Sometime around the year 177 CE, a man named Athenagoras composed a defence of Christianity that he addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Because he is one of the rare extant writers not mentioned by Eusebius, our information about him is slight and uncertain. According to the unreliable Philip of Side, writing some 260 years later, he was the first head of the Christian school in Alexandria; he had originally been a Platonic philosopher who planned to write against the Christians, but on reading the scriptures had converted. Our only other source of information is the chief manuscript of his works, copied in 914 CE, which describes the author as “Athenagoras, Athenian, philosopher, Christian”.

Athenagoras opens his defence by noting that the various peoples of the empire are all allowed to follow their ancestral customs in worship, all except the Christians; Christians instead suffer punishment. If they

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1 I owe thanks to the audience of the original paper for their comments, to Steve Mason for his detailed comments on the penultimate draft, and to Claude Eilers for his helpful suggestions and for sharing with me his work on the documents in Josephus in advance of publication. Translations of Athenagoras are those of W. R. Schoedel, ed., Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione (Oxford, 1972); all other unattributed translations are my own.

2 Αὐτοκράτοραν Μάρκα Άερημίω Αντωνίω καὶ Λοικίω Άερημίω Κομόδω Άμενικοις Σαματακοῖς, τὸ δὲ μέγιστον φιλοσόφοις. There are several problems with the imperial titles in this inscription, suggesting that it has been either garbled or added by a later抄写员. Yet even if we discount it, it is clear from the body of the text itself that the addressees were joint emperors (1. 1) and father and son (18. 2), which in the second century CE could mean only Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Commodus became imperator on 27 November 176 and Augustus in early 177 CE, and Marcus Aurelius died on 17 March 180, giving termini post and ante quem; if Athenagoras’ reference to the profound peace of the empire (1. 2) is not simply a rhetorical flourish, he must also have been writing before the start of the Marcomannic war in the summer of 178 CE. For the dates, see further L. W. Barnard, Athenagoras: A Study in Second Century Christian Apologetic (Paris, 1972), 19–22 and T. D. Barnes, “The Embassy of Athenagoras”, JTS 26 (1975), 111–114.

3 For full references and discussion, see Barnard, Athenagoras, 13–18 and Schoedel, Athenagoras, ix–xi; the fragment of Philip is most easily available in PG 6. 182.
are punished for actual crimes, he argues, then it is just; but if only because of their name, it is not. Athenagoras acknowledges that some people do in fact bring charges of criminal behaviour against Christians, which he categorizes under three headings: atheism, Thyestean banquets, and Oedipean unions (1–3). He then proceeds to refute these charges, focusing largely on atheism (4–30) and treating incest and cannibalism in what amounts to an appendix (31–36). He concludes with a brief plea that, having demonstrated the innocence of Christians, he should obtain his request for justice (37). Although Athenagoras’ work has its own distinctive features, in its main outlines it has much in common with those other second-century Christian texts conventionally known as apologies: the argument that it is unjust to punish Christians merely for their name, the defence of Christianity as philosophically valid and morally pure, and the attack on Greek and Roman religious traditions as irrational and immoral.

For our purposes, what is particularly striking about Athenagoras’ work is its title. The chief manuscript gives it the title Πρεσβεία περὶ Χριστιανῶν, “Embassy for Christians”, and Philip of Side refers to it as ὁ ὑπὲρ Χριστιανῶν πρεσβευτικός (sc. λόγος), “the ambassadorial (speech) on behalf of Christians”. At least by the early fifth century CE, then, the title was clearly well established. It is interesting because it is so unusual. The normal practice, as I have already mentioned, was to refer to this sort of defence of Christianity as an ἀπολογία, an apology. The title πρεσβεία, in contrast, is virtually unique, not just in early Christian literature but in Greek literature as a whole. There is in fact only a single parallel, so far as I know, and it is a highly problematic one: the work of Philo now known as The Embassy to Gaius. Whether or

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4 Philip’s evidence, which is surely a reliable indication of how the work was referred to in his day, strongly suggests that we should translate πρεσβεία as ‘embassy’ and not by a more general term like ‘plea’, since ὁ πρεσβευτικός was a standard technical term for an ambassadorial speech (Men. Rhet. 423. 6–424. 2).

5 This usage is particularly clear in Eusebius, who applies the term to the works of Quadratus (Hist. eccl. 4. 3. 1), Aristides (4. 3. 3), Justin (4. 8. 3), Melito and Apolonarius (4. 26. 1), and Tertullian (2. 2. 4. 3, 33. 2, 5. 5. 5), and also refers to a lost work of Philo as ὶ Ἡ συνεργεῖ αὐτοῦ ἱστορία (Praep. evang. 2. 18. 6, 8, 10. 19); at about the same time, Lactantius similarly refers to Tertullian’s Apologeticum (Div. inst. 5. 4. 3: ‘in eo libro cui Apologetico nomen est’; cf. Jer. Ep. 70. 5).

6 The question of the title is closely bound with the related question of the work’s original scope. The chief manuscripts carry the title ὁ ἐς τῆς χριστιανικῆς πρεσβείας πρὸς Γαίον. Eusebius cites ὁ Φίλων ἐν ἡ συνεργεῖ Πρεσβεία (Hist. eccl. 2. 5. 6) and quotes a passage from the text now known as the Legatio (Hist. eccl. 2. 6. 2 = Legat. 43); but he also refers to a work of Philo in five books that records the sufferings of