

## Converting after Constantine: Firmicus Maternus and the Scriptures

MATTIAS GASSMAN

*Abstract:* The two extant works by the senator Julius Firmicus Maternus, a manual of astrology (*Mathesis*, ca. 337) and a ferocious attack on senatorial paganism (*De errore profanarum religionum*, 343–350), offer exceptional insight into the transformation of a convert's beliefs in the era of Constantine. Study of Firmicus's Christianity has long been hampered by distaste for his desire to see pagan cult annihilated and by the belief that he took essentially all of his scriptural knowledge from Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum* and *Ad Fortunatum*. Recent scholarship has dealt with the first issue. This article focuses on the second. Surveying Firmicus's biblical quotations and allusions, it demonstrates that he had extensive knowledge of biblical passages that Cyprian does not cite, ranging far beyond the Psalms (which Firmicus is generally thought to have known independently). He interprets Cyprianic texts in light of non-Cyprianic parallels, cites surrounding context, weaves in references to liturgical custom, and deploys well-known exegetical motifs such as the interpretation of Psalm 23 (LXX) in reference to Christ's descent and ascension. Combined with his heavy reliance on Cyprian for quotations, Firmicus's use of biblical passages and extrabiblical theological ideas suggests that he had read widely in scripture, but had to hand only Cyprian's collections, with whose explanatory headings his ideas about coercion and his Christology engage. Firmicus's engagement with scripture, in part through Cyprian's mediation, thus illustrates the processes by which an upper-class convert could assimilate Christian ideas. His integration of astral language into his description of Christianity, in turn, undercuts modern generalizations about the Christianity of the Constantinian era. Far from being at home with pagan conceptions of the universe, Firmicus reworks them to exalt Christ and the Cross above the stars themselves.

Julius Firmicus Maternus is that rare thing in the history of early Christianity: a convert whose beliefs both before and after his conversion we can not only denote in general, as “pagan” and then “Christian,” but describe in their idiosyncrasies.<sup>1</sup> In the 330s, while Constantine was still emperor, Firmicus, a Sicilian of senatorial rank with some experience as a legal advocate, wrote an eight-volume guide to astrology. Dedicated to the eminent senator Lollianus Mavortius, the *Mathesis* presents a distinctly pagan spirituality.<sup>2</sup> “A priest of the Sun and Moon and other gods,” Firmicus’s astrologer communes daily with his gods, discerning divine *secreta*, living with strictest uprightness, and seeking to raise the soul back “to God our maker.”<sup>3</sup> Firmicus believes in a single high God, remote beyond the planets, and places his art within the ritual and priestly trappings of traditional cult. In his horoscopes, the astrological adept appears alongside priests and experts in the mantic or other technical arts, while the supreme divinity stands atop a hierarchy of planetary gods.<sup>4</sup> Beings worthy of worship in their own right, they are conduits for the power of the *summus deus*, can be identified with the gods of traditional cult, and both impart souls to living beings and offer a path to heavenly immortality.<sup>5</sup> Like many contemporary pagans, Firmicus was a henotheist—even, without too much exaggeration, a monotheist—yet his was a henotheism that felt no rupture with the ancestral order of worship.<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, Firmicus had undergone that rupture. Sometime after 343, when the emperor Constans had launched an expedition to Britain, Firmicus addressed a polemic *On the Error of Profane Religions* to him and his brother, Constantius II.<sup>7</sup> In it, he attacked the whole range of traditional cults, from the mysteries of Isis to the august sacrifices of the Vestal Virgins. He also made the first surviving case for a policy for which radical Christians had already been calling in 324, when Constantine established his sole, overtly Christian dominion over the whole Roman world.<sup>8</sup> After describing the moral corruptions celebrated, Firmicus alleges, in the world’s cults and detailing the mechanisms by which the devil has

counterfeited scriptural truths, he turns to the final proof that the emperors must annihilate pagan cult: Deuteronomy. God has commanded the destruction of entire cities if they house idolaters and, if the emperors carry out his mandate, they will enjoy peace, prosperity, and knowledge of the *arcana* of the divine law.<sup>9</sup>

Firmicus had, it seems, undergone a decisive conversion. Only the reference to Lollianus as ordinary consul in the preface to the *Mathesis*, a title the great man attained in the mid-350s, complicates the picture.<sup>10</sup> It would, however, put too much confidence in a single phrase to suppose that Firmicus had embraced his full astrological religion again, a decade or so after writing *De errore*.<sup>11</sup> More likely, the title was inserted into the archetype of our manuscripts by Lollianus or an admirer who wanted to keep his résumé up-to-date.<sup>12</sup> A convinced adherent of a sophisticated, esoteric tradition, Firmicus had become, roughly a decade after he finished the first book of the *Mathesis* (plausibly the capstone rather than the foundation of his project), one of the fiercest critics of traditional religion on record.

Firmicus's polemic is the last in a line of anti-pagan works written by men who had taught Latin rhetoric or practiced it in the courts, became Christians, and yet seem, unlike Cyprian or Augustine, to have remained laymen. Like the works of Minucius Felix, Lactantius, and Arnobius, *De errore* holds great importance for the historiography of late Roman religion. Filling a chronological gap in the epigraphic record for Roman senatorial religion, *De errore* offers an impressively detailed picture of an eclectic religiosity, informed by equally eclectic philosophical interests, that senators celebrated on altars and epitaphs erected at Rome across the fourth century. It thus marks an important step in Christian formulations of a unified "paganism" (a term introduced, a few years later, by another rhetorician-convert active at Rome, Marius Victorinus).<sup>13</sup> Equally important, the shift in Firmicus's thinking embodies one of the defining changes in a transformative epoch in Roman history. The Mediterranean world was ceasing forever to be routinely polytheist, and

here, decades before the altar of Victory affair, the downfall of the Serapeum, and the Theodosian empire of Prudentius and Ambrose, we find a man proclaiming exactly the triumph we are accustomed to find articulated in the 380s and 390s, in open letters to child-emperors, the destruction of splendid temples, or dying speeches put into the mouths of martyred Roman deacons.<sup>14</sup> Firmicus was a man of his times, well-informed about the cults that still absorbed Roman aristocrats in the 380s; he was, even, a man well ahead of his time. That, in itself, should lead us to pay more attention to his thinking than scholarly distaste for his coercive politics has ordinarily allowed.<sup>15</sup> The last several years have seen a fundamental rethinking of his polemical efforts and theological vision.<sup>16</sup> As yet, however, there has been no detailed consideration of the process by which he, as a convert who produced religious texts before and after his conversion, actually assimilated Christian teaching.

Here, we encounter one of his polemic's most novel features: its reliance, unmediated by secular learning, on Christian scripture. Breaking with all prior Latin apologetic except Cyprian's *Ad Demetrianum*, Firmicus grounds substantial portions of his argument directly on scripture. Most of his quotations come from scriptural compendia that Cyprian had written about a century before. The three books *Ad Quirinum* (sometimes called *Testimonia*) fall into two parts: the first, in two books, is a tightly focused collection of anti-Judaic and Messianic prooftexts, the third, added somewhat later, supplies a looser array of moral precepts.<sup>17</sup> The Messianic emphasis of the second book fit best to Firmicus's purposes, and he drew his quotations primarily from it and the later *Ad Fortunatum*, a briefer collection that encourages fearful Christians to stand fast under persecution.<sup>18</sup> Modern scholars have stopped with Cyprian. Thus, Robert Turcan, in a Budé rich with detail on Platonist intertexts and mystery cults, says that, "sa connaissance des deux Testaments est faite de citations tirées telles quelles d'un recueil de *Testimonia*."<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to the standard English translation, Clarence Forbes reaches a sum total of "fifty-nine verbatim scriptural citations," "forty-

seven” from Cyprian, five shared but clearly not borrowed, and seven not Cyprianic. “Add to these eleven biblical allusions without quotation, and you arrive at the total of seventy biblical allusions or quotations which are listed by Ziegler in his index of sources.”<sup>20</sup>

This article aims to show what it meant for Firmicus to convert from an intellectual paganism to an intellectual Christianity in the post-Constantinian era. Toward that end, it would pose no difficulty, if he were in fact so totally reliant on Cyprian as Turcan and Forbes suppose. To become a Christian is to acculturate oneself to a theological and spiritual tradition, and Cyprian was a key part of the tradition Firmicus absorbed. Indeed, Cyprian, who had written *Ad Quirinum* for the edification of converts, had realized that both compendia would offer future writers convenient access to scriptural citations.<sup>21</sup> Study of Firmicus’s use of scripture is thus a study in the reception of Cyprian, the third-century Latin Father most admired by his fourth-century heirs,<sup>22</sup> in precisely the manner he had expected these works to be received, though within a political context that he could never have envisioned. Set against the new religious-political setting of the post-Constantinian world, the headings Cyprian added to his prooftexts help (as we will see) to explain oddities in Firmicus’s interpretation of his passages. However, Firmicus had a wider knowledge of scripture, and a deeper interest in its theological patterns, than has been expressly recognized. Forbes’ numbers, founded on a cursory discussion by Bernhard Dombart, are deceptively precise.<sup>23</sup> In his commentary, Forbes identified allusions that had escaped even the sharp eye of Konrat Ziegler, editor of an excellent Teubner, but never revised his introduction accordingly.<sup>24</sup> A re-reading turns up even more allusions. These range from individual phrases to set-pieces in which Firmicus interprets the texts he quotes from Cyprian through scriptural parallels that are not found among Cyprian’s *testimonia*. He also draws on widespread theological traditions that lack direct warrant in the texts he cites, and alludes repeatedly to the sacraments.

Most of what follows will therefore be taken up with the fine details of Firmicus's scriptural quotations and allusions. I will go back over the evidence for his use of Cyprian and of non-Cyprianic quotations in the next section, but focus especially on the long-neglected (and mostly non-Cyprianic) allusions. On that foundation, I will then consider what Firmicus's polemic tells us about the ways in which a convert might approach Christianity in the era of Constantine and his sons. Author of multiple books, a failed advocate in the courts, and a man of senatorial rank with lofty connections, Firmicus was not representative of the great bulk of new Christians.<sup>25</sup> Nothing suggests, however, that he became a monk or clergyman, and he displays profound acquaintance neither with Neoplatonism nor with the theological controversies ongoing, after Nicaea, in the Greek East (though he may, as we will see, obliquely endorse a pro-Nicene theology).<sup>26</sup> His is the voice of an educated layman, well informed about pagan religion, but neither an especially brilliant writer nor an especially capable theologian. He is more articulate, perhaps, than the thoughtful, educated, religiously serious catechumens described, some sixty years later, by Augustine, but otherwise representative of such well-to-do converts.<sup>27</sup> In *De errore*, therefore, we may see how men like him, the satellites and lesser members of the senatorial order, could study, assimilate, and articulate Christian learning in the decades in which it had become respectable to be a Christian.

