

# Montanism

“Montanus” redirects here. For other uses, see [Montanus \(disambiguation\)](#).

For the unrelated Catholic philosophy emphasizing the authority of the Pope, see [Ultramontanism](#).

**Montanism**, known by its adherents as the **New Prophecy**, was an early Christian movement of the late 2nd century, later referred to by the name of its founder, Montanus. The movement held the basic tenets of Christian doctrine of the wider Church, although believing in new revelations and ecstasies, unapproved by the wider Church; the Bishop of Rome ultimately condemned the movement as heretical and excommunicated its adherents. It was a prophetic movement that called for a reliance on the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit and a more conservative personal ethic. Parallels have been drawn between Montanism and modern-day movements such as Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement, and the New Apostolic Reformation.<sup>[1]</sup>

It originated in Phrygia, a province of Asia Minor, and flourished throughout the region, leading to the movement being referred to elsewhere as "**Cataphrygian**" (meaning it was "from Phrygia") or simply as "**Phrygian**".<sup>[2]</sup> It spread rapidly to other regions in the Roman Empire at a time before Christianity was generally tolerated or legal. It persisted in some isolated places into the 6th century.

## 1 Foundation

Scholars debate as to when Montanus first began his prophetic activity, having chosen dates varying from c. AD 135 to as late as AD 177.<sup>[3][4]</sup> Montanus was a recent convert when he first began prophesying, supposedly during the proconsulate of Gratus in a village in Mysia named Ardabau; no proconsul and village so named have been identified, however.<sup>[5]</sup> Some accounts claim that before his conversion to Christianity, Montanus was a priest of Apollo or Cybele.<sup>[6][lower-alpha 1]</sup> He believed he was a prophet of God and that the Paraclete spoke through him.

Montanus proclaimed the towns of Pepuza and Tymion in west-central Phrygia as the site of the New Jerusalem, making the larger - Pepuza - his headquarters.<sup>[8]</sup> Phrygia as a source for this new movement was not arbitrary. Hellenization never fully took root in Phrygia, unlike many of the surrounding Eastern regions of the Roman Empire. This sense of difference, while simultaneously hav-

ing easy access to the rest of the Mediterranean Christian world, encouraged the foundation of this separate sect of Christianity.<sup>[9]</sup>

Montanus had two female colleagues, Prisca (sometimes called Priscilla, the diminutive form of her name) and Maximilla, who likewise claimed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Their popularity even exceeded Montanus' own.<sup>[10]</sup> “The Three” spoke in ecstatic visions and urged their followers to fast and to pray, so that they might share these revelations. Their followers claimed they received the prophetic gift from the prophets Quadratus and Ammia of Philadelphia, figures believed to have been part of a line of prophetic succession stretching all the way back to Agabus (1st century AD) and to the daughters of Philip the Evangelist.<sup>[11]</sup> In time, the New Prophecy spread from Montanus's native Phrygia across the Christian world, to Africa and to Gaul.

## 2 Aftermath

The response to the New Prophecy split the Christian communities, and the more-orthodox clergy mostly fought to suppress it. Opponents believed that evil spirits possessed the Phrygian prophets, and both Maximilla and Priscilla were the targets of failed exorcisms.<sup>[12]</sup> The churches of Asia Minor pronounced the prophecies profane and excommunicated New Prophecy adherents.<sup>[13]</sup> Around 177, Apollinarius, Bishop of Hierapolis, presided over a synod which condemned the New Prophecy.<sup>[14]</sup> The leaders of the churches of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul responded to the New Prophecy in 177. Their decision was communicated to the churches in Asia and Eleuterus, the Bishop of Rome, but it is not known what this consisted of, only that it was “prudent and most orthodox”.<sup>[15]</sup> It is likely they called for moderation in dealing with the movement.

There was real doubt at Rome, and its bishop (either Eleuterus or Victor I) even wrote letters in support of Montanism, although he was later persuaded by Praxeas to recall them.<sup>[16][17]</sup> In 193, an anonymous writer found the church at Ancyra in Galatia torn in two, and opposed the “false prophecy” there.<sup>[18]</sup>

Eventually, Montanist teachings came to be regarded as heresy by the orthodox Church for a number of reasons. The clash of basic beliefs between the movement's proponents and the greater Christian world was likely enough for such conflict to occur. Additionally, in the opinion of

anti-Montanists, the movement's penchant for dramatic public displays by its adherents brought unwanted attention to the still fledgling religion. Thus, fears concerning the appearance of Montanist practices to their non-Christian rulers fueled anti-Montanist sentiment.<sup>[19]</sup> The imperial government carried out sporadic executions of Christians under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, circa AD 161-180, which coincides with the spread of Montanism.

