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**“TRADITIONLESS SUPERSTITION”:  
HISTORICAL NOVELTY  
AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS**

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**Abstract:** To be disinterested in any historically approved tradition while also promoting oneself as a new, exclusive religion in terms of soteriology was something quite unacceptable to the mindset of antiquity. Nevertheless, this is exactly how Christianity was perceived in the *Imperium Romanum* as a historical novelty, an anti-traditional, ethnically unrooted, overbearing, and in fact superstitious religious movement which, to say the least, was a disturbing and subversive social phenomenon. Given the seriousness of these perceptions and accusations made by both pagans and Jews, early Christian apologetics focused on several key topics that lie in the background of this issue. First of all, apologetics focused on relativizing an alleged contradiction between the historically new and the truth. Moreover, they worked on a reinterpretation of the term new in the context of the Christian relationship to the Old Testament tradition and especially to its prophecies. Also, early Christian theology made it clear that novelty actually represented the timeliness of the divine revelation, as implied by the term *καιρός* in relation to the incarnation of the Logos. Moreover, this should not be understood in terms of the protological, but rather in terms of an eschatological perspective. Interpreted in this way, Christianity manifests itself as simultaneously old and new, as a phenomenon that inevitably bases its existence on an appreciation of History, within which the successive divine epiphanies took place and tradition (old and new) formed in connection with these epiphanies.

**Keywords:** Historical novelty, antiquity, Golden Age, truth, tradition, religion, superstition, Old Testament, proof from prophecy, *καιρός*.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the accusations against the early Christians articulated the position that Christianity was a *new* historical phenomenon that was not deeply rooted in historical traditions, or that it had completely severed ties with such traditions.<sup>1</sup> To

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<sup>1</sup> The position on this matter depended, to some extent, on whether the accusation was made by pagans or by followers of Judaism. Види: Jacobsen 2009: 85–110. For other reasons and excuses for the disparagement and

the contemporary eye, this accusation about the recent origin of a social phenomenon does not seem particularly serious, simply because respect for antiquity and tradition is significantly less present in the modern mentality than it was in the Old World. In classical times, if something was older, it was more respected. This is also a common perspective in our contemporary reflections on the culture of that time.<sup>2</sup> What was ancient and had withstood the test of time for several centuries, had an advantage in relation to that which was new or recent, and consequently, still untested by the experience of historical trials and turmoil.<sup>3</sup> The customs of ancestors in Roman culture,<sup>4</sup> for example, was a crucial concept for the preservation of traditional values. It had to be respected and transmitted through generations as a norm that compensated for the shortcomings of written laws, and had paramount value, and disciplinary and practical prerogatives. In his *Library of History*, Diodorus Siculus (Διόδωρος Σικελιώτης, 90-30 BC), an ancient Greek historian and writer, offered a concise description of the ancient mentality and its fascination with antiquity as a crucial foundation of identity:

“Again, with respect to the antiquity of the human race, not only do Greeks put forth their claims but many of the barbarians as well, all holding that it is they who are autochthonous (ἐαυτοὺς αὐτόχθονας λέγοντες) and the first of all men to discover the things which are of use in life, and that it was the events in their own history which were the earliest (ἐαυτοὺς αὐτόχθονας λέγοντες) to have been held worthy of record”.<sup>5</sup>

Fascination with ancient times was certainly linked to the widespread myth of a so-called Golden Age belonging to a fictitious, ancient historical past. More specifically, the Golden Age signified the notion of a mythological period at the beginnings of humanity, which was glorified as an ideal existential condition, when humanity was supposedly morally blameless, carefree, and all its needs were easily met due to universal abundance and fertility. This kind of representation is vividly depicted in Hesiod's poetry:

Golden was the race (χρύσειον μὲν πρότιστα γένος) of speech-endowed human beings which the immortals, who have their mansions on Olympus, made first of all ... just like gods they spent their lives (ὥστε θεοὶ δ' ἔζωον), with a spirit free from care, entirely apart from toil and distress. Worthless old age did not oppress them, but they were always the same in their feet and hands, and delighted in festivities, lacking in all evils; and they died as if overpowered by sleep. They had all good things (ἔσθλα δὲ πάντα τοῖσιν ἔην): the grain-giving field bore crops of its own accord, much and unstinting, and they themselves, willing, mild-mannered, shared out the fruits of their labors together with many good things, wealthy in sheep, dear to the blessed gods.<sup>6</sup>

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persecution of early Christians in the Roman Empire, see: Croix 1963: 6-38; Hargis 2001: 1–16.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Edlund-Berry 2014: 321–325. For a more comprehensive overview of the construction of the value system in the Old World in a multicultural perspective, see: Papadopoulos, Urton (eds.): 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on respect for antiquity, see Peter Pilhofer's comprehensive study. He provides a detailed account of the connections between Greco-Roman, Judaic, and early Christian intellectual history in the context of this topic. Herodotus' historiography, for example, tended to enhance the reputation of Greek history and culture by showing its supposed multiple connections with ancient Egypt and the wisdom that characterized its ancient culture. An argument like this provided Christian apologists with pre-existing paradigms for proving antiquity. Pilhofer 1990: 34–49.

