

Writing *Did Jesus Exist* was an interesting task. For one thing, before writing the book, like most New Testament scholars, I knew almost nothing about the mythicist movement. I think mythicists themselves find this very frustrating, that their work is not taken seriously - in fact is not really even known - by precisely the scholars they would most like to convince. But that's just the way it is. Many scholars have **heard** of G. A. Wells, who for years has propounded a mythicist view (of sorts: he actually thinks there was a man Jesus, but he is essentially unrelated to the Christ of Christian tradition). And Robert Price has a PhD in the field and wrote a bona fide scholarly book *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*. But scholars who know about the mythicists - e.g. by reading the second edition of Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, where he effectively disposes of the mythicists of his day - whether for good reason or not, simply do not take them seriously. And many scholars in the field, I would venture to say, until my book had not even heard much about them.

So that would be frustrating if you were a mythicist. What I was surprised to learn in doing my preparation for the book was just how extensive the research was that mythicists had done, how many arguments they had amassed, how many issues they addressed. Some of their works are voluminous. And their numbers do appear to be increasing. I wonder if that is related at all to the culture wars going on right now over religion. As the "religious right" tries to assert itself increasingly in the public discourse and to foist its moral agendas on the rest of us, the "neo-atheists" have arisen issuing a serious challenge not just to the right but to religion itself. Are the mythicists gaining traction because of the reaction of the left against the right?

In any event, writing *Did Jesus Exist?* was an interesting exercise precisely because it put me closely in touch with this entirely other world of the mythicist. But that was not all. It was interesting for two other reasons.

First, I realized when doing my research for the book that since New Testament scholars have never taken mythicists seriously, they have never seen a need to argue against their views, which means that even though experts in the study of the historical Jesus (and Christian origins, and classics, and ancient history, etc etc.) have known in the back of their minds all sorts of powerful reasons for simply assuming that Jesus existed, no one had ever tried to prove it. Odd as it may seem, no scholar of the New Testament has ever thought to put together a sustained argument that Jesus must have lived. To my knowledge, I was the first to try it, and it was a very interesting intellectual exercise. How do you prove that someone from 2000 years ago actually lived? I have to say, it was terrifically enlightening, engaging, and fun to think through all the issues and come up with all the arguments. I think really almost any New Testament scholar could have done it. But it ended up being lucky me.

The second reason it was interesting was that it allowed me to rethink what we can know about the historical Jesus. I devote a couple of chapters to that issue in the book. Once we have said that Jesus existed, what can we say about his life - his words, his deeds, his experiences? I would rank this issue as one of the greatest in the history of religions, and it was a privilege to be able to think through and write about it in this work

But *Did Jesus Exist?* is important for me for one other reason. It has set the stage for my next book project, a book about what happened to Jesus' reputation after his death. The short way to express the issue is this: if, as I am right, Jesus is best understood as a Jewish apocalypticist from the backwaters of a rural part of the Roman empire, a Jewish preacher who got on the wrong side of the law and was executed for crimes against the state, how is

it that within sixty years of his death his followers were saying that he was a divine being? And that within 150 years they were saying that he was the second member of the Trinity? I am tentatively calling this next book How Jesus Became God.

**I talk more about this book, and its relation to Did Jesus Exist, as I continue this posting on my membership section. Please Join!!**

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