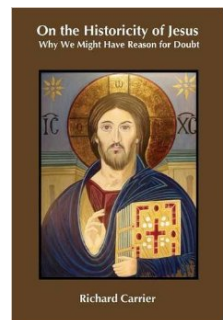


On The Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt, by Richard Carrier

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In the mall in Newcastle there is a bookshop called *The Book Grocer*. I made one visit a while ago to shop for Christmas presents and found it the most bewildering place, in that I had not heard of *any* of the books in the shop, nor did they have anything of what I was after. It was like entering a parallel universe. Reading through this book has been a similar experience. I felt like I had stepped into some



inter-fundamentalist debate with strawmen popping up at every corner. And at the worst of times it felt like I had stepped into a Jesus Seminar, a seminar armed with a reversed agenda and TI-89 Titanium calculators:

$$\begin{aligned} [\text{Worst odds on } H] &= [1/15] \times [3 / 2500] \\ &= 3 / 37500 \\ &= 1/12500 \text{ [odds]} \\ &\approx 0.00008 \text{ [probability]} \\ &\approx 0.008 \end{aligned}$$

In other words, in my estimation the odds Jesus existed are less than 1 in 12,000. Which to a historian is for all practical purposes a probability of zero. For comparison, your lifetime probability of being struck by lightning is around 1 in 10,000. That Jesus existed is even less likely than that. Consequently, I am reasonably certain there was no historical Jesus. (600)

Halfway through writing this review (and cursing myself for suggesting it), I stumbled upon James McGrath's comprehensive and judicious review of the precursor, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/08/review-of-richard-c-carrier-proving-history.html>). The reason why this review was a sight for really sore eyes was that while Carrier applies Bayle's Theorem in *On the Historicity of Jesus*, he recaps it in a single subsection (15–16) and otherwise refers to *Proving History* for further explanation. Now, having worked my way through 600-plus pages on the historicity of Jesus, you may forgive me for not jumping at the chance to read another 350 pages to figure out his basic methodology in the one I was actually reading.

On the Historicity of Jesus consists of twelve chapters. Chapter 1, "The Problem," gives us the full background of the development of Carrier's personal crusade, as well as the aim and description of the book. Chapters 2 ("The Hypothesis of History") and 3 ("The Hypothesis of Myth") set out his minimal theory of history and myth respectively. His minimalist historical theory (*h*) is based on the epistles and has the following three facts, which all have to be true for historicity of Jesus to be established:

1. An actual man at some point named Jesus acquired followers in life who continued as an identifiable movement after his death.

2. This is the same Jesus who was claimed by some of his followers to have been executed by the Jewish or Roman authorities.
3. This is the same Jesus some of whose followers soon began worshipping as a living god (or demigod). (34)

His minimalist theory of myth (*-h*) consists of the following five propositions:

1. At the origin of Christianity, Jesus Christ was thought to be a celestial deity much like any other.
2. Like many other celestial deities, this Jesus “communicated” with his subjects only through dreams, visions and other forms of divine inspiration (such as prophecy, past and present).
3. Like some other celestial deities, this Jesus was originally believed to have endured an ordeal of incarnation, death, burial and resurrection in a supernatural realm.
4. As for many other celestial deities, an allegorical story of this same Jesus was then composed and told within the sacred community, which placed him on earth, in history, as a divine man, with an earthly family, companions, and enemies, complete with deeds and sayings, and an earthly depiction of his ordeals.
5. Subsequent communities of worshipers believed (or at least taught) that this invented sacred story was real (and either not allegorical or only “additionally” allegorical). (53)

Chapters 4 and 5 assess the applicable background knowledge which tests the probability for these hypotheses. Chapter 4 looks at the established history of Christianity and its origins, while chapter 5 looks at everything else. This is necessary, because “even the most erudite scholars in the field are unaware of most of it” (15). The first twenty-two elements in chapter 4 are broken down into “Elements of Christian Origin” (1–10), which set forth the nature of Judaism at the rise of Christianity; “Elements of Christian Religion” (11–18), which include the relation to mystic religions, scripture, Jewish ritual, and the early Christians as schizophrenics suffering from hallucinations; and “Elements of Christian Development” (19–22), which discusses Paul as well as the lack of sources from 64 to 95 CE. Chapter 5 contains elements twenty-three to forty-eight, which concern (23–29) the political context including the Roman Empire; the Jerusalem Temple and Melanesian Cargo

Cults; religious and philosophical contexts (30–43) such as resurrection cults (Inanna, Adonis and Osiris), popular philosophy (Cynicism, Stoicism etc), Jewish sectarianism, popular cosmologies etc.; and literary context (44–48), especially hero narratives (Socrates, Aesop and Romulus) which culminates in the Rank-Raglan hero type (229), which happily shows that only mythical people fit this type (fifteen people who score more than half the twenty-two features) and “*every single one of them was regarded as a historical person and placed in history in narratives written about them*” (232, emphasis in original).

