

## Religious Polemics and Encounters in Late Antiquity

# Studies on the Children of Abraham

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# Religious Polemics and Encounters in Late Antiquity

*Boundaries, Conversions, and Persuasion*

*Edited by*

Timo Nisula  
Anni Maria Laato  
Pablo Irizar



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## Preface

Religion, as the Latin word *religio* (*re + ligare*) suggests following early Christian writers like Augustine and Lactantius, binds people together; yet so doing comes at the expense of severance. Religion therefore binds by dissociation, from whence oftentimes arise polemical encounters. With these broad considerations in mind, the present volume offers a modest contribution to the ever-pressing challenges of polemical religious encounters by turning to Late Antiquity as a source of insight into the emerging negotiation of Abrahamic religious identities in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Suffice it to turn on the news to realize that these remain as relevant today as they have been throughout history.

The present collection of studies, gathered in the *Studies on the Children of Abraham*, is based on contributions that were presented at the international meeting “Religious Polemics and Encounters in Late Antiquity: Boundaries, Conversions and Persuasion” at Åbo Akademi University (Turku, 23–24 August 2018). The meeting brought together scholars and research groups from several countries and universities, with the aim of addressing a plethora of topics related to encounters between different religious traditions in Late Antiquity. Several though not all of these encounters unfolded between the representatives of Abrahamic traditions. For this reason, some of the contributions in this volume address the lines of development and different phases in religious debates of these traditions.

How did the first Christian theologians develop their identities in relation and opposition to Judaism and in connection with a theology designed to explain the joint heritage of Abraham in these traditions? Since at the turn of the first century CE the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity were not clearly defined, *Antti Laato* considers the theology of Justin Martyr as a development of intra-Jewish discussions in the contribution *Abraham in Justin Martyr's Dialogue*. He argues that Justin follows Paul's (the Jewish apostle) interpretation of Abrahamic faith as per Galatians 3–4 and Romans 4. He thus proposes situating Justin Martyr's debate within as a discussion as to whether Jesus from Nazareth should be regarded as the Messiah or the Christ.

While some like the Apostle Paul look ahead to the development of Judaism with figures like Jesus, others such as Josephus turned to the past and the figure of Abraham and its role as the ancestor of the Hebrew people.

Thus, how did Jewish historiography present the figure of Abraham in the first century CE? *Erkki Koskenniemi* addresses this question in *Excellent, but how? Abraham in Josephus*, where he addresses contrasting views of Abra-

ham, either as a biblical character without much importance in Josephus, or acknowledging the classical importance accorded to Abraham. Within these contrasting views, Koskenniemi notes the eroding importance of Abraham in Josephus' portrayal. That Josephus omits the words of the covenant between God and Abraham, for example, is evidence that Josephus is not interested in a universalistic treatment of Abraham; rather, he emphasizes the particularistic role Abraham played world history as a figure of wisdom.

During the first centuries, as they searched for an authentic voice, Christian writers were involved in formulating and identifying ways of speaking. As representations of their own traditions, some perceived these voices as genuine representations, while others thought of them as disingenuous misrepresentations. A set of identity markers emerged for this purpose, one of the most important being that of a 'Gnostic'.

What did this title imply in the works of Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus of Lyon, for example? In *Illusory Polemics: Clement and Irenaeus on the Gnostics*, Sami Yli-Karjanmaa argues that attributing a negative portrayal of the 'Gnostics' to these authors lacks foundation. A crucial source of the use of the term in ancient literature, Clement applies the term only positively and is concerned only in criticizing those who falsely adopt the name. Carefully tending to the variant uses and denotations of the term in *Adversus haereses* by Irenaeus, Yli-Karjanmaa pleads for accuracy and transparency, which reveals the term, is honorific, rather than disparaging, akin to the use "orthodox" and not a synonym of "heretic."

The nascent Christian tradition was also keen to set boundaries against the learned standards and philosophies of the time, as Justin Martyr's example shows. This is the topic of *Sven-Olav Back's* contribution, titled *Justin Martyr as a Polemicist*. Back shows that in the context of interactions of Greco-Roman religion, the 'right' or 'sound' employment of reason functioned as an epistemological criterion to discern truth from falsehood. Accordingly, this illustrates how early Christians drew from the Stoic philosophical heritage to construe Christian doctrine as the proper understanding of revelation as per the Old Testament.

