



[Tertullian, To Scapula II.6-8](#)

Praise for the emperor

Name of the author: Tertullian

Date: 212 CE

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: To Scapula

Reference: II.6-8

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Tertullian, please see the commentary on [Apology V](#).

To Scapula is a letter from Tertullian addressed to Scapula, the proconsul of Africa, dated to 212 CE, and the latest of all of Tertullian's extant compositions. As Timothy Barnes highlights, the letter reasserts some of the arguments which were made several years earlier in the *Apology* (c. 197 CE), specifically the willingness of Christians to die for their beliefs, and an assertion of their admirable conduct and morality in daily life (*Tertullian*, p. 45). The letter responds to the persecution of Christians under the proconsul, and considers God's divine retribution on those who oppress the Christians, specifically Roman magistrates both in this world and post-mortem (chapter III describes in graphic detail the gruesome death of Claudius Lucius Herminianus, proconsul of Cappadocia, who persecuted Christians out of anger when his wife converted). Similarly, Justin warns in his *First Apology* XVII.4 that Roman rulers should consider the fate of their soul after death, which risked eternal torture if they continued to mistreat Christians: "each of you will pay penalties in eternal fire according to the worth of his actions." Tertullian claims, however, that he is not threatening the proconsul as such, but rather warning him as a courtesy, because the Christians love even their enemies, and do not wish God's harshest judgements on anyone (see IV.1). In Barnes's words, the horrors outlined in this text by Tertullian as being sent in response to persecution of Christians were "a small step towards giving the whole history of Rome and the Roman Empire a theological interpretation" (*Tertullian*, p. 142).

In the present passage, which gives a concise summary of the attitudes that Tertullian expresses towards the Roman emperor and the empire elsewhere in his writings, we see the Roman empire understood to be very firmly within God's control. The essential argument is as follows: a) Christianity is not a threat to Rome; b) the emperor is sanctioned by God and so deserves the respect of Christians; c) the emperor must not be elevated to the status of a God, although he is above all other humans; d) the emperor is greater than the gods venerated in Roman religion; and e) Christians offer not blood sacrifices for the safety of the emperor, but rather prayer. Each of these issues is developed in the *Apology* (see chapter [XXIX](#) for a refutation of the power of pagan gods to protect the emperor, [XXX](#) for Tertullian's pledge of Christian allegiance to the empire and its continuation, [XXXII](#) for the assertion that Christians desire a stable empire to delay the eschaton; and [XXXIII-XXXIV](#) for Tertullian's argument that the emperor is great enough without the need for divine status).

In verse 7, the issue of "lawful" reverence to the emperor is raised, which in this context refers to the biblical law that there is but one true God (Exodus 20:3) – it is made clear that the emperor is merely a human being who has received power *from* God, but must not be revered as anything more than a mortal ruler. The emperor occupies a space in the authoritative hierarchy which while above all other men, is below God, and he would have no power were it not the will of God. This succinct overview which Tertullian offers to Scapula highlights in clear terms his dual aim of showing that his religion embraced Roman rule, offering heartfelt support for its head, while making explicit the boundaries which biblical law has laid out. Christians are therefore bound by their duty to balance the respect they are instructed to give the Roman authorities (see [Romans 13:1-7](#); [1 Peter 2:12-17](#)), and their conviction that Roman dominion, given at God's behest, must always be relativized to him. Of course, not all Christians accepted that Roman power was God-given. Various early Christians in fact understood Rome's power and actions as being controlled by malevolent forces instead (we see this particularly in various so-called "Gnostic" sources such as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, where the inferior demiurgical creator god and his minions are responsible for influence earthly rulers).



Keywords in the original language:

- [Christianus](#)
- [constituo](#)
- [honoro](#)
- [hostis](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [sacrifico](#)
- [saeculum](#)
- [universitas](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [divine law](#)
- [divine providence](#)
- [divine support](#)
- [honor](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [stability](#)

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Text

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