The 'unconventionality' of Jesus from the perspective of a diverse audience: evaluating Crossan's historical Jesus

Johan Strijdom

ABSTRACT
In this article it is argued that Crossan's characterisation of Jesus' intention as 'unconventional' needs refinement, once one considers the different perspectives from which his diverse audience may typically have viewed his words and deeds. Three examples are selected to explicate my thesis: the parable of The Good Samaritan, the 'healing' of a leper, and Jesus' table fellowship. In each case it is shown that other scholars have sensed the problem I am addressing, but without expounding it systematically. In conclusion I maintain that Crossan's analysis of the earliest passion traditions presupposes that Jesus had very learned followers in his original movement, an assertion which actually forces us to take the diversity of his first audience very seriously.

1 INTRODUCTION
In Jesus: A revolutionary biography Dominic Crossan (1994a:108) holds that Jesus' itinerant mission in rural Galilee concerned 'the longest journey in the Greco-Roman world, maybe in any world—the step across the threshold of a peasant stranger's home.' That bold and extraordinary step, Crossan argues, was part and parcel of Jesus' social program in which he sought to realize his social vision of an egalitarian community. In those peasant homes Jesus and his first followers offered free healings and exorcisms, and in turn received free meals. In short, his intention was to build up the exploited village communities 'from the grass roots upward' (:118)—an objective that Jesus, in Crossan's assessment, subtly articulated in his parables and aphorisms. Jesus called the realisation of that ideal by himself and his peasant movement the 'Kingdom of God,' a mystical symbol of an utopian world in which God would be immediately present to the most common peasant and in which each peasant would be immediately available to another. By means of his words and deeds Jesus thus provocatively undermined all forms of systemic injustice: not only the exploitative hierarchies of Roman imperialism and Jewish aristocracy, but also the asymmetrical power relations of the patriarchal family.
What is emphasized in Crossan's construct, it seems clear, is the extraordinary focus on the unconventional or undermining tendency of Jesus' behaviour and speech. In this article I will argue that this characterisation needs refinement, once one considers the relative perspectives and reactions of Jesus' diverse audience: what is perceived as shameful by the upper-classes, is not necessarily experienced as such by the lower-classes and vice-versa. What about the perspective of women as distinct from men, of Gentiles from Jews, of enemies from friends? Part of the question I am posing to Crossan is this: If one accepts his portrait of Jesus for the moment, in what respects are Jesus' ideals and actions 'unconventional' in terms of peasant values and behavior? To put it in a simplistic way, with reference to our immediate example: If Jesus was a peasant as Crossan argues, what exactly is then so strange about one peasant in another peasant's home?

I will elucidate the problem by means of a selection of words and deeds that Crossan judges to contain a historical kernel (my criticism will thus not focus on Crossan's methodology, but will rather complicate only one aspect of his resultant construal of Jesus). I have chosen three examples to illustrate this thorny issue: the parable of The Good Samaritan, the healing of a leper and Jesus' table fellowship. In each case I will quote, although somewhat tendentiously, previous scholars who have sensed a problem here without expounding it systematically. In conclusion, I will not only stress my basic difficulty by looking at Crossan's analysis of Jesus' death, but will also suggest a possible solution to the identified problem.

2 THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

In A Myth of Innocence Burton Mack (1988:148) argues that The Good Samaritan, as a story told by the historical Jesus, could have had Crossan's proposed paradoxical effect on its first hearers 'only under certain very narrowly prescribed circumstances and in a very specific social context.' In the late twenties of the first century, Jews in the Galilee would have heard or experienced the parable quite differently than Samaritans, or Greeks, or Syrians. The critical point to note, according to Mack (:149), is that 'told in different contexts, the story of the Good Samaritan might function now as parable, now as satire, now as action, apologue, or myth.'

