



BRILL

JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

18 (2020) 124-140



brill.com/jshj

# Crowds and Power in the Early Palestinian Tradition

*Robert J. Myles*

Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

*r.myles@murdoch.edu.au*

## Abstract

This article draws on critical crowd theory to explore how historical Jesus research can benefit from a more robust understanding of the crowds that engulf Jesus as subjects of historical change. Conventional approaches to the crowds within New Testament scholarship are complicit in heightening Jesus' individual exceptionalism. Rather than envisaging the crowds as part of the anonymous background to Jesus' ministry, or as a literary invention by the Gospel authors, we should instead regard the crowds as a collective expression of underlying social, political, and economic antagonisms.

## Keywords

crowds – Jesus – Richard A. Horsley – Elias Canetti – individualism – Marxist exegesis

A spectre is haunting first-century Palestine—the spectre of crowds. All the powers have entered into an unholy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Caiaphas and Pilate, the Herods and Caesar, Judean elites and Roman police-spies. Where is the mass of opposition that has not been decried as bandits by their opponents in power? Where is the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of blasphemy and lawlessness, against the more advanced Pharisaic schools, as well as against its reactionary adversaries? To this end, crowds organically erupt, demanding justice, giving body and form to “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heatless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, “[c]rowds are more than large numbers of people

---

1 Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 1843, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

concentrated in a location. They are effects of collectivity, the influence—whether conscious, affective, or unconscious—of others.”<sup>2</sup>

The canonical Gospels make over a hundred references to the crowds (ὄχλοι) in connection to Jesus during his ministry and execution.<sup>3</sup> Despite their obvious importance for understanding the life of the historical Jesus, or what we might call the earliest Palestinian tradition,<sup>4</sup> only a handful of discussions of their existence and function can be gleaned within the current avalanche of historical Jesus research. James H. Charlesworth has noted that:

Jesus Research would benefit from an examination of Jesus and the crowds. This study would bring to bear the insights of Gustav [*sic*] Le Bon and Elias Canetti on the sociology of the “crowd”. A study of the sociology of crowds and Jesus would help clarify Jesus’ popularity among crowds in Galilee, his entry into Jerusalem that was saluted by a crowd, and the mob’s shouting that led to his crucifixion, and one reason why the Romans wanted to stop him.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, this article draws on critical crowd theory to cultivate a more robust understanding of the crowds that engulf Jesus as both agents and subjects of historical change.

The crowds in the early Palestinian tradition gesture towards underlying social, political, and economic antagonisms that anchor their *raison d’être*. By reframing the crowds as collective subjects we can begin to cultivate a richer understanding of the crowds and their relation to the broader Jesus movement. This is in contrast to their conventional portrayal in scholarship as part of “the anonymous background to Jesus’ ministry” (as the Theological

2 Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016), 8.

3 There are more than fifty occurrences in Matthew (4:25; 5:1; 7:28; 8:1, 18; 9:8, 23, 25, 33, 36; 11:7; 12:15, 23, 46; 13:2, 34, 36; 14:5, 13, 14, 15, 19, 22, 23; 15:10, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39; 17:14, 19; 20:29, 31; 21:8, 9, 11, 26, 46; 22:33, 23:1; 26:47, 55; 27:15, 20, 24), thirty-eight in Mark (2:4, 13; 3:9, 20, 32; 4:1, 36; 5:21, 24, 27, 30, 31; 6:34, 45; 7:14, 17, 33; 8:1, 2, 6, 34; 9:14, 15, 17, 25; 10:1, 46; 11:8, 32; 12:12, 37, 41; 14:43; 15:8, 11, 15), forty-one in Luke (3:7, 10; 4:42; 5:1, 3, 15, 19, 29; 6:17, 19; 7:9, 11, 12, 24; 8:4, 19, 40, 42, 45; 9:11, 12, 16, 18, 37, 38; 11:14, 27, 29; 12:1, 13, 54; 13:14, 17; 14:25; 18:36; 19:3, 39; 22:6, 47; 23:4, 48) and twenty in John (5:13; 6:2, 5, 22, 24; 7:12, 20, 31, 32, 40, 43, 49; 11:42; 12:9, 12, 17, 18, 29, 34).

4 I borrow this phrase from Crossley who clarifies he is “aiming more at the general reconstruction of the earliest Palestinian tradition which may (or may not) reflect something of the early Jesus movement rather than promising a precise picture of the historical Jesus.” See James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 35.

5 James H. Charlesworth, “Should Specialists in Jesus Research Include Psychobiography?,” in *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Brian Rhea (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 452.

