

“St. Justin and the Graeco-Roman World: An Analysis of Justin’s
Presentation of Christianity as the Fulfillment of Graeco-Roman Tradition”
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Although it was common practice for the early church’s teachers to use symbols and ideas from Graeco-Roman culture in order to present the gospel, they normally avoided drawing from Graeco-Roman philosophy because they considered it an enemy of the gospel. Instead, the first Christians chose to cut themselves off from the Graeco-Roman intellectual world in order to pursue a different way of life that was, according to Christian leaders, unpolluted by the evils of Graeco-Roman culture and philosophy. Unfortunately, this purposeful separation from the world of education seemingly justified the Graeco-Roman world’s suspicion of Christians, because the Christians were rejecting the ideas which helped to hold Graeco-Roman society together.

Therefore, the Romans continued to increase the persecution of Christianity, for the Christian response to the Graeco-Roman society did little to alleviate the Graeco-Roman world’s fears.

While Christians initially did not resist these persecutions, by the second century a group of Christians arose who chose to publicly engage with the world’s attacks against Christianity. These men defended the gospel and its adherents, arguing that Christians had the right to worship their God in peace without any threat of discrimination or death. These men were the apologists, and they were the first to counter the Graeco-Roman world’s attacks against Christianity. While several prominent figures spoke for Christians as apologists during the second century, the first and most prominent of these apologists was St. Justin the Martyr.

St. Justin, as we know, was one of the most important Christian figures of the second century. Born sometime around 90 AD in Samaria to a wealthy, Greek family, Justin studied philosophy during his early years and adult life, eventually becoming an accomplished Platonist (*I Apology 1, Dialogue with Trypho 2*). Yet supposedly, after a conversation with an old man on

a beach near Ephesus, Justin began to study the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings of the apostles and soon became a Christian (*Dial.* 5-8). After his conversion, he started his own philosophical school in Rome from which he taught Christian philosophy during the reign of Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius.¹ This school proved remarkably influential in the development of Early Christianity, with some of his most famous pupils being Tatian and Irenaeus from Smyrna.² Eventually, it appears that Justin was martyred during the early years of Marcus Aurelius' reign, and he was later given the title Martyr in order to honor his sacrifice.

Out of his extensive written works, only three of Justin's works are extant: two *Apologies*, which deal with common attacks against Christians, and the *Dialogue with Trypho*, which recounts a supposed conversation between Justin and a Hellenistic Jew named Trypho about Judaism and Christianity. Throughout his works, Justin sought to counter Graeco-Roman bias against Christianity by presenting Christianity as a viable way of life for both Gentiles and Jews. While a complete survey of Justin's methods is beyond the scope of this paper, my goal here is to analyze how Justin presented Christianity as the fulfillment of Graeco-Roman philosophy through his presentation of Moses as the inspiration of Plato and his doctrine of the *logoi spermatikoi*.

As a whole, the Graeco-Roman world considered tradition to be the best means of testing the validity and safety of new ideas. According to Robert Wilken, "tradition was the test of truth," an idea that was summarized by Plato in the *Philebus* dialogue: "The ancients are better than we for they dwelled nearer to the gods" (*Philebus* 16c).³ Since the ancients had more wisdom and understanding than living people, the Graeco-Roman world used the traditions handed down from the ancients to gauge the wisdom of different ideas. If an idea could not be

¹ L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr* (1967), 5.

² L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr* (1967), 12-13.

³ R. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans saw Them* (1984), 122.

found amongst the ancients or was openly decried by them as false, then it was rejected as wrong and most certainly dangerous. Yet if a new idea could be supported by tradition- a requirement that was often easy to satisfy due to the diversity of ideas taught by the ancients- then the idea could be accepted by society as trustworthy. The Graeco-Roman world thus used tradition to maintain societal peace, for it kept them from embracing dangerous thoughts and ideas which would undermine their society's stability.

Nevertheless, Christians as a whole rejected pagan traditions in the embrace of their new religion. From its very beginning, Christians were taught to avoid the ways of the world and the traditions of the past, making statements like the author of first Timothy's exhortation to "have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths" (1 Tim. 4:7). While the leaders of the early church adapted parts of their stories to Graeco-Roman traditions in order to present their message, they rejected the meanings and significance of these traditions and called for converts to forget the old ways which had governed their lives and instead embrace the new way of life proclaimed in the gospel. While Christians did continue to live in cities and work jobs, they simultaneously chose to create an exclusivist society- called the *ekklesia*- that rejected the traditions which had ruled the world for centuries with new, untested ideas that were irreconcilable with the traditions of the ancients. Therefore, educated pagans saw Christianity as an alien threat to the stability of their culture as a whole, for it rejected the traditions which held the Graeco-Roman world together.⁴

As a whole, Justin's works exhibit a keen understanding of the problems that pagans had with the Christian religion. For example, Justin purposefully addresses the three major accusations that pagans had against Christians at the beginning of his first apology before moving on to discussing the problems of Graeco-Roman religion or philosophy (*I Ap.* 6-12). He understood quite clearly what his attackers thought about Christianity and the threat that they felt

⁴ H. Chadwick, *The Gospel: A Republication of Natural Religion in Justin Martyr* (1993), 239.

from this Jewish sect, for he himself had grown up and been educated as a Platonic philosopher. Yet while the courage of the Christians in the face of certain death convinced Justin that they could not actually be guilty of any real crimes, many Romans continued to support the persecution of Christians due to the supposed threat which Christianity was to society (*II Ap.* 12). Justin, in his desire to see Christians treated justly and honorably by the Roman government, needed a way to prove to the Graeco-Roman world beyond the shadow of a doubt that Christianity did not undermine the traditions of the Roman world but fulfilled them. Therefore, he chose to present Christianity as the fulfillment of all Graeco-Roman philosophy.

