

## Equal Time for Freethought

Interview with Robert M. Price by Neil J. Murphy, December 25, 2005

Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

**Neil J. Murphy:** Today we'll be speaking with acclaimed Biblical scholar Dr. Robert Price on the issue of the historical evidence for Jesus Christ. Did Jesus Christ exist as a first century historical person? Is there any evidence to show that he *did* exist? And if he did *not* exist, what are the implications for Christians who actually believe that Christmas is based on the historical evidence of Jesus Christ? We'll discuss this and more with Dr. Robert Price, of the Center for Biblical Criticism.

Dr. Robert Price, welcome to Equal Time for Freethought!

**Robert M. Price:** Well, thanks for having me on! It's a great pleasure!

**Neil J. Murphy:** Thanks for coming on.

Dr. Price, let's set up the purpose and the arguments for the lack of historical evidence for Jesus Christ. What are the basic facts that would lead to that conclusion?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, one of them is: historically, critics have noted that Jesus does not appear to have made much of an impact on non-Christian writers of the day, which is odd if he were the miracle-working superman depicted in the Gospels. And the only real reference that takes that into account at all is in Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote for the Romans after surrendering to them at the end of the Jewish War in 73 A.D. or C.E. And there, the problem is that Christians have interpolated his writings, so we don't know if he mentioned Jesus at all. If he did, some Christian scribes couldn't leave well enough alone and padded it. But even if he *did* write it, the only non-Christian references to Jesus in the first couple of centuries merely reflect Christian preaching about Jesus.

**Neil J. Murphy:** By interpolation, you mean they literally added on different passages later in time from when it supposedly came from?

**Robert M. Price:** Yeah, because there was no idea of copyright at the time. We only have Christian-preserved copies, and they said, "Well, here's an otherwise comprehensive history of Biblical times, but oddly, Jesus isn't dealt with satisfactorily, so let's just correct that. I don't think they were trying to scam anybody — I mean they needn't have been; maybe they were — but as a result, we have a shorter Arabic version; a Greek version that is just obviously Christian, that Josephus couldn't have written; and a much longer Slavonic version, which goes into even more detail about Jesus and John the Baptist and so forth. We don't know what he wrote, if anything; but the earliest Christian to mention it, Origen in the late second century, he had read copies of Josephus centuries earlier than ours, and he says one thing's for sure: Josephus didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah; whereas our copies have him say exactly that! So that's not of any help.

But the thing is, since the dawn of Biblical criticism, you have most critics willing to say, "Even if there was a historical Jesus, he's been blown up into mythic proportions, with these miracles like turning water into wine." And so, if you say there could have been a non-miraculous Jesus, a Jesus like Socrates or something, well then it's no big surprise he wouldn't have been mentioned. So I don't think that is all *that* important. Another pillar to the

argument is that the earliest New Testament writings are by Paul, and he does not mention Jesus as a teacher, a miracle worker, or much of a historical figure. Rather, the son of God sent from heaven to Earth to die on the Cross, rise from the dead, and take a seat at the right hand of God.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Right. And all of this seems to assume that Jesus Christ in the Bible represents a kind of history textbook of the first century, when in reality, as you seem to be arguing, nothing could be further from the truth. That it's not based on a kind of Thucydides history, but is based on the kind of interpolations that try to conform Jesus to actually being historically accurate.

**Robert M. Price:** And yet part of the New Testament does not even do *that*. Most of the Epistles, as Earl Doherty points out in his writings, deal with simply a kind of a savior who gave his life at the persecution of the Archons, the rulers of this age, which usually meant evil angels. And it's not clear whether, in the Epistles, they're even thinking about a Jesus who was put to death by earthly governmental authorities. It sounds much more mythical. And so, at the very least, you can say the Epistles attributed to Paul imagine more of a spiritual/mythical Christ, and the Gospels seem to represent a later attempt to ground this figure in history. Much as Herodotus tried to speculate, "Gee, when would Hercules have lived?"

**Neil J. Murphy:** As if Hercules were actually a person that was from Zeus or somehow existed as a historical person.

**Robert M. Price:** Yeah, that was a common view called "euhemerism" in the ancient world. Where they figured, "All of these mythical gods and heroes, I bet you they did exist, but they were great warriors or doctors or whatever." And I kinda think that's what's happened with early Christianity. They eventually tried to place Jesus in history, assuming that he was historical, but one big reason we think he was not is that virtually every story in all four Gospels, and also in the book of Acts, can be plausibly explained as Christian rewrites of stories from the Old Testament, the Iliad and the Odyssey, Josephus's history, and Euripides. Almost every one!

**Neil J. Murphy:** Yeah, I wanted to talk about that, because if the Gospels are not historically accurate accounts, where do the Gospel stories come from, besides the sources you mentioned? Is there one source where this comes from?

