



**Crossley, James**

***Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins (26-50 CE)***

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To discover that a book delivers somewhat less than its title promises is a common enough phenomenon in the scholarly world. With a title as sweeping as *Why Christianity Happened*, that result seems almost inevitable. Religious movements as complex as early Christianity simply cannot be accounted for with the type of narrowly focused explanation James Crossley provides.

That said, a summary of Crossley's contribution is in order. The initial chapter of his book lays out Crossley's (passionate) agenda: providing an account of Christian origins "without having to resort to *theological reasons*" (33, emphasis added). Social, physical, and historical reasons for the appearance of Christianity are promised instead. To be fair, Crossley does not deny that theology played a role in Christian origins; he simply argues that its role has been exaggerated to the point of excluding other causal factors more typical (and worthy) of those examined by an academic historian. It is a redress of this imbalance that Crossley seeks to provide.

Crossley begins by reviewing what he understands to be the intellectually embarrassing dominance of "middle-and upper-class Christians" in New Testament scholarship. Their work, he claims, often represents mere "academic justification" for the various religious

ideologies they promote. This dire fault, he believes, is due in no small part to the Christian fear of Marxism and its attendant atheism, or at least to fear of lurking reductionism sometimes implicit in secular, interdisciplinary methods. The result, he suggests, is pseudo-history at best. It is not the kind of thing done by competent historians. Thus, rejecting any notion of the “superiority of Christianity” (34), especially vis-à-vis Judaism, and unimpressed by attempts to account for the emergence of Christianity as a movement of new religious *ideas*, Crossley looks instead for the sociohistorical conditions to which he believes Christianity was a response.

Crossley begins this primary inquiry in chapter 2 with a description of the social conditions during the lifetime of Jesus, including the peasant unrest that was a widespread response to economic and cultural oppression. Along the way Crossley throws in the dubious claim that emergent Christianity benefited from the spread of a “universal monotheism” (97).

That is followed by a chapter in which Crossley begins to develop the assertion that for him is the crux of the matter: the association between economic oppression and lawlessness. He claims that the term “sinner,” in the Hebrew Bible, in the teachings of Jesus, and indeed throughout the rabbinic writings, is an unmistakable designation for the rich, oppressive elite who controlled first-century Palestine. “Sinners” were not “the poor, the exploited, the uneducated, or the ordinary folk but rather the better off, the exploiters and the lawless rich” (95).

The notion of “lawlessness” is important. In fact, for Crossley it is the key to understanding the sociohistorical process that led to Christianity. Thus it is that from this point forward much of the book builds on, indeed rehashes, the work done in Crossley’s published dissertation: *The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insights from the Law in Earliest Christianity*. There Crossley tried (it is no more convincing the second time around) to make the case that the Gospel of Mark reflects a sophisticated knowledge of the law, describes an entirely law-observant Jesus, and therefore has to have been written in the late 30s or early 40s C.E., when the nascent Christian movement remained largely Jewish and largely law-observant. Q, he believes, reflects this same law-observant outlook and was incorporated by Matthew and Luke at the time of the rise of the Gentile mission in order to encourage “good Jewish morality in exactly the way the caricatured Pharisees of Q do not” (140). This encouragement of law-observance in the Gospels, he says, was necessary precisely because it was beginning to break down.

In a final chapter on the Pauline mission, Crossley traces the gradual decline of Christian law-observance as Gentiles with little knowledge of or interest in the law were incorporated into the social networks that characterized the Pauline churches. This move away from the law, nurtured by the inconsistent law commitment of new Gentile

adherents, was the key historical process that led to the rise of early Christianity. People with a foot in two worlds, both law-abiding Christian groups as well as their former lawless, Gentile social networks, gradually coalesced into a religious movement distinct from its law-abiding Jewish roots.

This account, of course, is hardly new to New Testament scholarship, yet Crossley's extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the law, and especially the rabbinic tradition, will benefit anyone interested in the way changing attitudes toward the law and law observance impacted the emerging Christian movement.

In this final chapter Crossley also offers an extensive review of contemporary scholarship on the topic of "conversion." He uses this work to suggest that new adherents are incorporated into religious groups not because of the attractiveness of the group's theological ideas but because of the social networking that always exists among friends. Friends attract friends, and only later do the new adherents really learn and assimilate the theological rationale for what they have done. Thus friends, not theological ideas, and especially not superior theological ideas, are what drew these new, nonobservant folks into the Pauline churches. Beginning with the social networks of Gentiles already attracted to Judaism, and reaching out from there to the outer edges of these Gentile social networks, that is to those unacquainted with the law or Judaism, the spreading Christian movement incorporated into itself and was influenced by those outside the law. It thereby changed from an initially law-observant movement within Judaism to a nonobservant and distinct religious group.

Throughout Crossley's work there is much to benefit New Testament scholars, especially those with minimal knowledge of Jewish law and rabbinic teaching. Crossley's knowledge in this area is impressive indeed. Yet it should be obvious to almost anyone that the single historical process Crossley describes—changing attitudes toward the law—is hardly sufficient to account for the emergence of early Christianity. The title of this book simply promises too much. Nor will many be persuaded by his dating of the Gospel of Mark.

Yet even those enamored of theology-laden historical explanations should welcome (as indeed the vast majority do—the burr under Crossley's saddle notwithstanding) the search for sociohistorical conditions that contributed to the emergence of Christianity. Such inquiry need not be inappropriately reductionistic, and indeed Crossley is almost certainly right that new religious movements are not primarily events in the history of ideas. Thus the insights he offers can be seen as a welcome change from the exclusively theological, often ahistorical accounts he so deplors.

Finally, it is unfortunate that Crossley appears to have only a superficial acquaintance with the now well-established scholarship in the field of social-scientific criticism. Much of that work could add significantly to his sociohistorical account of Christian origins and perhaps take into account other social, economic, and cultural factors that Crossley ignores.