

# PROPHETESSES MAXIMILLA AND PRISCILLA WOMEN'S HERESIES IN THE PATRISTIC PERIOD

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## **Abstract**

On his journey, the Church faces many heresies which try to deviate the orthodoxy teaching. One of these heresies was founded by Montanus and his teaching is known as Montanism. Montanus together with Maximilla and Priscilla claimed that they were filled by Holy Spirit and called themselves as a prophet and prophetesses who had to be followed and heard. The main teaching of this heresy is the promise of the second coming of Jesus Christ, and the promise of the end of the world. This theme is always interested by many people. The reason people attracted to the teaching of this heresy is the establishment of the coming of Jesus Christ which was promised by himself. Many of their followers became disappointed, because though the promised date had passed, Jesus Christ did not come yet. The other teaching of Montanism is about prophecy of the future which actually blinded the followers. If the prophecy failed to happen, it was because of the fault of the followers who lived less ascetic life and did many sins. The Prophets of Montanism had enthusiasm given by the Holy Spirit. It made them have to be obeyed and heard. They even claimed that the absolute truth was on their hand. Therefore, the hierarchy of the Church had to submit themselves to their teaching. Maximilla and Priscilla are two false prophetesses who had great influence in the Montanism period. In this heresy time, the Church had to work hard to fight Montanism teaching and prophecy, especially to defend its orthodoxy teaching of the Church from the false prophetesses.

**Key Words:** 1. Heresy 2. Montanism. 3. Prophetess 4. Prophecy 5. Enthusiasm

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## **Abstrak**

Sepanjang perjalanan, Gereja menghadapi banyak eresi yang berusaha mendefiasikan ajaran resmi. Salah satu di antara eresi yang banyak itu dikembangkan oleh Montanus yang alirannya dikenal dengan Montanisme. Ia bersama dengan Maximilla dan Priscilla mengaku kepenuhan Roh Kudus dan menyebut diri mereka sebagai Nabi yang harus diikuti dan didengarkan. Ajaran pokok mereka adalah menjanjikan kedatangan Kristus yang mau tidak

mau juga menjanjikan akhir dunia yang biasanya diminati oleh banyak orang. Salah satu alasan ketertarikan orang lebih akan ajaran eresi ini adalah penetapan kedatangan Kristus yang dijanjikan-Nya, walau akhirnya banyak orang menjadi kecewa, karena waktu yang ditetapkan tidak kunjung datang. Ajaran mereka lainnya adalah ramalan masa yang akan datang yang berusaha mengelabui pengikutnya. Jika ramalan tidak terpenuhi atau tidak kunjung datang, maka kesalahan berdada di tangan para pemohon karena kurang askese dan disposisi diri tidak baik. Para nabi ini memiliki sikap antusiasme berlebihan yang menekankan peran Roh Kudus yang mereka terima. Dengan alasan ini, mereka harus ditaati dan didengarkan. Bahkan kebenaran absolut berada di tangan mereka, bahkan pemimpin Gereja sendiri harus tunduk pada pengajaran mereka ini. Maximilla dan Priscilla adalah dua nabi perempuan yang sesat. Mereka sangat berpengaruh pada periode Montanisme. Gereja harus berjuang keras pada periode mereka untuk meluruskan ajaran dan ramalan Montanisme, terlebih membela ortodox Gereja dari nabi perempuan yang palsu tersebut.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** 1. Eresi 2. Montanisme 3. Nabi Perempuan 4. Ramalan 5. Antusiasme

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## Introduction

Heresy is a normal phenomenon which is found in various religion. Even in the traditional habit heresy is common. In the long history of the Church, heresy has always arisen and then subsided. Even during the same period, there were at times different heresies arising together. The reason heresies arise is to counterattack the orthodoxy<sup>1</sup> which is a guidance of the accepted teachings of the Church. Heresy (αἵρεσις) is a deviation from orthodoxy. It is a refraction from right teaching.