#### FIRMICUS'S SCRIPTURAL QUOTATIONS

Only scraps of the opening sections of *De errore profanarum religionum* survive in its one manuscript, the tenth-century Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Palatinus Latinus* 165.<sup>28</sup> The remnants address the emperors and offer programmatic material. The work ends with addresses to pagans and to the emperors (28–29). The main body falls into two sections, the first a detailed attack on cults and myths (2–16), the second an attempt to prove that all “profane religion,” now reduced almost to a single system, is a diabolical counterfeit from the

scriptural oracles (17–27). This latter section contains the majority of Firmicus’s scriptural quotations, arranged according to their order in Cyprian’s compendia. Firmicus proceeds by attacking the verbal formula (or, exceptionally, the object) used in a particular rite or set of similar rites, which he links to some idea (anointing, the wood of the cross, etc.) that he considers essential to Christian teaching. Embedded in this polemic is a narrative of the *Heilsgeschichte* (24–25), which recounts the fall of Adam and describes, in dramatic detail, the passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

In this section and the next, I gather and discuss Firmicus’s Cyprianic and non-Cyprianic quotations and allusions.<sup>29</sup> Old Testament references follow the chapter and verse divisions of the Septuagint throughout.

#### *Cyprianic Quotations*

18 (The divine bread and cup)		
18.3	Prov 9.5	<i>Quir. 2.2 (CCL 3:30–31): Quod sapientia Dei Christus, et de sacramento incarnationis eius et passionis et calicis et altaris et apostolorum, qui missi praedicauerunt.</i>
18.4–7	Isa 65.13, 15, Ps 33.9, 10–11; John 6.35, 7.37–38, 6.53	<i>Quir. 1.22 (CCL 3:24–25): Quod panem et calicem Christi et omnem gratiam amissuri essent Iudaei, nos uero accepturi, et quod Christianorum nouum nomen benediceretur in terris.</i>
19 (Christ the light and bridegroom)		
19.3–7	Joel 2.15–16, Jer 7.34, Ps 18.6–7, Rev 21.9–10, John 3.28–9, Luke 12.35–7	<i>Quir. 2.19 (CCL 3:55–57): Quod ipse sit sponsus ecclesiam habens sponsam, de qua filii spiritaliter nascerentur.</i>

20 (God as rock)		
20.2–3	Isa 28.16, Ps 117.22–23, Zech 3.8–9, Deut 27.8, Josh 24.26–7	<i>Quir. 2.16 (CCL 3:51–53): Quod idem et lapis dictus sit.</i>
20.4	Dan 2.31–35	<i>Quir. 2.17 (CCL 3:53): Quod deinde idem lapis mons fieret et inpleret totam terram.</i>
21 (the “horns” of the cross)		
21.4–6	Hab 3.3–5, Isa 9.5; Exod 17.9, 11–14 (paraphrased)	<i>Quir. 2.21 (CCL 3:59–60): Quod in passione crucis et signo uirtus omnis sit et potestas.</i>
24 (ascension)		
24.6–8	Dan 7.13–14, Rev 1.12–18, Matt 28.18–20	<i>Quir. 2.26 (CCL 3:63–64): Quod cum resurrexisset, acciperet a Patre omnem potestatem et potestas eius aeterna sit.</i>
27 (the lamb, or the ram caught in the tree)		
27.5–8	Exod 12.5–11 (paraphrased), Isa 53.7–8, Jer 11.18– 19, Rev 5.6–10, John 1.29	<i>Quir. 2.15 (CCL 3:48–50): Quod ipse dictus sit ouis et agnus, qui occidi haberet, et de sacramento passionis.</i>
28–29 (appeals to pagans and emperors)		
28.2	Wis 15.15–17, Ps 134.15–18	<i>Quir. 3.59 (CCL 3:146–48): De idolis quae gentiles deos putant.</i>
28.7	Exod 20.23, 4	



28.7–9	Deut 6.13, 5.7, 32.39, Rev 14.6–7, Matt 22.37–40 (with Deut 6.4/Mark 12.29), John 17.3	<i>Fort. 2 (CCL 3:188–89): Quod deus solus colendus sit.</i>
28.10– 13	Exod 22.19, Deut 32.17, Isa 2.8–9, 57.6, Jer 25.6, Rev 14.9–11	<i>Fort. 3 (CCL 3:189–90): Quae comminatio Dei sit aduersus eos qui idolis sacrificant.</i>
29.1	Deut 13.7, 9–11; 13– 14–19	<i>Fort. 5 (CCL 3:191–93): Quod sic idolatriae indignetur Deus ut praeceperit etiam eos interfici qui sacrificare et seruire idolis suaserint.</i>

Table 1: Scriptural quotations from Cyprian in *De errore profanarum religionum*, with Cyprian’s heading

Firmicus’s texts differ in many small ways from Cyprian’s, which may reflect stylistic choice, failure of memory, or minor lapses of the pen. The overall sequence of passages is nonetheless unmistakably Cyprian’s, so close, in fact, that Firmicus can introduce his Johannine citations in 18.7 as if they were in sequence, when the third citation (John 6.53) precedes the second (John 7.37) in the Gospel text.<sup>30</sup> There are only occasional departures: the quotations in 19.3–7 from *Quir.* 2.19 follow Cyprian’s order exactly, but skip several citations between John 3.28–29 and Luke 12.35–37; likewise, in 24.6–8, two passages from *Quir.* 2.26 have fallen out between Dan 7.13–14 and Rev 1.12–18, while Exod 12.5–11, paraphrased in 27.5–8, appears first rather than in its place in *Quir.* 2.15, after Jer 11.18–19.

Firmicus has copied Cyprian's text, probably from a manuscript rather than from his memory, and almost certainly without double-checking against a biblical manuscript, in which case we would (at the least) have expected him to put the Johannine passages in the original order in 18.7 and to have given more notice of the gap between Isa 2.8–9 and 57.6 in 28.11–12 than the mere, *Ait enim in sequentibus per eundem prophetam*.<sup>31</sup>

### *Non-Cyprianic Quotations*

The quotations from the Psalms form a special class, as E. J. Martin demonstrated long ago.<sup>32</sup> Those I have listed above do come from Cyprian. Others, even when shared with some section of the Cyprianic compendia, follow a text-form closer to that of the heavily interpolated eighth-century manuscript that Wilhelm Hartel preferred for his CSEL edition of *Ad Quirinum*, published in 1868.<sup>33</sup> As there are significant deviations (additional verses, for example) and Firmicus used a different and superior text of Cyprian for his other citations, he must have consulted these Psalms independently.<sup>34</sup> Thus, for example, in 23.2, where he blasts a pagan rite for presenting a different “Christ” receiving an “anointing,” he quotes Ps 44.3–9, pieces of which appear in *Quir.* 2.6 (*Quod deus sit Christus*) and 2.29 (*Quod ipse sit rex in aeternum regnaturus*). Later, in 23.3, he quotes Ps 2.1–2, which appears in slightly different form in *Quir.* 1.13 (*Quod iugum uetus euacuaretur et iugum nouum daretur*).<sup>35</sup> That text could, conceivably, come from the Cyprianic tradition; the former manifestly does not, and Firmicus's discussion owes nothing in either case to Cyprian's headings. Even more elaborate are the Psalms quoted in his account of the ascension (24); here, we may well surmise that Firmicus thought of Ps 109 while reading *Quir.* 2.26, from which he had just cited several passages, but he adds material found neither there nor in the earlier quotation at 1.17, and his text of Ps 23 (vital, as we shall see, for his exposition) differs profoundly from Cyprian's.

To these Psalm texts, we may add several quotations derived from the Epistle of Jeremiah (i.e., Baruch 6), a text apparently unknown to Cyprian, as well as occasional quotations from other passages, interspersed either with the sections tabulated above or with Firmicus's exposé of the god behind pagan cults as the ancient serpent (26). The full gleanings appear in Table 2, below. Most (not all, as Forbes claims) derive from the Old Testament.<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor 15.55, quoted at 24.4, could derive from Cyprian, but the section in which it appears (*Quir.* 3.57 [CCL 3:146]) is far removed from those Firmicus has just been citing. Another, from John 8.12 (*ego sum lux mundi*) at 19.2,<sup>37</sup> appears in Cyprian in a different text (*ego sum lumen mundi*). So brief and memorable a sentiment requires no immediate textual intermediary. The remaining New Testament quotation, from the temptation of Jesus in either its Matthaean or its Lucan version (14.2), has no Cyprianic precedent. Only this and one other quotation appear in the work's first half, where Firmicus appears not to have used Cyprian. That quotation, from Mal 3.19 (at 15.4), *Venit enim ... dies domini ut ardens clibanus*,<sup>38</sup> is found at *Quir.* 2.28 in a substantially different translation (*Ecce dies domini uenit ardens uelut clibanus*).

14.2	Matt 4.3–4/Luke 4.3–4	No parallel
15.4	Mal 3.19	Cf. <i>Quir.</i> 2.28 (CCL 3:66) ,
18.3	Gen 27.37	No parallel
19.1	John 8.12	Cf. <i>Quir.</i> 2.7 (CCL 3:39)
23.2	Ps 44.3–9	Cf. <i>Quir.</i> 2.6, 2.29 (CCL 3:36, 69)
23.3	Ps 2.1–2	Cf. <i>Quir.</i> 1.13 (CCL 3:15)
24.3	Ps 43.23–7	No parallel
24.4– 5	Ps 23.7–9, 1 Cor 15.55/Hos 13.14	For the Psalm, cf. <i>Quir.</i> 2.29; 1 Cor 15.55 quoted at <i>Quir.</i> 3.57 (CCL 3:146)

24.8	Ps 109.1–4a	Cf. <i>Quir.</i> 2.26, 1.17 (CCL 3:63–64, 17–18)
26.1	Gen 3.5	No parallel
26.3	Isa 27.1	No parallel
28.4	Ep Jer 5–10, 21–5, 28, 30–1, 50–7	Book not used by Cyprian
28.7	Isa 42.17	No parallel

Table 2: Scriptural quotations definitely or probably not from Cyprian in *De errore*

### FIRMICUS’S SCRIPTURAL ALLUSIONS

Quotations do not exhaust Firmicus’s engagement with the Bible. The third table lists every allusion that I have been able to identify, except a few paraphrases noted above. The summary format, already strained by the deviations-in-overlap of Firmicus’s and Cyprian’s Psalm texts, fails altogether to capture the richness and variety of the allusions. I thus supply an impressionistic notice of the depth of engagement, before describing the texts in detail.

