

The Fourth Quest: A Critical Analysis of the Recent Literature on Jesus' (a)Historicity

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Abstract

There has been some recent scholarly discussion on the reasonableness of questioning Jesus' historicity. While generally avoiding the question, this analysis seeks to compare the methods of those who assert Jesus' historical existence (historicists), and those who are less certain (mythicists or agnostics). Examples were taken from four recent authors on the topic. It was found that the recent defences of historicity by Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey lack lucid and competent methodologies, rely on highly questionable documents, and further make use of sources that no longer exist, if they ever did. They also seemed polemical, were occasionally vulgar, and often resorted to cavilling, focussing on tangential arguments of the more amateurish mythicists. My own case for agnosticism is largely grounded in the skepticism over the relevant sources necessitated by sound historical approaches, and has been well received by critical scholars. Richard Carrier's case for outright mythicism lays out a clear and transparent historical method, incorporating much relevant background knowledge that many mainstream scholars would be largely ignorant of. Despite arguing for the more controversial hypotheses, these more sceptical scholars are employing superior methods.

Introduction

In the wake of the Enlightenment,¹ Biblical scholars of the First Quest (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) for the historical Jesus began to apply

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¹ Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 9.

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critical historical methods to the Biblical texts, so that the true Jesus of history (as opposed to the Christ of Faith) could be discovered. A 'no quest' period supposedly followed, partly due to Albert Schweitzer's scathing critique of scholars' subjective speculations, and Martin Kähler's revelation that – as the sources are the same – it is impossible to separate the Historical Jesus from the Christ of Faith.² Ernst Käsemann effectively kick-started the Second Quest (mid-twentieth century) by convincing his fellow scholars that the Gospels could indeed be preserving authentic historical traditions.³ The so-called, and current, Third Quest (emerging around the latter part of the twentieth century), incorporates novel approaches and emphasises Jesus' Jewishness.⁴

There is a clear problem in the attempt to discover what it is that Jesus really said and did: it assumes that Jesus existed. Ever since the First Quest, Biblical scholars have largely accepted that the Christ of Faith is a mythological character and that the Gospels are generally unreliable. Nevertheless, since the First Quest, it was simply assumed that there was a Historical Jesus buried underneath the legendary embellishments. It is interesting to wonder why it is that the admittedly poor sources somehow, almost miraculously, become unquestionable when it is Jesus' benign and very human existence that is queried. While questioning Jesus' historical existence has become a semi-popular pastime, particularly with the rise of the Internet, a thorough examination of this topic by the Academy has been wanting. However, since 2012, a number of scholarly peer-reviewed books and articles have emerged, both defending Jesus' historicity, and arguing for Jesus agnosticism or Jesus mythicism (the view that Jesus did not exist as a historical person).

Four scholars in particular have been at the forefront of this discourse. In early 2012, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman published *Did Jesus Exist?* to address the supposedly false claims of the typically-amateurish mythicists, and to put forth his own comprehensive case for

² Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, pp. 10-11.

³ Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 11.

⁴ It is noteworthy that much of the earlier historical Jesus research was undertaken in Germany during a time of rabid anti-Semitism. See Fernando Bermejo Rubio, 'The Fiction of the 'Three Quests': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2009), p. 216.

Jesus' historicity.⁵ Only weeks later, independent historian Richard Carrier declared his intent to thoroughly examine the question of Jesus' historicity, and explained his sound, probabilistic method in *Proving History*.⁶ Later that year, inspired by the work of both scholars, and encouraged by some sceptical musings of my Religious Studies colleagues, I argued that Jesus' historical existence is uncertain,⁷ and further published on the topic (via both traditional scholarly and popular channels) throughout 2013 and 2014.⁸ In early 2014, New Testament scholar Maurice Casey also attempted to defend Jesus' historicity and heavily criticised certain mythicists in *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?*⁹ Mere months later, Richard Carrier followed up the earlier discussion of his method with the comprehensive *On the Historicity of Jesus*.¹⁰

There are clear implications of this work regarding the beliefs of numerous Christian and Muslim religious adherents. However, there are also serious implications for critical scholarship. If Jesus' historical existence can be reasonably questioned, then the methods employed by the more mainstream and reputable historicists are in need of reviewing.

⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

⁶ Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

⁷ Raphael Lataster, 'Jesus Scepticism: An Examination of the Arguments for Various "Jesus as a Myth" Theories' (M.A. diss., University of Sydney, 2013).

⁸ Raphael Lataster, 'Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the 'Criteria of Authenticity' and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism', *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2013), pp. 271-293; Raphael Lataster, *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013). Though a popular and self-published book, the latter is effectively peer-reviewed and has been praised by academic reviewers, for its content, and for its delivery. See Christopher Hartney, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), pp. 171-174; Carole M. Cusack, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), pp. 144-146.

⁹ Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁰ Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason For Doubt* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014).

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Biblical scholar Paul N. Anderson describes a Fourth Quest currently being undertaken, which accords more significance to the oft-dismissed Gospel of John.¹¹ In light of the far more crucial issue of Jesus existence, which also raises questions as to the insular nature of even critical and secular Biblical Scholarship, I refer to this contemporary and ‘actual’ search for the Historical Jesus as the ‘Fourth Quest’. What follows are brief analyses of the cases made and the methods used by the aforementioned scholars.

The Case for Jesus’ Historicity: Bart Ehrman¹²

The first of the recent books arguing for Jesus’ historicity, Ehrman’s *Did Jesus Exist?* acknowledges that the Christ of Faith is a myth, and seeks to demonstrate the reality of the Historical Jesus.¹³ Parts II (‘The Mythicists’ Claims’) and III (‘Who Was the Historical Jesus?’) of the book can be overlooked as they proceed from the assumption of Jesus’ historicity. It is in Part I, ‘Evidence for the Historical Jesus’, where Ehrman’s positive case for Jesus’ historicity is presented. Over five chapters, Ehrman acknowledges that the available sources are problematic, somehow finds them useful regarding the Historical Jesus, and appeals to hypothetical sources supposedly pre-dating the Gospels – which supposedly provide certainty over Jesus’ historical existence – and the Pauline Epistles.

Ehrman explains that the historian’s task is to establish “what probably happened in the past”, and admits that “we cannot prove a single thing historically”.¹⁴ He then clarifies that historians would prefer numerous, contemporary, detailed, and somewhat disinterested sources, which corroborate others’ accounts without collaboration having taking place.¹⁵ This is effectively a description of precisely what is lacking in the case for Jesus. In what could be mistaken as a case for Jesus agnosticism, Ehrman then admits that there is no physical evidence for Jesus, there are no mentions of him by first-century Greek or Roman authors, and agrees

¹¹ Paul N. Anderson, ‘A Fourth Quest for Jesus... So What, and How So?’, *The Bible and Interpretation*, at <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/fourth357921.shtml>. Accessed 20/06/2014.

¹² Much of this critique derives from my Master’s thesis, which incorporated a quasi-review of Ehrman’s work.

¹³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 11-13.

