

The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem

By Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

A Book Review by: John Madigan

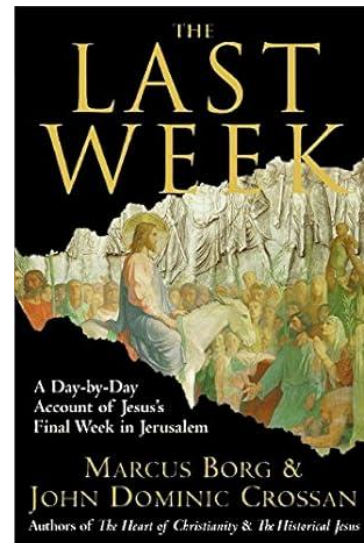
In *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, two leading scholars of the historical Jesus, present a daring and enlightening reinterpretation of Jesus's final days. Rooted in a close reading of the Gospel of Mark—the earliest and most historically grounded of the four canonical Gospels—this work guides readers day-by-day through Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter. But rather than focusing on familiar theological dogmas or devotional interpretations, Borg and Crossan deliver a powerful socio-political analysis that reshapes the reader's understanding of Jesus and the core of Christian faith.

At the heart of the book is a bold assertion: the first passion of Jesus was not suffering, but justice. Borg and Crossan argue that to understand the final week of Jesus's life, one must grasp his driving commitment to the Kingdom of God—a vision of a just world ruled not by Caesar or empire, but by a God who desires equity and peace. In this way, the authors redefine "passion" not as suffering alone, but as the consuming focus of Jesus's life: compassion for the marginalized, opposition to imperial domination, and the pursuit of distributive justice.

The book opens with a striking reinterpretation of Palm Sunday. While many Christians remember this event as a joyful procession of palms and hosannas, Borg and Crossan reveal it as a deliberate act of political theater. On one side of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate would have entered the city in a display of Roman military might—a reminder of imperial power during a potentially volatile Passover festival. On the other side, Jesus's humble procession on a donkey symbolized a counter-kingdom, a parody of empire, and a public proclamation that God's kingdom was rooted in peace, not conquest. This juxtaposition, the authors argue, sets the tone for the rest of the week: a confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

Throughout the week, Jesus's actions—such as the cleansing of the Temple—are interpreted as public protests against systems of injustice. His critique of the Temple was not about petty commercialism, but about its role as a religious institution complicit in economic exploitation and Roman collaboration. The book paints Jesus as a prophetic agitator who provoked both religious and political authorities, ultimately sealing his fate.

Borg and Crossan challenge traditional atonement theology, which holds that Jesus died as a substitutionary sacrifice to atone for humanity's sins. Instead, they argue that Jesus was



crucified because of the sin of the world—not sin in a personal or moral sense, but systemic injustice. He was executed by the powers that be—the Roman Empire and its local collaborators—because he posed a threat to the social and political order. In this view, the cross is not a symbol of divine satisfaction, but of human brutality met by divine resistance.

One of the book's major contributions is its clear articulation of the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter. Good Friday, they argue, is the collision of Jesus's passion for justice with the domination systems of his time. Easter, then, is God's vindication of Jesus and his vision of the Kingdom. In affirming that Jesus is Lord, the early Christians were making a radical anti-imperial claim: if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. This theme reverberates through Paul's letters and culminates in the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation, where empire is portrayed as a beast, a harlot, and a monster.

Borg and Crossan also draw sobering parallels between ancient Rome and modern-day empires—particularly the United States. They argue that empire today is not about land conquest, but about the use of economic and military power to shape the world to its interests. For American Christians, this realization poses difficult but necessary questions: Are we part of Jesus's procession, or Pilate's? Are we journeying toward justice, or maintaining the status quo?

The prose of *The Last Week* is both scholarly and accessible. It invites believers and skeptics alike to engage with the historical Jesus in a way that is intellectually honest and spiritually challenging. For those accustomed to a purely devotional Holy Week, the book may be unsettling, even provocative. Some readers may find its emphasis on politics and history eclipses traditional theological themes, particularly the mystery of Christ's divinity and resurrection. But for others, this approach opens up new dimensions of faith rooted in action, compassion, and resistance to injustice.

Perhaps the most enduring question raised by the book is one that transcends academic debate: What does it mean to follow Jesus today? Is Christianity a religion of personal piety, or a call to transform society? Borg and Crossan leave readers with this challenge—not merely to believe in the resurrection, but to live it. To walk the path of Holy Week is to commit to the same journey of nonviolent resistance, prophetic truth-telling, and hope in the face of empire.

In *The Last Week*, Borg and Crossan invite us to remember Jesus not just as a figure of faith, but as a revolutionary whose message continues to disturb and inspire. Whether one agrees with all their conclusions or not, the book is a necessary and urgent contribution to understanding the meaning of Holy Week in our time.

(About the author: John Madigan grew up on a farm along the Madawaska River and spent forty years in Ontario's education system as a teacher, principal, and school board

administrator. His religious education has included studies in philosophy, scripture, theology, and church history.)