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Augustine: Contributor or Hindrance of *Adversus Iudaeos*?

By: Collin Pierlott

Augustine of Hippo, doctor and Saint of the Roman Catholic Church who lived in the Late Antique world from AD 354 to 430, is considered one of the greatest Western theologians of all time, contributing around 120 works of writing that touch numerous topics including apologetics, theology, philosophy, letters, sermons, and other forms of rhetoric/literature.¹ His influence on theology is so profound that “even today he is a quotable authority.”² His most notable work, *Confessions*, which is his own story of how he came to convert to Christianity, is still widely read and referred to today, particularly for religious and theological reasons. According to William G. Rusch, “Augustine never tires of proclaiming how man comes to this rest in God only through God’s grace.”³ This kind of an idea which Augustine formulated is still very relevant to Christianity today.

Augustine was well educated from the time he was a boy, when his parents, seeing a career in law as a fitting occupation for their son, sent him off to education, an endeavor he pursued for most of his life, first as a professor of rhetoric, then later as the philosopher and theologian many know him as to this day.⁴ Due to his extensive education, the Bishop of Hippo was “in every sense of the word… a genius”⁵; he was an incredible writer, a master of rhetoric, and a true classicist with a profound understanding of Greek philosophers (particularly Plato and Aristotle), Roman writers and orators like Virgil and Cicero, and therefore language, especially Latin.⁶ after all, he was a Roman citizen with a great understanding of the implications that came with the title.⁷
Though Augustine brings many positive things to the realms of philosophy, theology, and even rhetoric, there is controversy surrounding the theologian due to his contributions to *Adversus Iudaeos* literature, and a long tradition of Christian anti-Judaism. In his article “Two Augustines?” David P. Efroymson states that of “569 of Augustine’s sermons… Anti-Jewish references or assertions have found their way into some 154 of the sermons.” Furthermore, one sermon is particular, entitled “*Adversus Iudaeos*”, is entirely taken up with a complete refutation and critique of Jews and Judaism. Many histories of Christian writings and studies of anti-Judaism omit these writings and facts about Augustine, probably to avoid contribution to controversy surrounding such an important philosophical and theological figure. However, scholars like Efroymson, Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai point to Augustine’s contributions to *Adversus Iudaeos* suggesting that it is important to include him in this category. Some scholars, like Efroymson, are quite frank in their approach to conveying Augustine’s contributions, while others, like Fredriksen, who do show his involvement, reveal a brighter side to things.

Paula Fredriksen, while showing Augustine’s contributions to *Adversus Iudaeos*, also reveals that he “alone of all the Church apologists, mounted a defense,… of Jews and Judaism”, and consequently preventing the possible and inevitable slaughter of countless Jewish lives during the Medieval period. This argument brings a more optimistic side to a rather dreary subject of Augustine’s contribution to this destructive literature.

With the two sides of the argument now mentioned (Efroymson’s pessimism and Fredriksen’s optimism), both sides will now be rigorously explicated in order to that some conclusion can be made. Is Augustine, the celebrated philosopher and theologian of the Late Antique world who melded Classical philosophy and reason with Christian doctrine, now a villain, who impugned Jews and Judaism with hard criticism? Or is Augustine the savior of
Jewish lives and Judaism itself for his arguments in defense of Jews and Judaism and his somewhat undermining of the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition?

Efroymson, in his article “Two Augustines?”, in which he analyzes both sides of the arguments at hand, claims that he has “found Augustine as antagonistic as any of the writers I have examined,”¹⁴ writers that contribute heavily to *Adversus Iudaeos*, including Tertullian, Ambrose, and Chrysostom. He further explains that the “the anti-Judaism is also real,… it is imperative to point to it.”¹⁵ Other scholars, such as Robert Michael, like Efroymson, put Augustine in a gray area of sorts as far as *Adversus Iudaeos* is concerned; that he did feel “ambivalent toward the Jews,” but, “like his teacher, the virulently anti-Jewish St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, St. Augustine made the Jews a special subset of those damned to hell.”¹⁶ However, Efroymson also mentions Paula Fredriksen and her position of the argument, and, pondering both of the seemingly contradicting sides, questions “Are there then two Augustines?”¹⁷ Pondering this as well, let us continue.

