

Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

reviewed by [William Brosend](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

This is not another Jesus book!" says the jacket blurb on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's new work. But though this is not a "historical Jesus" book, it is very much about Jesus, and is informed throughout by the author's reconstruction of Jesus as the founder of an "egalitarian," "Jewish" "emancipatory basileia-of-God movement."

The titles of the book's five chapters suggest the author's approach: "Who Do They Say I Am?: The Quest for the Historical Jesus"; "Jesus Matters: Historical and Theological Approaches"; "In Search of the 'Real' Jesus: The Social-Scientific Quest"; "Of Specks, Beams, and Methods: Anti-Judaism and Antifeminism"; "To Realize the Vision: Feminist Jesus Discourses." Each chapter was originally prepared for another occasion, and most have been or soon will be published elsewhere. There are extensive footnotes and a useful subject index, but no bibliography.

This is a sharply, almost harshly, critical work. Whether done by the Jesus Seminar or Luke Timothy Johnson, historical reconstructionists or social-scientific questers, males or females, virtually all of the well-known Jesus research of the past 20 years is broadly considered and generally found wanting. Schüssler Fiorenza criticizes it not for lack of scholarly rigor, but for the absence of ideological reflection and for "a historical positivism which corresponds to a political conservatism" that fails to detect its own racism, anti-Judaism and antifeminism, and from which "scholars inescapably fashion the Historical Jesus in their own image and likeness."

Schüssler Fiorenza summarizes her goal in the introduction, perhaps the best chapter in the book (because it was written for the occasion?): "I see the problem as one of epistemology . . . not so much with respect to whether and how one can establish scientific proof that Jesus said this or did that, but rather with respect to how scientific Historical-Jesus discourses authorize their reconstructions as 'true,'

'scientific,' and 'reliable.' . . . Such a critical discussion seeks to explore the nexus between reconstructions of Jesus and those theoretical, historical, cultural, and political conceptual frameworks that shape male-stream biblical as well as feminist academic Historical-Jesus discourses. . . . I seek to inquire into the politics of Historical-Jesus interpretation as a rhetorical process of meaning-making."

Schüssler Fiorenza has made these arguments before, and at times one is acutely aware of her frustration at having to again make a case she believes the biblical studies guild should have long since accepted.