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Justin Martyr as a Polemicist

Sven-Olav Back

1. Introduction

Justin Martyr presents himself as a philosopher defending Christians against unjust treatment by the state, slander by spiteful antagonists, and criticism by intellectuals. Justin, however, is not only an apologist. He is also a propagandist for the beliefs, morals, and worship of the Christians; there is a clear protreptic element in all of his extant writings.¹

Polemics provide an important aspect of protreptics. Desiring to persuade people to accept one's message, one may wish to distance oneself from other doctrines.² Hence, it is not surprising that Justin Martyr is also involved in polemics: against Greco-Roman religion and philosophical schools, against Judaism, and Christian heretics. His view is that “orthodox” Christianity is true and all other sorts of worship or philosophy are wrong—if not completely, then at least partly or mostly. “According to sound judgment (κρίσις σώφρων) our teachings are...superior to all human philosophy” (2 Apol. 15.3).³

¹ Michele Pellegrino, *Studi su l'antica apologetica* (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1947), 13–35; Charles Munier, *Justin Martyr: Apologie pour les chrétiens*. Introduction, traduction et commentaire (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 28–29; especially regarding 1 Apol., see Anthony J. Guerra, “The Conversion of Marcus Aurelius and Justin Martyr: the Purpose, Genre and Content of the First Apology”, *SecCent* 9 (1992): 171–87.

² Stefan Heid, “Iustinus martyr I”, *RAC* 19:801–47, here 818: “Zur Werbung für das eigene Lehrsystem gehört eine möglichst wirkungsvolle Abgrenzung gegenüber anderen Lehrsystemen.”

³ When not otherwise indicated, quotations in English from the *Apologies* follow Denis Minns and P. Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on the Text; OECT; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), quotations from the *Dialogue* follow St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (trans. T. B. Falls, rev. and with a new introd. by T. P. Halton, ed. M. Slusser; Selections from the Fathers of the Church, vol. 3; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003). —When quoting from the Greek, I follow the editions of Miroslav Marcovich, except for the order and numbering of chapters in 2 Apol. 3–8, where I follow the order of Codex Parisinus graecus 450;

The criteria for establishing truth and falsehood in religion and philosophy include “sound judgment”. Justin may also refer to “sound” (1 Apol. 2.1: ὁ σῶφρων λόγος; cf. 2 Apol. 6.9) or “right reason” (2 Apol. 9.4: ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος; cf. 2.2; 6.7) as a criterion. Or he may refer to “true reason” (1 Apol. 3.1; 43.6: ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος; cf. 5.3) or simply “reason” (1 Apol. 2.1 etc.).

Terms such as σῶφρων λόγος and ὀρθὸς λόγος are characteristic of Stoicism, where they refer to a reason which is undisturbed by affects and hence “sound” or “standing straight”. Such a σῶφρων or ὀρθὸς λόγος can function as a trustworthy guide in matters of knowledge and ethics.⁴ We may however assume that Justin has filled the old term with new meaning when he remarks, e.g., “right reason’s (ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος) contribution is to demonstrate (ἀποδείκνυσιν) that not all opinions nor all beliefs are noble, but that some are wicked and some good” (2 Apol. 9.4).

In this paper we will, for the most part, bypass Justin’s critique of Judaism, and instead look at his polemical interaction with philosophers and heretics; also, but to a lesser degree, his polemics with regard to pagan religion will be touched upon.

2. Reason as a polemical tool

In order to understand Justin’s use of reason as a polemical tool, it is helpful to first turn to his portrait of Socrates. According to Justin, Socrates was the excellent philosopher, a man of “true reason” (λόγος ἀληθής, 1 Apol. 5.3).⁵ He showed men how to use their reason in the appropriate way. He deserves no criticism, but only

thus also, e.g., A. W. F. Blunt, ed., *The Apologies of Justin Martyr* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911).

⁴ Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 60–62, 141–53.

