

8. Copan, Paul, (Ed.) *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*, Moderated by William F. Buckley Jr. and Withe Responses from Robert J. Miller, Craig L. Blomberg, Marcus Borg and Ben Witherington III (Baker Books 1998)

Talk about a disappointment. The "debate" between these two, representing the normative Christian view and the new history of Jesus approach never really got into what I was looking for: a coherent discussion of the timing and importance of the Gnostic Christians. Instead the debate was about whether the Christ of faith exists, and centered on the reality of the resurrection, as far as I could tell. But that is OK.

The reason I picked the book up is because Jenkins (see item # 22) attacks Crossan with great gusto for basing much of his historical reconstruction on sources that were not contemporary with early Christianity. The idea that you can learn what happened in the first century from materials written in the second and third centuries as if they offer reliable witness really, really offends him So when I saw Crossan in a debate I thought that would be the focus of the argumentation. But it was not discussed. I should have known that a debate between a scholar and a believer would not focus on the esoterica of sources and dates, but would instead focus on the substance of belief.

That said, however, I must say that the opening statement by the evangelical Christian, William lane Craig, is impressive in terms of content and structure. He cites Crossan and takes him to task for statements that, in the context of the debate, are not making him look like an objective scholar, but rather like the unbelieving modern scholar depicted in the introduction by the editor, Copan. I will cite his remarks

below in a slightly different context. By contrast, Crossan's opening statement was free-floating, unstructured, and short. It had content, but not structure.

The opening statements were followed by short rebuttals. I got all excited when Craig picked up the early Christian gauntlet and flung it at Crossan. First he says he agrees with Crossan's statements about the Gospel of Mark being used by Matthew and Luke, and about there being three layers of tradition (a reference to page 34 where Crossan says the three layers are the deeds and sayings of Jesus, the writing down of these historical materials into a coherent collection (I surmise he means the Q source underlying the gospels), and then the gospels written by the evangelists. So, Craig agrees with this, but no more (p. 40):

What I do not accept, however, is that the Gospel accounts of the death and resurrection of Christ are based on the Gospel of Peter, that Mark is based on a Secret Gospel of Mark, that this was an inventive early Christian community, and that naturalism holds.

At this point I was breathing hard and couldn't wait for Crossan's re-rebuttal. But it never came. The Secret Gospel of Mark is one I discuss below in a few paragraphs on a work by Morton Smith (see item # 33 below), and which is severely criticized and called into question by Philip Jenkins (see item # 22). The reference to an inventive early Christian community is a rejection of Crossan's interesting statement on pages 34-35 which nicely deals with the contradictions between the Gospels that Freke and Gandy make such a big deal of:

As soon as we say that Matthew and Luke are based on Mark, and as soon as we say (going a little bit further) that John possibly knew the works of Matthew, Mark

and Luke, we begin to see not four accounts about Jesus, but a stream of developing tradition. By the way, I see no problem with that. I think if we had the Evangelists here, they would say that is called the freedom of the children of God. That's what it means to have the Holy Spirit: "I, Matthew, am willing to look at Mark's telling me what Jesus said and respond for my people. Right now, this is a better way to say it. I too have the Holy Spirit, Mark."

The reference to the Gospel of Peter is what I had hoped Crossan would address since it is a non-canonical Gospel of unknown age, although it was referred to as early as the year 190 (see # 2 above, by Anonymous). It is not considered Gnostic, and brings in the dating question quite nicely. But Crossan didn't bite on this bait, it was not mentioned by him again, as Craig himself laments in a later statement on page 69. On page 30 Craig says it is universally acknowledged to have been a late second-century forgery. On page 102 Blomberg, a commenter, notes that the Crossan use of the Gospel of Peter and Secret Gospel of Mark may be "idiosyncratic" but it is an overstatement to say that Craig's views are universally acknowledged among scholars. The Crossan view is in the minority but he is not a minority of one, in other words. Borg, another commenter notes Craig's challenge on these two documents but suggests Crossan was right to disregard the challenge and focus on what is important: the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith and the meeting of the two in the nature of the resurrection.

