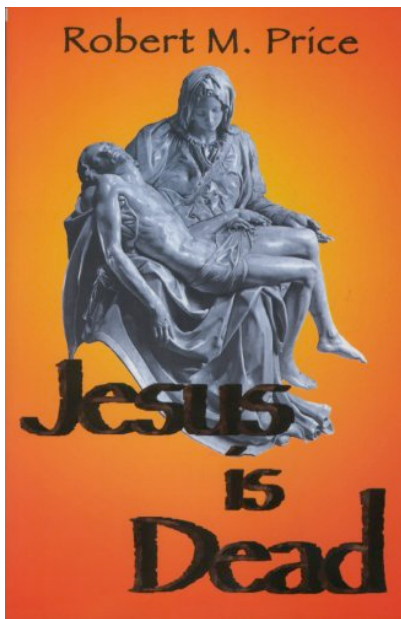


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**Price, Robert M.**

***Jesus Is Dead***

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The book *Jesus Is Dead* by Robert M. Price follows in the train of other similar books written by the same author, such as *Beyond Born Again*, *Deconstructing Jesus*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*. Price's writing is not the typical writing one would expect in New Testament studies or historical Jesus studies. Price, in fact, contends that Jesus of Nazareth never actually existed and that most if not all the narratives found in the New Testament Gospels are woven together from the fabric of Greco-Roman religious myths. The book is published by the American Atheist Press, which prints literature on atheism, atheists, and critiques of religion and religious history. Price wishes to structure his book around two main contentions: there is no good reason to think that Jesus rose from the dead; and there is no good reason to suppose that Jesus ever lived or died at all. Thus, the two main issues facing Price is the resurrection of Jesus and the existence of Jesus, both of which he seeks to refute. The arrangement of these two questions, however, seem to be out of place in that Price wishes first to argue that Jesus never rose from the dead and then argues that Jesus never existed at all. The second point does not follow from the first. Even if it was the case that Jesus did not rise from the dead, as Price contends, it still does not follow from this that Jesus did not exist. He may have existed within history irrespective of the resurrection. What Price should have done to make his case was to argue first that there was no historical Jesus to start with and that, therefore,

there could not have been a resurrection of Jesus, since he never existed at all. Price thus places the cart, as it were, in front of the horse.

Price begins first with his own personal testimony of how he was a born-again Christian and of his interests in apologetics and involvement with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Price later recounts his disillusionment with his faith when he came to the realization that the New Testament Gospels were a rewriting of Greco-Roman material, including stories of its heroes being transposed onto Jesus of Nazareth by the New Testament Gospel writers. This becomes the driving hermeneutic throughout Price's book as he assesses the New Testament Gospels, and it is evident that Price fully subscribes to the position of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. There is also an evident hyper-skepticism about anything the New Testament contains and extrabiblical materials such as Josephus. Price not only dismisses the references to Jesus in Josephus as spurious; he likewise dismisses the reference to John the Baptizer as equally spurious (88–89). While Price argues that he does not subscribe to “naturalistic presuppositions” because he asserts “I have none”(4), he goes on later to claim that naturalistic explanations are best explained by the “Principle of Analogy” that the “standard of current-day experience to evaluate claims from the past” is the only standard we have (275). Hence, Price commits himself to a philosophical worldview (although he denies having one) of naturalism. All researchers have a worldview to which they commit themselves. One of the annoying tendencies throughout Price's book is his ad hominem attacks on various writers he disagrees with. In chapters 10–17 (135–269) he assesses the writings of some scholars in the field of New Testament studies (Jonathan Z. Smith, N. T. Wright, William Lane Craig, Gary R. Habermas, and A. J. M. Wedderburn, to name a few). Price takes these authors to task for rejecting the position of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and for the convictions some of them hold in the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Instead of engaging them professionally, he dismisses them with mocking and insulting epithets, which is academically and professionally unacceptable. While scholars may differ on their views in the field of study, such differences should be discussed professionally and collegially as among friends instead of trying to demean and caricature others.

Price's attempt to dismiss the resurrection accounts as legend has not met with universal agreement among scholars. While Price sees the Gospel resurrection accounts as belonging to the genre of myth and legend, as Strauss and Bultmann did, many scholars have seemed to move in the other direction, seeing the Gospels in the genre of ancient biographies, as studies by Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biographies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) have shown. James D. G. Dunn has remarked that, “*Myth* is a term of at best doubtful relevance to the study of Jesus and the Gospels” (“*Myth*,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I Howard Marshall; Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992],

