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Did Jesus Die in Outer Space? Evaluating a Key Claim in Richard Carrier's *On the Historicity of Jesus*

The attempt to use later sources, interpreted in ways that are at best open to dispute, in an attempt to argue against what generations of skeptical scholars have concluded to be likely with respect to the early Christian sources, is never going to make mythicism seem more probable than the hard-earned and intensely-researched consensus of historians and scholars, namely that there was a historical Jesus of Nazareth.

See Also: [Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt: Should We Still Be Looking for a Historical Jesus?](#)

[Mythicism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric and Realities of Academic Freedom](#)

By James F. McGrath

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October 2014

This volume by Richard Carrier marks a welcome addition to the literature on Christian origins. It has been a long time indeed since someone with expertise in ancient history has sought to make a detailed case for the non-historicity of Jesus, and never before has someone with a PhD in history offered a case that is this detailed, or which adopts this precise approach. In a longstanding and crowded field in which it can often seem that everything significant has already been said, coming up with fresh ideas, whether plausible or outlandish, often seems impossible. And thus Carrier's attempt to inject fresh life both through the application of Bayesian reasoning, and through the systematic formulation of a case for Jesus' non-historicity, is bound to lead to interesting discussions, regardless of whether his claims and arguments manage to persuade many.

A volume of this length and detail deserves to be evaluated in comparable detail. The book attempts to clarify a great many details about the context of early Christianity, in ways that may be true whether there was a historical Jesus or not. Some of those are themselves worthy of consideration, and I intend to return to them in future articles (and blog posts). But the central thesis, that there is good reason to doubt the historicity of Jesus, depends on the strength of the details of, and arguments and evidence adduced in support of, the basic myth hypothesis. As Carrier notes, assessments of probability are frequently offered for complex and detailed scenarios, whereas the additional specifications inevitably reduce the probability of that specific scenario over against a more general one. And a great many details are compatible with more than one scenario. This is one reason why Carrier's claim, that multiple contradictory reconstructions show

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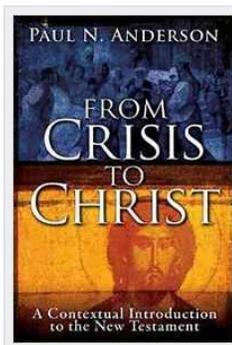
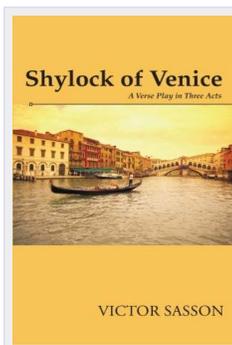
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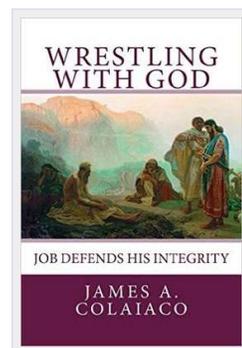


that there is a methodological problem with mainstream historical methods, is actually disproven by his own book, which acknowledges time and again that certain details are true of the evidence regardless whether there was a historical Jesus or not.^[1] If the same historical data can be compatible with more than one interpretation – and all historians know that this is often the case, particularly when it comes to matters of ancient history, when the evidence is often piecemeal – then a plurality of interpretations is bound to be par for the course, especially if the field is one which has been around for a long time and is very crowded, requiring the very sorts of original creative thinking that Carrier seeks to offer in his book, if one is to hope to have something worth publishing at all.

And so, for instance, the question of whether any Jews before the rise of Christianity expected the Davidic anointed one to die before restoring his dynasty to the throne is an interesting one, but whether one agrees with Carrier's treatment of the evidence or not, it is clear that such pre-Christian thinking about a dying messiah, if it existed, could have inspired a historical individual who believed himself to be the messiah to try to get himself handed over to authorities. And so we could devote a whole article just to that question, and yet not make any progress on the central question the book addresses, whether a historical Jesus of Nazareth existed.

Thus, while there is a place for standard-length reviews and review articles, this article will not try to provide an overview of the volume as a whole, but will instead seek to interact with one key element, and a central one at that - a core part of what Carrier calls the "basic myth hypothesis" or the "minimal Jesus myth theory." The first tenet Carrier lists is this: "At the origin of Christianity, Jesus Christ was thought to be a celestial deity much like any other."^[2] Carrier's chapter summarizing that mythicist core begins with the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a text which was central to Earl Doherty's mythicist case,^[3] and in turn has played a key role in Richard Carrier's.^[4] If their interpretation of the work is correct, *Ascension of Isaiah* provides an example of an ancient mythicist work. Unsurprisingly, Carrier continues to refer back to *Ascension of Isaiah* throughout his book, using it as evidence to interpret post-NT works, such as the letters of Ignatius, as well as earlier works, such as Paul's letters, in a manner favorable to his mythicist case.^[5] It therefore seems appropriate to take a close look at the relevant parts of *Ascension of Isaiah*. Doing so will not in and of itself either decisively prove or disprove either mythicism or historicity, nor even determine the overall usefulness of Carrier's volume as a whole. But it may, once other details are given similarly close attention, affect the way the probability of Carrier's case for mythicism is evaluated.

For readers unfamiliar with *Ascension of Isaiah*, translations of the text are available online,^[6] including the earlier one by R. H. Charles,^[7] and also the relevant section of M.



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A. Knibb's more recent rendering of the text into English.^[8]

Carrier provides a very brief introduction to the work, claiming that "The earliest version in fact was probably composed around the very same time as the earliest canonical Gospels were being written. It thus includes some very early Christian belief, almost as early as anything in the New Testament."^[9] As Carrier notes, *Ascension of Isaiah* is a composite work, having brought together two separate works often referred to as "The Martyrdom of Isaiah" and "The Vision of Isaiah." These two works, however, have been interpolated, whether by the author-editor of *Ascension of Isaiah* or subsequently. Whether details important to Carrier's case can be dated as early as he suggests requires a careful study of the evidence.

Robert G. Hall, in a discussion of the date and community setting of the work, suggests that the references to the martyrdom in the vision, and to the vision in the martyrdom, stem from the hand of the final redactor.^[10] Hall suggests that the work reflects debates also evidenced in the Gospel and Letters of John, in Revelation, and elsewhere, and he dates all of these to the early second or late first century.^[11] That is at odds with Carrier's claim that the work ought to be dated contemporaneous with the Gospel of Mark.^[12] While a matter of decades might seem of little importance, according to mythicists, the time period between Paul and Mark witnessed the conversion of a purely celestial Jesus into the Jesus of the Gospels who lived on earth as a human being. Indeed, the attempt to place a purely celestial Jesus at the beginning of the process is at the heart of mythicism. And so a dating of *Ascension of Isaiah* to around the time of the Gospel of John, when mainstream historical study concludes that the earthly Jesus of the earlier Gospels had begun to be transformed into an earthly Jesus who embodies a pre-existent divine entity, creates difficulties for the trajectory which mythicists envisage.^[13]

There are also important differences between various manuscripts and translations of the text, leading Jonathan Knight to emphasize, "It is therefore necessary at every stage to try to establish the most reliable form of text before attempting exegetical deductions of any kind."^[14] The text in some manuscripts refers to the Son descending in the form which Isaiah has, and says that "in the last days, the Lord, who will be called Christ, will descend into the world...And after he has descended and become like you in appearance, they will think that he is flesh and a man. And the god of that world will stretch forth his hand against the Son, and they will lay hands on him and crucify him on a tree, without knowing who he is" (9:12-14). It also refers in some manuscripts to Jesus bringing many of the righteous with him when he ascends from the world (9:17).^[15] Carrier notes that two key phrases – "he shall descend in your form" (8:26) and "they will think that he is flesh and a man" (9:13) are both missing from the Latin version. While Carrier notes that the Latin often abbreviates the text, he considers this insufficient to explain the removal of what he considers "the *only* statements outside the pocket gospel [in chapter 11] that refer to Jesus becoming like a man." (p.42).^[16] Their deliberate omission, however, is easily explicable in terms of the same motivation that led to the appendage of the "pocket

gospel” which is not found in the Latin manuscripts, namely the desire to emphasize that Jesus did not merely appear in the world, as Docetists claimed, but actually became a human being.^[17] And so what seem to Carrier to be additions to make Jesus like a human being, are phrases which could easily have been omitted by an orthodox scribe so as to eliminate language that seemed Docetic.

