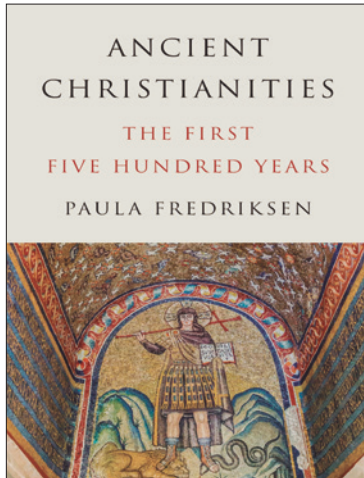


ANCIENT CHRISTIANITIES



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Paula Fredriksen is an Emerita Professor in the Department of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She is world-renowned expert on the historical Jesus and Paul and his letters. The key word is “Christianities”, the fact that there was as yet no concept of agreed upon “systematic Christian theology” until the post-Enlightenment period. “Systematic theology” summarized concepts and practices that all participants in a religion must adhere to. Arguments were presented utilizing philosophical principles of rationality with faith. In the ancient world, there is no equivalent of an agreed upon authority that could dictate people’s beliefs and practices.

All ancient peoples believed in the total integration of the divine with humans and everyday life. There was no ancient concept of “religion”. There was no word for this in Hebrew or Greek. The modern concept derived from the Latin, *religio*, coined by Cicero (106-43 BCE), as “those things that bind one to the gods”. Rather than “religions”, we have ethnic groups (in Greek, the “nations”). Ethnic groups shared a common ancestor or founder (usually a god or goddess), language, history, homeland, religious rituals, and mythology. The dictates of the gods provided validation for social conventions, gender roles, and law-codes for the governing authorities.

All ancient cultures shared a three-tiered concept of the universe: The heavens (above), the realm of the divine. This was the abode of the all the gods, characterized by descending gradients of divinities highlighting their importance and functions in the physical world, such as originators or protectors of agriculture or technology. We have the concept of a high god, or a “king of the gods”, who ruled over diverse powers. The lowest levels of divinity, *daemons* in Greek, originally neutral, were eventually blamed for the exigencies of evil in life, the demons.

The earth: the abode of humans, animals, and plants, was distinguished from the divine as consisting of physical matter. The underworld, the netherworld, was the “land of the dead”. Only gods could travel to the land of the dead and escape. Initially a neutral area, later concepts developed distinct areas for the righteous and wicked dead.

For five hundred years, (and beyond), what we have is “varieties of Christianity”. Dozens of Christian theologians and bishops expounded their views of what was ultimately deemed “orthodoxy” (correct beliefs and practices), as opposed to “heresy”, from the Greek for schools of philosophy, “opinion”, divergent concepts. But these were later Christian innovations. Native cults did not characterize differences as either orthodoxy or heresy, but as different points of view.

Fredriksen’s work is the model for anyone majoring in the modern discipline of Religious Studies. This includes the important element of context. Context determines content. Context changes over time, due historical circumstances. An understanding of the history of Israel, Classical literature of Homer and the epics, the schools of philosophy, the writings of the 2nd century “Church Fathers”, and their creation of dogma are required. Modern literary criticism is applied to ancient historiography as a comparative basis, particularly understanding the role of polemic and rhetoric.

Then, as now, polemic helped to define one’s group from another, utilizing stereotypes that were common to audiences. Anyone opposed to one’s views was always criticized by their “love of money”, and “sexual immorality”. Polemic, then as now, is not historical evidence. “Sexual immorality”, in Greek, *pornea*, “illicit

sexual unions” (the source of our word for pornography), arose from different degrees of incest laws, procreation, sexual intercourse with the woman as passive receiver, and laws against adultery.

Paul’s critique of “illicit sexual unions” in many English *New Testaments* is always translated as “fornication”. This was influenced by the later King James version, with the Latin, *forne*, “arches”. Street-walking prostitutes in Rome often did business “under the arches”. The later Christian derogatory term, “pagan” for non-Christians, remains a modern view promoted by Hollywood blockbusters, depicting their orgies and immoral life-styles. There is no evidence that all pagans were openly “fornicating” at religious festivals or banquets except in the charges of their critics.

As moderns, we tend to elevate “the written word” over what was practiced in every-day life. Most modern histories of the origins of Christianity consistently described the Pharisees and Sadducees as having “strict rules”. But “strictness” relates to enforcement. The dictates of *Leviticus* only related to the fact that the Temple in Jerusalem was “sacred place”. We have little information of how all the rules were practiced throughout the empire. Synagogues were not sacred space and had no altars. Just because something “was written in the Jewish scriptures” is not evidence that everyone followed the laws. Without comparable, contemporary evidence, we have no idea how Jews literally adhered to the codes. Then (as now), individuals decided which rules and practices they could follow or ignore.

