



A Reading Plan for Christian Apologists

Part 3

By

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Introduction

“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” Acts 20:29-30

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.” 2 Peter 2:1

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” 1 John 4:1

The Apostles of Jesus Christ warned Christians in the 1st century AD that false teachers would come at them from both inside and outside the Church. They would secretly bring in destructive heresies and draw away the disciples after themselves. Those were prophetic words because it happened in the 1st century and continues today in the 21st century.

We are currently looking in this series at some of the Christian apologists from the early centuries of Church history to see how they addressed attacks on Christians and Christianity.

Tertullian

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus was born in ancient Carthage (now in Tunisia) about 160 AD. Carthage was second only to Rome as a cultural and education center in the West (Britannica.com). Tertullian wrote in Latin and is often thought of as the founder of Latin Christian theology.

Tertullian's father was an army officer and not a Christian. Tertullian was educated in law and worked for a time in the practice of law. He became a Christian in his mid-30s and used his writing skills to argue powerfully for the Christian faith.

Tertullian began writing towards the end of the 2nd century, his undisputed works dating from c. 196 to c. 212 (*New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP Academic, 2016, p 894). He wrote in defense of Christianity and against those who opposed the Christian worldview. His works include *Apologeticum*, *Adversus Marcionem*, *Adversus Hermogenem*, *Adversus Valentinianos*, *De resurrectione carnis*, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, *De idollatria*, *Ad Nationes*, and *De fuga in persecutione*.

Tertullian's apologetics focused on four primary topics: Verbal attack, Ethics, Religions, and Philosophy (New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics, IVP Academic, 2006, p 694-695). His most famous work is thought to be *The Apology*.

In the last years of Tertullian's life he became a Montanist, then started his own movement that became known as the Tertullianists. The group is believed to have existed until the 5th century in Africa. Many ancient Christians were unforgiving of Tertullian's journey to the heresy of Montanism (based on the prophecies of Montanus who reportedly fell into a trance and began to prophesy under the influence of the Holy Spirit).

Here are some highlights from Tertullian's writings. As you read these excerpts, think about modern heresies and how Christian apologists should address them today. We will include a link to all of his writings at the end of this chapter.

The Apology, Chapter I

“Rulers of the Roman Empire, if, seated for the administration of justice on your lofty tribunal, under the gaze of every eye, and occupying there all but the highest position in the state, you may not openly inquire into and sift before the world the real truth in regard to the charges made against the Christians; if in this case alone you are afraid or ashamed to exercise your authority in making public inquiry with the carefulness which becomes justice; if, finally, the extreme severities inflicted on our people in recently private judgments, stand in the way of our being permitted to defend ourselves before you, you cannot surely forbid the Truth to reach your ears by the secret pathway of a noiseless book. She has no appeals to make to you in regard of her condition, for that does not excite her wonder. She knows that she is but a sojourner on the earth, and that among strangers she naturally finds foes; and more than this, that her origin, her dwelling-place, her hope, her recompense, her honours, are above. One thing, meanwhile, she anxiously desires of earthly rulers—not to be condemned unknown. What harm can it do to the laws, supreme in their domain, to give her a hearing? Nay, for that part of it, will not their absolute supremacy be more conspicuous in their condemning her, even after she has made her plea? But if, unheard, sentence is pronounced against her, besides the odium of an unjust deed, you will incur the merited suspicion of doing it with some idea that it is unjust, as not wishing to hear what you may not be able to hear and condemn. We lay this before you as the first ground on which we urge that your hatred to the name of Christian is unjust. And the very reason

which seems to excuse this injustice (I mean ignorance) at once aggravates and convicts it. For what is there more unfair than to hate a thing of which you know nothing, even though it deserve to be hated? Hatred is only merited when it is known to be merited. But without that knowledge, whence is its justice to be vindicated? for that is to be proved, not from the mere fact that an aversion exists, but from acquaintance with the subject. When men, then, give way to a dislike simply because they are entirely ignorant of the nature of the thing disliked, why may it not be precisely the very sort of thing they should not dislike? So we maintain that they are both ignorant while they hate us, and hate us unrighteously while they continue in ignorance, the one thing being the result of the other either way of it. The proof of their ignorance, at once condemning and excusing their injustice, is this, that those who once hated Christianity because they knew nothing about it, no sooner come to know it than they all lay down at once their enmity. From being its haters they become its disciples. By simply getting acquainted with it, they begin now to hate what they had formerly been, and to profess what they had formerly hated; and their numbers are as great as are laid to our charge. The outcry is that the State is filled with Christians—that they are in the fields, in the citadels, in the islands: they make lamentation, as for some calamity, that both sexes, every age and condition, even high rank, are passing over to the profession of the Christian faith; and yet for all, their minds are not awakened to the thought of some good they have failed to notice in it.” Translated by S. Thelwall, Late Scholar of Christ’s College

The Prescription Against Heretics

“THE character of the times in which we live is such as to call forth from us even this admonition, that we ought not to be astonished at the heresies (which abound) neither ought their existence to surprise us, for it was foretold that they should come to pass; nor the fact that they subvert the faith of some, for their final cause is, by affording a trial to faith, to give it also the opportunity of being “approved.” Groundless, therefore, and inconsiderate is the offence of the many who are scandalized by the very fact that heresies prevail to such a degree. How great (might their offence have been) if they had not existed. When it has been determined that a thing must by all means be, it receives the (final) cause for which it has its being. This secures the power through which it exists, in such a way that it is impossible for it not to have existence.” Chapter I, Translated by Peter Holmes

“On this point, however, we dwell no longer, since it is the same Paul who, in his Epistle to the Galatians, counts “heresies” among “the sins of the flesh,” who also intimates to Titus, that “a man who is a heretic” must be “rejected after the first admonition,” on the ground that “he that is such is perverted, and committeth sin, as a self-condemned man.” Indeed, in almost every epistle, when enjoining on us (the duty) of avoiding false doctrines, he sharply condemns heresies. Of these the practical effects are false doctrines, called in Greek heresies, a word used in the sense of that choice which a man makes when he either teaches them (to others) or takes up with them (for himself). For this

reason it is that he calls the heretic condemned, because he has himself chosen that for which he is condemned. We, however, are not permitted to cherish any object after our own will, nor yet to make choice of that which another has introduced of his private fancy. In the Lord's apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations (of mankind) the doctrine which they had received from Christ. If, therefore, even "an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel" (than theirs), he would be called accursed by us." Chapter VI

The Five Books Against Marcion, Book I

“The heretic of Pontus introduces two Gods, like the twin Symplegades of his own shipwreck: One whom it was impossible to deny, i.e. our Creator; and one whom he will never be able to prove, i.e. his own god. The unhappy man gained the first idea of his conceit from the simple passage of our Lord’s saying, which has reference to human beings and not divine ones, wherein He disposes of those examples of a good tree and a corrupt one; how that “the good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit, neither the corrupt tree good fruit.” Which means, that an honest mind and good faith cannot produce evil deeds, any more than an evil disposition can produce good deeds. Now (like many other persons now-a-days, especially those who have an heretical proclivity), while morbidly brooding over the question of the origin of evil, his perception became blunted by the very irregularity of his researches; and when he found the Creator declaring, “I am He that createth evil,” inasmuch as he had already concluded from other arguments, which are satisfactory to every perverted mind, that God is the author of evil, so he now applied to the Creator the figure of the corrupt tree bringing forth evil fruit, that is, moral evil, and then presumed that there ought to be another god, after the analogy of the good tree producing its good fruit. Accordingly, finding in Christ a different disposition, as it were—one of a simple and pure benevolence—differing from the Creator, he readily argued that in his Christ had been revealed a new and strange divinity; and then with a little leaven he leavened the whole lump of the faith, flavouring it with the acidity of his own heresy.” Chapter II, Translated by Dr. Holmes

