

**The Historical Jesus:
The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant**

John Dominic Crossan

HarperCollins 1993

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1993 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Books about Jesus have always been popular, but in recent years there seems to have been a real glut of them. Up till now none of those I've seen have really tempted me: Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man* seemed like a rather sensationalist attempt to make the bestseller lists (though still a huge improvement on such journalistic trash as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*), while a basic wariness about a biography of such a controversial figure written by a non-specialist has kept me away from A.N. Wilson's *Jesus*. *The Historical Jesus* is a completely different kind of book. The blurb on my copy describes it as a "bestseller", but that seems a rather unlikely fate for a book that begins with a survey of the social anthropology of honour-shame societies and its relationship to the ecology of the Mediterranean! Though it is also remarkably readable, Crossan's book is deeply scholarly.

The Historical Jesus is an attempt to reconstruct the life of Jesus — who he was, what he did, what he said, and what it meant — using all the evidence and all the available tools. Crossan's reconstruction is based on the triple pillar of social anthropology, history and textual analysis. The book is divided into three sections of unequal size. The first section (about 80 pages) uses cross-cultural anthropological studies to set the general background, the second (120 pages) narrows in on the history and society of first century Judaea and the last (200 pages) uses textual analysis (along with more anthropology and history) to focus on Jesus himself. Crossan uses a balanced combination of primary sources (mostly original texts, but with some archaeological evidence) and secondary sources (the latest in anthropological and historical studies).

Within the final section his methodology involves using what he calls first stratum sources (those dateable to 30-70 AD) and only considering events

and sayings with multiple independent attestations. He is very careful to make this methodology explicit, and when he does sometimes violate it he is careful to point out that he is doing so. He doesn't make grandiose claims about either his methodology or the certainty of the resulting conclusions. In the prologue he says:

It is clear, I hope, that my methodology does not claim a spurious objectivity, because almost every step demands a scholarly judgment and an informed decision. I am concerned, not with an unattainable objectivity, but with an attainable honesty.

A more general defense of reconstructive attempts in general is given in the epilogue, which concludes:

This book, then, is a scholarly reconstruction of the historical Jesus. And if one were to accept its formal methods and even their material investments, one could surely offer divergent interpretative conclusions about the reconstructable historical Jesus. But one cannot dismiss it or the search for the historical Jesus as *mere* reconstruction, as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is *only* reconstruction. For a believing Christian both the life of the Word of God and the text of the Word of God are alike a process of ... historical reconstruction... . If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in.

The first chapter is a very general introduction to the anthropology of the first century Mediterranean. Its main purpose is to give the reader some help in overcoming the distorting perspective of temporal and cultural separation. As well as the above mentioned work on honour-shame societies, it places Nazareth geographically within the Mediterranean world and uses extensive quotation from the Oxyrhynchus papyri to paint a picture of the life of a group of weavers in first century Egypt.

Two chapters give a brief description of the Roman empire and the nature of patron-client relations and slavery. This is done by quotation from classical sources (in particular Cicero, Petronius, and the Augustan poets) and reference to the works of modern anthropologists and historians (most notably Lenski and Carney).

The final chapter in the first section is about the Cynical tradition — a religious/philosophical movement stressing withdrawal from the world. The Cynics repudiated all worldly concerns and moved around with a cloak and staff, begging or working for a living (the exemplar being the Diogenes famous for living in a barrel). This chapter is important because Crossan later argues that Jesus drew on elements of the Cynical tradition.

Josephus is the major source for the history of Judaea during the critical period. The second section begins with a chapter describing his life and writings and the difficulties inherent in using him as a source. In the following four chapters Crossan traces particular aspects of Jewish response to Roman rule, starting before the first century and following through to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. during the first Roman-Jewish war. None of the chapters refer directly to the written accounts of Jesus' life, as their purpose is to provide the context within which to view it.

The first looks at the Jewish apocalyptic tradition as a form of reaction to imperial domination, using anthropological studies of other millenarian movements. It traces the history of opposition to the Romans within the scribal/retainer class up to the Sicarii and the 1st Roman-Jewish war. The sources used are Josephus and other Hebrew texts from the period, such as the Testament of Moses and 1 Enoch. The next chapter considers the nature of peasant opposition to oppression, drawing parallels with other extractive agrarian empires.

A chapter on prophets and magicians uses biblical and rabbinical sources to trace an "alternative" (to that of the temple) religious tradition from Elijah and Elisha through to Honi and Hanina Ben Dosa and the first century millennial prophets described in Josephus. This tradition stressed personal and individual, rather than communal and institutional, access to divine power.

Hobsbawm's work on social banditry provides the background for a chapter on banditry within Judaea. The situation there is compared with that in other agrarian empires and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Then the particular history of Judaeian banditry is narrated, up to the Zealots and their role in the siege and fall of Jerusalem.

