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MYTHICISM AND THE PUBLIC JESUS OF HISTORY

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SYNOPSIS

Arguments for the nonexistence of the Jesus of history stumble over the public nature of much of the primary evidence. Jesus was observed by crowds of people, by friends and foes alike. The strongest evidence for the existence of Jesus is found in Paul's letters to the Christians of Corinth and Galatia. In these letters, whose authenticity no one doubts, Paul describes his firsthand—and very public—encounters with two of Jesus' original disciples, Peter and John, and with James, the brother of Jesus. Attempts to explain away this James as someone other than the brother of Jesus reveal the desperation of the mythicist approach to the evidence. It is important to remember that critics of early Christianity never doubted the existence of Jesus—they disputed His identity and significance. Modern critics should follow their lead.

I recently had the opportunity to engage Richard Carrier in debate over the question of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ Carrier is a well-known and probably the ablest exponent of the theory that Jesus never existed. According to this theory, Jesus was a "myth," largely constructed of pagan mythology and shaped somewhat by Jewish conceptuality and language, that for whatever reason people in the first century came to believe was actually a real person of history. This view has become popularly known as mythicism, and its proponents, such as Richard Carrier, Timothy Freke, Peter Gandy, Robert Price, and others, are called mythicists or mythers.² Although mythicism is

gaining popularity in the public arena, the vast majority of scholars and historians—including many scholars who hold to very skeptical views—reject it. The existence of Jesus is a matter of historical evidence. The existence of Jesus is also the best explanation of this evidence and of the rise of the Christian movement—and is not in itself an article of faith or a religious dogma.

MYTHICIST ARGUMENTS

The principal mythicist arguments can be summed up by two claims: (1) the evidence for the existence of Jesus is weak and unimpressive, and (2) there is good reason to believe that the stories of Jesus presented in the New Testament Gospels are constructs inspired by various pagan mythologies, especially those that speak of dying and rising gods. The basic points of these arguments can be reviewed briefly.

The evidence for the existence of Jesus is weak. Mythicists claim that most of the ancient evidence for the existence of Jesus was produced by Christians and therefore cannot be trusted. After all, only Christians wrote biographies, that is, the Gospels. These Gospels present a miracle-working Jesus who was resurrected after being executed. Surely this is the stuff of myth, not history. The testimony of Paul is not to be trusted either, or at least it should not be taken as in reference to a real person of history. Rather, Paul is speaking of a celestial being, whose birth and death were in the heavens, not on Earth.

Mythicists reject, in one way or another, all references to Jesus in non-Christian Greek and Latin writings, including those references in the second-century writings of Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Lucian of Samosata, and Celsus. Their testimony is of no real value, it is claimed, because these writers rely on the Christian stories. The testimony of the Syrian statesman Mara bar Serapion, who refers to Jesus as the Jews' "wise king," is rejected for the same reason.

More troublesome for skeptics is the testimony of Josephus, who lived in the first century (c. 36/37–100 CE) and so overlaps chronologically with the generation of Jesus. In book 18 of his *Jewish Antiquities* (c. 93), Josephus refers to Jesus, a teacher and doer of wonders, who was opposed by the Jewish leaders and was crucified by Pontius Pilate (*Ant.* 18.63–64). But mythicists claim that the passage is a Christian interpolation, and so counts for nothing. So also the reference to Jesus and His brother James in book 20 (*Ant.* 20.200); either the passage is wholly an interpolation, or it has been tampered with. Therefore, this passage provides no proof for the existence of Jesus.

Not only is the evidence for the existence of Jesus weak, say the mythicists, but also we must wonder why there is no evidence of a more official kind. After all, the

Romans kept detailed records. Surely, a Jewish man crucified for claiming to be the Jewish king would have occasioned comment, not to mention at least one report by Pilate, the governor of Judea and Samaria. Yet, in all of the thousands of letters and reports from Roman late antiquity, we have not found one reference to the trial and execution of Jesus.