⁵ On Socrates as an *exemplum* in Greco-Roman and early Christian authors, see Klaus Döring, *Exemplum Socratis: Studien zur Sokratesnachwirkung in der kynisch-stoischen Popularphilosophie der frühen Kaiserzeit und im frühen Christentum* (Hermes Einzelschriften 42; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979). On Justin’s view of Socrates, see Ernst Benz, “Christus und Sokrates in der alten Kirche”, *ZNW* 43 (1950–51): 199–209 (unfortunately, there are several mistakes in Benz’s translations of Justin’s texts); Döring, *Exemplum Socratis*, 148–53; Oskar Skarsaune, “Judaism and Hellenism in Justin Martyr, Elucidated From His Portrait of Socrates”, in *Geschichte—Tradition—Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*. Volume 3: Frühes Christentum (ed. H. Cancik, H. Lichtenberger and P. Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 585–611; Michel Fédou, “La figure de Socrate selon Justin”, in *Les apologistes chrétiens et la culture grecque* (ed. B. Pouderon and J. Doré; Théologie historique 105; Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 51–66.

praise. “Justin’s assessment [sc. of Socrates] is constantly and unconditionally favourable.”⁶

Socrates’ most valuable contribution as a philosopher was his unmasking of the demons. Applying “true reason” to the case of the Greek gods, he saw through the illusion and realized that the gods were nothing but wicked demons.⁷ Consequently, he made a heroic effort to reveal the truth to his compatriots, to “draw people away from the demons” (1 Apol. 5.3), to encourage them to “shun wicked demons” (2 Apol. 10.6). On a deeper level, Justin explains, this was not just Socrates going about his rational work, but the Logos using Socrates as an instrument: “these things [sc. the truth about the gods being wicked demons] were brought to light...among the Greeks by Logos through Socrates” (1 Apol. 5.4).⁸

Socrates was not only involved in the “negative” task of revealing the true character of the gods. There was also a “positive” element in his efforts, viz. he urged his compatriots “to knowledge, through rational enquiry, of the God who was unknown to them” (πρὸς θεοῦ δὲ τοῦ ἀγνώστου αὐτοῖς διὰ λόγου ζητήσεως ἐπίγνωσιν προὔτρεπετο, 2 Apol. 10.6); this should be the goal for human beings, even if it is not easy to attain, as the Justinian Socrates pointed out (ibid.).

In Justin’s view, then, Socrates was the ideal philosopher, endowed with λόγος ἀληθής and using it in an admirable way. However, his intellectual equipment was not in principle unique. For all human beings “have come into existence as rational (λογικοί) and with power of perception (θεωρητικοί)” (1 Apol. 28.3). The reason for this is the fact that God created mankind through his Logos: the Logos was a mediator of creation (*Schöpfungsmittler*) (1 Apol. 64.5; 2 Apol. 5.3), which means that mankind was “marked” by Logos in the sense that human beings partake of the Logos by their being endowed with reason. Another way to put this is to describe the Logos as a “sower” who sowed his “seed” of truth into the *logos* of human beings. (Justin uses the term *Logos spermatikos* to describe the Logos in this capacity.) The Logos himself is the whole truth, but all human beings can,

⁶ Michele Pellegrino, *Gli apologeti greci del II secolo: saggio sui rapporti fra il Cristianesimo primitivo e la cultura classica* (Rome: Anonima veritas, 1947), 65.

⁷ On Justin’s demonology, see Skarsaune, “Judaism and Hellenism”, 591–94; Annette Yoshiko Reed, “The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine: Aetiology, Demonology, and Polemics in the Writings of Justin Martyr”, *J ECS* 12 (2004): 141–71.

⁸ This is how I understand the Greek text in 1 Apol. 5.4. Others supporting this interpretation include Pellegrino, *Gli apologeti greci*, 83; Döring, *Exemplum Socratis*, 149; Skarsaune, “Åpenbaring utenfor åpenbaringen? Antikk religion, gresk filosofi og kristen tro ifølge Justin Martyr”, in idem, *Og ordet ble kjød: studier i oldkirkens teologi* (Oslo: Luther, 2001), 137–59, here 142. According to another interpretation, Justin says: “these things were brought to light...among the Greeks *by reason*, through the words of Socrates”; thus e.g. Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, 91.

in principle, grasp some truths, viz. about God and morals (1 Apol. 46.2; 2 Apol. 7.1–3; 10.1–3, 8; 13.3–6; cf. below).⁹ Not all human beings, however, make the correct use of their *logos*, their reason, and those who do can only get as far as Socrates.¹⁰

