Jesus Among the Jews
Representation and thought

Edited by Neta Stahl
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4 Celsus’ Jew and the theological threat from Christianity

Adam Gregerman

Ancient Christians thought a lot about Jews. Considering Jesus’ Jewish roots and Christian claims that the Jews’ sacred texts foreshadowed the coming of Jesus, among other reasons, many Christians naturally puzzled over the refusal of most Jews to accept that Jesus was the expected Messiah of Israel. On the other hand, few Jews in late antiquity, at least until Constantine yoked church and state together in the fourth century, seem to have paid much attention to Christianity. It is evident from extant sources that the influence of Christian exegesis on Jewish thought, for example, was minimal. This is not to deny that Jews and Christians interacted socially, economically, or even religiously. Such fraternization especially angered church leaders. Yet, evidence for serious theological dialogue and discussion is limited. Jewish sources from the first few centuries CE say little about Jesus or about the spread of faith in him. For some Jews, it is understandable why they would ignore what was becoming a largely Gentile, non-Torah-observant new religion.

However, there is intriguing evidence that is frequently overlooked. We might even expect to find such evidence in light of the directly competing claims made by members of each religious community. In particular, Christian affirmations about Jesus and the new covenant between God and his Gentile followers sharply contradict fundamental Jewish beliefs about their own claims to the covenant, their election, and their views of the Bible. Fortunately, when we look beyond Jewish-authored texts, we can find rich and complex sources for reconstructing Jewish responses to such claims as well as sources for Jewish attacks on Jesus and Christianity.

I propose to study a remarkable source of such Jewish views: the book by the otherwise unknown second-century pagan, Celsus, called The True Philosophy. This work no longer exists, and we know of it only because it was extensively quoted in a mid-third-century rebuttal by the Christian theologian Origen. Origen’s work, which is aptly called Contra Celsum (or Against Celsus), contains long excerpts of Celsus’ polemic against Christianity. Much of what Celsus says, as we can reconstruct it from Origen’s quotes, reflects the perspective of traditional pagan accusations of the politically and religiously subversive nature of Christianity. However, in the first and second books of Origen’s Contra Celsum, Origen quotes extensively from parts of Celsus’ work in which Celsus himself quotes from a Jewish opponent of Jesus and Christianity. I focus on this part because it contains the views of “Celsus’ Jew.” Unfortunately, Celsus tells us almost nothing about this Jew, and we will never know if he actually existed. Nonetheless, I argue that Celsus’ Jew’s attacks are valuable and reliable sources for reconstructing a plausible second- or third-century Jewish critique of Jesus and Christianity.

We are admittedly a number of steps removed from the (perhaps fictional) Jew’s own views. We must rely upon Origen’s quotations of Celsus, who is himself quoting the Jew. Still, this is a valuable and useful source for Jewish-Christian polemics and one insufficiently investigated by scholars. They have usually focused on Celsus’ Jew’s mockery of Jesus, such as the accusations he makes about Jesus’ scandalous birth and his objectionable (e.g. magical) behavior. The issues that have drawn scholars’ attention are scathing but mostly superficial and ad hominem. Yet, we also find broader and far more serious critiques. Celsus’ Jew (and perhaps other Jews) and Christians were engaged in a zero-sum dispute over the Bible, in which only one side could be the winner. We see this notably in the Jew’s attacks on claims about Jesus that directly conflict with Jewish interpretations. Celsus’ Jew’s critiques are intended to neutralize threats to Jewish claims to chosenness, fidelity to the Torah, and correct understanding of biblical prophecies. In contrast to the blunter criticisms that predominate elsewhere and appear also in Contra Celsum, some of Celsus’ Jew’s critiques are sophisticated and reveal a dynamic and fluid Jewish polemical tradition. The clash is especially close because, having studied the gospels, he is aware of Jesus’ Jewishness and early Christians’ views on topics important to Jews, such as messianism, prophecy, and the commandments (2:74).

Because of the inevitable murkiness involved in analyzing statements made by a figure at least three steps removed from the reader, it is helpful to begin with a brief discussion of other approaches to the study of Celsus’ Jew in the context of Jewish-Christian polemics. Following this, I offer my own methodology and then consider in detail the Jew’s views on some of the contentious topics noted above.

