



[Justin Martyr, Second Apology I-II](#)

Appeal for reform in trials of Christians

Name of the author: Justin Martyr

Date: 153 CE

Place: Rome

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic

Title of work: Second Apology

Reference: I-II

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Justin and the *Apologies*, please see the commentary on *First Apology* [IV.1-V.4](#).

Pliny, in his [Letters to Trajan X.96.5](#), considers that failing any other evidence of criminal activity, simply one's refusal to give up the name "Christian" could be enough to prosecute. Trajan seems to agree with him on this point – a lapsed Christian who is willing to abandon this name can be set free. This is a situation which Justin is unhappy with, and one which he attempts to remedy through his *Apologies*. He draws at the end of his *First Apology* on the rescript of Hadrian to Minucius Fundanus, the proconsul of Asia, which stated that Christians should only be punished after they had been given a legal Roman trial (see Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 45). This topic forms the basis for the passage quoted above, which begins the *Second Apology*. The *Second Apology* is much shorter than the first, and apparently written in response to a specific event which had outraged Justin. The dating of the *Second Apology* relies on that of the *First Apology*, in which he appears to refer to the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132-135 CE as a relatively recent event (31.6). Based on the prominence of Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus in the *First Apology*, Denis Minns and Paul Parvis estimate 153 CE (the year of his quaestorship) as an approximate date (*Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 32, 44), meaning that the *Second Apology* must have been composed shortly after, as it is thought that Justin was martyred in Rome after a trial before Quintus Iunius Rusticus, the urban prefect between 164 and 168 CE.

In the first two chapters of this text, quoted above, Justin narrates the story of a woman who having become a Christian was no longer comfortable with the immoral behaviours of her husband. Deciding that their differences were probably irreconcilable, she wished to divorce her spouse, but was encouraged by her friends for a certain period of time not to go through with this. Eventually, however, she petitioned her husband for divorce when her Christian way of life became so obviously incompatible with her marriage that it was unbearable for her (for a consideration of the issues surrounding divorce in Roman legislation, particularly the terms for divorce/separation that Justin uses here, see Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 275; it is argued that while a *repudium* – the Latin technical term used for "divorce" here by Justin – was more frequently requested by the man, and a *divortium* by the woman, this was not absolute). Her husband, however, did not take kindly to this, and brought accusations against his wife before the Roman emperor. Failing to substantiate any charges against her, however, he changed tactics, and turned his attention to the Christian teacher, Ptolemaeus/Ptolemy, whom he believed had turned his wife against him. The husband charged Ptolemy with being a Christian, and subsequently, the urban prefect Quintus Lollius Urbicus (prefect between 146 and 160 CE, having previously been a legate of Hadrian in the Judaean expedition of 133-135 CE, and governor of Lower Germany and Britain) sentenced him and two others to death. Some scholars have identified the woman's teacher, Ptolemy, as the Valentinian Christian teacher, who also taught in Rome at this time, partly because both he and Justin's character offer teaching on divorce. This has led Peter Lampe to also identify the unnamed woman as the "Flora" to whom the Valentinian Ptolemy wrote a letter preserved in Epiphanius's *Medicine Chest (Panarion)*, XXXIII.3-7 (see Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, p. 237-240). This, however, remains speculative. Justin may not have named the woman for fear of repercussions upon her within the Christian community owing to her questionable past, or he may simply not have known it.

Justin claims that Urbicus's actions are being replicated elsewhere in the empire by those in positions of authority



