

Living, Breathing Jewish People and Augustine’s “Jews in the Head”

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As a medieval historian of Christian, Jews, and Muslims, my charge as a member of this roundtable is to address the repercussions of Paula Fredriksen’s *Augustine and the Jews* for medieval Jewish Studies. I must begin by clarifying that, as its subtitle, *A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, implies, this is not really a Jewish Studies work, but rather one of Religious Studies and Patristics. “Framing” her inquiry, Fredriksen states, is the deterioration of Jewish/Christian relations during the period of the crusades, and she asks in her prologue: “Why and how did relations between Christian and Jews ever become so terrible in the first place?” (xiii)—but this is a question this study was never geared toward answering. The aim of Fredriksen’s book is very firmly (and engagingly and usefully) to situate Augustine’s thinking about Ancient Israelites, Jews, and Judaism within the overall evolution of his hermeneutic and theology in light of recent scholarship—one of the heights of which is Fredriksen’s own meticulous and convincing close readings of the Augustinian corpus. In that context, I highly recommend the book to any teacher of the work of Augustine in any discipline. It is very readable and succeeds in its goal of situating Augustine’s scholarship in the context of the late Antique world, Neoplatonism, the Gospels, and the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition.

Although neither Religious Studies nor Late Antiquity is my specialty, I must say I am impressed by everything this work attempts and accomplishes. *Augustine and the Jews* is a step by step *vade mecum* to the evolution of Augustine’s thought on the major issues: how to read scripture, time and history, original sin, the will, election, divine justice, divine mercy, divine omnipotence and divine omniscience, among others. Fredriksen painstakingly relates each major issue to the developments in Augustine’s personal and religious life: e.g., his specific goals as student, rhetor, champion of African Catholicism, and

bishop. The book's description is thick and vivid; Fredriksen uses her encyclopedic knowledge of the immense body of Augustine's work ("5 million words in all" or the equivalent of "a modern three-hundred-page print book every year for forty years" [184]) to introduce details that bring his world alive. So she invites the reader to imagine Augustine's discomfort about his African accent as professor of rhetoric in Milan or to "overhear Augustine as he (literally) thinks out loud" by reminding us that he dictated his compositions, "writing in Antiquity [being a] specialized technology" (175). As the senior historical authority on Augustine, Peter Brown, says in his review of Fredriksen's study in the *New York Review of Books*, "In the best tradition of the Religious Studies world from which this book emerges, Fredriksen is, when need be, didactic. There are many *idées reçues* about the relations between Christians, Jews, and pagans in the Roman world of the first centuries that readers are urged not even to think of thinking" (2009, 42). Indeed it is through this encompassing sweep and intimate detail that Fredriksen wants to lead us to understand the magnitude of Augustine's innovation in proposing a new understanding of Jews and the Old Testament. In the face of Augustine's struggles with the heretical Manichees and given the strength of the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition in all intra-Christian polemic up to that point, "a revolution is precisely what he achieved" (102).

If there was any doubt in the reader's mind, Fredriksen establishes clearly that Augustine's reading of Jews and Judaism was not a by-product or side-line of his thought—it was integral to his method of reading, to his thinking about the life and work of St. Paul, and to any effective defense of Catholicism in the late Antique world. She crowns her achievement by laying out "the salient elements of Augustine's new teaching" on Jews and Judaism from the Ancient Israelites, through the apostles, and to his own time:

1. God chose Israel, he gave them his law as a benefit and as a privilege, and Israel genuinely received it all according to divine will....
2. Traditional Jewish praxis—Sabbath, immersions, holidays, food laws, and most especially blood sacrifices and fleshly

circumcision—truly and appropriately fulfill God's command....

3. Jesus, the original apostles, the churches of Judea, and Paul all kept the commandments piously and sincerely, according to the traditions of their fathers....
4. God and the Jews, and thus the church and the Jews, maintain an abiding relationship. This relationship is founded upon their shared biblical text....
5. God protects the Jews as he had protected Cain. He has placed his mark upon them, protecting their special identity by protecting their ancestral practices; and these ancestral practices are themselves God's mark. (316–319)

Within the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition, there were scholars who disputed each and every one of these points, for example arguing that “the law” was given to Israel as a punishment, or that once they became apostles Paul and Peter never lived by the commandments. Augustine stands as a singular, and formidable, critic of such claims.

I wonder still, however, if the senior Jewish Studies scholar of the Augustinian Doctrine of Jewish Witness and its legacy, Jeremy Cohen, might well remain unconvinced of the overall force of Fredriksen's conclusion. In her acknowledgements, Fredriksen gives thanks to Cohen (368). Thus I would have expected in her fifty pages of notes and twenty-five pages of bibliography to find Cohen's *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (1999), which devotes almost fifty pages to Augustine's formulation of the Doctrine of Jewish Witness and the Augustinian legacy in medieval Europe. Fredriksen does explain that in this monograph, the more popular presentation of her ideas, her notes “are discursive and only minimally bibliographical,” and she refers her reader to her website at Boston University where admirably and generously all of her scholarly articles can be downloaded—although there is no overall bibliography on the site (xxiii).

Indeed, it seems that Cohen and Fredriksen differ on the chronology of the development of Augustine's thought as well as on the importance of his interpretation of Psalm 59:12, “Slay them not lest at some time they forget your law: Scatter them by your might,” the quintessential

text concerning the Doctrine of Jewish Witness as it was understood in later generations. Fredriksen argues that *contra Faustum Manichaeum* (*Against Faustus*), begun in 398–399 CE, is the first text in which Augustine shifted his thought on Jews and Judaism, whereas Cohen places this shift at least a decade later. Similarly, Fredriksen sees Psalm 59:12 as a final flourish to Augustine’s case, while Cohen does not discern Augustine’s formulation as complete before Augustine integrates his interpretation of Psalm 59:12. Nor is Fredriksen’s assessment of the degree of Augustine’s originality of thought on Jews always shared by Cohen, who sees a real foreshadowing in the *Peri Pascha* of Melito, the mid to late second-century bishop of Sardis, whom Fredriksen does not indentify as a major figure in the discussion (Cohen 1998, 89–90).

