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Easter: History Remembered or Prophecy Historicized?

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From the theologically conservative Christianity of my childhood, **I learned to read the Bible *literally*—as a record of history as it had actually happened.** And although I would occasionally question details that did not make sense, I was also influenced by the significant number of people around me who seemed to unquestioningly accept the Bible as factual. Only later did I come to see that likely many more people in my childhood congregation did have questions about the Bible's historicity, but did not feel comfortable asking them aloud.

I was also taught to read the Hebrew Bible as the Christian “Old Testament.” Instead of studying the original context of these books within the Jewish tradition, I was taught that they were valuable primarily for the ways they were understood to have predicted events in the life of Jesus. As a child, **placing Jesus at the center of “life, the universe, and everything” did not seem strange. After all, the calendar in widespread use around the world literally counted the years from before and after Jesus's birth.**

But as I grew up, I began to encounter other perspectives. And I was increasingly struck by the differences between how Jews and Christians often read the exact same sentences in irreconcilably different ways. Along these lines, the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom has said, **“Christianity stole our watch and has spent 2,000 years telling us what time it is.”**

Today, the western calendar may tell us that the year is 2017 A.D. (*Anno Domini*, meaning “in the year of our lord” in reference to Jesus), but some of you will recall the challenge of the evolutionary evangelist Michael Dowd, who spoke here a few years ago, that from our

twenty-first century perspective, **we need to shift our paradigm of “B.C.” from “Before Christ” to “Before Copernicus,”** the astronomer whose 1543 book *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* presented scientific evidence that the Earth is not the center of the Universe.

In the 500 years since, we have come to see that the de-centerings we face as a species are far more profound than Heliocentrism. After Darwin, we know that we humans are not “a little lower than the angels,” but merely a “little higher than the apes.” After Einstein, we know that even space and time are relative to one another. Science tells us that **rather than Jesus being at the center of history, we humans are an infinitesimal part of a much larger universe story that has been unfolding for more than 13.8 billion years across more than two trillion galaxies.**

So if Jesus is not at the center of history, then what does twenty-first century scholarship tell us about the Quest for the Historical Jesus and how we might best understand the original context of the texts that we know today as the Bible? One of the turning points in my own understanding came from reading John Dominic Crossan’s book *Who Killed Jesus?* which asks if the passion narratives—the stories about Jesus’s death (from the Latin *passio*, meaning “suffering”)—are **“history remembered” or “prophecy historicized”** (x)?

As a child, I was only taught the perspective of “history remembered”: that the Christian scriptures were accurate historical records passed down from generation to generation. Part of the alleged “proof” that was often cited is that hundreds of years before Jesus, the Hebrew prophets claimed to have predicted with shocking accuracy the events around Jesus’s death. In contrast, the perspective of “prophecy historicized” holds that the direction of influence is reversed. Instead of the prophets predicting the future, Christian authors—decades after Jesus’s death—**reached back to draw on words, themes, and sequences from the Hebrew Bible in drafting their Gospels** (4). So passages in the Hebrew Bible, which originally had been about their own time and place—hundreds of years before Jesus—later became seen as proof of predicting details about Jesus’s death in the future. The prophecy became *historicized*.

Let me give you some examples. **I was raised to read Jesus’s final words from the cross in Mark 15:34 as if a journalist had been there taking notes for posterity:** “At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Later, as I began a more academic investigation into the Bible, it was pointed out to me that **those precise words are at the beginning of Psalm 22**: “1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? 2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (133-134). A “history remembered” view would argue that Jesus must have been quoting the words of the Psalmist in his hour of distress. That’s possible. But a “prophecy historicized” view would invite us to consider that, tragically, no one knows what Jesus’s last words were. Jesus’s followers scattered after his arrest, and likely would not have been present at his death.

Another exact parallel from the crucifixion jumps out, one chapter later, in Psalm 22:18: “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” Again, **was this an early prediction of what became history remembered—or were these details from the Psalm woven into a later reconstruction of what Jesus’s death may have been like?**

Maintaining a “history remembered” perspective becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as one studies example after example of the many places from the Hebrew Bible where exact words, phrases, and sequences were imported into the passion narratives.