Dictionary of the New Testament puts it),<sup>6</sup> an “outer circle” to Jesus’ assemblage of followers (as John P. Meier suggests), or as a clever narrative foil which heightens the storytelling of the Evangelists (as those who deem the crowds a literary invention typically assert). All three of these conventional approaches use the crowds in ways that intensify Jesus’ individual exceptionalism. Instead of minimizing the role of crowds in history, however, I implore we take them seriously as part of the foreground of the so-called quest itself. Their rich and conflicting portrayal within the Gospel narratives—and especially the contradictions inherent within their representation—is an expression of the political-economic conditions underlying the formation of the earliest Palestinian tradition.

The argument proceeds as follows: first, I suggest the neoliberal lives of Jesus—by which I mean Jesus scholarship produced, mass-marketed, and consumed within the last forty years or so<sup>7</sup>—has flattened the crowds in a way that heightens the individual exceptionalism of Jesus, thereby producing a skewed historical account. Second, drawing on critical crowd theory in dialogue with ancient sources, I define the crowds (ὄχλοι) as a collective expression of underlying social, political, and economic antagonisms. Finally, I explore the implications of taking the crowds seriously as agents with respect of their portrayal in the canonical Gospels. The approach I take is necessarily exploratory and experimental. My hope is that more exegetical work will follow to further refine our understanding of the crowds and their influence on the historical Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

## 1 Jesus, the Crowds, and Individual Exceptionalism

A typical analysis of the crowds can be found in John P. Meier’s multivolume work, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Unfortunately, Meier actively avoids using sociological tools or explanations, even when they might have much to offer.<sup>9</sup> Halvor Moxnes has noted, for instance, that since Meier

6 *TDNT*, 586.

7 Robert J. Myles, “The Neoliberal Lives of Jesus,” *Bible and Interpretation*, May 2016, <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/2016/05/myl408025.shtml>.

8 For a recent exegesis of the Jerusalem crowds, see Neil Elliott, “Jesus, the Temple, and the Crowd: A Way Less Traveled,” in *Class Struggle in the New Testament*, ed. Robert J. Myles (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 15–52.

9 In his discussion of the historical crowds Meier dismisses the use of the social sciences, noting they rely on statistics and abstract models that do “not supply concrete data that are otherwise lacking”. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 27.

does not follow up his promise of the ways in which Jesus was marginal “with a theory of marginalization or of social structures in Palestine it remains a dead end.”<sup>10</sup>

In Meier’s discussion of the followers of Jesus in his third volume of *A Marginal Jew*, the “crowds” form the outer circle around Jesus, with the “disciples” forming the intermediate or middle circle, and the “Twelve” the inner circle. He notes that “with the exception of the Twelve, the borders between these groups were probably quite fluid. In particular, movement from the intermediate to the outer circle or from the outer circle to indifference or even hostility would have been both easy and informal *since the choice lay entirely with the individuals* who found themselves no longer attracted to Jesus” [emphasis added].<sup>11</sup> Meier here assumes that the reason for the crowds’ historical existence is, in fact, Jesus himself. Such an explanation (or lack of an explanation) is entirely characteristic of the wider discourse of New Testament studies which feeds into the construction of Jesus’ individual exceptionalism. Scholars will rarely entertain the possibility that the crowds might be part of a broader organic movement—with multiple interacting social, economic, and cultural forces at play. Rather, the crowds are reduced to the background scenery; an aggregation of autonomous, independent individuals, centred around one great, charismatic, singular individual, namely, Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the discourse of modern, Western biblical scholarship has fetishized the individual in this way. We simply need to go back to the Enlightenment origins of the historical Jesus quest to observe how it has always been overdetermined by the ideology of the prevailing capitalist culture which engulfs it. In his book *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*, for instance, Moxnes points out that most historical Jesus books written in the nineteenth-century were presented as biographies. He suggests “[o]ne reason for the popularity of biographies was that the emerging culture of a bourgeois elite required institutional contexts and technological means that could provide

10 Halvor Moxnes, “The Historical Jesus: From Master Narrative to Cultural Context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28, no. 4 (1998): 138.

11 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:21.

