DEFENDING JESUS AGNOSTICISM

Raphael Lataster

Few critical scholars have responded to my recent work on the controversial topic of Jesus' probable ahistoricity. Disregarding my advice that this should be a debate among atheists, Brenda Watson has become the first to respond in an academic journal. Stephen Law also received some criticism for his own article on scepticism about Jesus. I respond to them all here.

Secular Scholarship

Brenda Watson ('An Unbelievable Myth: The Invention of Jesus?', *Think* 50) has responded to my 'Defending Jesus Agnosticism: Reply to Brenda Watson', *Think* 43). Her first criticism is strange. She takes issue with my appealing to secular scholars, finding it 'suspicious'. I shall again explain that I have many rational reasons for this, which she has overlooked, with the primary reason being that my work is aimed at the so-called Historical Jesus of the secular scholars. I argue against Watson's Christ of Faith in my more mainstream work. She also fails to realize that I am actually very critical of many of these secular scholars, which makes her next point about doubting the peer-review process, since 'it can easily become a form of recycling of currently fashionable ideas' (and her later suggestion that I allegedly regard secular scholars as unbiased), multiply surprising. Watson also fails to realize that another major reason I limit the debate to atheists is that it is to be expected that secular scholars, who seemingly have less need to defend Jesus' historicity than Christians, would present the most convincing case. Unlike many in my chosen fields, I prefer to

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engage with the best arguments against my positions, rather than gorge myself on the low-hanging fruit.

Watson then objects to my calling the Gospels 'terrible' sources, which further reveals the inefficiency of involving Christians in this debate; I have no desire to reinvent the wheel. At least she admits that these are poor sources, 'if you are quite sure that there is no God'. Predictably, she then demands that I, the atheist that privileges hard naturalism, must demonstrate with 'certainty that God does not exist'. I would rather wait for her to prove with certainty that God does exist, and to explain why the miraculous claims of all other religious traditions can be (rightfully) dismissed. Incidentally, much of my work effectively disproves the existence of God, and explains why all religions' miraculous claims should be doubted, but that is beside the point here. Watson overlooks the fact that the secular scholars I invoke do not need to be convinced of this, and despite her credentials, does not seem to realize how critical history is done. It is a probabilistic endeavour, and the onus is on her to explain why God's existence is probable. That is no easy feat, and would be necessary to make her point a valid one, though it would not be sufficient.

Christian Origins

Watson next attempts to school me on 'basic rules [that] have evolved regarding what counts as historical evidence'. Firstly, she says that the surviving evidence must be explained. That is what I do. Secondly, Watson demands that reasons be provided for doubting the sources. That is what I do. More can be said about her 'method' in simply believing the implausible claims of the Gospels when – in her view – there are no good reasons to doubt them, but I digress. She tangentially exclaims, as if to make my case for me, that 'the presence of mistakes and contradictions indicates real human source material!' Well, yes. Watson thirdly insists that I 'must account for the strangeness of

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what was imagined'. Again, that is what I do. She does not seem all that familiar with the work of myself, or that of my co-author. Clearly in a triune mood, the Trinitarian Christian then poses three questions:

1. 'How do we account for the very existence of Christianity? There is the simple fact – and few would contest that – of Christianity's existence and flourishing over millennia.' Likewise, many Muslims find the success of Islam to be indicative of its truth; yet another reason to exclude Christians from this debate. But Watson *finally* gets to the point, also asking, 'where is the evidence for the widespread belief in a pre-Christian Jewish Celestial Christ which Lataster considers is where Christianity originated?' Overlooking the term 'widespread' since I nowhere claim this, I point out that Watson answers both questions herself: 'The gospels and the letters of Paul offer an elegant, clear and straightforward explanation.' In short, Paul describes the Celestial Jesus, which seems eerily similar to pre-Christian Jewish (and non-existent) figures like the otherworldly Logos and the celestial Son of Man. Paul's basic story is then allegorized by Mark, and the tale is further embellished in the other Gospels. There is a clear historicizing trend as time goes on, with the earliest sources being more friendly to the Celestial Jesus theory.