¹⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 42.

that no contemporary accounts are available.¹⁶ Focussing on the non-Christian sources that are available, Ehrman generally dismisses the testimonies of Pliny the Younger, Suetonius and Tacitus.¹⁷ Likewise dismissing the disputed Talmudic references to Jesus,¹⁸ Ehrman somewhat surprisingly finds the Josephean references to Jesus inconclusive, as they would be derivative if genuine (citing arguments that suggest they had in fact been forged).¹⁹ Ehrman then moves to critique the Christian sources.

Assuring readers that “the Gospels, their sources, and the oral traditions that lie behind them combine to make a convincing case that Jesus really existed”, he initially concedes that the Gospels “are filled with nonhistorical material” and numerous “contradictions”.²⁰ Ehrman further admits that the authors are biased, which ought to have him questioning their intentions with more scrutiny, particularly given their unknown identities and capabilities.²¹ One reason he finds the Gospels so reliable relates to the credibility afforded by “multiple sources that corroborate one another’s stories without having collaborated”. On the very same page, Ehrman acknowledges that Mark is the earliest Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke relied on it.²² He resolves this seeming contradiction by referring to the unique material found in each of the latter Gospels, overlooking the possibility that each author simply added original and nonhistorical information to suit their own ends (we already agree that they were biased), and then delights in the “wealth” of “independent accounts”.²³ Still, the reliability of these questionable sources needs to be established, and that is where Ehrman’s creativity shines.

Ehrman is confident of the veracity of the Gospels because of the numerous written sources behind them, such as Q, M, and L.²⁴ Not only is the existence of such hypothetical (i.e. currently not – if ever – existing) sources disputed, but Ehrman does not give reasons for why these sources should be trusted. Nothing is said of their authors, authorial intent,

¹⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 42-46.

¹⁷ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 51-56.

¹⁸ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 66-68.

¹⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 57-66.

²⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 70-71.

²¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 73.

²² Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 75.

²³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 75-78.

²⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 78-83.

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composition dates, genre or authenticity. These alleged sources could be works of fiction (midrashic parables perhaps). Religions stemming from obvious fictions are not unheard of.²⁵ None of this seems to interest this Biblical historian, perhaps due to the sheer number of non-existent sources. After all, “No one knows how many there actually were”.²⁶ Ehrman then supposes that these innumerable hypothetical written sources must also stem from yet earlier sources: oral traditions.²⁷ Interestingly, in arguing for the existence of these oral traditions, he assumes basic facts about Jesus’ life (such as the approximate time of his ministry and death), which are only known via the Gospels, which apparently stem from these oral traditions; a clear instance of circular reasoning.²⁸

Ehrman attempts to allay the inevitable critical concerns over his reliance on hypothetical sources by simply asserting: “This is not pure speculation”.²⁹ He also argues that some of the oral traditions had Aramaic origins.³⁰ It is unclear how this is supposed to aid Ehrman’s case, unless he expects that competent historians will uncritically accept that Jesus and his earliest followers were the only Aramaic-speakers of the time.³¹ Towards the end of his ‘analysis’ of the Gospels, Ehrman makes the relatively reserved claim that some of these alleged oral traditions about Jesus stemmed “from within a few years of the traditional date of his death”.³² Surely he could just as easily have argued that some of these sources originated during Jesus’ life (hence scholars now do have access to contemporary sources), and even from the mouth of Jesus himself. It is understandable why he avoids doing so; such claims would probably make it even more obvious that Ehrman is potentially being overly creative.

²⁵ Contemporary examples include Discordianism and the Church of All Worlds. See Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

²⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 83.

²⁷ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 83-86.

²⁸ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 85.

²⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 86. Interestingly, the last scholarly reference of the chapter was made on p. 83. I see nothing but “pure speculation”.

³⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 87-92.

³¹ Note that all these temporal matters are questionable, especially as these oral traditions cannot now be analysed. It is also worth noting that this absurd scenario could not really aid the case, as Jesus’ existence is one of the issues being questioned; circular reasoning, again.

³² Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 91.

Ehrman concludes his crucial discussion of the Gospels by claiming that “there is yet more evidence”, but that the hypothetical sources behind the Gospels “makes it almost certain that whatever one wants to say about Jesus, at the very least one must say that he existed”.³³ Ehrman fails to reference a single credible historian that endorses this fondness for imagining the desired sources into existence, and his belief that they somehow give credibility to the problematic sources that are extant. As would be expected, not a single credible historian ‘outside’ of Biblical scholarship relies so uncritically on hypothetical sources. If all problematic historical sources were deemed reliable by appealing to hypothetical foundational ones, which could be used to justify any position, the entire discipline of History would lose all credibility.

Ehrman then analyses the Christian-sourced evidence for Jesus apart from the Gospels. The (relatively late) writings of Papias, Ignatius and Clement are somehow judged as useful by Ehrman, though they truly only demonstrate that later Christians believed in Jesus, which is not at all unexpected; nothing convincing is offered regarding these documents’ veridicality.³⁴ He handles Acts much like he handled the Gospels: there are hypothetical sources behind them, which support Jesus’ historicity.³⁵ Ehrman then briefly discusses the non-Pauline Epistles, with no argument as to their reliability, and while being oblivious to the fact that most of the scant passages he cites that seemingly support Jesus’ historicity are ambiguous, and apply just as well (or better) to the theory of minimal mythicism.³⁶ The same applies to his treatment of the Pauline Epistles (which he admits include the earliest extant Christian sources), with the notable addition that he fails to overcome the not insignificant fact that when Paul mentions his sources, it is always direct or indirect (via Scripture) revelation from “the Lord”.³⁷

Ehrman asserts that Paul sometimes alludes to the teachings of Jesus, even when the latter is not referenced.³⁸ This is surprisingly uncritical, as

³³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 93.

³⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 98-105.

³⁵ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 106-113.

³⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 113-117. The theory of minimal mythicism is the theory favoured by Richard Carrier.

³⁷ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 117-132.

³⁸ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 125-129. He continues this fallacious reasoning throughout his section on Paul’s Epistles.

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the Gospels that ascribe such teachings to Jesus are the *later* documents. Scholars cannot ignore the possibility that the Gospels are falsely attributing Paul's teachings to a historicised Jesus and are merely claiming that this all happened decades before Paul put pen to paper. Before moving on to Ehrman's final arguments for Jesus' historicity, a brief note on the inconsistency of his imagined sources approach is necessary. Not only is Ehrman's hypothesising of sources he would *like* to have access to woefully inadequate historical methodology, but he shows his inconsistency and privileging of the Gospels by later deriding such an approach if applied to other sources, such as the Epistles:

Paul almost certainly did not write the letter to the Colossians. It is one of the forgeries in Paul's name, written after his death, as critical scholars have recognized for a very long time. And to argue that the passage derives from a pre-Pauline tradition is problematic. Colossians is *post*-Pauline, so on what grounds can we say that a passage in it is *pre*-Pauline?³⁹

What Ehrman surprisingly says of Colossians can also be said of the Gospels: "The Gospels are *post*-Pauline, so on what grounds can it be said that passages in them are *pre*-Pauline?" If Ehrman finds it problematic to assume that a later document contains earlier information, it is remarkable that he thinks that a similar approach to the Gospels is perfectly acceptable, and even crucial to his case for Jesus' historicity. Ehrman then wraps up his "discussion of the historical evidence by stressing just two points in particular".⁴⁰ The first point is unconvincing in that it centres on the relationships Paul had with Peter and James.⁴¹ Of course, if Peter was indeed one of the earthly Jesus' closest Apostles, and James was truly the biological brother of Jesus, then Paul's writings may indeed indicate Jesus' historicity. Unfortunately for Ehrman, none of this is known from Paul's writings, but from the *later* Gospels; once again Ehrman overlooks the possibility that the later documents are elaborating on the earlier ones, and is simply assuming what he is supposed to be arguing for.

