“What Is Your Philosophy?:” Defining “The Jew” in

Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho

by

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Background

In the second century, when Justin Martyr wrote *The Dialogue with Trypho*, Christianity was forming into a coherent group. In the meantime, Judaism was dealing with the aftermath of the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., which gave birth to what we know as rabbinic Judaism. William Arnal argues that not only was “Christianity” not a cohesive “religion” before the second century, but even that “what evidence is available to us...strongly suggests that not merely the terminology but probably also the conception of “Christianity” are products of the second century.” (Arnal 195). Indeed, the first use of the term “Christianity” can be found in the work of Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote in the early second century, using the verb “Christianizing” in contrast to the verb “Judaizing.” Ignatius says, “It is absurd to have Jesus Christ on the lips, and at the same time live like a Jew. No; Christianity [Christianizing] did not believe in Judaism [Judaizing], but Judaism [Judaizing] believed in Christianity [Christianizing], and in its bosom was assembled everyone professing faith in God” (Ignatius10).

This quotation seems to suggest that there were people of somewhat indeterminate status who did profess faith in Jesus Christ while also keeping Jewish purity laws, for instance. But Ignatius, who is trying to form the identity of early Christianity, presents such hybridity as unacceptable. He also presents a sort of square and rectangle situation, in which rectangles are squares but squares are not rectangles: Judaism can believe in Christianity, but Christianity cannot believe in Judaism. By “believe,” I think Ignatius means believed in the tenets of the religion, i.e. not in the existence of the religion but in the specifics of its faith. This move created a bond
among Christian groups, which is to say groups that affirmed the divinity of Christ, by putting Christianity in descriptive contrast with Judaism; in short, “Judaizing” is what “we” are not. This quotation is also prescriptive: if you are a true believer in Christ you should not behave like a Jew--whatever that actually means. Ignatius evidently thought that there was a certain, although undefined, way in which one could “live like a Jew,” and thereby live unlike the newly-delineated “Christian.”

Quoting Arnal again:

This innovation in terminology is accompanied by a behavioral reinforcement: Ignatius is acknowledging and thereby generating, in his letters and his visits, a unity with various scattered individuals and especially groups in Asia Minor (and in Rome). The act of mutual recognition of common identity actually creates a distinct shared identity which Ignatius identifies as ‘Christianism,’ thus enacting such an identity in both word and deed (196).

Ignatius took disparate groups and unified them behind a single word. He could not have done so without the opposing ideology of Judaism and Jewish practice. But what is the Christian conception of the Jew, that it is able to serve as such a unifying force?

To begin to answer that question, we must pose another, preliminary one: who were the Jews of this time, and what were they doing? The destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. was a catastrophe. It decentered the Jewish people, both physically and spiritually. Masses of people were killed, Rome won, and the center of Jewish religious life was destroyed. This necessitated a thorough remaking of Jewish practice and theology. After the destruction of the temple, it is traditionally thought that the Jews gathered at Yavneh, in modern day Israel, and came up with a cohesive

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and singular idea of practice and theology. The mainstream historical argument, as articulated by Shaye Cohen, is that

Sectarianism ceased when the Pharisees, gathered at Yavneh, ejected all those who were not members of their own party. Christians were excommunicated, the biblical canon was purged of works written in Greek and apocalyptic in style, and the gates were closed on the outside world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. (Cohen 2).

By contrast, Shaye Cohen, the author of the previously quoted article, argues that whatever happened at Yavneh was not so clear cut as this reading would have it, but that an air of flexibility seems to have pervaded the supposed council. After all, the Mishnah—the record of the oral Torah and the ultimate basis for Jewish law—the structure of which could be characterized as a bunch of disagreements, was recorded around this time. In any case, the second century is considered a foundational time for what we think of as rabbinic Judaism, a style of Judaism that is predominant today. This is the Judaism--post-Temple and quickly changing--to which Ignatius and Justin Martyr react, and over against which they position their emergent “Christianity.” As we have already begun to see, however, a substantial concern for this boundary-defining Judaism was its own boundary-definition. To Justin, what constituted Judaism, and by extension, what constituted the figure of the Jew?

As Annette Reed and Adam Becker suggest in The Ways That Never Parted, there was not necessarily a clean break or a linear narrative to differentiate Jews from Christians. As they put it, “our literary and archaeological data...attest a far messier reality than this unilinear spatial metaphor.” (2) There was no exact moment to which one can point and say, “this is when Christians parted from the Jews.” Daniel Boyarin begins Borderlines by saying that “that the borders between Christianity and Judaism
are as constructed and imposed, as artificial and political as any of the borders on earth” (1). On the one hand, the two groups wanted to establish differences between them in order to establish sameness within their respective groups. By saying who they were not, they declared who they were. On the other hand, there was no exact way of making either of these determinations. As Boyarin asks, “...are there sets of features that absolutely define who is Jew and who is Christian in such wise that the two categories will not seriously overlap, irrespective of the numbers of members of the blurring sects? I think not” (21). This reminds me of Jonathan Z. Smith’s categorization of Judaism as “polythetic,” that is to say sharing a number of characteristics within multiple Judaisms without any of those characteristics being essential to the religion. This means that no single Jew can embody a distilled or perfect version of Judaism. The same might be true of Christianity; there are numerous overlapping, intersecting, and even opposed versions of this tradition—especially at the time that Justin Martyr is writing. Justin Martyr was endeavoring precisely to regularize these formations under a single “Christianity,” and did so by collapsing various Judaisms into the contrapuntal figure of “the Jew.”

Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* is a boundary-defining text that attempts to create this difference between religious traditions as a means of solidify “Christianity” itself. In the process of thus defining Christianity, however, this text also ends up defining Judaism, often through the figure of Trypho, the dialogue’s titular Jew and principal interlocutor. The *Dialogue* narrates an encounter between Justin and a group of Jews (of whom only Trypho is named), which allegedly takes
place over two days, in Ephesus in Asia Minor.² It is unclear when the text was actually written, but Trypho purports to be fleeing the Bar Kokhba revolt, which took place from 133-135 C.E. There is also a reference to Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (c. 150 C.E.) in *Dialogue* 120.6, which means that the *Dialogue* must have been written after that text. Justin died around 165, so the *Dialogue* must have been written between 150 and 165. Timothy Horner suggests a date of around 160 C.E. This text is the longest Christian text written in the second century, which one could guess just by reading its rambling pages. As Timothy Horner has argued, the *Dialogue* is “an excellent example of a Christian writing whose author saw himself as distinct and separate from Judaism” (8). What I would like to argue, however, is that Justin uses Jewish concepts and tools—the Hebrew Bible, ideas around covenant and circumcision, and above all, the person of Trypho himself—as a means of consolidating the categories of “Christianity” and “Judaism” in the first place.

How does Justin accomplish such consolidations? He needs to communicate ideas around the messiah, Jewish law, and the divinity of Christ (to give a sample of ideas that Justin explores). As is evident by the title, the text is written in the form of a dialogue, a conversation between two men. Justin Martyr is something of a known quantity: he existed historically, wrote apologetic treatises, founded his own philosophical school, and was beheaded under the reign of Marcus Aurelius. But Trypho exists only on the page, as a work of fiction. As such, Timothy Horner writes that this text is not about Trypho at all, but is rather an apologetic for Christianity that

constructs itself in relation to this fictional figure of the “Jew.” In order to understand this relational apologetic, we need to look at Trypho. Why is Trypho important? What is his function in the text?

In the *Dialogue*, Trypho is the one opposed to Justin, challenging him with questions about his philosophy, but also the one with whom Justin speaks and to whom he sometimes even listens. As such, this “Jew” is in continual construction during the course of the dialogue. As Boyarin explains, “Judaism is, for Justin, not a given entity to which he is opposed and which he describes accurately or not, or to which he addresses an apologetic, but an entity that he is engaged in constructing in the textual process.” (Boyarin, 28) And as he does so, Justin constructs the Christian philosophy he is promulgating by means of the dialogue, with interpretations of doctrines such as the unity of God, the divinity of Christ, and the Virgin Birth. Again, however, he is only able to articulate these stances in response to Trypho’s questioning. Trypho exists as a foil for Justin, but not only as a foil—he is also useful, from a Christian perspective, for figuring out what Jews are “like,” and in distinction to them, which Christians must be. What, the text asks, are Jewish personalities like? How do Jews react to Christian philosophy? What do Jews care about? Trypho represents both these questions and the answers to these questions. From him we can learn not just what Justin thought about the Jews but also how Justin constructed Judaism in his ongoing effort to construct Christianity.

What does it mean to construct or co-construct religions? In this case, as Boyarin explains, “authorities on both sides tried to establish a border, a line that, when crossed, meant that someone had definitely left one group for another” (Cohen
2). These boundaries might have been originally artificial but they became reified, as is evident today; we do not think of Judaism and Christianity as having fluid borders. For instance, in nearly every textbook on “world religions,” Judaism and Christianity have separate chapters. But if these religions had to be defined in the first place through apologetic texts like *The Dialogue with Trypho*, the borders between them were at the very least porous. How, then, does Justin’s interaction with Trypho enact (and, by means of that transparent enactment, disturb) this boundary? Through the lens of the figure of Trypho, we can see how Christian philosophy constructed both itself and “the Jew” in polemical relation to one another.

**Category Confusion**

As I have said, contemporary practitioners and even scholars tend to think of Judaism and Christianity as distinct religions. Nevertheless, they will admit significant regions of overlap—for instance, the shared injunction in Leviticus and Matthew to “love your neighbor as yourself,” along with the text of the whole Hebrew Bible. As Alison Salvesen puts it, “…Christianity never completely lost its grounding in Judaism” (233). This foundational interdependence is evident in Justin Martyr’s text, which often uses Jewish tropes, such as circumcision, to illustrate or make points about Christianity. In other words, even as Justin strove to distinguish between the two groups, he kept Christianity rooted in Judaism. According to Burton Mack, “Novelty was not a sign of wisdom in the Greco-Roman world. What people wanted was a wisdom rooted in antiquity and worthy of the illustrious history of their own people and culture” (Mack 261). The Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition and
practice served such a purpose for Justin Martyr: they legitimized Christianity by giving it historical roots. At the same time, Justin needed to distinguish the two in order to create a coherent Christianity.

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at the same time, Justin needed to distinguish the two in order to create a coherent Christianity.

In the *Dialogue*, Justin himself often works to root himself in Jewish tradition while also distancing himself from it, writing that Christians have in many ways replaced the Jews. In one such instance, he argues, “We have been led to God through this crucified Christ and we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, who though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many nations.” (*Dialogue* 11.5) In this passage, Justin establishes his lineage as going back to the forefathers--as having roots in his antiquity--while also replacing the people Israel as the true descendants of those forefathers. Not only do gentiles now rank alongside Israel, but they are even more Israel than Israel itself. Christians, according to Justin, have discovered the true way to follow God, represented by the figure of Christ. The invocation of the forefathers is interesting because it demonstrates a moment of going back to the source, as if Justin has more in common with the Abraham than the current Jews do. Although the new group has outdone the original, Justin is careful to ensure that Gentile Christians are still firmly within the legacy of the Jews--literally, “descendants.” This kind of descent, however, is not by virtue of blood but of a new covenant of faith. The Christians are the spiritual inheritors of the covenant of the Jews.

