

Encounters with Jesus

In a field that is littered with monographs on the historical Jesus, it is an act of some bravery to venture yet another attempt at an account that is methodologically and historically responsible, which contributes something new to an already-congested field, and which does not lapse into theological apologetics. Yet, this seems to be what Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce have accomplished. They suggest that a primarily theological account of the historical Jesus—by which it seems that they mean an account that is designed to serve the interests of later and even contemporary Christians, and which focuses primarily on extracting Jesus’ *ideas* from his sayings and deeds—“empties” the career of Jesus of much of its power and meaning (p. 170). In this conviction, Destro and Pesce join the ranks of a small number of recent scholars—I mention Bruce Malina, Halvor Moxnes, and Pieter Craffert—who are convinced that the combination of history and cultural anthropology provides an essential key both to avoid the ethnocentrism common in much contemporary Jesus scholarship, and to gain a picture of Jesus in his Mediterranean environment that is not arranged by the mainly ideational categories inherited from earlier scholarship.¹ Even within this company, Destro and Pesce’s book has used anthropology most consistently.

¹ I mention B. J. Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); H. Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003); D. E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants* (Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008); P. F. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective* (Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context; Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2008).

Anthropology is helpful, Destro and Pesce argue, because it “endeavors to uncover the strategies and the elements of challenge that (often in a way that is scarcely visible) characterize the world of human relations” (p. xiii). Anthropologists are good at examining the features of a world that those trained as historians, philologists and theologians tend to treat as epiphenomenal: spatial and temporal relationship, kinship patterns, the primary means of sustenance, the structure of families and clans, the function of networks and so forth.

Destro and Pesce adopt two—or really, three—criteria with which to sort the Jesus tradition, each transformations of criteria that are familiar from the recent quests of the historical Jesus. First, is what they call the criterion on continuity or conformity, which could be seen as a transformation and extension of Theissen’s criterion of historical plausibility. But instead of examining materials by assessing their degree of historical plausibility within the intellectual context of second temple Judaism, Destro and Pesce apply a more finely calibrated anthropological analysis. An anthropological approach requires that one interprets materials related to Jesus in a context consistent with Mediterranean anthropology, but at three levels of magnification: at the level of general cultural presuppositions that the author of the text and reader share—assumptions that are normally implicit—, the specific cultural assumptions of the social group to which the author belongs, assumptions that are often explicitly mentioned in the text, and finally, the author’s own views.²

Destro and Pesce also begin with the postulate that Jesus’ culture is *not continuous* with ours; Jesus does not belong to our culture, and hence approaches that assume continuities and commonalities are likely to be distorting from the outset.

²See A. Destro and M. Pesce, “An Anthropology of Early Christian Texts,” *Religions and Cultures* (A. Destro and M. Pesce; New York: Global Publications, 2002) 1–26.

The second criterion is a version of dissimilarity or embarrassment. But instead of framing the criterion in relation to beliefs and propositions (say, the belief expressed in Mark 9:1 about the imminent Parousia) or particular actions of Jesus (baptism by John), Destro and Pesce frame the criterion in terms of customs and practices. “We regard as authentic the attribution to Jesus of words and actions when these contrast or are not in harmony with the words and actions of the first Christian groups, for it is improbable that the original communities would have arbitrarily ascribed to him actions that contradicted their own practice and custom.” (p. xviii). As will become clear shortly, this way of framing the criterion is also protected from the problems that dogged the ‘New Quest’, where the application of double dissimilarity produced a Jesus who as a cultural or intellectual anomaly, belonging neither to the culture of second Temple Judaism nor to that of his followers.

The third criterion, which Destro and Pesce propose almost in passing, is a version of coherence. They argue that singly-attested sayings and deeds are not necessarily unhistorical. On the contrary, when the “contents of these actions and words converge with other actions and words in which it is difficult to doubt this historicity, they are to be considered reliable” (p. xix).

Armed with these criteria, Destro and Pesce begin their project, but not by scouring the Jesus tradition to lists of sayings and deeds, like Crossan or Sanders. Instead, they begin anthropologically, by reconstructing the spatial imaginations presupposed in the Jesus tradition. A number of observations contribute to this construction. First, they note that Jesus is never represented as entering Sepphoris or Tiberias, and although he perhaps entered Bethsaida-Julias, this was never the sphere of his most important activity. Instead, Jesus was a man of the villages, viewing cities from the periphery. This leads them to the conclusion that for Jesus “the village is the primary locus of Judaeon

identity” (10). While the observation that Jesus operated primarily in the towns and villages of the Galilee is not new, the way Destro and Pesce harness this observation is new.

Next, Destro and Pesce examine Jesu Markan map of Jesus’ travel, and ask about the relationship between political and mental maps. The political map of the region indicates that Jesus travelled outside Judaeen territory, entering the city regions of Tyre and Sidon and the Transjordan. But, as Destro and Pesce note, this map does not necessarily correspond to Jesus’ map, which may have been closer to the map of the Hasmonean kingdom but, above all, it was a social rather than a territorial map, compassing all Judaeans, including the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” On the assumption that Jesus’ mental map was one of a restored Israel, Jesus can be seen as reorganizing space.

