

***The Need for the "Historical Jesus"
A Response to Jacob Neusner's Review
of Crossan and Meier***

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*Jacob Neusner's review of John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus* and John P Meier's *A Marginal Jew* is insightful and helpful at many points. Although Neusner is not himself a Jesus scholar, his work in rabbinica qualifies him for meaningful participation in what is a technical and difficult field of study. Neusner rightly criticizes Crossan's uncritical use of apocryphal gospels, especially with respect to Morton Smith's *Secret Gospel of Mark*. But Neusner infers too much from this particular controversy; Jesus research is not in a state of chaos, nor has the discipline been unable to defend itself from hucksters and sensationalists. Neusner claims too much when he accuses Crossan and Meier of defending their work on "blatantly theological grounds." Both discuss the implications that their research has for Christian faith, but the work itself is not defended on theological grounds. It is concluded that historical Jesus research is credible and necessary.*

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Anyone familiar with the history of the various phases in the quest for the historical Jesus will appreciate what Jacob Neusner has to say about the subject in general and about the recent books by Dom Crossan and John Meier in particular. Neusner is not himself a Jesus scholar, but his quests for the historical Yohanan ben Zakkai and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, near contemporaries of Jesus ben David, have confronted him with the same difficulties with which Jesus scholars grapple. Indeed, one is able to perceive in the three decades of Neusner's remarkably productive career a development of thinking that in a certain sense parallels some of the developments in the two-century history of the quest for the historical Jesus. His *Life of Yohanan ben Zakkai* (SPB 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962) roughly approximates the assumptions and results characteristic of the better studies of the Old Quest. As

with many of the Old Questers, Neusner began his study with more optimism than his sources could justify. (In his c.v. Neusner places this work under the heading, "The pre-critical stage.") Following its publication, Neusner discovered form criticism, which is reflected in his second study of Yohanan (1970), the study of the Pharisees in rabbinic tradition (1971), and the study concerned with Eliezer (1973). (Neusner places the latter books in his c.v. under the heading, "The beginning of the critical enterprise.") From this work Neusner concluded that "in no way is biography possible on the foundations of the kind of evidence produced by the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah" (from n. 8 of Neusner's review above). This conclusion is similar to that reached by Gospel form critics beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Neusner's application of gospel form criticism to rabbinic studies marks a major advance, though not yet fully appreciated by rabbinic scholars. (Possibly illustrative of this point is that during a recent visit to the Mount Scopus campus of Hebrew University I was surprised to observe very few of Neusner's books on the library's shelves.) His recent work concerned with context runs parallel in certain ways to some of the more positive work that makes up the current "Third Quest." For New Testament scholars Neusner has emerged as a valuable partner in dialogue. He knows Judaica as few do and at the same time understands and applies the critical methods of New Testament scholarship. One might not always agree with him, but interaction with him is always rewarding (see our recent exchange in *JBL* 112 [1993] 267-304).

Neusner's review of the books by Crossan and Meier is perceptive. Crossan writes with passion; Meier with precision. Crossan's work is marked with imagination and daring; Meier's with caution and careful documentation. As Neusner says, Crossan's book is "poetic"; Meier's is "definitive." Before seeing Neusner's review, I had myself reviewed these books (Crossan's in *TrinJ* 13 [1992] 230-39; Meier's in *TrinJ* 14 [1993] 88-92) and found that Neusner and I are in essential agreement as to their respective strengths and weaknesses. Meier's assessment of the sources and the criteria of authenticity is sound, while his conclusions thus far are compelling. Of course, a comprehensive evaluation of Meier's work is not yet possible, since the second and third volumes have not yet appeared. (The book announces that a second volume is forthcoming, but in recent conversation with Meier I have learned that the second volume has now grown into two). It will be in these volumes that we will be treated to the results of his investigation.