“But on what principle did Marcion confine his supreme powers to two? I would first ask, If there be two, why not more? Because if number be compatible with the substance of Deity, the richer you make it in number the better. Valentinus was more consistent and more liberal; for he, having once imagined two deities, Bythos and Sige, poured forth a swarm of divine essences, a brood of no less than thirty AEgons, like the sow of AEneas. Now, whatever principle refuses to admit several supreme begins, the same must reject even two, for there is plurality in the very lowest number after one. After unity, number commences. So, again, the same principle which could admit two could admit more. After two, multitude begins, now that one is exceeded. In short, we feel that reason herself expressly forbids the belief in more gods than one, because the self-same rule lays down one God and not two, which declares that God must be a Being to which, as the great Supreme, nothing is equal; and that Being to which nothing is equal must, moreover, be unique. But further, what can be the use or advantage in supposing two supreme beings, two co-ordinate powers? What numerical difference could there be when two equals differ not from one? For that thing which is the same in two is one. Even if there were several equals, all would be just as much one, because, as equals, they would not differ one from another. So, if of two beings neither differs from the other, since both of them are on the supposition supreme, both being gods, neither of them is more excellent than the other; and so, having no pre-eminence, their numerical distinction has no reason in it. Number, moreover, in the Deity ought to be consistent with the highest reason, or else His worship would be brought into doubt. For consider

now, if, when I saw two Gods before me (who, being both Supreme Beings, were equal to each other), I were to worship them both, what should I be doing? I should be much afraid that the abundance of my homage would be deemed superstition rather than piety. Because, as both of them are so equal and are both included in either of the two, I might serve them both acceptably in only one; and by this very means I should attest their equality and unity, provided that I worshipped them mutually the one in the other, because in the one both are present to me. If I were to worship one of the two, I should be equally conscious of seeming to pour contempt on the uselessness of a numerical distinction, which was superfluous, because it indicated no difference; in other words, I should think it the safer course to worship neither of these two Gods than one of them with some scruple of conscience, or both of them to none effect.” Chapter V

Against Hermogenes

“WE are accustomed, for the purpose of shortening argument, to lay down the rule against heretics of the lateness of their date. For in as far as by our rule, priority is given to the truth, which also foretold that there would be heresies, in so far must all later opinions be prejudged as heresies, being such as were, by the more ancient rule of truth, predicted as (one day) to happen. Now, the doctrine of Hermogenes has this taint of novelty. He is, in short, a man living in the world at the present time; by his very nature a heretic, and turbulent withal, who mistakes loquacity for eloquence, and supposes impudence to be firmness, and judges it to be the duty of a good conscience to speak ill of individuals. Moreover, he despises God’s law in his painting, maintaining repeated marriages, alleges the law of God in defence of lust, and yet despises it in respect of his art. He falsities by a twofold process—with his cautery and his pen. He is a thorough adulterer, both doctrinally and carnally, since he is rank indeed with the contagion of your marriage-hacks, and has also failed in cleaving to the rule of faith as much as the apostle’s own Hermogenes. However, never mind the man, when it is his doctrine which I question. He does not appear to acknowledge any other Christ as Lord, though he holds Him in a different way; but by this difference in his faith he really makes Him another being,—nay, he takes from Him everything which is God, since he will not have it that He made all things of nothing. For, turning away from Christians to the philosophers, from the Church to the Academy and the Porch, he learned there from the Stoics how to place Matter (on

the same level) with the Lord, just as if it too had existed ever both unborn and unmade, having no beginning at all nor end, out of which, according to him, the Lord afterwards created all things.” Chapter I, Translated by Dr. Holmes

“Our very bad painter has coloured this his primary shade absolutely without any light, with such arguments as these: He begins with laying down the premiss, that the Lord made all things either out of Himself, or out of nothing, or out of something; in order that, after he has shown that it was impossible for Him to have made them either out of Himself or out of nothing, he might thence affirm the residuary proposition that He made them out of something, and therefore that that something was Matter. He could not have made all things, he says, of Himself; because whatever things the Lord made of Himself would have been parts of Himself; but He is not dissoluble into parts,, because, being the Lord, He is indivisible, and unchangeable, and always the same. Besides, if He had made anything out of Himself, it would have been something of Himself. Everything, however, both which was made and which He made must be accounted imperfect, because it was made of a part, and He made it of a part; or if, again, it was a whole which He made, who is a whole Himself, He must in that case have been at once both a whole, and yet not a whole; because it behaved Him to be a whole, that He might produce Himself, and yet not a whole, that He might be produced out of Himself. But this is a most difficult position. For if He were in existence, He could not be made, for He was in existence already; if, however, he were not in existence He could not make, because He was a nonentity. He maintains, moreover, that He who always exists, does

not came into existence, but exists for ever and ever. He accordingly concludes that He made nothing out of Himself, since He never passed into such a condition as made it possible for Him to make anything out of Himself. In like manner, he contends that He could not have made all things out of nothing—thus: He defines the Lord as a being who is good, nay, very good, who must will to make things as good and excellent as He is Himself; indeed it were impossible for Him either to will or to make anything which was not good, nay, very good itself. Therefore all things ought to have been made good and excellent by Him, after His own condition. Experience shows, however, that things which are even evil were made by Him: not, of course, of His own will and pleasure; because, if it had been of His own will and pleasure, He would be sure to have made nothing unfitting or unworthy of Himself. That, therefore, which He made not of His own will must be understood to have been made from the fault of something, and that is from Matter, without a doubt.” Chapter II

“At this point, then, I shall begin to treat of Matter, how that, (according to Hermogenes,) God compares it with Himself as equally unborn, equally unmade, equally eternal, set forth as being without a beginning, without an end. For what other estimate’s of God is there than eternity? What other condition has eternity than to have ever existed, and to exist yet for evermore by virtue of its privilege of having neither beginning nor end? Now, since this is the property of God, it will belong to God alone, whose property it is—of course on this ground, that if it can be ascribed to any other being, it will no longer be the property of God, but will belong, along with Him, to that being also to which it is ascribed. For “although

there be that are called gods” in name, “whether in heaven or in earth, yet to us there is but one God the Father, of whom are all things;” whence the greater reason why, in our view, that which is the property of God ought to be regarded as pertaining to God alone, and why (as I have already said) that should cease to be such a property, when it is shared by another being. Now, since He is God, it must necessarily be a unique mark of this quality, that it be confined to One. Else, what will be unique and singular, if that is not which has nothing equal to it? What will be principal, if that is not which is above all things, before all things, and from which all things proceed? By possessing these He is God alone, and by His sole possession of them He is One. If another also shared in the possession, there would then be as many gods as there were possessors of these attributes of God. Hermogenes, therefore, introduces two gods: he introduces Matter as God’s equal. God, however, must be One, because that is God which is supreme; but nothing else can be supreme than that which is unique; and that cannot possibly be unique which has anything equal to it; and Matter will be equal with God when it is held to be eternal.” Chapter IV

Against the Valentinians

“The Valentinians, who are no doubt a very large body of heretics—comprising as they do so many apostates from the truth, who have a propensity for fables, and no discipline to deter them (therefrom) care for nothing so much as to obscure what they preach, if indeed they (can be said to) preach who obscure their doctrine. The officiousness with which they guard their doctrine is an officiousness which betrays their guilt. Their disgrace is proclaimed in the very earnestness with which they maintain their religious system. Now, in the case of those Eleusinian mysteries, which are the very heresy of Athenian superstition, it is their secrecy that is their disgrace. Accordingly, they previously beset all access to their body with tormenting conditions; and they require a long initiation before they enrol (their members), even instruction during five years for their perfect disciples, in order that they may mould their opinions by this suspension of full knowledge, and apparently raise the dignity of their mysteries in proportion to the craving for them which they have previously created. Then follows the duty of silence. Carefully is that guarded, which is so long in finding. All the divinity, however, lies in their secret recesses: there are revealed at last all the aspirations of the fully initiated, the entire mystery of the sealed tongue, the symbol of virility. But this allegorical representation, under the pretext of nature’s reverend name, obscures a real sacrilege by help of an arbitrary symbol, and by empty images obviates the reproach of falsehood! In like manner, the heretics who are now the object of our remarks, the Valentinians, have formed Eleusinian dissipations of their own,

consecrated by a profound silence, having nothing of the heavenly in them but their mystery. By the help of the sacred names and titles and arguments of true religion, they have fabricated the vainest and foulest figment for men's pliant liking, out of the affluent suggestions of Holy Scripture, since from its many springs many errors may well emanate. If you propose to them inquiries sincere and honest, they answer you with stern look and contracted brow, and say, "The subject is profound." If you try them with subtle questions, with the ambiguities of their double tongue, they affirm a community of faith (with yourself). If you intimate to them that you understand their opinions, they insist on knowing nothing themselves. If you come to a close engagement with them they destroy your own fond hope of a victory over them by a self-immolation. Not even to their own disciples do they commit a secret before they have made sure of them. They have the knack of persuading men before instructing them; although truth persuades by teaching, but does not teach by first persuading." Chapter I, Translated by Dr. Roberts

You can read more of Tertullian's [writings here](#).

Clement of Alexandria

Titus Flavius Clemens was born to pagan parents in the middle of the 2nd century. Some historians believe he was born in Athens and became a Christian under the teaching of Pantaenus.

