Popular Polemics and Philosophical Truth in the Medieval Jewish Critique of Christianity

Daniel J. Lasker

*Ben-Gurion University of the Negev*

The medieval Jewish critique of Christianity is marked by an abundance of argumentation. The most popular type of argument was exegetical, in which the polemicist debated how holy texts, be they the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, or rabbinic literature, should be understood. Jewish authors attempted to demonstrate that Christian interpretations of holy texts were mistaken, often taking figuratively that which should be literal and vice versa. Arguments also revolved around the correct reading of Scripture – which text was authoritative, such as the Hebrew Masoretic one or various Christian versions. There were also arguments based on the social and historical conditions of the two religions, for instance questions of what can be learned from the temporal success of a particular religion, or which religion's practitioners exhibit more moral behavior. Jewish polemicists, for instance, were forced to respond to the Christian contention that the prolonged Jewish exile was a sign of divine displeasure. A third type of argumentation was rational, in which contentions were derived from contemporary philosophical discourse and revolved around issues of the philosophical or logical possibility of various religious doctrines. Jewish philosophical polemicists attempted to

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1 Much of what will be stated here is applicable to the medieval Christian critique of Judaism, but all the examples adduced will be from the Jewish anti-Christian literature.
demonstrate that Christianity is to be rejected because of its lack of coherence with reason.\(^2\)

The medieval polemical works are distinguished not only by content but also by tone. Whereas some polemical works were highly dispassionate and technical, others eschewed high philosophy for low vulgarity. An example of the former is Hasdai Crescas' *Biittul Iqqarei Ha-Nozerim* (*Refutation of the Christian Principles*) in the fourteenth century.\(^3\) Crescas’ work is a dry, almost detached, discussion and refutation of cardinal doctrines of the Christian religion, executed by one of the last great medieval Jewish philosophers. Crescas recorded the basic presuppositions which underlay the Christian principles, showing which are rationally possible and which are not. In contrast, the more vulgar type of polemic can be seen, for instance, in the anonymous ninth-century *Qis\ssat Mu\jjadala\l\at al-Usqaf* (*The Account of the Disputation of the Priest*), a work originally written in Judaeo-Arabic and translated into Hebrew in the twelfth century as *Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer* (*The Book of Nestor the Priest*).\(^4\) The treatise presents itself as the work of a former Christian priest who converted to Judaism and then addressed his former co-religionists with an acerbic, often vulgar, attack on their religion. The person of Jesus comes in for much criticism, and Christian texts and beliefs are the subject of biting ridicule. There are, hence, at least two different approaches to interreligious polemic, one which addresses itself to the intellect, the other which aims at more base emotions. We might say that the first appeals to philosophical truth; the second to the popular imagination.\(^5\)

What is the basis for this polarity? At first glance, one might think that diversity of polemical approach is a function of the temperament

\(^2\) For a discussion of the various types of arguments, see my *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: 1977) 3–11.

\(^3\) The Hebrew version is available in my edition (Ramat-Gan and Beer Sheva: 1990; the English translation is found in my translation Albany: 1992).


\(^5\) For the purposes of this paper, I will consider under the rubric of popular religion polemical approaches which appeal to the masses; philosophical truth will refer to arguments based on philosophical considerations.