Fifteen volumes long, Against the Christians was written by the Roman pagan Porphyry circa 280 and was an educated man’s studied attack on Christian theology. An exceedingly powerful and successful work, it and commentaries on it were condemned by the imperial church in 448 and burned. Only remnants which were contained in books that were primarily about other matters have survived until the present. As you will see, Porphyry used a literal interpretation of the Bible, a scathing wit, and an attack on Christian’s intelligence, integrity, and morals (piety, loyalty to the state, and character) to undermine the new, up-start religion, Christianity.

This book is divided into 2 parts: part one contains translations of Porphyry’s writings while part two contains Hoffman’s analysis of Porphyry’s writings.

1) Referring to Mark 16:18, Porphyry writes: "In another passage Jesus says: "These signs shall witness to those who believe: they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. And if they drink any deadly drug, it will hurt them in no way." Well then: the proper thing to do would be to use this process as a test for those aspiring to be priests, bishops or church officers. A deadly drug should be put in front of them and [only] those who survive drinking it should be elevated in the ranks [of the church].

If there are those who refuse to submit to such a test, they may as well admit that they do not believe in the things that Jesus said. For if it is a doctrine of [Christian] faith that men can survive being poisoned or heal the sick at will, then the believer who does not do such things either does not believe them, or else believes them so feebly that he may as well not believe them." page 50

2) Referring to Matthew 17:20, Porphyry writes: "A saying similar to this runs as follows: "Even if you have faith no bigger than a mustard seed, I tell you in truth that if you say to this mountain, Be moved into the sea - even that will be possible for you." It seems to follow that anyone who is unable to move a mountain by following these directions is unworthy to be counted among the faithful. so there you are: not only the ordinary Christians, but even bishops and priests, find themselves excluded on the basis of such a saying." page 51

3) Porphyry writes: "The God concept with which Israel began was basically polytheistic (Exodus 20:3). God was limited in power (Exodus 4:24) and local in character (Exodus 18:5; 33:3: 14-16). The most that could be claimed for yahweh was that as a national god he protected his people from neighboring peoples and their gods. His throne was on the high mountain; storm and volcanic phenomena were taken as manifestations of his presence (Exodus 19:16-19; 33:9f; 40:34-38). The transition from desert to settled life on the land (believed to be his gift to a "chosen" people) produces a change in the character of this God paralleling the change in people’s fortunes. Yahweh became the god of the armies of Israel, a was God - the God of hosts - who aided Israel in the subjugation of neighboring peoples or the defense of territory already taken. His other face, if not benevolent, was less severe: as giver of land, he was also the ball (fertilizer) of the soil and took responsibility for its fertility and for the rain, as well as for the famines that were occasionally used to..."
winnow the population and the floods that might be sent to winnow the population and the floods that might be sent to wash away the unrighteous, "as in the time of Noah" (Gen. 6:1f).

As revealed in his political dealings with his chosen people, Yahweh was fickle. Peace and security are less thematic in the history of Israel than political instability, warfare and religious apostasy."

page 96

4) Porphyry writes: "Apparently Jesus declared the Pharisees beyond the scope of salvation for their interpretations of the law (Matthew 5:20), which tended to focus on technical requirements rather than personal conversion." page 117

5) "Jewish tradition and later pagan critics knew Jesus as the son of a woman named Miriam or Miriamne, who had been violated and become pregnant by a Roman soldier whose name often appears a Panthera in talmudic and midrashic sources. The "single parent" tradition, if not the story of Jesus' illegitimacy, is still apparent in Mark, the earliest gospel (Mark 6:3), as is an early attempt to show Jesus' freedom from the blemish of his background (Mark 3:33-4)." page 122

"To counter the reports of Jesus' illegitimacy more than to secure his divine stature, his mother was declared the recipient of a singular divine honor: Jesus was the son of Mary - a virgin - "through the holy spirit" (Matthew 1:20). As is typical of his writing, Matthew comes closest to revealing the argumentative purpose of his birth story and its links to Jewish polemic against Christian belief in his reference to Joseph's suspicion of Mary's pregnancy (Matthew 1:19). He is also careful in the birth story and elsewhere to provide evidence and proofs from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible - as a running narrative." page 122

6) Regarding the Biblical prophecies concerning Jesus: "Porphyry notes that what is said in Hebrew prophecy could as well apply to a dozen other figures, dead or yet to come, as to Jesus." page 131

7) "As the mission progressed with its apocalyptic teaching persistently an issue in debates with itinerant Jewish teachers, the churches developed a variety of strategies for dealing with the delay:

the gentiles would be converted before the last days (Mark 13:10)

the power of pagan Rome and of the emperor would decline before God's son could be revealed in glory (Romans 16:20, Thess 2:2-10)

Jesus himself had professed ignorance about the time of this coming (Mark13:32), or had refused to speculate about the signs of the last days (Mark 8:11-12)

the kingdom of God was already working "secretly"and was being progressively realized through the success of the Christian mission (Luke 12:49-56; 17:22-37; Matthew 38-42).

