

Jesus scenarios

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity,
by Paula Fredriksen

Many Christians have assumed that Jesus lived and died for values dear to contemporary social reformers, liberation theologians and feminists. Jesus is commonly held to have challenged social inequalities, reached out to the poor and the marginalized, and expressed a special concern for the dignity of women. In a world of oppression and hierarchy, Jesus represented the values of justice and egalitarianism. According to this account, Jesus's teaching was so dangerous to the status quo that the authorities decided he had to die.

Paula Fredriksen launches a strong critique of this approach, accusing it of purchasing relevance at the price of anachronism. She insists on the moral discipline of allowing the past to be the past, in all its stark difference and strangeness, especially in regard to the ancient religious practices of animal sacrifice and purity regulations. Jesus is to be understood in his context, not ours.

Nonetheless, immediately after issuing this stern warning, Fredriksen engages in an explicit and vivid example of historical fiction. She pours imagined thoughts and feelings into the persona of a young boy, Yehoshua, son of Yosef, as he accompanies his father to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover. She gives a lengthy description of the boy's relationship to his family and his inner responses to the bloody sacrificial rites. Then an Alexandrian boy, the son of a merchant, addresses Yehoshua by his Greek name, Jesus of Nazareth. The implication seems to be that the work of other researchers, especially liberation theologians and feminists, involves anachronism, but her own projection of thoughts and feelings into the young Jesus does not.

At the center of Fredriksen's quest is the puzzling question, "Why did the Romans crucify Jesus alone?" If he was simply a religious figure involved in inner-Jewish wrangling, why would Pilate crucify him at all? If he was a political threat to the Roman Empire, why not kill his followers as well, and why allow them to preach in Jerusalem and throughout the Mediterranean immediately after his execution? Much

of Fredriksen's investigation is geared to setting Jesus into his context and to understanding the reason for his solitary crucifixion. She offers helpful discussions of purity laws in the ancient world, as well as a useful review of the history of Roman-Jewish relations.

Fredriksen presents Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher who proclaimed the kingdom of God but did not claim to be the Messiah. She argues that Jesus did not challenge the purity regulations of the Judaism of his day, nor did he oppose the operation of the Temple. Because Jesus believed that the kingdom would come through God's action, he did not pose any threat to the Temple leadership or to Roman rule.

According to her reconstruction of Jesus's crucifixion, Caiaphas and Pilate knew that Jesus was not a threat because they had heard him preach in Jerusalem many times before. Fredriksen argues that Jesus did not perform any disruptive action that would have challenged the Temple system or aroused the concern of the Temple leadership. Even if he had, the scale of the Temple was so large that Jesus would hardly have been noticed by the crowds of pilgrims. The best vantage point would have been that of the Roman soldiers. However, something unusual must have happened in one particular Passover season to bring about Jesus's death. In the absence of information, Fredriksen speculates that Jesus must have been killed because other pilgrim Jews in Jerusalem, not his own disciples from Galilee, proclaimed him as the Messiah when he entered the city.

Why did this happen? In the absence of data, Fredriksen provides more speculation. Jesus must have told the crowds that the kingdom of God was coming at a particular time, even that very year: this Passover would be the last before the arrival of the kingdom. This claim caused the crowds in Jerusalem to understand him to be the Messiah. In effect, Jesus "lost control of his audience." Excitement mounted during the week. Because the crowds acclaimed Jesus as Messiah and King of the Jews, Caiaphas was worried and most likely warned Pilate. Pilate had to act. Jesus was crucified as an act of crowd control. His followers were spared because they were not a danger.

Fredriksen's historical reconstruction is a possible but hardly a compelling interpretation. For all her strictures against importing modern ideas into ancient scenarios, her own tale depends upon her sense of what would have been plausible motives for the principal actors of the time. By excluding other options, Fredriksen presents her narrative as the only scenario that makes sense. But questions remain.

Is it really so clear that Caiaphas and Pilate knew Jesus himself was harmless? Would it really have been possible to proclaim the reign of God in first-century Palestine without apparent political overtones? Was there really such a sharp opposition between the action of God and human participation in the coming kingdom? For better or worse, the proper answer to most historical questions about the details of the ministry and the final week of Jesus remains: we don't know.

Fredriksen sounds a necessary warning against anachronism, but she does not deal fully and adequately enough with the relevant texts to dispose of the arguments of John Dominic Crossan and similar-minded scholars. The pursuit of the historical Jesus remains open.