The Passion of Jesus: History Remembered or Prophecy Historicized?
Craig A. Evans
Trinity Western University

The 1995 Easter season was ushered in with yet another book about Jesus by John Dominic Crossan, one of the English-speaking world’s most interesting and gifted writers. Crossan’s *Who Killed Jesus?* is sure to command, as did his *The Historical Jesus*, a great deal of attention at the popular level. But the book also raises many issues touching method and assumptions which will concern scholars. The principal purpose of the book is to make emphatically clear for laymen and non-experts what biblical scholars have known for most of this century: The Romans—not the Jewish people—were the principal players in the execution of Jesus. Herein lies the book’s popular appeal. Crossan explains that Jewish involvement in Jesus’ death was limited to a few of the priestly aristocrats who, when offended and/or threatened by Jesus’ statements and activities in Jerusalem a few days before Passover, handed him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea. On this score, Crossan is quite right. Only in anti-Jewish polemic generated in later centuries did the unhistorical notion arise that the Jewish people as a whole were responsible for Jesus’ death, with the Romans at best passive spectators. Support for this erroneous idea has traditionally been found in the way the Gospels portray Pilate as expressing his doubts about Jesus’ guilt and the way crowds of Jews demanded Jesus’ crucifixion. Later Christian apologists and polemicists failed to perceive (or perhaps did not want to perceive) that the Gospels do not in fact blame all Jews and exculpate the Roman authorities. In more recent times scholars have rightly recognized apologetic at work in the Gospels themselves which, written during a time of Roman threats, attempted to put the Roman authorities in the best light possible (viz., Pilate only reluctantly agreed to execute Jesus) and to emphasize the responsibility of the ruling priests and members of the Sanhedrin. Such a presentation would help protect Christians, in a hostile Roman world, from charges of promoting allegiance to an enemy of the state. In effect, early Christians could reply: Yes, officially Rome did execute Jesus, but it was really the Jew- ish leadership that brought it about because Jesus had criticized it. This way early Christians could almost come out on the side of Rome, which would be very desirable, in view of the bloody war fought between Jews and Romans in 66-70 AD. What makes Crossan’s presentation of this otherwise ...

You must have a subscription and be logged in to read the entire article.

Click here to subscribe