CrossMark

IT'S OFFICIAL: WE CAN NOW DOUBT JESUS' HISTORICAL EXISTENCE

Raphael Lataster

With the assistance of historian Richard Carrier, I have just published Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists *(2015), as a spiritual sequel to my earlier* There Was No Jesus, There Is No God *(2013). Unsurprisingly, I argue that – with the Christ of Faith already dismissed by mainstream secular scholars – it is very reasonable to doubt Jesus' historical existence. The basic premise of the book is to examine the arguments of four scholars who have recently published significant works about this controversial issue. What follows is a brief summary of these analyses.*

Bart Ehrman

First up is New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman who published *Did Jesus Exist?* (HarperOne) in early 2012, which attempts to prove that Jesus was definitely a historical figure. That this book exists is surely testament to the growing interest in alternative explanations for Christian origins. Historical Jesus agnostics (those that doubt Jesus' historical existence) and outright mythicists (those that think Jesus did not exist) are growing in number, and this concerns the more conventional historicists. The book starts quite competently, with Ehrman – true to type – acknowledging how problematic the sources are. After all, he is a secular scholar, and he is well known for his biblical criticism. Ehrman goes on to rightly explain that the historian must find out 'what probably happened in the past', and

doi:10.1017/S1477175616000117 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2016

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

admits that 'we cannot prove a single thing historically' (37–38). So far so good. He continues by noting how historians appreciate numerous, contemporary, detailed, and somewhat disinterested sources, which corroborate others' accounts without collaboration having taking place – just what we lack with regards to Jesus.

Ehrman also recognises the total lack of physical (non-textual) evidence, and the lack of available contemporary accounts. Seemingly continuing to do my job for me, he generally finds the external references to Jesus to be unhelpful, offering comments such as 'This reference [Pliny] is obviously not much to go on', 'Even less helpful is a reference found in the writings of the Roman biographer Suetonius', 'It should be clear in any event that Tacitus is basing his comment about Jesus on hearsay rather than, say, detailed historical research', and 'whether the *Testimonium* is authentically from Josephus (in its pared-down form) or not probably does not ultimately matter for the question I am pursuing here. Whether or not Jesus lived has to be decided on other kinds of evidence from this' (52–66).

In other words, the case for Jesus' existence rests upon the words of the Christians. The same Christians who don't believe in Ehrman's Jesus, the-so-called Historical Jesus, but believe in the Christ of Faith. Turning to the major Christian sources, essentially the canonical Gospels (I avoid the term 'primary sources', as these are not contemporary or eyewitness accounts), he acknowledges the many contradictions and fabrications therein. Ehrman also realises that the Gospel authors are unknown to us, despite their authorial designations, and that they are biased. Again, so far so good; but the problems with Ehrman's case soon emerge.

On the very same page where Ehrman claims that the Gospels are somewhat reliable because of the 'multiple sources that corroborate one another's stories without having collaborated', he admits that Mark is the earliest of the gospels, and heavily influenced the later Matthew and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Luke (page 75) – note that we tend to overlook the later and even more obviously theological John. This is but one of many problems with Ehrman's case, but certainly not the most problematic. That would be his appeal to *hypothetical sources*. That is, he bolsters the obviously unreliable sources we do have access to, with sources that he and other New Testament scholars merely posit. These are sources that may or may not have existed at one time, but are no longer extant. Coupled with this suspicious tactic is the counter-intuitive condemnation levelled at anyone else who dares to do likewise in support of an alternative hypothesis.

Ehrman's confidence in the sources that he has established ad nauseam as being absolutely terrible stems from the many written sources behind them. Please note that these written sources are apparently not the – extant – texts of the Old Testament, the Jewish intertestamental literature, or various Pagan myths. No, these written sources happen to be ones that cannot be scrutinised and no longer exist, if they ever did. Sources like Q, M, and L (note that scholars don't even agree that the very popular Q source existed, as evidenced by the likes of Austin Farrer, Michael Goulder, and Mark Goodacre).

