

BOOK REVIEW  
*THE FIRST APOLOGY OF JUSTIN*  
(Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, n.d.)

Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) wrote his “First Apology” to Emperor Antonius Pius and his two adopted sons (c.155). “Apology” is here used in its fundamental meaning of a “defense.” He wrote to influence the emperor to grant to Christians the normal protections of law and just treatment in the courts. His central argument is that Christians should not be condemned just because they are called Christians. They should only be condemned if they are found to be lawbreakers. In defense of his appeal, Justin presents evidence to defend the good morality of Christians, to demonstrate analogical parallels between the thought of Christians and the thought of respected pagan philosophers, and to demonstrate the validating evidence of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Justin highly elevated the place of reason. His first appeal to the emperor asserts, *[T]rue reason forbids you...to wrong blameless men.* Socrates, a champion of reason, was similarly condemned and forced to suicide. He was charged as an atheist, as were the Christians. They were “atheists” because they did not honor the same gods as did the Romans. Behind these official “gods,” Justin sees the lurking demons, who deceive men and subvert the truth. Justin ridicules idolatry and the unsupportable behavior of worshippers in acting as “the guardians of gods.” He does go too far when he grants “Christian” status to men of antiquity who lived “reasonably”. Such include Socrates and Heraclitus.

A number of times Justin reminds the emperor that he is not whimpering. The Christian is not afraid of death, because death can only touch the body, death releases the Christian into eternal life, and death, in any event, is ultimately unavoidable. But he does want the emperor to recognize that in killing Christians he is robbing his realm of its best people: *[M]ore than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace.* Why is that? Because Christians realize they are under the eye of God and God expects them to be good citizens. Jesus actually taught such when he said, *Render... to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*

In defense of culturally objectionable Christian doctrines, Justin employs logic, natural illustrations, and heathen analogies to demonstrate that these doctrines are indeed not something new, but have acceptable prototypes. Even the Virgin Birth of Christ, His resurrection, and His divine sonship—in all these instances Justin advances heathen parallels from their own panoply of gods. For instance, the mythology of Jupiter is put forth in several connections.

The middle portion of the book is a treatise on biblical prophecy. Primarily this has to do with Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Christ. This section is designed to impress the emperor. Here is Justin’s argument from prophecy:

*Since, then, we prove that all things which have already happened had been predicted by the prophets before they came to pass, we must necessarily believe*

*also that those things which are in like manner predicted, but are yet to come to pass, shall certainly happen.*

This is the weakest part of his argument. Some of his cited prophecies would not even be accepted today by Christian scholars as truly prophetic. How much less so a pagan emperor? For Justin's audience, prophetic arguments would surely have been perceived as *non sequiturs*.

Of particular interest to the modern Christian is the closing section on the early Christian practices of the sacraments and weekly Sunday worship. Woven into this material are illuminating details of the simplicity and warmth of this primitive Christian community. There is Scripture reading, a sermon, prayer, a kiss of "salute," an offering, and a distribution by the "president" (apparently what we call "pastor" today) of money for the needy.

Justin closes with words of stern warning about the judgment of God (this likely did not endear him to the emperor) and letters supportive of Christians from three of the emperor's predecessors.

What is the take-away value of this ancient piece for a modern Christian leader? 1) Our arguments for Christianity must be tailored to our audience. Justin's *Apology* would have won favor with a sympathetic reader, just as does much of what Christian defenders write and say today. But it takes much more insight to be persuasive with an adversary, or even a moderate skeptic. Justin is closest to the mark when he argues the social benefits of Christians as supportive of the king and morally upstanding. *Good works* are far more convincing than *theological arguments*. 2) He speaks with a refreshing fearlessness of the prospect of a martyr's death. He openly courts that fate by writing this letter. Indeed, just ten years later he was denounced as a Christian, refused to sacrifice in Roman fashion, and was beheaded. Here is a stirring example to me and my followers to never be ashamed to publish our allegiance to Christ. 3) Justin is a stimulus to Christian scholarship. This man had a broad acquaintance with the culture of his day. He was able to illustrate prolifically and deeply from the philosophers and the prevailing gods. He argued closely from the Scriptures which is most impressive knowing that he had no concordance and indeed no chapter and verse markings. Absent all the tools we today possess, this man shows a motivating command of the Word of God.

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