

QUESTION:

It must be difficult going into these types of debates knowing that if Robert Price is actually right, your entire career would be pointless and irrelevant. I certainly don't believe this, but it must have crossed your mind before?

RESPONSE:

This question arose from the debate I had a couple of weeks ago with Robert Price, on whether Jesus existed. Price argued, as you know, that there never was a historical man Jesus, but that the earliest "Christians" believed in a cosmic Christ, a mythical figure who lived above in the heavenly realm who was crucified by demons in outer space. This is the Christ attested, for example, he claimed, in Paul. But later Christians invented a historical figure Jesus out of this Christ, and the Gospels portray this fictitious figure that was simply made up. Jesus of Nazareth never existed.

And so this question is whether I really can't entertain this view as an option since, if it were true, I wouldn't have a career. My career is based on the history of early Christianity - studying the historical Jesus, the beliefs of his earliest followers, the history and literature of Christianity afterward. If Jesus didn't exist, I'd have nothing to study, right?

Ha! It's a good question! Doesn't the practical implication of the Mythicist position make my scholarship pointless and for that reason it's something I can't really consider?

The answer, if I'm being as honest as I can, is ...

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The answer, if I'm being as honest as I can, is no. If the Mythicist position were true, and there never was a historical Jesus, it wouldn't affect me personally in any radical way. I would still have my day job. And the nature of my research would not be very different at all. That's because of the historical importance of Christianity, independent of what you think about the historical Jesus.

There are still two billion people in the world who call themselves Christian. They need (in my opinion) to know where their religion came from. In my view, it ultimately goes back to a historical figure Jesus, a Jewish apocalyptic prophet from Galilee who proclaimed that God was soon to intervene in history to overthrow the forces of evil to set up a good kingdom on earth. In the Mythicist view, it goes back to a celestial being who never lived on earth, a heavenly cosmic Christ worshiped as a sun God who was crucified by demons in outer space and was later transformed into a human being by imaginative believers (not in reality). If the Mythicist view were right, that is what I would be teaching. It would still be important to teach it (and obviously interesting!) given the importance of Christianity in our world, as the planet's largest religion.

This view would also not affect my personal beliefs: I'm not a believer in Jesus' resurrection from the dead for the salvation of the world, so coming to think there never was a man Jesus would not affect my own religious perspective. And it would not affect my sense of the importance of Christianity, either in the contemporary world or throughout history. It

would simply change what I teach.

What I teach now is that there are numerous non-historical features surrounding the traditions of the historical Jesus. I do not think that the stories about Jesus being born of a virgin in Bethlehem stand up to historical scrutiny, as I've explained at length in this post before. I do not think that the stories of Jesus as the great miracle worker who could walk on water, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead capture who Jesus in history really was. I do not think we have fully accurate accounts of Jesus' life and the events surrounding his death. As indicated, I do not think that the stories of the resurrection are historically credible.

So what difference to my teaching would the Mythicist position - should I come to accept it - make? It would mean that I would merely teach a much more radical position, that the man never lived at all. But it wouldn't ruin, or even significantly change my career. My career has almost no connection to the question of whether Jesus existed. Instead of teaching an apocalyptic Jesus I would teach a mythical Jesus.

I know that many Mythicists wish that I would spend my entire career obsessing over whether Jesus existed or not (they keep wanting me to do debates, and respond to criticisms, and write more about it!). But most of my academic work - both teaching and research/ writing - is on completely other issues: the interpretation of the writings of the NT (the literary interpretation of which does not depend on whether the person they refer to actually lived), the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, the Apocryphal writings of early Christianity (i.e., the Gospels etc. that didn't make it into the New Testament), the development of early Christian heresy and orthodoxy, the persecution and martyrdom of the early Christians, the Christianization of the Roman empire and hence of the Western world, the use of literary forgery in the early Christian movement, the study of scribes who were copying the books that eventually became the New Testament.

These are the things that I spend my time researching and teaching. I spend almost no time focusing on the question of whether Jesus existed. And whether he did or not has almost no bearing on any of these things that I do study.

So, in response to the question, no, I don't really worry about the matter and don't think that deciding that Jesus did not exist would have much of an impact on my research, teaching, beliefs, or daily life. I don't reject the Mythicist view because I can't afford to do otherwise. I reject it because I think it is very bad history. And I believe in doing good history. I think Jesus certainly existed, and instead of mounting massive and massively improbable arguments that he did not, Mythicists would be better off turning their time and energies to doing something more productive.



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