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Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists

JESUS DID
NOT EXIST



A DEBATE AMONG ATHEISTS

RAPHAEL LATASTER
W/ RICHARD CARRIER



Synopsis

For a lay audience, and with help from historian Richard Carrier, religious studies scholar Raphael Lataster considers the best arguments for and against the existence of the so-called Historical Jesus; the Jesus of atheists. Parts 1 & 2 analyse the cases made by Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey, who assert that Jesus definitely existed. Their arguments are found to be riddled with errors, and dependent on unreliable, and even non-existing, sources. Parts 3 & 4 discuss the more sceptical work of Lataster and Carrier, who conclude that Christianity probably began not with a humble carpenter, but with 'visions' of a heavenly Messiah. This exciting collaboration makes it very clear why the Historical Jesus might not have existed after all, and, to those willing to adopt a commonsensical probabilistic approach, Jesus Did Not Exist.

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Customer Reviews

To start, I want to be clear that I have granted an additional star to this review due to what I consider to be an egregiously dishonest 1-star review by living42day. This review is not a commentary on that review. My criticisms of living42day's review are posted in the comments section of that review. What follows is a 4-star review of Lataster's book: Jesus Did Not Exist: A debate among

atheists. In *Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate among Atheists*, scholar Raphael Lataster assesses the arguments for and against the proposition that Jesus did not exist. The title is somewhat misleading if read as a statement of Lataster's conclusions. In fact, the title should be thought of more as a theory to be considered and weighed. Lataster from the outset makes clear that his own position is Historical Jesus agnosticism, though he leans toward non-existence. Lataster describes this work as a "meta-review," meaning that he will assess the work of scholars such as Ehrman, Casey, Carrier, and also myself. Lataster's selection of authors is based on their scholarly credentials, including having published related peer reviewed articles and books. In the case of Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey, Lataster finds that they are the only scholars in recent times to directly address the question of Jesus historicity, with a positive conclusion (that Jesus certainly existed). He points out that most scholars who have published on the question of the Historical Jesus assume the existence of Jesus rather than engage in a full-fledged discussion of the source material that can establish Jesus in history.

This volume contributes to the burgeoning literature regarding the historical existence of Jesus. It is welcome to have more such books coming from academics, and Lataster has a good point to make when he says that a non-specialist point of view has its own advantages, particularly in being less bound to traditions and vested interest. Hopefully, with time, the discussion will make its way back to specialist circles, as something more than a subject to hack away at half-seriously (which is the attitude that Ehrman, Casey, McGrath, and others unfortunately have adopted, to a man). It is, after all, rather foundational to the study of the New Testament and Christian origins. The strengths of this book lie with the author's uncompromising analytic approach. Lataster is able to identify the weak points of other's arguments quickly. And, in this respect, the book excels. The author also prescinds from the excesses of acerbic polemic, which is welcome in and of itself. If someone were interested in a basic outline of what is deficient with the arguments for the historicity of Jesus as they have been presented by academics in the 21st century, one couldn't do much better than Lataster's book. In terms of the presentation of a hypothesis of the non-historicity of Jesus, the book is derivative. That is not, of course, an issue in and of itself, as novelty for its own sake is far too often pursued in this field, to disastrous results. So it is good that Lataster sticks to a defense of what seems to be the best non-historicity hypothesis available. However, in virtually no particular case does the book advance the state of discussion on any of the questions of interpretation of texts or questions of historical criticism generally.

This is the latest shot in the ongoing David (Mythicist) vs Goliath (Historicist) battle on whether or not there was an historical Jesus. So far the Historicist have the upper hand – “ mostly by ignoring and marginalizing the mythicists. For those who have actually examined the evidence that seems surprising and many wonder about the agendas of mainstream Biblical scholarship. The over the top absolute certainty of some historicists is an indicator. Unlike the mythicists, who carefully state their case in relative probabilities, historicist state that they are absolutely certain that there was an historical Jesus. The vast majority of even mainstream biblical scholars started their careers by being religiously motivated. It seems likely that the scholarship may be poisoned by religious influence and fear of academic career limitations or loss. Scholars who have build academic careers, and published extensively on a historical Jesus, will suffer major cognitive dissonance when confronted with evidence opposing their widely published beliefs, and they will react accordingly. Specifically, this book reviews some recent literature supporting the secular views that (1), the Bible Jesus was based on an actual person, or (2), Jesus was a mythical celestial being who was never on earth. As an Atheist, Lataster rejects the religious version of Jesus and therefore frames the two options as an argument between Atheists. Lataster first targets Barth Ehrman’s Did Jesus Exist • (DJE). Previously, others have also done a fine job of ripping into DJE, which is easily the worst book written by Ehrman. Lataster’s review of DJE may be aimed at fence sitting Atheist, but I found it to be both overly detailed and polemic.

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