

# INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE CURRENT SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

RAMON D. ECHICA

**I**n their book, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*,<sup>1</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz list three characteristics of the current search<sup>2</sup> for the historical Jesus: a) interest in social history; b) emphasis on the place of Jesus within Judaism; and c) attention to non-canonical sources.

This paper attempts to see how two of these characteristics, the first and the third, are indeed present in the current search but most especially in the writings of John Dominic Crossan. We will not include the second listed characteristic since it may not be germane to the theme of interdisciplinarity.<sup>3</sup> To these two characteristics,

---

1. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1998), 10-11.

2. The author we are focusing on in this paper prefers not to use the terms *search* or *quest*. Rightly so, he prefers to speak of *reconstruction* of the historical Jesus. Cf. John Dominic Crossan, "The Historical Jesus as Risen Lord," in *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict*, eds. John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, Werner Kelber (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999), 5. The term *search* may suggest that there is an object that is waiting to be found, even without our own present presuppositions. A historical search without presuppositions is an impossible enterprise since history, as Crossan defines it, is "the past reconstructed interactively by the present argued through evidence in public discourse." Cf. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (Harper: San Francisco, 1999), 20.

3. Besides, the Jewishness of Jesus is not emphasized so much by Crossan. His lack of attempt to relate Jesus to Jewish literature is in fact one of the weaknesses of Crossan's enterprise. He addresses this apparent weakness in the epilogue of *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 418-421.

however, we add another, which is of particular interest for our theme in this conference: the appropriation of other sciences, most notably archeology. Previous searches focused simply on written documents.

We have chosen the writings of John Dominic Crossan since he is a well known and perhaps the most prolific New Testament scholar and one who has gained the most media attention. Furthermore, he has dealt extensively on the issue of methodology and the use of sources.

The limited goal of this paper is not to present my own preferred methodology. Rather, it intends to be expository of the interdisciplinary method in the current attempt to reconstruct the historical Jesus.

## **TWO CONTRASTING METHODS**

Before we go to the interdisciplinary method of John Dominic Crossan, it is good to explain, albeit briefly, the method employed by John Meier. The interdisciplinary method is better explained if it is also contrasted with the more traditional approach.

Of all those who use traditional methodology, Meier is undoubtedly the exegete and historian who has done the most extensive research on the historical Jesus in the English speaking world.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he is the exegete who has most consistently applied his methodology on the historical search.

The purpose of this detour is to contrast two methodologies. However, we also need to point out that the two methods are contrasted for didactic purposes but they are not mutually exclusive. The differences lie on emphasis.

---

4. At present, Meier has written three volumes with the fourth one, on the passion and death of Jesus, still to come. The volumes are John Meier, *The Marginal Jew* – Vol. I: *Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); Vol. II: *Mentor, Message and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Vol. III: *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

## JOHN MEIER: INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS<sup>5</sup>

Meier uses five main criteria to judge whether a saying or an event found in the New Testament can be traced back to the historical Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

### CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT

This means that any saying or event recorded in the New Testament that could have caused embarrassment to the early church is almost certainly historical. The logic here is that it is unlikely for the early church to invent a material that would unnecessarily provide unflattering data to her opponents then. In other words, there could be no theological agenda behind the story or saying. If anything, the early church wanted to soften whatever impact some embarrassing materials may have. A good example here is Jesus' baptism by John. At the time when the Gospels were written, Jesus was at least thought of as superior to John the Baptist. Thus, it is most unlikely that the kernel of this story was an invention of the early church.

### CRITERION OF DISCONTINUITY

Any saying or event that could not be derived from Judaism during the time of Jesus or from the early Church after him yet found its way into the New Testament has good chances of being historical. While this criterion has the danger of making Jesus ahistorically unique, it would make us conclude, among others, that Jesus' rejection of voluntary fasting and his prohibition of all oaths – not being derived from Judaism nor practiced by the early Church – are most probably historical.<sup>7</sup>

---

5. This section is taken almost exclusively from J. Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, I:168-177.

6. Crossan criticizes Meier for giving us only some criteria but no methodology. The two, according to Crossan, are not to be interchanged. See J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 143-147.

7. See also Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 92-95.

**CRITERION OF MULTIPLE ATTESTATION**

Any saying or deed of Jesus that is attested to in more than one independent<sup>8</sup> source is almost certainly historical. An example is the thesis that Jesus proclaimed the reign of God. Bracketing yet the historicity of each individual saying about the reign of God, Meier employs this criterion to conclude that the central theme of Jesus' message is the kingdom. After all, sayings about the reign of God can be found in several independent sources (and even in multiple literary genre). Another example is that Jesus performed deeds which he and his contemporaries perceived as extraordinary.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that each individual miracle story in the Gospel is historical.

