

WAS JESUS A MYTHICAL FIGURE?

A RESPONSE TO THE CHARGE THAT JESUS OF NAZARETH NEVER EXISTED

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine and refute the arguments made by mythicists, who deny the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. It begins by investigating the historical development of myth. Next, it explores the history of mythicism since its inception in the eighteenth century. The penultimate chapter outlines the main criticisms that mythicists level against the Gospels; the final chapter responds to these arguments. There are two major findings of this thesis. First, the mythicists' standard for evidence is not applied consistently. Second, they fail to show why their interpretations of the available data are better than more traditional approaches. The conclusion is that they do not provide sufficient reasons for doubting the existence of Jesus as a human in history.

To Amy

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, who worked so hard to support me in pursuit of my goals and  
dreams. I love you!

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Problem

The position that Jesus Christ was never a historical person, termed *mythicism*, grew out of the quest to find the historical Jesus by the eighteenth-century *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (The History of Religions School). Though it was thought to have been refuted in the nineteenth century, mythicism has enjoyed two subsequent revivals.<sup>1</sup> Unlike members of the Jesus Seminar—such as John Dominic Crossan and Gerd Lüdemann, who believe that at most eighteen percent of the material regarding Jesus' sayings and actions in the Gospels is historically authentic—proponents of mythicism, called *mythicists*, believe that the evidence for Jesus is so poor that his real sayings and actions are whittled down to the vanishing point.<sup>2</sup>

Two of the most recent prominent mythicists are Robert M. Price and Richard Carrier. Price holds a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Gordon Conwell University and a second Ph.D. in New Testament from Drew University. Formerly a professor of religion at Mount Olive College in North Carolina, he is also a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar and the Jesus Project. He seeks to demonstrate that the Gospels are mythic literature, not historical biographies. Carrier holds an M.A. in Ancient History at Columbia University and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in Ancient History. He gives public talks about the Christ-Myth Theory and participates in public debates with Christian scholars, such as William Lane Craig and Craig Evans. He argues that the probability of Jesus having been a historical person is exceptionally low.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 410-42.

<sup>2</sup> The eighteen percent figure comes from Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24-25.

All proponents of the Christ-Myth Theory dispute the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth by attempting to discredit the traditional sources for information about his life in at least six ways. First, they dismiss all miracle accounts and certain other episodes in the Gospels as later, legendary embellishments. Second, they hold that the original authors of the Gospels are unknown. Third, they claim that the Gospels are full of contradictions. Fourth, they claim that certain places, people (in addition to Jesus), and customs mentioned in the Gospels never existed. Fifth, they claim that many accounts in the Gospels are retellings of Old Testament stories. Finally, they claim that Christians plagiarized the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus from other stories of dying-and-rising gods in paganism. Due to the poor evidence for Jesus of Nazareth and the perceived parallels with ancient myths, mythicists believe “that it is quite likely that there never was any historical Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

Carrier proposes a minimal theory of mythicism in five parts: (1) “At the origin of Christianity, Jesus Christ was thought to be a celestial deity much like any other”—a cosmic being who lived, died and arose in space, not on earth. (2) “Like many other celestial deities, this Jesus ‘communicated’ with his subjects only through dreams, visions and other forms of divine inspiration (such as prophecy, past and present).” Influenced by their readings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the men normally taken to be Jesus’ followers actually came to know about him through hallucinations. (3) Like other celestial deities, Jesus experienced death, burial and resurrection in the supernatural realm. (4) This story was initially told as an allegory. (5) Later versions transformed the stories into literal, historical events.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Richard C. Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason to Doubt* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 53.

Clearly, if the mythicists are correct that Christ was merely an imaginary, celestial being, whose death and resurrection were hallucinated by his earliest followers, then orthodox Christianity is false. What needs to be determined, then, is whether the mythicists are using fair historical methods to examine the evidence for an earthly Jesus.

### 1.2 The Research Question

Do the arguments of Price and Carrier show that the evidence for the earthly life of Jesus is so poor that it is unlikely he was a real, historical figure?

### 1.3 The Importance of This Study

While mythicism was once thought to have been thoroughly refuted, it has enjoyed a resurgence thanks to the work of Carrier, Price, and others. Thus it is now taken seriously in popular culture at large, as exemplified in movies such as *Zeitgeist* and *Religulous*, and in fantasy novels such as Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, many people are being exposed to mythicism while being entirely unaware of the problems that have plagued it from the outset. Christian and non-Christian scholars alike have responded by trying to show that it is still an unreasonable historical stance to argue that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. These scholars include William Lane Craig, Craig Evans, Paul Rhodes Eddy, Gregory A. Boyd, Maurice Casey, Bart Ehrman, David Marshall, and James K. Beilby.

Casey, British scholar of New Testament languages, explains that there are two main problems with mythicist scholarship. First, “The representation of this view has changed radically in recent years, led by unlearned but regrettably influential people in the United States

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<sup>5</sup> *Zeitgeist*, directed by Peter Joseph (Gentle Machine Productions, 2007), DVD; *Religulous*, directed by Larry Charles, featuring Bill Maher (Thousand Words Production Company, 2008), DVD; Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York, NY: William Marrow, 2001); Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003).

... [who are in] rebellion against traditional Christianity, especially in the form of American fundamentalism.”<sup>6</sup> Second, the mythicists show a “drastic reliance on work which is out of date, most of which was of questionable quality when it was written, mostly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>7</sup>

This thesis is meant to be a tool to reach people at both the scholarly and popular levels because, as Baptist minister Walter Martin points out, “Throughout history, every time the church has failed to defend the faith and expose what is wrong, false doctrine and heretical teachings have plagued us.”<sup>8</sup> And though it is not the exact type of heresy that the Apostle John was talking about, his first epistle suggests how seriously a view like mythicism should be taken: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist of which you have heard that it is coming and now is already in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Reviewing one of Price’s articles, Crossan asks, “what if we have a purely parabolical Jesus and not an historical Jesus? What would be lost to Christianity? *Only the incarnation*, the in-fleshment, the claim that the character of God is revealed in the factual life of a historical person and not in the fictional life of a parabolic person.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, if Christ did not come, then he did not die for humanity’s sins, he was not raised to life, and no one is accountable to

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults: The Definitive Work on the Subject*, rev. ed., ed. Ravi Zacharias (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), 406.

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:2-4. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> John Dominic Crossan, “Response to Robert M. Price,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 86.

him. Therefore, to refute this idea must be part of the apologist's task of "destroying arguments" and "proud obstacles" that set "themselves up against the knowledge of God."<sup>11</sup>

#### 1.4 The Research Hypothesis

It can be demonstrated that the arguments and evidence advanced by Price, Carrier and other mythicists fail to make a compelling case that Jesus never existed.<sup>12</sup> This study argues that Carrier's and Price's arguments are based on weak and irrelevant claims, that they apply double standards to history,<sup>13</sup> and that they do not deal fairly with their critics.

Chapter 2 briefly treats the historical development of the concept of myth, working through the religious ideas of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) peoples, the Greeks, the Romans, the early church, and later Christians up until the time of Rudolf Bultmann—whose ideas had a great influence on critical scholarship. Chapter 3 traces the mythicist idea from its inception in the 1700s. Chapter 4 outlines mythicist reasons for thinking that the Gospels are not trustworthy sources. Finally, Chapter 5 provides detailed refutations of their arguments, primarily from a historical point of view. While the mythicist charges against the Gospels cover a wide range of fields, including philosophy, textual criticism, and archaeology, this thesis will focus on exposing two of their most salient methodological biases. First, they liberally employ a double standard against the Gospels versus other historical texts. Second, they routinely beg the question

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5.

<sup>12</sup> While Price's and Carrier's work will be given the greatest attention, the work of mythicist D. M. Murdock, who wrote quite prolifically about the supposed parallels between Jesus and the pagan gods, will also be critiqued later in the thesis.

<sup>13</sup> That is, if they applied the same methodology with which they critique the Gospels to other historical documents and figures, they would be forced to also dismiss much of known history.

in favour of mythicism.<sup>14</sup> Apologetic works and commentaries will also be utilized to respond to mythicist charges against the Gospels.

*This study will demonstrate that the evidence set forth by mythicists does not reasonably support their conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was never a human being in history.* A study of the historical development of myth shows that the Gospels do not fit into that genre. A study of the history of mythicism shows that the data they marshal is flawed, rendering their conclusions unsound. An evaluation of mythicist criticism of the Gospels reveals that many of their arguments—having already been adequately critiqued—are inconsistent and ultimately irrelevant as to whether Jesus existed in history. Finally, I will conclude that the mythicist case is not strong enough to show that Jesus was not a historical person.

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<sup>14</sup> Madsen Pirie explains that begging the question “occurs whenever use is made in the argument of something which the conclusion seeks to establish.” *How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic*, 2nd ed. (London, EN: Bloomsbury, 2015), 160.

## **2   Historical Development of the Notion of Myth**

### 2.1   Introduction

Does mythicism make a compelling case for the denial that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person? Mythicists claim that Jesus was originally conceived as a cosmic being, rather than an earthly being. To determine whether the Jesus of the Gospels and traditional Christianity truly fits into that category, it is important to have an understanding of how myths have been understood throughout history.

This chapter first considers two broad worldview categories that relate to the subject: pantheism and monotheism. Second, it outlines nine features common to ancient, pantheistic belief systems that were incorporated into the stories of the pagan gods. Third, it argues that the pagans of the ancient world did not adhere to the idea of there being one, exclusively-true religion: the differences between their particular religious beliefs were not considered grounds to reject their cultural compatibility or coexistence. Fourth, this chapter shows that Judaism and Christianity were distinct due to their monotheism, out of which came the conviction that faith in other gods was false. Finally, this chapter notes that through the course of much of Western history, Christianity was widely understood to have originated with the teachings of a first-century Jew named Jesus. It was only during the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment that Hermann Samuel Reimarus, and then Rudolf Bultmann, argued that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith needed to be separated. This paved the way for the view that Jesus Christ was not a historical person at all.

## 2.2 Two Types of Worldviews

### 2.2.1 Pantheistic Worldviews

The ancient pagan stories now classified as myths share an important theme in common: namely, that there is no distinction between the human realm and the divine realm. The modern term for this type of worldview is *pantheism*. The Dutch philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza outlined this view by explaining that no other substance could exist without God. His proof of this was as follows:

As God is a being absolutely infinite, of whom no attribute expressing the essence of substance can be denied ... and as he necessarily exists ... if any other substance than God exists, it must be explained by means of some attribute of God, and thus two substances would exist possessing the same attribute which is absurd; and so no other substance than God can exist, and consequently not even be conceived.<sup>15</sup>

From this, Spinoza drew the conclusion that since God is unique, his is the only substance that can be in the universe, and thus everything else that exists has to be an extension of that substance.<sup>16</sup> Even some members of the mythicist camp, such as Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, embrace this view today. They doubt the historical portrayal of the Gospels because there was never any need for God to come to earth. He is always present in all people: “God never left.”<sup>17</sup>

The pantheistic outlook is manifested in ancient paganism in four ways. First, the gods were to be identified with both humans and natural forces. Second, nature itself was a deity with

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<sup>15</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics and Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect*, trans. Andrew Boyle, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London, UK: J. M. Dent, 1993), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 254.

divine powers. Third, humanity itself was both divine and a part of nature. Fourth, the pagans used idols to represent their gods.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2.2 Monotheistic Worldviews

The biblical monotheistic worldviews sharply distinguish between one, transcendent God and his creation—which includes humanity. Professor of Systematic Theology John Frame explains the Christian understanding: “[God’s] transcendence is simply the fact that he is radically different from us. He is the Creator and we are his creatures. He is absolute. … We are not.”<sup>19</sup> This is different from pantheism. Transcendence entails that God is utterly beyond human control.

Of course, Christianity also emphasizes God’s immanence in, or closeness with, creation. An imperfect analogy might be that of someone who builds a computer. He is not literally part of the computer, but he can interact with it in various ways. This is different from pantheism, which would be more the equivalent of the computer being the designer and sustainer of itself.