The forms of Docetism of which we are aware – unless the *Ascension of Isaiah* is an exception – do not deny that Jesus appeared in the world, but merely deny that he was genuinely human. Is *Ascension of Isaiah* an exception? The Beloved is told to descend to the firmament, and from there to sheol, but not to haguel (perdition or “hell”). Carrier rightly points out that some systems of thought located the realm of the dead not in an underworld, but in the heavens.^[18] He nonetheless does insufficient justice to the fact that the realm of malevolent spiritual forces was thought to be, not the firmament alone, but the entire realm below the moon, including Earth.^[19] And so references to a descent into this region need not be taken as excluding Earth.^[20] And for many Jews, the souls of the dead were still thought to descend to an underworld, rather than (as for instance in many Gnostic sources) making a journey skyward immediately after death.^[21] The question of where the realm of sheol was thought to be, and where “hell” was thought to be, by the author of *Ascension of Isaiah*, is a question that deserves attention in its own right, probably in more detail than can be provided here. But it is worth noting that, even in works such as 1 Enoch, which envisages the possibility of posthumous ascent, the realm of sheol is still thought of as one to which the living *descend*.^[22]

There is, however, a common element of ancient thought which has important implications for the understanding of *Ascension of Isaiah*. In 7:10 we read, “And as above, so also on earth, for the likeness of what (is) in the firmament is here on earth.” As Carrier notes, “the narrative goes out of its way to explain that the firmament contains copies of everything on earth.”^[23] And yet, presumably because of his aim to present a case for mythicism, Carrier does not discuss the natural implication of this: that even if the celestial Beloved only descended as far as the firmament, and was crucified there by demons, this would mirror some corresponding occurrence on earth. This is reminiscent of what we find depicted or hinted at in a number of Docetic texts. While the earthly Jesus is crucified, the real Jesus is seen above the cross, a spiritual being whom they cannot harm, laughing at the fools who think they have genuinely crucified him.

The *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* uses language very similar to *Ascension of Isaiah* at times:^[24]

I was in the mouths of lions. And the plan which they devised about me to release their Error and their senselessness - I did not succumb to them as they had planned. But I was not afflicted at all. Those who were there punished me. And I did not die in reality but in appearance, lest I be put to shame by them because these are my kinsfolk. I removed the shame from me and I did not become fainthearted in the face of what happened to me at their hands. I was

about to succumb to fear, and I according to their sight and thought, in order that they may never find any word to speak about them. For my death, which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man unto their death. For their Ennoias did not see me, for they were deaf and blind. But in doing these things, they condemn themselves. Yes, they saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was another upon Whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height over all the wealth of the archons and the offspring of their error, of their empty glory. And I was laughing at their ignorance.

And I subjected all their powers. For as I came downward, no one saw me. For I was altering my shapes, changing from form to form. And therefore, when I was at their gates, I assumed their likeness. For I passed them by quietly, and I was viewing the places, and I was not afraid nor ashamed, for I was undefiled. And I was speaking with them, mingling with them through those who are mine, and trampling on those who are harsh to them with zeal, and quenching the flame. And I was doing all these things because of my desire to accomplish what I desired by the will of the Father above.

And the Son of the Majesty, who was hidden in the regions below, we brought to the height where I in all these aeons with them, which (height) no one has seen nor known, where the wedding of the wedding robe is, the new one and not the old, nor does it perish.

Here is the relevant section of the *Apocalypse of Peter*: [\[25\]](#)

When he had said those things, I saw him seemingly being seized by them. And I said "What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?"

The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me."

But I, when I had looked, said "Lord, no one is looking at you. Let us flee this place."

But he said to me, "I have told you, 'Leave the blind alone!'. And you, see how they do not know what they are saying. For the son of their glory instead of my servant, they have put to shame."

And I saw someone about to approach us resembling him, even him who was

laughing on the tree. And he was with a Holy Spirit, and he is the Savior. And there was a great, ineffable light around them, and the multitude of ineffable and invisible angels blessing them. And when I looked at him, the one who gives praise was revealed.

And so *Ascension of Isaiah* seems not only to fit the otherwise-attested Docetic view of Jesus (that the life and crucifixion of the terrestrial Jesus was a revelation of a spiritual reality which was made known in the world but did not become part of the world), but to do so much better than the mythicist interpretation, otherwise unattested in ancient times. This is not to say that these works all have precisely the same viewpoint, or depict the story unfolding in precisely the same way – far from it. It is merely to suggest that *Ascension of Isaiah* fits in its own unique way within the spectrum of Docetic Christologies otherwise attested in ancient Christian literature.

Before concluding, let us ask what one is to make of the parallels Carrier highlights between *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Descent of Inanna*. Carrier writes, “It cannot be believed that the author of the *Ascension* just ‘by coincidence’ ended up telling almost the very same story, right down to its characteristic repetitions, seven-stage descent and disrobing, crucifixion by demons, and resurrection.”^[26] Why Carrier suggests that those with whom he disagrees would view the similarities as “coincidence” is unclear. As Charles Talbert has conveniently summarized, there are many common motifs across a wide array of traditions which believed in some sort of descending and ascending redeemer figure.^[27] Descent through the seven layers of the heavens was the only way to reach the Earth in this cosmology, and disguising oneself along the way was the only possible way to do so incognito. The parallels are between the *outlines* of the stories, which reflect the widespread ancient view that beings from the celestial realm come to Earth. The closer one looks at the details, the less similar the stories seem to be.^[28]

But even if we were to grant that the author of this work takes the Inanna myth and directly adapts it into a Christian version, the obvious follow-up question would be, “So what?” That someone did this, not at the time of the composition of our earliest Gospel as Carrier claims, but at some point later in the first century when a wide array of views are known to us from many sources, would perhaps add to the diversity of Christianity in that period. But it would not change our perception of what the earlier sources say. Mythicists have a long history of trying to drive a wedge between the early letters and the Gospels, regarding the latter as the euhemerization of an originally purely celestial Jesus. But the attempt to drive apart sources which naturally cohere, separated in time by a mere decade or two, only to then bring in still later sources and use them to interpret the earlier ones, is clearly problematic.

In discussing Carrier’s treatment of the text, we have granted a number of points which are in fact open to dispute. And so it is important in concluding to notice what we find in Carrier’s treatment of *Ascension of Isaiah*, which is mirrored in his treatment of the Talmud, the *Apocalypse of Zerubbabel*, and other sources. Late sources are brought into

the picture, with not-implausible arguments for their containing traditions that are much earlier. But these arguments for the presence of earlier tradition are no less weighty than the similar arguments that have been offered concerning traditional material about a historical Jesus being found not only in the Gospels, but also in the letters of Paul. The attempt to use later sources, interpreted in ways that are at best open to dispute, in an attempt to argue against what generations of skeptical scholars have concluded to be likely with respect to the early Christian sources, is never going to make mythicism seem more probable than the hard-earned and intensely-researched consensus of historians and scholars, namely that there was a historical Jesus of Nazareth.

And so, turning to the question posed in the title of this article, does *Ascension of Isaiah* envisage Jesus being crucified in outer space, on the firmament, as Richard Carrier claims? That reading of the text still seems to me unlikely – the Beloved’s descent to the realm of sheol seems to envisage the journey including Earth and the realm of the human dead, given how that term tends to be used in ancient Jewish literature. But as we have shown here, even if *Ascension of Isaiah* does have this view, that the celestial Beloved descends from the highest heaven to the firmament and no further, then that still does not support mythicism. *Ascension of Isaiah* emphasizes that what happens on the firmament is mirrored in the terrestrial realm. We should not treat the crucifixion of the Beloved to be an exception. In that case, we would be dealing with a rather distinctive Docetist vision of Jesus – one that has the celestial Jesus mistreated in the celestial realm in spiritual ways, never becoming entangled with flesh, at a safe distance from human suffering, even though apparently being killed in some celestial sense. This would have a counterpart in the human realm, and so would presumably have been understood as a “behind the scenes” (or “above the firmament”) picture of the celestial-spiritual correspondents to events that ancient Christian sources consistently presuppose to have unfolded in the vicinity of Jerusalem in the not-too-distant past. In this, it would still be close to the vision of other Docetic texts, which have the one who descended located safely above the earthly cross, laughing. Of course, the depiction of the Beloved being slain, and subsequently plundering the angel of death, could be understood in ways that would situate *Ascension of Isaiah* closer to what became orthodoxy, than to the works from Nag Hammadi which I quoted above. But the death of the Beloved could also be understood in a manner akin to what Second Treatise of the Great Seth envisages, when it says “I did not die in reality but in appearance.” But whether it is Docetic or merely quasi-Docetic in outlook, the work seems to lend no support to Carrier’s mythicist hypothesis. Carrier is, however, quite right to highlight that the work is undeservedly neglected, and so, even if it does not depict Jesus as having been crucified in outer space, there are other reasons why it ought to receive much greater amounts of scholarly attention and study than it has.