With the passing of time, Christian writers of Late Antiquity continued to developed polemical strategies and discourses oriented against the traditional Roman religions and philosophical schools. One such strategy consisted in depicting the somehow similar religious features of the other traditions as diabolic and perverse imitations of the Christian truth. In *Mimus Religionis, Mimicry, and Deviance: Late Antique Polemic Against Religious Others*, *Maijastina Kahlos* discusses how Lactantius and other early Christian writers, up to the 5th century, deploy tactics to portray traditional Greco-Roman religions



as perversions and forgeries of true religion. Foremost is the contrast between religion (*religio*) and superstition (*superstitio*), whereby the idolatrous worship of images in the latter, stands in contrast as a simulation of sacred images in the former.

Tertullian shapes Christian identity with apologetic motifs (embryonic ideas of religious freedom and polemical conceptions of Roman religion and rites) and with positive emphasis on one's own religious tradition and rites (prayer, baptism). This is the central contention of *Anni Maria Laato* in her study *Tertullian on Christian Converts and Clashes with the Pagan World*. Laato shows Tertullian demarks Christian and non-Christian boundaries in terms of doctrine (*lex credendi*), praxis (*lex orandi*) and everyday life (*lex agendi*). Laato argues that these hard lines of differentiation are mainly due to Tertullian's uncompromising commitment to the worship of the one God of Christianity.

Certain writers like Eusebius of Caesarea emphasized an exemplary ancestry by adapting polemical characterizations of philosophical schools such as Epicureanism. In Eusebius' case, this ancestry also included the 'Hebrews'. In *Worshipping a False Go(o)d: Praeparatio Evangelica 7.2–4 through the Lens of Anti-Epicurean Polemics*, *Siiri Toiviainen Rø* reads Eusebius' account of the emergence of idolatry from the vantage point of anti-Epicurean polemics. In so doing, she demonstrates that how Eusebius employs commonplace rhetorical strategies aimed at discrediting the views of the Epicureans while championing those of the Hebrews, thereby reordering a sense of belonging in terms of Christian/Greek learning.

A section of contributions dedicated to Augustine and North Africa in the 4th and 5th century offers fruitful ground to analyze diverse trends of polemics, conversions and persuasion. These contributions show that one of the dividing boundaries was intra-Christian, as evidenced by the extensive amount of texts and debates between the 'Donatist' and the 'Catholic' representatives of Christian tradition in North Africa.

One is led to inquire, whether this particular debate inspired Augustine to present a general method for debating theological controversies in his handbook of hermeneutics, *de doctrina christiana*. *Joseph Grabau* addresses this question in *Anti-Donatist Polemics and Biblical Hermeneutics: Questions of Ecclesiology in Augustine of Hippo's De Doctrina Christiana*. In examining the reception of the Donatist Tyconius in Augustine's handbook for preachers, Grabau examines the emergence of normative rhetorical strategies at the intersection of polemical discourse and praxis. Grabau shows that Augustine appeals to preaching exemplarity by demonstrating how to uphold truth in love as an effective pedagogical tool in hand with eloquence.

Apart from being a theoretician of polemical debates, Augustine was also a preacher and a practitioner, presenting his congregations with lively and entertaining fictitious dialogues on anti-Donatist themes. In *Talking with the Enemy: Fictitious Polemical Dialogues against the Donatists in Augustine's Sermones ad Populum*, Timo Nisula explores the rhetorical function of fictitious dialogue (*sermocinatio*) in advancing an anti-Donatist agenda. While Nisula shows these dialogues did not intend to achieve accurate depiction of opponents, but rather for the entertainment of the congregation, he also demonstrates how these carefully treated controversial issues. Augustine used *sermocinationes*, argues Nisula, as an instrument to train the congregation to respond and even persuade Donatist interlocutors, of the Catholic position.

That Augustine was no heartless inquisitor but very capable of considering the conditions of amiable persuasion and correction both in intimate and theoretical form on the one hand, and in more public and popular form on the other hand, is shown by analyses of Augustine's early dialogues and their approach on the emotion of shame in correcting errors. In his contribution *The Challenge of Shame for Philosophical Dialogue in Augustine's Early Writings*, Eetu Manninen examines the role of shame in Augustine's early dialogues, first as a hindrance to the acquisition of truth, and then as part of the itinerary to reach truth. Overcoming the inevitable shame of error and correction, Manninen demonstrates, is a crucial to reach truth in the early philosophical dialogues.