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<sup>18</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 48-49. Oswalt and John H. Walton disagree about how the people of the ANE understood the nature of their idols. For Oswalt, they believed that the idols literally became the gods, and that what was done to one was done to the other. *The Bible*, 57. Walton instead argues that image was not the deity, but the reality embodied in it. As evidence, he cites the *Memphite Theology*, in which the creator god Ptah forms the gods: “So the gods entered into their bodies of every kind of wood, of every kind of stone, of every kind of clay, or anything that might grow upon him, in which they had taken form.” *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 116; Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 65. Walton’s interpretation of the text seems best here.

<sup>19</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 2nd ed., ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2015), 39-40.

Ancient pagan myths include a number of other defining features, including polytheism, the eternity of chaotic matter, a low view of the gods, the view that conflict was the source of life, and a cyclical view of existence.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.3 ANE, Greek, and Roman Myths

### 2.3.1 Common Features in Pagan Beliefs

#### 2.3.1.1 Polytheism

In the ancient world, one of the pantheist's primary goals was to maintain order, keeping the forces of nature, or "chaos," from overrunning their daily life. This fear caused people to personify the forces of nature as gods who could be appeased through worship. This, in turn, encouraged the rise of polytheism. In the ANE, the Canaanites had many deities, such as Baal, the god of thunder and lightning; Yam, the god of the sea; El, the patriarchal deity, and his wife Athirath; Kothar-wa-Khasis, the god of crafts; Mot, the god of death; and Anat, the goddess of war.<sup>21</sup> The Greeks had twelve gods who ruled from Mount Olympus, including Zeus, the king of the gods; Poseidon, the god of the sea; Hermes, the messenger of the gods; Ares, the god of war; and Hera, Zeus's wife.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in Rome there were gods of the state, such as Janus and Mars (originally the Greek god Ares); agricultural deities, such as Faunus and Consus; gods of the underworld, such as Dis Pater and Orcus; and gods of the city.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 57-62. Three other features Oswalt mentions are omitted here: first, there is the use of idols, which is not directly tied to the myths or their features; second, the idea that the gods are flat and stereotyped, which is a matter of interpretation third, Oswalt describes the lack of a standard of ethics, which is a result of the myths and not an actual feature of what is found in them.

<sup>21</sup> Keith N. Schoville, "Canaanites and Amorites," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 171-72.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Graves, Felix Guirand, Richard Aldington, and Delano Ames, *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, rev. ed. (1968; repr., New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 1972), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Graves, Guirand, Aldington, and Ames, *Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 200-13.

### 2.3.1.2 Eternality of Matter

The second feature of ancient pagan myths was the belief that matter had always existed: everything, including the gods' own existence, was contingent on the eternity of matter. It was out of this chaotic matter that the gods arose to bring order to the cosmos. In one Egyptian cosmogony, the creator god Atum emerged from the waters of Nun.<sup>24</sup> In the Greek work *Theogony*, Hesiod says, "there was Chaos, vast and dark. Then appeared Gaea ... and Eros. .... From Chaos was born Erebus and Night. ...."<sup>25</sup> This does not deny the gods' existence before their emergence: their raw materials were present. But as Walton explains, "something came into existence when it was separated out as a distinct entity, given a function and given a name. "<sup>26</sup> For example, while Atum's material substance always existed in the waters of Nun, he did not exist as a person until he was named and given a function.

### 2.3.1.3 Poorly Behaved Gods

The gods of the pagan religions were often portrayed as being extremely immoral. In fact, the gods sometimes acted worse than their human followers. For example, in *The Baal Cycle*, Baal engages in bestiality:

He fell in love with a heifer in the desert pasture, a young cow in the fields on Death's shore: he slept with her seventy-seven times, he mounted her eighty-eight times; and she became pregnant, and she bore him the Lord.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to their sexual deviancy, the gods of the ANE were also bloodthirsty. In the same tale, the goddess Anat destroys two whole cities, but even this fails to quench her

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<sup>24</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Graves, Guirand, Aldington, and Ames, *Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold and Beyer, *Ancient Near East*, 59.

bloodlust. When she returns home, she turns her furniture into soldiers that she can kill. The writer describes the carnage and her reaction to it with disturbing vividness:

Anat fought and saw, her soul swelled with laughter, her heart was filled with joy, Anat's soul was exuberant, as she plunged knee deep into the soldiers' blood, up to her thighs in the warriors' gore, until she was satisfied with her battling in the house, her fighting between the tables. The soldiers' blood was wiped from the house, oil of peace was poured from a bowl. The virgin Anat washed her hands, the Mistress of the Peoples her fingers; she washed the soldiers' blood from her hands, the warrior's gore from her fingers.<sup>28</sup>

The gods were the pagans' highest standard for ethics, so it is not surprising that they became sexually deviant and violent themselves. Studying the religious world of the ANE, Matthew Flannagan and Paul Copan note the wickedness that resulted from the beliefs of those who followed gods such as Baal and Anat:

The most exhaustive [biblical] list of the kinds of wickedness comes from Leviticus 18. It chronicles incest, adultery, bestiality, ritual prostitution ... and, most significantly, Deuteronomy 12:29-31 singles out child sacrifice as particularly abhorrent.<sup>29</sup>

Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Walter C. Kaiser Jr. writes:

Instead of reflecting the image of the true God, the Canaanites reflected the image of the gods and goddesses they worshipped, thinking that by acting as the gods and goddess acted, there would be some sort of magical help that would produce fertility, not only in humans but in their animals and crops as well.<sup>30</sup>

The gods of Greece and Rome were not much better. Zeus is well known for cheating on his wife, Hera. Rightly jealous, she takes her anger out on his sexual conquests even though the women themselves are more often victims than participants. Apollo, the god of archery, healing, and music, is portrayed as a petty, envious being. The same can be said of the Roman gods, as

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<sup>28</sup> Arnold and Beyer, *Ancient Near East*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2015), 30.

many of them were adapted from Greek myths.<sup>31</sup> Philip Wilkinson summarizes all this by saying, “extraordinarily bloody battles, bodies torn limb from limb, gods who behave with little or no concern at all for morality—all of these are regular features of Classical Greek and Roman myth.”<sup>32</sup>

#### 2.3.1.4 Creation Starts with Conflict

The creation accounts of the pagan mythologies often begin with a conflict between the forces of order and forces of chaos. Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch explains that the Egyptians believed that Ra, the Sun god, was the source of all life on earth. Stories pictured him and a crew of other Egyptian deities crossing the skies on his boat during the day. At night, the sun would travel through the underworld, and the crew would battle forces of chaos while Ra would awaken the dead and cause the sun to rise once again.<sup>33</sup> This continued through the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman literature.<sup>34</sup> This might raise the question of why there is the constant theme of conflict in the polytheistic myths. However, given the pagan focus on controlling chaos, it makes sense that the struggle would go back to the very beginning of creation for them.

#### 2.3.1.5 Humans as Second-Class Citizens

When it came to importance, humans occupied the bottom rung of the ladder. Walton observes that “Egyptian sources offer no explanation for the creation of humans.”<sup>35</sup> Professor of Old Testament John D. Currid suggests that since pantheism did not entirely distinguish humans

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<sup>31</sup> Phillip Wilkinson, *Myths and Legends: An Illustrated Guide to Their Origins and Meanings* (London, UK: DK Publishing, 2009), 7, 24, 25, 29, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkinson, *Myths and Legends*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Explained by Geraldine Pinch in *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182-83.

<sup>34</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 214.

from the gods, there would be no need for such an explanation: “creation started with the gods and was thought to continue with humans.”<sup>36</sup> In Mesopotamia, it was not much better. “Sumerian and Akkadian sources consistently portray people as having been created to do the work of the gods—work that is essential for the continuing existence of the gods, and work that they have tired of doing for themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

The chain of influence on pagan thinking was that since the people felt as though they were at the mercy of the natural forces—or gods—understandably, their view was pessimistic. This is particularly personified in the Greek concept of the Fates. Wilkinson describes them as “the daughters of the Night. Clotho was believed to spin the thread of life, and Lachesis measured its length. Atropos, the third daughter, cut it at the moment of death. … These creatures … have little regard for the emotions of their human victims.”<sup>38</sup> The ancient pagans’ low view of themselves led to a low view of each other. One clear example of how this played out was in the Assyrian Empire. Professor of Old Testament William C. Gwaltney Jr. writes:

Throughout Mesopotamian history … one senses a pervasive pessimism that the gods’ decisions were arbitrary and amoral. Humans had no destiny beyond an afterlife in dust and gloom. The Assyrians learned from their gods that military power outweighed moral force. Even their laws were harsher.<sup>39</sup>

Philosopher Sam Harris sums up this sort of history with the principle, “As a man believes, so he will act.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 37.

<sup>37</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 214-15.

<sup>38</sup> Wilkinson, *Myths and Legends*, 17, 32.

<sup>39</sup> William C. Gwaltney Jr., “Assyrians,” in Hoerth, Mattingly, and Yamauchi, *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, 103-4.

<sup>40</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004), 44.

### 2.3.1.6 The Ongoing Cycle

The ancient pagans did not understand history to be progressing toward a goal:

The past is only significant insofar as it shows us continuities that will repeat themselves. Thus, omens are of great importance. At some time in the past, the shape of the entrails of a sacrificial animal coincided with some significant event. If that shape should present itself again, we may expect the same events to happen again. Thus, the past will repeat itself and it is helpful to have information on hand to plan for that repetition.<sup>41</sup>

They studied the past as part of their goal of keeping control over the forces of chaos, nothing else.

Now that the features of the pagan beliefs have been examined, two matters can be addressed. First, it is important to this study to determine whether the ancient pagans saw their own stories as myths. Second is the matter of whether they believed that their religions were exclusively true.

### 2.3.2 How the Ancient Pagans Viewed Their Religions

While modern people do not take ancient myths to be historical, it does not follow that the ancients thought the same way. Walton gives a definition of what myth meant to the ancients: “The Canaanites or the Assyrians did not consider their myths to be made up works of the imagination. Mythology by its nature seeks to explain how the world works and how it came to work that way, and therefore includes a culture’s ‘theory of origins.’”<sup>42</sup> In other words, natural events were reflective of spiritual realities, which made the stories factual in the minds of ancient people.

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<sup>41</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 12.

This does not mean, however, that the ancients considered their religions to be exclusively true. Rather, they harmonized their views with others. While each nation had its own pantheon of gods, some ancient writings suggest that different pantheons were believed to be differently situated in terms of geography. The gods “were based in a particular area because that was where their temple was (where they dwelt) and where they were worshipped (needs were met) and recognized.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans could each have their pantheons located within their geographical borders.

A geographical conception of divine jurisdiction seems to have been in play for the Arameans when they were at war with Israel in 1 Kings. After losing the battle, the advisors to the king of Aram told him, “Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them on the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.”<sup>44</sup>

However, Walton does not think this should be taken to mean that the gods were limited to just one place. “The whole premise of imperialism is that the gods were capable of extending their territories from their power base. Again, their geographical connections can be seen as very similar to that of a king.”<sup>45</sup> When one land conquered another, it was one nation’s god conquering another’s. On the more positive side, as shown with the Greeks and Romans, there was also the chance of syncretistically assimilating the gods of one pantheon into another.

The foregoing analysis of the pagan cultural context—in which the ancient Hebrews and Christians found themselves—allows us to compare these pantheistic and the monotheistic worldviews. The matters that require further consideration are as follows: (1) whether the stories

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<sup>43</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Kings 20:23.

<sup>45</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 103.

in the Bible share the common features of the pagan stories; (2) whether the Jews and Christians believed their origin stories to be nonfiction; (3) what their views meant for the competing religions around them; and (4) supposing that the monotheistic views do prove to be different from the pantheistic ones, the matter of which viewpoint enjoys better support from the available evidence.

