Against the Heathen Book 3

Arnobius of Sicca (d. c. AD 330)

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1. All these charges, then, which might truly be better termed abuse, have been long answered with sufficient fulness and accuracy by men of distinction in this respect, and worthy to have learned the truth; and not one point of any inquiry has been passed over, without being determined in a thousand ways, and on the strongest grounds. We need not, therefore, linger further on this part of the case. For neither is the Christian religion unable to stand though it found no advocates, nor will it be therefore proved true if it found many to agree with it, and gained weight through its adherents. Its own strength is sufficient for it, and it rests on the foundations of its own truth, without losing its power, though there were none to defend it, nay, though all voices assailed and opposed it, and united with common rancour to destroy all faith in it.

2. Let us now return to the order from which we were a little ago compelled to diverge, that our defence may not, through its being too long broken off, be said to have given our detractors cause to triumph in the establishing of their charge. For they propose these questions: If you are in earnest about religion, why do you not serve and worship the other gods with us, or share your sacred rites with your fellows, and put the ceremonies of the different religions on an equality? We may say for the present: In essaying to approach the divine, the Supreme Deity suffices us,-the Deity, I say, who is supreme, the Creator and Lord of the universe, who orders and rules all things: in Him we serve all that requires our service; in Him we worship all that should be adored,-venerate that which demands the homage of our reverence. For as we lay hold of the source of the divine itself from which the very divinity of all gods whatever is derived, we think it an idle task to approach each personally, since we neither know who they are, nor the names by which they are called; and are further unable to learn, and discover, and establish their number.

3. And as in the kingdoms of earth we are in no wise constrained expressly to do reverence to those who form the royal family as well as to the sovereigns, but whatever honour belongs to them is found to be tacitly implied in the homage offered to the kings themselves; in just the same way, these gods, whoever they be, for whose existence you vouch, if they are a royal race, and spring from the Supreme Ruler, even though we do not expressly do them reverence, yet feel that they are honoured in common with their Lord, and share in the reverence shown to Him. Now it must be remembered that we have made this statement,

on the hypothesis only that it is clear and undeniable, that besides the Ruler and Lord Himself, there are still other beings, who, when arranged and disposed in order, form, as it were, a kind of plebeian mass. But do not seek to point out to us pictures instead of gods in your temples, and the images which you set up, for you too know, but are unwilling and refuse to admit, that these are formed of most worthless clay, and are childish figures made by mechanics. And when we converse with you on religion, we ask you to prove this, that there are other gods than the one Supreme Deity in nature, power, name, not as we see them manifested in images, but in such a substance as it might fittingly be supposed that perfection of so great dignity should reside.

4. But we do not purpose delaying further on this part of the subject, lest we seem desirous to stir up most violent strife, and engage in agitating contests. Let there be, as you affirm, that crowd of deities, let there be numberless families of gods; we assent, agree, and do not examine too closely, nor in any part of the subject do we assail the doubtful and uncertain positions you hold. This, however, we demand, and ask you to tell us, whence you have discovered, or how you have learned, whether there are these gods, whom you believe to be in heaven and serve, or some others unknown by reputation and name? For it may be that beings exist whom you do not believe to do so; and that those of whose existence you feel assured, are found nowhere in the universe. For you have at no time been borne aloft to the stars of heaven, at no time have seen the face and countenance of each; and then established here the worship of the same gods, whom you remembered to be there, as having been known and seen by you. But this, too, we again would learn from you, whether they have received these names by which you call them, or assumed them themselves on the days of purification. If these are divine and celestial names, who reported them to you? But if, on the other hand, these names have been applied to them by you, how could you give names to those whom you never saw, and whose character or circumstances you in no wise knew?

5. But let it be assumed that there are these gods, as you wish and believe, and are persuaded; let them be called also by those names by which the common people suppose that those meaner gods are known. Whence, however, have you learned who make up the list of gods under these names? have any ever become familiar and known to others with whose names you were not acquainted? For it cannot be easily known whether their numerous body is settled and fixed in number; or whether their multitude cannot be summed up and limited by the numbers of any computation. For let us suppose that you do reverence to a thousand, or rather five thousand gods; but in the universe it may perhaps be that there are a hundred thousand; there may be even more than this,-nay, as we said a little before, it may not be possible to compute the number of the gods, or limit them by a definite number. Either, then, you are yourselves impious who serve a few gods, but disregard the duties which you owe to the rest; or if you claim that your ignorance of the rest should be pardoned, you will procure for us also a similar pardon, if in just the same way we refuse to worship those of whose existence we are wholly ignorant.

6. And yet let no one think that we are perversely determined not to submit to the other deities, whoever they are! For we lift up pious minds, and stretch forth our hands in prayer, and do not refuse to draw near whithersoever you may have summoned us; if only we learn who those divine beings are whom you press upon us, and with whom it may be right to share the reverence which we show to the king and prince who is over all. It is Saturn, my opponent says, and Janus, Minerva, Juno, Apollo, Venus, Triptolemus, Hercules, Aesculapius, and all the others, to whom the reverence of antiquity dedicated magnificent temples in almost every city. You might, perhaps, have been able to attract us to the worship of these deities you mention, had you not been yourselves the first, with foul and unseemly fancies, to devise such tales about them as not merely to stain their honour, but, by the natures assigned to them, to prove that they did not exist at all. For, in the first place, we cannot be led to believe this,-that that immortal and supreme nature has been divided by sexes, and that there are some male, others female. But this point, indeed, has been long ago fully treated of by men of ardent genius, both in Latin and Greek; and Tullius, the most eloquent among the Romans, without dreading the vexatiousness of a charge of impiety, has above all, with greater piety, declared-boldly, firmly, and frankly-what he thought of such a fancy; and if you would proceed to receive from him opinions written with true discernment, instead of merely brilliant sentences, this case would have been concluded; nor would it require at our weak hands a second pleading, as it is termed.