What does it mean to be in a “spiritual lineage?” It means a few things, but the general idea is one of reinvention: using older ideas to create new paradigms.
Spiritual lineage means a non-literal descent from the forefathers in which the descendants embody the values, if not the practice or the biology, of the ancestors. There are three ways that Justin Martyr places Christians in the lineage of the Jews. First, he makes Christians a part of a new covenant modeled after the old one; second, he presents a new model of circumcision that is still within the model of circumcision as an important practice; and third, he uses the Hebrew Bible to understand post-Biblical events.

The first time the word “Jew” comes up in the Dialogue with Trypho is near the beginning: “the law promulgated at Horeb is already obsolete, and was intended for you Jews only, whereas the law of which I speak is simply for all men.” (Dialogue 11.2) Why is the law obsolete? It has been superseded by a new law-- a fulfillment and replacement of the old covenant, embodied by Jesus Christ. On the facing page Justin uses a proof text from Jeremiah 31 that says that God will make a new covenant with Israel. He goes on to say that “through the name of the crucified Jesus Christ, men have turned to God, leaving behind them idolatry and other sinful practices….everyone can clearly see...that he is indeed the New Law, the new covenant…” (Dialogue 11.4) Although this particular covenant is new, the idea of a covenant between God and man is an old Jewish and biblically-sourced one that can be found in Genesis 12 and 15 originally--the promise of land and offspring--and the covenant in Genesis 17, in which God promises to make Abraham’s line prosper, which is marked by Abraham’s name change and by circumcision. Like Paul, the originator of this concept, Justin places the covenant squarely in a Jewish context.
He is not the only one to do this: a famous example of the recasting of circumcision away from Jewish practice is Paul, in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 28-29 Paul writes: “A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.” In this passage, Paul redefines the Jew by means of a Jewish category. The true Jew is a spiritual Jew, not someone marked by a physical circumcision. This means that Paul opened up what it meant to be a Jew by removing the barriers of physical covenant and by extension the adoption of Jewish practice. As Matthew Theissen writes, “ethnic Jewishness and genital circumcision do not in and of themselves guarantee that God is pleased with someone…” (2) This is not just an early Christian idea: “circumcision of the heart” is also a Jewish concept which is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible multiple times, for instance in Jeremiah 4, in which Jeremiah exhorts the Jews to “circumcise their hearts.” Marion Carson writes that someone who is circumcised of the heart is someone “whose motivation is not personal interest, but the fulfilment of God’s purposes in the world. The true Jew is one who lives by faith” (380). When Justin Martyr talks about circumcision, he does in the context of Paul, rooted in Jeremiah.

Circumcision is a central example of a point at which Jewish and Christian thinking converge and diverge. It represents more than the physical: circumcision represents the covenant, which in turn represents God’s relationship to the people. So when Justin talks about circumcision, he is talking about how one relates to God through practice, worship, and covenant. Paul and Justin both use Abraham as a test-
case because he was originally uncircumcised and then became circumcised as a sign of God’s covenant with him. Abraham was considered righteous although he was originally uncircumcised, so why can’t uncircumcised gentiles be righteous?

Circumcision is a complicated category, one that sets Jews apart from gentiles in the most obvious and physical way. As Shaye Cohen points out, although “circumcision is an essential ethnic marker” the “circumcision of non-Israelites does not ipso facto make them Israelites.” (123) The difference is that “Israelite circumcision was covenantal, but the circumcision of other nations was not.” (124) That means that there was in fact more wiggle room for non-Judeans to participate in Jewish life.

Circumcision was also one of the few elements needed in order to convert into Judaism: “if [gentiles] wished to attain full membership in a Jewish community, they had to be circumcised.” (Cohen 219) Another physically enacted process of conversion was ritual immersion in the mikvah, which Justin also rejects—but Justin cared more about circumcision. So circumcision was a state of both covenant and purity, and you had to be circumcised to be Jewish but not Jewish to be circumcised.

In any case, circumcision is the most tangible way to be a part of the Jewish lineage. And yet Justin rejects circumcision---or at least he appears to. His treatment of circumcision is part of his effort to define the Jew (i.e., circumcision is important to the Jew, and a physical marker of the Jew), and that effort to define the Jew of course goes hand in hand with Christian self-definition.

Most of chapter 19, the beginning of a section in which Justin writes that Jewish ritual law is a remedy for idolatry, is devoted to discussing circumcision. It starts with Trypho asking the question of why Christians are willing to suffer all sorts
of tortures rather than just accepting Jewish customs? “As I already explained” Justin replies, “it is because circumcision is not essential for all men, but only for you Jews, to mark you off for the suffering you now so deservedly endure.” (Dialogue 19.2) Justin is probably referring to the destruction of the Temple and the privations of the Bar Kokhba revolt, which he would say the Jews deserve for, for instance, killing Christ. Circumcision marks them apart from other nations in a physical way, so that one who looks at a Jew could know what they did and what they endure. In the same breath Justin also rejects the mikvah: “Nor do we approve of your useless baptism of the wells…” (19.2). These are two essential marks of Jewishness, two out of three necessary steps that Shaye Cohen identifies as required for conversion. (Cohen’s three requirements for conversion in antiquity are: acceptance of commandments, circumcision, and immersion in the mikvah). In rejecting those two markers, Justin effectively rejects Jewishness as a valid way of life.