**CRITERION OF COHERENCE**

This criterion is dependent on the data gathered using the other criteria. The other criteria would provide a data bank, so to speak, and anything that coheres with the data already gathered is most probably historical.

**CRITERION OF REJECTION**

This criterion is employed negatively. It is premised on the established fact that Jesus died a violent death in the hands of Roman and Jewish authorities. Any picture of Jesus that *cannot* explain the violent ending of his earthly life is almost certainly *not* historical. Thus, a picture of Jesus as a harmless teacher composing stingless sayings or parables which were not directed at anyone could be far from the Jesus of history.<sup>10</sup>

---

8. *Independent* is a key word. A deed or saying that is found in all the synoptic Gospels does not necessarily pass this criterion since most probably the only attestation here is Mark. Matthew and Luke, not knowing each other's work, then used Mark as a common source.

9. Meier says that whether God was acting in the person of Jesus through these extraordinary events is already a theological question. Cf. J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, II: 517-518.

10. See also E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 95.

### JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The aim of Crossan, which is not uncommon in the practice of the hermeneutics of suspicion, is to go beyond historical records written by the ruling elite or by the conquerors. He writes,

The first century of the common era is obscured by our contemporary view by three giant filters. The past is recorded almost exclusively in the voices of elites and males, in the viewpoints of the wealthy and the powerful, in the visions of the literate and the educated.<sup>11</sup>

It is in view of uncovering what have been previously covered by the different elite sectors and of looking at history from the vantage of the ordinary people that inter-disciplinarity is employed. He explains, “My method is interdisciplinary, applying anthropology, history, archeology and literary criticism to the same subject.”<sup>12</sup>

### INTEREST IN SOCIAL HISTORY<sup>13</sup>

Crossan and many of the current reconstructors, for that matter, try to situate Jesus in his social setting. Thus, they have gone beyond previous attempts to reconstruct Jesus that focused mainly on the written texts. In a society where most people were illiterate peasants, written texts could not be the main, much less the sole expression of the people’s thought.

In *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, more than half of the total number of pages is devoted to social history, with hardly any mention of the life of Jesus. More particularly,

---

11. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 3.

12. J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 147.

13. This interest is not peculiar to Crossan in this current search. Richard Horsley is one of those who have gone beyond the traditional methods of the discipline of history with its emphasis on political events and the elite. What Horsley calls as “people’s history” focuses on ordinary people in all their aspects of life. Cf. R. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). See also the two essays by Horsley, “Unearthing People’s History” and “Jesus Movements and the Renewal of Israel,” in *A People’s History of Christianity*, gen. ed. Denis R. Janz, 7 vols. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005); Vol. I: *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard Horsley, 1-46.

Crossan studies the situation of the peasants at the time, social strata in agrarian societies, banditry as a challenge to political power, social hierarchies, the phenomenon of magicians, among others, before going to the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, which is the first chapter that deals specifically on the historical Jesus.

This study of social history is done through different levels of studies: cross-cultural and cross-temporal social anthropology, Greco-Roman history, and the literature of different sayings and anecdotes, deeds, concerning Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

More specific examples are in order. Using studies from other scholars, this New Testament scholar presents to us the socio-cultural constants of societies within the “Mediterranean construct.”<sup>15</sup> He also presents Nazareth as a poor Jewish village in a Roman era and whose inhabitants were mostly engaged in agriculture.<sup>16</sup> Crossan also gives us magic as a relatively widespread form of protest against the religious establishment. He also gives us a picture of Judea that was infested with social bandits (to be distinguished from plain robbers) who went against the political establishment.

From these data gathered from other sciences, Crossan has a different manner of reading New Testament stories or sayings about Jesus. Jesus is presented as a peasant and his table fellowship with anyone is seen as opposed to excessive social hierarchies.

Some more examples are in order. The Gospels’ accounts of healing are seen by Crossan as Jesus’ rejection of the perception of disease as a sign of ritual uncleanness and social ostracization.<sup>17</sup> Whereas stories of exorcism are usually seen as Jesus’ victory over evil forces, Crossan interprets these stories in terms of the close

---

14. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxviii- xxix. See also J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), xii.

15. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 7. In order not to digress from our discussion, these constants can be enumerated not in the main text but in this footnote: a strong urban orientation; disdain for the peasant way of life; sharp social, geographic and economic stratification; political instability; a history of weak states; ‘atomistic’ community life; rigid sexual segregation; tendency to rely on nuclear families; strong emphasis on shifting ego-centered non-corporate coalitions; honor and shame syndrome.

16. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 15-19.

