



## [Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus VIII](#)

The irony of Roman lordship

**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:** VIII

**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. Elsewhere in the treatise Cyprian has criticised the worshippers of Roman gods for blaming the Christians for their present sufferings, and for the maltreatment of Christians that has thus ensued, arguing that their problems are entirely deserved on account of their failure to worship the true God (see [chapter V](#), for instance). In the present extract, however, Cyprian condemns them specifically for their arrogant attitude of entitlement and superiority, and the irony of their firm belief in their own lordship and dominion, while failing to recognise the deity that can rightfully claim universal lordship.

Cyprian begins by citing some of the complaints that his Roman pagan audience have; namely that the earth's natural resources are not providing for them in the way that they once did. The language Cyprian chooses makes a point of emphasising that his addressees have assumed their entitlement to nature's provisions, and that the earth was subservient (*deservio*) to their needs. Their error, he suggests, is that they have not recognised that it is only through God's grace and will that these gifts were provided. God's favour, however, has run out for the Romans owing to their failure to serve him in return. Cyprian then highlights the hypocrisy of Roman slave ownership, while as masters themselves they cannot bring themselves to comprehend a master much greater. The critique Cyprian offers of the brutal way that Roman masters treat their slaves is telling of the Stoic influences on his 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*). This arrogant assumption of superiority over one's fellow man, for Cyprian firstly adds to the shameful ignorance responsible for the Romans' misunderstanding of who it is that has enabled nature to provide for them thus far. Moreover, it challenges the way in which the Romans understand their position as dominant rulers of the earth and other human beings, as Cyprian, like many Christian authors before him, asserts that they would be nothing were it not for God's sanctioning and favour (see also, for example, [1 Clement 60.4-61.3](#); Justin Martyr, *First Apology* XVII.1-XVIII.3). However, it should be noted that the language of slavery used to describe Roman hegemony is not specific to those criticising Roman power, such as Christians like Cyprian; it is a motif found in Roman discourse also (this has been treated in depth by Myles Lavan in his *Slaves to Rome*).

Keywords in the original language:

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- [anima](#)
- [deservio](#)
- [dominatus](#)
- [elementa](#)
- [fertilis](#)
- [ius](#)
- [lex](#)
- [terra](#)
- [universus](#)
- [utilitas](#)
- [voluptas](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [crisis of the third century](#)
- [Roman decline](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman lordship](#)
- [slavery](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Lavan, Myles, [Slaves to Rome. Paradigms of Empire in Roman Culture](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

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Price, Simon, "[Latin Christian Apologetics: Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian](#)", in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, Simon Price; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105-130

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**Other sources connected with this document:** Papyrus

## [Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Papyrus

## [Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English



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

Text

### [1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)

God's sanctioning of Roman authorities

- [Read more about 1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)

Text

### [Mishnah Sotah 9:12](#)

The destruction of the Temple and its aftermaths

- [Read more about Mishnah Sotah 9:12](#)

Text

### [Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

The suffering of the empire is due to Roman religious ignorance

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