It is best to regard these rationales as defensive and experimental. Jewish apocalyptic tradition itself had been mystically vague, studiously mysterious with respect both to the "timing" of the apocalyptic events and to the identity of the son of man." pages 135-136

8) "According to the early critics Tacitus, Pliny, and Aristides, Christianity was to be judged according to the unwillingness of its adherents to compromise. They were superstitious fanatics given to outpourings of enthusiasm, or they occasionally indulged in sexual orgies in association with their eucharistic banquets.
With the satires of Lucan, the moral critique of the church enters a new phase. Born at Samosata (Syria) around 120, Lucian regarded Christianity as a form of sophistry aimed at an unusually gullible class of people - a criticism later exploited by Celsus. The members of the new sect worship a "crucified sophist," an epithet that suggests the influence of Jewish views of the church on pagan observers. Like Galen, Lucian imagines the Christians as men and women with little time, patience or ability for philosophy, and who are willing to enthrone new leaders and gurus at the drop of a hat. To make his point, Lucian invents a mock Cynic-turned-Christian priest, Peregrinus Proteus, who dabbles in a thousand different sects and philosophies before becoming an "expert" in "the astonishing religion of Christianity. . . .

Lucian's "hero" is a shyster - the first example in literature of an anything-for-profit evangelist who bilks his congregation. . . . For all its looseness of detail, Lucian's portrait of Peregrinus can be said to reflect a popular view of the Christians at the close of the second century." page 145 - 146

9) "In his comments, Celsus attempts impartiality: He is no admirer of Judaism ['runaway Egyptian slaves who have never done anything worth mentioning'] but acknowledges the antiquity of Jewish teaching and juxtaposes it with the newness of Christian doctrine. He thinks Christian teachers are no better than the begging priests of Cybele and the shysters of popular religions. Importantly, Celsus does not dwell on the impurity of Christian ritual (though he alludes to it), but emphasizes that Christians are sorcerers like their founder, that they lack patriotism, and that every Christian church is an illegal association which exists not because their God arranges it (thus Tertullian), but because the emperor does not choose to stamp them out entirely.

The True Word or True Doctrine of Celsus was divided into two sections. In the first, Celsus presents a Jew as the antagonist to Christianity; in the second, he argues his own case. The strategy seems intended to show that Christianity is opposed not only by the philosophers of the "pagan" empire, but also by those with whom the Christians claims to have the closest affinity. In this way, the church could be seen to have neither the wisdom of the philosophical schools nor the antiquity of custom and law to its credit. Its teaching was merely eccentric -sectarian in the mean sense of the word. In his hierarchy of civilization, the Egyptian were beast-worshipers, the Jews infinitely worse in their religious practices, and the Christians renegade Jews "whom their miserable countrymen despised and hated." What would have aroused official distaste for Christianity, however, was Celsus' suggestion that the Christians were "breaking the religious peace of the world." With an outlaw as their head, they were rebels by nature and tradition.

Celsus' "Jew" is strident in his dialogue with the Christian teacher on the failure of the life of Jesus, a theme to which Porphyry will return over a century later. That Celsus would emphasize this theme is unsurprising: we have already noted that it was at the heart of the earliest Jewish-Christian "dialogue" and their fictional reenactments by teachers like Justin. Celsus' "Jew" is, however, a more worthy opponent that Justin's. In the pagan dialogue, the Jew lectures the Christian; in Justin's the Christian lectures - and defeats - the Jew.

