

I have decided that I can't simply post yesterday's blast from the past about the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and leave it at that, since the way we today tend to read the account (where Jesus seems, to our eyes, to be a Super-Brat) may not be the way it was read in antiquity (believe it or not!). So here is the post that I wrote to explain that, when I first dealt with the matter three years ago.

I had a great time giving my lectures at the Smithsonian yesterday. Terrific crowd, very attentive, highly intelligent, great questions. And a completely exhausting day. Four lectures back to back is tough. So I came back to my room and did football, pizza, and beer all night, which was just what the doctor ordered. (I am a Dr., after all)

The first lecture, as I indicated in my previous post, was on the Infancy Gospels, or at least on two of them, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Proto-Gospel of James (Protevangelium Jacobi). I have already summarized some of the stories of the Infancy Gospel, and have pointed out the obvious, that on a casual reading Jesus certainly seems to be a bit of a brat. Or at least a miracle-working son of God who as an immature boy does not seem to have his powers under control and behaves with a real mischievous streak.

But I also indicated that there are scholars who call that understanding of the text into question. I'm not sure that includes the majority of scholars, but I do (personally) think it includes the most thoughtful ones. I myself used to think that this was the Gospel of Jesus the Superbrat; but now I don't think so. Frankly, even though the stories seem very amusing and entertaining to us, I now don't think ancient Christian readers (most of whom were not known for their sense of humor) would have seen them in this way. My bet now is that the earliest readers of these accounts took them very seriously. And what they saw was that they bespoke important things about Jesus.

A bit of background. The genre "biography" was alive and well in Greek and Roman antiquity (biographies were called "bioi," literally meaning "Lives"). We have a bunch from Plutarch, for example, and Suetonius and ... others. They are instructive reading. I should stress as strongly as I can - emphatically (just to be redundant) - that ancient biographies were NOT like modern ones in numerous ways, and for lots of reasons. One of the most obvious is that ancient biographers simply didn't have access to the sorts of resources and data on their subjects that modern writers do, and so simply could not provide the kinds of in-depth and reliable analysis that is possible today.

One less obvious reason is that ancient biographers didn't have the psychological insights that modern authors do, especially in our post-Freudian age. Ancient people understood the human character differently from us, and among other things they did not believe in such things as character development in quite the same way as we do. Ancient biographers were not much interested in "formative influences" on a person's character. Instead, they tended to think that a person's character was given at birth, and the events that happened early in a person's life, rather than being challenges and experiences and influences that could shape their personalities were *instead* opportunities for a person to "manifest" his/her personality. And so when ancient biographers told stories about a person's youth, it was normally in order to show the person's character already at this early point in his/her life.

One less obvious reason is that...

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