

ARTICLE REVIEW

by

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John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (San Francisco: Harper, 1991)

What makes this attempt to describe Jesus unlike other reconstructions of the so-called historical Jesus is its methodology. Crossan acknowledges that because there have been so many different interpretations of Jesus claiming to be historically accurate, "it is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography" (xxviii) Crossan uses a formal "scientific historical" method that he believes to be rigorous enough to justify the title of his book. He challenges his scholarly colleagues to accept the formal method or to replace it with a better one. It will be interesting to see if his methods gain a consensus of approval among both biblical and secular scholars. If so, then it may indeed be the case that Crossan has given us a picture of Jesus which is closer to the actual Jesus than anything scholars have produced before.

Crossan's method involves utilizing the results of three areas of modern scholarship in which there are substantial amounts of academic consensus: (1) cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology, (2) Hellenistic or Greco-Roman history, and (3) the literature from the period in which Jesus lived which refers to him, otherwise referred to as the Jesus tradition.

Cross-cultural anthropology, for example, has analyzed the systems of honour and shame in various societies and in Mediterranean societies in particular where "these values are deeply tied up with sexuality and power, with masculine and gender relations." How did Jesus relate to the patriarchal character of his society? The answer surely depends on a clear understanding of that society and its patriarchal systems.

Again, cultural anthropology sheds light on social strata in agrarian societies, clearly analyzing class structures. What class did Jesus come from and what did he have to say or do about the other classes in his society?

Anthropologists also have categories to describe the diverse ways in which people respond to the evil or suffering in their societies. Which way did Jesus represent? Was he a revolutionary, a reformer, a utopian or what?

The history of the Greco-Roman world also sheds important light on the situation in which Jesus lived. For example, Nazareth was only three or four miles from the city

of Sepphoris about which a great deal is known. Major trade routes intersected in Sepphoris. The area was "one of the most densely populated regions of the entire Roman Empire" with the result that "life in lower Galilee in the first century was as urbanized and urbane as anywhere else in the empire" (18) Jesus may have been a peasant but he was almost certainly fully exposed to the culture of the Roman Empire.

The history of Palestine also renders extremely illuminating information about what was going on around the time of Jesus. The succession of tyrants, philosophers, visionaries, prophets, protestors, magicians, bandits, messiahs, rebels and revolutionaries is carefully studied as background for discerning where Jesus fit into the picture.

Explicit knowledge about Jesus, of course, must come from the writings of his times which refer to him. Here Crossan relies on the fact that "over the last two hundred years...comparative work on the Gospels has slowly but surely established certain results and conclusions" (p.xxx). Among these conclusions are that (1) Gospels are found outside the New Testament, (2) the Gospels in the New Testament were selected for reasons not only of content but of form, (3) materials about Jesus were both retained, developed and created in the canonical Gospels as well as in the extracanonical Gospels, (4) differences among the materials about Jesus were due to deliberate theological interpretations of Jesus, (5) and "the transmitters of Jesus tradition had a creative freedom we would never have dared

postulate were it not forced upon us by the evidence" (p.xxx). As a result of these accepted conclusions in modern biblical scholarship it is necessary to seek the historical Jesus not only in the New Testament but by careful assessment of all the writings of the times that refer to him. Crossan's sources, therefore, include the Gospel of Thomas, Egerton Gospel, Gospel of the Hebrews, Sayings Gospel Q, Cross Gospel, Gospel of the Egyptians, Secret Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Peter and several other extracanonical writings as well as the canonical writings.

Crossan, then, first assembles an inventory of all the different stories or sayings of Jesus coming from first and second century writings. The next step is to determine the chronological sequence in which the various gospels and writings were written. Here, of course, Crossan has to enter into discussions with many other scholars who are engaged in the questions about chronology. There appears to be quite a large measure of consensus on these questions.

The third step in the method of dealing with the Jesus tradition is to determine "attestation," that is, whether a particular story or complex of sayings is reported by more than one writer independently of others or whether it is dependent on another writer as, for example, some of Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark. The total inventory has 522 "complexes" or different stories and sayings. Of these 180 have double, triple or more than triple attestation. 342 complexes have only a single author as source. Crossan's

method is to deal only with those complexes which have more than one attestation. He does not deny that the others are historical but the fact is there is no way of proving or disproving it. One can have opinions about them, and Crossan ventures his own opinion about each complex in an interesting Appendix, but his strict historical method is based on the assumption that the more frequently different writers attest to a story or saying independently of other writers the more that story or saying is likely to be historically accurate.

