

What
Paula Fredriksen
gets
wrong
(and what she gets right)

A critique of Paula Fredriksen's article:

Jesus: "Who Do You Say That I Am?"

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Author of On Christian Origins

INTRODUCTION

Professor Paula Fredriksen from the University of Boston¹ is the author of an article entitled *Jesus: "Who Do You Say That I Am?"*²

Fredriksen's article is recommended by a satisfied reviewer on Amazon as follows:

Professor Fredriksen beautifully summarizes a vast amount of biblical evidence of the historical Jesus. I would strongly recommend it to believers and sceptics alike.'

PAULA FREDRIKSEN'S ARTICLE

Paula Fredriksen takes it as given that a person called Jesus existed in the first century and that he authored the religion of Christianity. In her introduction she claims that,

The historian . . . whatever his personal religious beliefs, will affirm what the traditional believer also holds to be true,

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² Available as a Kindle Edition at www.amazon.com.

namely, that Jesus of Nazareth stands at the source of Christianity.

The aim of Fredriksen's article is to question the popular conception of Jesus. She claims that 'The Jesus of the Gospels is a Jew.'

We could also assert quite rightly that King Arthur as described in the twelfth century *Life of Gildas* is British. However, Gildas' work from the sixth century never mentions Arthur, and modern historians generally agree that he is unhistorical. We are forced to face the possibility, with all its implications, that the Jewish Jesus too is unhistorical.

In developing her argument Fredriksen states that Paul wrote his letters by mid-first century; "Within twenty years of Jesus' execution" she asserts. If this were so we would find evidence of Christians existing in the first two thirds of the first century, but we do not.³ Instead, we find evidence that they existed late in the first century, and our best source is the Roman governor Pliny. In Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan, he describes the results of his research into the Christians' beliefs and practices, and after interrogating two female slaves under torture, concludes that " ... all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition." In this same letter, Pliny mentions Christian apostates who stated that they had

³ OCO p.9.

abandoned the new religion 20 years previously. As Pliny's letter is dated around 110AD, this provides evidence for the existence of Christians around 90AD.⁴ This is long after the Jewish sage was said to have preached to multitudes on the plains and hills of Galilee.

Fredriksen now quotes from Paul's letters. She is correct when she says,

In Paul's letters—and therefore within his Gentile Christian communities—Jesus was . . . spoken of as a superhuman, cosmic entity, not as "a son of God" (a common biblical locution that can refer to angels, pious persons, or indeed the whole people of Israel) but as *the* Son of God. According to Paul, Jesus as Son had had a life before coming into the body, dwelt presently in the heavens with God the Father, and would return to defeat the cosmic forces of wickedness: sin, the flesh, death itself.⁵

Here I agree with Fredriksen, but when were these letters written?

In Paul's first letter to the believers in Thessalonica, the same letter quoted by Fredriksen above, Paul writes,

⁴ OCO p.18.

⁵ Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Thus they [the Jews] have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath *has overtaken them* at last. (1 Thessalonians 2:16b)

It is beyond dispute that the wrath of God was experienced by the Jews from 66 culminating in the destruction of their capital and magnificent temple in the year 70. Surely this is the event Paul is alluding to.

When we examine Paul's magnum opus, the letter to the Romans we find the same kind of allusions. Paul says, regarding the Jews,

I ask, then, has God *rejected* his people? (11:1)

They [the Jews] *were broken off* because of their unbelief. (11:20)

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, *the Jew first* and also the Greek. (2:9)

If we need further evidence, we can cite Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

For he [Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (2:14)

This wall separated the Gentiles and the Jews in the Jerusalem Temple.⁶ The destruction of this wall happened in September AD70.

Fredriksen is correct in her description of the relationship between the Jewish Christians headed by Cephas, James and John in Jerusalem and the Gentile Christians.⁷

When quarrels between them break out, the argument is over Gentile observance of Jewish Law; Should Gentiles be circumcised, that is convert to Judaism, if they have come to worship the God of Israel through Jesus Christ? Can they or should they eat meat sacrificed to idols? Need they change their sexual behaviour? Could they continue worshipping their traditional gods, too? Paul says one thing, his fellow Jewish apostles say another. On some points they agree (none endorsed sexual profligacy or idol worship), on others they differ (some thought that Gentiles-in-Christ should convert to Judaism, Paul did not). But no one seems to argue (again, from what we have in Paul's letters) about the elevated status Paul attributes to Jesus.

⁶ OCO p.236.

⁷ See Galatians 2.