Other approaches to the study of Celsus’ Jew

Scholars of Judaism in late antiquity often rely primarily on extant Jewish sources. These are almost entirely rabbinic, and, as noted, reveal little interest in Christianity. This implicit privileging of such (rabbinic) texts for reconstructing Jewish views in this period sits uneasily alongside the statements attributed to Celsus’ Jew, for there are only scattered, largely superficial similarities between them. While the few rabbinic parallels might roughly confirm that some Jews around this time were making such statements, it is tempting to dismiss Celsus’ Jew’s overall views as idiosyncratic or unrepresentative of what other Jews might have been saying. In comparison to the Rabbis known from rabbinic literature, there is no doubt Celsus’ Jew was much more interested in and knowledgeable about Christianity. However, not all Jews were Rabbis, and non-rabbinic Jews in general may have been more open to disputation and dialogue with Christians. Therefore, we should consider the possibility that Celsus’ Jew’s concerns, though largely without parallels in rabbinic literature, were shared by other second and
third-century Jews. The absence of statements similar to Celsius’ Jew’s in extant Jewish documents may be an unfortunate accident of history due to an overall lack of non-rabbinic Jewish texts from late antiquity or a reflection of the Rabbis’ limited range of interests.

Some scholars have questioned the verisimilitude of the portrait of Celsius’ Jew on different grounds. References the Jew makes to non-Jewish texts and traditions, especially from Greek mythology, have been used to argue that it is unlikely that a pious second-century Jew would have drawn on them. Mentions of pagan gods, myths, and religious practices might cast doubt on whether Celsius’ Jew’s statements reflect those of a “real” Jew. However, it is now widely recognized by scholars that Jews were aware of and influenced by Hellenistic and pagan culture and traditions, even in the land of Israel. This is true even for presumably more traditional Jews such as the Rabbis. We should not be shocked to find these references attributed to a Jew, especially when we know so little about non-rabbinic Judaism at this time. They refer to widely known tales and stories, which a Jew living in a diverse environment could know. They are also retold by Celsius, so we cannot be sure we are getting the Jew’s exact words. Even where the Jew’s views seem positive, they are mentioned in order to set up a negative contrast to Christian claims. Importantly, there is nothing in Celsius’ Jew’s statements that suggest a rejection of Judaism, which would undermine the verisimilitude of Celsius’ portrayal. As in the case of the otherwise unknown Trypho in Justin’s Dialogue, whose views cannot be easily linked with those of better-known contemporary Jews and whose statements are sometimes puzzling as well, we should recognize the plausibility in the portrait of Celsius’ Jew.

Besides questioning the plausibility of Celsius’ Jew, scholars have in effect sometimes questioned the usefulness of his statements for reconstructing a Jewish polemic against Christianity. Sometimes this is implicit, though the effect is undeniable, in the choice of statements that reveal little beside mockery and scorn. As noted, scholars commonly focus on one type of critique presented by Celsius’ Jew: blunt, caustic, and often superficial attacks on Jesus’ birth and behavior. They assemble insulting statements by the Jew about Jesus’ birth, poverty, humble background, and behavior, as well as about Jesus’ mother and his undistinguished followers. There are such statements in the text, and, importantly, to the extent that we find parallels in rabbinic literature to Contra Celsum, they touch on these few topics. This partly explains why some of these scurrilous remarks have received attention.

However, this category of statements, despite scholars’ interest in them, offers very few insights into Jewish views of Jesus or Jewish-Christian polemics. This is because they do not reveal an especially elevated or sophisticated polemic, to say the least. Ad hominem attacks, designates to lampoon and mock Jesus and his followers, offer little of theological substance while perhaps hinting at a perception of a serious threat from Christianity. The statements may be accurate in reflecting what Jews did say, but they reveal almost nothing about the important theological issues that divided Jews and Christians. Rather, it seems from such statements that a Jewish critic took advantage of perceived weaknesses in Christianity, such as implausible nativity narratives, to mock Jesus. Celsius’ Jew did so using characteristically scathing rhetoric common to late antique polemics. Yet, we learn little about more serious engagement from these scurrilous topics. The undeniably portentous issues that divided these traditions are largely hidden from these critiques.

