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Exorcising Mythicism's Sky-Demons: A Response to Raphael Lataster's "Questioning Jesus' Historicity."

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Exorcising Mythicism's Sky-Demons: A Response to Raphael Lataster's "Questioning Jesus' Historicity."

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Historians do not depend on the Gospels, much less hypothetical sources behind them, for their conclusion that there was a historical Jesus. The letters of Paul, written within decades of Jesus' life by someone who had met his brother, combined not only with the Gospels but also Roman and Jewish sources, together provide a convincing impression that the religious phenomenon known as Christianity owes something to a historical figure named Jesus whose detractors viewed him as a charlatan and/or heretic.

See: Questioning Jesus' Historicity (<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/questioning-jesus-historicity>).
Mythicism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric and Realities of Academic Freedom.
(<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2014/03/mcg388024>)

By James F. McGrath

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From the outset of his article "Questioning Jesus' Historicity," Raphael Lataster seeks to frame the matter of the historical Jesus and his own approach to it in a particular way. He begins by labeling himself as a "secular scholar." It would be easy to pass by that language without analysis, and perhaps even feel vaguely reassured by it. However, the juxtaposition of these two words is awkward and far from self-explanatory. Does it mean that Lataster is a scholar who uses *secular methods* of historical study? If so, then (assuming his claim is true) this would not set him apart from the vast majority of scholars working in this and related fields, among whom are Christians, Jews, atheists, agnostics, and others, who hold in common a commitment to a shared methodological understanding of our collective endeavor, how it is to be undertaken, and norms for argument and evidence in our pursuit. More specifically, Lataster being "secular" in this sense does not set him apart from the two scholars who are the main focus of his article's polemical rhetoric, Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey, since their commitment to the mainstream historical enterprise is well established. There is, to be sure, a substantial amount of teaching and publication that takes place at sectarian universities, which reject academic freedom to a greater or lesser extent, which cannot be described as "secular" in any sense of the word, and which in many instances should not have their work labeled as "scholarship" either. However, when we discuss the mainstream activity of secular scholarship that occurs at private non-sectarian universities, it becomes clear that similar work is done even at seminaries and religiously affiliated institutions which are (and whose faculty are) committed to academic freedom and the application of mainstream methods of historical criticism to the Bible. Indeed, while it did not happen without controversy and significant efforts at censorship, these methods were for the most part pioneered by academics who were also liberal religionists. If what makes one a "secular scholar" in this field is the espousal of such methods, then there are many secular scholars, and the overwhelming consensus among them is that there was in fact a historical Jesus. There is a second possible meaning of Lataster's claim, namely that he himself is "secular" in the sense that he is not an adherent of any religion, with the insinuation that this poises him to provide superior insight into the historical Jesus. As a label for an individual, the word "secular" once again requires close attention to its definition. Lataster himself has not always been non-religious, and those who reject religion in general, or one religious view for another, often continue to be shaped by that background and its concerns, even if now antithetically, in ways that serve as distorting biases to their perspective and judgment. It is not the case that being "non-religious" guarantees that an individual offers a more level-headed, fairer, less

biased perspective on a particular topic. And so even if Lataster's meaning is that he is secular in this sense, or perhaps in both senses of the word, this neither sets him apart nor vouchsafes a better understanding of the subject under discussion.

Why am I focusing so much attention on words that occur in the introduction to Lataster's article? Because mythicism depends on these kinds of problematic linguistic maneuvers not only when it comes to how proponents of the viewpoint characterize themselves and others in their field, but also how they write about the relevant ancient sources and their contents. Indeed, Lataster's article consists of rhetorical ploys, insults, and insinuations far more than substantive argument, and it is thus not only appropriate but necessary to look closely at what is being said and how it is being conveyed. Lataster writes concerning early Christian sources, "the case for Jesus' existence rests upon Christian authors. Given what we know about early – and later – Christian authors and scribes, this is a bit of a problem." He goes on to call them "horrid." Historians are well aware of the genuine problems of bias that inhere in sources whose authors owe allegiance to their subject matter. However, I trust that most readers will agree that it would be ludicrous to suggest that disciples of Socrates or Confucius (to give a couple of examples) cannot be trusted to inform us about whether these were actual human beings, because they were biased to believe that they were. If we think of the individuals that we ourselves esteem in our own time, our high regard of them is a result of their existence as historical human beings, not a motive for us to delude ourselves into thinking that they were. It is typical for the earliest sources about *any* historical figure to be written by people who cared deeply about them, usually their followers and adherents in the first instance, but often followed soon afterwards by detractors. The fact that early information from followers of such figures preserves (and does damage control in relation to) information that is unflattering is one of many considerations that persuades historians the information in question is not all simply invented. All of this is standard reasoning in the field of history, and mythicism does not take the force of such arguments as seriously as it deserves.

