

How Did Christianity Begin?

James Crossley and Mike Bird

Round One- The Historical Jesus

Crossley introduces his path in the debate as follows: 'Three key areas, among numerous others, set Christianity apart from its Jewish heritage: Law observance (or lack of), Gentiles and the full deification of a human being, Jesus' (p. vxii). These are the areas that he sees as fruitful for answering the core question of the present book. He continues 'What I want to do is provide an explanation for the emergence of Christianity that is not heavily grounded in theology, the supernatural, and / or ideas but one that is heavily grounded in socio-historical explanation' (p. xviii).

Of course such an approach is understandable but is it viable? Is not the *a priori* exclusion of the possibility of divine activity in the human sphere just as prejudiced a viewpoint as that of the evangelical who insists that there is only one explanation for the Church; ie, divine activity? Naturally historians must operate precisely as Crossley does- but this nearly guarantees that the results will be skewed. But that, I suppose, is to be expected.

Crossley continues with a most pertinent question: "Who has got the better account of Christian origins?" (ibid.). Indeed, who? That's the object of the present debate of which Crossley's round one contribution is only the barest beginning.

As he launches then into his description of the Historical Jesus, Crossley reiterates his central belief - 'Christian origins are perfectly explicable in terms of this-worldly historical explanation and Jesus plays a small part of such developments' (p. 1). Ah, if only he had left out the word 'perfectly' we would be in perfect agreement. But as I've hinted, there may well be a dimension of reality which, being left out, hinders genuinely perfect understanding.

James goes on to describe what we can know, from a purely historical point of view, of Jesus' childhood, his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Law and conflict, Jesus' last week, and finally, who Jesus was (healer? Exorcist? Messiah?). In each of these subsections Crossley makes, in my opinion, a significant methodological error when he uses Mishnaic and Talmudic materials to bolster his reading of first century Jewish practice. I would quibble with this as I think it as improper as using the Gospels to construct actual events from the life of Jesus. Or, to say it another way, if in the Gospels we have the theology of the Church, it is equally accurate to say that in the Rabbinic materials we have the theology of the Rabbis. And both may, or may not, reflect actual practice in the first century. Indeed, none of us may allow ourselves to forget that the Mishnah and the Talmudim post-date the first half of the first century not just by decades, as do the Gospels, but by centuries. If the Gospels cannot be taken at historical face value, then most certainly neither can the rabbinic materials!

However, when Crossley concludes that 'Jesus ... does not do anything unparalleled in early Judaism' (p. 16) he is most certainly right. The best guess as to the actual reason for the execution of Jesus wasn't his teachings or his healings or even his behavior on the Sabbath. Rather, his action in the Temple stirred the priests to oppose him and the Romans to worry about him as insurrectionist. The two joined together to rid themselves of their common enemy.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, once Crossley has finished his first round of comments, Bird responds. Naturally we will take up Mike's ideas in due course. For now, we're concentrating on Crossley's contribution. So we next find him commenting about Bird's reaction to his description of the Historical Jesus.

Crossley writes, 'I am not convinced Bird has fully appreciated socio-historical methodology' (p. 33). And then he writes '... every parallel I used is purposely backed up by evidence from Jesus' immediate context...' but of course if he has in mind his use of the Mishnah and Talmudim, this isn't the case at all. They are hardly from Jesus' immediate context, as mentioned above.

Crossley next takes Bird to task for his belief in the miraculous. 'On the historicity of miracles,

Bird can cite as many multiple miracle traditions as he wants but they do not show Jesus really did perform supernatural miracles. All this shows is that some people believed Jesus performed supernatural miracles from an early date' (p. 34). This is most certainly correct. In fact, Crossley cannot seriously be disputed here, by anyone.

Next time- Crossley on the Resurrection, or, as I like to call it, round two of the smackdown.