Against the Heathen Book 4

Arnobius of Sicca (d. c. AD 330)

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1. We would ask you, and you above all, O Romans, lords and princes of the world, whether you think that Piety, Concord, Safety, Honour, Virtue, Happiness, and other such names, to which we see you rear altars and splendid temples, have divine power, and live in heaven? or, as is usual, have you classed them with the deities merely for form's sake, because we desire and wish these blessings to fall to our lot? For if, while you think them empty names without any substance, you yet deify them with divine honours, you will have to consider whether that is a childish frolic, or tends to bring your deities into contempt, when you make equal, and add to their number vain and feigned names. But if you have loaded them with temples and couches, holding with more assurance that these, too, are deities, we pray you to teach us in our ignorance, by what course, in what way, Victory, Peace, Equity, and the others mentioned among the gods, can be understood to be gods, to belong to the assembly of the immortals?

2. For we-but, perhaps, you c rob and deprive us of common-sense-feel and perceive that none of these has divine power, or possesses a form of its own; but that, on the contrary, they are the excellence of manhood, the safety of the safe, the honour of the respected, the victory of the conqueror, the harmony of the allied, the piety of the pious, the recollection of the observant, the good fortune, indeed, of him who lives happily and without exciting any ill-feeling. Now it is easy to perceive that, in speaking thus, we speak most reasonably when we observe the contrary qualities opposed to them, misfortune, discord, forgetfulness, injustice, impiety, baseness of spirit, and unfortunate weakness of body. For as these things happen accidentally, and depend on human acts and chance moods, so their contraries, named after more agreeable qualities, must be found in others; and from these, originating in this wise, have arisen those invented names.

3. With regard, indeed, to your bringing forward to us other bands of unknown gods, we cannot determine whether you do that seriously, and from a belief in its certainty; or, merely playing with empty fictions, abandon yourselves to an unbridled imagination. The goddess Luperca, you tell us on the authority of Varro, was named because the fierce wolf spared the exposed children· Was that goddess, then, disclosed, not by her own power, but by the course of events? and was it only after the wild beast restrained its cruel teeth, that she both began to be herself and was marked by her name? or if she was already a goddess long before the

birth of Romulus and his brother, show us what was her name and title. Praestana was named, according to you, because, in throwing the javelin, Quirinus excelled all in strength; and the goddess Panda, or Pantica, was named because Titus Tatius was allowed to open up and make passable a road, that he might take the Capitoline. Before these events, then, had the deities never existed? and if Romulus had not held the first place in casting the javelin, and if the Sabine king had been unable to take the Tarpeian rock, would there be no Pantica, no Praestana? And if you say that they existed before that which gave rise to their name, a question which has been discussed in a preceding section, tell us also what they were called.

4. Pellonia is a goddess mighty to drive back enemies. Whose enemies, say, if it is convenient? Opposing armies meet, and fighting together, hand to hand, decide the battle; and to one this side, to another that, is hostile. Whom, then, will Pellonia turn to flight, since on both sides there will be fighting? or in favour of whom will she incline, seeing that she should afford to both sides the might and services of her name? But if she indeed did so, that is, if she gave her good-will and favour to both sides, she would destroy the meaning of her name, which was formed with regard to the beating back of one side. But you will perhaps say, She is goddess of the Romans only, and, being on the side of the Quirites alone, is ever ready graciously to help them. We wish, indeed, that it were so, for we like the name; but it is a very doubtful matter. What! do the Romans have gods to themselves, who do not help other nations? and how can they be gods, if they do not exercise their divine power impartially towards all nations everywhere? and where, I pray you, was this goddess Pellonia long ago, when the national honour was brought under the yoke at the Caudine Forks? when at the Trasimene lake the streams ran with blood? when the plains of Diomede were heaped up with dead Romans when a thousand other blows were sustained in countless disastrous battles? Was she snoring and sleeping; or, as the base often do, had she deserted to the enemies' camp?

5. The sinister deities preside over the regions on the left hand only, and are opposed to those on the right. But with what reason this is said, or with what meaning, we do not understand ourselves; and we are sure that you cannot in any degree cause it to be clearly and generally understood. For in the first place, indeed, the world itself has in itself neither right nor left neither upper nor under regions, neither fore nor after parts. For whatever is round, and bounded on every side by the circumference of a solid sphere, has no beginning, no end; where there is no end and beginning, no part can have its own name and form the beginning. Therefore, when we say, This is the right, and that the left side, we do not refer to anything in the world, which is everywhere very much the same, but to our own place and position, we being so formed that we speak of some things as on our right hand, of others as on our left; and yet these very things which we name left, and the others which we name right, have in us no continuance, no fixedness, but take their forms from our sides, just as chance, and the accident of the moment, may have placed us. If I look towards the rising sun, the north pole and the north are on my left hand;

and if I turn my face thither, the west will be on my left, for it will be regarded as behind the sun's back. But, again, if I turn my eyes to the region of the west, the wind and country of the south are now said to be on my left. And if I am turned to this side by the necessary business of the moment, the result is, that the east is said to be on the left, owing to a further change of position, -from which it can be very easily seen that nothing is either on our right or on our left by nature, but from position, time, and according as our bodily position with regard to surrounding objects has been taken up. But in this case, by what means, in what way, will there be gods of the regions of the left, when it is clear that the same regions are at one time on the right, at another on the left? or what have the regions of the right done to the immortal gods, to deserve that they should be without any to care for them, while they have ordained that these should be fortunate, and ever accompanied by lucky omens?

