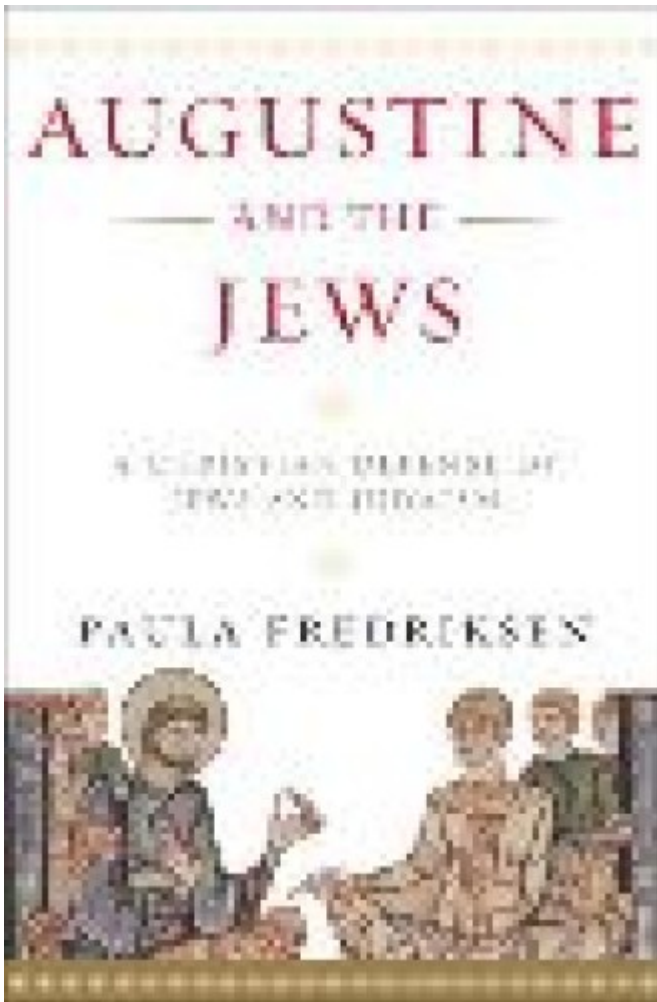


Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism

Paula Fredriksen
Doubleday

I remember once defending the doctrine of divine immutability to a renowned New Testament scholar at an academic conference. I was a graduate student at the time, and had not yet decided that I would work on Augustine's biblical exegesis for my dissertation. No doubt exasperated by my argumentation, and perhaps uncomfortable that I did not yet know that such conferences are not meant for actual theological conversation, he pulled out the ultimate trump card. "The anti-Semitism of the church fathers inclines me to mistrust them on pretty much everything." I did what graduate students do before esteemed professors: I shut up.

Had it all taken place after the publication of Paula Fredriksen's long-awaited tome, I would not have been so easily cowed. Fredriksen, herself a Jew, and a world-class scholar of ancient Christianity at Boston University, has done us the great service of writing this book for a broader audience than her fellow experts. She has a knack for turning the phrases necessary for doing well at Barnes and Noble: "Cult makes gods happy. Happy gods make for happy humans. And of course the opposite is also true: absent cult, gods grow angry. When gods are angry, humans pay."

Fredriksen's focus here has been the subject of much of her academic work: Augustine's theological defense of the Jews. While his "witness doctrine" is well known among scholars, it is not widely known among nonspecialists. Augustine lodges the only ancient Christian defense of Jews as Jews—that is, without their conversion to Christianity, Fredriksen contends. They verify that Christians did not rewrite scripture after the fact of Christ's coming. They don't even believe in our Savior and yet they worship with the same books. They are our librarians: they carry and testify to the trustworthiness of our books, verifying the Christian gospel without any intention of doing so.

