thecla)* and *The Acts of Thomas* were becoming widely popular for their messages of asceticism and sexual renunciation.

The repudiation of marriage was not unopposed, however. As key thinkers like Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian spoke out in defense of

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<sup>6</sup> For a thorough explanation of the Encratites, and particularly their attitudes toward marriage and sexuality, see Brown, 92-102.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 12.

marriage, Christian communities quickly faced a vexing debate over what Christian marriage should look like – and indeed, whether Christian marriage should even be supported at all. It is within the context of these debates, then, that Clement and Tertullian pushed back against the extreme forms of asceticism and sexual renunciation. Clement and Tertullian each carved out responses that reserved a place for marriage within Christian life. Given Clement’s location in the culturally and theologically diverse city of Alexandria, perhaps it is not surprising that he would uphold marriage as he did. But yet, even Tertullian reaches a similar conclusion from within a different cultural environment, which both demonstrates, perhaps, that some early Christians recognized the need to protect Christian marriage and reveals the efforts many made to negotiate Christianity’s inherently social nature with its commitment to an other-worldly faith.

Although later Fathers like John Chrysostom and Augustine are more widely recognized as the constructive theologians of early Christian marriage, Clement and Tertullian remain significant to its development because they each vocalized a position of compromise at a critical juncture in the debates over Christian marriage. Clement and Tertullian are of further importance to the study marriage in early Christianity because they stand out as regional leaders, representing the different cultural perspectives of Alexandria and Carthage, respectively. Understanding the early Christian writers from within their individual cultural locations is imperative for better understanding their ancient arguments, beliefs, and theological systems. Too often the contexts that inspired or produced these theologies are misunderstood or simply not considered. Christianity, however, must be studied

within its cultural context rather than abstracted from it. This paper, then, will explore the marriage theologies of Clement and Tertullian in order to demonstrate how these writings reveal the Fathers' individual backgrounds and particular cultures. Despite their differences, however, Clement and Tertullian each upheld the institution of Christian marriage alongside continence, a compromise which they achieved during a formative period of Christian history and which proved to provide a solid foundation for Christian marriage theology.

### ***Clement's Theology of Marriage and Continence***

Toward the end of the second century, Clement arrived in Alexandria well versed in Greek mythology and philosophy but dedicated in his conversion to Christianity.<sup>10</sup> As a Christian teacher, Clement set about communicating to his fellow believers "a sense of the God-given importance of every moment of daily life, and especially of the life of the household."<sup>11</sup> Clement's theology of marriage, found primarily in Books II and III of his *Miscellanies*, is rooted in biblical scriptures,<sup>12</sup> reinforced by Greek philosophical ideas, and guided by the value of continence. In response to those who are zealously arguing against marriage in his region – particularly the Basilidians, Isidore, followers of Carpocrates and Epiphanes, and the

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<sup>10</sup> See Brown, 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Throughout this paper, the term "biblical scriptures" will be used to reference both the Hebrew scriptures (Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) as well as the texts of the New Testament.

Marcionites<sup>13</sup> – Clement finds a compromise between these dichotomous positions: he supports both the institution of marriage and the sexually abstinent life. For Clement, the ultimate goal for Christians is to lead a life of continence, which intrinsically shapes his opinion on marriage, his interpretation of biblical scriptures, and his appropriation of Greek philosophical values.

### *Defense of Marriage*

Clement is adamant that marriage is a good and intentional aspect of creation. His view of marriage is formed by both his reading of biblical scriptures as well as from Greco-Roman understandings. Defining marriage as the “conjunction of man and woman for the procreation of legitimate children,” Clement first corroborates his definition with the Greek dramatist Menander rather than any biblical text.<sup>14</sup> He then summarizes various Greek philosophies of how and why marriage is good, relating that Plato and the Peripatetics, for instance, also approve of marriage. Additionally, Clement observes, many thinkers point to natural law as evidence that humans should marry; those advocating such a position argue that it “is evident from the structure of our bodies, which are male and female” that

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<sup>13</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 3.1-4 Translation *The Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origin with Introduction and Notes* by John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick, Eds., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954). Clement specifically mentions that these people or groups, and others, rejected either marriage altogether or monogamous marriage specifically; broadly speaking, they were gnostics or celibate Christians, typically ascribing to an ascetic lifestyle. For more information on these gnostics and other ascetic groups, see Brown, 103-125.

<sup>14</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2.23. Translation provided by Philip Schaff, Ed., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available online). In Book III, by contrast, Clement immediately grounds his ideas in numerous biblical texts.



“nature has adapted us for marriage.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, though, Clement clarifies the importance of marriage from a Christian perspective. God’s creation is good, as are the laws and commandments of the Old Testament proclaiming the holiness of marriage,<sup>16</sup> and numerous passages in the New Testament uphold marriage as well. Indeed, “marriage is co-operation with the work of creation,”<sup>17</sup> and scriptures affirm that marriage is an established way of serving the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

In Clement’s opinion, monogamous marriage allows for both procreation and proper “domestic affairs.”<sup>19</sup> To begin with, marriage is primarily undertaken with the goal of begetting children.<sup>20</sup> Firmly distinguishing procreation from fornication,<sup>21</sup> Clement disapproves of sex for the sake of pleasure, even within marriage. Sex for procreative purposes, however, is a necessary and appropriate aspect of marriage. Acknowledging a couple’s typical desire to have children, Clement thinks of the Greek poets who declare that “fruitful” marriages are happy ones; he also reiterates God’s command to “increase and replenish” the earth

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<sup>15</sup> Clement, *Stromata*. 2.23. (All translations from *Stromata* 2.23 are from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume II, unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>16</sup> Clement, *Stromata*, 3.12.84. (Hereafter, *Strom.*; all translations from *Stromata*, Book 3 are from the *Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity* unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>17</sup> *Strom.*, 3.9.66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.79.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.79, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 2.10.83. Trans. Simon P. Wood (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1954).

<sup>21</sup> *Strom.*, 3.12.84.

(Genesis 1.28).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, having children within marriage collaborates with God's intention for humanity. Through the act of procreation, "man becomes like God, because he co-operates, in his human way, in the birth of another man."<sup>23</sup>

While procreation is upheld as a natural part of marriage, it should still be undertaken in a serious manner, tempered by a "chaste and controlled will."<sup>24</sup> Although a married man ought to love his wife, he should not desire to have passionate sexual relations with her. It is "shameful that man, created by God, should be more licentious than the irrational creatures," Clement remarks.<sup>25</sup> Sex should only be undertaken for the purpose of procreation, "as a conscious action," and in a controlled, disciplined way.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Clement believes that a married couple should – and truly can – mutually agree "with reverence... to beget children" as well as to "suspend" marital relations in favor of prayer.<sup>27</sup> Sex has its place within marriage when the couple intends to produce children, but a couple can also agree to forgo sexual relations so as to more fully commit to the continent life.

In addition to providing children, marriage can be beneficial in one's relationship with the Lord; Clement firmly believes that marriage and family life are not inherently distracting. In fact, when Clement reads the biblical passage that

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<sup>22</sup> *Strom.* 2.23. (All translations from *Stromata* 2.23 are from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume II, unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>23</sup> Clement, *Paedagogus*, 2.10.83.

<sup>24</sup> *Strom.*, 3.7.58

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 2.23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 3.7.58. See also Brown, 132-134.

<sup>27</sup> *Strom.*, 3.12.79.

states the Lord is present when “two or three [are] gathered in the name of Christ,” he understands that it could easily be referring to a “husband, wife, and child.”<sup>28</sup> Since a wife “is a helpmeet in the house and in Christian faith,”<sup>29</sup> marriage provides a unique way of serving the Lord.<sup>30</sup> Christ may have been celibate, but he was not an “ordinary man... [who was] in need of some helpmeet after the flesh.”<sup>31</sup> Believers, though, may indeed need such help and can find support for their faith within a Christian household.

Furthermore, Clement describes marriage as “a sacred image,” which must be kept “pure from those things which defile it.”<sup>32</sup> Although Clement does not specify how marriage is a sacred image, one can infer two possibilities. First, as has been shown, begetting children within marriage allows a Christian to “cooperate” with God’s creation, thereby making the marital union a reflection of the divine intention for humanity. Additionally, marriage, as a good and intentional part of creation, can reflect the divine image when it is properly undertaken. In other words, marriage has the potential to help Christians attain the ultimate goal of a

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.10.68. See Matthew 18.20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23; 3.18.108.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.49. Clement says this in response to those who “proudly say that they are imitating the Lord who neither married;” he explains they are missing the point: Christ did not marry because his bride is the Church, and, moreover, it was also not “necessary for [Christ] to beget children since he abides eternally,” a statement that underscores the importance Clement places on procreation. *Strom.*, 3.6.49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23.

wholly continent life, through which he or she would thereupon reflect the image of God.