6. Lateranus, as you say, is the god and genius of hearths, and received this name because men build that kind of fireplace of unbaked bricks. What then? if hearths were made of baked clay, or any other material whatever, will they have no genii? and will Lateranus, whoever he is, abandon his duty as guardian, because the kingdom which he possesses has not been formed of bricks of clay? And for what purpose, I ask, has that god received the charge of hearths? He runs about the kitchens of men, examining and discovering with what kinds of wood the heat in their fires is produced; he gives strength to earthen vessels that they may not fly in pieces, overcome by the violence of the flames; he sees that the flavour of unspoilt dainties reaches the taste of the palate with their own pleasantness, and acts the part of a taster, and tries whether the sauces have been rightly prepared. Is not this unseemly, nay-to speak with more truth-disgraceful, impious, to introduce some pretended deities for this only, not to do them reverence with fitting honours, but to appoint them over base things, and disreputable actions?

7. Does Venus Militaris, also, preside over the evil-doing of camps, and the debaucheries of young men? Is there one Perfica, also, of the crowd of deities, who causes those base and filthy delights to reach their end with uninterrupted pleasure? Is there also Pertunda, who presides over the marriage couch? Is there also Tutunus, on whose huge members and horrent fascinum you think it auspicious, and desire, that your matrons should be borne? But if facts themselves have very little effect in suggesting to volt a right understanding of the truth, are you not able, even from the very names, to understand that these are the inventions of a most meaningless superstition, and the false gods of fancy? Puta, you say, presides over the pruning of trees, Peta over prayers; Nemestrinus is the god of groves; Patellana is a deity, and Patella, of whom the one has been set over things brought to light, the other over those yet to be disclosed. Nodutis is spoken of as a god, because he brings that which has been sown to the knots: and she who presides over the treading out of grain, Noduterensis; the goddess Upibilia delivers from straying from the right paths; parents bereaved of their children are under the care of Orbona,-those very near to death, under that of Naenia. Again, Ossilago herself is mentioned as she who gives firmness and solidity to the bones of young children. Mellonia is a goddess, strong and powerful in regard to bees, caring for and guarding the sweetness of their honey.

8. Say, I pray you,-that Peta, Puta, Patella may graciously favour you,-if there were no bees at all on the earth then, or if we men were born without bones, like some worms, would there be no goddess Mellonia; or would Ossilago, who gives bones their solidity, be without a name of her own? I ask truly, and eagerly inquire whether you think that gods, or men, or bees, fruits, twigs, and the rest, are the more ancient in nature, time, long duration? No man will doubt that you say that the gods precede all things whatever by countless ages and generations. But if it is so, how, in the nature of things, can it be that, from things produced afterwards, they received those names which are earlier in point of time? or that the gods were charged with the care of those things which were not yet produced, and assigned to be of use to men? Or were the gods long without names; and was it only after things began to spring up, and be on the earth, that you thought it right that they should be called by these names and titles? And whence could you have known what name to give to each, since you were wholly ignorant of their existence; or that they possessed any fixed powers, seeing that you were equally unaware which of them had any power, and over what he should be placed to suit his divine might?

9. What then? you say; do you declare that these gods exist nowhere in the world, and have been created by unreal fancies? Not we alone, but truth itself, and reason, say so, and that common-sense in which all men share. For who there who believes that there are gods of gain, and that they preside over the getting of it, seeing that it springs very often from the basest employments, and is always at the expense of others? Who believes that Libentina, who that Burnus. is set over those lusts which wisdom bills us avoid, and which, in a thousand ways, vile and filthy wretches attempt and practise? Who that Limentinus and Lima have the care of thresholds, and do the duties of their keepers, when every day we see the thresholds of temples and private houses destroyed and overthrown, and that the infamous approaches to stews are not without them? Who believes that the Limi watch over obliquities? who that Saturnus presides over the sown crops? who that Montinus is the guardian of mountains; Murcia, of the slothful? Who, finally, would believe that Money is a goddess, whom your writings declare, as though she were the greatest deity, to give golden rings, the front seats at games and shows, honours in the greatest number, the dignity of the magistracy, and that which the indolent love most of all,-an undisturbed ease, by means of riches.

10. But if you urge that bones, different kinds of honey, thresholds, and all the other things which we have either run over rapidly, or, to avoid prolixity, passed by altogether, have their own peculiar guardians, we may in like manner introduce a thousand other gods, who should care for and guard innumerable things. For why should a god have charge of honey only, and not of gourds, rape, cunila, cress, figs, beets, cabbages? Why should the bones alone have found protection, and not the nails, hair, and all the other things which are placed in the hidden parts and members of which we feel ashamed, and are exposed to very many accidents, and stand more in need of the care and attention of the gods? Or if you say that these parts, too, act under the care of their own tutelar deities, there will begin to be as many gods as there are things; nor will the cause be stated why the divine care does

not protect all things, if you say that there are certain things over which the deities preside, and for which they care.

11. What say you, O fathers of new religions, and powers? Do you cry out, and complain that these gods are dishonoured by us, and neglected with profane contempt, viz. Lateranus, the genius of hearths; Limentinus, who presides over thresholds; Pertunda, Perfica, Noduterensis: and do you say that things have sunk into ruin, and that the world itself has changed its laws and constitution, because we do not bow humbly in supplication to Mutunus and Tutunus? But now look and see, lest while you imagine such monstrous things, and form such conceptions, you may have offended the gods who most assuredly exist, if only there are any who are worthy to bear and hold that most exalted title; and it be for no other reason that those evils, of which you speak, rage, and increase by accessions every day. Why, then, some one of you will perhaps say, do you maintain that it is not true that these gods exist? And, when invoked by the diviners, do they obey the call, and come when summoned by their own names, and give answers which may be relied on, to those who consult them? We can show that what is said is false, either because in the whole matter there is the greatest room for distrust, or because we, every day, see many of their predictions either prove untrue or baffled expectation to suit the opposite issues.