## 2.4 The Bible and Pagan Myths Compared

As to whether the stories in the Bible contain the features common to pagan stories, there is reason to believe that they do not. The ancient Hebrews and Christians both viewed reality in significantly different ways from the pagan cultures around them: they were monotheist. They believed in the eternity of God's spirit, not matter, and they did not see conflict as the source of life. Both groups had much higher views of God and humanity. Finally, both believed history was working towards a goal.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.4.1 Judeo-Christian Worldview vs. Pagan Worldview

#### 2.4.1.1 Monotheism vs. Polytheism

While the pagan worldview was polytheistic, ancient Hebrews and Christians were monotheists. In Exodus, Yahweh tells Moses, "You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>47</sup> In Mark, when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he begins his reply with, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. . . ."<sup>48</sup> Thus Jesus affirms the monotheism of ancient Israel.

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<sup>46</sup> These features are pointed out by Oswalt in *The Bible*, 64, 66-76, 78-81.

<sup>47</sup> Exod. 20:3.

<sup>48</sup> Mark 12:29.

#### 2.4.1.2 First Principle of Spirit vs. Matter

In the Old Testament, it was God's spirit who existed first and then created the material universe. This shows God's independence from the cosmos. Moreover, unlike the polytheistic religions, the chaotic matter that God organized into a creative order was not a separate deity for him to compete with. Former Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Trinity Evangelical School John H. Sailhamer affirms that "The statement in Genesis 1:1 not only identifies the Creator but also explains the origin of the world. According to the sense of 1:1, God created all that exists in the universe."<sup>49</sup>

This idea is echoed in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being."<sup>50</sup> New Testament Theologian D. A. Carson writes, "Just as in Genesis, where everything that came into being did so because of God's spoken word, and just as in Proverbs 3:19; 8:30, where Wisdom is the (personified) means by which all exists, so here: God's Word, understood in the Prologue to be a personal agent, created everything."<sup>51</sup>

#### 2.4.1.3 High vs. Low Views of Humanity

While humans are merely an afterthought in the pagan myths, in Genesis God seems to be creating the whole world as a place for them to dwell in with Him. Moreover, the author writes that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and

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<sup>49</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 83.

<sup>50</sup> John 1:1-3.

<sup>51</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 118.

female he created them.”<sup>52</sup> This is not said about any other created being. This marks humankind as something special. One of the ways it does that is by giving them intrinsic value and dignity. Professor of Apologetics Paul Chamberlain explains that “To say humans have intrinsic dignity or value is to say that their lives have value simply because they are human, not because of any other qualities they possess such as health, strength, or the ability to make a contribution to others.”<sup>53</sup>

The Jews were to recognize this dignity in themselves and others, the result of which was ethical living. In the Old Testament, God passes laws to protect the dignity and value of persons, such as prohibiting lying, stealing, murdering, and adultery.<sup>54</sup> This is reaffirmed by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”<sup>55</sup>

#### 2.4.1.4 High vs. Low Views of Deity

While the ancient pagans believed in immoral gods, the Hebrews and Christians viewed their God as loving and just. First, the God of the Old Testament was shown to be merciful. One of the stories that best exemplifies this is where God commands Jonah to go to the Assyrian capitol city of Nineveh and warn the people of coming judgment.<sup>56</sup> This shows a God who is both ready to judge evil and merciful to those who repent: “...a gracious God and merciful, slow

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<sup>52</sup> Gen. 1:27.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Don't Believe: Confronting Seven Challenges to the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 120.

<sup>54</sup> Exod. 20:16, 15, 13, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Matt. 7:12.

<sup>56</sup> Jon. 1:2.

to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”<sup>57</sup> The New Testament emphasizes the same theme: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”<sup>58</sup>

Second, the Hebrews and Christians had a higher view of God. This is shown in that he does not have a gender as humans do. Neither does he have a partner, such as a goddess, which means he was not sexually active—unlike the pagan gods, who, as Walton writes, “have sexual needs and desires and … are … seen as anatomically equipped both for sexual activity and for procreation.”<sup>59</sup> This may raise the question of why, then, God is referred to with male pronouns. One explanation comes from Oswalt, which is that this has to do with avoiding the overtly sexual connotations that would have resulted from assigning Yahweh a female persona. Furthermore, an ancient audience would have found a female persona to be suggestive of pantheism, in which nature is an emanation of God rather than his separate creation. This carries over into the New Testament as well, as Oswalt notes:

quite unlike the myths that would celebrate God’s impregnating the virgin and getting a hero from her womb, [the New Testament] is in great pains to avoid those connotations. The Son is not God’s child, some semidivine hero like Achilles, He is God himself in human flesh, produced not through a tryst between a virile god and a particularly desirable woman, but by the divine Spirit’s overshadowing of a particularly virtuous maid.<sup>60</sup>

Third, for Christian and Hebrew monotheism, it is impossible for humans to manipulate God to their own advantage. Since Yahweh was not sexed and did not have sex, he could not be

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<sup>57</sup> Jon. 4:2.

<sup>58</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>59</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 72.

manipulated through it.<sup>61</sup> This set him apart from Canaanite deities, whose worship centered on fertility. Currid explains that “Such an emphasis sprang logically from the Canaanites’ belief that sustaining the cycle of life and death was absolutely vital for the fertility of their flocks, fields and wives. The rituals aimed chiefly to invoke the gods’ favor upon the worshippers.”<sup>62</sup> One of the forms of this manipulation in the ANE, Greece, and Rome was prostitution.<sup>63</sup> But in Israel, such acts were forbidden: “None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute.”<sup>64</sup> This same prohibition extended to the New Testament: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her?”<sup>65</sup>

Finally, while the gods of the pagans could be manipulated by magic, Israel’s God could not be.<sup>66</sup> As Oswalt writes, “Sorcery of every kind is forbidden and the Israelites may not attempt to manipulate God in any kind of ritualistic way.”<sup>67</sup> To that end, many Old Testament laws actually forbid magic.<sup>68</sup> Laying down such boundaries was necessary for the people of Israel if they were to maintain the right view of God. “Nowhere is this clearer than in the prophets with

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<sup>61</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> Currid, *Ancient Egypt*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Copan and Flannagan, *Did God*, 67.

<sup>64</sup> Deut. 23:17.

<sup>65</sup> 1 Cor. 6:15-16.

<sup>66</sup> Walton explains that in the ANE especially, magic could not be separated from the religion. He writes, “magic involves exercising power. … Resolution is often sought by means of incantations, which consist of oral rituals, usually performed in association with annual rituals to accomplish protection (*apotropaism*), elimination (exorcism), or imposition of evil spells (hexing). These represent an attempt to manipulate cosmic forces in pursuit of self interest.” Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 265.

<sup>67</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> Lev. 19:26, 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:9-12; Mic. 5:12.

their insistence that the rituals in and of themselves accomplish nothing. It is only as the rituals express genuine repentance, exhibiting itself in the non-manipulative behavior of righteousness and justice, that the ritual gives any pleasure to God at all.”<sup>69</sup>

The Jews had to understand that God could not be controlled by their rituals because of his transcendence. This transcendence did not prevent him from interacting with his creation, but when he did, it was an act of free choice. If the Jews had not realized this, they would thus have been worshipping a different god, and that would have been idolatry. What God does want is for his followers to come to him with trust that he has their best interests at heart. This attitude is expressed in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples “Give us this day our daily bread. . .”<sup>70</sup> Research Professor of New Testament Studies Darrell L. Bock and Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies Benjamin Simpson note that this “Expresses an awareness that God provides. . . The disciple knowing that well-being in life depends on God, prays accordingly so that the heart is directed towards the Father. The prayer expresses dependence on him.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 2.4.1.5 Linear vs. Cyclical Views of History

The final difference from paganism is that for ancient Hebrews and Christians, human history was not seen as cyclical. It may be noted that Israel’s history does suggest a cycle in which they sin, fall under God’s judgment, repent, and are rescued.<sup>72</sup> However, the overall thrust is very linear. Human sin has a discrete beginning in Genesis 3, after which God begins his plan of redemption. As Oswalt writes, “In Genesis Chapter 12 we see the beginning of God’s attempt

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<sup>69</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 75-76.

<sup>70</sup> Matt. 6:11.

<sup>71</sup> Darrell L. Bock and Benjamin I. Simpson, *Jesus According to the Scripture: Restoring the Portrait of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 349.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, the OT book of Judges.

to reinstate humanity in his plan of blessing. That start is small. All it is, is a series of promises to supply elemental human wants to a couple named Abram and Sarai.”<sup>73</sup> The promise is that they will have a son, and through that son will come a great nation. As a result, the whole world will be blessed. This all comes to a head in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Christian message centres on the cross of Jesus. Due to his resurrection, believers in Christ can now be sanctified and conformed to his image. This is what led Christians to share the good news with others in the hopes of bringing God’s kingdom to earth. It confirmed that one day, Jesus himself would return and set everything right. Evil would not last forever, unlike the cyclical outlook present in the pagan myths.

#### **2.4.2 Biblical History vs. Pagan Myth**

Analysis reveals a stark difference between the ancient pantheistic and monotheistic worldviews at hand. The next matter concerns the ways in which Jews and Christians considered their religions to be true. Specifically, they considered their religions to be true in the sense that they were based on the discrete, personal actions of God in history. This differed from the pagan worldviews, which saw the myths as true based on the way they made sense of inexplicable patterns in nature.

The Exodus is taken to be a major historical event in the Old Testament. God promises Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants will become a great nation and receive a good land.<sup>74</sup> After four hundred years of slavery, the people are still waiting for God to intervene; their prolonged slavery has caused them to doubt whether it will ever happen. God eventually delivers his people from Egypt, using Moses (and at times Aaron) as his mouthpiece. God performs signs

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<sup>73</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 80.

<sup>74</sup> Gen. 15, 17, 28.

and wonders: a clear sign of dominance over the Egyptian gods.<sup>75</sup> Israelite doubts about God's faithfulness are overcome by the tangible event of the Exodus. This forms the basis of worship of Yahweh alone and Israel's motivation for living ethically.<sup>76</sup>

Another important event in Israelite history was the return from the Babylonian exile, centuries after the Exodus:

Surely the fact that the Assyrians and Babylonians had triumphed over them showed that the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and everybody else, were correct. So would the unusual Israelite faith disappear? When Jerusalem finally fell, would the final remnant adhering to that faith in Judah give it all up and admit they had been wrong?<sup>77</sup>

The answer is no for two reasons. First, they believed that, through his prophets, God had promised that he would deliver Israel from exile. Second, they believed he eventually would deliver on his promise.<sup>78</sup>

For Christianity, the ultimate justification to doubt everything that Jesus had claimed would have been his crucifixion. American philosopher William Lane Craig writes:

Jewish Messianic expectations included no idea of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal. ... According to Old Testament law, Jesus' execution exposed him as a heretic, a man literally under the curse of God.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Exod. 7-15; Currid lays out this point about God's power display against the Egyptian gods in *Ancient Egypt*, 108-17.

<sup>76</sup> Exod. 20:2-3; Lev. 11:45, 19:36, 22:33; Deut. 5:15.

<sup>77</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God?: A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist*, Point/Counterpoint Series, ed. James P. Sterba (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

The doubts caused by Jesus' death were overcome by the disciples' belief that he had risen from the dead. The catalyst for their belief in the Resurrection was their belief that Jesus had appeared to them alive.<sup>80</sup>

The Exodus, the return from exile, and the Resurrection established the understanding that the Jews and Christians had of God. This God claimed to be the only God. Therefore, the Hebrews and Christians saw their beliefs as exclusively true, unlike the surrounding pagan religions. Oswalt writes,

The Israelites realized that these two different understandings of reality [the monotheistic and the pantheistic/polytheistic] could not coexist. If they had not formally expressed the logic of non-contradiction as the Greek philosophers had, they still understood that if the other understanding of reality was correct, then theirs was wrong.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, certain New Testament writers give indications that their teachings are based on real, historical events, not myths. In 2 Peter, 1 Timothy, and Titus, the word "myth" does not refer to stories that explain how or why things work, but to reports of events that never actually happened.

### 2.4.3 New Testament Treatments of Myth

At least three passages in the New Testament display the Christian awareness of truth versus myth. In 2 Peter, the writer discusses his efforts to make sure the Christian church will recall his teachings after his death. The reason he gives is

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> 1 Cor. 15:5-8.

