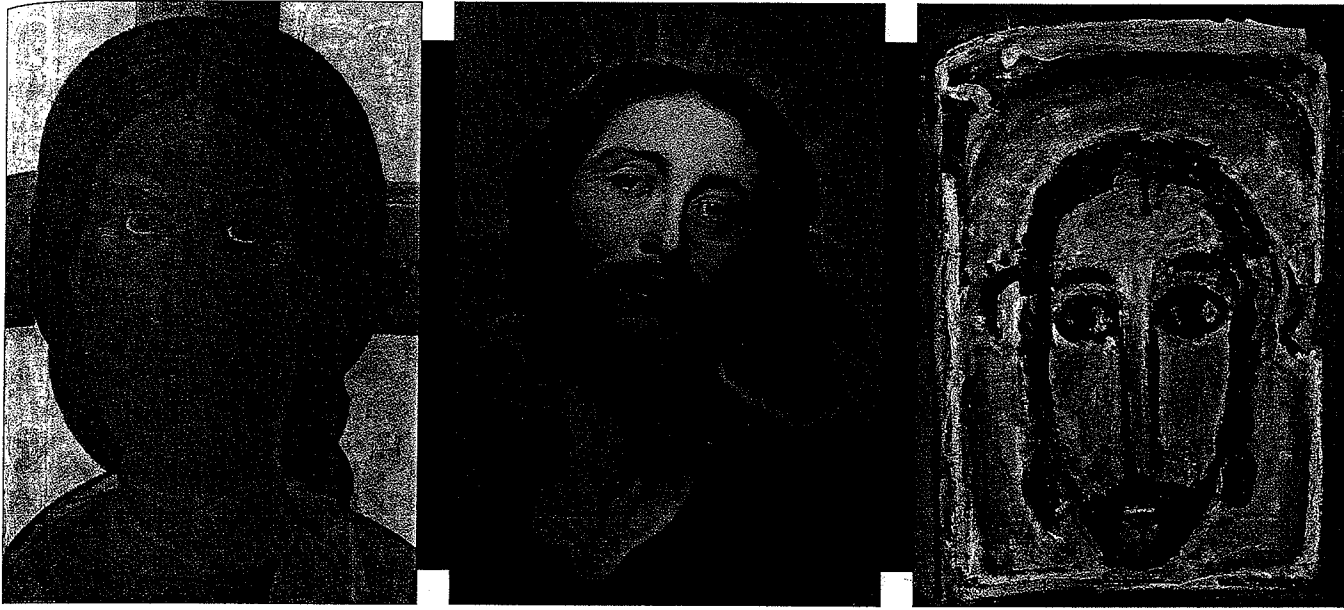


ESSAYS & REVIEWS



A late fourteenth-century Russian panel painting; Jesus Christ by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, c. 1630; and The Veil of Veronica by Georges Rouault, c. 1936.

My Quest for the Historical Jesus

BY PAULA FREDRIKSEN

I went to Jerusalem in the summer of 1994 for many reasons. I wanted to begin work on a new project — Augustine and Judaism — and Hebrew University's library was one of the best places to start my research. I wanted to live for a year in the roiling intensity of Israeli intellectual life. I wanted to plug a hole in my own text-based education with a summer of remedial archaeology, to dig around in dirt instead of catalogues, to touch antiquity with my hands as well as with my imagination. I wanted my children to pick up spoken Hebrew. The *last* thing I wanted to do was start another book on Jesus.

My earlier study, *From Jesus to Christ*, traced the development of the different theological images of Jesus preserved in the New Testament. How did the short-

spoken, powerful exorcist-healer of Mark's Gospel relate to the loquacious hero of John's? Why does Matthew's Jesus rant against the Pharisees, while Luke's Jesus treats some of them almost as friends? How did these various interpretations of the figure of Jesus, all written in the final third of the first century, relate to the triumphant cosmic agent so blazingly announced some fifteen to forty years earlier by Paul? And how well did any of these later Greek documents afford a glimpse of the Galilean Jew executed by Rome sometime around the year 30, whose mission and message stood at the source of the movement that transformed the West?