Methodology and topics

These examples indicate some of the types of questions that can be raised about the usefulness of Contra Celsum for reconstructing Jews’ views of Jesus and Christianity. By contrast, I want to defend the usefulness of Celsius’ Jew’s statements for contributing to our understanding of Jewish views of Jesus and Christianity using a different criterion to evaluate his statements. I believe that some statements likely reflect actual Jewish views because they reveal deep, serious disagreements about issues that lie at the core of both Jewish and Christian faith and identity. The statements on which I focus treat intensely contested topics relevant to both groups. Unlike, for instance, the Jew’s caustic statements mocking Jesus’ miracles or calling Jesus’ mother a harlot, elsewhere in the text the Jew argues (even if not face-to-face) about whether Jews or Christians properly interpret biblical prophecies. For example, they argue about the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah and the events they forecast; or about whether historical trends such as the growth of Christianity and the dispersion of the Jews show that God favors Christians (1:51, 53; 2:46).

These issues and questions are very different in both tone and content from crude rumors and slanders, for on these topics the Jew wades directly into complex discussions about, for example, prophecy and God’s role in history. As with slanderous and mocking statements, the reason the Jew raises these comparatively more serious topics is the same: to attack Christianity in whatever way possible. However, we learn far more about Jewish views of Jesus and of Christianity, and also of Origen’s efforts to affirm Jesus’ Jewishness, in disputes that go beyond mockery and expressions of ridicule over Christian claims. In the examples investigated below, the Jew suggests that something vitally important is at stake, something directly threatened by competing Christian claims. Jewish and Christian beliefs are implicated in these and similar disputes. Therefore, these are the focus of my discussion.

I turn next to the subjects in the disputes that are raised by Celsius’ Jew. I have chosen them because they are of undeniable relevance and interest to Jews and Christians. Specifically, from the Jewish side, they are those that a second-century Jew would likely care about because of their intimate connection to fundamental Jewish religious concerns. Frequently, these include correct interpretation of the Bible, the sacred text sacred text to which both Jews and Christians lay claim. They shared “the same text and the same exegetical principles, yet this [text] became their most flexible weapon in denying each other’s world.” Furthermore, these issues reflect the same type of clash between Jews and Christians. They are so important that both groups want to ignore them or even passively accept the other’s claims. This is the zero-sum quality of the dispute noted above: the issues give
evidence of a clash in which only one side can be the winner. The Jew's statements, just like the Christian Origen's, are meant to neutralize a direct or potential threat that strikes at the heart of his religious convictions. Finally, they are the types of issues not likely to be of interest to the pagan critic Celsus, except as a bludgeon against Christianity. While Celsus eagerly seized upon whatever anyone (such as a Jew) might have said against Christianity, the Jew's criticisms reflect distinctly Jewish views about God, covenant, and scripture. Celsus is unlikely to have made them up.\(^1\)

These include disputes about the following five questions: 1) Which religion correctly interprets biblical prophecies? 2) What is the nature of the Messiah? 3) Who is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, chapters 52–53? 4) Must one observe all of the Torah's commandments? 5) Is Christianity a success or a failure?

**Dispute #1: Which religion correctly interprets biblical prophecies?**

First, I want to focus on the competing interpretations of biblical prophecies found in *Contra Celsum*. As is well known, the so-called proof from prophecy was frequently used to buttress Christian claims, especially regarding Jesus as the crucified, suffering, and resurrected Messiah.\(^9\) Such proofs relied upon Christological interpretations of biblical verses that were said to point toward events in Jesus' life and the early church. These proofs are already present in the New Testament,\(^10\) and they may have a polemical function to respond to doubts about things said about Jesus. However, *Contra Celsum* is noteworthy because it presents an explicit, zero-sum clash between a Jew and a Christian regarding interpretation of biblical prophecies. The Jewish critic directly challenges what he knows Christians read in the Bible and apply to Jesus, for those claims pose a serious threat to his own claims.

I want to look at the Jew's importation: statement 2.8, in a section on biblical prophecies about the Messiah. The context was probably a response to a Christian who charged the Jew with disbelieving his own Bible. The Jew says, "How would we [Jews] despise [the Messiah] when he came, when we plainly declare to all men that the one who will punish the unrighteous will come?... Why should we have despised the one whom we proclaimed beforehand?" His point is that the coming of Messiah was a Jewish hope. This establishes a shared assumption of both Jew and Christian: the expectation that God would send a messianic deliverer to fulfill promises made long ago by the biblical prophets. The roots of this expectation lie in writings Jews and Christians alike revere.