Ehrman's second key point is merely that Jesus was believed to be crucified;⁴² a hypothesis which is entirely compatible with minimal

³⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 246.

⁴⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 144.

⁴¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 144-156. It is worth noting that the descriptions of these figures in Paul's writings are entirely compatible with minimalist mythicism.

⁴² Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 156-170.

mythicisism.⁴³ Part of his reasoning stems from his assumptions about what all ancient Jews would believe, as if there did not exist a multitude of Jewish and Christian religions, many of which are unknown to us today.⁴⁴ This is particularly surprising, given his standing as a personally secular Biblical scholar, and his authorship of *Lost Christianities* (recall that Christian sects were/are also Jewish sects).⁴⁵ Ehrman also stresses that the idea of a suffering Messiah is acceptable to Christians, but would be unthinkable to Jews.⁴⁶ Surely, he must realise that some Jews did believe as much, and could (and would) become Christians.

Ehrman concludes by claiming that “Jesus certainly existed” and indicates that his case for Jesus’ existence is complete.⁴⁷ Nowhere in Ehrman’s case, already suspect due to his reliance on non-extant sources, was the reliability of the existing sources substantially scrutinised. It was simply assumed that the anonymous authors of these non-contemporaneous accounts intended to present an accurate history of relatively recent events, that they did so competently, and that the ‘true’ message has been preserved virtually unchanged.⁴⁸ Ehrman’s faith in the sources is rather naïve. While he happily accepts that the Gospel authors would fabricate outlandish claims such as people coming back from the dead or walking on water,⁴⁹ he finds it unthinkable that a Jew would ‘make up’ more mundane claims such as that their Messiah would suffer.⁵⁰ This is characteristic of secular Jesus historicists. They happily disparage the Gospels when it comes to the claims made of the Christ of Faith, but when it comes to the Historical Jesus, these highly questionable documents are suddenly transformed into ideal sources that provide otherwise sceptical and critical scholars with the utmost certainty.

⁴³ Interestingly, Ehrman acknowledges that “One could easily argue that Christianity would survive quite well without a historical figure of Jesus”; it could certainly have originated that way also. See Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 337.

⁴⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 159-164.

⁴⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 165-166.

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 173-174.

⁴⁸ The latter is particularly surprising given the obviously mythical content of the Gospels and the proven record of textual manipulation.

⁴⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 179.

⁵⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 170.

The Case for Jesus' Historicity: Maurice Casey⁵¹

Ehrman's book arguing for what is already the consensus view is so underwhelming that the late Maurice Casey found it necessary to also weigh in on the debate, with what would be his last book, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?* He acknowledges Ehrman's "bold attempt", but alluded to his "regrettable mistakes".⁵² Casey aims to primarily "set out the main arguments for the existence as a historical figure of Jesus", and secondarily, to refute the claims of the opposing mythicists.⁵³ Regrettably, he completely misrepresents mythicism, mythicists and mythicist approaches. Casey fails to outline his own method, and, like Ehrman, he also relies heavily on hypothetical sources. He defends against the problem of Paul, though somewhat unnecessarily, as he argues for the Gospels' primacy by employing radically unorthodox dating methods. Casey finally attempts to engage with mythicist claims, though he focuses on the more amateurish mythicists, with barely a coherent word about Earl Doherty, who may have presented the most convincing mythicist hypothesis thus far (despite being a popular author). The tone of Casey's work is also unprofessional and, at times, crude.

Casey's introductory chapter is an attempt to 'poison the well', is filled with easily-avoidable errors about mythicism, and includes unnecessary *ad hominem* argumentation. In a section disrespectfully entitled 'Scholars' (inverted commas included), Casey attempts to discredit "the most influential mythicists", yet includes Bart Ehrman, who is precisely the opposite of a Jesus mythicist (and is indeed a *bona fide* scholar), and numerous figures who are amateurs and not actually mythicists, such as "Blogger Godfrey".⁵⁴ Casey irrelevantly portrays mythicists as being former fundamentalists,⁵⁵ which is demonstrably false.

⁵¹ A more succinct version of this section has been published as a book review. See Raphael Lataster, review of *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?*, by Maurice Casey, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), pp. 166-168.

⁵² Casey, *Jesus*, p. 17.

⁵³ Casey, *Jesus*, p. viii.

⁵⁴ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 10-36.

⁵⁵ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 44.

For example, Casey himself acknowledges that Doherty was not raised as “an American Protestant fundamentalist”, but as a Catholic.⁵⁶

These libellous errors are continued throughout the book, with Casey bizarrely accusing mythicists of being unable to accept that Jesus had a brother (i.e. James, the ‘brother of the Lord’), as “mythicists used to be conservative Christians: they did not believe that Jesus had natural brothers because they believed in the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary”.⁵⁷ One can only wonder how this had passed peer-review. It now seems that Casey is accusing all mythicists of being former Catholics, which is also demonstrably false, by his own hand (other Christian groups share the doctrine, but it is certainly not characteristic of American Protestant fundamentalists, for example).⁵⁸ Pointing out the rest of Casey’s errors in this regard, as well as the blatant contradictions of his own erroneous claims, would be too time-consuming. Of far more interest are Casey’s methods, and also the methods of the more sceptically inclined.

The chapter entitled ‘Historical method’ unfortunately makes no significant mention of Casey’s methods in demonstrating Jesus’ historicity. Instead, the chapter focuses more on the supposedly inadequate methodologies of various sceptical Internet bloggers, including a bizarre objection to the technically correct claim that the Gospels are not actually primary sources.⁵⁹ Discussing a claim about late dates for the Gospels made by Acharya S, Casey asserts that “mythicists try to date the Gospels as late as possible”.⁶⁰ This too is erroneous, as the examples of Carrier and I (we accept the mainstream dating of the Epistles and the Gospels) attest, and it is actually Casey who is at odds with the consensus view by opting for radically early dates, as we shall see. In a section on dating the synoptic

⁵⁶ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 16. Casey then surprisingly insists that Doherty “was nonetheless brought up in an authoritarian environment”, despite lacking evidence, and despite earlier acknowledging (on the same page) that “Information about Earl Doherty is not readily available”. He could have simply contacted Doherty.