12 Meier makes further generalizations about the historical crowds which effectively depoliticize and flatten them. For instance, he first observes that “[n]o doubt the vast majority of the faceless crowds were poor, but since the vast majority of people in 1st-century Palestine could be classified as poor in one sense or another, that does not get us very far. Even in Palestine there were varying degrees of poverty and social insecurity”. Meier then cites a number of examples of Jesus interacting with people who emerge from the crowds but also appear to hold relatively elevated social positions. Second, Meier notes that while “Jesus did concentrate on the ‘poor’ ... he did not do so in the narrow, partisan spirit attributed to him by some streams of liberation theology.” Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 3:27–28.

expressions of their ideas. The central group that participated in these reform movements was the intellectuals among the bourgeoisie.”<sup>13</sup> In its effort to solidify its “universal” claims to private property, the aspiring bourgeoisie were historically necessitated to invent individual persons—socially, culturally, and politically—with rights and identities ascribed to physical bodies, that would legally, and indeed morally, bind them to their private property.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, and as Richard A. Horsley appropriately cautions, “[t]o understand the earliest Jesus movements in genuinely historical terms requires some serious rethinking of standard assumptions and approaches in conventional New Testament studies ... Standard interpretation of the Gospels in particular focuses on Jesus as an individual figure...”<sup>15</sup>

Echoing this warning, James G. Crossley has recently proposed we rethink some of the fundamental ways we approach historical Jesus research. He suggests that “rather than seeing Jesus as a Great Man who, implicitly, changed history by himself, we should [instead] investigate what happened when the social upheavals in Galilee and Judea intersected with a range of different ideas and interests and if, or how, this contributed to the generation of historical change.”<sup>16</sup> The point is that too much historical research overestimates the significance of singular individuals (which almost always happen to be “Great Men”), rather than, say, the class struggle as the motor force of history, or wider social, political, and ideological forces. Crossley’s argument stems from an old debate between those who want to approach history as the culmination of the actions of great individuals on the one hand, and histories “from below” on the other.

These days it is hardly controversial to suggest that so-called Great Men are but the products of their societies, and their individual actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before and during their lifetimes. Be that as it may, it is not uncommon to encounter a scholarly portrait of Jesus subtly elevated above his socio-political and economic milieu. In several reconstructions, he exhibits a certain “charismatic” quality that undergirds the

13 Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth-Century Historical Jesus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 26.

14 See, for example, Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin, 2015).

15 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus in Context: Power, People, & Performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 35. Hurtado describes Horsley’s approach as “what looks like a soft Marxian viewpoint”, see Larry W. Hurtado, “A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work,” in *Whose Historical Jesus?* ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 285.

16 Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History*, 1.

Great Man view of history.<sup>17</sup> He is also, for some inexplicable reason, *different* from those around him, whether in terms of his relationship to first-century Judaism,<sup>18</sup> or simply in his daily life as a non-elite artisan. Social and economic forces affecting other peasant-artisans, including especially the frequent upheavals in and around Galilee during the first-century, do not seem to affect Jesus in quite the same way. As I have argued at length elsewhere, Jesus is repeatedly depicted in scholarship as voluntarily “choosing” to become itinerant, jobless, marginal, and so on, and a neoliberal emphasis on “personal responsibility” seems to reverberate through reconstructions of Jesus’ experience of poverty and marginality as a deliberate counter-cultural “lifestyle”.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, it is an obsession of modern scholarship to firmly locate Jesus within first-century Palestinian society, and yet, on the other, he seems equally entrepreneurial, possessing a curious ability to transcend it.

While this phenomenon can be largely attributed to the assumptions and interests of modern scholarship, the heightening of Jesus’ exceptionalism is, in fact, a process already underway in the Gospel tradition itself. In line with their broader literary conventions as Greco-Roman biographies, the Gospels exhibit a vested interest in presenting Jesus as a Great Man akin to the Caesars and other heroes and divine figures. Historical Jesus scholars have, however, uncritically seized upon these propagandistic qualities in ways that align comfortably with the idealized subject of neoliberal capitalism, that is, the bourgeois, “entrepreneurial” individual. But should we take such emphases at face value as historical? It seems more fitting to regard these attempts to make Jesus “stand out from the crowd” as part of the Gospels’ respective theologizing about the significance and meaning of Jesus’ life and death. In developing a history from below, it would make more sense to amplify the presence of the

---

17 Borg, for example, observes that the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus attracting great crowds “undoubtedly conveys the historical impression which he made. Jesus was widely known as a charismatic figure, and it was this reputation as a man of Spirit that drew the crowds which flocked to him.” Even so, Borg is careful to acknowledge the early church would have a vested interest in promoting Jesus in such a way. Marcus J. Borg, “The Spirit-Filled Experience of Jesus,” in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 311. See also Martin Hengel, *Nachfolge Und Charisma* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968).

18 James G. Crossley, “A ‘Very Jewish’ Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11, no. 2 (2013): 109–29. See also the popular book by Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

19 Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, *Social World of Biblical Antiquity*, 2/10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014).

crowds by tying them specifically to the broader social movements and upheavals that were manifest among Jews in first-century Palestine.

