

AUGUSTINE AND THE JEWS



Saint Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*. Incipit, B.M. Avranches, MS 90, Mont S. Michel, eleventh century.

AUGUSTINE AND THE JEWS



A CHRISTIAN DEFENSE OF JEWS AND JUDAISM

With a New Postscript

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AUGUSTINE AND THE JEWS

PROLOGUE

Whoever saves the life of a single person, it is as if he saved the entire world.

MISHNAH SANHEDRIN 4

In 1146, for the second time in fifty years, Christians in the Rhine Valley responded to the call to liberate the Holy Land from Muslims by first laying waste to communities of European Jews. The earlier slaughters of 1096, the bloody prelude to the First Crusade, had startled contemporaries. This time, however, a learned churchman was prepared, and he preached against those inciting anti-Jewish violence. His good deed was gratefully noted by a Jewish contemporary, Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn:

The Lord heard our outcry, and he turned to us and had pity on us. In his great mercy and grace, he sent a decent priest . . . named Abbot Bernard, of Clairvaux in France. . . . Bernard said to them: “It is good to go against the Ishmaelites [Muslims]. But who-soever touches a Jew to take his life is like one who harms Jesus himself . . . , for in the book of Psalms it is written of them, ‘Slay them not, lest my people forget.’” All the Gentiles regarded this priest as one of their saints When our enemies heard his words, many of them ceased plotting to kill us.¹

Reading Psalm 59:12 in this way—as an injunction addressed to Christians on how to treat Jews (“Slay them not”)—was not Bernard’s own idea. The Abbot of Clairvaux had drawn his instruction from one of the greatest authorities of the Latin church, Augustine of Hippo.

Some seven centuries before Bernard’s day, in what turned out to be the twilight of the Western Roman Empire, Augustine presented his interpretation of Psalm 59 in his great masterwork, *City of God*. He argued there that the Jews, alone of all the religious minorities within the (newly) Christian state, should be unimpeded in their religious practice. Why did the Jews merit this unique exemption? Because, said Augustine, their religious practices devolved from a unique author: God the Father. The same god whom Christians worshiped was himself the source of Jewish scripture, Jewish tradition, and Jewish practice. Thus God himself, Augustine insisted, wanted the Jews to remain Jews. Let them preserve their ancient books, he urged; let them live openly according to their ancestral practices while scattered among the Christian majority. In so doing, Augustine taught, the Jews performed a valuable service of testimony for the church.

By the evidence of their own scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ. . . . It follows that when the Jews do not believe in our scriptures, their scriptures are fulfilled in them, while they read them with blind eyes. . . . It is in order to give the testimony which, in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books [of the Old Testament] that they are themselves dispersed among all nations, wherever the Christian church spreads. . . . Hence the prophecy in the Book of Psalms: “Slay them not, lest they forget your law; scatter them by your might.”

CITY OF GOD 18.4

This paragraph sums up Augustine’s justly famous “witness doctrine.” His teaching on the Jews’ special status, and on the special service that their presence and their religious visibility rendered to the church, remained a singular aspect of his great theological legacy. With the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, this legacy passed into the traditions of medieval Christian Europe. In that more violent society, Augustine’s witness doctrine provided authority for later learned churchmen,

who used it—as Bernard, in the bleak days of the Second Crusade—to deflect and defuse Christian violence against Jews.²

Augustine and the Jews tells the story of how Augustine came to conceive this unique teaching, which was original to him. Thanks to the happy survival of so many of his writings, whose sequence we know, we can see the development of his thought on this topic in an astonishing degree of detail: philosophically oriented treatises and commentaries just after his conversion in Italy in 386, his failed commentary on Genesis once back in North Africa, short essays and attempted bigger projects on the Pauline epistles, transcripts of debates with heretical opponents, sermons, letters. And then, suddenly and dazzlingly, four brilliant and original works, produced in overlapping, rapid succession, beginning in 396—*To Simplicianus* (on Paul), *Christian Teaching* (on reading the Bible), *Confessions* (on knowing God), and *Against Faustus* (on the Bible, against the Manichees). We have them all. These works chart the way to his teaching on Jews and Judaism. Augustine’s writing is so vivid, his intellectual energy so fierce, the force of his personality so present, that we can practically *hear* him thinking. Tracing his thought through these closely dated works is like viewing time-lapse photography. We can watch—phrase by phrase, problem by problem, insight by insight—how he gets to where he goes.

Prior to this question of Augustine’s teaching on Jews and Judaism, however, and in a sense framing it, stands the more fundamental one already put to us by our glance at the Crusades: Why and how did relations between Christians and Jews ever become so terrible in the first place?



THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS makes this distressing question that much more difficult to answer. Christianity had been born and nurtured within Judaism. Its message of bodily resurrection, divine judgment, and messianic redemption is quintessentially Jewish. The earliest Christians, themselves Jews, had proclaimed the good news of this impending redemption in terms drawn entirely from Jewish scripture. Fanning out from Jerusalem, the Christian movement in its first generation, and indefinitely thereafter, incubated within diaspora synagogue communities. In brief, ancient Christianity was itself a type of Judaism. Nonetheless, by Augustine’s day—in fact, well before—an important shift had occurred. Even though Christianity’s past was incontrovertibly Jewish, its future was resoundingly gentile.

This shift in Christianity’s ethnic base came with shifts in traditions of textual interpretation. Which change came first, or whether both came together, is now impossible to say. The texts in question were themselves also originally Jewish. The larger and vastly older collection was the ancient Jewish scriptures in their “modern” Greek translation, the Septuagint (largely complete by the early second century B.C.E.). The fewer and more recent texts were, preeminently, Paul’s letters to his gentile communities and some or all of the gospels—also Jewish, also in Greek—that were eventually collected into the churches’ New Testament canon.