From Jesus to Christ is a 250-page tour through these questions. At the center of the book, like the slim neck of an hourglass, stands three pages on Jesus of Naz-

areth. All my sifting through the later Christian traditions had made him that much more elusive.

But it was the historical Jesus who mattered to the people who invited me to speak with them about my book — churches of all different denominations, equally various synagogue groups, communities engaged in interfaith dialogue, lay audiences

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simply intrigued by this period of history. My analysis of what had happened from Paul through the Gospels might be interesting, but the payoff they longed for, indeed demanded, was a better and clearer appreciation of Jesus of Nazareth, the human source of this new religious movement. But the problems with the evidence seemed to me overwhelming. By going to Israel with my new research project I was voting with my feet, heading out of the confusion of the first century into the relative clarity of the fourth. Or so I thought.

Something happened to me while in the Galilee. Retrospectively, of course, it now seems clear; at the time, I knew only that I had been deeply moved. I started my first summer in Israel as a member of an archaeological team excavating the city of Yodfat — Jotapatha, as the first-century Jewish historian Josephus names it in *The Jewish War*, his history of the Jews' war against Rome. When the rebellion broke out in Jerusalem in the year 67, Josephus was sent north to organize the defense of the country. Rome would march down from Syria. As long as the Galilee resisted, Jerusalem would remain secure.

Different Galilean cities responded differently. Some refused to support the rebellion and openly sided with Rome. Other cities and fortified villages resolved to resist. This stance was an all-or-nothing proposition. Defeat meant devastation — slavery, crucifixion, exile. Yodfat, a walled citadel, secure on its steep hill in the Galilean highlands, surrounded by deep ravines, belonged in this latter group, and it was there that Josephus made a last stand against the conquering general, Vespasian. His firsthand description of the doomed town and his gripping account of the siege make for some of the most compelling passages of his work.

The Last Days of Yodfat

More than nineteen centuries later, Yodfat was an archaeologist's dream. The town, like Pompeii, did not die: it had been killed. As the lava from Mount Vesuvius had killed Pompeii, burying the city for centuries, so the waves of Roman soldiers killed Yodfat, pouring over its walls on the forty-eighth day of the siege while the defenders slept. Enraged by their ear-

lier losses, "showing neither mercy nor pity for anyone" (Josephus), the army massacred the inhabitants. Vespasian ordered the town's demolition. Nothing was ever again built on the site. It too slept for centuries, until modern archaeologists, aided by Josephus's topographical description, identified it once again.

The archaeological team would wake up at 4:15 a.m. and be on buses to the site by 4:45. From where the bus parked we still had another ten-minute walk up the earthworks ramp, weaving through the Roman ballista stones still littering the way. We'd fan out to different locations: some people clearing the olive presses, others working on the residential interior, still others (including my group) digging closer to the encircling wall. One morning was incredibly beautiful. The edge of sunrise blushed the sky pink from one rim of the bowl of ridge surrounding Yodfat; at the other, the full moon sank into indigo. The stillness of the murdered town was absolute.

A Clay Madeleine?

We found mostly pottery — handles, necks, shards, bits. Ruined storage vessels, old cookware. The bric-a-brac of daily life. One day the dirt yielded a beautiful silver coin with Nero's profile on one side. And on another day a friend stopped his digging, stood to survey our spot, and then remarked quietly to me, "Today was the day the town fell."

That was a transformative moment for me. The embedded pottery fragment under my whisk broom changed utterly from a mute artifact to a piece of someone's life. Someone's hand had held these vessels, a hand that had lugged water to the house, cooked dinner, settled a child down for the night. These bits and pieces made a bridge connecting me across the centuries to another person, someone who had risked everything he knew and loved to defy Rome. In vain. Book Three of *The Jewish War* tells the story of Yodfat's death. It was up to us to speak its life. What had motivated these people and so steeled their determination? How could they possibly have hoped to go up against the Imperial Army and survive? Who were these Galileans?