The book of *Leviticus* enhanced the law-codes given to Moses at Sinai. What Moses originally brought down was 613 law-codes on how the Jews were to be “separate from the other nations”. *Leviticus* contained the concepts of purity/impurity. This related human behavior that separated the “holy” from the “mundane”. All ancient cultures had purity/impurity rules. In *Leviticus*, there were physical, ritual purity laws for Jews that defined their identity: circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath. There were also moral impurity/impurity laws for behavior.

A dominant concern of the book of *Leviticus* was, “You must therefore be holy because I am holy” (*Leviticus* 11:44). “Impurity” was not a sin. Most of the issues were involved in everyday life: the birth of a child; menstruation, sexual intercourse, the death of a family member (corpse contamination). Although a joyous event, women were deemed unclean as the result of childbirth and menstruation because it involved blood. Men who had sexual intercourse were unclean for a day. Blood and semen were the two sources of life and belonged to God. The time of being unclean was a designation for setting aside these special times from daily routines. In most cases, time (until sunset of the next day, etc.) and a sprinkling of water removed the impurity.

Where is the evidence that these laws were “strictly enforced?” *Leviticus* says that women who slept with their husbands while menstruating were “impure” for seven days. What poor soul in the towns and villages had the job of checking every night? And how could conformity be “strictly enforced?”

Perhaps one of the greatest misunderstandings of all this material in *Leviticus* is that the purity/impurity elements were not required for Gentiles (non-Jews). Simply to get into the inner, sacred zones of the Temple, Jews had to push through hundreds of Gentiles. Gentiles could and did offer sacrifices at the Temple. There was a “court of the Gentiles”, that was a popular tourist site.

In the gospels, the Pharisees are the foil for the teachings of Jesus. Other than Paul, no writings of the Pharisees at the time of the ministry (20-30’s CE) have survived. But the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees established the Christian claim that Jews kept “salvation” from the Gentiles.

Some modern *New Testament* scholars claim that Christians created a concept known as “table fellowship”, “social commensality” at meals. The dominant social occasion was the dinner-table; this was the place for cultural accommodation and integration and the way in “business was done”. In the gospels, the Pharisees continually criticized Jesus with eating with “tax-collectors and sinners”. A consensus is that the “tax-collectors” were Roman *publicani*, who received contract bids from the Senate to collect taxes in the provinces. The “sinners” are often described as “prostitutes”, from the stories of Jesus at meals where prostitutes were present in Luke’s gospel. But in neither case, physical contact with Romans nor prostitutes (whether Jewish or pagan) conveyed any sense of “contamination”.

What is often ignored in most studies of ancient Christianity, is the fact that literature and the material evidence of archaeology belie the claim that Gentiles, Jews, and Christians lived separate lives and never interacted. Fredriksen’s work opens up this ancient world where shared concepts of the gods and human behavior influenced each group, but were also “reinterpreted” over time.

Pagans, Jews, and Christians lived together in small towns and cities throughout the Empire. There was no bar against social interaction, government, or trade. Jews and then Christians served as elected magistrates in the cities where assemblies (town meetings) opened with sacrifices to the traditional gods. Jews and Christians served in the Roman legions and most likely ate legionary food. Pagans, Jews, and Christians shared the crowded tenements and shared meals. The catacombs of Rome and other cities shared space with pagans, Jews, and Christians. Financial contributions to synagogues by aristocratic Gentiles were accepted. Luke’s term, “God-fearers”, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, described pagans who participated in synagogue activities and holidays.

Absent an equivalent literature from these people, what remains unknown is how the groups rationalized their participation in the dominant culture. But there appeared to be no problem of mixing from any of the groups.

The other element of the “written word” is that most of our evidence comes from pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers who represented anywhere from 1-5% of the educated elite. The bishops of the 2nd century, retrospectively known as the “Church Fathers”, were converted pagans, who inherited the traditions of Judaism, but were educated in the schools of Greek and Roman philosophy. Their arguments for defining orthodoxy and heresy included esoteric concepts of their views of Plato and various schools. How did the vast majority of the uneducated understand such arguments?

Constantine I legalized Christian assemblies in the *Edict of Milan* in 313 CE. At Nicaea in 325 CE, we have the formation of “the Trinity”, that argued even higher esoteric, philosophical concepts (which moderns remain challenged in explaining, “one god” or “three”). At the same time, Nicaea validated the official formation of a “creed”, what all participants had to believe and adhere to”. But what is the evidence of the vast majority “strictly” adhered to the creed? in what was now a vast empire that included even more ethnic cults? The fact that more councils had to called after Nicaea, indicates that conformity was not achieved. Just as conformity is not achieved in the modern world. Consider the differences between Catholicism and many denominations of Protestantism throughout the world.

