ISSN: 0860-9411
eISSN: 2719-3586

VOX PATRUM 93 (2025) 55-84
DOI: 10.31743/vp.17555

Journey from Exclusion to Inclusion: A Literary Analysis of *The Letter to Diognetus*, Chapters 1-10

David E. Nyström[1]

Abstract: The second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* has largely been obscured in Christian history, discovered only in 1436 without any prior written records. The origins, authorship, and intended audience of this work remain uncertain. This article examines the text of *Diognetus* from a literary perspective, analysing its content, structure, and language to discern its character, intended audience and purpose. The analysis begins with an exploration of some rhetorical questions in the work's opening paragraph and their thematic development throughout the text. The article further examines how the use of personal pronouns and person-inflected verb forms blurs social boundaries, facilitating identity shifts and literary movement toward conversion. The final discussion compares the literary dynamic of *Diognetus* to an ancient conversion story, drawing attention to similarities in how these works succeed, through negotiation of identities, with transferring a literary addressee/protagonist from a state of exclusion to one of inclusion into a new community.

Keywords: Letter to Diognetus; Early Christian Apologetics; Apostolic Fathers; Christian Identity; Christian Self-Definition; Literary Analysis; Discourse Analysis

A brilliant piece of early Christian literature, *The Epistle to Diognetus* has been loved for generations by those who have read and studied it[2]. Its literary elegance and aesthetic portrayal of Christians and their faith, prompted 18th century German theologian Johann M. Sailer to label it "a pearl of Christian literature"[3], a sentiment affirmed by Joseph B. Lightfoot who, writing a century later, called the work "the noblest of

[1] David E. Nyström PhD, Senior Lecturer, Johannelund School of Theology, Uppsala, Sweden; e-mail: david.nystrom@johannelund.nu; ORCID: 0000-0002-4093-812X.

[2] Editions of the Greek text of Diognetus along with modern English translations are found in M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Grand Rapids 2007; B. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, v. 2, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge 2003, and C.N. Jefford, *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford Apostolic Fathers, Oxford 2013. In this article, unless otherwise stated, the Greek text as well as English translations are from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

[3] Quoted in H.E. Lona, *Diognetus*, in: *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, ed. W. Pratscher, Waco 2010, p. 197.

early Christian writings"[4]. Also in more recent times, *The Epistle* continues to elicit praise. According to Jefford, the style of the treatise "offers a simple beauty that is easily appreciated"[5] and in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to the Apostolic Fathers*, the work is called "a literary masterpiece" and "something of a sublime crescendo in early Christian literature"[6].

In sharp contrast to this modern era praise and fascination, stands the curious fact that the text seems to have been largely unknown for the better part of Christian history. Before its serendipitous discovery in 1436, among the wrapping papers in a Constantinople fishmonger's shop, there are no written records of it. No Church father mentions, let alone quotes it, in any surviving work. Although this does not prove that the work was completely unfamiliar to the ancient Church, it does show that it was not used or circulated to a great enough extent as to leave a mark within the bounds of preserved tradition[7].

To further complicate matters, the single surviving manuscript mentioned above – preserved in the 260 page long *Codex Argentoratensis Graecus ix* – was destroyed in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Fortunately, several scholars had made transcriptions of the manuscript, which now form the foundation for all modern translations[8]. The work's origin is also shrouded in mystery. It makes its late entrance on the historical stage quite naked; neither author, nor intended recipient, provenance or date of composition is certain, though scholarship has supplied no shortage of suggestions. Foster aptly summarizes the circumstances encompassing the history of this early Christian writing as "no text and no context"[9].

---

[4] J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, London 1879, p. 156.

[5] Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 13.

[6] M.F. Bird – K.H. Mackerras, *The Epistle to Diognetus and the Fragment of Quadratus*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Apostolic Fathers*, Cambridge 2021, p. 310.

[7] Though see Costache, who argues that echoes from Diognetus may indeed be heard in later patristic works, especially the *Fifth Spiritual Homily* attributed to Macarius the Egyptian, D. Costache, *Humankind and the Cosmos: Early Christian Representations*, Leiden 2021, p. 31, 40-43, 46-47.

[8] For a comprehensive history of the text, see H.I. Marrou, *A Diognète: Introduction, édition critique, traduction et commentaire*, SCh 33, Paris 1951, p. 5-42. For a briefer history, see Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 5-8.

[9] P. Foster, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, in: *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. P. Foster, London 2007, p. 147.

Even so, there are good reasons to why these questions have demanded so much attention. *The Epistle to Diognetus* is, in several ways, a unique text within early Christianity. It can broadly be placed within the early Christian apologetic tradition, but notoriously defies closer genre definition. Questions of genre, purpose and audience are intrinsically and inseparably connected to each other. The reason for identifying the genre of a given text is to understand its purpose. At the same time, one cannot fully recognize the purpose of a text without some prior conception of for whom it is intended.

The purpose of the present article is to address these questions from a literary perspective. As external information about this early Christian writing is virtually non-existing, we have nowhere to turn but to the text itself in our search for answers. This study focuses on what the text of the epistle itself, through its content, structure, literary flow, and use of language, can tell us about its purpose and intended audience. It a sentence, the question addressed is: "What kind of text is *The Epistle to Diognetus*?".

1. Initial remarks on date, textual integrity, genre and address

Before venturing into a literary analysis of the text, some preliminary remarks are warranted. The first concerns the dating of the text, a question at which scholarship is divided. Some have argued for a late dating of the work (3-4th century), but today, most scholars seem to favour a date in the late second century[10]. Bockmuehl has argued for an even earlier date, and though not conclusive, his findings convincingly show that nothing precludes a date in the mid-second century[11].

The second relates to the integrity of the preserved text. A marginal note in the now destroyed *Codex Argentoratensis Graecus* indicated a lacuna after chapter 10: "and here the copy had a break". Most scholars consider the two chapters that follow this (11-12) a later addition, due to

[10] Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 28: "Following the bulk of contemporary scholarship, the text is most likely to be attributed to some moment during the 2nd century, with a preference for the latter decades of that period". See also Lona, *Diognetus*, p. 211-212.

[11] M. Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 215-216. Cf. Lightfoot, who also favoured an early date: J.B. Lightfoot – J.R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Texts with Short Introductions and English Translations*, London 1891, p. 487-488.

differences in rhetoric, vocabulary, subject matter and perceived audience of the text[12]. This article follows the majority view and thus restricts the analysis to chapters 1-10 of the surviving text.

The third remark concerns the question of to which literary conventions or genres the text conforms. A named addressee, κράτιστε Διόγνητε (most excellent Diognetus, 1:1), is probably the reason to why the text has been titled a letter[13]. Yet, neither the opening section nor the rest of the work conforms particularly well to ancient epistolary conventions. The common third person greeting formula ("to X from Y, greetings"), in which both author and addressee are properly introduced, is absent. Instead, a singular "I" addresses an equally singular "you". Further, the "health wish" and the thanksgiving formula, both common features in Graeco-Roman letter introductions, are conspicuously missing in *The Epistle to Diognetus*[14]. In addition, the text contains no personal remarks or greetings to mutual acquaintances. The opening line, which presents the name of the addressee, is similar to the opening paragraph of the third gospel, which may well have served as inspiration to the author[15].

