

## REVIEW

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF JESUS AS AN HISTORICAL PERSON

James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus*. Biblical Refigurations. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 280. Paperback, £18.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-957058-4.

Crossley's book is a proposal to rethink the ways in which current scholarship approaches the study of the historical Jesus, or, as Crossley prefers to call it, the study of the earliest Palestinian tradition. The main thesis put forward is that rather than seeing Jesus as a Great Man who changed history, one should investigate how the social upheavals in Galilee and Judea during the time of Jesus effected historical change. In short, Crossley is arguing that individuals do not create history, but that history 'creates' individuals. An important thread running through the book is the question of how seemingly egalitarian and countercultural ideas can lead to or coexist with ideas of dominance and power. Put differently, how could a subversive, revolutionary, and anti-empire Galilean protest movement lay the foundations for its own brand of imperial rule?

The main thesis of the book unfolds in five chapters, ending with an 'irrelevant conclusion'. In chapter 1, 'Does Jesus plus Paul equal Marx plus Lenin?', Crossley argues that almost all mainstream historical Jesus-constructions could be labeled as liberal, since these constructions of Jesus conform to the general tendencies and trends in contemporary discourses of liberal democracy. A better approach, according to Crossley, would be to indicate in what sense Jesus (or the earliest Palestinian tradition) was a product of historical change and development. While most studies on the historical Jesus is concerned with fact finding, this approach asks '*why* the Jesus movement emerged when and where it did and *why* it led to a new movement' (14). 'As we will see,' Crossley continues, 'socio-economic changes in early first-century Galilee and Judea provide some important reasons for the emphases of the earliest Jesus tradition and why the Jesus movement emerged when and where it did' (20). What were the socio-economic changes that gave rise to the emergence of the Jesus movement when and where it did? Crossley lists the following: the building and rebuilding of key urban areas in Galilee, including its socio-economic consequences; the extensive rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in Judea; the extraction of the surplus by the urban centers from the countryside that underlays peasant unrest and the emergence of millenarian or utopian groups; significant economic

change; and the dislocation of peasant land as a major factor in peasant unrest and reaction. Crossley then shows that topics in the early Jesus movement like kingdom of God, purity and morality, 'Christology', and gender could be seen as a negotiation with the socio-economic changes in Galilee and Judea.

In chapter 2 Crossley discusses the traditional criteria used in historical Jesus scholarship to construct the historical Jesus. Crossley shares the skepticism that has recently emerged regarding the usefulness of the traditional criteria, and supports the view that the analysis of specific passages should be used to build up general pictures of plausibility rather than postulating precise pictures of the historical Jesus. When this approach is taken, it is possible to indicate that some material can be attributed to Jesus although it does not seem to reflect the historical Jesus or the earliest Palestinian tradition. Like many historical Jesus scholars, Crossley finds the criterion of dissimilarity of minimal use. The criterion of embarrassment, if one can make an argument that the embarrassing passage or theme most probably share the cultural assumptions of Palestine or Galilee around the early or mid-first century, and lack interest in the influence of later developments in the early church, can be useful. Other criteria that are deemed as useful by Crossley are the criteria of historical plausibility, Aramaisms, and multiple attestation, especially when the use of these criteria provides an argument of cumulative weight. For Crossley, like many historical Jesus scholars, John is of minimal use to construct the historical Jesus.

In chapter 3 Crossley turns to the first two topics in the early Jesus movement he believes could be seen as a negotiation with the socio-economic changes in Galilee and Judea, namely kingdom of God and Christology. According to Crossley, the earliest teaching in the name of Jesus 'does seem to have envisaged him as having a prime position in the impending kingdom of God, as did the developing Christology in his name' (64). Regarding the kingdom of God, Crossley argues that predictions about the kingdom and end times were part of the early Palestinian tradition, that these predictions generated eschatological enthusiasm, and when the kingdom and these predications failed to materialize, an attempt was made to explain why. Moreover, the kingdom with its subversive attitude towards empire, wealth, and inequality—as part of the early Palestinian tradition because of the socio-economic changes in Palestine as Jesus was growing up—did not escape imperial ideology; it reinscribed it. This, for example, is clear from *Matthew* 19.28 and *Luke* 22.29–30; two sayings that give Jesus and his followers power and authority in the eschatological kingdom. This understanding of the early Palestinian tradition, Crossley argues, is only possible when the focus is not on the specific sayings of Jesus, but on 'thinking about the Synoptic tradition in more general terms' (75). Turning to Christology, Crossley is of the opinion that the earliest Palestinian tradition gives evidence that the first followers of Jesus had visions of Jesus shortly after his death, and that these appearances generated sustained