12. But let them be true, as you maintain, yet will you have us also believe that Mellonia, for example, introduces herself into the entrails, or Limentinus, and that they set themselves to make known what you seek to learn? Did you ever see their face their deportment, their countenance? or can even these be seen in lungs or livers? May it not happen, may it not come to pass, although you craftily conceal it, that the one should take the other's place, deluding, mocking, deceiving, and presenting the appearance of the deity invoked? If the magi, who are so much akin to soothsayers, relate that, in their incantations, pretended gods steal in frequently instead of those invoked; that some of these, moreover, are spirits of grosser substance, who pretend that they are gods, and delude the ignorant by their lies and deceit,-why should we not similarly believe that here, too, others substitute themselves for those who are not, that they may both strengthen your superstitious beliefs, and rejoice that victims are slain in sacrifice to them under names not their own?

13. Or, if you refuse to believe this on account of its novelty, how can you know whether there is not some one, who comes in place of all whom yon invoke, and substituting himself in all parts of the world, shows to you what appear to be many gods and powers? Who is that one? some one will ask. We may perhaps, being instructed by truthful authors, be able to say; but, lest you should be unwilling to believe us, let my opponent ask the Egyptians, Persians, Indians, Chaldeans, Armenians, and all the others who have seen and become acquainted with these things in the more recondite arts. Then, indeed, you will learn who is the one God, or who the very many under Him are, who pretend to be gods, and make sport of men's ignorance.

Even now we are ashamed to come to the point at which not only boys, young and pert, but grave men also, cannot restrain their laughter, and men who have been hardened into

a strict and stern humour. For while we have all heard it inculcated and taught by our teachers, that in declining the names of the gods there was no plural number, because the gods were individuals, and the ownership of each name could not be common to a great many; you in fogetfulness, and putting away the memory of your early lessons, both give to several gods the same names, and, although you are elsewhere more moderate as to their number, have multiplied them, again, by community of names; which subject, indeed, men of keen discernment and acute intellect have before now treated both in Latin and Greek. And that might have lessened our labour, if it were not that at the same time we see that some know nothing of these books; and, also, that the discussion which we have begun, compels us to bring forward something on these subjects, although it has been already laid hold of, and related by those writers.

14. Your theologians, then, and authors on unknown antiquity, say that in the universe there are three Joves, one of whom has Aether for his father; another, Coelus; the third, Saturn, born and buried in the island of Crete. They speak of five Suns and vie Mercuries,-of whom, as they relate, the first Sun is called the son of Jupiter, and is regarded as grandson of Aether; the second is also Jupiter's son, and the mother who bore him Hyperiona; the third the son of Vulcan, not Vulcan of Lemnos, but the son of the Nile; the fourth, whom Acantho bore at Rhodes in the heroic age, was the father of Ialysus; while the fifth is regarded as the son of a Scythian king and subtle Circe. Again, the first Mercury, who is said to have lusted after Proserpina, is son of Coelus, who is above all. Under the earth is the second, who boasts that he is Trophonius. The third was born of Maia, his mother, and the third Jove; the fourth is the offspring of the Nile, whose name the people of Egypt dread and fear to utter. The fifth is the slayer of Argus, a fugitive and exile. and the inventor of letters in Egypt. But there are five Minervas also, they say, just as there are five Suns and Mercuries; the first of whom is no virgin but the mother of Apollo by Vulcan; the second, the offspring of the Nile, who is asserted to be the Egyptian Sais; the third is descended from Saturn, and is the one who devised the use of arms; the fourth is sprung from Jove, and the Messenians name her Coryphasia; and the fifth is she who slew her lustful father, Pallas.

15. And lest it should seem tedious and prolix to wish to consider each person singly, the same theologians say that there are four Vulcans and three Dianas, as many Aesculapii and five Dionysi, six Hercules and four Venuses, threesets of Castors and the same number of Muses, three winged Cupids, and four named Apollo; whose fathers they mention in like manner, in like manner their mothers, and the places where they were born, and point out the origin andfamily of each. But if it is true and certain, and is told in earnest as a well-known matter, either they are not all gods, inasmuch as there cannot be several under the same name, as we have been taught; or if there is one of them, he will not be known and recognised, because he is obscured by the confusion of very similar names. And thus it results from your own action, however unwilling you may be that it should be so, that religion is brought into difficulty and confusion, and has no fixed end to which it can turn itself, without being made the sport of equivocal illusions.

16. For suppose that it had occurred to us, moved either by suitable influence or violent fear of you, to worship Minerva, for example, with the rights you deem sacred, and the usual ceremony: if, when we prepare sacrifices, and approach to make the offerings appointed for her on the flaming altars, all the Minervas shall fly thither, and striving for the right to that name, each demand that the offerings prepared be given to herself; what drawn-out animal shall we place among them, or to whom shall we direct the sacred offices which are our duty? For the first one of whom we spoke will perhaps say: "The name Minerva is mine, mine the divine majesty, who bore Apollo and Diana, and by the fruit of my womb enriched heaven with deities, and multiplied the number of the gods. "Nay, Minerva," the fifth will say, "are you speaking, who, being a wife, and so often a mother, have lost the sanctity of spotless purity? Do you not see that in all temples the images of Minervas are those of virgins, and that all artists refrain from giving to them the figures of matrons? Cease, therefore, to appropriate to yourself a name not rightfully yours. For that I am Minerva, begotten of father Pallas, the whole band of poets bear witness, who call me Pallas, the surname being derived from my father. The second will cry on hearing this: "What say you?