These observations have led a majority of scholars to the conclusion that *The Epistle to Diognetus*, despite its title, is not really a letter but a treatise. Modern scholarship often refer to it as an *apology*[16]. Yet, as the term "apology", when referring to ancient literary genre, is notoriously slippery, further consideration is necessary[17]. Grant famously described the driving force behind apologetic literature as emerging "from minority groups that are trying to come to terms with the larger culture

---

[12] See H.D. Meecham, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, Manchester 1949, p. 64-68, and Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 43-51. A minority of scholars take a different view and consider chapters 11-12 as original to the text, see e.g. H.E. Lona, *An Diognet: Übersetzt Und Erklärt*, Freiburg 2001, p. 43-48, and Marrou, *A Diognète*, p. 219-227.

[13] Further, the classification of the work as a letter is of comparably recent provenance. It can be traced to its first publication by H. Stephanus, who took the author to be Justin Martyr: *The Philosopher and Martyr Justin's Letter to Diognetus and The Discourse to the Greeks*, Paris 1592.

[14] J.A.D. Weima, *Letters, Greco-Roman*, in: *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C.A. Evans – S.E. Porter, Downers Grove 2000, p. 642.

[15] Foster, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, p. 149.

[16] Ex. Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 3-56.

[17] For a discussion on the concept of "genre" in antiquity, see T.G. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Literary Genres: A Mirage?*, in: *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. A. Laird, Oxford 2006, p. 421-439.

within which they live"[18]. This is undoubtedly so, though as an articulation it is wide enough to fit almost any early Christian text, and therefore unhelpful in differentiating between them.

Within early Christian literature, the term *apology* can be defined in a narrow or broad sense. In a narrow sense, it typically relates to *form*, and it a wider sense, it usually relates to the *purpose* of a text or the strategies used by its author[19]. Form, in this context, is another word for literary convention. *Formal* apologies are texts modelled on forensic defence speeches given in courtrooms. They are often addressed to a judicial authority, but not necessarily so. The important part is that they take shape around allegation and defence; the text is, at least to some extent, a response to actual or perceived accusations[20]. These apologies are written extensions of forensic speeches given orally in court, their literary prototype being the *Apology* of Plato.

The second century is often referred to as the "age of the apologists" in accounts of Christian history. Who, then, are these apologists, and which works, more specifically, are rightfully called apologies? Eusebius of Caesarea, writing his *Church History* in the fourth century CE, lists seven apologies from this time period. These are treatises written by Aristides, Quadratus, Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Apollinaris, Militiades, and Tertullian[21]. As among these only the apologies of Aristides, Justin, and Tertullian have survived, mapping common denominators between them is difficult. Yet, from Eusebius descriptions of them, one interesting fact sticks out: they were all, seemingly, addressed to authorities. This suggests that early Christians defined apology in terms of *form* – that is, as a text addressed to a judicial authority. Likely, they were structured around accusations and defence, though this outruns the evidence

---

[18] R.M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, Philadelphia 1988, p. 9.

[19] For a more comprehensive treatment of questions relating to genre and early Christian apologetics, see D.E. Nyström, *The Apology of Justin Martyr: Literary Strategies and the Defence of Christianity*, Tübingen 2018, p. 19-28.

[20] Examples of apologies addressed to authorities are Justin Martyr's *Apology* (emperor Antonius Pius and his adoptive sons Verissimus and Lucius), Athenagoras' *Embassy* (emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus), and Tertullian's *Apology* (provincial Roman governors). Josephus' *Against Apion* is an example of a formal apology not addressed to an authority. Yet, it is occupied with defending Judaism against various accusations by means of forensic rhetoric, and therefore fits the literary convention.

[21] Eusebius, *HE* IV 3, 1-2; IV 18, 2; IV 26, 1-2; V 17, 5; II 2, 4.

from Eusebius[22]. Ancient writers would typically strive to emulate an admired model, rather than producing literature of a certain kind (genre)[23]. An apologist, to the ancient Christian mind, thus seems to have been someone writing a defence for the Christian faith in the tradition of Plato's *Apology*[24]. In essence then, a formal apology is a courtroom defence[25].

Some scholars have opted for a less strict definition of the term apology. Thus, the editors of the publication *Apologetics in the Roman Empire* define an apology as having to do with "the defence of a cause or party supposed to be of paramount importance to the speaker", yet at the same time they acknowledge that genre, rather than being understood "as a mechanical recipe-book for the production of texts", is "best seen as a way of talking about the strategies of writers (and readers) in different cultural traditions and particular contemporary situations"[26]. Likewise, Frances Young, in a contribution to the same volume, while acknowledging the close links between literature and oratory in antiquity, defines apology not as a genre, but as "properly the end or purpose of a speech, particularly a speech for the defence in court, and then more loosely a defence or excuse offered in a less precise context or genre"[27]. This less exact definition of apology, consequently, focuses on the *purpose* of the text, rather than the form it takes.

A reading of *The Epistle to Diognetus* with the criteria for an apology in mind (whether defined *sensu stricto*, or more loosely) yields mixed results. First, one notes that the treatise seems to be addressed to a personal friend, rather than an authority, which would rule it out as a formal apology. Yet, the word used for addressing Diognetos (κράτιστος) is interesting. It is typically used for addressing a person of political or social

---

[22] For further discussion, see S. Parvis, *Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition*, in: *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, ed. S. Parvis – P. Foster, Minneapolis 2007, p. 115-127.

[23] Rosenmeyer, *Literary Genres*, p. 435-437.

[24] So Edwards: "Christians had reserved the name *apologia* for works in the forensic mode" (M.J. Edwards, *The Flowering of Latin Apologetic: Lactantius and Arnobius*, in: *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, ed. M.J. Edwards – M. Goodman – S. Price, Oxford 1999, p. 201-202).

[25] The courtroom is indeed the place of birth for the term *apologia*. It was the defence speech, delivered in response to the prosecutor's accusation speech, the *kathegoria*.

[26] M.J. Edwards – M. Goodman – S. Price, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Oxford 1999, p. 1-2.

[27] F. Young, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, in: *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, ed. M.J. Edwards – M. Goodman – S. Price, Oxford 1999, p. 90-91 (quote from 91).

prominence. In the New Testament, it is only found within the Lukan corpus. Three times it is used in addresses to Roman procurators Felix and Festus (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25), and once in the Lukan prologue (Lk 1:3), in reference to Luke's addressee, Theophilus. If, as suggested above, the author of *Ad Diognetum*, emulates the Lukan prologue, this may account for his use of this particular term. Yet, at the end of *The Epistle to Diognetus*, in chapter 10, the rhetorical (singular) addressee is presented with a question: "And when you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled […]?". The theme of joy is then developed in v. 5: "For happiness is not a matter of lording it over one's neighbors, or desiring to have more than weaker people, or possessing wealth, or using force against one's inferiors". These verses, in combination with the honorary address in ch. 1., might suggest that Diognetos, whether a real or literary figure, nonetheless is to be understood as a person of influence, perhaps even of political power. If so, the treatise could be seen as addressed to authority.

