

Polemic Literary Units in the Classical Midrashim and Justin Martyr's "Dialogue with Trypho"

Author(s): Marc Hirshman

Source: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 83, No. 3/4 (Jan. - Apr., 1993), pp. 369-384

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1455159>

Accessed: 23-08-2018 12:06 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1455159?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Pennsylvania Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Jewish Quarterly Review*

POLEMIC LITERARY UNITS IN THE CLASSICAL
MIDRASHIM AND JUSTIN MARTYR'S
*DIALOGUE WITH TRYPHO**

MARC HIRSHMAN, University of Haifa

ABSTRACT

After a brief literary analysis of Justin's Dialogue with Trypho, I compare three selections from the Dialogue with parallel sources in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael and Genesis Rabbah. This comparison raises the possibility of the existence of polemical collections which were eventually incorporated into the classical midrashim. Some of these units might very well trace their beginnings to anti-pagan polemic, which were modified later to answer the needs of anti-Christian polemic.

The latter half of the nineteenth century marked a prodigious and impressive effort by Jewish scholars to grapple with the inter-relationship between midrash and patristics. We can view Louis Ginzberg's *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern*,¹ a doctoral thesis of 1899, as the culmination of a fruitful half-century of research. Yet, looking back now over the past ninety years, one notices that the major thrust of midrashic studies had veered from that pursuit and moved vigorously into the more pressing and immediate aim of producing critical scholarly editions of the midrashic literature. J. Theodor's monumental edition of *Genesis Rabbah* began to be published four years after Ginzberg's dissertation and set the standard for critical editions which, within one hundred years, were available for the lion's share of tannaitic and early amoraic midrashim. While scholars continue today to edit the later amoraic

* I am grateful to the faculty and students of Princeton University's Departmental Seminar in Religion and to the anonymous referees of *JQR* for their comments and questions on this paper.

¹ The first part was published in Amsterdam in 1899: *Die Haggada in den pseudo-hieronimianischen "Quaestiones."* See J. Baskin's bibliography of "Rabbinic-Patristic Exegetical Contacts," in W. S. Green, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 5 (1985), p. 77.

midrashim, the time is ripe for a reconsideration of the crucial issues which preoccupied students of midrash from Graetz² to Ginzberg and beyond. In the past decade an enhanced sense of midrash as literature³ has given rise to numerous theoretical and text-critical monographs and articles in Israel and elsewhere. These advances in our understanding of midrash, the new scientific editions of the midrashim, and the concurrent progress in patristic studies, have opened the way for renewed comparison of patristic and midrashic literature on various levels.

In this paper I compare units of polemical material in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* with parallel units in rabbinic literature. I will first explore the literary qualities of the *Dialogue* and then move to a comparison of some of the specific exegetical points of contact between it and the midrash.

Justin, the self-styled Christian philosopher, treats Trypho, the Jewish student of philosophy, to a lengthy disquisition on the true philosophy—Christianity. Research into this early Christian-Jewish dialogue has flourished in almost every respect,⁴ from the literary analysis of the dialogue form⁵ to the nature of Justin's Hebrew Bible citations.⁶ Justin's credentials as a philosopher have been tested,⁷ as well as the extent and intimacy of his knowledge of the Jewish traditions which he cites.⁸ Since Goldfahn's series of

² See H. Graetz, "Haggadische Elemente bei den Kirchenvätern," which appeared in *MGWJ* 3 (1854) and 4 (1855).

³ Two recent American contributions are D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, 1990), and S. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany, 1991). In Israel, J. Fraenkel's oeuvre (and others) has given new impetus to the study of aggadah as literature.

⁴ The bibliography listed in O. Skarsaune's article on Justin in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin, 1988), 17:476–478 gives a good picture of the state of Justin research.

⁵ I have benefited from Manfred Hoffman's "Der Dialog in der apologetischen Literatur," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 90 (1966): 10–28.

⁶ O. Skarsaune's revised dissertation, *The Proof from Prophecy* (Leiden, 1987) is a mine of information.

