

SIMPLE CHOICES? A RESPONSE TO JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

William (Bill) Loader
Professor of New Testament
Murdoch University
Murdoch WA 6150

The intellectual pleasure of reading Crossan's major works has been matched by the pleasure of listening to his presentation based on significant aspects of his most recent book, *The Birth of Christianity*. Both the manner of presentation and the broad brush perspective on the historical issues are stimulating and informative for discussion.

Crossan's reconstruction of the historical Jesus produces a figure who identifies with poor tenant farmers and the dispossessed poor as one of them. The good news of the kingdom is that he is setting in motion a program of radical inclusiveness, focused on mutual solidarity and commensality. It is focused on community, not on private salvation. It does not look to future divine intervention but identifies God's action as occurring in the present as people live out the Old Testament values of justice, preserved especially in the vision of the jubilee. This Crossan calls 'ethical eschatology'. It is God's ultimate (eschaton) strategy planted firmly in the here and now of peasant existence and represents a movement of resistance against the oppressive powers which dehumanise.

Only as the movement faced failure was there a return to the violence of apocalyptic eschatology which John the Baptist had espoused and which Jesus had disavowed, but which came to characterise Christianity of the canonical writings. Others, represented by the stream flowing into the Gospel of Thomas, chose ascetic eschatology, which focuses on the other end of history, its beginning, and on a return to undifferentiated singleness. Jesus stands out against the trends before and after. Some continued his program, even being unaware of Jesus' fate in Jerusalem ('the life tradition'); others made that fate the focus of their reflection ('the death tradition').

I find the construct of Jesus' mission attractive and eminently 'preachable'. Undergirding the construct are values which Crossan stoutly defends. Thus it does not engage in 'sarcophobic' dualism, which plays off body against spirit. It does not reflect eschatological dualism, which contrasts here and now with another time and

place. It has no intervening God of violence, no 'killer God'. It is radically inclusive and subversive, radically egalitarian.

Albert Schweitzer lived out the values enshrined in Crossan's construct, but did so believing this was not the historical Jesus' quest. Crossan, by contrast, offers a construct and a program which is transferable, not comfortably but with disturbing and challenging relevance to today's world. In this sense many will see his path as much more orthodox than those who, like Schweitzer, feel compelled by their research to declare that Jesus miscalculated in his expectation of imminent divine intervention. Crossan's orthodoxy is not achieved at the expense of integrity or through the kind of conservative manoeuvres of those scholars who are out to 'save' Jesus. Crossan writes and speaks with passion and honesty, committed to the ethics of sound, transparent methodology.

For me it is this same commitment which leads me closer to the unorthodoxy of Schweitzer's construct than to that of Crossan. In reality I find neither construct adequate. My own research wants to affirm that Crossan has skilfully identified a, perhaps even *the* central aspect of Jesus' mission and ministry. My problems lie more with what Crossan feels compelled to deny. Here I am thinking in particular of Crossan's denial that apocalyptic eschatology formed part of Jesus' vision.

The focus in my response will fall in particular on this aspect. I shall therefore leave aside the major issues of method except for the following brief comments. It is to Crossan's credit that he has sought a way out of the morass of subjectivity in relation to relevant sources by employing a method of identifying what he calls the Common Tradition. It consist of material shared by Q and Thomas. It necessarily leaves aside sayings which are attested in only one source. While valuing the effort to develop more careful controls, I see Crossan's proposals as too inflexible, too much of a methodological 'short-cut'. Our truth lies more in the pain of having to admit that we shall never escape uncertainties with regard to degrees of possible authenticity of material attributed to Jesus. Each claim must be tested against all the available evidence. We may cast our beads, as in the Jesus Seminar, but that does not take us beyond the value of opinion polling. We may make spurious claims for divinely controlled accuracy of transmission, but those are statements of faith not history. There is no escaping the complexity of arguing each case. Soundness of argument matters more than how many people reach a conclusion, but, when combined, the latter warrants attention. While finding Crossan's approach to sources too inflexible (and I would argue mistaken in dating of some material), I nevertheless find that in both his major books on the historical Jesus there is, indeed, detailed argument and discussion does far more than make decisions on the basis of source categories.

