



## [Justin Martyr, First Apology VII.1-5](#)

Petition for Christians to be examined fairly in the law courts

**Name of the author:** Justin Martyr

**Date:** 153 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Apologetic

**Title of work:** The First Apology of Justin

**Reference:** VII.1-5

**Commentary:**

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

Here in the present extract, Justin elaborates on the issue of judging *all* Christians purely on the basis of the behaviour, or even just the reputation, of some. Justin begins in VII.1 by posing a hypothetical objection relating to Christians who are arrested simply for claiming the name of “Christian,” but then later found to be criminals guilty of other wrongdoings (not that being a Christian is a wrongdoing in Justin’s mind of course). The problem, he argues, is that convictions are not ordinarily brought against people on account of the fact that others within their group (sharing a name) have committed crimes. In other words, the actions of some particular individuals in a group are not usually taken to reflect those of every member (VII.2). Justin then illustrates this point in VII.3. He claims that amongst Greek philosophers there are a wide variety of opinions (“?????”, *dogma*) and teachings, yet the adherents of these are all called “philosophers.” Moreover, among barbarian peoples the same title of “barbarian” is given to those who are found to be wise, and those who are not. In the same way, then, the name “Christian” covers a wide variety of people, some of whom will be good, and some of whom will be morally questionable (a similar appeal to philosophy as an illustration in this argument about names and identification is used earlier in the [First Apology, IV.1-V.4](#)). Each individual must therefore be examined on his or her own specific actions (VII.4), and judged on his or her character, not simply on the basis of being called a “Christian.” This way, Justin argues, those Christians found to have committed crimes can be rightly punished for them.

The text in VII.2 is corrupt, and editors have offered various interpretations and emendations in order to make sense of it. Generally, there are two readings. The first interpretation sees the “many” (?????, *polus*) which the manuscript speaks of in this verse as referring to Christians, and argues that Justin is claiming that many Christians, when they are examined after being accused, are not then condemned on the basis of those Christians previously convicted. However, as Denis Minns and Paul Parvis argue, this would contradict Justin’s argument, as he would be conceding that Christians are often found guilty, and admitting that there is therefore a “presumption of guilt” associated with the name. In this case, Justin would also be suggesting that the judicial procedure that he requests Roman courts follow with Christians is in fact already followed much of the time (Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 93)! The second interpretation understands the “many” (?????, *polus*) to be accused people more generally (i.e. non-Christians as well). This is the reading which Minns and Parvis choose to follow themselves. They argue that the ??? ??? (*kai gar*, translated as “of course”) introduces an answer to the objection outlined in VII.1: “Some of those who have already been caught were shown to be criminals.” Justin suggests that he does not have a problem with Christians being shown to be guilty, and indeed it is often the case that examination of suspects’ lives indicate them to be so. It is for this revealed crime that the person is convicted, however, not because of an association with those accused before him or her happening to be from the same group.

Justin therefore moves from the example of “some” Christians who have already been proven to be guilty (VII.1) to the example of the “many” defendants who are on numerous occasions shown to be guilty when their cases are further investigated (VII.2). He notes that conviction should usually be made on the basis on this investigation, and not on the past record of Christian defendants “as a class.” Minns and Parvis acknowledge that this interpretation is not without problems, however, as the transition from the few Christians implied in the statement of VII.1 to the



“many” defendants in VII.2 seems stark. They therefore posit that the text could in fact be even more corrupt than is commonly acknowledged (*Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, p. 93). VII.4 contains the crucial element of Justin’s petition, which the opening of the *Apology* addresses directly to the emperor, asking that “a person who is found guilty might be punished as a wrongdoer, rather than as a Christian.” Justin opts to take the moral high ground in the next verse, claiming that contrary to what was perfectly permissible in Roman law, Christians found to be innocent after having undergone this hypothetical “fair trial” will not insist that their accusers be punished, as their ignorance is punishment enough for them. Roman law permitted that a person who accused someone was liable to be punished for *calumnia* (“false accusation/slander”) if the case could not be proven (see Olivia Robinson, *Criminal Law*, p. 99-103). As stated earlier Justin refers in the *First Apology* to Hadrian’s rescript to Caius Minucius Fundanus, and at LXVIII.10 quotes its instruction for severe punishment of those engaging in calumny.

Justin’s view of the Roman authorities as evidenced here is not straightforward. On the one hand, here as elsewhere in his two *Apologies* he protests against the miscarriages of justice in the trials of Christians, and the poor decisions of Roman judges. Yet on the other hand, his plea for reform directly appeals to the words of the emperor Hadrian, and the underlying implication is that the situation with the Christians has demeaned what in theory is a fair and functional justice system.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [barbarians](#)
- [Greek philosophy](#)
- [Roman court](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [trial](#)

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**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

## [Justin Martyr, \*First Apology\* IV.1-V.4](#)

Christians condemned in Roman courts on account of their name

- [Read more about Justin Martyr, \*First Apology\* IV.1-V.4](#)

Text

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

Appeal for reform in trials of Christians

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