

Academic Roundtable

Paul, Faustus, and Augustine's Evolution toward Anti-anti-Semitism

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Most New Testament scholars, historians of Late Antiquity, and Historical Theologians know the work of Paula Fredriksen. For more than thirty years, by weaving together the (often) much too disparate and disconnected world of Biblical Studies on the one hand and the scholarly world of Late Antiquity on the other, she has published some of the English-speaking academy's finest work on early Christians'—with special emphasis on Paul's and Jesus'—relationship to Judaism, on Augustine, and, most particularly, on Augustine's reading and understanding of Paul. Notwithstanding her well-deserved plaudits for her two most recent books *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* and *From Jesus to Christ*, it seems safe to say that with the appropriately revisionist *Augustine and the Jews* she has managed to place a clear and much needed milestone on the road that is the study of Judaism and Christianity in the Late Antique period. This book, which is as readable as it is learned, is certain to change both popular and scholarly conceptions of both the history and the evolution of anti-Semitism in the Christian West.

Briefly put, Fredriksen's thesis is that, despite the sweepingly negative way in which most history textbooks, to say nothing whatsoever about prevailing popular assumptions, treat Christian-Jewish relations—especially following the legalization and eventual mainstreaming of Christianity in western society by the end of the fourth-century—we misunderstand both Augustine and the complex history of these relations if we fail to recognize that the Bishop of Hippo was far from being anti-Semitic *tout court*. On the contrary, while Fredriksen does make it clear both that Augustine was no pluralist and that Augustine's

employment of certain features of Late Antique rhetoric were often misconstrued by later readers, she is at pains to show how Augustine, for a whole host of ideological and contextual reasons, was both “pro-Jewish” and deeply respectful of the Jews’ history, their traditions, and what he understood to be their present and future roles in God’s salvific plan for humanity.

Her explanation of the phenomenon is as eloquent as it is accurate. Page 98 sums up both her position—in its broadest form—and the presuppositions she wishes to help counter:

We are unprepared to look at the evidence [in favor of close and harmonious interaction between Jews and non-Jews] positively because, first of all, good relations are not what we expect to see. We approach antiquity through the cultural memory of a millennium of violent Christian anti-Jewish hostility, from the massacres of the Crusades to the death camps of the last century. Our retrospect can prompt us to perceive Jews as segregated, perhaps even self-segregated outsiders in their ancient societies, and perhaps to presuppose that the traditions of anti-Judaism so characteristic of late Roman Christian rhetoric translated, as it did in the later medieval and modern periods, into active and generalized anti-Semitism.

With respect to Augustine’s role within this much broader tradition, Fredriksen’s argument, which is most clearly expressed in her “Part Three,” proceeds in the following four steps. First (cf. pp. 227 and 261), she explains how any reader who fails to give the proper weight to Late Antique rhetorical conventions cannot but misunderstand much that is said about Jews and Judaism by Late Antique Christians. She notes that, for the writers of what became the New Testament as well as more than a few of the most important Christian voices of the second and third centuries, the labeling of various groups as “Jews ... [is] first of all a rhetorical strategy. They are conjured in order to assist their authors in positioning themselves advantageously within the *agon* of intra-Christian theological dispute...”

Her second step (cf. p. 235), with which she turns exclusively to the thought of Augustine, is to show how the late 390’s marked a key turn for the Bishop of Hippo with respect to his thinking about the role the Nation of Israel plays in God’s all-important program of

Heilsgeschichte. According to Fredriksen, “impelled by all his hard thinking in the 390’s—on the figure and the theology of the Apostle Paul, on Tyconius and his views of the positive correspondence of Law and Gospel, on divine justice and human freedom, on understanding the Bible *ad litteram* as well as *secundam spiritum*—Augustine had begun to think about God, time, and scripture in new ways. And these new ideas, in turn, spurred him to rethink received ideas about Christianity’s relationship with Judaism, and about Judaism itself, both past and present.”