<sup>81</sup> Oswalt, *The Bible*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> 2 Pet. 1:16.

New Testament Theologian Craig Keener explains that “The word translated ‘myths’ (NRSV) was usually used negatively for untrue stories, such as slanderously false stories about the gods; ‘myths’ were contrastable with reliable accounts.”<sup>83</sup> Here it appears that Peter claims to be an eyewitness of the transfiguration of Christ rather than of the Resurrection itself. This does not change the overall point, however, since the standards of the time did not require a witness to limit himself to appealing to only one event in order to make his case. American Professor of Divinity Frank Thielman explains that 2 Peter was written partly in response to the rise of false teachers in the church:

The false teachers apparently claim that the notion of Jesus’ coming arose from slyly concocted myths … with which Peter and his fellow apostles have duped others (1:16). In addition, they seem to maintain that the Old Testament prophets misinterpreted their own visions and therefore cannot be trusted when they speak of coming judgment (1:20-21).<sup>84</sup>

Following the pattern of the Old Testament, the writer appeals to history to defend himself. This implies that already in the first century, the apostles were accused of making up stories about Jesus. They responded by reaffirming that they were indeed eyewitnesses to historical events. The word that Peter uses for eyewitnesses is *epoptai*. Now, this term has also been used for initiates into pagan mystery cults, but Peter is not describing his initiation into Christianity here. He is talking about an event that he witnessed. Because of this, as Keener notes, “the eyewitness element is the central point.”<sup>85</sup>

Historiography is defined by American Old Testament scholar Peter Enns as “not the mere *statement* of facts but the *shaping* of these facts for a particular *purpose*. To put it in

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<sup>83</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 701.

<sup>84</sup> Frank Thielman, *New Testament Theology: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 531.

<sup>85</sup> Keener, *New Testament*, 701.

another way, historiography is an attempt to relay to someone the *significance* of history.”<sup>86</sup> The Apostle Peter is relaying both the fact of the transfiguration and its significance here, so this fits into the category of historiography as well. Therefore, even though the New Testament authors cannot be held to modern standards of historical writing, it does not follow that the events they report are non-historical—much less mythical.

In 1 Timothy, Paul writes to his young protégé Timothy, who was a pastor of the church in Ephesus. Like Peter, he was dealing with local false teachers. Paul gives him this exhortation:

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.<sup>87</sup>

Thielman notes the paucity of information about what the false teachers have actually been saying. However, clues can be extracted from the words used to describe their teachings: “meaningless talk,” “old wives’ tales,” and “godless chatter.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, they were teaching patently false and baseless things.

In contrast, Paul is saying that the message he has preached is true and based on reality. Thielman writes, “The false teaching in the Pastorals appears either to have lacked coherence or emerged from a worldview so different from Paul’s that he could not make sense of it.”<sup>89</sup> And while Paul was not an eyewitness to the life and teachings of Jesus, he tells the Galatians that three years after his conversion he went “up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [Peter] and stayed with

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks Academic, 2005), 60; emphasis in original.

<sup>87</sup> 1 Tim. 1:3-4.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Tim. 1:6, 4:7, 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16; Thielman, *New Testament*, 409.

<sup>89</sup> Thielman, *New Testament*, 409.

him fifteen days; but [he] did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother.”<sup>90</sup> Peter and James were both eyewitnesses to the life of Christ. “Of interest is the term Paul uses to describe what he did while with Peter: [*historēsai*] (‘visit’), from which derives our English term *history*.<sup>91</sup> This word can have a variety of meanings. The NASB translates it to “make the acquaintance of.” According to American historian and apologist Michael Licona, it can also mean “‘to get information from,’ ‘to inquire into a thing, to learn by inquiry.’”<sup>92</sup> It seems likely that both senses of the word could be in play here. If Paul spent that much time with Peter and James, it is certainly possible that he interviewed them.<sup>93</sup> It is likely that Paul was inquiring about their eyewitness testimonies, and that would likely have served as his litmus test for knowing truth from fiction. Paul writes that he later presented the same gospel (which he had been preaching to the Gentiles abroad) to Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem. They in turn “recognized the grace that had been given to [Paul].”<sup>94</sup> At minimum, this means they agreed that Paul’s teaching was sufficiently accurate to their experiences.

Carrier objects to this interpretation of *historēsai* because of Paul’s words earlier in Galatians: “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>95</sup> He argues that “Paul writes exclusively of

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<sup>90</sup> Gal. 1:18-19.

<sup>91</sup> Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 230.

<sup>92</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 230.

<sup>93</sup> Carl Stetcher, Craig Blomberg, Richard Carrier, and Peter S. Williams, *Resurrection: Faith or Fact?: A Scholars’ Debate between a Skeptic and a Christian* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2019), 89.

<sup>94</sup> Gal. 2:9.

<sup>95</sup> Gal. 1:11-12.

*inner* experiences.”<sup>96</sup> On the face of it, there does seem to be a contradiction between Paul saying, on the one hand, that he did not receive the gospel from a human source while affirming, on the other hand, that he learned about Jesus’ life from the apostles. However, there is a simple solution. He had heard about the gospel message from Christians beforehand and had rejected it since he was persecuting the church for their message.<sup>97</sup> He only converted when the risen Christ appeared to him.<sup>98</sup> As Blomberg explains, this changed his outlook in four important ways:

His Christology would have been transformed as he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. ... His soteriology would have been changed ... to one relying on faith in Jesus apart from the works of the law. Paul’s ecclesiology would have been upended as he recognized God’s people now to be those who were followers of Jesus of any ethnicity. ... Finally, his eschatology would have changed from looking forward to the Messianic age to the conviction that the era of the Messiah had been inaugurated even without being fully consummated. Those four points alone would have created such a seismic upheaval in Paul’s thinking that one could see why he penned Galatians 1:11-12.<sup>99</sup>

Thus the variant meanings of *historēsai* do not detract from the likelihood that Paul went to Jerusalem, at least partially, for the purpose of a fact-finding mission.

Titus was a letter written to another of Paul’s proteges who had been working in a church that was being influenced by false teachers. Paul tells Titus to “rebuke them sharply so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth.”<sup>100</sup> Again, Paul does not go into detail about what exactly the false teachings were. When he refers to myths, Thielman suggests that this “may refer to speculation about the origin of the cosmos based on an exegesis of Genesis,” but scholars cannot be certain

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<sup>96</sup> Stetcher, Blomberg, Carrier, and Williams, *Resurrection*, 197; emphasis in original.

<sup>97</sup> Acts 8, 9.

<sup>98</sup> 1 Cor. 15:8.

<sup>99</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2016), 457-58.

<sup>100</sup> Titus 1:13-14.

because Paul does not elaborate. Still, his attitude towards myths is the same.<sup>101</sup> What Paul seems to be suggesting is that these myths were not worth believing because they were false and therefore had no bearing on the life of the church. Believers need to focus on the truth, which is found in the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

#### 2.4.4 A Personal God vs. Personification

The pagan stories were ancient attempts to use gods to personify, and thereby explain, what are understood today as natural phenomena. Famous atheist Richard Dawkins writes, “If an apparent gap is found” in our present understanding of nature, “it is *assumed* that God, by default, must fill it.”<sup>102</sup> But that was not the Israelite and Christian concept of what God was for. What set the Jews and Christians apart is that they were tasked with explaining things that did *not* seem to happen regularly, such as powerful empires letting slaves go, miracles, and dead people coming back to life.<sup>103</sup> Looking for tangible proofs for their views was what set them apart from polytheists. The next matter concerns how the life of Jesus was viewed throughout church history.

### 2.5 Mythologizing Jesus

Tracing the trajectory of beliefs about Jesus from the first century to the Enlightenment, it is fair to say that, for the most part, the historical accounts of the Gospels were initially taken at face value. After the Enlightenment, however, the overall historicity of the Gospels was called into question.

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<sup>101</sup> Thielman, *New Testament*, 410.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 151.

<sup>103</sup> Biblical authors do portray God as behind things like forming a fetus in a mother’s womb (Ps. 139:13), earthquakes (Isa. 29:6), and the plagues of Egypt (Exod. 7-12). The Bible rules out neither (1) the possibility that God uses natural processes we understand to do certain things nor (2) the possibility that it is always by his direct intervention that these things happen.

## 2.5.1 The First Century to the Enlightenment

Throughout church history, there have been different sects with different interpretations of Jesus. One major sect was known as Gnosticism. Church historian Justo González observes that Gnostics believed knowledge was the key to salvation. They “came to the conclusion that all matter is evil, or at best unreal. A human being is in reality an eternal spirit … that somehow has been imprisoned in the body.”<sup>104</sup> In order to gain the knowledge necessary for salvation, a messenger was needed; for Gnostic Christians, Christ was that messenger. However, their low view of matter led them to reject the idea that Christ had been given a human body. Another view went in the other direction: while accepting Jesus’ real humanity, Arianism denied that Jesus was fully divine or co-eternal with the Father.<sup>105</sup>

Despite Christological disagreements, none of these heretical groups ever suggested that the person named Jesus never existed at all. In fact, there does not seem to have been any doubt about his existence for the first seventeen hundred years of Christian history. German Professor of Protestant Theology Hans Schwarz explains:

Until the Reformation, the New Testament served as the basis for the dogma of the church. The quest for the “historical” Jesus was identical with the quest for Jesus Christ. The emphasis, especially in the Lutheran Reformation, was on the salvific accomplishment of Christ and not on his person or his words.<sup>106</sup>

The Reformation gave way to the Enlightenment, which paved the way for scholars to view Christianity much in the same way that the early church had viewed the pagan religions: as myths. British Theologian N. T. Wright explains that one of the most important figures of this

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<sup>104</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church and the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 2010), 70.

<sup>105</sup> González, *Story of Christianity*, 71, 184.

<sup>106</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 7.

movement was German philosopher Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768).<sup>107</sup> Reimarus argued that Jesus believed in a physical kingdom of God with a political Messiah, along with the rest of the Jews of his day, not in a spiritual kingdom with a Messiah who would die and rise again, saving mankind from their sins. He points out,

In the first case, it is clear that his object must have been to rouse the Jews to the expectation of a speedy worldly deliverance because he employed messengers whom he knew to have no other belief and who therefore could not preach a different one. In the second case, if he did not know their impression, he must still have guessed them to be under the universally prevailing one, and so ought to have enlightened and instructed the disciples until they abandoned their delusion, and were fully convinced of the truth of his real object, in order that they might not propagate a false Gospel.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, if Jesus had a new message for his followers, then he could have been a lot clearer in how he communicated it. Unfortunately, Jesus' plans to set up an earthly kingdom failed, and he was crucified by the Romans. Reimarus comments, "He ends his life with the words, '*Eli! Eli! Lama sabachtni?*' 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'—a confession which hardly can be otherwise interpreted than that God had not helped him to carry out his intention and obtain his object as he had hoped."<sup>109</sup> Thus Reimarus saw Jesus as someone who died a disillusioned prophet. Reimarus's writings began the process of other scholars attempting to distinguish the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. While there were many thinkers who were involved in this process, the most important one was Rudolf Bultmann.

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<sup>107</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>108</sup> Herman Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments from Herman Samuel Reimarus Consisting of Brief Critical Remarks on the Object of Jesus and the Disciples as Seen in the New Testament*, ed. G. E. Lessing and Charles Voysey (London, UK: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 12.

<sup>109</sup> Reimarus, *Fragments*, 26.

## 2.5.2 Enter Rudolf Bultmann

German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann is well known for his work on mythology and the New Testament. Bultmann believed that the universe was a closed system, and that the miracles in the Bible were “opposed to nature and to understanding.”<sup>110</sup> This would lead him to rule out all of Christ’s miracles, including the Resurrection, as *a priori* unhistorical. In fact, he sees parallels between the miracles of Jesus and stories told in Hellenistic and Rabbinic literature. Because these non-Christian stories came later, he concludes that “these miracles stories do not belong to the oldest strata of tradition, but, at least in their present form, were elaborated in Hellenistic Christianity.”<sup>111</sup> The only way he saw to determine the Gospel writers’ intended meaning was to look at their historical contexts.