The textual complexes accepted for consideration still require very careful comparison and critical evaluation to determine the editorial contributions of the writers. This necessitates many judgment calls by Crossan, or what he terms "material involvement" within the formal methodology. His judgments are made in conversation with other scholars who have addressed the same verses and same questions. There is some room for different judgments, of course, but the historical probabilities emerge quite clearly within a relatively narrow range of possibilities which the formal method has derived.

What picture of Jesus does this method produce? The first major question is whether Jesus was apocalyptic in his message and actions. Crossan's conclusion is that unlike John the Baptist "Jesus was not an apocalyptic ascetic" (p.260) and "He never spoke of himself or anyone else as the apocalyptic Son of Man" (p.259).

Jesus was not other-worldly but extremely concerned about the Reign of God in this world. This Reign "looks to the present rather than the future and imagines how one could live here and now within an already available divine dominion. One enters that Kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice or freedom....This is therefore an ethical Kingdom....Its ethics could...challenge contemporary morality to its depths" (p.292).

The Kingdom of God as Jesus preached and lived it had some extraordinary features. First it was egalitarian. Crossan examines the stories and sayings about eating in light of anthropological understanding of eating customs. Jesus' parables and practices of eating reveal an "egalitarian commensality" which "negates distinctions and hierarchies between female and male, poor and rich, Gentile and Jew. It does so, indeed, at a level that would offend the ritual laws of any civilized society" (p.263) Jesus' egalitarian openness was "a strategy for building or rebuilding peasant community on radically different principles from those of honor and shame, patronage and clientage." (p.344)

The Kingdom, as preached by this peasant-class Jesus, is a kingdom of children, i.e. of "nobodies", of the destitute and the "Unclean, Degraded and Expendable" who in the eyes of the respectable upper classes are like weeds (Mustard and Darnel). Jesus' egalitarian vision of the Kingdom goes so far as to "tear the hierarchical or

patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination" (p.300). He keeps moving from place to place in his ministry to avoid becoming a hierarchical figure himself, and he sends his followers out "two by two" (probably a man and a woman, not necessarily married to each other) to move from place to place as they pass on the gospel of the Kingdom to others.

Crossan sees Jesus' healing work as his second major feature in addition to his eating style. In anthropological terms miracle working is essentially indistinguishable from magic, so Jesus can be described as a magician. This characterization may offend people who think that miracles are what "good" people do whereas magic is what bad people or charlatans do. The distinction is biased, of course. Anthropologically speaking, Jesus was a magician whose exorcisms and healings were a sign of the Reign of God and, like Jesus' radical eating style, were a revolutionary challenge to the established society. He invited his followers to heal others, too, who in turn were to heal still others. Magic and meal, miracle and table are the essence of what Jesus did and taught others to do in healing the physical and social illness of his society.

Crossan refers to Jesus' egalitarian Kingdom as "unbrokered," which is to say radically democratized. The Reign of God is unmediated, available to all who ask for it. They do not have to go through anyone else to get it. It is "within them." Jesus' message and behaviour make him like

the Cynics of the Greco-Roman world. As a peasant Jewish "Cynic" Jesus was like a hippie "in a world of Augustan yuppies" (p.421)

In an Epilogue Crossan makes some comments about what happened to Christianity after Jesus. It certainly changes in many basic respects, most notably in the loss of Jesus' egalitarianism. The disciples soon reinstated hierarchy among Christians and elevated Jesus to an hierarchical status. Women were perhaps the biggest losers in this development as they were pushed aside from the full participation they had in Jesus' radically egalitarian movement. Crossan concludes plaintively that "Maybe, Christianity is an inevitable and absolutely necessary 'betrayal' of Jesus, else it might all have died among the hills of Lower Galilee. But did that 'betrayal' have to happen so swiftly, succeed so fully, and be enjoyed so thoroughly?" (p.424)

It may be that Jesus' egalitarian vision of the Reign of God has not been totally betrayed or lost. It seems to hold promise yet for the world.

In any case, it is certain that recovery of Jesus' actual teaching and actions must happen through such careful historical methods as Crossan and many other biblical scholars are now using. These methods are shedding new light on every aspect of the Jesus tradition. Space here does not permit telling of what Crossan and his colleagues have to say about, the Lord's Prayer, the Passion and

Resurrection narratives or many, many other complexes in the total inventory of the Jesus tradition. Suffice it to say that readers will be richly rewarded if they work their way through Crossan's big book. It is a gold mine of contemporary biblical scholarship for preachers and others concerned with doing exegesis of particular passages of the Gospels. It is a renewing challenge for theologians and others who believe that Christological formulations should not consist of speculation but be grounded in careful biblical study of Jesus.

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