

I often look back over all the posts I've made on the blog over the past six years, and one of the things that constantly strikes me, these days, is how testy I frequently was, in those days! Four years ago I expressed some dismay at a review of my book *How Jesus Became God*.

A bit thin-skinned, would you say? Either I'm getting a better sense of humor, or am taking myself less seriously, or am becoming more laid back, or, well, just getting older. Anyway, here is the post.

The responses to [How Jesus Became God](#) are starting to appear, and I must say, I find the harshest ones bordering on the incredible. Do people think that it is acceptable to attack a book that they haven't read - or at least haven't had the courtesy to try to understand?

Some of the reviewers are known entities, such as the Very Rev. Robert Barron, a Roman Catholic evangelist and commentator who has a wide following. His full response is available at <http://wordonfire.org/Written-Word/articles-commentaries/April-2014/Why-Jesus-is-God-A-Response-to-Bart-Ehrman.aspx> I find it very disappointing. Here is his opening gambit:

"In this most recent tome, Ehrman lays out what is actually a very old thesis, going back at least to the 18th century and repeated ad nauseam in skeptical circles ever since, namely, that Jesus was a simple itinerant preacher who never claimed to be divine and whose "resurrection" was in fact an invention of his disciples who experienced hallucinations of their master after his death. Of course Ehrman, like so many of his skeptical colleagues across the centuries, breathlessly presents this thesis as though he has made a brilliant discovery. But basically, it's the same old story. When I was a teenager, I read British Biblical scholar Hugh Schonfield's *Passover Plot*, which lays out the same narrative, and just a few months ago, I read Reza Aslan's [Zealot](#), which pursues a very similar line, and I'm sure next Christmas or Easter I will read still another iteration of the theory."

So I have to ask in all seriousness: has the Very Reverend Robert Barron actually read my book?

Where to start? How about with ...

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the "invention" of the resurrection of Jesus' disciples based on their hallucinations? Maybe Barron was so caught up in the idea that I am (in his view) a reincarnation of 18th century skeptics that he didn't bother to look very closely. I took great care in my book precisely not to say what he accuses me of saying. Nowhere do I say that Jesus' resurrection was invented by his hallucinating disciples. In fact I spent considerable length arguing that the visions of Jesus would be seen by his modern-day followers as appearances of Jesus - that is,

as veridical visions - and by non-believers as non-veridical hallucinations. But I pointedly did not take a stand on the issue in the book. My view is that the disciples saw visions, and each of us can decide whether they really saw Jesus or simply thought they did. In other words, Barron is attacking a straw man. (I also do not take a stand on the central theological question of whether Jesus really was God or not.)

Moreover, it is offensive to say that I “breathlessly present this thesis” as though I “had made a brilliant discovery.” This is mockery, not a serious evaluation. I have tried to present a sober historical analysis. It is based on many years of research. If I’m breathless, it’s only because of the hard work and many long hours I put into doing the work. If he imagines that I’m pretending that everything in my book is my new, spectacular, first-time ever made discovery - why doesn’t he cite some passages where I say that or even suggest it? If he had read my book he would see that I cite and mention previous scholars at virtually all the key points. But, of course, it is easier to disparage someone for their “breathless” presentation than it is to engage with them.

OK, so I’m a bit testy. But what really has sent me over the edge is his claim that my view is simply a re-hashing of Hugh Schonfield’s Passover Plot. Is he SERIOUS? Maybe he forgot what the thesis of the Passover Plot is. Or maybe he doesn’t care, but simply wants to tarnish me by association with an absurd thesis that someone else advanced, which in fact has nothing to do with mine.

For those of you who don’t know, The Passover Plot maintained that Jesus believed he was to be the messiah, and he “knew” that to be the messiah he had to die and be raised again. And so he planned for that to happen. He arranged to have himself drugged on the cross so that his vital signs would slow down and he would go into a coma, appearing to be dead. He worked it out with a couple of his followers then to retrieve him from the tomb so that he could revive, appear to others, and convince them then that he had been resurrected. Unfortunately he was not counting on a Roman soldier piercing his heart with a spear, and it was this injury that unfortunately killed him. He did revive, but only long enough to escape the tomb, which his disciples later found empty and came to argue then that he had left as the lord of heaven. Jesus himself died very soon after his failed plot.

What does this reconstruction of events have to do with the historical sketch that I give in How Jesus Became God? Almost precisely NOTHING. (And if he thinks I’m regurgitating anything like the thesis of Reza Aslan, he might do well to consider the sustained critique of Zealot found in multiple posts devoted to the subject here on this blog.)

I really don’t mind having serious criticism leveled against my book, or serious academic engagement over scholarly reconstructions of what happened in the life of Jesus or in its aftermath in the birth of Christianity. But I simply cannot stand cheap shots condescendingly delivered, by people - popular authors or not - who do not want to interact with historical data and serious interpretations, but instead want to take potshots to make the “faithful” think that all is well with the world and that their preconceived notions about religion cannot be shaken by historical inquiry. My view is that my book should have ZERO impact on intelligent, informed, Christian belief. (And I have evidence: I have intelligent Christian friends who are scholars of early Christianity who agree with almost all of my analysis.) If The Very Reverend Robert Barron does find my book threatening, it is either because he has not read it closely enough or because he holds to fundamentalist views that have somehow or other managed to work their way into the hearts and minds of the Catholic clergy. Or both.



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