

REVIEW

Christoph Ochs

*Matthaeus Adversus Christianos.
The Use of the Gospel of Matthew
in Jewish Polemics Against the Divinity of Jesus*

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The New Testament is not a part of the literature which can normally be found on what has become known colloquially as “the Jewish bookshelf,” despite the fact that its authors were mostly, if not all, Jewish. In fact, many rabbis interpret the prohibition on reading the books of heretics as including the New Testament, hoping to prevent Jewish attraction to Christianity. Yet, obviously, Jews have read the New Testament over the years and have reacted to it in various ways. One group of especially close readers of the Christian scriptures consisted of Jewish polemicists who took upon themselves the defense of Judaism and the refutation of Christianity. They prepared themselves for this task by reading their opponents’ scriptures which they then analyzed in order to undermine Christian doctrines. The present book describes in detail how medieval Jewish authors, over the course of 700 years (from the ninth to sixteenth centuries), used the Gospel of Matthew for the purpose of refuting Christianity in general and the divinity of Jesus in particular, or as the book title succinctly puts it, “Matthew against Christianity.” The works Ochs discusses are the anonymous *The Account of the Disputation of the Priest* (translated into Hebrew as *The Book of Nestor the Priest*); Jacob ben Reuben’s *The Wars of the Lord*; Joseph ben Nathan Official’s *The Book of Joseph the Zealous*; the anonymous *Nizzahon Vetus*; Ibn Shaprut’s *Touchstone*; Profiat Duran’s *Disgrace of the Gentiles*; and Isaac of Troki’s

Faith Strengthened. In these works, Ochs asserts, Matthew is the most cited New Testament book.

Why did Jewish polemicists focus on Matthew? Or, more specifically, why focus on Matthew, more than other books of the New Testament, such as the Pauline Epistles? Ochs, who wrote this work originally as a University of Nottingham dissertation, points out two main reasons for Jewish interest in Matthew. First, “Matthew played a vital role for Christian theology and development of the Christian *dogma* as the exegetical basis and defense of Jesus’ divinity by means of the incarnation” (p. 7; emphasis here and below in the original). Second, Matthew links its narrative intrinsically with the Hebrew Bible, making it an “easy target” for Jewish polemicists (pp. 9-10). Furthermore, “Historically, *the Gospel of Matthew functioned as [a] bridge over which the Jewish-Christian discourse was mediated*” (p. 318); and “[e]ven nowadays the Jewish-Christian dialogue continues to be mediated to a large exten[t] by the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, which in particular is focused on the Jewish context of the book and its author” (p. 319). The author obviously believes that the importance of Matthew is not coincidental (i.e., simply as a result of its placement as the first gospel).

From the few citations above, one can see that although this book deals with intellectual and textual history, Ochs’s concerns go beyond the strictly academic aspects of the subject. His examination of the Jewish use of Matthew, and the ties between Matthew and the Hebrew Bible, consists not only of recording passages and arguments but also of evaluating the cogency of such arguments, thereby, in a sense, grading the Jewish polemicists on their performance. He also comments on the similarities between Jewish readings of Matthew, on the one hand, and internal medieval Christian doctrinal debates and modern academic criticism, on the other hand. In his summary, he suggests it would “be more beneficial for the Jewish-Christian debate to not merely *use* Scripture to corroborate or confound (metaphysical) beliefs but to argue truly *from* Scripture” (p. 338). A change in perspective “would

liberate the entire interfaith dialogue” (p. 339). Given the subjects which Jews raised in their reading of Matthew, Ochs concludes: “Christians and Jews have debated each other precisely in those areas which they have most in common” (p. 340).

The possibility that a detailed analysis of Jewish criticisms of Matthew might serve as a basis for greater interfaith understanding and mutual appreciation seems unlikely. Medieval Jewish polemicists were interested in Matthew not as a bridge to Christianity but as a source of convincing argumentation that Christian doctrine as they knew it was not consistent with Christian sources and, therefore, should be rejected by Christians themselves. They did pour over the Gospel text not for spiritual reasons but for apologetical ones. As Ochs demonstrates so well, the polemicists obviously adduced only those passages of the New Testament which supported their goal of undermining Christianity, not selections which would seem to vindicate Christian doctrines (pp. 320-325). Thus, when the late fourteenth-century Shem Tov ibn Shaprut presented his readers a full translation of Matthew into Hebrew, he did so with the adjuration that it never be copied in the absence of his critical notes; Jews were not supposed to be interested in Matthew in any context other than polemical.

Despite his remarks about interfaith issues, Ochs’s efforts are devoted mostly to medieval texts. The result is a very comprehensive and useful work, presenting all the relevant sources in the Hebrew originals and with precise English translations and analyses, accompanied by copious annotation. He is a thorough scholar and commands the whole range of the scholarly literature on the polemics (although one might question his choice of some of the secondary literature which he considers authoritative, especially concerning Karaites). He is not reluctant to challenge views held by others, including occasionally those of this reviewer. Unfortunately, like the literature it studies, *Matthaeus Adversus Christianos* tends to be a repetitious book. The author is aware of this, but his goal of discussing every important text in chronological order restricts his

freedom of discussion. It is also regrettable that the book is marred by multiple typographical errors, especially in the Hebrew texts.

In the past decades, Jewish and Christian scholars have contributed to new understandings of medieval controversial literature, which is often maligned for its shallow argumentation and offensive methods of presentation. Polemical works are now being analyzed in the context of the overall picture of the interreligious relationship, which was not one of unmitigated antagonism and violence. This book, then, is one more important contribution to the ongoing effort to broaden and deepen our appreciation of Jewish-Christian theological interchanges in the Middle Ages.