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Mythicisism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric and Realities of Academic Freedom

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Mythicism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric and Realities of Academic Freedom

But when it comes to the mythicism proffered by people whose knowledge of relevant languages, historical texts, ancient cultures, and other such data is minimal or non-existent, and whose works consist only of web pages and self-published books, scholars are under no obligation to waste their valuable time on such matters any more than on the countless other topics which web sites and self-published books address, and which a quick perusal shows to be bunk.

By James F. McGrath

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March 2014

Introduction

There are few topics as crucial to the academic endeavors of teaching and research in which most members of our organization are engaged, as the topic of [academic freedom](#). The ability of scholars to draw conclusions that may be controversial or unpopular has become part and parcel of the definition of scholarship itself. And that is as it should be, and must be. In the absence of academic freedom, it is debatable whether real scholarship can in fact take place. This is true on at least two levels. On the institutional level, if a professor cannot draw the conclusions to which her research leads her, then such work can scarcely called research at all, but will resemble something closer to apologetics, as evidence and arguments are tailored to allow the required "conclusion" to be drawn. On the level of the academy, the motto is "publish or perish" (except in seminaries, where the motto is instead "publish or parish"). In order to publish, we must come up with something new, something that argues against another viewpoint, challenges a consensus, or in some other way improves our understanding and extends the boundaries of our knowledge. In the absence of academic freedom, the possibility of doing that is all but undermined. If some already-existing definition of truth is considered the unchanging standard, then the most one can do is find new ways to defend established views, and not genuinely contribute new knowledge.

And so, on the one hand, the attempt to predefine appropriate outcomes by appeal to dogma undermines the value of scholarship as primarily about evidence and rational inquiry.¹ And, on the other hand, institutions which do not value and safeguard academic freedom actually hamstringing the scholarly reputations and careers of those who work at

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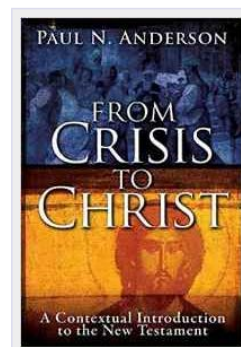
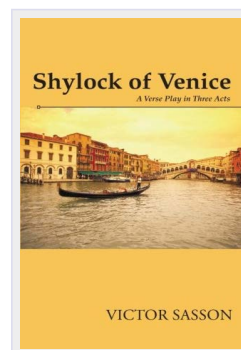
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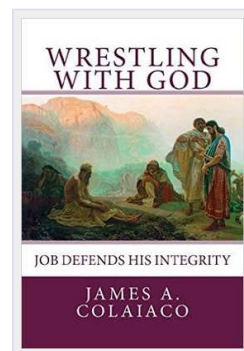
them.²

If we as scholars need to be vigilant in the defense of academic freedom from direct attacks upon it, we must also be careful to combat the cheapening of the phrase through deceptive appeals to academic freedom. Let me give an example from outside of our discipline. Those who promote Intelligent Design in the realm of biology complain that they cannot get their work published in mainstream scientific journals, and claim that this is because they are experiencing inappropriate censorship. However, the mainstream biologists who serve as the editors and peer reviewers for science journals see themselves very differently.³ Far from censoring legitimate scientific research, they would argue that they are engaging in the main purpose of the peer review process, namely the safeguarding of academia from being inappropriately hijacked into the service of ideology. Not that ideology and viewpoint can be excluded somehow from the academy, as though academics were not human beings with assumptions and points of view. Peer review is not intended to assess the correctness of conclusions, merely that appropriate methods are being used and scholarly norms of rigor and argumentation being followed. And biologists have judged the case for Intelligent Design to be not merely philosophically and mathematically problematic, but also at odds with the evidence that allegedly irreducibly complex features do indeed have precursors.

And so, to the extent that it is quite clear that certain ideologically-driven viewpoints are being promoted as scholarship, when in fact they do not fit any generally-accepted description thereof, we see here how academic freedom is placed in peril on two fronts – and, in this case, by the same forces. On the one hand, academic freedom is nullified by many sectarian institutions and the professors who work at them, when a statement of faith is allowed to predetermine what conclusions research is permitted to draw. And on the other hand, when those same sectarian institutions produce apologetically-driven claims and masquerade them as scholarship, and complain that it is because of a lack of academic freedom in journals and in the academy that they cannot gain acceptance for them, it cheapens the notion of academic freedom itself. It also is profoundly ironic.

There is plenty of room for things to appear muddled and unclear, particularly to those outside of a given field. While the matter seems clear cut to those within fields like biology and genetics, there are those in attendance at this conference who are highly intelligent academics, and yet as outsiders to those scientific disciplines, they may find complaints about censorship in the sciences appear plausible to them. And the situation is reciprocated, as people outside of Biblical studies often find it plausible that our field is one where conservative forces hold sway and exclude even the mere discussion of notions that appear controversial from the perspective of Christian dogma.

Now, I expect a chuckle at that point from insiders in this field. Among scholars who work



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on the historical Jesus, we know that, far from protecting Christian dogma, just about every possible interpretation of who Jesus was has been offered, including some quite sensational and downright impious ones. And not only that, but often these have been discussed, explored, and set aside in favor of more persuasive options so long ago, that the discussions may not be familiar to those who have never surveyed the history of scholarship on this topic. The idea that Jesus was a political revolutionary, like the idea that he never existed, may seem exciting and new to someone outside of this field (not to mention any [names](#)), and really old hat to someone within it. If we were to combine a number of recent and not-so-recent proposals related to Jesus, we could depict him as a gay hermaphrodite mamzer, conceived when his mother was raped by a Roman soldier, who grew up to pursue multiple vocations as a failed messiah, a failed prophet, a magician, and/or a mediocre teacher of Stoic ethics. From the perspective of traditional Christian dogma, one imagines that for Jesus never to have existed would be slightly easier to stomach (or at least, no more difficult) than some of the claims made by those who are convinced that he was a historical figure, and propose interpretations of the historical evidence which disagree with and even undermine the traditional claims of Christian creeds and piety.

But despite numerous publications giving public expression to these points, much that I have mentioned seems to be unknown to a wider public, or at the very least misunderstood. The academy does not exist in isolation, and so the discussion of what we as academics do by those outside the academy is something to which we need to pay attention. We need not only to work to safeguard academic freedom, but also to safeguard against the use of appeals to academic freedom to drive a wedge into the academy whereby ideas that do not meet scholarly standards of rigor, or which are ideology masquerading as historical-critical investigation, can be inserted into a space in which they simply do not belong.

And that is the question that is at the heart of my presentation today: how do we navigate between the Scylla of safeguarding academic freedom, and the Charybdis of not allowing that freedom to be appealed to by those who wish to give their viewpoint the reputation of scholarship while lacking the substance that ought to define it? To explore this question, I will focus on the recent memoir of Thomas Brodie, [Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus](#), in which he revealed his view that there never was a historical Jesus.

I hope that the relevance of Brodie's book to the broader topic is clear. Brodie himself mentions the difficulties he faced in finding a publisher for his case, and other mythicists outside the academy often use similar-sounding language to assert that their views are ignored or dismissed by academics because of undue Christian bias.

Sectarian scholarship?

Brodie's life and work unfolded within the context of the Roman Catholic Church. This is an important point to note. I doubt that many people will be as surprised as Brodie apparently was when Catholic publishers proved to have no interest in publishing a case

for Jesus' non-existence.⁴ Yet our lack of surprise should not be glossed over. We are surely all aware that publications relevant to our interests have appeared both from university and secular academic presses, and from religiously-affiliated publishers. Likewise, within the field of religion, our academy includes not only secular perspectives but also many who are religiously affiliated. There is no simple dichotomy. There are very clearly academics both with and without religious convictions who are determined to follow evidence wherever it leads. And there are those both among the religious and non-religious in the academy whose cherished assumptions color their perspectives in ways that are clearly recognizable to others, if not to themselves. And the fact that so many different assumptions and backgrounds can be brought together into scholarly conversation, with none of them being silenced or excluded, is part of what makes our field so vibrant, and the academic study of the Bible so truly fascinating.

And so we must return to the question raised by our introductory remarks: If scholarship and research require academic freedom, then can there be sectarian scholarship, or is that an oxymoron? If one teaches at a school which requires one to sign a statement of faith, then can one do legitimate research within the bounds of such constraints?

As someone who originally came to the academic study of the Bible in the interest of exploring his own faith, and who has taught at religiously affiliated schools in the past, as well as currently at a secular private university, I would like to suggest that genuine scholarly research both is and is not possible at a religiously affiliated institution, if that institution has a statement of faith (or something similar) which dictates that faculty must hold certain views.