On the other side of the scale, however, sits the fact that the text carry no indications of explicit or implicit charges against Christians which might have served as an occasion for writing. Christians are not "defended" against misconceptions or accusations as much as celebrated in panegyric acclamation. It is not then an *apology* – that is, a defence – in any material sense.

In an instructive analysis of Diognetus' different themes, Klostergaard Petersen, though still calling it an apologetic work, recognizes some of the difficulties and highlights its character as a protreptic work[28]. The ancient protreptic discourse (*logos protreptikos*) can be described as a speech or text, primarily using deliberative rhetoric, aiming at changing the hearers' or readers' mind and way of life. It typically includes praise of the promoted ideas, critique of rivals or competitors, and sometimes "a personal appeal to the hearer inviting the immediate acceptance of the exhortation"[29]. Admitting that the terms are not used consistently in antiquity, Stowers still makes a useful distinction between *protreptic*

---

[28] A. Klostergaard Petersen, *Heaven-Borne in the World: A Study of the Letter to Diognetus*, in: *In Defence of Christianity: Early Christian Apologists*, ed. J. Engberg – A.-C Jacobsen – J. Ulrich, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 125-138. See also Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 53.

[29] D. Aune, *Romans as Logos Protreptikos in the Context of Ancient Religious and Philosophical Propaganda*, in: *Paulus Und Das Antike Judentum*, ed. M. Hengel – U. Heckel, Tübingen 1991, p. 101. Cf. Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 53.

and *paraenesis*, applying the former "in reference to hortatory literature that calls the audience to a new and different way of life" and the latter "for advice and exhortation to continue in a certain way of life"[30]. In short, the purpose of a protreptic discourse is to effect a change of mind or a change of lifestyle among its audience, not merely presenting a defence[31]. As we shall see, this is an apt description of the *The Epistle to Diognetus*[32].

The fourth, and last, initial remark, relates to the audience of the text. As noted above, this question cannot be fully distinguished from those of genre and purpose, but it should be noted that the question itself furnishes two important parts which need to be kept separated. The first has to do with the rhetorical address, and the second relates to the intended audience of the text. The work is addressed to a certain Diognetus, who is construed as a pagan interested in Christianity. The text divulges nothing else about this addressee. Diognetus, as a name, is attested elsewhere in Greek literature, though it does not seem to have been particularly common[33]. Yet, nothing precludes it from referring to a real, historical person. If the address is genuine, this fact sheds light on the second part of the above question, which has to do with the intended audience of the text. The intended audience is then equal to Diognetus, a sympathetic pagan who had posed intriguing questions about Christians, and possibly other pagans of a similar frame of mind. In antiquity, letters addressed to a single person would often be composed with the understanding that they would be publicly read out loud to a larger audience.

If, on the other hand, the address is fictive, it has to be regarded as part of literary convention, having a symbolic and/or rhetorical function. It has sometimes been pointed out that the name Diognetus means "heir of Zeus" and that it therefore could be understood as a symbolic reference to pagans in general[34]. This, in turn, could mean that the intended audience are pagans, whom the author seeks to convert. Yet, even if the work is

---

[30] S.K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia 1986, p. 92.

[31] Cf. A. Hofer, *Clement of Alexandria's Logos Protreptikos: The Protreptics of Love*, "Eccles" 24/4 (2015) p. 500-504.

[32] In a recent publication, D.H. Williams thus correctly suggests that the epistle should not be called an apology, but rather "a spirited protreptic", the purpose of which is "explaining Christianity to a seeker" (D.H. Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith: An Introduction to Early Christian Apologetic Literature*, Oxford 2020, p. 132).

[33] Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 26.

[34] Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 25.

rhetorically addressed to a pagan individual, and ostensibly directed toward a pagan audience, it does not follow that it was chiefly intended for pagan consumption. This will receive further consideration later in this article.

In the end, questions of purpose and audience cannot be satisfactorily answered solely by categorising a given text according to the standards of some perceived "genre". Every text has to be analysed according to its own premises, and each of these questions needs to be raised within the context of a close reading of the text itself. The next part of the article comprises a literary analysis of the text of *The Epistle to Diognetus* with these questions in mind.

2. Opening questions and rhetorical occasion

The Epistle to Diognetus starts with a greeting, which incorporates an agenda for the treatise.

> Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you are extremely interested in learning about the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions about them – specifically, what God they believe in and how they worship him, so that they all disregard the world and despise death, neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observing the superstition of the Jews; what is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another; and why this new race or way of 1ife has come into the world we live in now and not before – I gladly welcome this interest of yours […][35].

As noted earlier, the text reveals no information about the rhetorical addressee, Diognetus, except that he is credited with posing several questions, to which the author intends to respond. These questions, seven in total, serve as the rhetorical occasion for the composition. They also suggest that the addressee indeed is fictive. The questions presented are not ones asked by an actual inquisitive friend; rather, they are standard "talking points" in early Christian apologetic and protreptic discourse. Each of these questions represent core elements of early Christian identity construction, and they are set up as an initial structure for the text, or as rhetorical points of departure. It is hard to imagine an actual "pagan

[35] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1, Holmes, p. 695.

friend" asking the author why Christians despise death, why they love each other so deeply, or why Christianity appeared so late in history. It is equally hard to imagine that questions from a curious outsider would not have included some reference to the many popular misconceptions about Christianity circulating within the contemporary Graeco-Roman society. Yet, as a platform for a treatise designed for promoting a certain understanding of the Christian community, these questions make perfect sense. Throughout the rest of the treatise, the author addresses them one by one, albeit not in the above-given order.

Initially, one must observe that the questions all relate to *Christians*, not *Christianity*. In the opening line, Diognetus is credited with showing interest in "the religion of the *Christians*" and with "asking very clear and careful questions about *them*"[36]. If, as suggested above, the text may be characterized as a protreptic discourse, it is a discourse designed to shape the audience's understanding of a community of people, not a religion or philosophy. Indeed, although one finds a good deal of theology in the text, theology is not what the treatise is about. It contains no systematic presentation of what Christians actually believe. Either knowledge of these things is assumed, or it is not important to the purpose of the treatise.

Accordingly, one function of the text seems to be to properly present, describe, and define Christians. Much has been written on identity and self-definition in early Christianity that will not be reiterated here. Suffice it to repeat the common observation that social identity construction never occurs in a vacuum, but is by its very nature relational[37]. Definition of oneself implies definition of the "other", and the negotiation of borders[38].

The following sections explore how *The Epistle to Diognetus* frames and construes Christians, in contradistinction to their conceived "others" (Pagans and Jews) as well as on their own terms. The analysis moves chronologically through the text, highlighting how the text addresses the points from the initial agenda in different parts of the work. This is followed by an inquiry into how the author uses personal pronouns and finite verb forms to sharpen the contours of Christian identity and to effect a movement in the text, which brings the rhetorical addressee from a state of exclusion to one of inclusion into the Christian community.

---

[36] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1, Holmes, p. 695.

[37] In Jenkins words, "identification makes no sense outside of relationships […]" (R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, London 2014, p. 7).

