



[Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

The suffering of the empire is due to Roman religious ignorance

Name of the author: Cyprian of Carthage

Date: 252 CE

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Address to Demetrianus

Reference: V

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Cyprian, please see the commentary on his [Epistle LXXXI](#).

In his *Address to Demetrianus*, Cyprian responds to the proconsul of Africa, who had stated that the problems the province was facing, such as war, famine, and plague, were the fault of the Christians because they refused to worship the Roman gods (chapters II-IV). In a similar manner to Tertullian in his *To Scapula*, in which he addresses the proconsul of Carthage, Cyprian also speaks to a prominent Roman leader. The treatise was written in the aftermath of the edict of Decius, when anti-Christian feeling had started to build due to a number of Christians refusing to comply in his request for universal sacrifice to the Roman gods (for a discussion of this, see [Papyrus Rylands 12](#) and [112a](#)) (Simon Price, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, p. 113). The text is usually dated to 252 CE, when the great plague was spreading through the empire, and had reached Carthage. Cyprian answers the allegations of Christian culpability for Rome's problems by arguing that it was simply natural for the world to have a beginning and an end like everything else, and that it was currently in an inevitable state of decline (this notion was discussed by Seneca, among others—see Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* VII.15—, and was echoed in Stoic thought more generally; see David Rankin, *From Clement to Origen*, p. 75). Secondly, Cyprian proceeds to blame the followers of Roman religion themselves, turning Demetrianus's argument on its head and asserting that it was in fact they who were responsible for the present troubles, due to their failure to worship the one true God (chapters VII-IX). As David Rankin states, Cyprian's essential argument is that "far from the old Roman adage that *Pax Romana* derives from *Pax Deorum* ... *Pax Romana* derives rather from *Pax Dei*!" (*From Clement to Origen*, p. 76).

Cyprian argues that by falsely accusing and persecuting Christians, pagans have made their plight even worse by angering God and abusing the one group of people whose prayers would actually be useful (chapter XXV). His arguments imitate both Tertullian's *Apology* (the two authors point out the apparent nonsensical manner in the ways that the Roman authorities arrest, question, and punish Christians; see chapters XIII-XIV of the present work), and the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, which also belittles the Roman claim of piety, and points out the incompatibility of this with the extreme violence committed by the empire. Cyprian's argument in the present passage is clearly influenced by contemporary Stoic currents of thought, which in a similar manner to Christianity, asserted that all men, whether slave or master, were ultimately made of the same soul and subject to the same universal laws (see, for instance, Galatians 3:26-27; Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, *Letter XLVII On Master and Slave*).

Cyprian's claims in the extract above (and the treatise more generally), present a mixture of threat and invitation to the followers of Roman religion. On the one hand, the assertions that the current state of the empire is a punishment for pagan neglect of the one true God draw on the notion that the present pestilences are unavoidable, foretold in Scripture, and very much deserved. On the other hand, however, it is implied that all might be reconciled if God were worshipped by all the inhabitants of the empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [bellum](#)



- [dominus](#)
- [fames](#)
- [iudicium](#)
- [morbus](#)
- [populatio](#)
- [religio](#)
- [sterilitas](#)
- [superstitio](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [crisis of the third century](#)
- [divine punishment](#)
- [famine](#)
- [impiety](#)
- [Pax Romana](#)
- [plague](#)
- [Roman decline](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [superstition](#)

Bibliographical references: Rankin, David Ivan, [From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers](#) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)

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Other sources connected with this document: Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

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Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 12](#)



Text

[Tertullian, *Apology XXIX*](#)

The folly of Roman idolatry

- [Read more about Tertullian, *Apology XXIX*](#)

Text

[Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius VI*](#)

Roman religious practice is specifically tailored towards its expansionist aims

- [Read more about Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius VI*](#)

Text

[Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius XXV*](#)

Roman success is due to ferocity, not religious piety

- [Read more about Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius XXV*](#)

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