Do you, then, bear the name of Minerva, an impudent parricide, and one defiled by the pollution of lewd lust, who, decking yourself with rouge and a harlot's arts, roused upon yourself even your father's passions, full of maddening desires? Go further, then, seek for yourself another name for this belongs to me, whom the Nile, greatest of rivers, begot from among his flowing waters, and brought to a maiden's estate from the condensing of moisture. But if you inquire into the credibility of the matter, I too will bring as witnesses the Egyptians, in whose language I am called Neith, as Plato's Timaeus attests. What, then, do we suppose will be the result? Will she indeed cease to say that she is Minerva, who is named Coryphasia, either to mark her mother, or because she sprung forth from the top of Jove's head, bearing a shield, and girt with the terror of arms? Or are we to suppose that she who is third will quietly surrender the name? and not argue and resist the assumption of the first two with such words as these: "Do you thus dare to assume the honour of my name, O Sais, sprung from the mud and eddies of a stream, and formed in miry places? Or do you usurp another's rank, who falsely say that you were born a goddess from the head of Jupiter, and persuade very silly men that you are reason? Does he conceive and bring forth children from ms head?

That the arms you bear might be forged and formed, was there even in the hollow of his head a smith's workshop? were there anvils, hammers, furnaces, bellows, coals, and pincers? Or if, as you maintain, it is true that you are reason, cease to claim for yourself the name which is mine; for reason, of which you speak, is not a certain form of deity, but the understanding of difficult questions. If, then, as we have said, five Minervas should meet us when we essay to sacrifice, and contending as to whose this name is, each demand that either fumigations of incense be offered to her, or sacrificial wines poured out from golden cups; by what arbiter, by what judge, shall we dispose of so great a dispute? or what examiner will there be, what umpire of so great boldness as to attempt, with such personages, either to give a just decision, or to declare their causes not founded on right? Will he not rather go home, and,

keeping himself apart from such matters, think it safer to have nothing to do with them, test he should either make enemies of the rest, by giving to one what belongs to all, or be charged with folly for yielding to all what should be the property of one?

17. We may say the very same things of the Mercuries, the Suns,-indeed of all the others whose numbers you increase and multiply. But it is sufficient to know from one case that the same principle applies to the rest; and, lest our prolixity should chance to weary our audience, we shall cease to deal with individuals, lest, while we accuse you of excess, we also should ourselves be exposed to the charge of excessive loquacity. What do you say, you who, by the fear of bodily tortures, urge us to worship the gods, and constrain us to undertake the service of your deities? We can be easily won, if only something befitting the conception of so great a race be shown to us. Show us Mercury, but only, one; give us Bacchus, but only one; one Venus, and in like manner one Diana. For you will never make us believe that there are four Apollos, or three Jupiters, not even if you were to call Jove himself as witness, or make the Pythian god your authority.

18. But some one on the opposite side says, How do we know whether the theologians have written what is certain and well known, or set forth a wanton fiction, as they thought and judged? That has nothing to do with the matter; nor does the reasonableness of your argument depend upon this,-whether the facts are as the writings of the theologians state, or are otherwise and markedly different. For to us it is enough to speak of things which come before the public; and we need not inquire what is true, but only confute and disprove that which lies open to all, and which men's thoughts have generally received. But if they are liars, declare yourselves what is the truth, and disclose the unassailable mystery. And how can it be done when the services of men of letters are set aside? For what is there which can be said about. the immortal gods that has not reached men's thoughts from what has been written by men on these subjects? Or can you relate anything yourselves about their rights and ceremonies, which has not been recorded in books, and made known by what authors have written? Or if you think these of no importance, let all the books be destroyed which have been composed about the gods for you by theologians, pontiffs, and even some devoted to the study of philosophy; nay, let us rather suppose that from the foundation of the world no man ever wrote anything about the gods: we wish to find out, and desire to know, whether you can mutter or murmur in mentioning the gods, or conceive those in thought to whom no idea from any book gave shape in your minds. But when it is clear that you have been informed of their names and powers by the suggestions of books, it is unjust to deny the reliableness of these books by whose testimony and authority you establish what you say.

19. But perhaps these things will turn out to be false, and what you say to be true. By what proof, by what evidence, will it be shown? For since both parties are men, both those who have said the one thing and those who have said the other, and on both sides the discussion was of doubtful matters, it is arrogant to say that that is true which seems so to you, but that that which offends your feelings manifests wantonness and falsehood. By the laws of

the human race, and the associations of mortality itself, when you read and hear, That god was born of this father and of that mother, do you not feel in your mind that something is said which belongs to man, and relates to the meanness of our earthly race? Or, while you think that it is so, do you conceive no anxiety lest you should in something offend the gods themselves, whoever they are, because you believe that it is owing to filthy intercourse ... that they have reached the light they knew not of, thanks to lewdness? For we, lest any one should chance to think that we are ignorant of, do not know, what befits the majesty of that name, assuredly think that the gods should not know birth; or if they are born at all, we hold and esteem that the Lord and Prince of the universe, by ways which He knew Himself, sent them forth spotless, most pure, undefiled, ignorant of sexual pollution, and brought to the full perfection of their natures as soon as they were begotten?

20. But you, on the contrary, forgetting how great their dignity and grandeur are, associate with them a birth, and impute to them a descent, which men of at all refined feelings regard as at once execrable and terrible. From Ops, you say, his mother, and from his father Saturn, Diespiter was born with his brothers. Do the gods, then, have wives; and, the matches having been previously planned, do they become subject to the bonds of marriage? Do they take upon themselves the engagements of the bridal couch by prescription, by the cake of spelt, and by a pretended sale? Have they their mistresses, their promised wives, their betrothed brides, on settled conditions? And what do we say about their marriages, too, when indeed you say that some celebrated their nuptials, and entertained joyous throngs, and that the goddesses sported at these; and that some threw all things into utter confusion with dissensions because they had no share in singing the Fescennine verses, and occasioned danger and destruction to the next generation of men?