Third, as a villager, Jesus did not feel that he belonged to the city and was alienated from urban centers, even Jerusalem. Destro and Pesce point out that both Mark and John represent Jesus as entering Jerusalem only during the day, but spending the night in a nearby village. His support network remained in the village of Bethany, not in the city. Nevertheless, he was not, and could not be, indifferent to Jerusalem, which was the symbolic center of the people of Israel.

The parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:1-9) depicts a conflict between a wealthy urban-dwelling landowner who tried to extract produce from his vinedressers. Mark’s locating of the story in Jerusalem is editorial but this choice refracts both Jesus’ anti-urban attitude, and his conflict with Temple authorities. These attitudes can also be seen in the comments about donations to the temple treasury, in the Jerusalem saying in Q 13:34-35, in the low-point of story of the prodigal son, where the son has to hiring himself out to ἐνὶ τῶν πολιτῶν τῆς χώρας. The anti-urban attitude of Jesus is seen in particular in the disruption of the Temple. Despite his weak connections with the city, his anti-

urban attitude and his criticism of Temple authorities, “Jesus needed Jerusalem because it was the locus of the most religious symbols of the people of Israel, and it was there that the projects he was pursuing had to be publicly manifested” (22).

The fourth and perhaps most interesting feature of Destro and Pesce’s analysis of space has to do with Jesus’ mobility. They emphasize Jesus’ constant movement—presumably drawing not only on the Markan outline but on Q 9:58. Employing Marc Augé’s 1992 book, *Non-Lieux*, Destro and Pesce argue that itinerancy results in a kind of displacement.³ Augé is speaking of modernity, where there is an “excess of space” and the multiplication of ‘non spaces’ (airports, supermarkets, etc.), such that the individual is no longer embedded in social relationships. Presumably, for Destro and Pesce, itinerancy produces the same effects as the excess of space: Jesus is disconnected from normal social relationships.

For Jesus, itinerancy meant that he could not be perceived through the normal networks of family and local connections nor through institutions such as the synagogue or temple (26). This displacement had two effects. On the one hand, those whom he encountered had greater freedom to accept or reject him, and on the other, it afforded him freedom in relation to the controls normally placed on persons by the higher strata of society (30). Thus, Jesus was neither a nomad (who oscillates between fixed places), nor a traveller who travels in order to see places, nor yet a pilgrim, who travels to a particular place in order to encounter the divine. In fact, he was the opposite of a pilgrim. According to Destro and Pesce, Jesus’ movements had the consequence of “desacralizing places, activities, materials and environments. “Work, property, and family are no longer the highest value to which a person must submit.... The things that

³ M. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (trans. J. Howe; London and New York: Verso, 1995).

are the most important in ordinary life no longer form the centre of interest in his project or his lifestyle” (33).

Destro and Pesce make two interesting observations about Jesus’ followers. First, they deduce from the calls in both Mark and Q to abandon family and work that “his closest disciples belong to a relatively prosperous class, which in some instances was on the rise. Their involvement in professional groups or commercial milieus exposed them to cultural influences and various forms of communication. They were part of a network of commerce centered on the fish market, which was probably organized by merchants who were dependent on the Romans” (49). This observation, however, does not lead in the direction of positing an anti-imperial program for Jesus, except indirectly. The focus of Jesus’ teaching were on the imminent intervention by god to reconstitute Israel, and the practice of a commensality unmediated by familial, institutional and hierarchical structures (101).

Second, Destro and Pesce note that Jesus’ first followers are all adults, not but householders. The calls to discipleship in Mark, Q and John are not issued in the house, but on the road or in workplaces (111). Particularly intriguing is their analysis of Q 14:26 where the ideal disciple is one who has a father and a mother, a son or a daughter, in other words, not a householder, but an adult who occupies an middle place in a house. The same sense is conveyed by Mark 10:28-30 where the list of things abandoned includes siblings, parents and children.⁴ Hence, the picture that Destro and Pesce paint is of Jesus’ first disciples coming, first, from an economic sector that was both relatively well-off but, as artisans and those engaged in commercial activities, more mobile and

⁴The same sense is conveyed by Q 9:59-60, where the prospective disciple has a newly deceased father and is thus in the position to assuming governance of the household himself, and (more tentatively) Q 12:51-53 where the divisions within a patri-local household are between the parental generation and the intermediate generation (son, daughter, daughter-in-law) (p. 118-9).

less tied to the land and to village life than others, and then from a social sector that was similarly interstitial, not yet enmeshed in the business of household management. It is here that the anthropologists' acute vision can be seen and appreciated.

Although Destro and Pesce do not make this observation, it might have been worth noting that the householders in the earliest of Jesus' parables are not unambiguously positive figures: they are either marked negatively as fools who lose all (Luke 12:16-21; *Gos. Thom.* 63, 65); or easily duped (Luke 16:1-8a); or as engaging in odd and unexpected activities that result in benefits for unexpected groups (Q 14:16-24; *Gos. Thom.* 64; Matt 20:1-16; Luke 15:11-32).

