

The Historical Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet or Social Revolutionary?

**Katie Bringman
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Introduction

The study of the historical Jesus is a current issue in North American academic discourse. Two thousand years after Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth, scholars are still actively and even heatedly debating his life and his works. Some of these views can work together, while some directly oppose one another. There are views that most mainstream American Christians are comfortable and familiar with, and there are views that seem to stand in opposition to traditional Christian teaching. There are many reasons why the study of Jesus is currently so popular, but it is partly due to the group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar. This group, which was established in 1985 by scholar Robert Funk, meets regularly to discuss issues surrounding the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, they have become known for their practice of voting on what Jesus probably actually said and what he probably did not. They use a system of colored beads to indicate whether they think Jesus actually uttered the words in question or whether it was likely added by the early Christians who wrote the gospels. This practice has raised new controversy and questions surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth both among the members of the seminar and for scholars outside the group.

The scholars working inside the Jesus Seminar or outside of it (or even against it) are trying to answer the question, "Who was Jesus?" The question is complicated by the fact that for some of these scholars and for Christians today, the question "Who *is* Jesus?" is also valid. This is, of course, because Christians view Jesus as a living presence in light of his reported resurrection, not as a dead historical figure. In general, however, these scholars are looking at the person who has become known as "the Jesus of history" or Jesus of Nazareth. This person stands in contrast (though not in opposition) to "the Christ of faith" or Jesus Christ, the center of Christianity. The study of "the Jesus of history" is concerned with Jesus as a historical figure,

and those studying him want to know who he was when he walked on earth, not who he has become in Christian thought. However, the study of Jesus stems from the fact that he has become central to a large part of the world's population. Although scholars are not always concerned with Jesus' status as the Christian messiah, they would not be studying him at all if Christians did not elevate him to the level of savior.

Those scholars who have tried to answer the question "who was Jesus?" have come up with many different answers. Among them: Jesus was a wisdom teacher, Jesus was a miracle-worker, Jesus was the son of God, Jesus was the Jewish messiah, Jesus was a healer, and Jesus was a Jewish peasant, just to name a few. As Stephen C. Barton writes, "Our knowledge of Jesus will always be partial, always open to correction, always a matter of listening to the diverse testimonies of those who claim to know or to have known him" (177). Two of these views have emerged as most interesting to me, namely the views of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet and Jesus as a social revolutionary. Although most scholars do not proclaim that their approach to Jesus is the only answer, and they do not propose that one should look at Jesus from only one angle, each tends to argue one specific view of Jesus. As I compared these two positions, I discovered some important similarities as well as some major differences.

The Social Revolutionary view is a development of or a reaction to the apocalyptic view, which has a long-standing tradition within the field. This newer view is groundbreaking, attractive to scholars and lay people alike, and has some firm supporters, but fails to meet one criterion necessary in the search for the historical Jesus. Most scholars maintain that the most important element to avoid in Jesus research is the search for a Jesus who fits one's needs. The result of historical study should not be a figure who fits easily into contemporary theology or who works too well with the scholar's personal beliefs. Those who take the social revolutionary

view affirm this position as well as all the other scholars, but I feel they fail to meet it. The social revolutionary view perhaps provides a Jesus of Nazareth who works a little too well with the needs of today's society.

A Brief History

The Quest of the Historical Jesus has gone through several phases over the past century. We are now in what scholars recognize as the “third quest” for the historical Jesus. In order to understand current views and debates within the field, it is helpful to know where the quest has been. A historical study of Jesus began in Germany in the eighteenth century with H.S. Reimarus, a professor in Hamburg. Before this point, the idea of studying Jesus from a historical perspective and in the context in which the gospels were written did not exist. Following Reimarus, D.F. Strauss added the conception of Bible as myth to the field. This idea, which will be discussed later, does not mean the texts are fiction, but that they are created to point to greater truths and should not be taken literally. Strauss also recognized that “the Gospel of John is composed on theological premises and is historically less trustworthy than the Synoptics” (Theissen and Merz 4). It is important to remember that Strauss' views, now commonly accepted, were radical at the time.

The study continued in nineteenth-century Germany: “Scholars hoped that by reconstructing the authoritative person of Jesus and his history through historical criticism they could renew Christian faith and thus leave the church's dogma of Christ behind” (Theissen and Merz 5). They looked to Jesus' historical context to define who he was. So far I am still describing what scholars refer to as the first Quest of the Historical Jesus (1778-1901). The most influential figure of this phase was William Wrede. Wrede demonstrated that even our

earliest source, the Gospel of Mark, is more theology than history. Scholars were no longer certain that the Jesus of history could be extracted from the Christ of faith presented in the gospels. The first phase is also defined by the work of Albert Schweitzer around the turn of the century. Schweitzer developed the apocalyptic argument at the end of the 19th century; his groundbreaking book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (from which we get the name of the entire movement), describing the apocalyptic Jesus, was first published in 1906. He was the first to view Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet focused on the nearing end of the world. As shocking as the book was, for Schweitzer, the historical Jesus was of little importance. For himself he placed the emphasis on what he saw as the living Christ of Faith. He, in effect, “announced the death of the quest for the historical Jesus” (Herzog 3). This was the end of the first quest.

The first quest was followed by a period of near silence regarding Jesus of Nazareth. Scholars had realized (or decided) that the gospels could not supply a full picture of the man and left him behind. During this time R. Bultmann, a theologian, argued that the “teaching of Jesus is of no significance for a Christian theology” (Theissen and Merz 7). He called Jesus’ message “a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself” (Bultmann in Theissen and Merz 7). Then, again in Germany, a second quest began in 1953 known as the “New Quest” for the historical Jesus. This period was marked by the recognition of the post-Easter Christ’s relation to the historical Jesus. Scholars again realized that the two figures must have *some* connection and returned to a historical approach to reconcile the two. They attempted to extract Jesus from Judaism and early Christianity. They sought authentic Jesus teachings that would have been the base for the gospel texts. This quest proved to be too reflective of the scholars’ own time and desires, however, “because, in a single stroke, it divorced Jesus from his Jewish environment and the political, social, and economic realities of

his world” (Herzog 18). This period of study did not place enough weight on Jesus’ Jewishness of or on the context of the Roman world that surrounded him.