Lataster resembles other prominent mythicists in his use of insult and denigration in place of argument. Lataster writes of Bart Ehrman's use of mainstream secular methods, "such reasoning would not fly with competent scholars of related fields, and especially not with a highly logical philosopher, who makes a living off of tearing to shreds her equally logical colleagues' arguments. To such a highly critical logician, this appeal to hypothetical sources is laughable, pathetic." Those familiar with the academic study of the New Testament will have noticed the sleight of hand here. Historians do not depend on the Gospels, much less hypothetical sources behind them, for their conclusion that there was a historical Jesus. The letters of Paul, written within decades of Jesus' life by someone who had met his brother, combined not only with the Gospels but also Roman and Jewish sources, together provide a convincing impression that the religious phenomenon known as Christianity owes something to a historical figure named Jesus, whose followers managed to sustain their belief that he was the heir to the Davidic throne despite his crucifixion, and whose detractors viewed him as a charlatan and a heretic. Whether we can detect sources behind the New Testament Gospels, and how much we can rely on them in reconstructing the life of Jesus, is a question that has been and continued to be debated. It is not a question that our historical judgment about Jesus' historicity depends. On the other hand, it most certainly *is* comparable to the kinds of analysis of texts and sources that is undertaken in relation to other ancient literature. Note as well Lataster's decision to throw William Lane Craig's name into the mix, implying that there is no difference between Bart Ehrman, who is at least as secular in every sense of the word as Lataster is, and a Christian apologist. If Ehrman cannot be trusted despite being "secular" in every sense of the word, then neither can Lataster. Hence my emphasis from the outset of this article that the question of what it means for an academic to be "secular" itself requires careful attention.

When Lataster shifts to focusing on Maurice Casey, he once again offers little more than dismissive comments about how nothing that Casey wrote is of value, a claim that few if any mainstream academics would agree with even if they disagree radically with every single one of Casey's conclusions. This is because it is not agreement on conclusions, but commitment to a common endeavor using the same tools and norms of evidence, that makes a scholar's work valuable to other academics. On the other hand, Lataster's remark that the sources of the Gospels "could be in Swahili for all we know" shows that he is not taking the discussion at all seriously or approaching it in an appropriate academic manner.[1] Aramaic words occur throughout early Christian sources (Paul's letters and the Gospels) despite being written in Greek. Nothing comparable has been identified that reflects Bantu languages, and Lataster offers no case to suggest otherwise. Readers might think I am making too much of a what is clearly a flippant, sarcastic comment. But once again Lataster's rhetoric and word choice deserves attention, and not only because it seems wildly inappropriate in a work that purports to be secular scholarship.[2] It is a common claim of apologists, fundamentalists, and denialists of various descriptions that if a conclusion of mainstream scholarship is not absolutely certain (which of course few things are), then any alternative they

proffer deserves equally serious consideration. But this does not follow, and Lataster's quip provides a good illustration of how and why this is so. What we know about Christian origins, the time and location thereof, would make a connection with Aramaic more probable than a connection with Swahili even if we did not have Aramaic words embedded in our Greek sources as well as other relevant evidence. That Aramaic sources of the Gospels, whether written or oral, have not been decisively proven beyond every shadow of a doubt does not mean that the emergence of Christianity in a Bantu linguistic environment is just as probable, because supposedly (to quote Lataster once again) "We know nothing." That claim is simply not true. Indeed, the claim that that the sources of the New Testament "could be in Swahili for all we know" relate to Casey's painstaking work on Aramaic in early Christian writings much as the claim that "Jesus might not have existed for all we know" relates to the hard-won conclusions of mainstream historians and scholars. The conclusions of scholars about the historical Jesus and early Christian sources may well be wrong in a wide array of details, but that does not mean that nothing in them is likely to be correct, much less that any and all alternatives are equally probable. Lataster's apparent confusion about (or perhaps deliberate obscuring of) the difference between sources hypothetically reconstructed based on careful analysis of existing texts, and a source concocted in the mythicist imagination to support their viewpoint, shows that either Lataster simply does not grasp what scholarship entails at its most fundamental level, or is simply happy to engage in misrepresentation and flights of fancy if doing so seems to support his preferred ideology.

