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Touchstone
HERITAGE AND THEOLOGY IN A NEW AGE

point of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.¹⁵

Those words speak to the depths of individuals. We recognize them as the words of one who knows something about the human heart. They were written, however, in the context of a discussion of the American nation and its quest for happiness. That is an indication of the wholeness of his thought and the way it speaks both to our personal and social needs.

The second quotation is prayer, one of the best known prayers in our society, prayed daily by all sorts of people who do not know its origin. To those who know Niebuhr's thought, however, it comes as no surprise to learn that he is the author of this prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous.

O God, grant us
Serenity to accept what we cannot change,
Courage to change what should be changed,
And wisdom to distinguish
The one from the other.

We began our discussion with Arthur Schlesinger's question: Why did "this passionate, profound and humble believer have so penetrating an influence on so many non-believers?" Schlesinger concluded that it lay in Niebuhr's capacity "to restate historical Christianity in terms that corresponded to our most searching modern themes and anxieties."¹⁶ That is right. His view of the human problem was thoroughly modern. He took the questions and issues of the time with utmost seriousness but then engaged them with the wisdom of the ages and specifically from the fullness of the Christian heritage. His greatest intellectual contribution was to combine the social gospel's passion for justice with a tragic sense of life and to see them both in the hopeful and healing context of Christ-centred understanding. For most of the difficult issues facing us, Reinhold Niebuhr is a rich and illuminating resource.

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954) p. 63.

¹⁶ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "Prophet For A Secular Age," p. 12.

Reviews

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: THE LIFE OF A MEDITERRANEAN JEWISH PEASANT

by John Dominic Crossan. San Francisco, Harper, 1991 Hardcover \$40.00

Editor's Note: We have on hand two reviews of this intriguing book and are printing them both.

What makes this attempt to describe Jesus unlike other reconstructions of the so-called historical Jesus is its methodology. 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.

Cultural anthropology, for example, 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?

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 where major trade routes intersected. Jesus may have been a peasant but he was almost certainly fully exposed to the culture of the Roman Empire.

The succession of tyrants, philosophers, visionaries, prophets, protestors, magicians, bandits, messiahs, rebels

and revolutionaries in Palestine 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 accepts the consensus of contemporary biblical scholarship that materials about Jesus were both retained, developed *and created* in the canonical Gospels as well as in the extracanonical Gospels, and that differences among the materials about Jesus were due to deliberate theological interpretations of Jesus.

Crossan, then, first assembles an inventory of all the different stories or sayings of Jesus coming from canonical and extracanonical writing of the first and second centuries and he then determines the chronological sequence in which the various gospels and writings were written.

The third step is to determine "attestation," that is, whether a particular story or complex of sayings is reported by more than one writer *independently* of others. The total inventory has 522 "complexes" or different stories and sayings. Of these 180 have double, triple or more than triple attestation, while 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.

The textual complexes accepted for consideration still require very careful comparison and critical evaluation to determine the editorial contributions of the writers. 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 "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' message and ministry were clearly focussed on the Reign of God which "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" (p. 292).

The Kingdom of God as Jesus preached and lived it had some extraordinary features. First, it was radically egalitarian. 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" (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 is a kingdom of children, i.e. of "nobodies", of the destitute and the "Unclean, Degraded and Expendable" who are like weeds (mustard and darnel). Jesus' egalitarian vision goes so far as to "tear the hierarchical or patriarchal family in two along the axis of domination and subordination" (p. 300). Jesus 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), to move from place to place as they pass on the Gospel of the Kingdom to others.

In anthropological terms miracle working is essentially indistinguishable from magic, so Jesus can be described as a magician whose exorcisms and healings were a sign of the Reign of God and, like his radical eating style, were a revolutionary challenge to the established society.

Crossan refers to Jesus' Kingdom as "unbrokered," which is to say unmediated, available to all who ask for it. They do not have to go through anyone else to get it. It is "within them." 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. 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.

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.

It will be interesting to see if Crossan's 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 previously produced.

Paul Newman

This is a book that resembles a mustang rather than a thoroughbred. It is fiercely independent, ignoring most of the great scholars on life-of-Jesus research. There are no references in the index on the one hand to Bultmann, Bornkamm, and Käsemann (except on a side issue), or on the other hand to the Mansons, Dodd, Cullmann, Jeremias (except on a side issue), or to Schweizer. This is more than a little brash on the part of the author. Can one really ignore the seminal work of those who, both liberal and more conservative, are preeminent in the field?

The scholars that are quoted may have done good scholarly work on some issues, but few are noted for synthesizing answers to individual critical problems into a cohesive and persuasive historical whole. There is a clear lack of theoretical and applied pedigree in this work.

This is not to say that Crossan's book is dull or not to be taken seriously. A mustang, after all, is lively; its kick can get attention, if not do some damage. Crossan is serious about

his endeavour. He wants to determine what can be known about the historical Jesus and inevitably he provokes a response.

But what field is the mustang grazing in? That is, where does it get its nourishment? Crossan's approach is fed by assumptions drawn from one kind of liberation theology, as is evident from the argument in the Overture and the Epilogue. "The historical Jesus must be understood within his contemporary Judaism. . . . There was, in the world and time of Jesus, only one sort of Judaism, and that was Hellenistic Judaism, Judaism responding with all its antiquity and tradition to a Greco-Roman culture undergirded by both armed power and imperial ambition" (pp. 417ff). Crossan goes on to say it is largely, but not only, the world of the peasant living at a subsistence level, who knows about rule and power, about kingdom and empire, about taxes and debts, malnutrition and illness, agrarian oppression and demonic possession. There is also the problem of the urban demons (pp. xiff). It is to this world that Jesus becomes the announcer of the brokerless (i.e. unmediated) Kingdom.

Jesus did not, Crossan maintains, speak of God as future apocalyptic judge, although Jesus had earlier accepted that view from John's ministry. Instead, he found a different way, that of a ministry of healing in the present, his disciples ministering as healed healers. Their task was to announce the Kingdom to others. Jesus was neither its patron, nor mediator; nor were his disciples its brokers.

Crossan says the Kingdom was and is available to any and all who want