Complicating our reconstructions of the ancient world is the problem of anachronism, “reading back” two thousand years of later Christian theology into earlier periods. Christian “buzz words” such as “monotheism”, “belief”, a concept of “faith”, and “salvation”, were Christian views. But the ancients did not articulate their concepts in the same way.

Anachronism begins with modern concepts of “polytheism” and “monotheism” (modern constructs). Polytheism (the belief in multiple deities), remains juxtaposed to monotheism (the belief in one god), always understood in polar opposition. The 19th century concept of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory still presents polytheism as “primitive”, “unenlightened”, culminating in the monotheism of white, Christians in Europe. No one in the ancient world would identify with being a polytheist. Philosophers first utilized the term to describe temples and shrines that held more than one image of the gods (*poly*).

In Western culture, monotheism specifically refers to the God of Israel – the creator God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Historians writing on the history of this period, nevertheless, utilized a capitol “God” for the god of Israel. It desig-

nates the God of Israel above all other gods and assumes an element of faith. The God of Israel was simply one among the thousands of deities that populated the universe. Ancient Jews were not “monotheists” in the modern sense.

Like their neighbours, ancient Jews conceived of a hierarchy of powers in heaven: “sons of God” (*Genesis* 6), archangels, angels, (the messengers from God who communicated God’s will), cherubim, and seraphim. Jews also recognized the existence of demons and introduced the concept of a fallen angel who eventually became Satan, the Devil.

Monotheism assumes only one god, but the Jewish scriptures consistently refer to the existence of the gods of the nations which were created by the God of Israel: *Deuteronomy* 6:14 “Do not follow other gods”; 29:18 “to serve the gods of those nations”; 32:43 “Praise O heavens, his people, worship him all you gods!”; and *Psalms* 8:21 “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the gods”. In the story of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt, God battled against the gods of Egypt to demonstrate who controls nature. This makes little sense if their existence was not recognized: “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt” (*Exodus* 12:12).

The foundational story for the idea that Jews were monotheistic was when Moses received the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai: “I am the Lord your God (...). You shall have no other gods before me”. This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it was a commandment that the Jews were not to worship any other gods. We combine “worship” with “belief” and “veneration” (modern terms) but worship in the ancient world always meant literal sacrifices. Jews could pray to angels and other powers in heaven, but they were only to offer sacrifices (animals, vegetables, libations) to the God of Israel. This commandment was one of the major differences between Jews and the traditional ethnic cults.

Our first historical evidence for the beginnings of Christianity is found in the letters of Paul, writing between the 50s and 60s of the 1st century. Paul wrote that his communities should “worship” both God and Christ as “Lord”. In *Philippians* 2, “every knee should bow” to them, in the age-old concept of bowing before a divinity. But synagogues had no altars and Paul eliminated traditional sacrifices. It is only in the centuries after Paul that “worship” became defined as the “sacraments” of Christianity.

The Jewish word for the native cults was idolatry, the worship of idols, Greek, *icons*, “images”. This was a collective, negative description of Gentiles by both Jews and Christians. Participants in native cults never self-identified as being “idolators”. Modern histories that describe pagans as “idolators” are imposing both a Jewish and Christian point of view as well as an anachronistic, generalization of a concept that did not exist.

While Jews only offered sacrifices to the God of Israel, they shared a common conviction that all the gods required respect; it was perilous to anger or revile the gods. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in heaven; Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of the other nations in his letters, the archons and principalities of the universe; they were powerful enough to interfere with his missions.

Anachronism continues with the modern reconstructions of religious systems that assume “systematic theology”. Ancient manuscripts can be difficult to interpret in relation to religion. A description of someone as Greek could indicate some who lived under Greek rule. It could also be someone who shared traditional concepts of the gods, but performed the rituals in “the Greek manner”. Similarly, a Roman could be someone living in Rome or a Roman province or someone who followed the religious traditions and rituals of worship of Rome.

There was no ancient concept of “Judaism” as an agreed upon concept for several centuries. Sharing the traditions at Sinai, various groups of Jews interpreted elements in their own way. Thus, the various sects of Judaism, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots. The term, “Jew” was a later designation, from the Persian period (*ca.* 550 BCE), *yehudi*, “someone from the Southern Kingdom of Judah”, named after Jacob’s son, the tribe of Judah. The Greek and Latin renderings of *ioudaios*, *iudaeus*, became the common translation of “Jews”. However, the complication is that these terms could simultaneously describe ethnic claims for people from Judea (the later Roman name for the province) and could refer to everything from geography to a particular life-style to political views and historical traditions. It did not always indicate religious or theological concepts.

