

The Historical Jesus

Methodology in Jesus research at the end of this century is about where methodology in archaeological research was at the end of the last. When an archaeologist digs into an ancient mound, ... takes what looks most precious or unique, and hurries home to some imperial museum, we have not scholarly archaeology but cultural looting. Without scientific stratigraphy, that is, the detailed location of every item within its own proper chronological layer, almost any conclusion can be derived from almost any object.¹

John Dominic Crossan, 1991

In my view, John Dominic Crossan's original assessment of the essential problem within historical Jesus research was perfectly on point—a valid reconstruction of the historical Jesus is indeed utterly dependent upon an accurate chronological stratification of the surviving materials. Crossan attempted to present such a stratification as the foundation for his extensive reconstruction of Jesus.² In many respects, his proposed dating of key gospel materials was not too far out of synch with conventional academic assumptions. He assumed the existence of a *Sayings Gospel Q* and estimated the date of its composition in the 50s CE; he imagined a Signs Gospel as a precursor to the *Gospel of John*, dated in the 60–80 timeframe; he placed two versions of the *Gospel of Mark* in the 70s, the *Gospel of Matthew* around 90, the *Gospel of Luke* possibly in the 90s, a first edition of the *Gospel of John* in the early second century, and a second edition of John that included the late addendum John 21 was produced in 120–150. More controversially, Crossan assumed the *Gospel of Thomas* to be a first century work from the 50s to 70s, whereas most scholars tend to interpret Thomas as a second century work. Nevertheless, most of Crossan's estimates do not diverge significantly in any consequential manner from conventional scholarly consensus. Yet Crossan's

¹ Crossan, John Dominic, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, xxvii–xxviii

² Crossan, 427–434

methodical stratification of sources failed to produce the academic consensus that he might have hoped for. In short, the confusion in historical Jesus studies appears to reign unabated, and the academic embarrassment that frustrated Crossan in 1991 continues.

At present, some in the academy have recently embarked upon what they have deemed the *fourth* quest for the historical Jesus, an effort promoted by Paul Anderson and other Johannine specialists which argues for increased attention on what appear to be historically credible elements in the *Gospel of John*. The objective of the fourth quest is to call into question the traditional interpretation of the Synoptic gospels as the primary historical sources and to elevate the Fourth Gospel into commensurate status with the Synoptics as a relevant and co-equally valid source for Jesus reconstruction. As Craig Blomberg states:

I resonate, then, with Paul Anderson's initial call for a fourth quest for the historical Jesus based on giving John and the Synoptics *parity as potential sources* for Jesus research. I agree with his more recent claim that such a fourth quest has already begun.³ (emphasis added)

Though I am certainly in sympathetic agreement with the impulse to recognize John as a vital historical source, the attempt merely to place John *on par* with the Synoptics is a recipe for continued confusion. It will result in a failure to establish a solid foundation for Jesus reconstruction. It does not help to suggest that John and the Synoptics reflect possible bilateral influence on various matters of either theological or historical import. Anderson's coining of the term *interfluentiality* is helpful in drawing attention to the fact that there are evident complex and puzzling interrelations between the texts, but it is limited in its ability to determine in particular cases the directions of dependence, or indeed whether any dependence actually exists. For example, it has been argued that the parenthetical comment in John 3.24, "*for John had not yet been put in prison,*" makes little sense apart from the reader's assumed familiarity with the *Gospel of Mark* since there are no other references to John's imprisonment in the Fourth Gospel. Has the author of John assumed his readers' knowledge of Mark? This inference might carry weight *if* the text was composed circa 100 CE. However, under the Ur-John theory, John 3.24 was part of the original Ur-John narrative that has been preserved in canonical

³ Blomberg, Craig L., *Jesus the Purifier: John's Gospel and the Fourth Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Baker Academic, 2023, 220-221

John. As originally composed, it was being addressed to a Jewish audience in Judea in the mid-first century. These readers/hearers would surely have had common knowledge if not remembrance of John's arrest and execution, so there is no need to imagine their knowledge of Mark to make sense of the reference. Thus, no certain inference regarding intertextual influence may be drawn from the comment in 3.24.

An Alternative Stratification of the NT Documents

In the present work I have argued that the traditional academic approach to the chronological stratification of the materials is erroneous, and it is the erroneous sequencing of key materials that renders any possible consensus on the historical Jesus an impossibility. In particular, the two most consequential errors in the conventional assumptions are (1) that Mark is the earliest narrative gospel, and (2) that the double tradition material in Matthew and Luke is drawn from a primitive Q collection. These two errors are fatal, as they cause researchers to develop sketches of the historical Jesus that are heavily influenced by the materials in these two sources. The mistaken reliance upon Mark and Q as the two primary sources is directly responsible for the wide array of disparate reconstructions of Jesus that Crossan deemed an academic embarrassment.⁴

Based upon the analyses in this book, the most probable chronological stratification of the gospel materials is as follows:

1. The earliest surviving Jesus tradition in the NT is found in the carefully preserved primitive layer of John, herein "Ur-John." This was most likely originally composed in Aramaic by or under the auspices of the apostle John. A probable date range for Ur-John is the decade of the 50s.
2. A non-apocalyptic proto-Mark was composed as a comprehensive rebuttal of Ur-John soon after the death of Peter and prior to the events of 70. Estimated composition date is 65–66 CE.
3. At the time of proto-Mark's appearance in 65–66, its original ending beyond 16.8 was recognized as politically counterproductive. Mark was truncated at 16.8, and the remaining finale was edited and transferred to Ur-John, concurrent with the release of proto-Mark.