21. But perhaps this foul pollution may be less apparent in the rest. Did, then, the ruler of the heavens, the father of gods and men, who, by the motion of his eyebrow, and by his nod, shakes the whole heavens and makes them tremble,-did he find his origin in man and woman? And unless both sexes abandoned themselves to degrading pleasures in sensual embraces, would there be no Jupiter, greatest of all; and even to this time would the divinities have no king, and heaven stand without its lord? And why do we marvel that you say Jove sprang from a woman's womb, seeing that your authors relate that he both had a nurse, and in the next place maintained the life given to him by nourishment drawn from a foreign breast? What say you, O men? Did, then, shall I repeat, the god who makes the thunder crash, lightens and hurls the thunderbolt, and draws together terrible clouds, drink in the streams of the breast, wail as an infant, creep about, and, that he might be persuaded to cease his crying most foolishly protracted, was he made silent by the noise of rattles, and put to sleep lying in a very soft cradle, and lulled with broken words? O devout assertion of the existence of gods, pointing out and declaring the venerable majesty of their awful grandeur! Is it thus in your opinion, ask, that the exalted powers of heaven are produced? do your gods come forth to the light by modes of birth such as these, by which asses, pigs. dogs, by which the whole of this unclean herd of earthly beasts is conceived and begotten?

22. And, not content to have ascribed these carnal unions to the venerable Saturn, you affirm that the king of the world himself begot children even more shamefully than he was himself born and begotten. Of Hyperiona, as his mother, you say, and Jupiter, who wields the thunderbolt, was born the golden and blazing Sun; of Latona and the same, the Delian archer, and Diana, who rouses the woods; of Leda and the same, those named in Greek Dioscori; of Aclmena and the same, the Theban Hercules, whom his club and hide defended; of him and Semele, Liber, who is named Bromius, and was born a second time from his father's thigh; of him, again, and Main, Mercury, eloquent in speech, and bearer of the harmless snakes. Can any greater insult be put upon your Jupiter, or is there anything else which will destroy and ruin the reputation of the chief of the gods, further than that you believe him to have been at times overcome by vicious pleasures, and to have glowed with the passion of a heart roused to lust after women? And what had the Saturnian king to do with strange nuptials? Did Juno not suffice him; and could he not stay the force of his desires on the queen of the deities, although so great excellence graced her, such beauty, majesty of countenance, and snowy and marble whiteness of arms?

Or did he, not content with one wife, taking pleasure in concubines, mistresses, and courtezans, a lustful god, show his incontinence in all directions, as is the custom with dissolute youths; and in old age, after intercourse with numberless persons, did he renew his eagerness for pleasures now losing their zest? What say you, profane ones; or what vile thoughts do you fashion about your love? Do you not, then, observe do you not see with what disgrace you brand him? of what wrong-doing you make him the author? or what stains of vice, how great infamy you heap upon him?

23. Men, though prone to lust, and inclined, through weakness of character, to yield to the allurements of sensual pleasures, still punish adultery by the laws, and visit with the penalty of death those whom they find to have possessed themselves of others rights by forcing the marriage-bed. The greatest of kings, however, you tell us, did not know how vile, how infamous the person of the seducer and adulterer was; and he who, as is said, examines our merits and demerits, did not, owing to the reasonings of his abandoned heart, see what was the fitting course for him to resolve on. But this misconduct might perhaps be endured, if you were to conjoin him with persons at least his equals, and if he were made by you the paramour of the immortal goddesses. But what beauty, what grace was there, I ask you, in human bodies, which could move, which could turn to it the eyes of Jupiter? Skin, entrails, phlegm, and all that filthy mass placed under the coverings of the intestines, which not Lynceus only with his searching gaze can shudder at, but any other also can be made to turn from even by merely thinking.

24. If you will open your minds' eyes, and see the real truth without gratifying any private end, you will find that the causes of all the miseries by which, as you say, the human race has long been afflicted, flow from such beliefs which you held in former times about your gods; and which you have refused to amend, although the truth was placed before your eyes. For what about them, pray, have we indeed ever either imagined which was unbecoming,

or put forth in shameful writings that the troubles which assail men and the loss of the blessings of life should be used to excite a prejudice against us? Do we say that certain gods were produced from eggs, like storks and pigeons? Do we say that the radiant Cytherean Venus grew up, having taken form from the sea's foam and the severed genitals of Coelus? that Saturn was thrown into chains for parricide, and relieved from their weight only on his own days? that Jupiter was saved from death by the services of the Curetes? that he drove his father from the seat of power, and by force and fraud possessed a sovereignty not his own? Do we say that his aged sire, when driven out, concealed himself in the territories of the Itali, and gave his name as a gift to Latium, because he had been there protected from his son? Do we say that Jupiter himself incestuously married his sister?

or, instead of pork, breakfasted in ignorance upon the son of Lycaon, when invited to his table? that Vulcan, limping on one foot, wrought as a smith in the island of Lemnos? that Aeculapius was transfixed by a thunderbolt because of his greed and avarice, as the Boeotian Pindar sings? that Apollo, having become rich, by his ambiguous responses, deceived the very kings by whose treasures and gifts he had been enriched? Did we declare that Mercury was a thief? that Laverna is so also, and along with him presides over secret frauds? Is the writer Myrtilus one of us, who declares that the Muses were the handmaids of Megalcon, daughter of Macarus?

