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Jesus: a revolutionary biography

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Judaism that can account for the widespread confession of Jesus as Christ. There is something historically contingent about the confession—something that seems to call attention to those events during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate that culminated in the execution of Jesus as the ‘king of the Jews’.”

In D. H. Juel’s article “The Origin of Mark’s Christology”, the title “Christ” is explored exegetically to determine the views of the political and religious leaders compared with those of the narrator and his readers. The term “Christ” appears infrequently (most notably Mark 1:1, 8:29, 14:61, 15:32) but climaxes in the narrative. Although there is some ambiguity about Jesus’ attitude toward the title in 8:30, he does accept it in 14:61. Mark does nothing to play down the difference between ideas of the royal messiah in Judaism and Jesus’ own behaviour. Rather he plays on it in the scene of the mockery of Jesus on the cross (15:31–32). Jesus’ ministry does not fit established patterns or expectations. “God’s truth is disclosed only by way of confrontation with established tradition and human institutions. There is a tension between ‘God’s ways’ and ‘human ways’” (Mark 8:33).

Theological endeavour must now take into consideration the work of this symposium. It is certain to lead to a more balanced historical picture and ultimately to better theology.

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The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant

John Dominic Crossan

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991

xxxiv + 507 pp. \$12.00 in 1993

Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography

John Dominic Crossan

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994

xiv + 209 pp. \$16.00

Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan

Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig, Editors

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994

xi + 180 pp.

He comes as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee. He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants living long enough at

subsistence level to know exactly where the line is drawn between poverty and destitution. He looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle. He speaks about the rule of God and they listen as much from curiosity as anything else. They know all about rule and power, about kingdom and empire, but they know it in terms of tax and debt, malnutrition and sickness, agrarian oppression and demonic possession. What, they really want to know, can this Kingdom of God do for a lame child, a blind parent, a demented soul screaming its tortured isolation....

Those words, from the concluding pages of John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, go some way in suggesting the monumental undertaking this New Testament scholar set his mind to, and the eminently readable, memorable, style with which he has accomplished it. Crossan asks that his work be considered a serious contribution to the "historical Jesus" quest of Renan, Schweitzer and many others, This reader, for one, is impressed!

A prominent member of The Jesus Seminar, Crossan for two decades has written numerous books and articles on various aspects of his research on the historical Jesus. In *The Historical Jesus* he endeavors to outline what he believes can be known of Jesus' actual life from the earliest independent sources. In *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (the more easily read of the two books, though both are models of accessibility) he popularizes and shortens his presentation substantially.

Just who was "the historical Jesus", as Crossan pictures him after his amazingly painstaking research? Jesus was, he claims, a "Mediterranean, Jewish, peasant, cynic". Having at first accepted John the Baptist's message of a God who was about to conduct an eschatological cleansing of Israel and her sin, Jesus after John's death modified his gospel to proclaim a "brokerless kingdom" in which God was immediately available to all and sundry, notably the destitute, the nobodies who, like children, might be open to receiving it. Further, Jesus clearly had a "program" for sharing this message. He spoke of it, especially in pointed stories; he demonstrated the kingdom's power in healing, especially exorcisms; those who asked how to repay him for his cures, he urged to take the Kingdom to others as healed healers, just as able to share it as he; he apparently sent such persons out in male-female pairs dressed as beggars, but not begging. "Radical itinerancy" Crossan calls it. They were to "bring a miracle and request a table". Jesus' openly eating with the riffraff was as clear a statement against the rigid social stratification of the Mediterranean world as could be imagined. That he ate with tax collectors, sinners and whores—and instructed his followers to do the same, did not go unnoticed.

Jesus' revolution was social, not political, but was all the more dangerous for that. The distinctions endemic to society then, as now—Gentile-Jew, female-male, slave-free, rich-poor—were not simply attacked in theory, but ignored in practice. And so the 'end' came when Jesus made his

(probably only) journey to Jerusalem: confronted with the temple's riches, Jesus "symbolically destroyed its brokerage function in the name of the unbrokered kingdom of God". Happening during the volatile Passover festival, the crucifixion probably came quickly and brutally.

But the 'end' was not the end. Crossan detects signs that at least two identifiable groups among Jesus' followers found his ministry still had power in their lives. One group was peasant 'healed healers' who found Jesus' program still having profound results. The other group was literate scribes who found themselves searching the Jewish scriptures for explanations of Jesus' death. Crossan believes they found these explanations in spades and eventually the "historical passion" (what actually happened) gave way to the "prophetic passion"—scriptural prophecies of the meaning of it all; finally, simpler "narrative passions"—what we have in the canonical Gospels—retold the prophecy as though it were "history". Luke's story of the Emmaus disciples hints at this process, Crossan believes. "How many years was Easter Sunday?" is one of his telling chapter titles. Crossan understands resurrection theology to be St. Paul's contribution, by the way.

Crossan's books are full of surprises which stop just short of being faith-testing, partly because of Crossan's gentle literary style. His Jesus was illiterate. The Last Supper was a creation of the early church, an amazingly powerful yet simple way to recall forever the open sharing at Jesus' memorable meals. The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and the nature miracles are principally about authority-struggles in the early church. And many more!

This reader has not been as challenged by anything else he has read in many years. We preachers, poor proclaimers of Jesus' Kingdom of God that we are, owe it to ourselves and our congregations to give John Dominic Crossan a fair hearing.

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Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography

John Dominic Crossan

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994

xiv + 209 pp. \$16.00 paper

When asked at a public lecture whether there was a role for the scholar simply popularizing the more technical works of others, James M. Robinson observed that the Jesus-books from the last two generations that have lasted have been those of Dibelius, Bultmann, Bornkamm, Conzelmann—scholars who were also expert in technical disciplines. No generalization