The importance of imagining typical reactions of a diverse audience was sensed even earlier by Robert Funk (1985:3-4). In his analysis of this parable he does not consider it probable that there were any Samaritans present, but can well visualize Jewish clerics and anti-clerics among Jesus' first listeners. As 'the priest and the Levite pass by,' those who were anti-clerical—'as many common folk in those days were'—would have been 'delighted to have (their) opinions of the clergy confirmed,' whilst 'clerical hearers (would have
wanted) to interrupt the story to debate whether ritual defilement, prudence, or mercy take priority under the circumstances.' Funk (:3) envisages the following receptions as the story unfolds:

Developments have opened up a preliminary division in the audience: on the one side are the common folk and the victim in the ditch, modestly bemused at the course of events; on the other, the chagrined clergy, who suspect the narrative will give them a raw deal. Into this tension rides the Samaritan astride his ass. The suspicions of the clergy now run to rage. And the 'am ha'arets, the ordinary people, begin to desert the ditch: they, too, are taken aback at the turn of affairs.

Although Crossan, in his most recent The essential Jesus (1994b), does start to take the interaction between Jesus and his audience seriously, his assessment in my opinion still needs refinement. He imagines the words of the peasant Jesus to be directed at a peasant audience with the aim of getting them involved in open discussion about the issues raised in his parables and aphorisms. In the case of The Good Samaritan it means the following to Crossan (:159): The first part of the story, with its clearly critical stance towards clerics and purity codes, might have led the peasant audience to expect

a Jewish layperson (like themselves) to be the third and model protagonist. Instead it is a Samaritan, a member of an ethnic and religious group living between Judea and Galilee with its own version of the Pentateuch and its own religious center on Mount Garizim. They were considered by some Jews as worse than pagans, almost as renegade Jews.

Crossan (:159) asks, as an open question: 'What happens to an audience [of peasants—JS] when the story's anti-heroes are revered members of its religious leadership and its hero belongs to a socially and religiously despised group? Who and what determines good and bad or in and out in a society?'

What exactly, then, is it in this latest proposal that still remains problematic and in need of greater nuance? Seen from my general thesis on the different responses of a diverse audience, there are at least three perspectives to be considered, the clues of which may be taken from Funk and Mack's respective analyses.

Firstly, the typical peasant perspective: How did Galilean Jewish peasants typically view the clerics of their society? In Who killed Jesus? Crossan (1995:50-54) characterises their attitude towards the Temple as ambiguous. On the one hand the Temple represented for them a corrupt institution of exploitation whose personnel not only collaborated with the Roman oppressors but also extracted tithes from a poor peasantry to further enrich a priestly aristocracy. For that reason it was to be expected that peasants would vent their anger against the Temple elites, when during the war Zealots killed two high priests and appointed a villager from their own ranks (ca 68 CE).
On the other hand the Temple embodied for pious peasants the centre of divine presence and sacrifice. For that reason they would, in general, still attend the yearly pilgrimages and, in particular, even threaten with a massive agrarian strike and be willing to face mass martyrdom if the Syrian governor Petronius dared execute Caligula’s command to erect his statue in the Jerusalem Temple (ca 41 CE). It is important to note that the one case involves Jews versus pagans, whilst the other concerns an opposition between upper- and lower-classes. Now, if we accept this construct, how does it influence our interpretation of *The Good Samaritan* from a peasant perspective?

The introduction of a priest and Levite into the story, and especially their apathetic behavior towards the victim out of purity concerns, would immediately evoke the division along class-lines and a feeling of repulsion amongst the peasant hearers (cf below on peasants and purity maps). The clerics are behaving in precisely the way peasants would expect: keeping a distance from impure people (i.e., establishing boundaries between people) is more important to them than compassion towards people in dire need (i.e., the realization of peasant egalitarian ideals). Up to this point the parable confirms real and typical peasant expectations and elicits quite valid objections amongst them. Crossan’s choice of words therefore seems a bit unfortunate and confusing in his latest proposal: ‘the parable seems to be planning some cheap anticlericalism or facile exaltation of compassion over purity’ or ‘the story’s anti-heroes are revered members of its religious leadership’ (1994b:159; my emphasis). I leave the expected peasant reception of the rest of the story for my third point below.