⁴ Crossan, John Dominic, *The Historical Jesus*, Harper San Francisco, 1991, xxviii

4. In the early aftermath of the war, the apocalyptic units of Mark 8.38–9.1, ch. 13, and an edited 14.62 were added to proto-Mark to salvage the new gospel's relevance in the post-war era. Probable date is 70–72 CE.
5. Also in the aftermath of the war, the Aramaic Ur-John with ch. 21 already appended was translated into Greek, again most likely in the early 70s.
6. The post-war emotional turmoil and outrage at the destruction of Jerusalem fueled a momentous creative amplification of Jesus traditions during the 70s. This produced an array of new mythical, moral, and eschatological expansions to the pro-Petrine traditions documented in Mark. These expansions found their first published form in Luke 3–24, which most likely appeared in the 77–80 timeframe.
7. Also, in the general timeframe of about 80 CE, the first recension to the Greek edition of the evolving *Gospel of John* appeared, which included the insertion of ch. 14 and related interpolations. This recension was written by the author of the Johannine epistles.
8. The creative amplification of the Petrine traditions continued into the 80s with additional mythical, moral, and eschatological attributions being incorporated. This new material took published form in the *Gospel of Matthew*, which appeared in the 85 CE timeframe. The author of Matthew used Mark, Luke 3–24, and other collections of sayings and new traditions such as the infancy story as sources.
9. A second recension of the *Gospel of John* was likely produced by about 85–90. This saw the addition of chs. 15 and 16 and parallel interpolations. The New Commandment appeared in this recension as an attempt to suppress unresolved hostilities between the Johannine and Petrine factions. The *aposynagogos* passages were also inserted at this stage.
10. A possible third and final recension of John incorporated ch. 17 and the prologue, perhaps around 100 to 110, which incorporated the most advanced interpretation of Jesus as a preexistent eternal being.
11. Luke 1–2 and Acts were added to Luke 3–24 in the 100–120 timeframe. The objective was to expand the narrative scope of Matthew

on both ends in order to supersede Matthew and strengthen the gravitas of the Lukan corpus as compared to Matthew.

A Sketch of the Historical Jesus

The earliest stratum of Jesus tradition is located in Ur-John, which appears to have been written by or under the auspices of the apostle John. As such it is the only account of Jesus written by an eyewitness associate of Jesus and should be regarded as foundational to the historical Jesus quest. Today's fourth questers are correct to argue for an increased focus on the *Gospel of John* as an important source for historical Jesus studies, but in my view they do not yet fully recognize how right they are. John must not be regarded merely as equal in status and relevance to the Synoptics, it is the single most essential cornerstone upon which any valid reconstruction of Jesus must be founded.

Ur-John contains several indications that Jesus had been promoting a seditious anti-Roman uprising, including (a) his self-promotion as Messiah, (b) the controversy between Jesus and John the Baptist as to which of the two was the authentic Messiah, (c) Jesus' reception by his followers as a would-be King of Israel, (d) the hints that the disciples were subject to arrest, (e) his hostile interrogation by Annas and the lack of a trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus' explicit condemnation as one who had challenged Caesar, (f) his taunting as a would-be king and (g) his execution via crucifixion along with two probable disciples.

It is equally important to recognize that the *Gospel of Mark* was written as a rebuttal of Ur-John with the objective of depoliticizing the legacy of Jesus. Mark's methodical and strenuous attempts to eliminate all hints of Jesus as a political rebel is confirming evidence that this was at the core of the historical memory of Jesus at the time Mark was composed. So Mark contains vital evidence in historical Jesus reconstruction, just not the evidence that the academy has always imagined. The *Gospel of Mark* is most revealing when interpreted as anti-history—e.g., Mark's claim that Jesus repeatedly attempted to suppress his identity as Messiah is a good indication that he did not; Mark's claim that Jesus supported the payment of Roman taxes is a good indication that he did not. Mark's claim that Jesus befriended tax collectors is another attempt to whitewash the fact that he had advocated tax resistance. Mark's claim that Jesus' rhetoric about the new "kingdom of God" had been fully misinterpreted due to his penchant for teaching in

opaque parables is intended to depoliticize an extant memory that he had advocated a restored, sovereign Kingdom of Israel. Mark's claim that Jesus routinely encountered and cast out demons and unclean spirits was a key literary device by which the author attempted to redefine the essential Jesus drama as one of spiritual conflict rather than political. Mark's claim that Jesus promoted himself by the politically innocuous title "Son of man" rather than Messiah, king, or even Son of God, further portrays him as one who had no political ambition. It is no accident that Ur-John contains no references to demons, unclean spirits, tax collectors, parables, the kingdom of God, or the Son of man. In short, when Ur-John and Mark are read in tandem as opposing accounts, a coherent sketch of Jesus as anti-Roman rebel comes into focus.

Attributes of the Historical Jesus

Jesus vs. John the Baptist. Both Ur-John and Mark begin the story of Jesus with John the Baptist. In Ur-John, Peter's brother Andrew and another unnamed first follower of Jesus are disciples of John. This unnamed disciple is usually thought to be a furtive reference to the Beloved Disciple, the apostle John. Jesus appears, and the Baptist proclaims him to be the *lamb of God* twice (1.29–34, 1.35–42). The first of these appears to be a later interpolation, but the second sequence in 1.35–42 is text that is most probably retained from Ur-John. It is in this second sequence that Andrew finds Peter and declares, "We have found the Messiah" (1.41). These three disciples of the Baptist, Andrew, the unnamed Beloved Disciple, and Peter, then follow Jesus and form the core of a separate Messianic movement. Accordingly, both Ur-John and the Synoptic gospels appear to identify Peter, Andrew, and John as the three first disciples of Jesus, with John's brother James included as a fourth in the Synoptic accounts.

After an initial trip to Galilee, Jesus and his disciples return to Jerusalem for a Passover, Jesus engages in the temple cleansing episode (2.13–17), then returns to the Judean wilderness and baptizes at the same location on the river in competition with John (3.22–26). After baptizing and making more disciples than John, he departs again for Galilee (4.1–3). So the Jesus movement is represented in Ur-John as a splinter faction that separates from John the Baptist and competes with him for some period of time prior to his arrest.

The *Gospel of Mark's* account of John the Baptist is, by comparison, remarkably terse. John declares himself to be a precursor to Jesus, he promptly baptizes Jesus (1.9), then disappears from the story. The author makes it a point to say that *after* John's arrest (1.14), Jesus went into Galilee and began to call his first disciples Peter, Andrew, James, and John (1.17). So in the Synoptics, these first disciples have no relationship to John the Baptist at all. Mark has essentially dissociated Jesus and his movement from John the Baptist geographically, temporally, and by implication politically, after a brief acknowledgment that Jesus had been baptized by him.