⁷ Justin passed with flying colors according to J. C. M. van Winden, *An Early Christian Philosopher: Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, Chapters 1 to 9* (Leiden, 1971).

⁸ The traditions are conveniently listed in W. A. Shotwell's *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London, 1965), pp. 71–90.

essays in 1873 under the title, “Justinus Martyr und die Agada,”⁹ it has become almost a commonplace to assume Justin’s familiarity with rabbinic traditions.¹⁰ I have serious reservations as to the nature and extent of Justin’s knowledge of rabbinic Judaism and would like to begin a reassessment of it in this essay. It is striking that Justin’s Trypho the Jew is a markedly nonrabbinic figure whose statements reveal little or no intrinsically rabbinic material. I will devote the first part of this paper to describing the nature of Trypho’s role in the *Dialogue*. This will give us a better appreciation of the manner in which Justin’s polemic operates and prepare us for the more difficult task of comparing Justin and midrash.

In a literary analysis of the *Dialogue*, Manfred Hoffman¹¹ has called attention to the subordinate role assigned to Trypho, who is confined to relatively brief and limited queries and responses. Indeed, one may add that from the very outset Trypho is cast as the eager student who, on the advice of his former teacher of philosophy, makes the most of every opportunity to engage other philosophers in conversation. He is hardly a match for Justin, and lest there be any doubt, we are given a very full account of Justin’s philosophical vita. But Trypho is not simply a “circumcised Jewish refugee from the last war” who has studied some philosophy. This militarily defeated Jew has taken the trouble to read the New Testament and has been impressed by it (10.2). This fact alone suffices to refute Hoffman’s view of Trypho as “the representative of the blind and hard-hearted Jewish people.” Trypho is neither blind nor hard-hearted and probably not even representative.

Trypho is as dispassionate in his support of his Jewish leaders (“God alone knows whether . . . the rulers of the people deleted anything from the Scripture” [73.5]) as he is admiring of Justin’s style and expertise (63.1). He is at best incredulous, sometimes wary, but mostly respectful and appreciative of the power of Justin’s argument. In general, Trypho is limited to brief queries whose sole purpose is to prod Justin on to further elaboration of

⁹ *MGWJ* 22 (1873): 49–60, 104–115, 145–153, 194–202, 257–269.

¹⁰ W. H. C. Friend speaks of Justin’s “astonishingly wide knowledge of contemporary Judaism,” in his “OT in the Age of the Greek Apologists,” reprinted in *Religion, Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London, 1976), p. 139.

¹¹ Cited above, note 5. See also E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* (Jena, 1923), p. 90.

his position. Indeed, at one point towards the end of the *Dialogue* Justin intimates that it seems that Trypho is repeating a question simply "to bring forward the same proof to these other friends" (123.7). This takes place at the very point where Justin is advocating that it is the Christians who are the true Israel.

In point of fact, Trypho is an active partner in the *Dialogue* only through chapter 90 (a little over half the dialogue), and real exchange takes place only in chapters 45–49 (whether the law still obtains) and chapters 67 and 68. Interestingly, the latter two chapters deal with the Virgin Birth, and Trypho's opposition is allayed in socratic fashion. These are the only places in the body of the *Dialogue* where Justin resorts to the same sort of argument to which he had been treated by the mysterious old man in the introductory chapters of the *Dialogue*. Certainly on the whole, the bulk of the treatise is a soliloquy attended by Trypho and his friends. Trypho himself bears little resemblance to even an informed Jew engaged in debate. It is essential and extremely instructive to note that the purportedly Jewish traditions are almost exclusively contained in Justin's remarks and are almost never raised by Trypho the Jew.

Why has Justin created such a congenial lightweight for a sparring partner? Why has he made himself the spokesman of Jewish exegesis and allowed Trypho to remain the almost innocent auditor?