There was never a uniform excommunication of New Prophecy adherents, and in many places they maintained their standing within the orthodox community. This was the case at Carthage. While not without tension, the church there avoided schism over the issue. There were women prophesying at Carthage, and prophecy was considered a genuine *charisma*. It was the responsibility of the council of elders to test all prophecy and to determine genuine revelation.<sup>[20]</sup> Tertullian, undoubtedly the best-known defender of the New Prophecy, believed that the claims of Montanus were genuine beginning c. 207.<sup>[21]</sup> He believed in the validity of the New Prophecy and admired the movement's discipline and ascetic standards. A common misconception is that Tertullian decisively left the orthodox church and joined a separate Montanist sect; in fact, he remained an early-catholic trinitarian Christian.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

Although what became the orthodox Christian church prevailed against Montanism within a few generations, inscriptions in the Tembris valley of northern Phrygia, dated between 249 and 279, openly proclaim allegiance to the New Prophecy. Speros Vryonis considers these inscriptions remarkable in that they are the only set of inscriptions which openly reveal the religious affiliations of the deceased before the period of toleration, when Christians dared not to do so.<sup>[23]</sup>

A letter of Jerome to Marcella, written in 385, refutes the claims of Montanists that had been troubling her.<sup>[7]</sup> A group of "Tertullianists" may have continued at Carthage. The anonymous author of *Praedestinatus* records that a preacher came to Rome in 388 where he made many converts and obtained the use of a church for his congregation on the grounds that the martyrs to whom it was dedicated had been Montanists.<sup>[24]</sup> He was obliged to flee after the victory of Theodosius I. In his own time, Augustine records that the Tertullianist group had dwindled to almost nothing and, finally, was reconciled to the church and handed over its basilica.<sup>[25]</sup> It is not certain whether these Tertullianists were in all respects "Montanist" or not. In the 6th century, on the orders of the emperor Justinian, John of Ephesus led an expedition to Pepuza to destroy the Montanist shrine there, which was based on the tombs of Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla.

A sect called "Montanist" existed in the 8th century; the Emperor Leo III ordered the conversion and baptism of its members. These Montanists refused, locked themselves in their houses of worship, set the buildings on fire and perished.<sup>[23]</sup>

### 3 Beliefs

Because much of what is known about Montanism comes from anti-Montanist sources, it is difficult to know what they actually believed and how those beliefs differed from the Christian mainstream of the time.<sup>[26]</sup> One source reports that Montanists claimed their revelation direct from the Holy Spirit could supersede the authority of Jesus or Paul or anyone else.<sup>[27]</sup> The New Prophecy was also a diverse movement, and what Montanists believed varied by location and time.<sup>[28]</sup> Montanism was particularly influenced by Johannine literature, especially the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse of John (also known as the Book of Revelation).<sup>[29]</sup> In John's Gospel, Jesus promised to send the Paraclete or Holy Spirit, from which Montanists believed their prophets derived inspiration. In the Apocalypse, John was taken by an angel to the top of a mountain where he sees the New Jerusalem descend to earth. Montanus identified this mountain as being located in Phrygia near Pepuza.<sup>[30]</sup> Followers of the New Prophecy called themselves *spirituales* ("spiritual people") in contrast to their opponents whom they termed *psychici* ("carnal, natural people").<sup>[31]</sup>

#### 3.1 Ecstatic prophecy

As the name "New Prophecy" implied, Montanism was a movement focused around prophecy, specifically the prophecies of the movement's founders which were believed to contain the Holy Spirit's revelation for the present age.<sup>[32]</sup> Prophecy itself was not controversial within 2nd-century Christian communities.<sup>[33][34]</sup> However, the New Prophecy, as described by Eusebius of Caesarea, departed from Church tradition.<sup>[35]</sup>

And he [Montanus] became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning.<sup>[36]</sup>

The Montanist prophets did not speak as messengers of God but were described as possessed by God while being unable to resist.<sup>[15]</sup> A prophetic utterance by Montanus described this possessed state: "Lo, the man is as a lyre, and I fly over him as a pick. The man sleepeth, while I watch." Thus, the Phrygians were seen as false prophets because they acted irrationally and were not in control of their senses.<sup>[37]</sup>

In some of his prophecies, Montanus apparently, and somewhat like the oracles of the Greco-Roman world, spoke in the first person as God: "I am the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>[38]</sup> Many understood this to be Montanus claiming himself to be God. However, scholars agree that these words of Montanus exemplify

the general practice of religious prophets to speak as the passive mouthpieces of the divine, and to claim divine inspiration (similar to modern prophets stating “Thus saith the Lord”). That practice occurred in Christian as well as in pagan circles with some degree of frequency.<sup>[39][40]</sup>

### 3.2 Other beliefs

Other beliefs and practices (or alleged beliefs and practices) of Montanism are as follows:

