

**Paula Fredriksen**  
***When Christians Were Jews:  
The First Generation***

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Paula Fredriksen's *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* attempts to answer two complex questions: How is it that Jesus' closest followers, Jews who saw themselves as the last generation, believing that "the world hovered at the edge of the end of time" because Jesus' resurrection initiated the onset of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, became instead the first generation of a community of believers who in succeeding generations would be composed primarily not of Jews but of Gentiles (6)? How did this first Jesus community survive through their "heightened expectations" and "disorienting disappointments" to become focused less on the immediacy of God's kingdom and more on mission (184)? This book is first and foremost the telling of an engaging story. Fredriksen reconstructs and reimagines the history of those followers living between circa 30 CE and 70 CE and their concerns in an attempt to get people to read Josephus, Paul, Acts, and especially the Gospels with fresh eyes, thinking about this first generation not anachronistically as "early Christians" but as apocalyptic Jews. She challenges our preconceived notions not just of the details but especially of the big picture of this remarkable period.

Fredriksen's portrait aims at removing the obstacles that historically have blocked attempts to place Jesus and his earliest followers fully within the diverse world of first-century Judaism. She does this by exploring the problematic nature of the post-70 sources (especially the synoptic gospels) for reconstructing the pre-70 Jesus movement. She then carefully selects among the sources to help reimagine what might have happened. The sources chosen are not without their problems (see below). Part of her approach involves addressing commonly misunderstood aspects of early Judaism (e.g., purity; the relationship of various Jews and Jewish groups to the Temple; messianic expectations; etc.) and the problematic ways New Testament texts have been interpreted (e.g., Paul and Jewish Law; Jesus' overturning tables in the Temple, etc.). She also highlights the misappropriation or even mis-translation of certain labels (i.e., "Christian" and "Church"). Fredriksen observes

that these tendencies of reading New Testament texts as antagonistic to Jews and Judaism are the result of later Christian anti-Judaism cast backward onto this first generation of believers (186).

In order to weave the story of this first Jesus community together, Fredriksen broadly considers the social and political dynamics in Roman-ruled Jerusalem in the pre-70 period. Then she asks a diverse array of questions, allowing her narrative to emerge out of her answers. What were the dynamics in Roman-ruled Jerusalem in the pre-70 period? What were the attitudes of Jesus, his earliest followers, Paul, the Essenes, and Jewish prophets to the institution of the Temple? (Fredriksen says they were generally positive.) What was the possible immediate cause and context of Jesus' arrest and death? (It was probably intended to avert chaos prior to the Passover holiday among the crowds who had already proclaimed Jesus as messiah/king.) Why would Jesus' followers have reassembled in Jerusalem after his death? (It was the location of his resurrection appearances and Zion was central to end-time speculation.) What happened when the expected end-time did not arrive? (They persisted in their belief that Jesus was the messiah but now insisted that he had to come again to mark the arrival of the kingdom.) The followers' reinterpretation of Jesus as messiah was made easier by the linkage between messianic expectations and end-time scenarios, and also by the variety of contemporary Jewish expectations, including some of end-times without a messiah. What prompted the community of Jesus' followers to take its message outside of Jerusalem to "all the towns of Israel" (Matt 10:23), discovering along the way that these towns included not just Jews but Gentiles? (Resurrection appearances had ceased and they sought to emulate and continue Jesus's mission.) Finally, what could Paul's "persecution" of this new movement have been all about? (It was a form of community discipline within the synagogue community and it may also have come from a concern that conversions of pagans might provoke hostility from their communities.) Fredriksen develops her rich portrait of the earliest Jesus community out of these topics and others, explaining how his followers were sustained by fresh interpretation through waves of heightened expectations and crushing disappointments.

