

Apologetics in the Roman Empire

Apologetics in the Roman Empire

Pagans, Jews, and Christians

EDITED BY

Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman,
and
Simon Price

in association with
Christopher Rowland

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I

Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World

MARK EDWARDS, MARTIN GOODMAN,
SIMON PRICE, and
CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND

The period with which this book is concerned is the first three centuries of the Roman Empire, from the first emperor Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE) to the first Christian emperor Constantine (306–37 CE). The period was marked by the existence of a great variety of religious traditions: civic cults, private religious associations, official cults of the Roman state, and personal observances. The adherents of these religions attacked each other with great ferocity at times. In response there emerged the practice of apologetic, the defence of a religion against actual or perceived opponents. It is the aim of this volume to examine the development of the literary expression of such apologetic among pagans, Jews, and Christians.

In commissioning contributions from scholars who work with very different literary materials, the editors laid down a working definition of apologetic, taking as the core meaning of the term the sense in which it is commonly applied to the formal treatises undertaken in defence of Christianity from the second century onwards. Apologetic is thus the defence of a cause or party supposed to be of paramount importance to the speaker. It may include *apologia* in the sense of Plato's *Apology*, the defence of a single person, but is distinguished from polemic (which need not assume any previous attack by the opponent) and from merely epideictic or occasional orations. Contributors were asked to consider how far a particular text or group of texts conforms to this definition.

This definition was only a starting-point. Several contributors to the volume, in responding to the definition, have argued that

there was no formal genre of apologetic in the ancient world. This is a useful piece of destabilizing, a questioning of common assumptions, but it is theoretically unsurprising. A common-sense view of genres like 'epic' or 'tragedy' is indeed that they exist unchanging over time and across cultures, and that individual works of literature instantiate the relevant genre more or less successfully. That is, the task of the critic is to classify, to pigeon-hole works in genres. This type of approach has been popular in, for example, studies of the New Testament, which have thought up new taxonomies for texts that once appeared to be unique. Theologians have seen the reduction of the Gospels and Epistles to a category (a genre, or *Gattung*), with the concomitant extension of that category to include texts that would otherwise lie far outside the range of their enquiries.¹ However, this view of genres, that they serve as a means of classification, has come to seem deeply unsatisfactory to literary critics. Genre should not be seen as a mechanical recipe-book for the production of texts, but rather as 'a discursive form capable of constructing a coherent model of the world in its own image'.² Genre is thus best seen as a way of talking about the strategies of writers (and readers) in different cultural traditions and particular contemporary situations.³ The various essays in this volume seek to investigate what those strategies were in relation to ancient religious debates.

The Roman Empire in this period was united politically, but contained a great variety of cultures, which retained their sense of distinctiveness to different degrees.⁴ In the eastern half of the empire, Greek language and culture were dominant: other, local traditions continued, but if they wished to move into the mainstream, they tended to relate themselves to Greek culture. So Jews outside Judaea and Christians from the beginning wrote not in Hebrew or Aramaic but in Greek. In the western half of the empire, the picture is rather different: local traditions tended to be suppressed or die out, and were replaced by a dominant Latin culture derived from Rome. The learned did recall some elements

¹ For recent treatments, see Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*; Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul*.

² Conte, *Genres and Readers*, 132.

³ See also Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, in relation to English literature.

⁴ Beard *et al.*, *Religions of Rome*, which concentrates on the city of Rome.

of their local traditions (cf. below, Ch. 6, on Tertullian and Carthage), but the overall frame of reference for the educated classes was Roman. One theme that runs through this book is the question of how deep-rooted this difference between eastern and western parts of the empire was—for example, in the area of attitudes to the ruling power—and how this might have affected the literary defence of their cultures composed by provincials from different regions. Hellenism as an issue is central to Simon Swain's contribution (Ch. 8), and the differences between East and West recur in chapters on Christian authors writing in Greek (Ch. 5) and Latin (Chs. 6, 9, 11).

An important feature of the Greek tradition of the imperial period was its self-conscious recall of Greek culture of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Philostratus, writing his lives of intellectual figures of the second and third centuries CE, classified them as heirs of the Sophists of the classical period, as members of the 'Second Sophistic'. Philosophers too paraded their loyalty to the masters of the past—Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle—though they developed their ideas in novel directions. Characteristic of the followers of Plato in this period is, for example, the declamation by Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates*, which concerns Socrates' claim to possession of a personal divine spirit (*daimonion*). This claim was one of the factors that led to his trial in Athens in 399 BCE.⁵ His condemnation and death by hemlock were events to which his pupils had to respond: both Plato and Xenophon wrote *Apologies*, speeches put in the mouth of Socrates at his trial. This type of work, a defence in a judicial setting, continued to be written in our period: for example, Apuleius' *Defence on a Charge of Magic* (below, Ch. 6), or the more or less fictionalized accounts of Christians being tried by the Roman authorities. The trial of Socrates himself had particular resonances for Greek Christians, who sometimes drew analogies between Socrates and the execution of Christ by the Roman authorities (below, Ch. 7).⁶

The book thus discusses not only the extent to which the methods used by religious apologists were similar across traditions, but also the emergence of similar themes in the literature of each group. Thus tradition was central to all religious groups in

⁵ Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*, ch. 4.

