

A Plea for the Christians

Modern English version · SermonIndex

Athenagoras of Athens · c. AD 177

A petition to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, written about AD 177, defending Christians against the charges of atheism, cannibalism and immorality. Athenagoras argues for one God from reason and from the prophets, and describes how Christians actually live.

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Opening address

Addr. To the Emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, conquerors of Armenia and Sarmatia, and above all, philosophers.

Translator's note. “Armeniakos” and “Sarmatikos” are victory titles taken from conquered peoples.

Chapter 1

1a Throughout your empire, greatest of kings, different peoples follow different customs and laws. No one is kept by law or by fear of punishment from loving his ancestral ways, however ridiculous they may be. The man of Ilium calls Hector a god, and he worships Helen, believing her to be Adrasteia. The Spartan reveres Agamemnon as Zeus, and also Philonoe, the daughter of Tyndareus. The man of Tenedos worships Tennes. The Athenian sacrifices to Erechtheus as Poseidon. The Athenians also hold rites and mysteries for Agraulus and Pandrosus, who were judged guilty of impiety for opening the chest. In a word, every nation and every community establishes whatever sacrifices and mysteries people want. The Egyptians regard even cats, crocodiles, snakes, asps and dogs as gods. And both you and your laws allow all of this. You consider it impious and unholy to believe in no god at all, but necessary for each person to worship whatever gods he chooses, so that through fear of the divine they may keep from doing wrong.

Translator's note. The "chest" is the one Athena gave the daughters of Cecrops to guard. In most surviving versions of the myth, Aglauros (Agraulus) and Herse opened it, while Pandrosus obeyed. Athenagoras' account differs from these versions.

1b But why is a name hateful to you? (Do not be misled by hearsay, as most people are.) Names do not deserve hatred. It is wrongdoing that deserves trial and punishment. That is why individuals, who admire your mildness and gentleness and your peaceful and kindly spirit toward everyone, enjoy equal rights. Cities share equal honor according to their worth, and the whole world, thanks to your wisdom, enjoys deep peace. But we who are called Christians you have not taken thought for. You allow us, though we do nothing wrong, to be hounded, plundered and persecuted, while the crowds make war on us for our name alone. As the argument goes on it will be shown that we are, of all people, the most devout and just in our attitude toward God and toward your empire. So we have dared to explain our situation. You will learn from this discourse that we suffer unjustly and against every law and reason. We ask you to give some thought to us as well, so that we may at last stop being slaughtered by false accusers.

Translator's note. The Greek calls the accusers "sycophants," meaning informers who bring malicious charges.

1c The loss our persecutors inflict does not stop at our money, nor the disgrace at our reputation, nor the harm at any other of the greater things. These we despise, though most people think them important. For we have learned not to hit back when we are beaten, and not to go to law against those who drag us away and plunder us. More than that, we have learned to offer the other side of the head to those who strike us on the cheek, and to give our cloak as well to those who take our tunic. But when we have given up our property, they plot against our bodies and our souls, heaping up a crowd of charges against us. These charges do not touch us even in thought. They belong to the babblers who make them, and to their whole kind.

Translator's note. The teaching on turning the other cheek and giving the cloak echoes the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5:39-40](#); [Luke 6:29](#)). Athenagoras does not name the source.

Scripture: [Matthew 5:39-40](#); [Luke 6:29](#)

Chapter 2

2a If anyone can prove that we are guilty of wrongdoing, small or great, we do not refuse to be punished. We consider it right to suffer even the harshest and most merciless penalty. But if the accusation goes no further than a name, then it is your task, great and kindly and most learned emperors, to remove this abuse from us by law. (Up to this very day, what people say about us rests on common, undiscerning rumor, and no Christian has been proved

guilty of any wrong.) Then, just as the whole world, both individuals and cities, shares in your benefits, we too may thank you and be proud that we are no longer falsely accused. It does not fit your justice that others who are charged with crimes are not punished until they are convicted, while in our case the name counts for more than the proofs at the trial. The judges do not inquire whether the accused has done any wrong, but heap abuse on the name as though it were a crime.

2b No name is considered good or bad in itself or by itself. A name seems good or bad because of the good or bad actions that lie behind it. You know this very clearly, since you come to the matter with all the learning of philosophy and education. That is why people brought to trial before you are confident, even when they stand accused of the gravest crimes. They know that you will examine their lives. You will not be swayed by names, if the names are empty, or by the grounds of the accusations, if they are false. They accept a verdict of condemnation as readily as one of acquittal, since they trust it to be fair. We ask for the same fairness that is shown to everyone. We ask that we not be hated and punished because we are called Christians (for what can the name contribute to wickedness?). We ask instead to be tried on whatever charges anyone brings against us. Those cleared of the accusations should be released, and those found guilty of wrongdoing should be punished. This should be for the crime, not for the name, since no Christian is wicked unless he only pretends to hold our teaching.

Translator's note. The older translation's "unless he falsely profess our doctrines" renders the Greek "unless he plays a part regarding the word (logos)." Here logos means the Christian message or teaching.

2c This is how we see philosophers treated when they are tried. Before the trial, none of them is thought by the judge to be good or bad because of his knowledge or craft. If he is judged guilty of wrongdoing, he is punished, and no blame is attached to philosophy itself (for the wicked man is the one who does not practice philosophy as the law requires, while the discipline itself is blameless). If he clears himself of the slanders, he is released. Let the same fairness be shown to us. Let the lives of the accused be examined, and let the name be cleared of every charge. As I begin my defense of our teaching, I must ask you, most mighty emperors, to be fair listeners to us. Do not be carried away and prejudiced by common, unreasoning rumor. Instead, give your love of learning and your love of truth a place in considering our teaching as well. Then you will not sin through ignorance, and we, once cleared of the charges that come from the undiscerning talk of the crowd, will stop being attacked.

Chapter 3

3 They pin three charges on us: atheism, Thyestean feasts, and

Oedipean intercourse. If these things are true, spare no one. Prosecute the crimes. Kill us, root and branch, with our wives and children, if any Christian lives like a wild beast. Yet even wild animals do not touch their own kind. By a law of nature they mate only at one time, the season for bearing young, and not without restraint. They also recognize those who do them good. So if anyone is more savage than the beasts, what penalty could he suffer for such great crimes that would be thought a fitting punishment? But if these are only invented stories and empty slanders, then they arise from the natural opposition of vice to virtue, and from the fact that opposites make war on each other by a divine law. You yourselves are witnesses that we do none of these wrongs, since you order that no one inform against us. What remains is for you to examine our way of life, our teachings, and our zeal and obedience toward you, your house and your empire. Then, at last, grant us the same treatment as those who persecute us, and nothing more. For we will defeat them, since we give up even our lives for the truth without hesitation.

Translator's note. "Thyestean feasts" refers to the Greek myth of Thyestes, who was tricked into eating his own children. "Oedipean intercourse" refers to Oedipus, who unknowingly married his mother. These stood for the charges of cannibalism and incest.

Chapter 4

4a I will answer each charge in turn, so that we are not ridiculed for failing to refute our accusers. First, that we are not atheists. The Athenians were right to charge Diagoras with atheism. He not only made public the Orphic teaching, exposed the mysteries at Eleusis and those of the Cabiri, and chopped up the wooden statue of Heracles to boil his turnips, but declared outright that there is no god at all. But we separate God from matter. We show that matter is one thing and God another, with a great gap between them. The divine is uncreated and eternal, perceived only by mind and reason, while matter is created and perishable. Is it not unreasonable to call us by the name of atheism?

4b Suppose we thought as Diagoras did, even though we have so many pledges pointing us to the worship of God: the good order of the world, its constant harmony, its size, color, shape, and arrangement. Then the reputation for not worshipping God, and the reason for our being harassed, might fairly be pinned on us. But our teaching brings us to one God, the Maker of this whole universe. He was not himself made (because what is does not come into being, only what is not), but he made all things through the Logos that comes from him. So we are wronged in both respects, spoken of badly and persecuted, and both without reason.

Translator's note. "Logos" means "Word" or "reason." Athenagoras uses it here for God's Word through whom all things were made.

Chapter 5

5a Poets and philosophers were not thought to be atheists for thinking carefully about God. Euripides speaks about the gods that people name without knowledge, following common assumption, and he expresses doubt: “If Zeus really is in heaven, he ought not to make the same man unfortunate.” But when he speaks of the God who is grasped by the mind through knowledge, he states his view as his understanding holds it: “Do you see this boundless ether on high, which holds the earth around in its moist arms? Think of this as Zeus. Consider this to be God.” He did not see that the beings to which the name is applied actually exist (as he says, “Zeus, whoever Zeus is, I know only by report”). Nor did he see that the names are applied to things that really exist. (For those whose beings do not exist, what do they have beyond names?) But the other God he understood from his works. By sight he perceived the unseen through what is visible: the air, the ether, the earth.

Translator’s note. The older translation turns Euripides’ line into “He ought not on the righteous ills to send.” The Greek says only that Zeus ought not to make “the same man” unfortunate.

| Scripture: [Romans 1:20](#)

5b So the one whose works these are, and by whose Spirit they are steered, Euripides grasped to be God. Sophocles agrees with him: “One, in truth there is one God, who made heaven and the wide earth.” Concerning the nature of God, which fills both heaven and earth with his beauty, Euripides teaches where God must be and that there must be only one.

Translator’s note. These lines are attributed to Sophocles here and by other early Christian writers, but they are not found in his surviving works. Many scholars think they were composed later and attributed to him.