⁵⁷ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 170.

⁵⁸ For example, Casey discusses mythicist Robert Price’s early involvement in a Baptist church, with no evidence of his ever being a Catholic and/or believing in Mary’s perpetual virginity. See Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 23-24. He also mentions Richard Carrier, who has never been a fundamentalist Christian or a Catholic. See Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 14-16.

⁵⁹ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 43-45. Note that the Gospels certainly are not primary sources in the sense that they are contemporary with the events in question and/or compiled by eyewitnesses.

⁶⁰ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 49.

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Gospels, Casey continues to rail against the likes of more amateurish figures like ‘Blogger Godfrey’ and Acharya S, and notes his own reliance – like Ehrman – on hypothesised (Aramaic) sources.⁶¹

Casey places great importance on hypothetical sources, and partly argues for them on the basis of mistakes caused by the poor translating skills of the Gospel authors.⁶² From this, an oddity of historicist argumentation is illuminated: sources that do not exist are claimed to be reliable, while the sources that scholars actually have access to are acknowledged as being filled with errors. Surely if the existing sources can be doubted on account of their errors and mythical claims, the hypothetical sources can also be questioned, and more so. It also seems to be an inconsistent approach, in that the sources that cannot be verified and may not have existed at all somehow provide good evidence for the existence of the Historical Jesus, but they could not possibly provide good evidence for the existence of the Christ of Faith.

Casey then defends against the problem of Paul: that the great Apostle should have provided more details about the historical Jesus, and that this, coupled with the earlier dating of Paul’s Epistles, should support the mythicist view. Casey’s response is simply that Paul did not need to, making no attempt to argue for which hypothesis best explains this evidence.⁶³ Herein is included an odd statement that in apparently late-dating the Gospels, “some mythicists turn Paul’s genuine epistles into our earliest sources for the life and teaching of Jesus”.⁶⁴ It is actually the mainstream view of Biblical scholars, and not just the minority mythicists, that Paul’s Epistles are indeed the earlier documents. In a chapter seemingly dedicated to historical methods, Casey forgot to describe – or even develop – his own. Moving on from this underwhelming discussion of ‘method’ (contrast this with Carrier who wrote a whole book on his method, before attempting to answer the question of Jesus’ historicity), Casey then attempts to argue for the early dating and the reliability of the Gospels.

⁶¹ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 51-54.

⁶² Casey, *Jesus*, p. 75.

⁶³ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 54-57. This is technically correct, but it is surprising (and thus improbable if Jesus was historical), and does not somehow elevate the historical reliability of the Pauline Epistles.

⁶⁴ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 54.

Casey's 'case' for the historical Jesus largely revolves around his arguing for Mark's and Matthew's gospels to be dated earlier. He again draws attention to Acharya S' supposedly late dating of the gospels,⁶⁵ as if she spoke for all mythicists. This may be to soften the impact of his own extremely early dating, compared to the traditional dates accepted by most scholars.⁶⁶ Casey then surprisingly claims that "the criteria reasonably used by historians writing about important political figures such as Julius Caesar need modification in dealing with the historicity of Jesus", which may partially explain his unorthodox dating methods.⁶⁷ In one brief statement, which echoes Freedman's revealing approach, Casey highlights just what is wrong with the methods of Jesus historicists.⁶⁸ Rather than simply acknowledging the uncertainty that results when applying the best methods to the sources, Casey and his allies redefine what good historical methodology is, so that they can arrive at the conclusion they desire; essentially that Jesus' historical existence is unquestionably certain. Without explaining why an earlier date is decisive, Casey begins his argument for Mark's reliability by uncritically accepting some of the traditions associated with Mark's gospel, such as the author being named Mark, because it was a popular name at the time.⁶⁹

Some aspects of this tradition must be true, but not all of them. First, the author was certainly Mark. Our name Mark is the Greek *Markos* without its ending, and this is the Greek form of the Latin *Marcus*, one of the commonest names in the Roman Empire.⁷⁰

It can barely be believed that a specialist historian would make such an unsophisticated argument. If this is what constitutes good method, it seems unlikely that Casey's case for Jesus' historicity will be convincing. Assuming (against the consensus) that Mark must pre-date the events of 70 CE, Casey mentions the possibility that Mark's supposed prophecy of the Temple's destruction "might" have been inspired by "the Caligula crisis of

⁶⁵ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 62-63.

⁶⁶ He actually acknowledges that his dates differ from the conventional dates usually arrived at by Biblical experts. See Casey, *Jesus*, p. 80.

⁶⁷ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 66.

⁶⁸ Freedman admits to examining the Bible with "looser" standards. See Hershel Shanks, 'How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1', *Bible Review*, vol. 9, no. 6 (1993), p. 34.

⁶⁹ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 82.

⁷⁰ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 82.

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39 CE”.⁷¹ Suddenly moving forward with the truth of this possibility assumed, Casey somehow settles on “c. 40 CE”, despite his own supplied range being 39-70 CE.⁷² Interestingly, this date would only somewhat alleviate ‘the problem of Paul’ (many scholars recognise the differences between the Christ of the Epistles and the Jesus of the Gospels), and still would yield a secondary source. Casey’s attempts to date Matthew fare no better, displaying circular reasoning.

He relies on the notion that the first generation of Christians died c. 50-60 CE, relating it to the prophecy of Matthew 16:28.⁷³ This of course incorporates ‘facts’ about early Christianity that Casey only knows by assuming the basic account of the Gospels to be true; this, like the very existence of Jesus, is the very thing that is doubted by mythicists. And as with Mark, a range for Matthew’s composition is supplied, 50-70 CE, with Casey inexplicably declaring that it “makes perfect sense c. 50 CE”.⁷⁴ It is also unclear how, in a positive case, this earlier dating helps prove Jesus’ historicity, without some thorough argumentation as to the Gospels’ reliability. After all, these dates still leave enough time for the mixture of myth and history (or fictitious history) in the Gospels that both ‘minimal historicity’ and ‘minimal mythicism’ hypotheses would predict.

Casey then leaves Luke’s traditional dating intact, but makes the claim that Luke is “an outstanding historian by ancient standards”, without any reasoning, repeating the claim on the following page prefaced with an “as noted above”,⁷⁵ and seemingly ignoring the many supernatural claims found in Luke’s gospel. This also overlooks the fact that Luke does not name any sources or display critical methodology, which is what other ancient authors had done, such as Philostratus (who by Casey’s reasoning must have thus been the greatest historian of all time) with his critical writings on the possibly-legendary Apollonius. This is also somewhat contradicted by Casey’s later acknowledgements that Luke fabricated part of his gospel, and that some (non-supernatural) elements of it are implausible.⁷⁶ As for the reliability of these documents, like Ehrman, Casey

⁷¹ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 85.

⁷² Casey, *Jesus*, p. 86.

⁷³ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 94.

⁷⁴ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 94.

⁷⁵ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 103-104.