Efroymson pays a considerable amount of attention to Augustine’s *Tractatus* on the Gospel of John, since the Gospel is known to have a rather vicious portrayal of the *Ioudaioi*:¹⁸ the Jews. He rhetorically asks whether or not “Augustine [is], then merely a “victim” of John’s portrayal of the *Ioudaioi*?”¹⁹ probably knowing all too well that he had obtained more than enough resources to show that Augustine not only used John’s portrayal, but added to it. Efroymson explains that, though “the gospel contains potentially dangerous material… the characteristically Augustinian elements… [is] used in antagonistic ways.”²⁰ Fredriksen also points to this “Augustine takes this gospel’s highly hostile representation of the Jews, in the course of creating his own sermons usually makes it worse.”²¹ He further claims that “anyone interested in the fate of the Johannine Ioudaioi/Judaei in the patristic tradition cannot afford to
ignore Augustine” and his Sermons, *Tractatus*, on the Gospel of John. Though the content is not entirely focused the Jews themselves, “what emerges is a good deal of anti-Jewish explanation.”

Efroymson points out that Augustine often uses the word carnal to describe the Jews and their practices. Taking a closer look particularly at *Tractate 3 on John 1. 15-18* Augustine does urge them to “expel carnal thoughts from your hearts, in order that you may be fair under grace, so that you might belong to the New Covenant,” as oppose to the Old Covenant, the Covenant of the Jews. He then urges them to “read the Old Testament, and see that the carnality of its people was being taught to us.” Augustine also points to how, in following their “carnal” laws, that “the Jews slavishly observe the Sabbath, to luxury, to drunkenness”; according to Augustine, everything about Jewish law is carnal, for, “because they were unable to take hold of the invisible, they were held by the visible.” Through this particular sermon on the commandments and laws of God, Augustine presents many of his thoughts about the difference he sees between Jewish Law, and Christian Law; the former he sees as carnal, and more concerned with bodily and secular desires, while the latter he sees as more spiritually nurturing.

Efroymson goes into more detail about what of Augustine’s views on Judaism can be found in the rest of the *Tractate*. He points to Augustine’s argument in which he “is explicit, in 60 different passages, spread throughout 29 of the homilies, that “the Jews” (rarely “leaders,” etc.) killed, crucified or sought to slay Jesus.” Efroymson further explains that “for Augustine, it is important (plane interest) to the evangelist… to show that “the Jews” were “implicated in the crime from which they were trying to disassociate themselves.” Other scholars, like Robert Michael, also point out that Augustine “described Christ’s passion in a dramatically anti-Jewish fashion.” To put full blame of Christ’s death on the Jews, even though it was their leaders in
conjunction with the Romans who put him to death. Augustine simply blames the *Ioudaioi* of John’s Gospel\(^33\), a sort of guilt by association.

As mention before, Augustine was skilled orator and rhetorician. Therefore, Efroymson has extensively parsed his rhetorical strategies not with which Augustine sought to enlighten his audience in Christian teaching, but to further disparage Jews and Judaism, further contributing to the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition of the Latin patristics. Efroymson first points out how Augustine intensifies “a certain antagonism already present in the gospel…” and “seems to think he is merely “explaining” something in the text; the “explanation,” however frequently has its own impact,”\(^{34}\) and paints a picture of the carnality, distrustfulness, and savagery that he associates with Jews and Judaism.

Efroymson also shows how Augustine superimposes “antagonistic material… on texts which themselves are more neutral,” to which he quotes section four of *Tractatus 119*, after mentioning how Jesus said “I thirst” from the cross: “the Jews were themselves the vinegar, having degenerated from the wine of the patriarchs and prophets, filled like a full vessel with the wickedness of this world, with hearts like a sponge, deceitful in the formation of its cavernous and tortuous recesses. (119.4)"\(^{35}\) Augustine, through brilliant use of rhetoric driven with hatred, superimposes such vicious imagery on the Passion narratives of the canonical Gospels, adding to his hoard of contributions to *Adversus Iudaeos*.

Continuing to explore the various rhetorical strategies that Augustine employs, Efroymson adds that he frequently presents contrasts between Jews and Christians.\(^{36}\) For example, Efroymson points to *Tractatus 119* once again: “a wicked people did such things, a compassionate Christ suffered them.”\(^{37}\) Also from *Tractatus 3*, Augustine says, as mentioned
earlier, “the Jews slavishly observe the Sabbath, to luxury, to drunkenness,” while, “Christians spiritually observe the Sabbath, abstaining themselves from servile work.” Through continual comparison Augustine makes Christianity appear to be superior to Judaism, Christians superior to Jews.