Chapter 6

6a Philolaus also says that all things are enclosed by God as in a guardpost, and so he shows that God is one and above matter. Of Lysis and Opsimus, the one defines God as an ineffable number. The other defines him as the amount by which the greatest number exceeds the one nearest to it. The Pythagoreans hold that the greatest number is ten, since it is the tetractys and contains all the numerical and harmonic ratios. Nine lies next to it. So God is a monad, that is, one, because the greatest number exceeds the nearest below it by one. Then there are Plato and Aristotle. I will not go through what they said about God as if I were giving an exact account of the philosophers’ teachings. I know that you surpass everyone in understanding and in the power of your rule,

and that you also excel everyone in exact knowledge of every branch of learning. You succeed in each part of it better than even those who devote themselves to a single part.

Translator's note. The tetractys was the Pythagoreans' sacred figure of the first four numbers (1+2+3+4), which add up to ten.

6b But it is impossible to show, without citing names, that we are not the only ones who confine God to a unity, so I have turned to their opinions. Plato says: "To find the Maker and Father of this universe is a hard task, and having found him, it is impossible to declare him to everyone." He is thinking of one uncreated and eternal God. If Plato also knows other gods, such as the sun, moon and stars, he knows them as created: "Gods of gods, of whom I am the craftsman and father of the works. They are indissoluble unless I will it, though everything that has been bound can be dissolved." So if Plato is not an atheist, since he understands the Craftsman of all things to be one uncreated God, neither are we atheists. We know and hold as God the one by whom all things were made through the Logos and are held together by the Spirit from him.

Translator's note. Both quotations are from Plato's *Timaeus* (28c and 41a-b).

6c Aristotle and his followers also bring in one God, but they speak of him as a kind of composite living being, made up of soul and body. They take his body to be the ethereal region: the wandering stars and the sphere of the fixed stars, which move in circles. His soul is the reason that governs the movement of the body. This reason is not itself moved, but it becomes the cause of the body's motion. The Stoics multiply the divine by names according to the changes of the matter through which they say God's Spirit passes. Yet in practice they too hold God to be one. They say God is a craftsmanlike fire proceeding by a set path toward the making of the world. He contains all the seminal principles by which each thing comes to be according to fate, and his Spirit pervades the whole world. So according to them God is one. He is called Zeus from the boiling (zeon) of matter, and Hera from the air (aēr), and given other names from each part of matter through which he has passed.

Translator's note. The Stoic naming rests on Greek wordplay: Zeus (Zeus) from zeon, "boiling" or "fervent," and Hera (Hērā) from aēr, "air."

Chapter 7

7a Almost everyone agrees that the divine is one, even when they do not mean to, whenever they come to the first principles of the universe. And we hold that the one who set this whole universe in order is God. So why are others free to say and write whatever they like about the divine, while a law is set against us? We have something to show for what we think and have rightly believed, that there is one God, and we can establish it with signs and arguments

of truth. The poets and philosophers, as in other matters, only made guesses. Each was stirred by his own soul, through its kinship with the breath that comes from God, to search for whether he could find and grasp the truth. But they could only go as far as thinking around it, and they did not find it, because they did not think it right to learn about God from God. Instead, each one learned from himself. So each of them taught something different about God, about matter, about forms, and about the world.

Translator's note. The older translation reads "affinity with the afflatus from God"; the Greek speaks of a shared feeling or kinship (sympatheia) with the "breath" (pnoē) from God.

7b But we have prophets as witnesses to what we think and believe. Moved by a divine Spirit, they spoke out about God and about the things of God. You too, who surpass others in understanding and in reverence toward what is truly divine, would say that it is unreasonable to leave off believing the Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the prophets as though they were instruments, and to pay attention to human opinions.

Chapter 8

8a Now consider, in the following way, that the Maker of this universe has been one God from the beginning, so that you may also have the reasoning behind our faith. Suppose there were two gods from the beginning, or more. Either they were in one and the same place, or each was in a place of his own. They could not be in one and the same place. Being gods does not make them alike. Because they are uncreated, they are not alike. Created things are like their patterns, but uncreated things are unlike, since they came from no one and were made after no one's likeness. Or is God one in the way that a hand, an eye and a foot are parts of one body, together making up one person? But Socrates is made up of parts and can be divided into them precisely because he was created and is perishable. God is uncreated, beyond suffering and indivisible, so he is not made up of parts.

8b But suppose each of them is in a place of his own. The one who made the world is above the things that have come to be, and around the things he made and put in order. Where, then, is the second god, or the others? The world has been made spherical and is enclosed by the circles of heaven. Its Maker is above what he made and holds it together by his care for it. What place is left for the second god or the rest? He is not in the world, because the world belongs to the other. He is not around the world, because God, the Maker of the world, is above it. And if he is neither in the world nor around it (for everything around it is held by this God), where is he? Is he above the world and above God? In another world, or around another?

8c But if he is in another world or around another, then he is no

longer concerned with us, since he does not rule our world. Nor is his power great, since he is in a limited place. And if he is not in another world (for all things are filled by this God), nor around another (for all things are held by him), then he does not exist at all, since there is no place for him to be. Or what is he doing? Another has the world, and he himself is above the Maker of the world, yet he is neither in the world nor around it. Is there some other place for him to stand? But God, and what belongs to God, are above that place. And what place could there be, when this God has filled everything above the world? Does he, then, exercise providence? But if he does not, he has made nothing. And if he does not make, does not exercise providence, and there is no other place in which he exists, then this one is the one God from the beginning, and the sole Maker of the world.

Chapter 9

9 If we were content with arguments like these, someone might think our teaching merely human. But the voices of the prophets confirm our reasoning. I think that you, who love learning so much and are so well informed, cannot be unfamiliar with the writings of Moses, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and of the other prophets. In an ecstasy, with their own reasoning set aside, they spoke out what was working in them as the divine Spirit moved them. The Spirit used them as a flute player breathes into a flute. What, then, do these men say? “The Lord is our God; no other will be reckoned alongside him.” And again: “I am God, the first and the one hereafter, and apart from me there is no God.” Likewise: “Before me no other god came to be, and after me there will be none; I am God, and there is none besides me.” And about his greatness: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is the footstool of my feet. What house will you build for me, or what is the place of my rest?” I leave it to you, when you take up the books themselves, to examine their prophecies more carefully, so that with sound reasoning you may throw off the abuse heaped on us.

Translator’s note. Athenagoras quotes the Greek (Septuagint) Old Testament loosely and sometimes blends passages: the first quotation begins like [Deuteronomy 6:4](#) and continues with Baruch 3:35 (3:36 in the Septuagint), “no other will be reckoned alongside him”; the others are close to [Isaiah 44:6](#), [Isaiah 43:10](#) (with 45:5) and [Isaiah 66:1](#).

Scripture: [Isaiah 44:6](#); [Isaiah 43:10-11](#); [Isaiah 66:1](#)

Chapter 10

10a I have shown sufficiently that we are not atheists. We hold that God is one: uncreated, eternal, invisible, beyond suffering, beyond comprehension, and beyond containment. He is grasped only by mind and reason, and he is surrounded by light, beauty, spirit and indescribable power. By him, through his Word, the whole universe

was made, set in order, and is held together. For we also recognize a Son of God. Do not think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. We do not think about God the Father or about the Son as the poets do in their myths, who show their gods to be no better than men. The Son of God is the Word of the Father, in idea and in activity. For all things were made by him and through him, since the Father and the Son are one.

Translator's note. "All things were made ... through him" echoes [John 1:3](#), and "the Father and the Son are one" echoes [John 10:30](#).

Scripture: [John 1:3](#); [John 10:30](#)

10b The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son, in the unity and power of the Spirit. The Son of God is the mind and word of the Father. But if, in your great understanding, you wish to ask what "the Child" means here, I will say briefly: he is the first offspring of the Father. This does not mean he came into being, for from the beginning God, who is eternal mind, had the Word in himself, since he was eternally rational. Rather, he came forth to be the idea and the working power for all material things. These lay underneath like a nature without qualities, a useless earth, with the heavier particles mixed together with the lighter ones. The prophetic Spirit agrees with this account: "The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways, for his works," it says. Moreover, we say that the Holy Spirit himself, who is at work in those who speak prophetically, is an outflow from God. He flows out from God and returns, like a ray of the sun. Who, then, would not be amazed to hear us called atheists, when we speak of God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit, and show both their power in unity and their distinction in order?

Translator's note. The quotation is [Proverbs 8:22](#) in the Greek Septuagint, which reads "created me" (the older translation has "made me"). Athenagoras applies the verse to the Son as the Word. He takes care to say the Son is the Father's offspring "not as having come into being," since God always had his Word in himself. The Son "came forth" to give shape and working power to creation.

Scripture: [John 10:38](#); [John 14:10-11](#); [Proverbs 8:22](#)

10c Our teaching about God does not stop here. We also speak of a multitude of angels and servants. God, the maker and builder of the world, assigned and appointed them through his Word to watch over the elements, the heavens, the world and what is in it, and to keep all of it in good order.

Chapter 11

11a Do not be surprised that I explain our teaching so precisely. I am being exact so that you will not be swept along by the common, unreasoning opinion, and so that you can know the truth. For through the very teachings we hold, which are not human but spoken by God and taught by God, we can persuade you not to think

of us as atheists. What, then, are the words on which we are raised? “I tell you: Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” Since this subject has become widely known amid much clamor, allow me here to speak about it openly, as one making a defense before philosopher-kings.

Translator’s note. The Greek of the last sentence is difficult. It seems to mean that the matter has become notorious “with much outcry,” so Athenagoras asks leave to speak freely about it. The older translation takes the outcry to be his own.

