



The Human Christ: the Search for the Historical Jesus. Paula Fredriksen.
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The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus, by Charlotte Allen (Free Press, 383 pp., \$26)

Cultural images of Jesus of Nazareth rarely render the features of that early-first-century Jewish religious figure. The Ravenna mosaics of the late imperial Church present a Roman military officer, beardless and armored, holding a standard proclaiming: "I am the Truth, the Way, and the Life." Luther's Jesus (as Luther's Paul) detested Judaism and preached something awfully close to sixteenth-century Protestantism to the obviously uncomprehending ancient crowds. And the Jesus of the modern American academy often shares the anti-sexist, anti-hierarchical, anti-right-wing politics of his late-twentieth-century liberal portraitists.

What accounts for the variety of interpretations? Historical malfeasance? Perhaps in part. But surely a larger part of the explanation has to do with the unique importance of Jesus in Western Christian culture. Unlike virtually any other figure from the past--Socrates, say, or Francis of Assisi, or even Freud --Jesus bears the singular burden of having to make immediate sense to us. The sorts of differences in world view, instincts, and manners that add charm to exchanges between Lizzie and Mr. Darcy, or that madden us when we try to deal with our parents, can turn threatening when they reveal the yawning gap between us in our world, and Jesus in his. Anachronistic reconstructions of the figure of Jesus are thus, in a sense, a backhanded compliment, a disguised index of his continuing cultural and emotional importance to later interpreters.

If the down side of such interpretations is their intrinsic anachronism, their up side can be their moral clarity and didactic force. In such instances we see not the first-century figure, but the ethical and religious values of the writer--hence, for example, the humane ethics of Jefferson's deist Jesus. This use of the figure of Jesus serves to sanction the moral vision of his interpreter. And as with most historical problems, retrospect aids our vision: we see such improbable correspondences (as between the ethics of the deists and the ethics of Jesus) only when we have out grown the world view that once seemed so compelling, and thus so obviously universal.

Does this mean that it is in effect impossible to read--or write--a good historical study of Jesus (and, by extension, of any culturally important figure)? Does our submergence in our own historical moment make it impossible to judge our own interpretations critically? Of course not. We as readers--and my academic colleagues and I as writers--routinely choose between reconstructions, routinely judge between good history and bad. And one of our standards of judgment is to gauge how well Jesus or any similar figure has been situated in a plausible historical context. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls; the explosion of archaeological knowledge from the land of Israel since 1948, and especially since 1967 with the reunification of Jerusalem; the intensive work on late-Second Temple Judaism pouring out of departments of religion and of Jewish Studies--all these have provided the building blocks for reconstructing Jesus' native context. If the Jesus who emerges from some study is not an early-first-century Jew speaking to other first-century Jews, concerned about the problems that concerned them and

dying for first-century-Jewish reasons, then he is not the Jesus of history but a man without a country, a figure of the author's imagining. No grand interpretive consensus rules the field--witness the superabundance of new studies being published every year--but the principled commitment to the sympathetic reconstruction of the world of Jesus and his contemporaries now unites all serious efforts.

Charlotte Allen's new book acquaints the reader neither with current research nor with what was valuable and interesting in earlier efforts. Instead she offers a long review of what, to her mind, were interpretive failures. After a quick tour through first-century Galilee and Judea, she surveys epochal moments in the Western interpretation of the figure of Jesus from the second to the twentieth century. The strategy of presentation and the intellectual take-home message are identical in each of her ten subsequent chapters. First she interweaves a narrative of a given period's constructions of Jesus with a description of that period's key intellectual or political allegiances. Then she points out how the given image of Jesus merely reflects the salient points of what was then the current intellectual and cultural context. Finally, she concludes with sweeping generalizations about the motives and methods of the people she has studied. Thus, the eighteenth-century rationalists were "merely on an ideological crusade"; Schleiermacher, Kant, Rousseau, et al. "sought to make Jesus presentable to the modern age by clothing him in philosophical garments"; mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American interpreters used "the gospel of social meliorism and liberal democracy" to displace "the transcendent as the religion of Jesus"; and so on. And on. Somewhere after page 200, I numbed up: in terms of both style and argument, *The Historical Christ* leaves the reader in about as much suspense as Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

By turns cute and snide, Miss Allen's tone further trivializes her subject. Voltaire appears as "that lovable rascal!"; ancient crowds "hurl imprecations and heavy objects," while the theological terms in which they thought "sound archaic and even silly" today; medieval and patristic biblical exegetes "often produced ludicrous results"; Jefferson's effort to retrieve a Jesus meaningful to him makes for "rather dull reading" and a "rather dull ramble." Miss Allen "knows" things that she could not possibly know: the physical aspect of Athanasius, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria (he "had the swarthy looks and toughness of a street thug"); the sartorial tendencies of two early Christian prophetesses ("flashily dressed"); the spiritual posture of roughly two million people in the late first century ("there were no atheists, or even agnostics, among the Jews"); King Herod's own religious commitment (he "wore his Judaism lightly"). Whether she likes or respects any of these people is, of course, Miss Allen's business; but her incessant condescension adds tedium to her tale.

Elementary errors of fact or interpretation accumulated so rapidly in the first part of her book that, well before getting to the eighteenth century, Miss Allen had lost my confidence. I will give only a few examples here, but in my copy I have dog-eared every other one of the first ninety pages. On page one, she conflates Jewish "crucifixion" with Roman crucifixion. Only the latter is a mode of execution; the former ("hanging from a tree," as the texts usually render the phrase, e.g., Deut. 21:23) is the display of the corpse of a person killed in some other way. Miss Allen states that Tiberius Julius Alexander was "the only Roman governor of Judea who made an effort to understand Jewish religious beliefs and customs." He did not need to make an effort: he was a Jew himself, who converted to the Roman religion. She scolds the emperor Marcus Aurelius for an anti-Christian persecution in Lyons in the year 177, evidently unaware that all such actions before 250 were local initiatives, not imperial policy. She misattributes to the third-century theologian Origen a famous quotation from the late-first-century martyr Ignatius. Isaiah 7:14 explicitly refers to King Ahaz, not Hezekiah. Marcion did not "excise the entire Old Testament from the Christian Bible, and most of the New Testament as well." In the early second century, the only Bible Christians had was "the Old Testament," which was not so named because there was as yet no such thing as a "new" testament. Marcion conceived the idea of explicitly Christian scripture, and

so compiled the very first "New Testament": his enemies, in response, came up with an expanded version, but they retained Marcion's conception, while insisting that the earlier scriptures too were legitimately Christian, though "old." Constantine did not "meddle in church affairs." Like every emperor before him, he bore the responsibility for ultimate oversight of all legitimate cults in the Empire: hence the imperial office of pontifex maximus. In antiquity, the literal meaning of scripture was never paramount: allegory was thought to reveal its truer, deeper, more spiritual meaning. The Greek "Iudaioi" can mean either "Judeans" or "Jews," a fact of which Miss Allen seems unaware when she sniffs that the Jesus Seminar's translation of the Gospel of John "is not true to the text."

Charlotte Allen announces in the introduction to *The Human Christ* that she is no biblical scholar, and this is true. According to the jacket blurb, however, she is "an accomplished journalist." I hope that she speaks more reliably on other topics. Here she has misinterpreted earlier material, mismanaged historical information, and missed entirely what remains intellectually and morally compelling in current research. There is much more to this story. Stay tuned.

Prof. Fredriksen, an historian of ancient Christianity, is the author of *From Jesus to Christ* (Yale). Her latest study, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, will be published next year by Knopf.

Named Works: *The Human Christ* (Book) Book reviews

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