Notes

[1] Carrier p.11; see also for instance pp.85-88.

- [2] Carrier, *On the Historicity*, p.53
- [3] <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/02/review-of-earl-doherty%E2%80%99s-jesus-neither-god-nor-man-chapter-10-part-two.html>
- [4] Carrier, p.36.
- [5] Carrier pp.321-323,534.
- [6] <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ascension.html>
- [7] <https://archive.org/details/cu31924014590529> Charles' volume includes transcriptions of the Ethiopic, Latin, and Greek texts available.
- [8] <http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/AscensionOfIsaiah.html>
- [9] Carrier, pp.36-37.
- [10] Robert G. Hall, "The Ascension of Isaiah: Community Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity," *JBL* 109 (1990), 289-306 (here p.290).
- [11] In another article, Hall makes the case for the "Vision of Isaiah" representing a Jewish-Christian-Gnostic composition: Robert G. Hall, "Isaiah's ascent to see the beloved: An ancient Jewish source for the Ascension of Isaiah?" *JBL* 113 (1994), 463-484.
- [12] Richard Bauckham argues for an earlier first-century date in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (SBL, 1999), although still not as early as Mark. In his argument, Bauckham notes the same references to Nero which Carrier highlights. But Bauckham also highlights 4:13, which seems to stand at odds with Carrier's mythicist view of the text in its early form, since it refers to people who had seen the coming of the one whom they awaited, who was crucified. Presumably a mythicist can simply assert that it refers to their seeing him in visions. But one problematic aspect of mythicism is that it seems quite happy to transfer things to the celestial realm even when there is no good evidence that that was what was meant – take for instance their treatment of Paul's references to Jesus having been of the seed of David according to the flesh, and to his burial, as well as his crucifixion.
- [13] Note also Jonathan Knight's important cautionary remarks: "if chapters 6–11 were written in the first century but incorporated only in the early second century, we cannot be sure that we have the original form of text of this material, including the issue noticed in respect of chapter 6. Besides the difficult textual problems in this part of the *Ascen. Isa.*, we must bear in mind the possibility that neither branch of the tradition in this section records the original first-century text." Jonathan Knight, "The Origin and Significance of the Angelomorphic Christology in the Ascension of Isaiah" *JTS* 63/1 (2012), 66-105 (here p.71)
- [14] Knight, "Origin and Significance" p.68. Knight also discusses the date of the work, and concludes that there is good reason to view it as, at the very least, incorporating first century material.
- [15] The Latin has Jesus sending forth preachers into the world in 9:17, rather than merely carrying the righteous thence.

[16] Carrier, p.42.

[17] On the non-Docetic character of the redacted version of Asc.Isa. including the material in chapter 11, see Darrell Hannah, "The Ascension of Isaiah and Docetic Christology," *Vigiliae christianae* 53/2 (1999) 165-196.

[18] Carrier, pp.41-2

[19] <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2010/09/mythlocating-the-firmament.html>

[20] See Carrier pp.187-193.

[21] See the texts conveniently surveyed in Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) pp.45-62. See too J. Harold Ellens, *Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife* vol.1 (Praeger, 2013) ; Peter Schäfer, "In heaven as it is in hell: the cosmology of Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit," in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, edited by Ra'anan S. Boustán and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 233-274.

[22] <http://wesley.nnu.edu/index.php?id=2126>

[23] Carrier p.45.

[24] Translation by Roger Bullard and Joseph Gibbons
<http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/2seth.html>

[25] From the translation by James Brashler and Roger Bullard
<http://gnosis.org/naghamm/apopet.html>

[26] Carrier p.46.

[27] Charles H. Talbert, "The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity," *NTS* 22 (1976), 418-39. See also the material about the different ways that celestial beings were thought to appear in the world in Pamela E. Kinlaw's book, *The Christ is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology* (SBL, 2005).

[28] On this see further Maurice Casey's posthumously-published volume, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) pp.230-232.

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Comments (59)

Interesting take. I think Carrier places too much credence in the celestial mechanics and ascents/descents and the pagan analogies to them. The cosmological schemes are of a secondary import, I believe. Other than the unknown origins and shape of the Jesuine traditions in Jerusalem what we have is the Pauline schema, which relies on receiving of the Son "in one's body" by apostolic worthies. The references in Paul are to intra-psychic realities and known internal effects of bipolar disorder which

project as receiving alternately, peaks of celestial bliss and powers of a revealer (life of Jesus) and unfathomable persecution with a necrotizing sense of perdition (his death). Whether Paul's schema was obliquely referencing and critiquing a historical minor prophet of the Nazarenes, or merely their take on messianism in general is the big unknown. Mark's gospel makes it hugely improbable the Nazarenes believed in a dying and resurrecting Messiah. Jesus in Mark teaches his retinue Paulinist theology of the cross, but they don't get it and do not receive the gospel...until allegorized by Mark !

#1 - Jiri Severa - 10/30/2014 - 15:29

I will give Professor McGrath credit for exceeding my expectations with this expected review article. Bravo, James. I also think it was wise to tackle one specific claim and agree it is an important one. My thoughts:

1) Disappointment that Carrier's words are rarely used. I counted five short quotes, mainly stating Carrier's claims, not his evidence or reasoning behind the claims. I appreciate the footnotes to the book, but not many people have the book. The devil is in the details, of course, and I don't think those details about the Ascension of Isaiah have been adequately engaged in this article. The sign of a good argument is accurately stating your opponent's case before making points against it. I don't think McGrath has allowed the reader to weigh the two arguments against each other.

2) The dating games. Hall claims the final redactor is responsible for the martyrdom in the vision (and the vision in the martyrdom?) which relies on Johannine literature and Revelation, which he dates to the late first / early second century. Carrier says what he is referring to in the Ascension dates from around Mark. How am I to say who is right? This article doesn't produce any evidence from either side. Plus there are the dating issues of constituents vs. composite, original vs. redaction, and the Gospels. A hot mess that can't be addressed in a paragraph.

3) Docetism and the Historical Jesus. This genuinely confused me. What is McGrath arguing when he says: "presumably because of his aim to present a case for mythicism, Carrier does not discuss the natural implication of this: that even if the celestial Beloved only descended as far as the firmament, and was crucified there by demons, this would mirror some corresponding occurrence on earth." Is McGrath saying a Docetic Jesus disproves mythicism? Or even just argues for a historical Jesus? To me, Docetism and a historical Jesus are mutually exclusive.

4) How disjointed it was. A page of preliminaries, including some confused statements on the problems with the criteria of authenticity. A page discussing the Ascension of Isaiah directly, although as number 2 shows, not without problems. A page of discussion of Docetism, again confusing with how that applies to a mythic or historical Jesus. A page plus of quoting two other non-canonical works, presumably to show the Ascension is mostly Docetic, regardless of what that means for Carrier's thesis. Almost a page discussing the comparison of the Ascension to the Descent of Inanna. Why I can't say. Maybe to provide a chance to state that the Epistles and the Gospels "naturally cohere". I would guess McGrath was quite happy to get in his hobby-horse, the paragraph beginning "In discussing Carrier's treatment of the text..." Then the conclusion which seems to flatly state a Docetic text argues against mythicism.

I look forward to reading a reply from Carrier, although he is on the road a lot these days and it will probably take a while. But I'll make a prediction that he will definitely say this article barely engages his arguments using the Ascension of Isaiah.

#2 - Mark Erickson - 10/30/2014 - 21:18

The Docetism for which we have evidence was the view that Jesus lived in the world and was encountered by human beings, but he himself only appeared to be human. It is the sort of claim that can be made about a historical figure whom one wishes to assert was divine. That is distinct (in ways that I thought would be obvious and so apologize for not spelling out) from the mythicist view of Carrier that Jesus had never been a person who walked the Earth.

I hope that helps clarify that point.