Both bodies of literature preserved condemnations of the social and religious practices of outsiders and they particularly condemned the images of the outsiders’ gods. But this literature also preserved hostile caricatures of *insiders*, heated polemics by their Jewish authors against other Jews. The scriptural prophets, for example, roundly condemned those Jews whose practice and interpretation of Jewish law differed from their way; and their way, they proclaimed, was God’s way. Asserting similar authorization (for he saw himself as “an apostle neither from human beings nor through them, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father”; Galatians 1:1), Paul energetically repudiated other Christian Jews who construed the gospel message in ways different from his own. And the evangelists present Jesus himself as condemning various Jewish contemporaries: scribes, Pharisees, priests, and

occasionally others of his own followers who in some way dissent from the position championed by the particular gospel writer. (Matthew 7:15–23 provides a particularly clear example of this internal debate, which in its original historical context would have been “internal” with respect to Judaism no less than with respect to Christianity.) Diversity, it seems, was worse than dangerous: it was damnable. Yet, clearly, diversity was also typical. At least, we have very many ancient Jewish texts—including paleo-Christian Jewish texts—that complain about or condemn such diversity.

In the Christian literature that begins to appear early in the second century, however, these arguments against other Jews transform into condemnations of Judaism itself. From this point on, many gentile authors, whether disputing with Jewish contemporaries or contesting with each other over questions of authority and identity, increasingly expressed the principles of their various Christian beliefs and practices by appealing to a vast web of interconnected anti-Jewish themes. They authorized their arguments by referring to biblical texts and, above all, to statements in the letters of Paul. By Augustine’s period, after three hundred years of vigorous development, this interpretive anti-Judaism had become a defining feature of orthodox identity and of orthodox theology. Scholars speak of this invective as the *adversus Iudaeos* or *contra Iudaeos* tradition: Christian teachings “against the Jews.”

These teachings appear throughout every form of early Christian literature known to us: in epistles, sermons, and commentaries; in apologies and in learned theological treatises. Eventually, from the early fourth century on, they echo in the legislation of church councils, in the mosaics ornamenting basilicas and baptisteries, and in the legal language of the imperial government. Yet, intriguingly, no correspondingly robust tradition *contra Christianos* appears in extant Jewish literature of the same period, from the second to the early fifth century. The bulk of these texts originates with the rabbis: the Mishnah, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the great homiletical commentaries (*midrashim*). They collect and preserve traditions whose focus is Jewish custom and community, whose language is Hebrew or Aramaic, and whose provenance is the Land of Israel. The voices of that vast portion of the Jewish population living west of the Land of Israel, however, the voices of the Greek- and Latin-speaking Jewish Diaspora, fall curiously silent. The abundant Jewish literary culture in Greek, which had flourished in the Hellenistic and the early Roman periods, and whose momentum had led, centuries before our period, to the translation of the Jewish scriptures into Greek, simply dries up.³

This imbalance in the evidence complicates efforts at explanation. What social context can accommodate the production of such hostile rhetoric, and why would this rhetoric be so heavily developed and so copiously represented on one side alone?

Current efforts to explain the scope and the energy of the *contra Iudaeos* tradition and to reconstruct a plausible social context within which our lopsided evidence might make some sense look back particularly to the late nineteenth century, to the work of the great church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack made three interpretive proposals. The first was that, after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem’s temple in 70 C.E., Jewish communities began to turn inward, withdrawing from active relations with and involvement in the outside, gentile world. (This conjecture accounts for the general lack of early Jewish responses to Christian anti-Jewish invective). His second proposal was that the stereotypical quality of Christian statements about Jews suggested that their usual source was not encounters with Jewish contemporaries but interpretations of Old Testament texts, especially of those of the prophets. (This second conjecture accounts for the repetitive and abstract quality of so much anti-Jewish criticism: hearts that are always stony, hard, or uncircumcised; necks that are always stiff; and so on.) And, third, Harnack suggested that *contra Iudaeos* invective was most often stimulated by Christians’ polemical contacts not with Jews but with the much larger population of

potential converts, which is to say, with pagans. Skeptical and hostile, these pagans would have pointed out to Christians that Jews did not follow the gentile Christian lead when interpreting what were clearly Jewish books. Christian anti-Jewish argument responded to pagans by making the case that the Jews had their interpretations all wrong.⁴

Other scholars challenged Harnack's contentions. Two of these scholars, who published their work in the years just after World War II, stand in the immediate background of the present study. The first scholar, Bernhard Blumenkranz, minutely analyzed a late sermon of Augustine's, traditionally identified as the "Sermon against the Jews," in *Die Judenpredigt Augustins* (1946). The second scholar, his friend and contemporary Marcel Simon, wrote a wider study: *Verus Israël. Études sur les relations entre Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'empire romain (A.D. 135–425)* (1948). In this book, Simon surveyed the pan-Mediterranean context of Christian–Jewish relations from the period after Rome's defeat of the Judean rebel Bar Kokhba through the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius II. Both scholars argued that the force, the scope, and the sheer ubiquity of Christian *adversus Iudaeos* polemic could not be accounted for by conjecturing, as Harnack had, that diaspora Judaism had all but disappeared. ("Do men rage so persistently against a corpse?" Simon famously asked.) On the contrary, urged these scholars: The church inveighed against the synagogue because the synagogue posed an active threat to the church.⁵

The many complaints within ancient Christian literature about gentile Christians who "Judaized"—that is, who voluntarily assumed some Jewish practices—and the occasional criticisms of and imperial laws against gentile conversions to Judaism provided the evidence in support of this new description of the late Roman religious and social context. But Blumenkranz and Simon went further, arguing that this evidence attested not only to the attractiveness of the synagogue but also to strenuous efforts to be attractive made by the synagogue. The Jews of late antiquity, argued Blumenkranz and Simon, exactly like their contemporary Christian counterparts, actively engaged in *missions*, seeking to persuade Gentiles, whether pagan or Christian, to become Jews. The noise and the quantity of Christian anti-Jewish invective, they urged, indexed the younger community's insecurity in the face of its much more established Jewish rival. Christian polemic *contra Iudaeos*, they concluded, actually reveals the intensity of the church's rivalry with the synagogue as both communities competed for a limited resource: new converts.⁶