<sup>4</sup> Summarized by concepts such as: *mos maiorum*, *mos patrius*, *mos antiquus*, *mos traditus a patribus*, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist.* 1.9.3; Oldfather (transl.) 1989<sup>4</sup>: 32–33.

<sup>6</sup> Hes. *Op.* 109–126; Most (transl.) 2006: 96–97. Cf. Baldry 1952: 83–92.

Within the setting of such an understanding of the mythological, romantic “Golden Age”, each successively younger historical period was perceived as a departure from original chastity and abundance.<sup>7</sup> Each subsequent epoch represented a decline and degradation in comparison to the original perfection.

## 2. Religion and Antiquity

In this context, the accusation that Christianity was a new religion, lacking in roots or respect for ancient traditions, sounded extremely serious and discrediting in Roman society, which greatly respected tradition and antiquity, but also, for the most part, tolerated religious pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, after initially being identified with Judaism,<sup>9</sup> which was tolerated to a considerable extent *due to its antiquity*, Christians in the Roman Empire were increasingly perceived as a religious community that had broken ties with Jewish piety.<sup>10</sup> The conviction that Christians had parted ways with their own Jewish tradition is discussed, for example, in Origen's polemic with the philosopher Celsus.<sup>11</sup> Citing Jewish objections to their compatriots who had converted to Christianity, this philosopher accused Christians of disrespecting their own paternal traditions and deviating from their own heritage.<sup>12</sup> Answers to similar accusations can be found in Tertullian<sup>13</sup> and Lactantius among others.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> About the so-called “primitive man” see in: Boys-Stones 2001: 1–27.

<sup>8</sup> Smallwood 1976: 124.

<sup>9</sup> The Jews resided in many cities of the Roman Empire and were easily recognizable by specific religious traditions, related to their own calendar, dietary regulations, and denial of pagan religions. However, their relatively small interest in proselytizing and converting their contemporaries and fellow citizens to their religion, additionally marked them as a religious community that differs from Christianity. See: Cohen 1989: 13–33, 20; North 2000: 72. For more information on missionary tendencies in Judaism, see: Bird 2010: 77–132; Goodman 1992: 53–78; Feldman 1992: 24–37; Riesner 2000: 211–20; Bedell 1998: 21–29; Paget 1996: 65–103; Dickson 2003: 11–85.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus recorded that the Jews could boast of the antiquity of their religious traditions and the wisdom associated with them, to the extent that even the great Pythagoras is said to have admired it. “Pythagoras the Samian... not only knew about our customs but was also especially keen in his emulation of them” (Πυθαγόρας τοῖνον ὁ Σάμιος... οὐ μόνον ἐγνωκῶς τὰ παρ' ἡμῖν δῆλός ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ζηλωτὴς αὐτῶν ἐκ πλείστου γεγενημένος), Joseph. *Ap.* 1.162.1–1.163.1; Barclay (transl.) 2007: 95–96. In addition, the narratives that even Alexander the Great offered gifts and sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple to the Jewish God greatly strengthened the reputation of the Jewish people and their religion. Cohen 1989: 16.

<sup>11</sup> Wilken 1984: 112–117. Julian the Apostate even held that Christian deviation from Judaism was actually the most vulnerable point in their system of thought and action. See: Jul. *Gal.*, 163233. Cf. Riedweg 2020: 245–266.

<sup>12</sup> “What happened to you, citizens, that you abandoned the law of our fathers ... (Τί παθόντες, ὦ πολῖται, κατελίπετε τὸν πάτριον νόμον...)”, Origen. *Cels.* 2.1.66–2.1.70.

<sup>13</sup> “Now, first, when you bring against us the general charge of breaking away from the institutions of our forefathers ... (Iam primo quod in nos generali accusatione dirigitis, *diuortium ab institutis maiorum* ...)”, Tert. *Ad nat.* 10.3.

<sup>14</sup> “... and to ensure that the Christians too, who had abandoned the way of life of their ancestors (*qui parentum suorum reliquerant sectam*), should return to a sound frame of mind; for in some way such self-will had come upon these same Christians, such folly had taken hold of them, that they no longer followed those usages of the ancients (*non illa veterum instituta sequerentur*) which their own ancestors perhaps had first instituted, but, simply following their own judgement and pleasure, they were making up for themselves the laws which they were to observe and were gathering various groups of people together in various places”, Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 34; Creed (transl.) 1984: 52–53.