After rejecting circumcision and the mikvah, Justin lists biblical figures who were not circumcised yet were still considered to be righteous in some way. The examples he uses are those of Adam, born uncircumcised, Abel, whose sacrifice was still pleasing to God despite his lack of circumcision, Enoch, Lot, and Noah. The most interesting example that he puts forward is the one of Melchisedek.

“Melchisedek, the priest of the Most High, was not circumcised, yet Abraham, the first to accept circumcision of the flesh, paid tithes to him and was blessed by him…” (Dialogue 19.4) In emphasizing the role of Melchisedek, Justin de-emphasizes the

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3 For instance, in Dialogue 16.4 in which Justin writes that the Jews have “murdered the Just One.”
importance of Abraham as a circumcised figure: the original Jew is willing to be
humbled before an uncircumcised figure. Justin seems to use Abraham as an example
when he is uncircumcised, but reject him when he becomes circumcised. This
removes the problem of Abraham’s transition between someone who is not
circumcised and someone who is--Justin argues that it doesn’t matter if he was
circumcised in the end, because he was willing to be blessed by the uncircumcised
Melchisedek. Paul does something similar in Romans 4:

“Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?
We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as
righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was
circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received
circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he
was still uncircumcised.”

Abraham was righteous before the sign of the covenant, and had that covenant
without needing to actually be circumcised. So if Justin rejects Jewishness in the form
of circumcision, why does he continue to talk about it?

In Chapter 28, Justin mentions his own uncircumcised state and then exhorts
Trypho to convert to Christianity before Jesus should come back, and to support
himself quotes Jeremiah: “Be circumcised to the Lord, and circumcise the foreskin of
your heart.” (Jer 4.3-.4.4) He quotes Jeremiah again: “For all the gentiles are
uncircumcised in the flesh, but all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart.”
(Jer 9:26) This is an interesting instance of the combination of scriptural references
and a discussion of circumcision to locate Justin within the spiritual lineage of the
Jewish people. Justin uses these verses with a universalizing impulse: “Even though a
man may be a Scythian, or a Persian, and yet knows God and his Son, and observes
his lasting precepts of justice, he is circumcised only with the good and useful circumcision, and both he and his offerings are pleasing to God.” (Dialogue 28:4)

One needn’t be circumcised in order to worship God--or rather, to have offerings that are pleasing to God, which echoes what Justin wrote earlier about Abel, and which constitutes the circumcision of the flesh. This “good and useful circumcision” is in direct contrast to the “fleshly circumcision” --but it is still circumcision in the covenantal sense. Interestingly Justin also appeals to one of Shaye Cohen’s categories for conversion, which is the acceptance of commandments. It’s not exactly the same--observing “lasting precepts of justice” is not the same as accepting the Jewish commandments, but it is in the same spirit of observing tenets of the religion. Justin uses a Jewish formula for conversion--acceptance of values and circumcision--to talk about being a part of a Christian community. He operates squarely within a Jewish framework to talk about his own community. Is this a move to legitimize conversion into Christianity? Is it to make Christianity comprehensible to Trypho, the Jew? Along with Burton Mack, I am inclined to say that it is not to make Christianity comprehensible, but rather to legitimize Christianity as having ancient roots.

A third way besides the use of covenant and circumcision that Justin places himself in a Jewish framework and establishes said ancient roots is by citing the Hebrew Bible, which he does almost every chapter of the Dialogue. In chapter 96 he quotes from Deuteronomy: “Now the statement in the Law, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree, strengthens our hope which is sustained by the crucified Christ, not because the crucified one is cursed by God, but because God predicted what would be done by all you Jews, and others like you, who are not aware that this is who was
before all things.” (Dialogue 96.1) Reading on in the chapter, Justin writes that the Jews curse the Christians and then the non-Christian Gentiles carry that curse out by persecuting Christians. So actually, the Gentiles aren’t really a category beyond Jews, but rather are instruments of Jewish iniquity. But back to Deuteronomy: the original context of this quotation is one that discusses capital punishment. You have to bury an exposed body, one put on a pole after being killed for a crime, on the same day that the person was killed--you can’t leave the body hanging overnight. In the Dialogue, however, where every biblical quotation is used to prefigure a post-Biblical event and construed to be about Jesus or Christians, the quotation is theological rather than legal. Specifically, it concerns the person of Jesus. Jesus was hung on a pole/tree but not left overnight, so legally this moment would not be insulting to him; however, Justin wants to prove that the Jews killed Jesus. He twists this by saying that actually this law in Deuteronomy was not just a law about capital punishment or even condemning Jesus, but actually a prediction of what the Jews would do to Jesus. Justin anticipates one possible reading of this moment, which is that Jesus is cursed because he was hung from a tree. Although Justin had to contort the scripture to make it work for him, he still uses the Hebrew Bible to promulgate Christian doctrine.

In fact, contortion might be the right word for how Justin uses Jewish tradition. He takes familiar and central elements of Jewish religious life and uses them in order to locate himself within the lineage of the covenant. Interestingly, although he is concerned with spiritual, covenantal, and textual lineage, he doesn’t seem to be that interested in biological lineage or technical genealogy. Justin wants to be close enough to the Jews to claim their covenant and blessing but, unsurprisingly,
he doesn’t want to actually be Jewish. Although Justin Martyr was using Jewish tools, which indicates that the boundaries between groups were porous, he was still writing a Christian text for the benefit of Christians. The Dialogue is a text that is meant to persuade the reader toward Christianity, and the persuasion is directed at non-Christian Gentiles. Miroslav Marcovic imagines that those gentiles might have been leaning toward Judaism, which could account for Justin’s extensive use of scripture; he wanted to root his argument in the opposing tradition in order to demonstrate its superiority to it.