[38] See Jenkins, *Social Identity*, esp. p. 104-119.

3. Pagans, Jews, and Christians

A visual representation of the introductory paragraph will be helpful at this point. The following chart shows each of the initial questions from *The Epistle to Diognetus* 1, 1, together with the corresponding sections later in the text, in which they are addressed.

Question	Greek text	Answers
1. What God do Christians believe in?	τίνι τε θεῷ πεποιθότες	7:1-8:11 (ch. 7-8)
2. How do Christians worship God?	πῶς θρησκεύοντες αὐτὸν	
3. Why do Christians disregard the world and despise death?	τόν τε κόσμον ὑπερορῶσι πάντες καὶ θανάτου καταφρονοῦσι	10:7-8
4. Why do Christians not recognize the Greek gods?	οὔτε τοὺς νομιζομένους ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων θεοὺς λογίζονται	2:1-10 (ch. 2)
5. Why do Christians reject the superstition of the Jews?	οὔτε τὴν Ἰουδαίων δεισιδαιμονίαν φυλάσσουσι	3:1-4:6 (ch. 3-4)
6. What is the nature of Christians' heartfelt love for each other?	τὴν φιλοστοργίαν ἔχουσι πρὸς ἀλλήλους	10:1-6
7. Why has this new race or way of life come so late into the world?	τί δή ποτε καινὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν βίον νῦν καὶ οὐ πρότερον	9:1-6 (ch. 9)

As noted, the author does not address the above questions in order. He starts out with a treatment of the Graeco-Roman gods, which corresponds to question # 4 above.

3.1. "Neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks"

"Pagan" is a problematic term, as it has no correlative in antiquity. In modern discourse, it is often used to designate practitioners of the ancient Graeco-Roman religion. In *The Epistle to Diognetus*, as in many other early Christian texts, these people are simply called "Greeks" (e.g. 1, 1; 3, 3). The first and main question of the text's opening paragraph, to which all the others relate, is "what God [Christians] believe in and how they worship him"[39]. This is in essence a sociological question, rather

[39] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1, Holmes, p. 695.

than a theological one. Its purpose is to accentuate sociological markers, through which Christians differentiate themselves from their "others". It is therefore unsurprising that the author in chapter 2, when he criticises pagans, focuses on their idol worship. Their practice, rather than their beliefs, is in focus.

The author establishes the folly of a practice foreign to Christians (worshipping images), through a battery of dialectical questions:

> Is not one of them stone, like that upon which we walk, and another bronze, no better than the utensils that have been forged for our use, and another wood, already rotted away, and another silver, which needs a watchman to guard it lest it be stolen, and another iron, corroded by rust, and another pottery, not a bit more attractive than that made for the most unmentionable use? Are not all these made of perishable matter? Are they not forged by iron and fire? Did the sculptor not make one of them, and the coppersmith another, the silversmith another, and the potter yet another? Before they were shaped by the skills of these craftsmen into the form they have, was it not possible indeed, is it not possible even now-for each of them to have been given a different form?[40]

The rest of the chapter proceeds in a similar vein. These are rhetorical questions, posed in the negative, implying answers in the affirmative. The critique of pagan worship of images is common within early Christian apologetics. It draws upon earlier Jewish apologetic works and ultimately on the Hebrew prophetic tradition. There is nothing original to be found here[41]. Yet, in comparison to contemporary Christian apologists, the criticism is markedly one-dimensional. Whereas writers such as Aristides, Justin, Tatian or Athenagoras go into deep details in criticizing Graeco-Roman myth, our author seems uninterested in the "theological" aspects of pagan worship. He is content with the most general of remarks, and in essence, a single point is made: worshipping crafted images is irrational. The religious views of worshippers of the Graeco-Roman gods are thereby clearly misrepresented, as no such practitioner, when sacrificing in front of an image, would have considered the image to be a god in and by itself, but rather a representation of the divine.

---

[40] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 2-3, Holmes, p. 695-696.

[41] Jefford, *Diognetus*, p. 203, and Marrou, *A Diognète*, p. 106-107.

3.2. "Nor observing the superstition of the Jews"

The author ends his attack on pagan gods with the statement that there are many more reasons as to why Christians do not serve (or rather, are "enslaved" to) these gods, but that what he has already written should be enough[42]. When turning to the Jews, in the following chapter, his tone is but slightly different. He readily accepts that Jews and Christians worship the same God, "the one God of the universe"[43], but claims that Christians do not serve God in *the same way* as the Jews. Again, practice rather than belief is in focus.

The distinction between Jews and Christians is a finer one than between Christians and pagans. Yet, the criticism against Jewish worship follows the same line as that against pagan worship, in that it relates to modes of worship:

> For whereas the Greeks provide an example of their stupidity by offering things to senseless and deaf images, the Jews, thinking that they are offering these things to God as if he were in need of them, could rightly consider it folly rather than worship. For the one who made the heaven and the earth and all that is in them, and provides us all with what we need, cannot himself need any of the things that he himself provides to those who imagine that they are giving to him[44].

Interestingly, the criticism against Judaism begins with focusing on the sacrificial temple cult. Even if an early dating of the treatise (mid-second century) is correct, this means that at the time of writing, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the temple cult abolished, already for two or three generations. No then living practitioner of Judaism had ever made a sacrifice at the temple. The author would have been aware of this, but the motif fits his rhetorical purposes well, as it enables him to place Jews and pagans in a single category:

> In any case, those who imagine that they are offering sacrifices to him by means of blood and fat and whole burnt offerings and are honoring him with these tokens of respect *do not seem to me to be the least bit different* from those who show the same respect to deaf images: the latter make offerings to

---

[42] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 10.
[43] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 3, 2, Holmes, p. 699.
[44] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 3, 3-4, Holmes, p. 699.

> things unable to receive the honor, while the former think they offer something to the one who is in need of nothing[45].

Jews are essentially no different from pagans, as they all practice wrong worship. In chapter four, the attack on the Jews continues with dismissals of circumcision, food laws and the keeping of Sabbaths and feast days. This is no coincidence, as these represent core practices, deeply connected to Jewish self-identification, and constitute corner stones of communal identity in early Rabbinic Judaism. Early Christians were keenly aware of this. In Justin Martyr's longest surviving work, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, his Jewish interlocutor challenges the Christian claim of being a pious people, by pointing out that Christians do not follow God's law by circumcising, keeping feasts and Sabbaths, or separating themselves from the Gentiles[46].

The attacks on both pagan religion and Judaism thus focus exclusively on religious rites, and bear no conventional traits of contention between religious or philosophical beliefs. The readers learn next to nothing about the beliefs or tenets of either pagans or Jews. The attacks on pagan religion make use of well-established tropes in earlier Jewish and contemporary Christian apologetics, focusing solely on the worship of crafted images. The subsequent attacks on Judaism follow the same track, by focusing on religious practises.

The reason is that religious rites constitute public displays of ethnic or religious identity. A dutiful Roman citizen was expected to participate in the public feasts, thereby showing loyalty towards the gods to whom Rome owed its greatness, and thus contributing to *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods. Diaspora Jews, living in pagan communities, were exempt from this mandatory pagan worship. Yet, their public rites of worship served a similar purpose – to distinguish themselves as a people, in the eyes of themselves as well as of others.