As confirmation that such an opinion existed even before, although promoted mainly by Jewish contemporaries, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca. 150–160), Justin the Philosopher presents the words of condemnation addressed to him by his interlocutor:

But this is what we are most puzzled about, that you who claim to be pious and believe yourselves to be different from the others do not segregate yourselves from them, nor do you observe a manner of life different from that of the Gentiles, for *you do not keep the feasts or Sabbaths, nor do you practice the rite of circumcision...* But you, forthwith, *scorn this covenant, spurn the commands* that come afterwards, and then you try to convince us that you know God, when you fail to do those things that every God-fearing person would do. [emphasis added]<sup>15</sup>

The severity of Trypho’s accusation seems to be supported by the choice of terminology in the previous verse, which further reinforces his irony. Trypho speaks here of the wonderful and exalted “precepts” (τὰ παραγγέλματα) that can be found in the “so-called Gospel” (ἐν τῷ λεγομένῳ εὐαγγελίῳ), which would seem to be so wonderful and exalted because no one can fulfill them - and it is impossible to fulfill them because they were deliberately made not in accordance with normal human capacities but allegedly in accordance with extreme ascetic imperatives. Or alternatively, in order to intensify his irony and make his disparagement of Christians more visible, Trypho chooses the term τὰ παραγγέλματα, even though it can be found only once in the texts of the Septuagint (1 Sam 22:14), nowhere in the New Testament, and only once in Justin himself, in this very place. The regulations and commandments of Old Testament Law are indicated mainly by these approximately synonymous terms: τὰ ἐντάλματα (commandments), τὰ ἐντεταλμένα (commands), τὰ προστάγματα (orders, commands), τὰ νομῖμα (customs, habits, institutions, usages), τὰ διαταχθέντα (commands, prescriptions), and αἱ ἐντολαί (commandments, injunctions). What Trypho was quite possibly drawing attention to was their allegedly conscious and erroneous disregard of the importance of Mosaic Law, which was essentially a rejection of their own sacred historical tradition.

### 3. The Relationship between Historical Novelty and Truth

The mindset of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds perceived historical novelty as lacking a foundation in old traditions and devoid of wisdom. It also grappled with a fundamental question: Is it even possible for something new to also be true? For the early Christian apologetic theology of the second century, this was a topic of exceptional importance. More specifically, if one accepts the thesis that what is new *ipso facto* cannot be true, on what grounds is it possible to establish a Christian mission at all? In other words, how is it even possible to achieve a successful kerygma (κήρυγμα) of the Gospel, if new and true are viewed as mutually exclusive? In this context, it was obvious that the task of Christian theology and the success of the Christian mission depended largely on the ability to relativize, or even show it to be completely false. This endeavor was even more urgent considering the fact that

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<sup>15</sup> “Μήτε τὰ σάββατα τηρεῖν μήτε τὴν περιτομὴν ἔχειν ... ταύτης οὖν τῆς διαθήκης εὐθέως καταφρονήσαντες ὑμεῖς ἀμελεῖτε καὶ τῶν ἑπειτα, καὶ πείθειν ἡμᾶς ἐπιχειρεῖτε ὡς εἰδότες τὸν θεόν”, Justin. *Dial.* 10.3–4.

Christianity was perceived not only as a new religion, but also as an “exclusive” religion, or rather a religion that aspires not simply to reveal a partial metaphysical truth but which also claims to represent itself as the revelation of Truth in its entirety.

To the contemporaries of the early Christians, the view that a new religion represents the final revelation of the entire truth about divinity, the cosmos and humankind all at once seemed, at the very least, to be extremely pretentious and lacking any foundation in the centuries-old perception of reality that was predominant in the ancient world. This is evident in several extant testimonies about the ideas contemporaries had about early Christianity. For example, Suetonius, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger all describe Christianity as “superstition,”<sup>16</sup> which was an extremely serious and discrediting perception that could easily be associated with widespread accusations against Christians as alleged atheists.<sup>17</sup> In the context of such perceptions of early Christianity, theologically articulated answers can be found very early in patristic literature. For example, in the *Epistle to Diognetus* it is possible to find a statement about the existence of a dilemma regarding the “late” appearance of Christianity on the historical scene and an attempt to explain this phenomenon:

... just why has this *new race* (καινός γένος) or way of life (ἐπιτήδευμα) come into being *now and not before* (νῦν καὶ οὐ πρότερον).<sup>18</sup> [emphasis added]

It was necessary to point out and discuss this dilemma precisely because the criterion of antiquity was often used as proof of authenticity and truthfulness.

## 4. Reinterpretation of Historical Novelty

### 4.1. Sacred Books of Ancient Israel

One of the most effective strategies used by early Christians to counter accusations that their religion was a novelty that lacked ancient wisdom was to refer to the Law of Moses and the Prophets. This apologetic strategy suggested that respect for historical continuity and tradition was unequivocally demonstrated by recognizing the authority ancient Israel’s sacred

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<sup>16</sup> “A new and harmful superstition” (*superstitionis novae ac maleficae*), Suet. *Ner.* 16.2; “pernicious superstition” (*exitiabilis superstitio*); Tac. *Ann.* 15.44; “distorted and unrestrained superstition” (*superstitionem pravam et immodicam*), Plin. *Tra. Ep.* X 96.8.