Given the numerous miracles recorded in the Gospels—such as the Incarnation, healings, exorcisms, and the Resurrection itself—conservative Christians found Bultmann’s view to be problematic. By denying the factuality of the Resurrection, he seemed to be undercutting the foundation of the very faith itself. However, G. L. Borchert provides a different perspective: “The purpose of demythologization … is the reinterpretation of the biblical images so as to provide self-understanding for the scientific mind of the twentieth century. Bultmann’s goal of reinterpreting the biblical myths was to highlight the nature of faith. In this emphasis upon faith he stood firmly in the tradition of Paul and Luther.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, he was trying to make the message more understandable and relevant for people living in a scientific age.

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<sup>110</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1968), 30.

<sup>111</sup> Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 50.

<sup>112</sup> G. L. Borchert, “Demythologization,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 309.

Borchert adds that what Bultmann was doing was differentiating between the event of history and its meaning, thereby showing that a believer could retain the latter without the former. The Resurrection could thus be a faith event even without a historical event. This leads Borchert to conclude that Bultmann was not trying to undermine the Christian message, as the word “demythologization” might suggest. Rather, he was seeking to reinterpret the mythological language to be more human centered. Bultmann was trying to bridge the gap between ancient and modern perspectives by putting the gospel into a language the latter could understand.

Interestingly, some of Bultmann’s students, such as Günther Bornkamm, found it unnecessary to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith that way Bultmann did. As a result, “they returned to the combined term” of Jesus Christ.<sup>113</sup> The question at hand, however, concerns whether Bultmann’s work connected at all with the claims of mythicists. Price thinks so:

It does not push us beyond Bultmann who reasons that the resurrection faith, though based on Easter Morning visions, was articulated in terms of these mystery-religion myths. Bultmann regarded Christ-Myth theorists as insane. And yet Bultmann was inconsistent. ... You mean, the first disciples *did* actually have visions of some type, persuading them that Jesus was risen, and then they adopted mystery-religion parallels? Too many explanations. There is no more reason to posit a core experience than in the case of Attis.<sup>114</sup>

While Bultmann himself did not go so far as to embrace mythicism, Price sees himself as continuing in the vein of Bultmann’s work.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the historical understanding of myth. It first looked at the differences between the relevant pantheistic and monotheistic worldviews. Second, it showed

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<sup>113</sup> Borchert, “Demythologization,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 309.

<sup>114</sup> Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 76.

that pantheism shaped pagan belief systems, and that pagans did not view the stories of their gods as fictional. Third, it examined how monotheism shaped the Israelite and Christian worldviews, leading them to classify some beliefs as myth while viewing their own as the exclusive truth—based on God’s acts in history. Fourth, it considered the views people held about the life of Christ from the first century and the Enlightenment. Finally, it looked at the life of Rudolf Bultmann and how his theology paved the way for the view that Jesus Christ did not exist at all. The next chapter turns to a history of mythicism.

### **3    The History of the Christ-Myth Theory**

#### **3.1    Introduction**

This chapter traces the history of the Christ-Myth Theory from its beginnings in the eighteenth century with Constantin Francois Volney—the first to claim outright that Jesus never existed at all—and Charles Francois Dupuis. During the nineteenth century, critical German scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Friedrich Strauss, and Martin Kahler suggested many reasons (on which later mythicists would rely) for doubting the Gospel accounts, but only Bruno Bauer actually denied Jesus’ existence altogether. Criticism of the Gospels continued into the twentieth century in the works of Albert Schweitzer, Adolf von Harnack, G. A. Wells, and J. M. Robertson. Finally, mythicism continues to the present day in the works of Robert M. Price, Richard Carrier, David Fitzgerald, D. M. Murdock, Earl Doherty, and others. After introducing these persons and their arguments against the reliability of the Gospels, this chapter will explain how twenty-first century mythicists are bringing new life to the Christ-Myth Theory.

#### **3.2    Eighteenth-Century Mythicism**

##### **3.2.1    Constantin Francois Volney (1757-1820)**

Constantin Francois Volney was a member of the Constituent Assembly during the French Revolution.<sup>115</sup> He appears to have been the first author to deny that Jesus of Nazareth ever existed. Volney published a book entitled *The Ruins*, in which he argued three points that would greatly influence mythicism.<sup>116</sup> First, he claimed that when all of the different codes of various religions are studied together, it is clear that they borrow ideas from one another,

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<sup>115</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012), 14-15.

<sup>116</sup> Constantin Francois Volney, *The Ruins: Or A Survey of the Revolution of Empires*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: St. Paul’s Churchyard, 1789).

modifying them “as suits their fancy.”<sup>117</sup> Second, Christianity was actually focused on the worship of a sun god that Christians called “Christ.”<sup>118</sup> Third, he used etymological arguments to show that Christ’s name had been derived from other pagan deities:

These traditions went still further farther specifying his astrological and mysterious names maintaining that he was called sometimes *Chris* or Conservator; and hence the Hindoo god *Chris-en*, or *Chrisna*; and the Christian *Chris-tos*, the son of Mary. That at other times he was called *Yes*. ... And behold, O Europeans, the name which, with a Latin termination has become your *Yes-us* or Jesus; the ancient and cabalistical name given to the young Bacchus, the clandestine son of the virgin Minerva...<sup>119</sup>

The idea that Jesus was a Christian adaptation of pagan myths would go on to become one of the pillars of the Christ-Myth Theory.<sup>120</sup>

### 3.2.2 Charles Francois Dupuis (1742-1809)

Another Frenchman, Charles-Francois Dupuis, was a secretary of the Revolutionary National Convention. He published *The Origin of Religious Worldviews* in 1795, in which his goal was to find the one deity behind all the world’s religions. Dupuis saw the sun as the inspiration for the story of Christ. He contended that autumn was the time of the Serpent when the sun was forced to retreat, and the world became darker. This is where stories of the god dying came from. Humanity’s only hope was for the sun to return at the spring equinox, which was the time of the Lamb. That was the point where the god was believed to return to life.<sup>121</sup> Dupuis goes

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<sup>117</sup> Volney, *The Ruins*, 220.

<sup>118</sup> Volney, *The Ruins*, 283.

<sup>119</sup> Volney, *The Ruins*, 292-93.

<sup>120</sup> Price says there are three pillars total. He only explicitly mentions two: the silence of non-Christian sources and the silence of the Apostle Paul about a historical Jesus. Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Boyd, *Historical Jesus*, 62-63. However, there seem to be at least four pillars. The other two include alleged parallels with stories about dying-rising pagan gods and the idea that the New Testament stories were created out of Old Testament stories.

<sup>121</sup> Charles-Francois Dupuis, *The Origin of Religious Worldviews* (New Orleans: Academy of Inscriptions, 1872), 231.

on to explain, “The God of Day, personified in the sacred allegories, had therefore to submit to the whole destiny of man; he had his cradle and his tomb, under the names of either Hercules or of Bacchus, of Osiris or of Christ.”<sup>122</sup> In other words, what people worshipped remained the same throughout history, even if they called it different things from culture to culture. Neither Volney’s nor Dupuis’s ideas gained much traction at the time. However, the search to discover Jesus’ true identity would return to these works in the century to follow.

### 3.3 Nineteenth-Century Mythicism

#### 3.3.1 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher “attempted to perceive Jesus in the context of his time and in his own right.”<sup>123</sup> He was not a mythicist, but he did struggle with the reliability of the Gospels as sources for historical knowledge about Jesus’ life.

Schleiermacher acknowledged that a large portion of Jesus’ ministry consisted of miracles, and he “realized that the distinction between the natural and the supernatural did not exist at Jesus’ time and therefore should not be applied to the discussion of Jesus’ miracles. Jesus performed healing miracles only incidentally and occasionally.”<sup>124</sup> While Schleiermacher did not discount the historicity of the miracles, he relied on what historians now call the “Principle of Analogy.” Price explains this principle: “Claims of past events must be judged by today’s standards of what does and does not happen. Otherwise there simply is *no* standard.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Dupuis, *The Origin of All Religious Worldviews*, 232.

<sup>123</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 19.

<sup>125</sup> Robert M. Price, *Jesus is Dead* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2007), 199.

Schleiermacher thus only gave credence to the miracle accounts that seemed normal to human experience. For example, in the story of Lazarus, he distinguishes between the act of Christ, which was prayer, and the act of God, which was to raise Lazarus from the dead. He writes, “In this instance we cannot speak of Christ as the doer of the miracle, *except to the extent that he was certain God would answer his prayer*. So, we cannot say that Christ performed something for whose effects there is no human analogy.”<sup>126</sup> In other words, Schleiermacher removed any innate power that Jesus had in himself and attributed it to God, whom he thought was a distinct being from Jesus.

Schleiermacher also had doubts about whether some of the Gospel accounts were based on eyewitness testimony. For example, he argued that the birth narratives could not have come from the disciples because they would not have been present at the time. Moreover, while the authors could have approached Mary, who went to live with John after the crucifixion, he deems this improbable since John left Christ’s birth out of his Gospel.<sup>127</sup> After a lengthy treatment of the subject, he writes,

If we cannot recognize any original authentic source and it is improbable that the narrative as it stands has come from immediate eyewitnesses, then we are obliged, because we are engaged in a piece of historical research, to place no weight on the difference between canonical and apocryphal writings.<sup>128</sup>

His conclusion is that the birth stories were only known by a small group of people; they did not have any impact on Christian faith in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>129</sup> While this is not the same as dismissing the Gospels entirely, it does demonstrate a distinct lack of confidence in them.

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<sup>126</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden, trans. S. MacLean Gilmour (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 218; emphasis in original.

<sup>127</sup> Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 45-46.

<sup>128</sup> Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 66.

<sup>129</sup> Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 68.

Schleiermacher notes several further difficulties in the text. Regarding the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, he writes, “When we summarize these reports we stumble at once against all sorts of difficulties—difficulties which increase in number when we take also into consideration the so-called apocryphal gospels and individual data found in other authors.”<sup>130</sup> Some of the difficulties are as follows: (1) one account has Joseph and Mary living in Nazareth while another says they lived in Bethlehem; (2) Matthew narrates their travel to Nazareth as a new event while Luke makes it a return journey; (3) differences are also evident in the Evangelists’ accounts of Jesus’ trial. For example, while John notes an appearance before Annas, the Synoptics only tell of Jesus’ appearance before Caiaphas;<sup>131</sup> and (4) discrepancies in “the locality of Jesus’ public ministry” make it “difficult to establish an itinerary of Jesus or definite places of residency.”<sup>132</sup>

Like the later mythicists, Schleiermacher held that these differences made it harder to know exactly what had happened. He thus called lengthy sections of the Gospels into question.<sup>133</sup> David Strauss built on this foundation.

### 3.3.2 David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874)

Schwarz contrasts Schleiermacher with German New Testament theologian David Friedrich Strauss: “if Schleiermacher’s christology was based on the Christ *event*, then Strauss’s

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<sup>130</sup> Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 45.

<sup>131</sup> Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 45, 52, 62, 397.

<sup>132</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 19.

<sup>133</sup> Another work by Friedrich Schleiermacher on the subject is *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York, NY: Harper, 1963).

christology was based on the Christ *idea*.<sup>134</sup> While he also acknowledged a historical Jesus, he was much more skeptical of the Gospel accounts than Schleiermacher had been.

When it came to the miraculous accounts of the Gospels, Strauss also endeavoured to find naturalistic explanations. Jesus may have believed he was performing exorcisms on demoniacs, but for Strauss these people must have been either mentally disturbed or epileptic. He writes, “Jesus cured many persons who suffered from supposed demoniacal insanity or nervous disorder, in a physical manner, by the ascendancy of his manner and words.”<sup>135</sup> Regarding the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Strauss suspects them to be “visions or hallucinations engendered by the enthusiasm of the disciples.”<sup>136</sup> Lacking an explanation, he concludes, “No other rescue for this self-annihilation remains to the anti-supernatural mode of explanation, than to question the verbal accuracy of the history.”<sup>137</sup>

Strauss did not believe that the Gospels had been written by eyewitnesses. He also found them riddled with contradictions. (1) In Matthew, Mary’s pregnancy is discovered first and then justified by an angel; in Luke, it is announced by an angel beforehand. (2) Matthew seems to assume that Bethlehem was where Joseph and Mary had always lived; Luke gets them there via the census. (3) While all four Evangelists have Peter deny Jesus three times, they change who confronts Peter and where. (4) In Matthew, Judas hangs himself out of grief; in Acts, Peter makes it almost sound accidental: “the betrayer purchased himself a field with the reward of his

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<sup>134</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 21.