Why do I give a "yes and no" answer to a question that might seem clear cut? Precisely because of the fact that there are genuine scholars with religious affiliations (both personally and professionally) whose publications are not to be discarded lightly – or at least, not all of them. Notwithstanding his qualification that historically speaking there is no way to tell, N. T. Wright still appears to be showing a blatant disregard for historical critical methods when he suggests that Matthew's zombie apocalypse might have occurred. I cannot, however, simply toss out his books, such as *The Climax of the Covenant*, a collection of articles about the writings and theology of Paul that I continue to find extremely useful. (And I won't toss out his new two-volume treatment of Paul's theology, not least because it could do some serious damage if it accidentally hit someone, as [Chris Tilling recently calculated in detail on his blog](#)).⁵

Sectarian scholarship is not a complete oxymoron. It even has some advantages. If caring deeply about a subject can motivate one to distort the evidence or lean towards predetermined outcomes, it can also motivate one to courageously challenge conventions of interpretation – both in one's ecclesiastical setting and in the academy – for precisely the same reason. James D. G. Dunn, my own doctoral supervisor, chose to put his credentials as an Evangelical at risk in order to make the case for an understanding of early Christology that ran counter to the convictions of many, but which he was persuaded was borne out by the textual evidence. Of course, he had the privilege of

teaching in contexts where his religious views were not a condition of employment. And that is a crucial point to be made. When scholars do not face a potential loss of employment if they draw conclusions that run counter to traditional views, they often do so. But not always. And when scholars are forced to choose between keeping their job or being honest about where they think the evidence leads, they often choose the former. But not always. And so it seems inappropriate to simply ignore scholarship produced at religiously affiliated schools. But the nature of the prior commitments and policies of such institutions ought to be noted, and it is perfectly legitimate to question the usefulness of publications which makes a case for a view that a scholar has no choice but to uphold if they wish to keep their job.

In the particular case I just mentioned, the conclusions drawn by Dunn are noteworthy in relation to our topic. Most forms of mythicism (although not Brodie's, I should add) adopt the viewpoint that Jesus was first of all a divine being, and only later turned into a human figure. That Jesus was a figure that pre-existed in heaven for Paul remains the majority viewpoint. Yet it is ironic that, at this very point at which scholarship coincides with the teachings of Christian dogma, mythicists, who accuse the academy of being unduly influenced by Christian doctrine, do not themselves take seriously the possibility that on this very point dogma may be a factor, and that the minority viewpoint articulated by Dunn and others might therefore deserve to be considered. This is important to note. If a viewpoint that claims to be unduly affected by a lack of academic freedom actually fails to challenge the consensus on an obvious point where bias ought to be suspected, then there is probably something else driving their agenda.

This is all relevant to the question of mythicism, as well as the broader question of sectarian scholarship and academic freedom. The fact that Christian historians and scholars consistently conclude that Jesus existed has little or no persuasive power when considered on its own. What does carry weight, however, is the fact that even Christian scholars have drawn conclusions about the historical figure of Jesus which were deeply disturbing not only to themselves but to their places of employment and their faith communities. And it will or should seem completely implausible to those of us who have taught at religiously affiliated schools, or know something about them, to imagine that those scholars thought to themselves, "Well, I think Jesus predicted the end of the world within his lifetime and was mistaken, but I bet it will redeem me in the eyes of the seminary board of trustees that at least I still think he existed!" And yet I have encountered that very suggestion from mythicists in my online interactions – that somehow challenging that Jesus was divine, that he was able to predict the future, and that he performed miracles was not going too far for a historian influenced by Christianity, but concluding that Jesus didn't exist would be. Once one has allowed one's faith's historical foundation to be shaken, so much so that you need to radically rethink your entire worldview, the extent to which one has to rethink it may not be an issue any longer. And again, as I have already suggested, for the Christian who is troubled by the possibility that Jesus thought that Canaanites were dogs and said as much, or that he made false predictions, the idea that all such disturbing material was pure invention

would not seem significantly more disturbing. Indeed, at times people have taken comfort in the view that disturbing things in the Bible may not reflect historical reality.

So let us return to the specific case of Thomas Brodie's work. Brodie is not an individual who has been unable to publish his work – except, according to his memoir, in an early period when in fact he was still learning what scholarship means, and had completely omitted essential elements such as footnotes and reference to other scholars' work.⁶ Interestingly enough, the kind of study of the Gospels that Brodie considers to lead inexorably to the conclusion that Jesus never existed has characterized his published work for the past several decades. Brodie's argument, in a nutshell, is that everything in the Gospels is explicable as a direct literary reworking of earlier texts, and therefore stories about Jesus were created through a purely literary process, and not on the basis of historical memories or oral traditions stemming from historical events.

Brodie is not the only one to engage in a study of literary borrowings in the Gospels and other early Christian. Literary criticism in general, and intertextual studies which highlight echoes of earlier texts in later ones, have thrived and increased in the academy during that same period. And yet most scholars and historians find this evidence not to lead to the conclusion that there was no historical Jesus – indeed, many would emphasize the inability of literary methods of inquiry to answer historical questions. Many scholars find Brodie's scenarios for the composition of the Gospels to not all be consistently persuasive. Many of his alleged parallels with other sources are slim. And evidence of literary borrowing, even when substantiated, does not automatically lead to the historical conclusions that Brodie asserts. One can use Scripture to concoct stories about a figure who existed, and not only about one who never did.

This article is not primarily about Brodie's case for mythicism, but about the broader issues related to its treatment within the academy. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Brodie provides such a case in his book, the question of whether his argument is persuasive cannot be ignored when considering its reception or lack thereof among historical Jesus scholars. And so let me briefly highlight what I consider some examples of serious flaws in Brodie's case.

First, Brodie's view of the compositional method used by New Testament authors seems unparalleled, and thus historically problematic. Examples need to be provided of texts being composed in the manner that Brodie posits, where not only are major themes and phrases echoed or quoted, but minor or tangential details and prepositions from an earlier text are utilized as the inspiration for composing a new story, and indeed, a complete new work filled with stories about an individual. Criticisms have been raised against certain views about the composition of the Gospels on the basis of what we know of ancient compositional practices, calling into question some of the assumptions underlying source and redaction-critical views of the Synoptic Gospels. Such questions cannot be ignored inasmuch as they also apply to what Brodie envisages.

Second, the specific claims about the origins of the Gospels, and connections with earlier

texts, are in a few instances very clear, but in many more instances extremely impressionistic. When one goes seeking parallels, one can always find them if one is willing to look hard enough and connect dots on as slim a basis as necessary. To provide an example, let me quickly illustrate how one could use the same reasoning to claim that Brodie's own book is a reworking of earlier texts. If we take the opening sentence of chapter 7 of Brodie's book, we find that the phrases he uses occur in close proximity to one another in earlier texts. On p.271 of [Alarm Management for Process Control](#) by Douglas H. Rothenberg, the words "dear reader" and "long chapter" occur in the same sentence! And on p.108 of [Parasites of the Colder Climates](#) edited by Hannah Akuffo, Inger Ljungström, Ewert Linder, and Mats Wahlgren, we find that "microscope" and "second revolution" occur within the same paragraph. Then, on p.72 of the book [Academic Callings](#) by Janice Newson and Claire Polster, in close proximity to a reference to "messianic power," the author uses almost the same phrase Brodie does, "at least one small part of it." Surely this indicates that Brodie was masterfully illustrating the method he attributes to the Gospel authors by doing the same himself, does it not?

My guess is that the answer to that question is "no," it does not. But if I wanted to press the case, I could surely suggest that the questions of academic calling, process control, messianic power, and parasitism all relate to religious scholarship, academic freedom, and the historical figure of Jesus. (In case you are wondering, I stopped where I did in Brodie's sentence because one of the next phrases Brodie uses, "not in the mood right now," occurs in John Gray's *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom*, and I decided that, as much fun as this is, we might all get a little carried away.)

Since I have tried to inject humor into this illustration, I should say that my aim is not in any way to mock, nor to dismiss, but rather to illustrate my point without boring you. Brodie has adeptly identified some instances of probable literary borrowing which are fascinating, and some of them are intriguing but less clear. Some, however, ought to be treated with an appropriate degree of skepticism, because (as I hope I have illustrated) once one is looking for parallels to a given text in other literature, one can almost always find them. Convergences of wording raise the possibility of deliberate echo, but they do not prove it. And even when they are present, they do not in and of themselves demonstrate that the texts in question were the *sole* source of the new story, without any contribution from memory or tradition concerning historical events. The tendency to conform even historical figures to ideal types is well documented.⁷

Brodie's work is (I expect most would agree) not *always* persuasive. And yet even so he has managed to get it published. This is important in relation to our theme of academic freedom and claims about the suppression of unconventional ideas. There cannot be at the same time a conspiracy to suppress and cover up such evidence, and ongoing scholarly publication thereof. This in turn brings us back again to the question of sectarian scholarship. Much like N. T. Wright's combination of historical insight, and claims which simply cannot be justified historically, Thomas Brodie has offered commentaries on texts which reveal what almost certainly *are* genuine textual

connections between the New Testament and the Jewish Scriptures, and a range of connections which seem more imaginative and eisegetical than real.