The second perspective to be considered is the typical reception by clerics: Whether one imagines clerics amongst Jesus’ immediate hearers (as Funk does), or as part of a broader removed audience who would get to hear indirectly about Jesus’ stories and deeds along the grape-vine, the point made by the story would in either case be doubly disturbing to them: not only does it undermine their authoritative position by being critical of their purity codes, but it goes on to denigrate them even to a point beyond their wildest nightmares by showing them to be worse than Samaritans. Jesus’ criticism would therefore irrevocably antagonise these opponents of his.

Thirdly, the typical perspective of non-Jews remains to be discussed. Again the most important point is not whether there were any Samaritans or non-Jews among Jesus’ immediate audience or not (as Mack and Funk’s analysis would presume or deny). The crucial question is how these people would typically have received this kind of story, whether as direct hearers or as recipients of its thrust by rumour. Here we touch on a very important theme not sufficiently exploited by current Jesus research in general or by Crossan
in particular (a point emphasised by Burton Mack during a personal discussion with him in 1993): How should we imagine ethnic relations in first-century Palestine and what stance did the historical Jesus take on this issue? In a recent article Seán Freyne (1994:83-84) notes that interaction between Jews and Gentiles was 'a fact of everyday life' and that 'Jews had ... learned how to live their traditional way of life among gentiles and to deal with them on a daily basis' in Jesus' Galilee, but that 'religious and ethnic differences ... between Jews and Samaritans did affect trading patterns.' A study is needed in which all the relevant material (Roman evidence, Philo, Josephus and archaeological data) is analysed to give us a nuanced portrait of possible attitudes of non-Jews towards Jews and of Jews towards non-Jews in Jesus' time. Only against that general background, combined with a detailed analysis of all relevant texts from the Jesus tradition (inter alia the parable of The Good Samaritan), should the question of Jesus and ethnic relations be addressed.

As far as the typical reception of this story by Galilean Jewish peasants is concerned, we may for the moment accept that if the Priest and Levite evoked biases along class-lines, the introduction of the Samaritan would have elicited ethnic prejudices. Funk and Crossan's assessment is probably on the mark as regards a typical peasant response to the parable: the peasants are taken by total surprise, since they would have expected one of their own ranks to be the hero of the story, but instead the hero in the parable is a Samaritan who 'belongs to a socially and religiously despised group' (Crossan 1994b:159). But if we go a step further and ask about the possible reaction of non-Jews and Samaritans (Mack's point), if they were to hear this kind of story, I can well imagine that they too would be surprised to hear such a story from a Jew. What impression would such a parable told by a Jewish peasant probably have made on them?

3 THE HEALING OF A LEPER

My second example involves, in Crossan's terms (1994a:82), the healing of a social illness rather than the curing of a physical skin disease. By touching the leper Jesus reached out to someone who, according to the dominant purity system, was to be isolated. Jesus, by his action of actual touching, negated the social stigma attached to such a person and reintegrated him 'into a community of the marginalized' (:83). He thus deliberately challenged the prerogative of the religious elites to define social boundaries and ostracise people (the second part of the Markan story is in Crossan's view a later addition which attempted to make Jesus a less controversial figure, that is, an observant Jew who actually acted in line with purity laws). Crossan (:83) characterizes Jesus' original deed as 'a case within Judaism of Galilean peasants against Jerusalem priests.' The problem, in terms of my general
thesis, is this: If we grant that his action would have engendered a strong negative reaction amongst Temple representatives, one question that still remains concerns the precise relationship between Jesus' action and peasant values and realities. How would Galilean Jewish peasants have perceived Jesus' action?