*The Goal of Continence*

Despite Clement's firm defense of marriage, he remains equally committed to the goal of continence and truly believes one can have a continent life even within marriage. The connection between continence and Clement's theology of marriage is evident when Clement begins his lengthiest treatment of marriage, in Book III of his *Miscellanies*, by defining continence. "Continence," he resolutely states, "is an ignoring of the body in accordance with the confession of faith in God."<sup>33</sup> Beyond just a value, continence is an ideal toward which humans should strive in all aspects of their lives.<sup>34</sup> Implying more than merely sexual abstinence, continence includes all "other things for which the soul has an evil desire... there is also a continence of the tongue, of money, of use, and of desire."<sup>35</sup> To Clement, continence, which he also defines as chastity, extends to all areas of one's life, including, and perhaps especially, marriage.<sup>36</sup> As was shown previously, Clement even proposes the idea of continent sex, that someone could have controlled, disciplined, and passionless

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4, 3.7.57.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.58-59, 3.11.71.

sexual relations.<sup>37</sup> The ideal of continence, Clement imagines, is like “a state of final serenity of purpose.”<sup>38</sup>

For Christians, having the goal of continence encourages one to develop self-control, which enables one to fully and properly worship God. Although someone can learn to exercise self-control within his or her life, it is never completely attained without being granted by God. Clement thus defines self-control as a “divine power or grace” that empowers the fully continent life but is only given to some.<sup>39</sup> It helps one achieve the “human ideal,” which is “that one should fight desire and not be subservient to it.”<sup>40</sup> The “practical effect” and ultimate goal “is not to experience desire at all.”<sup>41</sup> The human will “is to be directed only towards that which is necessary,” not that which is purely desired.<sup>42</sup> A Christian should strive to live his life free from “the passions” and thereby live according to God’s intention rather than human desires.<sup>43</sup>

Continence and marriage are not opposed to one another; rather, Clement clarifies that continence can be attained within marriage as well. The apostles Peter

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.58.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, 131.

<sup>39</sup> *Strom.*, 3.1.4

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.57.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Brown provides a nice definition for the “passions” in ancient thought: not merely “feelings,” passions were understood to be “complexes which hindered the true expression of feelings.” Brown, 130.

and Philip, for example, were married men with wives and children.<sup>44</sup> Serving as role models for continent marriages, they regarded their wives as if they were sisters and “devoted themselves to preaching without distraction.”<sup>45</sup> With such actions, these apostles exemplified the Christian goal of continence, living according to a controlled will rather than their desires.<sup>46</sup> Even though they were married, Clement contends, they agreed to suspend sexual activities, at least for a time, so they could devote themselves to doing the Lord’s work.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, their sister-wives served as “fellow-ministers,” evangelizing to women and housewives directly, which is how the earliest Christ-followers were able to spread the gospel in “the women’s quarters without any scandal being aroused.”<sup>48</sup>

As this example demonstrates, Clement understands that marriage provides a way to control one’s passions by providing an acceptable outlet and a supportive helpmate. A married man may choose to be sexually abstinent only for short periods at a time, lest he “fall into sin” or begin to desire other women than his wife.<sup>49</sup> Not

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<sup>44</sup> *Strom.*, 3.6.52.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.53.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.58.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Strom.*, 3.12.79.

<sup>48</sup> *Strom.*, 3.6.53. Even Paul, Clement suggests, addressed one of his letters to his “consort” (*Strom.*, 3.6.53, Trans. *Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity*) or “yokefellow” (*Strom.* 3.6.53, Trans. David Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 53), indicating that he had a wife, too. While many Christians believe Paul’s letters support the rejection of marriage, Clement contends that Paul not only had a wife but also that “the only reason why he did not take her about with him was that it would have been an inconvenience for his ministry” (*Strom.* 3.6.53. Begin again trans. from *Library of Christian Classics: Volume II, Alexandrian Christianity*).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.79.

everyone is capable of full continence all the time, and trying to live too strictly might cause someone to lose hope.

Although marriage provides the appropriate way for people to express their sexual impulses, some “become absorbed by marriage and fulfill their desires in the indulgence which the law permits.”<sup>50</sup> While such behavior is legal, they “become like beasts” and are distracted from loving God.<sup>51</sup> Rather than simply fulfilling one’s bodily desires, though, a Christian dedicated to serving God is expected to “walk honorably” in the way of Christ.<sup>52</sup> Since marriage is in accordance with living in a Godly way, cultivating self-control is an essential aspect of marriage.<sup>53</sup>

Achieving continence in all of one’s endeavors, including marriage, enables one to become closer to knowing God. Christians aim to be “like unto the Lord as far as possible” and work to “purify [themselves] from indulgence and lust and take care for [their] soul[s] which must continually be devoted to the Deity alone.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Clement explains, “it is not only the spirit which ought to be sanctified, but also our behavior, manner of life, and our body.”<sup>55</sup> Despite the extraordinary level of this goal, such sanctification is possible because the human mind is able to receive “the power of God and the divine image” when it is “pure and set free from

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 3.9.67.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.58.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.42.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.47.

all evil.”<sup>56</sup> All can attain this pure state of mind by believing in the Lord and cultivating the self-discipline necessary to follow the commandments.<sup>57</sup> “He who is controlled,” Clement writes, “liberates from its passions his soul which is master of the body.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, overcoming one’s inherent human passions, as opposed to yielding and thus being enslaved to them, brings liberty.<sup>59</sup> With help from God, humans are capable of the self-control required in life, even within marriage, “for desire is nourished and invigorated if it is encouraged in indulgence, just as, on the other hand, it loses strength if it is kept in check.”<sup>60</sup> Those who succumb to their passions are “choosing evil which they bring upon themselves, now and hereafter.”<sup>61</sup>

The biblical scriptures, Clement argues, not only support this belief that a Christian’s life and behavior should be marked by the values of continence and self-control but also demonstrate how marriage helps one nurture those values. Paul’s epistles, Clement relates, teach that the purpose of the law of the Old Testament “is to lead us from unrighteousness to righteousness, so that it would have us self-controlled in marriage, in begetting children, and in general behavior.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, Mosaic law dictates self-control. For example, while humans had been

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.42.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.41.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.42.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.46.



commanded to “increase and multiply” (Genesis 1.28), the commandments further instructed them that sex should only occur for procreative purposes.<sup>63</sup> For evidence of this, Clement points to the commandments dictating proper sexual behavior with one’s spouse or prohibiting sex with a “captive woman” (Deut. 21.11-13).<sup>64</sup> These instructions determine the necessity of mastering discipline over one’s sexual urges. Since the laws and commandments of scripture guide one’s behavior, and it is “through the commandments,” Clement writes, that “a life of blessedness is shown to us.”<sup>65</sup> One must develop the virtues of continence and self-control in order to completely satisfy the law. Additionally, Christ came to fulfill the law, not to replace it, thereby affirming that these laws and commandments of the Old Testament remain important for Christians.<sup>66</sup> Mandating self-control in all aspects of one’s life, the law and gospel are thus both important sources of divine instruction. Finally, Clement attests, the household codes and instructions, such as those for the wives of deacons, found in the epistles of the New Testament lend further support for developing continence within marriage. Even bishops, Clement notes, should be chosen based on how successfully they ran their households – a condition that presumes they were married.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, since the epistles of holy scripture “teach self-control and continence and contain numerous instructions about marriage,

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.11.71.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.11.71-73.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.11.71.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.79.

begetting children, and domestic life,” Clement argues that they support the institution of marriage as an intended, inherent aspect of creation.<sup>68</sup> “Nowhere,” Clement emphasizes, do these epistles “rule out self-controlled marriage.”<sup>69</sup> Overall, Clement recognizes the potential of Christian marriage vis à vis its value in helping believers achieve the self-control required for the ideal continent Christian life.

*Free Will to Live According to the Ideal of Continence*

Although Clement advocates marriage, demonstrating its goodness and all that it can offer humans, he also recognizes that humanity has God-given free will. He states that Christians both “welcome as the blessed the state of abstinence from marriage in those to whom this has been granted by God” and also “admire monogamy and the high standing of single marriage.”<sup>70</sup> Christians can choose whether to marry or remain single as well as whether to beget children or not.<sup>71</sup> Neither marriage or celibacy is better than the other; what matters is how and why one behaves in whichever life he has chosen. For example, there are athletes and non-Christians who remain abstinent for various reasons; there is nothing particularly praiseworthy about their abstinence from marriage, though, since they are not choosing to remain unmarried or continent out of love or service to God.<sup>72</sup> God, however, has blessed some Christians with the state of chastity, and they are

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.86.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.86.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 3.1.4.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.9.66-67. See also *Strom.*, 2.23.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.51.

able, therefore, to maintain the self-control necessary for complete sexual abstinence. These Christians are admired just as are those who maintain monogamous, single marriages.<sup>73</sup>

Regardless of whether one is married or not, the fundamental values of continence and self-control ought to shape every aspect of a Christian's life. The guiding question for Clement is not necessarily whether someone is married or not but whether the Christian is maintaining continence and self-control within his or her chosen lifestyle. It is good for some people to marry, Clement insists, if they so choose, without coercion, and for purpose of children. While "it is wrong to forbid marriage," for others, the chaste life is truly good.<sup>74</sup> Frustrated by those who believe there is a single correct Christian way in which to live, Clement argues that everyone is successful through the grace of God. Thus, the Christian community should help one another.

