

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 13

Justin Martyr

BACKGROUND

We are putting the finishing touches on very early church studies. Starting with the state of the world at the birth of the church, we saw the church grow quickly from a small Jewish renewal movement in the back waters of Israel to a larger apocalyptic movement spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

In the process, we have covered the Apostolic Fathers, looking at the generation and writings of those directly or indirectly in contact with the Apostles. Our lessons have examined not only the earliest writings of the church outside of scripture, but also we have examined certain important aspects of the first and second century church. We have looked at the martyrdom issues as well as the early heresies that arose. In the process, we have managed a look at a number of early personalities that God used to significantly shape the church.

Over the past two weeks, we paused to look at how scripture came together to teach, guide, and mold the church. As this class unfolds, we will frequently return to the scripture question finding it often at the center of the church's controversies and activities.

Our current direction is a movement toward the coronation of Christianity as the official state religion in the 300's. Before we get there, however, there are several more matters to which we should attend. First and foremost, we have somewhat ignored the apologists of the early church.

Justin Martyr¹ stands out in importance as one of the three key early apologists of the church. Along with Athenagoras of Athens and Theophilus of Antioch,² Justin wrote important defenses of the faith at a time when it was neither safe nor popular to do so! These defenses of the faith were multi-purposed. The Apologists sought to defend the beliefs of the church in a way that would stop the

¹ Okay, "Martyr" is not his last name! He bears it as a title to specify the "Justin" who gave his blood in witness to Christ suffering martyrdom.

² These were not the only three to write early Apologies. Origen and Tertullian wrote Apologies as well. These two are not considered here because their writings went far beyond their Apologies. Therefore, they are dealt with later in the fuller context of their writings and contributions to the church.

persecution and martyrdoms of believers. However, they also sought to write defenses that would move others to accept the faith as truth.

Our focus this week is on Justin Martyr.

JUSTIN MARTYR

Justin Martyr was born in Flavia Neapolis³ around the year 100. At some point in his life, he made it to Ephesus (modern Turkey) where he studied philosophy. Justin was not raised a Christian. While his name was Latin as was his father's (Priscus), his grandfather bore a Greek name (Bacchius).

Justin's philosophical studies took him through the belief systems of the Stoics,⁴ the Peripatetics,⁵ the Pythagoreans,⁶ and the Platonists in his search for religious truth and the meaning of life. Justin's philosophical wonderings left him a Platonist as he went about his professional life teaching philosophy. Justin was a Platonist when confronted with Christianity. Justin found in Christianity, ultimate philosophical truth. As might be expected, Justin's philosophical studies, especially as encapsulated in Platonism, heavily influenced both him and the church where he taught. Because of this, we will spend a brief time looking at Plato as taught and understood in Justin's day.

³ This name was given to the Samaritan town of Shechem when it was rebuilt under the Emperor Hadrian who reigned from 117 to 138. Over 4,000 years old, the town was the Samaritan capital until John Hyrcanus I destroyed it in 129 B.C.. It is also reputed to be the burial place of the Joseph in Genesis. Today, the city (now named "Nablus") is in the West Bank under Palestinian control.

⁴ Zeno founded the Stoic school in Athens in 308 B.C. teaching that the ultimate virtue was the pursuit of truth. Truth can best be found by the clear thinking that comes from independence of emotion or passion. Think Spock.

⁵ The Encyclopedia of Philosophy gives the origin of the name from those of the *peripatos* (covered walkway), a hallmark of a house where Theophrastus provided for a school of Aristotle. By the time of Justin, Peripatetics were in a bit of revival as they studied and taught the writings of Aristotle.

⁶ Named after the Greek philosopher/mathematician Pythagorus (b. 570ish B.C.), much of its early thought is obscure in history. By the time of Justin, what modern philosophers term "Neo-Pythagoreanism" had arisen. The teachings were a mixture of the teachings of Plato, the Stoics and the Peripatetics with a healthy dose of mathematics and numerology. Numbers had a mystical significance in the universe. The human soul pre-existed its birth and embodiment. The logic and consistency of math and numbers gave rise to a concept of ideas and thoughts as an ultimate truth and revelation of any divinity in the universe.

Much is available, and much can be written, about Plato. A student of Socrates, and the founder of a school in Athens, which had Aristotle as its most famous student, Plato lived from about 436 to 347 B.C. Plato was a prolific thinker and writer. Many have made careers out of analyzing his thought. As understood by Justin, Plato taught that God was transcendent (exalted above the universe – far and remote; as opposed to imminent, or close and caring). God was also mathematically constant, as unchangeable as the equation $2 + 2 = 4$. God was not physical (“corporeal”) but existed in Spirit. The physical world is a created world inhabited by souls that during life exist within a material body. These souls, however, pre-existed their embodiment and will live on for perpetuity after the body’s death. Justin approved of Plato’s identification of pagan cults and myths followed by the uneducated.