The third step in Fredriksen’s argument is even more specific and even more context dependent. In a word, she contends that Augustine was driven to new thinking as well as to new conclusions about both the Jews and Judaism as he divorced himself from his past involvement with Manichaeism. In Fredriksen’s reconstruction, the pivotal moment came ca. 399 when Augustine responded in writing to the theological views of the Manichaean leader Faustus (cf. pp. 240, 350 and 365). This response is Augustine’s longest anti-Manichaean work and was intended, at least in part, as a reply to a work of Faustus known as the *Capitula*. The *Capitula* were apparently written a few years prior to this; that they survive even in part is due to the fact that Augustine quoted from them in his *Against Faustus*. Fredriksen interestingly points out that Faustus’s impact on Augustine—at least with respect to the latter’s thinking about the Jews and their role in God’s plan—was directly proportional to Faustus’s own mastery of the by then conventional North African *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition that was prevalent within many North African Christian communities. She writes that, “[t]hanks to Faustus’s ingenuity, these familiar, biblically based critiques ricocheted off their original rhetorical targets back onto the church that had launched them.... [A]nd it was Augustine’s defensive confrontation with Faustus and, via Faustus, with traditional catholic anti-Judaism, that combined with the new directions in [Augustine’s] own thought to propel the vigorous originality of his lengthy riposte, *Against Faustus*.” In other words, because Augustine knew that he had to distance himself from Faustus, it followed that he had to distance himself from many of the positions that Faustus claimed were integral to Faustus’s theological vision—even if some of those positions had

their roots in the non-Manichaean Christian tradition.

The fourth and climactic step in this argument is taken most decisively on pages 288 and 289. Here, Fredriksen observes that Augustine—in terms that were quite antithetical to those used by many of his Christian predecessors and contemporaries—asserted that, when viewed from God’s perspective, the Jews who remained Jews *after* the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the subsequent proclamation of him as God’s long awaited Messiah were actually no worse off than were those who had never heard the Christian gospel. Indeed, like all non-believers, any and every Jew could establish a salvific relationship with God if she or he would believe and confess Christ’s claims about himself and, on the basis of that faith, begin to live the life of a true disciple. After quoting a longish section of *Against Faustus* 22.78, a passage that, according to Fredriksen, “provides the larger theological context for Augustine’s...defense of Judaism...and for his...defense of the Jewish praxis of Judaism,” she goes on to observe that, for Augustine, “no other nation was like Israel. Only Israel had received God’s revelation. Only Israel had worshipped God alone, utterly without images. Only Israel had safeguarded, both in word and deed, those divine mysteries that had pointed ahead to the incarnation and resurrection of God’s son, and that pointed ahead still to his redemption of humanity. By crucifying Christ, Israel had helped to bring salvation to the nations.” In a word, Augustine’s new view was that “Israel, all unknowing, was the servant of the church.... Israel, *secundum carnem* witnessed to God’s redemptive acts in history.”

In much of the explanation of this fourth step, any reader familiar with the New Testament will recognize much that has been borrowed “chapter and verse” from Paul—and especially from his *Letter to the Romans*. Fredriksen acknowledges this throughout this section, often referencing Romans 9 and 11. However, conspicuous by its absence is any reference to Romans 1–3, the chapters that serve to set up Paul’s argument about the significance for humanity of Christ’s advent, ministry, death, and resurrection. Paul’s ineluctable logic as found in Rom 1–3, and especially in its crescendo (cf. 3:21–31), remains difficult to appreciate in full even after two millennia: “[I]s God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since in-

deed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one" (3:29–30, NASB). Despite its difficulty, it seems certain that one of the conclusions Paul wanted to compel here is that, while Jews are no worse off than Christians, they are no better either. Again, as Fredriksen points out, Augustine follows Paul closely. The Bishop of Hippo gives the Jews much credit for their collective "choseness" and for their sporadic and occasional obedience, before noting that they are ultimately in the same boat as everyone else. Indeed, at the very end of this chapter, Fredriksen summarizes a sentiment of Augustine's that makes the link between Paul and Augustine abundantly clear: "As regards salvation, Jews were no better and no worse off than was the rest of humanity's *massa damnata*. Jews too were trapped in the penal condition of ignorance and difficulty that marked all human experience after the Fall. Jews too languished *sub lege*, not wanting to sin but not able, of their own will, not to sin. Whether God chose to leave them there or to bring some from among them *sub gratia*, to himself, he would do so, for them as for anyone, for inscrutable reasons, but justly."