⁶ For discussion of the terminology of *apologia* and *apologetikos*, see below, Chs. 6, 8, and 10.

this period. Greeks and Romans privileged religious tradition as the principal source of religious authority: the attitudes of the two are seen coinciding when Pliny the Younger writes to a Roman friend who is about to go off to be a Commissioner for mainland Greece:

Remember that you have been sent to the province of Achaia, to the pure and genuine Greece, where civilization, and literature, and agriculture, too, are believed to have originated. . . . Respect the gods, their founders, and the names they bear, respect their ancient glory and their very age, which in man commands our veneration, in cities our reverence. Pay regard to their antiquity, their heroic deeds, and the legends of their past. (*Letters*, 8. 24. 2–3)

The advice is deeply patronizing in tone (the Romans might respect Greece for its cultural heritage, but they were now in charge of the world), but illustrates a common acceptance of the value of antiquity. This sets the standard which other aspirants to mainstream culture (whether Greek or Roman) had to meet.⁷ Within Judaism the weight of tradition is exemplified by the practice, which goes back at least to the first century CE, of regular reading and commenting in synagogues on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. However, outsiders were not universally impressed by Jewish claims to venerable antiquity. It was partly in response to their criticisms that Josephus devoted the twenty books of his *Jewish Antiquities* to an exposition of the history of the Jews from the creation of the world down to the outbreak of the revolt against Rome in 66 CE, and the first book of *Against Apion* specifically to the issue of antiquity (on the latter work, see below, Ch. 3).

Christians, whom we might have expected to have presented themselves simply as carriers of a novel faith, in fact articulated a complex relationship to earlier traditions.⁸ It is quite likely that none of the New Testament books was written specifically to convince outsiders of the veracity of the Christian religion or to rebut false interpretations of it. The primary purpose of these writings was to convince those who were already members of the small groups committed to Christ of the plausibility of the step they had taken and to construct a world of thought where they

⁷ On this issue, see Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*, ch. 8.

⁸ For some texts, see Beard *et al.*, *Religions of Rome*, ii. 329–48.

could position themselves and their own beliefs with regard to an older story of the people of God. The attempt to satisfy the doubts of insiders, however, led to writing which has many of the hallmarks of apologetic. This is particularly apparent in a passage like 1 Corinthians 15, where the resurrection of the dead is discussed (a problem which was confronted by second- and third-century apologists: Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2. 55–79).⁹ Within the New Testament there are already signs that apologetic elements are beginning to intrude, as writers of texts intended for insiders inevitably have to wrestle with doubts and uncertainties felt by members, simply because they too reflect the values and assumptions of society at large.

One boundary that had to be negotiated was that with Jewish traditions. A major aim of the earliest extant Christian writings is the extent of the continuity between the Jewish Scriptures and the beliefs and practices of Christianity, notwithstanding the differences between them. This has an implicit apologetic concern. A central issue for the first Christians was to take an attitude to the Law of Moses in the light of their conviction that the Messiah had come. Two things united all the Christian groups, at least if the evidence of the New Testament is anything to go by: a common belief in the relevance of Jewish Scriptures, and a consequent need to make sense of their own ideas and practices in the light of them, and the definition of the boundaries of the Christian community. For example, some argued that Christ's teachings were the fulfilment of prophecies found in earlier Jewish writings: Matthew's Gospel claims at the start the descent of Jesus from David and Abraham, states that his birth was foretold by the prophet Isaiah, and makes Jesus himself say, 'Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them' (5: 17). Despite such arguments, the relationship between Christians and Jews remained an issue throughout the period. The Greek Christian writer Justin composed a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew in the second century (below, Ch. 4), and later Christians wrote sermons *Against the Jews* (below, Ch. 6).¹⁰

A second boundary to be defined was that between Christians

⁹ Cf. *ibid.* i, 290.