⁷⁶ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 115, 234.

defers to hypothetical sources, and mysteriously leaps from his possibly fallacious identification of Aramaic sources, to “authentic material”, as if Jesus and his followers were the only Aramaic-speakers in first-century Judaea.⁷⁷ So ends his case for the historical Jesus. Just as with Casey’s discussion of methods, there is little presented here that is coherent, let alone convincing.

In the remainder of his book, confident with his unconvincing ‘case’ for Jesus’ historical existence, Casey addresses many mythicist claims, characteristically focussing on the likes of Acharya S and ‘Blogger Godfrey’, with hardly a mention of Robert Price or Richard Carrier, who seemed to be the best-credentialed mythicists according to Casey’s own introductory list. While generally dismissing what may be some of the worst mythicist approaches (such as an overeager attitude to identify similarities between Christianity and earlier religions), he barely touches upon Earl Doherty’s promising hypothesis of Paul’s Christ being entirely celestial (with the later Gospels elaborating). He poses some challenges to Doherty’s thesis, but this falls short of a comprehensive comparative analysis of the plausibilities of his and Doherty’s theories (including a survey of all the relevant background knowledge),⁷⁸ which is effectively what Richard Carrier has since successfully completed.

It should be noted – particularly in light of Casey’s negative portrayals of mythicists – that his book is a rather unpleasant and distasteful read. Typographical errors abound, rudimentary errors are frequent, the structure is disjointed, and some sections are wholly unscholarly and unnecessarily offensive (and vulgar). Mary is described as having been “preggers”,⁷⁹ rugby games are referred to as “ruggger games”,⁸⁰ *bona fide* scholar Thomas Thompson is described as a ‘scholar’ (quotation marks included),⁸¹ and ‘criticising’ is replaced with “slagging off”.⁸² Casey also finds time to highlight one critic’s being “a gay anti-Christian socialist”, as if sexual orientation or politics has any relevance to the soundness of an argument.⁸³ Questions must certainly be raised as to why a reputable

⁷⁷ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 103.

⁷⁸ Casey, *Jesus*, pp. 188-200.

⁷⁹ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 114.

⁸⁰ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 207.

⁸¹ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 221.

⁸² Casey, *Jesus*, p. 173.

⁸³ Casey, *Jesus*, p. 234.

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publisher (and the academic reviewers) would accept such apparently homophobic and unprofessional language and content. One answer could be that without such unnecessary embellishment, the case for the Historical Jesus is disconcertingly scant.

In sum, Casey's *Jesus* does not describe a practical historical method, offers nothing convincing regarding Jesus' historicity, is otherwise an embarrassment to the Academy, and its only saving grace resides in demonstrating the desperate measures and lack of success of Jesus historicists' attempts to end the growing tide of Jesus skepticism. Rather than being fearful of what this respected authority had to say, Jesus mythicists will likely treasure this affirmation of the woeful methods and arguments used by the more conventional historicist scholars. In the wake of Ehrman's book and his *coup de grâce* that is the hypothetical source, it was not expected that a poorer case for the historical Jesus could have been put forth by a reputable academic. At least in that sense, Maurice Casey has exceeded all expectations. While relying on the same non-existent sources, he makes even more unsubstantiated claims, delights in criticising additional non-experts, and also manages to degrade historical Jesus scholarship to new levels of incompetence and vulgarity.

Raphael Lataster's Jesus Agnosticism⁸⁴

I have recently – via a Master's thesis, associated journal articles, and a bestselling popular book – argued for a significant conclusion in contemporary Biblical research: Jesus of Nazareth may not have existed historically. Being unable to review my own work, I provide a brief summary of my thesis, followed by comments of scholars who agree and disagree with the conclusions. As there is no physical evidence concerning Jesus it is inevitable that settling the question over his historicity will rely on the most relevant documentary sources. The arguments for my agnostic case include the lack of primary sources, the historical unreliability of the Gospels (and also the Epistles), and the historical precedent for such documents being wholly fabricated. With extra-Biblical textual sources generally taken to be relatively late and derivative,⁸⁵ and the Epistles mentioning little (if anything) of a historical person clearly located at a

⁸⁴ Much of this section summarises my aforementioned Master's thesis and associated articles.

⁸⁵ Lataster, 'Jesus Scepticism', pp. 47-61.

particular time and place, the investigation must focus on the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

Unfortunately, there are no primary textual sources concerning Jesus; that is, scholars do not have access to contemporary and/or eyewitness accounts. Influential historian Leopold von Ranke stressed the importance of primary sources, stating that historians ought to rely more on narratives of eyewitnesses, and on genuine and original documents.⁸⁶ The Gospels, and indeed all the sources concerning Jesus, are not primary sources; they are not contemporary to the events they describe, nor is it reasonable to assume that they were written by eye-witnesses. The extant sources concerning Jesus are, at best, secondary sources. Noted historian Louis Gottschalk cautioned against relying on secondary sources and asks historians to consider the primary sources they are based on, and particularly the accuracy with which the information was transmitted.⁸⁷ This is impossible regarding Jesus, as there simply are no extant primary sources. This fact is not insignificant and should be reason enough to allow for some reservations with regards to claims about the Historical Jesus. Nevertheless, historians can attempt to determine the usefulness of a source by taking into account its authorship, localisation, composition date, credibility, its own source material, and whether (and to what extent) it deviates from its original form.⁸⁸

The Gospels are anonymous. Their composition dates are disputed. They are obviously evangelistic, and further make many implausible claims. Virtually nothing is known of their source materials, and the original copies of the Gospels and their supposed sources are lost to history. Furthermore, the many variant manuscripts suggest that the documents were not as faithfully transmitted as might be hoped. New Testament critic Bart Ehrman notes that the Gospels are exactly the sort of sources that historians do not want, in establishing what probably happened

⁸⁶ Leopold von Ranke, Sarah Austin, and Robert Arthur Johnson, *History of the Reformation in Germany* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905), p. xi.

⁸⁷ Louis Reichenthal Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 165.

⁸⁸ Cf. Gilbert J. Garraghan and Jean Delanglez, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1946), p. 168.

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in the past.⁸⁹ Archaeologist and Biblical scholar David Noel Freedman describes how the discipline addresses this problem:

We have to accept somewhat looser standards. In the legal profession, to convict the defendant of a crime, you need proof beyond a reasonable doubt. In civil cases, a preponderance of the evidence is sufficient. When dealing with the Bible or any ancient source, we have to loosen up a little; otherwise, we can't really say anything.⁹⁰

The “somewhat looser standards” may refer to the speculative ‘Criteria of Authenticity’ (tools historical Jesus researchers employ to discover the nuggets of truth buried within the Gospels’ elaborations), which are becoming increasingly criticised.⁹¹ The earliest Christian documents are the (predominantly Pauline) Epistles, which scholars may also use to support Jesus’ historicity. Paul reveals his reliability as a historian by acknowledging his sources:

11 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.⁹²

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...⁹³

In contrast, he never describes a written or oral source – that does not derive from supernatural beings – used in preparing his Epistles. Not only is Paul an obviously unreliable historian,⁹⁴ he says nothing of a Historical Jesus, at least not anything that could not also apply to the ‘originally celestial’ Jesus proposed by amateur mythicist Earl Doherty.⁹⁵ It is simply

⁸⁹ Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, ‘Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?’ (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD; Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 42.

