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Mythicisism and the Making of Mark

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Mythicism and the Making of Mark

Carrier's approach allows him to say that every single thing he finds in the relevant sources is "exactly what we'd expect" if mythicism is true – "as symbolic myth, every oddity is explained, and indeed expected." This is because "they made this up" is compatible with everything that any text says – especially if one excludes in advance the possibility of using traditional critical methods and criteria for determining that some details may reflect actual historical events.

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Scholars of the New Testament typically view allegorical interpretation of the texts they study with disdain. There is a long history of Christians engaging first in allegorical interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, and then later, applying the same approach to their own Christian sacred texts. Allegory is notorious for reading things into the text that simply aren't there, things that are exceedingly unlikely to have been in view for the authors and their earliest readers. Allegory is also notoriously unconstrained, allowing one to find in the text just about anything one wishes to.^[1]

Richard Carrier has recently done more than merely offer yet another allegorical interpretation of a Biblical text. He claims that the Gospel of Mark was composed as an allegory (having suggested earlier in the book that proto-Mark was being proclaimed as an exoteric myth "whose real meaning (it's [sic] *esoteric* meaning, that of a cosmic event) would be explained only to initiates."^[2] I will not discuss here his conspiracy theory approach to early Christian literature, summed up nicely when he writes, "This appears to be what typically happened to the evidence. It was erased, doctored or rewritten to support a historicity party line against a mythicist one."^[3] And I will only note in passing the irony that an approach which was often used by Christians to avoid having the Bible be untrue (as it often is on its surface level when treated as a depiction of fact), is here adopted by an atheist expressly with the aim of demonstrating that the Bible is untrue. Instead, what I will focus on in what follows is Carrier's treatment of the character of the early Christian sources, his view of their composition (as largely

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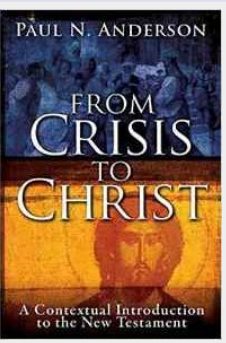
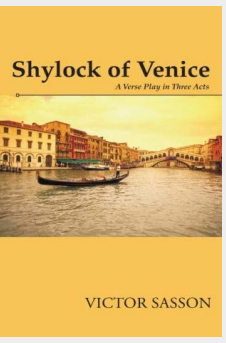
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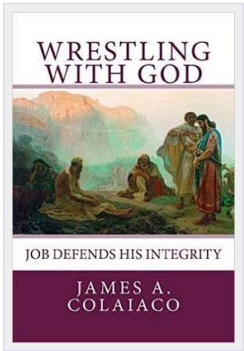
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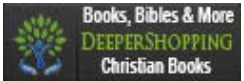


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constructed out of earlier stories), and his claims regarding their purported allegorical and symbolic meanings.

Carrier helpfully recognizes that identifying the genre of the work will not answer questions of historicity, “For in fact, a great deal of ancient biography, even of real people, was constructed of myth and fiction.”^[4] His treatment of myth, and how to determine whether a work is largely or entirely myth, is less satisfactory. Carrier writes,^[5]

Characteristics of myth are (1) strong and meaningful emulation of prior myths (or even of real events); (2) the presence of historical improbabilities (which are not limited to ‘miracles’ but can include natural events that are very improbable, like amazing coincidences or unrealistic behavior); and (3) the absence of external corroboration of key (rather than peripheral) elements (because a myth can incorporate real people and places, but the central character or event will still be fictional). No one of these criteria is sufficient to identify a narrative as mythical. But the presence of all three is conclusive. And the presence of one or two can also be sufficient, when sufficiently telling.

Since similarity between real events and other real events is not at all unlikely, and on the contrary well-documented, the first alleged characteristic of myth simply doesn’t work. The third point is equally problematic, not only because it is unclear what “external corroboration” entails (external to one literary work and confirmed in another, or external to the entire tradition in question?), but also because a great many figures in the Judaism of this time, such as John the Baptist and Hillel, might be deemed unhistorical by this criterion. The second also fails to do justice to the presence of the allegedly miraculous in a range of sources about verifiably historical people and events.

For instance, Carrier largely ignores examples of Jewish historiography, which are likely to provide the closest parallels to the Gospels. 1 Maccabees, for instance, provides no indication of its author or its sources. And yet John Bartlett concludes his study of the work by writing, “From this study the author of 1 Maccabees emerges with credit as a serious historian.”^[6] 2 Maccabees claims to derive from an otherwise unknown work in five volumes by Jason of Cyrene, provides no indication of what his sources were if any, and includes legend and miracle. Both these books include accounts of victories and other events which are implausible. Echoes are offered time and time again of stories from the Jewish Scriptures. And so a mythicist could easily account for these details in the same way Carrier accounts for similar phenomena in the Gospels. Yet these Jewish works are considered with good reason to be based on historical events, even if they are regularly

weave legend and myth into, out of, and around those events.