7. But why should I say that men seek from him subtleties of expression and splendour of diction, when I know that there are many who avoid and flee from his books on this subject, and will not hear his opinions read, overthrowing their prejudices; and when I hear others muttering angrily, and saying that the senate should decree the destruction of these writings by which the Christian religion is maintained, and the weight of antiquity overborne? But, indeed, if you are convinced that anything you say regarding your gods is beyond doubt, point out Cicero's error, refute, rebut his rash and impious words, and show that they are so. For when you would carry off writings, and suppress a book given forth to the public, you are not defending the gods, but dreading the evidence of the truth.

8. And yet, that no thoughtless person may raise a false accusation against us, as though we believed God whom we worship to be male,-for this reason, that is, that when we speak of Him we use a masculine word,-let him understand that it is not sex which is expressed, but His name, and its meaning according to custom, and the way in which we are in the habit of using words. For the Deity is not male, but His name is of the masculine gender: but in your ceremonies you cannot say the same; for in your prayers you have been wont to say whether thou art god or goddess, and this uncertain description shows, even by their opposition, that you attribute sex to the gods. We cannot, then, be prevailed on to believe that the divine is embodied; for bodies must needs be distinguished by difference of sex, if they are male and female. For who, however mean his capacity, does not know that the sexes of different gender have been ordained and formed by the Creator of the creatures of earth, only that, by intercourse and union of bodies, that which is fleeting and transient may endure being ever renewed and maintained?

9. What, then, shall we say? That gods beget and are begotten? and that therefore they have received organs of generation, that they might be able to raise up offspring, and that, as each new race springs up, a substitution, regularly occurring, should make up for all which had been swept away by the preceding age? If, then, it is so,-that is, if the gods above beget other gods, and are subject to these conditions of sex, and are immortal, and are not worn out, by the chills of age,-it follows, as a consequence, that the world should be full of gods, and that countless heavens could not contain their multitude, inasmuch as they are both themselves ever begetting, and the countless multitude of their descendants, always being increased, is augmented by means of their offspring; or if, as is fitting, the gods are not degraded by being subjected to sexual impulses, what cause or reason will be pointed out for their being distinguished by those members by which the sexes are wont to recognise each other at the suggestion of their own desires? For it is not likely that they have these without a purpose, or that nature had wished in them to make sport of its own improvidence, in providing them with members for which there would be no use. For as the hands, feet, eyes, and other members which form our body, have been arranged for certain uses, each for its own end, so we may well believe that these members have been provided to discharge their office; or it must be confessed that there is something without a purpose in the bodies of the gods, which has been made uselessly and in vain.

10. What say you, ye holy and pure guardians of religion? Have the gods, then, sexes; and are they disfigured by those parts, the very mention of whose names by modest lips is disgraceful? What, then, now remains, but to believe that they, as unclean beasts, are transported with violent passions, rush with maddened desires into mutual embraces, and at last, with shattered and ruined bodies, are enfeebled by their sensuality? And since some things are peculiar to the female sex, we must believe that the goddesses, too, submit to these conditions at the proper time, conceive and become pregnant with loathing, miscarry, carry the full time, and sometimes are prematurely delivered. O divinity, pure, holy, free from and unstained by any dishonourable blot! The mind longs and burns to see, in the great halls and palaces of heaven, gods and goddesses, with bodies uncovered and bare, the full-breasted Ceres nursing Iacchus, as the muse of Lucretius sings, the Hellespontian Priapus bearing about among the goddesses, virgin and matron, those parts ever prepared for encounter. It longs, I say, to see goddesses pregnant, goddesses with child, and, as they daily increase in size, faltering in their steps, through the irksomeness of the burden they bear about with them; others, after long delay, bringing to birth, and seeking the midwife's aid; others, shrieking as they are attacked by keen pangs and grievous pains, tormented, and, under all these influences, imploring the aid of Juno Lucina. Is it not much better to abuse, revile, and otherwise insult the gods, than, with pious pretence, unworthily to entertain such monstrous beliefs about them?

11. And you dare to charge us with offending the gods, although, on examination, it is found that the ground of offence is most clearly in ourselves, and that it is not occasioned by the insult which you think . For if the gods are, as you say, moved by anger, and burn with rage in their minds, why should we not suppose that they take it amiss, even in the highest degree,

that you attribute to them sexes, as dogs and swine have been created, and that, since this is your belief, they are so represented, and openly exposed in a disgraceful manner? This, then, being the case, you are the cause of all troubles-you lead the gods, you rouse them to harass the earth with every ill, and every day to devise all kinds of fresh misfortunes, that so they may avenge themselves, being irritated at suffering so many wrongs and insults from you. By your insults and affronts, I say, partly in the vile stories, partly in the shameful beliefs which your theologians, your poets, you yourselves too, celebrate in disgraceful ceremonies, you will find that the affairs of men have been ruined, and that the gods have thrown away the helm, if indeed it is by their care that the fortunes of men are guided and arranged. For with us, indeed, they have no reason to be angry, whom they see and perceive neither to mock, as it is said, nor worship them, and to think, to believe much more worthily than you with regard to the dignity of their name.