Scripture: [Matthew 5:44-45](#); [Luke 6:27-28](#)

11b Take those who unravel syllogisms, clear up ambiguities and explain the origins of words. Take those who teach about homonyms and synonyms, predicates and propositions, what the subject is and what is predicated of it. They promise to make their students happy by these and similar arguments. Are any of them so cleansed in soul that, instead of hating their enemies, they love them? Instead of speaking ill of those who started the abuse (which is the very least one would expect), do they bless them? Do they pray for those who plot against their lives? On the contrary, they go on forever, with evil intent, digging out these hidden matters for themselves. They are always eager to do some harm, since they have made their business an art of words and not a showing of deeds. Among us, however, you would find uneducated people, craftsmen and old women. Even if they cannot prove in words the benefit of our teaching, they show by their deeds the benefit of the choice they have made. They do not recite speeches; they show good works. When struck, they do not strike back. When robbed, they do not take anyone to court. They give to those who ask, and they love their neighbors as themselves.

Translator’s note. The closing list echoes Jesus’ teaching in [Matthew 5:39-42](#) and [Luke 6:29-30](#), and the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself ([Leviticus 19:18](#); [Matthew 22:39](#)).

Scripture: [Matthew 5:44](#); [Luke 6:28](#); [Matthew 5:39-42](#); [Matthew 22:39](#)

Chapter 12

12 If we did not believe that God presides over the human race, would we purify ourselves like this? Certainly not. But we are persuaded that we will give an account of our whole life here to God, who made us and the world. So we choose a life that is moderate and kind, a life that others readily look down on. We think that no harm we suffer here, even if someone takes our life, can compare with what we will receive there from the great Judge for our gentle, kind and fair-minded life. Plato said that Minos and Rhadamanthus would judge and punish the wicked. But we say that even if someone is a Minos or a Rhadamanthus, or the father of

them both, he will not escape the judgment of God. Now compare. Some think this life comes down to “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” They treat death as deep sleep and forgetfulness (“sleep and death, twin brothers”). Yet these people are believed to be godly. We, on the other hand, count this present life as worth little. We are guided on our way by this alone: knowing God and the Word who comes from him. We know what the oneness of the Son with the Father is, what the fellowship of the Father with the Son is, and what the Spirit is. We know what the union and the distinction is of those who are so united, the Spirit, the Son and the Father. We know that the life that awaits us is far better than words can say, if we are brought to it pure of every wrong. And we are so kind that we do not love only our friends. For “If you love those who love you,” he says, “and lend to those who lend to you, what reward will you have?” We are like this, and we live such a life in order to escape condemnation. Yet we are not believed when we say we are godly! These are only small points out of great ones, a few out of many, so that we may not trouble you any longer. After all, people who test honey and whey judge from a small sample whether the whole is good.

Translator’s note. The saying of Jesus freely combines [Matthew 5:46](#) and [Luke 6:32-34](#).

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 15:32](#); [Isaiah 22:13](#); [Matthew 5:46](#); [Luke 6:32-34](#)

Chapter 13

13a Most of those who charge us with atheism have no idea, not even in a dream, what God is. They are ignorant, with no insight into natural or divine matters, and they measure piety by the law of sacrifices. They accuse us of not honoring the same gods as the cities do. Consider both points, emperors, and first the matter of not sacrificing. The Maker and Father of this whole universe has no need of blood, or of the smell of burning fat, or of the fragrance of flowers and incense. He himself is perfect fragrance, lacking nothing and needing nothing. The greatest sacrifice to him is for us to know who stretched out the heavens and rounded them into a sphere, and who set the earth firm like a center. It is to know who gathered the water into seas and separated light from darkness. It is to know who adorned the sky with stars and made the earth send up every kind of seed, and who made the animals and formed man.

Translator’s note. The list echoes Scripture’s account of creation: stretching out the heavens ([Isaiah 40:22](#); [42:5](#)), gathering the waters and separating light from darkness ([Genesis 1:4](#), 9-10), and the earth bringing forth seed ([Genesis 1:11-12](#)).

Scripture: [Genesis 1:4](#); [Genesis 1:9-10](#)

13b We hold that God is the Maker who holds all things together and watches over them with the knowledge and skill by which he guides everything. When we lift up holy hands to him, what further

need does he have of a hundred-ox sacrifice? As the poet says:
“People turn the gods with sacrifices and gentle prayers, with drink offerings and the savor of burnt fat, begging them, when someone has overstepped and sinned.” But what are whole burnt offerings to me, when God has no need of them? Yet we ought to offer a bloodless sacrifice and bring the worship of the mind, the “reasonable service.”

Translator’s note. “Reasonable service” (logikē latreia) is the phrase of [Romans 12:1](#), also translated “spiritual worship.”

Scripture: [1 Timothy 2:8](#); [Isaiah 1:11](#); [Romans 12:1](#)

Chapter 14

14a The other complaint is that we do not come to worship the same gods as the cities, and that is a very silly one. Even the people who accuse us of atheism, because we do not regard as gods the ones they know, do not agree among themselves about the gods. The Athenians have set up Celeus and Metanira as gods. The Spartans have set up Menelaus, and they sacrifice to him and hold festivals for him. The people of Ilium cannot bear even to hear his name; they honor Hector. The people of Ceos honor Aristaeus, regarding him as the same as Zeus and Apollo. The Thasians honor Theagenes, the man responsible for a killing at the Olympic games. The Samians honor Lysander, in spite of all his slaughters and so many evils. Alcman and Hesiod honor Medea, and the Cilicians Niobe. The Sicilians honor Philip, son of Butacides; the people of Amathus, Onesilus; the Carthaginians, Hamilcar. The day would run out before I finished listing them all. When they disagree with one another about their own gods, why do they accuse us of not agreeing with them?

Translator’s note. The Greek of the Alcman, Hesiod, Medea and Niobe clause is very compressed, and how the names pair up is uncertain; the older translation’s pairing is followed here.

14b And is not the Egyptian practice actually ridiculous? At their festivals they beat their breasts in the temples as though mourning the dead, and yet they sacrifice to the same beings as gods. That is no surprise, for they treat animals as gods. They shave themselves when the animals die, bury them in temples, and hold public mourning. So if we are guilty of impiety because we do not worship as these people do, then every city and every nation is guilty of impiety, for not everyone holds the same gods.

Translator’s note. Herodotus (2.66) reports that Egyptians shaved their eyebrows when a household cat died and their whole bodies when a dog died.

Chapter 15

15a But suppose they all did hold the same gods. What then? Most

people cannot tell what matter is and what God is, or how great the gap between them is, and so they approach images made of matter. Are we to do the same on their account? We distinguish and separate the uncreated from the created, what is from what is not, what is grasped by the mind from what is perceived by the senses, and we give each its proper name. Shall we then go up and worship statues? If matter and God were the same thing, two names for one reality, then we would be impious for not regarding stones and wood, gold and silver as gods. But if they are very far apart, as far apart as a craftsman is from the materials he prepares for his craft, why are we accused?

15b The potter and the clay are a picture of it. The clay is the matter and the potter is the craftsman. In the same way God is the Maker, and matter is subject to him for the work of his craft. Clay cannot become vessels by itself without craftsmanship, and likewise matter, which receives every form, did not receive distinction, shape and order without God the Maker. We do not value the pottery more than the man who made it, nor the bowls and gold cups more than the smith who made them. If there is some skill to admire in them, we praise the craftsman, and he is the one who enjoys the glory for the vessels. So it is with matter and God. The glory and honor for the ordering of what has been arranged belong rightly not to matter but to God, its Maker. Therefore, if we regarded the forms of matter as gods, we would seem to have no perception of the God who truly is, since we would be putting what can be dissolved and destroyed on a level with the eternal.

Translator's note. "Bowls and gold cups": the older translation's "glass and gold" does not match the Greek, which names two kinds of vessel, bowls (phialai) and gold cups.

Chapter 16

16a The world is indeed beautiful, in its vast extent, in the arrangement of the stars in the zodiac and those around the Bear, and in its spherical shape. But it is not the world we must worship; it is the world's Craftsman. When your subjects come to you, they do not pass by you, their rulers and lords, from whom they may get what they need, in order to seek out the grandeur of your residence instead. They may come upon the royal palace and admire in passing how well it is built, but it is you whom they honor as all in all. You emperors furnish royal residences for yourselves, but the world did not come into being because God needed it. For God is everything to himself: unapproachable light, a perfect world-order, spirit, power, reason.

Translator's note. "Unapproachable light" echoes [1 Timothy 6:16](#), where God "dwells in unapproachable light."

Scripture: [1 Timothy 6:16](#)

16b So if the world is a well-tuned instrument moving in rhythm,

then I worship the one who tuned it, who strikes its notes and sings the harmonious song. I do not worship the instrument. At musical contests the judges do not pass over the lyre players and crown their lyres. Suppose the world is God's handiwork, as Plato says. Then I admire its beauty and come to the craftsman. Suppose instead it is God's substance and body, as the Peripatetics say. Even then we do not abandon the worship of God, the cause of the body's motion, in order to fall down before "the poor and weak elements," worshipping matter that is subject to change in what they call the impassible air. Suppose someone takes the parts of the world to be powers of God. Even then we do not approach and serve the powers, but their Maker and Master. I do not ask matter for what it does not have. I do not leave God to serve the elements, which are allowed to do nothing beyond what they were commanded. They may be beautiful to look at because of the Creator's skill, but in their own nature they are still matter.

Translator's note. The Greek about "the impassible air" is compressed, and its exact sense is uncertain.

Scripture: [Galatians 4:9](#)

16c Plato bears witness to this argument too. He says: "What he has named heaven and world has received many blessings from the Father, yet it has also come to share in body. So it cannot possibly be free from change." Now I admire the heavens and the elements for the skill shown in them, yet I do not worship them as gods, because I know the principle of dissolution that governs them. So how could I call gods things whose makers I know to be human beings? Consider this briefly with me.