This is the first of many attempts in Mark to depoliticize Jesus, in this case by dissociating Jesus from a prominent figure who was recognized as one who had attracted a large following and had possessed the power to incite an uprising. Mark does not want Jesus to be colored with the same brush, so he makes it appear as if the Jesus movement had nothing to do with the Baptist. Since Mark's account appears to be, in practical terms, a political whitewashing of the story in Ur-John, the latter account is the more credible from an historical perspective. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine that a late first century redactor would have introduced the notion that Jesus had competed with John the Baptist, in contradiction of the Synoptic tradition, if there had been no historical precedent for it.

Related to this is the intriguing representation in Ur-John that John the Baptist had insisted that he was not the Christ. His strident denial is recorded twice (1.19–21, 3.28), but the idea that anyone might have interpreted him as the Christ does not appear in the Synoptics. The author of Ur-John also feels compelled to note that unlike Jesus, John *did no sign* to authenticate himself as the Messiah (10.41). Thus, we may infer that some in the author's intended audience had recognized John the Baptist as the resurrected Messiah rather than Jesus, for these denials would make no sense otherwise. Hints of this belief are also found in Mark 6.14 and 8.27–28, where some believed that Jesus himself was a resurrected John the Baptist.

Thus, with the first strokes of a sketch of the historical Jesus, we may infer that Jesus was himself in some way associated with the movement of John the Baptist, that he may have been a disciple of John himself, that he was able to attract a group of John's disciples who then split off from the Baptist to follow Jesus in a competing populist movement. This evidently sparked a debate among the followers of these two as to which was the authentic Messiah. Clear evidence of this dispute has been retained in Ur-John but eliminated from the Synoptic accounts.

King of Israel/Messiah. On two occasions, Ur-John explicitly indicates that Jesus was being hailed by his followers as the pending *King of Israel*. He is declared as such by Nathanael in 1.49, where Jesus tacitly accepts the recognition. He is also proclaimed to be *King of Israel* in 12.13 during the Triumphal Entry where he formally arrives as the pending king. After the mass feeding the people wish to seize Jesus and install him as king without further delay (6.15). In Ur-John, Jesus also actively promotes himself as Messiah which carries political and royal implications, as the Messiah is commonly recognized as the coming king. Jesus explicitly declares himself to be the Messiah (4.25–26), and he performs numerous signs to authenticate his identity as Messiah. Jesus' most dramatic sign, the public raising of Lazarus, is stated as the specific reason the crowds assembled to hail Jesus as *King of Israel* during the Triumphal Entry (12.12–18).

The author of Mark makes a valiant effort to sweep all of this under the rug. No follower of Jesus ever refers to him as a king in Mark. The closest allusion to this occurs at the Triumphal Entry, where the people cry out, "*Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming*" (11.10). With a restored Davidic kingdom pending and being inaugurated by Jesus, there is an implied recognition of royalty.

However, in Mark, the only persons to explicitly identify Jesus as a king are his adversaries. This first appears on the lips of Pilate in somewhat mocking form, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" (15.2, 9, 12). The soldiers taunt him sarcastically, "*Hail King of the Jews*" (15.18). Mark implies that these are insults being hurled by the uninformed. The author avoids the incendiary title *King of Israel* until the end of the gospel, where the ostensibly ignorant chief priests taunt Jesus on the cross, "*Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.*" (15.32). Here the author finally reveals his awareness that Jesus had been recognized by his followers as *King of Israel*, but he makes it appear as if this was a gross misunderstanding by placing it on the lips of those ridiculing him.

Related to Mark's suppression of the kingship of Jesus is the notion that Jesus actively suppressed his identity as Messiah/Christ, a theme known as the Messianic Secret. When Peter declares, "*You are the Christ,*" Jesus charges them to tell no one about him (8.29–30). Jesus also commands the demons who knew his identity to remain silent, and those who witnessed his miracles or received his healings to remain silent as well. For the author of

Mark, it was essential to represent that Jesus did everything possible to avoid stirring the population to provoke a political uprising.

In short, the author of Mark attempts to nullify the representations in Ur-John that Jesus had promoted himself as King and Messiah. This constitutes another political whitewashing of the Ur-John tradition. From this we may infer that Ur-John has the more credible remembrance—the historical Jesus did in fact view himself as a Messianic figure and promote himself as a pending King of Israel.

The Twelve. Did Jesus assemble twelve apostles? This is a prominent concept in the Synoptic Gospels. There are frequent references to “the twelve” and each of the Synoptics names the twelve individually, although Luke’s list is slightly divergent from Matthew and Mark. The term *apostle* also appears in all three Synoptics.

The author of Ur-John also knows of a tradition that there was a group of “twelve,” but Jesus addresses them only once, and not in a positive light (6.66–70). The only other mention of the twelve in John occurs in 20.24, where the author incidentally refers to “Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin.” The term *apostle* does not occur in Ur-John. In short, the existence of the twelve has been suppressed in Ur-John as if the author did not want to call attention to the fact that Jesus had called twelve apostles. Perhaps this is no surprise for an author who wished to represent himself uniquely as a special “disciple whom Jesus loved.” But the fact that the author of Ur-John suppresses evidence of a group of twelve that it was not in his personal interest to draw attention to is compelling evidence that Jesus had in fact organized a group of twelve. Such an organizational structure would be in symbolic harmony with the idea that he would become *King of Israel*, and by implication rule over the twelve tribes.