It is interesting to compare Carrier's allegorical approach to Barbara Thiering's *pesher* approach to the texts.^[7] Although they use different terminology, and reach quite opposite conclusions in important respects, they share in common the conviction that these texts are not about what they claim to be at the narrative level. Thiering writes, "If people such as the Qumran community, who held a definition of scripture in two levels, set out to write a new scripture, they would set it up deliberately for the same kind of interpretation, and would improve on the Old Testament in that the secondary meaning would yield a consistent sense without the need for forcing."^[8] Carrier takes much the same approach. He writes,

Mark even *tells* us (on the sly) that he is writing in parables, so that those who follow the exoteric meaning will not understand and thus not be saved – only those who follow the *esoteric* meaning (the symbolic meaning) will get the *real* meaning and be on the road to salvation (Mk 4.9-12...). So Mark even invented a story about Jesus that provides us with a model for how to read Mark's Gospel...Christian and Jewish theologians regularly understood casual references to names and groups of names in scripture to indicate deep complex meaning. And as I noted before, if they could *read* texts that way, they surely would have *written* texts that way...^[9]

For Thiering, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation were telling the true story of what happened to the historical Jesus and his entourage, encoded using symbols. For Carrier, the Gospels take the celestial figure of Jesus and turn him into a historical figure, using the Jewish Scriptures as well as Greek classical literature in order to create new stories which have no actual basis in history. Since I have already addressed elsewhere the problems with Thomas Brodie's approach (which Carrier adopts and draws upon), I will not repeat that discussion here.^[10] But I will give an example of the kind of method that Carrier envisages the author of Mark engaging in, which resembles Brodie's in many ways. Carrier is worth quoting at length, to provide an example of the kind of interpretation - and speculative reconstruction of authorial process - he offers:

Moses performs two water miracles that end the people's thirst: the tree revealed by God (making bitter water drinkable again, his second miracle), and the flow of water struck from a rock (his fourth miracle). Mark has split these up, so that each inspires *two* miracle narratives for Jesus, but in different sequences, thus keeping the total miracle narratives in each sequence at five - yet another conspicuous coincidence, evincing considerable artifice. In the first sequence Mark draws on the water-from-a-rock episode, which carried the theme of faith overcoming fear and thus obtaining salvation. Hence, the episodes of Jairus's daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage have the same theme of faith overcoming fear to achieve salvation from suffering or death. The woman also flowed with blood, while the rock flowed with water. And in the

Jairus narrative Jesus takes only his top three apostles with him into the bed chamber (the pillars Peter, James and John: Mk 5.37), just as Moses is told to take only three elders with him to strike the rock (Exod. 17.5). The Exodus narrative likewise has the Jews perishing and worried about dying (17.3), thus Mark produces parallel narratives about a woman *perishing* (besides the obvious fact that she was slowly bleeding to death, that her condition was worsening is explicitly stated: Mk 5.26) and a girl who *died*.

In Mark's second sequence he draws on the magical tree episode. Which explains the otherwise very odd detail that the blind man of Bethsaida (8.22-26) sees trees at first instead of men (Mk 8.24), just as Moses did; and to cure the deaf mute, Jesus looks to heaven and cries out, just as Moses must cry out to God in heaven, who shows him the magical tree. (I must wonder if a lost tradition held that the tree was revealed from the heavens and thus Moses was looking up at it.) In both cases, while Moses must put the tree *into* the water to drink it, Jesus must put spit *onto* the afflicted to open their eyes, ears or tongue. The magical tree episode also concludes with the declaration, 'if you will diligently *hear* the voice of the Lord your God, and will do what is pleasing in his *sight*, and will *give ear* to his commandments' then God will heal you (Exod. 15.26), in each case supplying inspiration for Jesus to heal eyes, ears and tongue (to restore the mute's 'voice').

Thus, Mark shows he has consciously created these double narrative sequences. He is not 'accidentally' duplicating them (as many scholars assume). He probably does not have sources for them, either. Because of the way he distributes allusions to the underlying miracles of Moses (probably signifying some mystical teaching not given in the text), he is clearly conscious of what he is doing in doubling the sequence of five, even in deciding what miracles they should be, and thus clearly has every motive to fabricate every single one of these stories, just as we have it, in order to fit his scheme of allusions. For example, he knew he was going to have two healing miracles in the first sequence echo the water-from-the-rock miracle, and two healing miracles in the second sequence echo the magical tree miracle, and thereby still maintain five miracles in each sequence. His reversals of gender are likewise organized, showing knowledge of both sequences mirroring each other. Mark does this again for the fifth miracle (placed second in each sequence for Jesus), which echoes Moses' power over the forces of evil (the Amalekites). Here Mark divides different allusions between the two sequences: in the first sequence, the demons are equated with soldiers (they are named 'Legion'), thus reminding us of the Amalekite soldiers; and in the second sequence, the one cured is a Canaanite (a woman of Syria and Phoenicia), thus reminding us of the Amalekites themselves (who lived in Canaan). The extent of literary artifice here evinces considerable genius. This is what myth looks like.^[11]