---

[45] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 3, 5, Holmes, p. 699 (my emph.).

[46] Justinus Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo* 10, 3: "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. You place your hope in a crucified man, and still expect to receive favors from God when you disregard his commandments", tr. T.B. Falls – T.P. Halton, *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. M. Slusser, Washington 2003, p. 18.

Maintaining a distinct Christian identity therefore necessitated emphatic rejection of all these competing identity markers. Still, the complicated intertanglement of citizenship and religious identity posed a challenge for early Christians who did not share the Jewish exemption from mandatory participation in public feasts. They had to find ways to argue that Christians could be good members of society without participating in the common religious cult.

Christians, thus, needed to separate themselves from "Greeks" as well as "Jews", and carve out their own space in the world they inhabited. This is exactly what our author attempts to do in the chapter that follows.

3.3. "This new race"

Of the seven rhetorical questions about Christians articulated in the introductory paragraph, only the two relating to Greeks and Jews are framed in the negative – that is, their purpose is to describe what Christians are *not*. As seen, those questions are tended to first. Then, in chapter 5 and onwards, the time has come to address the remaining five questions, the purpose of which are to define what Christians, in positive terms, *are*.

Referring to the chart above, we can see that so far, only questions #4 and #5 have been addressed. Among the remaining five, only one (#1) concerns what Christians actually believe, and it is stated in the theologically most fundamental way: "in what God do Christians believe (or trust)?". This question is primarily addressed in ch. 7-8, a section presenting God as the Master and Creator of the Universe, who sends his son in meekness and in love, in order to reveal himself to the world. It is a beautiful but simple message, lacking theological depth or sophistication.

Two questions (#3 and #6) are only fleetingly addressed in the text. Christians despise death because they fear eternal fire more than earthly hardships and look forward to their real life in heaven[47]. The mutual love of Christians comes from loving God and imitating his goodness[48]. Clearly, these are not actual questions given well-reflected answers. They function more as panegyric proclamations. Early Christian idealistic constructions of self typically included both notions of brotherly love and courage in the face of martyrdom. Jesus himself identified

[47] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 10, 7-8.
[48] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 10, 1-6.

mutual love as the prime characteristic of true discipleship, and he encouraged endurance in persecution[49].

Question #7 ("why has this new race or way of life come so late into the world?") is placed last in the paragraph, because it is the only one presenting an actual apologetic problem. The ancient world frowned upon newness, particularly in relation to philosophy and religion. The fact that Christianity was a new religion constituted a real problem that demanded real answers. Different apologists addressed the problem in diverse ways. They either rejected the notion of newness (e.g. Justin, Athenagoras and Tatian), using a variety of strategies to argue for Christianity's ancient roots, or they embraced it (Aristides, *The Preaching of Peter*), construing history as a continuous ascension leading up to the advent of Christ and the formation of Christian faith. *The Epistle to Diognetus* seems to follow the latter path, contrasting "that former season of unrighteousness" against the newly created "present season of righteousness"[50].

The most important question from the introductory paragraph is, as noted above, the remaining one, #2 ("how do Christians worship God?"). It is so because it relates to Christian worship, and thus is posed against the foil of incorrect Pagan and Jewish worship. Curiously though, it is the only question never explicitly answered in the text. There is a reason for this. In the opening paragraph, Christians are called "this new race" ("καινὸν τοῦτο γένος"), but when properly introduced in chapter 5, they are conceived as "not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom"[51].

Early Christians often understood themselves in ethnic terms, but ethnicity was a much more flexible concept in antiquity than it is today. This served them well, as they could adapt these distinctions to their needs. In his *Apology*, Justin Martyr basically defines Christians in individual terms, as this is beneficial to his present apologetic needs. Christians were punished because of the "name" alone, making any collective identity problematic. Hence, Justin never refers to Christians in ethnic terms in the *Apology*. In his longer work, the *Dialogue with Trypho*, the apologetic needs are different. Here, the rhetorical opponent is a Jew, and the argument is about the true nature of God's elected people. Because

---

[49] John 13:35; Matt 5:10-12.

[50] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 9, 1.

[51] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 5, 1, Holmes p. 701.

of this, Christians are construed in decisively ethnic terms (ἔθνος, γένος, λαός), as they are set up as a rival to the Jewish people[52].

The author to *The Epistle to Diognetus* does describe Christian as a "γένος"[53] but he discards designators that would be crucial to any modern ethnic construal – country, language, and customs[54]. Instead he identifies *modes of worship* as that which separates them from pagans and Jews[55]. The fluidity of the ancient understanding of "race" allowed for this; there are many examples from antiquity of how religious practices were understood as constituent to ethnic identity[56].

Yet, though the worship practices of both pagans and Jews are described and dismissed, there is no section that specifically deals with Christian worship. This testifies to the sociological nature of the text's construal of Christian identity. As pagans and Jews are defined through their (similar) modes of worship, Christians distinguish themselves through their refusal to take part in these, as well as by their alternative practises. However, as participation in public cultic activities was deeply connected to the expectations of loyal citizenship, Christians' refusal to engage in them could not be substituted with rival, esoteric devotions to a foreign deity. It had to be substituted with other tokens of devoted citizenship. Therefore, though different modes of "worship" define both pagans and Jews, the text defines Christians primarily through their ethical lifestyle and contribution to the good of society.

---

[52] For further discussion, see D.E. Nyström, *Laos Heteros: The Changing Shapes of Christian Communal Identity in the Writings of Justin Martyr*, "Theofilos" 11/1 (2019) p. 21-28.

[53] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1.

[54] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 5, 1.

[55] An even earlier Christian writing, the *Preaching of Peter*, quoted by Clement of Alexandria, exhorts the audience not to worship as the Greeks or the Jews. Christians, this text asserts, worship God in third, new way (Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* VI 39, 4; VI 41, 2; VI 41, 6). Similarly, the early apologist Aristides differentiates between three or four peoples on the earth (depending on which recension of the text one follows). Christians, as the last people, are said to "have come nearer to truth and genuine knowledge than the rest of the nations" (Aristides, *Apologia* 15, 1). Some interpreters are convinced that the author to *The Epistle to Diognetus* was influenced by these two early texts (see e.g. M. Fiedrowicz, *Apologie Im Frühen Christentum: Die Kontroverse Um Den Christlichen Wahrheitsanspruch in Den Ersten Jahrhunderten*, Paderborn 2000, p. 56).

[56] For a compelling argument, see D.K. Buell, *Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition*, HTR 94/4 (2001) p. 449-476.

> [Christians] marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted[57].

The author signals this already in the opening paragraph by referring to Christians as both a *race* and a *way of life* (καινὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα)[58]. The benefit of framing identity in terms of both worship and lifestyle, is that Christians can be understood as a distinct τρίτον γένος, a third people, next to Greeks and Jews, even though they live in the same cities, speak the same language and eat the same food.

> For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life […]. But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship[59].