Current research is known as the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus. This phase is marked by a look at social and contextual influences on the life of Jesus. The scholars seek to place him in the first century Jewish world in which he lived. It is also notable in its use of non-canonical sources such as the Gospel of Thomas for evidence. It is from this quest that the view of Jesus as a social revolutionary or social reformer has emerged. Some of the most prominent voices come from John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, and Marcus Borg, all members of the Jesus Seminar. Many of them advocate a non-apocalyptic Jesus; that is, a Jesus who did not see the world soon ending. However, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz make the comment that “The ‘non-eschatological Jesus’ seems to have more Californian than Galilean local coloring” (11) suggesting that this view is reflective of the time and place in which it was created (modern North America), not the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible to see this view as presenting a Jesus who meets the needs of today’s society. I am inclined to agree with them and I see this as the main downfall of the social revolutionary view. The third quest also contains scholars outside of the Jesus Seminar who have reopened the case for an apocalyptic prophet view of Jesus. The main focus on both sides has been the attempted placement of Jesus within his own community and society. Whether this is achieved or not is debatable.

Jesus as an Apocalyptic Prophet

The contemporary view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet has been studied and argued by E.P. Sanders, Bart D. Ehrman and Alan Segal among others. Largely due to the work of the Jesus Seminar, which has become highly visible, Jesus scholarship as a whole has moved toward

the social revolutionary view. Although the apocalyptic view has a long history in Jesus scholarship, as Alan Segal writes, “It is no longer fashionable among Jesus scholars to maintain that Jesus was a millennialist or an apocalyptic Jew” (Jesus at 2000 63). However, some scholars still subscribe to this view today, and it is this group that I will primarily examine on this side of the debate. Over the past one hundred years many scholars have advanced this view, but for my arguments I will try to use scholars who are currently working in the field. In particular, Ehrman believes that

Jesus thought that the history of the world would come to a screeching halt, that God would intervene in the affairs of this planet, overthrow the forces of evil in a cosmic act of judgment, and establish his utopian Kingdom here on earth. And this was to happen within Jesus' own generation. (3)

Although it may sound surprising to many readers who are not familiar with the field, this is a statement typical of this apocalyptic view. Ehrman himself does not wish to sound sensational, but that is how this view comes across to many of us. The general population of Christians in North America might find it hard to believe that Jesus held this apocalyptic view. Why? Probably because in retrospect it is easy to realize that Jesus' view did not come to fruition. At first glance (and even second and third glance), Jesus' message appears downright wrong. In this view, Jesus thought the world was ending, but that did not end up happening. These scholars however, take a different position and offer their own arguments to counter the more mainstream views of Jesus found in American churches and among other Jesus scholars.

Scholars advancing the apocalyptic view believe that the apocalyptic statements of Jesus are authentic as opposed to demonstrating the influence of the members of early Christian movements. Jesus himself thought that the end of the world was coming very soon, and people needed to be prepared. This was also a belief of the early Christian movement, but the most reasonable explanation of this “conviction is that during his lifetime Jesus had let his followers to

expect a new kingdom to be established soon” (Sanders 95). This view supposes that when Jesus spoke of the world ending, as he often did, he was not speaking symbolically or metaphorically, as some other scholars have argued. Apocalyptic scholars use the criterion of dissimilarity to support this position. They maintain that the gospel writers would not have created these apocalyptic statements, since by the time they were writing, the statements would already be proven false. For example, Matthew 16.27-28 reads: “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Ehrman, Segal, and others assume that this statement is something Jesus actually said, since a gospel writer would lose credibility with his readers if he inserted something that was clearly not true by the time it was written. Therefore, the apocalyptic statements like this one must be strains of the original Jesus movement that were still common knowledge by the time the gospels were written. That movement was one of reform in light of the coming end.

An interesting element of the argument for Jesus as an apocalypticist is the fact that Jews at the time were *expecting* an apocalypse. They were looking for a messiah to arrive. Is this something that the early gospel writers imposed on their texts whether Jesus preached the impending apocalypse or not? Or was it Jesus himself who decided that he was to be the messiah and chose to die and suffer as the Jews were expecting? R.W.L. Moberly argues that, "Jesus' messianic claims within the gospels can no longer be confidently ascribed to him for they may be put into his mouth as expressions of the convictions of the early church" (185). This is the argument of the Jesus Seminar, but not of the scholars who ascribe to the apocalyptic view. Regardless of Jesus' own purpose, Jews at the time (and this would have included Jesus of

Nazareth, since he was a Jew living in the time period) felt that, although they were suffering, God would save them soon. They were waiting for the Kingdom and an age of no despair for themselves, the righteous. Prior to the time of Jesus there appeared in the Jewish world "self-styled prophets predicting the imminent intervention of God on behalf of his people" (Ehrman 117). Jesus appears to be one of these prophets, as he preaches the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God.

As mentioned, "Apocalypticism was not at all atypical of first-century Jewish movements if we read Jewish history under Roman domination carefully" (Segal 65). What did this apocalypticism look like and what was it exactly? Ancient (and modern) Jews believed they were the people of God. Their history told that God had made a covenant with them, the people of Israel, to deliver them from evil and lead them to a "promised land" if they kept the Law God had given them. However, the Jews were repeatedly dominated by other, more prosperous societies. Prophets recorded in the Hebrew Bible preached that God had not saved Israel because the people had sinned and were being punished. In order to explain the fact that righteous people suffered along with the sinners, Jews in Palestine believed that another force was at work, that of evil, Satan. This, however, was not to continue forever. The apocalyptic view held that soon God would reassert himself to Satan and offer protection for the Israelites once again, thus fulfilling the covenant. The current age was one of evil, but the age of good, the age without pain or suffering, God's age, was coming. This was "an ideology that tried to make sense of the oppression of the people of God" (Ehrman 121).

Leading up to the time of Jesus, many different prophets appeared preaching this apocalyptic message. They argued that the will of God had been revealed to them. Yes, the Jews were suffering now and there was nothing they could do about it, but the apocalyptic

message was one of hope for the oppressed. God, both creator and redeemer of the world, would intervene in their distress and he would do it very soon. “In some apocalyptic scenarios, God was to send a human Messiah to lead the troops of the children of light into battle against the forces of evil. In others, God was to send a kind of cosmic judge of the earth, sometimes also called the Messiah or the “Son of Man” to bring about a cataclysmic overthrow of the demonic powers that oppressed the children of light” (Ehrman 122). The apocalyptic view characterizes Jesus as one of these apocalyptic prophets, as evident by the words he spoke and his references to the nearing end and the “Son of Man.”

Since they believe that the apocalyptic statements of Jesus were his own words, the apocalyptic scholars cite the gospel texts in which Jesus makes comments that sound specifically apocalyptic in order to support their position. In Mark, considered to be the gospel written the earliest, Jesus made comments such as, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9.1). Also, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mark 13.30). In Luke he adds, “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (12.39-40). If one takes these statements as original words of Jesus, it is clear that he believed the end was coming soon. His message in this context was undoubtedly eschatological.