Kingdom of God. There is no mention of the *kingdom of God* in Ur-John. However, there is the implication of a coming kingdom: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the **King of Israel!**” And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it; as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, **your king is coming**, sitting on an ass’s colt!”* (12.13–15). This language anticipates a restored, sovereign kingdom of Israel that Jesus shall reign over as king. That the people wish to take Jesus by force to make him king without delay in 6.15 operates on the same implied premise—Israel shall be reestablished as a sovereign kingdom. Yet there is no explicit rhetoric in

Ur-John of Jesus calling for an expulsion of the Romans and the restoration of a sovereign Israel. This may be suspected as a key component of the suppressed message of the historical Jesus. For in Ur-John, Jesus has no message other than proclaiming himself to be the Messiah, so he is a Messiah without a message of substance. Now if the historical Jesus had been calling for the expulsion of the Romans from the holy land and the restoration of a sovereign Israel, it is no mystery that the author would have suppressed this in his writings on Jesus. It is reasonable to suspect that this may account for the “Messiah without a message” phenomenon.

It is precisely on this issue that the *Gospel of Mark* becomes highly instructive. For Mark boldly proclaims that Jesus did indeed announce and promote a new kingdom, but unfortunately, due to Jesus’ alleged preference for teaching in opaque parables, no one had understood what he had meant. Mark’s message to his readers is clear: “*You misinterpreted Jesus’ kingdom rhetoric. And it is not your fault, for even the disciples had not gotten it right.*” Mark introduces the concept that Jesus had taught in parables, and indicates that the express purpose of the parables was to mask the truth and prevent understanding:

4.10 And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside **everything is in parables; 12 so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand**; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.”

The Markan claim that Jesus taught in parables is directly related to the idea that Jesus was fundamentally misunderstood, for the stated purpose of the parables was to *prevent understanding*.

We may be confident that the author of Mark was quite aware that his readers/hearers remembered something of the kingdom rhetoric that Jesus had preached, because he insists that they had misconstrued his meaning. According to Mark, Jesus had not envisioned a restored political kingdom of Israel; Jesus was not ever intending to be the new *King of Israel*. This was all a mistake. Rather, Jesus had come to introduce a new spiritual kingdom consisting of a fellowship of believers: “*The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.*” (1.15) This Markan concept promotes an innocuous, spiritual kingdom of believers that would, by implication, coexist with the established political structure and represent no threat to the rule of

Rome. Accordingly, the amorphous, ill-defined spiritual kingdom of God in Mark functions as a smokescreen to obscure the concept of the restoration of a political kingdom of Israel as anticipated in Ur-John. The author of Mark's apparent intent is to obfuscate the original political agenda of Jesus. Thus, we may infer that the historical Jesus did in fact envision a restored sovereign state of Israel.

Parables. Ur-John has no awareness of a tradition that Jesus spoke in parables. The word *parabolē* does not appear in Ur-John (or canonical John). And there is no record of Jesus speaking in the literary form of a parable in Ur-John. Conversely, Mark claims that Jesus preferred to teach in obscure parables precisely to prevent understanding. At the core of the tradition is the simple fact that, for the disciples, things had not turned out as expected—the kingdom had not materialized. Evidently some must have wondered, “did we misunderstand Jesus’ meaning?” Since the parables are cited as the reason why Jesus had been misunderstood, it appears that the pro-Petrine faction had invented the notion that Jesus had taught in opaque parables to support this interpretation. For it makes little historical sense to imagine that an anti-Roman Messianic rebel attempting to foment a popular uprising would preach in puzzling parables. Anyone engaged in such a mission would have made himself plainly understood. Since Ur-John has no recollection of a parable tradition, and since the rationale for the parables in Mark 4.11–12 appears to be a somewhat ludicrous fabrication, I submit that we may safely dismiss the notion that the historical Jesus spoke in parables.

Son of Man. The author of Ur-John has no recollection of Jesus referring to himself as the *Son of man* (or lit. “the son of the man”). This title as associated with Jesus first appears in proto-Mark, in which it is used eight times in non-apocalyptic contexts (e.g., the *Son of man* has authority on earth to forgive sins (2.10), the *Son of man* is lord of the sabbath (2.28)). At face value, the title is innocuous and does not carry the same inflammatory connotations as Messiah, King of Israel, or even *Son of God*, given the emperor's appropriation of that title. It is doubtful that the Romans would have regarded an itinerant preacher promoting himself as the *Son of man* to be a political threat. It also seems doubtful that a politically motivated Jesus would have been declaring himself to be the *Son of man*, or that working peasant class Jews would have been inspired by one claiming to be such. Accordingly, the *Son of man* appears to be a Petrine/Markan literary creation intended to further

depoliticize of the legacy of Jesus. Given that it does not appear in Ur-John, the critical historian is on reasonably safe ground to suppose that title *Son of man* does not go back to the historical Jesus.

Tax Resistance. If the historical Jesus was a Messianic figure anticipating the restoration of a sovereign Israel, it is a practical certainty that he would have been advocating tax resistance. A revolt against Roman rule would entail a refusal to pay Roman taxes. Luke records a specific accusation that Jesus had been a tax rebel along with proclaiming himself to be king:

1 Then the whole company of them arose, and brought him before Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute [pay taxes] to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king." (Luke 23.1–2)

Luke's evident intent in recording this account is to make it appear absurd that Jesus had forbidden the payment of Roman taxes and claimed to be a king. Yet it is apparent in Ur-John that Jesus was indeed promoting himself as King of Israel and Messiah, and it is difficult to imagine that a Jewish Messianic figure who was advocating the restoration of a sovereign Israel would encourage the payment of Roman taxes. The accusations levied at Jesus in Luke 23.1–2 are likely historically correct, which is why the author is attempting to make them appear unfounded.

Furthermore, in the *Gospel of Mark*, once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem he is confronted directly on his views on Roman taxation:

12.13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to entrap him in his talk. 14 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the way of God. **Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? 15 Should we pay them, or should we not?**" But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin, and let me look at it." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17 Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at him.

In recounting this story, the author of Mark reveals his awareness that Roman taxation was an issue of controversy related to Jesus. For this author there was an explicit need to establish that Jesus did *not* contest the payment of

taxes. Yet if the historical Jesus had never objected to Roman taxation, it is unlikely that the author would have invented a memorable story such as this to establish that Jesus had not objected to Roman taxation.