4.3	Luke 15.3–7, 11–32	Lost sheep and prodigal son; brief summary
4.3	Eph 2.4	Near quotation
8.5	Ps 144.14	Loose reminiscence?
9.3	Matt 8.28–34/Mark 5.1–20/Luke 8.26–39	Gerasene/Gaderene demoniac(s); summary. Only Matt 8.29 appears at Cyprian, <i>Quir.</i> 2.28 (CCL 3:67).
13.1–2	Gen 39–41 (also Gen 17.17)	Joseph in Egypt; selective but accurate summary, with extrabiblical, apologetic tradition
15.4	Matt 3.12/Luke 3.17 (cf. Matt 11.14)	Allusions interwoven with parallel text at Mal 3.19

18.3	Gen 14.18–20, Heb 7.1; Gen 27.37–38, with Heb 11.20, 12.16–17	Melchizedek and Abraham; close summary, accompanied by quotation of Gen 27.37 (blessing of Esau), paraphrase of Gen 27.38 with Heb 11.20 and 12.16–17
18.6	Luke 16.19–31	Lazarus and Dives; only 16.25 appears at <i>Quir.</i> 3.61 (CCL 3:152)
19.6– 7	Matt 25.1–13	Non-Cyprianic passage used to interpret Luke 12.35– 37 (drawn from <i>Quir.</i> 2.19 [CCL 3:57]), with extrabiblical, exegetical tradition
20.1	Rev 21.10, 14 (cf. Eph. 2.20), Dan 2.44–45	Christ as foundation of New Jerusalem; allusions to Revelation and Daniel, with possible influence from Ephesians. Rev 21.10 likely taken from <i>Quir.</i> 2.19 (CCL 3:55), cited in 19.3–7
20.4	Dan 2.26 (e.g.)	Dream of Nebuchadnezzar
21.2	Ps 90.13, Luke 10.19, Gen 3.15, Isa 27.1, Job 40.25–26, 28	Devil as serpent; compendium of descriptive phrases. For Gen 3.15, cf. the rather different text in <i>Quir.</i> 2.9 (CCL 3:41)
21.6	Rom 6.4	Baptism, linked by Firmicus to the sign of the cross
24.2	Isa 10.27, 2 Cor 5.19 (cf. Jer 37.8 and Gal 5.1)	Reminiscence; Jer 37.8 is found within the manuscript tradition of Cyprian, <i>Quir.</i> 1.13 (CCL 3:15)
24.2	Matt 27.45, 51; Luke 23.44–45 (cf. Mark 15.33, 37–8, Matt 16.17, Heb 2.15)	Crucifixion; dramatic paraphrase from the Matthean and Lucan accounts, with reminiscences of Matt 16.17, Heb 2.15. Only Matt 27.45 appears at <i>Quir.</i> 2.23 (CCL 3:61).
24.4	2 Cor 2.14	Reminiscence

24.4–5	Ps 23.7–9, 1 Cor 15.55/Hos 13.14 (both quoted)	Psalm interpreted through extrabiblical tradition on the ascension.
24.6	Heb 1.2, 8	Enthronement of Christ; allusion, with theological clarification of Cyprian’s heading in <i>Quir.</i> 2.26 (CCL 3:63)
25.1–4	Gen. 2–3 (cf. Rom. 5.12–17), 4.26	Fall of Adam; close summary, with probable influence from Rom 5.12–17. Mention of Enosh.
25.2	Luke 1.35	Virgin birth; possibly from <i>Quir.</i> 2.10 (CCL 3:42–43).
25.3	Dan 9.24–27	Birth of Christ “in almost the last week of the ages”; the intertext is either Daniel or the tradition that makes the week of creation into seven thousand years of history
25.4	Gen 15.5/22.17/26.4/Heb 11.12	Reminiscence
27.3	Gen 6.13–18, 22.6 (with Heb 11.17), Exod 14.16, 15.23–25, 17.1–7 (with 1 Cor 10.4), 17.9–14, Gen 28.10–22, Exod 25.10	“Wood” of the cross; some citations likely or definitely Cyprianic: Gen 22.1–2 appears at <i>Quir.</i> 3.15 (CCL 3:106), Exod 17.9–14 at 2.21 (59–60); Gen 28 (Jacob’s ladder) is paraphrased at <i>Quir.</i> 2.15 (52).
27.4	Gen 22.13	Ram offered by Abraham (summary)
27.5	Exod 12.5–11	Adds slight context to Passover story (Exod 12.5–11, from <i>Quir.</i> 2.15 [CCL 3:49–50])
27.8	1 Pet. 1.19	Close paraphrase

28.1	Rev 7.14	Allusion, possibly from <i>Fort.</i> 11/ <i>Quir.</i> 3.16 (CCL 3:110, 211)
28.11	Gal 5.1	Allusion

Table 3: Scriptural allusions in *De errore*

The vast majority of these citations cannot derive from Cyprian.<sup>39</sup> Many that are paralleled in his collections are either not taken from them—inasmuch as Firmicus cites a passage of which Cyprian cites only part or a different rendering—or are embedded among non-Cyprianic texts, in a way quite distinct from the ordinary pattern of his definitely Cyprianic quotations. Whether drawn from Cyprian or found elsewhere, the citations can be grouped, for analysis, into four broad categories: passing reminiscences, loose enough that an actual scriptural allusion may be doubted; brief allusions that definitely borrow words or phrases from one or more passages; paraphrases of a particular text; and passages in which Firmicus supplies biblical, exegetical, or liturgical context in explaining a text he has quoted or paraphrased (again, usually from Cyprian). The simpler of these will require little more than citation, in parallel, from Firmicus and the biblical passage (in Greek, since we do not have a copy of Firmicus's Latin Bible), while the more complicated invite detailed commentary.<sup>40</sup> I will thus work through them, beginning with the least certain group, and commenting on those places where Firmicus does seem to be using Cyprian.

### *Reminiscences*

#### *Err.* 8.5 – Ps 144.14

Firmicus states his purpose in the work:

. . . *persequar cetera ut . . . misericordia dei nomine domini nostri Iesu Christi lapsos erigat, fugientes ad se reuocet, dubitantes confirmet, errantes corrigat et, quod est potissimum, uitam morientibus donet.*<sup>41</sup>

Cf. Ps 144.14, ὑποστηρίζει κύριος πάντας τοὺς καταπίπτοντας καὶ ἀνορθοῖ πάντας τοὺς κατερραγμένους, but Firmicus may just be echoing generic Christian language.

*Err.* 24.2 – Isa 10.27, 2 Cor 5.19; cf. Jer 37.8 and Gal 5.1

In his account of the *Heilgeschichte*, Firmicus says,

*Christus filius dei ut humanum genus a mortis laqueis liberaret uere omnia ista sustinuit, ut **captiuitatis durae iugum** tolleret, ut hominem patri redderet, ut **mitigata offensa hominem cum deo prospera conciliatione** componeret, ut promissae resurrectionis fructum proprio monstraret exemplo.*<sup>42</sup>

The second phrase in bold echoes 2 Cor 5.19, ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν. . . , while the first appears to echo Isa 10.27, . . . ἀφαιρεθήσεται . . . ὁ ζυγὸς αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄμου σου, καὶ καταφθαρήσεται ὁ ζυγὸς ἀπὸ τῶν ὄμων ὑμῶν (less likely, Jer 37.8, . . . συντρίψω τὸν ζυγὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ τραχήλου αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς δεσμοὺς αὐτῶν διαρρήξω . . . , a passage found in a branch of the manuscript tradition of *Quir.* 1.13 [CCL 3:15]). One may also detect influence from Gal 5.1, to which *Err.* 28.11 makes a more literal allusion.

*Err.* 24.4 – 2 Cor 2.14

Of the rising Christ:

*Exultat salutare numen et triumphales currus eius iustorum ac sanctorum turba comitatur.*<sup>43</sup>

Cf. 2 Cor 2.14, τῷ δὲ θεῷ χάρις τῷ πάντοτε θριαμβεύοντι ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ . . .



Err. 25.2 – Luke 1.35

*Per uirginem Mariam ac spiritum sanctum Christus natus et immortalitatem  
accepit et regnum.*<sup>44</sup>

A fundamental doctrine; Firmicus could, if need be, have gleaned it from a baptismal creed or from *Quir.* 2.10 (CCL 3:42–43).

Err. 25.3 – Dan 9.24–27

*Nam post multa tempora nouissimis temporum spatiis, id est nouissima paene  
saeculorum ebdomade, uerbum dei humano se miscuit corpori. . .*<sup>45</sup>

The reference could be to the seventh day of creation as the type for the final millennium of seven in the world’s history,<sup>46</sup> but the implication that there are multiple “weeks” suggests an allusion to a distinct eschatological idea with firmer biblical grounding, the “weeks” of Dan 9.24–27.

Err. 25.4 – Gen 15.5/22.17/26.4/Heb 11.12

*Sed deus Abrahae clarius a caeli sideribus promiserat regnum. Ideo ex genere  
Abrahae descendens Maria uirgo dei concipit . . .*<sup>47</sup>

The promise of God to Abraham is not quoted in Cyprian’s collections. Whether to Genesis or to Hebrews, Firmicus’s allusion is inexact: God did not promise a kingdom “more illustrious” than the stars, but offspring as numerous as the stars (e.g., Gen 26.4: καὶ πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ . . .).

*Allusions*

Err. 4.3 – Eph 2.4 and Luke 15.3–7, 11–32

Firmicus exhorts eunuch priests to repent:

*. . . calamitatibus uestris, dum adhuc tempus patitur, subuenite. **Misericordia dei diues est, libenter ignoscit.** Relictis nonaginta nouem ouibus amissam quaerit unam et reuerso pater prodigo filio et uestem reddit et parat cenam.*<sup>48</sup>

Cf. Eph. 2.4, ὁ δὲ θεὸς πλούσιος ὢν ἐλέει. The concluding sentence summarizes the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son from Luke 15.

Err. 9.3 – Matt 8.28–34/Mark 5.1–20/Luke 8.26–39

*Hic iam euangelicae traditionis secreta tractemus. Eiecto daemonio dominus porcorum gregem donat nec immerito, ut cum libidinis animalibus per dura praecipitia fluctusque iactatus per mortes porcorum uarias digna nece immundus spiritus carperetur.*<sup>49</sup>

Firmicus links the mauling of Adonis by Mars in porcine form to Jesus’s healing of the Gerasene/Gadarene demoniac(s). The description is too closely focused on the demon—whose plurality (“for we are many”) and name, Legion, Firmicus does not discuss—to confirm a source from among the parallel Synoptic passages.

Err. 20.1, 20.4 – Rev 21.10, 14 (cf. Eph 2.20), Dan 2.44–45; 2.26 (or a similar verse)

Near the beginning of his account of the “God-as-rock” motif, Firmicus says,

*Alius est lapis quem deus in confirmandis fundamentis promissae Hierusalem missurum se esse promisit. Christus nobis uenerandi lapidis significatione monstratur. . . . noster lapis dei fundatus manu exstruit, confirmat, erigit, munit et restaurati operis gratiam perpetuae immortalitatis splendore condecorat.*<sup>50</sup>

The quotations that follow derive from *Quir.* 2.16–17 (table 1, above). Firmicus had already referred, at 19.5, to the Jerusalem to come (Rev 21.10, via *Quir.* 2.19 [CCL 3:55]). Its foundations are associated with the twelve apostles in the non-Cyprianic 21.14; that Christ holds them together can be inferred from Eph 2.20, ἐποικοδομηθέντες ἐπὶ τῷ θεμελίῳ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν, ὄντος ἀκρογωνιαίου αὐτοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

*Noster lapis dei fundatus manu* may allude to Dan 2.45, καθάπερ ἐώρακας ἐξ ὅρους τμηθῆναι λίθον ἄνευ χειρῶν . . . That Firmicus had a general familiarity with Daniel may be inferred from the section's conclusion (20.4), where he prefaces a long quotation from Dan 2.31–35 (from *Quir.* 2.17) by crediting the passage, correctly, to Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream, a detail absent from Cyprian.