Justin is still seriously engaging with some sort of Jewish audience--at the very least, within the world of the text. As Judith Lieu puts it, “Whether at first of second hand, the Jews are a real audience and so too must their representatives be; they cannot simply be the projection of the ‘dark side’ or the ‘negative’ of Christian struggles to establish a secure identity” (106). The distinction between first- and second-hand is important. The first level of the audience of the dialogue, when taken at face value, is simply the Jews: the people whom Justin directly addresses within the text are Jewish. The second level of the text is meant for Gentiles whom Justin wants to persuade toward Christianity. On yet a third level, the text is meant for Christians in general, in order to shape and define Christian philosophy. But even if the text had been written with Gentiles, Christians, and originally Gentile Christians in mind, the ostensible first-level audience is one composed of Jewish people.

The Jews might not be the second-level intended audience that Justin has in mind--he may not be genuinely trying to convert Jews. But he is genuinely addressing the Jews, if only in his text, and there is a chance that the text is based on
conversations he may actually have had—as Lieu says, “There is, then little reason to deny that Justin engaged in such a debate with many a Jew—Trypho himself, probably with good reason, suspects that he had done so on several occasions in the past (50.1)” (104). The part of the Dialogue that Lieu cites is one in which Trypho says, “You seem to me to be ready to answer any of my questions, thanks to your extensive exchange in debates with many persons on every possible topic” (Dial. 50.1). This implies previous engagement with Jewish interlocutors. It could just be that Justin inserts something favorable about himself—the notion that he has previous experience in dialogue with Jews does lend him some legitimacy. If we do, however, take the idea at face value then we can say that even if the Dialogue itself is not intended for a Jewish audience, Justin himself has been in dialogue with Jews—or at the very least wants the reader to think that he has been in dialogue with Jews. Back to the rest of Lieu’s quotation: If the Jews are an audience that Justin intended to address, then we must think of them as authentic and multifaceted, as opposed to simply a device or tool that Justin uses to prove his points. The old Jewish-Christian dichotomy cannot stand simply as, as Lieu says, with Judaism as the dark opposite of Christianity.

How does Trypho fit into all of this? He is Justin’s first-level audience, the one to whom Justin addresses himself. But he is also an invention of Justin’s, even if he is based on historically real Jews with whom Justin conversed. Trypho himself is circumcised and relatively well-versed in scripture—for instance he is able to say things like: “Why...do you quote only those passages from the Prophets which prove your point, and omit those quotations which clearly order the observance of the Sabbath?” (Dialogue 27.1) From this quotation we can see a hint of both Trypho’s
personality and his knowledge. He knows enough scripture to know what Justin omits in his arguments. He is also not afraid to say it. If Trypho is a representative Jew, then in this case Justin sees Jews as presenting legitimate opposition to Christians. In reply to Trypho’s question, Justin launches a slightly convoluted *ad hominem* attack on Trypho and the Jewish people, saying that it is the Jews’ “sinfulness” that caused God to institute the Sabbath (for instance, he says the Jews sacrificed their children to demons [27.2]). Now that Christ had freed Christians of sin, however, they no longer had to keep the Sabbath. This could serve as instruction to other Christians on how to deal with these questions, but it also shows that Justin was seriously troubled by these questions. The fact that Trypho poses this question to Justin adds a sense of authenticity to Trypho—even if he is not historically real, he asks questions that Jews might have asked. The categories of “Jews” and “Christians,” in situations like the one in chapter 27 of the *Dialogue*, are in opposition to each other. The opposition, however, is generative. It allows Trypho and Justin to both define their boundaries, in this case around the question of the Sabbath. They could not do this if they did not have each other, and they could not do this if they did not have a common base of scripture about which to argue.

**Trypho’s reality**

There are two camps on the question of the identity of Trypho. The “historical Jew” camp argues that Trypho was not only an authentic representation of a contemporary Jewish man, but that he existed historically. This camp is represented most clearly by Eusebius, who wrote that Trypho was a particular Jew of his time. In
his Church history, Eusebius writes, “[Justin] also composed a dialogue against the Jews, which he held in the city of Ephesus against Trypho, the most distinguished Jew of the day” (Ecclesiastical History 4.18). Thanks in large part to Eusebius, scholars used to think that Trypho was “real” in the same way that Justin was real. Within the text itself, Justin gives us very little biographical material on Trypho, confining it to the character’s self-introduction: “Trypho,’ he said, ‘is my name. I am a Hebrew of the circumcision, a refugee from the recent war, and at present a resident of Greece, mostly in Corinth.’” (Dialogue 1.3) This provides the bulk of the information we are given about Trypho’s background, although we learn more about his personality as the dialogue unfolds. However sparse it may be, however, there is still a lot we can learn from this brief introduction. We know Trypho identifies himself by (presumably physical) circumcision, a crucial marker of the Jewish covenant, and that he believes circumcision to be vital to his identity (which lets us know that Justin sees circumcision as vital to the identity of the Jews in general). We know that Trypho is a refugee of the “recent war,” meaning the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt, in which the Jews revolted in vain against Hadrian. The rest, we are left to divine throughout the text.