25. Did we say that Venus was a courtezan, deified by a Cyprian king named Cinyras? Who reported that the palladium was formed from the remains of Pelops? Was it not you? Who that Mars was Spartanus? was it not your writer Epicharmus? Who that he was born within the confines of Thrace? was it not Sophocles the Athenian, with the assent of all his spectators? Who that he was born in Arcadia? was it not you? Who that he was kept a prisoner for thirteen months? was it not the son of the river Meles? Who said that dogs were sacrificed to him by the Carians, asses by the Scythians? was it not Apollodorus especially, along with the rest? Who that in wronging another's marriage couch, he was caught entangled in snares? was it not your writings, your tragedies? Did we ever write that the gods for hire endured slavery, as Hercules at Sardis for lust and wantonness; as the Delian Apollo, who served Admetus, as Jove's brother, who served the Trojan Laomedon, whom the Pythian also served, but with his uncle; as Minerva, who gives light, and trims the lamps to secret lovers? Is not he one of your poets, who re resented Mars and Venus as wounded by men's hands? Is not Panyassis one of you, who relates that father Dis and queenly Juno were wounded by Hercules? Do not the writings of your Polemo say that Pallas was slain, covered with her own blood, overwhelmed by Ornytus?

Does not Sosibius declare that Hercules himself was afflicted by the wound and pain he suffered at the hands of Hipocoon's children? Is it related at our instance that Jupiter was committed to the grave in the island of Crete? Do we say that the brothers, who were united in their cradle, were buried in the territories of Sparta and Lacedaemon? Is the author of our number, who is termed Patrocles the Thurian in the titles of his writings, who relates that the tomb and remains of Saturn are found in Sicily? Is Plutarch of Chaeronea esteemed

one of us, who said that Hercules was reduced to ashes on the top of Mount Oeta, after his loss of strength through epilepsy?

26. But what shall I say of the desires with which it is written in your books, and contained in your writers, that the holy immortals lusted after women? For is it by us that the king of the sea is asserted in the heat of maddened passion to have robbed of their virgin purity Amphitrite, Hippothoe, Amymone, Menalippe, Alope? that the spotless Apollo, Latona's son, most chaste and pure, with the passions of a breast not governed by reason, desired Arsinoe, Aethusa, Hypsipyle, Marpessa, Zeuxippe, and Prothoe, Daphne, and Sterope? Is it shown in our poems that the aged Saturn, already long covered with grey hair, and now cooled by weight of years, being taken by his wife in adultery, put on the form of one of the lower animals, and neighing loudly, escaped in the shape of a beast? Do you not accuse Jupiter himself of having assumed countless forms, and concealed by mean deceptions the ardour of his wanton lust? Have we ever written that he obtained his desires by deceit, at one time changing into gold, at another into a sportive satyr; into a serpent, a bird, a bull; and, to pass beyond all limits of disgrace, into a little ant, that he might, forsooth, make Clitor's daughter the mother of Myrmidon, in Thessaly? Who represented him as having watched over Alcmena for nine nights without ceasing? was it not you?-that he indolently abandoned himself to his lusts, forsaking his post in heaven? was it not you? And, indeed, you ascribe to him no mean favours;

since, in your opinion, the god Hercules was born to exceed and surpass in such matters his father's powers. He in nine nights begot with difficulty one son; but Hercules, a holy god, in one night taught the fifty daughters of Thestius at once to lay aside their virginal title, and to bear a mother's burden. Moreover, not content to have ascribed to the gods love of women, do you also say that they lusted after men? Some one loves Hylas; another is engaged with Hyacinthus; that one burns with desire for Pelops; this one sighs more ardently for Chrysippus; Catamitus is carried off to be a favourite and cup-bearer; and Fabius, that he may be called Jove's darling, is branded on the soft parts, and marked in the hinder.

27. But among you, is it only the males who lust; and has the female sex preserved its purity? Is it not proved in your books that Tithonus was loved by Aurora; that Luna lusted after Endymion; the Nereid after Aeacus; Thetis after Achilles' father; Proserpina after Adonis; her mother, Ceres, after some rustic Jasion, and afterwards Vulcan, Phaeton, Mars; Venus herself, the mother of Aeneas, and founder of the Roman power, to marry Anchises? While, therefore, you accuse, without making any exception, not one only by name, but the whole of the gods alike, in whose existence you believe, of such acts of extraordinary shamefulness and baseness, do you dare, without violation of modesty, to say either that we are impious, or that you are pious, although they receive from you much greater occasion for offence on account of all the shameful acts which you heap up to their reproach, than in connection with the service and duties required by their majesty, honour, and worship? For either all these things are false which you bring forward about them individually, lessening

their credit and reputation; and it is in that case a matter quite deserving, that the gods should utterly destroy the race of men; or if they are true and certain, and perceived without any reasons for doubt, it comes to this issue, that, however unwilling you may be, we believe them to be not of heavenly, but of earthly birth.

28. For where there are weddings, marriages, births, nurses, arts, and weaknesses; where there are liberty and slavery; where there are wounds, slaughter, and shedding of blood; where there are lusts, desires, sensual pleasures; where there is every mental passion arising from disgusting emotions,-there must of necessity be nothing godlike there; nor can that cleave to a superior nature which belongs to a fleeting race, and to the frailty of earth. For who, if only he recognises and perceives what the nature of that power is, can believe either that a deity had the generative members, and was deprived of them by a very base operation; or that he at one time cut off the children sprung from himself, and was punished by suffering imprisonment; or that he, in a way, made civil war upon his father, and deprived him of the right of governing; or that he, filled with fear of one younger when overcome, turned to flight, and hid in remote solitudes, like a fugitive and exile? Who, I say, can believe that the deity reclined at men's tables, was troubled on account of his avarice, deceived his suppliants by an ambiguous reply, excelled in the tricks of thieves, committed adultery, acted as a slave, was wounded, and in love, and submitted to the seduction of impure desires in all the forms of lust? But yet you declare all these things both were, and are, in your gods; and you pass by no form of vice, wickedness, error, without bringing it forward, in the wantonness of your fancies, to the reproach of the gods. You must, therefore, either seek out other gods, to whom all these reproaches shall not apply, for they are a human and earthly race to whom they apply; or if there are only these whose names and character you have declared, by your beliefs you do away with them: for all the things of which you speak relate to men.