The statement, however, also establishes a sharp divide between the two communities. Jews have been waiting for, and continue to wait for, the Messiah; Christians, of course, believe he has already come. This divide is well known, though significantly in *Contra Celsum*, it is situated in a directly polemical and controversial context. In our reconstruction of the context, the Jew, in asking these two questions, appears to be responding to Christian doubts about why he does not understand the prophecies in his own scripture.

The statement has both offensive and defensive functions. First, it is an attack on claims about Jesus. Jews, he says, expect that the Messiah will achieve a distinct goal: "punish[ment of] the unrighteous." Yet, he implies that this has not occurred. By specifying his expectations, he suggests that Jesus' deeds were unimpressive and have failed to convince the Jews who use this standard for the Messiah. Jews have delivered their verdict on Jesus with their refusal to believe in him, or, to quote the Jew, by "despis[ing]" the one revered by the Christians.

Celsus' Jew also defends Jews' refusal to accept Jesus because of their deep knowledge of their own scripture. The idea that Jews "proclaimed beforehand" their belief that such a Messiah would arrive means that they trusted and trusted in the words of their own prophets. They have not erred in rejecting Jesus out of indifference or ignorance. Rather, they "declare to all men" their faith in the scriptural prophecies, and it is this faith, coupled with implied claims to secure knowledge, that explains their opposition. We can detect a sense of laughters in the Jew's statement, and the stunned perception that Jews, who know their own scripture, should be accused of disbelief by Gentile Christians.\(^9\) One can almost hear the Jew's dismissive tone toward those Gentile Christians who only recently began to claim the Bible as their own. Likewise, in light of the remarkable spread of Christianity, we can imagine the Jew's discomfort and incredulity that such a competing interpretation of prophecy has convinced so many.

**Dispute #2: What is the nature of the Messiah?**

A similar and more detailed dispute over the nature of the Messiah in 2.28–29 provides further evidence of a profound difference between Jews and Christians. While Jews and Christians alike believe in a divinely-sent Messiah, they nonetheless have a deep disagreement about what he will accomplish. In this section, the Jew argues that Jesus' weakness undermines claims that he is the Messiah awaited by Israel. He says, "The [biblical] prophets say that the one who will come will be a great prince, lord of the whole earth and of all nations and armies" (2.29). The Jew expects not a meek and lowly figure like Jesus but a warrior Messiah, politically and militarily powerful, presumably able to defeat the nations that now subjugate the Jews. He has his own competing views about the nature of the expected Messiah. These, he says, simply reflect the biblical prophets' own teachings, something Christians have ignored.

With this quote, Celsus gives us a glimpse into what a second-century Jew was expecting, and why Jesus was not it. Strength, valor, and worldly accomplishments are the standard this Jew uses. That is why he attacks the Christians' claims: "The [messianic] prophecies could be applied to thousands of others far more plausibly than to Jesus" (2.28). This, he says, makes Jesus an especially unlikely candidate. We of course know that Jews and Christians had diverse messianic beliefs. What makes *Contra Celsum* so valuable is its illustration of a direct clash between two competing and mutually exclusive messianic expectations. The Jew says both what he expects and why Jesus' deeds fail to convince him.

Origen provides an unusual response. He agrees to the Jew's standard that it was right to look for a Messiah who would inaugurate great political and military changes. This is expected because Origen elsewhere admits that at
the first advent Jesus was weak. However, in a direct response to the Jew’s charge, Origen argues that Jesus actually meets the Jew’s own standard, at least roughly. He does not go so far as to say Jesus was a valiant warrior, but he does say that Jesus was linked with dramatic political and military changes. This is proven by the events that happened providentially when Jesus was alive during the rule of the powerful Roman emperor Augustus (reigned BCE 27?14 CE). In a somewhat loose but nonetheless explicit linkage, Origen says that the unification of fragmented political regions under this remarkable Roman ruler was engineered by God at precisely the time of Jesus’ ministry. The reason God did this is because Jesus’ message could only “spread throughout the whole world” when peace prevailed throughout the empire. Augustus’ world-changing successes are ultimately if indirectly attributable to Jesus. For Origen, this was not coincidence but divine causation: if “abundance of peace began with [Jesus’] birth... [this proves that] Jesus was a great person” (2:30). Likewise, the undeniable rapid spread of Christian faith, and with it the conversion of “so many men,” is further confirmation of Jesus’ worldly influence. Neither of these answers probably convinced Jews, but they do reveal Origen’s acceptance (at least here) of the Jew’s standard for messianic behavior. Though separated by decades, Origen and the Jew are in a sense engaged in a tight and narrowly defined polemic with shared assumptions alongside obvious disagreements.