Translator's note. The quotation is from Plato's Statesman (269d-e); "things whose makers I know to be human beings" looks ahead to the idols discussed next.

Chapter 17

17a Anyone making a defense has to give more exact arguments. Here I must show that the names of the gods are fairly recent. I must also show that their images came into being only yesterday or the day before, so to speak. You yourselves know these things thoroughly, since in every field, and more than anyone else, you are at home with the ancients. I say, then, that Orpheus, Homer and Hesiod are the ones who gave both genealogies and names to the gods they speak of. Herodotus bears witness to this as well: "I think that Hesiod and Homer lived four hundred years before me, and no more. They are the ones who composed a theogony for the Greeks. They gave the gods their titles, divided up their honors and their skills, and described their forms." As for images, they were not even in use as long as modeling, painting and statue-making did not exist. They arose only when Saurias of Samos, Crato of Sicyon, Cleanthes of Corinth and the Corinthian girl came along. Saurias

invented shadow-drawing when he traced the outline of a horse in the sun. Crato invented painting when he painted in the shadows of a man and a woman on a whitened panel. The girl was the source of clay figure-making. She was in love with a young man, and while he slept, she traced his shadow on a wall. Her father was a potter, and he was delighted with how exact the likeness was. He carved out the outline and filled it in with clay. That figure is still preserved in Corinth today.

Translator's note. A similar story about a Corinthian potter's daughter tracing her lover's shadow is told by Pliny the Elder (Natural History 35.151), who names the potter Butades.

17b After these came Daedalus and Theodorus of Miletus, who went on to invent statue-making and modeling. So the time since images and idol-making began is so short that one can name the craftsman of each god. The Artemis at Ephesus was made by Endoeus, a pupil of Daedalus. So was the Athena (or rather Athela, as those more given to the mysteries call her, since that was the name of the ancient image made from the olive tree), and also the seated figure. The Pythian Apollo was the work of Theodorus and Telecles. The Delian Apollo and Artemis were the work of Tectaeus and Angelion. The Hera at Samos and the one at Argos came from the hands of Smilis, and the remaining idols from Phidias. The Aphrodite at Cnidus, a courtesan, was the work of Praxiteles. The Asclepius at Epidaurus was the work of Phidias. In short, not one of them escapes having been made by a human being. If they are gods, then, why did they not exist from the beginning? Why are they younger than the people who made them? Why did they need human beings and craftsmanship in order to come into being? These things are earth and stones and raw material and overelaborate craftsmanship.

Translator's note. Calling the Aphrodite of Cnidus "a courtesan" probably reflects the ancient story that Praxiteles used a courtesan as his model.

Chapter 18

18a Some people say that these statues are only images, and that the gods are the ones the images represent. They say that the approaches made to the images and the sacrifices offered to them are really offered to those gods and take place for them. They also say there is no other way to come to the gods, since "gods are hard to see plainly." As proof they point to the powers at work in some of the idols. So let us examine the power attached to their names. Before I begin, greatest of emperors, I ask you to bear with me while I offer true arguments. My aim is not to refute the idols. I am clearing away the slanders against us and giving an account of the way of life we have chosen. You can understand the heavenly kingdom from your own case. All things have been put under your hand, father and son, who have received your kingdom from above. ("The king's soul is in God's hand," says the prophetic Spirit.) In the

same way all things are subject to the one God and to the Word who is from him, whom we understand to be the Son, undivided from him.

Translator's note. The "father and son" addressed here are the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. The words about the king's soul recall [Proverbs 21:1](#), which in the Greek Old Testament says "heart" rather than "soul." The "hard to see plainly" line quotes Homer, Iliad 20.131.

Scripture: [Proverbs 21:1](#)

18b Please consider this point before all the others. According to their own writers, the gods did not exist from the beginning. Each of them came to be in the way that we come to be. All their writers agree on this. Homer speaks of "Oceanus, origin of the gods, and mother Tethys." Orpheus was the first to devise their names, to go through their births, and to tell what each of them did. They believe he speaks of the gods more truly than others, and Homer follows him in most matters, especially about the gods. Orpheus also sets their first origin in water: "Oceanus, who has become the origin of all." For according to him water was the beginning of everything. From the water mud settled, and from the two together a living creature was born. It was a serpent with a lion's head growing on to it, and between them was the face of a god, named Heracles and Chronos (Time).

Translator's note. "Chronos" is the Greek word for time. The older translation spelled it "Kronos," which is the name of a different figure, the Titan father of Zeus.

18c This Heracles produced an enormous egg. It was filled by the force of the one who produced it, and the friction made it burst in two. The part at the top became heaven (Ouranos), and the part that fell down became earth (Ge). The goddess Earth also came forth in bodily form. Heaven then mingled with Earth and fathered three females, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. He also fathered the hundred-handed males Cottus, Gyges and Briareus, and the Cyclopes Brontes, Steropes and Argos. Heaven bound these and threw them down into Tartarus, because he had learned that his own children would drive him from power. Earth was enraged at this and bore the Titans: "Queenly Earth bore sons of heaven, whom they call Titans by name, because they took vengeance on great starry Heaven."

Translator's note. The Greek says Earth came forth "through a body"; the exact sense of the phrase is unclear.

Chapter 19

19a That is the beginning of the birth of their gods, and of the universe. What follows from this? Each of the things called gods is understood to have existed from the beginning. But if they came to be when they did not exist before, as the writers about the gods

say, then they do not exist. A thing is either unbegotten and eternal, or begotten and perishable. And I am not saying one thing while the philosophers say another. “What is that which always is and has no coming-to-be? And what is that which comes to be but never truly is?” Plato, speaking of the intelligible and the sensible, teaches that what always is, the intelligible, is unbegotten. What “is not,” the sensible, is begotten, beginning and ceasing to be. On this same principle the Stoics also say that all things will be consumed by fire and will exist again, when the world takes another beginning.

Translator’s note. The question about “what always is” comes from Plato’s *Timaeus* (27d–28a), quoted with small differences from Plato’s wording.

19b By their own account there are two causes. One is active and originating, and this is providence. The other is passive and changeable, and this is matter. Even so, once the world has come to be, it cannot stay in the same state, even though providence cares for it. How then can the existence of these gods last, when they do not exist by nature but have come to be? And how are the gods better than matter, when they get their make-up from water? Yet even by their own account water is not the beginning of all things. And what could be put together from elements that are simple and of one kind? Matter needs a craftsman, and the craftsman needs matter. How could shapes be made without matter or without a craftsman? Nor is it reasonable that matter should be older than God. The cause that makes things must come before the things that are made.

Chapter 20

20a If their theology were absurd only in saying that the gods came into being and have their make-up from water, I would move on to the other charges, since I have shown that nothing that comes into being is free from dissolution. But they have also described the gods’ bodies. They say Heracles is a god, a coiled serpent. They speak of others as hundred-handed. And the daughter of Zeus, whom he fathered by his mother Rhea (or by Demeter herself), they say has two eyes in the normal place, two more on her forehead, and a face on the back of her neck, and that she also has horns. Rhea was terrified at the monstrous child and ran from her, and would not let her have the breast. So in the mysteries she is called Athela, but commonly Persephone and Kore. She is not the same as Athena, who is called Kore from the “pupil” of the eye. They have also recounted in detail the deeds of the gods, as they think of them. Kronos cut off his father’s genitals and threw him down from his chariot. He killed his own children by swallowing the males. Zeus bound his father and shut him in Tartarus, just as Ouranos had done to his sons, and he fought the Titans for the rule. He pursued his mother Rhea when she refused to marry him. She turned into a serpent, and he himself turned into a serpent, bound her with what is called the Heraclean knot, and lay with her. The

rod of Hermes is a symbol of the shape of that union. Then he forced himself on his daughter Persephone, again in the form of a serpent, and by her he had a son, Dionysus. In the face of such stories I must at least say this: what is dignified or good in such a history, that we should believe Kronos, Zeus, Kore and the rest to be gods?

Translator's note. The rod of Hermes (the caduceus) was shown with two serpents twined around it.

20b Is it the descriptions of their bodies? What person of sound judgment and reflection could believe that a god fathered a viper? Orpheus says: "And Phanes fathered another terrible offspring from the sacred womb, a fearful-looking viper. From its head came hair and a lovely face to look at, but the rest of it, from the top of the neck down, was the body of a dreadful dragon." Or who could accept that Phanes himself, a god and the first-born (he is the one poured out of the egg), has the body or shape of a dragon? Or that he was swallowed by Zeus so that Zeus might become boundless? If these gods are no different from the lowest of beasts, they are not gods. The divine, clearly, must differ from earthly things and from what is separated out of matter. Why then should we come to them, when their birth is like that of cattle, and they themselves are beast-shaped and ugly?

Translator's note. "Boundless" translates a Greek word meaning "that cannot be contained." The verses are from the Orphic poems, about the god Phanes.

Chapter 21

21a But even if they said only that the gods are flesh-like, with blood and seed and the passions of anger and desire, we should still have to count such talk as nonsense and a laughingstock. For there is no anger in God, no desire or appetite, and no seed that produces children. So let them be flesh-like, but let them be above rage and anger. Otherwise we see Athena "angry at father Zeus, and savage wrath seizes her," and we see Hera: "Hera's breast could not hold her anger, but she spoke." And let them be above grief: "Alas, I see with my own eyes a man I love chased around the wall, and my heart mourns for him." For I call even human beings ignorant and boorish when they give in to anger and grief. But then the father of men and gods laments for his son: "Woe is me, that Fate has decreed that Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, be laid low by Patroclus, son of Menoitios!" He weeps, yet he cannot snatch him from danger: "Sarpedon, son of Zeus; but Zeus does not even defend his own child." Who would not blame the ignorance of those who are devoted to the gods because of myths like these, or rather, who are really godless?