*Err.* 21.2 – Ps 90.13, Luke 10.19, Gen 3.15, Isa 27.1, Job 40.25–6, 28

Firmicus describes the devil:

*Ipse est basiliscus et scorpio, qui fidelium securis uestigiis premitur; ipse malitiosus anguis, cuius caput quaerit decepta mortalitas, ipse tortuosus draco, qui hamo ducitur, qui captiuus includitur.*<sup>51</sup>

The text is a patchwork of Ps 90.13, ἐπ' ἀσπίδα καὶ βασιλίσκον ἐπιβῆση καὶ καταπατήσεις λέοντα καὶ δράκοντα, Luke 10.19, ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ὑμῖν τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ πατεῖν ἐπάνω ὄφεων καὶ σκορπίων . . ., Gen 3.15, . . . αὐτός σου τηρήσει κεφαλὴν, καὶ σὺ τηρήσεις αὐτοῦ πτέρναν, Isa 27.1, promising judgment ἐπὶ τὸν δράκοντα ὄφιν σκολιὸν . . ., and Job 40.25–6, 28: ἄξεις δὲ δράκοντα ἐν ἀγκίστρῳ . . . εἰ δήσεις κρίκον ἐν τῷ μυκτῆρι αὐτοῦ . . . λήμψη δὲ αὐτὸν δοῦλον αἰώνιον. Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.9 (CCL 3:41), quotes Gen 3.15 in a distinctly different text: *Ipse tuum obseruabit caput et tu obseruabis calcaneum eius.*

*Err.* 27.4 – Gen 22.13

*Abrahae immolatur filium iussu dei aries subponitur et in uicinae arboris  
radicibus alligatur.*<sup>52</sup>

Cyprian quotes the preceding verses, Gen 22.11–12, at *Quir.* 2.5, 3.20 (CCL 3:33–34, 114–15), but does not refer to the ram. The description appears to be Firmicus’s own elaboration; the Genesis account speaks of a “thicket” (transliterated in the Septuagint: ἐν φυτόν σαβεκ) rather than “roots.”

*Err.* 27.5 – Exod 12.5–11

Firmicus’s synopsis of the instructions for Passover derives from Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.15 (CCL 3:49–50), but he adds narrative context:

*Liberaturus deus summus ex Aegyptiorum tyrannide plebem suam . . .*<sup>53</sup>

*Err.* 27.8 – 1 Pet 1.19

Following a string of Cyprianic quotations, Firmicus says,

*Pro salute hominum agni istius uenerandus sanguis effunditur, ut sanctos suos  
filius dei profusione pretiosi sanguinis redimat . . .*<sup>54</sup>

The allusion is to a non-Cyprianic passage: 1 Pet 1.19, ἀλλὰ τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἀμνοῦ ἀμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ.

*Err.* 28.1 – Rev 7.14

Firmicus exhorts pagans:

*Quaere fontes ingenuos, quaere puros liquores, ut illic te post multas maculas  
cum spiritu sancto Christi sanguis incandidet.*<sup>55</sup>

The allusion is to Rev. 7.14, . . . καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου, which Firmicus could have derived from *Quir.* 3.16, *Fort.* 11 (CCL 3:110, 211).

*Err.* 28.11 – Gal. 5.1

*Hinc seueritas poenae ... quod dei indulgentia libertate concessa iugum potius eligis seruitutis.*<sup>56</sup>

Cf. Gal 5.1, Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν· στήκετε οὖν καὶ μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε. Firmicus turns a passage critical of obedience to Jewish law into an exhortation not to persist in polytheism. He had done much the same with his quotations in *Err.* 18, which derive from the first, anti-Judaic book of *Ad Quirinum*, and were accompanied by an explicitly anti-Jewish heading. This passage, however, is not Cyprianic.

### *Paraphrases*

Here, we arrive at extensive references to biblical texts. I will note particularly striking features.

*Err.* 13.1–3 – Gen 39–41 (also Gen 17.17)

The first of Firmicus's non-Cyprianic Genesis paraphrases appears in a section that purports to explain the origin of the cult of Serapis. Like many Jewish and Christian writers, Firmicus connects the Alexandrian god to the patriarch Joseph, deified against his will by the Egyptians (13.3); he takes the name to be a corruption of Σάρρας παῖς (13.2, naming him as Sarah's great-grandson and referring to the birth of her son when she was ninety, for which see Gen 17.17, also a non-Cyprianic passage).<sup>57</sup> His summary of Gen 39–41 (at 13.1) is

clipped and omits the conflict with his brothers, but touches on the main points of the patriarch's life in Egypt between his exile and his brothers' arrival: his imprisonment "on account of his chastity," his successful interpretation of the king's dream and promotion to rulership, and the seven-year famine following seven years' harvests.

*Err.* 18.3 – Gen 14.18–20, Heb 7.1; Gen 27.37–38, Heb 11.20, 12.16–17

Firmicus is arguing that the truly divine bread and cup are the *salutaris cibus* and *immortale poculum* offered by Christ "at his feast" (*epulis suis*, 18.8),<sup>58</sup> rather than the sacred foods of Attis (18.1). Between Cyprianic quotations, Firmicus inserts a synopsis of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek:

*Et Melchisedech rex Salem et sacerdos summi dei reuertenti Abrahae cum pane et uino benedictionis optulit gratiam.*<sup>59</sup>

The immediate reference is to a book Cyprian does not seem to have used, Hebrews 7.1, Οὗτος γὰρ ὁ Μελχισέδεκ, βασιλεὺς Σαλήμ, ἱερεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου, ὁ συναντήσας Ἀβραὰμ ὑποστρέφοντι ἀπὸ τῆς κοπῆς τῶν βασιλέων καὶ εὐλόγησας αὐτόν; the blessing is described at Heb 7.6–7 and Gen 14.19, but the bread and wine are named only in Gen 14.18. There follows a quotation from Gen 27.37 (Esau's abortive blessing), with theological comment (*Tunc Esau casus suos misera lamentatione defleuit, quia tritici et uini, id est futurae felicitatis, perdidit gratiam*) again colored by Hebrews' interpretation of the Genesis narrative.<sup>60</sup> In *futurae felicitatis*, there is a distinct allusion to Heb 11.20, Πίστει καὶ περὶ μελλόντων εὐλόγησεν Ἰσαὰκ τὸν Ἰακώβ καὶ τὸν Ἡσαῦ, and, in *misera lamentatione defleuit*, likely also to Esau's tearful but vain request for repentance at Heb 12.16–17. Cyprian had quoted only the blessing of Jacob (Gen 27.27–29, in *Quir.* 1.21 [CCL 3:21]), which Firmicus omits.

*Err.* 18.6 – Luke 16.19–31

Later in the same discussion, Firmicus inserts between Cyprianic passages an apostrophe addressing a worshipper of Attis, a nobleman dressed in the *toga praetexta* (*Qui sic in templo praetextatus incedis . . .*).<sup>61</sup> Most likely a senator and member of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, the priesthood responsible for the administration of the cult of the Magna Mater,<sup>62</sup> the man is assimilated to the biblical Dives. Firmicus expatiates on the rich man's scorn for the poor and the punishment that awaits. His knowledge of the pericope is clear; his purpose, an attack on senatorial pomp. It is not entirely impossible that Firmicus is nodding to the great senatorial priest Vettius Agorius *Praetextatus*, who died after forty years of marriage in 384 and so was a young man in the 340s,<sup>63</sup> but any specific allusion is otherwise lost to us.

*Err.* 25 – Gen. 2–3, 4.26, with Rom 5.12–17

After a description of Christ's ascension, Firmicus proposes to explain, for the satisfaction of any enquirers, why salvation was necessary. Here we have (25.3) an apparent allusion to the "weeks" of Daniel (discussed above), a short list of Old Testament saints (Abel, Enosh, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) who required the liberating work of God for their righteousness to receive its reward, and the references to Mary and the kingdom of Abraham discussed above. There is, as Alberto Vecchi noted long ago, a marked affinity between this section, with its focus on the long-awaited redemption, and Hebrews, whose influence we have already seen.<sup>64</sup> One detail suggests close attention to the logic of Genesis: the saintliest of the antediluvian patriarchs is absent. Enoch did not have to wait until Christ's coming to enjoy the presence of God, and Firmicus names instead the comparatively obscure Enosh, son of Seth, whom the Septuagint makes the first God-fearer (Gen 4.26).

Most substantial, however, is Firmicus's account of the creation and fall of man in 25.1–2.<sup>65</sup> The summary shows a decent grasp of the biblical detail; it cannot depend on Cyprian, who quoted only the curses.<sup>66</sup> God made Adam *ad imaginem suam*; Adam was deceived by the devil *per feminam, id est Euam*, but he himself (and not Eve) “lost the dignity of the glory promised him.” One may well suspect influence from 1 Tim 2.13–14, although Firmicus has extended the serpent's deception from Eve to Adam. In 25.2, Firmicus says that man (*homo*) was formed *de uirginis terrae limo*, since “it had not yet, as scripture says, rained upon the earth.” The Pauline coloring, now from Rom 5.12–17, is here even stronger. Christ is the antitype of Adam, offering the obedience he had not, and the cross brings life where the tree in the garden brought death (*Arbor ligni pestiferum deceptis pabulum praebuit; lignum crucis uitam immortali compage restituit. Contempsit Adam; oboediuit deo Christus*). Firmicus does not mention the tree of life.

### *Exegeses*

Here, I have grouped those passages in which Firmicus offers a relatively sophisticated interpretation of one of his scriptural texts, usually by invoking (but not explicitly citing) a biblical parallel or an extra-biblical tradition.

*Err.* 15.4 – Matt. 3.12/Luke 3.17 (cf. Matt 11.14)

Firmicus promises that the wrath of God will come upon the Palladium (the statue of Minerva allegedly brought to Rome from Troy) and the other objects of pagan veneration:

*Iam parturit flamma caelestis . . . iam futurae cladis nuntiatur exitium. . . .*

*“Venit enim,” inquit, “dies domini ut ardens clibanus.” Audisti quid ueniat . .*

*. Nihil est quod ex te collectum in apothecis dominicis reponi possit. Ardebis*



*ut stipula, cuius inanis uilitas in cineres fauillasque seruator, quam rapax ignis uiolentia cogenti spiritus pascitur.*<sup>67</sup>

The quotation is from Mal 3.19, in a text substantially different from Cyprian's at *Quir.* 2.28. Firmicus adds commentary, some of it in his own language: *in cineres fauillasque*, for example.<sup>68</sup> The imagery of the divine storehouse, however, is from the Gospels, and Forbes suggests a weak echo of Matt 13.30.<sup>69</sup> The actual intertext is the exhortation of John the Baptist that prefaces the beginning of Jesus's ministry in both Matt 3.12 and Luke 3.17 (οὗ τὸ πύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ διακαθαριεῖ τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συνάξει τὸν σῖτον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην, τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακάψει πυρὶ ἀσβέστω). The main elements all appear: gathering, the *apotheca* of the Lord (made plural in Firmicus's paraphrase), chaff, and fire. Neither Gospel text is Cyprianic, and the juxtaposition of the two texts shows that Firmicus knew the typological link drawn between Elijah and John the Baptist in Matt 11.14: in Mal 3.22, the prophet predicts the coming of Elijah, "before the great and terrible day of the Lord." The interpretation also fits neatly into Firmicus's theology of the divine judgment to come upon idolatrous cults, which he makes an outworking of Christ's first coming, not a hope to be realized at the second. The serpent "was crushed when he saw the God-man, when the divinity of Christ appeared to us" (26.3).