Even many theologically orthodox biblical scholars will admit that at least 20% of the stories about the death of Jesus are prophecy historicized, while still maintaining that about 80% are history remembered. But more progressive scholars such as Crossan go much further, convinced that the passion narratives are **approximately 80% prophecy historicized and only 20% history remembered** (1). That percentage is in line with the Jesus Seminar’s famous pronouncement that Jesus only said about 20% of the words attributed to him in the Gospels. In some ways these statistics are not surprising: the Gospels are almost entirely written in the third-person, do not claim to be composed by eyewitnesses to the historical Jesus, and were written at least four decades after Jesus’s death. To give you another example, looking again at Mark, the earliest of the four canonical Gospels: Mark 15:33, in isolation from a “history remembered” point of view, can seem like a straightforward recording of events: “When it was *noon, darkness* came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” But a perspective of prophecy historicized invites us to consider the ways that **Amos 8:9-10 was used to craft the narrative of**

how the crucifixion might have happened: “On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at *noon* and *darken* the earth in broad daylight.... I will make it like the mourning for an only son...” (2-3).

Or consider the way **the story of Judas betraying Jesus during the Last Supper may have been inspired by Psalm 41:9:** “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me” (69-70). Or regarding the **words allegedly spoken from heaven at Jesus’s baptism, those come from Psalm 2:7:** “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (82-83). Are these examples of history remembered—or prophecy historicized?

As you start to closely compare the passion narratives and the Hebrew Bible, the case becomes strong that:

- any mention of *spitting* and *nudging* comes from the popular scapegoat ritual;
- any mention of *scourging*, *buffeting*, and *spitting* comes from Isaiah 50:6
- any mention of *piercing*, *seeing*, *mourning* comes from Zechariah 12:10;
- any mention of *disrobing*, *rerobing*, or *crowning* comes from Zechariah 3:1-5. (132)

Crossan lays out these and many other examples in his book in ways that allow his readers to compare precisely how the earlier texts influenced the later ones. Hopefully, the examples I have given offer a taste of this perspective. His book Who Killed Jesus? is an accessible read if you are interested in learning more.

To give you a thumbnail sketch of how the canonical Christian Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John came to be, Jesus died around the year 30 C.E. **The earliest of the four Gospels is Mark, written four decades later** around 70 C.E. The next two were Matthew and Luke, written around 80 C.E. The last to be written chronologically was John, written around 90 C.E. or later.

If, instead of reading the four canonical Gospel in sequence, you read them *comparatively* in parallel columns, you can begin to notice trends such as:

- “80% of Mark’s verses are reproduced in Matthew”
- “65% of Marks’ verses are reproduced in Luke”—with both Matthew and Luke consistently correcting Mark in ways that are idiosyncratic to their respective editorial styles.

- “90% of the Gospel of John is unique to John,” but the 10% that John has in common with the Synoptic (“see together”) Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are the passion narratives. From their reconstructions of evidence, most respected biblical scholars tentatively conclude that both **Mark and John independently had on their respective desks a passion narrative source that is now lost to us.** Matthew and Luke, in turn, had on their desks both Mark as a source as well as the Q Gospel (from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source”) that was primarily a list of Jesus’s sayings.

Another pattern you notice if you read the Gospels not in the order they appear *canonically*, but in the order they were written *chronologically* is that **the later the Gospel was written, the earlier Jesus is declared to be divine and the more divine he is declared to be:**

- In Romans, written three decades after the historical Jesus, Paul depicts Jesus as being exalted at his resurrection.
- A decade later, in the first chapter of Mark, we see Jesus declared to be divine at his adult baptism.
- Moving another decade forward in time, Matthew and Mark mark Jesus’ divinization at his birth from a virgin.
- Moving forward yet another decade, John declares Jesus as divine since before Creation.