#3 - James F. McGrath - 10/30/2014 - 23:10

Even still, constraining docetism to such an ideal type does not sound far removed from post-resurrection appearances and it has been suggested that sayings from the Lord originated in the communities prophets speaking in the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

#4 - Aaron Hill - 10/30/2014 - 23:49

Did Jesus die in outer space? One thing is for certain: if the early Christians believed this, then we need them to say so unambiguously. In the Twilight Zone of mythicism, that an event is assumed to have happened on Earth unless otherwise stated is not the default position. In the real world it is. Therefore, there is no onus on James Mcgrath to prove that the Ascension of Isaiah doesn't say what Carrier thinks it does: it is enough for Mcgrath to point out that the matter is in doubt.

#5 - Thomas Fenton - 10/31/2014 - 08:30

In OHJ, Carrier writes on page 41 that "My perspective on this document [Ascension of Isaiah] has been inspired by the analysis in Earl Doherty, Jesus: Neither God nor Man". That's interesting, because Carrier seems to make the same mistake that Doherty made in J:NGNM, as I explained earlier in the "Did Jesus die in Outer Space" thread on BCH here:

<http://earlywritings.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=1018&start=40>

Carrier seems to imply that "in your form" in 9.13 is not in the earlier S/L texts. As Doherty noted, this is "a reference to human form and probably a reference to earth." (See my review of Doherty's book here for further details:

http://members.optusnet.com.au/gakuseidon/JNGNM_Review4.html

Given that the Beloved's form is **explicitly** stated in the other levels of descent, I can't see it referring to any other level except earth.

Carrier writes, again on page 41:

"In other words, instead of conducting a ministry on earth, Jesus is commanded to go straight to the firmament and die... The 'tree' on which he is crucified (9.14) is thus implied to be one of the 'copies' of trees that we're told are in the firmament (7. 10)."

As both Bernard Muller and I pointed out on the BCH thread, the text doesn't claim that there are "copies" of anything in 7.10. But leaving that aside, is the implication in 9.14 that the tree was in the firmament?

Let's look at 9.12 to 9.14: (items enclosed with [**] below are missing from some texts)

9.12. And he said unto me: "Crowns and thrones of glory they do not receive, till the Beloved will descent in the form in which you will see Him descent [**into the world in the last days the Lord, who will be called Christ.**]

9.13. Nevertheless they see and know whose will be thrones, and whose the crowns when He has descended and been made in your form, [**and they will think that He is flesh and is a man**].

9.14. And the god of that world will stretch forth his hand against the Son, and they will crucify Him on a tree, and will slay Him not knowing who He is.

Now, "made in your form" appears in all S, L and E texts. Since the Beloved takes on the form of firmament creatures in the firmament, and the form of air creatures in the air, then "in your form" would seem to be a reference to earth (as Doherty conceded in my review of J:NGNM, link above.)

But if 9.13 is a reference to a descent to earth, doesn't that suggest that the tree in 9.14 is also located on earth? I can't see it any other way, at least for the extant texts.

And from where does Carrier get "Jesus is commanded to go straight to the firmament and die"?

If my analysis is correct, then Carrier's use of AoI as support for his mythicist theory evaporates completely, as far as I can see.

#6 - GakuseiDon - 10/31/2014 - 22:27

"It is the sort of claim that can be made about a historical figure whom one wishes to assert was divine."

I get it now, thanks. A real human can later be said to have been just a likeness of a human, I suppose as a transitional belief between a human Jesus to a divine one. But it seems more probable to me that Docetism wasn't closely related to the views of Jesus developed in the NT, but it's own strand of Christianity.

#7 - Mark Erickson - 11/01/2014 - 01:50

Even if the Jeus of AoI was docetic, that docetism is 100% expected on the minimal Myth Theory:

At p.55, note 18, talking about the "supernatural realm", Carrier says:

"But the latter [the supernatural realm] could have been imagined to be in outer space OR on earth and still conform to minimal mythicism as I have defined it: see note in Chapter 11 (§8)."
(OHJ, p.55, note 18)

The latter note 67 of p.563 says:

"The original 'revealed' death and burial COULD have been imagined as occurring on earth and still be (from our perspective) mythical, if, e.g., the passion sequence was 'revelaed' to have occurred somewhere like the Garden of Eden, a place no one knew the actual location of and thus where no ordinary witnesses could have been available

(of course, the earliest Christians thought even the Garden of Eden was in outer space: 2 Cor. 12.2-4; see Element 38)."
(p.563, n.67)

If, according to original myth, the death of Jesus occurred on earth, then this Docetism is not historicity.

Docetism is historicity only when Jesus is imagined doing ****other things on heart**** (i.e. preaching, traveling, healing, having disciples), not only being killed and buried.

Therefore I have the suspect that McGrath didn't read the entire volume that he is reviewing.

#8 - Giuseppe Ferri - 11/01/2014 - 08:48

I've written a response to this article here:

<http://www.skepticink.com/humesapprentice/2014/11/01/did-jesus-die-in-outer-space-james-mcgraths-new-review-article/>

#9 - Nicholas Covington - 11/01/2014 - 11:16

Giuseppe

You say that docetism is 100% expected on the minimal myth theory. This seems odd. Do we normally expect a docetic interpretation of mythical characters? Did people say that although Hercules lived on Earth he only appeared to be human? Was this also said of King Arthur?

I'm not sure why you are declaring that an alleged death and burial on Earth is compatible with mythicism. Who said it wasn't? James Mcgrath is simply addressing one of Carrier's claims: that the early Christians imagined a crucifixion in the heavens. Since this is a bizarre idea, supported by evidence which is tenuous at best, it is entirely appropriate for Mcgrath to challenge it. The burden of proof rests with Carrier.

Carrier may claim that mythicism does not depend on the idea of heavenly crucifixion, but that is irrelevant. Carrier has presented the idea, and he should expect it to be criticised.

#10 - Thomas Fenton - 11/01/2014 - 16:35

Thomas:

"Since this is a bizarre idea..." How do you determine what was bizarre to first century Jews or early Christians? There is, in fact, a great deal of such literature that sounds bizarre to modern ears. It could be that we have to set aside our modern notions of what was considered bizarre.

#11 - Geoff Barrett - 11/02/2014 - 04:14

Fenton,

In the religious literature of the relevant time are there not many examples of gods

taking on the guise of men to perform some task on earth? And even the Old Testament contains several episodes of angels appearing to men in human disguise. In Genesis angels disguised as men visit Abraham and Lot. And, closer to intertestamental times, the book of Tobit describes the archangel Raphael as disguising himself as a man (Azarias), not to live for some protracted time on earth, but for a limited specific task. So I think it also defensible that the original Christian belief was that a divine Son of God descended to earth for a few hours disguised as a man in order to undergo an incognito crucifixion. (No birth, no public ministry, no prolonged stay). And after having returned to heaven, he appeared to certain chosen individuals, revealed to them the redemptive trick he had played, and commissioned them to tell others.

CONCLUSION:

If a mythical earth-death is at all plausible, it just increases the probability of non-historicity. Because the probability-space occupied by that option will be *added* to the probability-space occupied by the celestial-death theory.

You and McGrath in this post are acknowledging the possibility of a mythical earth-death (the view that you call docetic) and McGrath shows that there is support for it in AoI, as opposed to the celestial death theory, which has too (as Carrier extensively document in his book). It therefore becomes far more defensible. That doesn't mean the earth-death theory is false. It just means it's far easier to defend the celestial-death theory.

McGrath is doing that argument for Carrier.

#12 - Giuseppe Ferri - 11/02/2014 - 05:27

Geoff

If I am not mistaken, Carrier has suggested that the Gospel Jesus was invented because that idea was more appealing to the masses, and that the "truth" about the celestial Jesus was reserved for initiates. So Carrier himself seems to concede that the idea of a heavenly crucifixion may not have been palatable.

By the way, my apologies to James McGrath: I seem to have omitted a capital "G" in my above comments.

#13 - Thomas Fenton - 11/02/2014 - 07:51

Giuseppe

I'm not denying that some myths involve a celestial being who appears on Earth in human form. The question is whether this is 100% expected if the Jesus myth theory is true. There seem to be problems in this case. Celestial beings may appear on Earth briefly and then return to heaven, but this is incompatible with Paul's assertion that Jesus was born of a woman. Of course, mythical beings can be born of human mothers, but those mythical beings are not the same as the ones who only appear briefly in human form. So docetism is not 100% expected in this case.