Yet Justin clearly states that Christianity only fulfilled Graeco-Roman philosophy and not Graeco-Roman religious tradition. For Justin, the religious traditions of paganism were a worthless collection of silly, immoral stories that were concocted by demons in order to enslave humanity (*I Ap.* 1.14). However, Justin approached Graeco-Roman philosophy differently, for he considered philosophy and Christianity to have the same goal and procedure, for he defined philosophy as “the knowledge of that which is and the discernment of truth” and thus Christianity as the “only sure and valuable philosophy” (*Dial.* 3; *Dial.* 8). Therefore, while Justin was quick to cast out pagan religion, he embraced Graeco-Roman philosophy, claiming that it was reconcilable with the Christian faith because he considered these two separate traditions to have the same goal and purpose.

In order to convince his pagan audience that Christianity was the fulfillment of Graeco-Roman philosophy, Justin argued that the Hebrew prophets were the foundation of certain Platonic doctrines and that Graeco-Roman philosophy anticipated the Christian faith. In arguing for the validity of Christianity, Justin not only asserted that the Hebrew prophets preceded the Greek philosophers, but that the Greek philosophers drew upon their writings (*Dial.* 7; *I Ap.* 59).

For example, Justin claimed that Plato was taught by the writings of Moses that God created the world from shapeless matter, and that Plato based his arrangement of the universe around the form of the letter χ due to reading Moses' story of the brass serpent (*I Ap.* 59-60). In claiming that Plato drew upon Moses, Justin presented Christianity as founded upon texts which preceded any other pagan philosophical text, meaning that Christianity had a better claim to truth in the eyes of the Graeco-Roman world. Even though the claim that Plato drew upon the Hebrew Scriptures may be absurd in our eyes, Justin believed that his audience would have seen this argument as valid, and he therefore used it to show that Greek philosophy had the same foundation as Christianity.

Justin also used his doctrine of the *logoi spermatikoi* in order to argue that Christianity fulfilled Graeco-Roman philosophy. In this doctrine, Justin argued that God has a *logos*, or personal reason, which is the first thing of all creation and is the Lord's Glory, Wisdom, Son and Messenger (*Dial.* 61).⁵ Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is this *logos* incarnated in the form of a man because, "The *logos* of God is God's son" (*I Ap.* 63). This *logos* is also the source of all divine revelation, for he inspired the Prophets and was the one who was present in all the biblical theophanies (*I Ap.* 33, 62, 63; *Dial.* 126). It is through this *logos* that God and truth are revealed, with Christ being the full manifestation of the *logos* and thus the source of all truth.

Even though Justin viewed the *logos* as being most clearly revealed through the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, he also believed that men can come to a partial understanding of truth on their own through engaging their own *logos*. Even though only a limited number of people had access to the clear revelations of the *logos* through God's covenant with Israel, Justin described the *logoi* as *spermatikoi*, which translates as sown, in order to claim that God has sown the *logos* throughout the whole world and made all men partakers in the *logos* (*I Ap.* 46). Since this *logos*

⁵ L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr* (1967) 89.

is the means through which truth is revealed, people can begin to come to an understanding of the truth by engaging their portion of the *logos* through the use of their reason (*II Ap.* 10). It is crucial to note, though, that Justin believes that people can only come to a partial knowledge of the truth through the use of their reason because the fullness of the Word is only found in Jesus Christ (*II Ap.* 10). Nevertheless, Justin clearly states that people are able to come to an understanding of truth by accessing the partial *logos* of God which God has sown into every man.

Even though Justin believed that no one before Christ had ever had a complete understanding of the *logos*, Justin used this doctrine to present the Christian faith as anticipated by specific Greek philosophers. In his study of Christianity, Justin had found several different philosophical schools which had doctrines that were easily reconcilable with Christianity, such as Plato's doctrine of creation (*I Ap.* 60). While he also found many ideas in Graeco-Roman philosophy to be irreconcilable with Christian doctrine, such as Stoicism's doctrines concerning determinism, Justin considered each school to have some understanding of truth which they had acquired by engaging the *logos* with reason (*II Ap.* 13). Thus, Justin claimed philosophers such as Heraclitus, Musonius, and Socrates as Proto-Christians not only because they were faithful to the *logos* through their reason just as Christians were, but also because Justin believed them to have suffered the same accusations of atheism that Christians experienced (*I Ap.* 46). While Justin did not consider these men to be on equal footing as current Christians because they lacked the fullness of the *logos*, these men and their disciples lived as Christians before Christ was ever born because they lived according to the *logos* (*I Ap.* 46).

Justin's portrayal of these men as Christians showed that the Christian faith did not reject Graeco-Roman tradition but fulfilled it. Christians were not rejecting tradition as the Romans

believed, but they were teaching the truth which all of past Graeco-Roman tradition, especially philosophical tradition, had anticipated. By receiving these men as ones who looked forward to the Christian faith rather than rejecting them entirely like his predecessors did, Justin presented Christianity as the fulfillment of these philosophies which preceded it. While he was quick to assert that not all the teachings of the philosophers were true, he argued that the truth in them looked forward to the truths of Christianity. In doing so, he was able to show the Romans that Christianity was not a religion exclusively for Jews, but also a religion for Gentiles. Thus Greeks could accept Christianity as a legitimate Greek religion that would not actually threaten the stability of society but would build it up.

In the end, Justin presented Christianity as the fulfillment of Graeco-Roman traditions in order to make the gospel more palatable to the world in which he lived. While these actions and teachings were counter to the ways of his Christian predecessors, his teachings proved to be highly influential in the development of Christian philosophy, most especially Neo-Platonism. Overall, his pioneering works helped to make Christianity be seen as just as much a Gentile religion as it was a Jewish religion.

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