Clement firmly believes that those who reject marriage and procreation "blaspheme... both the creation and the holy Creator."<sup>75</sup> In response to their claims, he calls them antichrists, saying that they "pervert the sense of the books they quote."<sup>76</sup> Clement also wonders if those who reject marriage because they believe sexual relations are impure would agree that they themselves are impure since they

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.85.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.45.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

“owe their existence to sexual relations.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Clement sarcastically taunts, those who reject marriage because they believe “they have already attained the state of resurrection” should also avoid food and beverages, “for the apostle says that in the resurrection the belly and food shall be destroyed.”<sup>78</sup> Others believe marriage is fornication, introduced by the devil, and thus “they proudly say that they are imitating the Lord who neither married nor had any possession in this world, boasting that they understand the gospel better than anyone else.”<sup>79</sup> But, Clement responds, fornication and marriage are “as far apart as God is from the devil,”<sup>80</sup> and, besides, scripture says, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”<sup>81</sup> In Clement’s view, such boasting is not Christian-like behavior and, instead, indicative of a careless reading of the texts.

#### *Integration of Greek Culture and Philosophy*

Finally, Clement’s understanding of marriage demonstrates not only his location within Greek culture but also his integration of Greek thought into his Christian worldview. Establishing himself in the bustling metropolis of Alexandria, Clement became the head of the “Catechetical School” there.<sup>82</sup> In addition to

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.46.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.48.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.49.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.12.84.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.6.49.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, 123. For more on the “Catechetical” school of Alexandria, especially its connections to Philo, see Annewies van den Hoek, “The ‘Catechetical’ School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage,” *Harvard Theological Review* 90.1 (Jan. 1997), 59-87.

teaching, Clement wrote extensively. Well-known for the way in which he folds Greek thought into his Christian understanding, Clement's embeddedness in Alexandria is evident in his writings. Rich in ideas, culture, and commercial trade, the city of Alexandria boasted a thriving intellectual life as philosophers and theologians debated among one another, and this exchange proved especially fruitful in developing Christian thought.<sup>83</sup> Illustrating the pluralism of belief and thought in Alexandria, Clement's works are full of references to pagan Greek myths, philosophers, poets, and historians. Indeed, as Henny Fiska Hagg argues,

Any account of Clement and his philosophy will be incomplete if it does not attempt to give some impression of the life of the great and complex community in which Clement settled... and where he stayed for the twenty most important years of his working life. No doubt the influence that Alexandria exerted upon his career and work was considerable.<sup>84</sup>

Robert Louis Wilken adds that Clement remains "an unparalleled source of classical citations from lost works, including many precious passages from the writings of pre-Socratic philosophers."<sup>85</sup> Although Clement's location in Alexandria certainly

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<sup>83</sup> The city of Alexandria, well-known as a center for trade and commerce, was home to several distinct ethnic and religious communities; Jews, Christians, and pagans there had all been shaped by Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultures. Scholars and theologians worked alongside one another, debating the philosophical and religious beliefs of Plato, Aristotle, Judaism, and Christianity. Not only did Jews in Alexandria first produce the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible, but Jewish leaders there, such as Philo, significantly developed Jewish thought by interpreting Jewish theology in terms of the Hellenistic culture and philosophy of the city (See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Ed. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2004), 18-19.). As Christians began to establish themselves in Alexandria, ideas from Philo and the neo-Platonists were incorporated into Christian thought. (See Karen Louise Jolly, *Tradition and Diversity: Christianity in a World Context to 1500* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997), 63.).

<sup>84</sup> Henny Fiska Hagg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, "Culture and the Light of Faith," *First Things* (Feb. 2011), 33.

does not pre-determine a particular worldview, the effect of his situation is that his writings reflect the unique culture of the city.

The way in which Clement engages pagan texts with ease is evident in his discussions on marriage. He cites, for example, the myth of Polyxena, to whom the thought of marriage was “a calamity;” she thought yielding to the passions in marriage would enslave her.<sup>86</sup> After telling her story, Clement turns to biblical scripture, reiterating the necessity – and thus possibility – of self-control of the body even into marriage. Hence, Clement uses this Greek myth as an opportunity to explicate a certain element of his Christian theology. This “carefully considered alliance”<sup>87</sup> with Greek sources demonstrates how Clement transformed the myths and ideals of the Greek philosophers into useful models for the Christian household.<sup>88</sup>

One philosophy in particular, Stoicism, left a firm imprint on Clement’s view of marriage. Stoics believed a divine principle governed the universe and that humans were morally obligated to “conduct... life in harmony with this principle.”<sup>89</sup> The Stoics intertwined Aristotle’s view that marriage was part of the natural order with a belief that the divine *kosmos* naturally intended human beings to have marriages, households, and city-states.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, since they understood the

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<sup>86</sup> *Strom.*, 2.23.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 125.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-126.

<sup>89</sup> Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>90</sup> Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 55-56. For a summary of Aristotle’s discussion on

*kosmos* itself as a grand city-state, marriage was “an important component in a larger system of morality. The act of marrying was a sign of allegiance to a higher metaphysical order; it was the equivalent of acquiescing to the divine will.”<sup>91</sup> While marriage was a necessary part of life, the expected lucidity of a Stoic was too often hampered by “the passions.”<sup>92</sup> Clement, envisioning that the ideal Christian life could be free of these passions,<sup>93</sup> transformed the Stoics beliefs that humans should marry, procreate, and establish a household into his Christian theology of marriage.<sup>94</sup> Marriage is an intentional part of God’s creation, and the resulting household structure can help a Christian family commit to the ideal continent life. As Peter Brown explains, Clement’s writings showed his fellow Christians how, “by free acts of conscious moral craftsmanship, the believer could create, within the home, a pool of circumstantial order in the midst of an untidy world.”<sup>95</sup>

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marriage, see Richard Hawley, “In a Different Guise:’ Roman Education and Greek Rhetorical Thought on Marriage,” in *Satiric Advice on Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer*, Warren S. Smith, Ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>91</sup> Deming, 57.

<sup>92</sup> For an overview of how Clement relied on Stoicism “instinctively,” see Brown, 128-130. He describes the “passions” in Stoicism as “tendencies built up within the *ego*, which could force a sage to overreact to any situation” (129). Brown describes how Clement translated Stoic ideals and values onto the Christian life, 130-139.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, 130-131.

<sup>94</sup> Deming notes that this ideal “affirm[s] the traditional Greek understanding of human society.” Deming, 60. See Deming also for an explanation of the Stoic-Cynic debate that played out for several centuries across the Greco-Roman world and was still in play in Alexandria, along with a variety of Jewish, Christian, and gnostic beliefs, during Clement’s time. Believing that marriage, the household, and other social structures were simply human inventions, without divine purpose, Cynics upheld the need for philosophical reflection and touted the need for “freedom *from* the responsibilities of conventional existence,” including especially marriage. Deming, 60-61.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, 126.

Clement also incorporates other anecdotes from Greek culture. In advocating the good of marriage, for example, Clement notes Homer's advice that someone, presumably a Greek woman, might "earnestly pray for a husband and a house," and then suggests that "good agreement" should be added to the list since husbands and wives alike should "take advantage of marriage for help in the whole of life, and for the best self-restraint."<sup>96</sup> Typical of much of Clement's work, he first provides an example from Greek literature, such as this example from Homer, and then provides depth and comprehension from within Christianity; these commentaries on conventional Greek stories or ideas run throughout Clement's writings. Clement fully engages Christian scripture, but does not use it to refute Greek thought; rather, he uses selective examples from Greek philosophy and literature to reinforce his arguments, using the combination to counter those with whom he disagrees.

In conclusion, Clement's theology of marriage is based on a combination of biblical scriptures and Greek philosophy formed in particular against those arguing against the value of Christian marriage. Essentially, Clement remarks, "all the heresies" can be divided into two groups: "either they teach that one ought to live on the principle that it is a matter of indifference whether one does right or wrong, or they set a too ascetic tone and proclaim the necessity of continence on the ground of opinions which are godless and arise from hatred of what God has created."<sup>97</sup> In response to these dichotomous positions, Clement advocates a compromise between those extremes. He fundamentally believes that God's creation is good and

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<sup>96</sup> *Strom.*, 2.23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5.40.



that marriage is an intentional aspect of God's creation. He also believes, however, that it is essential for Christians to develop the virtue of continence, even – or perhaps especially – within marriage. This sustained emphasis he places on continence grants equality to marriage and celibacy and creates a compromise among the competing voices of his time. Overall, Clement emerges as a quiet, disciplined head of household who truly believes in value of marriage. Marriage provides Christians the opportunity to worship Christ together as a household, without distraction, due to the human capability of strict self-control.