<sup>17</sup> Plutarch (ca. 46–127) in his text Περὶ δεισιδαιμονίας (On superstition), an integral part of his *Morals*, described the understanding of his contemporaries regarding the topic of the relationship between correct traditional piety and superstition, which must be avoided in every way because it represents: “distorting and sully[ing] one’s own tongue with strange names and barbarous phrases, to disgrace and transgress the god-given ancestral dignity of our religion (ἀτόποις ὀνόμασι καὶ ῥήμασι βαρβαρικοῖς καταισχύειν καὶ παρανομεῖν τὸ θεῖον καὶ πατριον ἄξιωμα τῆς εὐσεβείας)”, Plut. *De superst.* 166b.5–7; Babbitt (transl.) 1962<sup>3</sup>: 490–491. Moreover, adds Plutarch, the superstitious man simply does not understand and therefore rejects the common tradition and “enjoys no world in common with the rest of mankind (τῷ δὲ δεισιδαίμονι κοινὸς οὐδεὶς ἐστὶ κόσμος)”, 166c.8–9. Bearing all this in mind, Plutarch is explicit in his assessment that, in the final analysis: “the atheist has no part in causing superstition, but superstition provides the seed from which atheism springs, and when atheism has taken root, superstition supplies it with a defence (ἡ δὲ δεισιδαιμονία τῇ ἀθεότητι καὶ γενέσθαι παρέσχεν ἀρχὴν καὶ γενομένη διδωσιν ἀπολογίαν), not a true one or a fair one, but one not destitute of some speciousness”, 171a.2–3. For more information on this issue, see: Jovanović 2022: 5–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Diogn.* 1.1.8–10.

texts had in the preaching of Jesus Christ and the apostolic communities of the early Church. In this sense, this new faith manifested itself through the acceptance and relevant interpretation of a collection of Old Testament texts that were at least a millennium old. This process of interpretation was two-pronged from the beginning: Faith in Christ as the incarnate Logos and Son of God had to be justified by referring to the Old Testament and its messianic prophecies. It was also equally important to demonstrate through theological interpretation that the Old Testament was still relevant to the new faith by referring to the Gospel of Christ. In this context, early Christian writers primarily pointed to the historical continuity of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament and the New Testament as well as, to their own right to adopt ancient Old Testament texts, given that they believed only Christ's Church had a true understanding of their content. In fact, Justin the Philosopher unequivocally emphasized that the Church was in fact "the true, spiritual Israel".<sup>19</sup> Justin reinforced this position by pointing out that the true message of the prophecies actually referred to Christians and the Christian Church, and that, consequently, Christian wisdom was essentially historically older than all others.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.2. Affirmation of the New People of God

An important step in the apologetic strategy, therefore, was to point out the *original meaning* from the Old Testament narratives. The essence of this hermeneutic approach, which should convincingly show pagan interlocutors the absurdity of their accusations against Christians, is that the person of Jesus Christ and everything related to his earthly life - preaching, teaching, suffering, resurrection, the foundation and rise of the Church - can be identified as the *fulfillment* of the promises and prophecies contained in the scriptures of ancient Israel. The Jews had simply failed to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah, and the Christians had taken their place as the new People of God. Therefore, when responding to objections about being uprooted from tradition, apologetics emphasized that Christianity represented the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and that consequently insinuations that it was a new religion without its own historical tradition were simply factually incorrect.

The Christian apologetics' response to the problem of the relationship between old and new in the domain of axiology was therefore formulated by a reinterpretation of the concept of novelty as being necessary negative. In this context, very early on, a self-understanding was articulated that Christians were taught by Christ to worship God in a new yet also traditional way. Specifically, in the pseudonymous writing of *Kerygma Petri*, probably written at the beginning of the second century, fragments of which have been preserved to us through quotations cited by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, a thesis about Christians as a "third genus or race" was developed:

He made a new [covenant] with us: for the ways of the Greeks and Jews are old, and we are those who worship him in a *new way*, as a third race (third genus, τρίτον γένος) as Christians.<sup>21</sup> [italics added]

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Justin. *Dial.* 11.2; 11.4.

<sup>20</sup> Norris 2004: 71–90.

<sup>21</sup> "Νέαν ἡμῖν διέθετο· τὰ γὰρ Ἑλλήνων καὶ Ἰουδαίων παλαιά, ἡμεῖς δὲ οἱ καινῶς αὐτὸν τρίτῳ γένει σεβόμενοι Χριστιανοί", *Ker. Pet.* 21–22. Emphasizing a *new way* of worship is a key term for understanding the concept of the third race. Cf. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 6.5.41. More on "third race" and ethnic identity as a topic in early

Thus, Christians understood themselves to be a new and distinct race, separated from the others.<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, the early Christian apologist Aristides responds to these objections and accusations with a reinterpretation of the term new, from which he removes the pejorative connotation and argues that just as Barbarians and Greeks can trace their origins back to a real or mythological ancestor and progenitor of their race, so too can the Christians, with the difference being that their origin is in a pre-existing Christ.<sup>23</sup> Aristides says:

The Christians, then, reckon the beginning of their religion from Jesus Christ, who is named Son of God most High.<sup>24</sup>

In Aristides' *Apology* the concept of genus or race (γένος) is used as a tool for the construction of a Christian identity based on spiritual rather than biological genealogy.<sup>25</sup>