Clement of Alexandria (as he is known to differentiate him from Clement of Rome) wrote to pagans exhorting them to become Christians. The three major works of Clement that survived in full are: *Protrepticus*, *Paedagogus* and *Stromata*. Here are examples from each –

“This is the New Song, the manifestation of the Word that was in the beginning, and before the beginning. The Saviour, who existed before, has in recent days appeared. He, who is in Him that truly is, has appeared; for the Word, who “was with God,” and by whom all things were created, has appeared as our Teacher. The Word, who in the beginning bestowed on us life as Creator when He formed us, taught us to live well when He appeared as our Teacher; that as God He might afterwards conduct us to the life which never ends. He did not now for the first time pity us for our error; but He pitied us from the first, from the beginning. But now, at His appearance, lost as we already were, He accomplished our salvation. For that wicked reptile monster, by his enchantments, enslaves and plagues men even till now; inflicting, as seems to me, such barbarous vengeance on them as those who are said to bind the captives to corpses till they rot together. This wicked

tyrant and serpent, accordingly, binding fast with the miserable chain of superstition whomsoever he can draw to his side from their birth, to stones, and stocks, and images, and such like idols, may with truth be said to have taken and buried living men with those dead idols, till both suffer corruption together.” Protrepticus, Chapter I

“Now, O you, my children, our Instructor is like His Father God, whose son He is, sinless, blameless, and with a soul devoid of passion; God in the form of man, stainless, the minister of His Father’s will, the Word who is God, who is in the Father, who is at the Father’s right hand, and with the form of God is God. He is to us a spotless image; to Him we are to try with all our might to assimilate our souls. He is wholly free from human passions; wherefore also He alone is judge, because He alone is sinless. As far, however, as we can, let us try to sin as little as possible. For nothing is so urgent in the first place as deliverance from passions and disorders, and then the checking of our liability to fall into sins that have become habitual. It is best, therefore, not to sin at all in any way, which we assert to be the prerogative of God alone; next to keep clear of voluntary transgressions, which is characteristic of the wise man; thirdly, not to fall into many involuntary offences, which is peculiar to those who have been excellently trained. Not to continue long in sins, let that be ranked last. But this also is salutary to those who are called back to repentance, to renew the contest.” Paedagogus, Book I, Chapter II

“The writing of these memoranda of mine, I well know, is weak when compared with that spirit, full of grace, which I was privileged to hear. But it will be an image to recall the archetype to him who was struck with the thyrsus. For “speak,” it is said, “to a wise man, and he will grow wiser; and to him that hath, and there shall be added to him.” And we profess not to explain secret things sufficiently — far from it — but only to recall them to memory, whether we have forgot aught, or whether for the purpose of not forgetting. Many things, I well know, have escaped us, through length of time, that have dropped away unwritten. Whence, to aid the weakness of my memory, and provide for myself a salutary help to my recollection in a systematic arrangement of chapters, I necessarily make use of this form. There are then some things of which we have no recollection; for the power that was in the blessed men was great. There are also some things which remained unnoted long, which have now escaped; and others which are effaced, having faded away in the mind itself, since such a task is not easy to those not experienced; these I revive in my commentaries. Some things I purposely omit, in the exercise of a wise selection, afraid to write what I guarded against speaking: not grudging — for that were wrong — but fearing for my readers, lest they should stumble by taking them in a wrong sense; and, as the proverb says, we should be found “reaching a sword to a child.” For it is impossible that what has been written should not escape, although remaining unpublished by me. But being always revolved, using the one only voice, that of writing, they answer nothing to him that makes inquiries beyond what is written; for they require of necessity the aid of some one, either of him who wrote, or of some one else who has

walked in his footsteps. Some things my treatise will hint; on some it will linger; some it will merely mention. It will try to speak imperceptibly, to exhibit secretly, and to demonstrate silently. The dogmas taught by remarkable sects will be adduced; and to these will be opposed all that ought to be premised in accordance with the profoundest contemplation of the knowledge, which, as we proceed to the renowned and venerable canon of tradition, from the creation of the world, will advance to our view; setting before us what according to natural contemplation necessarily has to be treated of beforehand, and clearing off what stands in the way of this arrangement. So that we may have our ears ready for the reception of the tradition of true knowledge; the soil being previously cleared of the thorns and of every weed by the husbandman, in order to the planting of the vine. For there is a contest, and the prelude to the contest; and there are some mysteries before other mysteries.” Stromata, Book I, Chapter I

Read more of the writings of Clement of Alexandria [here](#).

Melito of Sardis

Melito was bishop of Sardis during the 2nd century and was reportedly held in high regard by many Christian leaders of the time. Most of his writings have been lost, but a few fragments have been found and he is quoted by other apologists of the same era.

“For this reason did the Father send His Son from heaven without a bodily form, that, when He should put on a body by means of the Virgin’s womb, and be born man, He might save man, and gather together those members of His which death had scattered when he divided man.” Discourse on Soul and Body

“On these accounts He came to us; on these accounts, though He was incorporeal, He formed for Himself a body after our fashion, -appearing as a sheep, yet still remaining the Shepherd; being esteemed a servant, yet not renouncing the Sonship; being carried in the womb of Mary, yet arrayed in the nature of His Father; treading upon the earth, yet filling heaven; appearing as an infant, yet not discarding the eternity of His nature; being invested with a body, yet not circumscribing the unmixed simplicity of His Godhead; being esteemed poor, yet not divested of His riches; needing sustenance inasmuch as He was man, yet not ceasing to feed the entire world inasmuch as He is God; putting on the likeness of a servant, yet not impairing the likeness of His Father. He sustained every character belonging to Him in an immutable nature: He was

standing before Pilate, and at the same time was sitting with His Father; He was nailed upon the tree, and yet was the Lord of all things.” Discourse on the Cross

Read more of the writings of Melito of Sardis [here](#).

Athenagoras of Athens

Athenagoras identified himself as “Athenagoras, the Athenian, Philosopher, and Christian.” Though he was apparently influential during his lifetime, little is known about him now beside a few writings from the latter part of the 2nd century.

“To the Emperors Marcus Aurelius Anoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, conquerors of Armenia and Sarmatia, and more than all, philosophers.

In your empire, greatest of sovereigns, different nations have different customs and laws; and no one is hindered by law or fear of punishment from following his ancestral usages, however ridiculous these may be. A citizen of Ilium calls Hector a god, and pays divine honours to Helen, taking her for Adrasteia. The Lacedaemonian venerates Agamemnon as Zeus, and Phylonoe the daughter of Tyndarus; and the man of Tenedos worships Tennes. The Athenian sacrifices to Erechtheus as Poseidon. The Athenians also perform religious rites and celebrate mysteries in honour of Agraulus and Pandrosus, women who were deemed guilty of impiety for opening the box. In short, among every nation and people, men offer whatever sacrifices and celebrate whatever mysteries they please. The Egyptians reckon among their gods even cats, and crocodiles, and serpents, and asps, and dogs. And to all these both you and the laws give permission so to act, deeming, on the one hand, that

to believe in no god at all is impious and wicked, and on the other, that it is necessary for each man to worship the gods he prefers, in order that through fear of the deity, men may be kept from wrong-doing. But why— for do not, like the multitude, be led astray by hearsay—why is a mere name odious to you?

Names are not deserving of hatred: it is the unjust act that calls for penalty and punishment. And accordingly, with admiration of your mildness and gentleness, and your peaceful and benevolent disposition towards every man, individuals live in the possession of equal rights; and the cities, according to their rank, share in equal honour; and the whole empire, under your intelligent sway, enjoys profound peace. But for us who are called Christians you have not in like manner cared; but although we commit no wrong—nay, as will appear in the sequel of this discourse, are of all men most piously and righteously disposed towards the Deity and towards your government—you allow us to be harassed, plundered, and persecuted, the multitude making war upon us for our name alone. We venture, therefore, to lay a statement of our case before you—and you will learn from this discourse that we suffer unjustly, and contrary to all law and reason—and we beseech you to bestow some consideration upon us also, that we may cease at length to be slaughtered at the instigation of false accusers. For the fine imposed by our persecutors does not aim merely at our property, nor their insults at our reputation, nor the damage they do us at any other of our greater interests.” *A Plea For The Christians, Chapter I, Translated by B. P. Pratten*

“Moreover also, that His power is sufficient for the raising of dead bodies, is shown by the creation of these same bodies. For if, when they did not exist, He made at their first formation the bodies of men, and their original elements, He will, when they are dissolved, in whatever manner that may take place, raise them again with equal ease: for this, too, is equally possible to Him. And it is no damage to the argument, if some suppose the first beginnings to be from matter, or the bodies of men at least to be derived from the elements as the first materials, or from seed. For that power which could give shape to what is regarded by them as shapeless matter, and adorn it, when destitute of form and order, with many and diverse forms, and gather into one the several portions of the elements, and divide the seed which was one and simple into many, and organize that which was unorganized, and give life to that which had no life, that same power can reunite what is dissolved, and raise up what is prostrate, and restore the dead to life again, and put the corruptible into a state of incorruption. And to the same Being it will belong, and to the same power and skill, to separate that which has been broken up and distributed among a multitude of animals of all kinds which are wont to have recourse to such bodies, and glut their appetite upon them,—to separate this, I say, and unite it again with the proper members and parts of members, whether it has passed into some one of those animals, or into many, or thence into others, or, after being dissolved along with these, has been carried back again to the original elements, resolved into these according to a natural law—a matter this which seems to have exceedingly confounded some, even of those admired for wisdom, who, I cannot tell why, think those doubts worthy of

serious attention which are brought forward by the many.” On The Resurrection of the Dead, Chapter III

Read more of the writings of Athenagoras of Athens [here](#).