### ***Tertullian's Theology of Marriage***

Situated on the opposite side of North Africa in Carthage, Tertullian begins his work *On Monogamy* by stating that “continence honors the law of marriage, license tempers it; the former is not forced, the latter regulated; the former recognizes the power of free choice, the latter recognizes a limit. We admit one marriage, just as we do one God.”<sup>98</sup> These statements provide a nice insight into Tertullian's views of marriage. As he explains in an earlier work, the letter *To His Wife*, Christians “do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, [blessed] by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth and the furnishing of the world, and therefore permitted, yet singly.”<sup>99</sup> With

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<sup>98</sup> Tertullian, *De Monogamia (On Monogamy)*, 1.1. Trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 4: Fathers of the Third Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available online).

<sup>99</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem (To His Wife)*, 1.1. Trans. S. Thelwall. *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 4: Fathers of the Third Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, available online). Scholars generally believe this letter indicates Tertullian was married despite his strong advocacy of chastity. Robert Sider cautions that “it is natural to infer that he was married, although it is possible

statements like “admit” and “do not indeed forbid,” Tertullian does not deliver a glowing view of marriage, but it is a validation nonetheless. Marriage, while it is tempered, regulated, and limited, is necessary for maintaining humanity in this earthly realm.

Even as Tertullian defends monogamous, single marriage, he simultaneously advocates chastity, to which he is referring with his talk of continence.<sup>100</sup> Continence is also a choice for Christians, especially since there will be no marriage after the resurrection, at which time humans will be transformed into an angelic condition.<sup>101</sup> Using a close examination of biblical scriptures, Tertullian defends both chastity and monogamous marriage.

Although Tertullian develops these arguments on marriage strictly from his interpretations of biblical scriptures, his impetus to do so is his opposition to both the “heretics [who] do away with marriages” and the “Psychics” who “accumulate them.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, in order to argue against both life-long celibacy and polygamy, he carves out a particularly narrow definition of marriage. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments and determined to distinguish Christian behavior from that of his pagan

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that the addressee is a rhetorical fiction” given the “highly rhetorical character” of Tertullian’s writings in general. Robert D. Sider, “Tertullian,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Everett Ferguson, Ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1107.

<sup>100</sup> Although Clement is adamant that continence implies more than chastity, or sexual abstinence, Tertullian seems to use these terms more loosely. For Tertullian, continence is the avoidance of future sexual activity and thus is closely related to chastity. Celibacy, the state of being unmarried, also implies one is chaste.

<sup>101</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, 1.1. (Hereafter, *Ux*. All translations from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 4.)

<sup>102</sup> Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, 1. (Hereafter, *Mon*. All translations from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 4.)

neighbors, Tertullian aims to explicate why monogamous marriage is good, celibacy is better, and divorce and remarriage are not tolerated for Christians. Over-riding each of these opinions is Tertullian's expectation that the eschaton will soon be arriving and, hence, that Christians should prepare accordingly.

*Marriage: A Biblical Institution*

While issues related to marriage, spouses, and the virtues of chastity, modesty, and so forth are threaded throughout Tertullian's extensive corpus, three of his works address marriage specifically. These works, *To His Wife, An Exhortation to Chastity*, and *On Monogamy*, together provide a full picture of Tertullian's ideas on Christian marriage.<sup>103</sup> Using the biblical scriptures as his basis, Tertullian emphasizes the lawfulness of Christian marriage. Humanity sprang forth from the original union of Adam and Eve, a partnership created with intention because "God had foreseen that a peer was necessary for Adam."<sup>104</sup> Therefore, as Tertullian explicates in *On Exhortation to Chastity*, Adam and Eve were "mutually" responsible for the "duties of one marriage," an institution which God "sanctioned for mankind."<sup>105</sup> The singleness of their union is significant for Tertullian; "for Adam

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<sup>103</sup> Although firm dates for Tertullian's work are unknown, David Hunter suggests that *To His Wife* was Tertullian's first work of the three, written between 200-206; *An Exhortation to Chastity* was likely written between 208-210. *On Monogamy*, most likely Tertullian's final work addressing marriage, was written ca. 217. David Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 10-11. Scholars typically point to an increasing level of intensity throughout the progression of Tertullian's works, a tendency often attributed to Tertullian's growing commitment to Montanism, an early Christian movement that emphasized the role of ecstatic prophecy and seemed to expect a high level of moral strictness, including fasting and perhaps the rejection of second marriages or even marriage altogether.

<sup>104</sup> Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis (On Exhortation to Chastity)*, 5. Trans. S. Thelwall. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Volume 4: Fathers of the Third Century. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

<sup>105</sup> Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis*, 5. (Hereafter, *Cast*. All translations from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Volume 4.)

was the one husband of Eve, and Eve his one wife, one woman, one rib,” Tertullian emphasizes.<sup>106</sup> Although multiple wives and concubines were permissible in the time of the patriarchs, the texts of the New Testament provide new instructions for Christians, modifying some behaviors that had been allowed previously.<sup>107</sup> Christians, therefore, are only allowed one monogamous marriage; even remarriage is no longer permitted.

Tertullian stresses, however, that single marriage is permissible; “there is no place at all where we read that nuptials are prohibited,” he maintains.<sup>108</sup> Rather, Christian marriage is tolerated, just modified to once again reflect the original union of Adam and Eve. Indeed, the Paraclete was sent to complete the restoration of all things to their original states,<sup>109</sup> a process that Christ had begun a century before.<sup>110</sup> This “primitive” state of the world, which Christ and the Paraclete are in the process of restoring, is that of the original, monogamous state of Adam and Eve.<sup>111</sup> God intended marriage to be monogamous, as is seen in the union of Adam and Eve and the pairing of people and animals Noah was instructed to take on the ark; these first

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<sup>106</sup> *Ux.*, 1.2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ux.*, 1.2. See also *Cast.*, 6. Tertullian points to Romans 2.28,29; Philippians 3.3; Colossians 2.11.

<sup>108</sup> *Ux.*, 1.3.

<sup>109</sup> *Mon.*, 3, 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Ux.*, 1.2, 2.2, 2.7; *Mon.*, 4, 5, 14.

<sup>111</sup> Tertullian’s reference to humanity’s original state is a little unclear; he seems to use Adam and Eve as models of purity and chastity since they were not married before their exile from the Garden – or at least he suggests that humanity’s true primitive state was one of chastity – (*Mon.*, 5, 17) and he also uses Adam and Eve’s marriage as an example of “original,” monogamous marriage (*Mon.*, 4, 5, 17). Most likely, he believes that Adam and Eve represented the possibility of a chaste marriage.

couples were instructed “grow and multiply” the human race.<sup>112</sup> Marriage and sex, therefore, were instituted by God at the creation of humanity for the purpose of procreation; although Adam and Eve were not married before their exile from the Garden, marriage became necessary to propagate humanity.<sup>113</sup>

Marriage is not just an obligatory institution, though; it can be a beneficial Christian partnership. In *To His Wife*, for example, Tertullian concludes with a moving portrait of the potential beauty in a Christian marriage, which he describes as the “yoke... of two believers, partakers of one hope, one desire, one discipline, one and the same service.”<sup>114</sup> He continues,

Both are brethren, both fellow servants, no difference of spirit or of flesh; nay they are truly “two in one flesh.” Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit, too. Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God... Neither hides from the other; neither shuns the other; neither is troublesome... Alms are given without danger of ensuing torment; sacrifices attended without scruple; daily diligence discharged without impediment... Between the two echo psalms and hymns; and they mutually challenge each other which shall better chant to their Lord. Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys. To these He sends His own peace. Where two are, there withal is He Himself... [and] the Evil One is not.<sup>115</sup>

Marriage, then, can provide a true partnership, an opportunity for Christian believers to support one another in their worship of the Lord. Marriage provides

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<sup>112</sup> *Mon.*, 4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 17.

<sup>114</sup> *Ux.*, 2.8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* Translation from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 4.

mutual benefits for a husband and wife; their endeavors together please Christ, who blesses them with peace.