That Ehrman assumes such hypothetical sources existed is not even the worst of it. While I would prefer appealing to foundational sources that we do have access to (like the Old Testament scriptures), it is certainly possible that the Gospels made use of other sources, which are no longer accessible. However, Ehrman somehow assumes their reliability, without any argument. Quite appropriate given the state of the sources that do exist, Ehrman is unable to convince readers of these non-existing sources' authors, authorial intent, composition dates, genre, or authenticity. Had they existed, these hypothesised foundational texts could have been allegories, parables, or works of outright fiction. Ehrman then moves on from the apparently innumerable hypothetical written sources to proclaim that they stemmed from even earlier oral sources. All this is known

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from four unreliable Gospels, which probably really stem from one: Mark.

Interestingly, Ehrman doesn't seem to find it necessary to defend this highly suspicious approach. Not a single scholar from outside his field is appealed to, who endorses the appeal to sources that are no longer extant and the conclusions of certainty derived therefrom. Of course, he can't. Because they don't. If historians actually did this, the entire discipline of History would lose all credibility. In fact, Jacob Neusner, an expert in the related area of Old Testament studies, seems to shudder at the thought (see Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know*, Wipf and Stock, 2004). Now we are interested in what is probable, as Ehrman should agree, not what is merely possible, so it is hard to see how the mere appeal to hypothetical sources can be convincing.

Also, Ehrman's approach is inconsistent as he and his immediate or like-minded colleagues are apparently the only ones who can appeal to non-existing sources. Somehow, Christians, who could use them to prove the Christ of Faith, need not apply. Likewise the more sceptical secular scholars like myself, who could appeal to non-existing sources – perhaps a long lost letter of Paul, Peter, or James – that contains an admission that Jesus is wholly fabricated. Ehrman's approach is also inconsistent in that he is unwilling to posit even earlier hypothetical foundational sources behind other (existing) sources, which actually predate the Gospels. I suspect that this is all part of a strategy to overcome the 'Problem of Paul'. That is, the problem that Paul doesn't seem to know about the Jesus of the Gospels.

Ehrman does mention the letters of Paul, which he acknowledges are the earliest sources concerning Jesus. Finding them to support Jesus' historicity, he overlooks the fact that Paul constantly tells us that he did not have human sources, and that all he knows about Jesus has supernatural origins; namely, direct revelation from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lord, and indirect revelation via earlier Jewish scriptures. Ehrman reveals his illogical approach, asserting that Paul alludes to the teachings of Jesus, even when Jesus isn't credited. Of course, since Paul's letters predate the Gospels, we should allow for the possibility (probability?) that the Jesus of the Gospels is plagiarising Paul.

While Ehrman's penchant for imaginary sources underlying the Gospels is critical, he stresses two key points that apparently prove Jesus' historical existence. First, he thinks that since Paul knows Peter, who was one of Jesus' disciples, and James, who was apparently Jesus' brother, that there must have been a historical Jesus and that Paul knew about him. But how do we know about Jesus' relationships with Peter and James? From the Gospels. The later documents. From Paul, we know that James was a 'brother of the Lord'. This could be taken non-literally, with fictive kinship quite common in Paul's writings, and as I argue extensively (referring to suspicious omissions in later quotations by important and influential Christians), this is quite probably an interpolation; that is, it is not part of the original text. In fact, it is Ehrman that inspired me to investigate this possibility, having earlier asserted that Paul's writings were tampered with in order to combat the 'anti-flesh' Gnostics (see his *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1993, 238–239). Unfortunately, Ehrman simply assumes his key point, rather than being properly critical in entertaining the notion that the later documents (the Gospels) are elaborating on the earlier ones (Paul's Epistles).