*Err.* 19.6–7 – Matt 25.1–13

Concluding a string of Cyprianic quotations, Firmicus says,

*Huius rei mysterium ostensum est, huius sponsi aduentum sapientium uirginum chorus expectat, huic praefert lumina peruigili cura sancta uirginitas: expectantibus sponsum seruis felicius praemiorum promittitur munus.*<sup>70</sup>

A quotation follows from Luke 12.35–7. Firmicus then exhorts the pagan who has believed in a false bridegroom to convert, concluding,

*Tunc te in nomine suo cum uigilantem inuenerit sponsus, cum fidei tuae merita cognouerit, dabit maximum pretium, dabit integrum munus: intrabis cum eo caeli thalamum, uidebis regiam mundi et, ut uerus particeps esse possis, a piissimo ac iustissimo domino immortalitatis tibi gratia conferetur.*<sup>71</sup>

The Lucan passage, which has the servants waiting for the bridegroom to come from his wedding (*a nuptiis*), is from Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.19. However, we have another Gospel text silently woven in: this time, the roughly parallel passage from Matt 25.1–13, in which the wise and foolish virgins await the bridegroom's coming. Firmicus twice colors his paraphrase with a favorite expression, *peruigili cura*,<sup>72</sup> and comes close to identifying the virgins with the servants. What follows the Lucan passage is more curious. Neither Matthew nor Luke makes any mention of a *thalamus*, a nuptial *chamber*, and a substantial amount of text has intervened between this conclusion and Ps 18.6, *et ipse uelut sponsus egrediens de thalamo suo*, quoted at 19.4.<sup>73</sup> Firmicus is drawing on a widespread tradition that elaborates the wedding parables of the Gospels by promising the soul's entry, as bride, into Christ's nuptial chamber. Particularly influential in Syriac, the image recurs in the Latin translation of Irenaeus, in Firmicus's contemporary Hilary of Poitiers, and in Ambrose.<sup>74</sup>

*Err.* 21.6 – Rom 6.4–5

In this brief passage, Firmicus uses a liturgical rite to explicate a text he has paraphrased.

Firmicus says to the pagans:

*Ad haec cornua festina celeritate properate . . . his uos adfigant cornibus iustitiae, aequitas, pudicitia, misericordia, patientia, fides, ut ueneranda*

*praeferentes insignia consecratae frontis maiestate gaudentes et sepulturae  
Christi participes sitis et uitae.*<sup>75</sup>

The underlying text is Rom 6.4 (συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὥσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν), but Firmicus does not name baptism, silently replacing the ritual with its customary adjunct: the marking of the new *fidelis* on the forehead with the sign of the cross. Neither Romans 6 nor the baptismal liturgy has an obvious connection with *Quir.* 2.21, from which Firmicus has just quoted or paraphrased a few passages.

*Err.* 24.2–6 – Matt 27.45, 51; Luke 23.44–45 (cf. Mark 15.33, 37–38; Matt 16.17, Heb 2.15); dramatic exegesis of Ps 23.7–9, 1 Cor 15.55/Hos 3.14; Heb 1.2, 8

The most elaborate of Firmicus's biblical exegeses is his account of the victory of Christ over death and the powers of the devil. Space allows only for selective quotation:

*Fecit filius dei quod ante promiserat, clusit ianuas sedis infernae et durae  
legis necessitatem calcata morte prostravit. Per triduum recensita ab eo  
iustorum turba collecta est, ne diutius contra eos mortis dominaretur  
improbitas, ne iustorum meritum ex longa desperatione concideret. Fregit  
clausa perpetua et ferreae fores Christo iubente conlapsae sunt. Ecce terra  
contremuit et fundamentorum suorum stabilitate concussa praesentis Christi  
numen agnouit. Ante praefinitum tempus praecipitat diem mundi rotata  
uertigo et sol non completo diurnarum horarum spatio properato cursu uergit  
in noctem. Ecce ueli fastigia summa finduntur et obscurioribus tenebris orbem  
terrarum caligo noctis abscondit. Omnia elementa Christo pugnante turbata  
sunt, tunc scilicet cum primum contra mortis tyrannidem humanum corpus*

*armauit. Per triduum ista conflictatione pugnatum est quamdiu mors superatis  
malitiae suae uiribus frangeretur.*<sup>76</sup>

Only Matt 27.45 reports the earthquake at the crucifixion; only Luke 23.45 mentions the sun, to whose swift descent Firmicus appears to credit the darkness described by all three synoptic writers. Except for Matt 27.45 (in *Quir.* 2.23 [CCL 3:61]), the material is non-Cyprianic, and Firmicus fuses the passion with the harrowing of hell. The language is distinctly Hadean, with reference to the “doors” of hell, the liberation of the just from the power of death, and the breaking of the “perpetual prison,” and may echo Matt 16.18 (the promise of victory over the gates of hell) and Heb 2.15 (liberation from the fear of death).

In the sections that follow (24.4–5), Firmicus weaves together a description of the resurrection and ascension of Christ from the Psalms and from Cyprian’s *testimonia* on the passion (*Quir.* 2.26; see Tables 1 and 2, above). Taking central place in Firmicus’s dramatic rendition of Christ’s victory—a bright mirror for the sordid pagan dramas of the first half of the book—is an exegesis of Ps 23 (“Lift up your heads, O ye gates”). “Where, O death,” asks *elata mortalitas*, “is thy sting?” (24.4, a quotation of 1 Cor 15.55/Hosea 13.14, possibly from *Quir.* 3.57 [CCL 3:146]). The first quotation from the Psalm (*Aperite, aperite et immortalia claustra conuellite*) follows, with a triumphant gloss, “Christ the God, having trampled death, summons back to heaven Man, whom he had assumed” (*Christus deus calcata morte ad caelum hominem quem suscepit reuocat*).<sup>77</sup> Then comes the order, “Lift up the gates of your prince and be lifted up, eternal gates, and the king of glory shall come in.” The angels wonder at the unexpected news (24.5) and ask, “Who is this king of glory?” Recognizing the Son from his self-description (*Dominus fortis et potens, dominus potens in proelio*) and seeing the “spoils from the prostrate foe” (*prostrati hostis exuias*), they join Christ’s triumphal chariot and the ascending saints in repeating the refrain, “Lift up the gates,” etc.<sup>78</sup>

As Christ takes his throne (24.6), Hebrews resurfaces. Firmicus prefaces a quotation from Daniel (taken from *Quir.* 2.26) with a description of Christ's enthronement, *Reuerso filio promissa pater regni sceptrā restituit et sellam regni aequata potestate concedit ut imperet, ut regnet, ut teneat, ut perpetua numinis sui maiestate dominetur.*<sup>79</sup> The text echoes Heb 1.2, 8, ἐν υἱῷ, ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας· . . . ὁ θρόνος σου ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος, καὶ ἡ ῥάβδος τῆς ἐνθύτητος ῥάβδος τῆς βασιλείας σου, but the dramatic set-piece that precedes owes nothing to the epistle.<sup>80</sup> There is, by contrast, a close parallel in Ambrose's *De fide*, which likewise applies Psalm 23 to the ascension.<sup>81</sup> Both authors are adapting a far older tradition, to be found already in Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.<sup>82</sup> As with the "bridal chamber"-motif, we have Firmicus again applying a widespread tradition to biblical exegesis. His account, which focuses on the ascension but has also dwelt on the "three-day combat" of Christ, provides precedent for the later *Descensus*-tradition, incorporated into medieval Latin texts of the Gospel of Nicodemus, that makes the "eternal gates" those of hell, broken down by the victorious Christ.<sup>83</sup>

*Err.* 27.3 – Gen 6.13–18, 22.6 (with Heb 11.17), Exod 14.16, 15.23–25, 17.1–7 (with 1 Cor 10.4), 17.9–14, Gen 28.10–22, Exod 25.10

*Diuini ac liberantis ligni ordinem disce, ut scias nulla tibi posse ratione succurri. De cataclysmo humanum genus arca lignea liberauit; [de] Abraham ligna unici filii humeris imponit; de Aegypto recedentem dei plebem ligna uirga protexit; lignum dulcem saporem amararum Mercurii fontibus reddidit; ligna uirga ex spiritali petra salutaris unda profertur, et ut Amalech uinceretur, circa uirgam Moyses expansis manibus extenditur; scalae lignae patriarcha incumbens angelum somniat et per eandem alios ascendere alios*

*cernit descendere, et lex dei arcae creditur ligneae, ut his omnibus quasi per gradus quosdam ad lignum crucis salus hominum perueniret.*<sup>84</sup>

In a tight compass, Firmicus traces a typological motif, the “wood” that will be revealed as the cross, through the Old Testament. The narrative is compressed, but gives the gist of several passages: the Flood (Gen 6 and following), the offering of Isaac (Gen 22, with the stress on Isaac’s “uniqueness” from Heb 11.17), the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 14), the sweetening of the bitter water at Marah (Exod 15.23–25) and the provision of water from the rock of Massa and Meribah (Exod 17.1–7, interpreted as by Paul in 1 Cor 10.4), the defeat of Amalek with the help of Aaron and Hur (Exod 17.8–13), Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28.10–22, to which compare Cyprian’s paraphrase at *Quir.* 2.15 [CCL 3:52]), and the making of the ark of the covenant (Exod 25.10).

As we saw above, Firmicus has independent knowledge of the offering of Isaac, from which he will paraphrase 22.13 in the next section; Abraham places the wood on his son’s shoulders in Gen 22.6, but Cyprian quotes only 22.1–2 and 22.11–12 (*Quir.* 3.15, 2.5/3.20 [CCL 3:106, 33, 114]). Even more significant is Firmicus’s treatment of Exod 17, quoted in part (the victory over the Amalekites) at *Quir.* 2.21 and paraphrased, doubtless thence, in 21.6. Here, Firmicus alludes also to the preceding verses, on the rock of Massa and Meribah, adopting the Christological and pneumatological interpretation advanced by Paul in 1 Cor 10.4. Both the Mosaic and the Pauline texts are absent from Cyprian’s compendia.

## FIRMICUS THE CONVERT

In *Err.* 8.4, following a *prosopopoeia* in which the sun rebukes idolaters for crediting shameful deeds to him, Firmicus takes the stage, declaring, “I, now formed by the teaching of the sacred readings, confront ruined people with a religious address.”<sup>85</sup> The claim to scriptural education is much firmer than has generally been allowed. Firmicus makes independent reference to Genesis, Exodus, Job, the Psalms, Isaiah, the Epistle of Jeremiah,

Daniel, Malachi, Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and possibly 2 Corinthians and Revelation. Some of these references are isolated, but many are not. He was able not only to supplement the lists from the compendia, but also to provide theological, historical, or liturgical context for his quotations. His grasp of Exodus, for example, is good enough that he can adduce the passages that precede the victory over the Amalekites in Exodus 17, while he has clearly read several of his other passages (e.g., Mal 3.18 and Luke 10.35–37) with parallel texts in mind.

Firmicus's disproportionate reliance on Cyprian for scriptural quotations does not, therefore, mark the real limits of his scriptural knowledge. It does reveal the way in which he learned scripture. While he had a decent grasp of the Bible's contents, he did not know its text nearly so well. Many of his citations, especially the lists describing the devil as a serpent or showing the spiritual meaning of "wood," look like compilations made by jotting down (or memorizing) passages of particular interest. His interpretation of Luke 10.35–37 by way of the parable of the virgins and the "bridal-chamber"-motif and his paraphrase of the story of Joseph must reflect knowledge not just of the biblical texts, but also of extrabiblical, apologetic or exegetical ideas. The facility with which he weaves such texts together reveals him for a man with a good memory for striking details and a fine sense for thematic linkages: exactly what we would expect from his handling of pagan cults. That he does not quote his texts more often suggests that he had not mastered the entirety of an unwieldy biblical corpus well enough to repeat passages at will. His situation was not unlike that of a modern scholar who, lacking the profound facility in memorization that the best ancient rhetoricians attained, may remember a biblical or Classical text well enough to summarize or echo it, but would have to resort to a search engine or concordance to find the quotation verbatim. Firmicus did not have Google, but he did have Cyprian. That he quotes so much from the Epistle of

Jeremiah and the Psalms fits perfectly with the hypothesis. The Epistle is brief and easily consulted; the Psalms any Christian might learn by heart in liturgy.