At the age of about 30, Justin converted from his Greek philosophism to the Christian faith. He wrote and taught as a Christian in Ephesus and Rome until his martyrdom by beheading somewhere between 162 and 167.⁷

Justin wrote three different treatises of which we still have copies today. Two of the three are called “Apologies.” That name does not stem from “apology” in the sense of expressing regret. Rather, the word is from the Greek, *Apologia* (απολογία), which means “a speech in defense”⁸ of something. In Justin’s case, that something was the Christian faith.

Justin also wrote a missive called, “*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew.*” This work recounted the philosophical journey that brought Justin to Plato and then to Christ. Justin also sets out a coherent defense in this work of how one could believe in Christ as God and yet still be a monotheist. Similarly, Justin taught that Jesus and the Spirit, though divine, did not diminish God by their presence. Instead, as one fire starts another fire without losing its own identity as fire, so the Father could give off the Son and Spirit without himself being diminished in the process.

Many scholars regard Justin as the first major theologian in the church since the apostle Paul. Justin is credited with taking the faith and putting into the philosophical terms of his day in such a way that faith was a reasonable alternative belief system for the educated. Justin took the Christian faith and incorporated

⁷ We have our accounting of his death from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, a collection of martyrdom accounts parts of which are as ancient as the martyrdoms themselves. The Acts tells of Justin staying at the home of a fellow in Rome named Martinus, which was an important meeting place for the church. Justin would sit and teach all who would come. Among the many students was Tatian, who would be the first we know of to put together a harmony of the various gospel accounts (called the Diatessaron).

⁸ Liddell and Scott.

much of it into the philosophical teachings of Platonism in his day. In the process, Justin also took much of Greek philosophy, and Platonism in particular, and integrated it into Christianity!

Justin considered himself a “Christian Philosopher.” He never left his calling as a philosopher, he merely embraced the Christian faith as the ultimate truth in philosophy, the ultimate answer to the philosophers’ questions. Eusebius, writing 159 years after Justin’s death, recorded the tradition that Justin wore his philosopher’s uniform (robe/tunic!) after his conversion until his death.

For Justin, philosophy was God’s preparation for the Greek world to receive the gospel, much like the Old Testament was God’s preparation of the Jewish world to receive Christ. In fact, Justin considered Plato’s teacher Socrates (like Abraham) as a “Christian before Christ.”

Justin believed that Plato himself received much of his insight from Moses and Old Testament scriptures. Though history gives us no evidence, and most scholars are highly skeptical whether it might in fact be true, Justin believed that Plato actually had the Old Testament available and from it received his enlightenment about the nature of God and truth (*Apology* I.59-60).

Justin also believed that even apart from scripture, philosophers were able to deduce truth about the world. The divine *logos*, about which many Greek philosophers wrote and discussed was seen as an insight into the nature and plan of God. Justin would say that limited insight came from philosophy, but it was divine nonetheless. In essence, Justin saw two tributaries come together in God’s ordination of history to bring about the faith and the church. One river was the Old Testament and God’s interaction with the Jews. The second river was the Greek philosophers.

Justin was integral in taking a Jewish faith and making it comprehensible to a Greek world. So through the thought and teaching of Justin, educated Greeks, even those with no real knowledge of Judaism and the Old Testament, were introduced to the Church and its faith.

But Justin was doing this in the midst of a time of persecution. Martyrdom was prevalent in his day, even as it would ultimately take his life. Not only martyrdom, but rumors and slander against the faith were also propagated and common in Justin’s day. Justin took those false accusations seriously. He wrote his Apologies for several purposes. In them, he defended the practices of the church and provided a philosophical justification for the faith. He wrote seeking to end the persecutions suffered by the saints.

In his writings, Justin sought to proclaim the church as above reproach in its ethics and behavior. He also portrayed the Church's faith as the pinnacle of wisdom and truth in a full philosophical sense.

Lest this seem too complicated, let's break it down with a closer focus on the First Apology.

APOLOGY I

Justin addressed this defense of his faith to the Roman Emperor, Antoninus Pius and his two philosopher sons, Verissimus (Marcus Aurelius) and Lucius, both of whom Justin notes as philosophers,⁹ as well as the Roman Senate and the Roman people. Justin writes on behalf of those "unjustly hated and grossly abused ... myself being one of them" (*Apology* I.1).