The final chapter in this section analyses the 1st Roman-Jewish war (66-73 A.D.) as the culmination of the different forms of protest described in the previous four chapters. It is compared with other revolts against Rome. The idea is to make clearer the trajectories of unrest during the preceding half century.

The final section is the one I found the most difficult to read. That was partly because literary and textual analysis is more foreign to me than anthropology or history, and partly because Crossan sometimes assumes a general familiarity with the canonical New Testament that I lack. The analysis is roughly chronological, beginning with Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist and finishing with an analysis of the Passion and Resurrection accounts. Rather than describing the nitty gritty of Crossan's analysis, I will give a very brief summary of his conclusions. In doing this I also draw on the "overture" to the book, which is a kind of informal summary of his reconstruction, consisting of a short "story" of the life of Jesus followed by thirteen pages of sayings which he thinks can reliably be attested to Jesus, in the form he reconstructs as original. Throughout the account Crossan uses further anthropological work (in particular Bryan Wilson's work on religious movements of protest throughout the world) to set the events of Jesus' life in context.

Jesus originally accepted John's authority and apocalyptic vision. After John's death he developed his own vision of the Kingdom of God as here and now among the poor and destitute. His "ecstatic vision and social program sought to rebuild a society upwards from its grass roots but on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism". The core elements of his teaching were magical healing and shared meals (open commensality). His teaching opposed conventional morality and conventional power-structures and tried to break down all barriers — religious, social and economic.

The entire passion narrative is a later construction on Old Testament models. There was no trial before Herod or Pilate, and "it is difficult for the Christian imagination, then or now, to accept the brutal informality with

which Jesus was probably condemned and crucified." None of his followers witnessed his death and his burial place was unknown. The post-resurrection accounts and are related to the pre-resurrection miracle stories. The "'nature' miracles of Jesus are actually credal statements about ecclesiastical authority, although they all have as their background Jesus' resurrectional victory over death, which is, of course, the supreme 'nature' miracle."

I cannot really evaluate the final (and perhaps critical) part of this book, as I know only a little about literary analysis and almost nothing about the textual history of the New Testament. However I do have a solid grounding in social anthropology and ancient history, and I can vouch for Crossan's general honesty of approach and correctness of detail in those parts of the book that draw on those disciplines. It seems likely that his textual analysis is just as careful and disciplined (especially as New Testament studies is his native field) and his methodology seems reasonable. Details of his conclusions are clearly arguable, but it seems to me that the general argument is robust, in that small changes in the interpretations of texts or modifications to current anthropological theories are not going to cause major changes to the results. Crossan's scholarship is impressive, and he is equally at home quoting classical authors or the latest secondary sources. At any rate, those who wish to check the primary sources and look at the more detailed arguments in the secondary sources used will find all the information required to do so in the book. *The Historical Jesus* closes with forty pages of technical appendices on the textual Jesus tradition and a full twenty page bibliography.

Obviously Christians from a range of theological positions will find the conclusions of this book unacceptable. Some of them may even perceive it as an attack on Christianity, but I believe that is unreasonable, as it is clear that the author is himself a devout Christian (though this is nowhere stated explicitly) [1]. But only those who adopt an extreme fundamentalist position and insist that the bible was written for them personally as a member of a Western industrialised democracy (and perhaps even in English :-)) will find **nothing** of value in this book [2]. (It is possible to reject reconstruction if one is prepared to worship a particular text.) Those

Christians who insist on viewing Jesus from the perspective of later Church history (ie by insisting on a unique historical role for the canonical gospels), and those who hold particular theological positions on non-historical grounds, will probably find the first two sections interesting and the last contentious.

But religious proclivities aside, if you are interested in the social and historical background to the New Testament I can't recommend this book too highly. Crossan's breadth of knowledge is very impressive, and his application of different theories, models and typologies in social anthropology will be of interest to students of that discipline. There may be other books that present the same information, but I haven't seen any and doubt whether they could improve on Crossan's in both readability and scholarship. Anyone who genuinely cares about Jesus and his teachings, and who is interested in what we know about what he actually said and did, should read this book.

Notes:

[1] For those who worry about such things, the author of this review is himself an atheist.

[2] Literal, textual fundamentalisms are the only forms of Christianity I find intrinsically abhorrent. This is because they are almost necessarily coupled with some kind of cultural imperialism. Otherwise, instead of providing the desired certainty, they lead to an extreme relativism, since it is presumably reasonable for highland converts in New Guinea to read the bible in the light of **their** culture...

August 1993

External links:

- buy from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Related reviews:

- books by [John Dominic Crossan](#)

- books about [Christianity + Christian history](#)

- more [ancient history](#)

- more [anthropology](#)

%T The Historical Jesus
%S The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant
%A Crossan, John Dominic
%I HarperCollins
%D 1993
%O paperback
%G ISBN 1863712119
%P xxxiv,507pp

[Subjects](#) | [Titles](#) | [Authors](#) | [Best Books](#) | [Search](#) | [Latest Book Reviews by Danny Yee](#)