The real issue, of course, is that no one actually says that Jesus was crucified in the heavens.

#14 - Thomas Fenton - 11/02/2014 - 16:27

Ich würde jeden Gentleman gerne fragen, ob sie das ganze Buch zu lesen.
#15 - Walther Oldenberg - 11/02/2014 - 16:37

Giuseppe, thanks for your explanations on the Docetic issue.

Thomas, you are mistaken. I would be interested to see if you can provide any support for your memory.

For myself, I don't think that kind of explanation why the Gospel of Mark was written is accessible to us now. However, the result (the Gospel itself) was in fact appealing, and went on to be a foundational Christian text. That we can study.

#16 - Mark Erickson - 11/02/2014 - 17:33

I would like to improve my last sentence in #7 above to:

It seems more probable to me that Docetism wasn't a part of the Jesus tradition developed in the Gospels and later, but its own strand of Christianity. For example, Johannine arguments were anti-Docetic.

#17 - Mark Erickson - 11/02/2014 - 17:38

Mark

I thought Carrier had said that but, of course, it isn't my idea of how Mark's Gospel originated. The fact is, though, that we know the Gospel Jesus had the power to appeal to people. Did the celestial crucifixion story have the power to appeal to people? We don't know because we have no record that anyone actually believed it. Carrier will say that the Ascension of Isaiah is such a record, but it seems to me that the meaning which he gets from it is rather like a confession extracted under torture: it won't stand up in court.

#18 - Thomas Fenton - 11/02/2014 - 19:25

Thomas #17: I think the argument would be that the letters of Paul also bear witness to a belief in a celestial crucifixion and to widespread appeal of that message.

#19 - Geoff Barrett - 11/02/2014 - 23:05

Walther: Ja, Ich habe sie ganze buch gelesen.

Thomas: On whether the belief was "bizarre" or not, you were unclear as to whether it was "bizarre" to us or to ancients. I would still maintain that the idea itself was not bizarre to ancient Christians or Jews. That a more literal understanding in an actual person, Jesus, doesn't necessarily entail that early Christians saw a celestial crucifixion as bizarre.

#20 - Geoff Barrett - 11/02/2014 - 23:18

Geoff, vielen dank! Ich frage mich, ob Herr McGrath und Herr Fenton haben das ganze Buch zu lesen.

#21 - Walther Oldenberg - 11/03/2014 - 02:51

Thomas,

I agree that no one *clearly* says that Jesus was crucified in the heavens but from AoI that can only be inferred equally like your docetic exegesis (equally plausible on myth and on historicity).

I do not understand why, in absence of a *clear* location in heaven, the default position should be one and only historicity. So it seems that McGrath wants to prevent at the outset every comparison in bayesian terms because only 100% historicist claims are survived in record (like Testimonium Flavianum, for example) while the remaining (and prima facie more ambiguous) evidence can always hold a 'possible' "implicit" historicist exegesis.

About 'born of a woman' (Gal 4:4) Carrier explains the alternative and more probable meaning of genomenos. Paul says that Jesus has been *symbolically* (Gal 4:24) born by Hagar in the physical world, in order to liberate those that are enslaved by the elemental things of the world.

#22 - Giuseppe Ferri - 11/03/2014 - 08:07

Geoff

Perhaps I can offer an analogy. The idea of parallel universes is quite well known, and even scientifically respectable in our own time. However, if I told you that I had won the lottery, you would certainly be surprised to find out that I was referring to another version of myself living in a parallel universe.

Walther

I can't speak German, but I can use online translators. And, no, I haven't read the book.

#23 - Thomas Fenton - 11/03/2014 - 10:25

McGrath stresses that Carrier's thesis depends on the strength of the details but by focussing on an introductory discussion of the AoI he does not address any of arguments in support of the basic myth hypothesis. Carrier makes it clear that his discussion of the AoI is part of his definition of the mythicism he will be arguing and that his arguments will be given in future chapters.

When McGrath suggests there is a problem with Carrier's approach given that many details are compatible with a historicist or mythicist scenario, he is failing register the very point Carrier is making: his book intends to explore the probabilities of those respective contradictory reconstructions.

The review elaborates this point by noting that we could "devote a whole article just to" the question of whether possible pre-Christian expectations of a dying messiah might have inspired a historical figure as opposed to fabricators of a mythical one -- and get nowhere in such a debate. Again, McGrath has failed to grasp that this is the very question Carrier himself raises and that he explains he will explore by comparing the probabilities of each scenario.

Also suggested in the review is that Carrier is using the AoI in order to "interpret" NT works. On the contrary, Carrier uses the AoI as support for interpretations of texts

based on other grounds. Far from using the AoI to "interpret" Paul Carrier concludes his discussion of the AoI with the following:

So is Paul here referring to the demonic execution of Jesus in outer space? That would certainly explain why he would say this cannot have been seen by anyone, but is known only by revelation (1 Cor. 2.9-10, cf. Rom. 16.25-26). That his makes particular sense—in fact more sense than what's usually assumed—is what I shall argue in Chapter 11. Here my aim is not to argue that this theory is true, but to explain what this theory is. p.48

In his discussion of the AoI all McGrath has done is show that one can speculate alternative possibilities about what the original text looked like and remind readers of traditional interpretations that Carrier is challenging. Again, this is overlooking the reason Carrier has explained (1) that he is discussing the AoI in a chapter on definitions of mythicism and (2) that he will argue the mythicist case in future chapters.

McGrath's reference to Hall is also confused. He cites Hall in support of the AoI belonging securely after the NT writings had been completed but in fact in that same article Hall repeatedly stresses that he is speaking of the completed or composite form of the AoI and not its earliest section. It is that earliest section, the Vision of Isaiah, that Hall in the same article dates to the same period as the post-Pauline NT writings were being composed.

McGrath raises the possibility that references in the AoI to Jesus being "like a man" could have been omitted by an anti-docetic scribe but fails to acknowledge that Carrier actually anticipated that very objection in a footnote in these same pages. He points out that such a proposition is entirely speculation, not an argument.

The most obvious error in the review, however, is the assertion that Carrier fails to address the "as above, so also on earth" principle as it should apply to the AoI. If the reviewer had turned to the later chapter where Carrier's argument is found he would have seen that Carrier does indeed address this point: the sacrifice in heaven are matched by the sacrificial system on earth below -- as supported by even NT texts such as Hebrews.

There is irony in McGrath quoting from the Second Treatise of the Great Seth the Apocalypse of Peter at length to "interpret" the AoI given that he later censures Carrier for supposedly using later materials to interpret earlier ones.

Another complaint against Carrier is surely unjustified. McGrath suggests Carrier has overstepped the mark by suggesting those who disagree with him think in black and white terms: either the similarities between an ancient Babylonian myth and the AoI are "coincidence" or something more realistic. McGrath posits Talbert's explanation as a rebuttal to Carrier's "coincidence". But surely there is no contradiction between Carrier's "coincidence" and Talbert's explanation that "many common motifs and a wide array of traditions" can account for such similarities. That's the stuff that makes literary similarities likely as opposed to mere "coincidences".

#24 - Neil Godfrey - 11/03/2014 - 11:41

Herr Fenton, forgive my English please. I am surprise that you criticise with out reading the book. Sind Sie nicht ein Gelehrter?

#25 - Walther Oldenberg - 11/05/2014 - 01:16

Walther

Since I haven't read the book I will try say what I think the central issue is, and you can correct me if I have got it wrong. Carrier sees his version of the myth theory as the most viable one. There are other versions of the theory, but they are too implausible to be given consideration. If the evidence in general favours mythicism over historicism, then Carrier's version of the theory will be left standing, even if there is no direct evidence of his central claim.

The problem is that I cannot accept this approach in principle. Since I don't accept the approach there isn't much point in my reading the book. I will try to explain why I reject Carrier's methods. The claim that the earliest Christians believed in a heavenly crucifixion is one for which we could easily have unambiguous evidence, but we don't actually have such evidence. Is it possible to demonstrate the claim with a Bayesian analysis of a lot of indirect evidence? Let me put it like this: I would rather have one unambiguous statement than a Bayesian house of cards (I hope that makes sense in translation).