Translator's note. These lines are from Homer's Iliad. In Homer the speaker of "Alas, I see..." is Zeus, and the "man I love" is Hector.

21b Let them have bodies like flesh, but let Aphrodite not be wounded in her body by Diomedes: “The son of Tydeus, high-spirited Diomedes, struck me.” Nor let her be wounded in her soul by Ares: “How Aphrodite, the daughter of Zeus, always dishonors me because I am lame, and loves destructive Ares.” And of Ares: “He tore through the lovely skin.” The one who is terrible in wars, Zeus’s ally against the Titans, turns out to be weaker than Diomedes. “He raged as when Ares, brandishing his spear, rages.” Be quiet, Homer! A god does not rage. Yet you describe the god to me as blood-stained and a destroyer of men: “Ares, Ares, destroyer of mortals, blood-stained.” You also go through his adultery and his chains: “The two went to bed and lay down, and around them were poured the cunning bonds of resourceful Hephaestus, and they could not move a limb.” Do they not pour out a great deal of impious nonsense like this about the gods?

Translator’s note. The line about Aphrodite always dishonoring “me because I am lame” is spoken by her husband Hephaestus in Homer’s *Odyssey* (book 8), where the story of the bonds also comes from. “He tore through the lovely skin” comes from *Iliad* book 5, where Diomedes wounds Ares. “He raged as when Ares...” is said of Hector in *Iliad* book 15. The Greek does not name Ares in these sentences; the name is added for clarity.

21c Uranus is castrated. Cronus is bound and thrown into Tartarus. The Titans rebel. Styx dies in the battle. So they now show the gods to be mortal. They love one another, and they love human beings: “Aeneas, whom divine Aphrodite bore to Anchises on the ridges of Ida, the goddess lying with a mortal.” Do they not love? Do they not suffer? Surely they are gods, and desire will not touch them! And if a god does take flesh according to a divine plan, is he then a slave of desire? Zeus says: “Never yet has love for goddess or woman poured over the heart in my chest and conquered me like this. Not when I loved the wife of Ixion, not when I loved Danaë of the slender ankles, daughter of Acrisius, not when I loved the daughter of far-famed Phoenix, not when I loved Semele or Alcmene in Thebes, not when I loved Demeter, the fair-tressed queen, nor glorious Leto, nor even you yourself.” He has come into being, he is perishable, and he has nothing of God in him.

Translator’s note. Zeus’s speech is from Homer’s *Iliad* (book 14), where he speaks to Hera. Athenagoras leaves out some lines.

21d Not only that, but they even work as hired servants for men: “O house of Admetus, where I, though a god, endured to accept a hired servant’s table.” And they herd cattle: “I came to this land and herded cattle for my host, and kept this house safe.” So Admetus was better than the god. O prophet, wise one, who foresee what will happen for others, you did not foretell the death of the one you loved. Instead you killed your friend with your own hand! “And I hoped that the divine mouth of Phoebus was free of falsehood, overflowing with the art of prophecy.” (This is how Aeschylus condemns Apollo as a false prophet.) “But he himself who

sang the hymn, he himself who was at the feast, he himself who said these things, is the very one who killed my son.”

Translator’s note. The beloved friend whom Apollo killed is Hyacinthus, struck by Apollo’s discus in the Greek myth. The Aeschylus lines, which survive because Plato quotes them (Republic, book 2), are spoken by the sea-goddess Thetis about her son Achilles. Apollo had sung at her wedding and foretold good things for her child.

Chapter 22

22a But perhaps these things are just the poets’ error, and there is a natural explanation behind them, such as this one. As Empedocles says: “Bright Zeus, life-bearing Hera, and Aidoneus, and Nestis, who moistens the mortal spring with tears.” Now suppose Zeus is fire, Hera is earth, Aidoneus is air, and Nestis is water. These are elements: fire, water, air. Then none of them is a god, neither Zeus nor Hera nor Aidoneus. For their makeup and origin come from matter that God has sorted out into parts. As Empedocles says: “Fire and water and earth and the gentle height of air, and Friendship with them.” But these things cannot last without Friendship. They are thrown into confusion by Strife. How then could anyone say they are gods?

Translator’s note. In Empedocles, Friendship (or Love) and Strife are the two forces that join the elements together and drive them apart.

22b According to Empedocles, Friendship is the ruling principle. The compounds are ruled, and the ruling principle is the master. So if we assume one and the same power for the ruled and the ruler, we will unknowingly be making matter, which is perishable, fluid and changeable, equal in honor to God, who is unbegotten, eternal and always in harmony. According to the Stoics, Zeus is the boiling substance, and Hera is the air. The name itself shows this if it is joined to itself and pronounced as one. Poseidon is the drink. Others give other natural explanations. Some say that Zeus is air of a double nature, male and female. Others say he is the season that turns time into mild weather, and that is why he alone escaped Kronos. But to the Stoics we can say this. You consider the highest God to be one, unbegotten and eternal. You say the compounds are as many as the changes of matter. You also say that the Spirit of God, which passes through matter, receives one name after another according to its changes. If so, the forms of matter will become the body of God. And when the elements are destroyed in the great fire, the names must be destroyed along with the forms, and only the Spirit of God will remain.

Translator’s note. “The great fire” translates ekpyrōsis. This is the Stoic teaching that the universe is periodically consumed by fire.

22c So since these bodies change along with matter and perish, who could believe that they are gods? Next, some say that Kronos is time and Rhea the earth. They say Rhea conceives by Kronos and

gives birth, which is why she is thought the mother of all, while he begets and devours. The cutting off of the private parts is the union of male and female. This union cuts off seed and drops it into the womb, and so produces a human being, who carries desire within him, and desire is Aphrodite. The “madness” of Kronos is the turning of the season, which destroys things living and lifeless. The “chains” and Tartarus are time, which is changed by the seasons and passes out of sight. To these people we say: if Kronos is time, he changes. If he is a season, he turns. If he is darkness, or frost, or a liquid substance, none of these remains. But the divine is immortal, unmoving and unchanging. So neither Kronos nor the idol made of him is God. As for Zeus: if he is air born from Kronos, with Zeus as the male part and Hera as the female (which is why she is both sister and wife), then he is altered. If he is a season, he turns. But the divine neither changes nor falls into another state.

Translator’s note. “Kronos” and “chronos” (time) sound alike in Greek, which is why the allegory identifies them. The cutting refers to the myth, told by Hesiod, of Kronos castrating his father Ouranos (Heaven).

22d Why should I trouble you with more, when you know better than I do what each of the natural philosophers has said, what the writers have thought about nature, and what they say about Athena, whom they call wisdom running through all things? They say Isis is the nature of eternity, from whom all things grew and through whom all exist. They tell how Osiris was killed by his brother Typhon, and how Isis, with her son Horus, searched for his limbs, found them and prepared them for burial. That burial is still called Osirian today. For these people keep turning this way and that among the forms of matter. They fall away from the God who is perceived by reason, and they make gods of the elements and their parts, giving them one name after another. The sowing of grain they call Osiris. (From this, they say, in the mysteries, at the finding of his limbs, or of the fruits, these words are spoken to Isis: “We have found! We rejoice together!”) The fruit of the vine they call Dionysus, the vine itself Semele, and the sun’s flame the thunderbolt.

Translator’s note. In the myth, Semele, the mother of Dionysus, was destroyed by Zeus’s thunderbolt. The allegory makes her the vine and the thunderbolt the sun’s heat that ripens it.

22e Yet those who turn the myths into gods are doing anything but speaking about God. They do not realize that the very arguments they use to defend the gods confirm the stories told about them. What have Europa, the Bull, the Swan and Leda to do with earth and air, so that Zeus’s foul union with them could be a union of earth and air? In truth they have fallen short of the greatness of God. They cannot rise above this world by reason, for they have no fellow-feeling with the heavenly place. So they melt away into the forms of matter, and in their fall they make gods of the changes in the elements. It is as if someone were to take the ship he sailed in for the helmsman. A ship, however well fitted out, is no use without

a helmsman. In the same way the elements, however well ordered, are no use apart from God's providence. The ship will not sail by itself, and the elements will not move without their Maker.

Chapter 23

23a Since you surpass everyone in understanding, you might say: "How is it, then, that some of the idols work effects, if those in whose honor we set up the statues are not gods? It is not likely that lifeless, motionless images could have power by themselves without something to move them." We do not deny that in various places, cities and nations certain effects occur in the name of idols. But if some people have been helped and others harmed, we will not therefore think that those who produced either result are gods. We have examined carefully both why you think the idols have power, and who the beings are that work these effects by taking over their names. But I am about to show who those workers are and that they are not gods, so I must call on some witnesses from the philosophers.

23b Thales was the first to make the division, according to those who have studied his views closely. He divides the beings above us into God, demons, and heroes. He takes God to be the mind of the world. By demons he means beings of a soul-like nature. By heroes he means the souls of men who have departed the body: good souls are good heroes, and worthless souls are bad ones. Plato, who holds back his judgment on other matters, also divides these beings. He speaks of the unbegotten God. He speaks of those the unbegotten God made to adorn the heavens, the wandering stars and the fixed stars. And he speaks of demons. He does not think it worthwhile to speak about these demons himself, but thinks we should listen to those who have spoken about them. He says: "To speak about the other demons and to know how they came to be is beyond us. We must trust those who spoke before us. They were, as they said, offspring of the gods, and surely they knew their own ancestors well. It is impossible, then, to disbelieve the children of gods, even if they speak without likely or necessary proofs. They claim to be reporting matters of their own family, so we must believe them, as custom requires."