Dispute #3: Who is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, chapters 52–53?

Under the rubric of a zero-sum dispute, next I want to turn to 1:55–56, a clash over the identity of the Suffering Servant figure in Isaiah 52–53. This provides a prominent example of mutually exclusive interpretations on a substantive issue. In this example, Origen says he is reporting what he learned from Jews with whom he discussed this figure. They argued that the enigmatic Servant represents not Jesus but “the whole people” of Israel (1:55). The Servant is a symbol of the Jews’ own experiences of suffering, which, though painful, are ultimately ordained by a just God. They do not deny their hardships. Rather, they link them to a symbolic figure chosen by God for a special task to make them explicable. The Jews’ sufferings therefore have a divine purpose. Origen recounts that these Jews say they were dispersed throughout the nations as missionaries “so that many [Gentiles] might become proselytes.” When we recall that contemporary Christians, including Origen himself, saw the Jews’ current suffering and exile as punishment for killing Jesus, we can understand why a Jew might positively employ the Suffering Servant imagery. The afflicted symbolic figure, though persecuted, nonetheless does God’s work in the world. He is an appealing symbol for the Jewish people. Of course, this identification of the Suffering Servant with the people of Israel precludes any identification with Jesus. Therefore, it has a polemical function as well.

Predictably, Origen challenges this claim. He notes that Isaiah in 53:8 speaks of the Suffering Servant and the people separately, thereby undermining the Jews’ linkage between the two. Origen asks, “If according to them the people are the subject of the prophecy, why is [the Suffering Servant] said to have been led to death because of the iniquities of the people of God, if he is not different from the people of God?” Instead, he believes that Christ is the Suffering Servant: “Who is this if not Jesus Christ...?” This is a fundamental identification for Origen. It makes explicable, in biblical terms, important aspects of Christ’s own suffering, just as it was useful for the Jews in light of their own suffering. These interpretations of the Servant are mutually exclusive. While both Jews and Christians share the assumption that the prophet used this figure to refer to future events, each claims him for themselves and denies him to the other. However, only one can be right.

Dispute #4: Must one observe all of the Torah’s commandments?

Next, I want to shift to a related issue, one also viewed very differently by Jews and Christians: observance of the laws of the Torah. Although Jesus and the first Christians were Jews, many, if not most Christians rejected biblical commandments such as circumcision and food laws by the second century. Origen did in the third century. Jews, with their prominent focus on Torah observance, naturally disagreed with the Christian interpretation, though we have little evidence in Jewish sources for such critiques of Christians. Similarly, Christians say little about defending themselves against the charge of antinomianism. They are more often involved in defending their retention of the Hebrew Bible against Gnostics and Marcionites.

Celsus’ Jew focuses on this issue. In 2:1–7, he homes in directly on what he sees as a serious inconsistency in Christian theology, the widespread lack of observance of the commandments of the Torah by those who supposedly revere it. Importantly, it is not Gentile Christians who Celsus’ Jew critiques, but other Jews. That is, Jewish followers of Christ who do not observe the Torah trouble him. Their beliefs and behaviors, he says, are unacceptable deviations from Judaism. He therefore denounces at least some Christians as bad Jews. In his words, he says they were “deluded by Jesus [and they] left the law of their fathers” (2:1). There is a palpable sense of pathos and pain in his statement that these Jews have “deserted us for another name and another life.” Their rejection of the Torah strikes close to home, for Celsus’ Jew expects more from those who are fellow descendants of the biblical patriarchs. Christian rejection of the commandments is seen in terms of an inner-Jewish development, or perhaps more precisely as an inner-Jewish deviation from Jewish norms. Note his exclamation to his fellow Jews: “What was wrong with you?”