A major question that arises from this final "step" in Augustine's thinking is: If this new position is only a slightly modified version of what had been argued by Paul in Romans, why is it that it took Christians in general, Latin-speaking Christians in particular, and Augustine most particularly of all, so long to "connect these dots"? In other words, is not this the same as arguing that Augustine's revolutionary and thoroughly minority position on the Jews is really a direct result of a close and careful reading and clear understanding and acceptance of (much of) Paul's argumentation as found in Romans? If so, then it follows that Fredriksen's book should have explicitly attempted a plausible explanation of how Paul's direct and overt claim was overlooked by multiple generations of highly-educated and rhetorically-trained Latin Christians. It is true that the fourth-century "rediscovery" of Paul in several quarters of the Christian world has long occupied scholars, but, at least to my knowledge, it is also true that this particular aspect, namely, the degree to which this "rediscovery" spawned a newfound respect for the Jews and their place in God's historic and salvific plan for humanity in the writings of those "rediscoverers," has not been

directly addressed, much less adequately documented. How, to mention just one of many interesting questions, can we account for Augustine's new take on the Jews in the midst of a rediscovery of Paul that apparently did little or nothing to change the attitudes of others toward the Jews? How could it be that Augustine, like so many others, went back to Paul but emerged with not only a deeper appreciation of Pauline theology, but, unlike so many others, also a deeper, if less than perfectly Pauline, sense that the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition had gotten it all so wrong?

Fredriksen's work also exhibits—at least *passim*—a few signs of inconsistency. While it nowhere leaves the reader with the impression that she or he cannot trust what the text is imparting, one is left with the vague and indefinite sense that the book's latter chapters rest on a foundation that is less firm than that of the initial chapters.

Two specific aspects of this reduced rigor of the second half are (1) the propensity toward overstatement or oversimplification with regard to the conclusions of biblical and historical scholarship and (2) the frequency with which chronological claims with respect to certain works of Augustine are accepted and included but not supported. In other words, the second half of the book would have been improved by the inclusion of details, argumentation, and/or footnotes that would help convince both the wary reader and the reader unfamiliar with the state of scholarship on Augustine that this particular reconstruction is as reliable as it seems to be.

An example of Fredriksen's propensity to oversimplify issues of biblical scholarship can be found in her not infrequent references to the attitudes of early Christians toward the Jewish sacrificial system generally and the role that this system assigned to blood in particular. On page 73, and in support of the claim that “the fourth-century church” and “fourth-century imperial Christianity” had continued earlier theological traditions that emulated both the “high god” and the “divine Son” by “utterly [renouncing] Jews and Judaism,” Fredriksen writes: “In this ecclesiastical understanding, Jesus..., Moses..., and all of the prophets in the period before the incarnation...had denounced the Temple and its blood sacrifices, had condemned fleshly circumcision, had criticized the Jewish observance of the Sabbath, and had censured

Jewish practices generally. So too had Paul, and so too had the other apostles of the first generation.” Comments on pages 249 and 250 elaborate this theme with respect to Augustine. In Fredriksen’s reconstruction, the catholic Augustine was not slow to offer an answer to the questions of “*Why* blood sacrifices in particular? Indeed, why blood sacrifices at all?” (p. 249; emphasis in original) Then, on page 250, she notes that Augustine’s answer was simultaneously historical and typological. “All the Old Testament, but particularly the laws regarding offerings, [Augustine] asserts, are typological references to Christ’s redemptive death. ‘These [Jewish] sacrifices typified what we now rejoice in, for we can be purified only by blood, and we can be reconciled with God only by blood’ (*Against Faustus* 18.6).”