Yet there is a place for taking a hypothesis to its logical extreme in the academy. Indeed, we may all have experienced it. In undertaking doctoral work, it is very common to have a result of the application of one's method that one is not entirely persuaded by. What does one do in such circumstances? Hopefully couch one's conclusions in appropriately cautious language. But very often, if for instance we are exploring the applicability of a social-scientific model to early Christianity, we will try to follow through all the possibilities that our chosen approach leads to, even if some are at best only possible. Future scholarly interaction with our work will help to sort out where the application of the model leads to genuine insight of long-term value, and where it leads to dead ends and distortions.

Brodie has sought to carry his view of the Gospels as reworkings of earlier texts to its furthest possible extreme. There needs to be a place for this in scholarship, and given the range of doctoral dissertations that continue to be produced, I have every reason to believe that it is still being done. Brodie's own publications indicate this as well. But we must remember that this is but one of two poles involved in the process of scholarship. The other is the broader academy, to whom we make our case, and which will cast its critical eye upon our proposals. Given that we all depend for our ongoing efforts of publication on critical interaction with other scholars, it is not surprising that criticisms are offered even of brilliantly insightful works. What is surprising is that sometimes we agree, so strong does the evidence seem to be, or so persuasive a particular line of argumentation. Without the second pole in the scholarly process, that of peer review – not just in the sense of the process our manuscripts undergo prior to acceptance, but also the published reviews and responses – scholarship is nothing but a range of possibilities, published because we must “publish or perish.” We all know well that the existence of a scholarly case for something, or the existence of a scholar who holds a particular viewpoint, does not mean that viewpoint is correct. If it did, then scholarship would be a quantum phenomenon akin to Schrödinger's Cat, with contradictory things being simultaneously true.

All that I have said thus far does not mean that a compelling case for mythicism cannot be made. But it does suggest that Thomas Brodie has not yet made it. And so where does that leave mythicism? Mythicists need – as mythicists did in a bygone era – to participate in the scholarly process, if they wish to have their work be taken seriously. They will almost certainly not work at mainstream Christian seminaries. But to the extent that there are actual academics who find this viewpoint worth pursuing, they need to seek employment at secular institutions and publish them. At that stage, at least the conversation will have really begun, if indeed there is to be a scholarly conversation on this subject. It will not be the end of the discussion. It will not show that at long last Jesus mythicism has been shown to be correct. But hopefully it will bring scholarly methodologies to bear on the subject in an appropriate and even-handed manner. If scholarly cases for mythicism are made, then one of two things may happen. It may fail

to persuade more than a few people, in which case it will be like most of our doctoral dissertations – not unscholarly, but nonetheless almost certainly wrong. Or it may convince a small minority, one that keeps discussion of the topic alive, in a manner that parallels the subjects which most scholars consider to be settled, but which conservative religious scholars and institutions continue to focus on. Or perhaps mythicism will persuade a majority. That is when it would be appropriate to treat mythicism as a view that the wider public ought to adopt. But the attempt to bypass this scholarly process, to try to persuade the general public of a view that has not even been given a proper scholarly presentation in living memory, much less a convincing one, is to show one's view to be not merely ideologically-inspired or ideologically-constrained scholarship, but ideology *masquerading* as scholarship. And so, if there is a serious danger posed to academic research by dogmatic institutional constraints, the danger of casting aside the scholarly process altogether, by allowing any view to be considered scholarly regardless of whether it is conducted by people with expertise and presented to the scholarly community for evaluation, seems to me at least as bad if not worse.

And so what position should the academy adopt with respect to Jesus mythicism? It is certainly a view that any scholar ought to have the freedom to explore and consider. If institutions with religious affiliations move to censor and restrict such investigations, I am confident that our secular universities will provide a safe haven for scholars who wish to do so. But when it comes to the mythicism proffered by people whose knowledge of relevant languages, historical texts, ancient cultures, and other such data is minimal or non-existent, and whose works consist only of web pages and self-published books, scholars are under no obligation to waste their valuable time on such matters any more than on the countless other topics which web sites and self-published books address, and which a quick perusal shows to be bunk. As none other than Richard Carrier has said, a scholarly consensus is not to be dismissed lightly, and the burden is on those who wish to challenge it, not merely to make a persuasive case, but to do so using the appropriate scholarly methods, and in the appropriate venues.⁸ Until that is done, the reason why mythicism is not accepted by scholars and historians will be obvious to anyone who understands how academia works. It is not due to a conspiracy or censorship, but precisely because the system which safeguards academic freedom works to keep at bay both ideologically-driven attempts to silence scholars, and ideologically-driven attempts to pass off apologetics as scholarship.

And yet, despite such statements from Carrier, we still find him [offering rude insults on his blog](#), of a sort that are par for the course in the online apologetics of Intelligent Design and other denialist movements, aimed at Maurice Casey's recently-published critique of mythicism. Casey may well be wrong about things, and he certainly does not always reflect the scholarly consensus in his volume [Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?](#) But he is not a fool.

For a scholar to treat a fringe online viewpoint with disdain is not inherently inappropriate, but it absolutely is inappropriate when the disdain is offered in the opposite direction.

There is no reason why a scholar should take a stance particularly seriously when no one has bothered to offer an appropriate case for it in an appropriate venue, or when such a case has been made but has been examined and found wanting. The onus is on the fringe viewpoint to make its case, because nowadays, when a view is widespread among scholars, it will have achieved that status only through the same strenuous uphill effort to persuade and examine that now falls to whoever would challenge it.

If we visit the [Facebook page of Robert M. Price](#), another mythicist, and one of the few who has appropriate credentials, we find that he has embraced climate change denialism just as he has embraced mythicism. When one is open to conspiracy theory thinking about experts in one field, is it any surprise if they fall for it in others?

There are those who think that we are presently on the verge of a momentous occasion, when mythicism will move from beyond the pale to something that is taken seriously in the scholarly realm. I am not yet convinced of this, since the proponents of the mythicist viewpoint, even when they take steps to actually publish appropriately, nonetheless appear to remain steeped in an approach to discussion and investigation that is antithetical to the aims of scholarship. Until that changes, mythicism is unlikely to be widely discussed within the realm of scholarship, much less become part of the scholarly mainstream.⁹

Notes

- 1 There is an interesting discussion of this topic in *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University* by Walter P. Metzger (Columbia University Press, 1955) p.26. In early American history, many churches did not consider their stances "sectarian" as long as they were generally accepted Christian views rather than the seriously controversial ones. And, conversely, views which challenged such established "truth" was viewed as "sectarian." The importance of defining our terms clearly remains. Metzger's book goes on to indicate the use of creedal statements as weapons in a war of ideas that was waged to the detriment of educational institutions. See also Elizabeth Redden's article about events at Azusa Pacific, "Academic Freedom, Christian Context," in *Inside Higher Ed* <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/02/azusa> It is perhaps also worth noting that the AAUP is less than 100 years old, and the notions of academic freedom that many of us take for granted are nonetheless relatively recent developments in human history.
- 2 Lake Lambert's piece, "Theologies of Academic Freedom" in *The Cresset* http://thecresset.org/2012/Advent/Lambert_A2012.html, provides a useful indication of the fact that there can be theologies which support academic freedom. And so the matter is not one of religion vs. its absence, but those who espouse, value, promote, and defend academic freedom (religious and areligious) vs. those who do not.
- 3 See Mark Paxton, *Media Perspectives on Intelligent Design and Evolution* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013) pp.49-51.
- 4 *Beyond the Quest* p.35

5 Full calculations of the possible damage can be found on Chris Tilling's blog *Chrisendom*.
<http://blog.christilling.de/2013/10/could-wrights-new-books-harm-you.html>

6 *Beyond the Quest* p.40.

7 It must be noted at this point that some of the various competing cases for mythicism mutually exclusive. Earl Doherty claims that Paul did not think that Jesus was a terrestrial figure, and that the Gospels subsequently historicized him. Brodie, however, views the creation of Jesus and of Paul's letters as a literary phenomenon. Both cannot be correct simultaneously, at least not in their present form. This does not mean that *one* of the cases cannot be correct. But it does suggest that, if someone appeals to both Doherty and Brodie in arguing for the validity of mythicism, they are doing something inherently self-contradictory, suggesting perhaps that the aim of their appeal is ideological rather than principled or based on the finding of the authors in question persuasive.