2. 'Why indeed is the reading of Paul skewed in such a peculiar way as to suggest that he invented Jesus?' He did not, and I do not claim that he did. And we again see why Christians need to be excluded from the debate. Watson then implies that Paul really did experience Jesus (he certainly did not meet Jesus before the latter's death), and that he would be deluded if this were not true. Once again, she answers her own questions. In the actual world, cold and mechanistic as it is, people do not meet spiritual beings; Paul was indeed – assuming he was not a complete liar – deluded. It happens. Hence, the existence of many non-Christian religions. Watson demands evidence. Much of the evidence against supernatural claims is the lack of evidence for them; after all, if there was a God who wished for us to believe in him, it is

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strange – i.e. improbable – that he is hidden (the problem of hiddenness), just as it would be strange if a nuclear bomb went off in your bedroom, leaving no signs of damage or radiation. Additionally, there is ample evidence of people (which no doubt includes Paul and other authors, such as Muhammad and Joseph Smith) making stuff up and/or believing in things that are not true. Evidence indeed.

3. 'Is the late dating of the gospels uncontested?' No, and this harms Watson's position more than it harms mine. Note that I use the mainstream dating; it is not strange, and it is not late. If she wants 'late dating', I could make claims about the Gospels being written sometime in the second century. After all, we don't have the autographs. The extant copies appear centuries after Jesus' alleged death. If Christians want to invoke earlier dates, they need to provide us with good reasons. Strangely, Watson not only fails to provide reasons, she fails to provide her preferred dates! Also note that the dates seem to be relatively unimportant for the most part, so long as Paul's epistles precede the Gospels (and even that is not absolutely essential). Watson also overlooks the fact that my (widely held) assertion that the Gospels are not primary sources largely stems from their being anonymous; this is kind of a big deal. She then moves on to explaining how it is possible that Mark was penned earlier than around the early 70s. But this just highlights one of my biggest gripes with the believers and even many of the critical scholars in the field. Just about anything is *possible*. It's possible that God exists, that her name is Satan, and that Jesus is an evil false god hell-bent on deceiving people like Watson and causing destructive schisms. We need to know what is *probable*.

Watson ends her 'refutation' with an odd request: that I respond to Christian theologian N. T. Wright's argument for Jesus' existence and resurrection in Antony Flew's *There is a God*. Wright there barely mentions the issue of Jesus' historicity, noting only that most scholars accept it. As it is this topic that interests us at present, I ought to leave it at that. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that I do not find

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Wright's arguments persuasive. He essentially believes everything the Gospels claim about Jesus. That is obviously not how critical scholarship works. If only Watson were a critical scholar, we could have had a truly meaningful exchange. Note also that I prefer William Lane Craig's somewhat similar argument for the resurrection, which I refute (along with his case for God's existence) in much of my other work. A good place to start would be the article published in this very journal, entitled 'A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig's Resurrection of Jesus Argument'.

A Debate among Atheists

This was a poor 'defence' of Jesus' historicity. But I thank Watson, for the attempt, and for being the first to take on the task. She apparently has more courage than the self-styled experts. And, while it is all too easy to mock uncritical Christian scholars, I do admire a little the consistency of the 'it is all true' approach. In contrast, the secular Jesus historicists need to explain that the sources are 'terrible', since they are not Christian believers, but then must back-peddle and explain that the sources are not so bad after all; they apparently give us absolute certainty about the mundane Jesus' existence, and about some of the things he said and did. With that, I turn my attention back to the secular historicists, as Richard Carrier and I did in *Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists*. Especially Bart Ehrman and his most vital reason for trusting the 'terrible' Gospels: his innumerable non-existing foundational sources. But not before I look at what a few other secular philosophers think of the increasing respectability of questioning Jesus' historicity.

Cavin and Colombetti on Law

In 2011, *Faith and Philosophy* published an article by Stephen Law, which expressed doubt on miraculous claims,

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and even on the historicity of Jesus. Fellow atheists Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti responded with a 2014 critique, also in *Faith and Philosophy*. The latter scholars employ Bayesian reasoning to demonstrate that Law was correct to consider miraculous claims improbably true, but seemingly use the same approach to refute Law's claim that doubting Jesus' historical existence is reasonable. Here I show that Cavin and Colombetti's data are flawed, though the overall approach is mostly sound, finally concluding that Law was right. It is indeed reasonable to have some doubts about Jesus' historicity.

