
The debate between Crossan and Craig discussed under Copan, item # 8, contained a charge that Crossan’s use of the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Secret Gospel of Mark* was "idiosyncratic" to put it as nicely as possible. We look at Crossan’s use of those two volumes here. But first I need to explain what I am doing in a book that purports to describe the historical Jesus when what I thought really was of interest to me is the nature and beliefs of the first Christians, the ones immediately after Jesus. Crossan himself seems to answer that question (p. 422):

> This is a book about the historical Jesus and not about the history of earliest Christianity. But it is impossible to conclude without some more direct comments on what happened after Jesus.

The very fact that he believes has indeed described, and collected together the likely true sayings of the historical Jesus is a great counterpoint to the claim by Freke and Gandy that there was no Jesus at all, he was invented by the Gnostics, people like Paul. If anyone is afflicted with a belief in Freke and Gandy on this very particular score of whether there ever was a Jesus or not, I recommend plowing through Crossan’s book as a great antidote. But will you discover in Crossan’s book the Christ of the faith of your fathers or your youth? No. And this is where his use of the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Secret Gospel of Mark* come into play.

But before we go there let’s follow Crossan a bit further in this very end-chapter in this huge book, at the risk of making a mockery of his staggering scholarly work. The sentences cited above lead into a section which says that there was (p.
no contradiction between the historical Jesus and the deified Christ, no betrayal whatsoever in the move from Jesus to Christ. Whether there were ultimate betrayals in the move from Christ to Constantine is another question.

What is he talking about? Reading the book, or even the chapter, will make that clear, but his problem was that the new church, especially after it is imperially sanctioned, became a mediator between God and man, and its hierarchy became brokers of the Kingdom. This is in sharp contrast with the Christ that Crossan discerns from history, whose entire message was a call to come into the unbrokered Kingdom which already existed all around each of us, and to seek and experience the Divine within.

That is my distillation of many words by Crossan. Let me now cite part of Crossan’s own distillation of over 400 pages of detailed insights and painstaking historical research work regarding who Jesus was. These words occur just after Crossan explains (again) that when he says Cynic he is talking about a way of dressing and relating that showed a certain real-life "contempt for honor and shame, for patronage and clientage." Crossan sums that up by saying what he devotes many a chapter to saying, namely that (pp. 421-422):

. . . We are forced, then, by the primary stratum itself, to bring together two disparate elements: healer and Cynic, magic and meal.

The historical Jesus was, then, a peasant Jewish Cynic. His peasant village was close enough to a Greco-Roman city like Sepphoris that sight and knowledge of Cynicism are neither inexplicable nor unlikely. But his
work was among the farms and villages of Lower Galilee. His strategy, implicitly for himself and explicitly for his followers, was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power. And, lest he himself be interpreted as simply the new broker of a new God, he moved on constantly, settling down neither at Nazareth nor Capernaum. He was neither broker nor mediator but, somewhat paradoxically, the announcer that neither should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself. Miracle and parable, healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another. He announced, in other words, the brokerless kingdom of God.

So, given that is how Crossan sees the original Christ and his message, it is little wonder that he sees the imperialization of the kingdom as a betrayal.

But now the his use of the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. To see how Crossan uses these texts is to see a scholar at work. On pages 385 through 387 he discerns three message-layers within the *Gospel of Peter*. He notes on page 386 that: . . . "all the prophetic allusions are now buried under the narrative surface. If you did not know the prophetic passion you would not even recognize them, for example:" . . . The examples are from the Old Testament and I was simply amazed, I would not have seen these motifs in the *Gospel of Peter* nor recognized they even existed. So, I am impressed.

Where does Crossan take this exegesis of the *Gospel of*
Peter? To the fact of the "very, very early Christian" belief that between Christ’s death and rising from the tomb he visited the souls of the dead to announce salvation to them. He cites as one authority on this subject Daniélou, for whose book see item # 13. But Crossan passes through the "harrowing of hell" (p. 389) on his way to a point he is very eager to make: the earliest Christians resorted to this story to create a need for a death followed in just a short time by the arising and ascension of Christ: "Jesus ascending to heaven at the head of the holy ones released from Hell." This Crossan described as a "resurrection-ascension," and it is somewhat more clear now why Craig wanted to shoot down the credibility of Crossan’s all-important Gospel of Peter as being either very early (before mark) or a credible reflection of what Christians once believed: this resurrection is not the same one currently believed in.

