
David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 314 pp. \$39.95 (hardcover).

In this engaging and remarkable book, David Frankfurter proffers a model for scholars to rethink the oft-invoked yet undertheorized idea of Christianization. In Frankfurter's estimation, the Christianization of Egypt, as one instance of a much larger cultural phenomenon, should be conceptualized as an open-ended syncretistic process; that is, as a process of incorporating Christianity into an established social system through the conscious experimentation, eclectic assemblages, and creative repurposings of practitioners on the ground. Frankfurter's usage of syncretism (see his related essay in this very journal), which rejects older models of the term that envisioned cultural exchange as the passive mixture of two fixed or monolithic systems, stresses the active combinations and recombinations of symbols that take place not just across "systems" but within them as well. "Syncretism," Frankfurter writes, "should be understood as equivalent to the creative, synthetic process by which any idea, symbol, or idiom is appropriated and embraced by a culture: a cross inscribed over a doorway, for example, or the procession of a book of gospels around a field. But it should also be understood as an indication of the subtle attitudes and practices through which cultures *perpetuate* tradition, even in the use of new idioms and centers" (17, emphasis in the original). In other words, the Christianization of Egypt was not a process of rejecting one religion or religious system and replacing it with another, but rather a calculated effort to situate Christianity within an already vibrant, diverse Egyptian religious environment.

To the extent that Christianization "amounts to an ongoing and historically contingent *process* without endpoint," Frankfurter's monograph emphasizes the creative, ever-changing, efficacious quality of lived, local Christianity (257, emphasis in the original). The agents behind the execution of these practices modified, incorporated, and reinterpreted folklore and tradition to advance and/or mediate Christianity. For example, the ticket oracle, a thoroughly Egyptian practice going back to the New Kingdom, could unproblematically invoke the power of the saints and Christ. Likewise, Egyptian gods and spirits were not wholly dismissed by Christians; instead, they became embedded within ritual narratives that subordinated them to Christ. Christianization did not, then, entail the elimination of religious symbols and ideas that preceded it, but rather it operated as a perpetual unfolding in which

agents deployed and refashioned established rites and symbols in ways that advanced Christianity's power and authority as a cultural system. The deliberate appropriation of local tradition by Christians was a strategic effort to build up a sense of Christian efficacy, "whether in quotidian utility, social prestige, or supernatural protection" (182). Christians in Egypt sought to take control of the symbolic and physical landscape they inhabited.

Analyzing what he calls social sites, including the domestic sphere, the holy man, the craftsman's workshop, saints' shrines, scribalism, and landscape, Frankfurter illustrates *how* lay and expert classes alike drew on local traditions to articulate their Christianity. Each of the five body chapters, grounded in one of these symbolic sites, chronicles the process of syncretism whereby Christians redefined and reimagined traditional Egyptian practices, symbols, and myths through material objects, processions, veneration of saints, divination, scribal practices, exorcisms, dances, and so on. Frankfurter thus reconstructs the religious worlds of late antique Egypt through the careful analysis of figurines, textiles, mosaics, amulets, paintings, sermons, friezes, archaeological remains, ecclesiastical histories, oracle tickets, pottery, and miracle collections. To synthesize this vast amount of evidence, he draws, as he has done throughout his career, on anthropological comparanda and theorization (how refreshing it is to read at the end of the first chapter an extended explanation on the use of comparison). Fully aware of the limitations of the evidence, Frankfurter engages in a type of inductive reasoning that is less concerned with being the definitive or absolute reconstruction than it is with being a plausible attempt to imagine a series of overlapping social worlds.

This is quite obviously a book about late antique Egypt and the process by which it became Christian and what that Christianity looked like on the ground. But *Christianizing Egypt* is also about far more than Egypt; it offers a model for scholars to consider how a religion takes shape in a new environment. Frankfurter's book is a brilliant example of what a theoretically oriented study of late antique religion can look like, and what the world of late antiquity can offer those who work outside the period. Through his engagement with theories of cultural and religious transformation, Frankfurter has posed a series of questions (and answers) about Christian activities and experiences that might not, at first scholarly glance, seem altogether Christian. What, he wonders, does it mean to label these practices Christian or pagan? In that sense, the book's ultimate aim is to reorient scholarship away from the Christian and non-Christian binary and instead emphasize the

agents and social contexts behind the syncretistic objects and texts that constitute the bulk of our empirical data.