For it is manifest to us, O king, that there are three races of men in this world. These are the worshippers of your so-called gods, the Jews and Christians.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, early Christian apologetic literature relativized accusations about its own recent historical origin by seeing them as irrelevant to its own historical identity. Furthermore, Christian apologetics relativized appeals to antiquity as being completely insignificant because it did not represent any value in and of itself unless one could come closer to reliable knowledge of truth through it. The polemical response is summarized by Aristides with his position that Christians, unlike their pagan and Jewish contemporaries, are the only ones close to knowing the truth.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Justin's apologetic relativization is based on pointing out the discontinuity that can exist between antiquity and truthfulness. Quite simply, these two do not stand in any apodictic cause-and-effect relationship. What is old may be true, but it does not necessarily have to be.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, those who consider themselves wise should give priority exclusively to the truth, even in cases where it conflicts with what the ancients said on a certain subject. Empty and trivial opinions expressed in the past should be rejected without hesitation. Therefore, Justin wrote the following to the emperor Antony Pius the following:

“Reason prescribes (ὁ λόγος ὑπαγορεύει) that those who are truly pious and philosophers

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Christian apologetics see: Lieu 2004, 98–146, 239–268, 305–310; Buell 2005, 63–137; Frensdorff 2006, 1–15; Antonova 2019, 129–211.

<sup>22</sup> Harnack 1908: 240–278.

<sup>23</sup> Gruen 2013: 1–22.

<sup>24</sup> Arist. *Apol.* 2.29–30. Harris (transl.) 1893: 36.

<sup>25</sup> Gruen 2017, 235–249; Horrell 2012: 123–143.

<sup>26</sup> “Φανερόν γάρ ἐστιν ἡμῖν, ὃ βασιλεῦ, ὅτι τρία γένη εἰσὶν ἀνθρώπων ἐν τῷδε τῷ κόσμῳ. ὧν εἰσὶν οἱ τῶν παρ' ἡμῖν λεγομένων θεῶν προσκυνηταὶ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Χριστιανοί”, Arist., *Fragm.* 2.2.1–3. According to Aristides, pagans are further divided into three races - Chaldeans, Greeks and Egyptians: «Χαλδαίους τε καὶ Ἑλληνας καὶ Αἰγυπτίους», 2.2.3–5. In the Syriac recension there are actually four races - Barbarians, Greeks, Judeans and Christians: “This is plain to you, O king, that there are four races of men in this world; Barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians”, Arist. *Apol.* 2.16–17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 16.11–15.

<sup>28</sup> Nyström 2016: 249–259, 254.

should honor and hold in affection the truth alone, refusing to go along with the opinions of the men of old (παραιτουμένους δόξαις παλαιῶν ἐξακολουθεῖν), should these be of no value (ἂν φαῦλαι ᾤσιν).<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, Justin sought to show that the Christian teachings cannot be seen as completely new and different from the teachings previously presented by, for example, Plato, the Stoics and other philosophers<sup>30</sup> or even mythmakers.<sup>31</sup> With all this in mind, Justin raises the question of the real or unspoken reasons for the accusations against Christians:

“If therefore we say some things similarly (ὁμοίως) to the poets and philosophers whom you respect, and some things that exceed them and are divine, and for which we alone offer proof (μόνοι μετὰ ἀποδείξεως), why are we unjustly hated more than all?”<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the wisdom uttered in ancient times by mythmakers, poets, statesmen, philosophers, and others actually borrowed heavily from the writings of Moses and the prophets. However, and in this statement from Justin one can actually find the key to his argumentation - the wisdom written down by Moses and other prophets like him did not speak for themselves. In other words, they did not articulate the conclusions they reached solely on the basis of their own perception, observation and analysis. According to Justin’s opinion, and this is part of his renowned teaching about the Logos, they spoke wisely because they were moved by the pre-existent Logos of God.

“But when you hear the phrases of the prophets spoken as though from a character, do not suppose that they were spoken as from the inspired ones themselves, but rather from the divine Logos moving them (ἀπὸ τοῦ κινούντος αὐτοὺς θείου λόγου).”<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the question posed in the *Epistle to Diognetus* as to why Christianity appeared so late in history, Justin’s indirect answer is that Christianity emerged as the *final of many* historical manifestations of the Logos. Moreover, the incarnate Logos is actually the pre-existent Son of God<sup>34</sup> who showed himself repeatedly in history through the “seeds of Logos”<sup>35</sup> in practically all ancient manifestations of wisdom. This wisdom was present in an altered, corrupted and partial form in the statements of mythmakers and philosophers, but its final and complete revelation came with the incarnation of the Logos.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, any characterization of Christianity as a new religion is virtually impossible because it is virtually older than all religions and wisdom systems. Consequently, Justin’s perspective implies a somewhat paradoxical view that Christianity is both old and new at the same time old, because the partial manifestation of the Logos in history began long before the historical appearance of Christianity, but also new, because only with the complete revelation of the

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<sup>29</sup> Justin. *1Ap.* 2.1.

<sup>30</sup> See chapters: *Ibid.* 8.3-4, 18.5-6 and 20.3–21.1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 21–22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 20.3.

<sup>33</sup> Justin. *Dial.* 36.1.

<sup>34</sup> Justin. *2Ap.* 5.1–5.

<sup>35</sup> “Σπερματικός λόγος”, *Ibid.* 9; 13. Cf. Holte 1958: 109–168.

<sup>36</sup> Fédou 2009: 145–158.