In an earlier comment I mentioned an analogy with parallel universes. Let's have another look at this analogy. Suppose I tell you that I have won the lottery. You have a theory that what I actually mean is that another version of myself has won the lottery in a parallel universe. I haven't actually said this but we can do a Bayesian analysis of the evidence. Consider the following facts:

- a) It turns out that I haven't really won the lottery.
- b) I have recently read a book about parallel universes.

These two facts are 100% expected on the theory that I am actually talking about a lottery win in another universe. So your theory is looking good. However, wouldn't it be better if I just told you what I meant?

In answer to your question, I am not a scholar, so feel free to reject what I say.
#26 - Thomas Fenton - 11/05/2014 - 08:05

The two articles by Hall are on JSTOR. It sounds to me as though Hall views the complete work as late first/early second century, with some source material perhaps being somewhat earlier, but still roughly in the final quarter of the first century.
#27 - I. Dumitru - 11/05/2014 - 16:53

McGrath is surely right in logic at least to say that if people describe celestial events and hold the view that as it is above, so it is below then they must think that events here below corresponding to those above must happen, not that they are of no interest. But many questions remain unsettled: how close a correspondence would be demanded?

How could we tell the difference between someone who, because (s)he thinks that there must have been an earthly event to fit the stories of heaven, just invents the events, and someone who, because imagination is stimulated by moving and impressive events that really happened, writes fictions about heavenly counterparts and angelic hosts?

The existence of docetism as an interpretation of the supposed career of Jesus doesn't prove anything either way about whether this career really took place. It's possible to believe of a real person that he only seemed to die, possible in the same

degree, neither more nor less, to write a fiction in which a character only seems to die.

So we cannot determine anything relevant about reality here below by determining the exact terms of works of imagination about the heavens above.

#28 - Martin Hughes - 11/05/2014 - 18:15

Yeah, I really do think that commenting on a book you have not read disqualifies your point of view. You need to carefully consider the arguments and the evidence marshalled to support the argument in order to have a fully informed position.

By the way, I do not think the parallel universe analogy holds. The multi-layered heavens are not the same as the multiverse in that some entities could travel between them, even humans with the aid of a guide could be take to the upper heavens. The same is not true of the multiverse. Even today, probably a majority of Americans believe in a heaven where Jesus resides. Many of them believe Jesus communicates directly to them. This is a belief in an entirely heavenly entity, but one that lives in this universe.

#29 - Geoff - 11/05/2014 - 18:22

Geoff

I think you have missed the point of my analogy with parallel universes. If the theory is true, then there really *is* a parallel universe in which I have won the lottery. So the statement that I have won the lottery really could refer to another version of myself. The question of travel between the universes isn't relevant.

As for my views on the matter, you are free to discount them if you wish.

#30 - Thomas Fenton - 11/05/2014 - 21:36

The claim that the earliest Christians believed in a heavenly crucifixion is one for which we could easily have unambiguous evidence, but we don't actually have such evidence. Can't the same objection be made to Paul's treatment of Jesus? There is very little to suggest that Paul knew any earthly teachings of Jesus and scholars struggle to present indirect evidence that this or that statement is inspired by traditions later quoted in the Gospels.

#31 - Jens Knudsen (Sili) - 11/05/2014 - 21:54

Jens

I would regard Paul's statement that Jesus was crucified as strong evidence for an earthly Jesus. Paul also talks about meeting the brother of the Lord. I know that mythicists try to explain this away, so I shall try to anticipate the objections. The possibility has been suggested that Paul isn't referring to a biological relationship. Now, if I talk about my biological brother, I am obviously talking about a real person. What if I am talking about my spiritual brother; does that mean I am not talking about a real person? Certainly not. Spiritual or metaphorical brotherhood is a common relationship between real people. Paul refers to other Christians as brothers and they are obviously real people.

If James was not the biological brother of Jesus (and this idea is pure speculation

anyway) the most likely alternative is that he was someone who was very close to Jesus when Jesus was alive - a spiritual brother. There are literally billions of brotherly relationships, spiritual and biological. How many of these relationships involve a real person and a fictional character?

Paul's meeting with the Lord's brother is as close to unambiguous evidence as you can get in my opinion.

#32 - Thomas Fenton - 11/05/2014 - 23:55

Josephus recorded how Caligula told people he was the brother of Zeus. Lots of people met Caligula. Hardly seems "as close to unambiguous evidence as you can get" for a historical Zeus.

#33 - C. Anderson - 11/08/2014 - 04:43

So you have given one example of a real person who has a fictional brother. Do you really think that makes a difference? The chances that any particular brotherly relationship involves a real person and a fictional character are still utterly remote, for the simple reason that such relationships are vastly outnumbered by those involving two real people.

#34 - Thomas Fenton - 11/08/2014 - 16:13

People perpetuating fiction as truth is, however, not remote- be it through deliberate lying or through being deluded or deceived. Kinship to fictional characters were no exception.

Alexander the Great claimed to be the son of Zeus & therefore the brother of Apollo, Ares, Athena, Dionysus, Epaphus, Hephaistos, Hercules, Hermes, Pan, Persephone, Perseus, etc., etc., etc.

Demetrius Poliorcetes claimed to be the son of Poseidon & thus the brother of Triton, Orion, Theseus, Proteus, Asopos, Benthesisikyme, Cymopoleia, Despoine, etc.

Seleucus Nicator I and Augustus Caesar claimed to be the son of Apollo & thus the brother of Delphus, Asclepius, Agreus, Philammon, Lycoreus, Linos, Aristaios, the seven Corybantes, etc.

Diagoras of Rhodes was claimed to be the son of Hermes & thus the brother of Priapus, Echion, Eleusis, Angelia, Palaistra, Hermaphroditos, Pherespondos. Lykos, Pronomos, Cephalus, etc.

The kings of Egypt claimed to be sons of Re and thus brothers of the gods-
"Gods, Pepi is your brother"

"This is my brother; this is the one [at] my side,' says Geb, as [he] takes this Pepi by [his] arm [and leads] this Pepi from the sky's gates."

"Ho, Pepi Neferkare! Your sister Qebehut has cleaned you"
etc.

On and on and on and ON this could go. Hardly a remote phenomenon.

#35 - C. Anderson - 11/12/2014 - 22:02

C. Anderson,

I don't think you do justice to Paul's use of James in relation to Jesus.

For one, James himself isn't saying this, Paul is. Paul claims to have met James and identifies him as being biologically related and not in any way spiritual(look at the Greek). The Greek that Paul uses means that Jesus and James both shared the same womb. Now, unlike all those other Roman mythical gods that Greek and roman emperors claim they are related to, James was real, and many early independent sources refer to James as being related to Jesus. This means that Jesus had to exist since James exists and multiple independent sources, one of whom, claims to have met with him personally.

#36 - Matt - 11/16/2014 - 20:51

Matt,

In my 40+ years of Greek study, I have never encountered how the language used in Galatians shows biological/share the same womb notion. Please elaborate from a linguistic basis how you support your claim.

#37 - Timothy Bagley - 11/17/2014 - 02:18

Matt,

Paul is saying that he met only the Apostle Peter and no other apostles, but only brother James.

The specific "of Lord" serves to distinguish an apostle from a non-apostle. If James was an apostle, then there's would the risk that the Galatians had the suspect that was him, James the Apostle, to reveal the Gospel to Paul, contra his pretense of receiving it only by revelation (=hallucination).

#38 - Giuseppe Ferri - 11/17/2014 - 10:58

I never mentioned any of those three men you just did, therefore it is impossible that I have done anything in relation to "justice to Paul's use of James in relation to Jesus."

Nonetheless, you do err in your attempts to correlate your material to my posts. E.g.-

"For one, James himself isn't saying this, Paul is."

For one, Pharaoh Pepi himself wasn't saying this, his scribes who carved those spells into his tomb walls did.

"Paul claims to have met James and identifies him as being biologically related and not in any way spiritual(look at the Greek). The Greek that Paul uses means that Jesus and James both shared the same womb."

The scribes clearly met Pepi (they were hired by him) and identified him as being biologically related to the gods (look at the Egyptian). The Egyptian his scribes used means that Pepi shared the same womb with some of the gods, especially when it even explicitly says so-

"Nut's son of her belly"

Moreover, ἀδελφός- the word used by Paul in Galatians 1:19 -is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 12:47-50

"Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren [ἀδελφός] stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, ***the same is my brother [ἀδελφός],*** and sister, and mother."