From that time to this, an enormous volume of fresh research, new data, and different arguments have refined, softened, or reinforced the two interpretive options represented by Harnack to the one side and by Blumenkranz and Simon to the other. New archaeological finds have offset the silence of post-first-century Hellenistic Jewish literary texts. The monumental remains of the great synagogue at Sardis, integrated into the heart of that city; a wealth of inscriptional evidence and of mosaic donor plaques, attesting to close interactions between Roman-era Jews and Gentiles whether pagan or Christian; new ways of reading rabbinic literature in order to perceive contacts and influences across the confessional divide: Scholars now have much richer and more varied evidence to consider.⁷

Earlier interpretations have also been modulated and new ones proposed, as scholars have paid increasing attention to the ways that polemics ostensibly directed against outsiders work rhetorically to establish definitions of community for insiders. And also, while much of the formal Christian literary evidence (such as sermons and commentaries) bespeaks hostility between Christians of various kinds, Jews, and pagans, much of the nonliterary and nonecclesiastical evidence (inscriptions, papyri, decorative artifacts) and indeed, some of the complaints made within the literary evidence, attest to various, often friendly contacts between members of these different communities, up to and including co-celebration and marriage. A second gap thus begins to open up, this one between the

extremely hostile *contra Iudaeos* rhetoric and a surprisingly open and accommodating Mediterranean urban social reality. Whence the strength, the ubiquity, and the stability of this anti-Jewish invective, then, absent an explanatory social context of equally universal and intense competition or hostility?⁸

These difficulties of interpretation notwithstanding, we need to have a sense of the history and the role of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric in Augustine's culture in order to see how his bold revisions challenged this tradition. I propose to tell his story, then, by beginning with a different one: a broad and brief history of Greco-Roman Mediterranean civilization from its dawn in the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.) to its incipient twilight in the fifth-century western Christian empire. From this aerial view of Augustine's social and religious culture, we will move into our closeup of Augustine's life and thought and thence, finally, to the evolution/revolution of his theology of Jews and Judaism.

Thus **Part I**, "The Legacy of Alexander," examines the interactions of the two most important populations in antiquity: gods and humans. We will see how these gods and their humans—including the Judean god and his humans—formed units that were imagined and understood as family groups. We will also see how empire and the new "global" culture of Hellenism affected the ways that different ethnic and, thus, religious groups perceived and described themselves and others; and we will explore the various practical ways in which ancient people sought to maintain good relationships both with their own god(s) and with the gods of others. Next, we will consider elite traditions of Hellenistic education—chiefly rhetoric but also philosophy—to determine how these shaped social, political, and intellectual encounters and activities. As we trace the spread of the Christian movement within this erudite culture, we will examine how its leaders saw their enterprise, at least in part, as a conflict over the interpretation of texts. And finally, we will explore some of the variegated evidence noted earlier—inscriptions, archaeological remains, different kinds of literature—to gain a sense of the social world of Roman antiquity, of the ways in which pagans, Jews, and Christians interacted among themselves and with each other in the shared space of the Greco-Roman city.

Part II, "The Prodigal Son," explores the immediate context of Augustine's teaching on Jews and Judaism: his own intellectual and spiritual development. This story of Augustine's life ranges from his student days in Carthage (370s C.E.), during which he joined the outlawed Christian sect of the Manichees, through to his early years as a catholic bishop, when he composed his amazing prayer to God, the *Confessions* (circa 397). Here I highlight the particular questions that impelled him first to the heresy of Manichaean Christianity and, later, to a cosmopolitan version of his childhood church. What is the relation of spirit to flesh? Of a good god to the problem of evil? Of text to meaning? Of time to eternity? Grappling with these questions drove Augustine ever more deeply into the problem of interpreting the Bible. The challenge that these questions posed, and which his commitments to Manichaeism had greatly intensified, provoked in the later 390s an outpouring of original theology. The axial point around which these old questions and his new answers revolved is the issue of divine justice and human moral freedom. Scripturally—and thus both theologically and historically—that issue was embodied for Augustine in the ways that he imagined the relationship between God and the Jews.

Part III, "God and Israel," begins with the literary confrontation between Augustine and an old teacher of his, Faustus the Manichee. Faustus' book the *Capitula* had attacked the principles and traditions of Augustine's church. Its strategy was in one sense commonplace: Faustus the Christian defined and defended his Christianity as true Christianity by using anti-Jewish rhetoric to revile a rival group of gentile Christians, accusing them of the same moral and spiritual errors by which that rhetoric had long characterized "the Jews." But the *Capitula* had surprising polemical power, which

arose from Faustus' ingenious combination of two originally quite distinct traditions: the rhetoric *contra Iudaeos* of heretical Christianity and the rhetoric *contra Iudaeos* of orthodox Christianity. In Augustine's response to Faustus we can see in microcosm the applications and the effects of tradition of Greco-Roman rhetoric, philosophy, textual interpretation, and cross-ethnic relations explored in the macrocosm of [Part I](#). But we can also see, in wonderful detail, the effect that the particular contingencies of Augustine's own life had on his thought. His education and its limits; his relations with other Latin Christian intellectuals; the circumstances specific to late-fourth-century North Africa, with its communities of Jews, pagans, and dissenting Christians; the instability of Latin versions of the Bible; the particular conclusions that he had come to in understanding the biography as well as the theology of the apostle Paul: all of these factors combined to lead Augustine to the stunning achievement of his teaching on Jews and Judaism.



I OWE READERS some preliminary remarks to explain several peculiarities of this book. First, I have capitalized the word *god* only when it acts as the name of the biblical deity: thus, "God spoke to Moses" but "the god of Moses spoke." This decision reflects my effort to put all of our ancient actors on the same level playing field. Traditional capitalization seems like a form of special pleading. I did not want to write about "the god of Plato" if I wrote about "the God of Abraham."