<sup>135</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 4th ed., ed. Peter Hodgson, trans. George Eliot (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972), 436.

<sup>136</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 22. This quotation is Schwarz’s summary of Strauss’s view, rather than a direct quotation of Strauss. Schwarz does not provide a citation for it. The reader may take it to be Schwarz’s expert opinion of Strauss’s view.

<sup>137</sup> Strauss, *Jesus Critically Examined*, 102.

crime, but fell headlong, and burst asunder in the midst, so that all his bowels gushed out, which being known in all Jerusalem, the piece of ground was called ... *the field of blood.*" (5) In the Synoptics, Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross partway to Golgotha; in John, Jesus carries it the entire way.<sup>138</sup>

Strauss also deemed many parts in the Gospels to be unhistorical. He suggested that miracle accounts in Jesus' life had been constructed out of Old Testament narrative. He argued that the description of the disciples being unable to heal the possessed boy was based on II Kings 4, in which Elisha's servant Gehazi cannot bring the dead boy to life with the prophet's staff.<sup>139</sup> In his evaluation of Strauss, Alsatian theologian and philosopher Albert Schweitzer writes, "The immediate healing of leprosy has its prototype in the story of Naaman the Syrian."<sup>140</sup> The moralizing tendency found within the story made its historicity seem doubtful to Schweitzer. This idea of events in the Gospels being retellings of Old Testament tales is the second pillar of the Christ-Myth Theory.

### 3.3.3 Bruno Bauer (1809-1882)

German theologian and philosopher Bruno Bauer, like Volney and Dupuis before him, did not believe that Jesus was a historical person. Rather, Jesus was nothing more than a literary invention of the Gospel writers: Christianity borrowed its ideas from the philosophy of ancient Greece. He writes, "The principles of Christianity: the advantages of dying, the wisdom of

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<sup>138</sup> Strauss, *Jesus Critically Examined*, 39-87, 119, 152, 659-60; Acts 1:18-19 as quoted in Strauss, 662, 677.

<sup>139</sup> Albert Schweitzer references this in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2011), 79.

<sup>140</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 78.

escaping from this world and attaining perfection in death, (in addition to the image of the Logos as the revelation of the divine) were established by the philosophy of Greece.”<sup>141</sup>

Bauer goes on to illustrate the intellectual debt that Christians owed to the pagan culture before them, particularly the Stoics. Nothing could be found in Judaism or Christianity that wasn’t found in Paganism first. Bauer writes that Seneca himself was about fulfilling the law, not destroying it, just as Jesus claims in Matthew. Thus, he finds more likely that the writer of Matthew “was a Roman who was taught by the spirit of Seneca.”<sup>142</sup> As evidence, Bauer points out many times how villainous the Jews are portrayed in the Gospels. In Matthew, he sees a recognition of pagan wisdom in the story of the Magi coming and kneeling before the infant Jesus to present him gifts. He writes, “Meanwhile his Jewish homeland is intent on his destruction. Piles of bloody victims fall to its enmity while the child is still in the cradle.”<sup>143</sup> In John, he claims that the Jews are portrayed as people with a “carnal mentality,” and murderers who are ready to stone Jesus and are even called children of Satan. In Acts, the gospel went to the Gentiles because of the hatred of the Jews and their stubbornness. This marks a tendency in mythicism to try to bring Jesus out of his Jewish context and place him in a pagan one instead.

### 3.3.4 Martin Kahler (1835-1912)

German theologian Martin Kahler taught systematic theology at the University of Halle. He based *The So-Called Historical Jesus* on a lecture he gave to a group of pastors.<sup>144</sup> In this book, he claims that “*the historical Jesus of modern authors conceals from us the living Christ.*

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<sup>141</sup> Bruno Bauer, *Christ and the Caesars: The Origin of Christianity from Romanized Greek Culture*, trans. Frank E. Schacht (Charleston, SC: Alexander Davidonis, 1998), 297.

<sup>142</sup> Bauer, *Christ and the Caesars*, 325.

<sup>143</sup> Bauer, *Christ and the Caesars*, 331.

<sup>144</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 39.

The Jesus of ‘the-life-of Jesus movement’ is merely a modern example of human creativity, and not an iota better than the notorious dogmatic Christ of Byzantine Christology.”<sup>145</sup> He did not see the Gospels as helpful in the quest to find the real Jesus because “we have no sources for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth which measure up to the standards of contemporary historical science.”<sup>146</sup>

Furthermore, Kahler saw pre-existing Christian doctrines about Christ—not history—as the driving force behind the stories in the Gospels, concluding that they were meant to point beyond historical factuality.<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, it was this *confessed* Christ in Christian preaching that he saw as continuing to have an impact on his day—and for Kahler, that was the most important part. He writes,

*[T]his real Christ is the Christ who is preached. ... [I]t is ... erroneous to make [faith] depend on uncertain statements about an allegedly reliable picture of Jesus that has been tortuously extracted by the modern methods of historical research—a product having as little chance of succeeding in the establishing of faith as does the shadowy outline of Christ which dogma has constructed from mere concepts.*<sup>148</sup>

He did not think that faith could be placed in ideas such as biblical inerrancy, the authorship of the Gospels by eyewitnesses, or the factual accuracy with which the authors relayed events. Rather, faith had to be placed in the effects that Jesus himself had on people’s lives. Kahler emphasizes how encountering Christ takes a kind of theological priority over doing a historical investigation; however, mythicists twist this idea into saying that the disciples’ faith

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<sup>145</sup> Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 43; emphasis in original. By life-of-Jesus-movement, he was referring to the attempts by historians to find out who the true, historical Jesus was.

<sup>146</sup> Kahler, *So-Called Historical Jesus*, 48.

<sup>147</sup> Kahler, *So-Called Historical Jesus*, 126.

<sup>148</sup> Kahler, *So-Called Historical Jesus*, 66, 72-73.

in Christ was *chronologically* prior to any stories they made up about him. In the twentieth century, utter rejection of Jesus' historical personage would pick up once again.

### 3.4 Twentieth-Century Mythicism

#### 3.4.1 Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)

German theologian and church historian Adolf von Harnack noticed some of the same problems in the Gospels as other critics did, but he did not place as much emphasis on them. For instance, he did not think that the Gospels contained many miraculous accounts. Moreover, the miracle accounts that they did contain were not unbelievable by his estimation. He writes,

Strauss ... [and] many others too, have allowed themselves to be frightened by [miracle accounts] into roundly denying the credibility of the Gospels. But, on the other hand, historical science in the last generation has taken a great step in advance by learning to pass a more intelligent and benevolent judgment on those narratives, and accordingly even reports of the marvelous can now be counted amongst the materials of history and turned to good account.<sup>149</sup>

In other words, von Harnack did not think that the miraculous events went beyond what is naturally possible: they did not constitute a proper miracle in the first place. Therefore, they did not need to be dismissed as unhistorical.

As for authorship of the Gospels, von Harnack writes that “titles so completely similar and at the same time so imperfect cannot proceed from the authors themselves. We must conclude that ... [the] titles [of the Gospels] ... have been added at a later date.”<sup>150</sup> But this did not lead him to distrust their content. He derided critical scholarship’s overemphasis on how the Gospels did not measure up to the contemporary standards of agreement, inspiration, and

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<sup>149</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Bailey Sanders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1957), 24.

<sup>150</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament: And the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 68.

completeness—overlooking the fact that the Gospels reflected the later concerns of the proceeding church age.<sup>151</sup>

Von Harnack's most glaring overlap with the later mythicists was his emphasis on only part of Jesus' person, to the exclusion of the rest. He “portrayed Jesus as a very reasonable man; at times there were hints of the Romantic, but overall Jesus was not so very different from the liberal Protestants of the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>152</sup> Von Harnack believed that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God but never about himself. He summarized Jesus' teachings into three points: “*Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming. Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.*”<sup>153</sup>

### 3.4.2 John McKinnon Robertson (1856-1933)

John McKinnon Robertson was the next scholar to argue that Jesus was mythical. He is “sometimes considered the premier British rationalist of the beginning of the twentieth century.”<sup>154</sup> In *Christianity and Mythology*, he argues that only the naturalist is sufficiently unbiased to determine which religious claims are true. Since Christians had already decided their religion was the exclusive religious truth, they unfairly disregarded the miracle stories in other religions.<sup>155</sup> He goes on to say, “He [the Christian] is overwhelmingly biased to the view that any

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<sup>151</sup> Von Harnack, *What Is Christianity*, 23. The only events he dismissed as unhistorical were the infancy narratives.

<sup>152</sup> Schwarz, *Christology*, 29.

<sup>153</sup> Von Harnack, *What Is Christianity*, 51; emphasis in original.

<sup>154</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 16.

<sup>155</sup> John Mackinnon Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology* (London, UK: Watts and Co., 1900), 130. He does not say explicitly what he means by naturalist (which sometimes means a person who studies nature: a scientist), but, given the context, he seems to mean someone without any religious conviction.

‘myth’ which resembles a Christian ‘record’ is borrowed from that; and if, in some instances he repels that conclusion, it is still for an *a priori* theological reason ... and not for simple historical reasons.”<sup>156</sup>

Like Volney, Dupuis, and Bauer, Robertson tried to show that there were parallels between the stories of Jesus and those of other pagan deities:

It is as Sun-God that he is born at the winter solstice; it is as Sun-God ... that he is surrounded by Twelve Disciples; it is as Sun-God that like Osiris, he is to judge men after death—a thing not done by Adonis or Attis; it is as Sun-God passing through the zodiac that he is presented successively in art and lore by the Lamb and the Fishes; and it is as the Sun-God that he enters Jerusalem before his death on two asses—the ass and the foal of the Greek sign of Cancer ... on which Dionysus also rides.<sup>157</sup>

According to Ehrman, Robertson set out to find the singular person behind the myths built up by the “Jesusists.” He determined that Christianity’s Jesus was actually a mix of three different “Jesuses:” the composite Jesus found in the Gospels, an interposed Jesus who was a Nazarite, and a Jesus born in Nazareth. None of these was the one preached by Paul.<sup>158</sup>

### 3.4.3 Arthur Drews (1865-1935)

German theologian Arthur Drews wrote the book *The Christ Myth*. His work shares ideas with Robertson, so it is not necessary to go into these ideas as extensively here. In short, he suggested that Israel’s ideas about the Messiah were influenced during their domination by the Persian and Greek empires.

From the Persians he found three main lines of influence. First, he explained that the Persian view of God was what caused the Jews to start seeing Yahweh as separate from creation.

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<sup>156</sup> Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology*, 130.

<sup>157</sup> Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology*, 37. He also devotes an entire chapter to going into detail about the influence of the Krishna legend on the story of Christ.

<sup>158</sup> Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology*, xi.

Second, he argued that the Jews took the concept of the Persians' chief God, Ahuramazda, who was the source of all life. And third, the idea of a divine mediator came from Mithras, who Drews claimed stood in the foreground, the spirit of light, truth, and justice, the divine "friend" of men, the "mediator," "deliverer," and "saviour" of the world.<sup>159</sup> This has obvious parallels to Christ.