## 2 Crowds and Power

The Greek term ὄχλος carried strong political connotations within the broader Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, for instance, ὄχλος could be applied to the “lower classes” or “commoners”, thereby underscoring its usefulness as an articulation of distinctive economic group interests. For example, Xenophon explicitly uses the term in a contemptuous manner to draw a sharp distinction between the views of the lower classes and the rulers (*Cyropaedia* 2, 2, 21). Similarly, the aristocratic Nicias (an Athenian politician and general during the Peloponnesian war) expressed worry his emissaries to Athens would not “report the truth,” but instead opt “to please the mob [τῷ ὄχλῳ πρὸς χάριν]...” (*Thucydides* 7.8). On the other hand, the predominant usage of ὄχλος in the LXX is often connected to military affairs. In Isaiah 43:17, for instance, the “capacity” or “power” that “bring[s] out chariot and horse, army and warrior” is rendered in Greek as ὄχλον ἰσχυρόν (a “strong crowd”). Similarly, through much of the Prophets and Maccabean literature, the ὄχλος most often designates a militarized mob (e.g., Eze 16:40; 17:17; 23:24, 46, 47; Dan 11:13, 25, 43; 1 Macc 1:17, 20, 29; 9:35; 2 Macc 4:40; 11:6; 14:23, 43–46; 3 Macc 1:28; 2:7). In the New Testament book of Acts, the term ὄχλος is repeatedly connected to groups engaging in some kind of riotous action (17:13; 21:27, 34–5; 24:12, 18)—and, as explored below, certain passages in the Synoptic Gospels are best understood from such a perspective.

This explicit socio-political dimension to the crowds is what led the early Minjung theologians to seize upon them in their struggle against the political dictatorship in South Korea. The Korean term *minjung* literally means “mass of people” and refers to the Korean people and their suffering under foreign rule and oppression. Intriguingly, they deliberately avoided another (perhaps more appropriate, or at least differently nuanced) term *inmin* due to its associations with the North Korean regime. *Inmin* (meaning “people”) was used by the DPRK to denote the proletariat. By contrast, *minjung* was intended to be free of Marxian overtones.<sup>21</sup> In Ahn Byung-Mu’s seminal essay “Jesus and the Minjung

20 According to the *BDAG*, the ὄχλος generally refers to “a relatively large number of people gathered together” or, “a large mass of people, without ref[erence]. to status or circumstances leading to its composition”, 745.

21 According to Kuster, “the demarcation [of the Minjung] from the Marxist concept of class is clear. This can be explained not only by the repression of the military, who wanted to

in the Gospel of Mark,” first appearing in R.S. Sugirtharajah’s *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, the “crowd” is read from the perspective of the Korean *minjung*.<sup>22</sup> Ahn utilizes sociological tools to flesh out the crowds in their relation to broader social and economic forces in first-century Galilee and Judea.<sup>23</sup> Aside from the work of Ahn and Horsley (whose work is engaged below), however, there are very few approaches to the crowds in biblical studies that actually engage sociological and historical tools, most preferring narrative criticism which safely contains their collective agency to somewhere outside of history.<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly absent from discussions of biblical crowds (again with the exception of Horsley) is an engagement with critical crowd theory, which can help us to further unpack their socio-political dimension. There is a long tradition of this kind of theoretical work outside the discipline of biblical studies. The most influential early crowd theorist is Gustave Le Bon. Le Bon’s widely

---

muzzle the opposition with anti-communism laws. What went far deeper was their own painful experience of the bloody civil war of 1950–1953. Practically every Korean had to mourn losses in his family or his circle of close acquaintances.” Volker Kuster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 2001), 155. Interestingly, when giving a paper presentation on this topic, a colleague from South Korea informed me that *minjung* is itself a vocabulary which has become tainted in Korean culture today for its associations with radicalism.

- 22 Byung-Mu Ahn, “Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006). Because Ahn’s reading is explicitly theological, the crowd becomes a kind-of voyeuristic stand-in for the audience. Of primary importance is Jesus’ attitude towards the *ochlos*, and their responses. Rather than a broader sociological analysis of the dialectical connections between their manifestation and social, political, and economic forces, the crowds arguably once again function to accentuate Jesus’ individual exceptionalism. Cf. Warren Carter, “The Crowds in Matthew’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 54–67. Carter employs audience-oriented criticism to suggest the crowds in Matthew’s story-world function as stand-ins for the story’s actual audience—that is, Matthew’s first-century Antiochene community.
- 23 Ahn observes that “[a]lthough New Testament scholarship has focused a great deal of attention on the people who were the audience and the object of Jesus’ teaching, not much attention has been paid to the social character of his audience. Consequently, the words and deeds of Jesus have been desocialized.” Ahn, “Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark,” 87.
- 24 In his book-length study on the crowds in Matthew, Cousland contends “the sense of the word as it is found in Matthew and Mark does not differ appreciably from usages typical of the larger Greco-Roman world.” While Cousland does mention in passing the social and political dimension of crowds, his interest is primarily in their identity and narrative construction—and so he pays no attention to their relation to broader social and economic forces. See J.R.C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 35.