Efroymson concludes that “Augustine (and Augustine on John) is too significant to ignore.” Augustine is clearly a heavy contributor to *Adversus Iudaeos* literature, a tradition in which many Christians would point to in order to justify the murder of Jews and the destruction of their property. Because of this malicious tradition Christians throughout history may have pointed to the Jews with the logic that “like Cain, Jews were to suffer throughout history so that all human beings would realize the penalty for deicide and other religious crimes.” However, that logic is flawed, since God promised to protect Cain. With that logic, “St. Augustine, regarded the Jews as suffering witnesses, not to be murdered,” to which he quotes Psalm 59:11: “Slay them not, lest my people forget.”

It is the above quote which Augustine takes from the Psalms that Paula Fredriksen points to in her defense of Augustine. She proceeds that, “Because of their unique customs, Augustine continues, the Jews have survived as a people despite the loss of their kingdom. They are marked like Cain.” Just as God protected Cain in the Book of Genesis so does he, according to Augustine’s logic, protect the Jews. By this, Fredriksen mounts her defense of Augustine, claiming that, if it were not for him, the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition would have continued to intensify hostilities against Jews.

However, even before Augustine pointed to Psalm 59, he was already mounting his defense for Judaism when arguing for Catholicism against the Manichaeans’ form of Christianity
in *Contra Faustum*. The Manichaeans view was “that the Old Testament is unsuitable to Christianity.” Augustine refuted this easily by commending “Jewish practice as the divinely mandated, historical, embodied expression of Catholic truth.” Augustine is suggesting that without the Jewish faith there simply would be no Christianity whatsoever since Christian belief relies so heavily on Jewish customs and scripture. Therefore, “Augustine believed firmly that Judaism was essentially uniquely, congruent with Christianity,” to which he pursued to defend Judaism against those heretical Christians who believed Jewish scripture to be incompatible with Christianity; in proving his opponents wrong he defended Judaism.

Augustine also pointed to the epistles of Paul for a defense of Jews and Judaism. After reading and pondering upon 1 Corinthians 9:20-22, Augustine came to conclude that the passage “attested to the Apostle’s compassion… it indicated Paul’s act of imaginative identification with Jews and Gentiles;” Paul displays a “Christian compassion” in which he presents himself in solidarity with Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, Augustine, in his short treatise entitled *Lying*, he cited Paul once again when stating, “that the Jews should not be prevented from following the custom of their ancestors.” Augustine once again defends Jews, not only in arguing against his opponents, but in describing Christian charity through the example of Paul.

Not only did Augustine write on the ideal Christian love and compassion, he lived it. Fredriksen rightly points out that “there were individual friendships, urban social mingling, Christians visiting synagogues and joining Jewish celebrations, all contrary to the wishes of the leadership of both sides.” It would have also been quite difficult to avoid Jews in an Empire in which Jews were citizens. By this logic, Augustine most likely came into contact with many
Jews in his lifetime. In fact, there is evidence of an official matter for which Augustine appealed for a Jew.

Licinius was a North African Jew who owned land somewhere in Hippo. He asked “that Augustine intervene on his behalf in a property dispute between him and the bishop Victor, one of Augustine’s own colleagues.”\(^5^3\) Apparently Victor “defrauded Licinius of a piece of property,” and even, as Augustine scolded Victor in a letter, “chased him off the property, even though he owned it in full right.”\(^5^4\) In that same letter to Victor, Augustine quoted Paul once again in support of his argument to “give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks, nor to the church of God.”\(^5^5\) Not only does Augustine reprimand his colleague for stealing property in general, he also quotes an epistle from Paul, therefore suggesting that Victor’s actions have divine consequences along with temporal consequences.

The dispute did go to court, and Augustine, being “extremely familiar with Roman law, unhesitatingly takes Licinius’ side in the affair.”\(^5^6\) Augustine would have been of instrumental aid since he first studied law when he much younger, before he was baptized. After all, Licinius had documentation, and therefore proof that he owned the property which was unlawfully taken from him.\(^5^7\) Indeed, this episode “gives us a glimpse at the gap between rhetoric and reality in Augustine’s Africa.”\(^5^8\) So, though Augustine contributed to *Adversus Iudaeos* literature, he also lived his life according to Christian principles set down by Christ himself. However, the single most important feature of the matter of Licinius’ property dispute “is that Licinius’ being Jewish seems not to have mattered in the least,”\(^5^9\) to Augustine. Augustine was a fair man, worthy of his title of Bishop, and a true example of one of the most important aspect of Christianity: charity.\(^6^0\)
Wherefore, it can be concluded that, though Augustine contributes heavily to the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition, he was the one, unique contributor who also defended the Jews, not only in rhetoric, but in everyday affairs as well. Efroymson is right to insist that Augustine be included to the list of contributors of *Adversus Iudaeos*\(^\text{61}\), because it is the truth, though the subject is rather astonishingly grotesque. To hide the truth would be wrong since the study of history involves rigorous research of all sides of a figure or event in order to come to a conclusion, just as it is in any true court of law. To be dismissive of Augustine’s contributions would result in ignorance of reality, as well as absolute foolishness.

