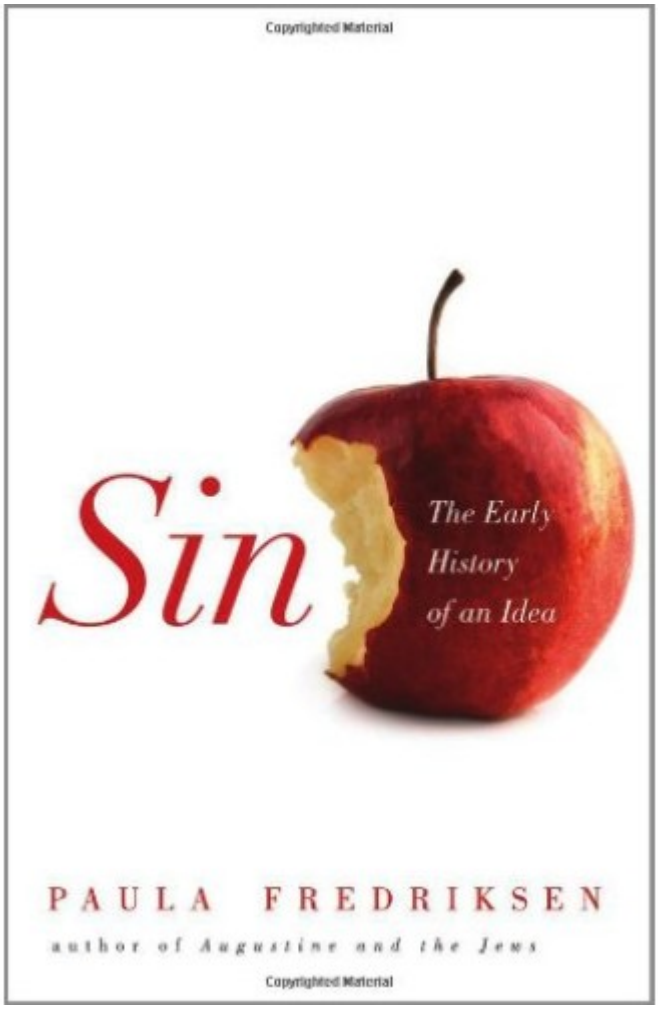
Chaos and continuity

by Jason Byassee in the December 26, 2012 issue

In Review



Sin

by Paula Fredricksen
Princeton University Press

I confess that I am disappointed in Paula Fredriksen's book on sin, though luminaries have praised it using words like *gripping* and *magnificent*. Fredriksen's book *Augustine and the Jews* was both of those. This one isn't.

The book is about “disjunctures,” Fredriksen announces at the outset, as she offers portraits of the doctrine of sin in the thought of seven figures, from Jesus to Augustine with a few Gnostic stops in between. She aims to show that sin has startlingly different meanings in different historical contexts. She does that beautifully. Jesus preaches to Jews that they should repent and await the kingdom, which will arrive any minute. Paul preaches to pagans, and for him it is an eschatological miracle that they listen. Justin cuts another direction, accusing the Jews of continual idolatry. Valentinus goes his own way also, imagining a redemption *out of* history instead of a redemption *of* history.

Each individual portrait exhibits up-to-the-minute scholarship and is elegantly written. Some of the portraits will influence my preaching: Jesus is not a non-Jewish nice guy. He’s a Jewish prophet, with a ministry oriented around the temple and founded on the practice of exorcism. Paul reorients Jewish language of sacrifice around gentiles presenting themselves to God. Origen follows Paul on the scope of salvation. All good.

But then Fredriksen leaves the pieces of the mosaic spread on the floor, unreconciled and unreconcilable. Maybe that’s fine—she’s written her book her way and has not advertised it falsely. But what troubles me is the way she deploys what is now common rhetoric in patristic scholarship. For example, she writes that “there was no ‘orthodoxy’ in Rome or anywhere else” in the second century. Terms like *Gnostic* and *heretical* “rely upon ideas of true religion as pure, unmixed, chronologically prior.” Augustine’s and Origen’s “orthodoxy” (Fredriksen’s scare quotes are omnipresent) in their respective centuries was “self-designated.” A caption on a Roman image of Christ was meant to “disallow contemporary religious diversity, to disenfranchise pagans . . . and to ‘rewrite’ the history of Christian origins.”

