

Letter 70

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Letter LXX. To Magnus an Orator of Rome.

Jerome thanks Magnus, a Roman orator, for his services in bringing a young man named Sebesius to apologize to him for some fault that he had committed. He then replies to a criticism of Magnus on his fondness for making quotations from profane writers, a practice which he defends by the example of the fathers of the church and of the inspired penmen of scripture. He ends by hinting that the objection really comes not from Magnus himself but from Rufinus (here nicknamed Calpurnius Lanarius). The date of the letter is 397 A.D.

1. That our friend Sebesius has profited by your advice I have learned less from your letter than from his own penitence. And strange to say the pleasure which he has given me since his rebuke is greater than the pain he caused me from his previous waywardness. There has been indeed a conflict between indulgence in the father, and affection in the son; while the former is anxious to forget the past, the latter is eager to promise dutiful behaviour in the future. Accordingly you and I must equally rejoice, you because you have successfully put a pupil to the test, I because I have received a son again.

2. You ask me at the close of your letter why it is that sometimes in my writings I quote examples from secular literature and thus defile the whiteness of the church with the foulness of heathenism. I will now briefly answer your question. You would never have asked it, had not your mind been wholly taken up with Tully; you would never have asked it had you made it a practice instead of studying Volcatius to read the holy scriptures and the commentators upon them. For who is there who does not know that both in Moses and in the prophets there are passages cited from Gentile books and that Solomon proposed questions to the philosophers of Tyre and answered others put to him by them. In the commencement of the book of Proverbs he charges us to understand prudent maxims and shrewd adages, parables and obscure discourse, the words of the wise and their dark sayings; Proverbs 1:1-6 all of which belong by right to the sphere of the dialectician and the philosopher. The Apostle Paul also, in writing to Titus, has used a line of the poet Epimenides: "The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies." Titus 1:12 Half of which line was afterwards adopted by Callimachus. It is not surprising that a literal rendering of the words into Latin should fail to preserve the metre, seeing that Homer when translated into the same language is scarcely intelligible even in prose. In another epistle Paul quotes a line of Menander: "Evil communications corrupt good manners." And when he is arguing with the Athenians upon the Areopagus he calls Aratus as a witness citing from him the words "For we

are also his offspring;" Acts 17:28 in Greek τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἔσμεν, the close of a heroic verse. And as if this were not enough, that leader of the Christian army, that unvanquished pleader for the cause of Christ, skilfully turns a chance inscription into a proof of the faith. Acts 17:22 For he had learned from the true David to wrench the sword of the enemy out of his hand and with his own blade to cut off the head of the arrogant Goliath. He had read in Deuteronomy the command given by the voice of the Lord that when a captive woman had had her head shaved, her eyebrows and all her hair cut off, and her nails pared, she might then be taken to wife. Deuteronomy 21:10-13 Is it surprising that I too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of the true Israel? Or that shaving off and cutting away all in her that is dead whether this be idolatry, pleasure, error, or lust, I take her to myself clean and pure and beget by her servants for the Lord of Sabaoth? My efforts promote the advantage of Christ's family, my so-called defilement with an alien increases the number of my fellow-servants. Hosea took a wife of whoredoms, Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and this harlot bore him a son called Jezreel or the seed of God. Hosea 1:2-4 Isaiah speaks of a sharp razor which shaves "the head of sinners and the hair of their feet;" Isaiah 7:20 and Ezekiel shaves his head as a type of that Jerusalem which has been an harlot, Ezekiel 5:1-5 in sign that whatever in her is devoid of sense and life must be removed.

3. Cyprian, a man renowned both for his eloquence and for his martyr's death, was assailed— so Firmian tells us — for having used in his treatise against Demetrius passages from the Prophets and the Apostles which the latter declared to be fabricated and made up, instead of passages from the philosophers and poets whose authority he, as a heathen, could not well gainsay. Celsus and Porphyry have written against us and have been ably answered, the former by Origen, the latter by Methodius, Eusebius, and Apollinaris. Origen wrote a treatise in eight books, the work of Methodius extended to ten thousand lines while Eusebius and Apollinaris composed twenty-five and thirty volumes respectively. Read these and you will find that compared with them I am a mere tyro in learning, and that, as my wits have long lain fallow, I can barely recall as in a dream what I have learned as a boy. The emperor Julian found time during his Parthian campaign to vomit forth seven books against Christ and, as so often happens in poetic legends, only wounded himself with his own sword. Were I to try to confute him with the doctrines of philosophers and stoics you would doubtless forbid me to strike a mad dog with the club of Hercules. It is true that he presently felt in battle the hand of our Nazarene or, as he used to call him, the Galilæan, and that a spear-thrust in the vitals paid him due recompense for his foul calumnies. To prove the antiquity of the Jewish people Josephus has written two books against Appio a grammarian of Alexandria; and in these he brings forward so many quotations from secular writers as to make me marvel how a Hebrew brought up from his childhood to read the sacred scriptures could also have perused the whole library of the Greeks. Need I speak of Philo whom critics call the second or the Jewish Plato?