What are the benefits of thinking of Trypho as a historically existing figure? If Trypho existed, it gives the text a certain weight and legitimacy. If the conversation between Trypho and Justin really happened, then Justin can be said to have addressed real problems in which Jews were interested. Eusebius labels Trypho as “distinguished,” which suggests that Trypho served as a fitting representative for the Jewish position, metonymically representing the “Jew.” That is to say, if Trypho was
the most distinguished Jew of his time, and if the dialogue shows Justin to be a fitting opponent for him, then Trypho’s distinction elevates Justin to a position of distinction himself, capable as he is of debating the finer points of scripture with such a figure. If Trypho existed on the same plane of reality as Justin--walking, talking, and debating strangers in Ephesus--then everything that Trypho says in the Dialogue has the weight of a conversation between equals and must be considered carefully. This is a helpful way to read the text, as the historical freight invites closer examination of Trypho’s words.

Eusebius’ summary of the Dialogue is also interesting insofar as it positions Justin’s position as being “against” the Jews. Such antagonism is not self-evident from any straightforward reading of the text; one does not necessarily interpret the two as opponents. But Eusebius sees the Dialogue as an anti-Jewish polemic. And if that is the case, one is left asking, how are we to understand Trypho? Along this polemical reading, he is not just Justin’s interlocutor--not even just his opponent--but also, the object of Justin’s vitriol. Indeed, if we are on the lookout for such vitriol, we can find it in Trypho’s voice, as well. For example, in a conversation about the fact that some Jews are converting to Christianity, we read, “‘Don’t you realize,’ interposed Trypho, ‘that you are out of your mind to say such things?’ ‘Listen to me, you,’ [Justin] retorted, ‘and I’ll prove to you that I’m not out of my mind…’” (Dialogue 39 3-4) This ad hominem exchange might support Eusebius’ claim that Trypho really existed: why would Justin have created such an oppositional character?

These moments of snappy retort, however, do not occur often and therefore cannot be used as proof of Trypho’s existence, even if they can be used to explore his
personality. Also, Trypho travels with companions, who, at various points in the text, laugh at or refuse to listen to Justin--characters that are even more oppositional than Trypho himself. The ultimate defiance of Justin comes at the very end, when Trypho and his companions refuse to convert to Christianity.

The scant proof concerning Trypho’s historicity leads me to the second camp, which contradicts the first. What we might call the “straw man” camp denies Trypho’s historical presence. That camp does not simply deny Trypho’s historicity but reduces Trypho to an inauthentic interlocutor whom Justin dreams up to advance his argument. As Burton Mack writes, “Trypho the Jew is an implausible fictional character serving as a straight man for Justin’s preachments, chastisements, and tirades against the Jews” (267). The same bit of conversation quoted above from the Dialogue could be used in support of this argument. Justin could have written the “out of one’s mind” exchange as an excuse to chastise and silence a Jewish character. In addition, there are large blocks of text--spanning whole chapters--in which Trypho never speaks and is not even mentioned. Such blocks of text quote extensively from the Bible--there are whole pages, for example, in which chapters of Isaiah are quoted verbatim. Frankly, this alleged dialogue often functions more like a monologue. I am therefore more inclined toward the “straw man” camp than the historical camp. Trypho barely has a voice in the Dialogue, which is not to say that he does not have a voice at all--it is simply that he literally does not speak often, does not speak particularly compellingly, and certainly never speaks as voluminously as Justin speaks. Justin is also not afraid to insult both Trypho and the Jewish people, calling
the Jews foolish, hardhearted, sly, treacherous, and evil all in the space of one section of one chapter (Dialogue 123).

Interestingly, despite all of Justin’s insults, Trypho treats Justin amicably, referring to him as “my friend” (Dialogue 63). This strikes me as, at the very least, unrealistic--why would Trypho have continued his conversation with Justin after sustaining so many insults? Such niceties in the Dialogue lends further support to the anti-historical camp because it shows that Trypho has very little integrity--he is literally acting as a straw man: a character and in fact caricature who is intentionally represented so as to be defeated easily in an argument. Indeed, Trypho makes numerous concessions to his opponent, admitting variously that the name “Joshua” is actually Jesus’ name (meaning that the scripture that Justin has cited in reference to Joshua as Jesus was all correct) and that all Justin’s Isaian quotations do refer to the Christ. The only position he steadily refuses to accept is that the Christ was crucified--such a violent end seems shameful to him. In other words, Trypho ultimately supports nearly every argument that Justin has made so far. He does stand strong against Justin’s insistence that Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah, but on the other points--the scriptural references and the eventual messiah’s name--Trypho gives in. Of course, Justin wants his reader to believe that Trypho is a historically real person with whom Justin had the debate recounted in the Dialogue. Rhetorically, however, Justin needs to make Trypho into a caricature of a contemporary Jew, because it means that Trypho cannot fight back.

Trypho does not travel alone. He has an unspecified number of companions who are also refugees from the Bar Kokhba revolt. He is different from them in
personality, as they are much less willing than he to listen to Justin Martyr’s pontifications. Twice in the text, they actually laugh at Justin. The first time they laugh is in the eighth chapter of the Dialogue, after Justin says that if they have any regard for their welfare they will convert. The second time they laugh follows soon after the first and is much more dramatic: after Justin says he will prove that Christianity is not groundless, “Trypho’s companions once again broke out in such loud, rude, and raucous laughter that I got up and was ready to walk away. But Trypho seized me by my cloak and said he wouldn’t let me go until I had kept my promise [to defend the Christians]” (Dialogue 9.2) So why would Justin write in a moment of insulting laughter if it hadn’t actually happened? I would argue that it mitigates Trypho’s lack of opposition to create a more authentic representation of the Jewish position. Justin realizes that many Jews would not be as acquiescent as he writes Trypho to be, and includes these moments to create a well-rounded Jewish position. Still, although he includes the laughter he also moderates it with Trypho’s overblown eagerness to listen. It is unclear in the text why Trypho is so eager to listen, to the point where he refuses to let Justin go. His inexplicable eagerness, which exceeds mere curiosity, is another factor that makes me think that he is not historically real. It is a little too convenient.