Socrates and other philosophers were able to work with the aid of God-given reason, based on their participation in the Logos (cf. 2 Apol. 10.2). However, this work could not go on undisturbed. For the demons, who are enemies of the Logos, take action when they see people following him, both in their ordinary lives and in their philosophical work. Consequently, they interfered to have Socrates executed (1 Apol. 5.3); they inspired those who lived “without Logos” to kill those who lived “with Logos” (1 Apol. 46.4), and, Justin remarks, they still keep doing or aiming to do this (1 Apol. 5.1, 3; 57.1; 2 Apol. 1.1–2; 7.2–3). In addition to these counter-attacks, the demons are also—as was the case in ancient times—continuously trying to lead people astray, partly by tricking them into believing that they themselves are real gods which should be worshiped, partly by teaching them to lead immoral lives; cf., e.g., Justin’s sarcastic comment in 1 Apol. 21.4: indecent mythological stories were written down for the advantage and encouragement of those being instructed, εἰς διαφορὰν καὶ προτροπὴν τῶν ἐκπαιδευομένων.

Just as the demons hate the Logos, they are also enemies of reason. It is interesting to note how often Justin associates them with the “irrational”. So, for example, in 1–2 Apol., Justin boldly claims that the addressees deal with the Christians ἀλόγῳ πάθει καὶ μάλιστα δαιμόνων φαύλων ἐξελαυνόμενοι, “with senseless passion, and driven under the whip of wicked demons” (1 Apol. 5.1; cf. 2.3); governors who persecute the Christians at the command of demons act with “unreasonableness” (2 Apol. 1.1–2; cf. 2.15); those who live “irrationally” are bound to fall prey to various demands on the part of demons (1 Apol. 12.5; 57.1), and “irrational” people easily become “fodder for godless doctrines and demons” (1 Apol. 58.2).

Against the background indicated above, we can understand how reason can function as a polemical tool for Justin.

⁹ Cf. Ragnar Holte, “Logos Spermatikos: Christianity and Ancient Philosophy according to St. Justin’s Apologies”, *ST* 12 (1958): 109–68; Nestor Pycke, “Connaissance rationnelle et connaissance de grace chez Saint Justin”, *ETL* 37 (1961): 52–85, here 55–65; Jan Hendrik Waszink, “Bemerkungen zu Justins Lehre vom Logos Spermatikos”, in *Mullus* (FS T. Klausner; JAC Ergänzungsband 1: Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 380–90; Skarsaune, “Åpenbaring”, 144–50.

¹⁰ Holte, “Logos Spermatikos”, 161.

(a) To begin with, it is clear that he is bound to reject and even condemn philosophers who condone “idolatry” and accept or promote the cult of “demons”. The attitude of Socrates is the right one; it deserves to be emulated.¹¹ The alternative means getting along with the demons. However, this criticism, which would seem to follow from Justin’s principles, is not made explicit. Justin refrains from directly attacking the main addressee of the *First Apology*, Antoninus Pius, and does not mention his care about religious observances in general nor his devotion to the “Great Mother” in particular.¹² Implicitly, though, Justin’s position is clear.

(b) According to Justin, heretics such as Simon Magus, Menander and Marcion have been sent by the demons to “lead human beings away from the God who made them and from his first-begotten Christ” (1 Apol 58.3). They are thus the opposite of Socrates, who was the instrument of the Logos and vigorously tried to lead human beings away from the false gods, i.e., the demons. Justin claims that Simon and Menander themselves claimed to be gods (1 Apol. 26.1–4); at least Simon was also regarded as such (1 Apol. 26.2–3; 56.2); both had a considerable following (1 Apol. 26.1–4; 56.1–2). While Marcion does not claim to be a god, he has been (and still is) teaching the absurd doctrine that there is another god, greater than the Creator (1 Apol. 26.5: 58.1), and similarly he proclaims “another son” (1 Apol. 58.1). These doctrines are demonical and irrational distortions of the truth:

