

## ***The Passion of Jesus: History Remembered or Prophecy Historicized?***

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The 1995 Easter season was ushered in with yet another book about Jesus by John Dominic Crossan, one of the English-speaking world's most interesting and gifted writers. Crossan's *Who Killed Jesus?* is sure to command, as did his *The Historical Jesus*, a great deal of attention at the popular level.<sup>1</sup> But the book also raises many issues touching method and assumptions which will concern scholars.

The principal purpose of the book is to make emphatically clear for laymen and non-experts what biblical scholars have known for most of this century: The Romans—not the Jewish people—were the principal players in the execution of Jesus. Herein lies the book's popular appeal. Crossan explains that Jewish involvement in Jesus' death was limited to a few of the priestly aristocrats who, when offended and/or threatened by Jesus' statements and activities in Jerusalem a few days before Passover, handed him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea.

On this score, Crossan is quite right. Only in anti-Jewish polemic generated in later centuries did the unhistorical notion arise that the Jewish people as a whole were responsible for Jesus' death, with the Romans at best passive spectators. Support for this erroneous idea has traditionally been found in the way the Gospels portray Pilate as expressing his doubts about Jesus' guilt and the way crowds of Jews demanded Jesus' crucifixion. Later Christian apologists and polemicists failed to perceive (or perhaps did not want to perceive) that the Gospels do not in fact blame all Jews and exculpate the Roman

1. John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995. xii + 238 pp. \$16.75. For discussion in this journal of Crossan's earlier *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), see J. Neusner, "Who Needs 'The Historical Jesus'? An Essay-Review," and C. A. Evans, "The Need for the Historical Jesus," in *BBR* 4 (1994) 113-33.

authorities. In more recent times scholars have rightly recognized apologetic at work in the Gospels themselves which, written during a time of Roman threats, attempted to put the Roman authorities in the best light possible (viz., Pilate only reluctantly agreed to execute Jesus) and to emphasize the responsibility of the ruling priests and members of the Sanhedrin. Such a presentation would help protect Christians, in a hostile Roman world, from charges of promoting allegiance to an enemy of the state. In effect, early Christians could reply: Yes, officially Rome did execute Jesus, but it was really the Jewish leadership that brought it about because Jesus had criticized it. This way early Christians could almost come out on the side of Rome, which would be very desirable, in view of the bloody war fought between Jews and Romans in 66-70 AD.

What makes Crossan's presentation of this otherwise unexceptional conclusion so distinctive is his reliance on the *Gospel of Peter*, a non-canonical Gospel that mainstream scholarship dates to the second century and regards as secondary to the canonical Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this widely-held opinion, Crossan argues that *Peter* is the earliest Gospel and the earliest known attempt to transform Old Testament messianic prophecies into history about Jesus. The passion story of the Gospels is not "history remembered," Crossan emphasizes, but "prophecy historicized." He further maintains that the four canonical Gospels are dependent on *Peter*.<sup>3</sup> This is the part of Crossan's book that is the least persuasive, and unfortunately it makes up most of the book. The salutary value of the book (viz., the argument that the Jewish people did not kill Jesus) fades from view as the reader is taxed with a protracted defense of the antiquity and priority of an apocryphal Gospel pseudonymously attributed to *Peter*. Why does Crossan do this?

Crossan does it because he believes that much of the passion narrative in the Gospels was generated by what Christians found in the Old Testament, not by what they remembered to have actually happened. He reasons that because the disciples ran away following Jesus' arrest, they had no idea what took place. All they knew was that Jesus had been crucified. They had no idea if a trial of any sort had occurred, or where (or if) Jesus had been buried. (Crucifixion vic-

2. For summaries of scholarly opinion, see S. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha. I: Gospels and Related Writings* (Cambridge: James Clarke; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 216-27; W. Rebell, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen und Apostolische Väter* (Munich: Kaiser, 1992) 92-99.