This is not a generic critique of Christianity. It is an expression of anger and betrayal over an issue dear to Celsus’ Jew. It is directed precisely at those one expects he would care about: other Jews. In his mind, they are “renegade Jews.” Unlike Gentile Christians, from whom he expects little and who he could more easily ignore, Christians who were born Jews now affirm a way of life directly opposed to his own religious convictions. Whether he felt that his Torah-observant Judaism was threatened by their behavior is not clear. What is clear is his sense of
befuddlement at their presumed betrayal of a shared tradition and abrogation of the obligation to observe the commandments (as he understood them).

Importantly, Jesus’ own example is relevant to this critique, as Jesus was of course a Jew. Celsus’ Jew mentions this because it is useful for his argument; however, he is not entirely consistent. That is, he mentions both Jesus’ observance and lack of observance of the Torah. On the one hand, he criticizes Jesus for his supposed role in this unwelcome development. He blames him for leading his Jewish followers astray by “deceiving” them into forsaking the Torah (2:1). Jesus, “this fellow who cheated you,” is responsible for the anti-Christianism of his formerly observant Jewish followers (2:4). On the other hand, on this same issue he highlights positive aspects of Jesus’ behavior. This is equally important for my focus on Christian-Jewish polemics and the portrayal of Jesus. Celsus’ Jew says that Jesus “kept all the Jewish customs, and even took part in sacrifices” in the Jerusalem Temple (2:5). According to Celsus’ Jew, Jesus was an observant Jew, who was faithful to the Torah. Why then do not his followers, among them Jews, do the same? He cannot understand how those who were once fellow members of “our religion... then, as if [they] are progressing in knowledge, despise [that religion]?” He questions how such a dramatic shift took place in what was once an all-Jewish movement. To highlight this inexplicable shift, which he sees as apostasy, he cites the example of Jesus. 34

The Jew is here, as elsewhere, searching for evidence of Christian inconsistency. In order to undermine the legitimacy of Christianity, he focuses on what he sees as an unacceptable departure from the Torah. However, he is not simply mocking Christianity but reflecting a serious dispute over the authority of the Torah. By citing the examples of Christian heroes who followed the commandments, including not just Jesus but also John the Baptist (2:4), he enlists their support for his community’s claims about the value and obligation of Torah observance. While the Jew seldom cites Jesus as a model for anything in non-Christian Judaism, in this section Jesus’ Jewishness now supports both this polemic against inconsistency and, more importantly, the Jew’s own core beliefs in Torah. Even Jesus, he says, kept the Torah as (non-Christian) Jews still do (2:6).

In a zero-sum debate, Jesus seems to be on the side of Celsus’ Jew rather than on the side of his own followers.

In his response, Origen largely relies upon his allegorical method. He says Jesus himself taught his followers to forsake literal/Jewish observance of the Torah’s many commandments (“the text and letter of the law”) in favor of a spiritual interpretation (“mystical contemplation”) that dispenses with Jewish rituals (2:6). However, I want to highlight one aspect of Origen’s defense that sits uneasily alongside his allegorical contention. He responds to Celsus’ Jew’s critique by arguing, unexpectedly, that the Jew is wrong about Christians’ non-observance of the Torah. While most Christians do disobey the commandments, Origen makes the fascinating claim that some do not. The Jew, Origen says, “failed to notice that Jewish believers in Jesus have not left the law of their fathers” (2:1). To prove this, Origen cites the examples of second and third-century Torah-observant Jewish Christians. 35 He says that some Christians were as faithful to the Torah as non-Christian Jews, which proves that Celsus’ Jew does not know all the facts.

This response is polemical and frankly opportunistic, for Origen otherwise scorns these very same Jewish Christians. 36 To mention them even semi-positively here seems disingenuous, when otherwise he denounces them precisely for this Torah-observant behavior. However, this response offers a revealing example of Origen’s acceptance of the Jew’s own standard, in this case, of Jewish-style faithfulness to the Torah. 37 With Marcion’s attacks on the Torah presumably not far from his mind, 38 here he is unwilling to admit that Christians have largely rejected observance of the Torah’s commandments. Origen’s awareness that these first Christian heroes were largely faithful Jews means that the dispute shifts temporarily from the authority of the Torah to the correctness of the Jew’s charge. In the face of such a challenge, Origen is unwilling to cede this point entirely to a Jewish critic, even if Origen knows that he himself stands on shaky ground theologically and factually.