*Chastity: the Better Choice*

Despite Tertullian's initial defense of monogamous, single marriage as an intentional part of creation, he also strongly advocates chastity. Therefore, although Tertullian beautifully illustrates the epitome of Christian marriage, the moving passage feels out of place in comparison to his tone and overall message throughout the rest of his writings on marriage. One might expect a defense of chastity in his work entitled *Exhortation to Chastity*, but even his treatises *To His Wife* and *On Monogamy* include several assertions that support chastity alongside, after, or even instead of marriage. Continence, or the avoidance of future sexual activities, "will be a mean whereby you will amass a mighty substance of sanctity; by parsimony of the flesh you will gain the Spirit."<sup>116</sup> Continence truly works to bring about sanctity, Tertullian asserts, for when a man is "deprived of his wife, he savors spiritually."<sup>117</sup>

Tertullian finds much evidence for the ideal of continence in the texts of the New Testament. For example, he reminds his readers that the Lord, "Himself... a virgin," stated that the heavenly kingdom is open to eunuchs and Paul affirmed this "preference to continence" (1 Cor. 7.1,7,37,40).<sup>118</sup> He also disassembles Paul's concession "Better it is to marry than to burn" (1 Cor. 7.9), asking his readers whether anyone would "have the hardihood to say, "Better (it is) to marry," without

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<sup>116</sup> *Cast.*, 10.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Mon.*, 3.

saying what it is better than. Consider, he continues, if the phrase were, “Better it is to lose one eye than two.” It would not “be *better* to only have one eye” than both, he reasons.<sup>119</sup> Tertullian establishes that during the New Testament period, Christ and the apostles upheld a “sanctity of the flesh” necessitating celibacy.<sup>120</sup> Celibacy, Tertullian presumes, implies that one would be chaste as well.

Indeed, a number of examples from the gospels demonstrate Christ’s preference for continence. Jesus states that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children (Matt 18.1-4, 19.13-15; Mark 10.13-15), whom he defines as those “who, after marriage, remained or became virgins;”<sup>121</sup> Jesus further calls his followers to “copy the simplicity of the dove, a bird not merely innocuous but modest too, and whereof one male knows one female.”<sup>122</sup> The story of the Samaritan woman demonstrates that “manifold husbandry is adultery” (John 4.16-18), and, finally, “in the revelation of His own glory, He prefers, from among so many saints and prophets, to have with him Moses and Elias – the one a monogamist, the other a voluntary celibate...”<sup>123</sup> Thus, while marriage is both good and permitted, numerous passages from the New Testament confirm that celibacy is truly the *better* choice.

While Tertullian thoroughly believes that all Christians should strive for chastity, he does concede that the Paraclete “in His character of Comforter... excuses

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*; emphasis added. For a similar argument, see also *Ux.*, 1.3.

<sup>120</sup> *Mon.*, 8.

<sup>121</sup> Tertullian seems to gather this understanding from the discussion of eunuchs in Matthew 19.12.

<sup>122</sup> *Mon.*, 8. Presumably, Tertullian is referring to Jesus’ advice in Matthew 10.16.

<sup>123</sup> *Mon.*, 8. See Matt 17.1-8; Mark 9.2-9; Luke 9.28-26; see also Luke 1.17.

your infirmity from (the stringency of) an absolute continence.”<sup>124</sup> Christ recognizes the difficulty of fully committing to complete abstinence from sexual relations, and thus those unable to do so are excused. In fact, for those “unequal (to that perfection), Christ stands... [as] a monogamist in spirit, having one Church as His spouse.”<sup>125</sup> Tertullian therefore accepts that there are “two priestesses of Christian sanctity, monogamy and continence.”<sup>126</sup> While celibacy is preferable, given the expected end of times, monogamy remains a biblically justifiable option, based on God’s intentions for Adam and Eve as well as Christ’s “spiritual” monogamy with the Church. Nowhere, he concedes, are nuptials prohibited in scripture.

#### *Christians Should Avoid Divorce and Remarriage*

The thrust of Tertullian’s theology of marriage is that Christian marriage should be limited to a single monogamous marriage; divorce and remarriage are not tolerated. While some of the patriarchs did not practice strict monogamy and allowed for divorce, Christ prohibited divorce not only because “it was not so” in the beginning – like plurality of marriage – but also because “What God hath conjoined, man shall not separate.”<sup>127</sup> Since marriage occurs “when God joins “two into one flesh,” it is permanent; not only does divorce “dissever” that marriage, it is unnatural

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<sup>124</sup> *Mon.*, 3.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; see Matt 19.3-8. Tertullian’s order is reversed. Tertullian acknowledges that some turn to Abraham for justification of non-monogamous relationships, but he argues that “reject[ing] [Abraham’s] circumcision” means that Christians “will refuse his digamy” – and, presumably, other non-monogamous marriages represented in biblical scriptures. (*Mon.*, 6)



since it does not emanate from God's intention.<sup>128</sup> Second marriages are further prohibited for "whether through marriage or promiscuously, the admission of a second man (to intercourse) is pronounced adultery by [God]."<sup>129</sup> Second marriages, Tertullian emphasizes, are "akin to adultery."<sup>130</sup> "Even when the carnal nature is allowed room for exercise in first marriage," it still "averts the Holy Spirit" and, thus, Tertullian muses, one can only wonder how much more damage a second marriage could do.<sup>131</sup>

While all second marriages should be avoided, Tertullian focuses particularly on why a Christian should not remarry after the death of his or her spouse; given the lower life expectancy rates during his time, remarriage for such a reason was common among Christians and pagans alike.<sup>132</sup> Despite the common practice of remarriage, Tertullian strongly believes these new unions should be avoided. Since, he explains, "continence has been pointed out by the Lord of salvation as an instrument for attaining eternity, and as a testimony of our faith," the death of one's spouse provides the perfect opportunity to dedicate oneself to continence.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Mon.*, 9.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>131</sup> *Cast.*, 10.

<sup>132</sup> For more on demographic information about this time period, see Walter Scheidel, Chapter 3, "Demography," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge Histories Online: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>133</sup> *Ux.*, 1.7.

“Let us love the opportunity of continence,” Tertullian advises, “as soon as it offers itself, let us resolve to accept it, that which we have not the strength to follow in matrimony we may follow in widowhood.”<sup>134</sup> Young people may not be able to control their desires for sexual activities, and thus they can properly channel these passions into marriage. Once one is older, however, he or she may then have the strength to commit to continence. Still, it is not an easy vow even then; the widow who dedicates herself to a continent lifestyle will have a harder task than the virgin “because it is easy not to crave after that which you know not, and to turn away from what you have never had to regret.”<sup>135</sup> It is “more glorious” for a widow to commit herself to continence when she truly knowing what she is giving up, for then, Tertullian states, “she has found the good for herself.”<sup>136</sup> The difficulty of the continent life aside, dedicating oneself to continence and the Lord is truly the better choice.

Lastly, Christians should eschew second marriages because they can be “detrimental to faith... [and] obstructive to holiness.”<sup>137</sup> While Tertullian upholds a Christian’s initial marriage as good, he presents a list of reasons why marriage, even to a fellow Christian, can distract spouses, particularly wives, from properly serving God.<sup>138</sup> Thus, although single marriage is permissible, Tertullian hopes to prove why

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.7.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.7.

<sup>138</sup> In this part of his discussion, Tertullian does not specify that these reasons to avoid marriage are particular to *second* marriages, and he thereby implicates *all* marriages with his lack of specification.

future marriages should be avoided. “Any and every believing woman must of necessity obey God,” Tertullian says, “and how can she serve two lords – the Lord and her husband...”<sup>139</sup> There are, of course, many reasons why people desire remarriage – or, rather, mere “excuses by which we color our insatiable carnal appetite;” specifically, people point to “the necessities of props to lean on; a house to be managed; a family to be governed; chests and keys to be guarded; the wool-spinning to be dispensed; food to be attended to; cares to be generally lessened.”<sup>140</sup> Yet while people provide these reasons for needing to be married, Tertullian argues that these domestic needs can be met by taking a “spiritual wife,” such as one of the Christian widows who is “fair in faith, dowered with poverty, [and] sealed with age.”<sup>141</sup> Taking a spiritual wife is fine since she will be equally devoted to serving the Lord.

What especially troubles Tertullian is when Christian women marry non-believing, Gentile husbands. “It is certain that believers contracting marriages with Gentiles are guilty of fornication, and are to be excluded from all communication with the brotherhood,” he states emphatically. Sexual relations with Gentile men “violates the “temple of God” [and] comingles the “members of Christ” with the members of an adulteress.”<sup>142</sup> Moreover, when the Christian woman obeys her

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As has been demonstrated, though, Tertullian states his preference for celibacy while upholding the institution of single marriage.

<sup>139</sup> *Ux.*, 2.3.

<sup>140</sup> *Cast.*, 12.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ux.*, 2.3.

Gentile husband, she will thereby follow typical practices of other Gentile women, such as cultivating lavish dress or hairstyles, desiring “worldly elegancies,” and so forth.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, an unbelieving husband is “a servant of the devil... hindering the pursuits and duties of believers.”<sup>144</sup> Regardless of whether a husband respects his wife’s Christian beliefs, he will most likely keep her occupied so she will be unable to observe fasts; he will be suspicious when she attends the Lord’s Supper and will not provide hospitality for Christian pilgrims. Finally, a wife of a Gentile husband would be expected to take part in pagan rituals, to visit the tavern with him, and so on. In no way will she be able to devote her time to the Christian faith.