Cavin and Colombetti agree with Law on the improbability of miracles, and endorse the Bayesian approach I so often employ. They agree that, '*extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence*', which is an inherently Bayesian notion: a hypothesis with a low prior probability will need to make it up with superior likelihoods. Cavin and Colombetti also agree that we lack extraordinary evidence of the New Testament's miraculous claims, and that we should therefore be doubtful about them. However, the agreement comes to an abrupt end. They think that Jesus almost certainly existed, and refer to 'four items of evidence'.

The first is that the Apostle Paul supposedly met with Jesus' relatives and closest disciples. We already encounter a significant problem, which lies at the heart of their disagreement with Law (and myself). Cavin and Colombetti privilege the Gospels' accounts. Uncomfortable though it may be, the Epistles are generally older than the canonical Gospels, with Paul's Epistles typically taken as being the very first Christian documents. Believing and non-believing scholars alike have noted that Paul's writings are far less detailed about Jesus and his life on Earth; it is almost as if the latter did not occur. It must be noted that Cavin and Colombetti have here engaged in eisegesis. Paul has not here – or anywhere in his writings – explained that the crucifixion of Jesus took place on Earth, neither do we have any documents from Jesus' early followers claiming to be his literal blood relatives. Instead, Paul gives us much

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ambiguous talk of celestial battles and fictive kinship (e.g. Ephesians 6:12 and Romans 8:29). Even 'mainstream' scholars like William Arnal, who do not so actively involve themselves in throwing doubt on Jesus' historicity, recognize that Paul's work should be considered without the (later) Gospels in mind. Put bluntly, Cavin and Colombetti supposedly invoke Paul, but they have really just invoked the Gospels. They also claim that, 'It seems improbable that Paul lied about this meeting'. Paul's honesty, or at least his ability to relay historically accurate information, should not merely be assumed. After all, everything Paul knows of Jesus comes through direct and indirect revelation; he explicitly rules out human sources (e.g. Galatians 1:11–12). This is clearly something that atheists like Cavin and Colombetti would reject!

The second item of evidence is 'the coherent body of sayings and actions attributed to Jesus in the gospels, which seem to derive from a single creative and sagacious personality'. This uninformed statement lacks the supposed sagacity of the subject and ignores the vast literature on the matter. Mainstream, even Christian, scholarship on the Gospels discusses a multitude of sources, with older biblical and even hypothetical sources like Q supposedly being made up of 'layers'. The Jesus Seminar also famously revealed that numerous mainstream biblical scholars doubted that much of the teachings did indeed originate with Jesus. These are stories that grew in the telling. Once again, Cavin and Colombetti privilege the Gospels, much like the Christians they normally oppose, despite, as Law recognized, their being 'contaminated'. It is to be expected that philosophers would not be so familiar with the cutting-edge research and diversity of opinions concerning scholarship on the Bible and religion, but perhaps then they should refrain from speaking with such authority on such matters until they are.

(All too often I see philosophers comment on biblical claims with an inadequate knowledge of the Bible, Judaism, Christianity, and religion in general. This can lead

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to scenarios like the present one, where too much credence – more than some Christian scholars of the Bible in some cases – is given to the sources. And all too often, I see biblical scholars make logical claims without the vitally important critical framework of the analytic philosopher. I believe that both are needed to answer questions of this sort. We need the knowledge and nuance of the specialist scholar of religion and the logical acuity of the analytic philosopher.)

The third item of evidence is apparently that belief in Jesus or someone similar initiating the Christian movement from within Judaism is 'the simplest explanation'. Interestingly, while this can be very much doubted, for a plethora of reasons, it need not be here. The best explanation for Christianity's origins that entails Jesus' non-existence, as presented by Carrier and myself, purports that the likes of Paul and earlier Christians (like Peter) believed that they had received revelations from the cosmic Son of Man that some apocalypticist Jews of the time already believed in (even Bart Ehrman acknowledges the latter); the key difference being that the Son of Man's mission has been accomplished. He was killed by Paul's *archons*, the cosmic demons, and, since this did not occur on Earth and nobody actually witnessed it, Jesus communicates to a select few via revelations (1 Corinthians 2:6–10). This 'Celestial Jesus' theory does not conflict with Cavin and Colombetti's third item. By our reckoning, Christianity certainly did originate 'within Judaism', and the belief in 'Jesus himself' or 'someone just like him'.

