

**AUGUSTINE AND THE  
JEWS: A Christian  
Defense of Jews  
and Judaism  
by Paula Fredriksen  
New York: Doubleday,  
2009, 512pp. \$40.00**

Paula Fredriksen is a Jew who teaches at Boston University in the area of ancient Christianity. One evening some years ago, in anticipation of an address to be delivered the next day, she was thumbing through *Contra Faustum*, written by Augustine, to see if she could pick up snippets that would support her assumption — which is also the common assumption — about the anti-Jewish sentiments in the church “Fathers”. Though she kept at the book most of the night she couldn’t find any. It not only altered her perspective on many things, but it resulted eventually in the present work, which was written, blessedly, with a broader audience in mind than simply her scholarly peers.

Ignoring St. Paul’s affirmations in Romans 9 - 11, most of Augustine’s Christian predecessors and contemporaries were supersessionists, assuming that God’s covenant had passed from the Jews to the Christians; continued Jewish life unconverted to the new covenant was an aberration.

Augustine is apparently the only known ancient Christian defender of the Jews as Jews. His theological insight into the blessing of a continued Jewish community was, according to Fredriksen, unique. He thought Jews, through their devotion to the Old Testament scriptures, which are also the Christian scriptures, were giving a kind of verification of the Christian faith, though without intending to do so. Fredriksen says that Augustine’s defense of Jewish practices like sacrifice, holy days, food laws, and circumcision “is the single brightest star in the constellation of the original ideas in Augustine’s theology of Judaism”.

It’s not as though anti-Jewish invective can’t be found in Augustine. That would be entirely out of character for him in writing about almost anybody. Indeed, John Wesley, who admired Augustine’s theological insights, was offended by what he considered to be a far-too-rough polemical style. So Augustine could refer to Jews as being stiff-necked and hard-hearted. But he urged his fellow Christians not to harm Jews, and on one occasion put his oar into the pool of a court case involving a fellow bishop and “Licinius the Jew”, regarding some property of Licinius’ that the bishop had appropriated. Augustine was instrumental in having the bishop

return it. When we think of the standing the bishop would have in a small Mediterranean town in that period, Augustine's intervention against him on behalf of a Jew is remarkable. Fredriksen also refers to a Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, who in 1146 thanks 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". It's one of many examples of how frequently it was Augustine's voice, more than any other of the ancient Christian writers, that reached the ears of people in later centuries.

A review this short, on a volume as long as Fredriksen's, might lead readers to think the book not all that important. On the contrary.

— Mac Watts