It is obviously very easy to find parallels when one's standard for positing one text having inspired another is that there be prepositions in both, and when something being different (such as gender) can simply be treated as a deliberate reversal. Did the woman's flow of blood remind you of Moses and the water flowing from the rock? Did the presence of Roman soldiers in the Markan story remind you of the Amalekites? What about the Greek woman in Syrian Phoenicia? Mark is described as a creative genius, but in fact the cleverness lies in the interpreter making connections. There is a long history of Jews and Christians reading texts in conjunction with one another, and drawing connections between them.^[12] And interpreters who were persuaded of the spiritual insight of the Biblical authors have sometimes deceived themselves into believing that the connections they drew were intended – usually by the divine author of all the texts. Carrier applies the same approach, albeit with a different aim. And his allegorical view of the reason and basis for composition is no more persuasive than the allegorical interpretations of the text that have been offered down the centuries. Clever preachers have long made connections between texts, in order to find a way to bring a third meaning out of the intersection that is not present in either alone. And scholars have rightly regarded such homiletic techniques as something very different from the kinds of investigation they aim for. Allegorical homiletics are unconstrained except by the imagination of the preacher. The same may now also be said of mythicism (not only in Carrier's version, but also in others), and scholars will rightly view this too as something very different from the approach to texts that they adopt.

We may here once again make reference to Bartlett's work on 1 Maccabees, mentioned earlier. Bartlett surveys the Scriptural quotations and allusions in 1 Maccabees, and they are abundant. Yet he is not led to conclude that the author – even if inventing speeches and even whole stories at times – is creating a *completely* fictional account.^[13] Connections with Scripture are a staple of Jewish literature. And what about purported agreements between the overall plot of stories? That certain set structures and stereotyped plot details recur in stories of a specific type is not a new and insightful observation. The entire field of form criticism has been dedicated to the exploration of precisely the things that Carrier treats as evidence of ahistoricity, namely similarities of structure and detail.^[14] These patterns recur throughout ancient literature, across time and geographical space, and simply cannot plausibly be viewed as evidence of direct literary borrowing in each instance. Most scholars recognize these forms to simply be a feature of ancient storytelling – whether about real events or fictitious ones. And thus, just as Carrier said about genres, so too the same forms may convey very different kinds of content with respect to their historicity. This is true even of the same form found within a single work. Raymond Newell has explored the post-battle suicide as a form, in relation to Josephus' narrative about Masada.^[15] As he emphasizes, "Each individual narrative must be examined and evaluated separately."^[16]

Where Carrier merely alludes to "some mystical teaching not given in the text," Thiering offers specific suggestions as to concrete historical occurrences that she believes are

encoded in the story – so, for instance, in this section of Mark, Thiering’s interpretation of the meaning is:

The unclean were not only admitted to the congregation, but allowed to become ministers. During the gospel period they were classed as lay ministers only, confined to the west side. Peter was told “get to the west (*opisō mou*)”. There, their sacrificial occasions were once a month, and they were devoted to prayer and the ministry of the Word. They wore black robes only, under Peter or Simeon the Black. Women were admitted to this side, the menstruous woman being “healed” of her perpetual sacrifices. In 31, the year they became lay deacons in the lower middle sanctuary, the healings of the two women, Mary Magdalene and Helena, were given. Mary was “raised from the dead”, meaning that she was reinstated and could enter new life as a minister.^[17]

This rendering of the “real meaning” of the Gospel account is found persuasive by very few, if any – indeed, I’m not certain that anyone other than Thiering herself finds it compelling. Perhaps Carrier knows this, and that is why he refrains from expounding what the mystical meaning of the texts is supposed to have been? Perhaps he is aware that any attempt to provide an actual interpretation would expose just how speculative and unconvincing such approaches to the Gospels really are.

If the Gospels are not allegories, nor the euhemerization of celestial myths, then what are they? This is not a question about genre, as Carrier rightly emphasized. One can write a biography about a mythical figure or a historical one, and the latter can be well-researched and skeptical, or credulous and filled with not just the miraculous, but even with dubious information about the mundane.^[18] The key point to note is that Mark – and those who wrote Gospels after him – wrote about a figure who makes good sense within the context of first century Galilean Judaism. That the later portraits sometimes seem far removed from the concerns of that context, and ill-acquainted with it, is precisely the reason why scholars believe that authors like Mark are not simply creating material from their own imagination, but are weaving a narrative influenced by traditions with roots in earlier decades, in a different linguistic, cultural, and religious context from their own, the mark of which is still recognizable on the material.^[19] And just as debates about genre can be a red herring, so too can debates about eyewitness testimony. In the case of Mark, there is universal agreement that the author is not an eyewitness, and so that matter can be set aside. The key question is how far removed in time and place he was from the events he purports to describe – and contrary to the impression which Carrier tries in vain to give, the consensus view – that Mark intends to give an account of events, even if it is a theologized and scripturalized one – remains persuasive. We cannot determine precisely how many individuals intervene in the chain of transmission between things that happened in Galilee and Jerusalem, and the author of Mark.^[20] But historians looking closely at the details of the Gospel have with good reason concluded that some of the material is more likely historical than not.