12. Thus far of sex. Now let us come to the appearance and shapes by which yon believe that the gods above have been represented, with which, indeed, you fashion, and set them up in their most splendid abodes, your temples. And let no one here bring up against us Jewish fables and those of the sect of the Sadducees, as though we, too, attribute to the Deity forms; for this is supposed to be taught in their writings, and asserted as if with assurance and authority. For these stories either do not concern us, and have nothing at all in common with us, or if they are shared in by us, as you believe, you must seek out teachers of greater wisdom, through whom you may be able to learn how best to overcome the dark and recondite sayings of those writings. Our opinion on the subject is as follows:-that the whole divine nature, since it neither came into existence at any time, nor will ever come to an end of life, is devoid of bodily features, and does not have anything like the forms with which the termination of the several members usually. completes the union of parts. For whatever is of this character, we think mortal and perishable; nor do we believe that that can endure for ever which an inevitable end shuts in, though the boundaries enclosing it be the remotest.

13. But it is not enough that you limit the gods by forms:-you even confine them to the human figure, and with even less decency enclose them in earthly bodies. What shall we say then? that the gods have a head modelled with perfect symmetry, bound fast by sinews to the back and breast, and that, to allow the necessary bending of the neck, it is supported by combinations of vertebrae, and by an osseous foundation? But if we believe this to be true, it follows that they have ears also, pierced by crooked windings; rolling eyeballs, overshadowed by the edges of the eyebrows; a nose, placed as a channel, through which waste fluids and a current of air might easily pass; teeth to masticate food, of three kinds, and adapted to three services; hands to do their work, moving easily by means of joints, fingers, and flexible elbows; feet to support their bodies, regulate their steps, and prompt the first motions in walking. But if the gods bear these things which are seen, it is fitting that they should bear those also which the skin conceals under the framework of the ribs, and the membranes enclosing the viscera; windpipes, stomachs, spleens, lungs, bladders, livers,

the long-entwined intestines, and the veins of purple blood, joined with the air-passages, coursing through the whole viscera.

14. Are, then, the divine bodies free from these deformities? and since they do not eat the food of men, are we to believe that, like children, they are toothless, and, having no internal parts, as if they were inflated bladders, are without strength, owing to the hollowness of their swollen bodies? Further, if this is the case, you must see whether the gods are all alike, or are marked by a difference in the contour of their forms. For if each and all have one and the same likeness of shape, there is nothing ridiculous in believing that they err, and are deceived in recognising each other. But if, on the other hand, they are distinguished by their countenances, we should, consequently, understand that these differences have been implanted for no other reason than that they might individually be able to recognise themselves by the peculiarites of the different marks. We should therefore say that some have big heads, prominent brows, broad brows, thick lips; that others of them have long chins, moles, and high noses; that these have dilated nostrils, those are snub-nosed; some chubby from a swelling of their jaws or growth of their cheeks, dwarfed, tall, of middle size, lean, sleek, fat; some with crisped and curled hair, others shaven, with bald and smooth heads. Now your workshops show and point out that our opinions are not false, inasmuch as, when you form and fashion gods, you represent some with long hair, others smooth and bare, as old, as youths, as boys, swarthy, grey-eyed, yellow, half-naked, bare; or, that cold may not annoy them, covered with flowing garments thrown over them.

15. Does any man at all possessed of judgment, believe that hairs and down grow on the bodies of the gods? that among them age is distinguished? and that they go about clad in dresses and garments of various shapes, and shield themselves from heat and cold? But if any one believes that, he must receive this also as true, that some gods are fullers, some barbers; the former to cleanse the sacred garments, the latter to thin their locks when matted with a thick growth of hair. Is not this really degrading, most impious, and insulting, to attribute to the gods the features of a frail and perishing animal? to furnish them with those members which no modest person would dare to recount, and describe, or represent in his own imagination, without shuddering at the excessive indecency? Is this the contempt you entertain,-this the proud wisdom with which you spurn us as ignorant, and think that all knowledge of religion is yours? You mock the mysteries of the Egyptians, because they ingrafted the forms of dumb animals upon their divine causes, and because they worship these very images with much incense, and whatever else is used in such rites: you yourselves adore images of men, as though they were powerful gods, and are not ashamed to give to these the countenance of an earthly creature, to blame others for their mistaken folly, and to be detected in a similarly vicious error.

16. But you will, perhaps, say that the gods have indeed other forms, and that you have given the appearance of men to them merely by way of honour, and for form's sake which is much more insulting than to have fallen into any error through ignorance. For if you confessed that you had ascribed to the divine forms that which you had supposed and believed, your

error, originating in prejudice, would not be so blameable. But now, when you believe one thing and fashion another, you both dishonour those to whom yon ascribe that which you confess does not belong to them, and show your impiety in adoring that which you fashion, not that which you think really is, and which is in very truth. If asses, dogs, pigs, had any human wisdom and skill in contrivance, and wished to do us honour also by some kind of worship, and to show respect by dedicating statues to us, with what rage would they inflame us, what a tempest of passion would they excite, if they determined that our images should bear and assume the fashion of their own bodies? How would they, I repeat, fill us with rage, and rouse our passions, if the founder of Rome, Romulus, were to be set up with an ass's face, the revered Pompilius with that of a dog, if under the image of a pig were written Cato's or Marcus Cicero's name? So, then, do you think that your stupidity is not laughed at by your deities, if they laugh at all?

or, since you believe that they may be enraged, do you think that they are not roused, maddened to fury, and that they do not wish to be revenged for so great wrongs and insults, and to hurl on you the punishments usually dictated by chagrin, and devised by bitter hatred? How much better it had been to give to them the forms of elephants, panthers, or tigers, bulls, and horses! For what is there beautiful in man,-what, I pray you, worthy of admiration, or comely,-unless that which, some poet has maintained, he possesses in common with the ape?