8 On the subject of seeking consensus among historians and scholars, Carrier writes, "This process cannot be bypassed, as specialists in a field are the most qualified to assess an argument in that field, so if *they* cannot be persuaded, no one should be (unless their resistance can be *proven* – not merely assumed – to have other motives than truth-seeking). Conversely, if they *are* persuaded, everyone else has a very compelling reason to agree (unless, again, their *acceptance* can be proven – not merely assumed – to have other motives than truth-seeking). This is the social function and purpose of having such experts in the first place" (p.21). Carrier even articulates as a separate axiom that "an effective consensus of qualified experts constitutes meeting an initial burden of evidence" because "it is far more unlikely that an incorrect argument would persuade a hundred experts than that it would persuade only one; and it's far more unlikely that it would persuade any expert than that it would persuade even a hundred amateurs"(p.29).

9 This article is based on a paper presented at the 2013 SBL Annual Meeting to the "Metacriticism of Biblical Scholarship" consultation.

Add to: 

Comments (66)

Your paragraph, at the end, on Robert Price is a bit misleading. His attitude to climate change and his political allegiances are very atypical amongst those you call mythicists, so you should have been more careful not to say THEY fall. Of course those who seek social and literary roots for the development of Christianities, rather than one man, would be the last to think that the roots are any kind of conspiracy. Whether any particular man named Jesus existed is not their main interest and is possibly as unknowable as whether an original king Arthur existed.

#1 - David Hillman - 03/25/2014 - 20:49

I have yet to find a version of mythicism which does not resort to conspiracy theory sooner or later - sometimes with ancient Christians conspiring to turn their mythical

figure into a historical one, sometimes with modern scholars conspiring to keep mythicism out of the academy, sometimes both. Rarely is there a mythicist who says that the early Christians simply misunderstood, and that modern historians and scholars do not accept mythicism because the case for it has not been made persuasively.

#2 - James F. McGrath - 03/26/2014 - 00:59

Maurice Casey likewise sought to characterize mythicists by some sort of psychological or religious predisposition to extremist views in his recent book. However, one only has to take careful note of the names of published mythicists he cites to see that the majority of such mythicists do not fall into such "denialist" or "ex-fundamentalist" categories as demonstrated at

<http://vridar.org/2014/03/09/whos-who-among-mythicists-and-mythicist-sympathizers/>

#3 - Neil Godfrey - 03/26/2014 - 02:40

NT studies are not like any other part of the academy. There is no need to talk of sectarian interests and institutions when discussing Ancient Greek history, much less chemistry. And while I don't expect mythicism to be rapidly adopted by NT scholars, there is a change underway on the validity of the traditional criteria of authenticity. I'd be happy for NT studies to join the rest of classical studies in methodology first. Only then will Jesus mythicism get a fair shake.

From the other side of your academic freedom discussion, consider the other subjects where the fringe claims their work is discriminated against because of its conclusions, not its evidence. Holocaust denial, racial IQ disparity, homosexuality is a chosen behavior, and 9/11 Truthers, to name only a few outside the hard sciences. There are vast resources, both within and without academic scholarship, refuting the evidence put forward by the fringe. For mythicism, two books so far, both highly problematic, and much online dismissal. Your "point" about Price's climate denialism is a perfect example of the latter.

#4 - Mark Erickson - 03/26/2014 - 04:42

Re #2, it does not take a conspiracy to turn a mythical figure into a historical one.

Euhemerization is a well known process from the ancient world. And Richard Carrier says the case for a mythical Jesus has not yet been made persuasively. Until his new book is released, of course.

#5 - Mark Erickson - 03/26/2014 - 04:49

Bart Ehrman started off his book on 'Did Jesus Exist?' by comparing people who disagreed with him to Holocaust deniers.

It is this sort of attitude which presumably led Maurice Casey to complain that his books and articles were often rejected because of bias by mainstream NT scholars who did not want to see certain kinds of works appearing.

#6 - Steven Carr - 03/26/2014 - 08:11

Dr McGrath makes the curious claim that he knows of no mythicist who does not sooner or later resort to some sort of conspiracy theory.

The fact is that neither Thomas Brodie nor G.A. Wells nor Earl Doherty nor Roger Parvus nor Raphael Lataster nor Hermann Detering nor Frank Zindler nor Tom Harpur nor Roger Viklund nor Richard Carrier nor Jay Raskin (all mythicists) nor Thomas Thompson nor Hector Avalos nor Kurt Noll nor Arthur Droge (all open to the possibility of mythicism) have ever breathed a hint of conspiracy theory at any time. I have not read all of Price's works but from what I have read of his mythicist works I would be very surprised if he at any point undermines most of what he has written by introducing conspiracy theories.

None of the critics of mythicist theories in the past -- Schweitzer, Goguel, Shirley-Jackson -- ever raised the conspiracy theory card; nor have the modern critics Bart Ehrman or Maurice Casey.

I would be interested if McGrath could support his claim with names and evidence.
#7 - Neil Godfrey - 03/26/2014 - 09:36

I am sure that the various views of Jesus that have been canvassed - that he was a mamzer with a speech impediment impediment, etc. - are old hat. (Aha! Has anyone thought of the speech impediment? A thematic link with Moses!) I think we should note, though, that the view (my view) that Jesus was a figure whom we may without absurdity regard as divine is by far the oldest-fashioned, compared with all the others, within Western academia. It's not really fair to cry 'old hat' at others and (even by implication) 'tam antiqua, tam nova!' at the oldest tradition. What does one have to say in order to be reckoned a Mytho? I'm not claiming that this is the only way to formulate the question, but if we consider the following sequence:

1. There was a movement that we can reasonably call Christian and there were stories allegedly about a great man, Jesus, whom we might reasonably call, at least on the stories' showing, the founder of that movement.
2. It is in fact quite uncertain whether any one individual played quite the central role in the foundation of the movement as the stories in question suggest.
3. If any one individual did perform that role it is extremely difficult to identify his (even her, I suppose) characteristics, teaching etc..
4. It is certain that no individual did perform that role.
5. The ascription of characteristics to him which we find in the relevant stories is essentially the compilation of a fiction.

At what point in this sequence does one cross the line from critique of the quest for the historical Jesus into Mytho territory?

#8 - Martin - 03/26/2014 - 14:17

One is given the impression that James McGrath dismisses Tom Brodie's arguments and conclusions as unscholarly. Yet, he doesn't discuss Brodie's arguments--not even his very well known thesis that the miracle stories of the synoptic gospels are reiterations of the Elijah and Elisha narratives in Kings. Lacking argumentation or any serious addressing of Brodie's actual scholarship one must wonder why McGrath indulges in such an extended criticism ad hominem. This is unacceptable.
Thomas

Thomas L. Thompson
Professor emeritus, University of Copenhagen

#9 - Thomas L. Thompson - 03/26/2014 - 16:54

Professor Thompson, if you care to read it, here is McGrath's review of Beyond the Quest. But don't expect to be disabused of your opinion here. A quote from the second paragraph:

The book is also the tragic tale of how a powerful idea grabbed hold of an individual, who became so persuaded of it, that he focused his life's work on it and nothing else.

This sentence could just as easily be used to describe a heroic tale by changing one word. But it would still be entirely unsupported by the rest of the text.

#10 - Mark Erickson - 03/26/2014 - 17:39

I think you can actually read the article and see what I find problematic in Brodie's parallelomania. No one disputes that there are stories in the Gospels, and in other Jewish literature from around this time, which echoes stories from the Jewish Scriptures. Few find it persuasive that those works were composed entirely simply by reworking the Jewish Scriptures.

The fact that Neil Godfrey lumps together as "mythicists" scholars old and new as well as non-scholars who were or are actual mythicists, and scholars who do not deny that there was a historical Jesus, illustrates the key problem, which is a lack of willingness to even address the issue in an honest and accurate way.

The suggestion that New Testament studies is a field that is hermetically sealed off from the rest of the scholarly world, and that scholars of ancient Judaism and the Roman world simply take over our conclusions uncritically, shows precisely the sort of insults that ultimately must be offered by mythicists to historians of antiquity in general, if they are to avoid accepting the more obvious explanation as to why their viewpoint is not widely held, namely because of scholars' greater familiarity with the relevant evidence and issues.

#11 - James F. McGrath - 03/26/2014 - 17:44

Dr McGrath introduces Samuel Sandmel's term "parallelomania" in the above comments and attempts to illustrate Brodie's argument in his article by a classic illustration of what Sandmel characterized as "extravagance", that is, applying "excerpts" from various writings, lifted from context, to a passage under study. By this method one can take isolated phrases and words from any set of books and apply it to a single sentence in Brodie's book. But that's the very method that Brodie avoids. McGrath's comparison is invalid.