The second key point revolves around the belief that Jesus had been a suffering saviour, which Ehrman asserts is effectively impossible for a Jew to imagine of their Messiah. This monolithic view of Judaism is countered by mounds of evidence to the contrary, and is rendered all the more surprising given Ehrman's own work in arguing for the great diversity in early Christianity (and thus, given that Christianity started as a Jewish sect, in the 'Judaism' of the time). In fact, we know from ancient sources that we are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

only aware of the beliefs of a couple of percent of world Jewry around Jesus' lifetime – Ehrman is also quite aware of this. The beliefs of millions of Jews are unaccounted for, and probably did involve some elements of the Hellenistic culture that was so ubiquitous back then. Ehrman clearly errs *de jure*, but is also wrong *de facto*. For we have several sources, from the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature, that do indeed show that some Jews imagined a Messiah figure that would suffer.

And thus ends Ehrman's case. He claims that he has demonstrated, at the very least, that the Historical Jesus *certainly* existed. But his case relied on assumptions that the Gospels are basically reliable and don't elaborate on or adapt the earlier Christian sources, ill-considered musings about what Jews of the time would and would not have believed, and sources that don't exist and can't be analysed. As someone that understands the basic axioms of logical reasoning, let alone being a critical scholar of religion, I find nothing convincing here.

Maurice Casey

Given his underwhelming case and Ehrman's standing as a very well respected secular critic of the New Testament, you would probably think that a worse scholarly case for Jesus' historicity could not be made. You would be wrong. In 2014, the now late secular New Testament scholar Maurice Casey published *Jesus: Evidence and Argument Or Mythicist Myths?* (Bloomsbury). Unimpressed by Ehrman's attempt, and again effectively admitting that scepticism over the Historical Jesus' existence has now become a serious issue, Casey sought to finally put the matter to rest, and show how the ahistoricists had got it all wrong. What Casey actually accomplished, was the opposite. His book is a gift that is to be treasured by the Historical Jesus agnostics/mythicists.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Casey begins by unnecessarily and distastefully poisoning the well. He attempts to show that those that question Jesus' historicity are ill suited for the job. Not only is the entire section irrelevant (10–36), but he also commits many unavoidable and inexplicable errors. For instance Bart Ehrman, clearly on the same team, is included in this list of 'fake scholars'! Casey also makes bold claims about the Catholic or Fundamentalist backgrounds of such figures, which are often untrue. He also focuses heavily on figures that are known more for their blogging than for being recognised academics. With the errors already piling up, and with no time to document them all, let us turn to his method.

Unfortunately, his chapter, 'Historical method', doesn't actually describe his method, or what it is that biblical and other historians should and do do. Instead, Casey rants about the apparently poor methods of the aforementioned internet bloggers. This includes a bizarre objection to the oft-cited claim that the Gospels are not primary sources. This is actually correct, as the Gospels are widely known by secular scholars as anonymous documents that appear several decades from the time that Jesus supposedly lived. Pointing to the work of one of the more amateurish mythicists, Casey then claims that 'mythicists try to date the Gospels as late as possible' (page 49). Actually, the sceptics that produce the most convincing arguments are quite happy to take the dates provided by the more mainstream scholars, 'as Gospel'. In fact, it is Casey who veers from the consensus on this point, as we shall soon see, when he opts for radically early dating.

Now just like Ehrman, Casey relies heavily on hypothetical sources and even partly argues for them via the obvious translating mistakes of the Gospel authors. Consider the logic: the sources that scholars actually have access to are filled with errors, but the sources behind them, sources that do not exist, sources that cannot now be examined, are very reliable. Given that the sources we have can be questioned, and are, surely this must also apply for the sources

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that we don't have, and may not have existed at all. And again, why not allow for the possibility that these hypothetical sources confirm alternative views, such as those of Christians and mythicists?