Until the end of the 1st century, there was no concept of “Christianity”, derived from *Christianoi*, “followers of the Christ” (Greek for *messiah*, “anointed one”). Paul never used the term. It was first used by Luke in the *Acts of the Apostles* (*ca.* 95 CE). Similarly, modern scholars have constructed the terms, “Jewish-Christians” (those held claimed that Gentiles participants for follow the physical distinctions of Judaism, circumcision, and dietary laws) and “Gentile-Christians”, non-Jews admitted without full conversion. Neither terms are found in Paul’s letters or the *Acts of the Apostles*.

When Paul derided “false apostles” in his letters, he used the term, “Judaizers”, those who attempted to force Gentiles to full conversion. But he never named names. Were these Jews from the Temple in Jerusalem? Jewish opponents in the synagogues? Jews in his own communities? The problem is that such “Judaizers” left no literature of their views that have survived.

The most common anachronistic concept is that of “faith”, often credited to Paul as an innovation. When Paul taught about faith, the Greek term is *pistis*, “loyalty”, loyalty to the commandments of God. From the Latin *fides*, “trust in something”, fidelity, through the King James translation and by the 18th century, “faith” became joined to “belief”, particularly for individual salvation. At the same time, the word faith also came to mean belief in something despite evidence to the contrary. All English *New Testaments* and world languages translate *pistis* as “faith”. But the ancients did not articulate their ideas as faith as we understand it. The great concern was to carry out rituals involved in the various native cults correctly. *Leviticus* had details of specific sacrifices at the Temple. Roman religion utilized contractual obligations, given by the gods to the ancestors in mythic time. Sacrifices began with addressing the god, “*du ut des*”, “I give that you may give”. This became the conviction that Jews and pagans were only concerned with “the letter of the law”, lacking enlightened “spirituality” of Christians.

The last few decades have seen a renewed understanding of Paul’s letters in his famous, “Gentiles are saved by saved by faith, and not works of the Law”. We now understand that Paul’s arguments related to the *admission* of Gentiles in his communities; “works of the Law”, only meant those ritual and behaviour characteristics of self-identity of Jews, circumcision, and dietary laws. These were barriers to his concept of unity in the groups. But once admitted, his Gentiles were held to concepts and precepts of Moses. Paul insisted that his Gentiles cease all idolatry, a Jewish commandment. Luke’s “God-fearers” are not found in any of Paul’s letters; they could no longer live in two worlds.

But Paul was not founding a new religion. Steeped in the prophets of Israel (his favourite appears to be Isaiah), he followed their descriptions of “the final days”. At that time, the righteous of Israel would be joined by some Gentiles who would come to worship the God of Israel. The prophets had always indicated that these Gentiles did not have to become ethnic Jews.

Less space is devoted to the Jewish believers of his communities. But when he does mention his Jewish believers, they are admonished to “follow the Law (of Moses)”. If one of his Jewish believers had a son and asked Paul if he should circumcise him, Paul would have answered, “Of course!”. The Law of Moses was eternal. Paul’s preaching of the coming “kingdom of God” retained this two-tiered community that included righteous Jews and now righteous Gentiles. The fact that Paul continued using “Gentiles” (and not “Christians”, as an ethnic descriptor), maintained the teaching of the prophets, “now fulfilled” in what scholars described as the future, “eschatological Israel”.

Another problem with anachronism, is “reading back” the later gospels and history of Christianity into the letters of Paul. Paul wrote in the 50s and 60s of the 1st century. Paul was not a witness to the ministry of Jesus. The canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John did not yet exist. Paul claimed that he initially “persecuted the church”. But he never provided a reason why or how. He consistently referenced the “sufferings of Christ”, particularly with the claims of his own sufferings and ordeals after he became believer, now “persecuted for “the cross of Christ”. Again, no reasons or names were given. But Paul never mentioned the harassment by Pharisees in the ministry, the betrayal of Judas, the trials by the Sanhedrin, and significantly, no mention of Pontius Pilate. Modern theologians and historians use this as circular arguments; the gospels and Paul provide “proof-texts” for each other.