Before ending, it is worth noting the consequence of Carrier's approach, including how his treatment of the Gospels relates to his overall mythicist hypothesis. By deciding that the Gospels are allegories, and that Paul believed Jesus to be a celestial figure in a realm where one could be "born of a woman, born under the Law," "of the seed of David according to the flesh," crucified, buried, and everything else that fits more naturally in the mundane terrestrial realm, Carrier has made it impossible for anything at all to contradict his viewpoint. Carrier's approach allows him to say that every single thing he finds in the relevant sources is "exactly what we'd expect" if mythicism is true – "as symbolic myth, every oddity is explained, and indeed expected."^[21] This is because "they made this up" is compatible with *everything* that *any* text says – especially if one excludes in advance the possibility of using traditional critical methods and criteria for determining that some details may reflect actual historical events. If everything is compatible with mythicism – just as nothing can contradict Thiering's pesher approach to the New Testament, and any details in a text can be allegorized if one is determined to do so – then far from demonstrating mythicism to be correct, this shows it to be *unfalsifiable*, and thus scarcely worthy of serious scholarly discussion. If the explicit statements in Paul's writings and in the Gospels to the effect that Jesus was a historical figure are unable to count as counterevidence to mythicism, then clearly nothing can, and the appropriate scholarly response to this approach is to set it aside as "not even wrong."

Notes

- [1] See James Barr, "Allegory and Typology" and "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship" chapters 26 and 27 in *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, vol.2, ed. John Barton (Oxford University Press, 2014). On allegorical interpretation in Judaism, see Louis Ginzberg's article on the topic in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1256-allegorical-interpretation>. On allegory as a mode of interpretation more generally, see Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3:2 (1972) 301-317.
- [2] Carrier, *On The Historicity of Jesus*, p.346. See also pp.114-124.
- [3] Carrier, *On The Historicity of Jesus*, p.352. Just as distrust of government can foster conspiracy thinking in the political realm, an exaggerated distrust not just for religion, but for all people associated with it, can apparently render conspiracy thinking seemingly plausible in relation to early Christianity.
- [4] Carrier, *On The Historicity of Jesus*, p.389.
- [5] Carrier, *On The Historicity of Jesus*, p.394.
- [6] John R. Bartlett, *1 Maccabees* (Sheffield Academic, 1998), p.101. Bartlett also discusses the sources that scholars have sought to identify through source-critical analysis of the text, on pp.22-23.
- [7] See my review of Thiering's book *Jesus of the Apocalypse* <http://works.bepress.com/jamesmcgrath/30/>. See also Robert Price's review of Thiering's *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*:

http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/rev_thiering__riddle.htm

- [8] B. E. Thiering, *The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church* (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, 1983) p. 7.
- [9] Carrier pp.443, 451.
- [10] See "Mythicism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric and Realities of Academic Freedom" in *The Bible and Interpretation* March 2014
<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/03/mcg388024.shtml>
- [11] Carrier, *On The Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 417-418.
- [12] We see an example of this in John 6, on which see my online article "Food for Thought: The Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:25-71) in Johannine Legitimation"
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/info/john-food.html>
- [13] John R. Bartlett, *1 Maccabees* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp.31-33.
- [14] Carrier seems at one point (p.312) to be surprised by the possibility that the sayings of Jesus initially circulated independently of the narrative contexts in which we find them in the Gospels!
- [15] Raymond R. Newell, "The Forms and Historical Value of Josephus' Suicide Accounts," in *Josephus, the Bible, and History*, edited by Louis H. Feldman, G  ohei Hata (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989) 278-294.
- [16] Newell, "The Forms and Historical Value of Josephus' Suicide Accounts,"p.286.
- [17] Thiering, *The Qumran Origins of the Christian Church*, p.175.
- [18] On this topic see the interesting blog post "The Certamen of Homer and Hesiod and the Gospels: Some Comparanda"
<https://adversusapologetica.wordpress.com/2015/07/14/the-certamen-of-homer-and-hesiod-and-the-gospels-some-comparanda/>
- [19] On this see for instance Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: T&T Clark, 2010). Carrier's confident assertion about *talitha k  um* in Mark 5, "Certainly, Jesus never actually spoke those words, since the story is entirely a fiction" (p.410), illustrates how his presumption that the material is fictitious leads him to dismiss details which in fact suggest otherwise. Carrier's speculation that Mark "adapted those words from a targum" is not persuasive.
- [20] For a radically different view from Carrier's, see for instance Richard Bauckham, "The Gospel of Mark: Origins and Eyewitnesses," in *Earliest Christian History*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston (WUNT 2, 320; T  bingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2012) 145-169.
- [21] Carrier, pp.487 and 425. A similar refrain is repeated time and again throughout the book.

Comments (14)

Good article, Dr MrGrath. I wonder if it is time that we coin the term "allegorimania" to describe Dr Carrier's type of approach? When Carrier writes that "The woman also flowed with blood, while the rock flowed with water", how can anyone argue against it?

The long quote from Carrier is revealing: reading through OHJ, I was shocked by how poorly written his book is, especially when he tries to communicate complex ideas.