Dispute #5: Is Christianity a success or a failure?

Lastly, I want to investigate the dispute over the success or failure of Jesus’ career and the religion that grew out of it. This dispute, part of a larger dispute about which religion is more successful overall, rests on a shared assumption by Jews and Christians that historical events can reveal God’s will (and if they go well for one’s group, God’s favor). Jews and Christians alike naturally try to “spin” their own experiences in order to present them in the most favorable light. In this case, worldly success, however measured, demonstrates the truth of one’s religious claims. 39

Again, I want to start with Celsus’ Jew’s arguments against Jesus, in this case, that he was a failure and therefore not the Jewish Messiah. He repeatedly emphasizes Jesus’ limited influence on his contemporaries and his seeming powerlessness over his own fate. The Jew continually hones in on Gospel passages about Jesus’ passivity in the face of opposition. He is puzzled by Jesus’ willingness to suffer. Importantly, he emphasizes the smallness of his following and his lack of Jewish support. These related claims about weakness and insignificance are not sarcastic jibes, but serious attacks on Christian claims made for Jesus’ greatness and even cosmic significance. The Jew, aware of the Gospel record, criticizes Jesus out of the Christians’ own sources.

A few passages illustrate this criticism. For example, the Jew asks rhetorically, “why then when you [Jesus] had grown up did you not become king?” (1:61). He wonders why Jesus never held any position of political power, even though, according to Matthew 2:16, King Herod so feared this outcome that he killed all the boys in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth. Matthew’s own hints about Jesus’ future power seem unfulfilled. Elsewhere, the Jew says that Jesus had limited influence over contemporary Jews and even failed to persuade his own followers. When he was alive, Jesus “convinced nobody” other than a few random troublemakers “of the most abominable character” (2:46). 40 His most committed supporters were, he says, few in number and far from steadfast. While Celsus’ Jew is prone to polemical exaggeration, his charge nevertheless reflects the Gospel data that Jesus was strongly supported by only a small group and often opposed by others such disinterest and opposition prompts the Jew to wonder,
“What god that comes among men is disbelieved?” (2:75). The Jew's implication is, of course, "No god at all!" Such a weak performance explains Jesus' failure to convince other Jews that he was their expected Messiah, although they eagerly awaited him. The Jew says that the corollary to this failure to convince others is his failure to punish those who opposed him. He asks, "Why does [Jesus] not... take his revenge on those who insult him and his father?" (2:35). This, he says, is further proof that Jesus' performance was thoroughly unimpressive. He neither succeeded as a preacher, nor acquired any worldly power that would have allowed him to punish wrongdoers or rule over Israel.

Origen's response is two-fold. Predictably, he highlights Gospel passages in which Jesus publicly performs impressive miracles, such as the feeding of the multitudes (2:46). His deeds brought him success among the masses of the Jews, who "were persuaded to follow him even into the deserts." (2:39). More interesting, however, is Origen's emphasis on the remarkable spread of Christianity long after Jesus' death. This claim repeatedly appears and hints at Origen's awareness that the strongest historical evidence for God's favor is much later than Jesus' own time. This evidence includes not Jewish responses to Jesus (which were often minimal or hostile) but pagan enthusiasm for the new religion.

To put this in a polemical context, he accepts the Jew's standard for judging the truth of a movement by its historical influence. Does it have a broad reach? Does it accomplish much? However, he advances his polemical agenda by citing Christian missionary success from the second and third centuries. As Origen says, "it is impossible to see any race of men which has avoided accepting the teaching of Jesus." (2:15). The truth of Christianity is clear, for "even to this day the power of Jesus brings about conversion and moral reformation" (1:43). Against the Jew's charge of Jesus' insignificance, Origen insists that Jesus "ventured to spread his religion and teaching in all the world." (2:79). Origen links this success to Jesus himself, though his most prominent examples are after his lifetime, and not incidentally, come from outside the Jewish world.