Sandmel also explained what a genuine study of parallels involves and how to avoid parallelomania: a genuine study that Sandmel said he encouraged involves a close and detailed study of the words and syntax and structures of literatures under comparison. And it is such a detailed study of words, contexts, syntax and literary structures that Brodie compares in order to make his case for literary borrowing. He also establishes this possible practice in the larger context of literary culture of the day.

McGrath has failed to address any of this method that Brodie applies and instead substitutes a quite silly comparison of isolated words from various books to a single sentence in Brodie's work. Brodie has clearly avoided Sandmel's trap of parallelomania if Sandmel's article and definitions have any meaning at all. McGrath has given a classic illustration of exactly what Brodie's method is not.

#12 - Neil Godfrey - 03/27/2014 - 03:55

Neil Godfrey: "I would be interested if McGrath could support his claim [that mythicists generally resort to conspiracy theories] with names and evidence."

McGrath responded: "The fact that Neil Godfrey lumps together as "mythicists" scholars old and new as well as non-scholars who were or are actual mythicists, and scholars who do not deny that there was a historical Jesus, illustrates the key problem, which is a lack of willingness to even address the issue in an honest and accurate way."

Response: All the names I listed are contemporaries. I cited current published mythicists, both scholars and non-scholars, as well as scholars who are open to the possibility of mythicism or have declared themselves agnostics (e.g. Hector Avalos). I ask Dr McGrath to supply evidence for his assertion from as broad a range as this for his claim that he has yet to find "a version of mythicism" that does not resort to conspiracy theory.

It escapes me how my comprehensive list of names and request for evidence can be interpreted as evidence of a lack of willingness to address the argument in an honest or accurate way.

I find McGrath's suggestion to be an extension of what Thompson here calls an "unacceptable" and "extended criticism ad hominem".

#13 - Neil Godfrey - 03/27/2014 - 04:36

When one is open to conspiracy theory thinking about experts in one field, is it any surprise if they fall for it in others?

I suspect that the arrow points in the other direction. Having worked in a field where the "blatant disregard for historical critical methods" doesn't disqualify an NT Wright from being considered an eminent scholar, it is not surprising that Price has less respect for appeals to consensus in other fields.

#14 - Vince Hart - 03/27/2014 - 12:20

In the imaginations of mythicists there are two kinds of conspiracy: the conspiracy to suppress the truth about Jesus in early Christian history, and the conspiracy to suppress the truth about Jesus today. The article was about the latter kind. On the other kind of conspiracy some interesting comments can be found in Raphael Lataster's book, "there was no Jesus, there is no God".

Lataster finds it very significant that most of Book 5 and the beginning of Book 6 of the Annals of Tacitus are missing. He believes that the failure of this material to mention Jesus resulted in its suppression. Apparently, Lataster has consulted Richard Carrier on this matter, who believes that the disappearance of other material from Philo and Cassius Dio has the same explanation.

Stuart Murray

#15 - Stuart - 03/27/2014 - 16:55

As a layman, I am grateful for McGrath's scholar/insider view. While I understand McGrath's desire to respond to some of the irrational aspects of fringe complaints, overall I was disappointed to find this article more an analysis of whom you are and aren't allowed to treat with disdain on your blog rather than a critical reflection on some of the more basic issues driving the current discussions of mythicism and what is perceived as academia's resistance to it.

Of course academia must protect itself from apologists and cranks. Of course a broad consensus of appropriately diverse scholars would constitute an initial burden of proof (or at least production). But what are we to make of a consensus which is the descendant of coercive (if well-meant) thought control from a centuries-long dominant religion? Or of scholarly inertia resting on previously ill-considered assumptions? Or possible parallels to how Thompson was treated back in the 1970s and 80s? Those are examples of far more interesting and engaging questions that prompt lay people like me to be fascinated with the idea of mythicism.

And why would someone so comfortably within a vast majority engage in ad hominem attacks on a tiny minority? And who cares about whether someone is rude on his blog? Could we not find examples of this in any field? Or are some allowed to engage in such behavior because it is "not inherently inappropriate?"

Perhaps as a layman I am simply missing something and my opinions here can be treated with the disdain they may so richly deserve. Nevertheless, I hope when scholars attempt to engage the public (like me) on issues like this, they come with good arguments, respect and a genuine self-critical approach that deals with these issues head-on rather than through statements of the blatantly followed up by innuendo and thinly-veiled insults. As such, I view this article as a regrettable waste of an opportunity.

#16 - Paul Egtvedt - 03/27/2014 - 18:27

I guess B&I doesn't allow html tags. Here is the link to McGrath's review of Brodie's work. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2013/02/review-of-thomas-brodie-beyond-the-quest-for-the-historical-jesus.html> All eight paragraphs.

#17 - Mark Erickson - 03/28/2014 - 03:03

Dear James,

you write: "Casey may well be wrong about things, and he certainly does not always reflect the scholarly consensus in his volume *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* But he is not a fool."

Given the mistreatment, the misrepresentation and the misunderstanding Casey has offered in his recent book about the work of Thompson, Lemche and, most bizarrely, myself--which stands closer to libel and propaganda than to proper scholarship--he at least can be accused of writing foolishly, which does not live up to his previous reputation as a scholar. I'm pretty sure Thompson, Lemche and myself have never written that Jesus never existed. I for one wrote in my one and only paper on the matter that there are epistemological problems for historical reconstruction of an ancient individual--pretty standard procedure in professional history circles. I can say then only a fool would consider that 'mythicist'.

Emanuel Pfoh

#18 - Emanuel Pfoh - 03/28/2014 - 14:24

I would like to echo Paul E's remarks above. Also to press for rather more definition of what you have to say to be a Mythicist.

#19 - Martin Hughes - 03/28/2014 - 15:49

As a followup to Emanuel Pfoh's comment above, let's not ignore Casey's dubious portrayals of non-scholars, too, such as myself and no doubt others. Like Emanuel Pfoh, neither have I ever written anything arguing a case that there was no historical Jesus but have always addressed problems and questions of methodology in this context; but worse, Casey's psychoanalysis of me and his interpretations of narrowly selected parts of my personal history are nothing short of misrepresentations.

It is also instructive, I think, to see that Dr McGrath has since found time to talk about the responses here on his own blog site, and there he dismisses most of the commentary here with the complaint that it coming from "mythicists". Who of the commentators here he continues to identify as mythicists I do not know.

#20 - Neil Godfrey - 03/29/2014 - 00:05

Did anyone else not catch the irony wherein one devotes one's time to writing/delivering an article/SBL paper in which he throws out the strongly worded salvo:

But when it comes to the mythicism proffered by people whose knowledge of relevant languages, historical texts, ancient cultures, and other such data is minimal or non-existent, and whose works consist only of web pages and self-published books, scholars are under no obligation to waste their valuable time on such matters any more than on the countless other topics which web sites and self-published books address, and which a quick perusal shows to be bunk.

If, in McGrath's view, the mythicist methodology/result is one of conspiracy and bunk, why waste his valuable time? Why commit ad hominem arguments against Bob Price when his skepticism about climate change is certainly allowed by 'academic freedom'? By the way, Newton believed in alchemy, Gödel believed in ghosts; do we drop from our understanding their accomplishments simply because of these silly ideas. The scholarly consensus in the days of Fred Hoyle viewed Penrose and Hawking with suspicion. Do we no longer read them? I simply don't understand the marginalizing tone of McGrath's academia. But for the most part, how banal this article appears to me...

Timothy Bagley - Denver, Colorado

#21 - Timothy Bagley - 03/29/2014 - 00:18

I don't see where I ever suggested that no one ought to read Brodie or Price, even though neither seems to me to be a Newton. But you will note that not everything Newton had to say is widely remembered today, much less embraced. If any of the mythicists is to be remembered as a paradigm-shifter, they must do what such individuals have always had to do: demonstrate that they are right.

#22 - James F. McGrath - 03/29/2014 - 14:31

Dr. McGrath, if that is what you took away from reading my comment, that is quite unfortunate.

#23 - Timothy Bagley - 03/29/2014 - 16:43

I do not deny climate change. Admitting, as I always have, that I am in no position to have an informed opinion, I only say that I must be suspicious because of the seeming tendency of many scientists to allow political and ideological loyalties to influence their advocacy. I remain agnostic. And in any case, it is certainly interesting that Mr. McGrath deduces from my one supposed thoughtcrime that my opinion on an entirely unrelated question may be rejected, too. He seems to have learned a little too much from the irascible Casey. And it is very funny when he bids mythicists, if they wish to be taken seriously, to acquire academic positions from which to make their case. He must know that being a mythicist is enough to send one's job application into the circular file automatically.

