TERTULLIAN, whose full name was Quintus Septim­ius Florens Tertullianus, is the earliest and after Augustine the greatest of the ancient church writers of the West. Before him the whole Christian literature in the Latin language consisted of a translation of the Bible, the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix—an apologetic treatise written in the Ciceronian style for the higher circles of society, and with no evident effect for the church as a whole—and a list of the books recognized as canonical (the so-called Muratorian fragment). Whether Victor the Roman bishop and Apollonius the Roman senator ever really made an appearance as Latin authors is quite un­certain. Tertullian in fact created Christian Latin litera­ture ; one might almost say that that literature sprang from him full-grown, alike in form and substance, as Athene from the head of Zeus. Cyprian polished the language that Tertullian had made, sifted the thoughts he had given out, rounded them off, and turned them into current coin, but he never ceased to be aware of his depend­ence on Tertullian, whom he designated as *κaτ έξοχήν* his master (Jer., *De Vir. Ill.,* 53). Augustine, again, stood on the shoulders of Tertullian and Cyprian ; and these three North Africans are the fathers of the Western churches.

Tertullian’s place in universal history is determined by

1. his intellectual and spiritual endowments, (2) his moral force and evangelical fervour, (3) the course of his personal development, (4) the circumstances of the time in the midst of which he worked.
2. Tertullian was a man of great originality and genius, characterized by the deepest pathos, the liveliest fancy, and the most penetrating keenness, and was endowed with ability to appropriate and make use of all the methods of observation and speculation, and with the readiest wit. His writings in tone and character are always alike “ rich in thought and destitute of form, passionate and hair­splitting, eloquent and pithy in expression, energetic and condensed to the point of obscurity.” His style has been characterized with justice as dark and resplendent like ebony. His eloquence was of the vehement order ; but it wins hearers and readers by the strength of its passion, the energy of its truth, the pregnancy and elegance of its expression, just as much as it repels them by its heat with- out light, its sophistical argumentations, and its elaborate hair-splittings. Though he is wanting in moderation and in luminous warmth, his tones are by no means always harsh ; and as an author he ever aspired with longing after humility and love and patience, though his whole life was lived in the atmosphere of conflict. Tertullian both as a man and as a writer had much in common with the apostle Paul.
3. In spite of all the contradictions in which he in­volved himself as a thinker and as a teacher, Tertullian was a compact ethical personality. What he was he was with his whole being. Once a Christian, he was deter­mined to be so with all his soul, and to shake himself free of all half measures and compromises with the world. It is not difficult to lay one’s finger upon very many obliquities, self-deceptions, and sophisms in Tertullian in matters of detail, for he struggled for years to reconcile things that were in themselves irreconcilable ; yet in each case the perversities and sophisms were rather the outcome of peculiarly difficult circumstances in which he stood. It is easy to convict him of having failed to control the glowing passion that was in him. He is often outrageously unjust in the substance of what he says, and in manner harsh to cynicism, scornful to gruesomeness ; but in no battle that he fought was he ever actuated by selfish interests. What he did was really done for the Gospel, as he understood it, with all the faculties of his soul. But he understood the Gospel as being primarily an assured hope and a holy law, as fear of the Judge who can cast into hell and as an inflexible rule of faith and of discipline. Of the glorious liberty of the children of God he had nothing but a mere presentiment ; he looked for it only in the world beyond the grave, and under the power of the Gospel he counted as loss all the world could give. He well understood the meaning of Christ’s saying that He came not into the world to bring peace, but a sword : in a period when a lax spirit of conformity to the world had seized the churches he maintained the “ vigor evangelicus ” not merely against the Gnostics but against opportunists and a worldly-wise clergy. Among all the fathers of the first three centuries Tertullian has given the most powerful expression to the terrible earnestness of the Gospel.
4. The course of Tertullian’s personal development fitted him in an altogether remarkable degree to be a teacher of the church. Born at Carthage of good family —his father was a “centurio consularis”—he received a first-rate education both in Latin and in Greek. He was able to speak and write Greek, and gives evidence of familiarity alike with its prose and with its poetry ; and his excellent memory—though he himself complains about it—enabled him always to bring in at the right place an appropriate, often brilliant, quotation or some historical allusion. The old historians, from Herodotus to Tacitus, were familiar to him, and the accuracy of his historical knowledge is astonishing. He studied with earnest zeal the Greek philosophers ; Plato in particular, and the writings of the Stoics, he had fully at command, and his treatise *De Anima* shows that he himself was able to in­vestigate and discuss philosophical problems. From the philosophers he had been led to the medical writers, whose treatises plainly had a place in his working library. But no portion of this rich store of miscellaneous knowledge has left its characteristic impress on his writings; this influence was reserved for his legal training. His father, whose military spirit reveals itself in the whole bearing of Tertullian, to whom Christianity was above everything a “ militia,” had intended him for the law. He studied in Carthage, probably also in Rome, where, according to Eusebius, he enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most eminent jurists. This statement derives confirmation from the *Digest,* where references are made to two works, *De Castrensi Peculio* and *Quæstionum Libri VIII.,* of a Roman jurist named Tertullian, who must have flourished about 180 a.d. In point of fact the quondam advocate never disappeared in the Christian presbyter. This was at once his strength and his weakness : his strength, for as a professional pleader he had learned how to deal with an ad­versary according to the rules of the art—to pull to pieces his theses, to reduce him *ad absurdum,* and to show the defects and contradictions of his statements,—and was specially qualified to expose the irregularities in the pro­ceedings taken by the state against the Christians ; but it was also his weakness, for it was responsible for his litigiousness, his often doubtful shifts and artifices, his sophisms and *argumentationes ad hominem,* his fallacies and surprises. At Rome in mature manhood Tertullian became a Christian, under what circumstances we do not know, and forthwith he bent himself with all his energy to the study of Scripture and of Christian literature. Not only was he master of the contents of the Bible : he also read carefully the works of Hermas, Justin, Tatian, Miltiades, Melito, Irenæus, Proculus, Clement, as well as many Gnostic treatises, the writings of Marcion in particular. In apologetics his principal master was Justin, and in theology proper and in the controversy with the Gnostics, Irenæus. As a thinker he was not original, and even as a theologian he has produced but few new schemes of doctrine, except his doctrine of sin. His special gift lay