Second, modern English uses two words, *Gentiles* and *pagans*, where the Greek on which these borrow rest has only a single word, *ta ethnê*, "the nations." The two English words have different connotations. *Gentile* makes a statement about a person's ethnicity: The person is not a Jew. *Pagan* refers to a person's religious beliefs: The person is neither a Jew nor a Christian. When Christianity began to appear in first-century diaspora synagogues, however, *mutatis mutandis*, pagans were Gentiles, and Gentiles were pagans. (The exceptions to this virtually universal rule are explored in the text.) The distinction between religion and ethnicity created by the two English words is an anachronism for the first several centuries of the Christian Era, one that makes the quarrels within the first generation of the movement and the reasons for later pagan anti-Christian persecutions harder to see. I note where this vocabulary presents problems, and I offset these problems by using the one word when modern usage expects the other. The reader should prepare for encountering "pagan Christians" when we look at the first generation of the Christian movement in the Diaspora.

Third, throughout the present study I have tried to compensate for one of the abiding problems in the field of ancient Christian studies: the language of the winners. Surveys of pre-Constantinian Christianity often identify various Christian communities, marginalized only during the power struggles of the fourth century and later, as already "heretical" in the late first century, or in the second, or in the third. Such an approach seems to grant to the "orthodox" their own claim, namely, that their version of Christianity was the defining one, always the same from the beginning and therefore authentic and in some special sense "true." It thereby invites and promotes anachronism. Before Constantine, each of the various Christian communities thought that its own views were correct and that the views of others, if different, were false. Before 312, what we have is variety. After 312, we still have variety. By that point, however, events had led to a clear, functional definition of *orthodoxy*: the views that enjoyed the support of the emperor. After 312, in brief, what primarily distinguished orthodox Christians from their rivals was power. To think otherwise is simply to recapitulate in modern academic language the ancient rhetoric of the orthodox bishops. (To see some version of rabbinic Judaism as "orthodox" Judaism projects the same error onto ancient Jewish communities.)

Nonetheless, we remain stuck with the vocabulary of the winners. Scholars habitually identify

various second- and third-century Christian groups by the names of their prominent leaders: Valentinians (the followers of Valentinus), Marcionites (the followers of Marcion), Manichaeans or Manichees (the followers of Mani). And we identify the community that names them this way as proto-orthodox or as orthodox. For clarity, I have had to acquiesce. The reader should remember, however, that in their own eyes, all of these people were simply followers of Christ and, therefore, “Christians.”

Fourth—a different version of the same problem—how should we identify Paul and his Jewish contemporaries in the first generation of the movement that formed around the memory and the message of Jesus of Nazareth? To call them “Jews” leads to confusion, because they are a particular kind of Jew, and it is their particularity that gives them their historical importance. (So too, for example, with those Jews who were members of other first-century Jewish schools or sects, such as the Pharisees or the Essenes.) To call this first generation “Christian” risks anachronism, however. The term, and arguably the concept, did not exist during their lifetimes. By their own lights, these particular Jews saw themselves—when they were not arguing with each other—as Jews who had the correct understanding of the Jewish god, the Jewish messiah, and the Jewish scriptures. The problem is no less acute when trying to speak about the non-Jews who joined with them. Are these people “converts”? (If so, in this period before a separate Christianity exists, then to what?) Or are they “Judaizers,” that is, pagans who adopt some but not all Jewish practices? (Which ones? In what ways? And why?) I have finally opted to use “Christian,” while acknowledging the many points made by good arguments against such usage. Where this label leads to problems of historical analysis, I mention it in the text.

Fifth, I have designated the fourth-century Christian victors as both “catholic” and “orthodox.” This too reflects their own claim, especially in the age after Constantine, to represent universal (*catholica*) and right-thinking (*orthodox*) Christianity. Those later and more localized churches, (Latin) Roman Catholicism and (Greek) Orthodoxy, descend from this community, but in our period they do not yet exist. Thus Latin theologians in the fourth and fifth centuries can be “orthodox” (like Ambrose, or Augustine); and Greek prelates in the eastern Mediterranean (like Athanasius of Alexandria), in claiming to represent an international and uniform Christian tradition, can be “catholic.” I hope that the use of lower-case letters will help avoid confusion. Of course, important fourth-century communities that self-identified as Romans and as orthodox Christians lived outside of the immediate Mediterranean linguistic world of Greek and Latin. Vital traditions also flourished in Coptic and in Syriac, and some of these contributed also to the development of Christian anti-Jewish invective. Augustine, however, felt the impact of those traditions that came through Greek and especially through Latin texts. For that reason, the present study concentrates on them.⁹

Sixth, while I have availed myself wherever possible of standard translations of Greek and Latin texts, I have usually altered and adjusted them. (This is true even when I used translations that I have previously published myself.) Biblical quotations in English, often but not always, draw on the text of the Revised Standard Version (RSV), though frequently I have adjusted these as well. Last, quotations of biblical texts made by ancient authors often do not conform to the received texts and authorized translations of today. Sometimes this is because the author is quoting from memory; sometimes it is because his text (especially if in Latin) differs from the Greek or the Hebrew that stands behind modern scientific editions of the Bible. In these instances, of course, I have kept their readings and translated accordingly.

Seventh, and finally, my notes here are discursive and only minimally bibliographical: I did not intend them to be exhaustive. Two considerations prompted this decision. The first was practical. The

earlier academic publications on which the present study rests are readily accessible thanks to the Internet. Readers who want a fuller complement of scholarly bibliography and argumentation than I give here can consult my Webpage at Boston University, where my earlier essays are available in PDF format (www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/fredriksen). My second consideration, however, was literary, thus aesthetic. The conclusions that I have reached in the course of several decades' work on a wide variety of questions, in related but different areas, emerged only severally. In *Augustine and the Jews* I wanted to retell the results of that research in one sweeping story.