17. But, they say, if you are not satisfied with our opinion, do you point out, tell us yourselves, what is the Deity's form. If you wish to hear the truth, either the Deity has no form; or if He is embodied in one, we indeed know not what it is. Moreover, we think it no disgrace to be ignorant of that which we never saw; nor are we therefore prevented from disproving the opinions of others, because on this we have no opinion of our own to bring forward. For as, if the earth be said to be of glass, silver, iron, or gathered together and made from brittle clay, we cannot hesitate to maintain that this is untrue, although we do not know of what it is made; so, when the form of God is discussed, we show that it is not what you maintain, even if we are still less able to explain what it is.

18. What, then, some one will say, does the Deity not hear? does He not speak? does He not see what is put before Him? has He not sight? He may in His own, but not in our way. But in so great a matter we cannot know the truth at all, or reach it by speculations; for these are, it is clear, in our case, baseless, deceitful, and like vain dreams. For if we said that He sees in the same way as ourselves, it follows that it should be understood that He has eyelids placed as coverings on the pupils of the eyes, that He closes them, winks, sees by rays or images, or, as is the case in all eyes, can see nothing at all without the presence of other light. So we must in like manner say of hearing, and form of speech, and utterance of words. If He hears by means of ears, these, too, we must say, He has, penetrated by winding paths, through which the sound may steal, bearing the meaning of the discourse; or if His words are poured forth from a mouth, that He has lips and teeth, by the contact and various movement of which His tongue utters sounds distinctly.

19. If you are willing to hear our conclusions, then learn that we are so far from attributing bodily shape to the Deity, that we fear to ascribe to so great a being even mental graces, and the very excellences by which a few have been allowed with difficulty to distinguish themselves. For who will say that God is brave, firm, good, wise? who will say that He has integrity, is temperate, even that He has knowledge, understanding, forethought? that He directs towards fixed moral ends the actions on which He determines? These things are good in man; and being opposed to vices, have deserved the great reputation which they have gained. But who is so foolish, so senseless, as to say that God is great by merely human excellences? or that He is above all in the greatness of His name, because He is not disgraced by vice? Whatever you say, whatever in unspoken thought you imagine concerning God, passes and is corrupted into a human sense, and does not carry its own meaning, because it is spoken in the words which we use, and which are suited only to human affairs. There is but one thing man can be assured of regarding God's nature, to know and perceive that nothing can be revealed in human language concerning God.

20. This, then, this matter of forms and sexes, is the first affront which you, noble advocates in sooth, and pious writers, offer to your deities. But what is the next, that you represent to us the gods, some as artificers, some physicians, others working in wool, as sailors, players on the harp and flute, hunters, shepherds, and, as there was nothing more, rustics? And that god, he says, is a musician, and this other can divine; for the other gods cannot, and do not know how to foretell what will come to pass, owing to their want of skill and ignorance of the future. One is instructed in obstetric arts, another trained up in the science of medicine. Is each, then, powerful in his own department; and can they give no assistance, if their aid is asked, in what belongs to another? This one is eloquent in speech, and ready in linking words together; for the others are stupid, and can say nothing skilfully, if they must speak.

21. And, I ask, what reason is there, what unavoidable necessity, what occasion for the gods knowing and being acquainted with these handicrafts as though they were worthless mechanics? For, are songs sung and music played in heaven, that the nine sisters may gracefully combine and harmonize pauses and rhythms of tones? Are there on the mountains of the stars, forests, woods, groves, that Diana may be esteemed very mighty in hunting expeditions? Are the gods ignorant of the immediate future; and do they live and pass the time according to the lots assigned them by fate, that the inspired son of Latona may explain and declare what the morrow or the next hour bears to each? Is he himself inspired by another god, and is he urged and roused by the power of a greater divinity, so that he may be rightly said and esteemed to be divinely inspired? Are the gods liable to be seized by diseases; and is there anything by which they may be wounded and hurt, so that, when there is occasion, he of Epidaurus may come to their assistance? Do they labour, do they bring forth, that Juno may soothe, and Lucina abridge the terrible pangs of childbirth? Do they engage in agriculture, or are they concerned with the duties of war, that Vulcan, the lord of fire, may form for them swords, or forge their rustic implements? Do they need to be covered with garments, that the Tritonian maid may, with nice skill, spin, weave cloth for them, and make them tunics to suit the season, either triple-twilled, or of silken fabric?

Do they make accusations and refute them, that the descendant of Atlas may carry off the prize for eloquence, attained by assiduous practice?

22. You err, my opponent says, and are deceived; for the gods are not themselves artificers, but suggest these arts to ingenious men, and teach mortals what they should know, that their mode of life may be more civilized. But he who gives any instruction to the ignorant and unwilling, and strives to make him intelligently expert in some kind of work, must himself first know that which he sets the other to practise. For no one can be capable of teaching a science without knowing the rules of that which he teaches, and having grasped its method most thoroughly. The gods are, then, the first artificers; whether because they inform the minds of men with knowledge, as you say yourselves, or because, being immortal and unbegotten, they surpass the whole race of earth by their length of life. This, then, is the question; there being no occasion for these arts among the gods, neither their necessities nor nature requiring in them any ingenuity or mechanical skill, why you should say that they are skilled, one in one craft, another in another, and that individuals are pre-eminently expert in particular departments in which they are distinguished by acquaintance with the several branches of science?