How Reading Helps Apologists

Reading the writings of 1st and 2nd century Church apologists helps modern Christians in many ways –

- Helps us understand how Christians who knew the apostles or disciples of the apostles dealt with theological concerns in the Church as well as heresies and challenges from local and national governments
- Helps us understand what early Christian leaders believed was important to members of their churches
- Helps us understand how similar early heresies were to the heresies we face today
- Helps us understand how to respond to challenges from local and national governments
- Helps us dispel misconceptions about Christianity
- Helps us develop strategies for responding to modern heresies
- Helps us explain and demonstrate Christian faith and practice
- Helps us support other Christians in their lives and ministries
- Helps us understand how early Christians lived, worshipped, evangelized and disciplined
- Helps us understand how important the Bible and prayer were to the early Christians and how important they are to us today

Theophilus of Antioch

Theophilus is believed to have pastored the church in Antioch during the latter half of the 2nd century AD. Jerome, Eusebius and other apologists and historians wrote about Theophilus as authoring several works against the heresies of his day. What we have available to read from Theophilus is three books to a man named Autolycus that he described as “an idolater and scorner of Christians.”

“A FLUENT tongue and an elegant style afford pleasure and such praise as vainglory delights in, to wretched men who have been corrupted in mind; the lover of truth does not give heed to ornamented speeches, but examines the real matter of the speech, what it is, and what kind it is. Since, then, my friend, you have assailed me with empty words, boasting of your gods of wood and stone, hammered and cast, carved and graven, which neither see nor hear, for they are idols, and the works of men’s hands; and since, besides, you call me a Christian, as if this were a damning name to bear, I, for my part, avow that I am a Christian, and bear this name beloved of God, hoping to be serviceable to God. For it is not the case, as you suppose, that the name of God is hard to bear; but possibly you entertain this opinion of God, because you are yourself yet unserviceable to Him.” Theophilus to Autolycus, Book I, Chapter I

“WHEN we had formerly some conversation, my very good friend Autolycus, and when you inquired who was my God, and for a little paid attention to my discourse, I made some explanations to you concerning my religion; and then having bid one another adieu, we went with much mutual friendliness each to his own house although at first you had home somewhat hard upon me. For you know and remember that you supposed our doctrine was foolishness. As you then afterwards urged me to do, I am desirous, though not educated to the art of speaking, of more accurately demonstrating, by means of this tractate, the vain labour and empty worship in which you are held; and I wish also, from a few of your own histories which you read, and perhaps do not yet quite understand, to make the truth plain to you.” Book II, Chapter I

Now we also confess that God exists, but that He is one, the creator, and maker, and fashioner of this universe; and we know that all things are arranged by His providence, but by Him alone. And we have learned a holy law; but we have as lawgiver Him who is really God, who teaches us to act righteously, and to be pious, and to do good. And concerning piety He says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I am the LORD thy God.” And of doing good He said: “Honour thy father and thy mother; that it may be well with thee, and that thy days may be long in the land which I the LORD God give thee.” Again, concerning righteousness: “Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt

not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, nor his land, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his beast of burden, nor any of his cattle, nor anything that is thy neighbour's. Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of the poor in his cause. From every unjust matter keep thee far. The innocent and righteous thou shalt not slay; thou shalt not justify the wicked; and thou shalt not take a gift, for gifts blind the eyes of them that see and pervert righteous words." Of this divine law, then, Moses, who also was God's servant, was made the minister both to all the world, and chiefly to the Hebrews, who were also called Jews, whom an Egyptian king had in ancient days enslaved, and who were the righteous seed of godly and holy men—Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. God, being mindful of them, and doing marvellous and strange miracles by the hand of Moses, delivered them, and led them out of Egypt, leading them through what is called the desert; whom He also settled again in the land of Canaan, which afterwards was called Judaea, and gave them a law, and taught them these things. Of this great and wonderful law, which tends to all righteousness, the ten heads are such as we have already rehearsed." Book III, Chapter IX

You can read the entire document by Theophilus [here](#).

Polycrates of Ephesus

Historians believe that Polycrates was a 2nd century bishop of Ephesus and most likely knew Polycarp and Irenaeus. Polycrates may have presided over an important meeting of Asiatic bishops in 196 AD discussing the Paschal feast.

“As for us, then, we scrupulously observe the exact day, neither adding nor taking away. For in Asia great luminaries have gone to their rest, who shall rise again in the day of the coming of the Lord, when He cometh with glory from heaven and shall raise again all the saints. I speak of Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who is laid to rest at Hierapolis; and his two daughters, who arrived at old age unmarried; his other daughter also, who passed her life under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and reposes at Ephesus; John, moreover, who reclined on the Lord’s bosom, and who became a priest wearing the mitre, and a witness and a teacher—he rests at Ephesus. Then there is Polycarp, both bishop and martyr at Smyrna; and Thraseas from Eumenia, both bishop and martyr, who rests at Smyrna. Why should I speak of Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who rests at Laodicea? of the blessed Papirius, moreover? and of Melito the eunuch, who performed all his actions under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and lies at Sardis, awaiting the visitation from heaven, when he shall rise again from the dead? These all kept the passover on the fourteenth. day of the month, in accordance with the Gospel, without ever deviating from it, but keeping to the rule of faith.

Moreover I also, Polycrates, who am the least of you all, in accordance with the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have succeeded—seven of my relatives were bishops, and I am the eighth, and my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven—I myself, brethren, I say, who am sixty-five years old in the Lord, and have fallen in with the brethren in all parts of the world, and have read through all Holy Scripture, am not frightened at the things which are said to terrify us. For those who are greater than I have said, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” ...

I might also have made mention of the bishops associated with me, whom it was your own desire to have called together by me, and I called them together: whose names, if I were to write them down, would amount to a great number. These bishops, on coming to see me, unworthy as I am, signified their united approval of the letter, knowing that I wore these grey hairs not in vain, but have always regulated my conduct in obedience to the Lord Jesus.” Epistle to Victor and the Roman Church, Fragment

Read about Polycrates of Ephesus [here](#).

Dionysius of Corinth

Dionysius was bishop of Corinth during the latter part of the 2nd century. We know about him through the writings of Eusebius, who knew of a collection of several “Letters to the Churches,” along with letter to another bishop and a private letter of spiritual advice to a woman who had written him.

“For this has been your custom from the beginning, to do good to all the brethren in many ways, and to send alms to many Churches in different cities, now relieving the poverty of those who asked aid, now assisting the brethren in the mines by the alms you send, Romans keeping up the traditional custom of Romans, which your blessed bishop, Soter, has not only maintained, but has even increased, by affording to the brethren the abundance which he has supplied, and by comforting with blessed words the brethren who came to him, as a father his children.”

“You also by this instruction have mingled together the Romans and Corinthians who are the planting of Peter and Paul. For they both came to our Corinth and planted us, and taught alike; and alike going to Italy and teaching there, were martyred at the same time.”

“Today we have kept the holy Lord’s day, on which we have read your letter, which we shall ever possess to read and to be admonished, even as the former one written to us through Clement.”

Read about Dionysius of Corinth [here](#).

Marcus Minucius Felix

Little is known about the personal history of Marcus Minucius Felix, but is believed to have lived during the latter half of the 2nd century and early part of the 3rd century AD. He, like Tertullian, was an early Latin apologist for Christianity. Jerome wrote of Felix as being a notable solicitor of Rome.

The writing we have from Felix is known as *Octavius*. It is a dialog about Christianity between a pagan and a Christian (*Octavius*).