Translator's note. "Demon" (Greek daimōn) here is a general word for spirit beings between gods and men; it does not yet mean only evil spirits. The quotation comes from Plato's *Timaeus* (40d-e).

23c "Following them, then, let us also hold and tell the origin of the gods themselves. Of Earth and Heaven were born Oceanus and Tethys. Of these were born Phorcys, Cronus, Rhea, and all who go with them. Of Cronus and Rhea were born Zeus, Hera, and all those we know are called their brothers and sisters, and then still other descendants of these." Now consider the man who conceived of God as the eternal mind, grasped by reason, and who described what

belongs to him. He spoke of the one who truly is, whose nature is single, and of the good that flows out from him, which is truth. He spoke of the first power, and how all things are around the King of all and exist for his sake, and how he is the cause of everything. He spoke of two and three: the second around the second things, and the third around the third things. Did this man suppose that learning the truth about those said to have come from things perceived by the senses, earth and heaven, was beyond his ability?

Translator's note. The opening genealogy is still Plato speaking; it continues the quotation from the *Timaeus* begun in the previous section. The phrases about “the King of all” and “the second” and “third” come from the Second Letter attributed to Plato.

23d Surely not; no one can say that. But Plato thought it impossible for gods to beget and to be born, since an end follows everything that comes into being. He thought it even more impossible to change the minds of the many, who accept the myths without testing them. For these reasons he said it was beyond him to know and to tell how the other demons came to be. He could neither learn nor declare that gods are born. Take also his saying: “Zeus, the great leader in heaven, driving a winged chariot, goes first, arranging all things and caring for them, and an army of gods and demons follows him.” He does not mean the Zeus said to be the son of Cronus. In this saying the name stands for the Maker of all things. Plato makes this clear himself. He had no other expressive name by which to call him, so he used the common name. He did not use it as God’s own name but for the sake of clarity, since it is not possible to bring God before everyone as fully as one might wish. And he added the word “great” in order to distinguish the heavenly Zeus from the earthbound one, the unbegotten from the begotten. The begotten Zeus is younger than heaven and earth, and younger than the Cretans, who stole him away so that his father would not destroy him.

Translator's note. The quotation is from Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The myth Athenagoras alludes to is that Cronus swallowed his children, and Rhea hid the infant Zeus in Crete.

Chapter 24

24a Speaking to you, who have explored every field of learning, why should I bring up the poets or examine other opinions? I can say this much. If the poets and philosophers did not recognize one God, and if they did not think of these gods as demons, or matter, or men who once lived, then we might reasonably be driven out, since we use an argument that distinguishes God from matter and the nature of each. But we speak of God, and of his Son the Word, and of the Holy Spirit. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are united in power, because the Son is the mind, word and wisdom of the Father, and the Spirit is an outflow, like light from fire. In the same way we have come to understand that there are other powers that

rule over matter and work through it. One of them is opposed to God. I do not mean that anything is God's rival or counterpart, as strife is to friendship in Empedocles, or as night is to day in the way things appear. If anything stood against God, it would cease to exist, because God's power and strength would dissolve its structure. What I mean is that the spirit who is concerned with matter is opposed to the goodness of God. That goodness is an attribute of God and exists together with him, as color does with a body, which cannot exist without it. It is not a part of him but an accompanying quality that is necessarily there, united and blended with him, as yellow is with fire and deep blue with the upper air. This spirit was made by God, just as the other angels were made by him, and was entrusted with the management of matter and of the forms of matter.

Translator's note. The Greek verb here (*antidoxein*) usually means "to hold a contrary opinion." From the examples Athenagoras gives, he seems to mean a rival opposite to God.

24b For this is why the angels were established: God made them to exercise providence over the things he has ordered. God keeps the complete and general care of the whole, while the angels appointed over the individual parts take care of those parts. The same is true of human beings, who have both virtue and vice by their own choice. (You would not honor the good or punish the wicked unless vice and virtue were in their own power. Some people are diligent in the duties you entrust to them, and others are found unfaithful.) The angels are in the same position. Some of them, free agents as God made them, stayed in the condition and the work that God made and appointed for them. But others abused both the nature of their being and their office. One was this ruler of matter and of the forms in it. The others were some of those who were around this first firmament. (You know that we say nothing without witnesses; we report what the prophets have proclaimed.) The latter fell into desire for virgins and were found to be overcome by the flesh. The ruler of matter became careless and wicked in managing what had been entrusted to him. From the angels who had to do with the virgins were born those called giants.

Translator's note. This draws on [Genesis 6:1-4](#), where the "sons of God" take the daughters of men and the Greek Old Testament speaks of "giants." Athenagoras's account of angels lusting after women also resembles the Jewish Book of Enoch (1 Enoch 6-7).

Scripture: [Genesis 6:1-4](#)

24c If the poets too have given some partial account of the giants, do not be surprised. Worldly wisdom and wisdom about God differ as much as truth differs from what is merely plausible. The one is heavenly and the other earthly. And in the words of the ruler of matter: "We know how to say many lies that look like the truth."

Translator's note. The quoted line is from Hesiod, *Theogony* 27, where the Muses speak it. Athenagoras puts it in the mouth of the ruler of matter,

| implying that he inspired the poets' falsehoods.

Chapter 25

25a These angels, then, who fell from the heavens, occupy the air and the earth. They can no longer rise to the realms beyond the heavens. The souls of the giants are the demons who wander about the world. Each group acts in keeping with what it is: the demons according to the natures they received, and the angels according to the desires they had. As can be seen from what actually happens, the ruler of matter governs and manages things contrary to the goodness of God. "Often the thought has passed through my mind whether chance or a spirit rules the affairs of life. Against hope and against justice, it leads some to fall from their homes without a livelihood, while others it leads on in good fortune." People do well or badly against hope and justice. This left Euripides at a loss to say whose management of earthly affairs this is. Of such a management one might say: "Then, seeing these things, how can we say that there is a race of gods, or keep to the laws?"

| *Translator's note.* The first quotation is a fragment of Euripides from an unidentified play; the second is an unattributed tragic fragment sometimes assigned to Euripides.

25b This is also what led Aristotle to say that the things below the heavens are not under providence. Yet God's eternal providence rests equally on us. As the poet says: "The earth, by necessity, whether she wishes it or not, grows grass and fattens my flocks." God's particular providence goes out, in truth and not merely in appearance, to those who are worthy. All the rest are cared for by the law of reason, according to the common order of things. But demonic movements and workings, which come from the opposing spirit, cause these disorderly attacks. They also stir people up, each in a different way, as individuals and as nations, in part and as a whole. They do this from within and from without, according to the pull of matter and to a person's sympathy with divine things. For this reason some men of no small reputation have supposed that this whole universe is not held together by any order, but is driven and tossed about by irrational chance. They do not understand that nothing in the constitution of the whole world is disordered or neglected. Each part came into being by reason, and so none of them oversteps the order assigned to it. Man himself, as far as his Maker is concerned, is also well ordered. He is ordered in the nature of his birth, which follows one common principle. He is ordered in the make-up of his body, which does not break the law set over it. And he is ordered in the end of his life, which remains the same and common to all. But according to his own individual reasoning, and according to the working of the ruling prince and the demons that attend him, each person is carried and moved in a different direction. All the while they all share the same reasoning power within them.

Translator's note. The lines about the earth and the flocks are from Euripides' play *Cyclops* (lines 332-333), spoken by the Cyclops Polyphemus. Athenagoras seems to use them to illustrate the general providence that works through the fixed order of nature.

Chapter 26

26a The ones who draw people to idols are the demons I mentioned earlier. They cling to the blood of the sacrificial animals and lick around it. But the gods who please the crowds and whose names are given to the images were human beings, as one can learn from their own histories. That it is demons who have taken over these names is proved by what each of them does. Some, the followers of Rhea, cut off their genitals. Others, the followers of Artemis, cut or gash themselves. The goddess among the Taurians kills strangers. I will say nothing of those who torture themselves with knives and knucklebone whips, or of all the kinds of demons there are. It is not the part of a god to drive people to things against nature. As the poet says: "When a demon prepares evil for a man, he first damages his mind."

Translator's note. "Knucklebone whips" translates a word for animal knucklebones, which were sometimes fastened into whips. The last line is a tragic verse by an unknown author, also quoted by the orator Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 92).

26b But God is perfectly good, and so he is eternally a doer of good. Those who work these effects are not the same as those for whom the statues are set up. The strongest proof of this comes from Troas and Parium. Troas has statues of Neryllinus, a man of our own time. Parium has statues of Alexander and of Proteus. The tomb and the statue of Alexander are still in the marketplace. Now the other statues of Neryllinus are a public decoration, if a city can really be decorated by such things. But one of them is believed to give oracles and to heal the sick. Because of this the people of Troas offer sacrifices to it, and they smear the statue with gold and crown it with garlands. Then there are the statues of Alexander and of Proteus. (You know that Proteus threw himself into the fire near Olympia.) The statue of Proteus is likewise said to give oracles. To the statue of Alexander, "Ill-starred Paris, handsomest of men, mad for women," sacrifices are offered and festivals are held at public expense, as to a god who hears prayer.

Translator's note. Proteus is Peregrinus Proteus, a Cynic philosopher who burned himself to death near Olympia at the time of the Olympic games of AD 165. The satirist Lucian describes the event in *The Passing of Peregrinus*.