translated book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (first published in 1895 in French), laid the groundwork for the twentieth-century theorization of crowds. Le Bon and others were informed by the social upheavals erupting in their own contexts, where crowds were often caught up in struggles for democratic change. For Le Bon, the crowd is a distinct form of collectivity; a “provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements.”<sup>25</sup> It is not a community, nor does it rely on traditions or have a history as such. Rather, “the crowd is defined as a temporary collective being. The crowd holds itself together affectively via imitation, contagion, suggestion, and a sense of its own invincibility.” Because the crowd is a collective being, it cannot be reduced to singularities. The crowd is more than an aggregate of individuals; “[i]t is individuals changed through the torsion of their aggregation, the force aggregation exerts back on them to do together what is impossible alone.”<sup>26</sup>

Towards the mid-point of the twentieth-century, the crowd once again became a locus for questions of power. The British historian George Rudé published several monographs on the French Revolution and the importance of the crowds in history, especially in the construction of a history from below.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Elias Canetti’s strangely compelling anthropological study of the crowds, entitled *Crowds and Power* (appearing in 1960 in German), explores the way crowds form, develop, and dissolve. Canetti’s work is the most heuristically useful when applied to the Gospels. The crowd, he suggests, has the following attributes:

1. The crowd always wants to grow. There are no natural boundaries to its growth.
2. Within the crowd there is equality. This is absolute and indisputable and never questioned by the crowd itself.
3. The crowd loves density. It can never feel too dense. Nothing is interspersed with the crowd—everything must be the crowd itself.
4. The crowd needs a direction. It moves towards a goal which strengthens feelings of equality. A goal outside the individual members and common to all of them drives its direction—and only with this goal does the crowd continue to exist. In fact, its constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept any goal.

25 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Lexington: Maestro Reprints, 2011), 11.

26 Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 9.

27 George Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1964); George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980).

For Canetti, the most important occurrence within the formation of a crowd is the *discharge*. This is what brings the crowd into being; that “moment when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal.”<sup>28</sup> A distinction can also be made between *rhythmic* and *stagnating* crowds. The stagnating crowd lives for its discharge but puts it off. For the rhythmic crowd, on the other hand, density and equality coincide from the beginning. Everything depends on movement.<sup>29</sup>

Canetti also categorizes crowds according to their prevailing emotion: First, the *baiting crowd* forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal. “This crowd is out for killing and it knows whom it wants to kill.”<sup>30</sup> This is a riotous crowd focused and determined on this one outcome. Second, the *flight crowd* is created when people flee together because of an external threat. Flight crowds have a force of direction, away from danger. Third, a *prohibition crowd*, much like an industrial strike, is created by a large number of people together refusing to continue to do what is normally expected of them. Fourth, a *reversal crowd* is where, in a stratified society, the exploited classes lash out against those in power, such as in a revolutionary situation. Reversal crowds direct power towards achieving liberation from the burdens of submission to domination. Finally, feast crowds, centred on the shared goal of a feast, are limited spaces, full of abundance, and where many prohibitions and distinctions are waived.<sup>31</sup>

In the rest of this article, I bring the above insights into dialogue with the crowds in the early Palestinian tradition. As will be shown, the crowds are best understood as a collective expression of underlying social, political, and economic antagonisms. Key to this depiction is linking their spontaneous formation and behaviour to broader patterns of social upheaval that was commonplace in first-century Palestine, especially in the lead up to the Jewish revolt. Josephus, for instance, traces the revolt’s origins in 66CE back six decades to the rebellion instigated by Judas the Galilean and Zadok the Pharisee in 6CE (*Ant.* 18.23), thereby situating such events squarely within the lifetime of Jesus. The broader landscape Josephus paints of first-century Palestine (see esp. *Ant.* 17) is also one of instability that would necessarily filter downwards, disrupting the daily life of the peasant masses and exacerbating already precarious situations of social and economic volatility. Is it any wonder that crowds

28 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1973), 17.

29 *Ibid.*, 30.

30 *Ibid.*, 49.

31 *Ibid.*, 49–63.

would spontaneously erupt, making demands on elites, and generally causing a nuisance?

### 3 The Formation of Crowds in the Early Palestinian Tradition

How are the crowds in the early Palestinian tradition formed? Contra Meier, a careful reading of our Gospel sources does not uniformly show the crowds initially radiating outward from Jesus.