The roots of Christianity run deep in Judaism. And the roots of anti-Judaism run deep in Christianity. To grasp the force and complexity of these two facts—and of Augustine’s singular response to them—requires a sense of their historical matrix, the culture that enabled their birth, sponsored their growth and fed their long-lived, manifold interactions. That culture was born nearly seven hundred years before the brilliant bishop reconceived his ideas about God, creation, and history; some three centuries before the message of the risen Christ began its reshaping of Mediterranean society. Understanding the traditions of Christian anti-Judaism, in order to see how Augustine’s ideas on Jews and Judaism ultimately challenged them, begins with an understanding of the world in the wake of Alexander the Great.



A task was set for me, which caused me deep anxiety. . . . I was to recite the speech of Juno in her anger and grief that she “could not keep the Trojan king out of Italy.”

AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS* 1.17, 2

Born in North Africa in 354, Augustine began life some four decades after Constantine’s momentous decision to link the fortunes of the Roman Empire with those of the church. Augustine’s father, Patricius, though not baptized until near the end of his life, was Christian; his mother, the formidable Monnica, was a fervent believer. Augustine’s native province, with its illustrious history of saints and martyrs, was the cradle of Latin Christianity. Nonetheless, it was the tales of ancient heroes and the classical gods that filled and formed the imagination of this bright little boy: furious Juno and Virgil’s doomed lovers, Dido and Aeneas; wicked Medea flying through the air; Zeus and Athena, Achilles and Odysseus, and the whole noisy throng of Homer’s outsize deities and warriors. Augustine’s formal education—a benefit that his Christian parents made considerable sacrifices to secure for him—was thoroughly and un-apologetically pagan.¹

How did these gods become so established in traditions of learning? Why would Augustine’s parents want this sort of education for their son? How did Augustine learn to read and to think with pagan literature, and how did this education ultimately affect his reading of the Bible and thus his interpretation of Judaism? To answer these questions, we have to look back across nearly seven centuries, to the birth of the world that Augustine lived in. Odd as it may seem, the story of Augustine and the Jews begins with the conquests of Alexander the Great.



BY THE TIME HE WAS THIRTY, Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.) presided over a vast and variegated empire that stretched from the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt to the edges of India. Though his empire was short lived—at his death, it fractured into much smaller kingdoms and city-states—his underlying cultural achievement endured. In the wake of his conquests, Alexander had planted Greek colonists and veterans from his army in new settlements. He organized these settlements along lines reminiscent of the Greek city, or *polis*. Urban life in Alexander’s new establishments pulsed around the agora, the central public space that served as the commercial and social nerve center of the city. At public feasts, civic altars smoked with the flesh of animals offered to the gods. Schools and gymnasia educated the next generation in public speaking and athletics, training the sons of the elite for future leadership. The *boulê* (town council), the library, the theater, the hippodrome: all served simultaneously as sites for social interaction and for the enactment of public piety.

These organs of the classical Greek city, widely transplanted abroad, enabled the growth of a new international culture, which scholars call *Hellenism*. Greek itself became antiquity’s English, the international language par excellence. As such, it facilitated trade and travel, the exchange of goods and ideas, and the workings of government and of diplomacy across vast expanses of territory. Hellenism, in brief, was the West’s first great experience of globalization.

Thanks to the gymnasia—institutes of learning for the adolescent sons of civic elites—education was also globalized. Adapted classical curricula brought the patrimony of high Greek culture, *paideia*, to local elites abroad. To the degree that citizens participated in the political, intellectual, and cultural life of their cities, to that degree they lived and thought in Greek. So penetrating was this linguistic accomplishment that by the second century B.C.E., Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora had dropped

their native vernaculars and translated their ancient sacred writings from Hebrew (or Aramaic) into Greek. So per-during was this linguistic accomplishment that most of the texts from the first several centuries of the Christian movement, even those composed in the “Latin” West—in Rome, for example, or in Lyon—were in fact written in Greek. The lineaments of Augustine’s curriculum in fourth-century North Africa, and Homer’s place within it, give the measure of Alexander’s long-lived cultural achievement.²

Vernaculars of course persisted, and Hellenism itself was a mongrel phenomenon, expressed in local accents whether in Egypt, Syria, or Asia Minor (modern Turkey). (Artifacts from the kingdom of the Ptolemies, for example, one of the dynasties that emerged in the power struggle after Alexander’s death, are at once recognizably Greek and unmistakably Egyptian.) Its myriad variations notwithstanding, however, Hellenism facilitated communication and spread cultural coherence across vast distances. Adapting and adopting it, Rome exported this civilization even further, adding to the Hellenistic repertoire its own variations on urban structures: the forum, the basilica, the circus, the public bath. By the end of the first century C.E., thanks to Rome’s conquests, the expanse of territory from Britain in the west to the edge of Persia in the east, from the Danube in the north to the African breadbasket in the south, formed an identifiable, if not uniform, cultural whole.

Trade and government, art and literature: these abstractions sit atop a rougher reality. Throughout the 750 years that stretch between Alexander and Augustine, war and its aftermath, peace, brought different, distant peoples closer together. Contact with other cultures achieved initially through military conquest often meant disempowerment, deportation, and dislocation for the losing side. Defeated peoples might remain where they were, cooperating with and accommodating themselves to the new order. Or they might move, whether as refugees, exiles, or slaves. But these empires, Hellenistic or Roman, also established domestic peace. Peace enabled and encouraged interior travel and less traumatic forms of migration. Merchants, enticed by the wider horizons and the increased opportunities for trade brought by empire, could travel in safety. So could pilgrims, who celebrated festivals and journeyed to famous temples and holy sites. Populations mixed as soldiers married, and they and their families garrisoned military colonies in frontier areas. Ancient empire thus not only spread the unifying global culture of Hellenism but also facilitated the mixing and mingling of populations, bringing foreigners—slave and immigrant alike—“home.” (Different people, as we shall see, greeted this new proximity to strangers with different attitudes.) And, since all ancient peoples had their own pantheons, these ancient empires also brought into closer contact many different gods.