Since at least the work of Walter Bauer, patristic scholars have often taught that what came to be viewed as orthodoxy was simply one option among others, the one that happened to win imperial favor and then used Rome’s scepter to beat its rivals to death.

It’s a common way of telling the history, but it has not gone unchallenged. Rowan Williams has written compellingly in defense of a pre-Nicene orthodoxy by virtue of Christian faith being a thing that constantly urges people toward repentance. To what does one turn in repentance if not to something outside one’s community that

is specific at least in its outlines? Others have written accounts of doctrinal history that are fully cognizant of modern criticism yet depict orthodoxy as something more than arbitrary. Fredriksen nowhere suggests that revisionist accounts of early church history have also seen revision.

Fredriksen's metanarrative of chaos and her on-the-ground descriptions of particulars don't mesh. She writes, "For Valentinus it is Christ's message and the knowledge of the divine Father that he brings, not his bodily medium as such, that matters for Christian redemption." And that is precisely why the church decided that Valentinus was wrong and couldn't be invoked on Sundays. Fredriksen patiently shows the ways that Justin retold Jewish history as a series of idolatries and failures. And she shows just as patiently the ways that "Gnostics" (her scare quotes) would regard his telling as entirely too Jewish still. And that's why the church has long said that Justin was more right than the Gnostics. In one offhand comment, she writes that Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian "survived the fourth-century triage." This was no accident—their work was closer to being right than their opponents'. The ancient church was perfectly able to say when someone's work was good but not fully orthodox.

Of course, it is true that definitions of *right* evolved through time. But no church has ever called Origen or Tertullian or Justin "saint" (Fredriksen misspeaks in one place and calls Origen a "doctor of the church"). Their work has always been regarded as too speculative, spotty or simply incorrect in places, in ways that became clearer through time. In other words, decisions about which works to treasure, which to read with circumspection and which to exclude were intellectual decisions, normed by patient, multicentury arguments over who reads scripture better; they were not simply decisions imposed by imperial power.

This is not to say that the history that proved to be orthodox is entirely admirable. Fredriksen makes a compelling case for the Pauline capaciousness of Origen's vision of salvation over against Augustine's gloomier portrait of all humanity as a "mass of perdition." Yet even here the church is ahead of her. At least since Henri de Lubac the Catholic Church has been reading Origen anew with great sympathy (and arguably portions of the Eastern Church never lost Origen's most admirable traits). Incidentally, Augustine is not always as gloomy as she suggests—he does take up nature in his vision of salvation, and he describes sin as a "happy fault" in *City of God*, an occasion to receive more of Christ's grace. But Fredriksen does disjunctures, not continuity. And she's not interested in ways churchly readers of that church

history have shown the nuance that she rightly demands.

Perhaps the real problem is with churches (like most Protestant ones) that have no language for that continuity, that thread through the chaos that she narrates so well. Roman Catholics have had both at least since John Henry Newman and arguably far longer. For them, doctrine is present in a nutshell before it flowers into a tree of explicit teaching. Protestants have tended to desire temporal priority and purity in doctrine that Fredriksen admirably shows never existed.

Yet even then she oversimplifies. When has the church not known that earlier doesn't necessarily mean better? (Arius precedes Athanasius on whatever timeline you check.) Or that power corrupts, or that bad characters can produce correct doctrine, or that God's people are an admixture of sinner and saint? It's not enough for a trade book like this to say "ancient Christians *really* disagreed a lot!" The church of Jesus Christ has to give some portrait of God's continuous faithfulness through time, of the continuity (not purity, not priority) of the church's faith through the ages, of the trustworthiness of what we have inherited. We've done a little of that occasionally. It'd be nice to have it noticed in a book like this.