4. Let me now run through the list of our own writers. Did not Quadratus a disciple of the apostles and bishop of the Athenian church deliver to the Emperor Hadrian (on the occasion of his visit to the Eleusinian mysteries) a treatise in defence of our religion. And so great was the admiration caused in everyone by his eminent ability that it stilled a most severe persecution. The philosopher Aristides, a man of great eloquence, presented to the same Emperor an apology for the Christians composed of extracts from philosophic writers. His example was afterwards followed by Justin another philosopher who delivered to Antoninus Pius and his sons and to the senate a treatise *Against the Gentiles*, in which he defended the ignominy of the cross and preached the resurrection of Christ with all freedom. Need I speak of Melito bishop of Sardis, of Apollinaris chief-priest of the Church of Hierapolis, of Dionysius bishop of the Corinthians, of Tatian, of Bardesanes, of Irenæus successor to the martyr Pothinus; all of whom have in many volumes explained the uprisings of the several heresies and tracked them back, each to the philosophic source from which it flows. Pantænus, a philosopher of the Stoic school, was on account of his great reputation for learning sent by Demetrius bishop of Alexandria to India, to preach Christ to the Brahmans and philosophers there. Clement, a presbyter of Alexandria, in my judgment the most learned of men, wrote eight books of *Miscellanies* and as many

of *Outline Sketches*, a treatise against the Gentiles, and three volumes called the *Pedagogue*. Is there any want of learning in these, or are they not rather drawn from the very heart of philosophy? Imitating his example Origen wrote ten books of *Miscellanies*, in which he compares together the opinions held respectively by Christians and by philosophers, and confirms all the dogmas of our religion by quotations from Plato and Aristotle, from Numenius and Cornutus. Miltiades also wrote an excellent treatise against the Gentiles. Moreover Hippolytus and a Roman senator named Apollonius have each compiled apologetic works. The books of Julius Africanus who wrote a history of his own times are still extant, as also are those of Theodore who was afterwards called Gregory, a man endowed with apostolic miracles as well as with apostolic virtues. We still have the works of Dionysius bishop of Alexandria, of Anatolius chief priest of the church of Laodicea, of the presbyters Pamphilus, Pierius, Lucian, Malchion; of Eusebius bishop of Cæsarea, Eustathius of Antioch and Athanasius of Alexandria; of Eusebius of Emisa, of Triphyllius of Cyprus, of Asterius of Scythopolis, of the confessor Serapion, of Titus bishop of Bostra; and of the Cappadocians Basil, Gregory, and Amphilocheus. All these writers so frequently interweave in their books the doctrines and maxims of the philosophers that you might easily be at a loss which to admire most, their secular erudition or their knowledge of the scriptures.

5. I will pass on to Latin writers. Can anything be more learned or more pointed than the style of Tertullian? His *Apology* and his books *Against the Gentiles* contain all the wisdom of the world.

Minucius Felix a pleader in the Roman courts has ransacked all heathen literature to adorn the pages of his *Octavius* and of his treatise *Against the astrologers* (unless indeed this latter is falsely ascribed to him). Arnobius has published seven books against the Gentiles, and his pupil Lactantius as many, besides two volumes, one *on Anger* and the other *on the creative activity of God*. If you read any of these you will find in them an epitome of Cicero's dialogues. The Martyr Victorinus though as a writer deficient in learning is not deficient in the wish to use what learning he has. Then there is Cyprian. With what terseness, with what knowledge of all history, with what splendid rhetoric and argument has he touched the theme that idols are no Gods! Hilary too, a confessor and bishop of my own day, has imitated Quintilian's twelve books both in number and in style, and has also shown his ability as a writer in his short treatise against Dioscorus the physician. In the reign of Constantine the presbyter Juvencus set forth in verse the story of our Lord and Saviour, and did not shrink from forcing into metre the majestic phrases of the Gospel. Of other writers dead and living I say nothing. Their aim and their ability are evident to all who read them.

6. You must not adopt the mistaken opinion, that while in dealing with the Gentiles one may appeal to their literature in all other discussions one ought to ignore it; for almost all the books of all these writers— except those who like Epicurus are no scholars— are extremely full of erudition and philosophy. I incline indeed to fancy— the thought comes into my head as I dictate— that you yourself know quite well what has always been the practice of the learned in this matter. I believe that in putting this question to me you are only the mouthpiece of another who by reason of his love for the histories of Sallust might well be called Calpurnius Lanarius. Please beg of him not to envy eaters their teeth because he is toothless himself, and not to make light of the eyes of gazelles because he is himself a mole. Here as you see there is abundant material for discussion, but I have already filled the limits at my disposal.



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