So clearly it was not used exclusively of those who physically shared the same biological womb. The examples continue in Matthew 23:8, 25:40, Acts 9:17 & 30, 11:1, 15:22, etc., etc., etc. And just in case the excuse of "but that's not Paul, this is about hwo PAUL used the word!" comes up, ἀδελφός is likewise used of people who did not share the same womb in Romans 1:13, 7:1 & 4, 8:12, 9:3, 10:1, 11:25, 12:1, 14:10-21, 15:14-15 & 30, 16:17, etc., etc., etc. Even just within the same book as the James reference, Galatians, there is verse 1:11, 3:15, 4:12 & 28 & 31, 5:11, 5:13, 6:1 & 18, all referring to the Galatian masses as his ἀδελφός.

Anyway, getting back on point-

"Now, unlike all those other Roman mythical gods that Greek and roman emperors claim they are related to, James was real"

Here you tried to pull a swerve, but it fails because James is not analogous to the "Roman mythical gods" in my posts. James is analogous to those historical "Greek and roman emperors" who, like James, claimed a biological kinship to divine beings. In my post, James is analogous to Alexander or Augustus or Pepi, etc. and NOT to Zeus or Apollo or Geb, etc.

"This means that Jesus had to exist since James exists and multiple independent sources[sic], one of whom, claims to have met with him personally."

This means Egyptian gods such as Geb & Qebehut etc. had to exist since Pepi existed and multiple independent sources exist, many of whom met him personally (his scribes, artisans, & architects, etc.).

Your reasoning fails you.

#39 - C. Anderson - 11/17/2014 - 14:21

Do you not see the irony in citing the statement Matthew attributes to Jesus, which contrasts Jesus' biological kin with his followers, as though it were evidence that Jesus was not a biological person with biological siblings?

#40 - James F. McGrath - 11/20/2014 - 13:17

No irony noted. Mr. Anderson was citing the passage as an example of word usage as a lexicon entry would show.

#41 - Timothy Bagley - 11/20/2014 - 19:39

Thank you Tim.

Jim does err in regards to my post in similar manner as Matt did above.

"...Jesus was not a biological person..."

A position never taken by me anywhere ever, and certainly not here, and you will fail to demonstrate that I ever have. Hence it is impossible that I have ever used ANYTHING as "as though it were evidence that Jesus was not a biological person with biological siblings."

This entire exercise here, as far as my involvement is concerned, has been about the quality of a certain piece of evidence offered by Mr. Fenton previously. He alleged that it was "as close to unambiguous evidence as you can get." It clearly is not, as has been demonstrated here.

Seems some here would do well to watch some court cases or even dramas, perhaps 12 Angry Men, to get a grasp on how debating quality of evidence does not equate to evidence for an opposite conclusion.

"How do you know what she saw?
How does he know all that?
How do you know what glasses she wore?
Maybe they were sunglasses! Maybe she was far-sighted! What do you know?"

"I only know the woman's eyesight is in question now.
She had to be able to identify a person.
You can't send someone off
to die ON EVIDENCE LIKE THAT."

They didn't need to prove that the suspect was innocent. They didn't even need to prove that the woman didn't actually see him commit the crime. And they didn't even need to prove that she has poor eyesight.

All they needed to do was demonstrate that this piece of evidence as it was presented to them was not of sufficient quality to prove what the prosecution alleged that it proved, i.e. to have a reasonable doubt.

#42 - C. Anderson - 11/21/2014 - 15:20

I've long thought that the Passion, particularly in Luke's version, is a kind of thriller (in Todorov's sense) in which the real bad guy, Satan, is finally exposed. So my answer to the question 'Did Jesus die in the heavenly realms?' is Surely not, but he surely must have come under attack there.

It makes no sense to think - or to think that any NT writer thought - that the day of the Lord's Passion was an ordinary working day in heaven. The events there must have been closely linked with events here and must have resulted in Satan's being unmasked and his schemes frustrated. At that rate the events down here were 'only' the visible aspect of a drama invisible to us but of the utmost significance for us. Which implies that there must have been real events down here, and a hero of those events.

It may be that 'death' is the best word for what happened to him but death could not mean entirely the same for him, a being whose life was already heavenly, as for me. I haven't (don't know about you guys) abandoned pre-existent glory or been 'this day begotten' by God on any day of my adult life, so for me death will be the cessation of the only form of consciousness I've known. His death can 'only have seemed' to be like that. It must have been awareness of this that made the framers of the Nicene Creed so reluctant to say in plain words that Jesus died.

The docetism which is in the logic of the story does not exclude but very strongly

implies that there were visible phenomena as of a person living the life of Jesus and (in his own way) dying at the end of it.

I think that the sense of the Passion narrative as a cosmic story of crime and detection is most apparent in Luke's version, where Satan and ministering angels are active and where Jesus seems very confident and in control.

#43 - Martin Hughes - 11/29/2014 - 21:34

I would like to view some response from Dr. McGrath to the precise criticisms that Neil Godfrey supplied in his comment (#24). Neil's entry directly calls into question McGrath's review. I am aware of a "history" between these two individuals but a response, I feel, is in order.

#44 - Timothy Bagley - 12/02/2014 - 22:01

Fraternity, as any French revolutionary will tell you, is an extension of equality, so an explicit ascription of fraternity implies something very significant in common. I cannot see authority for saying that Caligula claimed to be Zeus' bro, but there's plenty of extended language out there - we do find Francis of Assisi claiming to be a brother to the sun. He did not mean that he was an astronomical object but he did still mean that there is something in common, ie dependence on God, between the sun and himself.

So what does the author of Galatians think was at least somewhat distinctive about James and also in common between James and Jesus? Like Mr. Fenton, I can't think of anything that doesn't involve common humanity: for instance, Origen's 'ethos and logos' (C. Cels.1:47) are human characteristics, even though they do not involve blood relationships. To pursue a way of life and to teach as James later did Jesus had to be human, or James divine, at least partly and to some significant degree.

If Augustus thought that he was biologically the son of Apollo - I don't think he did, though some theologians speculated about it (Suetonius Divus Augustus 94) - I suppose he would have accepted that he was half-bro to other offspring of Apollo and (of course) claimed something of their divinity. But the more language becomes extended from the basic biological sense the less it supports inferential claims of that sort. Francis may have claimed to be the sun's bro but he did not think that his mum had given birth to the sun. I don't that inferential rather than explicit claims are of much significance in this discussion.

But it does seem to me that the author of Galatians - at least if we assume that James was solidly human - thought that Jesus shared something of James' humanity and thus had had some sort of human career.

Whether the author of Galatians was really as well informed and able to judge these things as he seems to be is another matter.

I may seem to be unpersuaded by 'mythicisim' but I really welcome the closer interrogation of the sacred text - what's the use of being sacred if you can't be interrogated? - that it has brought.

#45 - Martin Hughes - 12/02/2014 - 22:57

I don't respond to Neil Godfrey any longer, view to his history of vitriol, name-calling, and time-wasting. And I thought it went without saying that 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 does not say what he claims it does. I'm not sure what Tim thinks is deserving of a response in comment #24.

#46 - James F. McGrath - 12/03/2014 - 23:05

James, please tell me what does 1 Cor 2 say?

Also, can we expect another installment of your series on Carrier's book before Christmas?

#47 - Mark Erickson - 12/06/2014 - 03:39

It cannot possibly mean, as some mythicists have claimed, that what was revealed was the fact that Jesus was crucified, because whatever was hidden from the powers that crucified Jesus, it was not the fact that they crucified Jesus. The revelation, rather, is something which, if it had been known to the powers in question, it might have made them do otherwise. There is nothing in 2 Corinthians which in any way suggests that the crucifixion itself could not be seen. Hence my expression of surprise that anyone thought this suggestion, so obviously at odds with what the text says, actually deserved a response.

I do plan on having my next piece on Carrier's book done sometime before Christmas, yes.

#48 - James F. McGrath - 12/06/2014 - 21:27

Okay, thanks.

I hope the next piece addresses Chapter 11, as Neil quotes Carrier above:

"So is Paul here referring to the demonic execution of Jesus in outer space? That would certainly explain why he would say this cannot have been seen by anyone, but is known only by revelation (1 Cor. 2.9-10, cf. Rom. 16.25-26). That his makes particular sense—in fact more sense than what's usually assumed—is what I shall argue in Chapter 11. Here my aim is not to argue that this theory is true, but to explain what this theory is." Page 48, OHJ.