Justin does not ask for sympathy or mercy, merely justice. Over and over, Justin makes the appeal that Christianity maintains the highest ethics. He addresses the typical charges levied through rumor and public opinion and explains each. To the charge of Atheism, Justin explains that Christians are only atheists in regards to the evil "gods" of pagan myths that have reality only in the sense that demons were behind them. Justin explains that Christians are not atheists "with reference to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues." Justin adds that the church worships not only God the Father, but also "the Son who came from Him and taught us these things" (*Apology* I.6).

Admittedly, the church does not worship the man made objects placed in pagan temples. But Justin asks whether the Emperor could really believe something made by a craftsman's hands could be "God." Justin suggests that such a belief was not only irrational but also insulting to any real God that existed (*Apology* I.9). God has no need of material offerings from men. It is God who made all things and provides for the needs of man. Where is the logic in offering such a God a garland?¹⁰

Justin concludes this section asking, "What sober minded person will not then admit that we are not atheists, since we worship the maker of this universe?"

⁹ Throughout the Apology, Justin will punningly make appeals based on piety and philosophy. As the Emperor is named "Pius" and his adopted sons labeled "philosophers," Justin writes passages like, "Reason dictates that those who are truly 'pious' and 'philosophers' should honor and love only the truth" (*Apology* I.2).

¹⁰ Here is more theology in Justin's writings. He pleads to Platonic teaching as corollary to that of the church that God made the world out of unformed matter and God created us by his own choice.

(*Apology* I.13). This may not be the way of the ancients to the Romans, but it was taught by “Jesus Christ who was also born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontus Pilate ... the Son of the true God himself” (*Apology* I.13).

As to the charge of immorality also levied against the church, Justin takes particular umbrage. He explains that the ethics of the Christian are so high, that Christians will die a martyr’s death before they would lie about their faith (*Apology* I.7-8). He cites the faithful who lived before conversion as fornicators, yet stayed chaste after conversion. Similarly, he references those who once valued the pursuit of wealth but now opted for sharing their possessions. Christian ethics contrasted those who hated other peoples and other races with the church who taught that all are equal and enemies are to be loved (*Apology* I.14).

With considerable detail, Justin walks through a number of gospel teachings from the Sermon on the Mount to show the highest ethics of the church. He emphasizes that the chastity of the faithful is not just avoidance of actual adultery but even of lust. Christians give to those in need. They do not live for this world and its treasures. They live confident that God will provide for their food and daily needs. They turn the other cheek when smitten. They go two miles when forced to go one. They live with eternity in mind (*Apology* I.14-15).

Justin also addressed the charge of disloyalty. He affirms that Christians, “more than all other people are your helpers and allies in the cause of peace” (*Apology* I.12). Christians pay their taxes, as taught by Jesus.¹¹ Justin explains that Christians “worship God only, but in all other things we gladly serve you” (*Apology* I.17).

In this regard, the Emperor is urged not to pass judgment on Christians because of rumor and the name “Christian.” Instead, the Emperor and those in judgment are urged to do their own investigation and see whether anyone is guilty of any crime deserving punishment (*Apology* I.4-5).

Having made this defense of the church’s practices, Justin moves to defending the church’s beliefs. He makes an argument that the “Word,”¹² the “First-begotten of

¹¹ Justin supports the taxation issue telling the story of Jesus holding a coin and said to render unto Caesar what is Caesars (*Apology* I.17; Mt. 22:15-21).

¹² In terms of theology, this is typical of an important aspect of Justin’s place in church history. Justin ceased on a Greek philosophical term heavily laden with meaning. The term was *logos* (λογος). Greek philosophy used the term as the mediating being or rationality between Plato’s transcendent God and humanity. Using both John’s gospel (“In the beginning was the *logos*”) as well as Greek philosophy, Justin taught that Jesus was the cosmic *logos*. He was the mediating power between God and man. Before the incarnation, he was present in the world as the *logos*

God” was virgin born, was teacher, “was crucified, died and rose again” (*Apology* I.21). While that might be hard to swallow, Justin urges his readers to consider the alternatives available to them. Would they sooner believe the mythical accounts of Zeus, Hermes, Dionysus, Heracles and others?

Justin was a fervent believer in the presence and power of demons. He saw Genesis 6:1-2 as indicative of demon intercourse with humanity that resulted in increased demon presence in the world. Justin taught that the cultic myths of the Greeks and Romans were manifestations of such demons. The leader of the demons is “called the serpent and Satan and the devil” (*Apology* I.28). While Satan is destined for God’s fiery judgment, he walks the world now making misery in anticipation and fury over his own destiny. Later in his *Apology*, Justin goes in to great detail on the way demons misled the world in imitation of what they knew God was doing or would ultimately do in Christ. (*Apology* I.54-58). In I.58, Justin singles out Marcion (see earlier lessons!) as one put forward by demons to mislead the church and the masses.