Craig comes back one final time, now to take Borg to task for agreeing with Crossan on the lack of importance of these two documents to the main argument. On pages 167-168 Craig purports that Crossan needs to make the Gospel of Peter an early and accepted document because its description of the

appearance of a cosmically proportioned Christ coming from the tomb fits his thesis denying that Christ took up his actual-sized dead body. His use of the Secret Gospel of Mark and its reference to women is to then show that this inconvenient story in the Gospel of Peter, showing the women knew Jesus was actually buried and went to the tomb expecting to see his body, was probably an attempt to humor this extant work but needs not be taken serious. Hence the same story in a canonical Gospel also can be dismissed as an attempt to stay true to some extent to the sources that were already circulating. Crossan believes it more likely Jesus' body, like that of others crucified by Romans, was left on the cross to be eaten by birds, as a warning to other would-be rebels and criminals, and then was disposed of in the local landfill.

We visit Crossan's use of the Gospel of Peter and the Secret Gospel of Mark when we look at one of Crossan's books at item #10.

There is substance in this book that has value for reasons other than the simple argument over the dating and importance of Gnostic Christianity that I was looking for. In the introduction, which is a worthwhile read in itself, on pages 14 and 15, the editor, Copan, cites the theologian Bultmann as saying that the gospel is embedded in myth, and when that mythical add-on is scraped off it leaves only the fact that "God has acted redemptively in Jesus, and we. Realizing our desperate plight, are saved by responding in faith to the gift of God's grace." Copan continues to use Bultmann to say that modern ears (of historians for example) can only accept the demythologized, historical Christ without miracles and spirits, and disdains the very idea of blood atonement. The obvious intent is to make sure the audience knows this is so in their scholarly or popularized-scholarly products describing the historical Jesus, like

Crossan's books for example. Copan then says, and I agree with this (p. 15):

Consequently, historical research cannot ground or buttress our faith. Rather, we must embrace the saving message of the gospel without reference to such research. Bultmann declared that "we have to discover whether the New Testament offers man an understanding of himself which will challenge him to a genuine existential decision." Genuine saving faith, then, does not depend on historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth.

As mentioned on page 18 of the introduction, a commenter on the debate, Marcus Borg, notes that the debaters both affirm the resurrection, but each means something different when using the word. His commentary on this topic is on pages 118 through 121. Craig, the evangelical participant in the debate believes the resurrection means Jesus took up and re-occupied the very body in which he died. Crossan, the historian in the debate, says that the language is metaphorical and that the resurrection (as in the writings of some Gnostics!) is the same enlivening in the spirit experienced by all Christians in this life: "Rather, the meaning of the resurrection is that people within the early Christian movement continued to experience the 'empowering presence' of Jesus after his death." This in turn cites Crossan's rebuttal in the debate at page 47 where Crossan says, using a dock worker at Corinth listening to Paul as an example (but I cut out that introduction and its dialogue here):

A related difficulty occurs where Paul is pushed to describe a resurrected body; he says it is a spiritual body. I do not have a clue what that means. I know what a physical body is. I know what a spirit is. But I

don't know what a spiritual body is. . . . The docker at Corinth believed in the resurrection because, having heard Paul, he was able to experience the empowering presence of Christ in his own life. Resurrection was the way that Paul explained it. But the fact was the presence of Christ and the experience thereof. Without that, there is no Christianity. Paul is perfectly right; without that, it's all over. That is what the resurrection means for me—those two things: totally the same Jesus in a totally different mode of being.

This whole discussion is interesting to me because of my past status as a Mormon believer. Mormon scriptures such as the Book of Mormon and parts of the Pearl of Great price have been debunked as ahistorical, as fiction, by scholars. Yet still true believers will believe because of the spiritual awakening these books have brought to them. It appears to be exactly the same with the Bible, at least as Freke and Gandy describe that book. Even the way Crossan describes that book, much of it has to be taken with a grain of salt.

But the test that Bultmann, Copan, Crossan and others pose is exactly the same test that the Book of Mormon throws out: does it change hearts and lives? For many the answer is a resounding 'YES!' Same is true for the Koran, of course. It is also true for many other books that inspire belief and a change of heart, such as Mary Baker Eddy's 'Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,' 'The Bhagavad Gita,' and the works describing the teachings of Buddha and Confucius, etc. Historical truth is a murky concept at best, and in the end it is irrelevant to belief which as Crossan says is based on direct inner feeling and experience in the here and now.