When Jesus Was Jewish

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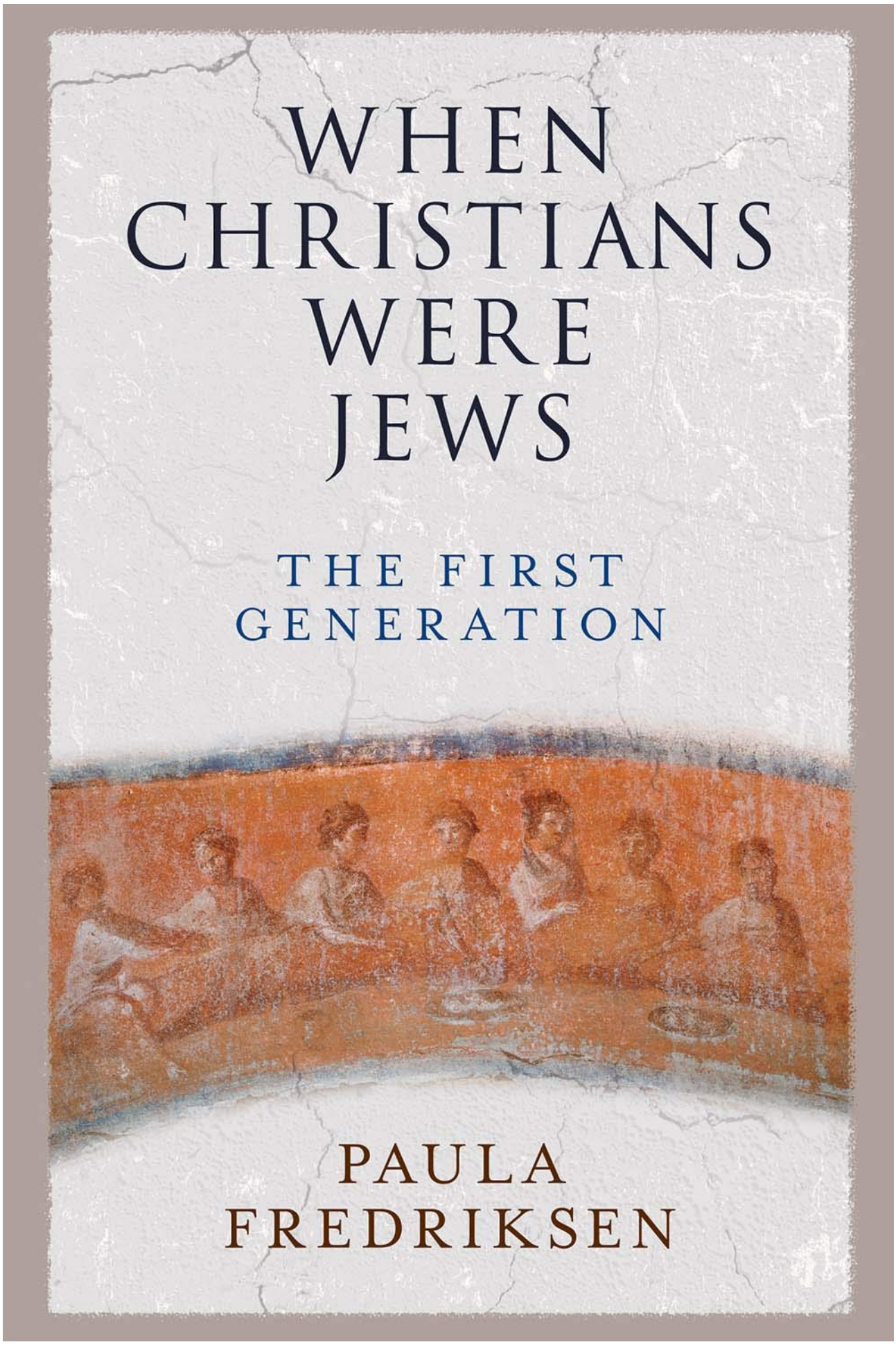
Paula Fredriksen:When Christians Were Jews: The First GenerationNew Haven, Yale University Press, 2018, pp. viii+261, $27.50.



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This latest book by Paula Fredriksen is aimed at a broad readership, and so heavily draws on some of her earlier works, especially *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (1999), and *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (2017). But the present book skilfully and readably weaves its own narrative and stands on its own as a succinct account of the earliest stage of what became Christianity. She succeeds admirably in presenting a compact account for "general readers" that is built on her much fuller work. The emphasis is on the Jewishness of Jesus and the earliest Jesus-followers, and their Jerusalem orientation, including particularly a positive view of the temple. In her own words:

> I have attempted to reimagine the stages by which the earliest Jesus-community would have first come together again, after the crucifixion. To understand how and why, despite the difficulties, these first followers of Jesus would have resettled in Jerusalem. To reconstruct the steps by which they became in some sense the center of a movement that was already fracturing bitterly within two decades of its founder's death. To see how the seriatim waves of expectation, disappointment, and fresh interpretation would have sustained this astonishing assembly in the long decades framed by Pilate's troops in 30 and Titus's in 70.