Where did he get his knowledge of scripture? Firmicus's allusions to baptism and his account of the divine bread and cup show that he was a baptized, communicant Christian, and so had presumably undergone catechesis. If he was like the learned converts Augustine described in his catechetical manual, he would have been reading Christian books long before he decided to be baptized,<sup>86</sup> but nothing in the *Mathesis* implies special knowledge of Christianity. Nothing, equally, licenses us to credit his non-Cyprianic scriptural allusions to a specific source. He could have heard a passage such as the parable of the virgins in a sermon, read about it in a biblical commentary or piece of theological writing (in his day, likely in Greek), or encountered it in a perusal of Matthew's text, and connected it from any of those sources—or all three—to the Lucan near-parallel he knew from Cyprian. He may, of course, have freely redeployed theological ideas ultimately owed to others, as he did with his Classical and antiquarian sources.<sup>87</sup> However, despite apparent echoes of Arnobius in his description of the passion, for example, his account of the *descensus* and ascension owes nothing to his predecessor, whose peculiar emphasis on Christ's dissimilarity from humans he lacks.<sup>88</sup>

The one body of exegetical literature we can be certain Firmicus both read and integrated into his own thinking were the headings that introduce and organize Cyprian's lists of *testimonia* (Table 1). Firmicus generally matches his themes—tied, in most cases, to a ritual formula used in the worship of a pagan god—to Cyprian's Messianic motifs; the main departure, the “horns” of the cross discussed in 21, follows an established Christian interpretation of the cross's shape.<sup>89</sup> He shows little interest, by contrast, in the anti-Judaic themes of *Ad Quirinum* 1, freely turning Cyprian's prooftexts against pagans in *De errore* 18.



Whatever Firmicus thought about Jews, Christian disagreements with them had little bearing on polemic against idolatry, and here he simply ignores Cyprian's priorities.<sup>90</sup>

There are, however, a few more complex theological interactions with Cyprian. The first concerns Christology. Firmicus's thinking, described as "Arian" on weak grounds by Jean-Marie Vermader, is in fact broadly Irenaean, without overt preference for one ecclesiastical party or another (appropriately, since his imperial addressees differed).<sup>91</sup> There is one place, however, in which he appears to be updating Cyprian's language with an eye on current controversies. In *Err.* 24.6, he says of the exalted Christ, "To the Son when he had returned, the Father restored the promised scepter of the kingdom and granted him the throne of the kingdom with equal power, to reign, rule, hold, and command by the perpetual majesty of his divinity."<sup>92</sup> Cast in Classicizing language (hence *numen*) and expanded, in an echo of Hebrews, with a reference to the scepter and throne of God, the phrase parallels the heading of *Quir.* 2.26, from which Firmicus takes the quotations that follow.<sup>93</sup> Cyprian, however, had written, "That when he had arisen, he would receive from the Father all power and that his power would be eternal."<sup>94</sup> Firmicus's "restored" (*restituit*) and "equal" (*aequata*, or the manuscript reading, *aequa*, retained by Ziegler) make clear, as Cyprian's "receive" (*acciperet*) and "all" (*omnem*) had not, that Christ was not receiving a new or secondary power, but one equal with the Father's and by which he had reigned before his incarnation.<sup>95</sup> Whether or not he knew much about Nicaea or the Trinitarian debates that were roiling, Firmicus seems to have leaned toward a theology not unlike that defended by its champions.

Respect for Cyprian may, on the other hand, help to account for the strange suggestion that the emperors ought to execute the full command of Deuteronomy upon idolaters. In the *Mathesis*, Firmicus had made out Constantine to be an earthly god, free of the celestial powers and subject to the *summus deus* directly.<sup>96</sup> His exhortation to Constantine's sons, while laudatory, leaves them fully human; God has shown them great

favor and is now “inviting” them to ascend past the first rudiments of faith to the “hidden things of the venerable law.”<sup>97</sup> That law is, of course, Deuteronomy, from which Cyprian had quoted in *Ad Fortunatum*, under the headings, “What God’s threat is against those who sacrifice to idols” and “That God is so angered at idolatry that he commands even those to be killed who have made a case for sacrificing and serving idols.”<sup>98</sup> When Firmicus invites Constantius II and Constans to pursue the will of God, he is asking them to do nothing other than what Cyprian said God had commanded to be done to idolaters. Cyprian’s aim had been to encourage frightened Christians to martyrdom by reminding them of the dire sinfulness of sacrificing; Firmicus’s was now to remove the source of that sin from the entire Empire.

The leap from peaceful martyrdom to violent suppression of others’ worship jars no less than the suggestion that Constantine’s sons, harsh in speaking against idolatry but pragmatic in dealing with actual idolaters, might destroy whole cities because of their traditional cults.<sup>99</sup> Firmicus matches a literalist reading of Deuteronomy and of Cyprian’s summation of its commands with an implausible expectation—if he did expect it—of emperors who, though professedly Christian, were nonetheless still rulers of a vast and diverse empire. No wonder, then, that many of his readers have wanted to see personal machination or favor-currying behind his exhortation. But zeal, even to excess, is often a mark of the fresh convert to a new conviction, and nothing rules out the plain interpretation of Firmicus’s words. He really did think, after reading Cyprian in a new age of vigorous public Christianity, that everyone would be better off, now and for eternity, if the emperors crushed both idols and, if need be, their worshippers. He hoped, however, to see the idolaters convert, before it came to that.<sup>100</sup>

## CONCLUSION: THE CONVERSION OF THE HEAVENS

Since Firmicus’s vocabulary (*numen*, *summus deus*, and so on) shows a general Classicism, even scholars who do not dismiss him as insincere have wondered just how much really

changed when he became a Christian.<sup>101</sup> He was, it has been suggested, possibly a Christian when he wrote the *Mathesis*, and did not reject astrology in *De errore*.<sup>102</sup> His expression of his beliefs had changed, but their deep structures remained the same, still putting a *summus deus* above all other powers and expressing his conviction in much the same language.<sup>103</sup> As an astrologer, he was thus, in the judgment of no less influential a scholar than Peter Brown, a typical representative of “the Christianity of the Constantinian age”—or of a mode of thought very similar to it—in worshipping a mighty God distant beyond the cosmos without denying the lesser powers superintendent over the present world.<sup>104</sup>

That picture downplays Firmicus’s assimilation of scripture. It also oversimplifies fourth-century Christianity, which was exemplified as much by ardently un-pagan opinion-makers, savvy ecclesiastical politicians, and self-consciously orthodox theological thinkers, as by any new wave of laxity or *laissez faire*. Firmicus’s own Christianity, in fact, most closely resembles that of a more famous convert: Constantine himself. The emperor, too, has often been thought to have embraced Christianity only for political reasons.<sup>105</sup> That inverts the relationship between imperial authority and religious duty. Constantine, who urged the young Shapur II of Persia to become a champion of Christians, who harangued his recalcitrant courtiers with sermons (one, the *Oration to the Holy Assembly*, still extant), whose coins showed a serpent being pierced by the *labarum*, a battle-standard surmounted by a chi-rho, used his influence as emperor to further the victory of Christ over the gods.<sup>106</sup> To a point. Presented, in 324, with arguments strikingly like Firmicus’s, Constantine rejected the total suppression of pagan cults as pragmatically impossible.<sup>107</sup> For Firmicus, pragmatic considerations did not enter in, as the efforts begun but not yet completed by Constantine and his sons seemed to promise a consummation of Christ’s victory over the devil now rather than in a distant eschaton.<sup>108</sup> His is, indeed, a distinctly Constantinian Christianity, eager to put imperial power at the service of God and the world’s salvation, yet his call for a total

abolition of idolatry outstripped, by some forty years, what the Roman emperors were able (or willing) to attempt.

As an astrologer, Firmicus had also pursued, to unusual intellectual sophistication, the fascination with the heavens shared not only (it would seem) by Constantine, a visionary on many more occasions than his march on Rome, but also by a rising Greek churchman, Cyril of Jerusalem, who reported the appearance of a solar cross to Constantius II in May 351, and by the senator Praetextatus, the greatest representative of the pagan mysticism attacked in *De errore*.<sup>109</sup> Here, Firmicus's polemic most neatly illustrates the intellectual and devotional shift that could be occasioned, despite real continuity of mental architecture, by conversion from a devoutly intellectual paganism to an articulate Christianity. *De errore* reveals a fundamental transformation of his thinking about the heavens he had once deified. In *Err.* 8.1-3, before his address as the man "now formed by the teaching of the sacred readings," Firmicus has the personified sun address the entire human race. The being who had once been the greatest of his astral gods, "who alone opens the gates of the supernal realm," declares himself a mere creature: "For the beginning of the day I was made by God; this is enough for me by itself."<sup>110</sup> What "leads men to the way of salvation" is now, "having rejected errors" to "drink in the grace of God simply and faithfully."<sup>111</sup> Firmicus can imagine the sun pointing the way to the salvation of God, but he is no longer its conduit. That office belongs now to a greater, and it is the sun's rays, brightened again after three days' darkness, that herald the resurrection of Christ, "the omnipotent God."<sup>112</sup> For Firmicus as for Arnobius (also an ex-pagan turned apologist) decades before, Christ is greater than the sun, and his word, not fate, rules human life.<sup>113</sup>

This new belief weaves its way through Firmicus's scriptural allusions. The repentant pagan, waiting vigilantly for the heavenly bridegroom, will enter the "bridal-chamber of heaven" and "see the palace of the cosmos," receiving "the grace of immortality from the

most pious and righteous Lord.”<sup>114</sup> This Lord, of course, is no astral god, but Christ the bridegroom. In the cross, Firmicus finds a cosmic significance. “The wood of the cross upholds the engine of heaven, steadies the foundations of the Earth, leads the people fixed to it to life.”<sup>115</sup> From the pen of a former astrologer, this image, coming after a string of Old Testament types, bears profound significance: salvation is still worked into the cosmic order, but in explicitly Christian and scriptural terms. It comes as little surprise when, a few pages later, Firmicus flatly rejects the determinism he had once defended, telling pagans, “God has made you free; it is in your hand that you live or perish.”<sup>116</sup> Grace has not simply replaced astral knowledge. The universe itself, reframed through scripture as Firmicus has reframed the world’s cults, is now become Christian. Firmicus has not just absorbed scattered theological ideas with his Cyprianic prooftexts. For this convert, to absorb scripture and Christian theology during the new era of Constantine and his sons has been to embrace a new vision, not just of the place of religion in a Roman world now under the acknowledged rulership of one God, but of the heavens in which he and influential contemporaries, both pagan and Christ, saw a manifestation of the divine order.

Mattias Gassman is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Classics at the University of Oxford.