At the beginning of the Church, at the time of the Apostolic Fathers, there was no dogma yet, and the canon of the New Testament had not been officially formulated. Therefore, the first reference for orthodoxy was the teaching of the apostles. Apostolic teaching seemed to be the only criteria for evaluating any kind of different teaching. And the second criteria was that corresponding to the traditions of the Church. The third criteria was according to the faith in Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. The last criteria was based on the charism of the Holy Spirit. All the heresies were examined on these criteria, in order to evaluate the teaching promulgated.

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1 Orthodox comes from Greek: ὀρθόδοξος, meaning "right teaching".

During the first two centuries, and even at the beginning of the third century, there were many heresies growing within that ancient Church. Even Paul found heresies in his various communities.<sup>2</sup> The time is known as the apostolic period, in which the fathers of the Church received directly the teaching from apostles or, even if they did not receive the teaching directly, from the second generation. Polycarp of Smyrna is the last Father of the apostolic period. He died in 167 at 80 years old. He knew John the evangelist and heard his teaching when he was staying at Ephesus.<sup>3</sup>

During the apostolic period, various heresies were stirred up within the Church. By the fourth century, Eusebius' book on the *History of the Church* had discussed the beginning of the growth of the Church, including different kinds of heresy. His information about heresies gives an important overview of the situation of the Church in its struggles in teaching the faith.<sup>4</sup> Before Eusebius, Irenaeus wrote a book about heresies. He entitled his book *Against Heresies*, focusing especially on heresies in Lyon, France. Unfortunately he did not present the heretics Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla who were regarded as founders of the Montanist heresy. Irenaeus differs from Eusebius who presents Montanism more generally together with its founders. It seems that Irenaeus concentrated only on the heresies in his diocese of Lyon.<sup>5</sup>

## Montanism

The end of the apostolic period (between 156-160) was characterized by the growth of heresy, and Montanus came to Phrygia, in Asia Minor to present his teaching of an ecstatic prophetic movement. He claimed to be a revelation of God and therefore the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. There is no indication of his birth, but he died probably around 170. The teaching of Montanism spread immediately over the district of Phrygia and Asia Minor. Then Rome made consideration Montanism between 177-178. And since that time, Montanism created many problems throughout the Church. Various synods were held

2 The kinds of heresies could find at, Propser Grech. "Criteri di Ortodossia ed Eresia nel N.T.", *Eresia ed Eresiodogia nella Chiesa Antica*, XII Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana. Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1984, hlm. 583-596.

3 P. Nautin. "Policarpo", *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, diretto da Angelo Di Berardino, (Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum). Genova: Marietti, 1994, 2687-2688.

4 Eusebius. *The Church History*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Eds.), Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers. Edinburgh – Michigan: T&T Clark – Grand Rapids, 1991.

5 Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*, Alexander Roberts and James (Eds.), Ante Nicene Fathers. Edinburgh – Michigan: T&T Clark – Grand Rapids, 1996.

in Asia Minor to stem its expansion, yet conversions unto, and it was quickly well organized and numerous.

On the decree of synods in Asia Minor, it was decided to excommunicate those who joined this new movement of Montanism with hope of reducing its expansion.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the numbers did not decrease; on the contrary, its diffusion was uncontrolled all over the Church. In a short time, Montanism reached Rome and then spread to the North, to Gaul and other countries. In this way, from East to West, Montanism spread throughout the Church.

A new phase of Montanism began at the beginning of the third century. After it failed completely to determine the time of the end of the world, Montanism concentrated on moral interests, characterized by a rigorous asceticism. Prophecy was abandoned and it began a new strategy with a rigorist life which was very effective. The result was that some theologians went over to Montanism. The most important representative theologian was Tertullian who converted to Montanism in 207. The reason for his conversion to Montanism was its rigorous asceticism. After this time, the writings of Tertullian strongly influenced Montanist teaching.