Justin has created, if I may be allowed an indelicate pun, a captive audience. These defeated Jews are intellectually curious and open, but fairly ignorant of their own oral traditions. Might they not, in reality, represent the most likely targets for Justin's mission? Since they do not carry the rabbinic traditions, they do not have to bear the abuse that Justin heaps on "the blind and stupid teachers." The bridge which he builds with these Jews is paved over what Justin sees as the ruins of rabbinic Judaism, with which they are only vaguely familiar. Though there is the occasional barb, usually directed by Justin at the Jews and not vice versa, there is no real impediment to the very cordial denouement. Jews and Christians could continue their dialogue, if only the Jews would repudiate their teachers' instruction. No effort is spared to drive a wedge between the Jews in the *Dialogue* and their "blind, lustful, and stupid teachers." It is certainly noteworthy that Justin concentrates his attack against the rabbinic instruction in the latter third of the *Dialogue*, where, as we have noted, Trypho is almost

entirely absent. He spares no invective, calling the rabbis “stupid” (ἄσύνετοις) and “blind” (τυφλοῖς), who expound in a low and sordid manner.¹²

We are now in a better position to analyze some of the points of contact between Justin’s *Dialogue* and the extant rabbinic literature. We shall consider three groups of exegesis, two in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* and one in *Genesis Rabbah*, and hold them up to the light of Justin’s second-century polemic.

We begin our treatment of *Mekhilta* with the account of the battle with Amalek and its more widely known parallel in the Mishnah. Having rehearsed the Mishnah and sampled scholarly opinion of its polemical nature, we will proceed to the *Mekhilta*, which is closest to Justin’s collection of exegesis.

Mishnah *RH* 3.8 cites two homilies to conclude its discussion of the intention (*kawwanah*) needed when listening to the shofar:

*And it came to pass when Moses held up his hand that Israel prevailed, and when he let down his hand Amalek prevailed. But could the hands of Moses promote the battle or hinder the battle!—it is, rather, to teach thee that such time as the Israelites directed their thoughts on high and kept their hearts in subjection to their Father in heaven, they prevailed; otherwise they suffered defeat. After the like manner thou mayest say, Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a standard, and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten when he seeth it shall live. But could the serpent slay or the serpent keep alive!—it is, rather to teach thee that such time as the Israelites directed their thoughts on high and kept their hearts in subjection to their Father in heaven, they were healed; otherwise they pined away.”*¹³

Though neither of these midrashic observations is directly relevant to the subject of the Mishnah, they do serve to enhance the idea of “directing the heart” which was demanded of one listening to the shofar. The repeated phrase in all three is *kawwanat ha-lev*. Clearly the two midrashic homilies were appended from a source which

¹² See P. F. Donahue’s dissertation, *Jewish-Christian Controversy in the Second Century: A Study in the Dialogue of Justin Martyr* (Yale University, 1973), chap. 9, pp. 190ff. See also M. Hoffman, p. 22, notes 3–4, or E. Goodspeed’s *Index Apologeticus* (Leipzig, 1912), s.v., “Didaskolos,” pp. 73–74.

¹³ I have followed H. Danby’s translation, *The Mishna* (Oxford, 1933), p. 192.

contained them as a unit, and they were inserted as a unit here in the unfamiliar ground of the Mishnah.

The war with Amalek and the fiery serpent are taken up by Justin in a section of the *Dialogue* which interprets passages of the Bible as prefiguring the symbol of the cross.¹⁴ Thus, Moses' outstretched arms and the serpent wound around the standard are understood to be representations of the cross. On one occasion the two themes appear back to back (91.3–4), similar to their appearance in the Mishnah. Justin develops them, however, in separate chapters (90 and 94). Louis Ginzberg, in his *Legends of the Jews*, is inclined to view the Mishnah's treatment of the war with Amalek as anti-Christian polemic,¹⁵ but rightly recalls that the pre-Christian work of Philo has a similar interpretation. He is even more reluctant to see the serpent tradition of the Mishnah as anti-Christian, since it too is echoed in the pre-Christian apocryphal work, *Wisdom of Solomon*.¹⁶ The *Mekhilta* contains a different version of these two homilies, and records an additional homily regarding the blood of the Passover which was placed on the lintel and the doorposts. It is striking that this third topic is also to be found in the section of Justin's work which collects symbols of the cross in the Bible (111.3–4).¹⁷

