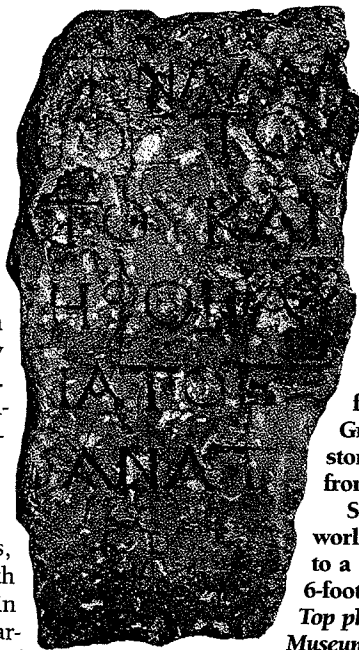




PAULA FREDRIKSEN

Dining with the Divine

Anyone and everyone could pray to a god in ancient times, but often only family members could join him for meals.



KEEP OUT! A partial limestone slab (left) found in 1935 outside Jerusalem's Old City bears a Greek inscription that has been reconstructed (based on a more complete version of the same text in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum) to read: "No man of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Anyone apprehended shall have himself to blame for his consequent death!" According to the first-century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus, similar warnings "some in Greek, some in Latin," were posted at "regular intervals" along the *soreg*, a stone balustrade that separated the Temple's outer Court of the Gentiles from the sacred inner precinct.

Such restrictions were apparently common throughout the Mediterranean world. A strikingly similar warning (below) was carved above the entrance to a small sanctuary on the isle of Delos. Badly damaged by the elements, the 6-foot-long Greek inscription reads: "It is not lawful for a foreigner to enter." *Top photo: Collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority/Photo by the Israel Museum. Bottom photo: Nicholas Rauh.*

Divinity, in antiquity, was local. It attached to places. However gods were imagined, whatever their relation to the upper cosmos, they lived in human society, too. Groves, grottos, mountains and springs: Nature provided earthly homes for the divine. Gods, of course, were also urban creatures. Cities held shrines. In Olympus, Delos and Jerusalem, on earth as in heaven, gods dwelled in particular locales, even in particular buildings. The Gospel

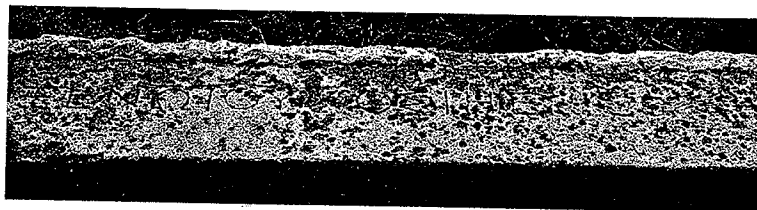
of Matthew makes this point nicely. "He who swears by the Temple," Jesus taught, "swears by it and by Him who dwells in it" (Matthew 23:21).

Most specifically, in city and country, gods lived around their altars. This was true of the gods of the Greeks as well as the god of the Jews. Altars were hot zones of divine-human interaction. Of course, encounters with the divinity could and did occur by chance: most commonly, in dreams; but also in sudden epiphanies, visual, aural or even olfactory (the "odor of sanctity" was a dead giveaway of divine presence); and in plagues or earthquakes or floods (usually interpreted as manifestations of divine anger). But altars were the focus of scripted encounters. Around altars, gods and men

enacted a fundamental binding social ritual: They ate together. The blood and flesh of offerings provided the medium of this encounter, cautiously governed by purity rules. These rules—which usually had been revealed by the god himself—guaranteed that the human was in the correct state to approach the divine. Mistakes made gods angry; proper ritual and piety, the indices of respect, affection and loyalty, pleased them and disposed them to be gracious. In such engagements, human scrupulousness paid off.

But divinity was local in a second sense, too. In antiquity, religion ran in the blood: Ethnicity expressed religion, and religious practice expressed ethnicity. Myths of primordial breedings between a god and a mortal might account for this connection between heaven and a people or its ruler. Aeneas was related directly to Venus—a connection that centuries later benefited his descendant, Julius Caesar. Alexander the Great, "fathered" by Zeus, was himself *isa theou*, "also divine." People or rulers might be adopted by heavenly patrons. Abraham and his family,

according to biblical tradition called by the creator, became the people of Israel; this people's king was their god's "son." In 2 Samuel 7:14, God says of Solomon: "I will



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holiest day of the year, could not confront God directly. He experienced a God who was doubly veiled, obscured first by the cloud in which God hovers, then by the cloud of incense that the priest created to prevent him from even glimpsing the divine cloud. God is experienced through veils, experienced through visions and glimpsed through events. And God's presence can be felt through the writings that record these experiences and consider these events. But these writings cannot be simpler or more obvious than the God they represent.