GODS AND HUMANS were the two key populations of ancient empire, which could prosper only if they cooperated. To understand how ancients solicited this cooperation, we need to imagine the world as they did, a world that was filled with gods.

Though, often, these gods lived in the heavens, they also lived on earth. Ancient gods tended to be local in two senses. They attached, first, to particular places. Sometimes their holy sites were natural—a grove or a grotto, a spring or a sacred mountain. No less often, however, these sites were man made. Gods, like men, were also urban creatures, and cities held shrines. Temples might be visited or statues temporarily tenanted by the god to whom they were sacred. The Gospel of Matthew, written in Greek probably toward the close of the first century C.E., provides a nice statement of this extremely common ancient idea. In that work, Jesus observes that “he who swears by the Temple [in Jerusalem] swears by it and by *him who dwells in it*” (Matthew 23:21)—that is, by the god of Israel, who abides in his temple.

At festivals and solemn occasions, whether in town or in country, ancient gods joined worshippers around their altars. There gods and men could enact a fundamental and binding social ritual: they “ate” together. The fat, bones, and flesh of blood offerings, the cereals and wine brought by worshippers, provided the medium of this encounter, which was cautiously scripted according to purity rules that (often) the god himself had revealed. Mistakes made gods angry; proper ritual and piety—all indices of affection, loyalty, and respect—pleased them and disposed them to be gracious. Humans, in consequence, took care to safeguard the purity, sanctity, and financial security of these altars and holy sites because, in a simple way, the god was there. (Much later into the Christian period when anti-pagan polemic demoted both the moral and the celestial status of these divine beings to that of “evil demons,” their presence around their altars was still assumed.)³

But ancient gods were local in another sense. They attached not just to places, but also to peoples. Put more concisely, ancient “religion” was inherited. It characterized ethnic groups. In antiquity, gods ran in the blood.

I put “religion” in scare quotes because of the important differences between the ways that modern people tend to think of religion and the ways that ancient peoples maintained good relations with their gods. For the modern Westerner, religion is a detachable aspect of individual identity. Largely personal or private, modern religion seems first of all a question of beliefs. And beliefs themselves often relate to individual psychological states, the sincerity or commitment or conviction or inner disposition of the believer.

In the ancient Mediterranean, by contrast, the closest social analogue to our concept of religion would be *cult*, those protocols and practices whereby humans enacted their respect for and devotion to the deity, thereby securing heaven’s good will. Cult focused on deeds. It was communal, both across generations (cult acts, or rituals, were performed according to ancestral tradition) and among members of the group. This is not to say that individual households and, indeed, persons might not have their own particular protocols of piety: They could and they did. And this is not to say that religious activities always involved an entire urban population. On the contrary, smaller groups gathered around particular deities whom they chose to worship, such as Isis or Dionysus. Various immigrant communities had their own liturgical calendars and traditions that served, precisely, to indicate who was in the group and who was not. Still, ancient worship in general emphasized actions that were public, communal, and (especially at the civic and imperial levels) what we would identify as political.⁴

To the degree that cult was inherited, to that degree it was also ethnic—that is, cult was most often specific to a people (*ethnos* in Greek). Cult thus functioned as a type of ethnic designation, binding a group together across time as well as space, defining one’s kinship group, the *genos* (Greek) or *natio* (Latin). Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C.E., gives a clear example of this way of thinking, when he defines “Greekness” (*Hellenismos*) in terms of shared blood, language, altars, and customs (*Histories* 8.144.2–3). Or, more simply, deities, peoples, and places could all be identified in terms of each other: the god of Israel, the gods of Rome, the god at Delphi, and so on. “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:28).

Hellenistic Jews, in distinguishing their way of life from that of outsiders, invented a word similar to Herodotus’ term for Greekness: *Ioudaismos*, “Jewishness” or (perhaps better) “Judeanness.” Thus the heroes of the passage in the Second Book of Maccabees, where this word first appears, fight for “the temple, the city (Jerusalem), and the laws” (2 Maccabees 2:21). Centuries later, sometime in the 50s C.E., another Greek Jew, the apostle Paul, defined Jewishness in ways that again recall Herodotus’ categories of Greekness. “My brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh,” wrote Paul, “are the

Israelites. To them belong . . . the glory [Greek: *doxa*], the covenants [*diathêkai*], the giving of the Law [*nomothesia*], and the worship [*latreia*]" (Romans 9:3–4 RSV). In other words, Paul explains to the (gentile) Christian community in Rome that his kinsmen (*syggeneis*) are distinguished by their customs, their cult, and their god.

The Greek word that Paul uses, which implies several of these ideas, is *doxa*. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) translates this word as "glory." But Paul's phrasing draws on the Jewish scriptures, so that beneath his Greek *doxa* lies the Hebrew word *kavod*. *Kavod* also translates as "glory," but the word refers most specifically to the glorious divine presence and thus to the particular place of this presence—that is, the altar of Israel's god in his temple in Jerusalem (Romans 9:4). Paul also lists customs as defining his people, their covenants (*diathêkai*) and laws (*nomothesia*), by which he means Torah. And as another ethnic identifier in this list, Paul names service or cult: *latreia* in his text, translated rather bloodlessly by "worship" in the RSV. But *latreia* specifically means "offerings," most often blood offerings; the biblical Hebrew behind Paul's Greek would be *avodah*. In the context of Paul's letter, then, this word *latreia* refers both to Torah, which communicated God's protocols for sacrifice, and also to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the cult was performed before his altar. (Romans 9:4–5. Note that neither the author of 2 Maccabees nor the apostle could follow Herodotus in using "shared language" to indicate shared ethnicity.)⁵

Thus, like their humans, ancient gods (including, emphatically, the Judean god) were ethnic also. Their ethnic relation to their humans was sometimes presented in terms of the family bond of descent. Myths of primordial breedings between a god and a mortal often recounted such a relation between heaven and a ruler. Alexander the Great claimed descent from Heracles; according to another legend, Alexander's mother, Olympias, had conceived him through the god Zeus. Aeneas, hero of Virgil's great poem, was the child of the goddess Venus, a connection that later served his descendant Julius Caesar very well.