But when did these arguments arise? Surely after the Law was ended with the destruction of the Jewish temple.⁸ Early Christians saw the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as fulfilling the ancient atonement ritual. (see Hebrews 2:17) When we study the trial and death of Jesus as described in the gospel of Matthew, we see significant allusions and references to the ancient ritual.⁹ Hence the introduction into the story of the character named Barabbas, who represents the scape goat in the Hebrew tradition.

Fredriksen claims that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist¹⁰ and crucified by Pontius Pilate. To support these propositions, she has mainly the gospel accounts. And these, apart from John, can be shown to be based on just one literary source, the gospel of Matthew.¹¹ She claims that Josephus the Jewish historian and Tacitus the Roman historian back up her claims. But the passages in Josephus are almost certainly Christian interpolations¹² and Tacitus was probably repeating stories he had heard from Christians.¹³ I will expand on these points later.

Regarding the gospel accounts Fredriksen has this to say:

⁸ The Romans not only destroyed the infrastructure they also massacred all the priests, bringing an end to the old dispensation.

⁹ OCO p.130ff.

¹⁰ Josephus mentions John the Baptist but does not in any way connect him to Jesus.

¹¹ OCO p.165ff.

¹² OCO p.290ff.

¹³ OCO p.298ff.

Matthew comes first in the canonical quartet because those ancient Christians who kept it regarded it as historically the first to be written. The Fourth Gospel, the canon's other putatively eyewitness account, was ascribed to John "the beloved disciple" of Jesus. The Second and Third Gospels, by contrast, were connected with the two premier apostles, Peter and Paul, by attributing authorship to two companions: thus, "Mark" wrote down the apostle Peter's reminiscences; and a (Gentile) physician and traveling companion of Paul's named "Luke" wrote the Third Gospel, as well as the Acts of the Apostles.

All these attributions began to erode under scholarly scrutiny. The church traditions on which they rested, historians noted, went back no earlier than the second century. Ecclesiastical titles notwithstanding, the Gospels themselves had originally circulated anonymously, and in a crowded field: Different ancient communities had kept different gospels. Scholars further began to note patterns of literary dependency between the first three Gospels,¹⁴ and many concluded that Mark, not Matthew, must be the earliest. They shifted the dates of the Gospels' composition from the first generation of believers to one to

¹⁴ Fredriksen notes that "Their relation to the Fourth Gospel, John, remains controversial; whatever John's sources, he tells a very different story from those of the first three evangelists."

two generations later: Mark, written just prior to or after the Roman destruction of the temple in AD70; the two Gospels that depend on him, Matthew and Luke, correspondingly later. John, given its sophisticated theology, may have come later still. And they noted that the original language of Matthew could only have been Greek: The text relies on biblical prophecies that work only if the version cited were the Septuagint, not the Hebrew.

The Septuagint . . . is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures begun in the third century BC by and for Greek-speaking Jews. It differed significantly from the Hebrew in many places, most notoriously for our current purpose in its translation of Isaiah 7:14. In the original Hebrew, a young girl (*'aalmah*) conceives and bears a child. The correlate Greek word should have been *neanis*, but the Septuagint gave, instead, *parthenos*, or "virgin" (for which Hebrew has its own word, *betulah*). Perhaps in the third or second century BC the word was ambiguous, like the English word maid or maiden, whose first reference is to the girl's youth and only secondarily, or by inference, to her sexual status. Matthew's birth story, however, requires that Mary be, quite specifically, *a virgin*. The Hebrew Bible could not have helped him here. Conclusion: This evangelist, whoever he was, read and wrote in Greek.

Fredriksen is wrong about the priority of Mark. The scholars Farmer¹⁵ and Powell¹⁶ have I think put that argument to rest.¹⁷ In other respects, she is correct.

Fredriksen notes the many faces of Jesus presented to the public.

In recent scholarship, Jesus has been imagined and presented as a type of first century shaman figure; as a Cynic-sort of wandering wiseman; as a visionary radical and social reformer preaching egalitarian ethics to the destitute; as a Galilean regionalist alienated from the elitism of Judean religious conventions (like the temple and the Torah); as a champion of national liberation and, on the contrary as its opponent and critic . . . All these figures are presented with rigorous academic argument and methodology; all are defended with appeals to the ancient data. Debate continues at a roiling pitch, and consensus—even on issues so basic as what constitutes evidence and how to construe it—is a distant hope.