For the author, this accomplishes three things:

- it delineates a collective identity for Christians distinct from both pagans and Jews;
- it shows Christians to be good citizens even though they do not participate in public pagan worship;
- it shows that though the borders between these three "peoples" become clear and distinct, they are not impassable. They can be crossed. Ethnicity defined through practice, makes it possible for an individual to move from one people to become part of another.

The next section of this article investigates the dynamic created in the text through the use of personal pronouns and finite verb forms. It shows how text creates a movement between identities through the use of a language of inclusion and exclusion.

---

[57] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 5, 6-11, Holmes, p. 703.
[58] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1.
[59] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 5, 2.4, Holmes, p. 701-702.

4. We, you, and they

Collective or group identities are constructed by the creation of boundaries:

> Defining 'us' involves defining a range of 'thems' also. When we say something about others we are often also saying something about ourselves […]. Similarity and difference reflect each other across a shared boundary. At the boundary, we discover what we are in what we are not, and *vice versa*[60].

In this negotiating process, language is key. Observing an a particular text's use of personal pronouns and/or person-inflected verbs can be a good method for detecting structures of inclusion and exclusion. An investigation into this dynamic can answer a series of different questions. With whom does the author identify, which groups are considered "others", and how are the recipients of the message construed and addressed?

The epistle begins with an address to a singular, named individual, Diognetus: "Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you [singular] are extremely interested in learning about the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions about them […]"[61]. Yet, beyond the opening line, the author – in singular first person – emerge only twice in the text, and then in the role of a teacher or a guide: "[…] these tokens of respect do not seem *to me* to be the least bit different […]"[62] or "[…] *I* doubt that you need to learn *from me* that they are ridiculous […]"[63]. In reference to the addressee, the whole first chapter and the opening line of the second chapter maintain the initial, singular "you", laying out the agenda for the treatise.

After this, there is a shift.

> ἴδε [2p, singular] μὴ μόνον τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἀλλὰ καὶ τῇ φρονήσει τίνος ὑποστάσεως ἢ τίνος εἴδους τυγχάνουσιν οὓς ἐρεῖτε [2p, plural] καὶ νομίζετε [2p, plural] θεούς

---

[60] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, p. 104-105. Cf. M. Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective*, Tübingen 2009, p. 57-58, and J.M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, Oxford 2004, p. 98-104.

[61] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 1, 1, Holmes, p. 695.

[62] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 3, 5, Holmes, p. 699.

[63] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 4, 1, Holmes, p. 701.

See not only with *your* [singular] eyes but also with *your* [singular] intellect what substance or what form those happen to have whom *you* [plural] call and regard as gods[64].

Here, in mid-sentence, the author moves from rhetorically addressing a singular, personal "you", to addressing a more generic, plural "you". This change is not accidental. In the opening paragraph of the treatise, the singular "you" conveys the impression of referring to someone sympathetic, or at least open-minded, towards Christians and Christianity. This "you" is personal, and close to the "I" of the text. It even has a name, Diognetus. The plural "you", introduced in 2, 1, is more distant and more generic. It is the "you" of one of Christianity's "others", worshippers of the Graeco-Roman gods.

The mildly sympathetic singular "you" is subsumed by this new, distinctly pagan, plural "you", which is gradually framed in ever more hostile terms. After belittling the Graeco-Roman gods through a series of dialectical questions, the author refocuses on the plural "you" in ch. 2:

> ταῦτα θεοὺς καλεῖτε τούτοις δουλεύετε τούτοις προσκυνεῖτε τέλεον δ᾽ αὐτοῖς ἐξομοιοῦσθε.
> These are the things *you* call gods; *you* serve them, *you* worship them, and in the end *you* become like them[65].

This rhetorical escalation is noticeable. The "you" of the text is accused of acknowledging the pagan gods, worshiping the same gods, and finally of becoming like them. As the author in the directly preceding verse describes the pagan gods as "deaf and blind, without souls, without feeling, without movement" who all "rot" and "decay"[66], the remarks of v. 5 are clearly intended as an insult. The diatribe culminates in the verse that follows: "This is why *you* [plural] hate the Christians: because they do not consider these objects to be gods"[67]. At this point, the rhetorical addressee has significantly changed character from previous chapter: from a sympathetic "friend" who is curious about Christianity, to an impersonal, pagan, and clearly hostile, collective.

Does this signal the breakdown of a literary fiction? I suggest not. The shift from singular to plural, invisible in English translations, is

---

[64] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 1, Holmes, p. 695.
[65] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 5, Holmes, p. 697.
[66] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 4, Holmes, p. 697.
[67] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 6, Holmes, p. 697.

significant and intentional, in that it allows the author to portray the addressee as both an individual who is interested in Christianity *and* as an individual who is part of, or perhaps trapped within, a larger, hostile group.

In the next two chapters (3-4), the author re-extracts the sympathetic singular "you" from the hostile, collective "you", and seeks common ground with the addressee. This, he finds in this stance against the Jews, construing them as an "other" Christians have in common with the addressee. In 4, 6 we read: "So then, I think *you* [singular] have been sufficiently instructed to realize that the Christians are right to keep their distance from the common silliness and deception and fussiness and pride of the Jews"[68]. The Jews serve no other function here than that of a backscene, against which both Christians and pagans can be distinctly perceived.

Moving to the third person plural, we may observe two distinct "they" – groups throughout the text. The first are the Jews of ch. 3-4, portrayed in an invariably negative light. The second group, introduced in ch. 5, are the Christians. This creates an interesting dynamic. The treatise consistently refers to Christians in the third person plural. In 1:1, we learn that Diognetus is interested in "learning about the religion of *the Christians* and are asking very clear and careful questions *about them* [περὶ αὐτῶν]". *Them*, not *us*. Chapters 5-6 re-introduce Christians through a lengthy epideictic tribute, portraying them as ideal citizens and the soul of the world[69].

Let us now pause and summarize our findings so far. The literary dynamic of chapters 1-7 is formed around five textual agents.

- *First person singular, the "I" of the text:* the implied author. Acquainted with the "singular you" of the text, but writing in the role of a teacher or instructor, rather than as merely a personal friend. The implied author glorifies Christians over and against pagans (or "Greeks") and Jews, respectively. Yet, he never explicitly identifies with the Christian community.
- *Second person singular, the "singular you" of the text:* The implied addressee. Personally acquainted with the "I" of the text. Interested in and mildly sympathetic towards Christians and their religion. The singular "you" is attributed introductory questions about Christians that serve as the rhetorical occasion for the treatise.

---

[68] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 4, 6, Holmes, p. 701.

[69] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 6, 1, Holmes, p. 703: "In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world".

- *Second person plural, the "plural you" of the text:* Worshippers of the Graeco-Roman gods. This is a larger group to which the "singular you" initially belongs. As a group, it is portrayed as foolish as well as hostile towards Christians.
- *Third person plural 1, the unfavourable "they" of the text:* The Jews. They serve as one of the two backdrops against which the characteristics of Christians are painted; the other being pagan worshippers.
- *Third person plural 2, the favourable "they" of the text*. Like the Jews, Christians are also referred to as a group in third person, though in a positive light that contrasts against that of both Jews and pagans.

