‘You Christians are being Led Astray!’ Some Notes on the Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus*

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The dialogue between Judaism and Christianity is as old as Christianity itself. The earliest history of this dialogue is reflected in most of the writings of the New Testament. But it is only in the middle of the second century CE that this type of conversation begins to find expression in the classical Greek genre of the dialogue. Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with the Jew Trypho is one of the earliest examples we know of and certainly the earliest that has been preserved in its entirety.1 It became the prototype for the later specimens of literary Jewish-Christian dialogues, but compared to these later ones Justin’s Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo is still of a relatively mild and polite nature, in spite of its polemics. Although Justin set the tone for much of the later Jewish-Christian dialogue literature, especially as far as the biblical ‘proof texts’ are concerned, in these later dialogues the exchange of thoughts began to become more acrimonious. The literary disputations of the later centuries (4rd–7th) would become increasingly aggressive in their anti-Jewish stance.2

* It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this small contribution to my former doctoral student, colleague and friend, Dineke Houtman. I am grateful for all she has done to further mutual understanding between Jews and Christians.

1 It is uncertain whether or not the lost Disputation of Jason and Papiscus by Ariston of Pella preceded Justin’s work. Usually Ariston’s work is dated to the years around 140 and Justin’s a decade or so later, but this is no more than an educated guess. See A.L. Williams, Adversus Judaeos: A Bird’s Eye View of Christian Apologiae Until the Renaissance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935; reprint 2012), 117–123; H. Schreckenberg, Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (t.–n. Jh.) (Frankfurt etc.: Peter Lang, 1990 [2nd ed.]), 180–200. For a succinct but good survey of dialogues in antiquity in general (Near-Eastern, Graeco-Roman, Jewish, Christian) see A. Herrmann—G. Bardy, ‘Dialog,’ Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum 3 (1957), 928–955.

2 It is striking that the Jews did not develop their own form of anti-Christian dialogue. M. Hirshman, A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) 13, states that ‘we have no evidence of any rabbinic attempt to compose special texts, such as the monographs of Christian authors, attacking their rivals or sustaining their own claims.’
Now it should be remarked that very few, if any, of these written disputation
disputants. Most of them are literary constructs in which the Jewish interlocu-
tor is put up as a strawman. But even though usually such dialogues do not
reflect factual debates, neither are they of necessity completely remote from
actual discussions. ‘An artificial form may well conceal material drawn from
life.’ If the text of such a dialogue were not to a certain degree a reflection of
what went on in real disputes between Jews and Christians, the author would
lose all credibility. Even if not one word of what Plato puts into the mouth of
Socrates in his many dialogues had been literally spoken by the latter, they must
have reflected at least to some degree the way Socrates conducted dialogues
with his disciples.

From the centuries after Justin, but only after a remarkable and hitherto
unexplained interval of some 200 years (ca. 150 – 350 CE), we are aware of several
literary dialogues between Jews and Christians, most of them anonymous or
pseudonymous. They include the Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus (late
4th—early 5th cent.); the Dispute between Simon the Jew and Theophilus the
Christian (5th cent.); the Dialogue of a Christian and a Jew (5th cent.); the
Dialogue of Timotheus and Aquila (6th cent.); the Disputation of Gregentius with
the Jew Herbanus (6th cent.); the Dialogue of the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a
Monk (ca. 700); and others. Religious disputes between Jews and Christians are
also found in other, lesser known works such as the untitled religious dispute at
the court of the Sassanians commonly referred to as Das Religionsgespräch am
Hof der Sassaniden5 (ca. 500); the Teaching of the Newly Baptized Jacob (first half
of the 7th cent.); and the curious list of anti-Jewish arguments in the Twenty-
Five Questions to Corner the Jews (first half of the 7th cent.).6

3 M. Simon, Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman
4 A good survey is L. Lahey, ‘Evidence for Jewish Believers in Christian-Jewish Dialogues
through the Sixth Century (Excluding Justin),’ in Jewish Believers in Jesus, ed. O. Skarsaune
5 This is the title of the latest edition, by E. Bratke in 1899. Lahey calls it Explanation of the
Events in Persia (‘Evidence for Jewish Believers’ 606).
6 For the latter two documents, which are much less well-known than the others, the reader
is referred to my earlier studies: P.W. van der Horst, ‘A Short Note on the Doctrina Jacobi
Nuper Baptizati,’ Zutot: Perspectives on Jewish Culture 6 (2009): 1–6; and idem, ‘Twenty-Five
Questions to Corner the Jews: A Byzantine Anti-Jewish Document from the Seventh