The Age of Innocence with respect to the status of the Gospels as historical documents closed

¹⁵ See Bibliography

¹⁶ See Bibliography

¹⁷ Mark's version of the gospel anecdotes is always an improvement over what we find in Matthew and Luke. What he cannot harmonise he omits. See OCO p.165ff.

definitively two centuries ago. All scholarly reconstructions of Jesus must now begin by acknowledging the gap—social, cultural, linguistic, and historical—that yawns between their subject and the earliest sources that we have for him.

Fredriksen claims that Jesus was an itinerant teacher who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and wrote nothing, but we note that the language of the evangelists is Greek, and their medium written, not oral. She says,

Their period of composition appears to have been sometime during the final third of the first century, between 70 to 100 C.E.—that is to say, one or possibly two generations after the lifetime of Jesus and also sometime after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70.

But for the sake of consistency let us go one step further than Fredriksen. Let us posit that ALL Christian literature, including Paul's letters was written after AD70. Surprisingly, this somewhat unorthodox and bold proposition is well supported by the evidence, and the contrary position is not.¹⁸

¹⁸ OCO p.217.

Fredriksen discusses some of the problems with the orthodox approach. She admits that her thesis, that the gospels are based on oral tradition, "hardly puts us on firm ground." She says,

These stories would have been told and retold—by those of the original generation during their lifetimes; by the later, intervening generations for theirs—before achieving the relative stability of writing. Revision and amplification inevitably travel along this chain of transmission, again because its links are human. Since we have no way of comparing later oral traditions with earlier or the earliest ones, the degree of change or distortion introduced into the tradition as it evolved is lost to us, silenced by death.

Nor did the eventual achievement of written form fully stabilize these traditions from and about Jesus, as a simple comparison of our four Gospels shows. The Gospels themselves differ. Sometimes the matter is undeniable but seemingly unimportant; for example, at Mark 8:27 Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" whereas at Matthew 16:13 he asks, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" But larger divergences exist. At the end of this scene, the Confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus rebukes Peter as Satan in Mark 8:33 and Matt.

16:23; Luke's Jesus is silent (cf. Luke 9:22); and John's gospel lacks any corresponding scene.

While Mark's Jesus seems overtly hostile toward some traditional Jewish observances (e.g., Mark 7:1-23, and Mark's comment at verse 19), Matthew's Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, actively endorses them ("Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them," 5:17).

Finally, the evangelists report events that are simply mutually exclusive. It is unlikely that Mary and Joseph's hometown could have been both Bethlehem (the implication of Matthew 1 and 2) and Nazareth (Luke 2:4); or that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple both at the beginning of his mission (John 2:14-16) and at its end (Mark 11:15). Jesus could not have been killed both on the 15th of Nisan (Mark) and on the 14th (John); his last meal with his disciples either was or was not the Passover seder (Mark 14:12; John 13:1). And so on.

If either the Gospels or some analysis of them claims or depicts something that cannot plausibly cohere with what else we know about

Jesus' period and culture, we have good reason to question its historical validity. In the case of the Gospels, this means considering their depictions in light of anachronism and plausibility. If we know from traditions in both Paul's letters and Acts, for example, that after his death Jesus' original disciples continued to keep the food laws and Sabbath, to live in Jerusalem, and to worship in the temple, how likely is it that Jesus himself would have preached against these practices during his own lifetime? Either he did, but those closest to him universally missed his point; or he did not, though the Gospels occasionally present him as though he had. (And our next question then has to be: Why did the evangelists choose to do this?)

But both the brute fact of Jesus' death on the cross and the evangelists' apologetic efforts vis-a-vis Pilate—whom they present as virtually being forced against his will to do the job—run head-on into a second, equally incontrovertible fact about the earliest Christian movement: Though Jesus died as an insurrectionist, none of his followers did. No roundup of those who acclaimed him son of David going into Jerusalem for Passover is depicted in the Gospel stories, nor do Pilate's men or the temple guards arrest the disciples, too, when they ambush Jesus at night. Jesus dies alone.

This is odd. If Pilate, whether mistakenly or not, had truly considered Jesus guilty of spearheading a seditious movement, more than just Jesus would have died. Pilate would not and could not have permitted the existence of what he would consider a revolutionary group.⁵ The fact that Jesus alone was killed suggests, then, that Pilate knew perfectly well that Jesus posed no political threat. This observation might seem to support the evangelists' view: Pilate, against his own wishes, acted to accommodate the priests. But then we run head-on against the other fact that began our line of inquiry: Why, then, a crucifixion at all? If for whatever reasons Pilate and/or the priests had wanted Jesus dead, they had many simpler means at their disposal. No public execution was necessary. Indeed, the same Gospels' insistence on Jesus' high popularity that Passover (the priests resolve to have him killed, says Mark 14:5, but "not during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people") makes the choice of a public execution that much less coherent within the Gospels' own stories.