Conspicuously, these seven chapters reveal no group with which the implied author clearly identifies. There is no distinct "we" of the text. In the odd instances a first person plural pronoun is used, it is generic and universal, referring to humanity as a whole[70].

Chapter 8, however, introduces a pronounced "we", with which the author clearly identifies. After having described Christians as "the soul of the world" in chapter 6, the author gradually moves over to a testimony about God and the Son whom God has sent. God "sent him in gentleness and meekness, as a king might send his son who is a king; he sent him as God; he sent him as a human to humans"[71]. Further, when God sent his Son, "he did so as one calling, not pursuing; when he sent him, he did so as one loving, not judging"[72]. He continues in chapter 8, stating that the truth about God was concealed to the philosophers, revealed through faith and communicated to his Son. Then, in verse 10, a new "we" is introduced in the text, featuring as the object of God's love and blessings:

> And after conceiving a great and marvelous plan, he [God] communicated it to his child alone. Now as long as he kept it a secret and guarded his wise design, he seemed to neglect and be unconcerned about *us* [ἡμῶν], but when he revealed it through his beloved child and made known the things prepared from the beginning, he gave *us* everything at once, both to share in his benefits and to see and understand things that none of *us* [ἡμῶν] ever would have expected[73].

---

[70] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 2, 2; 3, 4.
[71] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 7, 4, Holmes, p. 707.
[72] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 7, 5, Holmes, p. 707.
[73] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 8, 9-11, Holmes, p. 709.

This "us" surely does not refer to Christians. That God earlier "seemed to neglect and be unconcerned about us" is an unambiguous reference to people living before Christ, when God's plan was still a "secret". This understanding is corroborated by the contrast between "that former season of unrighteousness" and "the present season of righteousness" painted a few sentences later[74]. The "we", appearing in this section, is therefore still the generic "we" from earlier chapters, though with an important modification[75]. It should probably be understood as directly referring to the Greek or pagan section of humanity, rather than as humanity as a whole. The earlier rhetorical exclusion of the Jews from the categories of both sender and recipient suggests this, but also the fact that this section, and the verses that follow, so clearly draws on Pauline rhetoric and theology[76]. In Paul, the contrast between the new life in Christ and the "former way of living" is typically connected to the conversion of pagans[77].

This interplay between pronouns creates a movement in the text, which leaves a pattern that now starts to crystalize. *The Epistle to Diognetus*, in a sense, reads like a conversion tale. It is the tale of a pagan outsider being shown the way, or rather personally guided, out of his previous state into a brand new identity. It is a tale of movement from exclusion to inclusion into the Christian community.

Diognetus is the literary representative of the unconverted pagan finding his way to Christianity. He starts out as a sympathetic pagan, interested in Christians and their God (ch. 1), but also as one trapped within the ranks of a foolish and hostile collective (ch. 2). The literary dynamic of the text is set at moving Diognetus out from this original state into a new one, through a change in identity. This change can only be achieved through abandoning wrong worship and embracing a new way of life. The text accomplishes this movement by first restricting and narrowing the way forward. The worship of the Jews, the first "they" of the text, is established as a dead end (ch. 3-4). After this Christians, the second

---

[74] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 9, 1, Holmes, p. 709.

[75] Here is another argument to why chapters 11-12 should be seen as a later addition. In these chapters, unlike in chapters 1-10, "we" refer to the author/sender. Also dissimilar to the previous chapters, this "we" is distinctly Christian (*Epistola ad Diognetum* 11, 8).

[76] See M.F. Bird, *The Reception of Paul in the Epistle to Diognetus*, in: *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. M.F. Bird – J.R. Dodson, London 2011, esp. p. 85-87.

[77] See e.g. Rom 6:1-14; 1Cor 6:9-11; Gal 4:8-9; cf. Eph 4:17-24.

"they" of the text, are described with lavishly panegyric language (ch. 5-6). The path is now cleared, and the following chapter starts with presenting God's purpose with sending his Son into the world. Then, in ch. 8, the real movement begins. The author, attaching himself to the addressee – arm-in arm as it were – creates a new "we", and leads Diognetus forward, through salvation history, up to the brink of redemption.

> He did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners![78]

This is certainly not a merely Christian "we", but an all-encompassing "we", in which the addressee is included. This is an invitation to all sinners to experience the "sweet exchange", to substitute their sinfulness for God's righteousness.

In the final chapter. chapter 10, having led him right up to the point of decision, the author finally lets go of Diognetus' arm. The "we" disappears, and the singular "you" reappears: "If this faith is what *you*[79] too long for, then first of all you must acquire full knowledge of the Father"[80]. The treatise is coming to an end, and the circle is completed with focus being redirected, yet again, towards the singular "you" of the text, inviting him to join the ranks of the Christians, by becoming an imitator of God (ch. 10).

5. Discussion and conclusions

"What kind of text is *The Epistle to Diognetus*?". This has been the guiding question for this inquiry, and it is time to posit some answers.

---

[78] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 9, 2-4, Holmes, p. 711.

[79] The use of a personal pronoun in addition to the second person singular verb inflection gives emphasis to the word "you" (σὺ τὴν πίστιν ἐὰν ποθήσῃς).

[80] *Epistola ad Diognetum* 10, 1, Holmes, p. 711.

I earlier suggested that the text reads like a conversion tale, and this statement needs unpacking. *The Epistle to Diognetus* is obviously not the story of an actual conversion, but the text displays a similar dynamic to tales of this kind. A few comparisons with the ancient romantic conversion story of *Joseph and Aseneth* will serve as illustration.

The first 21 chapters of this text, which possibly dates from the first century BCE[81], feature the intriguing tale of how Aseneth, a beautiful Egyptian girl, converts to Judaism in order to marry Joseph. Joseph, as Pharaoh's right hand, is travelling the land and managing the country's affairs. He comes to visit the house of a prominent man, Aseneth's father. In anticipation of Josephs arrival, the father tells his daughter his plan of arranging a marriage between her and Joseph, but she responds with anger and withdraws to her chambers. As she meets Joseph, her attitudes towards both him and his religion changes. She becomes distressed by her earlier behaviour and tries to repent. With the help an angelic visitor, she finally converts to Judaism and marries Joseph.

There are some interesting parallels between the character Aseneth in this story, and Diognetus in our text. First, both Aseneth and Diognetus are initially described in positive as well as negative terms. They are both framed as good people caught within evil systems. Diognetus is portrayed as sympathetic towards Christianity, while at the same time trapped within an ignorant collective which hates Christians. In the case of Aseneth, her good attributes are signalled by her beauty which apparently was well-known, in spite of the fact that, according to the story, no man had ever seen her[82]. Yet, at the same time she was held prisoner physically (she lived in a tower), as well as emotionally by devotion to her native gods and personal prejudices against Joseph.

The textual dynamic is in both cases then set at leading the main character out from the prison of a collective pagan identity to a new identity as a Christian in the case of Diognetus, and a Jewish convert married to Joseph, in the case of Aseneth. For Aseneth, this journey begins with her beholding Joseph in his glory, discovering his virtues, and eventually referring to him as the son of God[83]. In a similar way, Diognetus is guided on his way towards conversion through panegyric description of Christians and of their welcoming, loving God.