Perhaps most interestingly, Cohen argues that the position of actual Jews under Christendom was relatively unimportant to Augustine: “Relative to other issues on the agenda to Augustine the Bishop and Augustine the theologian, that of the proper Christian attitude to the Jew paled in its urgency” (1998, 92). It seems that Fredriksen would like to be able to put forward a response here, but her attempts at a contextualization of the place of real Jews in the Mediterranean cities of the fourth century is hampered by the fact that there is no solid body of evidence concerning Augustine’s interactions with actual Jews. As Fredriksen explains, Augustine’s Jews were “Jews in the head”—totally mutable in the service of the argument he was marshalling at the time he was writing. However, Fredriksen certainly gets as much as she can from what evidence does exist: she leads the reader by the hand into the cities of Mediterranean late Antiquity (from the time of Alexander the Great through to that of Augustine) and introduces us to the ethnically and religiously diverse people who brushed shoulders there. For example, she sets her scene by explaining how it might be that at certain times and places Jews would have been perceived as a threat because of Christian Judaizing, e.g. to thinkers like Cyril of Alexandria or Commodian of North Africa: “The vitality of habitual contacts, both social and religious, between Christians and Jews—as among Christians of all various sorts, Jews, and pagans—probably accounts for much of the shrillness and the obsessive repetitiveness of the patristic invective” (101). And Fredriksen is careful to lay old mis-

conceptions to rest, for example by explaining that late Antique Jews were not active missionizers:

what makes the synagogue so dangerous—or at least so very aggravating—to many Christian bishops in the fourth century CE is precisely its continuing exercise of the practice that stretched back to the Hellenistic centuries BCE. Late Roman synagogues, like their earlier Hellenistic counterparts, received interested outsiders *without* trying to convert them. (96)

This lays valuable groundwork and enables her to move the discussion towards suggesting how Augustine's thoughts on Jews might have shaped his actions towards real Jewish people, such as the Jews of Majorca who were, notoriously, forced to convert.

Fredriksen proposes that, in his work as a civil magistrate as bishop of Hippo, Augustine consciously rejected the example of the Church of Majorca in not pressuring the Jews of North Africa to convert. This was in spite of the fact that Hippo too possessed the relics of St. Stephen that had been the source of anti-Jewish preaching and riot and the illegal forced conversion in 418 CE of the 540 Jewish residents of the city of Magona, on the island of Majorca. She notes that Augustine:

never praises Severus [the bishop who wrote the account of the forced conversion]. So far as we know, he never read Severus' letter aloud to his congregation in Hippo.... Augustine too had dedicated a chapel to Stephen in Hippo, where the saintly dust also made miracles. When Augustine reviewed the details of these miracles, he dwelt upon the saint's healings, exorcisms, and acts of charity: No *contra Iudaeos* theme sounds (*City of God* 22.8). (362–363)

Fredriksen also analyzes a tantalizing recent find: a letter that describes a lawsuit that was brought to Augustine in his *secretarium* where, in his capacity as bishop, he decided civil cases for the people of Hippo. Augustine's letter 8.1, to an unidentified Bishop Victor, concerns a Jewish landowner called Licinius whom Victor had evicted from a piece of property that was lawfully Licinius's. Augustine categorically instructs Bishop Victor to return the property: "this man must in no case be deprived of his property.... Justice is on his side; the laws cry out in his favor" (312–313). The fact that Licinius was a Jewish plaintiff in a case against a Christian bishop was irrelevant to Augustine: Licinius had a

right to the return of his land. These fascinating examples, however, are more suggestive than conclusive, as Fredriksen admits.

Despite Fredriksen's excitement at Augustine's innovative brilliance in incorporating Israelites, Jews, and Judaism into God's plan for the Church, her suggestive assertion that Augustine avoided putting pressure to convert on the Jews of Hippo, and the discovery of his equitable treatment of the Jew Licinius, the degrading overall tone of much of Augustine's work must not be lost on the reader. Augustine, like all late Antique churchmen, often wrote in the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition, and, as Fredriksen notes, in Augustine's sermons on "John's gospel, the bane of modern interfaith dialogue, [which] contains some of the harshest language about Jesus' Jewish contemporaries of any writing in the New Testament..., Augustine takes this gospel's highly hostile representation of Jews, and, in the course of creating his sermons, usually makes it worse" (304–305). Furthermore, Fredriksen includes David Efroymson's assertion that 60 of the 124 of Augustine's sermons contain "appreciable anti-Jewish material, and between fifteen and seventeen are extensively or completely taken up with it" (305, quoting Efroymson 1999, 198). Although we might appreciate that such sermons were part of intra-Christian polemic and dialogue and thus sometimes had no real negative effect on everyday relations between Jews and Christian in the cities of late Antiquity, they sometimes did cause riots, and their afterlife could prove lethal.

The many statements made by Churches during the last half of the twentieth century and beyond testify that the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition cannot be considered to be in the true spirit of the gospel. Interfaith dialogue today would perhaps not be possible had Augustine not rethought Ancient Israelites, Jews, and Judaism in a more positive light in relationship to the Church; but images like the Jewish mark of Cain still unsettle. Thus it is important that, like the Roman Catholic Church's *Nostra Aetate*, we continue to state categorically that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures" (Paul VI 1965, section 4).

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