Here are the three homilies as they appear in *Mekhilta*:

And It Came to Pass, When Moses Held Up His Hand, etc.
Now could Moses' hands make Israel victorious, or could his hands break Amalek? It merely means this: When Moses raised his hands toward heaven, the Israelites would look at him and

¹⁴ Although some scholars have claimed that the early Christians shied away from the symbol of the cross, it is quite clear that Justin has given it an important, even central, role in his polemic. See A. L. Williams ed., *Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho* (London, 1930), chapters 94 and 111, n. 16; p. 199, n. 2; G. Archambault, *Justin: Dialogue avec Tryphon* (Paris, 1909), p. 171, n. 4; H. Chadwick's "Justin's Defense of Christianity," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 47 (1964): 291.

¹⁵ See *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1968), 6:25, where Ginzberg says that this "haggadic explanation . . . would seem to be directed against the Christian view . . . but Philo (*Moses* 1.59) offers an explanation which is similar to that of the rabbis."

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 115–116: "The rabbinic explanation . . . must not be taken as an anti-Christian haggada."

¹⁷ D. Satran pointed out to me that this was noted already by L. Wallace, "The Origin of Testimonia Biblica . . .," *Review of Religion* 8 (1943/44): 131–132. Wallace's treatment of the sources, however, is most curious.

believe in Him who had commanded Moses to do so; then God would perform for them miracles and mighty deeds.

Similar to this: "And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Make thee a fiery serpent'," etc. (Num 21:8). Now could that serpent kill or make alive? It merely means this: When Moses did so, the Israelites would look at him and believe in Him who had commanded Moses to do so; then God would send them healing.

Similar to this: "And the blood shall be to you for a token," etc. (Exod 12:13). Now of what use could the blood be to the angel, or how could it help the Israelites? It merely means this: When the Israelites did so and put some of the blood upon their doors, the Holy One, blessed be He, had pity on them, as it is said, "The Lord will pass over," etc. (Exod 12:23). R. Eleazer says: For what purpose does it say "Israel prevailed," or what is the purpose of saying "Amalek prevailed"? Merely to tell that when Moses raised his hands toward heaven, it meant that Israel would be strong in the words of the Torah, to be given through Moses' hands. And when he lowered his hands, it meant that Israel would lower their zeal for the words of the Torah to be given through his hands.¹⁸

Though the thrust of the homilies in the Mishnah and the *Mekhilta* is the same, they are formulated differently and show different emphases. The Mishnah has incorporated the homilies into its discussion of *kawwanat ha-lev*, the importance of proper intention. The *Mekhilta* is still grappling with the anomalous nature of the symbols. How did these apparently theurgic acts work? The *Mekhilta* attempts to supply an understanding of these extraordinary acts which will mitigate the magical tones of these texts. Its answer is simply that the Jews believed in the one who commanded these acts, not in the acts themselves. Israel was asked to believe neither in the serpent nor in Moses, but in the one who commanded Moses to execute this peculiar therapy. Both acts smack of magic, and it is not surprising to find rabbinic attempts to channel their exegesis into a more delicate and desirable direction.¹⁹

¹⁸ Translations of the *Mekhilta* follow J. Z. Lauterbach's *Mekhilta* (Philadelphia, 1933).

¹⁹ D. Flusser has made this point in "It is Not a Serpent that Kills" in his collection *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 549. On Moses the magician, see J. G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville, 1972), pp. 134–161.

The thrust of the passage in *Mekhilta* is that it is belief in God the commander which effects salvation. Is this anti-Christian polemic or is it simply a deflection of the problematic magical nature of these acts? Let us look at the third homily in *Mekhilta*, which also has its counterpart in Justin's list of prefigurations of the cross in the Bible.

The text, as it stands, is opposed to the first two homilies, implying that the placing of the blood caused God to appear and have mercy on Israel. A variant reading recasts this homily to fit the mold of the first two: it is the people's belief in the one who commanded them, that brings God's mercy. This seems to be a "corrected" reading and is not supported by the best witnesses.²⁰ Here again the people fulfill God's command to them and are saved by their action. Whether it is their obedience or their belief which saves is not entirely clear.