Similarly, the fourth item reveals a great ignorance about early Christianity, the Judaism/s of the time, and religion in general. It concerns the alleged crucifixion of Jesus and relies on the validity of the criterion of embarrassment. Apart from the fact that religions often made 'embarrassing' claims (such as the castration of Attis), the speculative nature of attempting to figure out what the incredibly diverse Jewish and Christian sects would find embarrassing, and the overlooking of theological reasons, mainstream scholars have increasingly looked upon relying on

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the Criterion of Authenticity with scorn; partly because the sources are so scarce and unreliable, and partly because it is necessarily circular. It is also worth noting that Christians often employ this criterion in aid of their evangelism, such as the claim that it was embarrassing for women to have found Jesus' tomb empty (so Jesus probably was raised from the dead).

Cavin and Colombetti then focus on 'Law's *contamination principle* . . . which he claims entails that we should remain skeptical about the existence of Jesus'. Essentially, if a document contains a significant amount of extraordinary claims, and these are false (as atheists would probably agree on), the mundane claims therein should be treated with suspicion. Cavin and Colombetti nitpick on an analogy Law provides, so I shall provide another one. The Harry Potter books make many extraordinary claims, such as that Harry Potter has magical powers. But they also make mundane claims, such as that Harry Potter exists, is a boy, lives in the United Kingdom, and so forth. Of course, the Harry Potter books are so filled with fiction that we can doubt even the mundane claims therein. And even then, there are nuggets of truth, such as that London exists. But how well do these analogies work when we consider the Gospels? Cavin and Colombetti engage in Bayesian calculations to show that it is very likely that the mundane claims in the Gospels are true. As is expected, since I endorse Bayesian reasoning, I mostly disagree not with their method, but with their data. As I have earlier explained regarding certain arguments for Jesus' resurrection (for example the McGrews'), we must be mindful of the 'garbage in, garbage out' principle. Cavin and Colombetti insist that the prior probability for the truth of the mundane claims, given the mundane testimonies, is 'at least 0.99, and certainly no less than 0.5', and that 'ignorance' of the miraculous testimonies 'is bliss'.

Firstly, there is a complete lack of evidential justification for these figures. Despite this, the authors have the gall later to refer to 'the strength of the considerations we have adduced above to justify assigning comparatively high

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values of 0.99'. Secondly, the 0.5 prior probability they effectively concede as possible would end the discussion by revealing Law's (and my) agnosticism to be reasonable. Recall that Law is not claiming that Jesus did not exist; like myself, he really only makes the reserved claim that, given the state of the sources, it is reasonable to be less than certain. Indeed, a close analysis of the crucial pages in the response piece reveals that the posterior probability of around 50% is plausible, from their own figures, so that they effectively admit that Jesus' historicity could be '50–50'.

Thirdly, their 'bracketing' of the material in the sources makes the incredible assumption that the obviously mythical material should not at all make us sceptical about the rest. Let that soak in. Cavin and Colombetti would be happy to proclaim the 0.00001% of a story's mundane claims as being almost certainly true, even if 99.99999% of the story consisted of supernatural fiction. Such credulity would even be inappropriate if the story contained no supernatural fictions; there are countless reasons to doubt mundane claims, especially those made by people interested in spreading their religious beliefs, and especially if those people are known to peddle falsehoods. Unfortunately, we do not have purely mundane sources about Jesus. It would be great to have such sources, but they simply do not exist. In any case, such stories would still need to be questioned, which is something that Cavin and Colombetti strangely avoid doing. Fourthly, if we add to that the fact that we know that many of the Gospels' mundane claims are also fictional, this attitude is revealed as being beyond completely untenable. Not only is the 0.99 prior unjustified due to general considerations over the author/s, false memories, and the like, but it is also demonstrably wrong when it comes to the New Testament sources. Scholars know that a sizeable proportion of the mundane claims in these sources are not literally true, due to descriptions of ahistorical mundane events, contradictions between the Gospels, allegories, etc.