In these texts, Jesus regularly refers to the “Son of Man.” Traditionally, the word translated as “Son of Man” refers to all humans or humanity, but Jesus’ usage is clearly different. The early Christians believed that Jesus was referring to himself as the Son of Man, so many of the gospel texts present Jesus using the term this way. However, Jesus also uses the words to

refer to someone else. This use of “Son of Man” can, by the criterion of dissimilarity, be ascribed to the historical Jesus. If early Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of Man, why would they have written that he was speaking of someone else? Still, in Mark 8.38b Jesus says, “of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” There can be no doubt that Jesus is referring to another figure that has not yet arrived. This fits well with Jesus’ identity as an apocalyptic prophet. The term “Son of Man” probably came from a text in Daniel 7 that describes one “like a human being,” or “Son of Man” in other translations, (v. 13) who is given rule over the earth by God (this is the apocalypse). If Jesus ascribed to an apocalyptic vision, as discussed above, the use of an apocalyptic term from Daniel fits into his message. It is important to remember that there are also scholars who believe some of the sayings in which Jesus refers to *himself* as the Son of Man are original to Jesus. (Theissen and Merz 552) In the view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, scholars generally use Son of Man as a reference to his message of the impending end.

Those who hold the view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet are also convinced that Jesus was not concerned with establishing a just society, as many other scholars choose to argue. Rather, he was looking directly to the end and was concerned with establishing a society appropriate for the end times. This position leaves room to acknowledge that Jesus’ actions involved social reform, but maintain that reform was not his *primary* goal. Jesus’ present age was one of sin, evil, and rulers who prospered through evil, but Jesus preached that God would soon "reassert himself" (Ehrman 148). People, therefore, were to change how they lived in the present in order to prepare appropriately for God's coming. "Jesus preached repentance because he saw the end of the world coming soon and recommended a radical change of behavior as the only way to prepare for this event" (Segal 56). Jesus did preach lifestyle change, but not because

he was trying to work against the temple authorities or because he was trying to revolutionize the Jewish social system. A lifestyle change was only necessary because he saw the end as very near and saw an immediate need for preparation. Jesus “responded to the political and social crises of his day...by proclaiming that his generation was living at the end of the age, that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people” (Ehrman 123). Although Jesus' teachings may be seen as socially revolutionary, Jesus' main concern was teaching in light of the apocalypse he believed was coming.

Jesus asked his followers to leave their families, to love and to serve, but only in preparation for the end. In Matthew 25:31-46, there is an example of one of these teachings. Jesus relates a story about sheep and goats. He begins with the apocalyptic statement: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory” (v. 31). The Son of Man then proceeds to separate people as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. The goats have not served others, have not loved their neighbors, and do not make the cut. The sheep have fed, clothed, and cared for those in need, and it is they who reap the rewards of “eternal life” (v. 46). This story is not “distinctively Christian” in that “the future judgement is not based on belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection, but on doing good things for those in need” (Ehrman 136), so it is therefore probably not an addition of the earliest Christians. Rather, Jesus is preaching a lifestyle change, but not because of his own social agenda for revolution (as the social revolutionary camp might argue). Instead, he believes the end is coming and it is time to set things right and get lives in order for the looming judgment. God was coming and people needed to align their lives with what God would find favorable, like the ‘sheep’ did in the parable. “The end was coming soon, and the present social order was being called radically into question. What mattered was the new thing that was coming, the future

Kingdom. It was impossible to promote this teaching while trying to retain the present social structure” (Ehrman 171). Therefore, although Jesus was primarily concerned with the apocalypse, he caused some social changes along the way.

One reason many Christians today are not familiar with the view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet may be due to the gospel writers themselves. Those writing earlier and therefore closer to Jesus himself, (primarily Mark and Q) see Jesus as apocalyptic. This view gets toned down in later texts such as the gospels of John and Thomas. Even the earliest gospel writer, Mark, who was writing at least twenty years after Jesus’ crucifixion, had begun to realize that perhaps Jesus’ apocalyptic messages were not going to come to fruition in Mark’s lifetime. However, Mark, and Q (as evident in the modifications made by Matthew and Luke) were written early enough that they might have still been holding out hope that the apocalypse was very near at hand, and would at least occur in the lifetime of some of Jesus’ followers. John and Thomas, however, are the texts written latest and were much farther removed. They could not deny the fact that the apocalypse had not arrived when Jesus indicated that it would. Luke, written after Mark, and based on Mark and Q, already starts to tone down the apocalyptic message. For example, he approaches the idea of the kingdom differently; he tells the disciples “the kingdom of God has come to you” (11.20), which is not the approach that Mark takes (Mark does not give any hints that the kingdom may already be present.) In John, written even later than Luke, Jesus “talks about eternal life that is available here and now for the believer” (Ehrman 131). For example, John’s Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5.24). John makes it very clear that the message is no longer about the coming judgment; what is important is belief on earth. Segal believes that "It is far more rational

to suppose that apocalypticism was there in Jesus' message and became an embarrassment to the church by the time of the gospel writers and certainly later" (65).

Jesus as a Social Revolutionary

A second and more increasingly accepted view of Jesus of Nazareth is Jesus as a figure concerned with creating a social revolution. In particular, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Marcus J. Borg, and other members of the Jesus Seminar have developed this view. However they probably did not come to this conclusion *because* of the Jesus Seminar, as many of them had already taken this position before the Seminar was established in 1985. Many of the scholars within this field are working on a position in complete contrast with an apocalyptic Jesus. The social revolutionary side sees the apocalyptic view as outdated and the Jesus Seminar would argue that they go deeper to get even closer to the original words of Jesus. In general, this view sees the Jesus of history as a man with a social agenda. His primary goal was reform of the current social system under which Mediterranean peasants were living. Marcus Borg offers an extensive discussion of the ways Jesus worked against the Jewish legal and purity systems. His arguments are interesting and can help us understand the idea of Jesus working against a system, but they do not appear to be in line with the way the purity system actually operated in Jesus' society. J. D. Crossan offers his own arguments and discussion of the ways Jesus worked against the *Roman* social systems of the day, and these are the actions that could qualify Jesus as a true revolutionary.

Marcus Borg focuses on Jesus' teaching of purity from the inside as opposed to purity on the outside as a result of following the purity codes. Instead, Jesus called people to: "be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Borg Meeting Jesus Again 46). This statement comes

from “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36), but Borg uses his own translation of “compassionate” for what has traditionally been translated as “merciful.” As a parallel to the compassion statement, there is also a text that reads “be holy as God is holy” (Leviticus 19.2), and this is where the temple and the purity laws placed their focus at the time. The dominant social vision of the day was purity and following purity rules and rituals, but Jesus was seeking purity from the *inside*. For Borg, the compassionate social revolutionary Jesus is a Jesus of the heart, of empathy, of concern for others.