Efroymson reminds us that Augustine is as guilty as any other contributor to *Adversus Iudaeos*.\(^\text{62}\) He provides a multitude of examples of his vicious phrases and rhetorical strategies that Augustine employs to support his claim. However, even Efroymson points out that if Augustine had not mounted any kind of defense of Judaism, whether it be in rhetoric or in everyday affairs, “the history of Medieval Jewry would almost certainly have been far more tragic.”\(^\text{63}\) With the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition still intrinsically tied with patristic literature, even before Augustine’s birth, had Augustine not contributed it would have not change a thing in regard to a Late Antique or Medieval Christian view of Jews and Judaism. But the fact remains that Augustine, while contributing, also, unique among his contemporaries, buried the hatchet of anti-Judaism through his writings and, more importantly, his life.

Fredriksen, though she shows how Augustine added to the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition of those who came before him, provides us with a more optimistic view, with an incredible amount of sources and arguments for Augustine’s overall effect on Medieval Christianity: “slay them not.”\(^\text{64}\) She concludes that “his invocation of Psalm 59, taken literally, would ultimately
safeguard Jewish lives. Therefore Augustine’s reputation as a leading authority on Christian doctrine and theology was safeguarded by his stance to ultimately defend Judaism in the end.

Augustine was arguably the one Latin father and rhetorical contributor to *Adversus Iudaeos* who displayed a true Christian lifestyle of compassion, mercy, and charity. Unique among his contemporaries, Augustine stands above them as the one who defended those who they referred to as enemies. He thus provides an argument not to antagonize and murder Jews simply because of their Jewishness. He achieves this in several ways.

He, first of all defends Judaism in order to defend Orthodox Christianity, which is exactly what he does in some of his written works, such as *Contra Faustum*. By referring to Paul, a authoritative figure of Christian apologetics, and his epistles, Augustine furthermore mounts a defense for Judaism, once concerned with love and empathy, which is what Paul points to in Jesus’ teachings. He finally compares the Jews to Cain, whom God protected, thus showing it to be a divine crime to slay the Jews. It is with this that he invokes Psalm 59, “Slay them not.” Therefore, Augustine, being a well-known authoritative Christian doctor, ultimately preached the message of Christ for the people of Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and for all time. He is truly a timeless figure, who’s message and doctrines still apply today. He still stands as one of the most important figures of Late Antique and Christian history; he provided an incredible contribution of Christian doctrine by melding the religion with classical philosophy, and also set the tone of Christianity for the coming ages by ultimately writing and living Christ’s message of love, which he showed to Christians, Jews, Gentiles, and all others.
Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid, 109. Rusch explains the quote from *Confessions 1:1*, “Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te” which means “you have made us for yourself (God), and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”
5 Ibid. 108.
8 Translates as “Against the Jews”
15 Ibid, 213.
18 Transliteration of the Greek Word Ίουδαϊοι, Latin equivalent is Iudaei.
23 Ibid.
24 Carnales in Latin.
27 Ibid. *Legite Vetus Testamentum, et videte quia carnali adhuc populo ea quidem praecipiebantur quae nobis.*
28 Ibid. *Iudaei enim serviliter observant diem sabbati, ad luxuriam, ad ebrietatem.*
29 Ibid. *Quia non poterant capere invisibilia, per visibilia tenebantur.*
with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. 6. Efroymson points out that the verbs crucifigere, interficere, and occidere are used quite frequently throughout the Tractates on John.

31 Ibid, 6.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 10.
37 Ibid.
38 Augustine. Tractate 3 on John 1.15-18. Translated by Collin Pierlott. Spiritualiter observant sabbatum christianus, abstinens se ab opera servili.
41 Ibid, 2.
48 In this passage of his epistle to the Corinthians Paul wrote “I have become to the Jews like a Jew, in order that I may gain the Jews”: a statement of empathy and solidarity.
49 Ibid, 237.
53 Ibid, 1020.
55 Ibid, 313. 1 Corinthians 10:32.
56 Ibid, 314.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Charity is one of the three Theological virtues of the Catholic faith. Jesus also spoke of love, a synonym of charity, most throughout the Gospels.
63 Ibid, 214.