All the rest of my year in Israel, busy with one thing or another, I would be

suddenly importuned by the first-century past. Not just the epic past of sad heroic narratives — the rebellion against Rome from 67 to 74, the destruction of the Temple in 70, and in a different way, the Gospel stories — but the past of the quotidian, the past of ancient, anonymous persons. Standing in the cistern at Masada or near an excavated immersion pool near the Temple mount, walking in the ancient market area, the *cardo*, in Sepphoris or Jerusalem, noticing how beautiful the city looked when gazing down from Mount Scopus, realizing how high it was as our rented car toiled up the Jericho Road — everywhere I was, these ancient people were too. It was as if by being there I was closing some sort of circuit; I could feel the current coursing through my imagination, connecting me with them.

Shavuot — Hebrew for "Weeks," "Pentecost" in Greek — is the Jewish pilgrimage holiday that falls fifty days after Passover, sometime in late May or early June. In rabbinical tradition, it commemorates the giving of the Torah on Sinai, and people mark the holiday by staying up all night to study Torah until dawn. My neighborhood in Jerusalem was gripped by a generalized though concentrated excitement that reminded me of the mood around Super Bowl Sunday or the last game of the World Series. Every other household was hosting a study session. Even my children (then aged twelve, ten, and eight) started off at various houses sponsoring child-friendly classes. "Menachem's doing his special on the Ten Commandments around midnight." "David said that this year they're looking at commentaries on the Book of Ruth. He said come by at two." The night passed in a blur of seminar hopping. About an hour before dawn we stopped, grabbed jackets, and began to walk over to the Kotel, the Western Wall — all that remains standing of Herod's massive Temple.

E Pluribus Unum

Our approach lay across the Hinnom Valley, by the neighborhood of Yemin Moshe. I could see families from all over climbing up the footpaths leading into the Old City. By the time we got to the plaza in front of the Kotel, the place was packed. Packed with everybody — Chasidim in

coded clothing (light coats and fur hats meant their group had originated from one town in Poland; black coats and fur hats, another; with breeches rather than trousers, a third); American kids on junior year abroad programs; Israeli soldiers home on holiday leave, many no older than the students; Ethiopians; Russians. Women next to me murmured to one another in French. The low hum of morning prayers began to fill the air above our heads. We faced east, the deep blue night behind us, the lemon-yellow of predawn ahead. Sunlight struck and enflamed the gold dome of the Temple mount mosque — incongruously, unquestionably beautiful. The prayers grew louder, more excited; some groups started singing. I was struck by the contained chaos of it all.

And that, oddly, was when I began to feel most confident that I could indeed write about the historical Jesus. He did not live and work in a religious and social vacuum. He lived within a tradition thick with ancient allegiances — allegiances to the Torah, to the Temple, to the idea of Israel as a community and as a place, the power of which I could still tangibly appreciate more than nineteen centuries later. This tradition fundamentally shaped the context and the content of his mission, which had successfully attracted enough followers to have had a disruptive effect at another pilgrimage feast, Passover, in or around the year 30. Whatever Jesus had said or done to gain these followers, then, had to have appealed to, and cohered with, their common religious allegiances. How, then, would I steer my way through the oceans of later writings, from the New Testament documents to the proliferating modern paperbacks, to find the Jesus of history? My ancient people would be my polestar: I would navigate by them.

A Rorschach Jesus

Academic studies of the historical Jesus produced over the past two centuries notoriously, and too often, present their author's religious identity and concerns as if those concerns were Jesus' own. The Jesus of nineteenth-century Germany, famously, was himself a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant. The Jesus of the 1960s was a freedom-fighter. And the Jesus of current American research too often ends

up battling not ancient demons, but our own — sexism, nationalism, social hierarchy. What such studies actually present are costume dramas. They drape thinly disguised versions of ourselves in antique garb, constructing characters who comfortably inhabit the modern stage, not the ancient past. And Jesus' own native religious context too often is then sacrificed on the altar of interpretive clarity, serving primarily as his contrasting moral backdrop. Thus, if Jesus strove for egalitarian-

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ism, then his countrymen must have loved hierarchy. He approached the ill; thus, other Jews must have shunned them. He thought ethics were important, especially love of neighbor, but they were hung up on empty ritual — purity rules, laws of sacrifice, and so on.