In what is continually proving to be an unintelligible chapter about method that isn't actually about his method, Casey then addresses the aforementioned Problem of Paul. He simply says that Paul didn't need to make it clear that he believed in the Jesus of the Gospels, completely overlooking how this bit of information affects the various hypotheses in a probabilistic analysis. Of course Paul didn't *need* to. But that he doesn't is unexpected, and 'unexpected' translates to 'improbable' in probabilistic calculations. Continuing his fondness for the inexplicable, Casey strangely claims that 'some mythicists turn Paul's genuine epistles into our earliest sources for the life and teaching of Jesus' (page 54). They are. As agreed upon by most mainstream secular New Testament scholars.

Given Casey's use of irrelevant (and erroneous) arguments and non-existing sources, it hardly seems necessary to continue. Nevertheless, he does have some intriguing thoughts about why the Gospels can be trusted. Admitting 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' (page 66), which is but one indication of the problems festering in the parochial and insular academic discipline of New Testament, Casey begins with the gospel of Mark. Although we all know this document to be anonymous, Casey thinks that the author really is named Mark, because Mark was 'one of the commonest names in the Roman Empire' (page 82). Keep in mind that this comes from the hand of one of the most respected biblical scholars of recent times.

Moving on, with just about every critical scholar agreeing that Mark's gospel was written around the 70s CE largely because of his or her obvious knowledge of the Temple's destruction, Casey conjures up a date range of 39–70 CE, and then settles on 40 CE. The latter is done with no

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explanation. At all. Apparently, 40 CE seems quite right to him. It certainly suits his purposes in getting Mark to predate Paul's writings (around the 50s and 60s CE). Even worse, it isn't explained how this – if accepted – makes Mark's account any more reliable. Forget that Mark is very sparse. Forget that it is possibly a meta-parable. Forget that it derives largely from the Old Testament and Greek literature. Forget that mainstream scholars increasingly see Mark's gospel as an allegorisation of Paul's writings, which itself has the power to cripple the hypothesis that Jesus existed historically. There really isn't any need to continue, as he just goes on like this.

With Casey's 'case' for Jesus' historicity obviously underwhelming, we shall overlook his frequent and unnecessary vulgarities (such as his rejecting an argument because the proponent was a homosexual and a socialist, and his referring to Mary as 'preggers'), which you can read about in my recent popular book and associated peer-reviewed academic publications. Let us now look at what the other side has to say.

Raphael Lataster and Richard Carrier

From 2012–2014, I – a doctoral student and teacher of Religious Studies – have published a Master's thesis, a critically-acclaimed popular book (now accompanied by a sequel), and many popular and scholarly articles promoting the view that questioning Jesus' historical existence is no longer to be mocked; it is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Basically agreeing with almost every critical scholar that the post-biblical texts generally have little to offer regarding this issue, and that Paul has virtually nothing to say (if that) about a recent and Earthly Jesus, I generally build my case for agnosticism by examining the Gospels. Of course, the Gospels are terribly unreliable, and they certainly cannot be salvaged by appealing to sources that do not exist, and thus, present us with additional challenges. But

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there is a way that the truth can be teased from the layers of myth therein, or so scholars think.

Mainstream secular New Testament historians employ the Criteria of Authenticity, in order to discover the nuggets of truth in the obviously mythical Gospel accounts. Unfortunately, these Criteria are becoming increasingly maligned, and for good reason. The criteria of embarrassment and dissimilarity tend to make assumptions about what early Christians believed; assumptions based on the very texts being examined. The criterion of multiple independent attestation is effectively null given that independence cannot be established, and is unlikely. Scholars know that later Gospels build on Mark, and this combined with the composition dates, means that no convincing argument for independence is currently possible. Independence can only be claimed by appealing to the hypothetical sources, but that approach is obviously multiply fallacious.

The criterion of Aramaic context is only helpful if we assume that Jesus and his disciples were the only Aramaic-speakers of the era. The criteria of vividness and least distinctiveness can both indicate fiction, and, absurdly, contradict each other. This leaves the case for the Historical Jesus – which is essentially a stripped down version of the Gospel Jesus – on a knife-edge. So we need to consider Paul's Epistles, the earliest Christian documents, after all. This is certainly not a positive development given that Paul says virtually nothing about the Jesus of the Gospels, but his letters present additional hurdles.