Justin then sets out to offer proofs of his faith. He does so by noting the prophetic spirit present in some Jews of many centuries passed. For many chapters, Justin makes argument of scripture fulfilled in Christ. Many of them are those we might see and read today. For example, Justin cites Micah 5:2 and Mt. 2:6, “And you Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd my people.” Justin then explains that Bethlehem is a village about 4 miles from Jerusalem, urging Pius to go check the census records under Quirinius should he have any doubts (*Apology* I.34).

Justin also sets forward a number of prophecies,¹³ including:

1. “The ruler shall not depart from Judah.” Gn 49:10.
2. “He shall be the expectation of the nations.” Gn 49:10.
3. “A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a flower shall spring from the root of Jesse; and upon his arm will the nations hope.” Num. 24:17, Isa. 11:1, 51:5.
4. “Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they will call his name, God with us.”¹⁴ Isa. 7:14.

spermatikos (λογος σπερματικός) or the seed of the word that was p[resent in philosop[hers and prophets and others who had any grasp of the truth. For the *logos*, Jesus himself was truth. So wherever truth was found, Christ was there.

¹³ For reference, Justin sends the Emperor to the libraries of Alexandria for a copy of the Septuagint, though Justin calls it the prophetic books of the Jews translated into Greek (*Apology* I.31).

5. “A child is born to us, and a young man is given to us, and the government will be upon his shoulders.” Isa. 9:6.
6. “They pierced my hands and my feet, and casts lots for my clothing.” (Ps. 22:16, 18).¹⁵
7. “Behold your King comes to you meek, and riding upon a donkey.” (Zec. 9:9).¹⁶

Justin gives many other scriptures to drive home his point of prophetic fulfillment. It would be wonderful to have gotten his *Apology* just 120 or so years after the crucifixion and been able to chase down the records and read of the events!

In the midst of this discourse, Justin pauses to speak on those who predated Jesus, the “Christians before Christ.” He speaks of Socrates, Heraclitus, and others who wrote of the *logos* in Greek philosophy before the incarnation ever occurred. These he saw as Christians with the light they had, even though the Roman world would have counted them atheists for not ascribing to the common pagan myths. Justin notes that many of those (Socrates, for example) were slain by the wicked much as the Christian martyrs were in Justin’s day. (*Apology* I.46).

Justin adds to the end of his *Apology* an explanation of the Christian sacraments, baptism and Communion. These are the fullest early church descriptions of the practices outside of the *Didache* (covered in earlier lessons).

Baptism is explained as the rebirth referenced by Jesus in John 3:3 as Justin notes, “Except you are born again, you will not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven” (*Apology* I.61). Justin explains that we were born with free choice, but through our parents, upbringing, experiences, and personal choices, we are sinners. The waters of baptism demonstrate a washing of sin in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. The baptism was a three-part immersion that had each name pronounced over each dipping (*Apology* I.61). Like in the *Didache*, it seems the community had a teaching before the baptism. Prayer and Communion followed the baptism. (*Apology* I.67).

The Lord’s Supper, termed the “Eucharist” by Justin, was closed to all but believers. It was not a common meal or drink, but the body and blood of Christ.

¹⁴ Justin goes on to explain the meaning of the name Jesus, explaining how the prophecy was fulfilled (*Apology* I.33).

¹⁵ For this, Justin sends the Emperor to the official Roman records of the Acts under Pilate to see that in fact the truth of the prophecy’s fulfillment is found in the official Roman records. Pretty stupid move if the records didn’t actually have the crucifixion account!

¹⁶ Justin wrongly cites Zephaniah for this prophecy that comes from Zechariah!

Once the elements were blessed for distribution, it was taken from the congregational meeting to those who were unable to attend the service. Justin explained that throughout the world, on Sunday, Christians would gather together to celebrate the ritual communion. At the same gathering, the celebrants would give tithes and alms. The “Ruler” or director of the service would offer up prayers for the people and the people would respond, “Amen” (*Apology* I.66-67).

Justin finishes his first Apology urging the Emperor to avoid imposing the death penalty on the faithful. Ultimately, though, as Justin told the Emperor at the beginning of the letter, while the most the Emperor could do to the faithful was send them home to their Father more quickly. As Justin wrote, “You are able to kill us, but not to hurt us” (*Apology* I.2).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Christ truly gives life meaning
2. God is above all and with all
3. Faith in Christ is a rationale answer