

12. Crossan, John Dominic, *The Birth of Christianity; Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately Following the Execution of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco 1998)

When I first saw this book title I thought to myself: "I have been wasting my time looking at all these books, this one will answer all my questions." Wrong!

I thought he would have something to say about Paul's role in establishing Christianity, but he takes the book's title serious: Paul came too late to be included. Here is how Crossan describes this decision (page xxi and xxvii):

I include Paul not in the birth of Christianity but rather in its growth and development. That is neither a deliberate insult nor a calculated disparagement. My decision is based on four factors:, of which the last one is the crucial one. First, I do not think that Paul was as important theologically or historically in the first Christian century as he was in the sixteenth Christian century, and that later importance often blocks our ability to assess his original significance. Second, we tend to move much too swiftly from the historical Jesus in the 20's (where we have no contemporary texts) to the historical Paul in the 50's (where we *do* have contemporary texts). What happened in the 30's? What do we *imagine* happened in the 30's? Third, I sense profoundly different results between those who start with Paul and go back (or refuse to go back) to the historical Jesus, and those who start with Jesus and then go on (or refuse to go on) to Paul. I put it as a challenge: *If you begin with Paul, you will interpret Jesus incorrectly; if you begin with Jesus, you will interpret Paul differently.* The reason for that belief lies in my fourth (and most basic point), . . .

. . . the Platonic dualism that had influenced Philo, Paul, and Josephus had not so influenced John the Baptist, Jesus, and James, nor, I imagine, The Essenes and the Pharisees before the Rabbis. Start with Paul and you will see Jesus incorrectly; start with Jesus and you will see Paul differently. In this book, therefore, I bracket Paul to concentrate on a Christianity that had to be born before he could notice its existence and persecute its presence.

I skipped six pages of detailed explanation of the point in the last paragraph cited and if what he is talking about really interests you please go get the book and read it. I like this clear distinction: he is interested in what it was that Paul was persecuting, not in what Paul changed it to after he thought better of his ways after confronting Jesus in vision. I'll give this much to Freke and Gandy: Paul is like the Gnostics, in that he is basing his knowledge of Christ on revelations, on the post-resurrection teachings given to him (and to the Gnostics as they claimed) by revelation.

Crossan repeats this speech in slightly different words on page 15, but he adds something after telling what it is this book asks of history:

It asks, What happened to Jesus' first companions in the days and weeks, months and years immediately after his execution? It asks, What happened to believers in the kingdom of God when the God of that kingdom did not prevent Jesus' crucifixion? It asks, What was there before Paul or what was there for Paul to persecute? And that focus demands a word about Paul himself.

This book does not include a study of Paul, although it certainly includes elements from his life, his letters, and especially his pre-Pauline traditions. That

lack is quite deliberate, but I do not intend it as an indirect attack on Pauline theology. I am completely convinced that his thought represents a perfectly valid and very early continuation from Jesus to Christianity in a very different context from that of the historical Jesus.

Crossan again explains why he has taken this approach, citing studies by other whom he suggests skipped to facilely over the years after Jesus, directly from the 30's to the 60's where there is ample documentation in the writings of Paul. He does, however, go item by item through Pauline letters to see what may have been practices and customs he inherited rather than invented.

Pages 55 through 58 revisited his views on the *Gospel of Peter*, defending them against his critics. Crossan's use of the later *Teachings of the Apostles*, *Didache*, and *Shepherd of Hermas* gave me some pleasure since I was under the impression that they preserved very early traditions. Crossan is obviously of the same opinion as his Part VIII shows. In Part IX of the book Crossan spends whole chapters reconstructing what may have been Christian community practices before Paul, and spends much time on the Common Meal Tradition for which there is good evidence. Did I learn anything new from all of this? I don't think so, except that the ways of the scholar in this field of inquiry are close to inscrutable to the interested lay-person.

Though I learned nothing I could call new, I was pleased to see that the way the church learned to control the itinerant teachers and prophets, working in imitation of Christ. The way they came to restrict the activities of the itinerants in favor of the settled churches' leadership was the way I remembered from my readings in the 70's of the last century in the book by Daniélou that I review in item # 13).

In the 70's I was reading materials on the very early church in support of the claim of my newly adopted religion, Mormonism, to be a restoration of primitive Christianity. I was sufficiently satisfied with the parallels between Mormon practices and beliefs and early Christian practices and beliefs to start a book on the subject. I only got a few chapters completed when my faith crashed. I revisit some of what I then wrote, but never published, in item # 36.

One thing I did learn and appreciated learning was from his Chapter 24 of Part IX, on "Communities of Resistance." His description of multiple Essene communities, some in and some away from Qumran was a revelation to me in terms of the differences in outlook and approach between those communities. Now I can see that labeling John the Baptist as Essene, and saying Jesus had Essene ideas, does not necessarily load on them the whole spectrum of the strident and stringent Essene community at the Dead Sea. That was a useful insight for me.

Chapter 25 in Part IX is about the passion-resurrection story and repeats much of what I have read before from Crossan's use of and views on the *Gospel of Peter*. I was again pleased that he sees early tradition in the *Clementine Recognitions*, tradition that for him corroborates some of his views on the *Gospel of Peter*.

I was looking to see if he revisited the story of the women witnesses to the burial and resurrection, since his dismissing that story in his earlier book as an addition to the gospel that probably never happened was so controversial. It was controversial in large part because of his use of and reliance on *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. In this book he basically repeats his argument, but never mentions nor makes use of that controversial book thought by many to be an outright later forgery. The argument, on pages 545 through 562,

and recapped on pages 572 and 573, does make use of the fact that Paul seemed to know nothing about the women as important witnesses to the risen Christ in 1 Cor. 15:1-11.

This book will never become popular, it is too much into the details and defending Crossan against critics of his previous works. It is a veritable archive of information on the times, customs, powers and events of the time. But it is not an easy narrative to get through. And I found myself skipping entire chapters that seemed to me to be of interest to a scholar defending a point about to be made. Sorry, I tried to skip to those points, and was disappointed to have learned little that is really new to me. But then, I did spend several years reading the Ante-Nicene Fathers library, and had read the apocrypha and pseudopigrapha of the Old and New testaments already, and quite a bit of the Qumran and Gnostic materials of interest. In a way I was pleased that the citations he used from these sources were distantly familiar to me. The world he was describing I felt I already had a pretty good feel for. But I am definitely a layman, not a scholar.

OK, what really disappointed me about this book? From its title and the author's obvious knowledge and expertise, I was expecting an update of my all-time favorite book on this topic, namely Jean Daniélou's *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*. For readability, clarity, sticking to the topic, and providing insight, there is no book quite like Daniélou's (see item # 13). Still, even though it was published in 1964.