It seems that this tension between the views of fourth-century Christians who (a) rejected the Jews’ blood sacrifices altogether and (b) claimed that the first generation of Christians had set this precedent for them, and Augustine’s new conviction that the Jews’ blood sacrifices, while real and worthy of respect in their own day, were no longer necessary since their true typological significance had finally become clear, is little more than the debate about the authority and the canonicity of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. It is true that in the first half of the book (cf. p.159) Fredriksen includes references to Hebrews 8:5 and 9:11–28 and the letter’s profound appreciation for “typological allegories,” but it is also true that this one paragraph is the only place in which her text explicitly references Hebrews. Of the debate and discussion that took place in the fourth-century over the book’s value—to say nothing whatsoever of the debates about its authorship—and, hence, its authority, Fredriksen says nothing. Particularly conspicuous is the absence from her book’s second half of any references to chapters 9–13 and to the insistence those chapters repeatedly make that it was in fact blood that had made God’s program of reconciliation possible.

An example of included but unsupported chronological claims is the book’s treatment of the evolution of Augustine’s exegesis of Psalm 59:12. In Augustine’s version of the Psalter as provided by Fredriksen this verse reads: “Slay them not, lest they forget your law; scatter them by your might.” Psalm 59 is discussed in more than twenty locations in this book; indeed, it is discussed with greater frequency than is any

other biblical passage (cf. the index pp. 471–476). Fredriksen claims that a close study of the appearances of verse twelve in Augustine's works will help us document the evolution of his thought regarding the verse's meaning and application. She also claims that this knowledge about the changes in the verse's interpretation will, by extension, provide us with helpful evidence regarding exactly where and when Augustine's thinking about the Jews and Judaism changed. In this particular case, one of the primary shifts in Augustine's exegesis appears to be rooted in whether or not a given text couples Psalm 59—and especially 59:12—with Genesis 4—and especially the “mark” that the Lord put on Cain in order to protect him (cf. Gen. 4:15).

While, in general, such assumptions are logical enough and while, in general, such assumptions can provide us with more or less reliable results, reconstructions of this sort must be carefully conducted and, indeed, must carefully and accurately qualify any conclusions that they produce. In this regard, Fredriksen's reconstruction suffers on at least two levels. First, it suffers from loose and imprecise prose. Consider the following lines from page 347, just five pages prior to the book's “Epilogue”: “Cain drops out when Augustine quotes Psalm 59:12 only in his two *later, undated sermons*; and I think that this is so because Augustine delivered them only after he had conceived and become committed to his vision in *City of God* (italics added).” (See also page 349 where these same two sermons are again labeled as “late” and, without explanation, as “within Augustine's own lifetime, relatively unimportant....”) Upon reading these claims, the question that springs immediately to mind is: How exactly can a work be both “later” and “undated”? Surely the reader deserves some further explanation at this point. Second, her reconstruction suffers from faulty or, at least, incomplete reasoning. Even if one acknowledges that Fredriksen has here qualified her conclusion with the words “I think,” does not this sentence, at least as it is written, draw a thoroughly unwarranted, if not also illogical, conclusion? Does not Fredriksen seem to be claiming that these two sermons must be later because, if they are later, then they fit the reconstruction she has already made of Augustine's exegesis of Psalm 59:12?

The vague, if not muddled, chronological reconstruction of Augustine's thought as presented by Fredriksen is continued when one

investigates her claims with respect to the way particular books of *City of God* used Psalm 59. Fredriksen rightly notes that *City of God* was written over the course of thirteen or fourteen years, i.e., in fits and starts between 413 and 426. However, elsewhere she notes that two sermons on Psalm 59, which were penned at some vague point between the years 410 and 415 as part of Augustine's monumental *Enarrationes in Psalmos* project, linked Genesis 4:15 and Psalm 59 together just as Augustine had been doing for the previous ten or fifteen years. From here, she goes on to discuss *Letter 121* and *Letter 149*. Both of these letters revolve around the meaning of Psalm 59 and/or Psalm 59:12. However, according to Fredriksen, these two missives can only be dated to between "410–415?" and "414–420?" respectively. The whole discussion leaves the reader a bit unsure about the exact nature of Fredriksen's chronological claim(s) and about how the various pieces fit together. Then, from this already unsure standpoint and without a clearer qualification than "[a]t some point after this exchange with Paulinus," the man who wrote *Letter 121* and who received *Letter 149*, Fredriksen goes on to discuss a small handful of works that are "undated" but that are presumably late because of something that they lack: they nowhere mention Cain or Genesis 4. "Cain, Augustine's premier biblical figure for the Jews, is suddenly and strangely absent" (cf. p.331). This crucial difference, according to Fredriksen, is all because of a change that Augustine's thinking underwent as he composed the latter books of *City of God* (cf. the quote from p.347 *supra*).

