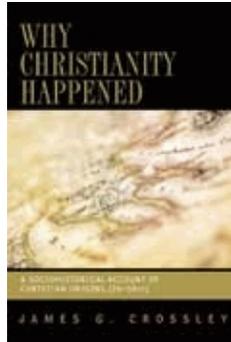


○ **REVIEW OF JAMES G. CROSSLEY, *WHY CHRISTIANITY HAPPENED: A SOCIOHISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS (26–50 CE)***  
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*Richard Walsh, Methodist University*



Crossley's brief account of the move from Jewish (and then Gentile) Christians observing the law to a Christianity that included Gentiles not observing the law builds upon his earlier work, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insights from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (2004). The present work provides the larger ideological and methodological context for that earlier work and Crossley's ongoing research. His agenda has two focal points: (1) a secular approach to Christian origins (cf. P. Davies; Berlinerblau); and (2) the application of the methods and insights of the social sciences to the same (see his Preface and Chapter One). He strives to move, in brief, out of the ghetto of New Testament history toward an academically defensible approach to the history of early Christianity.

Both foci call for attention to material conditions, rather than ideas or theology, as the important causal factors in history. Of course, as Crossley recognises, his agenda is itself ideological. His position, briefly stated, is that the present dominance of one ideology – i.e., Christian theology – prevents other perspectives from being heard and allows those sharing that theological perspective to 'get by' with quite shoddy arguments. Refreshingly, he pursues this secularising mission in an irenic spirit. He does not wish to banish Christians or their arguments from the field, simply their dominance (contrast the more polemical position of Burton Mack). His argument for his position has something of the aura of John Stuart Mill's 'On Liberty' about it.

Crossley's approach theoretically downplays the importance of creative individuals. While Jesus and Paul accordingly play far less of a role than they do in standard discussions of Christian origins, the historical Jesus actually appears surprisingly often (Crossley's present work ends before the time of Paul's letters). In keeping with his method, however, Crossley's historical Jesus is not unique. He is a typical (prophetic) Jew of a certain class, responding to a particular socioeconomic situation (see below).

Crossley's approach also theoretically minimises the importance of the exegesis of texts. Again, however, Crossley actually spends a great deal of time exegeting texts. His contention is that his exegesis follows upon social scientific analysis, rather than being the basis of his historical reconstruction, and that the exegesis is not about the current relevance of the texts in question. Moreover, Crossley himself recognizes this flaw and promises a future work – tentatively titled, *Explaining Christian Origins Historically: The First Century* – that will rely far less on exegesis in its reconstruction. It will be interesting to see if that work privileges Paul and his texts as much as this work does the historical Jesus and his teachings.

After setting out his agenda, Crossley explores the socio-economic unrest in which the Jesus movement arose, following the analyses of social inequality in advanced agrarian societies of Lenski (cf. Crossan) and of Kautsky and the discussion of banditry by Hobsbawm (cf. Crossan; Horsley and Hanson), in Chapter Two. The commercialisation of land – as well as the urban projects of Sepphoris and Tiberias – led to land alienation, debt, absentee ownership, and banditry in Galilee in the 20s. Crossley situates Jesus in this situation as either a peasant or a member of the class supplying religious connections (Lenski's priestly class), but definitely not a bandit. Depending primarily on Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 16:19-31, Crossley argues that Jesus damned the wealthy (regardless of their individual characters) for their part in the systemic oppression of the poor, but also called the wealthy to repent – that is, to observe Torah and social justice – in advance of the eschatological judgment. As this message appears throughout the synoptic tradition (multiple attestation), resembles the teaching of other Jews (e.g., John the Baptist), and suits Galilee in the 20s, Crossley concludes that it comes from the historical Jesus. Not incidentally, the last two points mean that Crossley's historical Jesus is far less unique than most other avatars of this figure (though cf. Vermes). Jesus' teaching climaxed in the Temple action (cf. E. P. Sanders), portending the Temple's destruction for corruption, oppression, and possibly even idolatry. That wealth virtually equals idolatry and that it indicates a status outside the Torah covenant are repeated themes. In passing, Crossley notes that some evidence indicates that some wealthy (females?) supported Jesus' ministry and that this support may account for the Jesus movement's continuance, as peasant resistance movements are notoriously local and ephemeral.