⁹⁰ Hershel Shanks, ‘How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1’, *Bible Review*, vol. 9, no. 6 (1993), p. 34.

⁹¹ Lataster, ‘Jesus Scepticism’, pp. 21-27; Lataster, ‘Bayesian Reasoning’; Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (eds), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

⁹² Galatians 1:11-12.

⁹³ 1Corinthians 15:3-4.

⁹⁴ Gerd Lüdemann, ‘Paul as a Witness to the Historical Jesus’, in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), p. 212.

⁹⁵ Lataster, ‘Jesus Scepticism’, pp. 73-92; Mainstream scholars suppose that Jesus was a historical figure that became gradually mythicised. Doherty theorises that Jesus was initially

uncritical for scholars to read the Epistles, which are the earlier documents, with Gospel-derived assumptions in mind.⁹⁶ While it may be of lesser relevance, it is also clear that much of the Gospels has been influenced by earlier religions and myths, including some clear parallels with Philo of Alexandria's *Logos* figure.⁹⁷ Since the available sources are so unreliable, and their existence is also explained by alternative theories about Jesus, it seems entirely reasonable to consider the possibility that he did not exist.

If the Gospels could be considered biographies at all (their genre is still disputed), historicists' enthusiasms must be tempered by the knowledge that purely mythical characters such as Romulus also inspire such work.⁹⁸ Intriguingly, stories of more benign (in that they are not generally associated with supernatural claims) characters have also been fabricated, and later accepted. Historian Arthur Droge notes the anti-technological movements and numerous writings deriving from the "perhaps apocryphal" Ned Ludd.⁹⁹ A similar situation arises with the case of alleged mass-murderer and cannibal Sawney Bean. Like Jesus, Bean was claimed to have a family, was involved with other historical figures, was considered significant enough that people wrote about him, and the locations of his greatest triumphs are 'known'. Similarly, the claims about Bean are made after the fact, with no contemporary documents attesting to his existence. Furthermore, Bean's story appears to derive from the stories of earlier figures. Notably, Sawney Bean's historical existence is questioned, and typically doubted.¹⁰⁰ The scholar may wonder why the historical existence of more mundane figures like Ludd and Bean (to say

a celestial figure that became gradually historicised. See Earl Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man* (Ottawa: Age of Reason Publications, 2009).

⁹⁶ William Arnal, 'The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 23, no. 3-4 (2011), pp. 193-215; On perceptions of Paul and his writings, John Gager calls on scholars to challenge long-held beliefs and venture into "unknown territory". See John G. Gager, 'Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 95, no. 1 (2005), pp. 60-73.

⁹⁷ Lataster, 'Jesus Scepticism', pp. 93-100.

⁹⁸ One example is Plutarch's *Life of Romulus*. See Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (London: W. Heinemann, 1917).

⁹⁹ Arthur J. Droge, 'Jesus and Ned Ludd: What's in a Name?', *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2009), pp. 23-25.

¹⁰⁰ Sandy Hobbs and David Cornwell, 'Sawney Bean, the Scottish Cannibal', *Folklore*, vol. 108 (1997), pp. 49-54.

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nothing of the less mundane figures of many religions and mythologies) is questioned by historians, while the existence of Jesus, whose sources are evangelical and contain numerous implausible claims, should be taken as a certainty.

My case for ‘mere agnosticism’, that Jesus’ historical existence is uncertain, has not entirely escaped attention. Apologist J. P. Holding’s error-filled review referred to me as being “the Scholarship Disaster” whilst also revealing his inability to produce superior sources.¹⁰¹ His conservative colleague, Nick Peters (son-in-law of apologist Mike Licona), also wrote a negative review, misunderstanding large parts of my case, and also making numerous errors.¹⁰² For example, Peters oddly took offence at my noting that the Gospels were not authored by eyewitnesses, demanding proof of this claim, and also derided my preference for scholarly research that generally dismissed miraculous claims. Such figures seem to have trouble comprehending that the Christ of Faith is most certainly not the Historical Jesus being discussed by secular scholars, and that these discussions of Jesus’ possible ahistoricity truly reflects a debate among atheists. Critical scholars have been much more receptive.

Respected secular academics, often from the field of Religious Studies, have embraced my arguments. Hector Avalos for example, asserted that “Although I am not a Jesus mythicist, I do think that Lataster makes a good case that one cannot simply dismiss all versions or all aspects of Jesus mythicism” and recognised that I “may be among the first to have a thesis sympathetic to Jesus Mythicism approved by a world-class university”.¹⁰³ Christopher Hartney declared that “Lataster goes through the numerous arguments that demonstrate that the story of Jesus must have taken place. He does a good job of dismissing all these”, and supports “the

¹⁰¹ James Patrick Holding, ‘Raphael Lataster the Scholarship Disaster, Part 1’, at <http://tektonticker.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/raphael-lataster-scholarship-disaster.html>. Accessed 22/06/2014.

¹⁰² Nick Peters, ‘Book Plunge: *There Was No Jesus. There Is No God*’, at <http://deeperwaters.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/book-plunge-there-was-no-jesus-there-is-no-god>. Accessed 22/06/2014.

¹⁰³ Hector Avalos, ‘Raphael Lataster’s New Book on Jesus Mythicism’, *Debunking Christianity*, at <http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/raphael-latasters-new-book-on-mythicism.html>. Accessed 22/06/2014.

ongoing validity of the questions” posed.¹⁰⁴ He adds that I revive “some interesting issues concerning the complicity that Western academia has when nurturing blind spots to particular historical proofs and particular faiths”. Professor Carole Cusack is cautiously supportive and notes that the harshest critics, if they have seriously engaged with the material at all, tend to be “clear conservative Christians”.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, related articles concerning the poor sources, and the inadequate methods often used by mainstream Jesus researchers, rejected by specialist journals focussing on Early Christianity and the New Testament, have since been accepted and published by Religious Studies journals.¹⁰⁶

A case for agnosticism on the matter could attract the ire of historicists and mythicists alike. To the historicist, questioning Jesus’ existence may be considered amateurish and hyper-sceptical. To the mythicist, ‘merely questioning’ Jesus’ existence may be considered lazy and concessionary (as if it were not already a major step forward for what is an extremely fringe view). Nevertheless, it seems a sober and balanced view, given the lack of decisive evidence, for both sets of theories. The rational case against Jesus’ historicity need not stop at agnosticism, however. Like John the Baptist anticipating Jesus, the Jesus agnostic predicts that an even greater case can be made. While what we do not have implies that we will never conclusively resolve the question, there is a way to derive the most preferable answer, from what we do have. The argument from silence can thus be upgraded to an argument to the best explanation.