Christological speculation. This speculation included some sort of enthronement and elevation of Jesus to someone with divine power. Thus, from very early on, the development of imperialistic Christology was well under way; '[i]mperialism, theocracy, and empire were as integral to the earliest tradition as were promises to the poor and overthrowing the rich and Rome' (95).

In chapter 4 Crossley looks at another topic that was generated by the socio-economic changes in first-century Galilee, namely the group called 'sinners', and the call for their repentance and return to the Law. Crossley's thesis is that the behavior of sinners was constructed in relation to purity concerns which provided a connection to ideas about the inclusion of Gentiles. In this process, morality became separated from purity, morality became the heightened boundary marker of inclusion, and because of this, the concern for purity in the earliest Palestinian tradition was reinterpreted metaphorically or simply forgotten. In defining the term 'sinners', Crossley argues, the early Palestinian tradition, like the many references to sinners in Jewish literature, always refers to sinners, in the context of socio-economic status, as people who are oppressive, cruel, idolatrous, unjust, rich, comfortable, powerful, abusing justice, people who hate the poor and who are unjustly successful; a label that can be seen as synonymous with Gentiles. Because the sinners were deemed as law-breakers who acted beyond the covenant, Gentiles were sinners by default; an understanding of 'sinners' that is in line with the Gospels' use of 'sinner'. For these sinners, the specific Jewish views of purity (like the washing of hands before eating) only had limited resonance. To also include these sinners, the moral aspects of purity became more and more important, so to also include Gentiles.

Turning to gender (chapter 5), Crossley disagrees with scholarly tradition that argues that Jesus 'was especially nice to women in the sense that it was outrageous to Jews' (134). To the contrary, he is of the opinion that ideas about gender in the earliest Jesus tradition were somewhat 'chaotic, unstable, and possibly inconsistent' (135). In this tradition a number of ideas about gender are present, some of which indeed shook conventional ideas about gender and which settled soon as conventional, while others effectively reinscribed conventional gender roles. Mark 6.17–29, for example, gives us an indication of some of the ways in which gender was understood in first-century Palestine, a narrative in which we find no challenge to the traditional assumptions of gender in first-century Palestine. One specific development in the emergence of Christianity, which can be tied with the understanding of gender in the earliest Palestinian tradition, is the role of female patrons. This, Crossley argues, was the result of the socio-economic and political forces in the first-century which paved the way for some kind of change in traditional roles, including gender. Because of shifting household patterns and the idea of fictive kinship, the ear-

liest traditions attest to the fact that women were followers and patrons of Jesus. This role of women in the Jesus movement is connected to the role woman played in the spreading of the gospel in early Christianity.

Crossley's book indeed makes a contribution to the study of the historical Jesus, and it is an insightful read. To critically engage with his work, my first question relates to his main thesis, namely that rather than seeing Jesus as a Great Man who changed history, one should investigate how the social upheavals in Galilee and Judea during the time of Jesus effected historical change. Is this approach really different from some published studies on the historical Jesus? Crossan's methodology, for example, in his *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991) consists of what he calls a triple triad process, of which the second triad (mesocosmic level) is Hellenistic and Roman history. The historical Jesus is *inter alia* studied in light of the socio-economic and political background of Jesus' Galilee and Judea. Maybe I misread Crossley's emphasis, and Crossan's methodology, but there seems not to be a huge difference between his approach and that of Crossan; an approach I believe should be one of the methodological starting points when studying the historical Jesus. Also, are texts not always products of a specific social system? No text emerges in a vacuum, especially when certain topics are at issue.