#24 - Robert M. Ptice - 03/29/2014 - 22:44

Regarding my comment #4, McGrath says: "The suggestion that New Testament studies is a field that is hermetically sealed off from the rest of the scholarly world, and that scholars of ancient Judaism and the Roman world simply take over our conclusions uncritically,"

I don't see where I ever suggested NT studies were hermetically sealed, in fact I think the demise of criteria of authenticity is influenced by classical studies. And I have no idea what McGrath means by the second part.

With his latest post included, there is substantial evidence McGrath's reading comprehension is faulty.

#25 - Mark Erickson - 03/31/2014 - 04:37

I continue to press for a definition, the importance and urgency of which is emphasised by Neil Godfrey's remarks about identify those who are Mythos. May I suggest that 'a Jesus Mythicist is one who believes that the information we have about the Jesus of the NT is insufficient to enable us, without using religious premises in our argument, to identify as 'Jesus', by ascribing teachings and a life story to him, any individual with anything approaching reasonable certainty.'

#26 - Martin Hughes - 03/31/2014 - 16:36

In reference to Martin Hughes, may I suggest a different way of looking at the mythicism/historicism debate? The one thing for which we have clear evidence is the existence of a Jesus movement. The question is whether the movement was centred on a man, called Jesus, who was known to at least some members of the movement. Those who answer "yes" are historicists, and those who answer "no" are mythicists.

#27 - Stuart - 03/31/2014 - 18:07

Stuart, I think we would want to refine that a bit more. Both 'groups' would hold that there were movements that centered on a man called Jesus; the difference is whether this man existed in history or is a creation of the movement(s)ideology.

Timothy Bagley, Denver

#28 - Timothy Bagley - 03/31/2014 - 18:41

In response to "Robert M. Ptime," that statement seems to suggest that no one who works in mainstream academia already would ever be led by the evidence to become a mythicist. But since even young-earth creationists manage to get PhDs and academic jobs under false pretenses and point to that as evidence of their scientific credentials, your claim that mythicists cannot accomplish even that can only be taken as evidence that they have an even weaker case for their view than the appalling quackery that is young-earth creationism.

#29 - James F. McGrath - 03/31/2014 - 19:12

Timothy, I would start with the question that I asked. Just to clarify, when I said that we have evidence of a Jesus movement I was referring to Paul's letters. So the question would be whether people like Cephas actually knew Jesus. According to my interpretation, a mythicist would answer "no".

The next question would be what kinds of myth theories there are. There seem to be two possibilities: either Jesus was a legendary figure from an imagined past, or he was a being who lived, died and was resurrected in a celestial realm. In my opinion, neither of these theories works.

#30 - Stuart - 03/31/2014 - 19:38

Dr. McGrath: I need not defend Bob Price (he is quite capable of defending his views), but I cannot accept your non sequitur conclusion ["your claim that mythicists cannot accomplish even that can only be taken as evidence that they have an even weaker case for their view"]. How would that follow from Price's comment? I consider his point to be addressing the socio-cultural 'employment' problem of a job candidate who may be a mythicist getting a fair hearing from an institution that would dismiss prima facie the applicant based on that position and not on the strength or weakness of the position. How strange a reply...

#31 - Timothy Bagley - 03/31/2014 - 19:56

Few would deny that Cephas knew Jesus, but most importantly, and perhaps only, as the risen Lord. There is no evidence in the epistles that Cephas' knowledge was any different than Paul's, or that the Nazorene's knowledge of Jesus was any different than later Christians. The Gospels could have begun as a parable on such knowledge. Speculative yes, but hardly deserving of McGrath's hysterical damnation.

#32 - David Hillman - 03/31/2014 - 20:33

Stuart – thank you for your reply. Little is known of Cephas except from the Gospels and Paul's few comments. What this Cephas knew or did not know is not verifiable. Paul writes (1 Cor. 15:1-8) that Christ 'appeared to Cephas'. Nothing about any pre-death and resurrection interaction. Some mythicists would say the emphatic No; others would argue, as I would, that we have no evidence outside of the mythical gospels to tell us. There are criteria of probability that must be used in assessing the evidence. Regarding your second point, I would not wish to reduce one's alternatives; particularly your second alternative: he was a being who lived, died and was resurrected. If one allows for a historical person named Jesus, another option would be that he lived and died – period. What a religious movement either theologically and/or mythologically did with that historical person is, as they say, history.

Timothy Bagley

#33 - Timothy Bagley - 03/31/2014 - 21:43

David and Timothy, I don't think there is any real disagreement here. Did Cephas know Jesus as a man before his death, or did he know Jesus only as the risen lord? According to my interpretation, the answer to this question is the answer to whether one is a historicist or a mythicist. So one could be a historicist while accepting that few if any details can be known about the life of Jesus.

#34 - Stuart - 03/31/2014 - 22:25

According to the myth theory, the idea that Jesus was known to Cephas and the others during an earthly life was a later invention. Carrier and Doherty think that Jesus was originally thought of as a celestial being. This original understanding was then completely superseded by the idea of a historical Jesus.

This raises an interesting question: why did the later idea supersede the original one? Presumably, because it was a better story. In fact, it must have been a much better story because no one bothered to preserve the original. This appears to create a problem when we try to understand the origin of Christianity. The challenge here is to understand what made the belief so attractive in the first place? From the mythicist perspective, the original belief was so unappealing that it was soon replaced by something completely different. This creates a fatal problem for mythicists. Mythicism makes the origin of Christianity inexplicable.

#35 - Stuart - 03/31/2014 - 23:52

I would appeal to Professor McGrath to pause for a moment. Price was talking about Mythos being unable, because of institutional prejudice, to get institutional jobs. The reply that creationists get jobs 'by false pretences' suggests, if any comparison is valid, that Mythos are by comparison honest people rather than that they have arguments even worse than those of the Creos.

I don't want to be po-faced over a humorous sally but the remark about false pretences, even if taken in the lightest possible terms, does suggest that a slightly discriminatory mindset does exist.

Meanwhile, as to the definition of Mythos, my comment on Stuart's suggestion would be that we should surely put in some time constraints - did the movement *at a time when its writings began to appear include - still include - people who had, *in the time of Pilate, met and known a leader of the movement called Jesus?

By that standard there would be many agnostics and the Mytho view would not in itself be too outrageous, though we do indeed see that anti-Mythos reach the point of outrage quite quickly. After all, direct contact between eyewitnesses and first recorders is neither necessary nor sufficient for the record to be correct, as I'm sure criminal investigators could tell us.

#36 - Martin Hughes - 04/01/2014 - 09:19

Stuart, the value assessment of "better" story, I guess, would reflect what your christological perspective is. The "superceding", as you call it, could be described more on the struggles of various early Christian groups and the doctrinal debates in the early centuries of Christianity relating to docetic views of the Christ. Some strongly needed him to be 'in the flesh'. I don't believe this is a fatal problem that makes the origin inexplicable. It accentuates the importance of historical study in early Christianity. 'Mythicists' have offered many explanations of these theological

transitions.

#37 - Timothy Bagley - 04/01/2014 - 15:18

Timothy, you raise a crucial issue about early doctrinal debates. Although certain "heretical" views were stamped out we still have evidence that those views existed and that there was a debate about them. This raises the question: where is the evidence for what must have been the biggest debate of all?

If the Doherty/Carrier theory is correct then there must have been a sudden and radical change in people's understanding of Jesus. Wouldn't this have given rise to disagreement? There is no evidence of it.

A successful myth theory would need to explain how the understanding of Jesus changed. On the myth theory it seems that Mark's Gospel was written as an extended parable. What happened next? Was Mark's Gospel misunderstood? Did people mistake it for history? Did the idea of a historical Jesus spread entirely by mistake? Did anyone try to correct the mistake? Were there disputes about it for which we no longer have any evidence?

These are the questions that the myth theory needs to answer.

#38 - Stuart - 04/01/2014 - 16:37

One should not discredit a scholar's work in one field by their work in another. Isaac Newton believed in astrology. Should we therefore dismiss his work on physics and gravity. Rene DesCartes' work on optics was completely silly, should we therefore conclude that analytical geometry and Cartesian coordinates are worthless?