From the Greeks, Drews argued that the Jews got the idea of the "Word," which was written about by the Jewish philosopher, Philo. Like Christ, it was the creative power of the Godhead, the bearer of revelation and God's representative on earth. Drews explains that while part of salvation according to Philo was man having to come to the realization of his true identity, the Logos played a necessary part: "The Logos must guide us, come to the aid of our human weakness with his supernatural strength in the struggles against the world and sin and raise us up to God. Thus, the apotheosis of man is the goal aimed at in all religious activity."<sup>160</sup>

His work "convinced Vladimir Ilych Lenin that Jesus was not a real historical figure. This, in a large measure, led to the popularity of the myth theory in the emerging Soviet Union."<sup>161</sup>

#### **3.4.4 Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)**

Albert Schweitzer was a theologian and philosopher who wrote an important book about Jesus of Nazareth called *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*. Like von Harnack, Schweitzer believed that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah. He writes, "The experience at the Baptism

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<sup>159</sup> Arthur Drews, *The Christ Myth*, rev. ed., trans. C. Delisle Burns (Project Gutenberg, last updated April 30, 2014), 38, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45540/45540-h/45540-h.htm>.

<sup>160</sup> Drews, *Christ Myth*, 50.

<sup>161</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 17.

signified the inception of Jesus' messianic consciousness.”<sup>162</sup> Schweitzer compared his preaching to that of John the Baptist, the chief difference being that John didn't perform miracles during his ministry. He went around Galilee teaching about the kingdom of God, but he did not meet with much success.<sup>163</sup> Still, Schweitzer notes, “Such outward illsuccess however, signified nothing for the coming of the Kingdom. The unbelieving cities merely brought down judgment upon themselves. Jesus had other mysterious indications for measuring the approach of the kingdom.”<sup>164</sup> His miracles were the assurance that the kingdom had arrived. The era had begun with the appearance of John the Baptist, who was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah being the forerunner of the Messiah. The sending of the Twelve was Jesus' last attempt to bring about the kingdom, but it failed to make its appearance.

Failure forced Jesus to withdraw so he could ponder the implications and ask two questions: Why had John been executed by a secular authority before the time of the Messiah; and, Why had the kingdom failed to appear? This, reasons Schweitzer, was when Jesus realized that God would only bring about the kingdom through the death of the Messiah.<sup>165</sup> Thus, “As soon therefore as the time came for the Passover pilgrimage, he set out with his Disciples. ... This journey to Jerusalem was the funeral march to victory.”<sup>166</sup> For Schweitzer, the story of Jesus ended with his death on the cross, suggesting he saw this as the ultimate failure of the

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<sup>162</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: The Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London, UK: Adam and Charles Black, 1951), 127.

<sup>163</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom*, 254, 259.

<sup>164</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom*, 259.

<sup>165</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom*, 260.

<sup>166</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom*, 267.

kingdom to materialize.<sup>167</sup> The historical Jesus, for Schweitzer, comes off as a tragic, deluded figure. Once again, there is an attempt to divide the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history.

### 3.4.5 G. A. Wells (1926-2017)

G. A. Wells was a British Professor of German at Birkbeck College in London. He took up the Christ-Myth Theory in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>168</sup> His view was that the Jesus portrayed by the Apostle Paul was quite different than what is found in the four Gospels. He writes, “These gospels make him a teacher and miracle worker in Palestine when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, that is, some time between A.D. 26 and 36, but were written fifty or more years later.”<sup>169</sup> Paul’s letters are the earliest sources for Jesus’ life, and he argues that “Not only the Pauline letters, but all early Christian epistles—a substantial body of material—fail to confirm what is said of Jesus in the Gospels. They do not portray his life as mythical, but [neither do they] set it in any historical context.”<sup>170</sup> For example, Philippians teaches that Jesus lived his life in humiliation, rather than as a miracle worker.<sup>171</sup> The letter never claims Jesus was from Nazareth. Whenever Paul gives his readers an example to follow, he never appeals to the life or teachings of Jesus but to his own life and those other missionaries.<sup>172</sup> Paul’s silence about a historical Jesus is considered one of the pillars of the Christ-Myth Theory. However, Wells’s

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<sup>167</sup> Schweitzer, *Mystery of the Kingdom*, 273.

<sup>168</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 2.

<sup>169</sup> G. A. Wells, *The Jesus Legend* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishers, 1997), xxii.

<sup>170</sup> Wells, *Jesus Legend*, 12.

<sup>171</sup> Phil. 2:6 is in view.

<sup>172</sup> Wells, *Jesus Legend*, 12-13, 20.

work did not gain much attention because it did not add anything new to the Christ-Myth Theory.<sup>173</sup>

### 3.5 Twenty-First Century Mythicism

#### 3.5.1 Robert Price (1954-)

Robert Price was once a Christian. He attended a Baptist church and was the president of a chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He claims that during his time with InterVarsity, he devoured the works of apologists concerning the historical Jesus, such as “John Warwick Montgomery (*History and Christianity*, 1964), F. F. Bruce (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 1960), J. N. D. Anderson, (*Christianity: The Witness of History*, 1969)” and countless more.<sup>174</sup> He holds a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary and a second Ph.D. in New Testament from Drew University. Eventually, he moved from Christianity to atheism. He is now “Professor of Scriptural Studies at Johnnie Coleman Theological Seminary, editor of the *Journal of Higher Criticism*, and author of a number of books, including *Beyond Born Again*, *Deconstructing Jesus*, and *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*.<sup>175</sup> Drawing on the types of arguments put forward by the liberal scholars of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, such as that the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses, and that they are full of contradictions, he continues to promote the message that the Gospels are

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<sup>173</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 2.

<sup>174</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 1; John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1986); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2011); J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History; A Lawyer’s Approach* (London, UK: Tyndale Press, 1972).

<sup>175</sup> Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, eds., *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 492; Robert M. Price, *Beyond Born Again: Toward Evangelical Maturity* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Apocryphal Books, 1993); Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000); Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008).

mythic literature and not historical biographies. He has a heavy internet presence through a podcast called *The Bible Geek*.<sup>176</sup>

### 3.5.2 Richard Carrier (1969-)

Like Price, Richard Carrier also has a religious background. His parents were “free thinking Methodists,” his mother “was church secretary,” and he went “to Sunday school and church on High Holy Days.” By fifteen, he was a “Philosophical Taoist,” and he was an “Atheist (secular humanist)” at twenty-one.” His experience includes “extensive study of philosophy and world religions, formal and informal.”<sup>177</sup> His credentials include a B.A. in history, an M.A. in Ancient History, an M.Phil. in Ancient History, and a Ph.D. in Ancient History.<sup>178</sup> He considers himself “a marginally renowned atheist, known across America and many other corners of the world as an avid defender of a naturalist worldview and a dedicated opponent of the abuse of history in the service of supernaturalist creeds.”<sup>179</sup> His published works include *Sense and Goodness without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism*, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn’t Need a Miracle to Succeed*, and three essays in Robert Price and Jeffery J. Lowder’s, *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*.<sup>180</sup> For Carrier, the Gospels bear the marks of myth, not historical biography, and this tips the balance in favour of an ahistorical Jesus.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Bible Geek* (blog), <https://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/biblegeek.php>.

<sup>177</sup> “Brief Biography of Richard Carrier,” The Secular Web, accessed September, 2018, [https://infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/bio.html](https://infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/bio.html).

<sup>178</sup> Richard Carrier, “Brief Biography of Richard Carrier,” The Secular Web.

<sup>179</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, xi.

<sup>180</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 15.

<sup>181</sup> The biographies of Robert Price and Richard Carrier above (sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2) are adapted from a paper submitted for Brian Cooper’s Interdisciplinary Research Seminar Class: Chris Christiansen, “Mything the Historical Mark,” (essay, ACTS Seminaries, 2017), 5-6; Richard Carrier, *Sense and Goodness Without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2005); Richard Carrier, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn’t Need a Miracle to Succeed* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Publishing, 2009).

### 3.5.3 D. M. Murdock (1960-2015)

American author D. M. Murdock, who also wrote under the pen name Acharya Sanning, or Acharya S., “received a B.A. degree in Classics, Greek Civilizations, from Franklin and Marshall College, after which she completed postgraduate studies at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.”<sup>182</sup> She wrote extensively on the parallels between Christ and various pagan gods, such as Buddha, Krishna, Horus, Osiris, Baal, and Mithras. Her books include *The Christ Conspiracy*, *Who was Jesus?*, and *Christ in Egypt*.<sup>183</sup> In each of these she attempted to show that the Christian story is not any different from the religions that came before it. While her credentials were not as robust as those of Price or Carrier, she was a prolific writer on the subject of the Christ-Myth Theory and is therefore important to engage with.

## 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has chronicled the history of mythicism from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries, outlining a number of common arguments raised by its proponents. Further, it has noted how these arguments have influenced the mythicism of today. A common criticism of mythicism is that many proponents do not have relevant credentials in the fields of history or biblical studies. Price and Carrier in particular are exceptions to the rule, giving the Christ-Myth Theory some intellectual weight. They have new light to shed on the mythicist arguments, which need to be taken seriously by scholars. The following chapter explains their arguments along with some contributions from their mythicist contemporaries.

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<sup>182</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 21. Casey makes a point of saying that Murdock “claims to have received” these degrees. However, it goes beyond my intended scope to research and verify her credentials. Either way, it is her arguments that I will examine.

<sup>183</sup> Acharya S., *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold* (Kempton, IL: Adventures Unlimited Press, 2012); D. M. Murdock, *Christ in Egypt: The Horus-Jesus Connection* (Seattle, WA: Stellar House Publishing, 2009). She identifies Buddha as a god, even though he has not been classically understood as one.

## 4 The Mythicist Case Against the Gospels

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter lays out seven of the mythicists' arguments against the historical credibility of the Gospels. To begin with, (1) they take issue with the reports of miracles in the Gospels. (2) They assign late dates to the Gospels, contending that (3) they were not written by eyewitnesses. (4) Identifying numerous contradictions in the Gospels accounts, they claim that (5) certain stories in the Gospels are outright fabrications. Not only this, but mythicists also take a number of the Gospel accounts concerning Jesus to be (6) Midrashic retellings of Old Testament stories or (7) Christianized versions of pagan stories about dying and rising gods.

### 4.2 The Problem of Miracles

#### 4.2.1 Carrier's Objections to Miracles

Carrier begins his case against miracles by describing the kind of God he thinks the Bible portrays. He writes,

The Christian God is an Almighty Creator, capable of creating or destroying anything, capable of suspending or rewriting the laws of nature, capable of anything we can imagine. He can certainly do any and every moral thing you or I can do, and certainly much more than that, being so much bigger and stronger and better than we are in every way.<sup>184</sup>

He then makes a comparison between himself as a loving person and God by giving examples of what he would do if he had the same powers. Bombs and bullets would become flowers. Garbage dumps would become gardens. There would be enough resources for everyone. There would not be an overpopulation problem. There would be no fatal disease or birth defects.

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<sup>184</sup> Richard C. Carrier, *Why I Am Not a Christian: Four Conclusive Reasons to Reject the Faith* (Richmond, CA: Philosophy Press, 2011), 18.

Finally, he would seek to help everyone resolve their conflicts peaceably.<sup>185</sup> But from there he goes on to write, “Yet I cannot be more loving, more benevolent than the Christian God.

Therefore, the fact that the Christian God does none of these things—in fact, nothing of any sort whatsoever—is proof positive that there is no Christian God.”<sup>186</sup>

Since there is no God, there can also be no supernatural activities: there is no supernatural being to cause them. That would make all the Gospel stories that speak of miraculous happenings automatically false. Thus, when Mark’s report has Jesus curse a fig tree so that it quickly withers, Carrier will have none of it: “obviously this story is completely made up.”<sup>187</sup> Likewise, Jesus’ raising of the young girl from the dead in Mark 5 is “entirely a fiction.”<sup>188</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Price’s Objections to Miracles

##### 4.2.2.1 Philosophical Objections

Price’s first objection against miracles is philosophical. It is based on what was referred to earlier as the Principle of Analogy—the idea that all claims about the past have to be judged by what historians know normally happens in the present. He writes, “Historians do not have access to H. G. Wells’s time machine. We cannot know what occurred in the past and thus do not dogmatize about it. We deal only in probabilities.”<sup>189</sup> This means that when historians are trying

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<sup>185</sup> Carrier, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 18-19.

<sup>186</sup> Carrier, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 19.