As referred to earlier, Crossley shares the recent skepticism that has emerged regarding the usefulness of the traditional criteria in constructing an historical Jesus. For him, the analysis of specific passages should be used to build up general pictures of plausibility, or, as he states differently, 'thinking about the Synoptic tradition in more general terms' (75). If one takes this as point of departure, I believe it is necessary to apply *Redaktionsgeschichte* in a very strict sense with regards to all specific sayings and longer narratives like the parables that are presented by the Synoptics as coming from Jesus. Crossley, for example, argues that the use of the language for 'father' for God is well attested in the sayings of Jesus, especially in the parables (45). In the parables Crossley cites (*Mark* 12.1–12; *Mt* 21.28–32; *Luke* 15.11–32), the equation of God with the owner of a vineyard (*Mark* 12.1–12), with the father with two sons (*Mt* 21.28–32), and with the father of the prodigal (*Luke* 15.11–32), are allegorical-contextual readings. In the Tenants the owner is simply an owner of a vineyard that he leases, in the Father with Two Sons and the Prodigal the father is simply a first-century Mediterranean styled father. It is only because of the Synoptics' allegorical use of these parables that it is possible to equate the fathers in these parables with God. Thinking about the Synoptic tradition in more general terms cannot be accepted as the general rule of thumb, since many of the sayings and longer narratives in the Synoptics are interpretations and redactional applications of what Jesus said to suit the theology of the respective Synoptics. Also, as it is indeed the case that Luke likes the parables of return and repentance, the question is if the Lukan version and application of these parables reflect what was implied when these parables were told by Jesus.

The Prodigal in *Luke* 15 is clearly introduced by *Luke* 15.1–2, which makes it possible to read the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal in *Luke* 15 as parables of repentance. This, however, is clearly Luke's hand. Taken out of this context, the Prodigal is most probably more about an atypical first-century Mediterranean father than a repenting son. Also, can one argue that the sayings of Jesus in *Matthew* 19.28 and *Luke* 22.29–30 (the Son of Man seated on the throne as judge) go back to Jesus because these ideas are found elsewhere in the Synoptic tradition? Put more pointedly, are the Son of Man sayings about the enthroned and judging Jesus part of the early Palestinian tradition, or a later development that is coherently presented by the Synoptics? This also relates to Crossley's view that the distinction between pre-Easter and post-Easter narratives should be less important in historical Jesus studies. Post-Easter narratives obviously are part of the proclamation of the earliest followers of Jesus, and should be treated as such.

This brings us to Crossley's use of the term 'early Palestinian tradition'. It is not always clear what is meant by this term. Does this tradition refer to the earliest layer of the historical Jesus, or the tradition that is found in the Synoptics? Or are the two the same? Crossley, for example, states that 'Imperialism, theocracy, and empire were as integral to the earliest tradition as were promises to the poor and overthrowing the rich and Rome' (95). Does 'the earliest tradition' here refer to the earliest Palestinian tradition, or the Synoptic tradition? It is not clear. Elsewhere Crossley equates the earliest Palestinian tradition with the 'pre-Gospel tradition' (111). Does this mean that the earliest Palestinian tradition is the same as the earliest layer of the historical Jesus? Crossley maybe could have been more clear on what is meant by 'the earliest Palestinian tradition'.

Finally, Crossley's depiction of 'sinners', from a socio-economic perspective, as the unjust rich is convincing. It is, however, also reductionist. Certain people in first-century Palestine were also labeled as 'sinners' from a cultic perspective, being 'pure' or 'polluted'. One can therefore not read all references to 'sinners' in the Synoptics only from a socio-economic perspective. Jesus not only ate with the rich, but also with the socially marginalized and outcasts of his day. And, in the end, this will lead to a different construction of Jesus as an historical person.

In spite of these critical remarks, Crossley's *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus* makes a contribution to the debate on the quest for the historical Jesus. The strong point of the book is the description of how seemingly egalitarian and countercultural ideas in the sayings of the historical Jesus led to ideas of dominance and power as the Jesus tradition developed in earliest Christianity.