The stories of Jesus are constructs inspired by pagan mythologies. After asserting that the evidence for the existence of Jesus is weak, mythicists claim that the New Testament Gospels present portraits of Jesus that were inspired by myths and stories of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman gods. The miracles attributed to Jesus and, above all, the accounts of His death and resurrection are said to have been created from similar stories about the pagan gods. The mythological stories about Attis and Osiris are of special interest and are the most frequently appealed to. Other scholars who believe that Jesus existed also argue that the Gospel accounts are largely mythological, inspired by the myths and epic poetry of Homer or other Greco-Roman literature.

SCHOLARLY REJECTION OF MYTHICIST ARGUMENTS

Few historians, and even fewer experts in comparative religion and mythology of late antiquity, have been persuaded by the arguments of the mythicists. They observe that the alleged parallels between Jesus and the pagan myths are not especially close and often require very questionable interpretation of either the pagan myth or the putative parallel in the Gospels, or both. Moreover, the mythological “construct” that supposedly explains Jesus is often just that—a construct made from many myths and sources from different times and geographical locations. The whole procedure is regarded by most as invalid.³

This is especially so in the case of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Scholars who have reviewed this evidence are not at all persuaded that the pagan myths about “dying gods” provide the backdrop for the Gospel accounts concerning Jesus. In a learned study, Tryggve Mettinger finds “no *prima facie* evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct.”⁴ Hans-Josef Klauck, among others, has reached the same conclusion.⁵

Bart Ehrman, who is not a Christian and who does not hold to conservative views of the New Testament Gospels, has argued forcefully against the mythicists’ claims, asserting, “The idea of Jesus’s resurrection did not derive from pagan notions of a god simply being reanimated. It is derived from Jewish notions of resurrection as an eschatological event in which God would reassert his control over this world.”⁶ Ehrman further adds that “there is no unambiguous evidence that any pagans prior to

Christianity believed in dying and rising gods, let alone that it was a widespread view held by lots of pagans in lots of times and places.”⁷

The tendency of mythicists not only to regard the whole contents of the New Testament Gospels as mythical but also to regard all references to Jesus in non-Christian sources as spurious interpretations strikes many as special pleading. Mainstream scholarship views the Gospels as essentially reliable, providing sufficient data for the historian interested in knowing what Jesus did and what He taught.⁸

THE PUBLIC JESUS OF HISTORY

The principal difficulty for the mythicist is what I call the “public history” of Jesus. He was observed by crowds, He taught crowds, and He taught several close followers, including the twelve disciples/apostles. Where Jesus did these things is often mentioned. He habitually preached and taught in synagogues (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:39; Luke 4:15–16), which were public buildings where the Jewish people gathered to worship, study, and socialize. He preached in the synagogue of Nazareth, with little success, as it turns out (Matt. 13:53–58; Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:16–30). He healed and taught in Capernaum (Mark 1:21–2:12). He performed wonders in Chorazin and Bethsaida, but with disappointing responses (Matt. 11:21; Luke 10:13). The crowd in Jericho tried to silence blind Bartimaeus who cried out for healing (Matt. 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43). The crowd hailed Jesus when He entered Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:28–40). The crowd enjoyed His teaching in the temple precincts; however, the ruling priests and their allies did not (Matt. 21:12–22:40; Mark 11:15–12:44; Luke 19:45–21:4). Jesus was condemned publicly (Matt. 27:1–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–23) and was crucified publicly (Matt. 27:27–44; Mark 15:16–32; Luke 23:26–43). Within thirty to fifty years of His death, biographies—Gospels—began to circulate.

If these Gospels spoke of a nonexistent person, one must wonder how they were not found out. The Gospels do not speak of a mysterious man from a far away, unknown place. They speak of a Galilean, a man from Nazareth, whose family members were known, who headquartered in Capernaum, who drew crowds, taught, and performed works of power in specific places. Given what we know of village memory,⁹ it is hard to see how Gospels circulating in the 70s and 80s (and they may have circulated as early as the 60s) could refer to a person by name, as well as to several named followers of this person, and to specific, named villages and not be easily challenged and contradicted if this person was, in fact, fictional. A few people who were children in the 20s would still be living 50 or 60 years later, and many of their children, too, would be living when the Gospels circulated.¹⁰ Had there not been a Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the kingdom of God and lived for a time in Capernaum,

surely the people of Capernaum would have asked, “Who is this man? No one here in Capernaum remembers any such person.”