Whatever we find in Paul, recall that I already explained how Paul denies human sources for his knowledge about Jesus, and explicitly tells us, several times, that he is receiving revelations from the Lord, and is reinterpreting the older Jewish scriptures (as many Jews were wont to do – consider the many examples in the Talmud). In other words, he is not a particularly reliable source. With that in mind, what we do find in Paul frankly leads us away from the Gospels' depiction of a Jesus that was recently on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Earth, and towards a Celestial Messiah, who was crucified in some mystical realm. To Paul, we mere mortals didn't witness this, and it is only 'now' (in Paul's time, decades after the alleged events of the Gospels, which, somewhat confusingly, were penned decades after Paul) that this is being revealed, through revelatory apostles like Paul (for example, see Romans 16:25–27). It is surely not insignificant that Paul, an apocalypticist Jew, speaks of a Celestial Messiah, when apocalypticist Jews before and around the time of nascent Christianity *already believed* in a Celestial Messiah – a cosmic figure that would defeat the 'sky demons'. This 'revelation' may surprise you, as it is not commonly discussed, but it is no secret amongst scholars of Judaism and Christianity – and this includes Ehrman.

Speaking of sky demons, according to Paul (1 Corinthians 2:6–10), Jesus was killed by the 'archons', who did not know his true identity and mission. Not coincidentally, the term 'archons' often refers to the sky demons. And of course, since Jesus' death was to result in salvation for humanity and the defeat of demonkind, this passage could easily refer to Satan and his cosmic allies. Humans, unlike the demons, would have had even more reason to kill Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, if they knew who he really was. Furthermore, Paul elsewhere praises the human authorities (who the Gospels claimed killed Jesus), as being agents of God, so these authorities (who Paul claimed killed Jesus) are almost certainly demonic. Many mainstream academics accept this infernal interpretation, and that includes some Christian scholars! But this flatly contradicts the Gospel account, reduces this crucial 'historical event' to the realm of fiction, and greatly supports the most plausible alternative to the mainstream Historical Jesus hypothesis: minimal mythicism. On this theory, Christianity started with the belief in a purely Celestial Messiah called Jesus, who later became allegorised and historicised into the Jesus of the Gospels.

This theory perfectly explains why the earliest Christian documents tend to portray Jesus as a figure up in the sky

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who communicates directly to special followers via visions or indirectly via reinterpretations of the older Jewish scriptures (as with Paul's Epistles, the Epistle of James, the first Epistle of Peter, and the non-canonical 1 Clement); why such authors show no knowledge of Jesus' Earthly life as portrayed in the later Gospels; and why one anonymous author indicates that Jesus had never been on Earth, was killed in or near a Temple not made by hands, and that his celestial sacrifice served as the perfect heavenly counterpart to the imperfect sacrifices conducted on Earth (see Hebrews 8–13). This theory explains why it is only the later documents (like the Gospels) that portray Jesus as a figure that recently lived on Earth. Belief in a Celestial Jesus also serves as a natural evolution from the already existing Jewish beliefs in a Celestial Messiah that would address the great physical problem of the Temple's inaccessibility. It also easily addresses the handful of passages in the earlier Epistles that allegedly portray an Earthly Jesus; those saying that Jesus had flesh, shed blood, was crucified, etc. This all applies just as well to the Celestial Jesus as it does to the Earthly Jesus of the Gospels, rendering these passages useless in supporting the mainstream view over the alternative.

There are many hints in and attributes of the texts that indicate that the minimal mythicist theory is the more probable one, but the most impressive I find to be: 1) Pre-Christian Jews already believed in a Celestial Messiah; 2) Paul, our earliest Christian author, speaks of a Celestial Messiah, with no unambiguous reference to the Jesus of the Gospels; and 3) the Gospels, via Mark, are allegories of Paul's writings. Of particular note is that all three points are backed by more mainstream scholars who have not joined the ranks of the fringe by declaring Jesus' non-existence; I believe that they have simply failed to connect the dots. If all this shouldn't get us at least doubting Jesus' historicity, it should have us outright denying it.