**Robert M. Price:** I think mainly the Bible and Homer; though there is a bit of Josephus and Euripides in there, Euripides especially in the Book of Acts. But by far most of it, as Randall Helms and John Dominic Crossan and others have shown, is taken from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, or the Jewish Scriptures, called the Septuagint. You can find word-for-word correspondences in important lines and phrases; thematic echoes to the point where it just seems like there's virtually no Gospel story that doesn't appear to be a rewrite of a Moses, or an Elijah, or a David story. I did a long article ["New Testament Narrative as Old Testament Midrash"] in an encyclopedia of Jewish Bible interpretation that Jacob Neusner edited called [Midrash](#), that just came out from Brill publishers, and I go on for page after page with every Gospel story, showing which Old Testament or Homeric story it

seems to have been based on. And the odd thing is, that there could have been a Jesus, but we'll never know, because if so, he has left no vestige of secular, non-religious, plain biography.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Right. It seems like there's the American Jesus and the Jesus of the Bible. This radical difference based on a lot of cultural characteristics that the society brings to itself. Which actually leads me to my next question: If you look at the Jesus Seminar — now, you were a part of the Jesus Seminar, is that correct?

**Robert M. Price:** Yes.

**Neil J. Murphy:** The Jesus seminar seemed to say that the majority of what Jesus said and did, he really didn't say or do. So I'm curious to know, then, what can we actually attribute to "Jesus", if anything, and what's the difference between the *real* Jesus, and, I guess, the fabricated one?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, there's nothing that we know of that is not a fabricated one. Theoretically, there may have been a Jesus, like presumably there was a Socrates, but we can't even be sure of that because everybody that gives us their picture of him has given us a kind of a Christology. That is, a kind of a stained-glass, official theological version of Jesus. There's no disinterested transcripts. The Q document, that along with Mark, was the basis for both Matthew and Luke, seems to me ultimately to have been a collection of Cynic and Stoic sayings that people from those two philosophical schools brought over into Christianity when some of them converted. Probably weren't even attributed to Jesus originally and, any way you look at it, virtually everything in the Gospels, the teachings, can be paralleled among the Cynics and the Stoics, the rabbis, and various others. There's almost nothing that is unique. And the parallels are often word-for-word. So Jesus could have been one more voice in the chorus, giving conventional wisdom from the first century, but it's just that there doesn't appear to be any bedrock for this discernible. He's much like Moses or the Buddha or Lao Tzu. It's really open to question whether these people are simply literary figureheads as well.

**Neil J. Murphy:** I'm curious. Because it seems to follow from what you're saying that if there's no bedrock of, let's say Jesus principles, then why would people believe in Christianity if their very founder, Jesus Christ, never existed?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, it depends. I think this is the reason: I just was out in San Diego debating an evangelical campus minister, and he and his flock feel very threatened by the notion that there wasn't a Jesus, because they're fundamentalists, and to them it all has to be literal. But there are people who take a Joseph Campbell sort of approach, and will say that these are myths; but myths come from the collective unconscious, à la Jung, and have great psychological power. And if one is not just interested in getting a ticket to Heaven and having infallible certainty that there's a God who loves you. There can be a kind of power in myth and ritual, much like we find in poetry. And I think many Christians are content with that. Did Jesus exist? That doesn't matter that much.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Yeah, Jesus exists, and therefore Jesus exists, and that's it. Right?

**Robert M. Price:** For many people. But there are Buddhists that say — I remember on *The Long Search*, Ronald Eyre asked a Zen abbot "Does the Buddha exist or not?" and the abbot said, "For those who need him to exist, he exists; but for those who don't, he doesn't"; of course, the abbot was one of the latter. And there have been non-literalist Christians and Buddhists and so forth; there's a big divide within each religion, whether you need it to be literally true or not.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Does that mean that the very holiday that represents Christ, Christmas, is based on the same interpolations as the very evidence for Jesus himself?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, that's an interesting and distinctive case. Like somebody at Wal-Mart won't let their people say "merry Christmas" is "happy holidays"; some guy called up Wal-Mart and said "Why don't you have 'merry Christmas'?" And they got some kind of a nut who represented them and said, "Well, that's because Christmas is a pagan invention anyway, and Jesus wasn't born on the 25th, and it's all based on Baal worship and Mithra"; well the guy's right! Only he was a fundamentalist who didn't want Christmas! Because yeah, Christmas is the rechristening of the Mithraic Roman holiday Brumalia, which was in its day the marker of the winter solstice and the days beginning to get longer; hence the rebirth day of the sun god. And when the Christians got official power in the Roman Empire, they couldn't stop people from going to their Brumalia parties and stuff, so they said, "Well, we don't know when Jesus was born; let's pick this day to celebrate it." In fact, I don't know that Christianity ever claimed it was actually the day he was born; it's just that not knowing it, you might as well pick one, and they picked one that was already current.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Pick a day out of the hat and see if it sticks, right?