Cities as well as rulers found such divine connections politically useful. A city whose citizens were descended from a god could negotiate treaties and reach understandings with other peoples by invoking newly discovered bonds through ancient divine–human relationship. Hellenistic and later Roman diplomats, availing themselves of these traditions, wove intricate webs of kinship diplomacy among cities. These diplomats could appeal to an ancient past when prolific deities and semidivine heroes, in the wake of their considerable wanderings, left behind human offspring, who were the ancestors of the parties to the treaty under negotiation. So too did Hellenistic Jews, who paired the offspring of their patriarchs with lesser Greek divinities. This ancient bond of shared "blood" served to stabilize current agreements.⁶

The Jewish god himself was austere removed from such divine–human couplings. He had children nonetheless. Biblical claims of divine sonship are a strong way of asserting intimacy with God. "You are my son; today I have begotten you," God says on the coronation day of an Israelite king (Psalm 2:7). "I will raise up your offspring after you," God promises David. "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2 Samuel 7:12,14; later Christians referred such passages to Jesus). So too with the entire people of Israel, whose historical (thus ethnic) descent ran from Abraham through Isaac to Jacob. "Israel is my first-born son," God announces in Exodus 4:22, and the image recurs often throughout Jewish scripture. The apostle Paul, repeating this biblical commonplace, distinguished his *genos* from others by referring to their sacred "sonship" (for example, at Romans 9:4). Those members of the nations whom Paul evangelized achieve this filial status through "adoption." Baptism brings them into the family as "sons"; like Christ, they can address Israel's god as "Abba, Father" (e.g., Galatians 4:5–7; Romans 8:15). Later, in the second and third centuries, when

non-Jewish Christian communities sought to formulate their identity, they too fell back on this native Mediterranean language of divinity and blood kinship or ethnicity, claiming that their community constituted a new “race” (*genos*).⁷



WHAT DID THESE IDEAS about gods and humans mean practically for the way that ancient peoples lived? They meant that, first, in an age of empire, gods bumped up against each other with some frequency, even as their humans did. The larger the political unit, the greater the number of different peoples and thus the greater the number of gods. And the greater the number of gods and of peoples, the greater the plurality of cultic practices, because different peoples naturally had their own ancestral customs. Ancient empires, in other words, accommodated as a matter of course a wide range of religious practices. To see this accommodation as “religious tolerance” is to misunderstand it. Ancient society was not liberal in the sense that modern civil societies tend (or try) to be. But it was, of practical necessity, pluralistic. Religious differences were a normal fact of life. Put differently: A mark of successful empire (the subordination of many different peoples to a larger government) was the variety of gods and the range of traditional practices that it encompassed (since many peoples meant, naturally, many gods).

Second, the existence or nonexistence of the gods of outsiders (those of a different *genos* or *natio*) was not at issue. Ancient peoples generally assumed that various gods existed, just as their humans did. When these gods, with their humans, were encountered, various kinds of recognitions and acknowledgments might occur. When Alexander conquered Egypt, for example, a priest of the god Ammon greeted him as Ammon’s son. Deified himself, Alexander was depicted on coins in gorgeous Hellenistic profile, the ram’s horns of the Egyptian deity growing out of his head. As cultures encountered each other, their gods might be identified with, associated with, or assimilated to each other. Thus the Roman Jupiter took on characteristics of the Greek Zeus; statues of the Roman Minerva replicated aspects of Athena; indigenous Semitic gods (such as *Ba’al shamin*, “lord of heaven”) gained currency by being presented under Olympian names (“Zeus”). When different peoples clashed, their gods were imagined as fighting, too. But this was not always the case. The Romans, ever practical, began sieges by addressing the presiding deities of the enemy. Through ritual of *evocatio* (“calling out”), the Romans summoned the city’s gods to come over to them, promising in exchange for victory to respect and to continue their cult.⁸

The Bible reveals a similar sensibility. Accustomed as we are to seeing our own modern monotheism mirrored in its verses, scripture’s messier monotheism can be harder to discern. Other gods, nonetheless, still peek through the biblical text. “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?” sings Moses (Exodus 15:11). “You shall have no other gods before (or besides) me,” the god of Israel insists (20:3). “All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god,” says the prophet Micah, “but we will walk in the name of the Lord *our* god forever and ever” (Micah 4:5). Both in law and in prophetic texts, ancient Jews condemned “images” or “idols,” those human productions that represented the divine personalities worshiped by other nations. The god of Israel, in his self-revelation at Sinai, forbade his people this style of worship (and Exodus 32, the story of the Golden Calf and God’s response to it, preserved a standing cautionary tale). Later Jews in the western Diaspora certainly thought that idol worship lowered the moral tone of pagan society: Paul in Romans 1:18–32 rendered particularly full-throated indictment. Some Jewish writers, like the author of the Book of Tobit (second century B.C.E.?), looked forward to the day when the nations would wake up and destroy their man-made images (14:6). The idols, however, were not the divinities themselves.⁹

The Bible's casual acknowledgment of the existence of other gods stands in stark contrast to its repeated injunction that Israel must worship only Israel's god and must never use images to do so. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, these two characteristics of Jewish religious practice—a principled cultic exclusivism and aniconic worship—were often remarked on by outsiders. But ancient Jews lived in the same world as their pagan contemporaries, which means that they lived with other gods as well. Jews thought that their own god was the best, the truest, the mightiest. Jews of an apocalyptic bent, as we shall see, looked forward to the day when the gods of the nations, together with their humans, would acknowledge the god of Israel alone as supreme. In the meantime, however, these other gods continued to inhabit the human landscape too.