Many, believing in him [sc. Marcion] as if he alone knew the truth, laugh at us, though they have no demonstration for the things they say (ἀπόδειξιν μηδεμίαν περὶ ὧν λέγουσιν ἔχοντες), but, being irrational, they are snatched away, like lambs by a wolf, and become fodder for godless doctrines and demons. (1 Apol. 58.2)

Justin also insinuates that the heretics may be guilty of the grossly immoral acts that Christians in general are often being suspected of: “[W]hether they also do

¹¹ Note that Justin never mentions Socrates’s instruction regarding a sacrifice to Asclepius (Plato, *Phaed.*, 118A). Later Christian writers criticize Socrates for a lack of consistency; on this, see Fédou, “La figure de Socrate”, 63–65. See further Michael Fiedrowicz, *Apologie im frühen Christentum: die Kontroverse um den christlichen Wahrheitsanspruch in den ersten Jahrhunderten* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 295–96.

¹² Cf. Michael Grant, *The Antonines: The Roman Empire in Transition* (London: Routledge, 1996), 15–16; Cornelius Mutschmann, *Die Religionspolitik Marc Aurels* (Hermes Einzelschriften 88; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 42–45.

those infamous deeds that are invented about us...we do not know” (1 Apol. 26.7).¹³

(c) Justin connects both of the above-mentioned groups (philosophers who condone idolatry, and heretics) with demons, either implicitly or explicitly. He does not throw this accusation at the Cynic Crescens, even if he regards him as obviously ἄλογος (2 Apol. 8); it is possible to be irrational without being under the influence of demons. In his dismissive remarks about Crescens, Justin partly follows conventional polemical portrayals of Cynics.¹⁴

According to Justin, Crescens attacked the Christians and publicly accused them of being godless and irreligious (2 Apol. 8.2). Justin confronted him publicly and claims he defeated him in a debate. Either, Justin argues, Crescens was acquainted with the doctrines of Christ, or he was not. If he did not know the doctrines and still attacked the Christians he is worse than common ignorant people, who often refrain from speaking in matters they do not know anything about. Alternatively, Crescens knew about the Christian doctrines. In this case, he either spoke against them without understanding, or else understood but was afraid of being suspected of being a Christian himself. “This would show him to be vanquished by vulgar and irrational opinion and fear” (ιδιωτικῆς καὶ ἀλόγου δόξης καὶ φόβου ἐλάπτων, 2 Apol. 8.3). Crescens, in fact, is a fine example of a non-philosopher (2 Apol. 8.1–2) who has no regard for true Socratic principles but refuses to honour the saying of Socrates, “a man is in no way to be honoured in preference to the truth” (2 Apol. 8.6; cf. Plato, *Resp.*, X.595C).¹⁵

(d) Whereas Justin shows no appreciation for the aforementioned groups and individuals, he is more nuanced in his assessment of Plato, Stoics and others (2 Apol. 7.1: poets; 10.2: philosophers and lawgivers; 13.2: poets and prose-writers). These have arrived at certain moral and philosophical truths because they profited from the “seed” sown by the *Logos spermatikos*:

¹³ For observations on Justin’s attempt, in the *First Apology*, to “attack and undermine” Marcion and other self-identified Christians who do not regard the Creator as the supreme God (i.e., “demiurgical Christians”), see Matthijs den Dulk, *Between Jews and Heretics: Refiguring Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho* (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World; London: Routledge, 2018), 13–23. Regarding the *Dialogue*, den Dulk argues that this work as a whole can be understood as an argument against “demiurgical” types of Christianity.

¹⁴ Abraham J. Malherbe, “Justin and Crescens”, in idem, *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity. Collected Essays, 1959–2012*, vol. 2 (ed. C. R. Holladay & al.; NovTSup 150; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 883–94, here 888. Cf. Justin’s dismissal of Peripatetics (Dial. 2.3) and Epicureans (2 Apol. 6.3; 12.5; 15.3).

¹⁵ Cf. 1 Apol. 2 for Justin’s insisting on the real philosopher’s respect for truth.

