

Apology

English translation · Apology of Aristides, translated from the Syriac (J. Rendel Harris, 1891)

Aristides of Athens · c. AD 125–140

One of the oldest Christian defenses, addressed to the emperor Hadrian (or Antoninus Pius). Aristides, a philosopher of Athens, divides humanity into barbarians, Greeks, Jews and Christians and argues that only the Christians have found the truth about God. It is short enough to read in a sitting.

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Opening

Open. Again, the apology which Aristides the philosopher made before Hadrian the king concerning the worship of God. [To the Emperor] Caesar Titus Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, from Marcianus Aristides, a philosopher of Athens.

Chapter 1

1.1 I, O king, by the grace of God came into this world; and having contemplated the heavens and the earth and the seas, and beheld the sun and the rest of the orderly creation, I was amazed at the arrangement of the world; and I comprehended that the world and all that is therein are moved by the impulse of another, and I understood that he that moveth them is God, who is hidden in them and concealed from them: and this is well known, that that which moveth is more powerful than that which is moved. And that I should investigate concerning this Mover of all, as to how He exists—for this is evident to me, for He is incomprehensible in His nature—and that I should dispute concerning the steadfastness of His government, so as to comprehend it fully, is not profitable for me; for no one is able perfectly to comprehend it. But I say concerning the Mover of the world, that He is God of all, who made all for the sake of man; and it is evident to me that this is expedient, that one should fear God, and not grieve man.

Chapter 2

2.1 Since then it has been spoken to you by us concerning God, as far as our mind was capable of discoursing concerning Him, let us now come to the race of men, in order that we may know which of them hold any part of that truth which we have spoken concerning Him, and which of them are in error therefrom.

Chapter 3

3.1 Let us then begin with the Barbarians, and by degrees we will proceed to the rest of the peoples, in order that we may understand which of them hold the truth concerning God, and which of them error.

Chapter 4

4.1 Let us turn then, O king, to the elements themselves, in order that we may shew concerning them that they are not gods, but a creation, corruptible and changeable, which is in the likeness of man. But God is incorruptible and unchangeable and invisible, while seeing, turning and changing all things.

Chapter 5

5.1 And in like manner again have those erred who have thought concerning water that it is God. For water was created for the use of man and in many ways it is made subject to him. For it is changed, and receives defilement, and is corrupted, and loses its own nature when cooked with many things, and receives colours which are not its own; being moreover hardened by the cold and mixed and mingled with the excrement of men and beasts and with the blood of the slain: and it is compelled by workmen, by means of the compulsion of channels, to flow and be conducted against its own will, and to come into gardens and other places, so as to cleanse and carry out all the filth of men, and wash away all defilement, and supply man's need of itself. Wherefore it is impossible that water should be God, but it is a work of God and a part of the world.

Chapter 6

6.1 So too those have erred who have thought concerning the sun that he is God. For lo! we see him, that by the necessity of another he is moved and turned and runs his course; and he proceeds from degree to degree, rising and setting every day, in order that he may warm the shoots of plants and shrubs, and may bring forth in the air which is mingled with him every herb which is on the earth. And in calculation the sun has a part with the rest of the stars in his course, and although he is one in his nature, he is mixed with many parts, according to the advantage of the needs of men: and that not

according to his own will, but according to the will of Him that ruleth him. Wherefore it is not possible that the sun should be God, but a work of God; and in like manner also the moon and stars.

Chapter 7

7.1 But those who have thought concerning men of old, that some of them are gods, these have greatly erred: as thou, even thou, O king, art aware, that man consists of the four elements and of soul and spirit, and therefore is he even called World, and apart from any one of these parts he does not exist. He has beginning and end, and he is born and also suffers corruption. But God, as I have said, has none of this in His nature, but He is unmade and incorruptible. On this account, then, it is impossible that we should represent him as God who is man by nature, one to whom sometimes, when he looketh for joy, grief happens; and for laughter, and weeping befalls him; one that is passionate and jealous, envious and regretful, along with the rest of the other defects: and in many ways more corrupted than the elements or even than the beasts.

Chapter 8

8.1 Let us return now to the Greeks in order that we may know what opinion they have concerning the true God.

Chapter 9

9.1 Now let us come to the history of these their gods in order that we may prove accurately concerning all those things which we have said above.

Chapter 10

10.1 And again they introduce another god, Hephaestus; and they say of him that he is lame and wearing a cap on his head, and holding in his hand tongs and hammer; and working in brass in order that therefrom he may find his needed sustenance. Is then this god so much in need? Whereas it is impossible for a god to be needy or lame: otherwise he is very weak.

Chapter 11

11.1 And after him they introduce another god and call him Apollo: and they say of him that he is jealous and. changeable; and sometimes he holds a bow and a quiver, and sometimes a lyre and a plectrum; and he gives oracles to men, in order that he may receive a reward from them. Is then this god in need of reward? Whereas it is disgraceful that all these things should be found in a god.