Not all polemical religious encounters resulted in straightforward outcomes of persuasion, for the boundaries of belonging emerged dynamically from negotiations in dialogical processes, as evidenced in Augustine's anti-Pelagian thrust in preaching on grace and merit. Pablo Irizar explores this phenomenon of dynamic identity formation in *The Grace of Merit and the Merit of Grace: Dialogical Ambiguity in Augustine's Sermons*. In charting the rhetoric of the divine image (Gen 1.26) in the midst of polemics on grace and merit, Irizar shows that dialogical ambiguity best characterizes the tone of Augustine's preaching on the interplay between grace and free will. The resulting effect is therefore not persuasion but the dynamic shaping of the 'moral imagination' of the congregation and consequently the sphere of human action and its relation to divine intervention as grace.

The Augustinian heritage of giving intellectual and doctrinal issues a pivotal role in the anti-Manichaean debates is shown by Evodius' *De fide contra Manichaeos*, a polemical work that relied on appropriating central concepts of the "other" into Catholic uses. In *The Rhetoric of Appropriation and Dissociation in Evodius' Aduersus Manichaeos: A Case Study of Anti-Manichaean Polemics*, Aäron Vanspauwen studies competing claims to the denomination

‘rightful Christian’. By employing a two-fold rhetoric of appropriation and dissociation, Vanspauwen shows how Evodius uses Manichean themes to distance the Manicheans from their founder, Mani.

Our volume ends with a survey of encounters between Abrahamic traditions on the threshold of an emerging Islam, focusing on the practical issues related on how and why Christians started to convert to Islam in the early 7th century CE. *Serafim Seppälä* argues in *Threat of Conversion in the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam?* that early Syriac conversions to Islam are best explained not in terms of doctrinal content, but primarily due to the discriminatory burden of taxes on the Christian population under Islamic rule. Only during Abbasid times, Seppälä argues, did the need for theological apologetics arise. The rule of Islam was therefore considered an apocalyptic disaster, as for the first time, large numbers of Christians denouncing the faith outmatched the failures of persuasion by persecution of the Church in Rome and Persia.

The diverse perspectives herein offered on religious controversies between different traditions testify to the rich and varying world of polemical and non-polemical contexts of encounters and persuasion in the Late Antique world. The contexts range from peaceful, even “academic” discussion, to outright ridicule and coercion. Our hope is that the present volume thus reflects the nuanced and detailed tapestry of polemical and persuasive encounters of the early centuries.

Even after nearly two millennia, the dynamics of religious encounter, the imagination of boundaries, the concern for conversion and the persuasive role of argumentation, remains ever relevant. If the past, as told by the vestiges of the historical textual tradition, reliably offers a window into the challenges, hopes, dreams and promises of a better future, how we continue to foster dialogue in the midst of polemics and religious encounters is inevitably a call to shape our times responsibly. We are our times, Augustine tenaciously reminds his congregation just as Rome was being sieged by Alaric in 410—a symbol of a failed civilization left to the mercy of violence in the absence of dialogue—, for just as we are, so are the times.

In offering this collection, the fruit of much labor that brought varied views from around the world and confessions into constructive and collaborative academic reflection, a word of gratitude is due. We remain grateful to *Anthony Dupont* (KU Leuven), whose support and aid was crucial to facilitate the original meeting at the Åbo Akademi University and to *Antti Laato* (Åbo Akademi) for accepting the proceedings of this meeting as a volume in the series *Studies on the Children of Abraham*. We are also grateful to the Inez and Julius Polin Institute for Theological Research for the financial support in organizing the meeting in 2018.

Our hope is that this collection inspire as much instruction and delight to the reader as they have done for the editors.

*Timo Nisula*

*Anni Maria Laato*

*Pablo Irizar*

## Notes on Contributors

### *Antti Laato*

Antti Laato is Professor in Old Testament exegesis with Judaic studies at Åbo Akademi University, Turku Finland. Since 2006, he has been leader in the international network Study for the Reception History of the Bible. Among his recent publications, are three monographs: *Who Is the Servant of the Lord? Jewish and Christian Interpretations on Isaiah 53 from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (2012); *Guide to Biblical Chronology* (2015); *The Origin of the Israelite Zion Theology* (2018). He has also edited several volumes, among them the most recent ones: *Understanding Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem in Three Abrahamic Religions* (2019) and *The Challenge of the Mosaic Torah in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2020).

### *Erkki Koskenniemi*

Erkki Koskenniemi, PhD (1992), Åbo Akademi University, is Adjunct Professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Helsinki, University of Eastern Finland and Åbo Akademi University. His publications include *Apollonius von Tyana in der neutestamentlichen Exegese* (1994); *The Old Testament Miracle Workers in Early Judaism* (2015), *The Exposure of Infants among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (2009) and *Greek Writers and Philosophers in Philo and Josephus* (2019). He is a member of the Network for the Study of the Reception History of the Bible and of the editorial board of *Studies in the Reception History of the Bible*. He acts as Bible Teacher at Lutheran Evangelical Association in Finland.