Near the beginning of Mark, Jesus calls Levi the tax collector from his office, and Levi follows him without question (2.14). Immediately following this, Jesus is said to be eating with tax collectors in his house, for there were many who followed him (2.15–16). It is suspicious that tax collectors in particular would be cited as a group uniquely attracted to Jesus. Yet it appears to be Mark's objective to depoliticize Jesus by any means possible, and if one believes that Jesus was calling and befriending tax collectors, and even sharing table fellowship with them, it would not be possible to imagine that he would have been advocating tax revolt. So this reads as another melodramatic obfuscation on the part of the author of Mark. It fits well with Mark's general whitewashing of Jesus and the author's desire to portray Jesus as Rome-friendly.

Luke seizes upon Mark's tax collector tradition and develops it further. After Levi is called from his tax office he hosts a great feast on Jesus' behalf with a large company of tax collectors in attendance (5.29). Luke speaks glowingly of tax collectors and includes the parable of the Pharisee and the repentant tax collector (18.10–14), as well as the episode in which Jesus befriends and stays at the home of the enthusiastic Zaccheus, the rich tax collector (19.2–10). In Luke, repentant tax collectors are represented as good folk seeking to be baptized by John (3.12, 7.29). With all of this as background context, the author of Luke evidently felt free to acknowledge that Jesus had been accused of provoking tax revolt (23.2), knowing that Jesus' extensive affiliation with tax collectors would make the accusation appear specious.

Matthew has no similar respect for tax collectors as he tends to speak of them in disparaging tones (5.46, 11.19, 18.17), but he does reproduce Mark's story that Jesus dined with them (9.10–12). Yet the *Gospel of Matthew* make one enormous leap to the claim that Matthew, one of the twelve apostles, was a tax collector (9.9, 10.3), and it is this apostle who is ostensibly credited with authorship of the grand *Gospel of Matthew* itself.

Collectively, one might say the Synoptic writers doth protest too much. Since Jesus was crucified as a would-be King of Israel, the "Jesus as friend of tax collectors" tradition reads as an elaborate smokescreen intended to erase genuine historical memories that Jesus had advocated tax revolt. Ur-John has no recollection of Jesus befriending tax collectors, nor does it record

any discussion concerning Jesus' views on taxation. In light of the melodramatic and historically dubious Synoptic representations of Jesus' warm friendship with tax collectors, the historian may safely infer that the Synoptic authors were attempting to erase a politically incendiary memory. The historical Jesus likely had no interactions with tax collectors, and he had indeed been advocating tax resistance as an integral part of his rebellion.

Open Commensality. The concept that Jesus shared table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners is common in the Synoptics but non-existent in Ur-John. The term *sinners* is not defined, so it is not clear who specifically is being referred to in this context. But clearly the sinner is regarded as one with whom it would be inappropriate to share table fellowship. However, the practice of open commensality in the Synoptics is specifically associated with tax collectors, while the undefined sinners are typically included as a secondary group. It is these two types that are cited to illustrate Jesus' liberal acceptance and inclusion of undesirables. In this regard, open commensality in the Synoptics connotes a radical egalitarianism that is in harmony with the overarching Synoptic concept of the *kingdom of God* as a fellowship of believers. This is a philosophical impulse that many scholars have understandably been happy to attribute to the historical Jesus.

Unfortunately, these concepts do not exist in Ur-John, in which Jesus eats with the family of Lazarus (evidently close friends), and he eats with his disciples at the Last Supper. But there is no indication in Ur-John that Jesus, as a matter of practice, shares table fellowship with anyone other than close friends and associates. Since there is no mention of either open commensality or the kingdom of God in Ur-John, and since open commensality is directly associated with the befriending of tax collectors in the Synoptics, it is most probable that Jesus did not adopt this as a practice.

Exorcism. Ur-John has no record of Jesus conducting exorcisms, casting out demons, or encountering unclean spirits. This tradition starts at the beginning of the *Gospel of Mark*, where the author is arguing from the outset that the essential dramatic conflict of the Jesus story was cosmic and spiritual in nature, rather than political. Thus, Mark opens with the temptations of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness (1.13), and follows with the first hostile encounter with an adversary being that of an unclean spirit in the synagogue (1.23–27). Then Mark says Jesus *went throughout all Galilee, preaching in synagogues and casting out demons* (1.39). Moreover, Mark represents that the twelve

were given authority to cast out demons (3.15), and they are said to have cast out many demons (6.13). Accordingly, Mark is insistent that not only Jesus, but the Jesus movement at large was engaged in spiritual warfare.

Since the casting out of demons and unclean spirits are mythical concepts designed to cloak the political aspects of Jesus' activity, and since there is no record of it in Ur-John, we may reasonably infer that the historical Jesus did not perform exorcisms.

Disciples subject to arrest. There are several hints in Ur-John that suggest the disciples were subject to arrest including Jesus' plea to the soldiers to let them go (18.8), their apparent fear of arrest (19.38, 20.19), and the favorable treatment of the two who died with Jesus as apparent disciples (19.18, 32). Conversely, Mark offers the memorable betrayal of Jesus by the kiss of Judas, the purpose of which is to establish that *only* Jesus was to be arrested:

14.44 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The **one I shall kiss** is the man; **seize him and lead him away** under guard." 45 And when he came, he went up to him at once, and said, "Master!" And he kissed him. 46 **And they laid hands on him and seized him.** 47 But one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 48 And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? 49 **Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.** But let the scriptures be fulfilled." 50 And they all forsook him, and fled.

It is a practical certainty that if Jesus was running an anti-Roman uprising for the purpose of effecting regime change, the movement itself would have been regarded as seditious and Jesus' associates would have been wanted as well. So Ur-John's hints to this effect are historically coherent. Mark's melodramatic kiss of betrayal is memorable, but superfluous even within Mark's story which indicates that those in the arrest party already knew who Jesus was (14.49). So the only purpose of the kiss is to establish that Jesus was the only one to be arrested. Since this is another apparent melodramatic fabrication by the author of Mark, the historian is justified to infer that Jesus' disciples had been subject to arrest and the movement itself had been regarded as seditious. This in turn increases the likelihood that the two executed with Jesus were indeed disciples or associates.

