

In browsing through some old posts, I came across this one from five years ago, in which I deal with two questions I still today get asked about the “evidence” that Jesus did, or did not, exist. The post deals with pointed issues raised by my colleague in the field, Ben Witherington. The answers still seem germane to me today, as the question of Jesus’ existence has simply ratcheted up, all these years later.

Ben Witherington, a conservative evangelical Christian New Testament scholar, has asked me to respond to a number of questions about my book Did Jesus Exist, especially in light of criticism I have received for it (not, for the most part, from committed Christians!). His blog is widely read by conservative evangelicals, and he has agreed to post the questions and my answers without editing, to give his readers a sense of why I wrote the book, what I hoped to accomplish by it, and what I would like them to know about it. He has graciously agreed to allow me to post my responses here on my blog. The Q’s are obviously his, the A’s mine.

Q. Robert Price’s argument that the stories of Jesus are a giant midrash on OT stories about Moses and others, and so are completely fiction seems to ignore the fact that midrash is a hermeneutical technique used for contemporizing pre-existing stories. Talk briefly about the difference between how stories are shaped in the Gospels and whether they have any historical substance or core or not. (N.B. It appears that Crossan has recently made the same kind of category mistake arguing that since there are parables in the Gospels, that whole stories about Jesus may be parables, pure literary fictions).

A. In Did Jesus Exist? I try to make a major methodological point that there is a very big difference between saying that a story has been shaped in a certain (non-historical) way and saying that the story is completely non-historical. I make this point because authors like Robert Price have claimed that all the stories about Jesus in the Gospels are midrashes on stories found in the OT. By that he means, roughly, that the story of Jesus is shaped in such a way as to reflect a kind of retelling or exposition of stories about persons and events in the Old Testament. For example, the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel shapes the stories about Jesus to make Jesus appear to be a kind of “second Moses.” Like Moses, Jesus is supernaturally protected at his birth when the ruler (Pharaoh/Herod) seeks to destroy him; like Moses he goes down to Egypt as an infant; like Moses he comes up out of Egypt to the promised land; like Moses he passes through the waters (the parting of the Red Sea; the baptism); after which he spends time in the wilderness being “tested” (40 years; 40 days); after which he goes up on the mountain to receive/deliver the Law (Mount Sinai; Sermon on the Mount). The story of Jesus has evidently been “shaped” in light of the author’s knowledge of the story of Moses in order to say something: Jesus is the new Moses.

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