29. And here, indeed, we can show that all those whom you represent to us as and call gods, were but men, by quoting either Euhemerus of Acragas, whose books were translated by Ennius into Latin that all might be thoroughly acquainted with them; or Nicanor the Cyprian; or the Pellaean Leon; or Theodorus of Cyrene; or Hippo and Diagoras of Melos; or a thousand other writers, who have minutely, industriously, and carefully brought secret things to light with noble candour. We may, I repeat, at pleasure, declare both the acts of Jupiter, and the wars of Minerva and the virgin Diana; by what stratagems Liber strove to make himself master of the Indian empire; what was the condition, the duty, the gain of Venus; to whom the great mother was bound in marriage; what hope, what joy was aroused in her by the comely Attis; whence came the Egyptian Serapis and Isis, or for what reasons their very names were formed.

30. But in the discussion which we at present maintain, we do not undertake this trouble or service, to show and declare who all these were. But this is what we proposed to ourselves, that as you call us impious and irreligious, and, on the other hand, maintain that you are pious and serve the gods, we should prove and make manifest that by no men are they

treated with less respect than by you. But if it is proved by the very insults that it is so, it must, as a consequence, be understood that it is yon who rouse the gods to fierce and terrible rage, because you either listen to or believe, or yourselves invent about them, stories so degrading. For it is not he who is anxiously thinking of religious rites, and slays spotless victims, who gives piles of incense to be burned with fire, not he must be thought to worship the deities, or alone discharge the duties of religion. True worship is in the heart, and a belief worthy of the gods; nor does it at all avail to bring blood and gore, if you believe about them things which are not only far remote from and unlike their nature, but even to some extent stain and disgrace both their dignity and virtue.

31. We wish, then, to question you, and invite you to answer a short question, Whether you think it a greater offence to sacrifice to them being neither wishes nor desires these; or, with foul beliefs, to hold opinions about them so degrading, that they might rouse any one's spirit to a mad desire for revenge? If the relative importance of the matters be weighed, you will find no judge so prejudiced as not to believe it a greater crime to defame by manifest insults any one's reputation, than to treat it with silent neglect. For this, perhaps, may be held and believed from deference to reason; but the other course manifests an impious spirit, and a blindness despaired of in fiction. If in your ceremonies and rites neglected sacrifices and expiatory offerings may be demanded, guilt is said to have been contracted; if by a momentary forgetfulness any one has erred either in speaking or in pouring wine; or again, if at the solemn games and sacred races the dancer has halted, or the musician suddenly become silent,-you all cry out immediately that something has been done contrary to the sacredness of the ceremonies; or if the boy termed patrimus let go the thong in ignorance, or could not hold to the earth: and yet do you dare to deny that the gods are ever being wronged by you in sins so grievous, while you confess yourselves that, in less matters, they are often angry, to the national ruin?

32. But all these things, they say, are the fictions of poets, and games arranged for pleasure. It is not credible, indeed, that men by no means thoughtless, who sought to trace out the character of the remotest antiquity, either did not insert in their poems the fables which survived in men's minds and common conversation; or that they would have assumed to themselves so great licence as to foolishly feign what was almost sheer madness, and might give them reason to be afraid of the gods, and bring them into danger with men. But let us grant that the poets are, as yon say, the inventors and authors of tales so disgraceful; you are not, however, even thus free from the guilt of dishonouring the gods, who either are remiss in punishing such offences, or have not, by passing laws, and by severity of punishments, opposed such indiscretion, and determined that no man should henceforth say that which tended to the dishonour, or was unworthy of the glory of the gods. For whoever allows the wrongdoer to sin, strengthens his audacity; and it is more insulting to brand and mark any one with false accusations, than to bring forward and upbraid their real offences. For to be called what you are, and what you feel yourself to be, is less offensive, because your resentment is checked by the evidence supplied against you on privately reviewing your life;

but that wounds very keenly which brands the innocent, and defames a man's honourable name and reputation.

33. Your gods, it is recorded, dine on celestial couches, and in golden chambers, drink, and are at last soothed by the music of the lyre, and singing. You fit them with ears not easily wearied; and do not think it unseemly to assign to the gods the pleasures by which earthly bodies are supported, and which are sought after by ears enervated by the frivolity of an unmanly spirit. Some of them are brought forward in the character of lovers, destroyers of purity, to commit shameful and degrading deeds not only with women, but with men also. You take no care as to what is said about matters of so much importance, nor do you check, by any fear of chastisement at least, the recklessness of your wanton literature; others, through madness and frenzy, bereave themselves, and by the slaughter of their own relatives cover themselves with blood, just as though it were that of an enemy. You wonder at these loftily expressed impieties; and that which it was fitting should be subjected to all punishments, you extol with praise that spurs them on, so as to rouse their recklessness to greater vehemence. They mourn over the wounds of their bereavement, and with unseemly wailings accuse the cruel fates; you are astonished at the force of their eloquence, carefully study and commit to memory that which should have been wholly put away from human society, and are solicitous that it should not perish through any forgetfulness. They are spoken of as being wounded, maltreated, making war upon each other with hot and furious contests; you enjoy the description; and, to enable you to defend so great daring in the writers, pretend that these things are allegories, and contain the principles of natural science.