566). Price does not engage these scholars but merely dismisses their views out of hand. Price seems to be entangled in the web of what Samuel Sandmel long ago warned about, “parallelomania” (“Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 [1962]: 1–13). Any perceived parallel between a Gospel narrative and a Greco-Roman narrative must automatically imply dependence by the former on the latter. Price, for instance, mentions the story of Apollonius of Tyana and argues for the dependence by the Gospels on this source. The main difficulty with this approach is one of dating. Apollonius of Tyana, while being a first-century sage, is first described as a wonder worker two hundred years later by Philostratus of Athens. The time gap between the sayings and deeds of Jesus and the writing of at least the Synoptic Gospels are only decades in comparison. Price avoids the dating problem by positing instead very late dates for the Synoptic Gospels. He places Mark at 100 C.E., Matthew and Luke at 150 C.E., and argues that the reason why “[m]ost scholars seem to adopt the earliest possible dates [for the Synoptics]” is “for apologetical purposes” (26). This appears to be hastily dismissive and misleading on Price’s part. Price seems to suggest that if Gospel scholars give early dates to the Synoptics they immediately become suspect as covert Christian apologists in academia! The view of the pre-Markan passion narrative espoused by Gerhardsson and Pesch, which places the earlier source material for Mark before 40 C.E., is also dismissed out of hand with no serious engagement of the issues by Price. While Price claims that the Gospel narratives have their source in Greco-Roman literature and hence claims to know their origins, he later asserts quite the opposite in stressing that “we just do not know where the gospel materials came from!” (18).

In some of his quotations throughout his book Price has been somewhat clumsy to the point that he misquotes the passage directly out of its intended context. For instance, he quotes Mark 10:45 as, “the son of man came not to serve but to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (31). The text actually reads, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (NRSV). Price reverses the order of the intended meaning of Jesus’ words, namely, that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom. The only way Price would have misread this passage is that he may have recalled it by memory and forgotten the actual wording of the text.

In Price’s treatment of the Easter narratives, he dismisses them out of hand on the grounds that they were reconstructions of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus based on apotheosis stories found in Greco-Roman materials. The difficulty in this area is that most of the stories Price cites are based on the ascension of the spirit or soul to heaven to be with the gods. The Easter Gospel narratives, on the contrary, are very concrete in that they emphasize the somatic nature of the resurrection of the body of Jesus. Even though Mark does not contain the postmortem appearances that appear in Matthew, Luke, and John, the narrative of the discovery of the empty tomb and the predicted appearance of Jesus to Peter and the disciples (Mark 16:6–7) does imply Mark’s insistence on the

somatic nature of the resurrection of Jesus. Price tries to dismiss this as a later accretion to the postmortem events of Jesus' life and in its place attempts to show that most of the disciples would have believed that Jesus' spirit or soul merely ascended to heaven to be with God. This, however, does not satisfactorily explain the resurrection language used to explain Jesus' postmortem state particularly in the earliest Christian creed found in 1 Cor 15:3–4. Price anticipates this critique and argues that Paul did not author 1 Cor 15:3–11 (201–3)! However, since Price denies the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth, one wonders why he expends considerable space and energy in refuting the resurrection of a man who never existed.

The most surprising argument Price puts forward in this book is the notion that Jesus of Nazareth was actually John the Baptizer (75–90). He collapses these two persons into one so that John the Baptizer = Jesus of Nazareth. Price acknowledges that this notion is “admittedly far fetched” and that it is for him merely a “thought experiment” (75). He also acknowledges that many of his readers will not go as far as him in his theory, but then Price throws out a “tu quod” fallacy that “exegetical scholarship is engaged in the same type of endeavor” (89). While scholars do present peculiar theories, the majority of them also grant the historical existence of Jesus, a point Price vehemently denies. How this is the “same type of endeavor” is elusive. Price bases this theory on Mark 6:14–16 that upon hearing of Jesus' healings and miracles he was taken to possibly be John the Baptizer, whom Herod Antipas had killed, risen from the dead. The text shows, however, that this was only one of the speculations about Jesus; others thought him to be Elijah or one of the prophets of old (Mark 6:15). Scholarship has generally held that Jesus and John the Baptizer are two distinct figures, and Price offer no good reason to reject this. In attempting to argue his case, Price resorts to eisegesis in reading into various texts alleged identification clues between the person of John the Baptizer and Jesus. While Price rejects the historicity of Jesus, he strangely enough is willing to grant the historical existence of John the Baptizer (89). But on what grounds can Price dismiss the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth while granting the historicity of John the Baptizer while using the same source materials that mention the two: the Gospels and Acts? If John can be shown to be historical from the New Testament, why cannot the same criterion apply to Jesus? Price never answers this.

In chapters 8–9 (91–133) Price addresses the various Jesus theories that have become popular in the media and the public, among which are *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and the so-called *Talmud of Immanuel*. These chapters are not so much academic as they are meant to provide Price's personal views on them; admittedly, Price does add a twist of humor by introducing his own term to this type of fanciful writings, which he calls *Bullgeschichte* (123). These chapters appear more as book reviews.