In fact, it is only Matthew's Gospel which closely resembles Meier's schema of three concentric circles of followers: the inner, the intermediate, and the outer, and wherein a link between Jesus and the formation of crowds is clearly initiated. In Matthew's text, Jesus' call of the two pairs of fishermen into his inner circle leads to the formation of a crowd. The call narrative in Matthew 4:18–22, for instance, directly precedes the first eruption of crowds in verses 23–25: "And great crowds followed him [Jesus] from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (25). These fishermen comprise what Canetti would label a "crowd crystal". These are "the small, rigid groups of men, strictly delimited and of great constancy, which serve to precipitate crowds. Their structure is such that they can be comprehended and taken at a glance. Their unity is more important than their size."<sup>32</sup> Jesus instructs these first disciples to come after him (δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου), that is, to adopt a subordinate position, yet combined with the promise that he will make them fish for people, that is, to form a crowd crystal (Meier's "inner circle") that draws in others and has the potential to erupt into a fully-fledged crowd.<sup>33</sup> Once this crowd erupts, according to Canetti, it undergoes a *discharge*—that moment when all who belong get rid of their differences and feel equal. From this point the crowd has a life of its own and develops its own agency and agenda.

As for the other Gospels, however, the crowds already exist prior to Jesus' arrival. For Mark, the crowd first appears abruptly as a physical barrier between Jesus and four people carrying a paralyzed man (2:4). Mark's crowd exhibits a density that suggests it has already reached a life of its own, independent of Jesus. A dense crowd, according to Canetti, is a stagnating crowd: "it is impossible for it to move freely. Its state has something passive in it; it waits. It waits for a head to be shown it, or for words, or it watches a fight."<sup>34</sup> As for its tight compression, "[t]he pressure which each member feels around him will also be

32 Ibid., 73.

33 See further Robert J. Myles, "Fishing for Entrepreneurs in the Sea of Galilee? Unmasking Neoliberal Ideology in Biblical Interpretation," in *Class Struggle in the New Testament*, ed. Robert J. Myles (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 115–38.

34 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 1973, 34.

felt as a measure of the strength of the formation of which he is now part.”<sup>35</sup> The denser a stagnating crowd, the more people it attracts. “Its density is the measure of its size, but is also the stimulus to further growth; the densest crowd grows fastest.”<sup>36</sup> For Luke, the crowd appears even earlier in the Synoptic sequence, during John’s appearance in the desert (3:7), and so, once again, precedes Jesus. A conversation between the Baptist and the crowds—who speak with a unified voice—ensues with John challenging them to “[b]ear fruits worthy of repentance” (8). The crowds do not re-emerge until 4:42, where they appear before (and not after) Jesus’ call of the fishermen in 5:1–11. Finally, in contrast to the Synoptics, John’s crowd first appears in 5:13 during a festival in Jerusalem. As a feast crowd, the mass of people are already “in that place” (ἐν τῷ τόπῳ) prior to Jesus’ arrival. According to the Johannine text, rather than being the reason for the crowd’s composition, Jesus disguises himself within it in order to slip away from “the Jews” in a shroud of anonymity.<sup>37</sup> What these conflicting accounts show is a general pattern of crowd formations in Palestine occurring organically. The crowds thus ought to be examined as historical subjects in their own right as part of the broader early Palestinian tradition, and not merely in ways that buttress Jesus’ individual exceptionalism.

The portrayal of the crowds is no less confusing as the Gospel narratives continue. In terms of their collective agency, the Synoptic tradition regularly heightens the *passivity* of the crowds: they are repeatedly depicted as “following” after Jesus (Matt 4:25; 8:1; 12:15; 19:2; 20:29) to mirror the disciples following after him; the crowds repeatedly react with astonishment and awe at Jesus’ teaching and deeds (7:28; 9:8, 33; 12:23; 15:31; 22:33); they occasionally take orders from Jesus (14:22; 15:35; 15:39); when subjected to harassment from elites, Jesus steps in and has “compassion” for them (9:36; 14:14; 15:32); finally, at the climax of the Synoptic narratives the crowds are famously manipulated by the chief priests and elders.

At several important junctures, however, the crowds play a pivotal role in driving the action. The Synoptic authors repeatedly insist the crowds are feared by Herod, the chief priests and elders, and the Pharisees. They also come with Judas as a mob to arrest Jesus (Matt 26:47//Mark 14:43//Luke 22:47; cf. John 18:3, where Judas brings not a crowd but “a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees”).<sup>38</sup> And despite the suggestion

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 35.