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Hartney, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), pp. 171-174.

¹⁰⁵ Carole M. Cusack, review of *There Was No Jesus, There Is No God: A Scholarly Examination of the Scientific, Historical, and Philosophical Evidence & Arguments For Monotheism*, by Raphael Lataster, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), p. 145. This point is ironic, as I consider such discussions over Jesus’ historicity to be a debate among atheists, with the prominent historicists, agnostics and mythicists all being dismissive regarding the Christ of Faith.

¹⁰⁶ For the article regarding method, see Lataster, ‘Bayesian Reasoning’. The article on the sources has been accepted by the *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*, forthcoming 2014 or early 2015. That it may be counter-intuitively ideal for scholars who are not direct subject matter experts to investigate Jesus’ historicity shall be explored and expanded in upcoming projects.

But after me comes one who is more powerful than I...¹⁰⁷

Richard Carrier's Jesus Mythicism¹⁰⁸

Independent historian Richard Carrier's exhaustive *On the Historicity of Jesus* is the latest in a recent spate of books discussing the controversial question of Jesus' historicity. Like my own work for agnosticism, it shares the rare distinction of being agnostic/mythicist literature that has been peer-reviewed.¹⁰⁹ Following Ehrman and Casey's sub-standard books for the affirmative, and my own work advocating Historical Jesus agnosticism, Carrier presents a case for outright mythicism (the view that Jesus has purely mythical origins) that has the potential to genuinely shake up the research field, and contribute to the by now seemingly inevitable shift away from the consensus view that a historical Jesus certainly existed. His case began with the earlier *Proving History*,¹¹⁰ which painstakingly outlines his approach to the sources and his method. Like many historians, analytic philosophers, and Religious Studies scholars before him, Carrier advocated a Bayesian approach, due to its transparency and probabilistic results, and stated his intention to use such an approach to illuminate questions over Jesus' historical status.¹¹¹ His work very clearly describes the competing hypotheses, produces reasonable prior probabilities, and argues for how the minimal mythicism theory better coheres with the most relevant evidence.

Proving History effectively opens with meticulous explanations of the hypotheses of "minimal historicity" and "minimal mythicism".¹¹² The latter position, highly influenced by the work of Earl Doherty, states that

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 3:11.

¹⁰⁸ A more succinct version of this section has been published as Raphael Lataster, review of *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason to Doubt*, by Richard Carrier, *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2014), pp. 614-616.

¹⁰⁹ Such work is usually published by amateurs, or *bona fide* scholars from 'outside' the relevant academic fields of History, Biblical Studies, and Religious Studies.

¹¹⁰ Carrier, *Proving History*.

¹¹¹ Bayesian reasoning incorporates all the available evidence and background knowledge, as well as how they interact with the possible theories. Carrier's *Proving History* provides an excellent explanation of Bayes' Theorem and its historical uses, as does Aviezer Tucker's earlier effort. See Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a simplified description, and a discussion of the uses of Bayesian approaches in judging the veridicality of religious claims, see Lataster, 'Bayesian Reasoning'.

¹¹² Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 18-55.

Jesus was initially believed to be a celestial figure, who came to be historicised over time.¹¹³ Carrier then masterfully outlines crucial “elements” of background knowledge supporting this position that are so forceful that the sceptically-inclined may already become persuaded. These include the great diversity of Jewish religions (Element 2),¹¹⁴ the early Christian practice of concealing secret doctrines within myths and allegories (Element 13),¹¹⁵ the Jewish predisposition towards positing an otherworldly victory (Element 28),¹¹⁶ and the ancient beliefs – Jewish and Christian included – in “celestial” realms (Element 34).¹¹⁷

He then shifts focus to the all-important prior probabilities.¹¹⁸ Carrier employs the ‘Rank-Raglan hero’ reference class,¹¹⁹ which Jesus fits almost perfectly (according to certain parts of the Gospels, which are rightly no longer used in further evidential analyses). This reference class includes elements such as the figure being the son of a god, dying atop a hill or some other high place, and eventual confusion as to the body’s location.¹²⁰ Notably, there is not a single confirmed historical figure that conforms to most of the characteristics of the ‘Rank-Raglan hero’. Jesus being unique in this case would certainly be extraordinary, and thus a low prior probability should be justified. Being generous to Judeo-Christianity, and also to alternative religions (he intends to argue *a fortiori*), he pretends that several of these obviously mythical figures (such as Zeus and Moses) were historical, granting a prior probability of the truth of the historicity theory to be 33%. Without doing so, the prior probability for Jesus’ historicity is calculated as a paltry 6%.¹²¹

¹¹³ Carrier acknowledges that Doherty’s theorising led him to seriously consider Jesus’ non-existence. Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. xii.

¹¹⁴ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 66.

¹¹⁵ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 108-114.

¹¹⁶ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 156-159.

¹¹⁷ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 178-180.

¹¹⁸ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 235-253.

¹¹⁹ Otto Rank et al., *In Quest of the Hero: The Myth and Birth of the Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹²⁰ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 229-230.

¹²¹ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 243. The reason that it is 6% and not 0% (after all, none of the figures apart from Jesus has been confirmed to be historical) is due to Laplace’s Rule of Succession. Mathematicians employ this principle, as 0 is unhelpful in probability calculations.

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In methodical fashion, Carrier then examines the residual evidence, so as to estimate the consequent probabilities (how the theories fit the evidence), which, when combined with the prior probabilities, will yield the answer as a single figure (the posterior probability). To illustrate the sheer scope of Carrier's work, before he has even begun to analyse the direct and most relevant evidence, and considering the content of *Proving History* (which explained his method), his page count thus far has already greatly overtaken that of Ehrman's and Casey's recent books on the topic, and also that of this author.¹²² Recall also that Ehrman's and Casey's books spent much time dispelling 'mythicist myths' and attacking the character and credentials of various (often the most amateurish) mythicists, rather than actually arguing for Jesus' historicity.

As can be expected by any critical scholar of early Christianity, most of the extra-Biblical sources are effectively discarded for being too late, derivative, and for most likely not being truly independent.¹²³ The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles are largely omitted also, as they are unreliable, and these relatively late mixtures of myth and (at least what purports to be) history would be expected if a celestial/mythical Jesus was later historicised *and* if a historical Jesus later became mythicised.¹²⁴ This may surprise Gospel proponents, but the logic is sound. The mythicist theory is not simply 'Jesus did not exist', which the Gospels would seemingly contradict (if at least they were reliable, which itself seems exceedingly unlikely), but that Christians originally believed in a celestial Jesus, and later attempts were made to place him in a historical setting. As such, the Gospels pose no problems to the minimal mythicist theory, particularly as they are relatively late.

Addressing the Epistles, Carrier finds much that is surprising if Jesus existed (such as Paul's silence on Jesus' ministry, miracles, and earthly life in general), and curious passages that expectedly (traditionalists see the Epistles as depicting events after those of the Gospels) and unexpectedly indicate that Jesus, at least initially, is/was a celestial – and not an earthly – figure. One such passage is 1 Corinthians 2:6-10:

¹²² The latter need not be so exhaustively detailed, as it focuses more on historicist flaws, and results in a benign, agnostic position.