Lataster eventually offers a brief presentation of the "Celestial Jesus" viewpoint that has been propounded by Earl Doherty and subsequently championed by Richard Carrier. There he claims that Paul viewed Jesus as having been crucified by "sky demons," a questionable way of translating the term "powers" that Paul uses. His tactic here is one that is widely used in the service of religious dogmatism. Various conservative translations of religious texts are criticized by mainstream secular scholars for imposing a particular interpretation through the very act of translation, choosing wording that is at best open to significant debate and at worst seriously questionable. Moreover, even if one were to accept Lataster's translation as the best rendering (or even a legitimate possible rendering) of the word, it would not support the mythicist idea of a purely celestial Jesus. However much time demons may or may not have been thought to spend in the sky, ancient authors writing about demonic powers were interested in them precisely because of the sway over and influence upon the terrestrial human realm these entities were imagined to hold. And so even if one accepts that the powers Paul referred to were demons whose abode is in the sky, rather than political powers representing Roman authority or perhaps both working collaboratively, the demons that were the biggest concern for ancient people were the ones that acted in the human realm. Celestial demons could get involved in the crucifixion of a man named Joshua, just as they were thought to possess people, torment them with diseases, and otherwise act in human affairs.[3] Thus Lataster's attempt to decide the matter through circular reasoning, translating the text a particular way and then quoting it as a proof-text, doesn't work even as such, because rendered in the manner Lataster prefers it still fails to prove what he claims it does. This sort of unpersuasive and shoddy reasoning is a regular feature of mythicism. Its tactics seem to be drawn from the norms of fundamentalist proof-texting and internet apologetics rather than secular scholarship. As a result, it fails to make a case that scholars and others with a sharper and better-refined toolkit can take seriously, never mind one that we are likely to find persuasive.

In case it may not be as clear to members of the general public as it is to academics, the mere publication of a book that makes the case for a particular viewpoint in no way suggests that that viewpoint should or will be found persuasive by academics, never mind adopted by the general public. Anyone who reads widely in scholarship in any field will know that academics as a matter of course try out new ideas, float new hypotheses, and explore unconventional approaches to well-worn subjects. This is what we are required to do as part of our jobs. We must "publish or perish" and the only way to get something published is to try to say something new. Most of the new ideas that are proposed will not stand the test of time, nor do they deserve to. Scholarship depends on this constant back-and-forth between innovative proposals and their critical evaluation by other academics. It is because of my great appreciation for the way academic research proceeds that I find mythicism (at least in its present-day form) such a huge disappointment. Every academic knows just how intellectually invigorating (and at times downright delightful) it can be to read a work that argues an unconventional case, especially ones that provide such creative insights and attention to detail that you find yourself thinking time and again as you read it that you might just be persuaded by its argument. Even if you aren't persuaded in the end, the intellectual exploration that reading such a work fosters is beneficial in its own right. Unfortunately, Lataster offers none of that, as I have hopefully illustrated here. I wish he did, because reading an unconvincing but well-argued case for the non-historicity of Jesus would surely be an enthralling and beneficial experience, even if it didn't persuade me to change my mind. Mythicism in general, and Lataster's article more specifically, offers nothing remotely like that.

Lataster's article ends by saying that the time is ripe for change. I do indeed think one particular change is long overdue: it would be wonderful to have well-argued and serious cases made for the non-historicity of Jesus. Even if not persuasive, reading them would be rewarding. But I fear that is not the sort of change Lataster would like to see – if it were, presumably he would have offered something along those lines in his article. He does not. If the fields of biblical studies and ancient history were to substitute the kinds of tactics Lataster uses for those normally practiced by secular scholars, that would represent a change for the worse. We will inevitably continue to have people like Raphael Lataster and Richard Carrier on one side of the spectrum, providing a mirror image of their dogmatic religious counterparts whose work blurs or crosses lines between apologetics and scholarship on the other end of the spectrum. But hopefully neither of these fringe groups will manage to replace secular scholarship with the low-quality imitation that they offer. Mainstream secular methods work well, precisely because the diverse community practicing them serves to counterbalance the biases of the ideological assumptions that individual academics and specific subcultures bring with them. The application of those methods to the question of the historicity of Jesus has led to such a strong consensus among scholars precisely because the methods used are genuinely secular and skeptical, and yet at the same time the practitioners using them are so diverse, providing opportunities for counterbalancing of bias that the polemical and dismissive rhetoric popular among mythicists leaves little room for.