37 The Greek text is ambiguous and could also mean that Jesus left “because” of the crowd.

38 Fredriksen notes that, if we follow the Synoptic version, then “we have to wonder how secret a mob action could be kept.” Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 60.

of manipulation, the Synoptics do at least portray the crowds as ultimately responsible for calling for Barabbas's release over Jesus, even if they are "persuaded" (ἐπεισσαν, Matt 27:20) or "stirred up" (ἀνεύσεισαν, Mark 15:11) by the chief priests and elders.

What is especially curious, however, is how, at the pivotal moment of the crowd's sudden and unexpected turn on Jesus, scholars will all-too-readily express doubts about their historicity (or at least the historicity of their portrayal, although this distinction is rarely clarified). For example, Paula Fredriksen has recently suggested that:

The crowds' wholesale defection between nightfall and morning is completely unexplained in the gospels. Had the people in Jerusalem in reality been so against Jesus, there would have been no reason for Pilate to crucify him. Jesus would have posed no destabilizing threat. Pilate would have been extremely incompetent had he released a known insurrectionist, Barabbas, just because a subject crowd told him to. The hostile Jewish mob seems to be the construct of the evangelists, the better to exculpate Pilate.<sup>39</sup>

Fredriksen's scepticism here arguably rests on an underestimation of the power of crowds. If we consider the combination of political terror and protest, and economic contradictions inherent within the wider social matrix, that undergirds the seemingly irrational responses of a crowd, then Fredriksen's dismissal might be premature. Canetti remarks that a crowd has power precisely because of its uncontrollable urge for growth and its thoroughly chaotic energy. Modern-day crowd observers and commentators generally react to large political crowds with combinations of anxiety and enthusiasm. Jodi Dean, for instance, observes that the crowd, manifesting a desire of the people, "forces the intrusion of the people into politics. Whether the people is the subject of a crowd even is up for grabs. The crowd opens up a site of struggle over its subject."<sup>40</sup> Thus, we should not limit our analysis of power to its dominant home in formal political institutions and structures. When crowds form, and social order is disrupted, anything can happen.

Public disturbances do not come from nowhere. Rather, they stem from built up resentment precipitated by underlying economic imbalances and wider patterns of social disorder. The Synoptic tradition repeatedly attests to this potential for uproar around Jesus' Jerusalem trial (Matt 26:5//Mark 14:2),

39 Ibid., 62; cf. Andrew Simmonds, "Mark's and Matthew's 'Sub Rosa' Message in the Scene of Pilate and the Crowd," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 4 (2012): 733–54.

40 Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 8.

but also much earlier in the sequence too, such as when the crowds gather in the desert immediately following the death of John the Baptist (Matt 14:13// Mark 6:34// Luke 9:11). Crowds engage in, or have the potential to engage in, riotous action. As Matthew puts it, “when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot [θόρυβος] was beginning...” (27:24). Until a crowd is dispersed, it remains beyond satisfaction. Through the lens of crowd theory, Pilate’s anxiousness to “satisfy the crowd” (as Mark puts it in 15:15) seems plausible. Crucifixion becomes the method of deflection that satiates the hunger of the unruly crowd.

#### 4 Crowds, Riots, and Richard Horsley

To briefly explore this notion of the tumultuous crowds I want to turn to an oft-neglected analysis of the Jerusalem crowd published more than thirty years ago. In an aptly-titled chapter on “Popular Mass Protests” in *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, Richard Horsley devotes a dozen fascinating pages to the riots of the Jerusalem crowd—situating the specific crowd associated with Jesus’ trial in the wider context of political and riotous crowds that were commonplace in Jerusalem leading up to the first century and especially in the lead up to the Jewish revolt. Horsley suggests that such riots “were an important form of protest against the imperial situation and that the Romans took the possibility of riots seriously, especially at festival times.”<sup>41</sup>

Avoiding the work of LeBon, which Horsley suggests tendentiously dismissed the crowd “as criminals, vagrants, and social misfits,”<sup>42</sup> he instead draws on the work of Marxist historians Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, and George Rudé (but curiously bypasses Canetti) to emphasize the importance of the crowd phenomenon in pre-industrial societies, especially in the construction of a history from below. Horsley suggests that “[t]he urban crowd did not simply represent an irrational and spontaneous venting of resentment, rage, or frustration.”<sup>43</sup> Rather, the crowd’s protest or “riot” was one of the few forms through which the masses could express their concerns and effect some kind of concession or official remedy for its grievance.