3. For his most detailed defense of *Peter's* antiquity and independence, see J. D. Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

tims were often left on the cross to be devoured by birds and animals. Burial often did not occur.<sup>4</sup>) What they did discover was that Jesus' kingdom message continued to work powerfully within the community that he had established. Convinced that he had been vindicated, Jesus' followers began to search the Scriptures to find out what it all meant and, in reference especially to the passion itself, to find out what had happened and how that fulfilled scriptural and jesuianic prophecies. Crossan believes that the *Gospel of Peter* is the earliest attempt at creating a historical narrative based on what was found in the Scriptures. But this invented passion story, which polemicizes against Jews (understandable in the first century, with Christianity the oppressed and beleaguered minority), is dangerous today and Christians need to know that it is mostly unhistorical.<sup>5</sup>

I have two major criticisms of Crossan's work. First, his contention that Old Testament prophecy is what underlies the Gospels' passion story is not persuasive. It is gratuitous to assert that Jesus' friends and followers did not know and did not find out what happened. It is much more probable that they did find out what happened, even if only in bits and pieces, and then did their best to show that what happened was "according to the scriptures." Second, the *Gospel of Peter* is late, not early. It represents an admixture of details drawn from all four canonical Gospels and is heavily seasoned with pious Christian imagination (complete with a talking cross and two angels whose heads reach the heavens) and not-so-pious Christian criticism of the Jewish people. Moreover, the *Gospel of Peter* is full of historical inaccuracies (which Crossan concedes) and strikes most scholars as far removed from the authentic Jesus tradition and its

4. On the horrors of Roman crucifixion, see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Crossan wonders, in light of so many crucifixions in Palestine and yet the attestation of only one crucifixion victim who received proper burial, if Jesus might not have been left hanging on the cross to be devoured by carrion birds and animals (*The Historical Jesus*, 392-94; *Who Killed Jesus?*, 187-88. This is also the view that has been adopted by the Jesus Seminar). For a better assessment of the evidence, see B. R. McCane, "'Where No One Had Yet Been Laid': The Shame of Jesus' burial," in E. H. Lovering (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 473-84. McCane concludes that there is every reason to believe that Jesus was placed in a rock-cut tomb, in accordance with Jewish custom.

5. This concern lies behind Crossan's unrelenting criticism of R. E. Brown's *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (2 vols. ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994). Crossan is critical of Brown's dismissal of the priority and independence of the *Gospel of Peter*. He is also critical of Brown's acceptance of most of the passion tradition as historical; and he is critical of what he perceives to be Brown's tendency to accept the historicity of the Gospels' negative portrayals of the Jewish people on the one hand, and their positive, exculpatory portrayal of Pontius Pilate on the other.

setting in first-century Jewish Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Further discussion of these two criticisms will help us appreciate just how problematic Crossan's approach is.

Crossan argues that Psalm 2 and other Old Testament passages provided the details and basic framework of the passion narrative, not memory of what actually happened. For examples of this he cites *Barnabas* 7 (late first or early second century), Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 40 (mid-second century), and passages found in the *Sibylline Oracles* (1:373-74; 8:296; mid-second century), which in various ways create "passion history" out of the scapegoat of Leviticus 16. He might also have cited Melito's *Paschal Homily* (late second century), which in poetic style recasts the passion in terms of the passover lamb.

These second-century Christian writings retell in a somewhat allegorical fashion the passion story in the light of these Old Testament passages and themes. But to the degree that these writings are truly parallel to *Peter*, to that degree Crossan's contention that *Peter* is mid-first century (perhaps written in the late 40s, only a few years after Agrippa I's death in 44) is undermined. *Peter's* resemblance to *Barnabas* et al., which are all second century, suggests that *Peter* also is second century, not first. This applies no less to Crossan's putative "Cross Gospel" (which he has to extract from extant *Peter*, in order to remove many of the obvious Synoptic elements) because it was supposedly framed according to Psalm 2 and was the core around which the later interpolations and embellishments became attached.