- In *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Tertullian wrote that the Holy Spirit through the New Prophecy cleared up the ambiguities of scripture.<sup>[41][42]</sup> The new prophecies did not contain new doctrinal content, but mandated strict ethical standards.<sup>[43]</sup> To the mainstream church, Montanists appeared to believe that the new prophecies superseded and fulfilled the doctrines proclaimed by the Apostles.<sup>[15]</sup>
- The power of apostles and prophets to forgive sins.<sup>[44]</sup> Adherents also believed that martyrs and confessors also possessed this power. The Apostolic Church believed that God forgave sins through bishops and presbyters (and those martyrs recognized by legitimate ecclesiastical authority).<sup>[45]</sup>
- They recognized women as bishops and presbyters.<sup>[46]</sup>
- Women and girls were forbidden to wear ornaments, and virgins were required to wear veils.<sup>[47]</sup>
- An emphasis on ethical rigorism and asceticism. These included prohibitions against remarriage following divorce or the death of a spouse. They also emphasized keeping fasts strictly and added new fasts.<sup>[48]</sup>
- Montanus provided salaries for those who preached his doctrine.<sup>[49]</sup>
- Some of the Montanists were also "Quartodeciman" ("fourteeners"), preferring to celebrate Easter on the Hebrew calendar date of 14 Nisan, regardless of what day of the week it landed on. Mainstream Christians held that Easter should be commemorated on the Sunday following 14 Nisan.<sup>[50]</sup> However, uniformity in this matter had not yet been fully achieved when the Montanist movement began; Polycarp, for example, was a quartodeciman, and St. Irenaeus convinced Victor, then Bishop of Rome, to refrain from making the issue of the date of Easter a divisive one.<sup>[51]</sup> Later, the Catholic Church established a fixed way of calculating Easter according to the Julian (and later the Gregorian) calendar.

## 4 See also

- Apostolic-Prophetic Movement
- Artotyrite
- Ascitans
- Charismatic Christianity
- Pentecostalism
- Testament of Job
- Thraseas

## 5 Notes

- [1] Claim made in *Dialogue Between a Montanist and an Orthodox* (4.4) and possibly alluded to by St. Jerome<sup>[7]</sup>

## 6 References

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- [2] Speros Vryonis, *The decline of medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor: and the process of Islamization from the eleventh through the fifteenth century*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), p. 36
- [3] de Labriolle, Pierre (1913). *La crise montaniste*. Bibliothèque de la Fondation Thiers (in French). **31**. Leroux. Retrieved 2015-07-01.
- [4] Trevett 1996, p. 2–7.
- [5] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 12; 19 note 8.
- [6] Tabbernee 2009, p. 19 note 2.
- [7] Jerome & 385, Letter 41.
- [8] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 15–18.
- [9] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 44.
- [10] Tabbernee 2009, p. 89.
- [11] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 37, 40–41 notes 6–8.
- [12] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 31–32.
- [13] Tabbernee 2009, p. 25.
- [14] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 21–23.
- [15] Chapman, John (1911). "Montanists". *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. **10**. Robert Appleton. Retrieved 27 June 2011.
- [16] Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, c. 1.
- [17] Trevett 1996, pp. 58–59.

- [18] Quoted by Eusebius 5.16.4
- [19] Trevett 1996, p. 43.
- [20] Tabbernee 2009, p. 128.
- [21] Tabbernee 2009, p. 98 note 1.
- [22] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day*, Prince Press, 1984, Vol. 1, pp. 159-161 • Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, The University of Chicago Press, 1971, Vol. 1, pp. 181-199
- [23] Vryonis, *Decline of Medieval Hellenism*, p. 57 and notes.
- [24] Tertullian, *Praedestinatus*, v. 1 c. 86.
- [25] Tertullian, *De haeresibus*.
- [26] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 1–3.
- [27] Placher, William C. *A History of Christian Theology: an introduction*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1983, p. 50.
- [28] Tabbernee 2009, p. 118 note 5.
- [29] Tabbernee 2009, p. 20 note 21.
- [30] Tabbernee 2009, p. 67.
- [31] Tabbernee 2009, p. 110.
- [32] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 68.
- [33] Ash, James L, Jr (June 1976), “The Decline of Ecstatic Prophecy in the Early Church”, *Theological Studies*, **37** (2): 236.
- [34] Jerome & 385, Letter 41.2: “we tell them [Montanists] that we do not so much reject prophecy—for this is attested by the passion of the Lord—as refuse to receive prophets whose utterances fail to accord with the Scriptures old and new”.
- [35] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 12, 37.
- [36] of Caesarea, Eusebius, “16”, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5.
- [37] Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 48.3–4.
- [38] Tabbernee 2009, p. 12.
- [39] Pelikan 1956, p. 101.
- [40] Tabbernee 2009, p. 93.
- [41] Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63.9.
- [42] Tabbernee 2009, p. 111.
- [43] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 129.
- [44] Tabbernee 2009, pp. 123.
- [45] Tabbernee 2009, p. 91.
- [46] Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 49.2.5.

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## 9 External links

- "Montanism". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. **18** (11th ed.). 1911.
- Jennings, Daniel R, *Ancient & Medieval References To Montanism*. An extensive listing of references by 67 ancient and medieval writers to the Montanists.
- *Montanism*, UK: Early Church. Extensive bibliography and on-line articles.

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