Keep that pattern in mind.

There is a similar but more pernicious trajectory that inspired Crossan’s book title Who Killed Jesus? Over the centuries, the accusations have grown increasingly loud that “The Jews killed Jesus.” However—even if there were in all likelihood some Jewish collaborators with the Romans—ultimately **the Romans killed Jesus** for disturbing the peace. The inciting incident was Jesus’s nonviolent activism at the Temple during Passover, when many pilgrims were in town and the Romans had a particularly low threshold for potential signs of insurrection. Jews did not crucify people; the Romans did. But **as we progress chronologically, the Gospels—and the Christian tradition generally—becomes increasingly *pro-Roman* and *anti-Jewish*:**

- In Mark, the Jewish *authorities* are bad, and a Jewish *crowd* is bad.
- In Matthew and Luke, not only are the Jewish authorities are bad, but the Jewish *people* at that time as a whole are bad.

- In John, *Jews* are bad without distinction. (90).

Pilate has even been canonized as a saint in some streams of the Christian tradition.

The truth is that there would have been standing order from a Roman official such as Pilate to crucify any peasant inciting insurrection, particularly during Passover. All the increasingly complex Christian narratives about Pilate (and/or his wife) wringing their hands in duress about potentially having to crucify a Jewish peasant are not history, but propaganda—as Christians sought increasingly to distinguish themselves as independent from Judaism and as acceptable to the Romans (150-151). At first, **when the early Jesus followers were marginal, this pro-Roman, Anti-Jewish trend was benign. But by the fourth century, when the Roman Empire became Christian, these seeds of Anti-Judaism grew into the virulent Anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust**—including Anti-Semitic and Anti-Jewish movements that continue today (152). Here in the twenty-first century, there remains much spiritual and ethical wisdom in the Christian tradition, but we are long past the point at which one can responsibly defend the claim that the Gospels should be read as literal “history remembered.” We must be honest about the original context and all that we have learned about how prophecy became historicized.

To summarize Crossan’s perspective:

- “The first stage is the *historical* passion.... It is what actually happened. But, because **those who knew did not care [the Roman authorities] and those who cared did not know,**” [the early followers of Jesus, who scattered after Jesus’s arrest] the actual historical facts “come to us today as little more than barest minimum: [Jesus of Nazareth was] crucified by a conjunction of Jewish and Roman authority under Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem at Passover....”
- “The second stage is the *prophetic* passion. It is the work of learned followers of Jesus, not from the [illiterate peasant class] but from literate scholars. **They searched their Scripture seeking understanding of what had happened to Jesus and to themselves....** Would they find in their sacred writings certain texts, themes, and types that would explain it all...?”
- “The third stage is the *narrative* passion, which **took that somewhat esoteric scholarly exegesis and turned it into a popular story,**” which circulated independently and was used by both Mark and John as a source for their respective Gospels.

- “The fourth stage is the *polemical* passion,” which claimed that the third stage of narrative was synonymous with the first stage of history. That **cruel twist turned Jesus’s mystical and prophetic reform movement *within* Judaism into a state religion that was anti-Jewish and pro-empire.**

In light of what we know about prophecy historicized, we can now see the absurdity of citing the “Old Testament” as proof that the Gospels are history remembered. “Of course, the narrative passion agreed in details with the prophetic passion; it had been quarried from its contents” (219-221).

So on this Easter Sunday, more than two thousand years later, can we still find hope and transformation in the passion narratives? In many ways, our invitation parallels second and third generation of Jesus followers. They searched their scriptures to better understand themselves and their situation—and to create meaning in a way that might inspire a better life and a better world. Too often, however, **later generations have been content to unquestioningly perpetuate whatever created meaning and community to a subset of people two millennia ago**. Instead, in the search for hope and transformation, the challenge to us—and for every new generation—is to do what our path-breaking, creative ancestors did, but in our own time and place. To draw from the sources of wisdom available to us—from all the world’s religions and from modern science—in our own “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”