#1 - GakuseiDon - 08/26/2015 - 22:20

There are two levels of literary question - are certain passages allusions to certain others and is there an intention on the author's part to have his most perceptive readers accept the story as myth? Then there is the question of what historical reality may underlie the text - all these questions should remain distinct. A text based on the reports of eyewitnesses and most firmly intended to convey real facts may be completely misleading - the witnesses may be untrustworthy and the reporter wildly prejudiced. A myth may be a highly informative reflection on, though it is not meant to be a prosaic report of, real events. Some might say that some modern war reporting falls into the first category, and that real regime changes c. 1000 BC are echoed in the story of Agamemnon.

I don't see much water imagery in the Jairus/woman with issue of blood story. I do (unoriginally) see gentle emphasis on the number 12, which is a reminder that God's mission to the Israelites continues. I would question Carrier's parallel because the moral message is different to my mind: 'faith rewarded' is not a theme, or not in anything like the same way, in the Moses stories.

However, I don't see how one can discuss these passages without accepting, as one thrashes out the details, the unashamed literary dependence of NT on OT, a dependence essential to making the Christian point. This does not prove that the Christians had no real founder on whom to reflect: that's another very complex question, where it is sometimes difficult to define the point at issue.

I see the words attributed by Mark to Jesus on the report of the daughter's death as a statement by Mark to his readership. I think he's saying that there's more to life than verifiable truth. On the other hand if he were saying that there's an esoteric doctrine that he's not yet ready to reveal I'd expect some reference to a private conversation with the disciples.

#2 - Martin Hughes - 08/29/2015 - 23:31

Mark portrayed Jesus as fulfilling all kinds of Old Testament scriptures because he was trying to sell "The Jesus story" and win converts.

#3 - John - 09/02/2015 - 18:17

Winning Converts was of prime importance to the original Christians. We read that:

(A) 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17)

(B) The Great Commission

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)

(C) Sending out Emissaries

Just as Moses had chosen twelve spies to reconnoiter the land which stretched "before your face," sending them through the cities of the land of Canaan, so does Jesus send a second group, after the twelve, a group of seventy, whose number symbolizes the nations of the earth who are to be conquered, so to speak, with the gospel in the Acts of the Apostles. He sends them out "before his face" to every city he plans to visit (in Canaan, too, obviously).

To match the image of the spies returning with samples of the fruit of the land (Deuteronomy 1:25), Luke has placed here the Q saying (Luke 10:2//Matthew 9:37-38), "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore beg the Lord of the harvest to send out more workers into his harvest."

And Jesus' emissaries return with a glowing report, just as Moses' did. (Deuteronomy 1; Luke 10:1-3, 17-30)

----- How far do you think the original Christians would go to win converts? Would they even lie about Jesus to win converts?

#4 - John MacDonald - 09/06/2015 - 19:10

This article is extremely dishonest. I have now detailed numerous instances of it falsely representing my work and scholarship in general:

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/8331>

#5 - Richard Carrier - 09/11/2015 - 18:46

Likely the clearest Prophecy about Jesus is the entire 53rd chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah 53:3-7 is especially unmistakable: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

The only thing is, as Spong points out, Isaiah wasn't making a prophesy about Jesus. Mark was doing a haggadic midrash on Isaiah. So, Mark depicts Jesus as one who is despised and rejected, a man of sorrow acquainted with grief. He then describes Jesus as wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. The Servant in Isaiah, like Jesus in Mark, is silent before his accusers. In Isaiah it says of the servant with his stripes we are healed, which Mark turned into the story of the scourging of Jesus. This is, in part, is where atonement theology comes from, but it

would be silly to say II Isaiah was talking about atonement. The servant is numbered among the transgressors in Isaiah, so Jesus is crucified between two thieves. The Isaiah servant would make his grave with the rich, So Jesus is buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a person of means.

Then, as Dr. Robert Price says

The substructure for the crucifixion in chapter 15 is, as all recognize, Psalm 22, from which derive all the major details, including the implicit piercing of hands and feet (Mark 24//Psalm 22:16b), the dividing of his garments and casting lots for them (Mark 15:24//Psalm 22:18), the "wagging heads" of the mockers (Mark 15:20//Psalm 22:7), and of course the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34//Psalm 22:1). Matthew adds another quote, "He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now if he desires him" (Matthew 7:43//Psalm 22:8), as well as a strong allusion ("for he said, 'I am the son of God'" 27:43b) to Wisdom of Solomon 2:12-20, which underlies the whole story anyway (Miller), "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life: for if the righteous man is God's son he will help him and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture that we may find out how gentle he is and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected."

As for other details, Crossan points out that the darkness at noon comes from Amos 8:9, while the vinegar and gall come from Psalm 69:21. It is remarkable that Mark does anything but call attention to the scriptural basis for the crucifixion account. There is nothing said of scripture being fulfilled here. It is all simply presented as the events of Jesus' execution. It is we who must ferret out the real sources of the story. This is quite different, e.g., in John, where explicit scripture citations are given, e.g., for Jesus' legs not being broken to hasten his death (John 19:36), either Exodus 12:10, Numbers 9:12, or Psalm 34:19-20 (Crossan). Whence did Mark derive the tearing asunder of the Temple veil, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38)? Perhaps from the death of Hector in the Iliad (MacDonald). Hector dies forsaken by Zeus. The women of Troy watched from afar off (as the Galilean women do in Mark 15:40), and the whole of Troy mourned as if their city had already been destroyed "from top to bottom," just as the ripping of the veil seems to be a portent of Jerusalem's eventual doom.