In Chapter Three, Crossley argues that the sinners with whom Jesus notoriously associated were not the people of the land (cf. E. P. Sanders), but rather the wealthy that he called to repent. Jesus' table fellowship with the suspect further means that he did not observe the expanded purity regulations of the Pharisees. Much of the legal controversy in the Synoptic tradition is, then, debate with the Pharisees over interpretation, not about law observance itself (see Crossley's earlier *The Date of Mark's Gospel*). As importantly, Jesus' association with sinners, who are functionally equivalent to Gentiles, paved the way for a later association with Gentiles, although the historical Jesus himself had no concern for Gentiles.

In Chapter Four, Crossley locates traces of Gentiles in the earliest Christian traditions, Q and Mark, the latter of which he dates before the early 40s (see his *The Date of Mark's Gospel*). Like the historical Jesus, both Q and Mark have an understanding of Torah which is more open than that of those who wished to expand the purity laws. Incidentally, although Crossley makes no overt comments on the point, the historical Jesus loses much of his uniqueness here again. Furthermore, like the historical Jesus, (the) Q (communities) did not participate in a Gentile mission (Crossley defends his case on law-observant, but open Q with discussions of Matt. 5:18/Luke 16:17; Matt. 23:25-26/Luke 11:39-41; and Matt. 23:23/Luke 11:42.). For Crossley,

Mark reflects a law-observant Christianity including Gentiles. As in his earlier book, the crucial passage is Mark 7:1-23, which Crossley reads as a debate on purity interpretation, not on Torah observance. Mark 7:1-5 dismisses tradition, not scripture; and Mark 7:19 means that all foods *permitted by Torah* are clean. Not incidentally, Crossley believes this to be the position of the historical Jesus as well. Situated between the Jewish feeding of Mark 6 and the Gentile feeding of Mark 8, Mark 7 becomes a statement on the decorum of association with observant, morally pure Gentiles.

After a brief discussion of the socioeconomic origins of monotheism and evidence of tendencies toward monotheism in the larger culture in Chapter Four, Crossley turns in Chapter Five to the inclusion of the Gentiles in early Christianity. Following Stark, J. Sanders, and Meeks (among others), he argues for a process of conversion by social networks, rather than through ideological persuasion by charismatic evangelists. The entry of whole households and of many nominally converted into Christianity meant that not all followed the Torah completely. Moreover, most Gentiles had countervailing connections with non-observant Gentiles which meant that (some) Gentile Christians observed Torah when with Jews and did not when with Gentiles. Although definitive evidence is lacking for this 'historical imagination' (his phrase), Crossley feels that these different social settings provided the shift from law observance to non-observance, a matter for which Paul (and others?) later supplied intellectual justifications.

Most readers of this journal will applaud Crossley's attention to material concerns and his secular approach. Many readers, in fact, might wish for more fervent Marxism. In particular, some might wish a more violent Jesus or some remarks about the relevance of this historical reconstruction. Crossley rejects both, the former as a conclusion of his historical approach and the latter as a corollary. For Crossley, the issue at hand is improved – i.e., atheological – history, not the furtherance of a particular political agenda today. The usual suspects will demur in the usual ways.

Of those willing to imagine or reconstruct early Christian history, many will willingly accept his (social-scientific) approach in Chapters Two and Five, if not with all the details. Most of the historical debate about Crossley's reconstruction will turn on his early dating of Mark and his novel interpretation of Mark 7:1-23. Finally, as suggested earlier, it is possible that he could make his move away from creative individuals – here Jesus – clearer with a few summary statements at crucial places. Perhaps, he does not do so, because of his irenic approach (see above). Or, perhaps, this work is only an early volley in that respect, as it is with respect to a move away from exegesis.