Finally, Tertullian explains, “it is equally congruous that those whom God has separated by death man is not to conjoin by marriage; the joining of the separation will be just as contrary to God’s will as would have been the separation of the conjunction.”<sup>145</sup> The institution of marriage was created for the joining of one man and one woman; anything beyond that violates what God originally intended.

#### *The Relevance of the Coming Eschaton*

Tertullian’s theology of marriage is further informed by his belief that the eschaton is imminent and, hence, that Christians should be actively preparing for its arrival. For example, even as Tertullian emphasizes that marriage is, “of course... a good thing,”<sup>146</sup> he considers 1 Corinthians, chapter 7: “What, however, is better than

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Mon.*, 9.

<sup>146</sup> *Ux.*, 1.3.

this “good,” we learn from the apostle, who permits marrying indeed, but prefers abstinence; the former on account of the insidiousnesses of temptations, the latter on account of the straits of the times.”<sup>147</sup> Following Paul, Tertullian believes that the end of times and subsequent resurrection will soon arrive. This belief has two consequences for marriage. First, Tertullian believes that marriage inherently distracts Christians from preparing for the end of times and subsequent resurrection. Secondly, all of the reasons for marriage, especially children, are no longer relevant since the eschaton will soon be arriving. The “anxiety for posterity... is idle,”<sup>148</sup> Tertullian asserts, “for why should we be eager to bear children, whom, when we have them, we desire to send before us to glory (in respect, I mean, of the distresses that are now imminent); desirous as we are ourselves, too, to be taken out of this most wicked world, and received into the Lord’s presence...”<sup>149</sup> Thus, Tertullian’s focus on chastity is a result of his belief that the eschaton will soon be arriving and, hence, Christians must prepare themselves accordingly.

Additionally, Tertullian’s rejection of second marriages is also due in part to his understanding of the resurrected state. Jesus teaches, for example, that in the eschaton, Christians “will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but will be equal to angels” (Matthew 22.30; Mark 12.25; Luke 20.35, 36); therefore, Tertullian concludes there will probably not be any “restitution of the conjugal relation,”

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ux.*, 1.4.

<sup>149</sup> *Ux.*, 1.5.

either.<sup>150</sup> Instead, humans are “destined... to rise to a spiritual consortship” and will recognize not only themselves but also their “departed consorts,” or previous partners.<sup>151</sup> “Else how shall we sing thanks to God to eternity,” he wonders, “if there shall remain in us no sense and memory of this debt; if we shall be reformed in substance, not in consciousness?”<sup>152</sup> Thus, even though humans will be resurrected in a new way, without marriage, they will still retain a memory of their earthly lives, including all of their former spouses. Better to avoid any potential awkwardness, Tertullian states, by only marrying once.

*Rooted in the Roman World*

Despite Tertullian’s best efforts to distinguish Christian practice and behavior from the Romans, he remains rooted in his Roman context. Even Tertullian’s persistent nervousness about married life reflects the values of Roman marriage. When he rejects much of married life as being focused on worldly affairs and too distracting from God, he cites, for example, that being married to a fellow Christian necessitates that a wife serve two masters, her husband and the Lord.<sup>153</sup> He does not base this assertion in the household codes of the New Testament, as he could easily do, but simply states such as fact. This recognition of the husband as

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<sup>150</sup> *Mon.*, 10.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ux.*, 2.5.

having authority over his wife demonstrates how Tertullian cannot escape his embeddedness within the Greco-Roman world.<sup>154</sup>

As has been established, Tertullian believes that a non-believing husband presents further obstacles to a Christian wife's worship, and the desire for children is "idle" given the imminent in-breaking of the kingdom of God.<sup>155</sup> Much better, Tertullian believes, is the chaste life, for it provides an opportunity for someone to focus completely on God.<sup>156</sup> Here, Tertullian is arguing against several Roman practices. First, he disagrees with the Romans and Christians alike who permit divorce and multiple marriages and do not value the importance of monogamy and chastity. He also rejects the Roman expectation that a husband and wife produce children.

Tertullian remains particularly marked by the Roman values of modesty and pragmatism. Modesty, a key virtue for Roman women, is apparent throughout his discussions of women and the behavior Tertullian expects of them.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, Tertullian is an exemplar of Roman pragmatism. "Tertullian," Everett Ferguson writes, "marked out the rational lines along which much of subsequent Western theology would proceed."<sup>158</sup> In fact, Ferguson observes, "his favorite word is reason

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<sup>154</sup> This also indicates how the texts of the New Testament, upon which Tertullian so heavily relies, are also strongly rooted in the ideals of the Greco-Roman world.

<sup>155</sup> *Ux.*, 1.4.

<sup>156</sup> *Cast.*, 1, 10.

<sup>157</sup> See Tertullian's treatises *On the Veiling of Virgins* and *On the Apparel of Women*, in particular. For a discussion on virtues of Roman women, see Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>158</sup> Ferguson, Everett, "Tertullian," *Expository Times* 120.7 (2009), 316.

(*ratio*).<sup>159</sup> Finally, although Tertullian's proscriptions for Christian marriage spring forth from Christian scripture, they are also shaped by the traditional Roman attitudes toward marriage. Judith Evans Grubbs states, for example, that Tertullian, in advocating that women (and men) marry only once, adapts "the ancient Roman ideal of the *univira*... though the pagan ideal differed somewhat in emphasis from the Christian."<sup>160</sup> Throughout his work, Tertullian includes specific examples of behavior he either supports or condemns, revealing an intimate view of Roman marriage.

Overall, Tertullian's theology of marriage is fraught with ambivalence. While he supports single, monogamous marriage, he also believes that celibacy is a much preferable choice. If Christians must marry, they should be committed to that decision, as divorce is not permitted, and they should most certainly limit themselves to that one marriage. Not only would a second marriage be like adultery,<sup>161</sup> but it would also pose a host of distractions for the practicing Christian.

### ***Comparison of Clement and Tertullian's Theologies***

#### *Differences*

Clement and Tertullian's theologies of marriage are significantly different in a number of ways. The writings of each Father reflect their particular cultural

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<sup>159</sup> Ferguson, "Tertullian," 315.

<sup>160</sup> Judith Evans Grubbs, "'Pagan' and 'Christian' Marriage: The State of the Question." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.4 (Winter 1994), 392.

<sup>161</sup> *Mon.*, 15.



situations, which shape both their questions and responses. To begin with, Tertullian is focused on what his fellow Christians are doing, especially in contrast to their pagan neighbors. Even as Tertullian roots himself wholly within Christian scripture, his arguments against pagan practices reveal just how entrenched in them he truly is; despite his best attempts to distinguish Christian practice from Roman ones, he ends up incorporating many Roman marriage traditions into his vision of the ideal Christian version. Clement, on the other hand, is similarly attuned to Christian behaviors but is more interested in addressing *why* such behaviors need to be controlled. Revealing his philosophical tendencies, he weaves Greek philosophy throughout his explanation of Christian marriage, demonstrating his deep knowledge of both biblical scriptures as well as the greater intellectual and religious debates of his home city Alexandria. Thus, through their discussions on marriage, Clement and Tertullian reveal not just the general debates within Christianity at their time but also the particular ideas and practices of their specific communities and even the general tendencies of Eastern and Western Christian theology of the time period. Lastly, through their writings, they each promote ideas that are unique to their understanding of marriage. For Tertullian, that emphasis is the imminence of the eschaton, which necessarily shapes his idea of what is important in a Christian's daily life. Clement, by contrast, is focused on developing the ideal, continent Christian household.

Clement's pluralistic approach is best explained by his extended residence in Alexandria since the city was renowned for its rich intellectualism and diversity of religious belief and practice. Comfortable referring to Greek ideas and culture,

Clement commonly cites various Greek philosophies or myths and often gives them a new Christian interpretation. He cites, for example, both the civic duty to marry and have children as well as Christian endorsement of the marriage institution.<sup>162</sup>

In particular, Clement incorporates the values and goals of Stoicism into his Christian worldview; understands Christianity through Stoic and Platonist lenses, influences which are especially evident in his advocacy of continence. He, like the Greek Christian-Platonists before and after him, sought to find the divine within the created realm. Clement believed in the value and good of marriage, though he cautioned for the need of discipline and self-control within that marriage. Unlike Tertullian, who seems to define continence primarily as future abstinence from sexual relations, Clement discusses how continence can and should properly extend to all areas of one's life, even marriage. Chastity within marriage is not possible, it is the recommended objective. The ultimate goal for Christians is to live in a continent, disciplined manner, for such a lifestyle is the pathway for serving God. Marriage and the household do not inherently distract Christians from attaining this goal; rather, Peter Brown explains, in Clement's understanding, "the spiritually mature Christian might often find himself or herself at the head of a large family... to preside over a household was to be "a faint image of the Divine Providence"."<sup>163</sup> Using language of gendered mutuality, Clement expresses faith that men and women can each equally

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<sup>162</sup> *Strom.*, 2.23.