Origen matches these claims about Christian missionary success with sharp statements about the Jews' weakness and powerlessness in the centuries after their military defeats by the Romans in 70 ce and then 135 ce. He is emphatic that the Jews' loss of their Temple, the fall of Jerusalem, and their current low state reveal God's final rejection of the Jewish people: "What nation but the Jews alone has been banished from its own capital city and the native place of its ancestral worship?" (2:8). Their powerlessness is obvious and theologically significant. This "ignoble people" have sinned against Jesus and God, for which they have suffered divine punishment (indirectly, at the hands of the Romans). While they were once the elect, they were cast off by God. The Gentile Christians replaced them in their former covenant with God, and the growth in the number of believers offers visible proof of divine favor. Origen repeatedly sets these two trends - Jewish failure and Christian success (measured by his standards) - side-by-side.

He is not the first Christian to draw on Jewish setbacks in a theological critique. They are already alluded to in the New Testament and are prominent, for example, in Justin's Dialogue with Trypho. However, he does situate them in a zero-sum context, in which Jewish setbacks in the second and third centuries are contrasted with Christian successes that are indisputable in his time. This reflects the polemical context introduced by Celsus' Jew, who appeals to history in order to support opposing claims. The frequent appearance of such claims in the Jew's statements and of such claims in Origen's responses demonstrates the importance each gives to this argument and their reliance on a common standard.

Conclusion
In my study, I have sought to move the focus beyond the stereotypical, defamatory polemics in Contra Celsum. I have argued that we can reconstruct something of the perception of what a second-century Jew might have found threatening about Jesus and Christianity from the text. This is significant, especially because of the paucity of references to Christianity in Jewish sources. Celsus' Jew's learned and highly critical focus on the issues discussed above reveals a serious concern with a serious threat. Claims about Jesus as the Messiah, proper interpretation of the Torah, and worldly success as a demonstration of divine favor directly clash with Jewish claims about precisely the same topics. The zero-sum nature of the disputes explains Celsus' Jew's refusal to allow such Christian claims to go unchallenged. All touch on core Jewish convictions. This is not surprising. Many early Christians, including Origen, simultaneously affirmed both continuity and discontinuity with the Jewish tradition, especially on issues related to Jesus, who was both a Jew and the "founder" of what became a Gentile religion.

We might say that Celsus' Jew, with his knowledge of Jesus and his learned engagement with Christian theology, grants to Christianity a sort of grudging respect. While Celsus' Jew is no model for interreligious dialogue, he takes Christianity seriously and presents thoughtful critiques and responses. Jesus and his followers are not cast only as fools and charlatans - though there is some of that too - but also as genuine adversaries. Jesus' views are mocked, but also carefully studied. Christian theology is scorned for its inconsistency, but also challenged. This happens, I have argued, because Celsus' Jew focuses on Jesus as a Jew and the claims made on his behalf that directly clash with his own Jewish views. While Celsus' Jew sometimes stoops to base accusations, his statements also yield remarkable insights into a vibrant moment of serious conflict and engagement.

Notes
Quotations in this paper are taken from Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). He dates Celsum’s work to about 177–80 CE and Origen’s work to the middle of the third century; see Origen, Contra Celsum, xiv–xv, xxv–xxviii.

On the complex structure of Contra Celsum, see Frede, “Origen’s Treatise Against Celsum,” (145–51).

Origen himself doubts whether the Jew even existed; e.g. 1:28; 2:28.


E.g. 1:64.

See also Wilson, Related Strangers: Jewish–Christian Relations 70–170 C.E.: 260.

The most recent example of such a focus on Celsum’s statements mocking Jesus is in Schäfer, Jesus in the Talmud: 18–21, 56–7. He highlights statements about Jesus as a magician, Jesus’ base parentage, and Jesus’ illegitimate birth. The same topics dominate his discussion of rabbinic opposition to Jesus. See also Philippon, “Origen,” 339–40.


E.g. 1:28, 32, 38.


While it is incorrect to say that there was a universally-recognized, clear separation between the religion called “Judaism” and the religion called “Christianity” by the second or third century, Origen, Celsum, and Celsum’s Jew conceive of two distinct faith communities.