Consider also Cavin and Colombetti's claim that the prior probability for the non-truth of the mundane claims, given

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the mundane testimonies, is 0.01, even less, and what that means. This effectively says that it is *almost impossible* for these claims not to be true. On what basis do they make such a startling declaration? Cavin and Colombetti do not explain. It is as if they think it impossible that an unidentified proselytizer – who is obviously wrong about much – could purposefully lie about the mundane, or used artistic licence, or simply misremembered, or used an inaccurate source, or was communicating non-literally, and so forth. And we do know that the transmission of the texts was not ideal, with medieval Christians happy to make edits as they required. Even most Christian scholars would not go about their work so carelessly.

In assuming that the mundane claims in the Gospels have high prior probabilities, Cavin and Colombetti have effectively (there is no need to detail the similar problems with their likelihoods) assumed that these claims were intended to be taken as historically true, making them far less critical than many mainstream – including Christian – biblical scholars; calculations become unnecessary. Critical scholars of the New Testament have long known that the sources are quite poor, with even Bart Ehrman admitting as much in a book dedicated to proving Jesus' historicity (*Did Jesus Exist?*) and being forced to retreat to an even shakier foundation made up of *hypothetical* sources; the Gospels are, after all, anonymous, non-contemporaneous, biased, largely allegorical, and filled with both extraordinary and mundane fictions. The latter presents a particularly pointed problem for Cavin and Colombetti; one that alone obliterates the rationality of invoking a 0.99 prior. The Gospels do contain many false mundane claims (such as Matthew's Massacre of the Innocents and Luke's census), and this is widely accepted, though Cavin and Colombetti seem oblivious. Many critical scholars of early Christianity will agree that Jesus existed, but would be unimpressed with how Cavin and Colombetti arrive at this conclusion.

Even worse, numerous scholars have concluded that the all-important Gospel of Mark (from which the others

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elaborate) builds upon earlier Jewish sources, pagan sources, Paul's writings, and the Jewish penchant for reinterpreting earlier texts, and is filled with allegories. With this immense scholarship, it is all too easy to view Mark's Gospel as a meta-allegory, with what little that is left over, once all the improbable miraculous claims, mundane fictions, and allegories are removed, serving only as the filler that would be required to construct a coherent narrative. And it becomes all too reasonable to suppose that the later Gospels (primarily Matthew and Luke) are historical fictions, layered upon allegories (Mark), layered upon hallucinations or even deceptions (Paul), prompted by necessary reinterpretations of earlier Jewish texts (such as the Tanakh). A charitable interpretation of Law's argument is, rightly, that increasing amounts of material that is not true in the historical sense should have us questioning the veracity of the remainder.

This alludes to another deficiency in Cavin and Colombetti's essay. They fail to explain properly at what point the amount of 'non-truths' in a source allows us to be sceptical about the rest. Despite the relevance to the prior probabilities, on all this, Cavin and Colombetti had nothing to say; and there is a great dearth of references to the work of critical biblical scholars in their essay. They completely overlook the entire sub-field of Historical Jesus research, which is primarily interested in establishing what it is that Jesus actually said and did; this clearly entails a healthy scepticism about just about any claim in the Gospels. By contrast, like apologists arguing for the resurrection via the bracketing/minimal facts approach, Cavin and Colombetti seem happy to accept any biblical claim that is not miraculous. They simply assume that Paul is in tune with the Gospels, that the Gospels were intended to portray history, and that they do so very reliably – bar some supernatural exaggerations. Furthermore, Cavin and Colombetti explicitly reveal that their use of the increasingly maligned embarrassment criterion, as well as their superficial interpretation of Paul's writings, plays a role in their assigning high prior probabilities to the mundane claims.