It is much more probable that the earliest passion tradition comprised of a series of loosely connected stories, which eventually were tied together and punctuated with scriptural prooftexts.<sup>7</sup> Not until we get to the second century do we find wholesale theological/allegorical rewriting of the passion based on Old Testament passages and images

6. Representative of scholarly skepticism with respect to Crossan's positive estimation of the *Gospel of Peter* and other apocryphal gospels is D. M. Smith, "The Problem of John and the Synoptics in Light of the Relation between Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," in A. Denaux (ed.), *John and the Synoptics* (BETL 101; Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University Press, 1992) 147-62. Smith asks: "[I]s it thinkable that the tradition began with the legendary, the mythological, the anti-Jewish, and indeed the fantastic, and moved in the direction of the historically restrained and sober?" (p. 150).

7. My views here are compatible with those of M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 31-58. In his commentary on Matthew, R. H. Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* [rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] xix-xxx, 627-40) has argued that the Matthean evangelist created some narrative (notably in the infancy account), as a form of haggadic midrash, on the basis of certain passages thought to be messianic and prophetic. This parallels in some ways Crossan's notion of "prophecy historicized." But Gundry understands Matthew's literary and exegetical work as an attempt to interpret and embroider the story of Jesus, as drawn from Mark and Q, while he understands the Gospel

(as seen in *Barnabas*, Justin, Melito, etc.). Even first-century Hebrews, to which Crossan also appeals, does not actually retell the passion.<sup>8</sup> It instead enriches and develops certain aspects of christology (such as Jesus as High Priest or the sacrifice that need never be offered again). The Marcan passion, contrary to Crossan's views, in all probability is based on primitive, reliable data.<sup>9</sup>

The second major aspect of Crossan's work that I find dubious is his explanation of the presence of Johannine and Synoptic elements in *Peter*. He contends that these elements moved from *Peter* to the canonical Gospels, not the other way around. But this explanation is no more convincing than it is when applied to the Egerton Papyrus 2, which also contains stories where Johannine and Synoptic material are combined. Crossan and Helmut Koester argue that this is primitive tradition that predates the bifurcation of the respective Synoptic and Johannine streams of tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Crossan and Koester doubt that the authors of the Papyrus Egerton 2 and *Peter* would sit down with the four canonical Gospels and pick and choose among them in writing their Gospels.<sup>11</sup> I doubt it too. What the authors of these writings did was write what they remembered hearing and possibly reading at various times and what they wanted to add, edit, emphasize, embellish, etc. The authors of the Papyrus Egerton 2 and *Peter* no more deliberately picked and chose bits and pieces from the canonical Gospels than did Justin Martyr or other second and third century Christians when they cited the Gospels.

of Mark itself (*Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 19-23, 1026-45, 1049-51) pretty much as does Hengel. See also E. P. Sanders (*The Historical Figure of Jesus* [London: Penguin, 1993] 63, 83-91), who recognizes the presence of some instances of the historization of prophecy. But like Gundry, Sanders limits the phenomenon to instances of redaction, supplementation, and embellishment.

8. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, 79.

9. See Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*; R. Pesch, "Exkurs: Die vormarkinische Passionsgeschichte," in Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2 vols. HTKNT 2.1-2; 4th ed., Freiburg: Herder, 1991) 1-27; idem, *Das Evangelium der Urgemeinde* (Herderbücherei 748; Freiburg: Herder, 1979) 79-89. Pesch concludes: "Als *terminus ante quem* der Entstehung der vorm[arkinischen] Passionsgeschichte ist folglich das Jahr 37 n. Chr. zu nennen" (*Markusevangelium*, 2.21). Hengel thinks this date is too early. He believes that Mark is a dramatic biography, perhaps composed of five scenes (surrounded by a prologue and an epilogue) that "probably developed out of living oral teaching and was composed for solemn reading in worship" sometime in 69 CE (*Studies in Mark* 22, 34-36, 52).

10. J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (rev. ed., Sonoma: Polebridge, 1992), 183; H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 207.

11. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, 137-38; Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 215.