According to Destro and Pesce, Jesus had no intention of reforming the patronal or patriarchal system or (we might add) overthrowing Roman hegemony. "It was virtually impossible to eliminate this mechanism of power" (127). What they do suggest is that Jesus had the Jubilee in view: to envisage

another social world, that of the restoration of equality. The transformation of the *oikos* that Jesus proposed is a step toward the regeneration of the whole community of Israel. Jesus wanted to shatter the mechanisms that imprisoned the world he encountered in a series of ruptures and divisions—between cities and country village, between the rich and the poor, between the hungry and the satisfied, between the sick and the healthy, between the violent and the meek, between women and men, and between Judeans and non-Judeans.... Hospitality thus became the symbol of his project. It had to be practiced in such a way that the house was no longer a place that sanctioned social inequality, the alliance between the powerful and the rich, and the dependent status of the poor . . . It had to become the place where the excluded were included and all shared in the renewed world. (127)

In assessing some of the merits of *Encounters with Jesus*, it could be said at the outset that they have avoided the problem that has plagued some recent Jesus-scholarship, of having to decide whether Jesus was an apocalypticist or a

social reformer. They agree that, like John the Baptist, Jesus imagined god's imminent intervention and the restoration of Israel. But this is not fetishized and turned into the basis for making theological claims about the implicit christology of the historical Jesus.⁵ At the same time, it is clear that their historical Jesus had a vision of transformed social relationships in the present, and did not defer the implementation of that vision into the future.

The focus on space—physical space, social space, and the placement of persons in the economy and the family—represents one of the major innovations of *Encounters with Jesus* and among its most valuable achievements. Their approach invites a series of follow-up explorations, examining the light that this approach might shed on sayings and stories that are normally thought to be indubitably authentic: the Q beatitudes, the Good Samaritan, and sayings such as Q 11:20 or 17:20-21.

There are a few points where Destro and Pesce observe how later editing of the Jesus material distorted its earlier shape. Such instances could be (and perhaps should have been) multiplied for the purpose of setting in sharper relief the character of their earliest stratum. For example, Matthew and Luke both clearly integrate Jesus much more firmly into a household structure even if neither is able to claim that Jesus became a householder. Matthew's transformations of various parables is designed to align God with the householder and thus to transform Jesus' discourse into a form that is more congenial with settled households. For his part, Luke underscores Jesus' attachment both to the Temple and his synagogue-oriented piety, both transformations having the effect of overcoming the kinds of criticism of

⁵ On the apologetic use of apocalyptic eschatology, see J. S. Kloppenborg, "As One Unknown, Without a Name: Co-Opting the Apocalyptic Jesus," *Apocalypticism, Antisemitism, and the Historical Jesus: Subtexts in Criticism* (Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus, Supplement Series = JSNTSup 275; ed. J. S. Kloppenborg; collaborator J. W. Marshall; London and New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005) 1–23 and the other essays in this volume.

deracination, disrespect for ancestral piety, and novelty that critics like Celsus would soon hurl at the Jesus movement. And of course Paul and, even more so, the pseudo-Pauline writer rooted their visions of Christ groups firmly within the household. To point out the ways in which Jesus' original vision was changed would also have had the effect of underscoring its peculiarity.

What I most missed in this anthropological account of Jesus is what anthropologists do best, in proposing helpful analogies. So let me offer one perhaps pertinent to the interesting observation about the economic catchment of Jesus' followers.

The Sabbatarian movement was deeply influential in late seventeenth century Europe, both before and after the apostasy and death of Shabbati Zvi (1625–1676). It spread in Northern Europe, aided by the rendering of the Zohar and works of Lurianic Kabbalism into Yiddish and other vernaculars, and was carried on a network of travelling teachers and artisans. Key among the latter was Heshel Tsoref (d. 1700), a silversmith who had fled to Amsterdam during the Polish-Swedish war. Tsoref had no formal education, but produced several thousand pages of manuscripts. His position as an artisan afforded him freedom from the constraints of contemporary rabbinism, which was alternately hostile to his messianism, and unknowingly approving of his exegetical conclusions. Or, one might also think of Menocchio, the sixteenth century miller of Friuli, tried for heresy in 1584 and 1599, and burned by the Holy Office in 1601. Menocchio had put forth and promoted a complex set of utterances that combined popular, peasant elements with “an extremely clear and logical complex of ideas, from religious radicalism to a naturalism tending toward the scientific, to utopian aspirations of social reform.”⁶

⁶C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (trans. J. Tedeschi and A. C. Tedeschi; Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) xix.

There are, of course, many differences between Tsoref and Menocchio, on the one hand, both aided by the invention of the printing press and by the events of the Reformation, and on the other, Jesus. Nevertheless, some discussion of limited analogies between the early Jesus movement and other millenarian movements with utopian visions of social transformation might have strengthened the anthropological approach that otherwise works so well in *Encountering Jesus*.

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