#39 - jay Raskin - 04/01/2014 - 17:16

I think Mark was not so much replacing Paul as adding to him, much as the later evangelists built on and reacted against each other. Paul's proclamation of the gift of eternal life through the blood shed by Christ crucified was the starting point of Mark's gospel which incorporated hints and details from the epistles. While Paul knows little if anything of the life of an earthly Christ, and gets all his information from those heavens where indeed he might have considered the crucifixion to take place, Mark shows Jesus interacting with the Pharisees, poor fishermen, and rulers of what was then over 60 years before his time. Mark adds to Paul's message very ironic comments on most of the burning questions of his time - for aristocrats how to live with some authenticity in face of overwhelming power, and for the poor and marginalised a revival of the age old and still unfinished promise, later developed by Luke, of liberation through weakness. It was a work of genius to set the drama and passion in an historical place and time which challenged and answered so many questions, though the story is not that of a son of man but of an hypostasis of God. None of the story is though actually historical as every detail comes from pre-existing stories in the Pentateuch and from those stories which every well educated, Greek educated Jew would know. And the story is told not to replace Paul's good news but to reemphasise his challenge - to take up his cross and follow him. That is why the story is told, and whether behind some minor details lies a real historical figure matters little. Dr McGrath's "I'm a scientist, you are not" response to this is unworthy. That I think what I have said is a quite likely scenario does not make me a fundamentalist, a denialist, a creationist, an anti-evolutionist, or anything else he chucks at me. In fact I would be quite happy to be persuaded to some kind of Ebionite believe if he would concentrate on the evidence and what people actually say

instead of talking past them.

#40 - David Hillman - 04/01/2014 - 18:37

If we grant mythicism then yes, we do have the problem of explaining how the understanding shifted to a historical Jesus. Yet on the basis of the HJ model, we have the problem of explaining how the understanding shifted to the Christ of faith. The wide variety of explanations involving vastly different HJs, along with naturalistic paraphrases of a series of miraculous or mystical events, shows that this problem is likewise far from simple.

As for the question of a radical shift in understanding of the Jesus story, I don't see this as an insurmountable problem for a mythicist explanation for Christian origins. Several modern interpreters can see Mark's narrative as being largely symbolic, and we can see how Matthew and Luke rewrote some of the more obviously symbolic episodes to read more "naturally". It is easy enough to interpret Mark (and overlook his symbolism) through Matthew and Luke.

If Matthew and Luke were able to change the way one read Mark so early, then perhaps we have more clues to finding the answer to our question than we realize.

I think some of the difficulty arises from thinking of the ecclesia as a monolithic body with a single historical trajectory. Now that does pose real problems for understanding how an understanding can switch so dramatically so quickly.

#41 - Neil Godfrey - 04/01/2014 - 22:47

Stuart: what singular event do you have in mind that is prompting this statement? "If the Doherty/Carrier theory is correct then there must have been a sudden and radical change in people's understanding of Jesus. Wouldn't this have given rise to disagreement? There is no evidence of it." Where do you see that it "must" be sudden and radical?

#42 - Timothy Bagley - 04/01/2014 - 23:12

David, I think you have just restated the problem. For Paul, Jesus was a mythical being with no life story. Mark gave him one and set it on earth, and then everyone came to think of Jesus in this way. That is the theory; now I want to know whether it is plausible. You have told me what you think happened without addressing any of the difficulties.

Neil and Timothy, the change in understanding, if there was one, appears to have been sudden. Matthew and Luke definitely give the impression of thinking that Jesus was a historical person. However, it doesn't really matter how sudden the change in understanding was. The question is whether the change in understanding gave rise to any debate. It is hard to believe that there wasn't any debate, yet we have no evidence of it. This would still be a problem even the church wasn't a monolithic body, because then there would be other groups arguing against the idea that Jesus was a historical figure.

Neil, it doesn't have to be an insurmountable problem; it just has to be a problem. If it is a problem then it diminishes the credibility of the myth theory. You say that the conventional view has the problem of explaining the transition from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith, but really this is just the problem of explaining the belief

in the resurrection. And this is also a problem for the myth theory. Why would anyone believe in the resurrection of a mythical being? Certainly, people might have visions of a celestial being, but why would those visions be taken as evidence of a resurrection in a celestial realm?

#43 - Stuart - 04/02/2014 - 10:16

Stuart, you wrote: "Neil and Timothy, the change in understanding, if there was one, appears to have been sudden. Matthew and Luke definitely give the impression of thinking that Jesus was a historical person." First of all, thank you for the concession. I would prefer to start from the 'if there was one' perspective rather than have the confidence you present in your second sentence. All too often we tend to read Roman period texts with post-Enlightenment understandings. I would recommend that before we conclude that Matt. and Luke think Jesus was historical that we consider mythography in the Roman period. Alan Cameron's learned, serious study [Greek Mythography in the Roman World. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004] discusses a number of texts that with modern reading methods would 'sound' historical but are not. I would recommend that you read it and also R. L. Fowler, Early Greek Mythography, Volume 1: Text and Introduction (Oxford 2000). I am not attempting to 'school' you on this point but to encourage a breadth of understanding of the historical-literary context. Another recommendation is to expand one's reading in early Christian gospels (there are at least 40 known gospels in existence) and with comparative reading and analysis, determine if, as you say, it is plausible to believe the 'theory'. I sense that your perspective is a bit constrained by canon limitations.

#44 - Timothy Bagley - 04/02/2014 - 20:55

Hi Stuart, you raise a range of rhetorical questions that are indeed resolved by various mythicist scenarios, and some of them (e.g. interpreting Mark's symbolism as literal) are even answered within mainstream studies on the Gospels and Christian origins. Moreover, there are a range of rhetorical questions that can be and are likewise raised against the historical Jesus model. The latter are not always recognized as problematic as they really are because of cultural familiarity with the model.

This is one reason I am not interested in arguing for or against an historical/mythical Jesus. The real historical question is surely trying to account for the evidence as we have it. Ideologies and cultural assumptions very easily get in the way of any such study.

I think the first step in any historical question is setting out the raw data itself and asking of it questions of provenance and genre and testing these answers through independent controls and comparative literary-critical studies. That will inevitably lead to many problems to be resolved.

Evolution did not have to answer the how questions before it became acknowledged as a viable theory. Indeed, the "how" it happened is still being debated.

#45 - Neil Godfrey - 04/02/2014 - 23:39

Neil, I hope I can say this as nice as I can, but mythicism is psuedo-history/psuedo-scholarship.

The argument that Carrier is proposing is nothing short of Mormonism. Mormons believe Jesus was a celestial being. Just because the gospels transition from Jesus of Nazareth to the Jesus of Christ, is not proof that Jesus was a myth. Nor does it prove

that the Gospel narratives and accounts are myths. You would also have to prove that all the secular historians who wrote about Jesus were forged or wrong. Then you would have to show how Jesus was made into a myth. This is an extremely enormous impossibility.

As Stuart said above "Neil, it doesn't have to be an insurmountable problem; it just has to be a problem. If it is a problem then it diminishes the credibility of the myth theory."

Neil, Mythicism digs bigger holes than it can fill. The atheists who are gullible enough to fall for it are no more than internet bloggers and lay people. Very few have ventured to affirm Mythicism in mainstream Academia (Carrier, Price, Brodie, Thompson) and even within the ranks of these men, some of them realize (Price) how absurd arguing that Jesus was a myth is.

#46 - Matt - 04/03/2014 - 00:48

"Mormons believe Jesus was a celestial being."

Don't the Christians believe something similar - that Jesus was the incarnation of the second person of the trinity? So what?

"You would also have to prove that all the secular historians who wrote about Jesus were forged or wrong."

Josephus? Tacitus? Thallus?

Have you read any of the writings of Doherty or Carrier?

#47 - Manoj Joseph - 04/03/2014 - 04:17

Would the change be as sudden as the sudden change in the Gospels from Jesus coming from Nazareth to Jesus being born in Bethlehem?

That happened so fast that the only possible explanation is that people found out that Jesus really had been born in Bethlehem.

#48 - Steven Carr - 04/03/2014 - 06:57

Matt: No, that wasn't nice. What an incredibly uninformed reply! You strike me as one who hasn't spent much of your time reading the scholarly literature. Badly done!

#49 - Timothy Bagley - 04/03/2014 - 08:09

Timothy, I am afraid that you have missed the point. I'm obviously not making a concession, am I? I don't think that there was any change in understanding, so any talk about it is necessarily hypothetical from my point of view. It is the task of mythicists to chart the change of understanding and to explain how it happened. But before they do this, they may want to consider whether there is anything to chart or explain.

In this case the smoking gun is missing. There is no evidence that early Christians were debating whether Jesus existed as a historical person. In the absence of this evidence, there is no reason to take the myth theory seriously.

Neil, you may recall that Darwin set out abundant evidence to show that evolution had happened and also proposed a mechanism to explain how it happened. The analogy with mythicism seems ill chosen.

#50 - Stuart - 04/03/2014 - 08:58

Yes, Manoj, I have read about Carrier and Doherty. Doherty is not a historian. He has a bachelor's degree in history. Carrier is a qualified historian, but his work is shoddy and very sloppy, in terms of his historical methodologies. That's why Bart Ehrman, Maurice Casey, Mark Goodacre, and the rest of the scholarly world disagree with him.

None of our sources are faulty. They all contain valuable historical information about Jesus of Nazareth that prove his existence.