"Slay them not," Augustine insisted, quoting Psalm 59:12, a verse he famously (to scholars) and unexpectedly (to everyone else) pressed upon his fellow Christians on behalf of the Jews. Fredriksen opens her book with a word from one Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, penned in 1146, thanking God for sending the "decent priest" Bernard of Clairvaux, who insisted with Augustine that anyone who harms a Jew "is like one who harms Jesus himself." Bernard was no peacenik, as his preaching up of the Crusades made clear. Yet Augustine's shadow was so long that occasionally it protected Jews in medieval Europe.

Lest we Christians congratulate ourselves too readily, Augustine is plenty capable of standard anti-Jewish invective: they are stiff-necked, hard-hearted and so on. Scholars have wrangled for years over the degree to which Augustine bumped into actual flesh-and-blood Jews (was there a “Jew in the pew?” Fredriksen quips about church attendance in Hippo). Adolf von Harnack argued that the rote nature of Augustine’s invective suggests that in his region in the patristic era few diaspora Jews remained. Others have said his repetition of the invective suggests that Jews were still there—otherwise “why beat a dead dog?” one scholar asked. Fredriksen is a minimalist on the question. There is little hard evidence either way, except for one tantalizing document. Augustine weighed in on a court case in which a fellow bishop defrauded a man of some property. He tactfully but forcefully told the bishop to give it back. The wronged man in whose favor Augustine decided was one *Iudaeus Licinius*: Licinius the Jew. This “precious” document shares a key trait with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: “Nobody barks.” In an everyday legal interaction in a small Mediterranean town, Augustine took the side of the Jew against the bishop and felt no need to apologize for it.

Fredriksen’s professional reason for writing the book, given in the acknowledgments, is striking. She stayed up late before a conference planning to skim Augustine’s work *Contra Faustum* for some handy anti-Jewish sound bites. She looked all night but found none. How was it that Augustine could engage all the things his opponent Faustus hated about Catholicism, like the Old Testament, Jewish ritual, a fleshly God, and praise of earthy creation and resurrection, without once bashing the Jews? Somehow he had, and so Fredriksen’s categories had to expand.

Much of this book is a running engagement with *Contra Faustum*, showing that in almost every place where Augustine provides original, groundbreaking thought, he does his “thinking with ‘Jews.’” Early in his career he compared the Jews to Cain, with Cain’s peculiar mark of protection from God. Their ubiquity in the world and cultural distinctiveness were both given by God to prepare the way for the gospel; for example, it was diaspora Jews who translated the Old Testament into Greek. Faustus was wrong, he said, to disparage Jewish law and ritual and fleshliness generally, for it all prepared the way for God’s coming to save in the flesh of Christ.

Later, Fredriksen notes, the comparison to Cain dropped out of Augustine’s thought on the Jews. Why? Because as he developed his theology of the two cities, one eternal and elect, the other worldly and damned—and the former on pilgrimage through the latter—he had to reevaluate the resonance of such words as *wandering*

and *exile*. They became for him not just words that describe Jews from long ago or Jews of his day whom the church should protect, but words that describe the church's experience of exile and wandering through this secular age on the way to our eternal home. Augustine's thought, Fredriksen implies, became more Jewish. Augustine doesn't close the circle, but we might: the church should learn from the Jews not just how to translate technical terms from Hebrew, but how to live as a pilgrim people.

Why don't we hear more about this—especially considering the distinctiveness of Augustine's thought over against that of his Christian forebears and contemporaries? Fredriksen contends that impressive as Augustine's witness doctrine and his use of Cain are, on those topics Augustine still had marked similarities to his anti-Jewish Christian companions. His defense of actual Jewish practices, like sacrifice, holidays, food laws and circumcision, however, is "the single brightest star in the constellation of the original ideas in Augustine's theology of Judaism."

Those of us who hope that Christian theology will become more Jewish—more attentive to practice rather than a disembodied idea, more oriented to holy days and biblical law, more lovingly engaged with the fleshly Savior and the goodness of the creation from which we spring, and more in constructive dialogue with living Jews rather than just dead ones—have a friend in, of all people, Augustine of Hippo. And all of us owe a debt of gratitude to Paula Fredriksen for showing us that church history is far more interesting than we remembered.