Most intriguing is R. Eliezer's dissent from the first homily about Moses' lifted hands. R. Eliezer sees this as a symbol of the Jews' strength in the Torah which was given by means of Moses' hands.²¹ The battle with Amalek is none other than a type of the Jews' study of the Torah, which was given at Sinai. If we trust the attribution in *Mekhilta*, this homily predates Justin by some thirty years. If the hands of Moses represent Torah for R. Eliezer, they represent the form of the cross for Justin Martyr. The distance between these interpretations is slight.

In the *Mekhilta* we have a collection of difficult texts which were reinterpreted by the rabbis to dispel any hint of theurgy. They substituted belief as the essential element and advocated the idea

²⁰ The variant in *Mekhilta* appears only in *Midrash Hakhamim* and looks like a harmonization of this third exegesis with the first two. Indeed, MS Munich of the *Mekhilta* adds the words "and God revealed himself" prior to "had pity," making the theurgic effect even stronger. The thrust would be that the Jews' observance of God's command in this case is parallel to their believing in the One who commanded Moses. I am grateful to Professor M. Schmelzer for this insight.

²¹ The parallel in bShab 130a has R. Simon ben Eleazar, but the tannaitic corpus is to be given preference. On *Mekhilta* in general and its tannaitic stature, see M. Kahana, "Editions of Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus in Light of Geniza Fragments" [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 55 (1986): 515–520. My point here is that the hands of Moses are representative, both for R. Eliezer and for Justin. The additional *waw* in *we-gavar* can serve as an exegetical stimulus for the *derashah*, but the heart of the homily is that Moses' hands represent Torah.

that it alone was determinative. In his homily R. Eliezer substituted Torah study for belief.

Justin Martyr took these same texts and filled them with christological elements in a method differing but little from that of the rabbis. Did he have specific knowledge of this particular rabbinic exegesis? If he did, he went to considerable length to hide that knowledge, not only by omission but also by commission. For after Justin vigorously pursues his interpretation of the serpent in chapter 94, he has one of “those who had come on the second day”—that is one of Trypho’s Jewish companions—confess, “I myself have often asked our teachers about this, and none gave me any reply.”

As Williams notes in his edition of the *Dialogue*,²² the Mishnah and the *Mekhilta* were available, as were other rabbinic traditions. I am not claiming that these literary works were extant; rather that they were probably oral interpretations which were later included in these tannaitic collections. In our case, for example, it has been noted that as far back as the *Wisdom of Solomon*, there was a sensitivity to these verses. Be that as it may, I remain skeptical as to whether Justin knew these Jewish traditions in their rabbinic recension.

It is quite clear that these three biblical passages invited interpretation by Christians and Jews alike. Both traditions had to soften the magical overtones of these verses. Yet *Mekhilta* seems to be going out of its way to stress belief in a God who commands. This particular formulation may indeed have been shaped by the need to counter both the Christian claim on the one hand, and the essential difficulty of the verse on the other hand.

Let us consider a further parallel to a different section of *Mekhilta*. Trypho offers what he considers to be a thumbnail account of what constitutes a proper Jew. His first account appears in chapter 8 of the *Dialogue* and is remarkably biblical in its orientation. He says:

Be circumcised then . . . keep the Sabbath and the Feasts and God’s New Moons, and, in short, do all the things that are written in the Law.

²² See n. 14, above. Williams has, to my mind, the most complete notes, in terms of Jewish parallels, of any of the editions of the *Dialogue*.

We don't have to look much beyond Isa 56:6 for this formula:

As for the foreigners who attach themselves to the Lord . . . all who keep the Sabbath . . . and who hold fast to my covenant . . .

and again Isa 66:23:

And New Moon after New Moon, and Sabbath after Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship me.