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Sami Yli-Karjanmaa defended his doctoral thesis on Philo of Alexandria in Åbo Akademi University (Turku, Finland) in 2013. Subsequently he has worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the ÅAU as well as in the University of Helsinki on projects funded by the Academy of Finland and (presently) by the University of Helsinki.

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### *Maijastina Kahlos*

Maijastina Kahlos is a historian and classicist (University of Helsinki, Finland). She is currently working as a university researcher in the Centre of Excellence

'Reason and Religious Recognition', funded by the Academy of Finland. She is the author of *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430* (2007), *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* (2009), and *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity* (forthcoming), and editor of *The Faces of the other: Religious Rivalry and Ethnic Encounters in the Later Roman World* (2012) and *Emperors and the Divine—Rome and its Influence* (2016).

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Anni Maria Laato is adjunct professor in patristic studies at the University of Helsinki, and in dogmatics in Åbo Akademi University. Apart from her dissertation, *Jews and Christians in De duobus montibus Sina et Sion*, she has published articles mainly in the field of patristics. Her most recent articles include "Biblical Mothers as Images of the Church". *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 2019, "Adam and Eve Rewritten in Vergil's Words: Cento of Proba". *Adam and Eve Story in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2017, "Divided by the Common Ground. The Prophecy of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:19–26) Patristic Texts up to Augustine with Respect to Modern Inter-Faith Dialogue". *Abraham's Family*. WUNT 415. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 2018, and "Tertullian and the Deacons". *Diakonia and Deacons in the New Testament and the Early Church*. WUNT 11, 479. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018.

*Siiri Toiviainen Rø*

Siiri Toiviainen Rø obtained her PhD in Historical Theology from the University of Durham with a thesis that explored the links between pleasure, sin, and the good life in the works of Gregory of Nyssa. Since 2017, she has been working as a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellence in Reason and Religious Recognition at the University of Helsinki, where her project focuses on the receptions of anti-Epicurean polemics in early Christian literature.

*Joseph Grabau*

Joseph Grabau (S.T.L.) is PhD Researcher in the History of Church and Theology at the Catholic University of Leuven's Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. His doctoral dissertation, supervised by Prof. dr. Mathijs Lamberigts and Prof. dr. Anthony Dupont, reconsiders the North African reception of the Gospel of John, principally in the *Tractates* of Augustine of Hippo, with full attention to its exegetical, polemical, rhetorical and theological contexts.

*Timo Nisula*

Timo Nisula is adjunct professor in dogmatics at the Åbo Akademi University. He is the author of *Augustine and the Functions of Concupiscence* (2012) and has published several articles on the theology and rhetoric of Augustine's preaching, as well as translations of Augustine's theological works and sermons.

*Eetu Manninen*

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*Pablo Irizar*

Pablo Irizar is Faculty Lecturer and Kennedy Smith Chair in Catholic Studies at the School of Religious Studies of McGill University in Montreal (Canada). He serves as Director of the Newman Centre, also at McGill. He was recently awarded his PhD, which focused on the concept of the Church as the image of God in the thought of Augustine, with the highest distinction (*summa cum laude*) at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the KU Leuven. His doctoral research was funded by a FWO Doctoral Research Grant. He is the recipient of the 2020 Louvain Studies Theological Research Award for emerging young scholars.

*Aäron Vanspauwen*

Aäron Vanspauwen (PhD 2019) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven (Belgium), and secretary of that faculty's Research Unit of History of Church and Theology. The subject of his doctoral research was the anti-Manichaean treatise *Aduersus Manichaeos*, attributed to Evodius of Uzalis (4th–5th century). His study encompassed a historical, literary, and theological analysis of this treatise. He has previously (2018) finalized a new critical edition of *Aduersus Manichaeos*. His fields of interest include Early Christianity, in particular fourth- and fifth-century North Africa, Manichaean Studies, and the textual transmission of Patristic texts.

*Serafim Seppälä*

Serafim Seppälä (b. 1970), doctor of philosophy (University of Helsinki, 2002) and professor of systematic theology and patristics (University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, 2007–). In addition to several monographs in Finnish, he has published numerous scholarly articles in English on topics related to early Syriac literature, East Syrian mysticism, Mariology, Byzantine aesthetics, Christian–Muslim encounter during the early Islamic period, and the cultural heritage of the Armenian genocide.