A Question of Non-violent Revolution

There is ample evidence in Ur-John and the non-apocalyptic proto-Mark to suggest that Jesus had been fostering an anti-Roman Messianic rebellion that he imagined would culminate in a restored sovereign Israel. He believed he would serve as King in this newly restored kingdom. However, there is very little surviving evidence that Jesus had intended this to be in any sense an armed or violent rebellion. Much is made of the fact that Peter appears to have been carrying a sword during the arrest in the garden which suggests that they were at least prepared for violent conflict. And Luke claims that Simon, one of the twelve, was called Zealot (6.15), which implies that he was interested in armed rebellion. But Simon stands out as anomalous from Jesus and the other eleven in this regard. There is also a peculiar discussion regarding swords in Luke:

22.36 He said to them, "But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. **And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one.** // 38 And they said, "**Look, Lord, here are two swords.**" And he said to them, "**It is enough.**"

Here Jesus appears to counsel his disciples to arm themselves, but then after being alerted that they have two swords, Jesus declares it to be enough. Other than these few oblique references, there is no indication that Jesus had envisioned an armed insurrection. He is accused of promoting himself as Messiah and would-be King. He is accused of challenging the authority of Caesar in Ur-John, and of advocating tax resistance in Luke 23.2, but no one ever accuses him of violent armed confrontation even as an ostensibly "false accusation" than the Synoptic authors can appear to make ludicrous.

Was Jesus following *Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18*?

How could Jesus have imagined that he could initiate a regime change and an expulsion of the Romans without an armed rebellion? In this regard, it is noteworthy that an apparently non-violent Messianic rebellion is envisioned and predicted in the *Psalms of Solomon* which consist of eighteen psalms composed in the mid-first century BC, several decades prior to the birth of Jesus.⁵ The 17th Psalm in this collection specifically anticipates the

⁵ The translated text of the *Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18* are included for reference in in Appendix II.

coming of a Messiah/King who will bring about the expulsion of Rome, who will cleanse Jerusalem from the gentiles (PsalmSol 17.22) and restore Jerusalem to greatness. It envisions a reversal of political power in the world; Israel will become the elite sovereign power, the tribes of Israel shall be reestablished in the land (PsalmSol 17.26,28), and all nations will be subservient to Israel. The Messiah/King will rule over the tribes of Israel and the gentile nations (PsalmSol 17.30). So PsalmSol 17 does not envision a world-ending cataclysmic apocalypse of judgment, but rather a radical realignment of political power in the world. But most notably, all of this will come to pass without the Messiah/King resorting to violence and war:

For he will not trust in horse and rider and bow, nor will he multiply his gold and silver for war (17.33)

He will destroy the lawless nations with the word of his mouth (17.24)

He will judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness (17.29)

Through the hope in God he will even show mercy to all the nations who stand before him in fear, for he will smite the earth with the word of his mouth forever. (17.35)

The *Psalm of Solomon 17* ends with the declaration that God will cause all of this to happen:

Blessed are those born in those days to see the good things for Israel which God will cause to happen in the assembly of the tribes. May God hurry up his mercy over Israel; may he deliver us from the impurity of unhallowed enemies.”(17.44–45)

The *Psalm of Solomon 18* is much shorter, but anticipates the Messiah in a coming generation:

18.5 May God purify Israel for the day of mercy in blessing, for the appointed day when He raises up his Messiah. 6 Blessed are those born in those days to see the good things of the Lord which he will do for the coming generation, 7 under the rod of discipline of the Messiah of the Lord, in the fear of his God, in wisdom of spirit, and of righteousness and of force, 8 to guide aright people in works of righteousness, in the fear of God, to establish them all before the Lord.

Did Jesus know the *Psalms of Solomon*? Was he inspired by them? Did he view them as his personal mandate and script? One cannot know, of course, it is a matter of speculation. However, *Psalm of Solomon 17* does proclaim that a Messiah/King without an army will rise up and come to power in a restored Kingdom of Israel, and on the strength of the word of this Messiah/King and the assistance of heaven, the Romans will be expelled and Jerusalem cleansed of the gentile invaders. The sketch of the historical Jesus that can be drawn from elements in Ur-John and the *Gospel of Mark* is consistent with a Messianic rebel that was acting upon such a vision. Once Jesus had begun to envision himself as a chosen Messiah and pending King, it would not be surprising to discover that Jesus had drawn confidence that he was on a predestined mission guaranteed to succeed from the *Psalms of Solomon*.

The End of the Jesus Quest

In the end, we come to discover why the quest for the historical Jesus has been what Crossan deemed to be a scholarly bad joke. The reason is clear: from the outset, the academy has simply been looking in the wrong places. With an overwhelming academic consensus that the historical Jesus was to be found in Mark and Q, the chronic failure of the quest has been guaranteed from the outset since much of this material was created precisely to obscure the political roots of the Jesus movement. Yet once we understand Ur-John to be the earliest and most historically coherent memory of Jesus in the NT, we have a new foundation upon which to build a more viable reconstruction. Moreover, once we recognize that the author of the *Gospel of Mark* and (evidently) the apostle Peter were motivated to create false narratives for the purpose of obscuring the political aspirations of Jesus, we can put Mark into proper perspective and derive a coherent historical sketch from these materials:

1. Jesus was born in Nazareth to a father named Joseph.
2. Jesus was an aggressive self-promoting Messianic figure who staged public miracles as “signs” to authenticate his claim to Messianic status.