17. J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 80-82.

connection between possession and imperial oppression.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the saying of Jesus that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him (Mk. 10:13-16) is traditionally interpreted to mean as an affirmation of the innocence of children, Crossan sees in this passage the condemnation of view that children were non-persons. Lastly, whereas Jesus' multiply attested practice of eating with prostitutes and sinners is usually given the meaning of Jesus' compassion for sinners, Crossan sees in this activity Jesus' radical egalitarian philosophy and lifestyle.<sup>19</sup>

It should be clear from the above discussion that the context given the study by interdisciplinary approach is chronologically prior to the interpretation of the texts.<sup>20</sup>

#### ATTENTION TO NON-CANONICAL SOURCES

Attention to non-canonical sources is in itself not novel. Many books dealing with Jesus would touch on some few and scattered references to Jesus in the works of Tacitus and Josephus. However, since these references are few and far between, they are not considered extremely helpful in the reconstruction of the life of Jesus. But in one of the more controversial points in his methodology, Crossan gives more weight to some non-canonical sources than to the canonical gospels. In his reconstruction of the passion of Jesus,<sup>21</sup> he believes that while the whole gospel of Peter may have been written late, there is an original and independent core, which Crossan calls the Cross Gospel,<sup>22</sup> which is composed sometime in the middle of the first century and which has not fallen victim to later attempts

---

18. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 313 ff; idem, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 77-80.

19. J. D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 66-70.

20. J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 147-148.

21. See J. D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995); idem, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

22. Crossan however is not insistent on the term. The important point is the hypothesis that there is a passion-resurrection narrative independent from Mark. See *ibid.*, 120.

to conform to the canonical gospels.<sup>23</sup> Crossan also holds that there is a secret Gospel of Mark on which the Synoptics and the Gospel of John are dependent.

From his analysis of this Cross Gospel and the secret Gospel of Mark in relation to the canonical Gospels, Crossan comes to the conclusion that most of the sayings and stories in the passion narrative are not history remembered but prophecy historicized.<sup>24</sup>

Other non-canonical sources which Crossan gives more credence than the canonical gospels in the New Testament is the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>25</sup> The latter is important most especially in the reconstruction of the sayings of Jesus.

#### **THE APPROPRIATION OF OTHER SCIENCES**

In *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*,<sup>26</sup> Crossan partners with the archeologist Jonathan Reed to explain the more important archeological discoveries in “excavating Jesus.” Interestingly, the authors claim that the book is written jointly. In other words, the two authors did not write two separate pieces which are eventually joined together to form one book. In theory, archeology and exegesis are therefore placed side by side in reconstructing Jesus. The two authors claim that both archeology and exegesis involve unearthing layers and layers of history.

The two authors list ten important discoveries in the field of textual exegesis and archeology. While the listed discoveries in

---

23. Meier criticizes the priority given by Crossan to what he calls the Cross Gospel. See J. Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, Vol. I, 116-118. For Meier, the attempt of Crossan to reconstruct the chronology of the texts goes against the principle that all things being equal, the simplest theory that explains the most data is to be preferred. Furthermore, the hypothetical Cross gospel shows signs of dependence on the canonical gospels.

24. For a critique of this position, see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 1347.

25. We can include the Q gospel but the weight given to it is distinctive neither to Crossan nor even to the Jesus Seminar. It is now almost universally accepted that the non-extant but hypothetically constructed Q Gospel is the common source of Matthew and Luke.

26. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001).

exegesis are well known among exegetes, it is interesting to mention some of the archeological discoveries. Listed as the top discovery is the James's ossuary. It is a "box hewn of soft limestone in which bones of the deceased were reburied after the flesh decomposed, (and which) contains an Aramaic inscription of James son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."<sup>27</sup> This serves to confirm the New Testament datum of the existence of James the brother of the Lord (Mk. 6:3; Gal. 1:19).

Other archeological discoveries, which have more significance in reconstructing the social world of Jesus then, include the results of the excavation around the Temple in Jerusalem. The excavation would show how Herod, in his expansion of the Jewish temple, would show his loyalty to the Roman emperor and to the Roman empire.<sup>28</sup>

### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO APPROACHES

By now, the differences between the two approaches should be clear. However, for the sake of more clarity, and at the risk of oversimplification, we may present schematically the differences.

<b>Traditional method</b>	<b>Current reconstruction</b> (Crossan)
Interpretation of texts	People's history
Religious issues	Social and economic issues
Opposing forces are Jesus and his companions versus Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians, etc.	The peasants versus the ruling religious, political and social elite

After having presented the above table, we may ask whether the differences in methodology between the two exegetes come from or would lead to different soteriological models, even if the two do not specifically treat the question of how Jesus brought about salvation. This question can come from a Christological

---

27. *Ibid.*, 2.

28. *Ibid.*, 4; 92ff.

premise, most notably explained recently by Roger Haight,<sup>29</sup> on the intrinsic link between Christology and soteriology.