[1] Lataster's dismissiveness towards the possibility of Aramaic sources seems particularly inappropriate given his own prior adherence to the view that the entire New Testament was originally written in Aramaic. His all-or-nothing approach to this topic mirrors the way mythicists approach the historical Jesus: If we cannot be certain the entirety of the New Testament was originally in Aramaic, then all reconstruction of Aramaic precursors are completely speculative and without value. If we cannot be absolutely certain about everything we'd like to know about Jesus, then he may as well not have existed at all. On Lataster's earlier espousal of Aramaic primacy see further the following websites:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20060408015133/http://aramaicpeshitta.com/>

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20060408015133/http://aramaicpeshitta.com/>)

<http://eaglefeather.org/series/Ancient%20Culture%20Series/Was%20the%20N...>

(<http://eaglefeather.org/series/Ancient%20Culture%20Series/Was%20the%20New%20Testament%20Really%20Written%20>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131029053007/http://pantheismunites.org/B...>

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20131029053007/http://pantheismunites.org/Books.htm>)

<http://ojtr.org/orality/oralrelationaldynamicsandbible.html> (<http://ojtr.org/orality/oralrelationaldynamicsandbible.html>)

When we consider his current denigration of views that are related to ones that he himself previously held, without acknowledgment of his own intellectual journey in relation to the subject, it provides evidence of a pendulum swing from one extreme fringe position to another, rather than a shift away from dogmatic absolutism in the direction of the more nuanced and tentative approach to knowledge that academic historical study entails.

[2] I am not claiming that hyperbole, sarcasm, and *reductio ad absurdum* are inherently inappropriate in scholarly writing. However, they only seem appropriate at the climax of an extended demonstration of the inherently problematic character of the views being criticized. Lataster, however, merely asserts that this is so in this article, rather than demonstrating that it is so. His rhetoric thus functions as a substitute for scholarly argument rather than a rhetorical flourish within it.

[3] I would note here that it would be surprising for a purely celestial figure to have an ordinary human name such as that which the distinctive name "Jesus" in English obscures that the main character in Paul's letters and the Gospels had, namely the relatively common Jewish name Joshua.

Article Comments

Submitted by Kenneth Greifer on Tue, 08/20/2019 - 09:33

Permalink (/comment/553#comment-553)

My understanding of mythicism is that they say that people back then thought the Messiah would do things in heaven and not on earth, which I think is what Lataster is saying. I once asked a Christian guy how JC could forgive sins on earth while he was alive like in Mark 2 without any blood atonement because he said you need blood to atone for sins, and he said that JC already atoned for all sins in heaven with his blood before he came to earth. He said something like every

thing that happens on earth also takes place spiritually in heaven, which sounds like what mythicists are saying. I don't fully understand their arguments, but it does sound like something that is in the New Testament, so why are they wrong? I am sorry if I don't make much sense because I don't fully understand Christian beliefs or the mythicists beliefs.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/553)

Submitted by Raphael Lataster on Wed, 08/21/2019 - 16:16

Permalink (</comment/556#comment-556>)

Response here: <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/when-critics-miss-point-about-...>

(<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/when-critics-miss-point-about-questioning-jesus-historicity>).

And thank you, Greifer. Indeed, the book of Hebrews is oddly (from the mainstream perspective) concerned with a heavenly Jesus being sacrificed in the heavens, since the sacrifices done down here are just not good enough.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/556)

Submitted by Doug Chaplin on Wed, 08/28/2019 - 13:57

Permalink (</comment/590#comment-590>)

Maybe if you read the sources a little more carefully, you wouldn't make such obviously inept summaries of them. While Hebrews is odd in many ways including this one, it is very clear that the sacrifice is of a flesh and blood Jesus (as victim) by a risen/ascending Jesus (as a priest), collapsing both of these into the same event. I think James' characterising of your article is only borne out by such lazy assertion.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/590)

Submitted by Raphael Lataster on Sat, 08/31/2019 - 17:44

Permalink (</comment/591#comment-591>)

The flesh and blood verses do not support the Historical Jesus theory. They are ambiguous, and also work on the Celestial Jesus theory.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/591)

Submitted by Sean Moran on Mon, 09/16/2019 - 10:57

Permalink (</comment/605#comment-605>)

"it would be wonderful to have well-argued and serious cases made for the non-historicity of Jesus."

What on earth does he think Richard Carrier's On the Historicity of Jesus is? Five years on, and we're still waiting for an effective reply to that publication.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/605)

Submitted by J.J. Scott on Tue, 06/23/2020 - 17:32

Permalink (</comment/753#comment-753>)

Your article begins with an absurd character attack. This bizarre approach reflects the weakness of your argument.

Reply (/comment/reply/node/2119/field_article_comments/753)

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