Familiar slanders resurface in the True Doctrine: Jesus was the son of a woman named Mary by a Roman soldier named Panthera. . . . The resurrection is rejected on the grounds that the only witnesses were "women half crazy from fear and grief, and possibly one other from the same band of charlatans, who dreamed it all up or saw what he wanted to see - or more likely, simply wanted to astonish his friends with a good tale." pages 148-149
10) "Church fathers from Eusebius to Augustine were intimidated by Porphyry’s challenges and arguments - so much so that his worthiest opponent (Macarius Magnes) is not an especially articulate one, wholly unable to play the role of Origen to his Celsus. [Origen wrote Contra Celsum, the best classical refutation of Celsus' True Doctrine.] Constantine in the fourth century and Theodosius in the fifth decided that the only way to overcome Porphyry’s objections was to put his books to the torch. Thus, the extent of his writings against Christianity is unknown." page 155

11) "The process of disputation (propositions followed by refutation) was the Socratic means of arriving at truth. Christian teachers such as Justin, Origen, and Minucius Felix had long since affected this style of literary opposition, though their opponents were either dead (Celsus) or fictionalized (Justin’s Trypho), thus rendering them more amenable to persuasion." pages 156-157

12) "The "end" of knowledge is truth, though one could also call it a "god." This "god" is not the Christian god, nor even the Christian idea of God. Theologians from the second century onward had misread Plato (and would later misread Plotinus and Porphyry) on this fundamental point." page 159

13) "Porphyry's "God," therefore, has no need to save because he is not affected by sin. This is not to say that the philosopher fails to recognize a category of actions which are displeasing to God. But these actions are expressions of active failure and not of a passive genetic deficiency in a God-created race of men, as Augustine theorized. God strengthens those who practice virtue and "noble deeds" (Marcella 16), but he does not (cannot) punish those who fail to practice virtue or who do things contrary to virtue (Marcella 17), since the divine nature can only work for the good. Accordingly, the classical Christian theodicy does not arise in Porphyry's thought; he thinks it foolish to speculate, on Christian premises, about an all-good God, creator of an originally good world, over which, through lack of foresight (omniscience) or power (omnipotence) evil reigns and in which he is obliged to intervene time and time again. The puzzles of Christian theology are non-puzzles for Porphyry: The pieces comprise not a picture but a muddle, and can only be slotted together by trimming edges and omitting embarrassingly contorted segment. This, however, does not prevent Christian priests and teachers from selling their wares as a kind of philosophy. While religious observances -pagan or Christian - are not actually harmful, they encourage the simple-minded in a belief that God has need of them. The only true priests are the wise of the world, not the "fools praying and offering sacrifice". The only truly sinful man is "he who holds the opinions of the multitudes concerning God" (Marcella 17), and those who think that tears, prayers, and sacrifices can alter the divine purpose. The Christian god fails, in Porphyry's view, because he epitomizes false opinion, baseless hopes. He is changeable, fickle, unpredictable. His priests preach "mere unreasoning faith [in a God] who is gratified and won over by libations and sacrifices," without perceiving that men making exactly the same request receive different answers to their prayers (Marcella 23). Worse, human beings seem to believe that their basest actions can be erased by prayer, or, caught in the web of their illogic, they become haters of the world and the flesh and mistakenly accuse the flesh of being the source of all evil (Marcella 29). "Salvation" for Porphyry cannot begin with self-hatred or the abnegation of the flesh. In its demythologized form, it is simply the "soul's" quest for wisdom as expressed in the pursuit of virtue - an acknowledgment of redemption being natural to the soul because of the soul's affinity to God. Porphyry does not think of the body as vile; he thinks of it as the discardable "outer man," whose satisfaction cannot be a final end or goal because it is corruptible, limited, and earthbound. The body defines creaturely existence and not the soul's quest." pages 162-164

14) "In a devastating critique which has not survived, but which has evoked plenty of reaction from his critics, Porphyry began Against the Christians with an attack on the Christian view of prophecy. Although Platonism had actually inspired the allegorical interpretation of prophecy by teachers such as Origen, the philosopher’s nemesis, Porphyry condemned the use of allegory as a
means of explaining away difficulties and contradictions in the biblical text. It has even been suggested that Porphyry drew some of his polemic directly from Origen's book on the difficulties of interpreting scripture, the Stromatesis. All he had to do was to "accept Origen's negative statements . . . and reject the deeper spiritual meanings" that Origen found for them . . . . Despite his contempt for allegory - a feature which shines through rather clearly in Macarius' fragments - the philosopher was more concerned with chronology than interpretation. He denied the extreme antiquity of the Moses story, the traditional dating of the law, and the ascription of the Book of Daniel to the period before the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C.E." page 166

15) "Furthermore, we know from Augustine (City of God) that Porphyry complained of the influx of educated women into the church; in his Philosophy from Oracles, written around 263, he laments (en masque as Apollo, the god of enlightenment) that it is almost impossible to win back anyone who has converted to Christianity: it is easier, he says, to write words on water than to use argument on a Christian. They simply cannot understand the folly of worshipping as a god a man who had died as a criminal." page 168

16) "The truth seems to be that Porphyry regarded Jesus as a criminal, justly punished for his crimes by the power of the Roman state, and hence undeserving of the status of hero or of the divinity conferred upon him by his misguided followers.