#49 - Mark Erickson - 12/07/2014 - 05:27

Mark and James,

I think I should be surprised as well. I was not expecting McGrath to reply to a single verse cited in Godfrey's (#24) comment as if that was the argument. My concern (and I have written to you James directly via email mentioning my concern but without receiving your reply) is regarding the main thrust of Godfrey's comment which is McGrath's use of the Ascension of Isaiah. That is what deserves a response. Carrier discusses in many sections in his lengthy book this important text and makes it part of his definition, if you will, of a "minimal Jesus myth theory" that appears to have been existent at the time. McGrath cites Hall and an early work by Jonathan Knight in support of seeing the AoI as a late text. However, more recent scholarship, since the publication of Enrico Norelli's magisterial critical edition and commentary in the CCSA series, weakens the arguments of both Hall and early Knight work. Even Hall, if read carefully, points to sections of the AoI as contemporaneous in thought with the definition that Carrier is working with. Godfrey is attempting to have the readers of this article and their comments to think about these dating and source critical issues in relation to Carrier's argument throughout the book.

There has been a great deal of scholarship about the AoI since Norelli's volumes came out. Hall's and early Knight's works do not reflect the findings in these later critical studies. See the excellent work done by Catherine Playoust in her Harvard

dissertation (2006) or Jonathan Knight's later work, *Disciples of the Beloved One* or the recent work by other Italian scholars Acerbi or Pesce.

#50 - Timothy Bagley - 12/07/2014 - 17:09

Tim, that's spot on, and said better than I could have said it. Unfortunately, McGrath quite frequently will ignore the obvious, and larger, point, in order to avoid addressing it.

And I'm not actually thankful for McGrath's latest response, as I would like to know what he thinks 1 Corinthians, Chapter 2 does mean.

#51 - Mark Erickson - 12/09/2014 - 03:46

Tim, as I indicated in an e-mail which I hope you received, the issue is the attempt to date a version of the Ascension of Isaiah which provides clear evidence of mythicism to a date contemporaneous with the earliest Gospels. Due in part to the fact that there has been only slight work on this important text, it seems to me impossible to use a hypothesis about the text, one which has not received extensive scholarly scrutiny, as grounds for rejecting the overall impression given by the evidence.

Moreover, mythicists insist that the Gospels, despite the consensus to the contrary, are purely allegorical and/or attempts to turn a celestial figure into a historical one. Once one is willing to so thoroughly dismiss out of hand the evidence provided by the Gospels themselves, insisting that a text which has received less scrutiny, and which has been redacted in significant ways, ought to be embraced as indicating what Christians really thought, is obviously not going to persuade those who are seeking to use critical scholarly methods consistently.

#52 - James F. McGrath - 12/12/2014 - 17:14

Yes, thank you for the email. Just a few comments. I would have to differ with you on the 'slight work on this important text' or 'one which has not received extensive scholarly scrutiny' unless, by those casual statements, you intend the limited work done by recent NT scholars. It would be pretentious of me to list all those scholars (and their bibliography) who have, since the late 1800s, interacted with these texts that make up the putative Ascension of Isaiah. As you should know, there exists an extensive amount of study of its redaction, dating, and the theology that may reside in its pages (whatever they may truly be). I can certainly see that Carrier is attempting to use his understanding of some of that theology, as expressed in the second half (6-11) to explain a 'mythic' belief residing in the early decades of the first century. He vaguely cites 'an early redaction' in support of that reading but provides little scholarship to support what that early redaction would look like.

I am not competent to describe what the group "mythicists" insist about the gospels. I am also unsure what you intend by stating that this group dismisses "out of hand the evidence provided by the Gospels themselves". I do applaud Carrier for attempting to provide some literary and cultural context for a historical question by making the AoI part of his definition of what that mythical element would entail. Its success as a persuasive argument requires a great deal of study of this important text. As you say, "Whether details important to Carrier's case can be dated as early as he suggests requires a careful study of the evidence." Whether it is as critical to his entire argument in the book he has written as you imply also requires careful study. As one example: You cite Hall in support of a late date for the 6-11 section of

AoI. But in re-reading Hall (both articles he wrote), he stresses that his dating refers to the final redaction or the final author or the final form. Others (e.g. Knight and Bauckham) have considered the crucial section to date from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem or a bit later. There is a great deal of discussion as well in the more recent Italian scholarship that support this earlier date.

In short, I would encourage more study of the AoI scholarship before we assess whether Carrier's argument or suspect.

#53 - Timothy Bagley - 12/12/2014 - 23:11

Sorry, that last part should read: is suspect.

#54 - Timothy Bagley - 12/13/2014 - 09:24

I would like to point out that back in 1977 Historian Michael Grant stated: "This skeptical way of thinking reached its culmination in the argument that Jesus as a human being never existed at all and is a myth. In ancient times, this extreme view was named the heresy of docetism (seeming) because it maintained that Jesus never came into the world "in the flesh", but only seemed to; (I John 4:2) and it was given some encouragement by Paul's lack of interest in his fleshly existence. Subsequently, from the eighteenth century onwards, there have been attempts to insist that Jesus did not even "seem" to exist, and that all tales of his appearance upon the earth were pure fiction. In particular, his story was compared to the pagan mythologies inventing fictitious dying and rising gods. (paragraph break) Some of the lines of thinking employed to disprove the Christ-myth theory have been somewhat injudicious."

Note that Michael Grant expressly stated that "argument that Jesus as a human being never existed at all" was in ancient times "was named the heresy of docetism"

Since Michael Grant a PRO historical Jesus scholar defined docetism this way why should Carrier follow his lead?

#55 - Morgan - 02/06/2015 - 10:01

For my response, endorsing and adding to the responses of Godfrey and Covington:

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/6817>

#56 - Richard Carrier - 03/05/2015 - 23:06

I don't see why you think that the Ascension of Isaiah is just like those other Docetic texts.

The whole point of Docetism was that while the fleshly body could be tortured and crucified the spiritual one was immune to any suffering and to death. That is why in those Docetic texts you quote the spiritual Jesus is laughing, calm, always in control and even appear a distance away to other people.

In contrast in the Ascension of Isaiah the Beloved is made to suffer and is crucified in heaven. That is if you

grant Richard Carrier that that is what the text says.

You add that there was an implied event on Earth mirroring the crucifixion in the firmament and

that this implied event was the earthly crucifixion of Jesus. I don't

think that implication is valid.

Not only because, like I said before, the heavenly counterpart you propose is tortured and killed just like the earthly one but mainly because I think a more likely candidate for what was the Earthly counterpart the early Christians had in mind for this heavenly crucifixion is what we find in Hebrews. There the author explicitly says that the sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple are the earthly lower quality imitations of the sacrifice in Heaven of Jesus. That sacrifice in heaven had now made the earthly ones unnecessary.

If you want to argue against mythicism you should not grant that the Ascension of Isaiah has just a crucifixion in the firmament.

#57 - Frank Salinas - 05/22/2015 - 05:05

Carrier is not a theologian, and his theological arguments are not strong, but they are also not at all crucial to his case or its conclusion, which rests very solidly on the evidence of the Epistles and the Gospels.

The question of whether the Ascension of Isaiah is talking about an Earthly or celestial Jesus is hard to resolve, as the events mirror each other. But Carrier's thesis does not require the crucifixion to be SOLELY celestial, merely that the crucifixion is revealed to Paul and Peter through revelation.

The remaining stories of the historical Jesus are later produced as exegesis, as Carrier argues, whether or not Jesus is seen to have died on Earth or in space. They are easy to form as composite narratives of actual martyred Jews of the 1st century (there are parallels between even the few Josephus lists and Jesus), and those OT sources which were used to discover and predict the crucifixion and resurrection in the first place by the early Christians. The Christians would not consider such narratives as lying, because they are simply an Earthly mirror of events revealed through celestial sources.

I am agnostic on whether Paul believed Jesus revealed in the celestial sphere or on Earth, I don't think it makes any difference at all to the mythicist case. It is just something that makes the mythicist claims look weird to an uninformed outsider.

#58 - Ron Maimon - 08/23/2015 - 20:03

What then of the passages that Carrier (and Doherty) cite allegedly showing that Paul was familiar with the Ascension? If this is the case then this establishes the date of the Ascension as prior to the Epistles, and thus prior to the earliest written gospel?

#59 - James Hiscox - 01/21/2016 - 03:58

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