¹⁰ Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos*, is a helpful survey of this topic; see also Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Iudaeos Texte*.

and the religious traditions of their environment, which meant in the first instance those of the Greeks. There were two distinct options: one building on the insights of non-Christians, the other rejecting those 'insights' as fundamentally flawed. The first is expressed in an emblematic fashion in the account in the Acts of the Apostles of Paul's preaching in Athens, chosen as the cultural capital of the eastern empire. Paul, who is said to have been 'revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry', engaged in debates in the synagogue and with Greek philosophers in the market-place. The episode seems very confrontational, until Paul delivers a speech to the Athenian Council of the Areopagus:

Men of Athens, I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because I noticed, as I strolled round admiring your sacred monuments, that you had an altar inscribed: To An Unknown God. Well, the god whom I proclaim is in fact the one whom you already worship without knowing it. (17: 22–3; Jerusalem Bible)

In other words, despite the errors in which the Athenians were ensnared, there was an underlying truth, of which they were not conscious, which Paul sought to expound. Embedded in the New Testament there is thus a statement of the possibility of 'natural theology'. People, just by virtue of being human, 'have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible'.¹¹ This type of appeal to natural theology occurs again in some later authors in our period (Lactantius, Constantine), but the dominant position in the second and third centuries was the second, oppositional option. Greek apologists point with glee at the immoralities of the gods in mythology, and (sometimes) with horror at rituals performed in their honour. Tatian's *Address to the Greeks* associates a rejection of Greek culture with a condemnation of Greek religion.

So, when I saw these things [the stupidity of Greek religion and culture], I also took part in mysteries and tested the rituals performed everywhere by effeminate and androgynes; I found that among the Romans their

¹¹ The definition is that of Barr, *Biblical Faith*, 1, who analyses Paul's speech at length.

Zeus [i.e. Jupiter] Latiaris relished human gore and the blood of slaughtered men; while Artemis [i.e. Diana], not far from the great city, was engaged in the same type of actions, and different demons in different places were busy inciting the perpetration of evil.¹²

Among the Latin apologists, Tertullian rejects all three categories of the Roman gods: those of the philosophers, the gods of mythology, and the gods of civic practice. This was not an irenic position.

Such oppositional tactics sometimes went along with the definition of Christians as a 'third race': alongside and distinct from the first two races of Greeks/Romans and Jews were the Christians.¹³ This definition, which emerged both within Christianity and in the mouths of her enemies, was analogous to a Jewish self-definition, and was the product of a particular phase of Christian history, when Christians were a minority, whose members could at any time be executed by the Roman authorities. The question is whether this type of self-definition is paralleled in other contemporary contexts. The normal approach of outsiders was to buy into the dominant culture, whether Greek or Roman, while retaining some sort of local identity—pride in being Lycian, or a citizen of Carthage. But there are also cases in which more of a problem in integrating different identities is visible. For example, the Greek satirist Lucian wrote in impeccable Greek, and totally within a Greek tradition, but he came from Samosata, a city in the province of Syria, which had been capital of an independent kingdom until a generation before his birth. Lucian refers to himself several times as 'Syrian', and even as 'barbarian', which suggests some level of problem; those of his contemporaries who used the Syriac rather than the Greek language may have been expressing a rejection of things Greek. Multiple identities do not always sit easily together.¹⁴ In various parts of the Roman Empire (for example, Syria and Egypt), some elements of the population felt themselves to be a race apart from the dominant classes of Greeks and Romans.¹⁵ The Jewish and Christian positions need to be set in that context.

¹² Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 29, trans. in Beard *et al.*, *Religions of Rome*, ii. 332.

¹³ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, i. 240–51, 266–78; Schneider, commentary on Tertullian, *To the Gentiles*, 1. 8.

¹⁴ Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 298–329, who also shows the difficulty of relating Lucian's adopted Hellenism and Roman culture.

¹⁵ The extent to which this was true of Jews is examined in Goodman (ed.), *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*.

The relation of Jewish and Christian apologetic to the contemporary world needs further examination. Some have cast this issue in terms of the intention of the authors: to persuade the unconverted, to edify the converted, to show the learned world that they could write. We have to ask, then, whether it is an actual intention, an implied intention, or merely a convention that is expressed by Robert Grant, when he begins his useful book on the second-century Greek apologists with the statement that ‘Apologetic literature emerges from *minority* groups that are *trying to come to terms* with the larger culture in which they live.’¹⁶ Some apologists lend themselves more readily than others to this dictum: Clement, for example, has been married more than once to an ‘Alexandrian Platonism’ that would seem to belie the Christian zeal of his own *Protrepticus*.¹⁷ But everyone sees that synthesis is not the stated purpose of Justin or Tertullian, who profess to be exculpating their religion from the charges of superstition or depravity which expose it to the hatred of the Romans. It was Clement and Lactantius who explicitly proposed to themselves the object of devising a Christian scheme of education, to explode and supersede the false instruction of the schools; but this may also have been the intention of some of their predecessors, if they were aiming at the creation of a new system of philosophy, rather than at an intellectual courtship of the world.¹⁸

This has implications for the chief market of our apologetic texts. Both pagan and Jewish texts were addressed ostensibly to patrons, like other literary works in antiquity. Some of the Christian texts were addressed to Roman emperors or governors, and the form of address may have been important.¹⁹ The Acts of the Apostles can depict Paul making a speech to the Council of the Areopagus, but in reality there was no public place at which Tatian could pronounce his *Address to the Greeks*. Christians before Constantine could not, like pagans, make a career of oratory, and even if the public exhibition of their religion was

¹⁶ Grant, *Greek Apologists*, 9; emphasis added.