What makes this view revolutionary? To the modern reader it may seem like a lofty ideal, but not a radical revolution. Borg believes the idea of Jesus’ turn towards compassion *was* radical, because the social ethos of Jesus’ time and place were the ethos of purity in order to achieve holiness. In order to remain pure, people had to practice certain rituals that structured daily life. Borg believes that this purity system was divisive and classist. It provided a system for determining who could enter the temple and who could not, who could and could not touch one another, who could and could not eat with one another, and clearly marked boundaries between people depending on their state of ritual cleanliness. For example, gentiles were always unclean, women were often unclean due to menstruation, and those who touched the sick or the dead were unclean. Anyone who desired to remain ritually pure could not come into contact with those who were unclean. Borg assumes that the purity laws therefore created divisions within society among gender, classes, professions, lifestyles, etc. In this situation, a Jesus who advocated compassion was a social revolutionary because he was preaching directly against the way the Jewish world was working. “He not only challenged that system [of purity laws]; he also had an alternative social vision” (Borg Jesus at 2000 11). Marcus Borg sums up this reformation when he writes,

Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and an alternative social vision affirmed. (Meeting Jesus Again 58)

As mentioned, there are some problems with Borg's arguments. First, he is examining the *Jewish* system, not the greater Roman social and political systems. This would make Jesus a religious revolutionary, perhaps, but certainly not a social revolutionary threatening to the Roman state. In addition, many scholars do not agree with Borg's understanding of the purity system. Jewish scholars do not see the system as divisive as Borg suggests it is. Impurity or a state of being unclean is not equated with sin. Those who were temporarily unclean were not automatically assumed to be sinners or of a lower status. For example, childbirth, which was a joyous occasion, made a woman unclean for a certain period of time. Certainly the woman was not in a state of sin, nor did Jewish authorities look down upon her for having given birth recently. She was simply temporarily restricted. Finally, though Borg suggests that the ethos of compassion is revolutionary, perhaps it is not as much of a reform as he would like to think. Most people living today like to think that they are compassionate, and most people of Jesus' day probably liked to think the same thing. The idea of calling people to compassion, though it aimed for something higher, was not strange and unusual in and of itself.

J. D. Crossan has been more successful in his discussions of Jesus as a revolutionary working against the Roman political and social systems. He makes it clear that his view is not in line with Borg's. He does not understand the Jesus movement as "compassion against legalism" (Crossan Jesus 83) but sees Jesus as a man who believed he was acting out the Kingdom of God. Crossan uses anthropological and sociological models of peasant societies along with Greco-Roman and Jewish history to make assumptions about the culture in which Jesus – a Mediterranean Jewish peasant – lived. He then draws conclusions about the social statements

Jesus' actions would have made in that first-century world. Crossan calls Jesus an eschatological figure, though not an apocalyptic prophet. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably, but the term eschatology really refers to "a radical criticism of culture and civilization and thus a fundamental rejection of this world's values and expectations" (Crossan Jesus 52). Thus Crossan does not entirely discount the social movement purported by the apocalyptic scholars, but takes Jesus' movement out of the context of the apocalypse. Instead, Jesus creates a movement in order to develop what he believes is the Kingdom of God on earth.

Crossan's Jesus worked directly against the class systems of the Roman social world. This is revolutionary in itself because Jesus emerged from a class even lower than the peasants. Crossan writes, "The Roman Empire...was characterized by an abysmal gulf separating the upper from the lower classes" (Jesus 24). Jesus, probably a carpenter, was from a lower class; peasants, at least, had some land under their control, but a carpenter had almost nothing. We can assume that he must have done *something* important or interesting for his actions to be noticed at all. This Jesus preached blessing for the destitute, which Crossan argues was radical. These were not blessings for the poor or unfortunate, but for those who are completely without. Therefore, his message included beggars and the outcast (the destitute), but *not* the majority of peasant society who were merely living in poverty. This is radical because it works against the majority of society, even if the majority is living by much lower standards than the ruling elite. Jesus was not preaching to those who wanted to hear it or to those who were destitute themselves. Many peasants listening to Jesus' words probably did not see themselves inside his message. To parallel this situation, Crossan offers "A contemporary equivalent: only the homeless are innocent. That is a terrifying aphorism against society because...it focuses not just on personal or individual abuses of power but on such abuse in its systemic or structural

possibilities...none of our hands are innocent or our consciences particularly clear” (Jesus 62). Jesus ignores the class system, eats with the unclean, touches lepers, and acts politically to convey this message.

Some of Jesus’ most revolutionary actions occurred around a table at mealtime. Jesus frequently ate with those who were outcast, marginalized, and impure and he encouraged his disciples to do so as well, thus crossing both Jewish and Roman social boundaries. Eating together – commensality – in the time of Jesus was a powerful act of equality. When two people sat down to eat together, it was an indication of similar status. Eating still carries some of these connotations today; the President does not stop by a corner deli to eat, nor do most of us invite the homeless to dine with us. Crossan sees “the rules of tabling and eating as miniature models for the rules of association and socialization” (Jesus 68). In several sources, Jesus narrates a parable about a banquet (Thomas 64, Luke 14:15-24, Matthew 22:1-13) in which a man sends his servant to invite guests to dinner. The first guests decline the invitation so the man sends the servant to invite anyone he can find. In this parable Jesus advocates a table open to all equally. Commensality was not merely a way of supporting Jesus’ mission by keeping him and his disciples fed. It “was, rather, a strategy for building or rebuilding peasant community on radically different principles from those of honor and shame, patronage and clientage” which were the principles of the time. Instead, “it was based on an egalitarian sharing of spiritual and material power at the most grass-roots level” (Crossan Jesus 113). This is a message that translates well – maybe a bit too well – to today’s society.

In addition to crossing the boundaries of the table, the social revolutionary Jesus crossed the boundary between the sick and the well. As mentioned in the discussion of Borg’s position, those who had certain diseases were considered impure by Jewish standards. One of the most

prevalent of these diseases was leprosy. Although not contagious, lepers were excluded from Roman as well as Jewish society. Crossan applies an anthropological model to Jesus' context and argues that, although it was not contagious, leprosy was outcast specifically because it blurred the boundaries as a disease. Since it is a disease of the skin, the boundary between the inside of the body and the outside are confused. Regardless of the reason, a leper was unclean and not permitted to live in mainstream society. People did not know how to deal with this, so they were physically as well as emotionally exiled. The accounts of Jesus healing a leper are important because Jesus refuses to recognize those social boundaries. He does not "accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization. Jesus thereby forced others either to reject him from their community or to accept the leper within it as well" (Crossan Jesus 81-82). Jesus ignores the boundaries set by society and sets his own using other standards, much like many Christian churches try to do today.