Kazmierski (1992) senses the problem I am emphasising, when he pleads that we 'be more nuanced in our appreciation of the diversity of reactions among the people' (:40) and that we take 'the contours of first-century Palestinian peasant experience' (:41) seriously in a consistent way. He argues that it is clear that 'Jesus himself often had little regard for many of the boundaries set by its [i.e. that society's—JS] official interpreters,' but that 'it is not so certain at all that what is often seen as his [i.e. Jesus—JS] unique “sense of authority” over the Law was not simply a reflection of the peasant reality of his day' (:44; my emphasis). He stresses the point that official priests rather than peasants themselves labelled people as deviant, and that peasants would probably not have treated such a person the way the priests would have. He notes that these villagers were actually known for their disregard of the Law and were therefore 'looked down upon by the Pharisees' (:43), and further states with regard to leprosy that 'it was only in the great cities and walled towns that the restrictions seem to have been strictly observed, so that while certainly no “ακόθαρτος” was allowed to enter the actual precincts of the Holy City of Jerusalem (cf Isa 52.1), the further one was removed from the Temple and its holy mount, the more likely it was that a certain “leniency” prevailed' (:43). This description indeed seems not far removed from Crossan's own remark that 'purity codes are always much easier for elites than for peasants' (1994b:151), or from his depiction of concrete peasant life in 'tiny hamlets whose houses were usually covered rooms around an open courtyard with either an extended family owning the entire courtyard or unrelated peasants forced to share a common one. At that economic level: a house is a courtyard room of about 135 square feet with an average of around five or six people per room' (:152).

If this construct is valid, I presume that Galilean Jewish peasants would NOT have viewed Jesus' action as subversive to their own values, but would rather have experienced it as a confirmation and sanctioning of their practices and realities. This suggestion, however, immediately introduces a second question: how to explain the strong reaction of Jesus' opponents, if Jesus was a peasant affirming peasant values. The important point here would be to imagine not only a strong position of power for Jesus amongst those peasants (he was a peasant leader), but to presume that his actions were in deliberate opposition to the priestly elites. If they tried, by means of village scribes and Pharisees, to get peasants to adhere to their purity ideology, Jesus diligently
told these common people of the land that their own way of living was just
fine and even to be preferred to that of official religion. This kind of talk, and
the energetic application of it, would certainly have provoked the anger of
his opponents. His position of power amongst the Galilean peasants and his
ceaseless challenge of official religion's practices would undoubtedly have
been experienced as a threat by the religious upper classes. In this sense Cros­
san is probably correct: it was a case of 'Galilean peasants against Jerusalem
priests' (1994a:83). But when he asserts that Jesus reintegrated the diseased
'into-a community of the marginalized' (:83), his formulation is confusing
and in tension with his later statement that 'purity codes are always much
easier for elites than for peasants' (1994b:151). The problem should be
apparent, when I probe it for a third time in my next example.

4 JESUS' TABLE FELLOWSHIP

Crossan holds that the heart of the Jesus movement consisted of 'free heal­
ing' and an 'open table': the peasant Jesus and his peasant followers went to
small village homes 'to heal the sick'; in turn they received free meals from
those simple folk. I have already indicated my problem with the first point: if
we accept Crossan's interpretation that Jesus did not cure the physical disease
but rather removed the social stigma attached to a disease like leprosy by
reintegrating such a person into the community, it is unclear what this would
have meant on peasant level where lepers were anyway not ostracised but
remained part of the household and peasant society (cf Kazmierski's argu­
ment above).

A similar problem arises with Crossan's undifferentiated assessment of
Jesus' meal practices as a 'radical challenge' to 'honor and shame, those basic
values of ancient Mediterranean culture and society' (1994a:70). If Jesus
received food from those hungry peasant families in exchange for his 'healing
activity' and if we assume that the egalitarian sense of sharing is the common
ideal of peasants, what else would this reciprocity have been but a confirma­
tion and realization of the peasant perspective of how life should be? From
the point of view of villagers, it is difficult to see how they would have experi­
enced one peasant at another peasant's table as in conflict with their
sense of

honour and shame.