¹²³ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 281-358.

¹²⁴ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 359-509.

We speak a wisdom among the mature [*i.e. the fully initiated: see Element 13*], a wisdom not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age [*archontōn tou aiōnos toutou*], who are being abolished, but we speak God's wisdom, in a mystery, that has been hidden, which God foreordained before the ages [*aiōnōn*] for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age [*archontōn tou aiōnos toutou*] had known. For if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. But as it is written, 'Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of a man, those things God prepared for those who love him'. For God revealed them to us through the Spirit... (1 Cor. 2.6-10).¹²⁵

This passage could indicate that Jesus was killed by non-earthly and malign beings. After all, had human authorities known who Jesus was and what his death would accomplish (their own salvation), they would have had even more reason to kill Jesus, not less, as Paul seems to assert. It would only be Satan and his followers, who would be defeated by Jesus' atoning sacrifice, who would have refused to kill Jesus, had they known who he truly was. As Carrier recognises, this interpretation coheres well with the celestial Jesus' death and resurrection portrayed in the early and non-canonical Christian document, the Ascension of Isaiah.¹²⁶ The latter interpretation fits minimal mythicism perfectly, while the former would at least be less expected (if not completely outrageous) on minimal historicity. In formal expression, less expected means less probable.

Though in effect unnecessary due to the nature of the sources, the damning prior probability, and the carefully-constructed theory of minimal mythicism (which all the evidence seems to support), Carrier nevertheless carries on with his calculations, mathematically arguing that the probability of Jesus' historical existence is 33% at best, and far less than 1% at worst.¹²⁷ Carrier concludes that "He did not exist".¹²⁸ Though I have no great desire to deny some form of historical Jesus, I am inclined to agree, and applaud his careful, thorough and methodological approach, particularly given the underwhelming recent efforts of historicists such as Ehrman and Casey. The most significant aspect of Carrier's book – as much of his source-criticism is already well-known – is that he seems to be the first to examine the issue of Jesus' historicity, incorporating all the

¹²⁵ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 564.

¹²⁶ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 565.

¹²⁷ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 596-600.

¹²⁸ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 618.

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relevant background evidence, and including a direct (and effectively logically exhaustive) comparison of the plausible hypotheses.

As a result, this work far outdoes anything the typically-amateurish mythicists have produced to date, but is also methodologically superior to the work of more respected and mainstream historicist scholars. One need only compare the scant descriptions of ‘methods’ in Ehrman and Casey’s books, with Carrier’s *Proving History*, which effectively served as the methods section of his *On the Historicity of Jesus*. My only real criticism is that the minimal mythicist theory fits the evidence so perfectly which some may see as suspicious. This could be because the theory is simply true, or because it has been carefully crafted for this purpose, and suffers from a lower prior probability as a result (cf. apologists who inadvertently damage their hypotheses by inventing evidentially-unsupported excuses to counter the evidences of evil and hiddenness, in arguing over God’s existence).¹²⁹

It is up to historicists, however, to show that this theory is inherently implausible. A careful analysis of Carrier’s work should reveal that he is not guilty of gerrymandering. He ends by provoking the mainstream scholars: “the ball is now in your court”.¹³⁰ *On the Historicity of Jesus* is clearly and convincingly argued, extensively researched, solidly referenced, and is essential reading for those open to questioning the Historical Jesus, and to those who want to learn how historical theorising ought to be done.

Conclusion

If questioning Jesus’ historical existence is reasonable, there are significant concerns for the Academy regarding the methods, motives and conduct of mainstream Jesus researchers.¹³¹ While the approach taken by the scholars agreeing with the consensus view is uncritically grounded in unjustified presuppositions, and sometimes appears as unprofessional and un scholarly,

¹²⁹ Such excuses allow the improved theory to better cohere with the evidence, but results in a lower prior probability (compared with the theories that did not rely on the excuses), so that the overall probability is unremoved, or even diminished.

¹³⁰ Carrier, *Historicity of Jesus*, p. 618.

¹³¹ John Dominic Crossan noted that the “stunning diversity” of scholarly opinions about Jesus “is an academic embarrassment”, whilst also wondering if certain scholars are theologians masquerading as historians. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. xxviii.

the work of the more respectable agnostics and mythicists appears to be measured, impersonal, and surprisingly nuanced. My own work in this field merely argued that the sources used in historical Jesus research are too problematic to provide certainty over his existence, and that the methods used by mainstream historicist scholars are ill-defined and otherwise fallacious. Specifically, I explained how historians judge the reliability of source material, and how the Jesus sources fail to meet even the most basic criteria. Notably, this more reserved agnostic position seems overlooked by mainstream historicists who seem to imagine a false dichotomy, ironically appearing as dogmatic fundamentalists in the process.¹³²

Not content with the seemingly concessionary ‘we do not know’ result, Richard Carrier defends the more aggressive mythicist position with a rigor previously unseen in the field. He prepared for this momentous task by adopting and clearly explaining (in its own book) a sound, transparent, mathematical and specifically probabilistic method. Applying this Bayesian method to the existing sources, and incorporating relevant background knowledge about the various religions prevalent around the time of Jesus’ alleged life, Carrier convincingly argues that the sources are better explained by the hypothesis of minimal mythicism; that Jesus was initially believed to be a purely celestial figure who communicated with his disciples through revelations. Even when practicing restraint, Carrier’s relatively conservative calculations justify a sceptical attitude towards Jesus’ historicity.

Apart from the bewildering reliance on sources that do not exist, the mainstream historicists’ case for Jesus seems to be crudely summarised by, “we have some sources that mention him, so he existed”. This *might* be impactful if the mythicist claim was simply that Jesus did not exist.¹³³ It does nothing, however, to dispel the hypothesis of minimal mythicism. The earliest sources, the Epistles, cohere surprisingly well with the notion that Jesus was originally believed to be a purely celestial figure, while the Gospels are exactly the sort of documents that would be expected if Jesus were a historical figure becoming mythicised *or* a mythical figure becoming historicised. It is recommended that historicists refine and elucidate their methods, and either discover (and reveal) the sources that

¹³² Cf. the common false dilemma of ‘the truth’ being found in ‘Christianity’ or in ‘strong atheism’.

¹³³ The veridicality and even intent of these sources is still highly disputed.

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would prove their case, or simply admit that agnosticism over Jesus' historical existence is entirely reasonable. Finally, given that Jesus' historical existence is paradigmatic to the typically insular field of New Testament scholarship, it may paradoxically be ideal that those investigating the question be historians and Religious Studies scholars of other – though related – specialisations.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Mainstream historicists tend to decry the irrelevant (or even lacking) qualifications of their mythicist opponents. See Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 2; Casey, *Jesus*, p. 2. That mythicists tend to be 'outsiders' may be somewhat necessary.