Both of these camps have merit. The “historical Jew” camp lends authenticity to the figure of Trypho, which leads the reader to take Trypho seriously and to examine his words and actions as if they have weight. The “straw man” camp when taken too far pushes us to disregard Trypho even when Trypho actually has something to say. The “straw man” camp, however, is a little more realistic
considering Trypho’s air time and the concessions that he makes. One must navigate disbelieving Trypho’s actual existence while still giving him credit for what he does say and represent in the text. On the one hand, we have a few things: Trypho’s existence in the *Dialogue* as an oppositional figure, the laughter of Trypho’s companions at Justin, and the fact that Trypho and his companions are never converted to Christianity. On the other hand, we have Trypho’s silence and concessions. This quotation from Lieu is interesting because although it posits that Trypho is more than a straw man, she treats him as such: in describing how Trypho is useful to Justin she makes Trypho into a tool that Justin uses for the furtherment of his argument. According to Lieu in this quotation, Trypho is not a fully-developed person because he does not exist outside of Justin’s use for him. Still, he is not a total straw man because he does more than nod along: he is actually useful for the project of furthering Justin’s arguments. The nuance remains. Trypho is more than a straw man but less than a historically real person. He is an authentic character.

Another move that adds nuance to Trypho’s existence is that despite Justin’s clear hope that Trypho convert (as explicitly stated in *Dialogue* 8.3), Trypho never does. The *Dialogue* goes for about two hundred pages without Justin’s desired result. The text ends with Justin addressing Trypho and his friends: “I beg of you to put your every effort into this great struggle for your own salvation, and to embrace the Christ of almighty God in preference to your teachers” (*Dialogue* 142.2). So the text ends with a plea for Trypho’s conversion, but no actual conversion. Trypho demonstrates some autonomy by remaining Jewish. One might also read this resistance another way: Justin could have written the *Dialogue* sans conversion to demonstrate the
obduracy of the Jewish people, as if to say, “of course the Jew did not convert--Jews are too stubborn and don’t know what is good for them.” Justin literally calls the Jews stubborn in chapter 39, so it is no stretch to say that Trypho’s unshakeable Jewishness is a result of his stubbornness. Although I view that as a positive quality, Justin clearly does not. Trypho’s lack of conversion makes it seem like the point of the Dialogue is not actually the conversion of the Jews but an apology for Christianity.

Trypho as a character is therefore beside the point: he is more of a prop Justin uses to explain Christianity than a fully realized character.

The “historical Jew” camp and the “straw man” camp, when merged, create a meaningful picture of Trypho: someone who is a tool of Justin but too stubborn to fully submit; a sketchily realized character who nevertheless has some opinions of his own; and a representation of the Jews who does not represent all Jews, including but not limited to his own companions. What we end up with is a slightly enigmatic figure of Jew, someone who lives on the border of reality and unreality—categories as unstable and processual as those of Judaism and Christianity.

I think it is worthwhile to ask the basic question of: why is Trypho in the text at all? Why would Justin write such an enigmatic figure? He could have cast Trypho as an easy opponent to defeat, or on the contrary a truly worthy opponent, but instead he chose a middle ground. I would like to suggest that Justin uses Trypho both as an example and as a foil. Both of these set up Trypho in opposition to Justin, and by extension, Judaism in opposition to Christianity. Justin often treats The Jew as an enemy who is an enemy because the Jew hates the Christian, not necessarily because the Christian hates the Jew. In chapter 17, following Justin’s accusation that the Jews
killed Christ, Justin writes: “The other nations have not treated Christ and us, his followers, as unjustly as you Jews have, who, indeed, are the very instigators of that evil opinion they have of the Just One and of us, his disciples” (Dialogue 17.1). Not only did the Jews treat Christ and his disciples badly, but they are the originators of the negative opinion that other Gentiles have about Christians. Justin repeats this assertion in chapter 93, saying that “But, as for you Jews, you have never manifested friendship or love either toward God, or toward the prophets, or toward one another, but you have shown yourselves always to be idolaters and murderers of the just; in fact you even did violence to Christ himself” (93.4) This is harsh language, language that Justin is not afraid to address to Trypho. Justin calls the Jews idolaters, while not specifying what idols they worship, which is to say that they do not even perform their own religion appropriately, let alone treat others the way they are supposed to be treated. It is odd that Trypho, at these moments, did not get up and leave the conversation but remained in the face of this anti-Jewish rhetoric. Trypho as a character seems content to act as Justin’s enemy. Justin sets it up to seem as if the hatred he describes between Jews and Christians is not instigated by him: instead, it is the inevitable result of the Jews’ actions.

The Dialogue with Trypho is, among other things, an anti-Jewish text. Still, it is an anti-Jewish text whose titular character is a Jew. In making the only other named character in the Dialogue a Jew, Justin privileges the Jewish voice. Finally, then, we must ask: why would Justin make a Jew an important character while simultaneously attacking him?
The roles of example and foil are easily conflatable, but for these purposes, they ought to be distinguished. As an example, Trypho embodies the kind of person the Christians are not or should not be—legalistic idolaters, for instance—and in so doing, he acts as a foil for Justin himself. If the Jews misread scripture, then Justin is the one who knows how to read. If the Jews have an obsolete covenant, then Justin is calling our attention to a replacement. This construction, however, works both ways. Justin works hard to create Christianity as a unified philosophy within the text, with interpretations and stances on concepts such as the unity of God, the divinity of Christ, and the virginal birth. He is only able to articulate these stances in response to Trypho’s questioning. So in that sense, Judaism is useful to constructing Christianity—but how does Justin also construct Judaism? In a sense, Jews are negatively defined. They do not believe in the virginal birth, or Jesus as the Messiah. They are not necessarily the anti-Christians, because to say that would be to play into the established dichotomy articulated by Lieu (of the Jews as the dark negative of Christianity), but the Jews are the not-Christians. Christianity and Judaism are not as different as someone like Justin would have us believe—but they are obviously still different despite it all. This difference, Boyarin argues, is not necessarily inherent to the religions, but rather it is co-constructed. Justin’s Christians believe that Jesus is the messiah? Then Trypho’s Jews do not. And so on. Neither Judaism nor Christianity exist on its own; their relationship is defined through texts like the Dialogue.

