



[Arnobius, Against the Pagans I.5](#)

Christianity cannot be blamed for past or present catastrophes

Name of the author: Arnobius of Sicca

Date: 297 CE to 310 CE

Place: Sicca Veneria (near Carthage, North Africa)

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against the Pagans

Reference: I.5

Commentary:

We know little of Arnobius of Sicca other than the limited information which Jerome provides, who informs us that he taught rhetoric in Sicca, North Africa, during Diocletian's reign. Arnobius was supposedly converted to Christianity through a dream (Arnobius tells us of his conversion in *Against the Pagans* I.39), and wrote the present treatise, *Against the Pagans*, against his former religious beliefs in an attempt to convince the sceptical bishop of Sicca of his new found faith (Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* LXXIX; LXXXIII). Oliver Nicholson has suggested that the bishop read the seven books of *Against the Pagans* which survive to us at some point after the first edict of the so-called Great Persecution in 303 CE ("Arnobius and Lactantius," p. 259-260), but we have no way of knowing for certain that he read this lengthy work in its entirety. Claudio Moreschini argues that *Against the Pagans* was written between 304 and 310 CE, when the Diocletianic persecution was under way, due to the mention in book IV.36 of specific destruction of churches and Christian books. However, it is possible that books I-III were written earlier, perhaps as early as 297 CE (*Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, p. 393). There is some difference in opinion as to the precise dating of the text, with the likes of Mark Masterson preferring to place it around 300 CE, and Mark Edwards even suggesting a date as late as 326/327 CE (see Masterson, "Authoritative Obscenity," p. 375 n. 6; Edwards, "Dating Arnobius"). The latter author is more willing to trust the assertions of Jerome, who in his *Chronicon* speaks (likely mistakenly) of Arnobius being active twenty-three years later than he has previously stated. However, that Jerome also tells us that Lactantius was a disciple of Arnobius (*On Illustrious Men* LXXX) suggests that the earlier dating was correct, as we also learn in the *Chronicon* that Lactantius was made tutor of Constantine's son in 317 CE when he was a very old man, and it seems strange that an individual of such old age in 317 could have had a teacher who was in his prime years in 326. It is assumed that Arnobius died at some point during the persecution under Diocletian.

No works by Arnobius have been preserved other than *Against the Pagans*, and only two manuscripts are known to exist (in Brussels and Paris). In Oliver Nicholson's words, *Against the Pagans* "is less a defence of Christianity than a vigorous counter-attack on a broad range of pagan religious thought and practice, deploying a detailed knowledge of Latin literature and Roman myth," which "gives a sharp idea of religious dissension in the cities of Africa in the generation of the Great Persecution" ("Arnobius and Lactantius," p. 259, 261). Concerning the sources employed by Arnobius, Johannes Quasten notes that there are fifteen citations of Varro, fourteen of Plato, two each of Aristotle, Sophocles, Mnaseas of Patara, Myrtillus and Posidippus, and Lucretius and Cicero are also frequently drawn upon. Arnobius also shows some familiarity with Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, the Chaldean oracles, Plotinus, Zoroaster, Osthane and the magical papyri of the Mithriatic liturgies. Interestingly, no Christian authors are named, but it is apparent that Arnobius has made use of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix (see Quasten, *Patrology*, p. 386). As Masterson identifies, the treatise is written in a rhetorical style which makes good use of oratorical techniques and intertextual use of earlier Latin works in a bid to increase the author's authority ("Authoritative Obscenity," p. 387; on Arnobius's rhetorical style, see also Michael Simmons, *Religious Conflict*, p. 113-117 and George McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca*, p. 23).

In the present extract from book I of *Against the Pagans*, we find one of the key concerns of Arnobius. It was commonly believed that Roman religion protected against natural disasters, and one of the criticisms that pagans launched against Christianity was that it was because of this new (in relation to the more established religious heritage Rome believed itself to have) and illegitimate superstition, causing some to neglect worshipping the



traditional gods, that plagues, pestilence and famine were striking the empire (I.13). This accusation was something that certain Christian authors writing during the third century found themselves responding to (see also, for example, [Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#), and [Papyrus Rylands 12](#) and [112a](#) for a more detailed discussion, including Decius's universal edict of sacrifice in 250 CE, which it is often argued was an attempt to remedy this so-called 'crisis of the third century'). In order to counter this claim that the Christians were somehow responsible for the empire's problems, the first book of *Against the Pagans* seeks to argue that the Roman empire had suffered from natural disasters well before the advent of Christianity. Moreover, it undermines the integrity of the Roman gods to believe that one portion of the population (the Christians) could have such a dramatic effect by ceasing to perform Roman religious rites (see I.23).

Arnobius cites various historical events which had caused great turmoil in various ways, yet none of which can be attributed in any way to the Christians. He opens with a reference to the mythical island of Atlantis, from where armies are said to have sprung and destroyed many peoples. Arnobius attributes this knowledge to Plato, who in his *Timaeus* 24e-25d provides a history of Atlantis. Interestingly, neither Plato nor Tertullian—who also refers to the destruction of Atlantis in the context of defending Christianity against claims it was responsible for historical catastrophes recognised by the Romans—mention Neptune in relation to this, and so it might be that Arnobius only mentions this god to indicate that Atlantis was in the sea (see Tertullian, *Apology* XL.4; *To the Nations* I.9; see George McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca*, Vol. I, p. 273). Alternatively, Arnobius may be polemically playing with the pagan notion that catastrophes were sent by the gods.