To put this question more pointedly, and to focus exclusively on the author in question, is Crossan motivated to present a preconceived “politically correct” soteriological model of Jesus as a liberator who fought an unjust status quo? It is now an accepted hermeneutical principle that there is no presuppositionless and value-free historical reconstruction or interpretation. Thus, Crossan cannot be free from his own biases, and he does not claim to be. The important question is whether he has deliberately distorted the data to present a Jesus who would be useful in fighting current forms of oppression. The answer is that there is no evidence of distortion. The conflicting interpretations can be adjudicated by the exegetes themselves.

### **CONCLUSION: RESULTS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION**

Since we are primarily concerned with the methodology and not with the outcome, this section will be brief.

Meier would present a qualified<sup>30</sup> eschatological Jesus. According to Meier, “future eschatology tied up to the symbol of a transcendent kingdom of God, is a central part of Jesus message.”<sup>31</sup> However, the coming of this kingdom does not carry a specific timetable and that “Jesus at times spoke of the kingdom as already present in some way or to some degree in his ministry.”<sup>32</sup>

---

29. See Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, New York Orbis, 1999), 181 ff. Haight writes, “The reason why people were and are interested in Jesus is that in some experiential manner he mediates salvation from God. Thus, the fundamental structure of Christian faith and Christology is soteriological, and from an anthropological perspective, the whole of Christology rests on soteriology.”

30. We say “qualified” because he gives nuances to eschatological picture of Jesus advocated today most notably by E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), and Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999). The two would basically follow the thesis of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss.

31. J. Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, Vol II, 337.

32. *Ibid.*, 450.

The results of the project of Crossan to reconstruct the historical Jesus would present him as an itinerant Jewish peasant who preached and practiced a kingdom with no hierarchy, a brokerless kingdom of nuisances and nobodies. This message is practiced in his table fellowship with almost anyone. It is also shown in his miracles – or magic<sup>33</sup> – which are performed to challenge the ideological control of Palestine’s elite.

These results are disputed and so the interdisciplinary approach of Crossan has not given us a definitive picture of the historical Jesus. Simply as examples, at least three of the several disputed conclusions in Crossan’s attempt at reconstruction can be cited: First, his thesis that the difference between a magician and a miracle worker is based on prior ideologies is persuasively put into question by Meier.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, no other well known exegete agrees with his thesis on the existence of the Cross Gospel which is prior to the canonical Gospels. Thirdly, the high degree he gives to “prophecy historicized” rather than to “history remembered” with regard to the crucifixion of Jesus is questionable.<sup>35</sup>

This exegete himself calls the different pictures of the historical Jesus one scholarly joke.<sup>36</sup> And his enterprise has not brought us nearer to an absolutely conclusive and clear correspondence between the result of the historical construct and the real Jesus who walked on the shores of Galilee.

This is not to say that the lack of clarity is due to the interdisciplinary approach. Rather, it is inherent in historical research itself that it cannot produce objective certainty. Historical research

---

33. Crossan holds that there is no substantial difference between the two -- magic and miracle. See J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 307.

34. Cf. J. Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, Vol. II, 537-552.

35. Crossan argues from the attested datum that the disciples left Jesus during his passion and they were not eyewitnesses to the crucifixion. Without saying that every detail in the crucifixion story is historical, Brown argues that it is inconceivable that the disciples did not seek information on the end of Jesus’ earthly life. See also R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 14.

36. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxvii.

on Jesus can produce, at best, a logical and plausible reconstruction. Meier himself writes of the quest for the historical Jesus:

Of its very nature, this quest can reconstruct only fragments of a mosaic, the faint outline of a faded fresco that allows of many interpretations. We constantly have to be reminded that not only are there no VCR videotapes or Sony Cassette recordings of what Jesus said or did. For better or for worse, there are no Watergate tapes of Jesus' trial before Pilate... The historical Jesus may give us fragments of the 'real' person, but nothing more.<sup>37</sup>

But this interdisciplinary approach can be a continuing project<sup>38</sup> and Crossan can add more fragments to the mosaic, to use the image of Meier. In principle, interdisciplinarity should help us to understand more the life of Jesus. Understanding more the life of Jesus means we value much more the incarnation of the Word who chose to participate in our human history.

**Ramon D. Echica**  
**Seminario Mayor de San Carlos**  
**School of Theology**  
**Juna Luna Avenue, Mabolo**  
**Cebu City, Philippines**

---

37. J. Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, Vol. I, 25.

38. We disagree with Luke Timothy Johnson who is calling for a moratorium of this quest. Partly following but not explicitly quoting Bultmann's thesis, Johnson says that what is crucial for our faith is the living Christ. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 4-5. See also idem, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).