And so we can at least propose there may not be any historical content with a fairly comprehensive haggadic midrash reading of The Passion of the Christ in Mark.

#6 - John MacDonald - 09/12/2015 - 17:06

I would agree there is definitely a lot of fictional material in Mark. Take, for instance, the narrative surrounding John The Baptist:

As Spong points out, the gospel narrative at this point is scripture fulfillment: Mark says "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ ; as it is written in the prophets." Mark immediately interprets John the Baptist as a forerunner of the Messiah (a la

Elijah in II Kings 1:8). Mark then clothes John similar to Elijah (Mark 1:6. II Kings 1:8.) He then says John ate locusts and wild honey, the food of the wilderness in which Elijah lived. Also, as Miller points out, in view of parallels I mentioned above between John and Jesus on the one hand and Elijah and Elisha on the other, the Jordan baptism and the endowment with the spirit is a repetition of 2 Kings 2, where, near the Jordan, Elijah bequeaths a double portion of his own miracle-working spirit to Elisha, who henceforth functions as his successor and superior. Further, as Price points out, the heavenly voice at the baptism (bath qol) speaks a conflation of three scriptural passages. "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11) combines bits and pieces of Psalm 2:7, the divine coronation decree, "You are my son. Today I have begotten you;" Isaiah 42:1, the blessing on the returning Exiles, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;" and Genesis 22:12 (LXX), where the heavenly voices bids Abraham to sacrifice his "beloved son." And as William R. Stegner points out, Mark may have in mind a Targumic tradition whereby Isaac, bound on the altar, looks up into heaven and sees the heavens opened with angels and the Shekinah of God, a voice proclaiming, "Behold, two chosen ones, etc." There is even the note that the willingness of Isaac to be slain may serve to atone for Israel's sins. Here is abundant symbolism making Jesus king, servant, and atoning sacrifice.

#7 - John MacDonald - 09/17/2015 - 21:46

Mythicists like Price, Doherty, and Carrier discount the gospels as sources of information about the historical Jesus because the pericopes are all just basically guilty of scripture fulfillment. If a pericope has a theological structure, there is no reason to think it goes back to the historical Jesus. For example, Price argues that:

The Withered Hand (Mark 3:1-6)

Mark has borrowed the substance of this scene from the miracle of the Judean prophet of 1 Kings 13:1-7ff (Helms, pp. 90-91). There the prophet confronts King Jeroboam in the Bethel temple and predicts Judean King Josiah's destruction of the rival altar. For this blasphemy Jeroboam orders his arrest, with surprising results: "the king stretched forth his hand (exeteinen... thn ceira autou) from the altar, saying, 'Take hold of him!' and his hand which he stretched forth against him withered (echraqh), and he could not draw it back to himself" (v.4). In Mark, the man is a nobody, but the authorities are nonetheless present in the house of worship and waiting to pounce. The man's hand is already withered (echrammenhn) when Jesus calls him out. "'Stretch out your hand!' He stretched it out (thn ceira... eceteinen), and his hand was restored" (Mark 3:5). The anonymous prophet, too, heals the sufferer: "And King Jeroboam said to the man of God, 'Entreat the Lord your God, and let my hand be restored to me.' And the man of God entreated the Lord, and he restored the king's hand to him, and it became as before" (1 Kings 13:6 LXX). Whereas the withering and healing were the aftermath of the villains' attempt to arrest the prophet in 1 Kings, in Mark it is the healing of the withered hand which makes the villains plot to arrest him: "The Pharisees went out and immediately took council with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (3:6).

I have been wondering lately about Paul's understanding of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection as being "ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE" in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5:

"3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas,[b] and then to the Twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)."

What does "according to Scriptures" mean? Is Paul saying he experienced a vague savior experience of the crucified Christ and subsequently learned the details by reading scripture? Is Paul saying Christ's death fulfilled scriptures?

We are all familiar with allusions to the Hebrew scriptures in Mark's portrayal of Jesus' death, but maybe Paul has the same thing in mind even though he doesn't elaborate. Is this what "according to scripture" means in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5? If Paul interpreted Jesus death in accordance with Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, and Wisdom of Solomon, this would certainly be "according to scriptures." But why would Paul say Christ was buried and that he was raised in three days "according to scripture?" Maybe Paul had in mind the story of Jonah. For Matthew it is a symbolic prophecy represented by the three days and three nights that Jonah spent in the stomach of a great fish (Jonah 1:17). Jesus said the only "sign" people would be given would be "the sign of Jonah." Jesus then proceeded to explain what He was talking about: "for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:38-40). Other scripture possibilities could be from Daniel (the Son of Man figure representing the martyrs and the dying Messiah there) and from the account of Abraham's "sacrifice" of Isaac (Levenson). Hosea 6:2 speaks of being raised up on the third day, of course.