The traditions about Barabbas are, for the same reason, incredible. If Pilate, anxious to please his Jewish subjects, would go so far as to release a known insurrectionist and murderer, he would soon have been out of a job.

All these elements of the Passion narratives are so generally familiar that it can be difficult to begin to see how odd, and finally incoherent, they actually are.

WHERE SHE GOES WRONG

Fredriksen states that,

It is the end of Jesus' life that is most secure in the historical record. Jesus died on a cross: On this the evidence of Paul, the Gospels, Josephus, and the Roman historian Tacitus all agree.

Let's go through the list of evidence she presents to us.

Firstly, we can dismiss the gospels as worthy of our credence. They are anonymous, clearly written to encourage faith and are peppered with anachronisms¹⁹, contradictions, and tales of miracles.

Next, we come to Paul's letters. We note that Paul's Jesus,

¹⁹ For example, the wall and gate of Nain did not exist until after June 68. The miracle story though is set in the time of Jesus. OCO p.242.

- had no miraculous birth (and none is recorded in Mark)
- had no childhood (none is recorded in Matthew or Mark)
- had no family
- had no earthly career after the resurrection (as in the shorter ending of Mark)
- performed no miracles
- delivered no teaching, and
- had no disciples²⁰

What then does Paul say about Jesus? Paul says this.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law... (Galatians 4:4)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

²⁰ OCO p.121.

Paul here is expressing a religious conviction which he says he obtained by revelation. He never claims to be a witness of these events. He says in his letter to the Galatians,

For I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is *not of human origin*; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:11-12)

In other words, Paul's belief was NOT based on anything he had seen or witnessed. He never met the human Jesus. Nor does he ever claim to have spoken to witnesses²¹. He claims that the risen Jesus appeared to him in a vision, and that this vision had appeared to others as well. (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

Where did these ideas come from? Paul is quite clear. Everything that he believed had been according to the (Old Testament) Scriptures.

He says in his letter to the Corinthians,

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for

²¹ Some might object and quote the Jerusalem meeting as mentioned in Galatians 1 and 2. But these people that Paul meets are church leaders. Nowhere does he say that they were or even claimed to be witnesses.

our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...(1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

We now come to the Jewish historian Josephus.

Did Josephus write about Jesus? Church historian Eusebius says that he did. Oddly, Eusebius writing about the year 300 is the first ancient doyen to make such a claim. Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 200) wrote prolifically against heretics. He cites and names Josephus, but in none of his writings does he cite the passage about Jesus, which is in our copies of the Jewish historian.

Can Eusebius be trusted? Eusebius admits he produced a flawed and incomplete history, the aim of which was to demonstrate the spiritual victory of the orthodox church over the forces of paganism and heresy. He records events which we know to be unsubstantiated and even fanciful. Examples are the suicide of Pilate, letters of Pilate to Tiberius and Tiberius himself adopting the role of public defender of the Christian faith. If this were true the Roman historians would have noted it, but there is silence.

The passage as quoted by Eusebius and as it appears in Antiquities of the Jews is this.

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

When we examine the placement of the Jesus passage in Josephus' history, we notice that it interrupts the sense and flow of the narrative. It is followed by,

About the same time also another sad calamity put the Jews into disorder, and certain shameful practices happened about the temple of Isis that was at Rome.

Olson has examined the language of the passage and has found that,

Comparison of the Testimonium with the writings of Josephus and Eusebius ... reveals that while much of the content is unlikely to have originated with Josephus, none of it is inconsistent with Eusebius' beliefs. Further, except for two phrases peculiar to Josephus, the language is entirely consistent with Eusebius' normal usage. The three phrases "maker of miraculous works," "tribe of Christians," and "to this day" occur several times elsewhere in Eusebius, and never, elsewhere, in Josephus.

We conclude quite reasonably that the Jesus passage in Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* is a Christian interpolation and probably by the hand of Eusebius himself.²²

We next turn to Tacitus.

²² OCO p.290ff.

There is a passage in *Annals* written by Tacitus which links the emperor Nero, the Roman fire of the year 64 and Christians. This passage is often quoted by orthodox historians as evidence that the founding myth of Christianity as presented in the gospels has some support in pagan literature. However, a close examination of this passage and its wider context, reveals that there are major problems with this assessment.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian and senator writing about the year 120, some 56 years after the event under consideration. The *Annals* covers the period 14 to 68 AD, but several books and parts of books in the series are missing.