23. But you will, perhaps, say that the gods are not artificers, but that they preside over these arts, and have their oversight; nay, that under their care all things have been placed, which we manage and conduct, and that their providence sees to the happy and fortunate issue of these. Now this would certainly appear to be said justly, and with some probability, if all we engage in, all we do, or all we attempt in human affairs, sped as we wished and purposed. But since every day the reverse is the case, and the results of actions do not correspond to the purpose of the will, it is trifling to say that we have, set as guardians over as, gods invented by our superstitious fancy, not grasped with assured certainty. Portunus gives to the sailor perfect safety in traversing the seas; but why has the raging sea cast up so many cruelly-shattered wrecks? Consus suggests to our minds courses safe and serviceable; and why does an unexpected change perpetually issue in results other than were looked for? Pales and Inuus are set as guardians over the flocks and herds; why do they, with hurtful laziness, not take care to avert from the herds in their summer pastures, cruel, infectious, and destructive diseases? The harlot Flora, venerated in lewd sports, sees well to it that the fields blossom; and why are buds and tender plants daily nipt and destroyed by most hurtful frost? Juno presides over childbirth, and aids travailing mothers;

and why are a thousand mothers every day cut off in murderous throes? Fire is under Vulcan's care, and its source is placed under his control; and why does he, very often, suffer temples and parts of cities to fall into ashes devoured by flames? The soothsayers receive the knowledge of their art from the Pythian god; and why does he so often give and afford answers equivocal, doubtful, steeped in darkness and obscurity? Aesculapius presides over the duties and arts of medicine; and why cannot men in more kinds of disease and sickness be restored to health and soundness of body? while, on the contrary, they become worse under the hands of the physician. Mercury is occupied with combats, and presides over

boxing and wrestling matches; and why does he not make all invincible who are in his charge? why, when appointed to one office, does he enable some to win the victory, while he suffers others to be ridiculed for their disgraceful weakness?

24. No one, says my opponent, makes supplication to the tutelar deities, and they therefore withhold their usual favours and help. Cannot the gods, then, do good, except they receive incense and consecrated offerings? and do they quit and renounce their posts, unless they see their altars anointed with the blood of cattle? And vet I thought but now that the kindness of the gods was of their own free will, and that the unlooked-for gifts of benevolence flowed unsought from them. Is, then, the King of the universe solicited by any libation or sacrifice to grant to the races of men all the comforts of life? Does the Deity not impart the sun's fertilizing warmth, and the season of night, the winds, the rains, the fruits, to all alike,-the good and the bad, the unjust and the just, the free-born and the slave, the poor and the rich? For this belongs to the true and mighty God, to show kindness, unasked, to that which is weary and feeble, and always encompassed by misery, of many kinds. For to grant your prayers on the offering of sacrifices, is not to bring help to those who ask it, but to sell the riches of their beneficence. We men trifle, and are foolish in so great a matter; and, forgetting what God is, and the majesty of His name, associate with the tutelar deities whatever meanness or baseness our morbid credulity can invent.

25. Unxia, my opponent says, presides over the anointing of door-posts; Cinxia over the loosening of the zone; the most venerable Victa and Potua attend to eating and drinking. O rare and admirable interpretation of the divine powers! would gods not have names if brides did not besmear their husbands' door-posts with greasy ointment; were it not that husbands, when now eagerly drawing near, unbind the maiden-girdle; if men did not eat and drink? Moreover, not satisfied to have subjected and involved the gods in cares so unseemly, you also ascribe to them dispositions fierce, cruel, savage, ever rejoicing in the ills and destruction of mankind. 26. We shall not here mention Laverna, goddess of thieves, the Bellonae, Discordiae, Furiae thieves, and we pass by in utter silence the unpropitious deities whom you have set up. We shall bring forward Mars himself, and the fair mother of the Desires; to one of whom you commit wars, to the other love and passionate desire. My opponent says that Mars has power over wars; whether to quell those which are raging, or to revive them when interrupted, and kindle them in time of peace? For if he claims the madness of war, why do wars rage every day? but if he is their author, we shall then say that the god, to satisfy his own inclination, involves the whole world in strife; sows the seeds of discord and variance between far-distant peoples; gathers so many thousand men from different quarters, and speedily heaps up the field with dead bodies; makes the streams flow with blood, sweeps away the most firmly-founded empires, lays cities in the dust, robs the free of their liberty, and makes them slaves; rejoices in civil strife, in the bloody death of brothers who die in conflict, and, in fine, in the dire, murderous contest of children with their fathers.

27. Now we may apply this very argument to Venus in exactly the same way. For if, as you maintain and believe, she fills men's minds with lustful thoughts, it must be held in

consequence that any disgrace and misdeed arising from such madness should be ascribed to the instigation of Venus. Is it, then, under compulsion of the goddess that even the noble too often betray their own reputation into the hands of worthless harlots; that the firm bonds of marriage are broken; that near relations burn with incestuous lust; that mothers have their passions madly kindled towards their children; that fathers turn to themselves their daughters' desires; that old men, bringing shame upon their grey hairs, sigh with the ardour of youth for the gratification of filthy desires; that wise and brave men, losing in effeminacy the strength of their manhood, disregard the biddings of constancy; that the noose is twisted about their necks; that blazing pyres are ascended; and that in different places men, leaping voluntarily, cast themselves headlong over very high and huge precipices?