When Julius Caesar conquered the eastern provinces, he utilized Jewish mercenaries in his legions. When he was under siege in Alexandria, the Idumean tribal chief, Antipater, and his son Herod, marched Jewish armies to Alexandria and helped him win the civil war that was going on between Cleopatra and the court of the Ptolemies. When he finally got back to Rome, he legislated an edict that the Jews were to be rewarded with permission to practice their “ancestral traditions”, exempt from the state cults of Rome. “Practicing their ancestral customs” retained their status as an identifiable ethnic group, with the tacit understanding that they were not to recruit or interfere with the status quo of ethnic ancestral customs.

Paul taught that the idols (the statues) consisted of “wood and stone”. But he never denied their existence; they were powerful enough to interfere with his missions. But Paul *did* revile the other gods in his letters, “Flee from the idols” (1 *Corinthians* 10:14). This is mostly likely why Paul was often arrested and in prison in some of his letters.

At the end of the 1st century, during the reign of Domitian, Christians were charged with the crime of atheism, disrespect, and non-participation in the new Imperial Cult of Rome, instituted by Augustus, when Caesar was declared a god. The concept was equivalent to treason, which always and everywhere resulted in death. Conservative Rome disdained “new religions”, full of charlatans and wonderworkers, especially from the east.

The second Church Fathers appealed to magistrates and emperors that Christians were also “ancient”, not a new religion. They argued that Christians should not be persecuted, to be exempt, like the Jews, unsuccessfully for 300 years. The result was a collection of texts known as “*adversos* literature”, meaning “adversaries” against Christians, the Jews.

In claims for antiquity, Christians utilized the ancient Jewish scriptures and books of the prophets. Reading the scriptures demonstrated that Jews had always rebelled

against God, unlike Christians who are good Roman citizens. The prophets have Israel long-ago “predicted” Jesus as the *messiah*. The reason that God permitted Rome to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem during the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE was because it was corrupted. Retaining the Jewish scriptures as “the old testament” (dispensation), having ancient roots, Christians now produced a “new testament”, proving that God had sent Jesus to institute the true understanding of God’s commandments.

In the subsequent chapters, readers will be surprised by the plethora of so many divergent debates over the centuries. But the stakes were high.

(1) Inheriting the prophets of Judaism, as “fulfilment of the scriptures”, this included the concept of the “final days”, when God would intervene in human history to bring about his “kingdom on earth”. The “kingdom” would be preceded with “tribulations” of suffering and evil. But the decades passed, and the “kingdom” was not manifest. It was stilling coming, but in the interim, the “church” proleptically filled in as the ideal, “kingdom on earth” until Christ returned from Heaven. Christians could avoid the coming tribulations by following the precepts of the Christian Church. But which Christian Church?

(2) Divergent bishops were punished with excommunication (“casting out”) from the assembly. But they simply moved across the street or to another city and created their own assemblies. This produced the first (and on-going) schisms in Christianity. What constitutes a “good” Christian? What to do with “lapsed”, those bishops and Christians who performed sacrifices to the gods to avoid death? Could they be forgiven, or are they condemned to Hell?

(3) Claiming one’s “truth” against others, validated now Christian emperors with the power of rule on earth. “Religion and state” had always been combined in the ancient world; kings had received their power directly from the gods. With Constantine I’s conversion, several bishops asked him “meditate” the various schisms. Constantine I’s goal was unity, that there should only be one Imperial religion under the emperor. The innovation of Christianity was to argue that only a *Christian* emperor’s views were valid as the representative to carry out the will of God for all nations on earth. But again, which emperor? In Late Antiquity, subsequent emperors held different views. Thus, the ultimate distinctions that became the Catholic church of the west and the eastern, Orthodox communities of the eastern empire.

(4) The highest stake of all concerned the fundamental questions of existence: “Why do we die?” and “What happens after we die?” Then as now, it was difficult for humans to imagine a complete annihilation of themselves after death. Ancients reflected upon this question and created the idea that there was a continued form of existence,

either in a renewed body or as a soul (and sometimes both). As the dead continued to exist, they could either help or harm the living. Funeral rituals emerged for both helping them on their journey to the land of the dead as well as keeping them there. But no one was ever completely sure of what happened in the afterlife. One's fate in the afterlife was now determined by one's adherence to the church (and which church). One's destiny in Heaven or Hell was simultaneously the summation of someone's value (or not), and contributed to one's legacy through memory by the community.

Traditionally, Christianity is described as one of the three western traditions as a "revealed religion", directly by the God of Israel. But like all religious systems (as what explained "the meaning of human existence"), Christianity did not rise in a vacuum. Christianity emerged over time and absorbed the religious, cultural, and political elements of the ancient world. *Ancient Christianities. The First Five Hundred Years* is highly enlightening for the origins that remain at the core of Christianity as a world religion.