

DOING CIVIC GOOD WITHOUT BOWING TO THE CIVIC GODS: SECOND-CENTURY APOLOGETICS AS CULTURAL CATECHESIS

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I. The Second-Century World—and Ours

“The second-century world is, in some sense, our world” (Carl Trueman).

II. Arguments from the Second-Century World

A. Christians practiced habits of radical civic good while refusing to bow to the civic gods

“Christians rescue orphans from those who abuse them.... Whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one according to his ability pays attention and carefully sees to his burial. If anyone... is imprisoned or oppressed for the name ‘Christ,’ all of them provide his needs, and if it is possible for him to be delivered, they deliver him” (Aristides of Athens).

B. Christianity was a coherent commitment requiring consistency between profession and practice

“Even if rationality led to skepticism about the nature of traditional gods, the ancient customs [regarding the worship of the gods] should be maintained” (Frances Young).

III. Second-Century Apologies as Cultural Catechesis

A. Second-century apologies were never intended to reach the Roman emperors

B. Second-century apologies were catechetical and intended to cultivate a culture of public accountability and practice



Papyrus 2486

Apology of Aristides 15:6–16:1 (P.Lond.Lit. 223) + Song of Songs 5:12–6:10 (P.Lond.Lit. 209)

Selections from *Apology of Aristides*

“All-powerful Caesar Titus Hadrianus Antoninus, venerable and merciful, from Marcianus Aristides, an Athenian philosopher.

“I, O King, by the grace of God came into this world; and when I had considered the heaven and the earth and the seas, and had surveyed the sun and the rest of creation, I marveled at the beauty of the world. And I perceived that the world and all that is therein are moved by the power of another; and I understood that he who moves them is God....

“This is clear to you, O King, that there are four genuses of humanity in this world: Barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians...

“Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who abuses him....



Addressing apologies to an emperor imbued the church’s catechesis with public accountability, even if the documents never reached any emperor. By presenting declarations of Christian faith in a way that linked them to public powers, Christians rejected the possibility of keeping the implications of their newfound faith to themselves.

“The Christians, O King, while they went about and made search, have found the truth. As we learned from their writings, they have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations. For they know and trust in God, the Creator of heaven and of earth, in whom and from whom are all things, to whom there is no other god as companion, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds and observe in hope and expectation of the world which is to come.... verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine mingled among them.

“Take, then, their writings, and read therein, and lo! you will find that I have not put forth these things on my own authority, nor spoken thus as their advocate.”