#51 - Matt - 04/03/2014 - 16:09

Timothy, what are you talking about? Virtually no scholar or historian today says that Jesus was a myth. Mythicism was disproven in the 19th and early 20th century.

I challenge you to cite me a list of historians and scholars today. I guarantee you won't find more than the amount of fingers on your hand.

#52 - Matt - 04/03/2014 - 16:11

Stuart, I didn't really believe you were making a concession; a bit of poor comedy on my part. However, would you not have to concede (to stay with the word) that there is also a possibility that there was no debate because readers during those early periods were not looking at these writings as historical and that the historization of Jesus is a later development? I cannot begin to document or flesh out this notion within the sound bites of these little give-and-take replies. I am not a pundit. But what I do know of the Roman period at this time and its continued interest in Hellenistic literary forms, tropes and content leads me to consider that the scenario of myth to historicity to be a more probable trajectory.

By the way, where is the absent author McGrath? Has he left the discussion?

#53 - Timothy Bagley - 04/03/2014 - 16:12

Matt (last name missing), I have no interest in taking up your challenge. The acrimonious tone of your posts do not welcome my interaction.

#54 - Timothy Bagley - 04/03/2014 - 16:24

Timothy, a bit of poor understanding on my part then :-)

All I would say to that is that it would be far better for the myth theory if it predicted a major debate and upheaval and this is exactly what we found.

If the myth theory is correct and there was a radical change in the understanding of Jesus, which hasn't left any trace, then we are out of luck, aren't we? In that case, there could never be a compelling reason for believing it even if it is true.

#55 - Stuart - 04/03/2014 - 16:41

No, I keep checking back in. But a mere assertion such as yours ("what I do know of the Roman period at this time and its continued interest in Hellenistic literary forms, tropes and content leads me to consider that the scenario of myth to historicity to be a more probable trajectory") doesn't seem to me at all adequate, both because it fails to address the time frame within which our evidence for early Christian beliefs unfolds, it fails to address the evidence that our earliest source (Paul's letters) envisaged a Davidic anointed one who had lived on Earth, and it fails to account for why almost all scholars and historians with relevant expertise the Roman period fail to draw the conclusion you do, based on their greater acquaintance with the evidence.

#56 - James F. McGrath - 04/03/2014 - 16:52

James, thanks for checking back in. My scenario, I could reply, is not a mere assertion any more than the list of inadequacies you mention without any examples. My attempt to reply to Stuart was to pose a scenario as a possibility, nothing more. I am willing to learn from you (since my lesser acquaintance with the evidence is apparent to you – how would you know, I ask?) an example of the evidence of early Christian beliefs and what you could cite as how fast or slow beliefs develop. I would sincerely appreciate the text you refer to as Paul's source for a Davidic anointed one who 'lived on Earth'.

#57 - Timothy Bagley - 04/03/2014 - 17:16

Jay, A scholar who is not relevant in the field of ancient history or NT studies does not make them qualified to speak on the issue.

Your analogy falls flat because 1) Physics and astrology are both part of scientific studies. 2) Optics involves some analytic thinking along with mathematical proofs or calculations.

GA Wells, Frank Zindler, Richard Dawkins, etc. are not ancient historians, nor are they New-Testament scholars. Their opinion does not count toward the mainstream view since it's not relevant.

How would you feel if a historian said that the earth is 6000 years old? He's not qualified to speak on that issue because it's out of his field since that's more of a biological/geo-logical question.

Why do you think that 99% of historians and scholars are wrong, when the evidence we have is sufficient enough? No reason to doubt Jesus of Nazareth's existence

#58 - Matthew Brown - 04/04/2014 - 00:26

Well, I still think that there is a problem about definition and that some of the preponderance of heat over light here arises from eliding 'weak' usages of 'myth' and related words with 'strong' ones. The weaker versions would claim that the stories about a certain character are very dramatic, ideologically inflected, somewhat hard to reconcile among themselves and difficult to verify, the stronger that only the processes of fiction - making composites of different originals, using imagination freely etc. - could have produced these stories. I would have thought that mythicism concerning Jesus in the weaker sense is commonplace, in the stronger sense very rare. So I keep saying that the term needs to be defined more clearly than it has been. One of the marks of academic discourse, one of the things that makes it much more dry but also much more reliable than polemic, is that guidance is offered as to

the meaning of key terms and that writers think twice before thinking that their meaning is obvious.

#59 - Martin Hughes - 04/12/2014 - 16:31

I am surprised to see this on B&I; Casey's is not the book (nor the thesis) with which to defend. Very disappointing article.

#60 - Tom Verenna - 04/13/2014 - 15:31

Timothy,

When Paul refers to Jesus (actually the common Jewish name Joshua) as having been descended from David, as being the expected anointed one, as having been crucified and buried and even having been raised from the dead as the firstfruits because he expected all human beings to do so, and mentions having met Jesus' brother, he may have been wrong about any or all of these things, but the only way to treat them as though they are references to a purely celestial figure is to assert that without evidence, even though there are more natural ways of interpreting these things that Paul mentions.

When Mark composes his narrative of a life of Jesus, he seems to clearly be talking about the same figure Paul mentions, as part of the same broad religious phenomenon, and shows no sign of being involved in turning a previously celestial figure into a terrestrial one.

#61 - James F. McGrath - 04/17/2014 - 19:21

Dr. McGrath,

I am not surprised but I am disappointed by the schoolbook answer you have provided. I can only assume that your brief response is an evidence of your way of avoiding the vast amount of work that has been done in ancient mythography, the scholarly work of Thompson, Price, and other putative mythicists, as well as the literary work on the gospel of Mark since the days of George Nickelsburg (HTR 73 [1980]) onward. Paul's statements that you cite have been analyzed by many to show that the claim of "assertion without evidence" is somewhat naïve. But I am surprised that there are 'natural ways of interpreting'. Whatever do you mean?

#62 - Timothy Bagley - 04/18/2014 - 14:55

Timothy, I challenge you to please cite me a list of historians and scholars who think Jesus was a myth?(19th and 20th, as well as early 21st century scholars don't count).

#63 - Matthew Brown - 05/10/2014 - 22:54

Mr. Brown: No; as I stated before (see #54) and gave my reason there.

#64 - Timothy Bagley - 05/12/2014 - 21:51

Matthew, allow me to take a different response to your challenge. I suppose you want a list so that (a) you can eliminate from that list anyone who does not meet your criteria of historian or scholar (and I assume you would only accept NT scholars); or (b) you can point to the small size of the list and declare that you have the consensus

of scholars/historians on your side. Then, I assume you would believe that this number is a strong support for the claim/argument that Jesus is a historical person. This tack resembles the old argumentum ad populum fallacy. To provide a list for you indicates to me that you are thinking along these lines. Science works this way generally but there are known cases where a consensus of scientists changed when new data was shown to weaken the argument or old data was called into question. In my view, your need to have a list would "appear" to resemble an argument from authority (a known logical fallacy). The history of biblical scholarship in the last 50 years or so has shown us all that a majority opinion isn't always right. I am sure that scholars in archaeology, Hebrew Bible, New Testament can all attest to those brave individuals who furthered their respective fields along by 'going against the consensus.' The admirable Thomas L. Thompson is one such example; John Van Seters is another. A fair analysis of the difficulty of the consensus argument was recently written by Richard Carrier on his blog at <http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/5553>. I personally do not care for Carrier's writing style and general puerile tone in his books and blog articles but he does make a good point in relation to this whole argument that McGrath started weeks ago.

In short, I don't see what benefit is achieved by giving you a list. I personally have no stake in the claim that Jesus was a real man or not. I "believe" that it is unprovable at this point in my understanding of the evidence. Whoever this man was, if he was, the New Testament does not reflect what he actually said or did.

#65 - Timothy Bagley - 05/14/2014 - 20:58

Timothy,

First off, do you know what argument ad populum and argument ad authority are? Argument ad populum is appealing to an idea as being true because it's popular. This is something that I never once claimed. Second, argument from authority is arguing from someone who is not an expert on something but you claim they are. Appealing to an authority of experts bypasses this fallacy because, while experts can be wrong, it is more than likely they aren't.

As to your second point, you point to two OT scholars as going against the mainstream as though this is evidence that mythicism should be taken seriously like biblical minimalism. However, this is a faulty analogy because 1) Most OT scholars do not believe in biblical minimalism. 2) There is a consensus of historians and scholars on the historical Jesus. 3) There is far better evidence for Jesus than David, Abraham, or Moses.

I don't find Carrier's arguments convincing. He merely points to examples that you gave as "evidence" that we should not trust a consensus of experts. But this is just another example of Carrier's tactics of trying to sow doubt on lay people who have no credentials or expertise in biblical studies or ancient history.

#66 - Matt - 11/16/2014 - 14:44

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