What would have struck them as a surprise, however, is a parable like The
Feast, since it ends with a table where members of unequal social classes could
be reclining next to each other. Villagers would visualize a feast given not by
a peasant but by someone who could afford it, someone who owns a slave.
With no friends responding to the host's invitation, he sends his slave to
invite anyone. This is indeed a verbalization of the peasant sense of what is
right, that is, a situation in which the rich shares what is produced with the
lower classes. Crossan (1991:263) pushes the point too far, to the extent that we imagine a typical peasant response, when he supposes not only a mixture of classes and races at the final table, but also of sexes as a danger to that society in general. In those tiny peasant houses women were probably eating with their husbands, and would therefore not have experienced a mixture of sexes at one table as a threat to their own social structure. But what about the reception of this story by the upper-classes?

Crossan (1994a:48,64) argues that Jesus’ opponents experienced the parable as a threat to their hierarchical concept of society. From their perspective the rules of table fellowship should be kept meticulously; these laws should actually be enforced upon peasants, so as to maintain the distance between the classes lest the privileged position of the upper-classes be undermined. They, that is, ‘religio-political functionaries such as local village scribes, teachers, and whatever Pharisees were around in early first century Galilee’ (1991:263), therefore denigrated Jesus by labelling him a deviant: a glutton and a drunkard who revels in feasting, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Crossan accepts as authentic that Jesus dined with women, ‘especially unmarried women,’ and connects this behaviour with the slander of his enemies that he ate with ‘whores, the standard epithet of denigration for any female outside appropriate male control’ (1994a:69). In a recent article Kathleen Corley (1993) takes this point of Crossan seriously, but she also points out some difficulties in his proposal. In her argument she emphasizes that the phrase ‘tax collectors and sinners’ refers to members from the retainer rather than peasant class. Tax collectors were ‘those who exacted anywhere from 30-70% of a peasant’s income’ (:452) and Jesus’ association with them would definitely have struck villagers as a betrayal of their class. Since she sees no evidence that the accusation derives from the lower classes, she presupposes that the criticism came ‘from a more upper class perspective, from at least that of the priestly, retainer or merchant classes’ (:452). She similarly argues that the term ‘sinners’ refers to Jesus’ table fellowship with women from the upper-echelons rather than peasant women: the label of ‘whores’ would not fit those peasant women in small houses who were by necessity forced to share meals with their husbands; it would, however, be applicable to urban women who behaved in a liberal way contrary to the dominant conventions of the day. She summarises her conclusion as follows:

the women criticized by this slander [i.e., of being whores—JS] do not fit within the social class that many scholars [e.g., Crossan and Horsley; cf her footnote—JS] have assumed Jesus came from, attracted and supported. It is possible that the line between the retainer or merchant classes and the peasant class may not have been as rigid as has been supposed. However, if Jesus attracted members of the retainer
or merchant classes, this also calls into question suggestions that his movement was some kind of "revolution" against the elite. Rather than characterizing Jesus as an advocate for "peasant egalitarianism," the slander that Jesus ate and drank with "tax collectors and sinners" betrays that Jesus was perceived by his opponents as having more in common with more urbane groups like Hellenistic Cynics, whose social behavior at meals implied a critique (rather than a revolution) of Hellenistic society and challenged Greco-Roman social hierarchy by their inclusion of women at formal meals.