We know that the followers of Stoic opinions were decent at any rate with regard to their ethical doctrine, as were the poets too in some respects. ... For the seed of reason has been implanted in the whole human race. (2 Apol. 7.1)

Whatever philosophers and lawgivers have at any time uttered well or found was achieved by them with hardship, as they were working, by invention and contemplation, according to a participation in the Logos. But since they did not know all that has to do with the Logos who is Christ, they also frequently contradicted themselves. (2 Apol. 10.2–3)¹⁶

I confess not that the teachings of Plato are alien to those of Christ, but that they are not in all ways the same as them, just as neither are those of the others, Stoics, and poets, and prose-writers. For what each of them proclaimed was good, when he saw from a part of the divine spermatic logos what was connatural to it. But when they contradict themselves in their principal teachings they are shown not to have secure understanding and infallible knowledge. (2 Apol. 13.2–3)

The Stoics, then, are “decent” (κόσμιοι) in their ethical doctrine (2 Apol. 7.1; cf. 2 Apol. 6.8), and Plato’s teachings are not totally alien to those of Christ (2 Apol. 13.2). However, because Plato and the Stoics only had access to the “seed” of the Logos, and not to the Logos as a whole, they were also guilty of mistakes. Internal inconsistencies in the doctrinal systems make this clear to the critical observer.¹⁷

According to Justin, the Stoic doctrine of fate (εἰμαρμένη)¹⁸ is contrary to “right reason” (λόγος ὁ ὀρθός) and has the consequence of blurring the distinction between virtue and vice—a consequence which is flatly rejected by “true reason” (ὁ ἀληθής λόγος). Instead, the reasonable approach is to affirm human free will (2 Apol. 6.6–7; 1 Apol. 43.2–8).¹⁹ These reasonable points are confirmed by the

¹⁶ The translation of v. 2, while partly following Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* (p. 309), has been adapted to Marcovich’s edition.

¹⁷ Justin often remarks that philosophers speak “contradictory” things: 1 Apol. 4.8; 7.3; 26.6; 2 Apol. 10.3; 13.3; cf. Dial. 2.1; 35.6. In the texts quoted above it is a question of self-contradiction rather than a contradiction between different philosophical schools. The argument from contradiction (in different variants) was common; cf. Fiedrowicz, *Apologie*, 292–3. Munier thinks Justin’s use of it is “banal” (*Justin Martyr*, 326, in a comment on 2 Apol. 10.3).

¹⁸ Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*, 101–6.

¹⁹ For a closer look at Justin’s criticism of Stoic fatalism (especially in 2 Apol. 6.3–9 and 1 Apol. 42.1–44.11), see Paolo Merlo, *Liberi per vivere secondo il Logos: Principi e criteri dell’agire morale in San Giustino filosofo e martire* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1995), 30–63. Andresen points out that Justin agrees with Middle Platonism in his polemical statements; Carl Andresen, “Justin und der mittlere Platonismus”, *ZNW* 44 (1952/53): 157–95, here 183–7. Similarly L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 115–7.

teachings of Moses and Isaiah, and in addition by Plato, who learned from Moses (1 Apol. 44.1–11).²⁰

As far as Plato is concerned, the philosophical dispute between the old man and Justin-as-a-Platonist, related in the introductory part of the *Dialogue* (Dial. 3.1–6.2), showed considerable weaknesses in fundamental Platonic doctrines. Plato’s doctrine of the soul, as defended by young Justin, could not withstand the criticism of the old man (Dial. 4.1–6.2). This concerns the doctrine of the “affinity” (συγγένεια) of the soul with God (4.2–4a), the doctrine of the transmigration of souls (4.4b–5.1a), and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (5.1b–6.2). While this section of the *Dialogue* contains some obscurities, and while there seems to be no agreement among interpreters regarding the precise origins of the old man’s arguments, the main point in this context is that the old man demonstrated the presence of absurdity and inconsistency in the Platonic doctrine of the soul and did so purely with the help of reason. At least this is how Justin prefers to present the matter.²¹

At the end of the discussion on the soul, when Plato and Pythagoras have been disproved, the question arises, “If these philosophers...do not know the truth, what teacher or method shall one follow?” (Dial. 7.1a). At this point Justin could have made the old man refer to Christ, the incarnated Logos. Instead, the old man introduces the Old Testament prophets.