Interestingly, with a bit more care, Fredriksen's reconstruction can be shown to be more specific than her discussion ever lets on. Elsewhere, she claims that this key exegetical turn took place sometime between the composition of Book XV, which she does not venture to date, and Book XVIII, which she very tentatively, but without argumentation, places "sometime around 425?" (cf. p.339). Fredriksen says nothing else about the chronology of the individual books, a chronology that, it would seem, holds within it much that might be of value for undergirding her claims about this crucial component of her overall thesis. In the end, Fredriksen has (most likely) convinced the reader that *something* important shifted in Augustine's exegetical thinking at some point between ca.410 and ca. 427. However, if the reader re-

lies only on Fredriksen's text and is unwilling (or unable) to do some extra reconstructive work on her or his own, she or he would not know anything more precise about this important shift. (In fact, assuming the accuracy of Fredriksen's textual data, a little extra chronological work reveals that this shift in Augustine's thinking probably occurred between 420 and 425.)

Less central, but still not insignificant, is the claim found on page 349 with respect to Augustine's relationship to Proverbs 8:35, a verse that in the Septuagint or LXX version known to Augustine contains the provocative claim that "[t]he will is prepared by the Lord." Fredriksen makes mention of this verse, which, incidentally, appears only here in her book and which is not labeled either here or in the volume's index as hailing from the LXX, in support of the sweeping (not to mention not easily proven) claim that Augustine's "... identifying of proof texts ... often came considerably after he conceived and developed the ideas that they served to sum up." The support for this claim takes the form of a brief summary of what many scholars acknowledge as a key turn in Augustine's thinking about grace, the human will, and God's salvific activity that occurred in the late 390's as Augustine wrote his *To Simplicianus*. This is followed by the comment that "Only later, after 411, did [Augustine] discover Proverbs 8:35. 'The will is prepared by the Lord.' He used it repeatedly thereafter" (cf. p. 349). While the available scholarship does back up Fredriksen's claim about the date of the first appearance of this verse in Augustine's extant oeuvre, none of that scholarship—to say nothing of that scholarship's nuances—is discussed or made available to the reader. In fact, there are at least two easily accessible publications that deal with the role this verse played in Augustine's theology: an article published by Sage in 1964 and a monograph-length study published by La Bonnardière in 1975. Neither finds its way into Fredriksen's endnotes to this section, just as both are absent from the book's bibliography. Also noteworthy is the fact that Sage's article hypothesizes that it was Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan who died in 397 and who played a crucial role in Augustine's return to catholic Christianity, who, "semble-t-il, ... a fixé l'attention de saint Augustin sur *Prov.* 8:35."

Interestingly, if Sage is correct, his hypothesis would seem to

undermine Fredriksen's claim that, for Augustine, the ideas often came first and the prooftexts second. However, if Sage is incorrect, those inclined to accept Fredriksen's aforementioned claim would be reassured were they offered a plausible explanation as to why Sage's hypothesis is wrong. Either way, this omission, which cannot be chalked up to having overlooked either very recent or very obscure secondary studies, demonstrates the tendency of the book's second half to move forward with what sometimes amounts to less than fully convincing argumentation or comprehensive support.

Once all the claims, arguments, and data have been sifted, the reader of this book will doubtless be left with questions—some general and many specific. And this same reader may well be left wondering if she or he has been presented with all of the facts and details that are necessary to support every claim or to comprehend every point of argumentation fully. However, it is highly likely that the attentive reader will come away convinced of (at least) two things: Augustine of Hippo did *not* substantially contribute to the Christian West's frequently sad and sometimes thoroughly slanderous conduct vis-à-vis Judaism, nor did Augustine of Hippo encourage hostility toward Jews, either individually or collectively, as enemies of Christ or of Christ's church. And, of course, those are the convictions that Professor Fredriksen's book has attempted to cultivate among its readers from the very beginning.

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