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Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: a Jewish life and the emergence of Christianity

Oscar Cole-Arnal

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for those who want to see a prime example of how the classic moralist and Hebrew wisdom traditions function in the New Testament. Certainly if you are preaching from or studying the later part of Revelation, this is the commentary to read.

Allan Rudy-Froese
Erb Street Mennonite Church
Waterloo, Ontario

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity

Paula Fredriksen
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999
327 pages, \$39.00 Hardcover

As a Jesus of History “Scholar wannabe” I looked forward to reading and reviewing Paula Fredriksen’s recent work on the historical Jesus. It came to me with some strong recommendations. Unfortunately my overwhelming reaction to the book remains a profound disappointment. Not surprisingly, in the welter of widely divergent reconstructions of the historical Jesus, I find myself drawn powerfully to some, such as John Dominic Crossan and William R. Herzog II’s, and passionately at variance with others, including Marcus Borg and to a lesser extent, N. T. Wright’s. Yet in all these, I found myself comfortable with the researchers’ careful scholarship. Even though I disagree, as well, with Dr. Fredriksen’s portrayal, it is not her reconstruction as such which troubles me. After all, scholarly debate stands as the lifeblood of academic work. Rather, what disturbs me in Dr. Fredriksen’s *Jesus of Nazareth* is the data she uses, the data she doesn’t use and the ways she brings together her material. Sadly I find her reconstruction quite thin.

Initially I was intrigued by her thesis that there are two indisputable facts – Jesus’ execution by Pilate and the non-execution of Jesus’ followers. She puts it this way: “This is a crucial anomaly. Because it is established by two absolutely secure historical facts, it will serve as the driving wheel for my effort here to reconstruct the Jesus of history” (9). With this introduction, I was eager to see her argument unfolding from these premises. I continued to be with her on the danger of inserting anachronisms into our interpretations – all history of Jesus scholars strive mightily not to fall into this trap, at least without a clear recognition that this is happening or is, to some extent, inevitable. However, at this point in her discussion of sources, my alarms began to buzz. She spoke of our canonical texts, Philo, Josephus, as well she should. At the same time, she overwhelmingly

ignored “Q” scholarship and the Gospel of Thomas, save for a rather flip aside here and there (see, pp. 75-76). For Dr. Fredriksen to give little value to these documents is one thing; to ignore them without serious methodological discussion is to run roughshod over the important work of such scholars as John Dominic Crossan, Burton Mack, John Kloppenborg and others. At this point I felt alarmed by what seemed to me the skewing of available data by ignoring important sources for a reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

Next I was struck by what seemed to me to be a totally inappropriate addition to her text – her “Preludes 1 and 2”, especially no. 2 (“The Temple”), a fictional story of the young Jesus going to the Temple. Such a device belongs in a novel, not in an historical reconstruction. Moving beyond this annoyance I plunged into the main body of her work. For most of the rest of the book I found myself lost in a morass of data, much of it useful yet unconnected to the crispness of her earlier thesis. I was happy toward the end of the book that she returned to her thesis and dealt with it, a thesis with which I agreed in part and disagreed in part.

Nonetheless, my disappointments with the work outweighed what I viewed to be its positive aspects. Constraints of space demand that I illustrate this and not become bogged down with this or that detailed scholarly question (e.g., did Jesus have a concept of “twelve” disciples he tried to embody in his following? Was Jesus an apocalypticist?) Instead, I prefer to single out and illustrate three additional criticisms by way of conclusion: 1) I find the book contains too many judgmental potshots. By way of example, immediately after she criticizes the anachronistic separation of “ethical” and “ritual” (certainly a just and fair critique), she has her own contemporary moral judgment to make: “No normal society could long run according to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. Total passive resistance to evil – indeed compliance with injustice... – and an absolute refusal to judge would simply lead to the exploitation of those abiding by such rules by those who do not. Voluntary poverty ultimately only increases the absolute numbers of the poor. Not worrying about tomorrow – a principled refusal to plan – can be disastrous: Lilies of the field live one kind of life, but humans another” (110). I find items such as these a trivialization of both her academic debating partners and the nuances of any historical reconstruction. In my own field, for example, there is a world of difference between the voluntary poverty of Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day and the French worker-priests. Might the same nuanced analysis apply to first century Galilee, Judea and the historical Jesus?