3. The prophetic writings as a polemical tool

The old man’s answer commences thus:

A long time ago...long before the time of those so-called philosophers, there lived blessed men who were just and loved by God, men who spoke through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and predicted events that would take place in the future, which events are now taking place. We call these men the prophets. They alone knew the truth and communicated it to men, whom they neither deferred to nor feared. With no desire for personal glory, they reiterated only what they heard and saw when inspired by a holy spirit. Their writings are still extant, and whoever reads them with the proper faith will

²⁰ Cf. Merlo, *Liberi*, 57–63. As I remarked above, Justin explains the “decent” elements in Stoic ethical doctrine by referring to the “seed” of the Logos; for this reason, he sees no further need to explain how a decent ethical doctrine can co-exist with a flawed “physical” one.

²¹ Cf. Niels Hyldahl, *Philosophie und Christentum: eine Interpretation der Einleitung zum Dialog Justins* (ATDan 9; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), 190–227; J. C. M. van Winden, *An Early Christian Philosopher: Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, Chapters One to Nine* (Philosophia patrum, vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 69–110.

profit greatly in his knowledge of the origin and end of things, and of any other matter that a philosopher should know. (Dial. 7.1–2)

Regarding the *contents* of the prophetic writings, the old man in the immediate context adds that the prophets “exalted God, the Father and Creator of all things, and made known Christ, his Son, who was sent by him” (Dial. 7.3). In the following parts of the *Dialogue*, Justin will further discuss their message regarding Christ,²² and in the *First Apology* he summarizes the theme of the prophetic writings by referring to prophecies about “our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Apol. 31.7).

Regarding the *trustworthiness* of the prophets, the old man not only underlines that they spoke “through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit”. He adds that they are worthy of belief since they performed certain miracles and since their predictions have come true (Dial. 7.2–3). Hence, one can trust and believe them, even if they gave “no proof at that time of their statements” (Dial. 7.2).

At the end of his eulogy of the prophets, the old man underlines that nobody can understand the prophetic writings and the truths that they contain without *illumination* from above, “unless he has been enlightened by God and his Christ” (Dial. 7.3). This is a point that Justin stresses time and again (cf., e.g., 1 Apol. 60.11; Dial. 55.3; 58.1; 78.10–11; 92.1; 100.2; 119.1).²³

The antiquity of the prophets, mentioned by the old man, is highly important for Justin. The prophets are more ancient than all the Greek philosophers, including Pythagoras and Plato. Earlier in the *Dialogue*, Justin has brought in the idea of a primordial philosophy, which “was sent down to men” (Dial. 2.1). This philosophy “is most precious in the sight of God, to whom it alone leads us and to whom it unites us, and in truth they who have applied themselves to philosophy are holy men” (ibid.). Now, by quoting the old man, Justin makes it clear that those “holy men” were in fact the Old Testament prophets and that their writings contain the primordial philosophy.²⁴ In the case of the prophets, the greatest antiquity and the possession of truth are combined: they lived “long before” all “so-called philosophers”, and “they alone knew the truth” (Dial. 7.1).

²² Giuseppe Visonà, *S. Giustino, Dialogo con Trifone: introduzione, tradizione e note* (Milano: Paoline, 1988), 45: “[I]l dialogo tra Giustino e l’anziano traccia la distinzione tra rivelazione e ragione e sancisce l’insufficienza della [seconda] a giungere alla verità; il dialogo tra Giustino e Trifone si svolge all’interno del secondo livello, tra coloro che sanno e accettano dov’è la verità, cioè nella parola di Dio trasmessa dalla Scrittura.”

²³ Pycke, “*Connaissance rationelle*”, 66–79.

²⁴ van Winden, *An Early Christian Philosopher*, 111–2.

As a polemical tool, the statement that the prophets are more ancient than “those so-called philosophers” (Dial. 7.1) is important. This is the *πρεσβύτερον κρείττον*-argument which was used already by Jewish apologists from the second century B.C. onwards.²⁵ Justin was the first Christian apologist to make use of it;²⁶ before him, the author of the *Preaching of Peter* as well as Aristides of Athens were content to emphasize the newness of Christianity.²⁷