Mysterious Contradiction

Here the two best attested, most secure *facts* of early Christian tradition gave me my second point of reference. We know beyond doubt — if we know anything about the historical Jesus at all — that he died by crucifixion. Paul, the Gospels, Josephus, Tacitus — all report the same mode of death. This fact carries with it the implication of several others. If Jesus died on a cross, he died by Rome's hand. And if he died on a cross, then Rome held him to be in some way guilty of sedition. Crucifixion was the manner of death the Empire reserved particularly for punishing rebels.

But against this fact of Jesus' crucifixion stood another, equally incontestable fact: although Jesus was executed as a rebel, none of his followers was. We know from Paul's letters that they survived: he lists them as witnesses to the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-5), and he describes his later dealings with some (Galatians 1-2). But the Empire was famously intolerant of sedition. Josephus provides extensive accounts of other messianic, prophetic figures from before and after Jesus' period: their followers were all cut down by

Rome. If Pilate had seriously thought that Jesus were leading a seditious movement, more than Jesus would have died.

Since only Jesus died, then, Pilate knew he really was not a rebel. But in that case, *why death by crucifixion at all?* Why not a quicker, efficient, and much more private murder (especially if, as the Passion narratives depict, Pilate was essentially just doing the chief priests a favor)? That would have made more sense, especially in light of the Gospels' insistence that the reason the

chief priests had to arrange for Jesus to be ambushed in the first place was precisely his popularity with Jerusalem's holiday crowd. "And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people'" (Mark 14:1-2). And what were the priests doing in there, anyway?

Two definite, secure facts. Two anomalous facts. If I could not account for these, I could not tell Jesus' story. At this point, precisely, my anonymous ancient people, Jesus' contemporaries, guided my way. And what pointed me toward them was the crucifixion itself. As a mode of execution, crucifixion was slow. It was painful. It was ugly. But above all, it was public. Crucifixion was a message to those watching: if you do as this one did, you will end as he has. Crucifixion was meant to intimidate. To work, it required an audience.

Jesus died less because of how and what he thought of himself — why should the prefect care about that? — than because of what Pilate suspected the crowds watching Jesus thought of him. It followed that whatever Jesus was saying during his mission, it had to make sense first of all to his own first-century Jewish contemporaries — sympathizers, admirers, opponents, enemies. Away went the Protestant Jesus who preached the superiority of grace to works. Away went the social critique informed by Marxian class analysis. Away went the concept of sexism that would have baffled my Neapolitan grand-

father, let alone a first-century Mediterranean male (or female). Away went the Jesus preaching against the laws and practices of purity and sacrifices that his people had preserved in Torah and guarded as divine revelation for centuries by his time. And away, finally, went a Jesus who thought up his own, radically innovative, utterly unprecedented definitions of *messiah* and *Kingdom of God*. His message had to be well enough understood to attract a Jewish following great enough to get Jesus in trouble with Pilate. Were it

so idiosyncratic, who but himself and perhaps a few, specially instructed others would have understood? And if his message were so circumscribed, why would Pilate, or the priests, have cared?

I finished my project this past winter: *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* will be published in the fall. I kept my argument focused on the paired, anomalous historical facts; I steered my course with an eye always to the great anonymous cloud of witnesses, now lost to us, whose response to him was the reason why we know about

Jesus in the first place. When I think of what Jerusalem and the Temple area must have been like during the holidays, when he taught there, my mind goes back to that dawn on Shavuot. And when I think about the sort of hope and conviction mobilized in biblical prophetic tradition by *messiah* and *Kingdom of God*, I think too of the people of Yodefah, of their courage and confidence in defiance of Rome. I like to think that they would recognize as a fellow first-century Galilean Jew the Jesus I sought to convey.