28. Can any man, who has accepted the first principles even of reason, be found to mar or dishonour the unchanging nature of Deity with morals so vile? to credit the gods with natures such as human kindness has often charmed away and moderated in the beasts of the field? How, I ask, can it be said that the gods are far removed from any feeling of passion? that they are gentle, lovers of peace, mild? that in the completeness of their excellence they reach the i height of perfection, and the highest wisdom also? or, why should we pray them to avert from us misfortunes and calamities, if we find that they are themselves the authors of all the ills by which we are daily harassed? Call us impious as much as you please, contemners of religion, or atheists, you will never make us believe in gods of love and war, that there are gods to sow strife, and to disturb the mind by the stings of the furies. For either they are gods in very truth, and do not do what you have related; or if they do the things which you say, they are doubtless no gods at all.

29. We might, however, even yet be able to receive from you these thoughts, most full of wicked falsehoods, if it were not that you yourselves, in bringing forward many things about the gods so inconsistent and mutually destructive, compel us to withhold our minds from assenting. For when you strive individually to excel each other in reputation for more recondite knowledge, you both overthrow the very gods in whom you believe, and replace them by others who have clearly no existence; and different men give different opinions on the same subjects, and you write that those whom general consent has ever received as single persons are infinite in number. Let us, too, begin duty, then, with father Janus, whom certain of you have declared to be the world, others the year, some the sun. But if we are to believe that this is true, it follows as a consequence, that it should be understood that there never was any Janus, who, they say, being sprung from Coelus and Hecate, reigned first in Italy, founded the town Janiculum, was the father of Forts, the son-in-law of Vulturnus, the husband of Juturna; and thus you erase the name of the god to whom in all prayers you give the first place, and whom you believe to procure for you a hearing from the gods. But, again, if Janus be the year, neither thus can he be a god.

For who does not know that the year is a fixed space of time, and that there is nothing divine in that which is formed by the duration of months and lapse of days? Now this very argument may, in like manner, be applied to Saturn. For if time is meant under this title, as

the expounders of Grecian ideas think, so that that is regarded as Kronos, which is chronos, there is no such deity as Saturn. For who is so senseless as to say that time is a god, when it is but a certain space measured off in the unending succession of eternity? And thus will be removed from the rank of the immortals that deity too, whom the men of old declared, and handed down to their posterity, to be born of father Coelus, the progenitor of the dii magni, the planter of the vine, the bearer of the pruning-knife.

30. But what shall we say of Jove himself, whom the wise have repeatedly asserted to be the sun, driving a winged chariot, followed by a crowd of deities; some, the ether, blazing with mighty flames, and wasting fire which cannot be extinguished? Now if this is clear and certain, there is, then, according to you, no Jupiter at all; who, born of Saturn his father and Ops his mother, is reported to have been concealed in the Cretan territory, that he might escape his father's rage. But now, does not a similar mode of thought remove Juno from the list of gods? For if she is the air, as you have been wont to jest and say, repeating in reversed order the syllables of the Greek name, there will be found no sister and spouse of almighty Jupiter, no Fluonia, no Pomona, no Ossipagina, no Februtis, Populonia, Cinxia, Caprotina; and thus the invention of that name, spread abroad with a frequent but vain belief, will be found to be wholly useless.

31. Aristotle, a man of most powerful intellect, and distinguished for learning, as Granius tells, shows by plausible arguments that Minerva is the moon, and proves it by the authority of learned men. Others have said that this very goddess is the depth of ether, and utmost height; some have maintained that she is memory, whence her name even, Minerva, has arisen, as if she were some goddess of memory. But if this is credited, it follows that there is no daughter of Mens, no daughter of Victory, no discoverer of the Olive, born from the head of Jupiter, no goddess skilled in the knowledge of the arts, and in different branches of learning. Neptune, they say, has received his name and title because he covers the earth with water. If, then, by the use of this name is meant the outspread water, there is no god Neptune at all; and thus is put away, and removed from us, the full brother of Pluto and Jupiter, armed with the iron trident, lord of the fish, great and small, king of the depths of the sea, and shaker of the trembling earth.

32. Mercury, also, has been named as though he were a kind of go-between; and because conversation passes between two speakers, and is exchanged by them, that which is expressed by this name has been produced. If this, then, is the case, Mercury is not the name of a god, but of speech and words exchanged by two persons; and in this way is blotted out and annihilated the noted Cyllenian bearer of the caduceus, born on the cold mountain top, contriver of words and names, the god who presides over markets, and over the exchange of goods and commercial intercourse. Some of you have said that the earth is the Great Mother, because it provides all things living with food; others declare that the same earth is Ceres, because it brings forth crops of useful fruits; while some maintain that it is Vesta, because it alone in the universe is at rest, its other members being, by their constitution, ever in motion. Now if this is propounded and maintained on sure grounds, in like manner,

on your interpretation, three deities have no existence: neither Ceres nor Vesta are to be reckoned in the number of the gods; nor, in fine, can the mother of the gods herself, whom Nigidius thinks to have been married to Saturn, be rightly declared a goddess, if indeed these are all names of the one earth, and it alone is signified by these titles.

33. We here leave Vulcan unnoticed, to avoid prolixity; whom you all declare to be fire, with one consenting voice. We pass by Venus, named because lust assails all, and Proserpina, named because plants steal gradually forth into the light,-where, again, you do away with three deities; if indeed the first is the name of an element, and does not signify a living power; the second, of a desire common to all living creatures; while the third refers to seeds rising above ground, and the upward movements of growing crops. What! when you maintain that Bacchus, Apollo, the Sun, are one deity, increased in number by the use of three names, is not the number of the gods lessened, and their vaunted reputation overthrown, by your opinions? For if it is true that the sun is also Bacchus and Apollo, there can consequently be in the universe no Apollo or Bacchus; and thus, by yourselves, the son of Semele and the Pythian god are blotted out and set aside,-one the giver of drunken merriment, the other the destroyer of Sminthian mice.