What was Paul talking about? If Paul is alluding to the Old Testament in his conceptualization of the death and resurrection of Christ, can historical content be derived from it?

The RSV cites Psalm 16:10 as Paul's "Scriptures" for 1 Cor 15:4: "For thou doest not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit." It references Acts 2:31: "[David] foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption."

Usually what we say is that if a section of text serves a theological purpose (such as Old Testament scripture fulfillment), then there is no reason to think it goes back to The Historical Jesus. If Paul is illuminating Jesus death, burial, and resurrection by saying he understands them "according to scripture," then there is no reason to think that any of it goes back to the historical Jesus.

#8 - John MacDonald - 09/20/2015 - 00:54

What can we know for sure about Jesus?

(1) Regarding the historicity of Jesus, the only two events subject to "almost universal assent" among New Testament Scholars are that (A) Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and (B) was crucified by the order of the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate. (A) can somewhat be put into dispute because the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist (as I said in a previous comment) seems to serve a theological function, and so can't be traced back to the historical Jesus: Mark immediately interprets John the Baptist as a forerunner of the Messiah (a la Elijah in II Kings 1:8). Mark then clothes John similar to Elijah (Mark 1:6. II Kings 1:8.). He then says John ate locusts and wild honey, the food of the wilderness in which Elijah lived (and so on and so on). And it would make sense Mark would model John the Baptist on Elijah because Mark says "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ ; as it is written in the prophets." And, as Price argues:

"Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:9-11)

The scene has received vivid midrashic coloring. The heavenly voice (bath qol) speaks a conflation of three scriptural passages. "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11) combines bits and pieces of Psalm 2:7, the divine coronation decree, "You are my son. Today I have begotten you;" Isaiah 42:1, the blessing on the returning Exiles, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;" and Genesis 22:12 (LXX), where the heavenly voices bids Abraham to sacrifice his "beloved son." And as William R. Stegner points out, Mark may have in mind a Targumic tradition whereby Isaac, bound on the altar, looks up into heaven and sees the heavens opened with angels and the Shekinah of God, a voice proclaiming, "Behold, two chosen ones, etc." There is even the note that the willingness of Isaac to be slain may serve to atone for Israel's sins. Here is abundant symbolism making Jesus king, servant, and atoning sacrifice. In view of parallels elsewhere between John and Jesus on the one hand and Elijah and Elisha on the other, some (Miller) also see in the Jordan baptism and the endowment with the spirit a repetition of 2 Kings 2, where, near the Jordan, Elijah bequeaths a double portion of his own miracle-working spirit to Elisha, who henceforth functions as his successor and superior."

(B) can somewhat be put into dispute because Paul says Jesus died "According to scripture (1 Cor 15:3)," which could either mean that (i) Jesus's crucifixion was fulfilling scripture, or (ii) that Paul discovered Jesus' crucifixion through an allegorical reading of Hebrew scriptures. In either case Jesus' crucifixion in Paul serves a theological function, so it can be doubted as to whether it can be traced back to the historical Jesus. Paul also doesn't mention Pilate, so this may be a Markan invention.

(2) Elements whose historical authenticity is almost universally disputed include the two accounts of the Nativity of Jesus, the miraculous events including the resurrection, and details about the crucifixion (because of the apparent exegetical use of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 by Mark to construct the crucifixion narrative).

#9 - John MacDonald - 09/25/2015 - 22:33

The method by which Carrier "eliminates" the Gospels as evidence is the same method that also "eliminates" Acts as evidence. This has an interesting implication. If we were to test the hypothesis of a minimally historical Paul with regard to Acts, it would pass with flying colours. Paul's letters show that the central figure of Acts was very much a historical person.

What can we conclude from this? In the case of Acts, it was very much the intention of the author to base his account on a real historical figure. And it just so happens that the author of Acts was also the author of one of the Gospels. We cannot necessarily assume that the purpose in writing Acts was the same as the purpose in writing the Gospels, but we should certainly be wary of a "method" that rules out the Gospels as evidence for their central figure when that method would also incorrectly rule out Acts as evidence for its central figure.

We should be particularly wary when the person employing this "method" has no established expertise in the area on which the method is based. Indeed, it is interesting to note that when Richard Carrier was recently challenged by a genuine expert on these matters (on James McGrath's blog, it quickly became apparent that he had no real understanding of the technicalities involved.

#10 - Cecil Bagpuss - 09/26/2015 - 10:18

In terms of Josephus' TF:

(1) Mythicists seem to have a point because When Ehrman reconstructs Josephus on page 61 of "Did Jesus Exist", he takes out the word "messiah" as an interpolation and has, in part, "At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man ... And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out."

Why would Josephus say a tribe of "Christians" were named after "Jesus?" That makes no sense. There should be no connection in Josephus' mind between the Word "Jesus" and the word "Christian." The word "Christian" is named after "Christ." And "Christ" shouldn't be here in Josephus. So there may be good reason to argue the last line is an interpolation. Christians are named after Christ, not Jesus.