I preface the following comments by agreeing to assume Crossan's Common Tradition for the purpose of discussion. My comments will then be by way of testing a

hypothesis, the hypothetical construction which Crossan makes on the basis of his understanding of the sources.

The kingdom of God, according to Crossan, is Jesus' radical program engaging people in solidarity in community in the context of exploitation and oppression. For this he finds support in the unredacted saying of the 'Common Tradition'. My problem is with what this excludes: no future divine intervention. It is not whether I want it to be there or not, but whether it is still present in Crossan's primary sources. Among these we find the beatitudes. Is the blessing of the poor and the hungry a statement about their favoured lot and the promise of Jesus' program for them or does it (also) look to a divine reversal, such as people saw promised to the poor in Isa 61:1? Does not 'the kingdom of God' ('of Heaven' in Thomas 54, a Matthean fingerprint?) refer to the hope of a future divine act and not only to its present form? Is the divine passive in these and the sayings of reversal, like the first shall be last (4), not a reference to a future divine act or to future divine fulfilment as Jesus' program succeeds?

The question relates in a broader sense to the way future statements are understood in the Gospel of Thomas. At least the following should also be reconsidered: the hidden shall be revealed (5, 114); the imagery of harvest (57, 73); the promise that the angels and prophets will give you what is yours (88). Perhaps they all refer to immanent hope rather than imminent divine intervention. Thomas does include some prediction of future events: Jesus' declaration that he would destroy this house must be originally a reference to the temple, as may be 40 which speaks of the uprooting of the vine. The saying that the heavens will be rolled up before the disciples (111) sounds very apocalyptic. It is all the more remarkable because the verses which follow appear to correct its emphasis, adding to the impression about its original meaning. My first question, therefore, relates to the source material Crossan affirms: does it really exclude the notion of a future act of God?

My second question relates to categories. Throughout his book Crossan frequently poses alternatives. Often these are oversimplified. This appears to be the case with ethical eschatology, apocalyptic eschatology and ascetical eschatology. He makes an important observation about apocalyptic eschatology. In pointing towards a future act of God 'all too often' (p. 283) or as Crossan goes on, 'almost always' (p. 284, 287) involves violence. By this he means reactive and vengeful, as if to say: they refuse our preaching; therefore let God take it out on them at the eschaton! One might ask: can one imagine a future act by God which reverses the present without implying violence of some kind on the part of God? Crossan points here to an important theological issue.

As far as the historical issue is concerned, he leaves little room for the possibility that future apocalyptic eschatology might not be violent. Certainly we should not assume

too quickly that there is a single category: apocalyptic eschatology. Perhaps Paul was sensing the problem of how such a reversal might be fulfilled when he spoke of divine mystery: that all Israel will be saved. Similarly I have argued elsewhere that Jesus left loose ends,¹ both about manner and about timing in the context of his imminent expectation. There are positive images of future hope where former enemies are reconciled, Gentiles included, outcasts restored, from the prophets to writings such as the Psalms of Solomon 17. These are in stark contrast to the overtly violent portrayals of the Apocalypse. Crossan, however, argues that Jesus deliberately rejected the apocalyptic approach (of John and others), because of these aspects. My second question is therefore: has Crossan sufficiently taken into account the possibility that there could be an apocalyptic eschatology that did not assume a 'killer God'? Alongside this must be the question whether the evidence, even then, would suffice to deny any negative aspects to Jesus' vision. What do we do with the widely attested tradition of predicting God's involvement in destroying the temple? It is hard to deny such features without coming under the suspicion of trying to sanitise Jesus' theology.

Associated with the theme of violence is the matter of how apocalyptic eschatology works. Crossan differentiates between primary and secondary apocalyptic. By the former he means the kind of expectation which has the effect of saying; do these things because the near end requires them, producing an interim ethic. Such millennial movements hardly survive. This is his basic response to D. C. Allison, and so far I would agree.² By secondary he means the effect: do these because they are what God wants and unless you do, you will be punished when the end comes, all too often a vengeance model. In this the eschatological vision operates negatively as a sanction. I would identify the former as 'eschatocentric' and the latter as 'theocentric'. The 'theocentric' is much more likely to survive, but even then there are weaknesses if the day of vengeance stalls.