<sup>163</sup> Brown, 135, citing *Strom.* 7.11.70.7:3.

achieve the continent life. A husband and wife must mutually assist one another in their dedication to Christianity; a spouse is indeed a “needful help.”<sup>164</sup>

The impact of Clement’s thinking and writing lasts far beyond his time. He remains known for his extensive writings and his role in developing what became known as the Alexandrian school of theology, one of the first organized centers of Christian teaching. Clement is often credited for heading the “Catechetical School” in Alexandria.<sup>165</sup> While little is known about this “school” with certainty, Annewies van den Hoek contends that the “claim that Clement engaged in catechetical instruction seems... amply justified,”<sup>166</sup> thereby cementing the stronghold Clement had in the Alexandrian Christian community. Moreover, Origen, one of the greatest early Christian thinkers, was one of Clement’s students, and together they had a significant impact on Christian thought, especially with regard to Eastern asceticism.<sup>167</sup> Although Origen’s theology of marriage differs from Clement’s, some of Clement’s emphases are evident in other Eastern theologians. John Chrysostom, for instance, develops Clement’s attention to the mutuality between a husband and wife.

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<sup>164</sup> *Strom.*, 2.23.

<sup>165</sup> For more on the “Catechetical” school of Alexandria, especially its connections to Philo, see Annewies van den Hoek, “The ‘Catechetical’ School,” 59-87.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. Annewies van den Hoek cautions that “hypotheses about the school... have sometimes far exceeded the limits of the scanty information surviving in ancient authors, who themselves had incomplete evidence for their reconstructions” (59-60) but, after careful analysis of several ancient texts, concludes that Eusebius’ assertion that Clement was head of the school is valid.

<sup>167</sup> John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick, Eds., *The Library of Christian Classics Volume II: Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen with Introductions and Notes*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 38.

Finally, the values and ideas that would come to signify much of early Eastern Christianity, such as universalism and the progressive development of the soul, are already present in Clement.<sup>168</sup> While few theologians are “pure types,” Clement reveals some of the tendencies common to Eastern Christianity with his belief that Christians can progressively work toward the ultimate goal of continence. Due to his influence in the developing “Alexandrian” school of Christian thought as well as his discourses in response to various Christian groups like the Encratites, Clement of Alexandria was significant for the development of early Christian thought in the East.

While Clement effortlessly integrates his Christian beliefs with Greek philosophy, Tertullian emphatically writes against pagan practices. On the opposite side of North Africa, in Carthage, Tertullian wholly roots himself in the biblical scriptures, indicating how each of his points corresponds to biblical teaching. Raised as a pagan, Tertullian was well educated and most likely had been trained in rhetoric. Though he knew of Greek philosophy, including Plato and Stoicism, and was undoubtedly shaped by it,<sup>169</sup> he vocally rejected these beliefs when he converted to Christianity as an adult. In his effort to demonstrate the high potential of Christian morality, his focus is to refute Christian beliefs or practices he finds problematic. In fact, Tertullian writes against those he deems “heretics” so frequently that modern scholarship generally recognizes Tertullian’s “anti-heretical

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<sup>168</sup> See, for example, Patout Burns’ article on the general theological differences between the Greek and Latin schools of thought in early Christianity. J. Patout Burns, “The Economy of Salvation: Two Patristic Traditions.” *Theological Studies* 37.4 (1976): 599-600.

<sup>169</sup> Ferguson, “Tertullian,” 313.

works” as their own category within his corpus. He often writes against other groups generally, variously labeling them “heathens,” “heretics,” or “pagans,” though at times he identifies the target of his attacks, focusing specifically on the views of Marcion or the Valentinian gnostics.

Remaining focused on his biblical orientation, Tertullian mines the New Testament for passages corroborating his argument, and his marriage theology remains marked by his belief in the coming eschaton and his vision of the resurrected state. It is this perspective that foremost drives his advocacy of the ideal of chastity as well as his total rejection of divorce and second marriages. Celibacy truly is the best choice, and while marriage is good and may even be necessary, remarriage is not an option. Instead, the death of a spouse provides the opportunity to devote oneself to chaste life. Unlike the philosophical camaraderie in Alexandria, Tertullian was determined to distinguish the Christians from the pagans in Carthage. To this point, he is representative of the Latin theologians who maintained salvation could only be achieved through Christ and participation in the Church.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, parts of Tertullian’s theology of marriage appear in Augustine, who maintains, for example, the dual goods of marriage and continence.

Even though Tertullian rails against his fellow Christians for participating in the pagan lifestyle, Tertullian himself was very much a Roman and even upheld many Roman values himself. At times, Tertullian even embraces Roman practice when it serves to strengthen his exhortations, making apparent his embeddedness in Roman culture. He begins his letter to his wife, for example, by stating that since

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<sup>170</sup> Burns, “The Economy of Salvation,” 599-600.

they are “active enough” “in things worldly,” such as having wills to direct their inheritance, they should thus have a “will,” of sorts, with regard to their divine or heavenly posterity, too.<sup>171</sup> That he wishes that his wife not remarry upon his death is derived not only from a theological understanding but also from Roman practice. Since the Romans took great strides to protect the transmission of property, to the extent that property was not mixed or joined between a husband and wife, wills played an important part in Roman society. Here, Tertullian is not just using an analogy his wife will understand but appropriating Roman practice in his development of Christianity. Indeed, references to Roman marriage are found throughout Tertullian’s works. David Hunter argues, for instance, that Tertullian “deliberately employed technical terms drawn from Roman marriage customs,” a tactic that makes it difficult to parse out if or when Tertullian is referring to Christian marriage practices rather than Roman ones.<sup>172</sup> Thus, Tertullian’s writings are a prime example of the way in which early Christians struggled to work out how – or whether – to differentiate between the ideal Christian life and that of their Roman neighbors.

### *Similarities*

Although the marriage theologies of Clement and Tertullian differ significantly, ultimately they both assert that Christian marriage is good so long as it remains monogamous and strictly disciplined. In forging a compromise between

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<sup>171</sup> *Ux.*, 1.1.

<sup>172</sup> David Hunter, “Augustine and the Making of Marriage in Roman North Africa,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11.1 (Spring 2003), 69.

those who reject marriage and others who are indifferent toward marriage, they both acknowledge the choice Christians have between chaste celibacy and marriage. Furthermore, they recognize the legitimacy and potential of a controlled, continent Christian marriage and uphold the value of continence within marriage. Even though Tertullian is much more committed to the ideal of celibacy than Clement is and absolutely rejects second marriages, he too upholds the goodness of marriage alongside Clement. Finally, they are both shaped by the practices and ideals of marriage in Greco-Roman society.

Both Tertullian and Clement developed their positions on marriage in response to other Christians who were advocating more extreme practices, which explains a great deal of their similarities. While Clement is often described as one of the early Christian apologists,<sup>173</sup> he also argued against a number of “gnostic” and other groups that rejected marriage. Among the few extant voices who responded to the growing popularity of asceticism and rejection of marriage in the second century, Clement provided the “fullest and most articulate defense of marriage and response to the Gnostics and Encratites.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, Hunter contends,

Clement represents a fusing of both the apologetic and the antiheretical traditions of the second century. Like the earlier apologists, Clement was concerned to show the compatibility of

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<sup>173</sup> Although Clement’s work is more than just apologetic, the term does describe much of his writing appropriately. As Helen Rhee explains, apologetic works “not only defended ‘orthodox’ Christianity against pagan charges, but also expounded Christian doctrine and practice in a way that could appeal to their pagan adversaries on philosophical grounds. While refuting the popular accusations of atheism, immorality, and disloyalty of Christians, they presented Christianity as the genuine heir of Greco-Roman civilization and ideals... The Apologies essentially sought to present Christianity in harmony with Greco-Roman civilization and were endorsed by the later orthodox tradition.” Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*, 3-4.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Christianity with the best of Greek culture and philosophy. Like the antiheretical writers, Clement aimed explicitly to refute the gnostic, Marcionite, and Encratite rejection of marriage.<sup>175</sup>

Since Clement intended both to appeal to Greek pagans and refute “heretical” Christian ideas, his ideas on Christian marriage acquired a unique style.

As mentioned, Tertullian also develops his thought in opposition to others. Determined to refute both Roman practices and Christian beliefs he finds problematic, “Tertullian’s writings enable us to glimpse the conglomerate of conflicting notions on sexuality, and on the meanings that might be attached to its renunciation, that circulated in a major Latin church at the beginning of the third century.”<sup>176</sup> In fact, Tertullian writes against all of those he deems “heretics” so frequently that modern scholarship generally recognizes Tertullian’s “anti-heretical works” as their own category within his corpus. He often writes against other groups generally, variously labeling them “heathens,” “heretics,” or “pagans,” though at times he identifies the target of his attacks, especially when he focuses specifically on the views of Marcion or the Valentinian gnostics. Remaining dedicated to his biblical orientation, Tertullian mines the New Testament for passages corroborating his argument, determined to demonstrate the high morality of Christianity.