The influence of Montanism on later history had little effect but it was still mentioned by some writers as a heresy until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, even if not so often. Therefore Montanism practically speaking had become very weak, except at Pepuza, in the region of Phrygia, where it kept its vitality. Only Pepuza as the center of Montanism still actively promoted this movement,<sup>7</sup> until it finally perished at the end of the patristic period.

## Doctrine

Montanus together with Maximilla and Priscilla, after claiming to be filled by the Holy Spirit, tried to formulate the doctrine of Montanism. The foundation of their doctrine was fulfilment of Jesus Christ's promise to return, and to send down that Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> Montanists accentuated enthusiasm as a characteristic doctrine which was shown through glossolalia and spiritual language accompanied by ecstasy. Being filled by

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6 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,16,10.

7 Jerome. *Letter*, 41,3. (Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Eds.), *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Edinburgh – Michigan: T&T Clark – Grand Rapids, 1996).

8 He who is to befriend you, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send on my account, will in his turn make everything plain, and recall to your minds everything I have said to you (Jn. 14:26). And yet I can say truly that it is better for you I should go away; he who is to befriend you will not come to you unless I do go, but if only I make my way there, I will send him to you (Jn. 16:7).

the Holy Spirit, as they claimed, Montanus together with his prophetesses declared that they heard the voice of Christ and the Paraclete. Therefore, they began to persuade the audience to convert to Montanism. They filled claimed to be superior to the others, including the hierarchy of the Church and even Scripture.

With their superiority, they spoke authoritatively and demanded their followers' absolute obedience to their teaching and other directives. Montanism absolutely ignored any kind of ecclesiastical teaching and authority, including the decisions of councils or synods, even disobeying their bishops.

The important teaching of Montanism was about prophecy. They realized that human beings' need to be reassured about the future of life in this world and after death. To meet this need, Montanists prophesied fortune of life to their followers. Their way of telling fortunes was to spin the eschatological concept of Christianity, because they predicted the time and location, even the circumstances of death. Their main point was that the end of the world is imminent, which was figured by the New Jerusalem. Montanists established that the New Jerusalem was to come down from heaven in Phrygia.<sup>9</sup>

The prophecy of the New Jerusalem was very stormy to Christians and others because of its imminence. To justify the prophecy, Montanists gave various signs of what would happen at that time. The most significant sign was the gesture of Roman emperor toward Christians in the form of malice and persecution. In 170, Emperor Marcus Aurelius vigorously persecuted Christians everywhere in his empire, which according to Montanists, was the exact sign of the coming of the New Jerusalem. The atmosphere became tumultuous as the Montanists established the date of that coming. The failure of Montanism about the date of the arrival of the New Jerusalem calmed the situation a little. But Montanism did not forfeit its idea. They accused their followers as the reason for the failure, because they were not serious in preparing for that day. The other accusations were about fasting and asceticism, which were not done in the correct way. Therefore, Montanists asked their followers to implement these two ways of life more seriously. However, the imminence of the New Jerusalem did not come and again, the reason given was still the followers' lack of rigor. The followers realized slowly the false prophecy of Montanism. Therefore their doctrine of the imminence of the end of the world was presumed to be only an illusion.

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9 Then I saw a new heaven, and a new earth. The old heaven, the old earth had vanished, and there was no more sea. And he carried me off in a trance to a great mountain, high up, and there shewed me the holy city Jerusalem, as it came down, sent by God, from heaven (Rev. 21:1, 10a).

All the teaching of Montanism based on the prophetic tradition and apocalyptic, which were also declared by Christ during his life in this world.<sup>10</sup> The real intention of Montanists was the restoration of the life in this world and in the future, which is in correspondence with the economy of salvation. The intention was to unveil the plan of God. For the Montanists, to prophesy eschatological life, is the real meaning of the New Jerusalem. The Montanists knew that people would be interested in this point even if they paid with an amount of money. In this case, Montanists filled the need as a gatekeeper of revelation. Therefore Montanists had a tendency to gather people as much and as often as possible from all directions to collect money. They were motivated by the receiving of gifts under the name of offerings and provided salaries for those who preached their doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine of Montanism had strong intention to storm all Christian teachings on theology, dogma and institutions which were just human formulations. In the view, the Montanists doctrine was really form the Paraclete, even in his voice, therefore they had more authority and truth. The moral teaching of Christianity was changed by Montanists to an ascetic life for realization of the New Jerusalem. In the relationship with moral teaching, Montanists also prohibited marriage because it was only a human and Christian creation.

