

Aritecus' Letter to Emperor Hadrian

SECTION IV.—CHRISTIAN LIFE UNDER HADRIAN AS PRESENTED BY EARLY CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS.

We have dwelt a little on the life and character of the famous Emperor Hadrian, who certainly, for the first sixteen years of his reign very gently interpreted the Imperial precedents, which with one consent determined to regard the Christian communities as composed of outlaws who had incurred the extreme penalty of the Roman law. Some have even chosen to regard Hadrian as, in one portion of his reign, positively inclined to favor the worshippers of Jesus. **The tendency of his rescript to *Minucius Fundanus*, of which we have spoken, was certainly in this direction; for it allowed a kindly provincial governor effectually to discourage any attempt at persecution.**

Encouraged, apparently, by the benevolent attitude of the all-powerful master of the Roman world, two Christian scholars ventured to approach the throne and publicly to defend the proscribed and dreaded faith. The first of these formal *Apologies for Christianity* was presented to Hadrian at the time of one of the imperial visits to Athens by *Quadratus*, who was, some scholars think, the Quadratus distinguished for his prophetic gifts referred to by Eusebius as a *disciple of the Apostles*. The work of Quadratus has not come down to us. But *Eusebius* has given us from it some striking sentences which suggest power and originality and seem to imply that the writer had been personally acquainted with some of those who had seen the Lord. The passage is a very remarkable one and runs as follows: *"The works of our Savior were ever present, for they were real; (they were) those who were healed, those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when healed and when raised but were always present. They remained living a long time, not only whilst our Lord was on earth, but likewise when He had left the earth, so that some of these have also survived even to our own times."*

The other apologist, *Aristides*, Eusebius describes as *"a man faithfully devoted to the religion we profess."* Like Quadratus, he has left to posterity a defense of the faith, addressed to the Emperor Hadrian. *"Their works,"* says the historian, *"are also preserved by a great number, even to the present day"* (i.e., the first half of the fourth century). The *"Apology" of Aristides* was for ages among the lost works of early Christianity and was only quite lately re-discovered in part and published, in an Armenian version, by the learned Armenians of the Lazarist monastery at Venice. Since then, in the year 1889, a Syriac rendering of the whole text of the long missing work was found in the library of the **Convent of S. Catherine, upon Mount Sinai**; and in the last decade of the nineteenth century the Greek text, with very slight modifications, was found to be embedded in the famous romance of **"Baalaam and Josaphat"**—a writing that dates from the sixth century or earlier, and once enjoyed an extraordinary popularity. Thus, thanks to the research of modern scholars, one of the most interesting of the lost early Christian writings has been restored to us in Greek and in Syriac, and a portion of it in Armenian. The "Apology" of Aristides is of singular interest to the historian of early Christianity; for in the course of his argument for the truth of the religion of Jesus, the writer lifts the veil which hangs over the inner life aimed at and largely followed by those Christian communities which had sprung into existence in so many of the important cities of the Empire during the thirty or forty years which followed the death of John. We will give some of the very words of Aristides. They are at once simple and beautiful and give us a unique picture of early Christian life and conduct."

"Now the Christians, O King, by going about and seeking, have found the truth. . . . They know and believe in God the Maker of Heaven and earth . . . from whom they have received those commandments which they have engraved on their minds, which they keep in the hope and expectation of the world to come; so that on this account they do not commit adultery or fornication, they do not bear false witness . . . nor covet what is not theirs, they honor father and mother, they do good to those who are their neighbors . . . those who grieve them they comfort, and make them their friends, and they do good to them, and they do good to their enemies. Their wives, O King, are pure as virgins, and their daughters modest, and their men abstain from all unlawful wedlock and from all impurity, in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world; but as for their servants and handmaids . . . they persuade them to become Christians from the love that they have towards them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction brethren . . . they walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. From the widows they do not turn away their countenance, and they rescue the orphan from him who does him violence; and he who has, gives to him who has not, and when they see the stranger, they bring him to their dwellings and rejoice over him as over a true brother . . . When one of their poor passes away from the world, and any one of them sees him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they have not abundance of necessities, they

*fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food. And they observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, they live honestly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and at all hours, on account of the goodness of God toward them, they praise and laud Him, and over their food and over their drink they render Him thanks. And if any righteous person of their number passes away from the world, they rejoice and give thanks to God, and they follow his body, as if he were moving from one place to another. And when a child is born to any one of them, they praise God, and if again it chance to die in its infancy they praise God mightily as for one who has passed through the world without sins. And if again they see that one of their number has died in his iniquity or in his sins, over this one they weep bitterly and sigh, as over one who is about to go to his punishment. Such is the ordinance of the laws of the Christians, O King, and such their conduct. "As men who know God, they ask from Him petitions which are proper for Him to grant and for them to receive, and thus they accomplish the course of their lives. . . . And because they acknowledge the goodness of God towards them, lo! on account of them there flows forth the beauty that is in the world. ... But the good deeds which they do they do not proclaim in the ears of the multitude, and they take care that no one shall perceive them; they hide their gift as he who has found a treasure and hides it. And they labor to become righteous as those who expect to see their Messiah and to receive from Him the promises made to them with great glory. . . . But their sayings and their ordinances, O King, and the glory of their service, and the expectation of their recompense of reward according to the doing of each one of them, which they expect in another world, they are able to know from their writings. . . . Truly great and wonderful is their teaching, to him that is willing to examine and understand it. . . . Take now these writings and read in them, and lo, you will find that not of myself have I brought these things forward, nor as their advocate have I said them, but as I have read in their writings, these things I firmly believe, and those things that are to come. ... I have no doubt that the world stands by reason of the intercession of Christians. . . . **The Christians are honest and pious, and the truth is set before their eyes, and they are long-suffering, and therefore while they know their error** (i.e. of the Greeks, or Pagans), and are buffeted by them, the more exceedingly do they pity them as men who are destitute of knowledge, and in their behalf they offer up prayers that they may be turned from their error. . . . Truly blessed is the race of Christians more than all men that are upon the face of the earth. . . . Their teaching is the gateway of light; let all those then approach thereunto who do not know God, and let them receive incorruptible words, those (words) which are so always and from eternity; let them therefore anticipate the dread judgment which is to come by Jesus the Messiah upon the whole race of men. The Apology of Aristides the philosopher is ended."*

In our sketch of the inner life of the very early Church (circa, as we think, A. D. 124-30) which we are drawing from the picture of the life painted so vividly in this "Apology of Aristides," we must not omit the dogmatic references. These are, as we should expect in the circumstances (a Pagan sovereign and his court being addressed by the apologist), most simple and elementary in character, though they include the more important fundamental doctrines of Christianity. That a creed, very similar to the Apostles' Creed, was current in these very early Christian communities, of which Aristides was writing, is evident; and this creed can be without difficulty reconstructed, at any events in large part, from the expressions used in the "Apology."

The fragments of Aristides' creed are as follows:—"We believe in one God, Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, And in Jesus Christ, His Son, Born of the Virgin Mary. He was pierced by the Jews, He died and was buried. The third day He rose again, He ascended into heaven. He is about to come to judge."

Nothing is said about the sacraments, baptism or the Eucharist. This omission is naturally accounted for. The document we are citing was simply an "apology" (defense) addressed to a Pagan auditor; whereas, in a treatise probably older than that of Aristides, the Didache, or "Teaching of the Apostles," written for believers, the two great sacraments in question occupy a prominent place. In Aristides, however, the liturgical references are all of the simplest character, **prayer and thanksgiving to God being alone dwelt upon**; to these several references occur, and even details as to the nature of such prayers and thanksgiving are given—prayers for the enemies of Christians being expressly mentioned. In close connection with these general notices on prayer stands a **reference to fasting**, which is alluded to in the "Apology" as a practice observed by the communities for whom the writer was pleading. Such fasting is not mentioned as "ordered" or as part of the "rule" of Christian life, but simply as a bit of **generous self-denial** on the part of poor folk, who were in the habit of "fasting" for two or three days so as by this means to be able to save something to provide for the needs of brethren poorer than themselves.

Similar directions on "fasting" are given in the "Similitudes" of Hermas, written only a few years later in this century, where directions are given that on the day of a fast only bread and water (the bare necessities of life) are to be eaten, and the amount thereby saved is to be given to the needy.

One curious mark of the very early date of this writing of Aristides has been pointed out in the comparatively friendly spirit with which the Jews are alluded to. They are spoken of (in Section xiv.) as being "much nearer the truth than all the peoples, in that they worship God more exceedingly, and not His works," in their compassionate love for others, etc. Very different, indeed, was the feeling of Christians towards Jews a few years later, as we see for instance in the allusions to them in the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, circa A. D. 157, where the tone adopted towards the Jews has become decidedly hostile. The Church and the Synagogue evidently had not finally parted company when the "Apology of Aristides" was put out.

We possess another writing which also may be classed among what are termed "Apologetics," the well known and beautiful "**Letter to Diognetus**." The author is unknown. It is evidently somewhat later than the "Apology of Aristides," some critics, indeed, have suggested that it was a treatise supplementary to it. It is best placed between that writing and the first "**Apology**" of Justin Martyr, its concluding fragment being later than the earlier part. This would date it roughly some time before the middle of the second century.

The "Letter to Diognetus" also gives us a few most interesting and graphic pictures of the life led by these Christians of the second century. The writer tells us how they *conformed to the customs of the country in which they lived in matters of clothing, and of eating and drinking, and while in possession, many of them, of the rights of citizens, were yet universally treated as strangers. They avoided all excesses, they lived on earth while their hearts were all the time in heaven.* They submitted to human laws and ordinances, observing them with the greatest care; loving all men, though persecuted by all, and condemned by those who knew nothing about them and their lives; they were evil-spoken of, put to death—but death meant to them eternal life; they were hated by the Jews, persecuted by the Greeks, and yet in spite of all they kept advancing and multiplying day by day. The common mode of punishment to which they were subjected, says the writer of the letter, was exposure to wild beasts or condemnation to the flames. The epistle to Diognetus was evidently the work of a scholar.