



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2013.05.06

Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. \$24.95. ISBN: 9780691128900.

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Discussions about sin are ubiquitous in Christian theology, but despite their presence in homilies, creeds, catechisms, and confessions, sin is a concept that is neither easy to define nor to understand. Paula Fredriksen, the Aurelio Professor of Scripture emerita at Boston University, tackles this thorny problem by tracing the origins and multivarious development of early Christian ideas about sin from their initial inception in Judaism. As one of the leading experts on Augustine, as well as on early Jewish-Christian relations, Fredriksen's lifelong career of research into these arenas positions her well to address these issues. Writing in an accessible, non-scholarly tone, Fredriksen provides a radical re-reading of Christianity's position on sin appropriate both for the scholar and general, well-educated reader alike.

The central argument in *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* is that dramatic mutations in early Christian ideas about sin during the first four centuries of the religion led to diverse ideas about God, the physical universe, and the soul's relation to the body. Rather than seeing the Christian concept of sin as an immutable entity, Fredriksen argues that it had its roots in Second Temple Jewish thought, then mutated in a number of different ways in the early centuries of Christianity, and consequently impacted other concurrent topics of early Christian debate such as the nature of God, the universe, and humanity. To trace such a wide range of issues is, no doubt, a formidable task, but Fredriksen narrows her focus by presenting what she calls a staccato history of early Christian ideas about sin. In order to accomplish this, she focuses on seven key early Christian thinkers—Jesus, Paul, Valentinus, Marcion, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Augustine—and demonstrates how their thoughts on sin differed from one another. In particular, borrowing a term from evolutionary biology, she argues that these seven figures represent moments of punctuated equilibrium wherein distinctive changes in early Christian perceptions about sin can be seen.

The primary issue that Fredriksen engages in the first part of her book is how the first century C.E. Jewish figures Jesus and Paul, often associated with the beginnings of Christianity, conceived of sin. For Fredriksen, the key to understanding both of these men is that their

perceptions of sin remain firmly rooted within an authentic Jewish milieu. For instance, with respect to Jesus she identifies three central features that inextricably link Jesus' thoughts on sin with the worldview of Second Temple Judaism: temple, law, and repentance before immanent judgment. First, as she demonstrates, Jesus conceived of the Jerusalem temple as *the* site of purification. This was the place where Mark's Jesus directed the cleansed leper, where sin offerings occurred, and where Jesus' disciples continued to worship even after his death and resurrection. Similarly, as Fredriksen argues, the law loomed large in Jesus' theological worldview. Not only did Jesus wear *tzitziot* as a physical reminder to practice the law, he also instructed his followers, in direct reference to the tablets of the law, that their greatest duty was to love God and to love their neighbor. Third, like other apocalyptically minded Jews of his day, Jesus connected his message of the immanent end-of-times with threats of divine judgment. Repentance from sin was the only way to avoid God's wrath and to be a part of "the center of God's new kingdom" in Jerusalem (p. 15). Accordingly, Fredriksen argues that Jesus' understanding of sin accords well with many other Jewish apocalyptic traditions (200 B.C.E.–70 C.E.) that were popular in and around his lifetime.

With respect to Paul, Fredriksen insists that he too remained squarely within an authentic Jewish worldview in regards to his position on sin—albeit with a distinctive shift. Fredriksen argues that for Paul, "the temple and the cult remained . . . two of the abiding privileges that God had conferred upon his people (Rom 9.4–5)" (p. 12). Yet Paul, like other earlier Jewish Hellenistic thinkers, such as the authors of the Wisdom of Solomon, *I Enoch*, and Tobit, thought that the root cause of sin was pagan worship of idols. As a result of this egregious error, in Paul's view, "the very tissue of the cosmos [had] been rent by sin's power, which abides not only in mortal flesh, but also in the upper spheres of the universe" (p. 32). Since the entire cosmos had become enslaved to sin, the world needed an external redeemer, Jesus, to die for sin and ultimately to defeat the cosmic powers. Yet surprisingly, Fredriksen demonstrates that in order to articulate this process of redemption, Paul employs language from the Jerusalem temple—such as sanctuary, sacrifice, purity, and holiness—to describe the efficacy of redemption through Christ. Consequently, Paul's articulation of sin and its antidote in Christ remain inextricably linked to the Judaism of his day.

After describing the position of these first century Jewish-Christian thinkers, in part II Fredriksen turns to the beliefs of Valentinus, Marcion, and Justin Martyr—all of whom were active in Rome during the first half of the second century C.E.—in order to underscore the dramatic shifts that were occurring with respect to early Christian conceptions of sin. What unites these three figures together, she argues, is that their high god "was not the lord of Jewish history but the supreme deity of pagan philosophy; unique, changeless, perfect, radically transcendent; and . . . the father of Jesus Christ" (p. 63). Yet from this common basis, their interpretations of sin widely diverged. For Valentinus, Fredriksen argues that it was not sin per se, but rather ignorance that led people to sin. Thus knowledge, not sacrifice, is the means to salvation. Similarly, for Marcion, Fredriksen claims "redemption is not temporal, bodily, and communal so much as spatial, spiritual, and individual, an ascent of the saved believer's true self or spirit out of the lower cosmos to a realm above" (p. 76). This is because Marcion believed that the God of Genesis created an evil material world, and thus, redemption could only occur through a separate deity, who rescued humanity *from* this evil material world and its connection to sin. By contrast, Fredriksen shows how Justin Martyr taught the redemption *of* the flesh. Sin exists, particularly

among those who are not a part of Justin's community, because those persons have acted in ways that are contrary to reason. But God, via the dying and rising of his son, Christ, has immortalized the flesh and redeemed it for the good. Consequently, though these three Gentile Christians begin from a similar perspective in pagan *paideia*, their ultimate interpretations of sin and redemption widely diverge.

In part III, Fredriksen addresses the rivalry of genius between Origen and Augustine and argues that though both placed sin at the center of their theologies, their ideas about sin sharply contrasted that of the other. She observes that sin for Origen was a turning away from God, an error that no one would willingly make, and that everyone fell to different degrees except for Jesus, the one rational being who chose to love God fully. As a result, Jesus performs a pedagogical function. Other beings, even the devil, can learn from him how to return to God. In sharp contrast, Fredriksen argues that Augustine viewed Adam as the origin of sin. His original sin, the intentional dismissal of the divine commandment, affected all of humanity so everyone was born into sin. No longer was anyone free to choose to follow God, and some persons, such as the devil, now stood beyond the pale of grace. Only a few, those to whom God has extended his grace via the death and redemption of the flesh through his son, Jesus, could be redeemed.

This book challenges the predominant notion—particularly in popular, but also scholarly arenas—that the Christian definition of sin is timeless and easily defined. Here Fredriksen draws upon her years of expertise in early Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations to reveal how complicated and multifaceted the story of early Christianity's development of the notion of sin truly is. In doing so, Fredriksen thus joins the efforts of recent scholars, such as David Braake and Bart Ehrman, who seek to underscore the theological diversity present among early Christian groups. Admittedly, by narrowing her focus to only seven key figures, and to specific geographical locations, Fredriksen limits the scope of her analysis; nevertheless, her work offers a step in the right direction. Though this book is short, coming in at only 179 pages, and directed towards an audience of general, well-educated readers, it re-reads a topic that many had previously assumed to be a monolith. As a result, Fredriksen's work offers an invaluable addition to the scholarly discourse about sin during the early centuries of Christianity, not only because she underscores the Jewish roots of this concept, but also, and more significantly, because she emphasizes the diversity present in early Christian circles in relation to the idea of sin.