These appear to exhaust the possibilities Crossan considers. Even then mostly his argument against apocalyptic eschatology is against the former, especially in rejecting the millennarian model because it cannot explain Christianity's survival. He gives too little attention to the latter, the theocentric model, or considers it only as a vengeance model. He appears to ignore completely a third variant: positive eschatological hope which generates not only expectation but also an agenda for life, here and now. If my vision of the reign God is soon to bring includes radical commensality, then how can it

¹ "Jesus Left Loose Ends - Reflections on Jesus and the Church" *Pacifica* 2 (1989) 210-228; see also my "The Historical Jesus Puzzle" *Colloquium. The Australia New Zealand Theological Review* 29 (1997) 131-150

² D. C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth. Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998)

be otherwise than that this vision informs my life now? It is this same God in whom I hope and whose will is to be done. Theocentric eschatology will always entail the double aspects of now and then. The vision dictates the agenda for now. We see this operating in the sectarian documents of Qumran where the community structures its life already now in a manner patterned on the structure of its life in the eschaton. The impact upon the present is not only joy because of the hope of expectation but joy because the hope is already being realised in the present.

In this way I want to affirm Crossan's emphasis on the program of Jesus, but I see it fed also by future eschatological vision. The weakness of interpretations which overemphasise the millenarian hope is that they miss what Crossan rightly identifies in the present aspect. So my third question is: Is apocalyptic eschatology always either imminent millenarianism or a threat of vengeance to sanction obedience to God the killer? Is there not evidence for a third model where theocentric eschatology expresses itself in terms of a vision of hope which, because it is a vision of what happens when God will fully reign, sets an agenda (program) already for the present where it begins to be realised? Such a theocentric hope is far more likely to survive – and, I would argue, it has; and, I should add, does so at times with great difficulty as dualisms constantly seek to change its focus away from transformation of present reality to hope for the other side of bifurcated reality, in the realm of the spirit and the immaterial.

Crossan's construct must also explain the resultant discontinuity it must posit between John the Baptist and Jesus. The thesis is that after John's arrest Jesus saw the folly of apocalyptic eschatology and began to espouse ethical eschatology. This was more than a difference in emphasis (less on judgement in the case of Jesus) or a sense that the end events for which John waited had begun (hence the celebratory lifestyle of Jesus in contrast to John's asceticism). Jesus, argues Crossan, declares John less than the least in the kingdom, because he fundamentally disagrees with John. The distancing which we observe as we move from early to later traditions in the gospels is, on this thesis, prefigured in Jesus' own radical break with John. That break was not just about emphasis and timing, but about theology in the strictest sense. Jesus, in effect, abandoned a transcendental theism for an immanent theism, a major change. Crossan, I believe, does not fully appreciate these implications. We are talking not only about a different eschatology but also about a different theism. We are also asked to believe that we have no record of it, but only of different emphases and sense of place in God's history. The thesis strains credibility.

Crossan's hypothesis must also come to terms with the discontinuity on the other side: between Jesus and early Christian tradition. Here Crossan calls for support from the Common Tradition which he claims was devoid of apocalyptic eschatology. We have had reason to question that above. It depends heavily on assuming that the Thomas

tradition never knew Jesus sayings with such emphasis, an argument from silence either way. So much is made to depend on this and on the supposition that the earliest layer of Q as reconstructed by Kloppenborg was exclusively normative, that is, its failure, allegedly, to include apocalyptic saying reflected rejection of them, their eschatology and, as with John, their theism. This is a huge argument from silence – again, either way. Again, Crossan does not weigh the seriousness of the claim that entails such a radical change not only in eschatology but also in the underlying theism. This does more than his sources will allow.

The matter is all the more unsatisfactory when Crossan effectively sidelines Paul on the basis of a very doubtful assessment of Paul's eschatology (and anthropology) as dualist which appears to ignore the extent to which already in much of the rest of Judaism there was extensive cross cultural influence which does not allow us to identify a clear sarcophobic/sarcophilic 'faultline', as Crossan supposes (cf. pp. xxi-xxxi; 38). His treatment of Paul belongs to the least satisfactory aspect of his book.