“WHEN I consider and mentally review my remembrance of Octavius, my excellent and most faithful companion, the sweetness and charm of the man so clings to me, that I appear to myself in some sort as if I were returning to past times, and not merely recalling in my recollection things which have long since happened and gone by. Thus, in the degree in which the actual contemplation of him is withdrawn from my eyes, it is bound up in my heart and in my most intimate feelings. And it was not without reason that that remarkable and holy man, when he departed this life, left to me an unbounded regret for him, especially since he himself also glowed with such a love for me at all times, that, whether in matters of amusement or of business, he agreed with me in similarity of will, in either liking or disliking the same things. You would think that one mind had been shared between us two. Thus he alone was my confidant in my loves, my companion in my mistakes; and when, after the gloom had been

dispersed, I emerged from the abyss of darkness into the light of wisdom and truth, he did not cast off his associate, but—what is more glorious still—he outstripped him. And thus, when my thoughts were traversing the entire period of our intimacy and friendship, the direction of my mind fixed itself chiefly on that discourse of his, wherein by very weighty arguments he converted Caecilius, who was still cleaving to superstitious vanities, to the true religion.” Octavius,
Chapter I

“And thus Octavius began: “I will indeed speak as I shall be able to the best of my powers, and you must endeavour with me to dilute the very offensive strain of recriminations in the river of veracious words. Nor will I disguise in the outset, that the opinion of my friend Natalis has swayed to and fro in such an erratic, vague, and slippery manner, that we are compelled to doubt whether your information was confused, or whether it wavered backwards and forwards by mere mistake. For he varied at one time from believing the gods, at another time to being in a state of hesitation on the subject; so that the direct purpose of my reply was established with the greater uncertainty, by reason of the uncertainty of his proposition. But in my friend Natalis—I will not allow, I do not believe in, any chicanery—far from his simplicity is crafty trickery. What then? As he who knows not the right way, when as it happens one road is separated into many, because he knows not the way, remains in anxiety, and dares neither make choice of particular roads, nor try them all; so, if a man has no stedfast judgment of truth, even as his unbelieving suspicion is scattered, so his doubting opinion is unsettled. It is therefore no wonder if Caecilius in the same way is cast about by the tide, and

tossed hither and thither among things contrary and repugnant to one another; but that this may no longer be the case, I will convict and refute all that has been said, however diverse, confirming and approving the truth alone; and for the future he must neither doubt nor waver. And since my brother broke out in such expressions as these, that he was grieved, that he was vexed, that he was indignant, that he regretted that illiterate, poor, unskilled people should dispute about heavenly things; let him know that all men are begotten alike, with a capacity and ability of reasoning and feeling, without preference of age, sex, or dignity. Nor do they obtain wisdom by fortune, but have it implanted by nature; moreover, the very philosophers themselves, or any others who have gone forth unto celebrity as discoverers of arts, before they attained an illustrious name by their mental skill, were esteemed plebeian, untaught, half-naked. Thus it is, that rich men, attached to their means, have been accustomed to gaze more upon their gold than upon heaven, while our sort of people, though poor, have both discovered wisdom, and have delivered their teaching to others; whence it appears that intelligence is not given to wealth, nor is gotten by study, but is begotten with the very formation of the mind. Therefore it is nothing to be angry or to be grieved about, though any one should inquire, should think, should utter his thoughts about divine things; since what is wanted is not the authority of the arguer, but the truth of the argument itself: and even the more unskilled the discourse, the more evident the reasoning, since it is not coloured by the pomp of eloquence and grace; but as it is, it is sustained by the rule of right." Octavius, Chapter XVI

You can read the entire document of Octavius [here](#).

Tatian the Syrian

I add Tatian to our list of 2nd century apologists with some caution. He was a student of Justin Martyr and wrote some apologetics that we will look at in a moment. However, Irenaeus mentioned some problems with Tatian's theology that we should note –

“Many offshoots of numerous heresies have already been formed from those heretics we have described. This arises from the fact that numbers of them-indeed, we may say all-desire themselves to be teachers, and to break off from the particular heresy in which they have been involved. Forming one set of doctrines out of a totally different system of opinions, and then again others from others, they insist upon teaching something new, declaring themselves the inventors of any sort of opinion which they may have been able to call into existence. To give an example: Springing from Saturninus and Marcion, those who are called Encratites (self-controlled) preached against marriage, thus setting aside the original creation of God, and indirectly blaming Him who made the male and female for the propagation of the human race. Some of those reckoned among them have also introduced abstinence from animal food, thus proving themselves ungrateful to God, who formed all things. They deny, too, the salvation of him who was first created. It is but lately, however, that this opinion has been invented among them. A certain man named Tatian first introduced the blasphemy. He was a hearer of Justin's, and as long as he continued

with him he expressed no such views; but after his martyrdom he separated from the Church, and, excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he composed his own peculiar type of doctrine. He invented a system of certain invisible Aeons, like the followers of Valentinus; while, like Marcion and Saturninus, he declared that marriage was nothing else than corruption and fornication. But his denial of Adam's salvation was an opinion due entirely to himself." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.28.1.

These problems Irenaeus mentioned apparently didn't arise until after Justin was martyred (approx. 165AD). Tatian reportedly broke with the Roman church and returned to Syria where he became involved with the Encratites. The name came from the Greek word ἐγκράτεια (*enkrateia*), which means "self-mastery, self-control." The Encratites were known for not marrying, not eating flesh, and not drinking alcohol. That included substituting milk or water for wine in the Eucharist.

What remains of Tatian's works includes his *Address To The Greeks* and what Eusebius called the *Diatessaron* (Harmony of Four). Tatian combined the four Gospels of the New Testament into a single narrative. We have fragments of the document available to read today. Some early church leaders were opposed to Tatian's *Diatessaron* because he added material not found in the original four gospels.

In his Address To The Greeks, Tatian attempted to prove that paganism was worthless and Christianity was reasonable to believe.

“For what reason, men of Greece, do you wish to bring the civil powers, as in a pugilistic encounter, into collision with us? And, if I am not disposed to comply with the usages of some of them, why am I to be abhorred as a vile miscreant? Does the sovereign order the payment of tribute, I am ready to render it. Does my master command me to act as a bondsman and to serve, I acknowledge the serfdom. Man is to be honoured as a fellow-man; God alone is to be feared,—He who is not visible to human eyes, nor comes within the compass of human art. Only when I am commanded to deny Him, will I not obey, but will rather die than show myself false and ungrateful. Our God did not begin to be in time: He alone is without beginning, and He Himself is the beginning of all things. God is a Spirit, not pervading matter, but the Maker of material spirits, and of the forms that are in matter; He is invisible, impalpable, being Himself the Father of both sensible and invisible things. Him we know from His creation, and apprehend His invisible power by His works. I refuse to adore that workman ship which He has made for our sakes. The sun and moon were made for us: how, then, can I adore my own servants? How can I speak of stocks and stones as gods? For the Spirit that pervades matter is inferior to the more divine spirit; and this, even when assimilated to the soul, is not to be honoured equally with the perfect God. Nor even ought the ineffable God to be presented with gifts; for He who is in want of nothing is not to be misrepresented by us as though He were indigent. But I will set forth our views more distinctly.”

Address to the Greeks, Chapter IV

Papias of Hierapolis

Papias reportedly lived in the latter part of the 1st century and early part of the 2nd century AD and was one of the early bishops of Hierapolis, which was located near Laodicea. Paul mentioned the church at Hierapolis in his letter to the Colossians –

“Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.” Colossians 4:12-13

Most of what we know about Papias comes from the writings of Irenaeus and Eusebius. Irenaeus wrote that Papias was “a friend of Polycarp.” Irenaeus, who was also a 2nd century apologist and knew Polycarp, wrote that Papias had five books “in common circulation” called “an Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord.” We do not have copies of the Oracles, so the fragments from Irenaeus are helpful in knowing what Papias wrote.

You can read more about the Fragments of Papias [here](#).

Apollianaris of Hierapolis

Claudius Apollianaris is believed to have become bishop of Hierapolis after Papias. What we know about Apollianaris comes from the writings of Jerome, Eusebius, Theodore and others. He was reportedly held in high esteem and well known for his writings against heretics of the 2nd century. Apollinaris wrote five books against pagans, two against the Jews, two on "Truth." He also wrote an Apologia for Christians addressed to Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

You can read more about the Fragments of Apollinaris [here](#).

Hegesippus

What we know about Hegesippus comes from the writings of Eusebius and Jerome. Hegesippus reportedly wrote books about the tradition of Apostolic preaching, church history, and some apologia against the heresies of Marcion and the Gnostics.

You can read more about the Fragments of Hegesippus [here](#).

Rhodon

What we know about Rhodon comes from the writings of Eusebius, Philip of Side and Jerome. Rhodon wrote during the latter part of the 2nd century. Jerome said that Rhodon was a student of Tatian and wrote a polemic against the Marcions titled Solutions. Philip wrote that Rhodon was head of a Christian school in Alexandria and possibly in Pamphylia after the school moved.

You can read more about the Fragments of Rhodon [here](#).

Pantaenus of Alexandria

What we know about Pantaenus comes from the writings of Eusebius and Jerome. Pantaenus was the head of the catechetical school of Alexandria in the latter part of the 2nd century. He reportedly also traveled as a missionary and may have reached as far as India. Clement of Alexandria became head of the school after Pantaenus' death in about 200 AD.

You can read more about Pantaenus of Alexandria [here](#).