(a) In the *First Apology* Justin time and again uses the *πρεσβύτερον κρείττον*-argument. First, he uses it against Greek philosophers, claiming that (i) Moses and other Old Testament prophets are more ancient than all other writers, including the Greek philosophers (1 Apol. 23.1; 31.8); that (ii) Plato and other philosophers have borrowed some of their teachings from Moses (1 Apol. 44.8–10; 59.1); and (iii) that Plato sometimes partly misunderstood what he read in Moses (1 Apol. 60.1–7).²⁸ All this, according to Justin, is to show the superiority of the prophets in comparison with Plato and other philosophers. Of course, Justin’s argument is not in favour of Judaism, but of Christianity. For the message of the prophets concern “our Lord Jesus Christ, proclaimed ahead of time as drawing near” etc. (1 Apol. 31.7).²⁹

(b) Justin uses the *πρεσβύτερον κρείττον*-argument against Greco-Roman religion as well: some classical myths are dependent on the Old Testament, which was read but poorly understood by the demons (1 Apol. 54); nevertheless, their intentions were evil, whereas Plato was well-meaning.

(c) Justin also seems to hit heretics with the same argument: look, poor Simon Magus did not appear until the time of the Emperor Claudius (1 Apol. 26.2)! He was later followed by Menander (1 Apol. 26.4), and “someone called Marcion” appeared only quite recently (1 Apol. 26.5). This is to be compared with Moses, who prophesied 5000 years ago (1 Apol. 31.8–32.1), and the Logos, who is *πρωτότοκος τοῦ θεοῦ* (1 Apol. 46.2).

(d) In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin attacks both Greek philosophers and Christian—or, in Justin’s view, pseudo-Christian—heretics with a special version of the *πρεσβύτερον κρείττον*-argument. The philosophers, he maintains, were initially in contact with the primordial philosophy (cf. Dial. 2.1, cf. above), but

²⁵ Peter Pilhofer, *PRESBYTERON KREITTON: der Altersbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte* (WUNT 2.39; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990). Cf. Fiedrowicz, *Apologie*, 208–26.

²⁶ Pilhofer, *PRESBYTERON KREITTON*, 294.

²⁷ Pilhofer, *PRESBYTERON KREITTON*, 227–34.

²⁸ Pilhofer, *PRESBYTERON KREITTON*, 235–44.

²⁹ On the interrelationship between the *Altersbeweis* and the *Weissagungsbeweis*, see Pilhofer, *PRESBYTERON KREITTON*, 252, 295; Fiedrowicz, *Apologie*, 214.

they were never really able to grasp it. The different philosophical schools have, rather, always been part of a deteriorating movement, ever distancing itself from the true philosophy sent down from above and represented by the Old Testament prophets (Dial. 2.1–2; 7.1).³⁰ In a similar way, the heretics do not represent true Christian doctrine, but degenerated versions thereof (Dial. 35.6).³¹

4. Conclusion

Holte argued long ago that Justin, in his use of the originally Stoic term *σώφρων λόγος* (or *ὀρθὸς λόγος*) did not leave the significance of the term untouched, but filled it with a new content: “*σώφρων λόγος* is in actual fact nothing but reason enlightened by the Christian doctrines.”³² And these doctrines are to be found in the Old Testament revelation, rightly understood. For a Stoic, the term may refer to an ideal, but for the Christians it is an actual reality.³³

He [sc. Justin] can therefore critically examine the philosophical doctrines and according to the norm *σώφρων, ὀρθὸς λόγος*, choose and reject. “When the right reason appears, it proves that not all opinions nor all doctrines are good, but that some are evil and others good” [2 Apol. 9.4]. ... A term taken from philosophy is thus used for Christian purposes and turned against philosophy. And behind this *σώφρων λόγος* stands Christ himself.³⁴

Based on the observations above, I find myself in full agreement with these remarks by Holte.

³⁰ van Winden, *An Early Christian Philosopher*, 42–45, 111–2.

³¹ van Winden, *An Early Christian Philosopher*, 43; den Dulk, *Between Jews and Heretics*, 108–9. As den Dulk observes (pp. 106–8), Justin points out that Jesus had predicted the rise of heresies (Dial. 35.2–3); hence the existence of heretics among his declared followers is no embarrassing problem, but, on the contrary, a validation of his message.

³² Holte, “Logos Spermatikos”, 161.

³³ Holte, “Logos Spermatikos”, 162.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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