The objection, moreover, that the Roman execution of Jesus would be referenced in official records and that therefore the absence of a report argues against the existence of Jesus is quite naïve. Only a tiny fraction of Roman government records has survived.

The Firsthand Testimony of Paul

The most acute problem for the mythicist is the testimony of Paul. Mythicists sometimes claim that the stories about Jesus in the Gospels are second and thirdhand. They claim that the stories about the disciples of Jesus and the brother of James in the book of Acts are second and thirdhand. But they can't make this claim for several of Paul's letters, the letters that are universally recognized as genuine, that is, written by Paul. Among these letters are two that mention James, the brother of Jesus, as well as Peter (or Cephas), the leading disciple of Jesus. Paul does not simply mention them but he talks about meeting them (and not always without tension). Paul was personally acquainted with Peter and John, two of Jesus' original disciples, and James, the brother of Jesus. The mythicist hypothesis suffers shipwreck on the rocks of Paul's testimony.

For the present discussion, the most important references to James are found in Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). Throughout this letter, Paul defends his apostleship and his understanding of the gospel. He does this because some were questioning Paul's credentials, in part because he had not been one of the original disciples who followed Jesus. His conversion came later, probably two years or so after the proclamation of the Resurrection. What made Paul controversial was his conviction that believers in Jesus the Messiah—be they Jews or Gentiles—can fellowship together. This means that they can sit down at table together and partake of common food, whether kosher or not. For Paul, this demonstrated the unity of the church and the unifying work of the Holy Spirit.

But some in Galatia were teaching Christians, many of whom were Gentiles, that it was necessary to adopt the essential elements of Jewish law and practice. Among other things, this included eating kosher food. It was primarily the question of food that led to sharp disagreement between Paul and Peter (whom he sometimes calls by his Aramaic name *Cephas*). In reference to what happened in Antioch, Paul says of Peter, “Before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself” (Gal. 2:12).¹¹

In context, this James must be “James the Lord's brother” mentioned in Galatians 1:19, that is, James the brother of Jesus. If Paul was personally acquainted with a man named James, known as the “brother of the Lord (Jesus),” then it becomes very difficult

to argue that there was no historical person known as Jesus. Mythicists try to argue that the James of Galatians 1:19 and 2:9 is some other James, perhaps the brother of John, son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19; 3:17). But that does not work, for James the son of Zebedee had been martyred (Acts 12:1–2) well before the time of the events described in Galatians 1–2. It was the martyrdom of James son of Zebedee that prompted Peter to quit Jerusalem, with the result that James the brother of Jesus became the leader of the church (Acts 12:17).

The same applies in Paul’s recounting of the tradition that he had received regarding the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:1–7). When Paul says, “Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:7), he has distinguished James from the original apostles. Who is this James? It cannot be James the son of Zebedee (Matt. 10:2; Mark 1:19; Luke 5:10), one of the original apostles. Nor can it be James son of Alphaeus, another original apostle (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). It must be James the brother of Jesus, which is the view taken by all major commentators.

Moreover, the only James with the clout to intimidate Peter would have been James the brother of Jesus. When men from James came to Antioch, Peter feared their disapproval and so stopped eating meals with Gentile Christians. Accordingly, it makes far more sense to understand that Paul is speaking of James the brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Peter’s departure.

Mythicists also argue that “brother” in Galatians 1:19 could be understood in a metaphorical sense, in that all believers are brothers of Jesus. Here appeal is usually made to Romans 8:29 and Hebrews 2:11, where Jesus is said to regard believers as His “brothers.” Understood this way, the reference to James as “the Lord’s brother” means only that James is a Christian. But this hardly makes sense of the relevant passages.