Crossan's presentation of the historical Jesus is complete, so the results of his study can be evaluated. The great strength of his book is its contextualization. Reading it helps fill in the background

against which any person of the first-century Mediterranean should be studied. However, I have two principal reservations, both of which are shared by Neusner. The first reservation has to do with Crossan's utilization of the apocryphal gospels, particularly the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, discovered at the Mar Saba monastery by Morton Smith in 1958 and published in 1973. Neusner describes it as the "forgery of the century," the production of which was motivated out of spite for Jesus and Christianity. As to Morton Smith's personality and personal feelings, I have no firsthand knowledge. Neusner knew Smith; I did not. So he certainly has a better understanding of the man. But still I find it hard to believe that anyone would devote years of painstaking labor to the production of a 450-page technical book that studies a writing that the author himself faked. I think that it is a virtual certainty that the fragments of *Secret Mark* cited in the Clementine letter are spurious and therefore of no value for serious Jesus research, but the letter itself may very well be genuine. Several patristic scholars think so, and not all have a vested interest in Jesus research.

Because Smith's book was taken seriously by some, among them Helmut Koester and Dom Crossan, Neusner believes that the quest for the historical Jesus has been seriously discredited: "Now the spectacle of the quest for the historical Jesus was exposed for all to see." "I dwell on a memorable academic scandal . . . to recall the moment at which, to outsiders to the entire enterprise, the very worth of the work came under suspicion. A field of learning that cannot defend itself from forgery and fraud commands no claim on a continued place in the academy." On the contrary, I think the field has defended itself adequately in this case. Not only has Quentin Quesnell raised the appropriate objections relating to the lack of verification (*CBQ* 37 [1975] 48-67), but many others have concluded that the putative fragments of *Secret Mark* have nothing constructive to offer (e.g., H. Merkel, *ZTK* 71 [1974] 123-44; E. Bammel, *JSNT* 4 [1979] 69-76; F. Neiryck, *ETL* 55 [1979] 43-66). Outside of Crossan, Koester, and a few of Koester's students, not too many scholars take *Secret Mark* seriously. Since in all probability Smith did not forge the Clementine letter, there really is no scandal. *Secret Mark* is a second—not twentieth—century forgery. Its use or lack of use in the quest for the historical Jesus is a matter of source-critical judgment.

The issue that Neusner has raised is, however, part of a much larger problem. Crossan's assessment of the apocryphal gospels is the primary weakness from which the whole work suffers. From the second-century *Gospel of Peter* Crossan believes that he can extract a primitive "Cross Gospel," the source on which the four canonical Gospels drew for their respective passion accounts. Despite Crossan's

careful pruning, indications of Synoptic influence remain (cf., J. B. Green, *ZNW* 78 [1987] 293-301). In any case, is it really credible to regard a passion account that describes a talking cross and angels whose heads reach the heavens as the most original account? Similarly, Crossan argues that fragment §2 of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* presents us with the "earliest text" of Jesus' baptism: "And it came to pass when the Lord was come up out of the water, the whole fount of the Holy Spirit descended upon him and rested on him and said to him: My son, in all the prophets was I waiting for thee that thou shouldest come and I might rest in thee. For thou art my rest; thou art my first-begotten Son that reignest for ever" (Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 232-33). How Crossan can regard this account, which gives every indication of secondary pious embellishment, as the "earliest text" is difficult to fathom. Surely Mark's simpler description (Mark 1:10-11) is more primitive.