26c So is it Neryllinus, Proteus and Alexander who do these things through the statues? Or is it the material they are made of? But the material is bronze. What can bronze do by itself? It can be melted down and made into another shape, as Amasis did with the footbath in Herodotus. And what use are Neryllinus, Proteus and Alexander

to the sick? For the things the statue is said to do now were already being done while Neryllinus was alive and ill.

Translator's note. Herodotus (Histories 2.172) tells how Amasis, king of Egypt, had a gold footbath melted down and made into the image of a god, which the Egyptians then worshipped.

Chapter 27

27 What then? First, the irrational and image-making movements of the soul, in matters of opinion, draw in now one image and now another. Some of these images they take from matter, and others they shape and bring to birth for themselves. The soul suffers this most when it has taken on the material spirit and been mixed with it. It no longer looks up to heavenly things and their Maker. It looks down to earthly things, wholly toward the earth, as if it had become only blood and flesh and no longer pure spirit. So these irrational, image-making movements of the soul give birth to fantasies that make people mad for idols. Now take a soul that is tender and easily led. It has never heard or tried strong arguments, has never seen the truth, and has never thought about the Father and Maker of all things. Such a soul may be stamped with false opinions about itself. Then the demons that hover around matter step in. They are greedy for the smoke of sacrifices and the blood of the victims, and they deceive people. They seize on these false-minded movements in the souls of the many and ride upon their thoughts. They make impressions flow into them as if they came from the idols and statues. And whenever the soul by itself moves rationally, as an immortal thing does, either foretelling the future or healing present troubles, the demons reap the credit for it.

Chapter 28

28a In keeping with what I have said, it is perhaps necessary to say a little about the names. Herodotus, and Alexander the son of Philip in his letter to his mother, both say they learned from the priests that the gods had been men. Each of them is said to have talked with the priests at Heliopolis, Memphis and Thebes. Herodotus says: "They showed that those whose images these were had been men like these, very far from gods. But before these men, they said, the gods were the rulers in Egypt. They did not live together with men, and one of them was always supreme. Later Horus, the son of Osiris, whom the Greeks call Apollo, was king. He put down Typhon and was the last to reign over Egypt. Osiris is Dionysus in the Greek language."

Translator's note. Greek god names are kept in this translation, where the older version used Latin ones (for example Bacchus for Dionysus, Diana for Artemis, Latona for Leto).

28b So these, the others and the last, were kings of Egypt. From

them the names of the gods came to the Greeks. Apollo was the son of Dionysus and Isis, as Herodotus himself says: "They say that Apollo and Artemis are children of Dionysus and Isis, and that Leto was their nurse and protector." The Egyptians had these as their first kings, men of heavenly origin. Partly from ignorance of true reverence toward the divine, and partly out of gratitude for their rule, they counted them as gods, together with their wives. "All the Egyptians sacrifice clean male cattle and calves. They are not allowed to sacrifice females, because these are sacred to Isis. Her image is that of a woman with cow's horns, just as the Greeks paint Io." Who could be more believable in saying these things than people who receive the priesthood and the history by family succession, child from father?

28c It is not likely that the temple keepers, whose job is to make the idols seem holy, would falsely say that these gods had been men. Suppose Herodotus alone said that the Egyptians tell the stories of their gods as stories of men. He also says, "I am not eager to relate the divine parts of the accounts, as I heard them, except only their names, and those very briefly." In that case we might well refuse to believe him, as a mere teller of tales. But Alexander, and Hermes called Trismegistus, linked the race of gods called everlasting to these men, and so did countless others whom I will not list one by one. So no argument is left for denying that they were kings who came to be regarded as gods. That they were men is also made clear by the most learned of the Egyptians. These men call the upper air, earth, sun and moon gods, but they consider the others mortal men and their tombs sacred places. Apollodorus makes it clear too, in his work *On the Gods*.

Translator's note. The older translation reverses the meaning here: it calls the temples tombs, but the Greek calls the tombs sacred places.

28d Herodotus even calls their sufferings mysteries: "How they celebrate the festival of Isis in the city of Busiris I have told before. After the sacrifice, all the men and women, many tens of thousands of people, beat themselves. But in what manner they beat themselves, it is not right for me to say." If they were gods, they would be immortal. But if people beat themselves for them, and their sufferings are mysteries, then they were men, as Herodotus himself says: "There are also the burial places of him whose name I think it unholy to speak in such a matter. They are at Sais, in the temple of Athena, behind the shrine, along the whole wall of Athena's temple. Next to it is a lake, ringed around with a stone curb. In size, it seems to me, it is as large as the one on Delos called the Circular."

28e "On this lake the Egyptians stage at night the representations of his sufferings, and they call them mysteries." Not only is the tomb of Osiris shown, but also the embalming. "When a body is brought to them, they show the people who brought it wooden models of corpses, painted to look like the real thing. The most

elaborate of these, they say, is the model of him whose name I do not think it right to mention in connection with such a matter.”

Translator’s note. The quoted lines are from the Greek historian Herodotus (Histories 2.171 and 2.86). Herodotus refuses to name the god. The sentence naming Osiris is Athenagoras’s own comment between the two quotations.

Chapter 29

29a Greek poets and historians also say the same. Of Heracles one says: “Cruel man, he had no respect for the watching gods, nor for the table he had set before his guest; then he killed the man himself.” Being such a man, he naturally went mad, and naturally built a pyre and burned himself. Of Asclepius, Hesiod says: “The father of men and gods was angered, and hurling a smoky thunderbolt from Olympus he killed Leto’s dear son, stirring up his wrath.” And Pindar says: “But even wisdom is bound by profit. Gold shining in the hand turned even him with a lordly fee. Then the son of Kronos, hurling with his hands, swiftly took the breath from the chests of them both, and the blazing thunderbolt brought down their doom.” So either they were gods and had no craving for gold (as the poet says, “O gold, the fairest gift of welcome for mortals! Not even a mother gives such pleasures, nor do children,”

Translator’s note. The Pindar lines are from Pythian Ode 3. “Both” refers to Asclepius and the dead man he was bribed to raise, not to “both hands.”

29b for the divine is without need and stronger than desire), and they did not die; or else they were born men, and were wicked through ignorance and overcome by money. Why should I say more, mentioning Castor or Polydeuces or Amphiaraus? They were men born of men only yesterday and the day before, so to speak, and yet they are thought to be gods. People even imagine that Ino became a goddess after her madness and the sufferings of her madness: “Wanderers of the sea will call her Leucothea by name.” And of her son: “Revered Palaemon he shall be called by sailors.”

Chapter 30

30a For even detestable people, hated by God, gained the reputation of being gods. Semiramis, the daughter of Derceto, a lustful and murderous woman, was thought to be a Syrian goddess. Because of Derceto, the Syrians worship doves, and Semiramis too (for, impossibly, the woman was changed into a dove; the story is in Ctesias). So what wonder is it if some were called gods by their contemporaries because of their rule and tyranny? The Sibyl, whom Plato also mentions, says: “And then came the tenth generation of speaking men, since the flood had come upon the men of former times. And Kronos reigned, with Titan and Iapetus, the noblest children of Earth and Heaven, whom people called Earth and

Heaven, giving them those names because they were the first of speaking men.” Others were called gods for their strength, like Heracles and Perseus, and others for their skill, like Asclepius.

| *Translator’s note.* Plato mentions the Sibyl in his *Phaedrus* (244b).

30b So in the case of those to whom honor was given, either the subjects themselves or the rulers themselves gave it. Some shared in the title out of fear, others out of reverence. Antinous, too, came to be thought a god through the kindness of your ancestors toward their subjects. Those who came after them accepted such gods without testing them. “Cretans are always liars; for a tomb, O lord, the Cretans built for you; but you did not die.” Callimachus, you believe in the birth of Zeus but disbelieve in his tomb. You think you are hiding the truth, yet you announce his death even to people who did not know it. If you look at the cave, you are reminded of Rhea giving birth; but when you see the coffin, you are trying to cover up the one who died. You do not know that only the unbegotten God is eternal. For either the stories told by the many and by the poets about the gods are unbelievable and the reverence paid to them is pointless (for those whose stories are false do not exist), or else the births, the love affairs, the murders, the thefts, the castrations and the thunderbolts are true. In that case the gods no longer exist, having ceased to be, since they came into being out of non-existence.

| *Translator’s note.* The verse is from Callimachus’s *Hymn to Zeus*. Paul quotes the words “Cretans are always liars” in [Titus 1:12](#).

30c What reason is there to believe some of these stories and disbelieve others, when the poets have told the history of the gods in a way that makes them more august? For those poets, through whom the gods came to be thought gods, and who made their history dignified, would not have invented the sufferings of those same gods. That we are not atheists, then, since we acknowledge as God the Maker of this universe and his Word (the Logos), has been shown as well as I am able, even if not as well as the subject deserves.

Chapter 31

31a They also spread stories against us about godless meals and unlawful unions. They do this so that they can think they have a reasoned basis for hating us. They also suppose that by frightening us they will either turn us from our steadfast way of life, or make the rulers harsh and unforgiving through the sheer size of the charges. But they are playing games with people who know that from long ago it has been the custom, and not only in our case, for wickedness to make war on virtue, according to some divine law and reason. So Pythagoras was burned in a fire along with three hundred others. Heraclitus was driven out of the city of the Ephesians, and Democritus out of Abdera, with the further charge

that he was mad. The Athenians condemned Socrates to death. But those men were no worse in respect of virtue because of what the crowd thought of them. In the same way, the thoughtless slander of some does nothing to cloud our uprightness of life, for we have a good name with God.