In addition to acting socially, Jesus' actions stood out politically. It is hard for the modern reader to place him or herself into the world of the first century and understand how the events of Jesus' life as described above can be revolutionary. It can help to look at the results of his actions. For example, whatever he was doing was enough of a threat to the Romans that they captured him and allowed him to be put to death. "Herod Antipas, in whose territory he ranged as a travelling sage, had him pegged as a troublemaker, much like John the Baptist, and the Romans regarded him as a mild political threat" (Funk, et al. 1). In addition, Crossan notes that the term "Kingdom of God," which Jesus used regularly, itself is political (Jesus 93) and could have been seen as a threat to those in charge of the kingdom at the time. For whatever reason, Jesus had created enough of a movement that those in power had taken notice; they were not interested in allowing his reformation to continue.

While he often acted alone, Jesus also tried to ensure that this movement did not stop with him. He had a band of followers, specifically twelve apostles, who were to act in the same manner he did. Although Jesus continued to preach *to* the disciples throughout his ministry, he also sent them out to preach his message to others. For example, “Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. [He said] ‘Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons’” (Matthew 10.1, 8), thus asking them to cross the same social boundaries he did. Jesus was deliberately trying to create a movement. For him, it was a process of social reform, not merely one man preaching his personal beliefs in the hopes that someone would listen. The fact that Jesus took the time and effort to create a group of followers and send them out to do the same work he was doing indicates that he was out to reform on a large scale.

Crossan also places importance on the fact that Jesus was an *itinerant* preacher. Jesus moved around as he preached, and often asked his followers to move with him. This worked against all societal expectations of responsibility and attachment to the family; Jesus’ mission took precedent over his family commitments. Crossan argues that Jesus’ itinerancy throughout his ministry contributed to his social agenda. He sees “the heart of the original Jesus movement” as “a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources” (Crossan Jesus at 2000 36). When the group was moving, possessions were not important. In fact, they would have been more of a burden than a gift. Thus, the fact that the movement was itinerant placed everyone on a level plane. It worked against the hierarchical system that was in place in the temple and promoted a system that was “unbrokered egalitarianism available openly and freely to all” (Crossan Jesus at 2000 39).

Jesus was certainly a movement initiator. The social revolutionary view promotes him not as one placed on earth without his own agenda, but as a preacher and a prophet with a specific social goal in mind. “The earliest sources portray Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, a sage” (Funk 143). He set out to create a movement, and create a movement he did. His message contained “policies, plans, and procedures for communal implementation” (Crossan Jesus at 2000 35), not Jesus proclaiming himself as the messiah, nor proclaiming a message of the impending apocalypse. Scholars on this side of the historical Jesus debate believe that people took to this alternative view of the world and began to follow both Jesus the man and Jesus’ teachings.

Are the two views similar?

I have attempted to present both a view of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, and a view of Jesus as a social revolutionary as I understand them. However different they may appear, these two radically different views of Jesus of Nazareth have some similarities. Neither view is popular with many mainstream Christian movements. Both scholarly positions believe they are consciously placing Jesus in his own historical context instead of placing him among the needs of today’s society (of course, this is what historians always do, but it is not how most people approach the study of Jesus). Both positions argue that Jesus led some kind of political movement while he preached on earth. It is important to note first that these two views share methods and approaches to Biblical study. They examine the texts in similar ways, but get very different results. These methods of studying the historical Jesus include applying the criterion of dissimilarity and the criterion of multiple attestation. In addition, scholars advancing both of these views see the Bible as myth instead of historical fact.

Although not all Biblical scholars adhere to these rules of study, all of the scholars I have read and studied for this project apply the criterion of dissimilarity and the criterion of multiple attestation to their work. The criterion of dissimilarity suggests that if words in the Bible do not seem to make sense in the context of first-century Judaism or Christianity, the words have a good chance of being original to Jesus. That is, they are less likely to have been altered by the gospel writers or the early Christian church and may be words Jesus actually spoke. For example, each of the four gospels ends with Jesus being betrayed by one of his closest followers. Is this something the gospel writers would have inserted? Probably not. The writers were all followers of Jesus and it is not likely that they invented a scene in which a member of the inner crowd turned on Jesus. This would not have made Jesus look appealing to outsiders. (Ehrman 91)

The criterion of multiple attestation in the study of the life of Jesus states that the more a certain passage appears in different independent sources, the more likely it is to be actually related to Jesus of Nazareth. If a certain event or words appear in more than one canonical gospel and perhaps in the gospel of Thomas, we have more than one source for the same event. A key here is to remember that the vast majority of scholars recognize that Matthew and Luke were based on the gospel of Mark. Therefore, simply because Matthew, Luke, and Mark all mention an event or use the same words, that event or those words do *not* meet the criterion of multiple attestation unless they are attested in some other source. Instead, these three are counted as one source with regard to the stories that all three of them share. If a story appears only in Matthew and Luke, however, and not in Mark, then the story probably was taken from the hypothetical source known as “Q.” Q is a text (now lost) that is considered to be the basis for many of the words in Matthew and Luke.

The scholars I have examined also share the view of the Bible as myth. “Myth” does not mean that something is false or fictitious. It does mean, however, that it is not factual, nor entirely historically accurate. These stories were not meant to be historically accurate, but were intended to teach a lesson. This is a view that is widely held and accepted in scholarly circles, but is not a part of most religious circles. As Ehrman describes it, “There are stories in the Gospels that did not happen historically as narrated, but that are meant to convey a truth” (30). He notes that many scholars today choose not to use the word “myth” but continue to believe that “the Gospel accounts are not 100 percent accurate, while still important for the religious truths they try to convey” (Ehrman 30). Borg agrees; he uses the example of Jesus’ birth stories found in Matthew and Luke. These stories are different from one another, and scholars generally agree that neither one is a factual account of Jesus’ birth. However, the writers created them with rich symbolism that conveys certain truths they believed about Jesus that they wanted to share. “Of course, these stories say something indirectly about the historical Jesus, even though it is highly doubtful that they tell us anything about his birth. Namely, they tell us that he was such an extraordinary person that these kinds of stories were told about him” (Borg Meeting Jesus 24). The birth stories, along with many other stories found in the Gospels, should not be taken at face value, but should be viewed as myths to convey even greater messages about who Jesus was.