The Pentateuch was completed during a time of complexity and new horizons following the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in the sixth century B.C.E. The rest of the Hebrew Bible was finished in yet another period of complexity—the Greco-Roman era. The other parts of the Bible, the Prophets (consisting of the Former Prophets [Joshua through Kings] and the Latter Prophets [Isaiah through Malachi]) and the Writings (Psalms through Chronicles), abound in diverse opinions and contradictory thoughts. Since the composition of the Bible, much of its complexity has been simplified or ignored by authorities who have claimed hegemonic power to determine its interpretation. Now, however,

the world is once again exploding with new horizons, and the old hegemonic authorities have come under suspicion. Indeed, the very idea of hegemonic power clashes with some of our contemporary approaches to reality. The genie and genius of indeterminacy have come out of the bottle, and the multiple facets of the Bible are once again compelling attention.

The new interpretations of the Bible show that the rabbinic interpreters made choices—and that other choices can be made. By presenting alternative voices in the central iconic text in Judaism, the study of the Bible helps undermine the authority of any single biblical voice, any one particular biblical reading. Biblical studies present an alternative source of authority to rabbinic thinking and create a fertile opportunity for dialogue between biblical and rabbinic ideas. The Bible itself offers us a model of how to react to the collapse of old hegemonies. It shows us that we need not fly into a new absolutism or to nihilistic despair, but that we should proceed with a determination to keep faith and an understanding that revelation and sacrality do not lie in any particular written word, but in the very process of sifting and negotiating and wrestling. This is the process of Torah. **BR**

¹A minor version of this service takes place on Monday and Thursday mornings. At that time, only three people are called up and only the first section of the week's portion is read. There is no *haftarah*.

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be a father to him and he shall be my son" (see also Psalm 2:7). The adoption might extend to the entire people, who then also became the god's "sons." In Exodus 4:22, God describes all Israel as his "first-born son" (see also Romans 9:4). In short: Gods and their worship passed from one generation to the next within the extended family of a people. Cult was a kinship designation.

This is the cultural context for two inscriptions from antiquity. Each demarcates the boundary of a sanctuary. The first reads: "It is not lawful for a *xenos* [foreigner, stranger] to enter." The second states: "No man of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure around the temple."

Both inscriptions come from sites of major religious and civic/political importance to their peoples. However, both sites also attracted huge numbers of foreigners to the shrines of their respective gods. As the two inscriptions make clear, in neither place was a foreigner permitted proximity to the god's altar: That was the privilege and duty of the god's people. But visitors were encouraged to worship and

to show their respect in other ways. In Delos, home to the first inscription, a special sacrificial officer called the *proxenos* (the title means "for the stranger") closed the liturgical gap between non-Delians and the god Apollo, who was worshipped there. In Jerusalem, home to the second inscription, the largest court ringing the sanctuary of the Temple compound was given over to "the nations": In this court, Gentiles could worship the god of Israel, just not directly at his altar.

The Gospels depict Jesus dramatically disrupting the support services housed in this Court of the Gentiles. He turns over the tables of the moneychangers and pigeon sellers whose stations ringed the court. In relating this scene, Mark and, following him, Matthew, attribute to Jesus a quotation from Isaiah: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?'" (Mark 11:17//Matthew 21:13). This verse, and indeed Jesus' action, have been interpreted in later Christian tradition as a condemnation of the sacrifices at the Temple. In this view, the offerings and sacrifices occurring there (facilitated by the moneychangers and the pigeon sellers) impeded prayer, the "true" function of the Temple. By disrupting such transactions, Jesus "cleansed" the Temple, which is the traditional title given to this scene.*

However useful such an interpretation might be for later Christian theology, it completely confuses first-century Jewish history. In Jesus' lifetime as for generations before and for one more generation after, the Temple already was "a house of prayer for all the nations." At the same time, without mixture or confusion, it was the house of sacrifice for Israel. If Jesus had condemned such sacrifices, his apostle Paul was unaware: He names *latreia* ("altar sacrifice," Hebrew *avadoah*, translated bloodlessly in the RSV as "worship"), along with the people's "sonship" as two of God's privileges to his *genos* (nation, people), Israel (Romans 9:4-5).

In sum, prayer and sacrifice did not compete as modes of religiousness. Everyone could pray, and when at a god's sanctuary, everyone should pray. But sacrifice, in Jerusalem as at Delos as at countless cult sites throughout the Mediterranean, was often just for the *genos*. In antiquity, when gods and humans got together, eating was frequently a family affair.

Paula Fredriksen is a historian of ancient Christianity at Boston University. Her most recent book is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity (Vintage, 2000).

*Paula Fredriksen will continue her discussion of this scene in her next column.—Ed.

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