(I.1), and appeals to his addressees in anticipation that they will sympathise with his desire for reform in the way that Christians are treated by Roman authorities. The manuscript adds a specific address to “Romans,” but it is likely that this was inserted later, after the *Second Apology* was identified as a separate document in the manuscript tradition, in an attempt to explain the second-person pronouns in this section; the redactor imagines that Justin addresses the entire Roman people, but if we understand the two *Apologies* as an originally connected work, then the emperor and his adopted sons, who are addressed explicitly in the *First Apology*, can be understood as the addressees here also (see (see Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 271). I.2 explains these unjust undertakings by governors by affirming that they are under the influence of demonic spirits, inciting them to make wicked decisions against the Christians: “and the evil demons, who hate us, and who keep such men as these subject to themselves, and serving them in the capacity of judges, incite them, as rulers actuated by evil spirits, to put us to death.” This connection of Roman authorities with demonic beings is a common motif in early-Christian literature. The *Apocryphon of James*, for instance, explains the threat of Christian persecution as the work of Satan, the “evil one,” and the Gospel of Matthew understands the entirety of Rome’s power and dominion to be under the control of Satan ([Matthew 4:1-11](#)). For Justin, however, it must be qualified that he does not view the entire Roman legal system as evil or unjust; his frustration at the treatment of Christians stems partly from the fact that he is dissatisfied with the seemingly arbitrary charges that are often brought against them – i.e. just claiming the name “Christian” –, when for any other legal case more substantial evidence of wrongdoing would be required (see the introductory discussion above). His comments in this opening passage, therefore, indicate that certain governors have become corrupt at the hands of demonic forces, and Justin wishes for a higher authority to be made aware, presumably with the hope of the situation being rectified.

The husband’s actions against Ptolemy proceed as follows, after, Justin tells us, the emperor has granted the woman’s petition to arrange her financial affairs before answering the charges levelled against her regarding her Christianity (II.7). The husband manages to persuade a centurion friend of his to arrest Ptolemy, and ask him if he would admit to being a Christian (compare the formal question posed by Pliny to his subjects, *Letters to Trajan*, X.96.3). Ptolemy, being invested in the truth, readily confesses as such and is imprisoned by the centurion. When he is eventually brought before Urbicus, the urban prefect, the question is repeated, and he once again confesses his faith (II.12-13). In the *First Apology* (IV.4), Justin implies that it is only Christians who are punished prior to being convicted of wrongdoing (i.e. admitting to the name “Christian”), unlike other criminals, and here we are told that Ptolemy is punished in prison for a long time before his formal trial before Urbicus (II.11) (Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 277). However, it does not seem that Ptolemy’s punishment process involved attempts to get him to recant (for examples of this process, see for instance, the texts and commentaries on the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the [Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#)) – if it did, we are not informed as such, and this would seem a powerful detail for Justin to include in order to further prove the steadfastness and integrity of his Christian subject, adding to his praise of the “true Christian” in II.14.

Section II.16 opens with a question posed to Urbicus by another Christian called Lucius, asking why he has allowed a man convicted of no real crime (such as adultery, murder, or theft) to be executed simply for claiming the name of “Christian.” Lucius is promptly also led away to execution, along with another unidentified Christian. This episode emphasises that Justin’s main bone of contention is not with the Roman legal system per se, or its right to punish those who do wrong, but the abuse of it by governors who pass empty, unjust convictions. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that Urbicus commits an act of impiety which brings shame upon the emperor, his son, and the holy Senate. The “holy Senate and the whole People of the Romans” is included in the address of the *First Apology* in the manuscript, but this is likely to be an editorial edition. While “The holy Senate” was found on bronze coins minted in Asia Minor, and was often coupled with the imperial household or the Roman People in inscriptions, it was not usual to address a petition such as Justin’s to the Senate or the whole Roman People. Minns and Parvis argue that the adjective “holy” is used of the Senate here in II.16 to highlight the stark contrast between the piety of Antoninus Pius, the Senate, and his adopted son Marcus’s philosophy, and the expressly impious, unjust action of the prefect Urbicus (for examples of coins and inscriptions referring to the Senate, see Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 35-36). By appealing to the imperial virtues of the emperor and his Senate, Justin’s text seeks to win favour for Christians by bestowing honour upon Rome’s governing authorities and the system over which they preside. The implication is that piety and sound judgement are virtues which Justin firmly respects in the emperor, and understands to be defining qualities of the Roman legal system, yet are under threat from misguided governors such as Urbicus.

Keywords in the original language:



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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Antoninus Pius](#)
- [honor](#)
- [impiety](#)
- [piety](#)
- [prosecution](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman Senate](#)
- [urban prefect](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness

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Text



[The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#)

The record of the trial of a group of Christians in Carthage

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Text

[Pliny the Younger, Letters X.96-97](#)

Pliny's correspondence with the Emperor Trajan regarding how to deal with Christians.

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