In addition to sharing methodology, neither the view of Jesus as an apocalypticist nor Jesus as a social revolutionary is popular in mainstream Christian thought. Both views have remained within scholarly circles. It is easy to see why Jesus the apocalyptic teacher has not permeated the consciousness of worshipers sitting in the pews every Sunday. Just as the later gospel writers were realizing, the apocalypse that Jesus had promised (if this view of him is

correct) did not arrive. The easy conclusion is that he must have been wrong! What is the modern-day believer to make of this? If a mainstream movement were to view Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher above all else, the movement would somehow have to reconcile the fact that the members continue to worship someone who turned out to be incorrect, or maybe even a liar.

Although currently one of the main views in contemporary Jesus scholarship, the social revolutionary view of Jesus has not come into popular favor either. The same mainstream Christian perspective that avoids seeing Jesus as an apocalyptic figure also chooses not to view him a figure whose main purpose on earth was to begin a revolutionary social movement. The Christian community is very attached to the view of Jesus as messiah and savior. Borg recognizes that this is the case, and he notes that he believes the current views of Jesus are inaccurate and incomplete. The popular images of Jesus as a moral teacher or a divine savior do not paint an accurate picture of who the historical Jesus really was (in this view). However, the Christian church is so firmly planted in these beliefs and so focused on the established theology that a shift towards the view of Jesus as a social revolutionary has not yet happened. The church is not ready to accept this new Jesus: “The Jesus that is emerging from a reevaluation of the ancient records in the light of new discoveries will shake the temple [or today’s church] to its foundations” (Funk 23). While Jesus has not shaken any foundations yet, I think the time will come. One thing that separates this view from the apocalyptic view is the appeal it *could* have to mainstream Christians. While the two views both currently remain within the academic world, the social revolutionary view has the potential turn mainstream.

Both views attempt to place Jesus in his own social and historical situation. “To understand what he was really like, we must situate him in his own context, not pretend that he

fits perfectly well into our own” (Ehrman 126). To many readers this may seem like an obvious goal, but it is especially important in Jesus scholarship. This is because it appears that the gospel writers placed their own “spin” on the texts they wrote. It is hard to read the gospels and extract the historical Jesus from the messages of the early Christian church under which the gospels were written, since they all came at least twenty years *after* the death of Jesus. “Whatever the differences between the various versions of the historical Jesus...they tend to agree at this point: That the real Jesus differed significantly from the composite image of him created by the evangelists” (Watson 158). Scholars typically describe this process of removing the images created after Jesus’ death as the search for the “historical Jesus” or “Jesus of Nazareth” as opposed to Jesus Christ, the Jesus of the Christian church. “On one hand, Jesus refers to the pre-Easter Jesus, namely, Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Galilean Jew. On the other hand, Jesus refers to the post-Easter Jesus, or what Jesus became after Easter” (Borg Jesus at 2000 8). Of course, in actuality these two figures are the same person, but it is a matter of using all available information to remove what has been projected upon Jesus by his earliest followers. The gospel writers were already writing about Jesus Christ, not the historical Jesus of Nazareth. However, it is necessary to note that although scholars agree on this fundamental point, they differ as to what sayings, actions, and parts of texts *do* actually belong to Jesus of Nazareth instead of to the early church.

As these scholars seek the historical Jesus, the ideas of Jesus as Christ, Jesus as messiah, and Jesus as savior often get left by the wayside. These groups are often not interested in whether Jesus was or was not what the earliest Christians and contemporary Christians claim him to be. They do not make statements about whether or not Jesus was the Son of God as some say he claimed to be, since events such as the resurrection cannot be assumed to be historically

accurate. Their images of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet or Jesus as a social revolutionary do not hinge on Jesus' possible status as God's savior, which is who Jesus has become for most Christians. Although the scholars I am examining in this project concern themselves mainly with Jesus outside his messianic status (or lack thereof), this is not the case in all Jesus scholarship. R.W.L. Moberly notes "One recurrent issue in twentieth-century gospel debate was whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah. The crucial question, however, is surely whether or not Jesus genuinely *was* and *is* the Messiah" (195). So although I have been studying two important arguments within the historical Jesus debate, I am certainly not encompassing all views.

Both images of the historical Jesus also agree that Jesus was leading some kind of a political or social movement. They differ with regard to his motivations and the reason for the movement, but they both acknowledge that it was part of his ministry. These elements of Jesus' ministry were mentioned previously in the descriptions of both the apocalyptic prophet view and the social revolutionary view. For Jesus the apocalyptic prophet, a movement was necessary to prepare people for the coming reign of God. It was necessary for Jews to get their lives in order before the apocalypse. Jesus the social revolutionary was working directly against the prevailing social vision of purity laws and dividing lines, and was preaching an egalitarian message as he crossed social boundaries. Joel B. Green, who does not specifically take sides on the question of who Jesus was and his mission notes how his actions turned the Jewish world upside down.

the Temple establishes the order of the world, providing the centre point around which human life is oriented...In important ways, Jesus set himself and his ministry over against the ideology that emanates from the Temple. He flouted conventions related to food and table associates, for example, by extending table fellowship to toll collectors and sinners. (94)

For the Jews, the Temple was the prevailing social structure of Jesus' day, both religiously and politically. Any action directly against it was revolutionary. Scholars agree that – although they all offer different reasons why – Jesus was questioning the dominant social vision and teaching another way.

How do the two views differ?

Although the two views of Jesus share some elements and share an approach to study, they are certainly more different than they are the same. They have different opinions regarding why Jesus was preaching and what his mission was. Was Jesus proclaiming the apocalypse or attempting to reform society? Several comparisons will help demonstrate what each side believes Jesus' mission was. Ehrman and Crossan, along with other scholars (though not all of them), clearly state that Jesus was not “the other.” That is, Ehrman is certain Jesus was not concerned with a just society and Crossan is just as certain that Jesus was not an apocalyptic figure. Both sides agree that John the Baptist was an important figure but, as John is the main eschatological figure in the gospels, they disagree about John's specific role in the life of Jesus and whether or not the early church imposed his teachings on Jesus. They also both agree that one of Jesus' central messages was about “the kingdom of God.” However, as we will see, each view explains Jesus' idea of the kingdom differently.