There is certainly nothing particularly rabbinic in this short description of the prospective Jew.²³

Trypho's second definition of the proper Jew is more interesting and finds a close match in *Mekhilta*. In this instance Trypho is asked to give Justin examples of Jewish laws which were not made obsolete by the destruction of the temple. Again Trypho lists circumcision, Sabbath observance, and monthly feasts, but this time he adds a surprising fourth element: "washing, if one has touched anything forbidden by Moses, or after sexual intercourse" (46.2). I suspect that this curious addition to the original list has a serious literary role which far overshadows the ostensible importance which Trypho attaches to "washing." First of all, Williams's translation here is a disservice, since the Greek reads τῷ βαπτίζεσθαι, which is better rendered "immersion." What we have here is simply a foil for the true baptism which has already been raised at the end of chapter 44 (cf. 18.2):

That you should recognize this Christ and washing yourselves in the laver that was proclaimed by Isaiah for the remission of sins.

The theme of baptism returns immediately following chapters 49–51, with quotes from the New Testament about the ultimate baptism that Christ will bring. Trypho is simply setting up another pin for Justin to knock down. Just as Justin has shown in chapter 43 that circumcision and Sabbath ended with Jesus and were only

²³ It has been suggested that Justin might be echoing Col 2:16, where food and drink is also mentioned. But Justin has already dealt with the latter subject in chap. 20, and does not raise it here at all. Even if Justin's source is Paul, we are certainly not dealing with a definition of Judaism according to rabbinic sources.

given originally because of the Jews' hard-heartedness, so too immersion has been redefined.

One can hardly accuse Justin of totally fabricating the claims of Trypho. The following passage, again from *Mekhilta*, is illuminating:

And so we find that anything to which the Israelites were devoted with their whole souls has been preserved among them. But anything to which the Israelites were not devoted with their whole souls has not been retained by them. Thus the Sabbath, circumcision, the study of Torah, and the ritual of immersion, for which the Israelites laid down their lives, have been retained by them. But such institutions as the temple, civil courts, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, to which the Israelites were not wholeheartedly devoted, have not been preserved among them.

Now all of Trypho's four categories are here with the very noticeable, yet wholly characteristic, addition of Torah study. If one had to choose a representative characteristic for rabbinic Judaism it would surely be Torah study. On the other hand, the prominence accorded to immersion is as remarkable in its presence as Torah study would have been had it been absent.²⁴ Trypho is hardly a spokesman for rabbinic Judaism when he never once mentions Torah study. Yet the similarity between the list in *Mekhilta* and Trypho's list should serve to remind us that the major contours of Judaism were quite obvious even to those who were uninitiated in the language of the Oral Law of the Jews.²⁵ These were the prominent features of Judaism in its meeting with the outside world.²⁶

²⁴ Bathing after sexual intercourse was commonplace in antiquity. See P. Veyne, *A History of Private Life*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, 1987), p. 11.

²⁵ Because of the relative paucity of our knowledge of other kinds of Judaism in the mid-second century, I have held the *Dialogue* up to the light of rabbinic literature. This is not to say that a lay follower of the "rabbis" or even a disciple of the "rabbis" would answer in the same vein as the "rabbis" themselves. I think the fact that Justin portrays himself as coming from Samaria and Trypho as a refugee from Judea, demand that we consider his possible knowledge of a literature which presents itself as the regnant Jewish culture of Judea at the time, as others have noted.

²⁶ Sabbath and circumcision were certainly the most popular subjects in pagan literature. See M. D. Herr, "The Historical Significance of the Dialogues between Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 134–135.

But at a deeper level Justin has attempted to deal a winning blow to the very heart of rabbinic Judaism, to the rabbis themselves, who are the torch-bearers of Torah study. If they are discredited, Torah study—the oral transmission from teacher to pupil—is, in fact, moribund. In his 1973 Yale dissertation, “Jewish-Christian Controversy in the Second Century: A Study in the *Dialogue* of Justin Martyr,” P. J. Donahue points to one of Justin’s parting remarks to Trypho:

Endeavor to prefer to your own teachers the Christ of almighty God (142.3).