Theophilus of Caesarea

Theophilus of Caesarea was a bishop at the church of Caesarea Maritima during the latter part of the 2nd century. He was a teacher of Clement of Alexandria and also involved in the Quartodeciman controversy concerning the date of celebrating Paschal/Easter.

You can read more about Theophilus of Caesarea [here](#).

Other 2nd Century Apologists

[Bardesanes](#)

[Maximus of Jerusalem](#)

[Victor I](#)

[Serapion of Antioch](#)

3rd Century Apologists

We move now to Christian apologists of the 3rd century.

The early Christians lived during the Roman Empire. We read about the impact of the Roman government on Jesus Christ, His apostles and other disciples throughout the writings of the New Testament. As Christianity spread across the world from the 1st through 3rd centuries, followers of Christ faced the challenges of paganism and a government that became increasingly oppositional to Christianity.

Christianity and the Empire

Christians, like other people who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, had to deal with the decisions of emperors as well as local government leaders. Local opposition to Christianity was approved of by many emperors and their representatives. Some of the emperors persecuted Christians on an empire-wide basis.

Emperor Claudius

The Roman historian Suetonius mentioned early Christians in his famous work, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. In the biography of Emperor Claudius, Suetonius wrote –

“Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.” (Claudius 25, Edwards translation)

Claudius was emperor from 41-54 AD. The name “Chrestus” is believed by many scholars to be a reference to Christ and those who followed Him.

Luke wrote about the event in Acts 18 –

“And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them.” Acts 18:2

Emperor Nero

Nero became emperor of Rome after Claudius and wrongfully blamed Christians for a large fire in Rome. Suetonius mentioned Nero's treatment of Christians in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* –

“Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.” (Nero 16, Rolfe translation)

Roman historian and senator Tacitus also wrote about Nero's persecution of Christians –

“Such indeed were the precautions of human wisdom. The next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the fane and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the

hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed." *The Annals of Tacitus*, 15.44

The apostles Paul and Peter are believed to have been executed in Rome during Nero's reign (64-68 AD).

Emperor Domitian

Domitian was emperor from 81-96 AD. He believed strongly in the ancient religion of Rome, worshipping many gods, and reinstating the Imperial Cult (state divinity of emperor). Domitian persecuted Jews and Christians (possibly to a lesser extent than the Jews).

Emperor Trajan

Trajan ruled from 98-117 AD. He persecuted Jews and Christians. The Christian apologist and bishop Ignatius is believed to have been martyred during Trajan's reign, along with many other Christians.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius was emperor from 161-180 AD and allowed anti-Christian literature to be written and distributed across the empire. Christians suffered persecution during his reign and many of them were martyred, including Justin Martyr. Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyons during this time because of the martyrdom of the local bishop.

Emperor Severus

Severus was hard on Christians, but it reportedly didn't begin that way. He was emperor from 193-211 AD. Some members of Severus' household were Christians and he entrusted his young son to a Christian nurse. However, Severus issued an edict in 202 that made converting to Christianity a criminal offense. What followed was a strong persecution of Christians until Severus' death.

Emperor Maximinus

Maximinus was emperor from 235-238AD. Christian historian Eusebius wrote that a persecution against Christians during Maximinus' reign led to the exile of some bishops.

[The period of 235-284 AD is known as the Crisis of the Third Century (Imperial Crisis) when the Roman Empire came close to collapse. The empire split into competing states. Emperor Aurelian ruled from 270-275 AD and was able to reunite the Roman Empire by defeating the Palmyrenes, Vandals, Visigoths and Gallics. Aurelian was hailed as 'Restorer of the Word' and demanded that he be called 'master and god.']

Emperor Decius

Decius was emperor from 249-251 AD. He signed an edict (law) ordering everyone in the Roman Empire to sacrifice to the Roman gods and the health and well-being of the emperor. This was the first legislation forcing Christians to choose between their faith in Christ and death. Some Christians chose death, but many performed the sacrificial ceremonies and received a certificate of sacrifice (libellus) from the local sacrificial commission. Possessing a libellus cleared Christians of suspicion by the Roman government. Other Christians fled and went into hiding. This caused a serious division in the 3rd century Church because of members who had apostatized by sacrificing to Roman gods rather than dying for their faith.

Emperor Valerian

Valerian was emperor from 253-260 AD and continued the persecution against Christians. Many Church leaders were martyred (e.g. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage) during his reign including many members.

Emperor Diocletian

Diocletian ruled from 284-305 AD and pursued Christians with a vengeance toward the end of his reign (some historians believe at the urging of Galerius who was a member of the Tetrarchy). Diocletian purged the Roman Army of soldiers who were Christians and surrounded himself with

people who opposed Christianity. The anti-Christian perspective eventually led to Diocletian's and the Empire's attempt to destroy Christianity, known historically as the Great Persecution. This persecution included the arrest of Christian leaders and members, the threat of death if Christians did not make a pagan sacrifice, the outlawing of Christian meetings, the destruction of buildings owned by Christians, and the surrender of all sacred writings for burning.

Emperor Galerius

Galerius was emperor from 305-311 AD and intensified the persecution against Christians. He had a strong influence on Diocletian in the empire's persecution of Christians and took that to another level after Diocletian's death.

3rd Century Apologists

Here is a list of some of the Christian apologists we will read about during the upcoming parts of our study, A Reading Plan for Christian Apologists.

- Tertullian
- Hippolytus
- Pantaenus
- Serapion of Antioch
- Apollonius
- Caius
- Ammonius of Alexandria
- Origen
- Lucian of Antioch
- Dionysius of Alexandria
- Firmilian of Caesarea
- Commodianus
- Cyprian of Carthage
- Cornelius of Rome
- Stephen of Rome
- Dionysius of Rome
- Theognostus of Alexandria
- Gregory Thaumaturgus
- Felix of Rome
- Victorinus of Pettau
- Methodius of Olympus

- Hesychius of Egypt
- Pierius of Alexandria
- Pamphilus of Caesarea
- Arnobius of Sicca

I want to remind us of something important that we've addressed before –

“Please keep this in mind as we continue to look at the writings of Christian apologists from the 2nd century to the present day. We must be careful not to be pulled into error because of human admiration. It is easy to become enamored with men and women we like and forget that our primary responsibility is to Jesus Christ. Our job is to represent the Truth of God without turning to the left or to the right. Even a small turning away from absolute biblical truth can be catastrophic. We must maintain a straight path as we present our “defense” for Christianity.”

You will find many lineages in the Bible (also called genealogies). Genesis chapters 4, 5, 10 and 11 are examples. The first several chapters of 1 Chronicles contain one of the most extensive lineages in the Bible. Matthew 1 and Luke 3 contain the all-important genealogies of Jesus Christ. Lineage is apparently important to God.

Some of the Christian leaders of the 2nd Century AD were mentored by men who knew the Apostles of Christ. Those include Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. Others in the 2nd century were mentored by men who knew the men who were Apostles of Christ. One of the best known was Irenaeus.

The direct lineage to the teaching of the Apostles of Christ widened by the time Christianity got to the 3rd century. The persecution of the Church by the government of Rome and the many heresies swirling in and around the Church made for a challenging time for Christian apologists. In this next section about A Reading Plan for Christian Apologists we will look at some of the leading apologists of the 3rd century and what they wrote that might help us in our 21st century apologetics ministries.

As we have mentioned before, we can trust the writings of the Old and New Testament, but who we can trust after that will be more difficult to determine. The key, I believe, is in how closely the writer stays to the biblical text. That means we as Christian apologists must know the Scriptures well – very well. How else can we compare the writings of men to the Word of God? Though we can learn a great deal about early Christianity and the apologists who fought many battles in the name of Christ, we must not lose sight of the Authority of God's Word when discerning truth and error.

Hippolytus of Rome

Hippolytus was born toward the end of the 2nd century and may have been a disciple of Irenaeus. Hippolytus wrote several apologetic works including Treatise on Christ and AntiChrist, Expository Treatise Against The Jews, Against Plato On The Cause Of The Universe, Against The Heresy Of One Noetus, Against Beron And Helix, The Discourse On The Holy Theophany, Discourse On The Resurrection And Incorruption, On The Hexaemeron Or Six Days' Work, and The Refutation Of All Heresies.

Hippolytus may be known best for his ten books refuting the heresies of the early part of the third century. He wrote about the beliefs of pagans and more than 30 gnostic Christian individuals and groups. Manuscripts for eight of the books have been discovered and translated. Manuscripts for books II and III have not been found yet.