Logos, i.e. - with its incarnation, did it become definitively shaped over the course of history.<sup>37</sup> The paradoxical presence of the old and the new in Christianity is depicted in the most striking way in the verses in which Justin contrasts the behavior, understanding and scope of the old pagan man and the ethos of the new man completely transformed by Christ's entry into the world of history.<sup>38</sup>

## 5. Prophecy and Truth

### 5.1. Proof from Prophecy

The foundation of Christianity's antiquity built on Old Testament prophecies that chronologically predate the Greek writers was of exceptional importance for apologetic argumentation. Moreover, in the context of Justin's apologetics, "proof from prophecy" is inextricably linked to "proof from antiquity". For without evidence of antiquity, the persuasiveness of arguments based on "proof based on prophecy" would be drastically reduced, if not completely ineffective. This is the reason why he repeatedly insists on this insight. For Justin, Plato's philosophy is dependent on Moses and his wisdom, and Greek myths are often nothing more than misinterpretations of the Old Testament. This illustration of his position on this issue, is worth reading:

So when Plato said – "blame belongs to the one who chooses; God is without blame",<sup>39</sup> - he spoke taking this from Moses the prophet. For Moses is older than even all the writers in Greek (πρεσβύτερος γὰρ Μωυσεῖς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐν Ἑλληνισι συγγραφέων). And everything whatever both the philosophers and poets said concerning the immortality of the soul or punishments after death or contemplation of heavenly things or similar teachings they were enabled to understand and they explained because they took their starting-points (τὰς ἀφορμὰς) from the prophets.<sup>40</sup>

This insight from Justin was one of the reasons why he developed his teaching of the "seeds of truth" that were present among ancient philosophers and poets.<sup>41</sup>

Justin emphasized that he did not want to convince his interlocutors simply by referring to ancient people who had made various claims. He says instead that they should be "persuaded of necessity (κατ' ἀνάγκην πειθόμενοι) by those who foretell things before they happen (τοῖς προφητεῦουσι πρὶν ἢ γενέσθαι),"<sup>42</sup> and that these prophets deserve trust<sup>43</sup> and must be believed "because we can see things with our own eyes" in the historical present, "things that have happened and are happening as they were foretold." Compared to such prophetic testimonies and proofs, everything is pale and arbitrary because, quite simply, prophecy represents "the greatest and truest proof" (μεγίστη καὶ ἀληθεστάτη

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<sup>37</sup> Barnard 1971: 132–141.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Justin. *I Ap.* 16.4, 25.1–2, 39.3.

<sup>39</sup> "Αἰτία ἐλομένον· θεὸς ἀναίτιος", Plat. *Resp.* 10.617e.

<sup>40</sup> *I Ap.* 44.8–9.

<sup>41</sup> *Μαρτυρέλος* 2014: 359–378.

<sup>42</sup> *I Ap.* 30.1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

ἀπόδειξις).<sup>44</sup> Justin’s argument is well known in scholarly literature as “proof from prophecy” and it permeates all of his preserved works.<sup>45</sup> This proof, which convincingly refutes the objection that Christianity is not rooted in ancient history is also one of the foundations of Justin’s anti-Jewish polemic.

## 5.2. The Enigmatic Nature of the Prophecies

Justin was certainly aware that prophecy and prophets were known and recognized among his interlocutors.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, he was also aware that his interlocutors were well aware that the prophecies were often enigmatic and stated in an insufficiently clear and obvious way. Consequently, for the sake of authentic understanding, it was necessary to have a reliable interpreter. It is for this reason that he emphasizes that it was impossible to understand the prophecies until the appearance of “Jesus Christ, our teacher and interpreter of unfathomable prophecies.”<sup>47</sup>

Given that Justin spoke elsewhere of the Logos inspiring the prophets,<sup>48</sup> it is clear that he wishes to suggest that it is natural for all to agree with Christians that authentic prophecy is always of divine origin and this is precisely what also makes such origins distinct from various other predictions, conjectures, and false prophecies. Justin expresses his general principle for identifying authentic prophecy as follows: “inspired by nothing other than divine utterance (λόγω θείῳ).”<sup>49</sup>

## 5.3. Two Types of Prophecy

Justin also wanted to introduce his interlocutors to an important distinction regarding prophecy. According to him, it is possible to distinguish between two types of prophesied events. The first type are those events that have already occurred and had been prophesied in a true way, regardless of the fact that at one time the prophecies about those events were not properly understood (until such an understanding was made possible by Christ).<sup>50</sup> The second type of prophecy, analogous to the first model, concerns events that have been prophesied but have not yet occurred. Regardless of the fact that now many do not understand them, and do not believe in them even though all that is required for understanding now exists (because Christ became incarnate), those prophecies will turn out to be true.<sup>51</sup> Justin bases the fulfillment of both types of prophecies on the fact that both are of divine origin. However, the basic condition for any discussion of the prophecies is, first of all, an *appreciation of the ancient writings* in which they are recorded. This is followed by contextualization and the careful process of interpretation follow. Consequently, the extraordinary interest of Christians in the Old Testament prophecies and the context in

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See important study: Skarsaune 1987.

<sup>46</sup> About prophecies in the ancient world see: Kelly 2018; Nissinen 2019; Woodard 2023.

