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TERTULLIAN AND BRITISH ISRAELITISM

A correspondent wrote to me, in search of a quotation:

In McBirnie (1973,227) writing about the 12 apostles I found a quote he states is from Tertullian. He cites Lionel Smithett Lewis (1955, 129) who wrote re Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury, England. Both authors cite the Tertullian reference as (Def. Fidei, 179). McBirnie's bibliography only refers me to Lewis and Lewis has no bibliography! I want to know what Tertullian text the quote is from. Could you help?

The full quote is 'The extremities of Spain, the various parts of Gaul, the regions of Britain, which have never been penetrated by Roman Arms, have received the religion of Christ.'

Roman Arms never penetrated Ireland.

The source for this is Tertullian, *Adversus Judaeos*, ch. 7, v.4, which reads, in the Latin of Trankle and the old English of [Thelwall](#):

[4] For upon whom else have the universal nations believed, but upon the Christ who is already come? For whom have the nations believed,-Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and they who inhabit Mesopotamia, Armenia, Phrygia, Cappadocia, and they who dwell in Pontus, and Asia, and Pamphylia, tarriers in Egypt, and inhabitants of the region of Africa which is beyond Cyrene, Romans and sojourners, yes, and in Jerusalem Jews,⁹⁵ and all other nations; as, for instance, by this time, the varied races of the Gaetulians, and manifold confines of the Moors, all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and **the haunts of the Britons-inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ**, and of the Sarmatians, and Dacians, and Germans, and Scythians, and of many remote nations, and of provinces and islands many, to us unknown, and which we can scarce enumerate?

(... et Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca Christo ...)

So where on earth does that poor translation come from?

The oldest volume that I can find is Richard Williams Morgan, *St. Paul in Britain, or, The origin of British as opposed to papal Christianity*, Parker: Oxford and London, 1861 ([Download](#)). There are reprints in 1880 and 1925 - in fact one modern writer suggests nine reprints, the latest in 1984, because it was "adopted" by the British Israelite Society.^[1] The publisher is the same as for the Oxford Movement series of translations, the *Library of the Fathers*, curiously. The book was significant enough to attract a [Wikipedia page](#).

On p.146 we read:

Now we know from Tertullian that Britain was Christian before it was Roman. The Dove conquered where the Eagle could make no progress. "Regions in Britain which have never been penetrated by the Roman arms," are his words, (A.D. 192) "have received the religion of Christ." If this statement were correct, after the war between Rome and Britain had raged for a century and a half, from A.D. 43 to A.D. 192—and in a national point of view it is impartial testimony, for Tertullian was an African—it is obvious that the Arimathæan mission must have been founded in the heart of independent Britain, quite out of the pale, therefore, of the Roman empire. ...

But on p.194-5 we find:

Tertullian, who flourished during the war of Commodus in Britain, which Dion Cassius terms "the most dangerous in which the empire during his time had been engaged," says expressly "that the regions in Britain which the Roman arms had failed to penetrate professed Christianity for their religion." "The extremities of Spain, the various parts of Gaul, the regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by the Roman arms, have received the religion of Christ g."

He sounds somewhat uncertain about what Tertullian actually says here, giving the same material twice. And the reference, "g"? It is this:

g Tertullian, *Def. Fidei*, p. 179.

This is the source given in all the subsequent "quotations", which may thus be described as descended from it. And what is "Def. Fidei"? Is it, perhaps Bishop George Bull's *Defensio Fidei Nicaenae*? (1688, and translated into English in 1852 by one of those who translated Tertullian for the Oxford Movement *LFC*) If so, I have not been able to locate the passage. "Defensio fidei" is the opening words of a number of books, and Morgan gives no bibliography.

Interesting to see how a book may have a long literary progeny.

1. ^[1]Joanne Pearson, "Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic", Routledge, 2007, p.35. The author describes Williams as a maverick Welsh clergyman.↩
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