Donahue notes that this is the summation of Justin’s entire polemic.²⁷ It is indeed, as the old man said in chapter 7 of the *Dialogue*: the writings of the prophets remain open to any one who wishes to consult them, if he has the proper belief. The *Dialogue* was Justin’s attempt to demonstrate to Trypho that the rabbis did not know how to address Scripture.²⁸

What about the rabbinic sources in the *Mekhilta*? Do they exhibit an awareness of these second-century Christian claims? In two instances we saw the *Mekhilta* treating the same issues and the same verses as Justin, in similar groupings. Is this mere coincidence? I think not. Was the *Mekhilta* aware of the charges leveled by Justin and his coreligionists of the second century?

It is tempting to see the first passage in *Mekhilta*—regarding the war with Amalek, the brass serpent, and the Passover blood—as a response to the Christian attack. We must, however, be cautious, since there was ample religious motivation to combine these three texts and reinterpret them without reference to Christianity. Yet I have raised the possibility that the particular formulation in the *Mekhilta*, as opposed to the Mishnah, might indeed reflect an attempt to stress the people’s belief in the God who gave commandments. This emphasis may be anti-Christian polemic. It is important at the very least to take note of the literary fact that these three examples—the hands of Moses, the serpent, and the Passover blood—are a unit in the *Mekhilta*, which at some point in an earlier transmission served the editor of the Mishnah.

²⁷ Donahue makes this point on p. 208 of his dissertation (n. 12, above).

²⁸ See J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Antisemitism* (Oxford, 1983), p. 56.

The second passage in *Mekhilta*, and its striking congruence with Trypho's Sabbath, circumcision, and immersion, seems to be a more distinctly anti-Christian polemic. The rarity of immersion is the clue here.²⁹ Moreover, the thrust of this text is to explain why some laws fell into desuetude while others remained vibrant: Israel was incapable of devoting itself to all the laws. This paradoxically recalls Trypho's amazement as to whether one could possibly fulfill the arduous laws of the New Testament (chap. 10). Be that as it may, the laws are not meant as punishment. They are opportunities, sometimes missed by the Jews, but a privilege, not a penalty.

Let us look at a third rabbinic source, this time an amoraic collection, *Genesis Rabbah*, which will allow us to reflect further on the literary form of rabbinic polemic. The eleventh chapter of *GenR* contains a series of nine interpretations of Gen 2:3, "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it." These interpretations recount, in uniform formulations, the particular blessings of the Sabbath day. One of the nine has it that the Sabbath was blessed with the manna, while another states that it was blessed with delicacies. This last interpretation is followed by a chain of stories which relate how various contemporary Jews honored the Sabbath with delicacies.

At this point in the text we are presented with two dialogues between sages and their Gentile interlocutors—one between R. Akiba and Tineius Rufus, and the other between R. Hoshaya and a philosopher. The first discussion concerns the Sabbath and is germane to the topic of *GenR*. The second, which deals with circumcision and is not germane, is as follows:

A philosopher asked R. Hoshaya: "If circumcision is precious, why was it not given to Adam?" "If so," he replied, "why do you shave the corners of your head and leave your beard?" "Because it grew with me wildly"³⁰ was the answer. "If so, you should blind your eye and cut off your hands!" "To such an argument have we come!" observed he. "I cannot send you away empty-handed, (*halaq*)" said he. "[The real reason is this:] whatever

²⁹ So too, the opening volley in this section of the *Mekhilta* is "Sabbath will never be abolished" (Lauterbach ed., p. 204).

³⁰ *Shaṭya/shetut*="wildly." See M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Palestinian-Jewish Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan, 1990) p. 545.

was created in the first six days required further preparation, e.g., mustard needs sweetening, vetches need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and man too needs further correction.”³¹

As Theodor notes in his commentary, Bacher and others have attempted to identify the philosopher with Origen. R. Hoshaya was known to have frequented Caesarea and was a contemporary of Origen. But let us take a closer look at this curious discussion.

The question raised is, why was circumcision not included in the original plan of nature? Why was Adam created uncircumcised? The final answer is that just as the rest of nature needs care and correction, so too does man.