---

This article was written while the author was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow. My thanks to Neil McLynn, Oliver Nicholson, and Christopher Kelly for discussion, the anonymous *JECS* referees for their comments, and Diana Stow for permission to cite her unpublished Oxford B.Litt. thesis. Elements have also benefited from discussion of papers delivered in Cambridge, San Francisco, Birmingham, and Newcastle.

<sup>1</sup> “Pagan” may seem too generalizing (e.g., Maijastina Kahlos, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity, 350–450*, Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity [New York: Oxford University Press,

---

2020], 92–104), but the term, though unused by Firmicus, is suited to the senators he attacks in *De errore profanarum religionum* (= *Err.*, ed. Robert Turcan, *Firmicus Maternus: L'Erreur des religions païennes*, Collection des universités de France [Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982], 76–155). Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* = *Math.*; Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum* = *Quir.*, *Ad Fortunatum* = *Fort.* I build throughout on the political and intellectual background I have sketched in *Worshippers of the Gods: Debating Paganism in the Fourth-Century Roman West*, Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); here, esp. 48–58.

<sup>2</sup> *PLRE* 1: 512–14 (Lollianus 5). The likeliest dating is early in 337: Timothy D. Barnes, “Two Senators under Constantine,” *JRS* 75 (1975), 40–49. Firmicus’s senatorial rank is attested in the manuscripts: Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 155, Pierre Monat, ed. *Firmicus Maternus: Mathesis*, 3 vols., Collection des universités des Frances (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1992–7), e.g., 1:90.

<sup>3</sup> *Math.* 2.30.1–2, 1.4.11, 8.1.1 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:139–40, 63; 3:232). On Firmicus’s pagan religiosity, see José Martínez Gázquez, “Fírmico Materno: La astrología, enseñanza para el recto gobierno de la vida,” in *Homo mathematicus: Actas del Congreso Internacional sobre Astrólogos Griegos y Romanos (Benalmádena, 8–10 de Octubre di 2001)*, ed. Aurelio Pérez Jiménez and Raúl Caballero (Málaga: Charta Antiqua, 2002), 161–75.

<sup>4</sup> Astrologers and other experts: *Math.*, e.g., 3.2.18, 3.7.6, 9, 19 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 2:16, 86–7, 91); the gods: 1.10.14, 5.praef.3–5; (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:89, 2:218–19).

<sup>5</sup> *Math.* 5.praef.5 (Monat, *Mathesis* 2:219), addressing the sun as *Sol optime maxime . . . per quem cunctis animantibus immortalis anima diuina dispositione diuiditur, qui solus ianuas aperis sedis supernae, ad cuius arbitrium fatorum ordo disponitur*, 1.10.14 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:89), addressing the planet Jupiter as *Tarpeiae rupis habitator* (i.e., Jupiter Capitolinus; cf.

---

Diana M. Stow, “Julius Firmicus Maternus—Mathesis and De Errore Profanarum Religionum: An Introductory Survey” [B.Litt. thesis, Oxford, 1978], 47).

<sup>6</sup> Firmicus does forbid participation in nocturnal rites: *Math.* 2.30.10 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:142); M. W. Dickie, ““Julius Firmicus Maternus’ Defence of Astrology: Writing an Astrological Handbook in the Reign of Constantine the Great,” in *Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar* 15 (2012): 317–47.

<sup>7</sup> *Err.* 28.6 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 148–49); the work was completed before Constans’ death in 350.

<sup>8</sup> See note 107, below.

<sup>9</sup> *Err.* 29 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 153–55).

<sup>10</sup> *Math.* 1.praef.8 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:53).

<sup>11</sup> Despite Karl Hoheisel, “Das Urteil über die nichtchristlichen Religionen im Traktat ‘De errore profanarum religionum’ des Iulius Firmicus Maternus” (PhD dissertation, Bonn, 1972), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ziegler, “Firmicus Maternus,” *RAC* 7 (1969): 946–59, at 947. It is also possible that an offer of a consulship for 338 was withdrawn due to Constantine’s death (Theodor Friedrich, *In Iulii Firmici Materni de errore profanarum religionum libellum quaestiones* [Bonn: Universitäts-Buchdruckerei und Verlag Carl Georg, 1905], 53, followed by Barnes, “Two Senators,” 40).

<sup>13</sup> Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 61–106, with a list of the inscriptions at 84n48; only *CIL* VI 498 (from 350) can be securely placed between *CIL* VI 508 (from 319) and the 370s. Victorinus, *Gal.* 4.9 (CSEL 83/2:145).

<sup>14</sup> Ambrose, *Ep.* 73(18).7 (CCL 82:36–8), Rufinus, *Hist.* 11.22–30 (GCS, n.s. 6/2:1025–36), Prudentius, *Peri.* 2.412–84 (CCL 126:271–74). On Theodosian “triumphalism,” see esp. Peter Brown, “Christianisation and Religious Conflict,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*,

---

13: *The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 632–64, at 633–34; on the demise of the polytheistic norm, Edward J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation, Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 53 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 17–36.

<sup>15</sup> The near-polemic in Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 19–24, is typical, but contrast, e.g., Ilona Opelt, “Firmico Materno, il convertito convertitore,” *Augustinianum* 27 (1987): 71–78.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of scholarship, see Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 57–61.

<sup>17</sup> On the positioning of *Ad Quirinum* within Cyprian’s oeuvre, see now Mattias Gassman, “Cyprian’s Early Career in the Church of Carthage,” *JEH* 70 (2019): 1–17 (esp. 9–15); Andy Alexis-Baker, “*Ad Quirinum* Book Three and Cyprian’s Catechumenate,” *JECS* 17 (2009): 357–80 examines the structure of the third book. Despite Charles Bobertz, “An analysis of Vita Cypriani 3.6–10 and the attribution of *Ad Quirinum* to Cyprian of Carthage,” *VC* 46 (1992), 112–28, its attribution to Cyprian is secure: esp. Edwina Murphy, “‘As Far as My Poor Memory Suggested’: Cyprian’s Compilation of *Ad Quirinum*,” *VC* 68 (2014): 533–50.

<sup>18</sup> The date is likely 257, during the Valerianic persecution; on all aspects of *Fort.*, see now Robert Walz, *Vorbereitung auf das Martyrium bei Cyprian von Karthago: Eine Studie zu Ad Fortunatum*, Patrologia: Beiträge zum Studium der Kirchenväter 27 (Frankfurter: Peter Lang, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Clarence A. Forbes, trans., *Firmicus Maternus: The Error of Pagan Religions*, ACW 37 (New York: Newman, 1970), 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> *Quir.* 1.praef. (CCL 3:3): . . . *necessaria quaeque colligerem, quibus non tractasse quam tractantibus materiam praeuisse uideamur*; thus also, in similar language, *Fort.* praef.3 (CCL 3:184). *Quir.* 3.praef. (CCL 3:72) stresses the convenience of such excerpts for speedy and repeated reading.



---

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Prudentius, *Peri.* 13.1–14, 96–106 (CCL 126:382, 385), Augustine, *Doctr. chr.*

4.14.31, 21.45–50 (CCL 32:137–48, 151–57).

<sup>23</sup> Dombart, “Ueber die Bedeutung Commodians für die Textkritik der Testimonia Cyprians,” *ZWT* 22 (1879): 374–89, at 375–76.

<sup>24</sup> Konrat Ziegler, ed., *Iuli Firmici Materni V.C. De errore profanarum religionum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907), 84.

<sup>25</sup> Other astrological treatises, planned or already finished, are named at *Math.* 4.20.2, 5.1.38, 7.8.4, 8.4.14 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 2:195, 235, 3:174, 245).

<sup>26</sup> He quotes Porphyry at *Err.* 13.4 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 106) and shows acquaintance with a few Platonist works in *Math.* (discussion and prior scholarship in Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 65–66).

<sup>27</sup> *Catech.* 8.12 (CCL 46:133).

<sup>28</sup> Digitized at [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Pal.lat.165](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Pal.lat.165), accessed November 5, 2021; see further Alfons Müller, *Zur Ueberlieferung der Apologie des Firmicus Maternus* (Tübingen: J. Heckenhauer, 1908).

<sup>29</sup> I have consulted Ziegler’s *index locorum* (*Iuli Firmici Materni*, 84) and the commentaries by Forbes, *Firmicus Maternus*, Turcan, *L’Erreur*, Ennio Sanzi, trans., *Firmico Materno: L’errore delle religioni pagane*, Collana di testi patristici 191 (Rome: Città nuova, 2006), Agostino Pastorino, ed., *Iuli Firmici Materni De errore profanarum religionum: Introduzione e commento*, Biblioteca di studi superiori 27 (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1956), and Gilbert Heuten, ed., *Julius Firmicus Maternus, De errore profanarum religionum: traduction nouvelle avec texte et commentaire*, Travaux de la Faculté de philosophie et lettres de l’Université de Bruxelles 8 (Brussels: Éditions de la Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1938). To avoid larding the notes, I cite particular commentaries only where the interpretations offered are of special importance.

---

<sup>30</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 118: *Ait enim in euangelio cata Iohannem ... Item in sequentibus hoc idem simili modo significat; ait enim ... Et rursus ipse ut maiestatis suae substantiam credentibus traderet ait . . .*

<sup>31</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 152.

<sup>32</sup> Martin, "The Biblical Text of Firmicus Maternus," *JTS* 24 (1923): 318–25

<sup>33</sup> Martin, "Biblical Text," 322; CSEL 3/1:34–184. Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Sessoriano 58 (2106) (description at [https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/opac\\_SchedaScheda.php?ID=218482](https://manus.iccu.sbn.it/opac_SchedaScheda.php?ID=218482), last updated November 8, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Martin, "Biblical Text," 319.

<sup>35</sup> Cyprian begins (*Quir.* 1.13, CCL 3:15), *Ad quid tumultuatae sunt gentes*, Firmicus (*Err.* 23.3, Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 131), *Vt quid fremuerent gentes*; the texts are thereafter identical.

<sup>36</sup> Forbes, *Firmicus Maternus*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 119.

<sup>38</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Some are found elsewhere in Cyprian's works: e.g., Gen 14.18–19 appears in *Ep.* 63.4.1 (CCL 3C:392), while *Ep.* 73.25.3 (CCL 3C:560) alludes to Esau's displacement by Jacob, 55.23.2 (CCL 3B:283) to the prodigal son, and *Zel. et liu.* 17 (CCL 3A:85) to Exod 15.25. A link between the last passage and *Err* 23.7 has been suggested (Pastorino, *Iuli Firmici Materni*, 260, Forbes, *Firmicus Maternus*, 218–19n497), but systematic mining of the Cyprianic corpus would be remarkable in itself—and nothing like Firmicus's handling of the proof-text-lists.

<sup>40</sup> I quote from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012) and *Septuaginta, id est Vetus Testamentum*

---

*graece iuxta LXX interpretes*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), via <https://www.academic-bible.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 98–99.

<sup>42</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 132.

<sup>43</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 133.

<sup>44</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93.

<sup>47</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 138.

<sup>48</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 126–27.

<sup>52</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 142.

<sup>53</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 144.

<sup>55</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 145.

<sup>56</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 105. Gerard Mussies, “The Interpretatio Judaica of Sarapis,” in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*, ed. M. J. Vermaseren, *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain* 78 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 189–214.

<sup>58</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 116.

<sup>60</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 116–17.

---

<sup>61</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 117.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 66–67.