In his final chapter, Price summarizes the theme of his book *Jesus Is Dead* by entitling it “Christ a Fiction” (271–79). He begins by first assailing the position of conservative Christian apologists who believe in the theological claims made about Jesus in the New Testament. Price compares these statements about Jesus to fictional characters such as Superboy, Peter Pan, and Hermes (271). Price concludes his arguments by stating that the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels is portrayed after the mythic hero archetype and hence Jesus is not to be taken as a historical figure. Price places Jesus’ existence as a possibility but not “particularly probable.” At another point Price asserts that if there was a historical Jesus behind the Gospels, “he can never be recovered” (276). This comes very close to what Rudolf Bultmann once asserted, that we can know almost nothing about the life and personality of Jesus (*Jesus and the Word* [trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Scribner, 1958], 8). Bultmann, however, never went to the extreme that Price has gone in completely eradicating Jesus from the pages of history.

The dying and rising gods such as Osiris, Tammuz, Baal, and others are taken by Price to be the thematic background to the Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Price also comments that that the dying and resurrection of these gods was “ritually celebrated each spring to herald the return of life to vegetation” (272–73). While most scholars seem to have moved beyond this theory, advocated primarily by the *religions-geschichtliche Schule*, and are increasingly abandoning it, Price never addresses why early Jewish Christians would have wished to link their belief in the resurrection of Jesus with the dying-and-rising-god motif, which was connected to the agricultural crop cycle. Here is a case of a slippery slope into Sandmel’s cautioned “parallelomania.” Similarity does not always mean sameness. In such a scenario, the god represented by the crop cycle “died” during the autumn season and was “raised” in the spring season. In the case of Jesus, he died and rose again according to Christian belief in the spring season during the Passover festival. If Christians had copied the dying-and-rising-god motif from their Greco-Roman neighbors, one wonders why they did not invent the death of Jesus as occurring during the autumn season and having him later rise in the spring. Another argument Price advocates that Jesus did not exist is that Paul never mentions Jesus performing healings or being a teacher. This seems extremely weak in light of the fact that it is almost virtually acknowledged by the majority of scholars that Jesus of Nazareth did indeed conduct a ministry of exorcisms and healings as signs that the kingdom of God that he proclaimed was breaking into the human sphere. Craig A. Evans has covered this area in some detail in *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Paul does not mention John the Baptizer in his letters, but this need not imply that John did not exist. Paul also does not use the favored term “son of man” used by Jesus in the Gospels to refer to the risen Christ in any of his letters, but that Jesus used such a phrase seems to be taken

as sound by scholars, notwithstanding the debate over its precise meaning. Paul wrote letters to his churches, not Gospel accounts, and this could explain why we do not have a detailed sketch of the life and ministry of Jesus. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the two principal twin events that he focuses on as integral to salvation. Ignorance of the historical Jesus is too quickly attributed to Paul. Paul may have known more than is often assumed. Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper, for instance, in 1 Cor 11:17–34 would never have been written were it not for the abuses of the Corinthian church regarding that meal to start with, and this explains why the subject of the Lord's Supper is addressed by Paul only in 1 Corinthians.

Another problem with this book is that Price does not seriously engage the various historians (Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Josephus) who mention Jesus as a historical figure. Price echoes Albert Schweitzer that previous scholars of the historical Jesus quest merely drew self-portraits of themselves (276). But is it possible that Price has done the same thing in reducing his Jesus to a fiction? Price interprets the Gospels against the backdrop of Greco-Roman myths and comes to the conclusion that Jesus is equally fictitious and a myth.

The difficulty in following Price's book is that, while he provides the chapters in his contents page, he does not do so in the headings that begin the chapter, which makes it somewhat difficult to follow the structure of the book. Another notable feature is the absence of footnotes. Price cites various authors and sources without providing documentation for them. The material at times is difficult to follow, as Price introduces many of his personal thoughts and opinions with relentless sarcasm. The book also does not contain a bibliography or an index at the end, which makes it difficult to locate and reference materials within the text. No endorsements appear at the back of the book by any scholar in the field of New Testament studies. All this leads one to view this book as not intended for scholarly discourse or engagement but as written to a general public audience. It appears to be more of a bitter rant against conservative Christianity than scholarly interaction. The hyper-skepticism in Price's book comes to the surface when he states that "The New Testament texts are like a constantly shifting kaleidoscope, and the application of our methods is the twisting of the tube.... But the next twist will yield something else, and we may not judge it more 'true' or 'accurate' than the one before. None can carry any particular conviction" (90). Not only does this argumentation yield uncertainty; it is self-refuting. If we cannot know that the texts we are reading have value, whether they are true or accurate, and no one can carry any particular conviction, what, then, is the purpose of academia? If there is no conviction, then what was the purpose in writing this book? Every author writes what he or she is convicted to write based on the available evidence in the texts. While this book may be attractive to the reading populace at large, it has little to commit itself to the scholarly field of New Testament studies. The

writing is not a serious discussion of the issues among one's scholarly peers but rather comes across as an extremely bitter rant against conservative Christianity and those who subscribe to it. There is a lot of heat in this book, but at the end there is no light.