But the conversation is a true dialogue, as is its predecessor. It is a testy exchange, brimming with curt, cutting remarks. The philosopher challenges, R. Hoshaya parries and attacks.

There is also some punning in this dialogue. R. Hoshaya’s response that he cannot “let him go without an answer (*halaq*)” is a highly unusual phrase in midrash. Now *halaq* is used in the Bible as an antonym for “hairy” (Jacob’s deception of his father: “Esau is hairy, but I am smooth”). The shaving,³² which opened the dialogue, continues here as a jest.

The thrust of the philosopher’s query, as in Tineius Rufus’ query of R. Akiba in the preceding dialogue, was that Sabbath and circumcision run contrary to the natural course of the elements (στοιχεῖα). R. Hoshaya’s answer is that embedded in nature is a demand for paring and fixing—man’s essence is to adapt and change nature to suit his needs.

Though Justin (and others) make wide use of this argument from nature, it does not have a specific Christian ring to it. Indeed in this dialogue in *GenR*, no effort is made to explain why circumcision was not required of the early righteous figures, such as Noah or Enoch.

³¹ *GenR* 11.6 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 95).

³² Whether or not the physical description of “shaven corners and unshaven beard” is a clue to the identity of the philosopher remains to be shown. For now see J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven, 1968), p. 304: “A long beard was part of the unkempt appearance affected by many professional philosophers.”

We should note that the Hoshaya-philosopher exchange is out of place in this chapter of *GenR* which deals with the Sabbath. It seems to me that the amoraic midrash is drawing on an earlier collection of anti-pagan polemic attributed to Akiba of the second century and Hoshaya of the early third. Once again I think that we have located an early polemical source, not specifically anti-Christian, but available to counter Christians who took up the pagan line of attack. Indeed the following section in *GenR* is almost certainly an anti-Christian polemic,³³ as are other clearly anti-Christian polemical passages in early Jewish literature. There are, in fact, similar polemic collections in early³⁴ and late³⁵ rabbinic literature which posit a dialogue with an obvious Christian counterpart. An inquisitive pagan or a thoughtful Jew might also ask why circumcision began only with Abraham (as Abraham is made to ask in *GenR* 46.3). Any sensitive reader would also probably wonder why God, the creator of the world, waited twenty-six generations to give his Torah.

The *Dialogue with Trypho* is an invaluable source for the task of unraveling the intertwined strands of pagan, Christian,³⁶ and Jewish reflections encoded in the midrash. I have tried to show that the *Dialogue* is not a true conversation with Judaism, as it is represented in extant rabbinic literature. It is, rather, a powerful and persuasive Christian reading of the Bible accompanied by an acerbic indictment of a putative Jewish reading of Scripture and its attendant life-style. (We are not yet in a position to locate that

³³ *GenR* (ed. Soncino), p. 85:

R. Johanan said in R. Jose's name: Abraham, who is not reported to have kept the Sabbath, inherited the world in (limited) measure, as it is written, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it" (Gen 13:17). But Jacob, of whom the keeping of the Sabbath is mentioned ("And he rested [E.V.: encamped] before the city" (Gen 33:18), which means that he entered at twilight and set boundaries before sunset, inherited the world without measure (as it is written), "And thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, etc. (Gen 28:14).

³⁴ See tHul 2.24.

³⁵ See *EccLR* 1.8 and my brief comment on this phenomenon in "The Greek Fathers and the Aggada on Ecclesiastes," *HUCA* 59 (1988): 163.

³⁶ Compare also A. Marmorstein, *Studies in Jewish Theology* (London, 1950), pl. 213.

particular brand of Judaism within the range of “Judaisms” of antiquity.) I have tried to establish that within the exegetical framework of midrash one can isolate *collections* which bear witness to pagan and Jewish dialogue. The same holds true for Christian-Jewish dialogue. I have tried to show that the two selections from the *Mekhila* seem to suggest that already in tannaitic times units of anti-Christian polemic were beginning to crystallize.