<sup>63</sup> *CIL* VI 1779a.23; PLRE 1:722–24 (Praetextatus 1). Cf. R. Ellis, “On a Recently Discovered Latin Poem of the Fourth Century,” *The Journal of Philology* 1/2 (1868): 66–80, at 80.

<sup>64</sup> “Giulio Firmico Materno e la ‘Lettera agli Ebrei,’” *Convivium* 25: 641–51, at 648.

<sup>65</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 137.

<sup>66</sup> Serpent: Gen. 3:14–15, at *Quir.* 2.9 (CCL 3:41); Eve: Gen. 3.16, *Quir.* 3.32 (125–26); Adam: Gen. 3:17–19, *Quir.* 3.58 (143–44).

<sup>67</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 110.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Err.* 20.6 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 125), . . . *in cinerem fauillasque conuerso* . . . , *Math.* 1.9.1 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 1:84): . . . *in cinerem fauillasque conuertitur* . . .

<sup>69</sup> Forbes, *Firmicus Maternus*, 187n297.

<sup>70</sup> *Err.* 19.6 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 121).

<sup>71</sup> *Err.* 19.7, (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 122).

<sup>72</sup> Forbes, *Firmicus Maternus*, 200n372, pointing to the closing sentence of Firmicus’s other work: *Math.* 8.33.4 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 3:321).

<sup>73</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, “Some Distinctive Features in Syriac Liturgical Texts,” in *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East: An International Symposium in Honor of the 40th Anniversary of St Nersess Armenian Seminary*, ed. Roberta R. Ervine, AVANT 3 (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), 141–60, at 148–49. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.27.2 (SC 294:266), Hilary, *Psal.* 118, nun, 4 (CCL 61A:129), *Trin.* 9.65 (CCL 62A:445), Ambrose, *Psal.* 118.14.7 (CSEL 62:302); cf. *Is.* 8.72 (CSEL 32/1:692), on John 13.23.

---

<sup>75</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 128–29.

<sup>76</sup> *Err.* 24.2 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 132–33).

<sup>77</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 133.

<sup>78</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 134.

<sup>79</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 134.

<sup>80</sup> For Hebrews in this passage, cf., very briefly, Vecchi, “Giulio Firmico Materno,” 651.

<sup>81</sup> Ambrose, *Fid.* 4.1.1–14 (CCL 78:158–62).

<sup>82</sup> Justin, *Apol.* 1.51.6–9 (ed. Miroslav Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis*, Patristische Texte und Studien 38 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005; reprint of 1994 edition], 103), *Dial.* 36.3–6 (ed. Miroslav Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, Patristische Texte und Studien 47 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005; reprint of 1997 edition], 130–31), Irenaeus, *Apostolic Preaching* 84 (SC 406:196–98), Tertullian, *Fug.* 12.2 (CCL 1:1150). See further Ernst Kähler, *Studien zum Te Deum und zur Geschichte des 24. Psalms in der Alten Kirche*, Veröffentlichungen der Evangelischen Gesellschaft für Liturgieforschung 10 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 50–64.

<sup>83</sup> See Latin version A of the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, section 5, in Constantin von Tischendorf, ed. *Evangelia Apocrypha: Adhibitio plurimis codicibus Graecis et Latinis maximam partem nunc primum consultis atque ineditorum copia insignibus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelsohn, 1876), 397–9.

<sup>84</sup> Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 141–42.

<sup>85</sup> *Err.* 8.4 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 98), *At ego nunc sacrarum lectionum institutione formatus perditos homines religioso sermone conuenio.*

<sup>86</sup> *Catech.* 8.12 (CCL 46:133).

---

<sup>87</sup> For example, the exhortation to the eunuch-priests of Caelestis at *Err.* 4.3 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 84–85) bears a distinct resemblance to Cyprian, *Hab. uirg.* 17, 21 (CCL 3F:308, 313).

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *Err.* 24.2 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 132), *Ecce terra contremuit et fundamentorum suorum stabilitate concussa praesentis Christi numen agnouit . . . omnia elementa Christo pugnante turbata sunt . . .* to Arnobius, *Aduersus nationes* 1.53 (ed. C. Marchesi, *Aduersus nationes libri VII*, 2nd ed., Corpus Scriptorum Latinorum Paravianum 62 [Turin: Io. Bapt. Paraviae et Sociorum, 1953], 49), . . . *nouitate rerum exterrita uniuersa mundi sunt elementa turbata, tellus mota contremuit . . .* Despite Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 50–53, the occasional overlaps with previous apologists, except probably Arnobius (for which Ziegler, *Iuli Firmici Materni*, esp. 60–61), are too weak to prove direct knowledge.

<sup>89</sup> E.g., Justin, *Dial.* 91.2 (Marcovich, *Dialogus*, 227).

<sup>90</sup> Which naturally shaped Cyprian's own deployment of his citations: for an example, see Edwina Murphy, "Widows, Welfare and the Wayward: 1 *Timothy* 5 in Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum*," *SP* 94 (2017): 67–74.

<sup>91</sup> Emanuele Di Santo, "Firmico Materno: Un ariano mascherato o un 'discepolo' di Ireneo? Per una corretta valutazione del ruolo della tradizione teologica nell'ambiente siculo-romano del IV secolo," in *Vescovi, Sicilia, Mediterraneo nella tarda antichità: Atti del I convegno di studi (Palermo, 29–30 ottobre 2010)*, ed. Vincenzo Messina and Vincenzo Lombino, *Storia e Cultura di Sicilia* 29 (Caltanissetta and Rome: Salvatore Sciascia, 2012), 115–42, at 140–42; Jean-Marie Vermander, "Un arien d'Occident méconnu: Firmicus Maternus," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 81 (1980): 3–16.

<sup>92</sup> *Err.* 24.6 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 134), *Reuerso filio promissa pater regni scepra restituit et sellam regni aequata potestate concedit ut imperet, ut regnet, ut teneat, ut perpetua numinis sui maiestate dominetur.*

---

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Pastorino, *Iuli Firmici Materni*, 238.

<sup>94</sup> *Quir.* 2.26 (CCL 3:63), *Quod cum resurrexisset, acciperet a Patre omnem potestatem et potestas eius aeterna sit.*

<sup>95</sup> Ziegler, *Iuli Firmici Materni*, 63.

<sup>96</sup> *Math.* 2.30.5–6 (Monat, *Mathesis*, 141).

<sup>97</sup> *Err.* 29.3–4 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 154–55). For the subtle alteration, cf. Kenneth M. Setton, *Christian Attitude towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century Especially as Shown in Addresses to the Emperor*, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law 482 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 66.

<sup>98</sup> *Fort.* 3, *Quae comminatio Dei sit aduersus eos qui idolis sacrificant*, 5, *Quod sic idolatriae indignetur deus ut praeceperit etiam eos interfici qui sacrificare et seruire idolis suaserint* (CCL 3:189, 191). For the themes within Cyprian's works, see Walz, *Vorbereitung*, 140–60.

<sup>99</sup> See Timothy D. Barnes, “Christians and Pagans in the Reign of Constantius,” on *L'Église et l'empire au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Albrecht Dihle. *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique* 34, (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1989), 301–37, Muriel Moser, *Emperors and Senators in the Reign of Constantius II: Maintaining Imperial Rule between Rome and Constantinople in the Fourth Century AD*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 292–98.

<sup>100</sup> *Err.* 28.9–13 (Turcan, *L'Erreur*, 150–53) is only the most elaborate of many exhortations.

<sup>101</sup> On Firmicus's theological language, see Aldo Bartalucci, “Considerazioni sul lessico cristiano del ‘De errore profanarum religionum’ di Giulio Firmico Materno,” *Studi italiani di filologia classica* 39 (1967): 165–85.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Edwards, “Astrology and Freedom: The Case of Firmicus Maternus,” in *Individuality in Late Antiquity*, ed. Alexis Torrance and Johannes Zachhuber, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 29–45, at 42.

---

Cf. Franz Skutsch, “Ein neuer Zeuge der altchristlichen Liturgie,” *ARW* 13 (1910): 296–305, at 303.

<sup>103</sup> Frédéric Chapot, “Prière et sentiment religieux chez Firmicus Maternus,” *REAug* 47 (2001): 63–83, esp. 81–82.

<sup>104</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 202, on Ausonius, to whom Firmicus is likened on 203.

<sup>105</sup> On Constantine’s religion, Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), remains convincing; for a contrasting view, see H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000). Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*, *Empire and After* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), adds fine political texture.

<sup>106</sup> Eusebius, *Vita* 4.12–13, 29–32 (ed. Friedhelm Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke* 1/1: *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, GCS [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008; reprint of second Akademie-Verlag edition of 1991], 124–25, 131–32). *Labarum*: Roman Imperial Coinage VII: Constantinople 19 (<http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.7.cnp.19>); cf. Eusebius, *Vita* 3.3 (Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke* 1/1, 82).

<sup>107</sup> Eusebius, *Vita* 2.60.2 (the *Letter to the Eastern Provincials*; Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke* 1/1, 72).

<sup>108</sup> In fact, Firmicus never explains how the emperors’ actions will fit together with Christ’s return; on the shift from a distinctly eschatological thinker, Lactantius, see Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 73–75.

<sup>109</sup> Constantine’s many visions: Eusebius, *Vita* 1.47.3 (Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke* 1/1, 40); *contra* Peter Weiss, “The Vision of Constantine,” trans. A.R. Birley, *Journal of Roman*



---

*Archaeology* 16 (2003): 237–59, the specific visions attributed to Constantine by Eusebius and others need not be reduced to a single experience of a solar halo. Cyril: Ernest Bihain, “L’Épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance sur la vision de la croix (BHG<sup>3</sup> 413): Tradition manuscrite et édition critique,” *Byzantion* 43 (1973): 264–96, with discussion in Mattias Gassman, “Eschatology and Politics in Cyril of Jerusalem’s *Epistle to Constantius*,” *VC* 69 (2015): 1–15. Praetextatus’s widow, Fabia Aconia Paulina, proclaimed his immortalization in the Milky Way: Jerome, *Ep.* 23.3 (CSEL 54:213), possibly influenced by *Err.* 18.6 (Lellia Cracco Ruggini, “En marge d’une ‘mésalliance’: Prétextat, Damase et le *Carmen contra paganos*,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 142 (1998): 493–516, at 507–8).

<sup>110</sup> *Math.* 5.praef.5, quoted at note 5, above; *Err.* 8.3 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 98). For the change, cf. Opelt, “Firmico Materno,” 73–75.

<sup>111</sup> *Err.* 8.3 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 98).

<sup>112</sup> *Err.* 24.4 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 133), *Ecce post triduum lucidior a solito dies oritur et reddita soli praeteriti luminis gratia omnipotens deus Christus splendidioribus solis radiis adornatur.*

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Arnobius, *Adversus nationes* 1.47 (Marchesi, *Adversus nationes*, 42), *sole ipso est clarius, potentior illum fuisse quam fata sunt.* . . . Arnobius’s conversion is reported by Jerome, *Chronicon* 327 p. Chr. (GCS 47:231).

<sup>114</sup> *Err.* 19.7 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 121–22).

<sup>115</sup> *Err.* 27.3 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 142), *Quapropter lignum crucis caeli sustinet machinam, terrae fundamenta conroborat, adfixos sibi homines ducit ad uitam.*

<sup>116</sup> *Err.* 28.13 (Turcan, *L’Erreur*, 152).