3. Jesus had competed with John the Baptist for some period of time, and some Jews were debating whether Jesus or the Baptist was the authentic Messiah.
4. Jesus had anticipated the expulsion of Rome and a restoration of an independent sovereign Israel, which is the root of his misunderstood “kingdom of God” rhetoric.
5. Jesus’ followers hailed him as a pending *King of Israel*.
6. Jesus advocated tax resistance.
7. Jesus likely had conflicts with some Pharisees who had not accepted him as the authentic Messiah.
8. Jesus’ historical message was inflammatory, pro-Israel and anti-Roman. His historical rhetoric has been suppressed in the gospels for political reasons.
9. The Jewish priests and religious elite in Jerusalem who were politically aligned with Rome quite likely did seek to arrest Jesus and put him to death for inciting a rebellion. Ur-John’s reports that the “Jews” wanted to kill Jesus (7.1, 8.37, 11.8) are viable assuming the Jews he is referring to are the high priest and chief priests who were functionaries of the Roman administration.
10. Jesus was arrested and condemned for challenging the authority of Caesar.
11. There was no late-night trial before the Sanhedrin at which he was condemned for blasphemy.
12. Jesus did not speak/teach in parables.
13. Jesus did not conduct exorcisms.
14. Jesus did not refer to himself as the Son of man.
15. Jesus did not practice open commensality.
16. Jesus did not preach of a world-ending apocalypse or final day of judgment, but rather of a restored sovereign Israel and a realignment of political power.

17. Jesus did not conduct an exclusive Galilean “ministry” of healing and teaching. Indeed, the term *ministry* is an inappropriate descriptor of the activities of Jesus, which were political in nature.
18. Jesus’ disciples were subject to arrest. The movement at large had been condemned as seditious. The two who died with Jesus were followers or disciples.
19. Jesus was mocked, beaten, and crucified as a would-be King of the Jews.

The Puzzling Burial Stories

Once one moves beyond the crucifixion to the burial sequence, the waters get muddier, providing an opportunity for untethered and fanciful speculations. Yet it is entertaining at the least to contemplate what might have accounted for the burial and empty tomb stories.

First, some skepticism. Ur-John 19.14 indicates that Jesus was condemned at about the sixth hour, or about noon on the day of Preparation, and crucified soon thereafter, perhaps 1 pm. Soon after that the “Jews” requested that the bodies be taken down before the onset of the sabbath at sunset (19.31). There are several problems with this scenario. First, crucifixion was intended to be a slow torturous method of execution. Victims could remain alive for several days before succumbing. It was a labor-intensive method of execution requiring several soldiers and some invested time to affix the victims to the crosses. So it was a far more gruesome and elaborate process than a simple beheading. And the express purpose of crucifixion was to create a public display of the victims as a warning to anyone thinking of defying Rome—it was intended as an ominous public announcement. Victims typically remained on the crosses for many days as a grim reminder of Roman authority. The Jewish authorities were certainly aware of this. Accordingly, there is no practical chance that they would have clamored for the crucifixion of Jesus at noon, then immediately demanded that he be taken down from the cross several hours later to avoid degrading the Passover. Moreover, there is little chance that Pilate would have gone to the trouble of crucifying three persons at 1 pm on the day of Preparation, only to consent to the victims being taken down a few hours later. It is also difficult

to imagine that an unknown Joseph of Arimathea, whoever he might have been, was able to secure the body of Jesus, assemble the linens and spices, and provide an honorable burial in the short time that would have been available. Collectively, this entire scenario in Ur-John is historically incredible.

However, a clue might be found in the fact that the alleged timing of the crucifixions as reported in both the *Gospels of John* and *Mark* are theologically driven. In Ur-John, Jesus is declared to be the Lamb of God in John 1.29. Jesus then dies symbolically as the sacrificed Lamb of God on the day of Preparation when lambs are slaughtered for Passover. In Mark, the Last Supper with the disciples is the Passover meal itself, during which Jesus inaugurates the tradition of the bread and wine. Yet in Mark, Jesus still dies on the day of Preparation (14.42), prior to the Passover meal which is not possible.

Since both accounts are imbued with theological symbolism, one might suspect that the time frames for the crucifixion may have been compressed precisely for this purpose. For the accounts make a great deal more historical sense if Jesus and two others had been arrested and crucified several days earlier, then taken down on the day of Preparation. This is speculative of course, but under this scenario, the Romans would have achieved their objective of staging a public warning to pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the holiday. By the day of Preparation, the victims would have been dead or close to death, and at least conceivably it would have made more sense for the Jewish authorities to request the removal of the bodies in respect of the holiday if they had already been on the crosses for several days. Pilate would have achieved his goal of using the crucifixions as an extended public announcement, and he may have had less of a concern about granting the request. There is little chance that Pilate or the soldiers responsible for taking the bodies down would have cared how the bodies were to be disposed of. And it is not surprising that a follower of Jesus would have wanted to afford him a proper burial. So if this unknown Joseph who hides his identity as a disciple suddenly appears, wishing to take possession of the body of Jesus, it does not seem likely that the soldiers involved would have objected. Furthermore, if Jesus had been on the cross for several days, Joseph would have had time to consider whether he should get involved, and once deciding to act he would have had time to collect the linens and spices alleged to have been used in the burial preparation. Therefore, an earlier crucifixion date eliminates all of the abrupt timeframe problems that exist in the gospel

accounts as written. Of course this is all purely speculative, but it is not an impossible scenario by any means.

Several incidental references point to this interpretation of the events as having some credibility. First, crucifixion was not intended to be a quick death, and it could take some days for victims to succumb. Ur-John 19.32 reports that when the soldiers arrived, Jesus was dead, but the two other victims were still alive and their legs needed to be broken to hasten their deaths. This is historically viable as a method of hastening death by crucifixion, and it is suspicious as a detail that an author would have fabricated out of whole cloth. One might as easily hasten death with a spear to the chest as is indicated with Jesus. Ur-John also indicates that Joseph was assisted by Nicodemus, which is a detail omitted in the Synoptic gospels. In Ur-John, Nicodemus is the ruler (member of the Council) who came to Jesus by night, evidently for fear of being associated with him (Ur-John 3.1). This detail is interesting in the sense that both Joseph and Nicodemus are represented as individuals who were fearful of disclosing their interest in or allegiance to Jesus. And from a practical perspective the wrapping a body and carrying it to deposit in a tomb would most likely have been a two-man job. The story then indicates that Joseph and Nicodemus elected to place the body of Jesus in a nearby tomb “because of the day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand.” The implication is that they were running out of time and found an unused tomb at random as a temporary resting place. This is critical, for tombs were private property and “borrowing” someone’s tomb for such a purpose would have been improper and illegal. It would have been incumbent upon them to relocate the body for more appropriate burial as soon as possible after the Passover, which ended Saturday night at sundown.