In a prologue, Fredriksen lays out what she takes as the core driving factor among circles of the Jesus-movement: Jesus' prophecy of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, involving the redemption of history, the defeat of evil, resurrection of the dead, and a "universal reign of justice and peace." In this light, for earliest believers Jesus' crucifixion was a major crisis, but his subsequent resurrection meant to them that this Kingdom truly was near at hand chronologically. For in ancient Jewish expectations, the coming of God's reign included particularly collective, personal resurrection of the righteous. Jesus' resurrection, thus, was taken as proof of this hope and the advance signal that final events were near and beginning to unfold, despite his crucifixion. As I will note later, her emphasis on this eschatological factor in earliest circles of Jesus-believers seems to me to come at the cost of doing justice to the additional conviction that Jesus' resurrection also signalled his unique significance.

But before pursuing her emphasis on eschatology, Fredriksen's first chapter presents the centrality of the Jerusalem temple, for Jews generally, and particularly for Jesus and also, notably, the Apostle Paul. The chapter is foundational for the rest of the book. As relates to Jesus, agreeing with some other scholars that the Gospel of John presents a more credible account of Jesus making multiple pilgrimage trips to Jerusalem (not just one fatal trip as narrated in the other New Testament Gospels), Fredriksen cogently contends that Jesus shared the generally positive regard of Jews for the city and its temple. This puts her at odds with those scholars who posit that Jesus rejected (or came to reject) the validity of the Jerusalem temple and its sacrificial system. Personally, I find her take on things more plausible.

In chapter two, she follows up this discussion with a further and more detailed consideration of the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' well-known overturning of the money-changers' tables in the outer court of the temple. As indicated already, Fredriksen insists that Jesus did not condemn the temple as such, but, instead, his action may have been intended "to prophesy visually the approach of the End." This she grants may have included a replacement of the then-current temple with "the final one at the End of the Age." But then she notes that there is a problem. Paul's letters make no reference to the idea that the Jerusalem temple was regarded as invalid or was to be destroyed. Indeed, I might add, in the Acts of the Apostles (21:17-26), Paul is portrayed as happily taking part in temple activities, including sacrifices. So Fredriksen departs here from scholars, such as E. P. Sanders, who posit that Jesus' temple-action was the key event that provoked the temple authorities to seize him.

Instead, Fredriksen contends (chapter three), in what became his final pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Jesus and his followers expected “an eschatological miracle” that included the coming of God’s kingdom and, integral to that, the revelation of God’s messiah, “perhaps, indeed, the revelation of Jesus as his messiah.” This expectation generated an enthusiastic response among the many other pilgrims from Galilee and elsewhere in Jerusalem at that Passover time, and this in turn is what prompted the authorities to seize Jesus and execute him. The hopes of Jesus’ followers were, thus, “brutally crushed,” which Fredriksen portrays as the first of several disappointed expectations about the imminent appearance of the kingdom of God and Jesus’ revelation in glory.

Rightly noting how interesting it is that only Jesus was seized and crucified, and his followers allowed to go free, Fredriksen urges (curiously, in my view) that this suggests that Pilate did not so much have a problem with Jesus, but, instead, was troubled by “the crowds who followed him.” This is one of what I regard as a few dubious alternatives that Fredriksen advocates. Of course, had Jesus been unsuccessful in generating interest in his person and teaching, he might well not have even come to Pilate’s attention. But, surely, those enthusiastic crowds of Galileans and others were generated in response to Jesus; and for both followers and critics of Jesus the validity of his person had become the polarizing issue already during his ministry. At one point, Fredriksen seems to recognize this. In discussing the conviction of Jesus’ earliest followers that God raised him from death, she grants that this is “a measure of the degree to which Jesus . . . had successfully forged his followers into a group intensely, indeed singularly, committed to himself and to his prophecy.”

On the other hand, only a few pages later, she insists that for early followers the point of Jesus’ resurrection “was not to express Jesus’ special status as such [but] was to vindicate his prophecy” about the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. She grants that as “the years stretched on” Jesus’ resurrection was reinterpreted from being a “time-indicator” (the nearness of the End) to a “status-indicator” confirming Jesus as Messiah. But various texts in the New Testament clearly make Jesus’ resurrection from the first as indicative (even constitutive) of his exalted status as God’s unique “Son” (e.g., Romans 1:3-4), Messiah (e.g., Acts 2:36), and the “Lord” to whom all creation is to give obeisance (e.g., Philippians 2:9-11). When we examine various early Christian texts, including Paul’s epistles and the portrayal of early preaching in Acts of the Apostles, the emphasis in the “gospel” message is almost entirely on the significance of Jesus as God’s plenipotentiary. To be sure, the same texts reflect the hope, even the expectation, that the kingdom of God will duly come soon. But the crux of the gospel in these texts is on the centrality of Jesus in God’s purposes, not a preoccupation over some eschatological timetable. The early Jesus-followers were able to weather disappointed hopes that Jesus would come again in glory during their lifetime, because their primary attachment was to him, not to a given date, or even a successively adjusted set of dates.