Moving on to discuss other catastrophes, Arnobius next mentions the war of Assyria under king Ninus against Bactria under a king who some writers call Zoroaster, which involved both physical violence and a contest between the Magi and Chaldeans. This war was described in a lost work of the historian Ctesias about the history of the Assyrian empire (see also Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* II.6; Augustine, *City of God* XXI.14). Following this comes the famous narrative from Greek tradition surrounding the abduction by Paris of Helen of Troy, after he was bribed by Aphrodite, subsequently culminating in the sacking of Troy by the Greeks. Next, the actions of king Xerxes I of Persia are recalled, who in his preparations for the second invasion of Greece (480 BCE) instructed a canal to be dug through Mount Athos and built a bridge over the Hellespont (see Herodotus, *Histories* VII.22, 33). The penultimate narrative is that of Alexander the Great, the "one youth" who conquered the Eastern kingdoms. Most interesting for our purposes, however, is the narrative which Arnobius leaves until last—that of the Romans and their subjugation of numerous peoples.

The Romans are left until last firstly for chronological reasons, of course, but for Arnobius, it is their actions which are most relevant for his point. The Romans and their violent, expansionist aims are mentioned as part of a list of catastrophic events that have blighted humanity in some way, mainly through the mass destruction or enslavement of people. Indeed, the Romans are likened to a "mighty flood" which mercilessly engulfed every nation in its path, highlighting Rome's sheer brutality. Significantly, this is labelled by Arnobius as "madness" (the term used is *furor*, which evokes a specifically violent and rash form of fury), with the author firmly denying that the Christians could have anything to do with affecting the decision to engage in such warfare. This juxtapositioning of Rome's thoughtless madness with Christianity fits in with the claims made more firmly in book II of the treatise that Christianity is superiorly intelligent to anything that has come before it (in the second book, this claim is made in relation to intellectual and philosophical movements). In chapter 16 of this first book of his treatise, Arnobius points out that it is illogical to connect Christianity with misfortunes because just as one might argue that a certain people were conquered because of the presence of Christians among them, one could equally question how the Romans themselves had been so successful when there were Christians within their population also. There is no consistency, Arnobius claims, when it comes to the occurrence of disasters—be they natural or due to war, and so to connect Christianity with calamity in any way is impossible. Ultimately, what this passage reveals is that unlike Christian apologists who were happy to credit Rome for its vast expansion, and even assert that Christians continued to pray for the empire's prosperity and continuation in this regard, Arnobius merely views Rome and its militaristic actions as just a more recent example of violent tragedy (for examples of writers more willing to acknowledge Rome's success and in some cases partially attribute this to Christianity, see [Melito of Sardis, Apology](#); [Tertullian, Apology XXXII](#); [Tertullian, To Scapula IV.5-6](#)).

Keywords in the original language:

- [antiquitas](#)



- [captivitas](#)
- [crimen](#)
- [furor](#)
- [natio](#)
- [populus](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [religio](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [servitium](#)
- [subiugo](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alexander the Great](#)
- [Atlantis](#)
- [crisis of the third century](#)
- [Diocletian](#)
- [history](#)
- [kingdom](#)
- [nation](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman violence](#)
- [subjugation](#)
- [Troy](#)

Bibliographical references:

[Patrology Vol. 2: The Ante-Nicene Literature After Irenaeus](#)

Quasten, Johannesbook*Patrology Vol. 2: The Ante-Nicene Literature After Irenaeus* Westminster, MD.Christian Classics1994

[Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History, Vol. 1: From Paul to the Age of Constantine](#)

Moreschini, Claudio , Norelli, Enricobook*Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History, Vol. 1: From Paul to the Age of Constantine*PeabodyHendrickson2005

[“Arnobius and Lactantius”](#)

Nicholson, Oliverarticle-in-a-book*Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* Lewis Ayres, Frances Young, Andrew Louth259-265“Arnobius and Lactantius”CambridgeCambridge University Press2004

[Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian](#)

Simmons, Michael Blandbook*Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian*OxfordClarendon Press1995

[Arnobius of Sicca: The Case Against the Pagans, Vol. I](#)

McCracken, George E. book*Arnobius of Sicca: The Case Against the Pagans, Vol. I*Westminster, MDThe Newman Press1949



[“Authoritative Obscenity in Iamblichus and Arnobius”](#)

Masterson, Mark [article-in-a-journal373-39822.3](#) “Authoritative Obscenity in Iamblichus and Arnobius” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2014

[“Dating Arnobius: Why Discount the Evidence of Jerome?”](#)

Edwards, Mark J. [article-in-a-journal263-27112](#) “Dating Arnobius: Why Discount the Evidence of Jerome?” *Antiquité tardive* 2004

[Arnobe: Contre les Gentils. Tome I: Livre I](#)

Le Bonniec, Henri [book](#) *Arnobe: Contre les Gentils. Tome I: Livre I* Paris Les Belles Lettres 1982

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

The suffering of the empire is due to Roman religious ignorance

- [Read more about Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

Text

[Tertullian, Apology XXXII](#)

It is in Christianity's interests to pray for the emperor

- [Read more about Tertullian, Apology XXXII](#)

Text

[Melito of Sardis, Apology \(preserved in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History IV.26.7-11\)](#)

Christianity has benefitted the Roman empire

- [Read more about Melito of Sardis, Apology \(preserved in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History IV.26.7-11\)](#)

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution



Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Text

[Tertullian, To Scapula IV.5-6](#)

Examples of Christianity's aid of the Romans, and imperial recognition of this

- [Read more about Tertullian, To Scapula IV.5-6](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/arnobius-against-pagans-i5>