The Jew’s personality too is important to Justin as a way of boundary-definition (this is how Jews act and this is how Christians act) but Trypho’s actions
and Justin’s description of the Jew often conflict. In chapter 39 Justin says “It is small wonder;’ I continued, ‘that you Jews hate us Christians who have grasped the meaning of these truths, and take you to task for your stubborn prejudice” (39.1). Interestingly, if the Jews are prejudiced, stubborn, and hate Christians then Trypho cannot be taken as a representative Jew. Trypho displays contradictory qualities to what Justin would consider a Jew. He is curious, willing to listen, and patient with Justin’s insults. Trypho asks constructive questions and placates Justin when Trypho’s friends laugh at him. Justin’s conception of the Jew and the actual Jew before him do not line up. So why is it important for Justin that his Jew be such a negative figure? This could be an instance of boundary-definition—it does not matter to Justin what Jews are actually like as long as he can have an enemy to project his ideas on to. It is still puzzling why Justin would write such an obliging character when he portrays Jews to be the exact opposite. Judith Lieu argues that there is “little reason to deny that Justin engaged in such a debate with many a Jew--Trypho himself, probably with good reason, suspects that he had done so on several occasions in the past” (104). The passage that Lieu references is chapter 50.1, in which Trypho commends Justin for being so ready to answer his questions and says that it must be because Justin had previously had these conversations (presumably with other Jews). So it could be that Trypho is actually an accurate composite picture of Justin’s contemporary Jews. It is impossible to say if Justin actually did meet with the Jews of his time or if the Jews would have been obliging or combative. Trypho’s unknowability is therefore magnified, because there is no way of knowing how authentic a character he is. To Justin, Trypho represents both the obstinate negative
picture of the Jew and the interested listener--Trypho contains both images of the Jew.

Ultimately, Trypho does not represent every Jew of his time. There is no way that he could, because he is only one person, but also because even in the text we can see a difference of opinions on how to treat Justin between Trypho and his companions. Trypho’s companions laugh at Justin; Trypho listens quietly. In chapter 9.3, two of Trypho’s friends leave the scene before the conversation really begins: “two of his friends, joking and making fun of our earnestness, went their way.” So no argument could be made that Trypho functions as a good representative of the Jews, as we get a wider sample size of Jewish behavior in the text. However, Trypho is a representative Jew from the Christian perspective: that is to say that he is what Justin wants him to be. He is passive enough to listen to Justin but does not convert to Christianity at the end of the text, which demonstrates his stubbornness.

The text ends, on its 212th meandering page, with Trypho’s admission that he has “derived great pleasure from our association” and request that Justin “remember [Trypho and his companions] as friends when you depart” (142.1). This is an altogether pleasant and frictionless farewell on the part of Trypho, but Justin cannot resist slipping in one last plea. “I can wish you no greater blessing than this, gentlemen, that, realizing the wisdom is given to every man through this way [the Christian way of life], you also may one day come to believe entirely as we do that Jesus is the Christ of God” (142.3). This alleged blessing shows that although Justin wanted Trypho to convert from the beginning of the conversation (in chapter 8.2), by the end of their two-day dialogue Trypho does not. He retains some sort of autonomy.
Is this because Justin wanted to demonstrate that the Jews were stubborn and would not convert? I.e., is it meant to demonstrate a personality trait of the Jews? Or is it reflective of conversations that Justin actually had with Jews, in which the Jew would not convert? This conclusion makes it seem as if the point, or at least one of the points, of the *Dialogue* is to convert the Jews, but Justin fails. But are we to take it that the *Dialogue* is a failure? No, because the impetus behind the *Dialogue* is not necessarily directed at the first-level audience, the Jews. It is directed at non-Christian gentiles and at Christians, in order to persuade people toward Christianity and provide a text for Christian self-definition.

What is “the Jew?” The singular figure of the Jew is a rhetorical formulation imposed by the Christian thinker, in this case Justin Martyr, onto the Jewish people. This formulation is necessary for Justin as a part of his project of the creation of Christianity. The figure of the Jew exists in contrast to Justin’s Christianity. As we can see by the divergent behavior displayed by Trypho and his companions, there is no “Jew” as a singular--only Jews as a plural, that is to say a multifaceted, complicated body of a community. That is not to say that an archetype of the Jew does not exist. Certainly it exists for Justin--to him the Jew he has in his mind is stubborn and wrongheaded, but even he acknowledges that the Jews that he encounters can be obliging and curious. The authentic Jewish person, as demonstrated by Trypho, is known for their polythetic nature as J.Z. Smith would have it--Jews share characteristics without one characteristic being necessarily essential to their Jewishness. This applies even to Jewish personalities, as we can see with Trypho and his companions. But even if the type exists, there is no singular model that one can
demonstrate as the ideal or perfect Jew. There is no such thing as the essential Jew--there are only individual Jews, a plurality of personalities and identities.
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