Let us consider some of the arguments against accepting Tacitus at face value.

1. The Nero story is not mentioned by any of the early church fathers.
2. The incident is not mentioned by Josephus.
3. Suetonius while repeating the rumour that Nero was responsible for the fire fails to mention Christians as the arsonists or accused arsonists responsible for the fire.
4. The Christian author Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325), who became an advisor to Constantine, carefully detailed the wrongs committed by tyrannical rulers against the Christians. But he says nothing at all about a fire under

Nero. Instead, he connects Nero's attack on the Christians, and the killings of Peter and Paul, with the fact that people were abandoning traditional cult.

5. Pliny the Younger, a contemporary and friend of Tacitus, in the letter already quoted has heard of Christians, but knows nothing of their beliefs or practices. If the story of Tacitus were true, Christianity as a sect would have been widely known.

6. The silence of Pliny the Elder, author of the voluminous book *Natural History* published in parts from AD77 is also remarkable.

7. The Christian father Tertullian dismisses Tacitus as "loquacious in falsehood."²³

We conclude that Tacitus has creatively reconstructed an event using some true elements and other elements from popular rumour, information which was current when Tacitus was writing his histories.²⁴ He like many others of that age uncritically accepted the myth of origins that Christians put forward.

AN ALTERNATIVE THESIS

Fredriksen presents a thesis for the origins of Christianity which is clearly deficient. Evidence for the existence of a body of people who called themselves followers of Jesus in

²³ OCO p.305.

²⁴ OCO p.298ff.

the first two thirds of the century is missing. The Dead Sea Scrolls dating up to the year 70 are silent. We know what didn't happen. So, what did happen? What event could have precipitated the emergence of the religion, sometime in the latter half of the century? The answer surely is the national and religious catastrophe which was the Roman-Jewish War of 66 to 70AD.

In proposing this thesis, I am not alone. In 1904 Thomas Whittaker published *The Origins of Christianity*, in which he posed this very question. He replies,

The answer I propose is, that it was not until after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. That great crisis unloosed ideas which had long been preparing. We know both from Josephus and from Tacitus that prodigies were reported to have taken place before the fall of the Temple. A voice louder than human was heard proclaiming the departure of "the gods." But few, says Tacitus, interpreted this in the sense of fear: most were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient scriptures of the priests that at that time the East should wax strong, and that men going forth from Judaea should possess the world. . . Thus it seems probable that, just after the catastrophe of the year 70, those Jews or semi-Jews who for any reason were discontented with the hierarchy and the Rabbis would show quite exceptional

activity. For they too were penetrated with the national hopes, and the accepted leaders of the people had failed. Let a rumour go forth that the Messiah who was to suffer, and then to triumph, had already appeared and undergone that which was foretold by the prophets. Would not this gain instant credence with many? And here is such basis as may be found for a myth.

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

One by one the authorities relied on by Fredriksen fall by the wayside. Her thesis is built on sand. But having discovered holes in the orthodox position why does she still champion it? It seems to me that she lacks courage, the very courage she calls for in her readers.

The truth lies in the evidence and what we might expect given what we know about the invention of modern religions.²⁵ The failure of the political Messiah to appear in AD70 would have caused an upheaval in the Jewish religious sphere. The role of the Messiah, as suffering servant or political leader would have been much debated. The Christians chose the comprehensive model. Orthodox Jews rejected this assessment and opted for a Messiah who

²⁵ OCO p.67ff See also Festinger, *When prophecy fails* listed in the Bibliography.

is lord and king alone, an outcome which they still cling to today.

As Jerome testifies,

The veil of the temple has been rent²⁶; an army has encompassed Jerusalem, it has been stained by the blood of the Lord. Now, therefore, its guardian angels have forsaken it and the grace of Christ has been withdrawn. Josephus, himself a Jewish writer, asserts that at the Lord's crucifixion there broke from the temple voices of heavenly powers, saying: Let us depart hence.²⁷

The abandonment of the holy site occurred in AD70. This date marks the birth of the myth, and the emergence of Christians. There is little to support the idea that a Jewish sage instituted the religion around the year 30. Fredriksen like most theologians is partly right but mostly wrong.

²⁶ Matthew 27:51.

²⁷ *Wars of the Jews*, Book 6.5.3. Jerome, *Letters*, 46.4.

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