In order to demonstrate that each side of the issue clearly works against the other, I believe it is best to use the words of the scholars themselves. Ehrman sees all of Jesus' teachings in the light of the apocalypse that Jesus believed was coming. Ehrman explains:

Many people – Christian and non-Christian alike – think of Jesus as a great moral teacher whose ethical views can help produce a better society for those of us who are determined to make our lives together as just, peaceful, and enjoyable as possible. On one level, I think that's probably right. But it's also important to realize that Jesus himself did not

see it that way. He did not propound his ethical views to show us how to create a just society and make the world a happier place for the long haul. For him, there wasn't going to *be* a long haul. The judgement of God was coming soon with the arrival of the Son of Man – and people needed to prepare for its coming by changing the way they lived. Preparation for the Kingdom – *that's* what ultimately lies at the heart of Jesus' ethics. (162)

This view is relatively straightforward. These scholars do not deny that Jesus was making social reforms, but they argue that a revolution was not his main concern. Jesus was only interested in societal change in light of the end he saw nearing. The Biblical study is straightforward in that the apocalyptic statements, which are the statements in question, are taken to be original to Jesus. As mentioned earlier, to these scholars it makes more sense that the apocalyptic words of Jesus were original and only later became an embarrassment to the early church when it was discovered that they did not come true. If the early church did not add the words, then they must go back to Jesus of Nazareth. Remember, this view has been accepted by scholars for one hundred years.

The social revolutionary side of the argument takes a different approach. Again, Robert Funk's words explaining the non-eschatological position of the Jesus Seminar are better than my own:

Several scholars have expressed outrage at one of the early conclusions reached by the Jesus Seminar – namely, that Jesus was not an eschatological prophet who expected history to come to an end in his own time....

The reason the seminar came to that conclusion is simple: The characteristic parables and aphorisms of Jesus proved, on close scrutiny, to be non-eschatological. Indeed, a couple of his sayings indicate that Jesus was critical of the kind of dire warnings made by other prophets, such as John the Baptist. Furthermore, apocalypticism was widely embraced and endorsed in Jesus' day, while Jesus' view of things may have been odd or unusual. The best explanation for this discrepancy between what Jesus said and what his disciples said he said is this: Many of his followers were originally followers of John the Baptist; John was an eschatological prophet, to judge by the sayings attributed to him in Q: after Jesus died, his disciples, who had not understood his sophisticated notion of time, reverted to what they had learned from John and assigned that same point of view to

Jesus. This appears to be the best explanation for the contradictory evidence provided by the gospels. (Honest to Jesus 145-146)

In this case, the Jesus Seminar has decided that the apocalyptic statements in the gospels are *not* originally words of Jesus'. The argument for the apocalyptic Jesus therefore breaks down because the texts they have used bear no credibility with the scholars who argue for a social revolutionary Jesus. Therefore the argument that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet falls apart. Since this view has been developed more recently, it is really on the shoulders of these scholars to *disprove* the notion that Jesus was an apocalypticist. The difference in views comes down to what words are actually believed to be historically Jesus', and what role John the Baptist really had in his life. The Jesus Seminar has developed a Jesus focused on social change. The question may become: is this Jesus a reflection of the first-century Jewish world, or of the desires of twenty-first century scholars?

Each side of the issue sees John as an important figure. Jesus' ministry began with John, and John had been preaching to people who later became followers of Jesus. These aspects of Jesus' life are agreed to be historically accurate by most scholars. However, Ehrman sees this connection as one that lasts throughout the life of Jesus. His ministry began with John, who was an apocalypticist. John is waiting for another – for the coming messiah. “He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’” (Mark 1:7-8). Scholars tend to agree that John really did baptize Jesus. For scholar E.P. Sanders, “this, in turn, implies that Jesus agreed with John’s message: it was time to repent *in view of the coming wrath and redemption*” (94). Ehrman notes that the earliest Christian writings were apocalyptic. Since these sources are closest in time to the life of Jesus, they are the most valuable in terms of indicating to us what Jesus might have actually preached. He

draws the conclusion that, since John – an apocalypticist – started Jesus ministry, and since the writings that came soonest after the death of Jesus ascribe an apocalyptic tone to Jesus, Jesus must be the missing link that connects the two. He must, indeed, be an apocalypticist since that is the view that came both before him and after him. Since it is agreed that Jesus and John knew each other, probably well, Chilton offers a suggestion helpful to the apocalyptic argument.

“Friends and enemies have a unique power to define who we are. They locate us socially, within the world of what other people do...Our relationships to friends and enemies express who we are and seek to become” “Jesus’ relationship to John the Baptist presents the strongest case in point” (Chilton 72). It is easiest to assume that if Jesus and John were friends, they must have had similar views.

However, this is exactly what the Jesus Seminar does not assume. They agree that Jesus started with John. At first, they were similar in their approaches to ministry. But then Jesus changed his mind. The connection with John stops there for Jesus. He moved away from the apocalyptic message John offered and turned towards a ministry of social reform. That is the ministry of reform discussed earlier. But the connection to John did not stop there for the followers of Jesus, both during his lifetime and after. Many of these people would have been followers of John before they turned toward Jesus. They had already heard and perhaps decided to agree with the message that the end was near and God was coming soon. This is what they were expecting from Jesus, and they did not know what to think when Jesus offered something entirely different. Jews in the first century were *anticipating* a messiah. They were looking for the Son of Man and were waiting for God to come and rescue them from Roman rule. Although, according to the Jesus Seminar, this is not what Jesus was preaching, this is what people heard him saying. After he died, those who had been followers of John the Baptist before they were

followers of Jesus reverted to their old way of thinking. With Jesus no longer present to encourage them to cross social boundaries and make social reforms, his followers returned to what they had known before.

The difference in views can also be explained with regard to Jesus' view of the Kingdom of God. This is one of the main discussions in Biblical scholarship because it is one of the things Jesus mentions most throughout his ministry, but he is not very specific with regard to what the kingdom actually *is*. Scholars are continually debating what he means by this and the apocalyptic Jesus scholars and the social revolutionary scholars take very different views. The main difference comes with the questions of when and where the kingdom is to occur. Is the kingdom in the future? Is the kingdom a reference to the coming reign of God? This is what the apocalypticists believe; the apocalypse will occur and God's kingdom will be ushered in after that. Or is the kingdom something that is to come on earth very soon, even already? Was Jesus ushering in the kingdom through his social revolution as the social revolutionist view argues?

The apocalyptic Jesus refers to the kingdom as a place where God is king: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19.28). This is not some sort of statement about God coming to be the ruler of one's heart or of God issuing in a new social order. This is a statement specifically about a kingdom with a ruler. However, quoting specific Biblical passages is helpful only to a certain degree, as some scholars – such as those who have chosen to discard the apocalyptic statements as insertions by early Christians – do not place as much value on this statement as Ehrman or others might. "The kingdom of God is his sovereign, dynamic rule. More often than not, there is a

clearly temporal sense: the kingdom is referred to in the context of hope for the future” (Stanton 59). In this view, the present age (the time of Jesus) was seen as evil.