Where Crossan now turns is to the first evangelist, Mark. Crossan says that (p. 390): "It is . . . impossible, in my mind, to overestimate the creativity of Mark." In so many words, I read Crossan to say that by taking what seems symbolic from the previous layers of passion narratives, like the Gospel of Peter, and changing it into historical fact with Jews acting the part of the bad guys, Mark created a gospel narrative followed by the other evangelists, but at its very heart:

It is magnificent theological fiction, to be sure, but entailing a dreadful price for Judaism.

Crossan’s statement here turns into a completely separate book, item # 11. But then after making this very direct charge, claiming in essence that the Gospel of Peter is a more genuine reflection of the earliest Christians’ beliefs than the first of the recognized, orthodox gospels, Crossan launches into a lengthy discussion of the move from the
earlier version of the passion and ascension-resurrection narrative into the one that is reflected into the New Testament. Eventually he gets to the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark* on page 411 and goes through page 416 analyzing it and concluding for himself that it was the first version of the Gospel by Mark. In short, he believes the latter Gospel is made from the removal and editing out of material from the former, or Secret Gospel of Mark. The evidence he gives for this is the remnants of shards of facts related to a story removed from the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, remnants sprinkled into the surviving gospel or left in a place where they do not make much sense whereas in their original context it made very good sense.

In this context Crossan identifies a suspicious parallelism between three women named in a section of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* that was deleted, and three women mentioned three times in Mark from 15:40 through 16:1, a section added, according to Crossan to a Markan gospel that ended at 15:39! His point? If his hunch is right the later believers added the last part of Mark to prove the physical resurrection and used as witnesses to the passion, burial, and the empty tomb three names drawn conveniently from the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, with a touch of variation thrown in for effect. Now I see why Craig (see item # 8 by Copan) was so adamant about condemning Crossan’s usage of these two books. They allow Crossan to believe what he wishes, about a spiritual resurrection and ascension, and call into question the central fact of the New testament: Christ physically risen from the dead as proven by witnesses who actually existed and had integrity.

Getting back to the origins of Christianity and Gnosticism, there is an interesting synopsis on pages 418 and 422. On page 418 Crossan recapitulates what he spends a lot of time establishing with references to ancient documents earlier in
the book, namely that there was a well established division between an inclusive and an exclusive Judaism at the time of Christ. Exclusive Judaism allowed no such attitude as "render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s," so, clearly, Jesus was an inclusive Jew. Crossan does a better job of making the case, but to me it was all rather obvious once he explained the two categories.

Among the exclusive Jews were the Zealots that got Rome upset and started three wars. The wars finally wiped out much of the more militant crowd, and the remnant invented Rabbinical Judaism. At the same time the inclusive crowd turned mostly to Gnosticism and to Christianity, and in some cases to both.

On page 422 Crossan shows he too is capable of concocting a good theological fantasy. He asks which would have surprised Moses more had he returned to life in the year 200 A.D., the Christian offshoot or the Rabbinical offshoot from the tree of the religion he basically was the founder of. Crossan suggests both were new branches were very different religions than the trunk from which they both sprang.

What the exclusive Jews fate during the terrible Jewish wars, and the later development of Rabbinical Judaism, reminded me of was this: the history of the Radical Anabaptists in Muenster, Germany, fighting off the besieging armies of Catholics and Lutherans. They lost, and a remnant found a peaceful preacher named Menno Simons, and became the peace-loving Mennonites. Similarly radically militant Judaism was replaced, after a severe blood-letting, with a peaceful alternative under the leadership of Rabbis.

What does all this have to do with Gnostics and Paul? Nothing except that it was this mix that he stepped into and
made in my opinion yet another new religion out of. Another new branch, but one not far out of touch with its short parent branch, or the trunk that feeds them all.