

Curren Mehta

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Analysis of “The Epistle to Diognetus” and “To Scapula”

The 1-3rd Centuries CE was one of the most important time periods in the history of Christianity. It was in this period that Christianity began to establish itself with the Roman Empire and shift towards a Greco-Roman cultural context, rather than one defined by Judaism. In this period, Christians found themselves having to constantly defend their identity and refute other religions in an attempt to remain faithful to God and to avoid persecution. The two texts *The Epistle to Diognetus*, and *To Scapula* examine different responses to the Roman persecution of Christians. The former text attempts to explain to the Romans, who are apparently curious about Christianity, why other religions are foolish and wrong and why they should adopt Christianity as the correct religion; the latter is slightly harsher and gives a warning to the Romans as to what will happen if they continue to kill Christians rather than accept the Christian God.

In *The Epistle to Diognetus*, widely regarded as one of the first Christian apologies, the anonymous author, who refers to himself as “Mathētēs”, makes the claim that Christianity is the only correct religion by disproving the validity of, and illuminating the foolishness in, other religions. Addressing Diognetus, Mathētēs begins the epistle by discussing the foolishness of the Roman pagan religion. He describes how Roman idols are nothing more than pieces of metal, steel, and wood that can be made by any craftsman. He also talks about how the Roman method of worshiping gods, offering them blood and pure fat, is actually torturous and insulting. Taking it further, Mathētēs describes how the

insulting worship is irrelevant because the Roman gods don't have feelings, considering they are just pieces of metal, wood etc.

Mathētēs then describes what he believes to be the foolishness of Judaism. He describes how the Jews confuse the word of God by morphing it something that it isn't. Mathētēs questions how some of the things that God created for men can be deemed as "good", while others are deemed as "bad". Mathētēs further illuminates his belief that Judaism is foolish by explaining how Jews prevent themselves from doing even good deeds on the "special" Sabbath day, and how the Jews are foolish enough to believe the word of God can be interpreted through the movement of the stars and heavenly bodies.

After disproving the validity of the other two main religions of the time, Roman paganism and Judaism, Mathētēs finishes his epistle by proving the validity of Christianity as the correct religion. He first offers insight into the background and lives of Christians, through an extended analogy relating Christians to the soul of a body, and then goes on to describe some basic tenants of Christianity, including how God sent down His Child to forgive the mortal Christians from bondage of sin. Mathētēs ends the epistle with a powerful message, based on his proof of the validity of Christianity, that Romans should take up Christianity and accept God.

Throughout the text, Mathētēs makes certain assumptions. First, Mathētēs assumes that Diognetus, and the Romans, are anxious and curious about Christianity. Mathētēs writes, "I perceive...that you are exceedingly zealous to learn of the religion of the Christians." This is a major assumption because many Romans wanted nothing to do with Christianity and wanted to cast it off as a "mystery cult", but Mathētēs bases the style of his epistle on his belief that the Diognetus, and the Romans, are eager to learn

about Christianity, and that they are reading the epistle with an open mind to religion. In addition, this essay provides very little context for historians. We are given no indication on the specifics of when this piece was written, and we are given no information on who the author or who the recipient are. This makes it difficult for historians for use this epistle to paint a picture of the religion in the Roman Empire at a certain time because they are not given any context, however despite this, this epistle is still a widely respected primary source believed to be one of the first Christian apologies.

Mathētēs wrote this epistle at a time of great transition in Christianity, when Christianity was shifting from a Jewish cultural context to a Greco-Roman one. At this time, as Christianity was being introduced to the Roman Empire, Roman elites threw Christianity into a pile of other “mystery cults” and often thought of it as barbaric. Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire because unlike members of other “mystery cults”, Christians refused to also pay worship to main Roman pagan gods, which was a requirement of the Roman Empire. Christian apologist writers, such as Mathētēs, began to write apologies at this time as a result of the persecution that Christians faced in an attempt to prove the validity of Christianity and convince the Roman Empire that Christianity was not just another “mystery cult”.

In Tertullian’s, *To Scapula*, Tertullian writes a letter from Carthage to Scapula, the Roman proconsul of Africa. Tertullian begins his letter with a background on the Christian faith and the relationship between Christians and God, in an attempt to justify that charges of “sacrilege and treason” against the Roman Empire. Tertullian writes how the letter isn’t a plead for forgiveness by Christians, for the actions of the Christians are simply reflective of Christians following the will of God. However, this letter is a

warning for the Romans and those who persecute the Christians, for they will be punished by God. Like Mathētēs, Tertullian finds fault with the Roman system of worship, saying that everyone is entitled to his/her own religious beliefs, but people should not force others to follow in their religion (i.e. Roman paganism). Tertullian claims that the Romans are incorrect in worshipping their pagan gods, and that the Christian God is the true God, however, they are just not aware of it yet. Tertullian explains to Scapula that God sees all actions, and that a person cannot hide himself or his actions from God. He further explains that the Romans are severely mistaken in trying to please their fake gods and their emperors, for the emperors and leaders will die as all humans do, but Christianity will live on forever, and eventually each person will have to face his/her punishment or reward from God.

Tertullian wrote this text at a time of immense hardship for Christianity and for Christians in general. Christianity, as a religion, was given no respect in the Roman Empire, and was often viewed as a “mystery cult” sect. The Romans tolerated Christianity as an off-sect of Judaism but when Christians refused to worship the Roman pagan gods in addition to the Christian worship, Roman emperors slaughtered thousands of Christians attempting to set an example and force Christians to accept the Roman pagan gods as well. However when this did not work, and Christians let themselves be killed rather than compromise their relationship with God, the situation got even more tense. It was during this tumultuous time period that Tertullian wrote his letter to Scapula, in an attempt to both convince him to convert and/or accept Christianity and God, and also to explain to him that Christians were going to accept death rather than give up their religious faith because of the promise of a better afterlife from God.

This letter presents an interesting viewpoint that historians can study when attempting to gain a better understanding of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Tertullian's viewpoint sums up the main ideas of the early Christian martyrs as to why people would rather die than convert to another faith than Christianity, especially considering Christianity was a relatively new religion at this time. Historians studying how Christianity was able to grow so rapidly in this time period, even considering that Christians were often persecuted and killed, need to understand this article and realize that many people considering converting to Christianity in the 1-3rd centuries CE didn't fear death because they knew that if they remained faithful to God then they would be rewarded in the afterlife.

Both these texts, *To Scapula* and *The Epistle to Diognetus*, share similar traits with other primary texts that we have studying in this class. For example, *First Apology*, by Justin Martyr aims to convince Roman emperors and elites that Christianity is the true, correct religion, which separate from the other mystery cults. Similar to both texts, *First Apology* describes the Roman pagan worship practices and how Christians only offer proper offerings worthy of a God rather than offering the disgusting blood and steamed fat that the Romans offer their gods.

Although written in the same time period, *To Scapula* and *The Epistle to Diognetus* are two very different writings *The Epistle to Diognetus* is focused on converting the Romans to Christianity through disproving the validity of other religions by demonstrating their foolish practices *The Epistle to Diognetus* has a friendlier tone, with Mathētēs assuming that people are eager to learn about Christianity and are willing to listen to him with an open mind. On the other hand, *To Scapula* has a much harsher

tone. Although, like *The Epistle to Diognetus* part of the paper is used to prove the validity of Christianity as the only correct religion, the tone is harsher because Tertullian spends much of the letter warning all the Romans that God has seen their actions and that they will be punished accordingly.