

## **“Anti-Semitism in Patristic Literature”**

Symposium “An End to Anti-Semitism”, Panel Bible and Christianity

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### ***Abstract***

Anti-Jewish polemic, sometimes very vehement and insulting, can be found in various writings of the patristic era: in treatises *Adversus Iudaeos* or so-called “dialogues” between a Christian and a Jew, but also in collections of testimonies, in homilies, didactic works, and in biblical commentaries. On the other hand, patristic interpreters of the Bible refer to Jewish sources of information, as do Origen and Jerome, or their biblical interpretation exhibits striking parallels to various forms of Jewish interpretation. Origen, for instance, owes much to Philo, and Ephrem the Syrian reads partly like a midrash. These parallels have often been noticed and explained in different manner. These biblical interpretations, however, also raise the question, how it is possible that authors at the same time patently display anti-Judaism and interpret biblical texts in a “Jewish” way or use “Jewish” methods of interpretation. In Origen’s dichotomic worldview, “Jewish” by definition means “non-Christian” and thus earthly, fleshly, vicious and the like. Jerome’s position is similar, perhaps less sophisticated. Ephrem the Syrian designates heretics as “Jews” or evaluates their teaching and praxis as “Jewish.” These examples show that in the construction of Christian identity in the first centuries CE Jews are identified as the absolute “other” of Christians and are thus depreciated and rejected. The nearer a group is to one’s own identity the more dangerous it is perceived. It seems that for most Christians in this time the boundaries between Jewish and Christian were not unambiguously clear. Patristic writings construct such boundaries and draw a sharp line between “us” and “them,” between the own Christian identity and the Jews as the others. Many of the topoi constructed by the church fathers soon became conventional and played a prominent role in later anti-Semitism. The first step to avoid perpetuation of these concepts is to critically reveal their way of constructing identity and its ongoing impact on contemporary thinking about Jews. Furthermore, alternative ways of defining identity have to be developed which do not think in dichotomic patterns, do not define identity in terms of uniformity and appreciate diversity.