The existence of these lesser divinities was a matter of experience, not a question of “belief.” Paul, for example, complained that these beings attempted to impede his mission. “The god of this cosmos,” he protested to one of his communities, “has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Such beings, he tells gentile Christians in Galatia, are not gods by nature but mere *stoicheia* (“elements”), celestial lightweights unworthy of fear or of worship (Galatians 4:8–9. Note that Paul only demeans the cosmic status of these beings; he does not deny their effects and thus their existence). Idols—those figural representations of gods that are made by men—Paul insists are “nothing” (1 Corinthians 8:4, 10:19). The gods represented by these idols are actually only demons (and thus of lower status than the “living and true” God; 1 Corinthians 10:19–20; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). The Septuagint, centuries earlier, had identified them as such: “The gods of the nations are *daimones*” (Psalm 95:5). Both earth and heaven hold “so-called gods”—“indeed there are many gods and many lords,” Paul notes to his Gentiles in Corinth. Nonetheless, he insists, his congregations must turn from these other, lower gods and lords to worship the god of Israel alone, together with the one lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:5–6). When the risen Christ returns, Paul explains, he will defeat these cosmic entities, who at that point will themselves acknowledge the god of Israel (1 Corinthians 15:24–27). They too will bend knee to the victorious Jesus (Philippians 2:10).

But Jewish apocalyptic convictions, such as Paul expresses to his communities, represent an extreme attitude toward foreign gods and thus are by definition exceptional. On a day-to-day basis, for Jews as well as for others, what mattered was deciding how to deal with the gods of outsiders while dealing with their humans as well. This was a practical question: Any god by definition was more powerful than any human, and gods as a group tended to be incensed when slighted. In general, most people opted for a sensible display of courtesy, showing and (perhaps just as important) being seen to show respect. Such courtesy went a long way toward establishing concord both with other gods (who, if angered, could be dangerous) and with their equally sensitive humans.

Third, this ancient identification of gods and peoples in the Greco-Roman world meant that piety required first of all the honoring of one's own gods according to ancestral custom. Ethnicity and antiquity were the measure of religious respectability and sources of pride. The terms designating proper religious behavior reflect this definition. *Ta patria êthê*, *patria nomima*, *mos maiorum*, *paradosis patrikôn*: All these phrases translate as “ancestral custom.” No matter how odd a practice might seem—and other people's practices could strike outside observers as odd indeed—if it were ancient and traditional, it could to that degree be understood and accepted as appropriate to that particular *ethnos*.¹⁰

Fourth and finally, the dense religious and thus ethnic multiplicity of ancient empire was offset by the binding power of two transethnic cultic institutions: civic organization and the cult of the ruler. Both were key aspects of the legacy of Alexander, and both had a lasting effect on Roman religion and politics, even after the Roman Empire became Christian.

To civic organization first. Moderns tend to think of cities as densely populated secular space: Individual communities within a city might be “religious,” but the city itself is neutral. In antiquity it was otherwise. Ancient Mediterranean cities were themselves religious institutions, which their citizens and residents were collectively responsible for maintaining. The urban elites who manned antiquity’s town councils were, as magistrates, also priests. So were Roman emperors themselves, beginning with Augustus. Through innumerable public and communal rituals—processions, blood sacrifices, dancing, hymns, plays, competitions both athletic and musical—citizens and residents displayed their respect for the heavenly patrons of their city, thereby ensuring divine favor. Further, the opening of a city council, the convening of a court of law, the enjoyment of and participation in cultural events such as rhetorical, theatrical, or athletic competitions—all activities that moderns experience as religiously neutral—in antiquity honored the gods.¹¹

Public displays of piety measured civic responsibility. Indeed, to be a citizen meant to take responsibility for the cult of the city’s gods. These forms of social activity, by publicly demonstrating respect for the gods who superintended the well-being of the city, likewise bound the city’s inhabitants together while articulating the social rankings organizing them. Civic cult frequently involved shared eating, and shared eating forged bonds between citizens and other residents, just as the sacrifices through which the gods “ate” forged and maintained the bonds between heaven and earth. Thus ancient civic ritual established and consolidated necessary relations with powerful patrons both celestial and (since rulers, too, received divine honors) terrestrial. Neglect of these responsibilities was impious, and impiety risked divine anger, which could be manifest in any number of dangerous ways—drought, flood, plague, earthquake, invading armies. Proper cult pleased gods. When gods were happy, cities prospered.

Finally, the cult of the ruler, introduced into the Mediterranean world through Alexander, was adapted and adopted by Rome. The emperors from Augustus on ruled and protected the commonwealth as heaven’s special agent on earth. After death, translated to a higher realm, they continued to serve as the empire’s special agents. Imperial cult served both soldier and civilian, focusing the allegiance and piety of the army while notionally binding the empire’s wide-flung municipalities both politically and religiously (terms that are virtually synonymous in this context). Establishing a cult to the emperor and his family brought honor to one’s city and the possibility of imperial patronage. And to offer to the emperor, as to the goddess Roma (the divine personification of the city), was to offer as well for the empire.

Inscriptions identified the ruler as “divine” (*divus*). In provincial temples and private shrines, the emperor whether living or dead could also be referred to as “god” (*deus* in Latin; *theos* in Greek). Temples, priests, feast days, blood offerings, images, incense, processions, ritual prostrations, festive gladiatorial combats: Through all these means, citizens of the empire enacted divine honors to the emperor. (Jewish citizens, in light of their ancestral customs, were excused from such liturgies.) After 312 C.E., with his decision to become a patron of the church, Constantine eventually banned blood offerings, but all the rest of the imperial cult perdured long into the Christian period. (Jews once again were excused.) And deceased Christian emperors, like their earlier pagan counterparts, continued to be venerated as heaven’s special residents, well-placed celestial patrons of the empire below. In short, like the civic cults, the ruler cult served to bind citizens together even as it bound together heaven and earth. It too helped establish and maintain the *pax deorum* (“the peace of the gods”) or, after Constantine, the *pax dei* (“the peace of God”), that benevolent concordant between humanity and divinity upon which depended the common-weal.¹²

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