Fredriksen has kept the focus on the big picture—something we often lose sight of—by thoughtfully reconstructing and reimagining what might have been going on in the community of Jesus' followers between 30 and 70. Keeping that big picture in view helps us to read and understand the sources better. She corrects common misunderstandings and tries to answer (and not dodge) the difficult questions, always reminding us not to read the later history of Christian anti-Judaism back into this period. However, for someone considering using the book with beginning students, there are a couple of additional issues to be aware of. Because she is carefully and deliberately constructing a narrative different from earlier scholars, there are places in the book where it would be left up to instructors to explain to students how her narrative diverges from traditional interpretations (since students would likely not be aware of them). Only in some instances does she mention those traditional narratives. This is understandable, because she is trying to develop a coherent narrative of that first Jesus community here. Interrupting that regularly to tell the reader what the range of scholarly views are would be

confusing and too disruptive. It is helpful that Fredriksen uses questions to help the reader to link one part of the narrative to another. However, for beginning students it would be a good idea to limit the questions to those that are actually answered in the next part of the narrative. Because the narrative can be winding (e.g., as she corrects a misunderstanding or provides a detailed explanation or even as she digresses to explain something important), it would be useful to have more titled subsections and also to provide a more explicit connecting of the dots, showing how and why what she is writing is important for the larger narrative.

There is a need for a much clearer understanding of why Fredriksen chose some sources and not others to use in reconstructing the history of the first Jesus community. That should include a clearer evaluation of the sources and their reliability for this reconstruction as well as their limits. This is especially important for non-specialist readers who may not know that Acts and Josephus, for example, are often viewed skeptically by scholars (for different reasons). Fredriksen does briefly introduce the sources at the start (pages 2-5) and then says a bit more about her use of them as they come up in the book (e.g., she is trying to “peer behind Acts” [184]). However, the book needs a more extensive discussion of sources, whether in the text itself or in an appendix.

Significant theological questions (likely of special interest to Christian readers) are indirectly and sometimes directly raised by Fredriksen. Some of these questions have to do with the identity of Jesus Christ. Since the historical Jesus as reconstructed by Fredriksen viewed himself as a Jew among Jews with a mission focused on the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel and not as the founder of a new world religion including Jews and Gentiles, how do we explain the emergence of very different portraits of Jesus in later Christianity? What are we to make of the fact that early Christians shifted the focus of their movement away from the imminent kingdom that Jesus proclaimed (and which did not appear) to the figure of Jesus himself as the center of their faith? According to Fredriksen and other scholars, the historical Jesus did not claim to be God or divine. In fact, historical titles ascribed to him in his lifetime were “Son of Man,” meaning a human being, or “prophet” (as in Luke’s Gospel), or “rabbi.” Even if Jesus was hailed by the crowds as “Messiah” when he entered Jerusalem, it is not clear what was meant given the diverse meanings of the word in that time; it certainly was not necessarily linked with claims of divinity. And if Jesus proclaimed the imminent arrival of a divine kingdom that did not appear, what are Christians to make of this frustrated expectation? For example, how might it serve as a reminder of the humanity of Jesus whose passion for God’s kingdom exceeded the realities of his times (a common experience of many who struggle to realize visions of a “beloved community”)?

Other theological questions raised by this text have to do with the eventual emergence of what became Christianity, an independent religion often defined in opposition to Judaism. Fredriksen overturns the common notion that Judaism was the parent religion of Christianity. She demonstrates the inescapable Jewishness of the first followers by showing just how Jewish and apocalyptic they were. This has the effect of reminding us that these two religions grew up largely like siblings in the last centuries of the Roman empire.

*When Christians were Jews* is an accessible scholarly book about a complex history, told in a way that is engaging and thoughtfully provocative. It is suitable for undergraduate and seminary students, non-specialists, and those interested in Jewish-Christian relations. However, Fredriksen's unique and intriguing interpretations, her overall reframing of the narrative, her use of difficult sources, and the head-spinning plot twists and turns in her historical reconstruction make it valuable reading for scholars who are open to a challenge to traditional interpretations.