From Idea to Finished Book — A Journey into Print

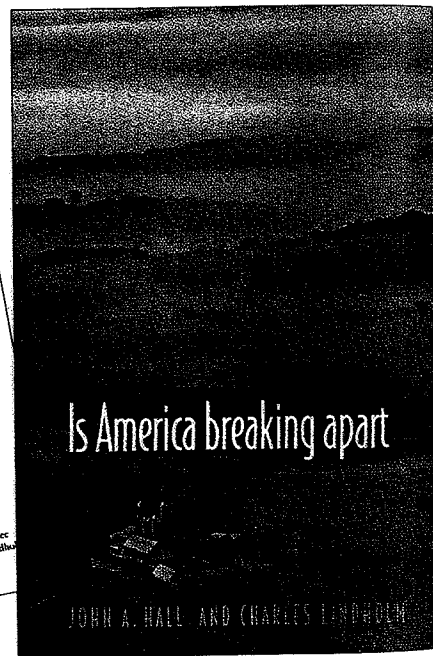
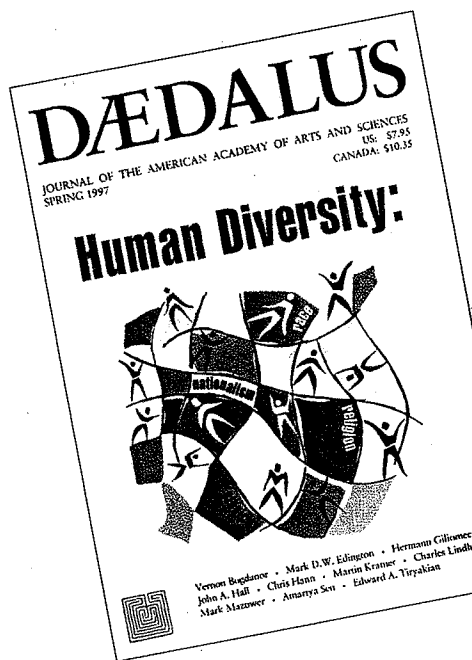
BY CHARLES T. LINDHOLM

Many magazine articles are excerpted (often without credit) from forthcoming books. The reverse is frequently the case when an article intrigues an editor, who then asks the author to expand it to book length. Here's how it worked in one case.

Shortly after publication of my book *The Islamic Middle East: An Historical Anthropology*, I wrote a piece comparing and contrasting the egalitarian individualism of the Pukhtun of Northern Pakistan with that of Americans. Unfortunately, anthropological journals were unimpressed by my efforts, and for some time this paper languished in my computer, waiting for a sympathetic publisher.

Meanwhile, my friend John Hall, a professor of sociology at McGill University, had been asked to contribute an article about America to a special issue of *Daedalus*. Hall knows a lot about nationalism and civil society, but felt he needed some help on the cultural material and asked me if I wanted to collaborate. I agreed, pleased that my recent ideas about America might find a home, albeit divorced

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from the unwieldy comparison with the Pukhtun.

The specific impetus of our *Daedalus* article was the work of the well-known Harvard political theorist Robert Putnam, who in 1995 had published a widely discussed paper entitled "Bowling Alone," in which he argued that Americans no longer cooperate in voluntary associations — they don't even join bowling leagues. This, Putnam said, did not bode well for the United States, which he pictured as se-

riously under threat from a lack of civic trust. The economy and even political stability of America were, Putnam implied, in imminent danger of collapse.

Both Hall and I have lived in societies that were on the verge of breakdown. The United States was patently not such a society, and we thought Putnam's argument was alarmist and inaccurate. Our *Daedalus* article was intended to show that despite deep internal tensions, America actually had a remarkably coherent and stable so-