Carrier concludes this survey of the basic elements with the point that “in my experience, a great deal of what has been surveyed up to this point remains unknown even to many experts in the study of Jesus” (234). Given that he does cite selected scholars in his footnotes (he seems to have a particular fondness for James Crossley) to support the elements, one wonders who he is writing against, or who these ignorant experts and most erudite scholars are.

Just as a quick example, in the section on political context no mention is made of Richard Horsley’s work (although he does get a lashing elsewhere) or Warren Carter’s. Whether you agree with their work or not, it surely is extraordinary that a survey of the scholarship on the political context of early Christianity does not include their contributions to the field.

Chapter 6, “The Prior Probability,” establishes the prior probability that Jesus was historical as 33%. This is based on Jesus’s assignment to the Rank-Raglan reference class, which, as Carrier assures his readers, does not “pre-suppose that Jesus began as a Rank-Raglan hero.” Even if strictly correct, the methodology is tenuous. In addition, the numbers and the statistics seem like a diversion or an illusionary tactic which intentionally confuse and obfuscate and attempt to give personal conviction the sheen of scientific language instead of presenting a sound argument. As an example, from chapter 8, after pointing out the discrepancy between the dating of Jesus’s life and death to the time of Alexander Jannaeus in Epiphaneus (281–82) and that of the canonical gospels, Carrier ventures the opinion that the best explanation for this dual dating is that Jesus didn’t exist:

As a general rule, it must *surely* be more common for a mythical man to be placed in different historical periods than for this to happen to a historical man, for whom there would only be one core tradition originating from his own time, well known to his worshipers and tradents. I have no data on the relative

frequency of this phenomenon (How many people do we know to have been set in different historical periods? How many of them never existed to begin with? What would those numbers then be in a hypothetical infinite repetition of history?) But it must *surely* beg all credulity to believe that this happens to historical persons exactly as often as non-historical ones—even for the simple reason that it is so much easier to do this to non-historical persons. As I noted before, if there is no actual set of historical events anchoring that person to reality, then they can easily be inserted into history wherever any given mythographer wants. This must *surely* be harder to do for a man already solidly linked to his actual historical context, and widely known to be so among all who worship him. *In mathematical terms, this would mean the ratio must be greater than 2 to 1—in other words, being placed in different historical periods must happen to mythical persons twice as often as it happens to historical persons. In fact, more than twice, surely. But I am committed to erring as far against the mythicist hypothesis as is reasonably possible, so I will assume this ratio to be 2 to 1.* (288, emphasis added)

This assumption (hey presto: “statistic”) then takes on a life of its own in the prodigious footnote 18.

The following chapters, “Primary Sources” (7) and “Extrabiblical Evidence” (8) reiterate with tiresome pomposity debates over dating and authorship of the New Testament texts and extra-biblical evidence. On the basis of the extra-biblical evidence, Carrier unsurprisingly concludes that the evidence is against a historical Jesus.

Chapters 9–11 discuss in more detail the New Testament evidence. Chapter 9 looks at Acts, chapter 10 at the gospels, and chapter 11 at the epistles. Carrier’s analysis of the gospels reaches the equally unsurprising conclusion that the gospels are mythological and have no base in history. Thus his analysis of Mark reveals that Mark “deliberately arranged his narrative to symbolically represent Jesus as the Passover lamb” (425); that the five Great Discourses in Matthew “are obviously meant to replace the five books of the Pentateuch” (468); and that Luke rewrote the story to communicate how Christian values differ from mainstream Roman values (482). He reserves his most scathing critique for the gospel of John, whose authors are totally obsessed (thus Carrier) with proof and evidence, inventing an eyewitness and

thus showing itself to be “the most ruthlessly propagandistic, and thus the most thoroughly untrustworthy, of all the canonical Gospels” (490).

In his conclusion, Carrier trumpets that for Jesus studies this means that “all later tales of a historical Jesus and his family need to be seen as legendary, mythical and propagandistic inventions, and studied for their literary and rhetorical purpose and not for their specific historical content” (608). Such a statement reveals Carrier’s ignorance of the field of New Testament studies and early Christianity and we should once again ask to whom he is preaching. While I will concede that the historical Jesus haunts biblical scholarship of all shapes and sizes, Carrier’s response seems to come out of some parallel universe. Maths aside, nothing in the book shocked me, but seemed quite rudimentary first year New Testament stuff. What did surprise me was Carrier’s claims to indifference as to the historicity of Jesus and his professed lack of vested interest in the matter, which in my opinion rests somewhat uneasily with his confessed atheism and flies in the face of the fundamentalist drive of the book to disprove the historical Jesus. In sum, it is not that I disagree with some or all of his representations of the material; it is more the lack of insight into New Testament scholarship, the mathematics which replace careful argumentation, and above all, the evangelical commitment to truth that I find so tremendously off-putting.

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