2) Although Dr. Fredriksen describes various groups of first century Jews, I detect a quickness in harmonization, which seems to hide how fractured and hostile these groups could be to each other. Even to speak of Judaism for first century Jews smacks of the same kind of anachronism that calls early followers of Jesus Christians in contradistinction to Jews. For example, she says: “Jewish communities meanwhile prayed for Rome’s well-being and, in Jerusalem, offered

sacrifices on its behalf" (176). I expect that this was true about certain Jewish communities and among those elements in Jerusalem who collaborated with the Roman occupiers. At the same time, our sources tell us how divided Jews were from one another, even to the point of violence in some instances, and how rebellious they were against their colonizers, whether Seleucid, Idumean or Roman. This is the context of Jewish life from, at least, the Maccabees to the revolt of Bar Kochba. The Jesus movement fits into this fractured and explosive society in which different Jewish groups came to terms with Torah, covenant and tradition. Not surprisingly, these convictions reflected concepts and actions which fed and fed from the explosive environment of the epoch. Hence, just as ritual and ethics belong together, so also do politics belong to both.

3) Finally, Dr. Fredriksen spends a fair bit of time (198-203) decrying those scholars who supposedly adopt modern agendas of class struggle, egalitarianism and gender justice and then adapt Jesus to that agenda. Unfortunately, she spends little time on who these scholars might be and what arguments they use. "How then," she concludes, "can we presume to import our values or political agendas across millennia to serve as an explanatory construct for their actions?" Indeed, scholarly and human integrity demand that we strive mightily to sort out our contemporary context from the antiquity that we study. However, this does not, willy nilly, remove class analysis and other post-Enlightenment methods from scholarly use. After all, does not and should not Dr. Fredriksen use post-Enlightenment methodological canons for her analysis of Synoptic and other materials? At the same time, she seems to presume a nearly uniformist view of all Jews toward purity laws, the Temple and what it means to walk the Torah. Could we not argue that instead of "Second Temple Judaism" (203), there were Second Temple Judaisms, i.e., Essenes, Galileans, Diaspora Hellenized Jews, bandits, Messiahs, Pharisees, followers of Jesus, etc.? This would challenge the notion that there was a normative Judaism to which all Jews subscribed. Perhaps also, we must be wary of the anachronistic method of psychologizing the data. Dr. Fredriksen states concerning her earlier main thesis: "The chief priests know what Pilate knows: Jesus himself is not dangerous" (253). Based on this supposition about the internal workings of the chief priests' and Pilate's mind, she surmises that Pilate also knew the dangers of what a swelled and volatile Passover crowd in Jerusalem meant (an explosive mix of messianic hopes). Hence he executes Jesus (the leader) as an object lesson but makes no attempt to kill his followers. Maybe! Likely? I and some others don't think so, but my chief concern is not that. It is rather the presumption to know the internal workings of, for example, Pilate's mind, especially giving him a political subtlety and savvy that most of the data don't seem to support.

Dr. Fredriksen's book links a conclusion to the thesis anomaly she underscores early on in the book (9). She asserts that these basic facts about Jesus' death force us to conclusions about the Gospel evidence that run radically

counter to the prime assumptions of all other current work on Jesus, most especially on the question of why he was killed. I emphatically include my own earlier book, *From Jesus to Christ*, in this group whose conclusions this book challenges. I do not feel that her recent book has supplanted or challenged seriously either her earlier fine book or that of most major Jesus of history scholars. In spite of this sharply critical review I believe also that every scholarly work that survives the test of peer review and publication deserves a continued hearing and further discussion. This book is no exception. Although historical Jesus studies are not my field, I remain much more convinced by the continued work of such figures as John Dominic Crossan and William R. Herzog II. Let the dialogue continue.

Oscar L. Cole-Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Women and Christianity: The First Thousand Years, Volume I

Mary T. Malone

Ottawa: Novalis, 2000

276 pages, \$19.95 Softcover

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This book review in the form of a letter stands as an unqualified and urgent letter of recommendation. Although I am somewhat hesitant to advocate a book for the sisters (since men have too long presumed to do so for women), I will take the risk because of the exceptional quality of Mary Malone's first volume of *Women and Christianity*. I have no such hesitancy with pressing my brothers to purchase this book, read it and then act upon its wisdom.

Last year for the first time I taught my new course on "Women in Christian History" and was unable to find a textbook that I could recommend unequivocally. Yes, there are studies by feminist theologians and historians which are excellent, but none of these quite fit the bill as a textbook. Dr. Malone's book (just out) fills that gap admirably.

The only criticisms I might have about her first volume are so minuscule as to be useless, but given the constraints of space, I would like to highlight some of the many especially excellent facets of the work. Her first chapter "Reading Women into History" is alone worth the price of the book. It is simultaneously measured advocacy, history of the treatment of women in the tradition, and methodology – all written with a blend of grace and balance. Throughout the book I found myself chilled and outraged by the progressive and relentless