

**Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*.** Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xv, 365. ISBN 978052151574. \$99.00

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus ascended to the episcopal chair of Carthage in 248 CE, only two or three years after his conversion from paganism and subsequent baptism. In this monograph, Allen Brent aims to demonstrate that Cyprian's Roman values came through the baptismal waters with him, shaping the vision of Church order that he would construct in the wake of the Decian persecution and bequeath to future generations of Christians. Brent offers a revised narrative of Cyprian's episcopal tenure by interpreting his writings against the backcloth of Roman jurisprudence and Stoic eschatology. Emerging from these pages is a portrait of a bishop who fervently believed that he had abandoned the classics and his rhetorical training for the Bible and Christian tradition, yet remained deeply influenced by the same notions of *imperium* and metaphysical decline from golden into iron age that led Decius to issue his universal *supplicatio*.

The work unfolds in seven chapters and a very brief postscript. The first four are more thematically oriented, whereas the latter three proceed in a linear fashion, from the issuance of Decius' *supplicatio* in 249 to Cyprian's execution in 258. In the first chapter, he advances the thesis that Cyprian understood the episcopal ministry "in terms of the categories of power and authority of the Roman political constitution and their sacralization" (4). For Cyprian, each bishop presided within his own bounded territory [*imperium*], occupying a chair [*cathedra*] that far more closely resembled the *sella curulis* of the *flamen Dialis* or the magistrate with *imperium* than the *diadoche* of the philosophical schools, which had been the model for earlier theologians such as Irenaeus or Hippolytus (cf. p. 58).

Brent's key aim in the second chapter is to demonstrate that in the Republic and Principate, "political order consisted in the exercise of legitimate authority within a space that had been sacralized" (29), and that this fundamentally influenced how Cyprian exercised his authority as bishop. His account of the founding of Roman Carthage draws widely on literary, artistic, and numismatic evidence to demonstrate how it embodied both the political and religious ideals of the Augustan program, which entailed raising the curse of Scipio, vouchsafed by augury. The magistrate with *imperium* held a religio-political office, a concept that Cyprian transferred to the episcopacy.

The third chapter traces the Stoic roots of Cyprian's Christian eschatology. Cyprian, Brent argues, subscribed to the view of his near-contemporaries Cassius Dio and Herodian that the world had entered a period of *senectus* and *vetustas*, differing only in his view that the final judgment, not the *renovatio saeculi*, was at hand. Although Brent wishes to emphasize Cyprian's radical continuity with his pagan past, it is difficult to see how he can maintain this in light of the bishop's rejection of a cyclic view of history.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Brent offers an exhaustive analysis of the nature of and background to Decius' edict. He argues convincingly against Rives (1995) that in

issuing the universal *supplicatio* Decius clearly sought to fulfil his role as *pontifex maximus*, whose duty it was to secure the *pax* and avert the *ira* of the gods. Brent also successfully dispatches the argument that Decius specifically targeted the Christians, based on existing anti-Christian legislation; with Barnes (1968), he concludes that no such legislation had been put into effect.

A slightly more polemical edge emerges in the sixth chapter, on Cyprian's conflict with the Church of the martyrs. At the height of the persecution, confessors wrote *libelli pacis* to penitent apostates to readmit them to the full communion of the church, a practice that Cyprian strongly opposed as a dangerous break with custom. Although Brent acknowledges that the "act of writing such a certificate was undoubtedly new" (251), he asserts that the confessors had the support of a "long tradition" that allowed them to act "in independence of a formal hierarchy" (253). He is referring to the *ordinatio per confessionem* (cf. *Traditio Apostolica* 9), which granted sacramental authority to confessors bearing the marks of suffering (261–5). Cyprian's response was "clever and even sinister" (258): he "deliberately devalue[d] physical suffering in martyrdom" (258) by expanding the definition of martyrdom so greatly that it could include nearly everyone who did not apostasize. This was part of a "strategy" to replace a more traditional theology of order that recognized parallel sources of authority within a single territory with a "new model of Church Order" grounded in "pagan jurisprudence, and its concept of jurisdiction in terms of *imperium*" (286–7). Brent does not, however, provide any evidence that the *ordinatio per confessionem* was recognized by, or even known to, the North African churches. The third century Roman provenance of the *Traditio Apostolica*, for which Brent has elsewhere laboriously argued, limits its use for establishing Carthaginian tradition, nor does it support Brent's claim of a "long tradition".

The seventh and final chapter presents an uneven analysis of Cyprian's rejection of the validity of baptisms performed in schismatic churches. Cyprian rests his argument on the twin pillars of Scripture and tradition: he presents a raft of biblical texts that demonstrate the church's unity and sole claim to sacramental authority (*Song of Songs* 4:12, 6:9; *Matthew* 12:15, 18:17; *Ephesians* 4:5; *1 Peter* 3:20–21; cf. *ep.* 69.1–2) and he invokes the judgment of the council of Carthage held in c. 230, under the leadership of Agrippinus, which ruled that anyone baptized in a "heretical" church must be rebaptized (*ep.* 70.1.2; 73.3.1). Brent questions the cogency of Cyprian's exegesis by arguing that it is not "uncontaminated by a pagan jurisdictional and secular perspective" (296)—a bizarre line given that no credible scholar of early Christianity would assert that any writer of the period could approach the biblical text "uncontaminated" by assumptions drawn from the broader culture. He also finds Cyprian disingenuous for presenting the earlier precedent as a *mos maiorum* since it is less than thirty years old (299). This point is, however, irrelevant to the case at hand; Cyprian was nonetheless following a North African tradition that had been established well before his own conversion, not introducing a new practice.

The hero of the narrative is Stephen, bishop of Rome, who correctly discerns in the

New Testament a separation between baptism and the reception of the Spirit and who relies on the ancient Hebraic belief in the “power of the name” (305), which compels him to accept all baptisms in which Jesus is invoked. Brent presents the contrast as follows: “All that [Stephen] could rely on was a traditional practice that he found reflected in the New Testament, in order to refute Cyprian’s innovating voice of secular reason” (317). In proposing this dichotomy, however, Brent undermines the task he had set for himself of elucidating the complex interactions between his past life as *rhetor* and new vocation as bishop, choosing instead to reduce Cyprian’s entire theology of church order to thinly-veiled Roman jurisprudence. The conflict can, however, be far more readily attributed to a clash between Roman and North African traditions, each with its own exegetical logic, than between biblical and Stoic philosophies.

There is fine scholarship in this work, most notably on Decius and his universal *supplicatio*, but the portrait of Cyprian is not fully convincing. Brent portrays Cyprian as far more deliberate and conniving than is plausible. It must be borne in mind that Cyprian’s authority was vulnerable from the first: his ordination had been opposed by five of the presbyters, who were then charged with the administration of the church’s affairs when Cyprian was in exile. The martyrs, in aligning with these presbyters, were not a neutral parallel source of authority, but were perceived by Cyprian as a threat to his very standing as bishop and to the harmony of the Carthaginian church. This sociological dimension is fruitfully explored by J. Patout Burns in *Cyprian the Bishop* (2002), and extensive engagement with the arguments there put forth would have strengthened Brent’s analysis. Moreover, Brent’s clear antipathy towards the territorial episcopal model (328–9 and A. Brent, *Cultural Episcopacy and Ecumenism* [1992]) has led him to overemphasize the innovative and “pagan” elements in Cyprian’s influential theology of Church order, as a means of discrediting its roots in Scripture and Christian tradition. Nonetheless, this wide-ranging monograph, with its detailed attempts to set Cyprian’s thought in its broader cultural context, deserves a close read by historians of Late Antiquity.

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