Conscious of the risk from Montanist doctrine, the Church undertook a reaction in order that Christians had support for the teaching of faith and to prevent conversion to Montanism. Therefore the local Church of Phrygia organized a synod and Epiphanius clarified that the theological aspect of the controversy turned on the point of whether a true prophet spoke in ecstasy without cooperation, and hence had potential corruption of the prophet's rational mind or whether the true prophet spoke in possession of his sense, that was non-ecstatically.<sup>12</sup> Then Epiphanius added that an authentic Montanist inscription proved female could be clergy,<sup>13</sup> which was really beyond the later Church tradition, although present in the early church and among other groups such as Gnostics. In modern study, Dennis E. Groh expressed that Montanist prophets also practiced charismatic exegesis, in which the text of Scrip-

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10 B. Aland. "Montanus – Montanism", *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, diretto da Angelo Di Berardino, (Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum). Genova: Marietti, 1994, 2299-2302.

11 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,18,2.

12 Epiphanius. *Haereses*, 48.

13 Epiphanius. *Haereses*, 49; Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,16,1.



ture was actually cited in their oracles in such a way as to include their eschatological key to the scriptures within the text.<sup>14</sup>

### Maximilla and Priscilla

After the death of Montanus, the prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla, were spearheads of Montanism. Both worked hard for the continuation of Montanism, although Maximilla was more popular than Priscilla. They took over the responsibility of Montanist experience, especially spreading the voice of Christ and the Paraclete, who were superior to any authority in the world. For that purpose, they looked for people to convert them to Montanism as often as possible, which they saw as the main intention of the voice of Christ and the Paraclete. Both of them organized and consolidated the Montanist institution.

After the death of Montanus (c. 170), Maximilla and Priscilla were in charge of the continuity of Montanism but with a greater accent on the teaching of prophecy, directions, asceticism and fasting, which were fundamental to their doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Both prophetesses spread these heavenly messages unceasingly and established continually the new date of the coming of the New Jerusalem, without any fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> Even up to the death of Maximilla (c. 179), the New Jerusalem did not come yet in Phrygia where it was predicted. On the contrary, the end of the world (her death) already had arrived before the determined time of the imminent end of the world.

The real anxiety of the Church during Montanism's times was the uncertainty about the established time of the end of the world. Christ had promised that he will come down into the world as his second coming,

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14 Dennis E. Groh. "Montanism", *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Second Edition, Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1998, hlm. 778-779.

15 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,14,1; 5,16,4; 5, 16,7, And he 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. 5, 16,8, Some of those who heard his spurious utterances at that time were indignant, and they rebuked him as one that was possessed, and that was under the control of a **demon**, and was led by a deceitful spirit, and was distracting the multitude; and they forbade him to talk, remembering the distinction drawn by the Lord and his warning to guard watchfully against the coming of *false prophets*. *Mat. 7:15*. But others imagining themselves possessed of the *Holy Spirit* and of a prophetic gift, were elated and not a little puffed up; and forgetting the distinction of the Lord, they challenged the mad and insidious and seducing spirit, and were cheated and deceived by him.

16 Maximilla and Priscilla are the second emancipation of woman on heresy after Helena at the first century, Ac. 8:4-25; Ireneus, *Adv. Haer.*, I,23,3.

but no one knew when, where and how. Therefore, the teaching of Montanists was counterfeit prophecy and unacceptable to the orthodox mainstream tradition. Many Christians thought that the death of Maximilla testified to her false prophecy. Consequently, the response of apostolic the Church emerged through various ways, especially writings. However the consequence was that some writers unfortunately converted into Montanists, even the famous one, –Tertullian-. One of the followers of Montanism was Asterius Urbanus who testified that through Maximilla, he was driven away from the sheep like a wolf through word and spirit power.

