

B&R Reviews

Who Do You Say I Am?

From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God

The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology

By Maurice Casey
Westminster/John Knox,
197 pp., \$20.95

The Historical Jesus

The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant

By John Dominic Crossan
HarperSanFrancisco, 507 pp., \$30.00

A Marginal Jew

Rethinking the Historical Jesus

By John P. Meier
Doubleday, 484 pp., \$22.50

Paula Fredriksen

The apostle Paul did not know Jesus of Nazareth. Nor did he, think much of those colleagues who had—Peter, James, and John—“those reputed pillars,” as he archly refers to them in his letter to the Galatian churches. At the heart of Paul’s gospel flamed the Risen Christ—glorious, ascended to the Father whence he had originally and obediently come down (Philippians 2), poised to return to defeat evil and transform decaying Creation (1 Corinthians 15), redeeming all of humanity, Greek and Jew (Romans 9-11). Paul’s Christ is the pre-

Paula Fredriksen is the William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture in the Department of Religion, Boston University, and the author of From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus (Yale University Press).



existent Son of God and agent of Creation “through whom all things are.” What on earth—literally—did this Christ have to do with Jesus of Nazareth?

Not much. If all that survived from the first century were Paul’s letters, we would know precious little about Jesus: not where he was from or to whom he preached, not much of what he said, nothing of what he did. Paul’s proclamation really takes off from the eschatological miracle of the Resurrection, surging ahead to the soon-expected climax of history at Christ’s return. Paul did not look back.

But others did. Sayings from and about Jesus, traditions about his deeds and teach-

ing, biographical episodes and legends, grew. They were circulated and were collected, weathering a dual linguistic translation from Aramaic (the Jewish vernacular of Palestine) to Greek (the *lingua franca* of the Empire), from oral transmission to written texts. They also survived a dual social translation from a Jewish context to a Gentile one, from territorial Israel to the wider world of the Mediterranean Diaspora. By the time the anonymous evangelist we designate “Mark” gathered up some of these threads and wove a narrative of Jesus’ mission and death, much intervened between the lifetime of his subject and his

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account—some forty years. These were years marked by controversy and competition within the Christian movement, and by the steady degeneration of Roman-Jewish relations which ended, finally, in the bloody revolt of 66-73 C.E. and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

This, in brief, is the evidential quagmire into which all those who seek the Jesus of history must go. Paul, our earliest and only incontrovertibly Jewish source, tells us almost nothing, and our later Christian sources must be handled with care. Beyond Mark, we have several other gospels. Matthew and Luke each independently used Mark while incorporating a Greek source of Jesus' sayings (called "Q," after the German word "Quelle," meaning "source"). They also quarried the Jewish scriptures in Greek translation for biographical information about the historical Jesus—an exotic and unlikely procedure, perhaps, to moderns, but the origin of many of Christianity's most enduring traditions, for example, the Virgin birth and the Bethlehem nativity. In these, as in the Gospel of John, in other noncanonical gospels (those of Thomas, Peter, the Egyptians), in ancient Christian texts (the *Didache*, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch), in traditions recollected by the early Church fathers, and in a tiny number of Jewish and pagan sources (Josephus, Tacitus), lie nuggets of historical fact.

**The historical Jesus
was as much the
concern of the
apostles, disciples, and
evangelists then as he
is of academics now.**

How, then, can the historian find these facts, and thus assemble a picture of the historical Jesus? Through sifting sources through the fine mesh of historical probability and filtering out what would be implausible or anachronistic in Jesus' native early first-century context. The Jesus reconstructed from the remaining material, however, continues to vary from historian to historian—which is clearly evidenced by these three new volumes: Meier's *A Marginal Jew*; Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* (no false modesty here!); and Casey's *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*.

All three authors, acknowledging the frustrations inherent both in the evidence and in the project, turn to the social sciences in an effort to get a methodological grip on their subject. For Meier, the key concept is Jesus' "marginality." By examining the ways in which a poor and powerless Jesus was socially and politically marginal,

and made himself further marginal by his life-style and his teaching, Meier hopes to perceive new leads in the evidence which point back to authentic, reliable data. Four hundred and thirty-three pages later, he leaves the reader still waiting for the goods: *A Marginal Jew* is but a volume-long prolegomenon. The historical Jesus won't show up until volume 2.

Meanwhile, what do we have? Meier's painstaking shifting of evidence—absolutely any and all, and in some cases, none. The second half of his book treats Jesus' childhood, a period from which we have virtually no reliable data. The curious *tendresse* of Meier's discussion of the Virgin Birth leaves one wondering what else might motivate his line of questioning—few historians I know stay up late at night wondering about the sexual status of Jesus' mother. And even if, miraculously, it could be shown past doubting that she were a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth, what then? We would still have learned nothing useful about Jesus' ministry, the events that led to his execution, and the reasons for the movement that formed so quickly after his death.

But Meier steadfastly refuses to own any doctrinal or ecclesiastical baggage. In a chapter entitled "Why Bother?," Meier makes the astonishing assertion that the historical Jesus is irrelevant to the Christ of faith. Over the 200 preceding pages (and all those footnotes!), and over the 200-plus that follow, falls the shadow of the "merely empirical"—that is, quotidian reality. Writes Meier: "Faith and Christian theology . . . affirm ultimate realities beyond what is merely empirical . . . for example, the triune God and the risen Jesus. . . . What, then . . . is the usefulness of the historical Jesus to people of faith? My reply is—none." One gets the impression that Meier worked on the historical Jesus almost to be a good sport, to go along with modern culture.

But in dismissing the modern focus on the historical Jesus as a passing cultural moment essentially irrelevant to faith, Meier is untrue to his sources, to whom the "merely empirical" mattered tremendously. Even Paul—despite his kerygmatic, non-biographical gospel—insisted that Jesus' bodily Resurrection was an *empirical, historical fact*. That, said Paul, was the whole point (I Corinthians 15). So, too, the evangelists, whose increasingly elaborate post-Resurrection stories of empty tombs and close encounters over food emphasize *physical, empirically verifiable* Christophanies (Luke 24; John 20-21). I am not saying that these things really happened because the New

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