**Robert M. Price:** Yeah. Since it was already a savior's birthday, they just said, "OK, what the heck, let's appropriate it."

**Neil J. Murphy:** I'd like to move from a historical analysis to almost a sociological one. Because one of the things that I find very interesting is, if Christians believe in this holiday of Christmas, in other words December 25th, Jesus is born and all good things come forth; if it has been shown that the origins of the Christian religion and Christmas are not based on this historical literalism you were mentioning earlier; that seems to have radical consequences. Would you agree with that?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, yes, but in another sense, I think the people that still believe tenaciously that it's historical are acting as if it were myth anyway. They seem to know that deep down. This time of year they'll sing about Christ coming, the desire of the ages has come, and now darkness and sin are over with. Well they know that's not true, just looking at the news every night! But I guess what they're doing is to continue to chant and sing the poetry as a reminder that, well, wouldn't it be nice if someday it were so. And that's kind of the function of myth. Or look at Easter, the way they deal with that. Bunnies and eggs and fertility. They know this is about the renewal of vegetation, even though they *think* it's about a guy dying on the Cross to save you from your sins. It's a kind of a strange split consciousness.

**Neil J. Murphy:** And certainly, that was not the only story of a messiah rising from the dead. I remember there were the stories that Augustus Caesar was born of a virgin and resurrected into the heavens, so that actually leads to my question: was that the major philosophical concept of this period, the notion of a son god, S-O-N god, rising into Heaven, as this renewal myth takes form?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, sometimes they had, like you mentioned, Caesars and other philosophers and so forth; historical figures whom they honored by saying they had been taken up among the gods. In fact, that was done so often that there was a satire written in the ancient world called *The Pumpkinification of Claudius*. It was a play on "deification" in Greek. And the gods say, "What, *another* one of those emperors is coming up here? So that was very common. Or an earlier thing that was still going on in the Roman Empire was these ancient fertility gods, like Attis, Baal, Osiris, Adonis dying and rising from the dead in the spring because of vegetation. Those were widely observed. They began in the Middle East but swept the Roman Empire in pre-Christian and Christian times. You might go to an Easter service, and then you might go down the street to a service about the resurrection of Osiris. Plenty of people did two or three at the same time. It's very common in ancient religion in the Roman Empire.

**Neil J. Murphy:** I wonder, just from your perspective as a Biblical scholar: what is it about the Christ story that has survived 2000 years? It almost seems, in the immortal words of Richard Dawkins, to be a kind of cultural meme that has survived countless stages of evolution. What is it about the story that not only people believe in so passionately and perhaps fundamentalistically, if that's even a word, but yet continues to exist in spite of all the evidence you present?

**Robert M. Price:** Well, it's a great, heroic tale, and a tragedy full of pathos, which is why you have the mythic hero archetype all over the world. Similar stories told of Hercules, Oedipus, Apollonius of Tyana, the Buddha, Romulus and so on. So it's a heroic story and has a lot of values people appreciate. Like nobody doesn't like it when Jesus is exposing the hypocrites and accusing the corrupt authorities.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Overturning the money changers, for instance.

**Robert M. Price:** Yeah, everybody says "Go get 'em!" That's great! And when he's betrayed, and so forth, you can't help but feel, that like Lincoln's assassination and so on, there are a lot of emotional heights and depths and it's very entertaining and very moving. And the idea of the reincarnation, that God somehow took on our lot. In kabbalistic, Hasidic Judaism there's a similar thing, that the glory of God is held captive in the fallen world; and by actions of tikkun, piety, we can release God from his captivity and he will release us. Very similar thing. It really speaks to the depths of suffering humanity. None of which means any of it is literally true, the Christian or the kabbalistic version, but that's the way of powerful literature and poetry.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Who is responsible, then, for the organized institutionalism of Christianity? Because you've often heard the argument that Christ, or the Christ story, was

somehow, for lack of a better word, bastardized, and this evil version or spawn of Christianity is not the origins of what true Christianity's about. How do you view that argument? First off, where does the institutionalized religiosity come from, and second, do you view what's happening today with the rise of fundamentalism as coming from the actual message, or is it a deformity and distortion? A lot in that question, I know.

**Robert M. Price:** Well, it recedes off into the mists of antiquity. For instance, if Renan was right and Christianity began as a branch of Essenism — which is a good theory, that may well be true — you have a kind of a one movement splitting from another, and when this happens, like the Methodists splitting from the Anglicans who split from the Catholics etc., you have a continuing pattern of a socially and religiously radical group pulling up stakes and challenging society with daring ideas. But after a generation or two, they become more integrated with society again, and become more institutionalized. So that must have happened with Christianity somewhere along the line. But did it begin de novo with a founder like Jesus, or was it simply a sectarian reaction, like the Methodists were against the Anglicans, or the Anabaptists against the Lutherans? It's really hard to know which first egg or chicken to pick.