In contrast to his earlier view expressed in *The Historical Jesus*, Crossan now admits that Jesus should be seen as a Torah observant Jew. This is now widely recognised. It is, then, strange that Jewishness does not appear among the 'macros' which Crossan employs as lenses through which to view the material. Use of the macro of the pattern of agrarian peasant economies is one of the most helpful contributions of his research. It is then strange that for Jewish thought he confines himself to the law about land in Leviticus. It is itself important, but what about the rest? What about the impact of the temple and its retainers? Tithing is first mentioned incidentally (p. 343).

Why is there nothing about movements similar to that of Jesus? We find some of this in *The Historical Jesus* (cf. pp. 103-224)? But surely macros should include movements which employ similar language and imagery. In this context the extensive imagery which belongs to Jewish hope and its presence in so many movements which are otherwise comparable to all that we know of Jesus must surely be taken into account. One could only reach Crossan's construct of a unique Jesus amid all of this by denying the extent of its influence in Judaism of the time, including in those contexts where sapiential traditions were strong (from the sectarian scrolls to Wisdom and even Philo).

So much of the Jesus tradition makes sense in this context that it becomes a major weakness in Crossan's construct. There would be greater coherence had he moved more in the direction of Mack and reduced Jewish influence to a minimum. Now that he admits the strength of Jesus' Jewishness, he must face the question: why then ignore so much of Jewishness? Why did the disciples interpret Jesus' vindication in terms of resurrection and exaltation and as first born from the dead? What explains the emphasis on the Spirit, the continuing practice of baptism? What is the meaning the imagery surrounding the meal? Why the emphasis on the temple, the twelve, the city, the land,

the gathering of the Gentiles? These all require the Jewish context. Crossan's construct does not sit well in the light of this evidence.

When one combines Crossan's rich insights into the plight of Galileans with the widely acknowledged conclusion that Jesus believed God would act for the redemption of Israel in a particular way, then a powerful construct emerges. In proclaiming the good news Jesus addressed Israel's hope. He both announced that God would soon intervene to restore justice to the land and he acted to implement that vision in the present. The action was not to take up arms, nor to intensify detailed observance of Torah, nor to withdraw, but bring into lived reality in the here and now the radically inclusive vision. While I am not convinced that the call to dispense with property cloaks the reality that they were already the dispossessed, as Crossan, following Stegemann, suggests (p. 281), nevertheless the abject poverty made radical itinerancy feasible and the pattern of mutual support and shared meals formed a central aspect of living out the agenda which the vision set. Here, too, I am inclined to think that Crossan tends to see Jesus' participation in meals in too monochrome a fashion (cf. pp. 337-344). At some he might well have been more like the 'akletos' the 'uninvited guest', who was a favourite for those who, like the toll collectors, had wealth enough to mount public meals. Other times meals among the poor were, as the eucharistic liturgy, suggests: foretastes of the future banquet.

The strength of Crossan's construct is that it reminds us again that the historical Jesus was good news and not just a preliminary to the saving event, identified as an atoning transaction wrought through his death. If Jesus was not good news, then we are in trouble. Easter does not leave Jesus behind; it celebrates the vindication of who he was and is. If for Crossan, this is largely the living impact of his memory, his analysis should prevent us from divorcing a Christ of faith from a Jesus of history. Historically what holds both together is the apocalyptic eschatological understanding of the transition and here Crossan's construct is at its weakest and he has to resort to fantasies about Jesus' disciples busied in Galilee with their program during Jesus' fateful last days, uninterested in the occasion and then not considering it worth a mention in their (Crossan assumes) all sufficient pre Q1 and pre Thomas Common Tradition.

Many will warm to the image of Jesus the peasant revolutionary sage, as much as it is fashion to flirt with Marxism from the comfort of the disenchanting intellectual world of the west. Jesus becomes the mentor, par excellence, the irritant we need in the complacency of westernism. Crossan's Jesus is profoundly disturbing. My view is that it is also very close to reality. I share with many, however, the additional discomfort of the acute distance between Jesus' reality and ours in relation to eschatology, a discomfort not present for those who follow Crossan. But theocentric eschatology means the God

of justice remains the same. However problematic an apocalyptic eschatology is for today, if it makes sense to have one at all, the agenda is profoundly one and the same. It still has the potential to jump its disguise in the eucharist and call us to be good news to the poor and to find true poverty and hunger. Crossan's construct tells what we must never forget about the heart of our faith and for this historical work I am deeply grateful.