The reactions of the Church were written by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*. He asserted that Maximilla and Priscilla were filled with the false spirit and therefore they talked wildly and unreasonably and strangely with exaggerated promises. According to Eusebius, the arrogant spirit taught them to revile the Church under heaven, because the spirit of false prophecy received neither honor from it nor entrance into it.<sup>17</sup> The other side, the bishops, Zoticus, Julian, and the other members of the Church, silenced and refused to permit these persons of the false and seductive spirit to speak. Before she died, Maximilla had predicted the time of wars and anarchy. But in fact, there were no wars, neither partial nor general in the world, but rather, through the mercy of God, continued peace to the Christians.<sup>18</sup> Miltiades<sup>19</sup> also criticized the prophecy of Maximilla which was unfulfilled. In fact the prophetic gift is necessary and should continue in all the Church until the final coming.<sup>20</sup>

Montanus, Maximilla, Priscilla and also the other Montanists called themselves martyrs, but in reality they did not persevere in passion; on the contrary, they were very aggressive for the people, especially gathering their gain not only from the rich men, but also from the poor, orphans and widows.<sup>21</sup> Then the followers of Maximilla and Priscilla called themselves martyrs. But those who called this martyrdom must be in the Church to defend the truth and faith. However, the martyrdom of Montanists had to be on assent to the spirit of Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla.<sup>22</sup> Miltiades showed the false attitude of both prophetesses about ecstasy; they were without shame or fear. In his words, at the beginning with purposeful ignorance, they grew to involuntary madness

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17 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,16,9.

18 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,16,17-18.

19 Miltiades is Greek apologist from Asia Minor who wrote his Apology circa 179-190.

20 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,17,3-4.

21 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,18,7.

22 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,16,21-22.



of soul.<sup>23</sup> In his book *Against Montanism*, Apollonius<sup>24</sup> said that these prophetesses prophesied themselves, as soon as they were filled with the spirit and abandoned their husbands. Therefore they spoke falsely who call Priscilla a virgin. Apollonius continued that the prophetesses received gold and silver and costly garments, which is not permitted by Scripture as attitude of a prophet or a prophetess.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of his notice about Maximilla and Priscilla, Eusebius still cited the writing of Apollonius about the criteria of a prophetess, which is seen from the fruit of the tree (Mat. 12:33). Therefore it is necessary that all the fruits of Maximilla and Priscilla as prophetesses should be examined. In fact both prophetesses dye their hair; they stain their eyelids; they delight in adornment; they play with tables and dice; they lend on usury. With these criteria, Apollonius convinced the Christians to evaluate the speaking, teaching and deeds of Maximilla and Priscilla, if they are real or false prophetesses, in order to judge their prophecy.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

In one occasion, Jesus promised, “I can say truly that it is better for you I should go away; he who is to befriend you will not come to you unless I do go, but if only I make my way there, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). After that time, many persons interpreted this promise in wrong way either from eschatological or timing point of view. Regarding the time, on the journey of Christian, especially at this present time in many place, many people make use of it to take advantage of others. Montanism was one of the heresies which made us the promise of the coming of Jesus by establishing the time of his coming, even though it was not accomplished. Montanism was founded by Montanus together with Maximilla and Priscilla. They claimed themselves as prophet and prophetesses in order to gain benefit as much as possible. They blinded the eyes of their followers. The responsibility of the Church at that period was to convince Christians to be conscious of the deceit of Montanism heresy.

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23 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,17,1-2.

24 Apollonius of Ephesus is an author of anti montanism who is cited quiet often by Eusebius, *The Church History*, 5,18,1-12. He wrote his Apology around 212.

25 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,18,3-4.

26 Eusebius. *The Church History*, 5,18,8.11.13.

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