The Heresies

Hippolytus wrote about a wide variety of heretics and heresies active in the early part of the third century. They included:

- Pythagoras
- Plato
- Aristotle
- Empedocles

- Heraclitus
- Anaximander
- Anaximenes
- Anaxagoras
- Archelaus
- Parmenides
- Leucippus
- Democritus
- Xenophanes
- Ecphantus
- Brahmins
- Zamolxis
- Druids
- Hesiod
- Chaldeans
- Metoposcopists
- Magicians
- Astrologers
- Valentinus
- Simon Magus
- Ophite
- Naassenes
- Peratae
- Sethians
- Justinus
- Basilides
- Saturnilus

- Marcion of Sinope
- Carpocrates of Alexandria
- Docetae
- Monoimus
- Tatian
- Hermogenes
- Quartodecimans
- Montanus
- Encratites
- Noetus
- Jews: Pharisees and Sadducees

Book I

Here are some highlights from Book I, which is a summary of what Hippolytus addressed in his series.

“We propose to furnish an account of the tenets of natural philosophers, and who these are, as well as the tenets of moral philosophers, and who these are; and thirdly, the tenets of logicians, and who these logicians are.

Among natural philosophers may be enumerated Thales, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Archelaus, Parmenides, Leucippus, Democritus, Xenophanes, Ecphantus, Hippo.

Among moral philosophers are Socrates, pupil of Archelaus the physicist, (and) Plato the pupil of Socrates. This (speculator) combined three systems of philosophy.

Among logicians is Aristotle, pupil of Plato. He systematized the art of dialectics. Among the Stoic (logicians) were Chrysippus (and) Zeno. Epicurus, however, advanced an opinion almost contrary to all philosophers. Pyrrho was an Academic; this (speculator) taught the incomprehensibility of everything. The Brahmins among the Indians, and the Druids among the Celts, and Hesiod (devoted themselves to philosophic pursuits).” *The Refutation of All Heresies, Book I, Introduction, Translated by J.H. MacMahon*

Book IV

“Employing these accounts, (the heretics) think to deceive as many of these as devote themselves over-sedulously to the astrologers, from thence striving to construct a system of religion that is widely divergent from the thoughts of these (speculators). Wherefore, beloved, let us avoid the habit of admiring trifles, secured by which the bird (styled) the owl (is captured). For these and other such speculations are, (as it were), dancing, and not Truth. For neither do the stars yield these points of information; but men of their own accord, for the designation of certain stars, thus called them by names, in order that they might become to them easily distinguishable. For what similarity with a bear or lion, or kid, or waterman, or Cepheus, or Andromeda, or the spectres that have

names given them in Hades, have the stars that are scattered over the firmament—for we must remember that these men, and the titles themselves, came into existence long after the origin of man,— (what, I say, is in common between the two), that the heretics, astonished at the marvel, should thus strive by means of such discourses to strengthen their own opinions?” Book IV, Chapter 50

Book V

“There is also unquestionably a certain other (head of the hydra, namely, the heresy) of the Peratae, whose blasphemy against Christ has for many years escaped notice. And the present is a fitting opportunity for bringing to light the secret mysteries of such (heretics). These allege that the world is one, triply divided. And of the triple division with them, one portion is a certain single originating principle, just as it were a huge fountain, which can be divided mentally into infinite segments. Now the first segment, and that which, according to them, is (a segment) in preference (to others), is a triad, and it is called a Perfect Good, (and) a Paternal Magnitude. And the second portion of the triad of these is, as it were, a certain infinite crowd of potentialities that are generated from themselves, (while) the third is formal. And the first, which is good, is unbegotten, and the second is a self-producing good, and the third is created; and hence it is that they expressly declare that there are three Gods, three Logoi, three Minds, three Men. For to each portion of the world, after the division has been made, they assign both Gods, and Logoi, and Minds, and Men, and the rest; but that from unorigination and the first segment of the world, when afterwards the world had attained

unto its completion, there came down from above, for causes that we shall afterwards declare, in the time of Herod a certain man called Christ, with a threefold nature, and a threefold body, and a threefold power, (and) having in himself all (species of) concretions and potentialities (derivable) from the three divisions of the world; and that this, says (the Peratic), is what is spoken: "It pleased him that in him should dwell all fulness bodily," and in Him the entire Divinity resides of the triad as thus divided. For, he says, that from the two superjacent worlds—namely, from that (portion of the triad) which is unbegotten, and from that which is self-producing—there have been conveyed down into this world in which we are, seeds of all sorts of potentialities.

What, however, the mode of the descent is, we shall afterwards declare.

(The Peratic) then says that Christ descended from above from unorigination, that by His descent all things triply divided might be saved. For some things, he says, being borne down from above, will ascend through Him, whereas whatever (beings) form plots against those which are carried down from above are cast off, and being placed in a state of punishment, are renounced. This, he says, is what is spoken: "For the Son of man came not into the world to destroy the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." The world, he says, he denominates those two parts that are situated above, viz., both the unbegotten (portion of the triad), and the self-produced one. And when Scripture, he says, uses the words, "that we may not be condemned with the world," it alludes to the third portion of (the triad, that is) the formal world. For the third portion, which he styles the world

(in which we are), must perish; but the two (remaining portions), which are situated above, must be rescued from corruption.” Book V, Chapter VII

Book VI

“For also the blessed presbyter Irenaeus, having approached the subject of a refutation in a more unconstrained spirit, has explained such washings and redemptions, stating more in the way of a rough digest what are their practices. (And it appears that some of the Marcosians,) on meeting with (Irenaeus’ work), deny that they have so received (the secret word just alluded to), but they have learned that always they should deny. Wherefore our anxiety has been more accurately to investigate, and to discover minutely what are the (instructions) which they deliver in the case of the first bath, styling it by some such name; and in the case of the second, which they denominate Redemption. But not even has this secret of theirs escaped (our scrutiny). For these opinions, however, we consent to pardon Valentinus and his school.

But Marcus, imitating his teacher, himself also feigns a vision, imagining that in this way he would be magnified. For Valentinus likewise alleges that he had seen an infant child lately born; and questioning (this child), he proceeded to inquire who it might be. And (the child) replied, saying that he himself is the Logos, and then subjoined a sort of tragic legend; and out of this (Valentinus) wishes the heresy attempted by him to consist. Marcus, making a similar attempts with this (heretic), asserts that the Telrad came to him in the form of a woman,—since the world

could not bear, he says, the male (form) of this Tetrad, and that she revealed herself who she was, and explained to this (Marcus) alone the generation of the universe, which she never had revealed to any, either of gods or of men, expressing herself after this mode: When first the self-existent Father, He who is inconceivable and without substance, He who is neither male nor female, willed that His own ineffability should become realized in something spoken, and that His invisibility should become realized in form, He opened His mouth, and sent forth similar to Himself a Logos. And this (Logos) stood by Him, and showed unto Him who he was, viz., that he himself had been manifested as a (realization in) form of the Invisible One. And the pronunciation of the name was of the following description. He was accustomed to utter the first word of the name itself, which was Arche, and the syllable of this was (composed) of four letters. Then he subjoined the second (syllable), and this was also (composed) of four letters. Next he uttered the third (syllable), which was (composed) of ten letters; and he uttered the fourth (syllable), and this was (composed) of twelve letters. Then ensued the pronunciation of the entire name, (composed) of thirty letters, but of four syllables. And each of the elements had its own peculiar letters, and its own peculiar form, and its own peculiar pronunciation, as well as figures and images. And not one of these was there that beholds the form of that (letter) of which this was an element. And of course none of them could know the pronunciation of the (letter) next to this, but (only) as he himself pronounces it, (and that in such a way) as that, in pronouncing the whole (word), he supposed that he was uttering the entire (name). For each of these (elements), being part of the entire (name), he denominates (according to) its own peculiar sound, as if the whole (of

the word). And he does not intermit sounding until he arrived at the last letter of the last element, and uttered it in a single articulation. Then he said, that the restoration of the entire ensued when all the (elements), coming down into the one letter, sounded one and the same pronunciation, and an image of the pronunciation he supposed to exist when we simultaneously utter the word Amen. And that these sounds are those which gave form to the insubstantial and unbegotten Aeon, and that those forms are what the Lord declared to be angels—the (forms) that uninterruptedly behold the face of the Father.” Book VI, Chapter XXXVII

Book VII

“Basilides, therefore, and Isidorus, the true son and disciple of Basilides, say that Matthias communicated to them secret discourses, which, I being specially instructed, he heard from the Saviour. Let us, then, see how clearly Basilides, simultaneously with Isidorus, and the entire band of these (heretics), not only absolutely belies Matthias, but even the Saviour Himself.