Corley’s critique indeed represents a major counter-proposal to that of Crossan, but is still in need of finer exposition. If we accept, for the moment, as historical that Jesus made friends with tax collectors and their women and that he actually dined with these members from the retainer class as a way in which he ‘lived out his own parable [of The Feast—]S’ (Crossan 1994a:69), we need to ask from the point of view of my general hypothesis how the different segments of that society would have reacted to this behaviour of his? Peasants would certainly have been surprised. Some may have felt betrayed. Others may have grasped the point: the social stigma attached to these retainers should be removed—as in the case of ethnic relations in the parable of The Good Samaritan. Tax collectors and their ‘whores’ would have been taken aback that a peasant was actually willing to dine with them without judging them. On the other hand, the religiopolitical functionaries would certainly have been disturbed by his deliberate opposition to and denial of their boundary rules, and they would therefore have given him the label of a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and their ‘promiscuous’ women.

Corley also raises a second point that we need to explicate as clearly as possible: the question of the social stratum from which Jesus himself came. My final example will stress the necessity of getting clarity on this issue.

5 JESUS’ DEATH

In his analysis of the passion traditions of earliest Christianity, Crossan (1994c:15-20) hypothesizes that immediately after Jesus’ death (ca 30 CE), very learned followers of his started, probably in Jerusalem under the leadership of Jesus’ brother (the historical James), to search the Hebrew Scriptures in order to understand ‘their present in terms of their past.’ Crossan thus presupposes that the historical Jesus himself must have had some very literate followers amongst his original audience. The question then is: Why would learned scribes from the retainer class have become interested in a ‘peasant nobody’? Firstly, as I have already emphasized, Jesus was no simple, unimportant peasant but a leader with a power base amongst peasants. Secondly, how helpful is it to characterise Jesus as a ‘peasant’? During a seminar
at the University of South Africa (April 1995) Richard Horsley asked the question by imagining contemporary parallels for Mao Tse Tung as ‘an Oriental Chinese peasant’ or Lincoln as ‘an American Illinois farmer.’ It seems to me indeed necessary to understand Jesus’ social and religious role from the perspective of a peasant leader but with definite contact with and influence upon the upper-classes. Among the latter we should then presuppose not only people who were very sympathetic to his cause (eg, stigmatized retainers like tax collectors and their women), but also people who were vehemently opposed to it (religio-political functionaries who tried to force villagers to observe purity rules). The real question is, however, still not answered: why would Jesus’ brother in Jerusalem, a peasant-turned-scribe, return to a life-style of purity and boundaries radically opposed by Jesus? This question, of course, takes us into a consideration of diverse earliest Christianities, which logically is Crossan’s next major project, of which we eagerly await the results in order to continue an exciting dialogue.

6 CONCLUSION

What have I demonstrated in this article? My plea, in short, has been for a more nuanced assessment of Jesus’ ‘unconventional’ words and deeds. I have discussed three examples to indicate how a consideration of Jesus’ diverse audience can help us refine Crossan’s construct of the historical Jesus. The three examples have been selected for two reasons. Firstly, Crossan argues that Jesus’ intention is only clear when one considers his words (parables and aphorisms) in conjunction with his deeds (‘miracles’ and table practices), that is, his egalitarian vision as it was enacted in his social program of ‘free healing’ and ‘an open table.’ For this project of Jesus he constantly uses terms like ‘unconventional,’ ‘undermining,’ ‘challenging,’ ‘shocking,’ ‘surprising.’ My argument is that these terms should not be used in a general and undifferentiated way, but should rather be imagined in a consistent way from different perspectives in Jesus’ diverse audience. My second reason for choosing these examples links up with previous research, since it is exactly in these three cases that I have noticed that other scholars have sensed the problem I am addressing, but without expounding it systematically. In the final section of the paper I have taken Crossan’s own analysis of the earliest passion traditions as an indication that Jesus must have had very learned followers even during his lifetime. This confirms on the one hand the necessity of taking the diversity of Jesus’ audience very seriously, but on the other hand raises another crucial question: how to explain the fact that scribes became so interested in an illiterate peasant.
WORKS CONSULTED


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Rev J M Strijdom, Department of Classics, Unisa, P.O. Box 392, PRETORIA, 0001 South Africa