31b Still, I will answer these charges too. I am well aware that what I have already said has defended me before you. You surpass everyone in understanding, and you know that people whose lives are ruled by God as their standard, so that each of us may be blameless and above reproach before him, will never let even the smallest sin enter their thoughts. If we were persuaded that we would live only this one life, we might be suspected of sinning, enslaved to flesh and blood or overcome by greed or desire. But we know that God stands over what we think and what we say, by night and by day. We know that he is wholly light and sees even what is in our heart. And we are persuaded that when we are released from this life we shall live another life. It will be better than the life here, and heavenly, not earthly. With God and alongside God we shall remain unshaken and untouched by suffering in soul, not as flesh, even if we still have flesh, but as a heavenly spirit. Or else, falling with the rest, we shall have a worse life, and one in fire. For God did not form us, as he did sheep or beasts of burden, as a mere side-work, to perish and vanish. Given this, it is not likely that we would choose to do evil, or hand ourselves over to the great Judge to be punished.

| Scripture: [1 John 1:5](#)

Chapter 32

32a It is no wonder, then, that they invent about us what they say about their own gods. They even display the gods' passions as mysteries. But if they were going to judge unrestrained, indiscriminate intercourse to be a terrible thing, they ought to hate Zeus, who fathered children by his mother Rhea and his daughter Kore, and who took his own sister as his wife. Or they ought to hate Orpheus, who composed these stories, because he made Zeus more unholy and defiled than Thyestes. For Thyestes had intercourse with his daughter because of an oracle, wanting to become king and to take revenge. We, on the other hand, are so far from being indiscriminate that we are not even permitted to look with desire. For "the one who looks at a woman so as to desire her," he says, "has already committed adultery in his heart." Now these are people who are allowed to look at nothing beyond the purpose for which God made the eyes, which was to be a light for us. For them a pleasurable look is adultery, since eyes were made for other things, and they will be judged even down to a thought. How could anyone doubt that they are self-controlled?

| Translator's note. Compare [Matthew 5:28](#). Athenagoras quotes the saying

with small differences from the Gospel's wording and introduces it only with "he says".

Scripture: [Matthew 5:28](#)

32b We do not answer only to human laws, which a wicked person can break without being found out. (At the beginning, my lords, I gave you proof that our teaching is taught by God.) We have a law that makes it the measure of justice to treat ourselves and our neighbors alike. For this reason we regard people according to their age. Some we think of as sons and daughters, others we count as brothers and sisters, and to those further advanced in years we give the honor due to fathers and mothers. So we care deeply that the bodies of those we call brothers and sisters, or by other family names, stay unabused and uncorrupted. For the Logos tells us again: "If anyone kisses a second time because it pleased him..." And he goes on: "So the kiss, or rather the reverent greeting, must be guarded with great care. If it is clouded even a little in the mind, it puts us outside eternal life."

Translator's note. The Greek phrase about the law and "our neighbors" is compressed. The older translation paraphrases it as "dealing with our neighbour as ourselves," which probably echoes the command to love one's neighbor as oneself ([Leviticus 19:18](#); [Matthew 22:39](#)).

Scripture: [Matthew 22:39](#); [1 Timothy 5:1-2](#)

Chapter 33

33a So because we have the hope of eternal life, we despise the things of this life, even the pleasures of the soul. Each of us regards as his wife the woman he married according to the laws we have laid down, and he regards her so only up to the point of having children. A farmer who has thrown seed into the ground waits for the harvest and does not sow more on top of it. In the same way, for us, having children is the limit of desire. You would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried in the hope of being closer to God. If remaining a virgin or a eunuch brings a person nearer to God, while even going as far as a lustful thought or desire takes us away from him, then since we shun the thoughts, we refuse the deeds all the more. Our way is not a practice of fine words but a demonstration and teaching by deeds: either to remain as one was born, or to stay with one marriage. A second marriage is a respectable-looking adultery.

Translator's note. "Eunuch" here most likely means a person who chose lifelong celibacy for God's sake, in the sense of Jesus' words in [Matthew 19:12](#).

33b "For whoever divorces his wife," he says, "and marries another, commits adultery." So he forbids a man to send away a woman whose virginity he has ended, and he forbids him to marry again. A man who deprives himself of his first wife, even if she has died, is a hidden adulterer. He transgresses the hand of God,

because in the beginning God formed one man and one woman. He also breaks up the joining of flesh to flesh in union, which was meant for the fellowship of the human race.

Translator's note. "The hand of God" means God's creating work. The older translation's "resisting" is looser than the Greek, which means "transgressing."

Scripture: [Mark 10:11](#); [Matthew 19:9](#); [Matthew 19:4](#); [Genesis 2:24](#)

Chapter 34

34a But though we are people like this (oh, why should I speak of things not to be spoken of?), we hear the proverb used against us: "The harlot reproves the chaste woman." They have set up a market for fornication. They have made lawless dens for the young, offering every kind of shameful pleasure. They do not spare even males: males commit dreadful acts with males, outraging in every way the most dignified and best-looking bodies. In this way they dishonor the beauty God has made, for beauty on earth does not make itself but is sent by the hand and will of God. Yet these same people slander us for the very things they know about themselves and attribute to their own gods. They boast of these things as honorable, as worthy of gods. These adulterers and pederasts revile eunuchs and the once-married, while they themselves live like fish. Fish swallow whatever falls in their way, and the stronger hunts down the weaker.

Translator's note. The proverb is quoted in its short form, with the verb left to be understood.

Scripture: [Romans 1:27](#)

34b And this is what it really means to lay hands on human flesh: to do violence against the established laws, which you and your ancestors enacted after examining everything for justice. The violence is so great that not even the provincial governors you send out are enough to handle the cases. And the people treated this way are not even permitted to refuse to offer themselves when they are struck, or to refuse to bless when they are slandered. For it is not enough for us to be just, since justice is to repay like for like. We are called to be good and patient under wrong.

Translator's note. The words about being struck and slandered echo Jesus' teaching ([Matthew 5:39](#); [Luke 6:28-29](#)) and Paul's "when reviled, we bless" ([1 Corinthians 4:12](#)).

Scripture: [Matthew 5:39](#); [Luke 6:28-29](#)

Chapter 35

35a Who in his right mind, then, would say that people like us are murderers? We cannot eat human flesh without first killing someone. So they lie on the first charge. On the second, if anyone

asks them whether they have seen what they claim, no one is so shameless as to say he has. And yet we have slaves, some of us more and some fewer, from whom we cannot hide. Not one of these has invented such serious charges against us. They know that we cannot bear even to watch a man being put to death, even justly. So which of them would accuse us of murder or cannibalism? Who does not rank the contests with weapons and with wild beasts among the things worth keen attention, especially the ones you put on? But we think that watching a man being killed is close to killing him, so we have renounced such spectacles.

35b Since we do not even watch, so as not to bring guilt and defilement on ourselves, how could we kill? We say that women who use drugs to cause abortion commit murder and will have to answer to God for it. On what ground, then, would we commit murder ourselves? The same person cannot consistently hold that the child in the womb is a living being, and therefore under God's care, and then kill it once it has come into life. He cannot refuse to expose a newborn because those who expose children are child-killers, and then destroy the child after raising it. No, we are the same in everything and everywhere, equal to ourselves, serving reason and not ruling over it.

Translator's note. "Reason" translates the Greek *logos*, which can also mean "word"; Athenagoras elsewhere uses the same term for the divine *Logos*, the Son.

Chapter 36

36a Who, then, if he believes in a resurrection, would make himself a tomb for bodies that will rise again? It is not the mark of the same people to be persuaded that our bodies will rise, and then to eat them as though they will not rise. Nor would they believe that the earth will give back its own dead, and yet that the bodies a man has buried within himself will not be demanded of him. On the contrary, it is natural that some people would hold back from no daring crime. These are people who think they will give no account for their life here, whether wicked or good, and that there is no resurrection, and who reckon that the soul perishes along with the body and is, as it were, put out in it. But others are convinced that nothing will go unexamined by God, and that the body, which served the soul's irrational impulses and desires, will be punished together with it. It is unreasonable to suppose that such people would commit even the smallest sin. Suppose someone thinks it great nonsense that a body which has rotted, been broken down and vanished should be put together again. Then, in the eyes of those who do not believe, we could fairly be charged with foolishness, but not with wickedness. For by the arguments with which we deceive ourselves, we wrong no one.

36b That the bodies will rise is not only our teaching but also that

of many philosophers. But it would be needless to show this at present. We would seem to be bringing in arguments foreign to our subject if we spoke about the intelligible and the sensible and how they are constituted. We would also seem to do so if we argued that the incorporeal is older than the corporeal and that the intelligible comes before the sensible, even though we meet the sensible things first. On that view, intelligible bodies are formed by the combining of incorporeal things, and sensible bodies are formed from intelligible ones. For according to Pythagoras and Plato, nothing prevents bodies, once they are dissolved, from being put together again from the very things from which they were first composed. But let the discussion of the resurrection be put off for now.

Translator's note. A separate treatise, *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, has come down under Athenagoras's name, though some scholars doubt that he wrote it.

Chapter 37

37 And you, who in every way are good, moderate and kind by nature and by training, and worthy of your kingdom: I have answered the charges and shown that we are godly, fair-minded and disciplined in our souls. Now give me your royal nod of approval. For who has a juster claim to obtain what they ask than we do? We pray for your government, that you may receive the kingdom, son from father, in the most just way. We also pray that your rule may grow and increase as everyone is brought under your hand. This also serves our own interest, so that we may live a calm and quiet life and ourselves gladly carry out everything we are commanded.

Translator's note. "A calm and quiet life" echoes the Greek of [1 Timothy 2:2](#), where Paul urges prayer for kings "that we may lead a calm and quiet life."

Scripture: [1 Timothy 2:2](#)

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