Chapter 12

12.1 Now the Egyptians, because they are more evil and ignorant than all peoples upon the earth, have erred more than all men. For the worship of the Barbarians and the Greeks did not suffice them, but they introduced also the nature of beasts, and said concerning it that they were gods: and also of the creeping things which are found on the dry land and in the waters, and of the plants and herbs they have said that some of them are gods, and they have become corrupt in all madness and impurity more than all peoples that are upon the earth. For of old time they worshipped Isis; and they say that she forsooth is a goddess, who had forsooth a husband Osiris, her brother; but when forsooth Osiris was killed by his brother Typhon, Isis fled with her son Horus to Byblos in Syria and was there for a certain time until that her son was grown: and he contended with his uncle Typhon and killed him, and thereupon Isis returned and went about with her son Horus, and was seeking for the body of Osiris her lord, and bitterly bewailing his death. If therefore Isis be a goddess, and was not able to help Osiris her brother and lord, how is it possible that she should help others? Whereas it is impossible that the divine nature should be afraid and flee, or weep and wail. Otherwise it is a great misfortune.

Chapter 13

13.1 The Egyptians then have erred with a great error, above all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. But it is a matter of wonder, O king, concerning the Greeks, whereas they excel all the rest of the peoples in their manners and in their reason, how thus they have gone astray after dead idols and senseless images: while they see their gods sawn and polished by their makers, and curtailed and cut and burnt and shaped and transformed into every shape by them. And when they are grown old and fail by the length of time, and are melted and broken in pieces, how is it that they do not understand concerning them that they are not gods? And those who have not ability for their own preservation, how will they be able to take care of men? But even the poets and philosophers among them being in error have introduced concerning them that they are gods, things like these which are made for the honour of God Almighty; and being in error they seek to make them like to God as to whom no man has ever seen to whom He is like; nor is he able to see Him; and together with these things they introduce concerning Deity as if it were that deficiency were found with it; in that they say that He accepts sacrifice and asks for burnt-offering and libation and murders of men and temples. But God is not needy, and none of these things is sought for by Him: and it is clear that men are in error in those things that they imagine. But their poets and philosophers introduce and say, that the nature of all their gods is one; but they have not understood of God our Lord, that while He is one, He is yet in all. They, then, are in error; for if, while the body

of man is many in its parts, no member is afraid of its fellow, but whilst it is a composite body, all is on an equality with all: so also God who is one in His nature has a single essence proper to Him, and He is equal in His nature and His essence, nor is He afraid of Himself. If therefore the nature of the gods is one, it is not proper that a god should persecute a god, nor kill nor do him that which is evil.

Chapter 14

14.1 Let us come now, O king, also to the history of the Jews and let us see what sort of opinion they have concerning God. The Jews then say that God is one, Creator of all and almighty: and that it is not proper for us that anything else should be worshipped, but this God only: and in this they appear to be much nearer to the truth than all the peoples, in that they worship God more exceedingly and not His works; and they imitate God by reason of the love which they have for man; for they have compassion on the poor and ransom the captive and bury the dead, and do things of a similar nature to these: things which are acceptable to God and are well-pleasing also to men, things which they have received from their fathers of old. Nevertheless they too have gone astray from accurate knowledge, and they suppose in their minds that they are serving God, but in the methods of their actions their service is to angels and not to God, in that they observe sabbaths and new moons and the passover and the great fast, and the fast, and circumcision, and cleanness of meats: which things not even thus have they perfectly observed.

Chapter 15

15.1 Now the Christians, O king, by going about and seeking have found the truth, and as we have comprehended from their writings they are nearer to the truth and to exact knowledge than the rest of the peoples. For they know and believe in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, in whom are all things and from whom are all things: He who has no other god as His fellow: from whom they have received those commandments which they have engraved on their minds, which they keep in the hope and expectation of the world to come; so that on this account they do not commit adultery nor fornication, they do not bear false witness, they do not deny a deposit, nor covet what is not theirs: they honour father and mother; they do good to those who are their neighbours, and when they are judges they judge uprightly; and they do not worship idols in the form of man; and whatever they do not wish that others should do to them, they do not practise towards any one, and they do not eat of the meats of idol sacrifices, for they are undefiled: and those who grieve them they comfort, and make them their friends; and they do good to their enemies: and their wives, O king, are pure as virgins, and their daughters modest: and their men abstain from all unlawful

wedlock and from all impurity, in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world: but as for their servants or handmaids, or their children if any of them have any, they persuade them to become Christians for the love that they have towards them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction brethren: they do not worship strange gods: and they walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another: and from the widows they do not turn away their countenance: and they rescue the orphan from him who does him violence: and he who has gives to him who has not, without grudging; and when they see the stranger they bring him to their dwellings, and rejoice over him as over a true brother; for they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the spirit and in God: but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him.

Chapter 16

16.1 As men who know God, they ask from Him petitions which are proper for Him to give and for them to receive: and thus they accomplish the course of their lives. And because they acknowledge the goodnesses of God towards them, lo! on account of them there flows forth the beauty that is in the world. And truly they are of the number of those that have found the truth by going about and seeking it, and as far as we have comprehended, we have understood that they only are near to the knowledge of the truth.

Chapter 17

17.1 Thus far, O king, it is I that have spoken. For as to what remains, as was said above, there are found in their other writings words which are difficult to speak, or that one should repeat them; things which are not only said, but actually done.

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