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Despite the many issues with the sources, and the failure to explain how we can determine which mundane claims are literally true and which are not, Cavin and Colombetti greatly privilege the Gospels, even more than many believing biblical scholars would. They also make the mistake of adopting an absurdly monolithic view of Judaism and Christianity, when they say, 'Even if mythicists were to protest (absurdly) that the earliest Christian leaders in Jerusalem, e.g., Peter, John, and James, and the later New Testament authors had rejected these Jewish views and embraced a radically new perspective, they cannot deny that the Jews to whom they preached had not.' This reveals a great ignorance about the obvious and widely known diversity of Jewish and Christian thought at the time, and about how religions grow, evolve, and compete. Given the excessive amount of credulity and respect shown to the highly problematic sources, it is no surprise that Cavin and Colombetti conclude that the mundane claims about Jesus in the Gospels are almost certainly true.

However, realizing that the likes of Law will not accept the extraordinarily high values that they assign to be the mundane claims' prior probabilities, Cavin and Colombetti redo the calculations several times, arriving at probabilities such as 86% and even 66%, before concluding that Law has been decisively refuted. These numbers are of course well below the 95%+ probabilities required by scientists to be reasonably certain. Even then, their priors are based on the increasingly untenable assumption that the relevant documents are reliable (we have not even touched on the lack of autographs, medieval interpolations, differences in manuscripts, and so forth) and even intended to relay accurate historical information. In fact, and as is to be expected since all of these discussants are philosophers and not scholars of the Bible or of religion in general, Law actually joins Cavin and Colombetti in placing too much faith in the Christian sources. So Cavin and Colombetti are correct in claiming that 'Law is simply wrong to claim that the evidence of the New Testament renders the existence

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of Jesus only (or at best) "a little more probable than not".' Carrier and I have explained that both the Gospels and the Epistles do more service to our preferred ahistoricity theory. But that point is unnecessary here.

The Crux

My most important objection to Cavin and Colombetti's essay is their prior of 0.99. They assume that a person's mundane claim in a mundane portion of a source is almost certainly true, 'at least' 99%, even if that person is unknown, clearly biased, and is demonstrably wrong about many of their supernatural and even mundane claims. This is tantamount to saying that it is almost impossible for people to lie or simply be mistaken about mundane matters, even when their own track record indicates otherwise. Indeed, this very debate, with Cavin and Colombetti on one side and Law and myself on the other, reveals how unrealistic the 0.99 prior is. It effectively says that if someone makes a mundane claim, it is almost certainly not a lie, a mistake, etc. But in our interaction, and in many debates about non-supernatural issues, there are clearly very many wrong claims being made. And yet, Cavin and Colombetti effectively claim that 'people making claims about the supernatural are almost always wrong, but people making claims abut the mundane are almost always right, almost all of the time, even when they have a demonstrably poor track record'. It really just seems that Cavin and Colombetti were uninterested in a proper Bayesian analysis to figure out what they should believe; they had already made their minds up and produced unrealistic and self-serving figures that would force the calculations to agree with them. They ought to have opted for a more reserved prior, like 75%, and then argued for that figure by explaining who the author is, describing their qualifications, giving us confidence regarding the transmission of the texts, explaining why it does not matter that most of the author's supernatural and mundane claims are not true, and so forth.

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Their prior probability is key to this discussion. Everything else can be perceived as filler. I could be wrong about everything else I said, such as about Paul's views about the Celestial Jesus, and Cavin and Colombetti could be right about everything else they said. It matters not. This prior of 0.99 is the crux. Lower it just a bit and Law's (and my) agnostic position is justified. Unfortunately, Cavin and Colombetti not only failed to, but they did not even *attempt* to justify their figure.

Conclusion

Whether or not the likes of Carrier and myself have demonstrated that Jesus probably did not exist, and that the biblical texts themselves make this sceptical hypothesis more likely, the gist of Law's argument rings true; 'we should be at least somewhat doubtful about the existence of the historical Jesus', and especially since Law's conclusion is unquantified, Cavin and Colombetti's more conservative figures actually confirm this. Additionally, none of Cavin and Colombetti's figures were evidentially justified, especially their crucial prior probability of 'at least 0.99'. I would argue that even their 'conservative' figures miss the mark, being greatly inflated, but that is a topic for another day. At the very least, it is rational to be agnostic about Jesus' historicity. It is rational to have some reservations about it. Mainstream scholars such as Hector Avalos and Arthur Droge wholeheartedly agree, and even the likes of James Crossley, István Czachesz, and Philip Davies seem to recognize that there is some merit to this controversial, but increasingly acceptable, notion.

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