In writing this account of the lived Christianity of the residents of late antique Egypt, Frankfurter has produced a work that, through its very emphasis on the local dimensions of Christian praxis, compels us to think anew about the idea of Christianity itself. Frankfurter is keenly aware of this, as he observes in the preface: “if the construction of Christianity comes down to idiosyncratic local efforts, and if syncretism as I explain it is an inevitable and perennial force in that construction everywhere, how should we talk about ‘Christianity’ at all?” (xv). His answer, grounded in the terminology of the anthropologist Robert Redfield, insists that religion itself is the negotiation between the great and the local traditions.

To speak, then, of Christianity is not to invoke “an a priori and immutable presence” but rather a series of symbols and ideas that were repackaged differently by local actors (257). Christianity, as a great tradition, encompasses not a singular orthodoxy or institutional apparatus but the authoritative edifice upon which locals experimented. In that sense, “Christianity amounted to a system of authority and a repository of symbols and stories, variously combined and recombined with local traditions according to the goals, crafts, and everyday circumstances of specific types of people” (257). In this model of Christianity, institutional forces are but one piece, however powerful, in a much more complicated web of religious configurations.

The problem, of course, is that no matter how much one insists on the diversity of interpretations that comprise Christianity (and the fluidity within the tradition itself), there must still be, as Frankfurter acknowledges, a system of symbols and authority to be variously reinterpreted. (It is telling that the book sometimes maps this dialectic onto a dichotomy between the local and the translocal and other times onto the local versus the ecclesiastical). And so, for all its strengths, the book mostly assumes the existence of Christianity as a so-called great tradition.

In writing about workshops, for example, Frankfurter argues that “these workshops functioned in the general context of an institutional Christianity—not as agents of the institution itself but rather as agents in the construction of a material Christianity by virtue of this religion’s cultural domination” (163). That seems to me to avoid the issue of how and why particular symbols came to become culturally dominant and how Christianity established an authority that could efficaciously draw on the symbolic palette of late antique Egypt. In the afterword, Frankfurter does elaborate on what he

considers to be the terms of Christianity as a great tradition. He identifies powers, modernity, hierarchy, codes, pantheon, and book as the constituent elements of this Christianity. But he never specifies in any detail why these are dominant features of translocal Christianity. To be sure, Frankfurter's project is not fundamentally to devise a (new) definition of Christianity broadly speaking; this is simply a consequence of his shift to the local. And so, while Frankfurter has laid the foundation for a reappraisal of the contours of late antique Christianity and even Christianity itself, the task now falls to the rest of us to pick up where Frankfurter has left off.

Indeed, it is precisely because the project of *Christianizing Egypt* remains unfinished that it is such an important and compelling work—one that I sincerely hope will produce a wide range of responses and applications. Frankfurter has invited scholars trained in a variety of disciplines not only to think about other regions of the ancient Mediterranean through his syncretistic framework but also to reconsider our rote deployment of the words *Christianity* and *Christian*. Thus, while Frankfurter's book is obviously targeted at scholars of late antique religion, it is enormously useful for anyone seeking a sophisticated model of the developments and negotiations that define a religious tradition. In the end, *Christianizing Egypt* is a book that will force its readers to become better students of religion, in both its great and local forms.

Todd S. Berzon
Bowdoin College

Ross Shepard Kraemer, *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 520 pp. ISBN: 9780190222277 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780190222284 (ebook), ISBN: 9780190222291 (online). 520 pp. \$105.00.

“Some of this may really have happened” (43). This is how Ross Kraemer begins her discussion of an account of the conversion to Christianity of the Jews of Minorca that is the second chapter of this important and surprisingly personal book. The nod to uncertainty underscores a central problem that any book of this sort needs to address. Clearly, over the interval between Constantine and the promulgation of the Theodosian Code (429 CE), imperial law about Jews had changed in tone and content. The funerary and