Furthermore, there is an important class interest in the phenomenon of the crowd that should be stressed. According to Horsley, “[f]ar from the rioters being merely criminals and riffraff, the crowd exercising its protest was composed

<sup>41</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

of the ordinary people of the city, the urban poor or settled abode and trade.”<sup>44</sup> “A riot can be an expression of class conflict of poor against the rich and powerful” without being directed against any one institution or class group in particular.<sup>45</sup> As Slavoj Žižek puts it with respect of modern rioting: “to riot is to make a subjective statement, to implicitly declare how one relates to one’s objective conditions, how one subjectivizes them.”<sup>46</sup> Horsley, however, pulls back from declaring the crowd a “revolutionary” subject by noting that “[a]lthough urban mobs may have achieved a degree of political consciousness and direction, they were not usually revolutionary in intent or effect.”<sup>47</sup> He observes that the crowds protesting abuses in the system usually remained loyal to the authorities, and so the urban crowd’s protests were not a serious threat to the established order.

Through the lens of Canetti, the emotional crowd type present at Jesus’ trial scene is a baiting crowd. It is useful to distinguish between the feast crowd already present in Jerusalem and the baiting crowd that participates in Jesus’ trial. Robyn Whitaker, writing on Jesus’ trial in Luke 23, suggests that by the Evangelist emphasizing the crowd’s size, placement, and role in the drama, Jesus’ death is presented as a failed spectacle in a manner similar to a death in the Roman arena. Her reading attributes the crowd a heightened sense of agency: the crowd functions as an active participant whose chorus signifies not the expected response of grief at Jesus’ sentencing and execution. Canetti himself observes that in a public execution “The real executioner is the crowd gathered round the scaffold. It approves the spectacle and, with passionate excitement, gathers from far and near to watch it from beginning to end.” Canetti actually mentions Jesus’ trial scene as a primary example of this phenomenon. He writes:

The cry of ‘Crucify Him!’ comes from the crowd; it is the crowd which is truly active here. On another occasion it might have done everything itself and stoned Jesus. The tribunal pronouncing judgment—normally in front of a limited number of people only—stands for the multitude which later attends the execution.... It is actually for the sake of the crowd that justice is done and it is the crowd we have in mind when we speak of the importance of justice being public.<sup>48</sup>

44 Ibid., 90–91.

45 Ibid., 91.

46 Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 164; cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

47 Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 92.

48 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 52.

As Canetti observes, “Once a baiting crowd has attained its victim it disintegrates rapidly. Rulers in danger are well aware of this fact and throw a victim to the crowd in order to impede its growth.”<sup>49</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

The time has come for a mainstreaming of historical Jesus research that engages seriously with the insights of critical theory and a much broader array of interdisciplinary tools. Such explorations are routinely marginalized within the discipline,<sup>50</sup> as James Crossley, Steven Friesen, and Neil Elliott have independently observed with respect of Marxist-oriented scholarship.<sup>51</sup> Such omissions are arguably a reflection of the prevailing capitalist culture which has overdetermined the so-called quest for the historical Jesus from its beginnings in the eighteenth century, and, not coincidentally, as the capitalist mode of production was emerging as a dominant global economic and ideological system. Recent moves towards social memory theory, and the demise of the criteria of authenticity show inklings of a mood for something different. But we also need fresh methodological and interpretive approaches to the historical Jesus that provide antidotes to the “liberal” and indeed “neoliberal” lives of Jesus prevalent today. The work of Horsley and others I have cited above provide a refreshing starting point, by exploring alternative avenues for investigating the early Palestinian tradition as a history from below.

While we do not have to accept everything the Gospels attribute to the crowds as historical, their frequent appearances do nonetheless attest to the wider social forces, patterns, and pressures that lie behind the formation of the early Palestinian tradition. In this article, I have shown how historical

---

49 Ibid.

50 Three examples immediately come to mind: Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: WJK, 2003); Michael J. Sandford, *Poverty, Wealth, and Empire: Jesus and Postcolonial Criticism*, New Testament Monographs 35 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000). What is notable is the overwhelming non-engagement from other historical Jesus scholars, despite these studies raising legitimate concerns about the directions of scholarship, and also offering alternative hermeneutical paradigms.

51 James G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins (26–50ce)* (Louisville: WJK, 2006); Steven J. Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26, no. 3 (2004): 323–61; Neil Elliott, “Diagnosing an Allergic Reaction: The Avoidance of Marx in Pauline Scholarship,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 8, no. 2 (2012): 3–15.



Jesus research can benefit from a more robust understanding of the crowds, informed especially by critical crowd theory. The historicity of crowds and their portrayal within the Gospels need not be judged on subjective criteria that seeks to psychologize them, or in ways that end up accentuating Jesus' individual exceptionalism, but rather, and simply, as a collective expression of underlying social, political, and economic antagonisms.