And then again, if there was a single founder, a radical leader, was it Jesus? I mean, if he didn't exist, I guess not, so who would it have been? Who started Pauline Christianity? We don't know much about Paul, because his letters are all disputed. We don't know if he wrote part or all of them. Parts of his letters have been added by institutionalizing forces at work in the emerging Catholic Church, but who wrote the rest of it? Might have been Marcion of Pontus, who was a radical theologian in the early second century that believed the father of Jesus Christ was not the god of Judaism and split off a whole new religion, but it got absorbed back into the parent body. So it's hard to know who really started it.

And then again, similarly, to say, "Well, what we know of as Christianity is a distortion", that implies we know what the pristine original was, and in almost all of these things, whatever religion you're looking at, it's almost impossible to tell. Like, what is the real Buddhism? Is Mahayana Buddhism a distortion of it? It's much more complex and philosophical. Or is the picture of the Buddha as a reforming prophet the product of a reductionistic kind of Buddhism? It's just tough to tell without a time machine.

**Neil J. Murphy:** One of the things I find interesting about Jesus, especially in American political culture, is that Jesus seems to be a really good political football for conservatives and liberals. You have the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Fallwells claiming that Jesus is this kind of muscular Rambo and the liberal groups like Jim Wallis think of Jesus as this kind of servant of the poor. From your understanding of the historical evidence of Jesus and perhaps the origins of the story, do you think Jesus, if it were to be understood as a kind of political figure, is more liberal or conservative?

**Robert M. Price:** Again, it's hard to say, because all we can do is compare the Jesus figures that have already become entrenched by the time of the New Testament. Because we have Jesus, for instance, having wealthy friends — Nicodemus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha, Bethany — but he also is a friend of the poor. And yet, when he says you should give your possessions away, sell them and give the money to the poor, does he mean land redistribution, or does he mean "Give it to me and my followers"? As when medieval monks and Buddhist monks say that, they mean "We're the poor, give it to a holy man and you will get a holy man's reward." So it's really tough to say. I think Schweitzer was probably right.

At least the most compelling picture of Jesus in the Gospels is a prophet who believed the end of the age was at hand. Kind of a fanatical, though benign, version of Jesus who said that there's time for nothing but individual repentance and piety, because the Judgment is at hand. And this kind of Jesus is almost politically irrelevant, and that creates a vacuum. We cannot be without political concerns, so if Jesus is important, we have to make him address the issues, and he becomes a ventriloquist dummy. So I don't know if there really is a more recognizably left or right Jesus.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Yeah, because the obvious implication, of course, is that you often hear people on both sides, as I said, claiming Jesus to be something, whether left, right or center; and yet it seems like you're saying there's no way to possibly know that, and so whoever kinda wants to hijack Jesus is doing it without actually knowing what Jesus said or did.

**Robert M. Price:** Yeah, they think they do, but that is exactly what I think is happening. I saw a great cartoon where Jesus is on the crest of the hill giving the Sermon on the Mount, when you enter into your prayer closet and don't let anybody know it, and Gingrich is coming up behind him with a picket sign saying "another secular liberal, we need prayer in schools". But it's just impossible because Jesus has already become a figurehead and a ventriloquist dummy in the Gospels. We don't have any other Jesus. There may have been a prior one. But who knows? I mean, we can't even tell what a given Senator today thinks, partly because they talk out of both sides of their mouth. To hear their fans, one's "Oh, Hillary Clinton is this way." "Oh no she's not." I don't even know what contemporary figures are saying!

**Neil J. Murphy:** Right. Dr. Price, I'd like to wrap this up with one concluding question that brings this all together. With your work in the Jesus Seminar, your writings on the historical Jesus or lack thereof, what do you hope to achieve with your work, as a contribution to religious studies and overall secular understanding?

**Robert M. Price:** Well actually, your question is the answer. I would just like to play the Socratic role of trying to throw more counters into the game. I'd like to advance the discussion and bring more attention to a view, in this case the Jesus-didn't-exist theory, than it usually gets. It's not taken very seriously anymore. Well, it is a little bit more than it was, but decades ago it was much more debated and should be again. So I'm just sorta trying to influence the discussion so that all positions are on the table.

**Neil J. Murphy:** Well this has been a wonderful discussion of some really complex issues, and I appreciate you coming on Equal Time for Freethought and talking about these issues in a very concise and informative way, and I look forward to having you on again.

**Robert M. Price:** Sure hope so! Thank you very much!

**Neil J. Murphy:** Thank you very much.