34. Some of your learned men -men, too, who do not chatter merely because their humour leads them-maintain that Diana, Ceres, Luna, are but one deity in triple union; and that there are not three distinct persons, as there are three different names; that in all these Luna is invoked, and that the others are a series of surnames added to her name. But if this is sure, if this is certain, and the facts of the case show it to be so, again is Ceres but an empty name, and Diana: and thus the discussion is brought to this issue, that you lead and advise us to believe that she whom you maintain to be the discoverer of the earth's fruits has no existence, and Apollo is robbed of his sister, whom once the horned hunter gazed upon as she washed her limbs from impurity in a pool, and paid the penalty of his curiosity.

35. Men worthy to be remembered in the study of philosophy, who have been raised by your praises to its highest place, declare, with commendable earnestness, as their conclusion, that the whole mass of the world, by whose folds we all are encompassed, covered, and upheld, is one animal possessed of wisdom and reason; yet if this is a true, sure, and certain opinion, they also will forthwith cease to be gods whom you set up a little ago in its parts without change of name. For as one man cannot, while his body remains entire, be divided into many men; nor can many men, while they continue to be distinct and separate from each other, be fused into one sentient individual: so, if the world is a single animal, and moves from the impulse of one mind, neither can it be dispersed in several deities; nor, if the gods are parts of it, can they be brought together and changed into one living creature, with unity of feeling throughout all its parts. The moon, the sun, the earth, the ether, the stars, are members and parts of the world; but if they are parts and members, they are certainly not themselves living creatures; for in no thing can parts be the very thing which the whole is, or think and feel for themselves, for this cannot be effected by their own actions, without the whole creature's joining in; and this being established and settled, the whole

matter comes back to this, that neither Sol, nor Luna, nor Aether, Tellus, and the rest, are gods. For they are parts of the world, not the proper names of deities; and thus it is brought about that, by your disturbing and confusing all divine things, the world is set up as the sole god in the universe, while all the rest are cast aside, and that as having been set up vainly, uselessly, and without any reality.

36. If we sought to subvert the belief in your gods in so many ways, by so many arguments, no one would doubt that, mad with rage and fury, you would demand for us the stake, the beasts, and swords, with the other kinds of torture by which you usually appease your thirst in its intense craving for our blood. But while you yourselves put away almost the whole race of deities with a pretence of cleverness and wisdom, you do not hesitate to assert that, because of us, men suffer ill at the hands of the gods; although, indeed, if it is true that they anywhere exist, and burn with anger and rage, there can be no better reason for their showing anger against you, than that you deny their existence, and say that they are not found in any part of the universe. 37. We are told by Mnaseas that the Muses are the daughters of Tellus and Coelus; others declare that they are Jove's by his wife Memory, or Mens; some relate that they were virgins, others that they were matrons. For now we wish to touch briefly on the points where you are shown, from the difference of your opinions, to make different statements about the same thing. Ephorus, then, says that they are three in number; Mnaseas, whom we mentioned, that they are four; Myrtilus brings forward seven; Crates asserts that there are eight; finally Hesiod, enriching heaven and the stars with gods, comes forward with nine names.

If we are not mistaken, such want of agreement marks those who are wholly ignorant of the truth, and does not spring from the real state of the case. For if their number were clearly known, the voice of all would be the same, and the agreement of all would tend to and find issue in the same conclusion.

38. How, then, can you give to religion its whole power, when you fill into error about the gods themselves? or summon us to their solemn worship, while you give us no definite information how to conceive of the deities themselves? For, to take no notice of the other authors, either the first makes away with and destroys six divine Muses, if they are certainly nine; or the last adds six who have no existence to the three who alone really are; so that it cannot be known or understood what should be added, what taken away; and in the performance of religious rites we are in danger of either worshipping that which does not exist, or passing that by which, it may be, does exist. Piso believes that the Novensiles are nine gods, set up among the Sabines at Trebia. Granius thinks that they are the Muses, agreeing with Aelius; Varro teaches that they are nine, because, in doing anything, that number is always reputed most powerful and greatest; Cornificius, that they watch over the renewing of things, because, by their care, all things are afresh renewed in strength, and endure; Manilius, that they are the nine gods to whom alone Jupiter gave power to wield his thunder. Cincius declares them to be deities brought from abroad, named from their very newness, because the Romans were in the habit of sometimes individually introducing

into their families the rites of conquered cities, while some they publicly consecrated; and lest, from their great number, or in ignorance, any god should be passed by, all alike were briefly and compendiously invoked under one name-Novensiles.

39. There are some, besides, who assert that those who from being men became gods, are denoted by this name,-as Hercules, Romulus, Aeculapius, Liber, Aeneas. These are all, as is clear, different opinions; and it cannot be, in the nature of things, that those who differ in opinion can be regarded as teachers of one truth. For if Piso's opinion is true, Aelius and Granius say what is false; if what they say is certain, Varro, with all his skill, is mistaken, who substitutes things most frivolous and vain for those which really exist. If they are named Novensiles because their number is nine, Cornificius is shown to stumble, who, giving them might and power not their own, makes them the divine overseers of renovation. But if Cornificius is right in his belief, Cincius is found to be not wise, who connects with the power of the dii Novensiles the gods of conquered cities. But if they are those whom Cincius asserts them to be, Manilius will be found to speak falsely, who comprehends those who wield another's thunder under this name. But if that which Manilius holds is true and certain, they are utterly mistaken who suppose that those raised to divine honours, and deified mortals, are thus named because of the novelty of their rank. But if the Novensiles are those who have deserved to be raised to the stars after passing through the life of men, there are no dii Novensiles at all. For as slaves, soldiers, masters, are not names of persons comprehended under them, but of officers, ranks, and duties, so, when we say that Novensiles is the name of gods who by their virtues have become gods from being men, it is clear and evident that no individual persons are marked out particularly, but that newness itself is named by the title Novensiles.