In his *First Apology* Justin gives what appears to be a continuous quotation of dominical tradition (*I Apol.* 16.9-13). Examination of the quotation reveals that it is a pastiche of fragments from Matthew, Luke, and John:

... for not those who make profession, but those who do the works, shall be saved, according to his word: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven [cf. Matt 7:21]. For whoever hears me, and does my sayings [cf. Matt 7:24 = Luke 6:47], hears him who sent me [cf. Luke 10:16 (Codex D); John 5:23-24; 13:20; 12:44-45; 14:24; cf. *First Apol.* 63.5]. And many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, have we not eaten and drunk in your name, and done wonders?' And then I will say to them, 'Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness [cf. Luke 13:26-27]: Then shall there be wailing and gnashing of teeth, when the righteous shall shine as the sun, and the wicked are sent into eternal fire [cf. Matt 13:42-43]. For many shall come in my name [cf. Matt 24:5 par.], clothed outwardly in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are devouring wolves [cf. Matt 7:15]. By their works you will know them [cf. Matt 7:16, 20]. And every tree that does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire [cf. Matt 7:19]."

Sometimes Justin introduces apocryphal or otherwise unknown sayings into quotations of dominical tradition: "If you love those who love you [cf. Matt 5:46 = Luke 6:32], what new thing do you do [*unparalleled*]? For even the fornicators do this [Matt 5:46: "tax collectors"; Luke 6:32, 33: "sinners"]. But I say to you [cf. Matt 5:44], pray for your enemies [cf. Matt 5:44: "love"] and love [cf. Luke 6:27: "do good to"] those who hate you and bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you [cf. Luke 6:28]" (*I Apol.* 15.9). The statement, "What new thing do you do?," is not found in the canonical gospels and appears to be an apocryphal variant.

Does Crossan think that Justin sat down with these three Gospels and deliberately picked and chose various elements? Or should we think of this dominical quotation as a primitive, pre-Synoptic and pre-Johannine source that underlies our canonical Gospels? (Had these passages in Justin been found in the form of isolated papyrus fragments, I suspect that this is exactly how Crossan and Koester would understand them.)<sup>12</sup>

Mark 16:9-20 provides another helpful illustration. Crossan agrees with the majority of scholars that this longer ending of Mark is not original. It seems to be made up of elements taken from Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts. The allusion in Mark 16:12-13 to the

12. Rebell (*Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, 90) finds the suggestion that Papyrus Egerton 2 represents a primitive stage before the bifurcation of Synoptic and Johannine streams of tradition "altogether improbable."

story of the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) is especially revealing:

*Mark 16:12-13*

After these things he appeared in a different form to two of them who were walking and who were going into the country. And they departed to report to the rest, but they did not believe.

*Luke 24*

And behold, two of them (v. 13) did not know him (v. 16) walking (v. 17) returned to Jerusalem (v. 33) they found the eleven (v. 33) "slow in heart to believe" (v. 25)

Which way does the dependency here go? Does Luke 24 represent an imaginative embellishment and expansion of Mark 16:12-13? Almost no one thinks so. Most believe that Mark's (later) longer ending contains a summarizing allusion to the (earlier) Lucan story.

The same holds for the longer ending as a whole. Should we imagine that Mark 16:9-20 contains early, perhaps even mid-first century traditions that were later picked up and expanded by the later New Testament writings? Or, if we are convinced that the longer ending is secondary, must we imagine that the author sat down with Acts and the other three canonical gospels and picked and chose details from them? Surely the most plausible explanation is that the author of Mark 16:9-20 was familiar with the earlier writings and with various legends and composed according to memory and imagination.

In the cases of Justin's conflated quotations and the longer ending to Mark, we find loose quotation or paraphrase, summarizing, deliberate alterations, and utilization of apocryphal traditions. I find no compelling reason why *Peter's* relationship to the four canonical gospels should be understood differently.

Criticisms such as these notwithstanding, Crossan's *Who Killed Jesus?* makes an important point, and one that Christians need to hear. There is no place for anti-Semitism in Christian thought and theology. The New Testament is not anti-Semitic (as some have mistakenly alleged), but it is in places polemical.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Christians of almost every age have misinterpreted this intramural polemic, in which Christian Jews criticize non-Christian Jews for rejecting the Jewish Messiah and Savior, and turn it into (Gentile) Christian criticism of the Jewish people as a whole. This kind of sloppy interpretation helps pave the way for virulent anti-Semitism and the unconscionable acts prompted by it.

13. For a recent treatment of this problem, see C. A. Evans and D. A. Hagner (eds.), *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).