

Chapter One

Tertullian's Question and its relevance to Modern Freemasonry

"Tertullian's Question" is admittedly a strange subtitle for a book purporting to deal with Freemasonic philosophy, so now is as good a time as any to explain its title and relevance. Tertullian is the Anglicised form of the Latin name *Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus* – (...a name that certainly has its own flourish). Tertullian was born in the city of Carthage in what is now Tunisia in about the year 158 CE.

History says that Carthage was a city founded by colonists from the city of Tyre in Phoenicia almost a 1000 years before Tertullian was born. It is this very same city of Tyre that two of our legendary First Grand Masters called home and it was also home to the tragic Queen Dido. Queen Dido was the lover of the Trojan prince Aeneas, through whom both Julius Caesar and the emperor Augustus claimed lineal descent and it is Virgil who explored Aeneas' legendary adventures in the epic poem, *The Aeneid*.

Hannibal the Great who waged a 16 year military campaign against Rome during the Second Punic War (218 – 202 BCE) also came from the city of Carthage. While this military campaign is not something that readily springs to our minds we probably each have a vague childhood recollection of enemies of Rome staging an audacious crossing of some Alps using elephants. The dim recollection of this campaign is the one that Hannibal had architected and executed.

Born some 200 years after Tertullian, was the great Doctor of the Christian church - Augustine of Hippo, who also lived in Carthage for a short, but significant period of his life. As we will discover, Augustine of Hippo acknowledged that it was actually Plato's written output that was the basis of his conversion to Christianity. It was Augustine who injected Plato's philosophy into the developing core of Christian theology and it was the Protestant movement (some thousand years later) that re-defined Christian theology by returning *once again* to Platonic philosophy.

So what do we know of Tertullian's life? In actual fact, we know very little. He was born to pagan parents who provided him with a high level of education mainly in law but also in Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. At some point in his life (and for reasons that are not at all clear), Tertullian made a dramatic conversion to Christianity. Only a few years later, Tertullian was ordained a priest. During his life, he became a writer of enormous influence, developing aspects of Christian theology.

Arguably, his most significant contribution was the concept of "trinity" – a concept that subsequently developed into one of the great pillars of Christian dogma.

As fervent and impassioned as his conversion was - his association with Christianity was rarely harmonious. He decided to break with the established Christian church of Carthage and converted to a heretical sect known as the Montanists. Becoming disillusioned with their brand of Christianity, he left them to found his own Christian sect, dying some time in 255 CE.

If you have any familiarity with the Spanish language you will identify the word *tertullia* with a "symposium", or "discussion" or even a "meeting of minds". In previous employment, I had the good fortune to work with a Chilean colleague who pointed out to me this word-association which demonstrates Tertullian's broader influence, not only in the "serious" studies of theology and philosophy but also to "lighter" studies like linguistics.

The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

While our knowledge of Tertullian's life is only brief and episodic, the main recurring feature of his life is a predisposition to *conversion*. From paganism, he converted to Christianity. From Christianity, he converted on two separate occasions to heretical brands of its own mainstream theology.

Keeping this in mind, history is full of stories regarding conversion and one of the things that often seem to accompany conversion is a strong *aversion* – a strong turning away from all aspects of a person's earlier life and beliefs. In this regard, Tertullian was no stranger to this psychological phenomenon.

One of his most famous writings is a short work which is called in Latin, *De praescriptione haereticorum*. The English translation is a very simple one, *On the Prescription of Heretics*. Given what we know of Tertullian and the path that his life took, he chose an intriguing title. In this short work and in the space of just a few, short paragraphs, he rejected the entire body of Greek philosophy that his parents had schooled him in from his early childhood. It is in this work that he posed the very famous question from which the title of this book takes its name. Tertullian's question was:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?

In posing this question Tertullian was making the point that pagan philosophy (which he characterised as *Athens*) had in his opinion, no influence or even relevance on the developing body of Christian philosophy or revealed theology. In contrast, he characterised Christian philosophy and its theology as *Jerusalem*. Then, with a sparse use of words and a rich, elaborate use of rhetorical skill, Tertullian totally dismissed all the centuries of advanced thinking that had come down to us through philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (among others). However, he struck further. He struck even deeper. With the fanatical zeal accompanying his conversion, his words also conveyed his very turgid position that the world views held by the ancient Greek philosophers were totally irreconcilable with a Christian world perspective. For Tertullian, these were two wholly incompatible universes. These were in every sense of the term - worlds in collision.

So how does Tertullian's question relate to our Freemasonic experience?

Understanding what he was trying to express, let's reinterpret his question in our Freemasonic milieu and ask the simple question:

"Are there any Greek philosophical, historical or mythical influences in our ritual?"

Well...the answer to that question will surprise many brothers.

Without even the smallest qualification, we can confidently say that in any Ritual that is based on the ritual and rubrics of English *Emulation* - the answer is – yes! Furthermore, these Greek influences are neither minor, nor accidental. These Greek influences were carefully considered, carefully selected and then artistically embroidered within the Hebrew story of the building of King Solomon's Temple that is related in the *Books of Kings* and *Chronicles*.

Then - when *Emulation* Ritual was approved in 1816, it was released as a modern *re-working* (or a modern reinterpretation) of Plato's principles of leadership as he developed in a number of his *dialogues* but primarily a dialogue known as *Republic*. With a high-level understanding of Greek history, mythology and Platonic writing, the authors of *Emulation* composed a ritual that (once explained) speaks to us today with a message that is particularly relevant for our lives in this 21st century.

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What I am proposing may *appear* novel but this is far from the case. There is evidence suggesting that as little as 150 years ago, it was well understood that the philosophy of Plato was the proud backbone of modern Freemasonry.

Henry Mildred, the first Provincial Grand Master of South Australia gave an Address at the laying of the foundation stone of the British and German Hospital in Carrington St Adelaide on 24th May 1851. In his own words, he claimed that “the principles of Freemasonry... shone effulgently in the philosophy of Plato”.

With a wry grin, we can critique Mildred's choice of words (understanding that Plato predated Freemasonry by just... *quite a few centuries*). What he was stumbling over his tenses to express, was that the philosophy of Plato shone effulgently in the principles of Freemasonry.

Where this work departs from mainstream Freemasonic research is in providing a *primer* (or in other words) - a *first* attempt - to reconcile our Ritual to Platonic philosophy and Greek history and mythology. I hope that some time in the future, a brother with considerable skill in Greek may be able to add colour to the greyscale of this first attempt at a Platonic/Freemasonic reconciliation.

If my argument holds even the smallest germ of truth, then we are faced with the recognition that from the moment we stood at the North East Corner – something of extraordinary *significance* was taking place that linked us to the philosophy of Plato's *philosopher-king*. At that one moment in time, we became active participants in an engagement model with the objective of being groomed to become *philosopher-kings* in every arena of our lives.

The seamless, effortlessly elegant amalgam of Platonic writings with Hebrew scripture (as evidenced in English *Emulation* ritual), has always been focused on achieving in the lives of each one of us, the highest potential (or in Platonic terms) the highest *ideal* of a human being that each of us has the potential to achieve in the brief years of life given to us.

Let's return very briefly to our friend Tertullian... Having posed his famous question, he then went on to justify his stance. Without arguing his position either one way or the other, we can note that his argument is not only elegant, but it also pulsates with Masonic resonance:

...for our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.