The social revolutionists view the kingdom as the will of God done on earth. It is not something that people need to wait for, nor is it an apocalypse soon to be ushered in by God. Jesus’ ministry on earth was a ministry of the kingdom. “The vision of Jesus was that of the Kingdom of God, of the will of God to be done on earth as in heaven” (Crossan Jesus at 2000 33). Jesus was bringing in the Kingdom through his acts of compassion, of healing, of table fellowship, of preaching an egalitarian message. His social revolution *was* the kingdom of God. As Luke wrote, “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (9.1-2). This was not a ministry of Jesus alone, but he called others to follow him. He created a social program based on his idea of bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. To me, and to many others, this is an attractive argument. Perhaps too attractive.

Conclusion

The social revolutionary position continues to gain acceptance within Jesus scholarship. It becomes more and more prominent both within the field and in mainstream society. It is a development of and a reaction to the earlier apocalyptic position. However, I find some major flaws with a few elements of the social revolutionary Jesus. The first, minor issue deals with Crossan’s approach to the study of Jesus. The second, larger issue surrounds the warning offered by scholars against discovering a Jesus who fits one’s own personal needs. The Jesus Seminar including Borg and Crossan insist that their position is radical and edgy. Their Jesus is not the

Jesus of most Christians. Despite their insistence, I believe the picture they paint of Jesus is a little too convenient.

First, Crossan's methods of applying anthropological and social models to Jesus' first-century Jewish society are certainly interesting. I am sure it brings a new component to Jesus research. However, I am afraid he makes a few too many assumptions and draws too many conclusions based only on models and theories. It is difficult to apply these methods to a society that no one around today has ever encountered. Since this is not my main argument I will be brief, but for example, Crossan applies one of these models to Jesus' healings. Since historically no one can prove that Jesus worked miracles that defy modern science, historians need a different approach if they are to study this part of Jesus' ministry. Medical anthropology generally separates the disease from the sickness. A disease is a biomedical problem, probably caused by a pathogen that causes the body to function abnormally in some way. The illness is the societal expectations that surround that disease. The illness prescribes how one with the disease should act, how he or she interacts with others, and how others view the person with the disease. With regard to Jesus' contact with lepers, Crossan argues that Jesus heals the illness, not the disease. That is, he does not heal the physical condition, but tries to heal the societal stigmas attached to leprosy. (Crossan Jesus 81-82) As I mentioned above, Jesus crosses those boundaries and heals the lepers from their positions as outcasts.

This is an interesting argument. It works historically and it supports the position that places Jesus as a revolutionary crossing those social boundaries. Perhaps this is really what happened. However, I think Crossan places too much confidence in this idea. It does not seem logical to me that the gospel writers, writing in the first century, would have presented Jesus as a "healer" when they knew he did not really change the form of a disease. If they knew his

ministry was one of social change, why would they have called his actions “healing” when he was healing *social* problems? I do not know Greek so I cannot return to the original text and study words in their original context. I do not have the knowledge with which to continue this argument much further. However, it seems odd that Crossan applies one particular anthropological model, assumes it will fit, and bases one of his arguments on this idea about Jesus’ ministry that he cannot prove.

Second, the social revolutionary view claims to be something it is not. I do not think that this view is outside the mainstream, as many of the scholars claim it is. Many different writers note that one of the main issues in Jesus scholarship is the danger of describing a Jesus who fits into today’s society a bit too well. “We are constantly remaking Jesus in our own image. He needs to be the very best we can imagine we should be. This is a warning to historians, for it makes doing history very difficult, if not impossible...As historians we need to be most suspicious when we begin to come up with a Jesus who seems comfortably acceptable to our values” (Segal 56). Or as Crossan puts it, “it is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography (Crossan The Historical Jesus xxviii). The idea of a Jesus who fits our needs is appealing to many lay people and churchgoers, but is not appropriate in scholarly research.

If Crossan realizes that a Jesus close to our own needs is a problem, then he must think that his Jesus would be radical for non-scholars. In the bulk of this paper I have tried to present his arguments as he makes them. However, I think he is misguided in his view of a Jesus unacceptable to most Christians. I am convinced that the image he develops of Jesus as a social revolutionary fits very well into the needs of today’s Christians. People like the idea of a social reformer; it is appealing and gives a person on which something to model his or her life. “The

Jesus that emerged from Crossan's study is an ethical teacher, a first century Gandhi, who speaks to and for the dispossessed" (Denova 22). If "Crossan argues adamantly that the original teachings were nonaggressive and nonviolent" and that "Jesus teachings against oppression – political, economic, religions" (Denova 22) then Crossan is painting a picture of someone like Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi and King are not figures who are removed from mainstream social thought. They are held up as models of persons fighting for just and ethical standards. If Crossan's Jesus comes across as a Gandhi-like figure – which I think he does – this is not a Jesus who is unacceptable and foreign to the ears of most people as Crossan seems to assume.

The way Crossan sometimes describes his view of Jesus probably appeals to many of his readers outside academia. For example, he describes Jesus' practice of open commensality as "the longest journey in the Greco-Roman world, maybe in any world: the step across the threshold of a peasant stranger's home" (Jesus at 2000 37 and Jesus 108). It is as if, through his use of words and images, he is deliberately trying to paint a picture of a Jesus who could work well in contemporary situations. This is not a Jesus who would *fit in* to today's society, but one who would be a positive force for social justice in today's society. This search for justice is not something outside of Christian teaching. There are many Christians who already hold this view of Jesus as some kind of social prophet and base their faith on the idea that Jesus was out to create just reforms. Crossan also comments that he is "putting Jesus' vision and program back into the matrix from which it sprang, the ancient and universal peasant dream of a just and equal world" (Jesus 74). This is all well and good, but once again he deliberately makes comparisons between Jesus' vision and universal goals. If Jesus is acting on a "universal peasant dream" then his ministry is not foreign to contemporary Christians. Crossan only draws attention to the fact that this "dream of a just and equal world" exists still today.

Although historically I am not sure which view of Jesus is closer to accurate, as a response to the apocalyptic view, the social revolutionary view does not make the kind of progress it wants. It is a different approach to study. It asks new questions and sees the historical Jesus in a new light. It makes us think in a different way. It may help Christians reform their faith and their churches. These are all valuable contributions to the field and to the larger community. However, Crossan constructs “a Jesus to fit our needs, a Jesus whom he then discovers in the evidence. This is perfectly acceptable as a theological “quest,” but not as an historical one” (Denova 26). The main drawback to the view – the appeal it has for many laypeople – convinces me that it does not immediately offer a better answer to the question of the historical Jesus.

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