34. But why do I complain that you have disregarded the insults offered to the other deities? That very Jupiter, whose name you should not have spoken without fear and trembling over your whole body, is described as confessing his faults when overcome by lust of his wife, and, hardened in shamelessness, making known, as if he were mad and ignorant, the mistresses he preferred to his spouse, the concubines he preferred to his wife; you say that those who have uttered so marvellous things are chiefs and kings among poets endowed with godlike genius, that they are persons most holy; and so utterly have you lost sight of your duty in the matters of religion which you bring forward, that words are of more importance, in your opinion, than the profaned majesty of the immortals. So then, if only you felt any fear of the gods, or believed with confident and unhesitating assurance that they existed at all, should you not, by bills, by popular votes, by fear of the senate's decrees, have hindered, prevented, and forbidden any one to speak at random of the gods otherwise than in a pious manner? Nor have they obtained this honour even at your hands, that you should repel insults offered to them by the same laws by which you ward them off from yourselves. They are accused of treason among you who have whispered any evil about your kings.

To degrade a magistrate, or use insulting language to a senator, you have made by decree a crime, followed by the severest punishment. To write a satirical poem, by which a slur is cast upon the reputation and character of another, you determined, by the decrees of

the decemvirs, should not go unpunished; and that no one might assail your ears with too wanton abuse, you established formulae for severe affronts. With you only the gods are unhonoured, contemptible, vile; against whom you allow any one liberty to say what he will, to accuse them of the deeds of baseness which his lust has invented and devised. And yet you do not blush to raise against us the charge of want of regard for deities so infamous, although it is much better to disbelieve the existence of the gods than to think they are such, and of such repute.

35. But is it only poets whom you have thought proper to allow to invent unseemly tales about the gods, and to turn them shamefully into sport? What do your pantomimists, the actors, that crowd of mimics and adulterers? Do they not abuse your gods to make to themselves gain, and do not the others find enticing pleasures in the wrongs and insults offered to the gods? At the public games, too, the colleges of all the priests and magistrates take their places, the chief Pontiffs, and the chief priests of the curiae; the Quindecemviri take their places, crowned with wreaths of laurel, and the flamines diales with their mitres; the augurs take their places, who disclose the divine mind and will; and the chaste maidens also, who cherish and guard the ever-burning fire; the whole people and the senate take their places; the fathers who have done service as consuls, princes next to the gods, and most worthy of reverence; and, shameful to say, Venus, the mother of the race of Mars, and parent of the imperial people, is represented by gestures as in love, and is delineated with shameless mimicry as raving like a Bacchanal, with all the passions of a vile harlot. The Great Mother, too, adorned with her sacred fillets, is represented by dancing; and that Pessinuntic Dindymene is, to the dishonour of her age, represented as with shameful desire using passionate gestures in the embrace of a herdsman;

and also in the Trachiniae of Sophocles, that son of Jupiter, Hercules, entangled in the toils of a death-fraught garment, is exhibited uttering piteous cries, overcome by his violent suffering, and at last wasting away and being consumed, as his intestines soften and are dissolved. But in these tales even the Supreme Ruler of the heavens Himself is brought forward, without any reverence for His name and majesty, as acting the part of an adulterer, and changing His countenance for purposes of seduction, in order that He might by guile rob of their chastity matrons, who were the wives of others, and putting on the appearance of their husbands, by assuming the form of another.

36. But this crime is not enough: the persons of the most sacred gods are mixed up with farces also, and scurrilous plays. And that the idle onlookers may be excited to laughter and jollity, the deities are hit at in jocular quips, the spectators shout and rise up, the whole pit resounds with the clapping of hands and applause. And to the debauched scoffers at the gods gifts and presents are ordained, ease, freedom from public burdens, exemption and relief, together with triumphal garlands,-a crime for which no amends can be made by any apologies. And after this do you dare to wonder whence these ills come with which the human race is deluged and overwhelmed without any interval, while you daily both repeat and learn by heart all these things, with which are mixed up libels upon the gods

and slanderous sayings; and when you wish your inactive minds to be occupied with useless dreamings, demand that days be given to you, and exhibition made without any interval? But if you felt any real indignation on behalf of your religious beliefs, you should rather long ago have burned these writings, destroyed those books of yours, and overthrown these theatres, in which evil reports of your deities are daily made public in shameful tales. For why, indeed, have our writings deserved to be given to the flames? our meetings to be cruelly broken up, in which prayer is made to the Supreme God, peace and pardon are asked for all in authority, for soldiers, kings, friends, enemies, for those still in life, and those freed from the bondage of the flesh; in which all that is said is such as to make men humane, gentle, modest, virtuous, chaste, generous in dealing with their substance, and inseparably united to all embraced in our brotherhood?

37. But this is the state of the case, that as you are exceedingly strong in war and in military power, you think you excel in knowledge of the truth also, and are pious before the gods, whose might you have been the first to besmirch with foul imaginings. Here, if your fierceness allows. and madness suffers, we ask you to answer us this: Whether you think that anger finds a place in the divine nature, or that the divine blessedness is far removed from such passions? For if they are subject to passions so furious, and are excited by feelings of rage as your imaginings suggest.-for you say that they have often shaken the earth with their roaring, and bringing woful misery on men, corrupted with pestilential contagion the character of the times, both because their games had been celebrated with too little care, and because their priests were not received with favour, and because some small spaces were desecrated, and because their rites were not duly performed,-it must consequently be understood that they feel no little wrath on account of the opinions which have been mentioned. But if, as follows of necessity, it is admitted that all these miseries with which men have long been overwhelmed flow from such fictions, if the anger of the deities is excited by these causes, you are the occasion of so terrible misfortunes, because you never cease to jar upon the feelings of the gods, and excite them to a fierce desire for vengeance.

But if, on the other hand, the gods are not subject to such passions, and do not know at all what it is to be enraged, then indeed there is no ground for saying that they who know not what anger is are angry with us, * and they are free from its presence, and the disorder it causes. For it cannot be, in the nature of things, that what is one should become two; and that unity, which is naturally uncompounded, should divide and go apart into separate things.

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.