<sup>47</sup> “Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦ ἡμετέρου διδασκάλου καὶ τῶν ἀγνωστούμενων προφητειῶν ἐξηγητοῦ” (1Ap.32.2).

<sup>48</sup> 2Ap. 10.8

<sup>49</sup> 1Ap. 33.9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 32.2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 52.2.

which they were uttered clearly testifies to the *importance of historical tradition* for them. Bearing this in mind, any objection to Christians representing a new, recent phenomenon with no roots in ancient traditions, simply has no objective foundation.

## 6. Eschatological vs. Protological Perspective

In relation to the question of why the final divine revelation came so late in history, the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* argues that it is a question of divine permission that, according to our free will and the choices we make, we are “drawn by our lawless aspirations” (ὡς ἐβουλόμεθα ἀτάκτοις φοραῖς φέρεσθαι) and fueled by “passions and lusts” (ἡδοναῖς καὶ ἐπιθυμίασι).<sup>52</sup> Therefore, God certainly knew our choices we make over the course of history do not actually lead us anywhere, and that, in an existential sense, they are a failure because they do not lead to eternal life. That being the case, God allowed it to be shown that the human race, in accordance with its own choices and actions, is unworthy of eternal life and entry into the Kingdom of God. However, precisely at that historical moment when the hopelessness and unworthiness of humankind’s historical iniquities had become apparent, humanity was “now” (νῦν) saved and considered “worthy of life” (ἀξιωθῶμεν ζωῆς),<sup>53</sup> thanks solely to the goodness of God.

By no means did the historical moment of God’s self-revelation come too late. This is the case simply because the measuring scale or reference point is not a mythological perfect past, as in the notion of a Golden Age, but the future, that is, the metahistorical eschatological Kingdom of God. In the context of the eschaton, the historical manifestation of God’s revelation in Christ came at the right time, a time when “our injustice was fulfilled” (πεπλήρωτο μὲν ἡ ἡμετέρα ἀδικία) and when it became unequivocally clear that injustice could only result in “torture and death” (κόλασις καὶ θάνατος),<sup>54</sup> and a complete existential collapse. Just then, the “time” (καιρὸς)<sup>55</sup> had come for God to intervene in the course of human history and to “reveal His goodness and power” (τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χρηστότητα καὶ δύναμιν).<sup>56</sup> In response to this soteriological initiative by God, the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* utters in admiration “Oh, how great is the love for humanity” (<ὦ> τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης φιλανθρωπίας).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Diogn.* 9.1.1–4. On the identification of sin with desires and pleasures, see: Mel. Sard. *Pasc.* 357–370; cf. also Plato’s *Laws*: “Now at this point I would clearly define for you what I say is the just and the unjust (δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον), without complication. The tyranny in the soul of spiritedness, fear, pleasure, pain, feelings of envy, and desires (τοῦ θυμοῦ καὶ φόβου καὶ ἡδονῆς καὶ λύπης καὶ φθόνων καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἐν ψυχῇ τυραννίδα), whether it does some injury or not, I proclaim to be in every way injustice.”, Plat., *Lg.* 863e5–8; Pangle (transl.) 1988: 257.

<sup>53</sup> *Diogn.* 9.1.8–9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 9.2.1–3.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Gal 4:4. The term καιρὸς denotes a decisive, crucial historical moment in which God undertakes certain activities and self-revelation in the context of his soteriological intentions. This term is also used in the New Testament literature to denote the coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God. As far as man is concerned, this term implies a kind of “critical situation” that he must recognize as such and not miss the opportunity to direct his actions in accordance with it, which fit into the plan of divine soteriological Providence.

<sup>56</sup> *Epistula ad Diognetum* 9.2.3–4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 9.2.5. An interesting juxtaposition could be found with Clement of Alexandria who uses the same phrase, albeit not in a decidedly soteriological, but in a pedagogical key. “Ὁ τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης φιλανθρωπίας”, *Protrepticus* 9.82.2, in: Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le protreptique* (C. Mondésert, trad. & ed.), Sources

Precisely in the context of the New Testament notion of *καίρως*, which finds its usefulness in later apologetic literature, the most significant and most authentic strategy for refuting objections to Christianity as an allegedly unrooted historical novelty is what seems like, what we would call an eschatological perspective. In comparison to these other strategies that emphasized the existence of prehistoric or historical antiquity that are proven by referring to the appropriation of Old Testament writings, the true meaning of the prophecies, or to the pre-existent Logos who sowed the seeds of truth in the past, it would appear that the eschatological perspective relativized the supposedly inseparable connection of historical antiquity and truth in such a way that it subordinated the entire historical process to its final completion or fulfillment. In other words, what had become crucially significant in the context of the relationship between the terms “old”, “new” and “truth” should not be sought in any specific phase or instance of the historical process in which the world was created and humankind developed. What is decisively significant is the intrusion of the eschaton or personal God and the Kingdom of God over the course of history, whose inauguration Christ brings with him. The glorification of mere antiquity and the historical process isolated from its eschatological completion and the final revelation of its intended goal, meaning and truth could not encompass or disclose the fullness of the personal revelation of Truth in the Person of the incarnate Logos who, with his “goodness and power” brought the entire historical process into the Kingdom of God. It seems that this dynamic eschatological perspective among early Christian apologists within the process of refuting accusations about the so-called “novelty” of Christianity should have been more strongly emphasized in the otherwise brilliant and lucid reviews of scholars in the context of this topic.<sup>58</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The apologetic strategy that determined the early Christian arguments, quotations, allusions, and appeals was primarily aimed at creating a discourse that would shape a reevaluation and positive perception of Christianity. Moreover, the apologists were interested forming a public perception that Christianity was superior to polytheistic religions. Within this frame of reference, accusations that Christianity was a novelty or a faith uninterested in historical roots and tradition was a very serious burden that early Christian apologetics had to address. As part of a widespread respect for antiquity in the Old World, any neglect of historical tradition in the sphere of religion would mean relegating oneself to the realm of superstition in the form of quite arbitrary conceptual constructions completely uninterested in the true wisdom that had been accumulated and preserved for centuries.