In his 2014 book *On the Historicity of Jesus* (Sheffield Phoenix Press), historian Richard Carrier put this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

alternative hypothesis to the test. Unlike any other scholar previously looking at this question, he ran the numbers. Like many other historians, philosophers, scholars of religion, and scientists, Carrier endorses a probabilistic approach (specifically Bayesian) to answering such questions. Postmodernists would object, but then, when has postmodernism ever allowed us to determine that something is probably true? Starting with the prior probabilities, Carrier notices that the Gospels portray Jesus in a way that is consistent with non-existing characters. He grants minimal historicity (the idea that Jesus was a historical figure, later mythicised) a prior of 1/3 and minimal mythicism (the idea that Jesus was a mythical – fictional – figure, later historicised) gets 2/3 by default. That's not to say that historicity has already lost. This is only the prior. And it is undeniable. The Gospels do portray Jesus in a way (several ways actually, with multiple reference classes basically yielding the same result) that is consistent with fictional characters. It is simply unreasonable to deny this. Never fear, historicity can win on the consequent side of the equation, via good evidence.

Unfortunately, as you are probably tired of hearing by now, we do not have good evidence. But it gets worse. The Gospels are mixtures of obvious myth and what is at least purported to be history. So they work on both theories. Such later texts are expected on the theory that a historical person was later mythicised, but also on the theory that says that a mythical (or fictional) person was later allegorised or historicised. Apart from how they influenced the prior probabilities, they, the most important sources concerning Jesus, can be scrapped. And so we come to the earlier Epistles. Again. Also finding Paul's silence about an Earthly Jesus to be deafening, and the oddity that some passages even indicate a non-Earthly Jesus (made worse by the fact that it were the historicising Christians that eventually dominated and controlled and edited the texts), Carrier judges that the Epistles favour minimal mythicism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While somewhat unnecessary due to the poor state of the sources, the low prior probability for the historicity theory, and the fact that all the evidence is neutral towards or outright favours minimal mythicism, Carrier nevertheless continues with his calculations, revealing that the probability of Jesus' historical existence is between 0% and 33%. Having thoroughly scrutinised Carrier's calculations (as of yet, I am the only scholar to have properly reviewed Carrier's work, in the academic literature), this author is inclined to agree. Unfortunately, while we both have received positive reviews in the proper academic channels, no refutation of our arguments has yet come in the form of a proper peer-reviewed article or book.

Conclusion

The approach taken by the mainstream historicists is riddled with unjustified and no longer tenable presuppositions, employs the use of illogical methods such as the overuse of non-existing sources, and surprisingly involves attacks on critics' personal beliefs and qualifications. By contrast, the work of ahistoricists like Carrier and myself is published in the peer-reviewed literature, and is measured and impersonal. Given the state of the available sources, it is entirely reasonable to be undecided over the issue of Jesus' historical existence.

A proper probabilistic analysis, however, of the hypotheses of minimal historicity and minimal mythicism, reveals that it is also reasonable to outright deny Jesus' historicity. Not simply because the sources are terrible, but because they indicate that Christianity evolved naturally from pre-existing Jewish beliefs in a Celestial Messiah. One that found its way into Paul's Epistles, and was later allegorised and historicised into the Jesus of the Gospels; later to be stripped-down by mainstream secular scholars into the so-called Historical Jesus. Whether any of this matters with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regards to religious belief is irrelevant to the discussion at hand. What is relevant is that, historically, it seems all too probable that Jesus Did Not Exist.

Raphael Lataster is a Doctoral student at the University of Sydney, and lectures in the Department of Studies in Religion. raphael.lataster@sydney.edu.au

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000117 Published online by Cambridge University Press