Since both Clement and Tertullian develop their theologies of marriage in opposition to gnostic and ascetic Christians, their approval of Christian marriage, however timid or reserved at times, provides a lasting counterbalance to the total rejection of marriage. Tertullian and Clement were not totally alone in upholding

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Brown, 76.



marriage, of course, but they firmly established a foundation upon which a solid Christian theology of marriage could emerge.

Moreover, it is important to remember the “silent majority” of Christians during that time period.<sup>177</sup> Although the ascetic movement was quite strong within early Christianity, no doubt those not subscribing to it welcomed Tertullian and especially Clement’s advocacy of marriage. Peter Brown writes that Clement “wrote, in part, to block the rise of a dangerous mystique of continence. He reassured married householders that they did not need to feel... unable to aspire to Christian perfection.”<sup>178</sup> In many ways, the same sentiment could be said of Tertullian. He too writes to the laity of Carthage, which was most likely “a confederation of believing households, in which married persons predominated.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, in many ways Tertullian and Clement were clearly addressing their Christian peers, and yet they seemed to have no doubt that these married Christians could achieve their austere visions of marriage.

In addition to the climate of ascetic Christianity, Clement and Tertullian were influenced by Greco-Roman culture. Both born to pagan parents, they continued to be surrounded by the behaviors and values of their pagan friends and neighbors even after their conversions to Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, to find elements of their marriage theologies that derive from the traditions and practices of Greco-Roman society as well as those from biblical scriptures. For example,

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

Romans seemed to consider that the “purpose” of marriage was to produce legitimate Roman citizens.<sup>180</sup> Procreation was considered a “civic duty” that “all citizens of marriageable age were expected to contribute.”<sup>181</sup> In her landmark book on Roman marriage, Susan Treggiari notes that in addition to imperial interests, Romans saw the value of children in two other key ways: children guaranteed that the family name and blood-line would continue and that the parents would be taken care of in their old age.<sup>182</sup> Children were an “insurance policy,” so to speak.<sup>183</sup>

This emphasis on children, fundamental to Roman marriage, is evident in Clement and Tertullian’s works, too. Both of their definitions of marriage include a reference to children, and they agree that marriage was intended for the procreation of children. Clement wholeheartedly embraces the prospect of raising children, though he does believe that procreation can occur in a calm, controlled manner. Tertullian’s belief that the eschaton is imminent leads him to be less enthusiastic about children, but even he is influenced by the concern for children. To be sure,

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<sup>180</sup> The Augustan marriage legislation, for example, imposed penalties on those who did not marry or beget children, indicating the imperial hope that Romans, particularly the wealthy upper classes, would produce more legitimate citizens. In 18 BCE, the Roman emperor Augustus introduced marriage legislation as part of an attempt to encourage marriage among Roman citizens. The legislation, known as the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, placed various restrictions on citizens’ rights to marry, likely done to distinguish what was to be considered “marriage” from other, non-marital relationships (of which there were several types in Roman society). Thus, the legislation tightened the definition and practice of marriage while simultaneously demanding that all citizens marry and reproduce. The Augustan marriage legislation is well known for the rewards it provided to those who complied as well as the penalties threatened to those who did not. For more information, see Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>181</sup> Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 7.

<sup>182</sup> Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 11.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

children play a prominent role in the definition of marriage in both biblical scriptures as well as in Greco-Roman culture, and the mixed nature of this influence is apparent in their works.

In addition to the role of children, Clement and Tertullian are also squarely rooted in the household unit as a whole. Widely recognized as the fundamental unit of society in the Greco-Roman world, the household was essential to life and ideology in the ancient world. The Latin term *familia*, for example, connotes both “family” and “household,” indicating how intricately interwoven these concepts were. Indeed, both legal and literary sources suggest that the *familia* was one of the most basic components of Roman society,<sup>184</sup> and essential to that *familia* was the institution of marriage.

For Clement and Tertullian, a marriage exists within the framework of the household. Clement is the stronger advocate of the Christian household, readily believing that proper self-control and discipline can create in a household the fruitful environment from which to serve the Lord. Tertullian is more ambivalent in his approach toward the household, articulating both its opportunities and dangers. Yet while he is hesitant about the benefits the household provides, worrying about the anxieties and distractions it necessarily commands, even Tertullian admits that marriage, symbolized by the household, can be a “yoke” for two married believers. His beautiful acknowledgment of Christian marriage – “one hope, one desire, one

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<sup>184</sup> Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A. J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.), 3-4, 11. They note that it was primarily so during the “legal regime that prevailed during the first three centuries of the Roman Empire (roughly, 31 BC to AD 235), especially in Rome.” (p. 3-4).

discipline... together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining..."<sup>185</sup> – may feel odd within his corpus, given his more typical exhortation to chastity, but he includes the moving passage nonetheless. Thus, both Clement and Tertullian reflect and reinforce the Greco-Roman value of the household within Christian marriage.

Finally, in addition to legal and practical implications of marriage, the Greco-Roman *ideals* of marriage also informed Christian marriage. As David Hunter writes, the “civic institution” of marriage was becoming “internalized as a private, moral code,” evidenced in the “shifting emphases in the rhetoric of Roman philosophers and moralists” just as Christianity was developing.<sup>186</sup> This new morality attached to marriage was greatly influenced by Stoicism, a philosophy that greatly impacted many Greek and Latin thinkers as well as many early Christians, including both Tertullian and Clement. Articulating the significance Stoicism had on early Christian thought, Hunter writes,

The new morality of the Greco-Roman philosophers... became an important bridge between the early Christians and their culture. Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria in the late second century borrowed directly from the works of Musonius and Plutarch to forge a Christian theology of marriage that harmonized with the prevailing philosophical ideals.<sup>187</sup>

Stoicism’s influence on Clement is quite apparent, unlike Tertullian, who, by contrast, vocally rejected much of Greco-Roman philosophy, including Stoicism.

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<sup>185</sup> *Ux*, 2.8.

<sup>186</sup> Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 7.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

There is, however, evidence of Stoic values in Tertullian's work.<sup>188</sup>

One of the ways in which Stoicism's influence is most apparent in Clement and Tertullian is in the weight they each give to the ideal of continence. Although Clement and Tertullian both try to temper much of the ascetic movement, especially its rejection of marriage, they still highlight the importance of continence. Clement and Tertullian both strongly advocate the continent life. While Clement is convinced a Christian can be both married and continent, Tertullian is more suspicious of that reality. Regardless, though, the values of continence, chastity, and self-control run throughout all of their works.

Understanding these two early Christian writers from within their particular cultural perspectives, is important in several ways. First, it helps modern readers better understand these ancient arguments, beliefs, and theological systems. Too often the contexts out of which these theologies were produced is misunderstood or simply not considered. These understandings of marriage find their origins in a multiplicity of places across the ancient world, from an appropriation of Stoic and Platonist philosophy and Roman cultural practices to arguments against ascetic celibates and more. Recognizing the context from which these theologies developed provides greater clarity and deeper understanding, especially given the lasting influence of these marriage theologies.

Although the differences in the works of Clement and Tertullian are rooted in their particular cultural situations, the effects of their conclusions are remarkably the same for Christian life: while marriage is a good and intentional aspect of

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<sup>188</sup> See Deming, 60-61.

creation, striving for continence, whether within a marriage or not, enables one to fully and properly worship God. Their proposals for Christian marriage constitute a compromise, acknowledging both the need for continence as well as the institutions of marriage and household, and thereby provide a solid foundation for Christian marriage theology – a significant achievement in the midst of the developing ascetic, celibate Christian movements in the second century.

### ***Conclusion***

While Clement and Tertullian advocate celibacy to different degrees, they both mandate a life of continence and strict discipline and, ultimately, defend monogamous Christian marriage. This defense came at a critical time as sexual renunciation was growing in popularity within many early Christian communities. Although the ascetic movement continued to develop for centuries, the tendency toward marriage eventually “won out” among the majority of Christians. In light of this, the marriage theologies of Clement and Tertullian no doubt reassured many Christian householders trying to achieve Christian ideals within their everyday lives.

Moreover, although later Christians such as Augustine are commonly – and accurately – regarded as the major formative voices for Christian marriage, the frame of the conversation on Christian marriage had already been established in part by the theological contributions of Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian. Advancing the Christian discussion on marriage, these two Fathers strived to balance married life with the value of continence, a move with clear ramifications throughout the history of Christian theology; for many Christian communities, the

view that marriage is the second-best option to celibacy persists even today.

Although it is unlikely that they knew of one another, Clement and Tertullian each achieved a great compromise at a time when many Christians were advocating complete sexual renunciation. By reassuring married householders that they too were capable of fully worshipping the Lord, these early Fathers established a precedent for Christian marriage that would prove to last.

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