It is intriguing that the author of Matthew is aware of this possibility, for he goes to exceptional histrionic lengths to defeat it. He fabricates the absurd notion that Pilate is told that the disciples might steal the body to concoct a resurrection myth, and this motivates Pilate to seal the tomb and place guards. Quite notably, Matthew even attributes ownership of the tomb to Joseph himself, which would obviate the moral/legal obligation for him to relocate the body promptly after the Passover (Mt 27.59–66). These read as comical fabrications, but their evident purpose is to plug the holes in the Ur-John account that undermine the implication of the “empty tomb” as evidence of a resurrection. Accordingly, they tend to imbue the comparatively innocuous account in Ur-John with a patina of plausibility.

As the Ur-John story continues, Mary Magdalene arrives alone on Sunday morning, and she finds that the stone at the tomb had been “taken away” rather than “rolled away” as in the Synoptics. This is a vital discrepancy in detail since tombs with rolling stones were rare prior to 70 CE in Jerusalem. Tombs were typically closed with blocking stones that needed to be lifted into place and taken away. The language in Ur-John suggests that this was the type of closure, not only for the tomb of Jesus but that of Lazarus as well (11.38–41). Furthermore, Ur-John reports that both the BD and Mary were required to *stoop down* to look into the tomb (20.5,11). Thus, a relatively small tomb is being visualized by this author. Conversely, the author of Mark describes a tomb with a door enclosed by a “very large” rolling stone that, once rolled back, one could simply walk into (Mk 16.3–4). In this regard, Mark imagines that Jesus’ body had been placed in a tomb fit for a king, a concept that may have been exaggerated precisely for this purpose. But the fact that Ur-John reports a modest tomb with a blocking stone is consistent with the finding that the Ur-John account is an earlier tradition overall, and it contributes to the impression that the story is not as wildly fabricated.

As the story in Ur-John proceeds, Mary then flees from the open tomb and reports to the disciples her first impression, “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*” (20.2). Practically speaking, this is a perfectly natural inference on Mary’s part and historically coherent, for it may well be that Joseph had already retrieved the body and relocated it for more proper burial as he would have been required to do. Note that this character Joseph has no known prior association with the apostles; he is a “secret disciple” who appears out of nowhere. Meanwhile, the apostles are wanted individuals in hiding for fear of arrest. Thus, there is no reason to imagine that Joseph would have been able to inform them of the body’s relocation, even if he had wanted to. So at face value, as Ur-John reports the events to this point, one can see a natural explanation for the burial sequence and the empty tomb. It is not difficult to imagine that the report of a missing body and an empty tomb might have eventually given rise to speculations about a resurrection.

Beyond this point, Ur-John’s account moves into more obviously mythologized elements of the story, with angels appearing to Mary, then the risen Jesus himself appearing first to Mary, then to the disciples. This portion of the narrative is clearly beyond the bounds of the historian’s inquiry and beyond the limits of responsible speculation. The point of this discussion is to illustrate that, if one considers that the actual date of Jesus’ crucifixion as

reported in the gospels may have been altered a few days to accommodate theological symbolism and to eliminate the humiliating specter of Jesus hanging on the cross for several days, the rest of the Ur-John account of Jesus' condemnation, crucifixion, burial, and subsequent discovery of an empty tomb that forms the foundation of the resurrection myth, does not read as entirely implausible history.



Afterword: A Note on Paul's Interpretation of Jesus

There has always been much speculation about the apostle Paul's lack of interest in the historical Jesus. Why did Paul not refer to any of Jesus' parables or moral aphorisms? Why does he not mention any of Jesus' miracles? Paul knows that Jesus was human—he had a brother James, he was born of a woman, he was a Messianic (*Christos*) figure, and he was crucified. But he focuses virtually all of his interpretive attention on Jesus as risen Lord while ignoring the reputed teachings and activities of Jesus. This is so striking that mythicists routinely cite Paul's intense preoccupation with the celestial Jesus as evidence that a historical Jesus never existed.

However, with an understanding that the historical Jesus was leading an anti-Roman rebellion, Paul's lack of interest in the historical Jesus becomes quite intelligible. Paul is largely silent on the rhetoric of the historical Jesus for the same reason the author of Ur-John presented a "Messiah without a message." Jesus' actual speech advocating for a restored Israel was politically inflammatory, it would have served no practical purpose to document it, and it would have placed any author promoting it at grave risk. Both Paul and the Apostle John appear to have been writing before the movement had fully developed and attributed to Jesus the politically sanitized collection of parables and aphorisms that appear in the Synoptics. They simply did not have this collection of sayings to draw from, and the interpretation of Jesus as an apolitical moral teacher and sage had not yet developed in the movement's kerygma. So for perfectly cogent reasons they remained silent on the rhetoric of the historical Jesus.

There is little doubt Paul knew the full story of Jesus' anti-Roman crusade. His self-confessed violent persecution of the church (Gal. 1.13) is understandable in historical context as the Jesus movement Paul knew was indeed seditious. Paul understood him from the outset to have had an anti-Roman agenda, which explains and justifies his persecution of the movement. Yet at some point he underwent a conversion. He began to interpret the story of Jesus as an inspiring human tragedy in the sense that Jesus had suffered crucifixion and lost his life in an honorable attempt to free the Jewish people from the oppression of Rome. So from this historical root, he transformed the story into a creative new vision that Jesus had given himself as a sacrifice to deliver all people from the evil of the present age (Gal 1.4). He had heard the story of the empty tomb, and the speculations of resurrection that it had given rise to. Paul came to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead (Gal 1.1), and that Jesus' death and resurrection had been an atonement for the sins of humanity. Paul's sympathetic reinterpretation of historical events led to his transformative theology.