To turn to another matter, one of the acute observations in the book is how noteworthy it is that Jesus’ followers (who were Galileans) relocated to Jerusalem in the aftermath of their experiences of the risen Jesus. Fredriksen rightly contends that this reflects their belief that the events of eschatological salvation would all unfurl from Jerusalem, Zion, the “holy mountain.” But she doesn’t seem to recognize also that this Jerusalem focus likely reflects the belief that Jesus had been designated as the royal-Davidic Messiah. That is, establishing themselves in Jerusalem was another expression of this messianic or “christological” claim, which did not develop over time, but was prominent from the outset. As those who comprised the messianic community, where else should they locate than the Davidic city? Their relocation also represented, in short, their messianic claim upon Jerusalem!

Noting the various reports of sightings of the resurrected Jesus in New Testament writings, she ponders how long these sightings went on. A lot depends on when we date the experience of the Apostle Paul that changed him from opponent to perhaps the most well-known proponent of the early Christian gospel message. At one point she proposes that Paul’s experience must have

been “several years after Jesus’ crucifixion,” but on another page she seems to date the experience “within two years or so,” which I think more likely.

Earlier I opined that Fredriksen emphasizes the apocalyptic hopes of the early Jesus-movement, but may not do justice to their beliefs and practices that show Jesus’ continuing significance for them. As an illustration, she cites “a rare Aramaic outcropping in Paul’s Greek” in 1 Corinthians 16:22, the phrase “*Marana tha*” (“Our Lord, come!”) as giving a glimpse of the “apocalyptic mind-set” of early Jesus-followers. True. But it is also important that the phrase addresses the risen Jesus as “Lord” of the gathered believers and comprises a ritual acclamation or appeal. These features surely express the remarkable centrality of Jesus in the religious life of early Christian circles, including, notably, Jewish, Aramaic-speaking circles.

Proposing that the disappointment of hopes for the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God could have led to the demise of the Jesus-movement, Fredriksen offers “four interrelated factors” that enabled those early believers to maintain their commitment against the odds. These included continuing experiences of “charismata” such as prophesying, healing and exorcizing demons, which believers ascribed to the divine Spirit. These experiences validated the community of believers as those to whom the Spirit had been given.

A second factor was “their intensified turn to Jewish scriptures.” That is, early on, Jewish believers searched their scriptures to find resources for understanding their circumstances and also, importantly, the figure of Jesus. This process introduced the third factor, as this biblical interpretation led believers to “refine” (or reformulate) ideas about “Messiah” and the ways that Jesus fulfilled that role. So, for example, there was the novel idea that Messiah was to undergo a violent death and then come again in glory.

The fourth factor in Fredriksen’s proposed scheme was another novel idea: the early believers felt themselves obliged to continue Jesus’ mission “to prepare Israel” for the coming Kingdom of God. Then, through various circumstances, this mission expanded to include initially Jews in the wider Diaspora and then even Gentiles (or pagans, to use Fredriksen’s preferred term).

This inclusion of Gentiles, however, she posits was initially “unintended” and came about as a consequence of the mission to the Jewish Diaspora. For in Diaspora synagogues, there were also “pagans,” “God-fearers,” who were attracted to the Jewish deity and to some Jewish practices, such as Sabbath observance (and, she argues, were not expected by the synagogue to desist from worship of their ancestral deities). She contends that, unlike the more common Jewish attitude toward such pagans, the early Jesus-movement required them to desist from worship of their ancestral deities. Thereby, these gentile converts were no longer pagans, and no longer God-fearers, and not proselytes to Judaism either, but, instead, “eschatological gentiles” treated as the fulfilment of the scriptural oracles about the nations abandoning their idols and coming to embrace the God of Israel.

But, Fredriksen proposes, this demand made upon these pagan converts led to trouble. The Diaspora synagogues feared that these converts would arouse animosity against the Jewish community. This animosity, she further proposes, is what led Paul to engage in what he later regretted as “persecution” of the Jesus-movement. In her view, this also subsequently led to Paul being arraigned and flogged in various Diaspora synagogues. I think that she may well account for the Apostle Paul being flogged, but I am not persuaded that her theory accounts for Paul’s own earlier opposition to the Jesus-movement (which he refers to in language connoting violence). His reference to the experience that made him change directions portrays it as all to do with the figure of Jesus, which suggests to me that his prior opposition was aroused by what he regarded then as inappropriate claims about Jesus and devotional practices that he feared infringed on the uniqueness of God.

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There is much more in this thought-provoking book, small but intriguing observations, such as the proposal that the “swords” ascribed to Jesus’ disciples in the Gospels accounts were actually sacrificial knives used for Passover, and larger emphases on how early Jesus-movement circles were shaped by, and engaged, their Jewish context. Whether one agrees with every point, Fredriksen is always stimulating and writes with a verve that makes the ancient time come alive.

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