¹⁷ Bigg, *Christian Platonists*; Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*.

¹⁸ Daniélou, *History of Christian Doctrine*; Osborn, *Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*.

¹⁹ Millar, *Emperor*, 561–6, stresses the conventionality of their address to the emperor.

less dangerous than they indicate, the matter and style ensured that the apologists would not have been much read outside the Church. Within the Church, on the other hand, their eloquence would be esteemed both for itself and for the piety that it rendered so conspicuous; small wonder, then, that in each new generation of Christians the most astute apologist is also the most voluminous writer on morals, history, biblical exegesis, and dogmatics.²⁰ Some writers engaged in explicit debate with those outside the faith: Josephus and Apion, Origen and Celsus, Lactantius and Porphyry. In each case the author is responding to attacks mounted from outside. There is little to suggest that the response was in its turn read outside the faith (except for Christian readings of Josephus or Philo), and nothing to show that the arguments deployed by a Minucius Felix affected the terms of reference of philosophers arguing about the nature of God.

These texts, important though they were in their time, subsequently fell into neglect. Josephus and Philo were not influential in the Jewish tradition, and survive only because they were taken up by Christians. In the many stylized discussions between Rabbinic sages and gentile kings, philosophers, matrons, and others recorded in Rabbinic literature, the gentile party was generally set up to draw attention to problems in specific scriptural passages or apparent illogicalities in Rabbinic law, only to be knocked down with suspicious ease.²¹ More generally, the extent to which Rabbinic interpretations of the Bible were formulated already during the fourth and fifth centuries, in response to Christian exegesis, is debated. The view has been put forward that the whole agenda of the Jerusalem Talmud in the fourth century, to stress the election of Israel and the Jewish concept of history and the Messiah, was shaped by opposition to Christian claims; but it is not based on any direct evidence at all, and must remain hypothetical.²² On the other hand, there is no doubt that Christian claims to the heritage of the Hebrew Bible led to the growth of an extensive apologetic, polemical Jewish literature in

²⁰ T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 211–32, well characterizes Tertullian as a ‘Christian sophist’.

²¹ e.g. Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin*, 59b; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 39a; *Genesis Rabbah*, 17: 7. See the material discussed by Herr, ‘Historical Significance’.

²² Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*; against this view, see Goodman, ‘Palestinian Rabbis’.

medieval Europe, as well as to numerous works aimed at defending the true faith against what were perceived as heresies of various kinds. But none of these developments, nor the apologists for Judaism within an agnostic world after the Enlightenment, owed anything to their predecessors in the time of the Roman Empire.²³

If the afterlife of Jewish apologetic was very different to that in antiquity, the history of pagan apologetic came to a total end. An efflorescence of defensive literature in the fourth-century Roman Empire, as highly articulate Roman senators and others tried to defend their ancestral cults against a newly intolerant Christian state, culminated in the great plea for tolerance in the defence of the Altar of Victory by Symmachus in 384.²⁴ In the pagan twilight of the fifth century, scholars and poets sang the praises of the old ways, but their voice was to disappear with the rise of Christendom in Europe, and those who read these works in the Middle Ages and Renaissance did so without perceiving any conflict between these pagan views and Christianity.

The Christian apologies themselves also fell from attention. They have been among the least respected of the early Church writings, offering, as it seems, only bad theology, bad philosophy, or bad history. An intriguing aspect of Christianity is the ambivalence felt by its adherents, from an early stage, about engaging in apologetic. Reasoned explanation seemed at times a pretty hopeless strategy in the face of a world 'which preferred darkness to light'. While there are examples in plenty of appeal to a common humanity, there is, from the first, in the Christian literature a suspicion that human reason itself is inadequate to comprehend the magnitude of the divine revelation. There came a point when reason could no longer prevail. Thus, despite the limited acceptance of natural theology in the early Church, the use of it alongside revealed theology creates a tension in Christian identity which resonates with debates down the centuries, from the apostle Paul to Karl Barth in the twentieth century. There has always existed a deep-seated suspicion of human reason and its ability to offer anything but a partial account of God and the divine purpose in words. Occasionally,

²³ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. 'Apologetics'.

²⁴ Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, 203–11. Texts translated in Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict*, 30–51.