In the face of these accusations, early Christian apologetics relativized the supposed contradiction between the notions of new and the true, and they pointed out that what is

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Chrétiennes 2, Paris: Cerf, 1949<sup>2</sup>, 149.

<sup>58</sup> With the partial exception of Brian E. Daly (who analyzes Aristides, Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus), it seems that among other scholars who addressed this topic, an apologetic strategy based on eschatology had not played a decisively prominent role in clarifying the tension between the concepts of “antiquity”, “history”, “novelty”, and “truth”. Cf. Daly 1991, 20–24. Compare also the following important works: Pilhofer 1990, 293–303; Young 1999, 81–104; Fiedrowicz 2000<sup>3</sup>, 13–23, 49–60; Jacobsen 2009, 85–110; Nyström 2016, 249–259.

ancient does not necessarily reveal the truth. In addition, apologetics offered a reinterpretation of the term new by indicating that, in the case of Christianity, it includes a connection with the ancient Old Testament, or even with ancient Greek wisdom, through the Logos, who has actually sown the “seeds of truth” from the very beginning of history of the humankind. The final revelation of the truth was accomplished by the incarnation of the Logos himself, who also represents the only true interpreter of the ancient wisdom uttered by the prophets and the philosophers and sages who only partially knew the truth. In this sense, Christianity, connected to the incarnated Christ, i.e., the pre-existent Logos, is not at all unrelated to history and tradition, but actually precedes all religions and philosophies known up to that time. Consequently, the historical novelty of Christianity should not be understood as a belated historical appearance and disregard for tradition, but rather the opposite - a manifestation in accordance with the notion of *καιρός*, which implies timeliness or rather a decisive historical moment within the context of divine providence. In this context, probably the most significant apologetic strategy that was constructed to refute charges of the so-called novelty of Christianity linked the notion of *καιρός* to the timely intrusion of the eschaton in the matrix and flow of history. Therefore, an eschatological perspective becomes crucially important for an authentic interpretation of the early Christian understanding of the relationship between the terms antiquity, novelty, and truth. In this context, the dynamic eschatological perspective that was so prominent in the New Testament writings and functioned as a key to understanding the significance of humanity’s entire historical experience remained fundamentally significant in the post-apostolic period and the apologetic literature of the second century.

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**ЗДРАВКО ЈОВАНОВИЋ**  
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**„СУЈЕВЕРЈЕ БЕЗ ТРАДИЦИЈЕ“:  
ИСТОРИЈСКА „НОВИНА”  
КАО ТЕМА РАНОХРИШЋАНСКЕ АПОЛОГЕТИКЕ**

**Резиме**

Бити незаинтересован за традицију и истовремено промовисати себе као нову, искључиву и у дотадашњој историји неукорењену религију, представљало је феномен који је био у потпуности неприхватљив за менталитет античког човека. Управо на такав начин они су перципирали Хришћанство – као историјски нов, антитрадиционалан, препотентан, а заправо сујеверан религијски покрет који, као такав, представља, у најмању руку, узнемиравајући и субверзивни друштвени феномен. Имајући у виду озбиљност ових перцепција и упућиваних оптужби од стране пагана и Јудеја, ранохришћанска апологетика се фокусирала на неколико кључних тема које се налазе у позадини ове тематике. Пре свега, апологетика се усредредила на релативизовање наводне противречности између историјски „новог” и „истине”, затим на реинтерпретацију појма „ново” у контексту хришћанског односа према старозаветном предању и нарочито према пророштвима. Такође, ранохришћанско богословље је учинило јасним да новина, а заправо правременост божанског откривења описана појмом *καιρός*, у контексту оваплоћења Логоса, не би требало разумевати у контексту протолошке, већ у контексту есхатолошке перспективе. Протумачено на овакав начин, Хришћанство се манифестује као феномен који своје постојање неизоставно утемељује на уважавању Историје у оквиру које се дешавају сукцесивне божанске епифаније, као и Предања (старог и новог) које је у вези са овим епифанијама оформљено.

**Кључне речи:** Историјска новина, антика, златно доба, истина, традиција, религија, сујевеље, Стари завет, доказ из пророчанства, *καιρός*.

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