Crossan also makes use of Papyrus Egerton 2, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*. Of these only the last may actually contain a few superior readings, though many scholars dispute this. The real problem in all of this is that Crossan's uncritical use of these apocryphal gospels leads to a distortion of the portrait of the historical Jesus. For example, preference for the purged versions of Jesus' teaching found in the *Gospel of Thomas*, a document that shows little interest in Jewish salvation history or commercial and business matters, lends support to Crossan's portrait of Jesus as Cynic. In most cases the parables of Thomas make better sense viewed as abridged and gnosticized versions of the Synoptic parables, rather than the latter as embellished expansions of the former (cf. K. R. Snodgrass, *SecCent* 7 [1989-90] 19-38). Meier's more prudent position is to be preferred: "Contrary to some scholars, I do not think that the . . . *agrapha*, the apocryphal gospels, and the Nag Hammadi Codices (in particular the *Gospel of Thomas*) offer us reliable new information or authentic sayings that are independent of the NT. . . . For better or worse, in our quest for the historical Jesus, we are largely confined to the canonical Gospels; the genuine 'corpus' is infuriating in its restrictions. For the historian it is a galling limitation. But to call upon the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Gospel of Thomas* to supplement our Four Gospels is to broaden out our pool of sources from the difficult to the incredible" (*Marginal Jew*, 140-41). Recently, Moody Smith has commented that "it is not unfair to suggest that we are seeing now a willingness or propensity to credit the independence and antiquity of the apocryphal gospels that is somewhat surprising in view of what is allowed in the case of the canonicals" ("The Problem of John and the Synoptics," in A. Denaux [ed.], *John and the Synoptics* [BETL 101; Leuven: Peeters, 1992] 147-62, here 151).

The problem with the *Gospel of Thomas* brings us to the second reservation, which has to do with Crossan's discovery of a Cynic

Jesus. The Cynic-like features that Crossan finds in the historical Jesus approximate the attitudes and actions of many groups (e.g., the Essenes) and individuals (e.g., prophets) in Israel. What actually constituted the philosophy and life-style of the historical Cynic is not entirely clear. Most of our primary material has been handed down by Stoics, whose idealized portraits scarcely provide the realism necessary for worthwhile comparisons (e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22). Cynicism evolved over several centuries and was about four centuries old in the time of Jesus. There is no body of doctrine or coherent first-hand description (as in Epicureanism or Stoicism). Nevertheless, Crossan thinks he can reconstruct Cynicism by drawing from sources that span about six centuries. Picking and choosing, primarily from Gerald Downing's *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (JSOT Manuals 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), a Strack-Billerbeck-like compilation of "parallels," Crossan finds several points of contact that lead him to conclude that Jesus was a Jewish Cynic. One might just as easily pick and choose through Strack-Billerbeck and conclude that Jesus was a mishnaic authority (which is not too far from what many scholars have done). Selection from a list of dubious "parallels" is uncritical and misleading. As this journal's readers know full well, Neusner himself has led the way in articulating this criticism (see the comments in nn. 5 and 6 of his review). I have to agree with him and with Luke Johnson, whose review Neusner cites, that Crossan's egalitarian, politically correct Jesus does seem to "fit perfectly the idealized ethos of the late twentieth-century academic."

There are two important points where I disagree with Neusner. First, he exaggerates when he says that "the results of the quest have produced nothing short of chaos" and then goes on to paraphrase the concern voiced by Albert Schweitzer in 1906: "every scholar comes up with the historical Jesus that suits his taste and judgment." I do not think that the picture is quite so grim, nor is it a problem limited to the quest for the historical Jesus. Revisionism, which is what in essence we are talking about, is a problem that plagues most disciplines concerned with history. Gender issues, ethnic issues, social and economic issues currently drive much of contemporary scholarship. In effect, we want to find our causes championed by the heroes of the past. For Christians this often means Jesus has to be seen advancing a particular Christian agenda. Consequently, it is often not a quest for the historical Jesus as much as it is a quest for justification of our views.

From the point of view of non-experts there may be a chaos of sorts. But that is because they cannot distinguish credible work from that produced by hucksters and sensationalists. Here, one thinks of recently published books by Barbara Thiering (*Jesus and the Riddle of*

the Dead Sea Scrolls) and Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh (*Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*), both of which exploit public interest and ignorance concerning the writings of Qumran. For scholars who engage in serious Jesus research there is diversity and disagreement, to be sure, but not "chaos" The books by Crossan and Meier illustrate significant points of divergence. But both of these scholars have much in common. They read the same primary and secondary literature. They presuppose many points of common ground. They interact with one another and with academically qualified colleagues. Both are open to revising their views, if presented with convincing evidence and argument.