(Time) was, says (Basilides), when there was nothing. Not even, however, did that nothing constitute anything of existent things; but, to express myself undisguisedly and candidly, and without any quibbling, it is altogether nothing. But when, he says, I employ the expression “was,” I do not say that it was; but (I speak in this way) in order to signify the meaning of what I wish to elucidate. I affirm then, he says, that it was “altogether nothing.” For, he says, that is not absolutely ineffable which

is named,—although undoubtedly we call this ineffable,—but that which is “non-ineffable.” For that which is “non-ineffable” is not denominated ineffable, but is, he says, above every name that is named. For, he says, by no means for the world are these names sufficient, but so manifold are its divisions that there is a deficiency (of names). And I do not take it upon myself to discover, he says, proper denominations for all things. Undoubtedly, however, one ought mentally, not by means of names, to conceive, after an ineffable manner, the peculiarities (of things) denominated. For an equivocal terminology, (when employed by teachers,) has created for their pupils confusion and a source of error concerning objects. (The Basilidians), in the first instance, laying hold on this borrowed and furtively derived tenet from the Peripatetic (sage), play upon the folly of those who herd together with them. For Aristotle, born many generations before Basilides, first lays down a system in *The Categories* concerning homonymous words. And these heretics bring this (system) to light as if it were peculiarly their own, and as if it were some novel (doctrine), and some secret disclosure from the discourses of Matthias.” Book VII, Chapter VIII

Book VIII

“Since the great body of (the heretics) do not employ the counsel of the Lord, by having the beam in the eye, and announce that they see when in reality labouring under blindness, it seems to us expedient in no wise to be silent concerning the tenets of these. Our object is, that by the refutation accomplished by us, the (heretics), being of themselves ashamed, may be brought to know how the Saviour has advised (men)

first to take away the beam, then to behold clearly the mote that is in thy brother's eye. Having therefore adequately and sufficiently explained the doctrines of the majority (of the heretics) in the seven books before this, we shall not now be silent as regards the (heterodox) opinions that follow (from these). We shall by this means exhibit the abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit; and we shall refute those (who suppose) that they have acquired steadfastness of doctrine, when it is only in appearance. Now these have styled themselves Docetae, and propound the following opinions:- (The Docetae maintain) that God is the primal (Being), as it were a seed of a fig-tree, which is altogether very diminutive in size, but infinite in power. (This seed constitutes, according to the Docetae,) a lowly magnitude, incalculable in multitude, (and) labouring under no deficiency as regards generation. (This seed is) a refuge for the terror-stricken, a shelter of the naked, a veil for modesty, (and) the sought-for produce, to which He came in search (for fruit), he says, three times, and did not discover (any). Wherefore, he says, He cursed the fig-tree, because He did not find upon it that sweet fruit—the sought-for produce. And inasmuch as the Deity is, according to them to express myself briefly—of this description and so great, that is, small and minute, the world, as it seems to them, was made in some such manner as the following: When the branches of the fig-tree became tender, leaves budded (first), as one may (generally) see, and next in succession the fruit. Now, in this (fruit) is preserved treasured the infinite and incalculable seed of the fig-tree. We think, therefore, (say the Docetae,) that there are three (parts) which are primarily produced by the seed of the fig-tree, (viz.,) stem, which constitutes the fig-tree, leaves, and fruit—the fig itself, as we have previously declared. In this

manner, the (Docetic) affirms, have been produced three AEons, which are principles from the primal originating cause of the universe. And Moses has not been silent on this point, when he says, that there are three words of God, “darkness, gloom, tempest, and added no more.” For the (Docetic) says, God has made no addition to the three AEons; but these, in every respect, have been sufficient for (the exigencies of) those who have been begotten and are sufficient. God Himself, however, remains with Himself, far separated froth the three AEons. When each of these AEons had obtained an originating cause of generation, he grew, as has been declared, by little and little, and (by degrees) was magnified, and (ultimately) became perfect. But they think that that is perfect which is reckoned at ten. When, therefore, the AEons had become equal in number and in perfection, they were, as (the Docetae) are of opinion, constituted thirty AEons in all, while each of them attains full perfection in a decade. And the three are mutually distinct, and hold one (degree of) honour relatively to one another, differing in position merely, because one of them is first, and the other second, and the other of these third. Position, however, afforded them diversity of power. For he who has obtained a position nearest to the primal Deity—who is, as it were, a seed—possessed a more productive power than the rest, inasmuch as he himself who is the immeasurable one, measured himself tenfold in bulk. He, however, who in position is second to the primal Deity, has, inasmuch as he is the incomprehensible one, comprehended himself sixfold. But he who is now third in position is conveyed to an infinite distance, in consequence of the dilatation of his brethren. (And when this third AEon) had thrice realized himself in

thought, he encircled himself with, as it were, some eternal chain of union.” Book VIII, Chapter I

Book IX

“There has appeared one, Noetus by name, and by birth a native of Smyrna. This person introduced a heresy from the tenets of Heraclitus. Now a certain man called Epigonus becomes his minister and pupil, and this person during his sojourn at Rome disseminated his godless opinion. But Cleomenes, who had become his disciple, an alien both in way of life and habits from the Church, was wont to corroborate the (Noetian) doctrine. At that time, Zephyrinus imagines that he administers the affairs of the Church –an uninformed and shamefully corrupt man. And he, being persuaded by proffered gain, was accustomed to connive at those who were present for the purpose of becoming disciples of Cleomenes. But (Zephyrinus) himself, being in process of time enticed away, hurried headlong into the same opinions; and he had Callistus as his adviser, and a fellow-champion of these wicked tenets. But the life of this (Callistus), and the heresy invented by him, I shall after a little explain. The school of these heretics during the succession of such bishops, continued to acquire strength and augmentation, from the fact that Zephyrinus and Callistus helped them to prevail. Never at any time, however, have we been guilty of collusion with them; but we have frequently offered them opposition, and have refuted them, and have forced them reluctantly to acknowledge the truth. And they, abashed and constrained by the truth, have confessed their errors for a short period,

but after a little, wallow once again in the same mire.” Book IX, Chapter II

Book X

“But Theodotus of Byzantium introduced a heresy of the following description, alleging that all things were created by the true God; whereas that Christ, he states, in a manner similar to that advocated by the Gnostics already mentioned, made His appearance according to some mode of this description. And Theodotus affirms that Christ is a man of a kindred nature with all men, but that He surpasses them in this respect, that, according to the counsel of God, He had been born of a virgin, and the Holy Ghost had overshadowed His mother. This heretic, however, maintained that Jesus had not assumed flesh in the womb of the Virgin, but that afterwards Christ descended upon Jesus at His baptism in form of a dove. And from this circumstance, the lowers of Theodotus affirm that at first miraculous powers did not acquire operating energy in Saviour Himself. Theodotus, however, determines to deny the divinity of Christ. Now, opinions of this description were advaned by Theodotus.” Book X, Chapter XIX

“Such is the true doctrine in regard of the divine nature, O ye men, Greeks and Barbarians, Chaldeans and Assyrians, Egyptians and Libyans, Indians and Ethiopians, Celts, and ye Latins, who lead armies, and all ye that inhabit Europe, and Asia, and Libya. And to you I am become an adviser, inasmuch as I am a disciple of the benevolent Logos, and hence humane, in order that you may hasten and by us may

be taught who the true God is, and what is His well-ordered creation. Do not devote your attention to the fallacies of artificial discourses, nor the vain promises of plagiarizing heretics, but to the venerable simplicity of unassuming truth. And by means of this knowledge you shall escape the approaching threat of the fire of judgment, and the rayless scenery of gloomy Tartarus, where never shines a beam from the irradiating voice of the Word!

You shall escape the boiling flood of hell's eternal lake of fire and the eye ever fixed in menacing glare of fallen angels chained in Tartarus as punishment for their sins; and you shall escape the worm that ceaselessly coils for food around the body whose scum has bred it. Now such (torments) as these shall thou avoid by being instructed in a knowledge of the true God. And thou shalt possess an immortal body, even one placed beyond the possibility of corruption, just like the soul. And thou shalt receive the kingdom of heaven, thou who, whilst thou didst sojourn in this life, didst know the Celestial King. And thou shalt be a companion of the Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by lusts or passions, and never again wasted by disease. For thou hast become God: for whatever sufferings thou didst undergo while being a man, these He gave to thee, because thou wast of mortal mould, but whatever it is consistent with God to impart, these God has promised to bestow upon thee, because thou hast been deified, and begotten unto immortality. This constitutes the import of the proverb, "Know thyself;" i.e., discover God within thyself, for He has formed thee after His own image. For with the knowledge of self is conjoined the being an object of God's knowledge, for thou art called by the Deity Himself. Be not

therefore inflamed, O ye men, with enmity one towards another, nor hesitate to retrace with all speed your steps. For Christ is the God above all, and He has arranged to wash away sin from human beings, rendering regenerate the old man. And God called man His likeness from the beginning, and has evinced in a figure His love towards thee. And provided thou obeyest His solemn injunctions, and becomest a faithful follower of Him who is good, thou shall resemble Him, inasmuch as thou shall have honour conferred upon thee by Him.

For the Deity, (by condescension,) does not diminish aught of the divinity of His divine perfection; having made thee even God unto His glory.”
Book X, Chapter XXX

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