If “brother” in Galatians 1:19 was only metaphorical, then why is *only James* designated “the Lord’s brother”? Several times Peter (Cephas) is mentioned, but he is not called “the Lord’s brother.” John is mentioned (Gal. 2:9), but he is not called “the Lord’s brother.” Barnabas and Titus are referenced (Gal. 2:1, 3, 9, 13), but neither of them is called “the Lord’s brother.” So why is James alone designated “the Lord’s brother”? Especially telling is the rhetorical question Paul raises in 1 Corinthians 9:5: “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” Here “brothers of the Lord” must refer to literal brothers of Jesus. Paul is saying that all Christian missionaries, whether the apostles, the brothers of the Lord, or Cephas, have the right to be accompanied by their spouses. By “brothers of the Lord,” he means at the very least James and Jude, and perhaps also Joseph (Joses) and Simon, as we see in the Gospels (“His brothers James and Joseph” [Matt. 13:55]; “The brother of James and Joses” [Mark 6:3]). These are brothers of Jesus.

Paul's use of "brothers" is literal, not metaphorical. All major commentators understand his language this way.¹²

The whole of Galatians 1–2 is a narrative of Paul's conversion, his call as an apostle, his minimal contact with the original apostles as he grows in his new faith, his later confirmation at the hands of the apostles, "reputed to be pillars" in the church (Gal. 2:9), and his sharp confrontation with Peter. None of this is metaphor or allegory. The latter part, especially the quarrel with Peter, is a very hard-hitting narrative of a very public disagreement: "I opposed him to his face...I said to Cephas *before them all*, 'If you, though a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (Gal. 2:11, 14, emphasis added).

It is this public dimension of Jesus and His family, attested directly by Paul in his letters, that makes the mythicist hypothesis so implausible. One can play the role of the extreme skeptic, raising the bar so high that very little evidence will ever pass muster and then declare that the evidence falls short. In the case of Jesus, this means dismissing four first-century biographies, all of the other writings of the New Testament, the first-century testimony of Josephus, and all of the second-century non-Christian testimony. But the firsthand testimony of Paul is not so easily dismissed, and the attempts to reidentify James the Lord's brother as some other James or to redefine the word "brother," contrary to its natural sense in the context of Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians, are unconvincing.

The claim that Jesus did not exist is a modern enterprise.¹³ It does not arise from a critical assessment of ancient evidence or from the ancient evidence itself. Rather, it is very much a reflection of our postmodern society, a society that often places a greater premium on imagination and subjectivity.

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NOTES

- 1 The debate took place at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, Georgia, April 13, 2016. I appreciated Dr. Carrier's respectful and courteous tone throughout our exchange.
- 2 Here I cite only Carrier's recent and substantial work on the subject, again because I think it is the most scholarly of the mythicist publications. It is certainly one of the lengthiest, weighing in at some 700 pages. See Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*.

- 3 For a critique of this method, see Mark S. Smith, "The Death of 'Dying and Rising Gods' in the Biblical World: An Update, with Special Reference to Baal in the Baal Cycle," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12 (1998): 257–313.
- 4 Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (ConB-OT 50; Lund: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2001), 221.
- 5 Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2000), esp. 117–44.
- 6 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 226.
- 7 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* 230.
- 8 As affirmed years ago by E. P. Sanders in his highly regarded *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). See comment on p. 2. All major scholars agree with Sanders.
- 9 In antiquity, as well as in much of the third world today, most people lived out their lives in the village of their birth. Stories about memorable persons and events were kept alive in the collective memory of the people of the village.
- 10 For the details, see Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study 59; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).
- 11 All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).
- 12 Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox interpreters usually prefer to understand "brother" as a relative, in the sense of cousins or perhaps stepbrothers. Even understood this way, Paul is still talking about real relatives of the historical Jesus.
- 13 So far as we know, the first to suggest that there may not have been a Jesus of history was Constantin François Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney, in his 1791 treatise entitled *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires*.