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Selections from *The letter to Diognetus*

I have noticed, most excellent Diognetus, the deep interest you have been showing in the piety of the Christians, and the close and careful inquiries you have been making about it. You would like to know what God they believe in, and what sort of worship they practise which enables them to disregard this world and even to look down on death itself—since they reject the deities revered by the Greeks no less than they disclaim the superstitions professed by the Jews. [You would also like to know] what is the tender affection they have for one another and why this new race or manner of life has come into our lives now instead of earlier.<sup>1</sup>

They live in their own native lands, but as sojourners; they share all things as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is a fatherland for them, and every fatherland a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, have children, but they do not expose their infants. They share a common table, but not the marriage bed. They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend [their days] on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. [*Diognetus* 5.5-9].

As I said before, it is not an earthly discovery that has been passed on to them [i.e. Christians]. That which they think it worthwhile to guard so carefully is not a result of mortal thinking, nor is what has been entrusted to them a stewardship of merely human mysteries. On the contrary, the Almighty himself, the Creator of the universe and the invisible God, has from heaven planted the Truth, even the holy and incomprehensible Word, among men and fixed it firmly in their hearts. [He did this] not, as one might suppose, by sending to humanity some servant, angel or ruler... Rather, [he has sent] the very Designer and Maker of the universe, by whom he made the heavens and confined the seas within their bounds; ...from whom the sun is assigned the limits of its daily course and whom the moon obeys when he bids her to shine by night, and whom the stars obey as they follow the course of the moon. He is the One by whom all things have been set in order, determined, and placed in subjection—both the heavens and things in the heavens, the earth and things on the earth, the sea and the things in the sea, fire, air, abyss, the things in the heights and those in the depths and the realm between. Such was the

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<sup>1</sup> *Diognetus* 1 [trans. Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), 142, altered].

The other translations of the text are those of the author.



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One God sent to them. ...In gentleness and meekness he sent him, as a King sending his son who is a king. He sent him as God, he sent him as [man] to men, he sent him as Saviour. [*Diognetus* 7.1-4].

[God] did not hate or reject us or bear us ill-will. Rather, he was long-suffering, bore with us, and in mercy he took our sins upon himself. He himself gave his own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy One for the godless, the Innocent One for the wicked, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal. For what else was able to cover our sins except his righteousness? In whom could we, who were lawless and godless, have been justified, but in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange! O the inscrutable work of God! O blessings beyond all expectation!—that the wickedness of many should be hidden in the one Righteous Man, and the righteousness of the One should justify the many wicked! [*Diognetus* 9.2-5].

God loved humanity, for whose sake that he made the world, and to whom he subjected everything in the earth. He gave them reason and intelligence, and they alone have been allowed to look up to him. He formed them according to his own image. He sent his only-begotten Son to them and promised them the kingdom of heaven, and he will give it to those who have loved him. Once you have acquired this knowledge, with what joy do you suppose you will be filled? Or how will you love him who first loved you in such a way? Loving him you will imitate his goodness... [*Diognetus* 10.2-4].