40. Nigidius taught that the dii Penates were Neptune and Apollo, who once, on fixed terms, girt Ilium with walls. He himself again, in his sixteenth book, following Etruscan teaching, shows that there are four kinds of Penates; and that one of these pertains to Jupiter, another to Neptune, the third to the shades below, the fourth to mortal men, making some unintelligible assertion. Caesius himself, also, following this teaching, thinks that they are Fortune, and Ceres, the genius Jovialis, and Pales, but not the female deity commonly received, but some male attendant and steward of Jupiter. Varro thinks that they are the gods of whom we speak who are within, and in the inmost recesses of heaven, and that neither their number nor names are known. The Etruscans say that these are the Consentes and Complices, and name them because they rise and fall together, six of them being male, and as many female, with unknown names and pitiless dispositions, but they are considered the counsellors and princes of Jove supreme. There were some, too, who said that Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva were the dii Penates, without whom we cannot live and be wise, and by whom we are ruled within in reason, passion, and thought. As you see, even here, too, nothing is said harmoniously, nothing is settled with the consent of all, nor is there anything reliable on which the mind can take its stand, drawing by conjecture very near to the truth. For their opinions are so doubtful, and one supposition so discredited by another, that there

is either no truth in them all, or if it is uttered by any, it is not recognised amid so many different statements.

41. We can, if it is thought proper, speak briefly of the Lares also, whom the mass think to be the gods of streets and ways, because the Greeks name streets laurae. In different parts of his writings, Nigidius speaks of them now as the guardians of houses and dwellings; now as the Curetes, who are said to have once concealed, by the clashing of cymbals, the infantile cries of Jupiter; now the five Digiti Samothracii, who, the Greeks tell us, were named Idoei Dactyli. Varro, with like hesitation, says at one time that they are the Manes, and therefore the mother of the Lares was named Mania; at another time, again, he maintains that they are gods of the air, and are termed heroes; at another, following the opinion of the ancients, he says that the Lares are ghosts, as it were a kind of tutelary demon, spirits of dead men.

42. It is a vast and endless task to examine each kind separately, and make it evident even from your religious books that you neither hold nor believe that there is any god concerning whom you have not brought forward doubtful and inconsistent statements, expressing a thousand different beliefs. But, to be brief, and avoid prolixity, it is enough to have said what has been said; it is, further, too troublesome to gather together many things into one mass, since it is made manifest and evident in different ways that you waver, and say nothing with certainty of these things which you assert. But you will perhaps say, Even if we have no personal knowledge of the Lares, Novensiles, Penates, still the very agreement of our authors proves their existence, and that such a race takes rank among the celestial gods. And how can it be known whether there is any god, if what he is shall be wholly unknown? or how can it avail even to ask for benefits, if it is not settled and determined who should be invoked at each inquiry? For every one who seeks to obtain an answer from any deity, should of necessity know to whom he makes supplication, on whom he calls, from whom he asks help for the affairs and occasions of human life; especially as you yourselves declare that all the gods do not have all power, and that the wrath and anger of each are appeased by different rites.

43. For if this deity requires a black, that a white skin; if sacrifice must be made to this one with veiled, to that with uncovered head; this one is consulted about marriages, the other relieves distresses,-may it not be of some importance whether the one or the other is Novensills, since ignorance of the facts and confusion of persons displeases the gods, and leads necessarily to the contraction of guilt? For suppose that I myself, to avoid some inconvenience and peril, make supplication to any one of these deities, saying, Be present, be near, divine Penates, thou Apollo, and thou, O Neptune, and in your divine clemency turn away all these evils, by which I am annoyed, troubled, and tormented: will there be any hope that I shall receive help from them, if Ceres, Pales, Fortune, or the genius Jovialis, not Neptune and Apollo, shall be the dii Penates? Or if I invoked the Curetes instead of the Lares, whom some of your writers maintain to he the Digiti Samothracii, how shall I enjoy their help and favour, when I have not given them their own names, and have given to the others names not their own? Thus does our interest demand that we should rightly

know the gods, and not hesitate or doubt about the power, the name of each; lest, if they be invoked with rites and titles not their own, they have at once their ears stopped against our prayers, and hold us involved in guilt which may not be forgiven.

44. Wherefore, if you are assured that in the lofty palaces of heaven there dwells, there is, that multitude of deities whom you specify, you should make your stand on one proposition, and not, divided by different and inconsistent opinions, destroy belief in the very things which you seek to establish. If there is a Janus, let Janus be; if a Bacchus, let Bacchus be; if a Summanus, let Summanus be: for this is to confide, this to hold, to be settled in the knowledge of something ascertained, not to say after the manner of the blind and erring, The Novensiles are the Muses, in truth they are the Trebian gods, nay, their number is nine, or rather, they are the protectors of cities which have been overthrown; and bring so important matters into this danger, that while you remove some, and put others in their place, it may well be doubted of them all if they anywhere exist.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.