---

[81] J.J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 108-110.

[82] *Fabula Josephi et Asenethae* 2, 1.

[83] *Fabula Josephi et Asenethae* 6, 1.

As with many conversion stories, the purpose of *The Epistle to Diognetus* could therefore be understood as establishing the rationality of pagan conversion, and as plotting out a course for pagans to leave behind one particular group identity and embracing another. Collective identities, as noted earlier, are construed in such a way that movement between them is possible. In short, *The Epistle to Diognetus* might reasonably be seen as carrying a missionary purpose.

Yet, as have often been argued, apologetic and other seemingly mission-oriented literature often served an equally important role for an inward audience, especially a newly converted one[84]. There are several details in *The Epistle to Diognetus* that points in this direction. First, though dealing entirely with Christians, the treatise gives no comprehensive exposition of Christian beliefs. This knowledge seems to be assumed in the audience. Second, the religious views of pagan practitioners are crudely misrepresented in the text, and would hardly have impressed a pagan audience. In a similar vein, it is hard to see how the criticism of Jewish sacrifice – a practice long since abandoned at the time of writing – would have any impact on a pagan audience. Thus, the criticism against both pagan and Jewish worship has a ring of fiction to it; a scent of not being rooted in real life issues, and thereby void of any real persuasive power to convert pagans. For a Christian audience, on the other hand, this criticism would serve well in creating rhetorical "others" and in creating reassurance, in particular to Christian converts, of the veracity of their newly found faith.

Yet, even though it is likely, on balance, that treatise was chiefly intended for inward consumption, with the purpose of strengthening former pagan worshippers' conviction that their decision to convert to Christianity had been rational, it is not necessary to create an either/or scenario[85]. It is fully possible that writers of this kind of literature entertained hopes that their works would reach the attention of outsiders as well.

So, what kind of text, then, is *The Letter to Diognetus*? Early in this article I argued for labelling this text a protreptic discourse, but this does not really answer the question. Perhaps the best way of answering this type of question is to describe what the text does. And having done so throughout this article, the following picture emerges. *The Epistle to Diognetus* sets out at defining Christians as a group distinct from and

[84] The classic study is V. Tcherikover, *Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered*, "Eos" 48 (1956) p. 169-193. See also e.g. Edwards – Goodman – Price, *Apologetics*, p. 4-5.

[85] See Williams, *Defending*, p. 29-31.

better than both pagans and Jews. Christians are both a race – something solid and tangible – and a way of life – something that can be embraced. This opens up for the possibility of movement between identities.

The text then plots a course for the pagan practitioner to shed one identity and embrace another, to move from a state of exclusion to one of inclusion. It invites the reader to join the ranks of those who constitute "the soul" of the world and to become an imitator of God. For the primary readers, whom I take to be Christians and therefore had already undertaken this journey or perhaps were in the midst of it, this treatise was intended to provide courage, consolation and confirmation that they had made the right choice. For everyone else, the text issues a challenge to take the first step.

Bibliography

Sources

Epistola Ad Diognetum, *The Apostolic Fathers,* v. 2, ed. and tr. B. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge 2003, tr. M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Grand Rapids 2007.

Iustinus Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, tr. T.B. Falls – T.P. Halton, *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. M. Slusser, Washington 2003.

Studies

Aune D., *Romans as Logos Protreptikos in the Context of Ancient Religious and Philosophical Propaganda*, in: *Paulus Und Das Antike Judentum*, ed. M. Hengel – U. Heckel, Tübingen 1991, p. 91-121.

Bird M.F., *The Reception of Paul in the Epistle to Diognetus*, in: *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. M.F. Bird – J.R. Dodson, London 2011, p. 70-90.

Bird M.F. – Mackerras K.H., *The Epistle to Diognetus and the Fragment of Quadratus*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. M.F. Bird – S. Harrower, Cambridge 2021, p. 309-331.

Bockmuehl M., *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2000.

Buell D.K., *Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition*, "Harvard Theological Review" 94/4 (2001) p. 449-476.

Collins J.J., *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, Grand Rapids 2000.

Costache D., *Humankind and the Cosmos: Early Christian Representations*, Leiden 2021.

Edwards M.J., *The Flowering of Latin Apologetic: Lactantius and Arnobius*, in: *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, ed. M.J. Edwards – M. Goodman – S. Price, Oxford 1999, p. 197-221.

Edwards M.J. – Goodman M. – Price S., *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Oxford 1999.

Fiedrowicz M., *Apologie Im Frühen Christentum: Die Kontroverse Um Den Christlichen Wahrheitsanspruch in Den Ersten Jahrhunderten*, Paderborn 2000.

Foster P., *The Epistle to Diognetus*, in: *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. P. Foster, London 2007, p. 147-156.

Grant R.M., *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, Philadelphia 1988.

Hofer A., *Clement of Alexandria's Logos Protreptikos: The Protreptics of Love*, "Pro Ecclesia" 24/4 (2015) p. 498-516.

Jefford C.N., *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford 2013.

Jenkins R., *Social Identity*, London 2014.

Klostergaard Petersen A., *Heaven-Borne in the World: A Study of the Letter to Diognetus*, in: *In Defence of Christianity: Early Christian Apologists*, ed. J. Engberg – A.C Jacobsen – J. Ulrich, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 125-138.

Lieu J.M., *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, Oxford 2004.

Lightfoot J.B., *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, London 1879.

Lightfoot J.B. – Harmer J.R., *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Texts with Short Introductions and English Translations*, London 1891.

Lona H.E., *An Diognet: Übersetzt Und Erklärt*, Freiburg 2001.

Lona H.E., *Diognetus*, in: *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, ed. W. Pratscher, Waco 2010, p. 197-213.

Marrou H.I., *A Diognète: Introduction, édition critique, traduction et commentaire*, Sources Chrétiennes 33, Paris 1951.

Meecham H.D., *The Epistle to Diognetus*, Manchester 1949.

Nyström D.E., *Laos Heteros: The Changing Shapes of Christian Communal Identity in the Writings of Justin Martyr*, "Theofilos" 11/1 (2019) p. 21-28.

Nyström D.E., *The Apology of Justin Martyr: Literary Strategies and the Defence of Christianity*, Tübingen 2018.

Parvis S., *Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition*, in: *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, ed. S. Parvis – P. Foster, Minneapolis 2007, p. 115-127.

Rosenmeyer T.G., *Ancient Literary Genres: A Mirage?*, in: *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. A. Laird, Oxford 2006, p. 421-439.

Stowers S.K., *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia 1986.

Tcherikover V., *Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered*, "Eos" 48 (1956) p. 169-193.

Tellbe M., *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective*, Tübingen 2009.

Weima J.A.D., *Letters, Greco-Roman*, in: *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C.A. Evans – S.E. Porter, Downers Grove 2000, p. 640-644.

Williams D.H., *Defending and Defining the Faith: An Introduction to Early Christian Apologetic Literature*, Oxford 2020.

Young F., *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, in: *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, ed. M.J. Edwards – M. Goodman – S. Price, Oxford 1999, p. 81-104.