(2) However, as historicist Dr. James McGrath points out even before we had Agapius' version of the Testimonium Flavianum, some suspected that, rather than "He was the Christ" being an interpolation in its entirety, the original may have read "He was called/said to be Christ" or something along those lines. The later mention of James as the "brother of Jesus called Christ" would also fit well with this.

#11 - John MacDonald - 09/27/2015 - 00:09

Carrier disagrees with McGrath and argues "we know the Arabic of Agapius derives from Eusebius, via a later Syriac edition, and thus 'he was believed to be' is a later emendation and not an early form of the text. See On the Historicity of Jesus, pp. 336-37, esp. w. n. 88 where I show that proposing the sequence the other way around requires the most improbable conspiracy theory, to alter three different manuscript traditions, and not just three manuscripts but all existing manuscripts of all three texts—that of the Jewish Antiquities, the Historia Ecclesiastica, and the Praeparatio Evangelica—when we know a single alteration in a single later Syriac manuscript explains all the evidence without any such astronomical improbability. So we know Eusebius had no knowledge of a 'believed to be' being in the text. On the rest, see OHJ, Ch. 8.9."

#12 - John MacDonald - 09/27/2015 - 01:29

I already posted about why there may be no history in the crucifixion account, so let's consider the empty tomb and the resurrection. Price comments that:

1. The Empty Tomb (Mark 16:1-8)

Crossan and Miller and Miller note that the empty tomb narrative requires no source beyond Joshua (=Jesus, remember!) chapter 10. The five kings have fled from Joshua, taking refuge in the cave at Makkedah. When they are discovered, Joshua orders his men to "Roll great stones against the mouth of the cave and set men by it to guard them" (10:18). Once the mopping-up operation of the kings' troops is finished, Joshua directs: "Open the mouth of the cave, and bring those five kings out to me from the cave" (10:22). "And afterward Joshua smote them and put them to death, and he hung them on five trees. And they hung upon the trees until evening; but at the time of the going down of the sun, Joshua commanded, and they took them down from the trees, and threw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves, and they set great stones against the mouth of the cave, which remain to this very day" (10:26-27). Observe that here it is "Jesus" who plays the role of Pilate, and that Mark needed only to reverse the order of the main narrative moments of this story. Joshua 10: first, stone rolled away and kings emerge alive; second, kings die; third, kings are crucified until sundown. Mark: Jesus as King of the Jews is crucified, where his body will hang till sundown; second, he dies; third, he

emerges alive (Mark implies) from the tomb once the stone is rolled away.

The vigil of the mourning women likely reflects the women's mourning cult of the dying and rising god, long familiar in Israel (Ezekiel 8:14, "Behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz;" Zechariah 12:11, "On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo;" Canticles 3:1-4, "I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but found him not; I called him but he gave no answer," etc.).

2. The Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 27:62-28:20)

Matthew had before him Mark's empty tomb story and no other source except the Book of Daniel, from which he has embellished the Markan original at several points. (Matthew had already repaired to Daniel in his Pilate story, where the procurator declared, "I am innocent of the blood of this man," Matthew 27:24b, which he derived from Susanna 46/Daniel 13:46 LXX: "I am innocent of the blood of this woman.") (Crossan). First, Matthew has introduced guards at the tomb and has had the tomb sealed, a reflection of Nebuchadnezzar's sealing the stone rolled to the door of the lion's den with Daniel inside (6:17). Mark had a young man (perhaps an angel, but perhaps not) already in the open tomb when the women arrived. Matthew simply calls the character an angel and clothes him in a description reminiscent of the angel of Daniel chapter 10 (face like lightning, Daniel 10:6) and the Ancient of Days in Daniel chapter 7 (snowy white clothing, Daniel 7:9b). He rolls the stone aside. The guards faint and become as dead men, particular dead men, as a matter of fact, namely the guards who tossed Shadrach, Meschach, and Abed-nego into the fiery furnace in (Daniel 3:22).

To provide an appearance of the risen Jesus to the women at the tomb (something conspicuously absent from Mark), Matthew simply divides Mark's young man into the angel and now Jesus himself, who has nothing more to say than a lame reiteration of the angel's words. He appears again on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16) which he now says Jesus had earlier designated, though this is the first the reader learns of it. There he dispenses yet more Danielic pastiche: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This is based on a conflation of two Greek versions of Daniel 7:14. In the LXX, "to him [the one like a son of man was] ... given the rule... the authority of him [the Ancient of Days]." In Theodotion, he receives "authority to hold all in the heaven and upon the earth." The charge to make all nations his disciples comes from Daniel 7:14, too: "that all people, nations, and languages should serve him" (Helms).

#13 - John MacDonald - 09/27/2015 - 01:37

All I can say to McGrath is "read Randel Helms". "Gospel Fictions" has more than enough proof in its mere 149 pages to show that the Gospels are derived -- from the Tanakh and from each other, and in many ways for specific and transparent reasons.

#14 - robert wahler - 03/13/2016 - 05:09

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