In my judgment, the quest for the historical Jesus has had positive results. Many of the advances in biblical literature and history in the last two centuries have been prompted by the quest. If scholars abandon the quest for the historical Jesus, because of the diversity of results and the evidence of personal bias, then the field will be left to the quacks and cranks who do promote chaos.

At a second point I disagree with Neusner. It is not fair to say that "Meier and Crossan explain and defend their work . . . on blatantly theological grounds." A few paragraphs later, Neusner cites statements that Meier makes on pp. 198-200. If one reads the whole chapter in which these statements are made (chap. 7, pp. 196-201), one is not left with the impression that Meier is attempting to defend his work "on blatantly theological grounds." In his chapter, which is entitled, "Why Bother?" Meier "doff[s] for a moment the hat of an exegete using purely historical-critical methods and put[s] on the hat of a theologian" (p. 197). Such a chapter is necessary, not for Meier or other Jesus scholars, but for most of the Christians who will read his book. Indeed, I suspect that one of his editors asked him to write this chapter. (In two studies dealing with the historical Jesus I had editors request footnotes in which the point of such research is explained to Christians who might question it on theological grounds.) As Meier says, "It is . . . the staunch believer who often feels that the quest is at best a waste of time and at worst a threat to faith" (p. 196). It is for people with such concern that Meier makes "a momentary change in method" and dons "the hat of a theologian" (p. 197). But the perspective of *historical* Jesus research is non-theological: "the Jesus of history is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith" (p. 197). Meier is correct, and herein lies the error of the "Old Quest," which looked for a Jesus of history in which Christians could believe.

Crossan seems to make a similar point, but it is less clear, less explicit. In the part of his Epilogue entitled, "Jesus and Christianity" (pp. 422-26), he queries the relationship between Jesus and the Christian Church. He speaks of theologically invested "Christs" being built upon historically interpreted "Jesuses" (p. 423) and, if I under-

stand him, he speaks of the historical Jesus and the christology built upon him as "a graded process of historical reconstruction" (p. 426). His interest in Christian faith is seen in the final sentence: "If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in" (p. 426). Although Crossan has not explicitly stated that he has "doffed" the hat of the exegete in making these comments, I think he has. Earlier in this portion of the Epilogue he avers that "any analysis of a historical Jesus must be open to the disciplined historical methods of its *contemporary* world and must be able to stand up to its judgments without special pleading" (p. 423, his emphasis). From this, as well as from the book as a whole, I do not think that it is fair to describe Crossan as explaining or defending his work on "blatantly theological grounds." As in the case of Meier, he has to explain to his readers what relationship historical Jesus research has to the emergence of Christianity and what relevance the historical Jesus has for Christian faith. But I do not think that Crossan's work as a whole has been driven by theology or apologetics.

Of course, this is not to say that Meier and Crossan are unbiased. They are indeed, as are all human beings. The background, world view, education, and experience of each has influenced their work. But their respective biases no more invalidate historical Jesus research than the love of art invalidates the work of an art critic or the love of science invalidates the research of a scientist. What validates historical Jesus research, as in the case of all scholarly research, is its communal dimension. Persons of every ideological stripe can and have contributed to it. Historical Jesus research prevents the picture of Jesus from "freezing," much as ongoing scientific inquiry prevents a given understanding of the cosmos from assuming the status of an absolute.

If I too may be permitted to doff the hat of the exegete, I would add that the historical Jesus is very important for Christian theology. I can add little to what Meier has already said in chap. 7 of his book. Christian theology obviously goes far beyond history and historical verification, but it is, as Crossan himself tries to explain in his Epilogue, dependent in an important way on things that *happened*. This is especially true with regard to christology. In my judgment, if the historical Jesus did not speak of himself as God's Son or as in some sense Israel's Messiah, then certain aspects of christology should be modified. Accordingly, this suggests that "christology" should presuppose and undertake the study of the historical Jesus and what extrapolations and implications may be drawn from it. So, "Who needs the 'historical Jesus'?" Everyone who holds beliefs about him.