

In my previous post I pointed out that mythicists have a real problem on their hands when it comes to insisting that Jesus didn't exist (well, they actually have a *boatload* of problems; but this is one of them): Paul actually knew, personally, Jesus' own brother, James. It's hard to say that Jesus never lived if he in fact had a brother....

It doesn't solve the problem to say that this was in fact Jesus' cousin, since, well, he would still then be the cousin of (the real) Jesus (!) (plus the word Paul uses is "brother" not "cousin") and it doesn't work to say that he is Jesus' brother meaning he is a member of the Christian church (since Paul differentiates him from himself and Peter by calling him the "brother" - and both Peter and Paul were also members of the church!).

Mythicists have tried other approaches, including the one I discussed yesterday, of trying to claim that there was a group of fervent missionaries in Jerusalem called "the brothers of the Lord," and James was one of them. No need to repeat yesterday's post: that claim is bogus.

The one mythicist with qualifications in NT studies is Robert Price, a smart, interesting, and good guy (unlike some of the others ...). But he too doesn't think Jesus existed and he too has to explain then how it is that Paul knows his "brother." One of the other possibilities that Price sets forth is the one I discuss below, again in an extract from my fuller study, Did Jesus Exist.

Price himself puts forward a different way to interpret Paul's words so as not to concede that the James that Paul knew was actually related to Jesus. In this second view (which, I need to add, stands at odds with the first), James is said to be the brother of the Lord because he reflected on earth so well the views of Jesus in heaven that he was his virtual twin. As evidence Price appeals to several apocryphal books from outside the New Testament, including the famous Acts of Thomas. This is the second-century account of the missionary endeavors of the apostle Thomas after Jesus' resurrection, most famous for its stories of how Thomas was the first to bring the gospel to India. In this account Thomas is called the "twin" of Jesus. And why is he Jesus' twin? For Price it is because Thomas, better than any of the other disciples, has a true understanding of who Jesus is, as indicated in yet another apocryphal book, the Gospel of Thomas (saying 13). In addition, Price notes several apocryphal works that deal with James of Jerusalem, which also call him Jesus' brother. Price argues that this is because of his particularly close ties to Jesus and his clear understanding of Jesus and his teaching.

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This last piece of evidence shows where Price's argument unravels itself. The reason James is called Jesus' brother in these other apocryphal works is because it was widely believed in early Christianity that James was in fact his brother. These texts say nothing, not a thing, to counteract that view. They simply assume a sibling relationship.

So too with the Acts of Thomas. The whole point of the narrative of this intriguing book is precisely that Thomas really is Jesus' brother. In fact he is his twin. Not only that: he is his identical twin. This is not because he uniquely agrees with Jesus or understands him particularly well. Quite the contrary, the very first episode of the book shows that Thomas does not agree with Jesus and does not see eye-to-eye with him in the least. After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas is instructed by the other apostles to go to India to convert the

pagans, and he refuses to go. It is only when Jesus appears from heaven that he forces his twin brother to proceed against his wishes. It is only in a different book, the Gospel of Thomas, that Thomas is said to understand Jesus better than any of the others. But strikingly, the Gospel of Thomas decidedly does not say that for that reason Thomas was Jesus' brother, let alone his twin.

The reality is that there was a tradition in some parts of the early Church that Thomas really was the twin of Jesus. The Aramaic word Thomas, itself, means "twin." That Jesus and Thomas were identical twins plays a key role in the Acts of Thomas itself, in one of its most amusing episodes. While Thomas is en route (reluctantly) to India, his ship stops in a major port city, where the king's daughter is about to celebrate her wedding with a local aristocrat. Thomas as an outside guest is invited to the wedding, and after the ceremony he speaks to the wedded couple, but in a highly unusual way. As a good ascetic Christian, Thomas believes that sex is sinful, and that to be fully right with God, people - even married people - need to abstain. And so he tries to convince the king's daughter and her new husband not to consummate their marriage that night.

But he is frustratingly unsuccessful in his pleas. He leaves the scene and the couple enter their bridal chamber. But to their great surprise, there is Thomas again, sitting on their bed. Or at least they think that it's Thomas, since he does, after all, look exactly like the man they were just talking with. But it is not Thomas. It is his identical twin, Jesus, come down from heaven to finish the task that his brother had unsuccessfully begun. Jesus, more powerfully persuasive, of course, than his twin, wins the hearts of the newlyweds, who spend the night in conversation instead of conjugal embrace.

This tale is predicated on the view that Thomas and Jesus really were twins, in a physical, not symbolic or spiritual sense.

One might wonder how the Christians who told such stories could have possibly imagined that Jesus had a twin brother. Wasn't his mother a virgin? Then where did the twin come from?

None of our sources indicates an answer to that question, but I think a solution can come from the mythologies that were popular in the period. We have several myths about divine men who were born of the union of a God and a mortal. In some of those stories, the mortal woman is also impregnated by her husband, leading to the birth of twins (it is hard to know how they could be identical twins, but anatomy was not among most ancient story-tellers' long suit). This in fact is how the divine man Heracles is born. His mother Alcmene is ravished by the king of the gods Zeus, but only after she has already become pregnant by her husband Amphitryon. And so she bears twins, the immortal Zeus and the mortal Iphicles.

Is it possible that the Christians who told stories of Jesus and his twin brother Thomas had a similar idea? That Jesus himself was conceived while Mary was a virgin, but then her husband also slept with her, so that two sons were born? We will never know if they thought this, but it at least is a viable possibility. What does not seem viable, given what the stories about Thomas and Jesus actually say, is that they were unrelated. On the contrary, for these stories they were actual, twin brothers.

Price claims that his view that a mortal could be a special "brother" of Jesus because he so well reflected his views is supported by a range of the Apocryphal Acts. But he does not cite any of the others, just texts that deal with Thomas and James, the two figures in the early

church best known precisely for being Jesus' actual brothers. But as a clinching argument Price appeals to the nineteenth century revolutionary leader in China named Taiping Messiah Hong Xiuquan, who called himself "the Little Brother of Jesus." Price finds this figure to provide compelling evidence of his view. In his own words "I find the possible parallel to the case of Hong Xiuquan to be, almost by itself, proof that James' being the Lord's brother need not prove a recent historical Jesus." That is, since Hong Xiuquan was not really Jesus' brother, the same could be true of James.

Now we are really grasping at straws. A nineteenth-century man from China is evidence of what someone living in the 30s CE in Palestine thought about himself? Hong Xiuquan is living 1800 years later, in a different part of the world, in a different social and cultural context. Among other things, he is the heir of eighteen centuries worth of Christian tradition. He has nothing to do with the historical Jesus or the historical James. To use his case in order to cinch the argument is an enormous stretch, even by Price's standards.

I'll stop here. Jesus had a brother. And it's because Jesus really lived.



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