Whatever Porphyry may have thought of Jesus, the bulk of his criticism was reserved for the evangelists, the apostles of Jesus - especially Peter - and the Christian mission epitomized by Paul. . . . Macarius' "pagan" deals with most of the same subjects we know, from Augustine's Harmony, to have attracted Porphyry's criticism: that the apostles fabricated genealogies, that there are discrepancies concerning the time of Jesus' death, that Jesus had not claimed to be divine, and that the teaching of Jesus was obscure and self-contradictory. " page 171

17) "A general view of Porphyry's work yields the following picture: Beginning with an introduction in which the ambitions of the Christians were repudiated ("they want riches and glory . . . they are renegades seeking to take control" . . . , Porphyry went on to show their unworthiness. They accepted but misunderstood the "myths" and oracles of the Jews, then turned around and altered these to make them even more contemptible . . . . Their religion had neither a national anchor nor a rational basis; they required initiates to accept everything on blind faith. Moreover, the initiates themselves were the worst sort of people, moral invalids who (cf. Celsus) found security in their common weakness . . . . The Christians had proved that they cared nothing for those who had lived in the era before the coming of Jesus: these could not be saved.

The Christians taught absurd doctrines about the suffering of God or the suffering of a some of the supermen god. They also prayed for the destruction of the world, which they hated because they were hated by it - and believed that at its end they alone would be raised bodily from the dead . . . . The sky would be destroyed and the ruler of the world would be cast into an outer darkness, as a tyrant might be driven out by a good king. By such thinking the Christians showed contempt for God. How could god be angry? How, if all powerful, as even some of their teachers said, could his property have been stolen in the first place?

After attacking the chronology of the Old Testament . . . and arguing against Christian allegorical interpretation, Porphyry took up the subject of the writers of the gospels and epistles, whom he regarded as ignorant, clumsy, and deceptive. The fact that he wages his assault chiefly against the "pillar" apostles, Peter and Paul, suggests that he regarded the destruction of their reputations essential to wiping out the claims of an emergent Catholic Christianity . . . . Thus Paul himself had called Christian believers "wretches" (1 Cor. 6:9f) and promised his followers the resuscitation of the
"rotten, stinking corpses of men" (cf. Augustine, *City of God* 22.27). As for Peter, he had been called "satan" even by Jesus, yet was entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of heaven . . . . The apostles proved themselves traitors, cowards, weaklings, and hypocrites - even in the accounts written by them.

The Jesus allegedly praised for piety and wisdom by Hecate in Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*, finds no grace in *Against the Christians*. His parables are trivial and incomprehensible. They are "hidden from the wise but revealed to the babes" (Matthew 11:25), a state of affairs which encourages ignorance and unreasonableness. Jesus and his followers represent a lethargic ethic of the status quo, the very opposite of the Greek quest for moral excellence; indeed, his blessing on the poor and downtrodden and his repudiation of the rich make moral effort impossible. Had he not taught that selling everything and giving it to the poor (Matthew 19:21), thereby becoming a lout and a beggar and a burden on others, was the height of Christian perfection? . . . .

Furthermore, Jesus did not follow his own advice. His show of weakness in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest was disgraceful: having preached fearlessness in time of persecution to his disciples, he exhibited only fear and trembling at the moment of his capture. When Jesus stood before his accusers, he spoke like a guilty man, not like a hero on the order of Apollonius of Tyana who had been hauled before Domitian . . . . Had he been a god on the order of the ancient heroes, he would have flung himself from a parapet of the temple, he would have appeared after his death to haunt Herod and Pilate - or, indeed, to the Senate and People of Rome, to prove he had risen from the dead. That would have convinced everyone of the truth of Christian belief, and it would have spared his followers the punishment they now suffered for their beliefs. In short, had Jesus cared for his followers he could have taken care to spare them their martyrdom."

pages 172-173