

Adversus Iudaeos

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The body of literature “against the Jews” may refer narrowly to specific treatises so entitled (by their authors or later editors) that responded to real or imagined Jewish accusations against Christ, Christians, and Christianity. Texts entitled *Adversus Iudaeos* were written by, or later attributed to, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, and Theodoret of Cyrus. Although varying in format (from sermon to formal treatise to lists of *testimonia*, or “proof-texts,” drawn from the Old Testament), these treatises shared common arguments: Jesus’ messiahship according to scripture, God’s repudiation of Jews as the chosen people, and the rejection of Jewish Law in light of a new, spiritual revelation.

Adversus Iudaeos literature may also refer more broadly to any text (including martyrologies, letters, literary dialogues, apologetic works, and biblical commentaries) that aggressively differentiated Christianity from Judaism to establish the former’s superiority. Peter Schäfer traced many of the anti-Jewish themes found in Christian *adversus Iudaeos* literature to pre-Christian polemical works against Jews, particularly Egyptian Hellenistic writings. These polemics anticipated later Christian accusations of Jewish exclusivism and misanthropy (Schäfer 1998; see *APION*; *MANETHO*, *EGYPTIAN HISTORIAN*; *JOSEPHUS*). John Gager, however, pointed out the ambivalent attitudes of Greeks and Romans toward the venerable, yet odd, customs of Jews (Gager 1985). Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that the attitudes of *adversus Iudaeos* literature are not only unique to Christian thought, but were theologically embedded in the earliest layers of Christianity (Ruether 1974).

Early texts, such as the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews and the noncanonical *Epistle of Barnabas* (see *BARNABAS*, *EPISTLE OF*), emphasized a supersessionist theology: Christianity is the

“new Israel” chosen by God over the Jews, with a new, universal interpretation of the old covenant and scriptures. MELITO OF SARDIS, in a later second-century homily, *On Easter*, introduced additional themes that would become common in *adversus Iudaeos* literature: the culpability of Jews for the murder of Jesus, the continued persecution of Christians, and the persistent refusal of Jews to accept the spiritual truth of their own scriptures. The idea of Jews as persecutors was taken up in several early Christian martyrologies, such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

By the second century, the dialogue emerged as a potent form of *adversus Iudaeos* literature, framing the dispute between Jews and Christians as a literal debate. Celsus (a second-century pagan critic of Christianity) referred to a now-lost *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus* that likely influenced later Jewish–Christian dialogues (cited by Origen *C. Cels.* 4.52). Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* portrayed Justin the Christian philosopher in a two-day debate with Trypho, a refugee from the Bar Kokhba revolt (see *JUSTIN MARTYR*). Much of the *Dialogue* consisted of debates over biblical interpretation, such as the famous interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the virgin birth. Justin chastised Trypho for not recognizing in Jesus the fulfillment of his own scriptures, and intransigently sticking to overly literal interpretation of ritual laws. The common patrimony of the Old Testament was frequently at issue in *adversus Iudaeos* texts.

Some scholars suggest that real debates between Jews and Christians lie behind *adversus Iudaeos* literature (Simon 1986: 173–4). Tertullian and ORIGEN in the third century both referred to public dialogues between Jews and Christians (*Tert. Adv. Iud.* 1.1; Origen *C. Cels.* 1.45, 1.55). However, later literary dialogues, such as the *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus*, the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*, and the *Teaching of Jacob, Recently Baptized*, were much more stylized. David Olster argued that, in the Byzantine period, the “imagined Jews” of these later literary dialogues served

to embody anxieties over power and loss for seventh-century Christians (Olster 1994). It is likely that, whatever “real world” conflicts prompted the production of *adversus Iudaeos* texts, they functioned throughout the early Christian period to channel and process internal concerns as well as respond to perceived attacks from Jews (see APOLOGISTS).

Some anti-Jewish Christian writing paradoxically relied on Jewish sources, exemplifying the complex of fears and desires that characterized mainstream Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism throughout this period (see Jacobs 2008). Both Origen (d. ca. 254) and JEROME (d. ca. 420) produced voluminous biblical commentaries in which they simultaneously decried Jewish interpretation as overly “fleshly” and “literal” and cited Jewish instructors who taught them Hebrew language and rabbinic midrash. By construing Jews as inherently scriptural, Christians could simultaneously demonize Jews and make a place for them in a Christian world. Such doubled appreciation and repudiation of Jews reached its pinnacle in the so-called “witness theology” of Augustine (d. 430): Jews must remain in Christendom, marginalized and inferior, in order to bear witness to the truth of Christian scriptures and their superiority (*De civ. D.* 18.46).

Some *adversus Iudaeos* texts, such as the homilies of John Chrysostom (d. ca. 407) or treatises of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), portrayed Judaism as a theological threat hovering at the margins of Christian society, threatening to infect the Christian religious body with error. Well into the fifth century, it seems, many Christians consulted Jews to calculate the date of Easter (decried as so-called Quartodecimanism) or attempted to integrate the practice of Jewish Law into Christian life (decried as so-called Ebionism). Daniel Boyarin has suggested that the social reality of “Judaean-Christianity” may have been much messier on the ground than our sources suggest: *adversus Iudaeos* literature, on this reading, seeks to impose clean and utter distinction where it did not exist (Boyarin 2004).

The fierce rhetoric of *adversus Iudaeos* literature was highly effective. Scholars continue to debate whether *adversus Iudaeos* literature reflects a social reality of religious competition and vibrancy throughout the ancient period or vigorous internal anxiety and debate (Wilken 1983; Simon 1986; Taylor 1995; Jacobs 2008: 170–3). By the Middle Ages, the Christian image of the Jew – intransigent, murderous, misanthropic, diabolical, and deicidal – had hardened into the chilling stereotype that would eventually feed into the racialized anti-Semitism of the modern era.

SEE ALSO: Ebionites; Moses, Jewish and pagan image of.

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