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# Jesus: a revolutionary biography

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(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

could apply better to John Dominic Crossan, who has spent a career on technical studies on the parables, aphorisms, miracle stories, the editing of Mark, hermeneutics and poetics. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* and its longer sister *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) are the products of careful, disciplined and mature scholarship, breathtaking in its erudition.

Crossan disciplines himself with three constraints: Mediterranean anthropology, the history of the early first century, and literary criticism. To be conscious of the dynamics typical of agrarian societies is to acknowledge the unrepentantly stratified, agonistic, honour-oriented, non-individualistic character of Jesus' society and to guard against unconsciously creating a post-Industrial revolution, middle class Jesus. Attention to Graeco-Roman history allows Crossan to situate Jesus within the richly layered realities of Imperial propaganda, local military occupation, Herodian client kingship, scribal and sacerdotal retainers, overtaxed peasants, apocalyptic prophets, messianic pretenders and much more. Finally, Crossan disciplines himself with literary criticism—the existence of layers of literary evidence from Q (and within Q) and Mark, to the redaction of Matthew and Luke—in a way that most other Jesus books have simply ignored, casually picking whichever pericopae appeal, regardless of their stratum. Crossan's analysis, by contrast, is constructed with materials that are independently attested at the earliest stages of the tradition at least twice in Q and Mark, or Mark and the Gospel of Thomas, and so forth.

Crossan tries to locate eschatological expectations in four quadrants, defined by social level and future/present orientation: some retainers (scribes, priests, bureaucrats) hoped for the imminent return of the splendours of the Davidic monarchy; peasant apocalypticism chose instead the victories of David and Joshua and the winning of a land; other retainers (Philo; Wisdom of Solomon) thought of an ethical kingdom attainable in the present through education and ethical exertion, while peasants might look for a redistribution of wealth, power and resources—open commensality and radical egalitarianism.

It is in the latter quadrant that Crossan locates Jesus. From the perspective of medical anthropology, Jesus' healing miracles are not so much biological as social events, signalling his refusal to accept the ritual uncleanness and social ostracism that attended disease. Analogously, exorcisms are not private events but concern, as the story of Mark 5 suggests, colonial occupation. At the same time, Crossan insists that Jesus refused himself to become a patron or broker, or to let his host village become one; hence his departure from Capharnaum (Mark 1:35–38). Both Jesus' parables and the "mission" he encouraged (with male-female pairs) evidence a vision of local renewal based on free healing and open commensality rather than on honour and shame, patronage and clientism. In this sense, Jesus was a Jewish Cynic, the adjective being as important as the noun.

Crossan's analysis of the passion-resurrection traditions are perhaps more problematic. He interprets all of the nature miracles (where the disciples are present) and all of the appearance stories as essentially legitimations of post-easter leadership and regards most of the passion account as

later construction. The nature miracles, especially the sea miracles, cannot, I think, bear this interpretation, but given the importance of conquest of the sea, both figuratively and actually, in Imperial propaganda, fit better into Crossan's anti-colonial reading of the exorcisms. And, while granting that much of the passion narratives is scripture-generated rather than historical recollection, many critics would argue for somewhat more historical recollection than Crossan allows.

The great virtues of Crossan's volume are its clarity and coherence of argument. His conclusions are bound to be troubling, but throughout, it is clear that they derive from a carefully articulated method that strenuously resists producing a Jesus congenial with the writer. If Crossan's Jesus is a troubling figure, perhaps it was that Jesus was a troubling figure.

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### **The Five Gospels, The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus**

Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover  
New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1993

Every critical edition of the Greek New Testament involves hundreds of thousands of individual judgments. The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have developed their own critical edition of the gospels called the Scholars Version. Now we can read the results from *The Jesus Seminar* published in *The Five Gospels, The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, a new translation and commentary by Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1993). In addition to a fresh translation of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, it also includes the Gospel of Thomas, a translation from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas found in 1945 in Nag Hammadi and earlier Greek fragments. This addition helps to round out the historical picture of gospel writings.

Called the Scholars Version, the book is organized with Mark leading the others since scholars believe that Mark is the earliest gospel. The work was begun in 1985 with thirty scholars taking up the challenge. Eventually more than two hundred joined the Fellows of the Seminar. They met twice a year to discuss papers and to vote with coloured beads (from red as an unequivocal indicator through pink, gray, and finally black as not probable) to indicate the degree of alleged authenticity of Jesus' words. The fact that some words attributed to Jesus were not likely spoken by him does not diminish their importance.