<sup>187</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 433.

<sup>188</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 410. In Mark 5:41, Jesus uses the Semitic words *Talitha Koum*, which Mark transliterates into Greek, followed by a translation: “Little girl, get up!” Evans explains that “sayings and deeds that reflect the Hebrew or Aramaic language (Semitisms), or reflect first century Palestine (geography, topography, customs, commerce) are what we should expect from authentic material.” *Fabricating Jesus*, 50-51. For Carrier, however, the logic runs the other way: since they appear in (what he takes to be) clearly fabricated stories, he concludes that Semitisms do not provide a trustworthy means of determining which stories are authentic.

<sup>189</sup> Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 56.

to determine what happened in the past, they must judge this based on their own experiences and those of their contemporaries.<sup>190</sup> He is aware that mythicists are often charged with employing an anti-supernatural bias, but he denies that he is doing this. Further, he says that Christian apologists make this accusation because of their own failure to understand the Principle of Analogy—without which “we are stuck believing every fairy-tale and political promise.”<sup>191</sup> Thus, when the Gospels claim that Jesus did something that Price or other modern historians have not seen happen in their own time, they consider it more likely that the biblical writers were either mistaken or exaggerating.

#### 4.2.2.2 Textual Objections

Price’s second objection is based on what is, and is not, found in ancient writings. He notes that “virtually everyone who espoused the Christ-Myth theory has laid great emphasis on one question: *Why no mention of a miracle-working Jesus in secular sources?*”<sup>192</sup> This is representative of mythicists in general: they argue that if the famous, miracle-working Jesus described in the Gospels existed, secular historians surely would have taken notice.

Moreover, mythicists wonder why Jesus’ miracles are never mentioned in the works attributed to Paul, Peter, James, and John. Historian and classical scholar Earl Doherty notes that “[I]f Jesus had performed healings which tradition later turned into raisings from the dead ..., it is perplexing that no epistle writer shows any knowledge of them.”<sup>193</sup> Since Price and others are

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<sup>190</sup> Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 56.

<sup>191</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 199.

<sup>192</sup> Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 62; emphasis in original. (I will explain this argument further later in this thesis.)

<sup>193</sup> Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ? Challenging the Existence of an Historical Jesus* (Ottawa, ON: Age of Reason Publications, 2005), 61. (I will explain this in more detail later in this thesis.)

certain that Paul's letters predate the Gospels, they conclude that the miracle stories were later, legendary traditions. From this general silence, Carrier argues that the only options open to historians are that either Jesus never existed as a historical person, or that he was a "virtual nobody."<sup>194</sup> Here, those who defend the historicity of Jesus might point out that the Gospels are good enough sources in themselves, even rivaling biographies for Alexander the Great. However, Carrier considers this type of claim lacking for two reasons. First, there is archaeological evidence for Alexander that corroborates the information in his biographies, and this type of evidence does not exist for Jesus. Second, the Gospels are far more problematic sources than those for Alexander.<sup>195</sup>

The mythicist demand for secular attestation is also applied to the Evangelists' reports of the supernatural events during Jesus' life. American writer David Fitzgerald asks, for example, why a three-hour, supernatural darkness over all the land and the veil of the temple being ripped in two were not mentioned by anyone else.<sup>196</sup> Moreover, he finds it impossible to believe that Matthew was the only historian who would know about the mass resurrection of the dead Jewish saints—supposing it happened at all.<sup>197</sup>

#### 4.2.2.3 Tacitus and Josephus

It might seem patently false that there are no non-Christian sources that mention the life of Jesus. After all, the Roman Historian Tacitus talks about the originator of Christianity, Christ

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<sup>194</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 20.

<sup>195</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 22.

<sup>196</sup> Matt. 27:50-53; Mark 15:33-39; Luke 23:44-45.

<sup>197</sup> David Fitzgerald, *Nailed: Ten Christian Myths that Show Jesus Never Existed at All* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu, 2010), 28.

who “had been executed in Tiberius’ reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus.”<sup>198</sup> Also, the Jewish Historian Josephus recorded what is now called the *Testimonium Flavianum*:

Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as that receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of the Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.<sup>199</sup>

While there are parts of this passage that look like the work of later Christian editors, at face value this passage looks like a reference to Christ as a historical person.

However, mythicists do not believe these passages in Tacitus and Josephus are authentic at all. Carrier believes that this passage is actually talking about followers of the Jewish instigator Chrestus; the line about the being crucified under Pontius Pilate was a later interpolation. He writes, “Before then, no one, Christian or non-Christian, ever heard of this persecution event under Nero, or of any reference to Christians in Tacitus; this event is not mentioned even when second-century Christians told stories of Nero persecuting Christians!”<sup>200</sup> Price likewise argues that the pertinent lines in Josephus’ *Testimonium Flavianum* was an interpolation, likely put in by the church historian Eusebius.<sup>201</sup>

Other Christian apologists argue that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ ministry, but the mythicists deny this also. Price writes, “we just do not know where the gospel materials came from! If they stem from a circle of stenographer disciples who memorized

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<sup>198</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44.

<sup>199</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.

<sup>200</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 344.

<sup>201</sup> Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 62.

everything for posterity, then, fine—the gospels can be trusted. *But that is a big if!* That is precisely what we do not know!”<sup>202</sup> Based on the philosophical Principle of Analogy and the silence of various texts about any miracle-working Jesus, Price concludes that the stories of Jesus as a miracle worker are later, legendary developments.

### 4.3 Doubts about Authorship

The mythicists argue that the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses for several reasons. First, they believe the Gospels were written too late for eyewitnesses to have been involved. Second, they believe that the authors were anonymous. Third, the source of the tradition for authorship, Papias, does not seem trustworthy to them. Fourth, the Gospel authors come across as being too familiar with Greek for the authors to have been native Aramaic speakers. Finally, the Evangelists themselves appear to indicate that they were writing long after the events they report.

#### 4.3.1 Too Late for Eyewitness Authorship

##### 4.3.1.1 The Gospels and the Destruction of the Temple

The main reason the mythicists have for dating the Gospels late in the first century concerns the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans.<sup>203</sup> According to American New Testament scholar Craig Evans, who strongly opposes the mythicists, most scholars date the Gospel of Mark to AD 60-70, Luke and Matthew to AD 75-80, and John to AD 90-95.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 19.

<sup>203</sup> Late in the first century is the earliest they are willing to date the Gospels. Some mythicists think the Gospels were written as late as the second century; their reason is that (for them) Ignatius and Clement seem to be ignorant of the Gospels. A critique of second-century dating would have taken this thesis too far afield. There are good reasons to call into question dating past the AD 70s, so the approach taken here deals with the problem even before we get to the second century.

<sup>204</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 54.

Carrier agrees with Evans on this dating. He adds, “Of course, fundamentalists want all those dates to be earlier, while many well-informed experts are certain they are later, and I find the arguments of the latter more persuasive, if inconclusive.”<sup>205</sup> Carrier himself thinks that Mark was written sometime after AD 70 (he is not sure how much later) because the Gospels clearly mention the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>206</sup>

Price likewise agrees that the Gospels were written after AD 70, meaning they could not have been written by eyewitnesses: “There is just no inherent likelihood that any of the original apostles would have survived the tumultuous events of 70 CE, the devastating war with Rome that ravaged Galilee and resulted in the siege, starvation, and fall of Jerusalem at Roman hands.”<sup>207</sup>

#### 4.3.1.2 The Gospels and Events Long Ago

For mythicists, the Gospels themselves bear telltale marks of being descriptions of long-past events. Murdock gives several examples: some texts use the phrase “in the days of John the Baptist”;<sup>208</sup> in Matthew 28, the story of the disciples stealing the body “is still told among the Jews to this day”;<sup>209</sup> and Luke begins with a prologue about how “many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us.”<sup>210</sup> For Murdock, “The phrase ‘from the beginning’ … implies a passage of time, as does the fact that there were ‘many’

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<sup>205</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 264.

<sup>206</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 265.

<sup>207</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 21.

<sup>208</sup> D. M. Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?: Fingerprints of the Christ* (Seattle, WA: Stellar House Publishing, 2011), 62; Matt. 28:15.

<sup>209</sup> Matt. 28:15.

<sup>210</sup> Luke 1:1.

who preceded Luke in writing Gospels.”<sup>211</sup> Fitzgerald adds Matthew’s mention of the place where Judas hung himself to the list—“called the field of blood unto this day.”<sup>212</sup> For Murdock, all of this strongly suggests that the Gospels were written too late to have been the products of eyewitness testimonies.<sup>213</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Unnamed Authors

According to Doherty, mythicists accept the consensus of critical scholarship that “the assigning of Gospels to legendary early figures of the Christian movement was a product of the later second century, and critical scholarship regards such traditions as inaccurate.”<sup>214</sup> Murdock adds that “The gospels are in fact *anonymous*. Indeed, the belief in the authorship of the gospels ... is a matter of *faith*, as such an opinion is not merited in light of detailed textual and historical analysis.”<sup>215</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Doubts about Papias

Apologists often cite a passage by Papias (AD 63-130), who was bishop of the church in Hierapolis, as positive evidence for the traditional authorship ascribed to the Gospels. In this passage, he claims to pass on the teachings of Ariston and John the Elder:

... if ever any man came who had been a follower of the elders, I would enquire about the sayings of the elders; what Andrew said, or Peter, or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples; and what Ariston says, and John the elder who are disciples of the Lord. For I did not consider that I got so much profit

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<sup>211</sup> Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?*, 62.

<sup>212</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 69; Matt. 28:14.

<sup>213</sup> The mythicists also argue for a second-century dating based on what they perceive to be the silence of the Church Fathers. While this is tied to the Gospels, it would take too much space to properly do justice to the mythicist arguments. Also, the response to Price’s and Carrier’s arguments on dating the Gospels after the AD 70s because of the temple destruction adequately answers the point of why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John likely belong in the first century.

<sup>214</sup> Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle*, 144.

<sup>215</sup> Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?*, 60.

from the content of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice. ... Mark became the interpreter of Peter and he wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered of the sayings and doings of Christ. For he was not a hearer or a follower of the Lord. ... So, then Matthew recorded the oracles in the Hebrew tongue, and each interpreted them to the best of his ability.<sup>216</sup>

Carrier disagrees with Papias, finding him to be an unreliable source for supporting a traditional view of Gospel authorship. He gives several reasons: (1) Papias did not know the original disciples but only people who claimed to know them. Carrier doubts that even this much is true, however, since “we can tell Papias was a very gullible fellow, so much so that even Eusebius calls him ‘a man of very little intelligence.’”<sup>217</sup> (2) Papias claimed to reject what he read in books and preferred to listen to hearsay. (3) Papias recounted incredible stories that were obviously not historical. (4) Carrier accepts that Peter was a Torah-observant Christian, but he reads Mark’s Gospel as advocating *against* Torah observance (in favour of Pauline Christianity instead). For Carrier, this suggests that Papias is wrong: Peter’s disciple Mark cannot be the true author of Mark. (5) Moreover, Mark also shows an ignorance of Palestinian geography. For example, Fitzgerald writes, “Mark 7:31 tells us Jesus departed ‘from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis,’ a trip 50 miles out of his way on foot!”<sup>218</sup> Again, this makes little sense if Peter is the source for Mark.<sup>219</sup> (6) As for how the titles of the Gospels say “according to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John,” Carrier holds that this is the Greek designation for the *source* of a work, not its author.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *The Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28-29.

<sup>217</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 324; Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 3.39.13.

<sup>218</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 72.

<sup>219</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 325.

<sup>220</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 397.

#### **4.3.4 Doubts about Literacy**

The mythicists claim that the Gospels were clearly written in Greek, which raises problems for historians. For example, they believe that the disciples would likely have been illiterate, so they could not have written in such elegant Greek as we find in the Gospels.<sup>221</sup>

#### **4.4 Problems in the Gospels**

Mythicists also emphasize many differences between the Gospel narratives, which they think make it impossible to tell what really happened in Jesus' life. These include differences in wording and details—as well as the apparent fabrication of stories unknown to earlier writers. Additionally, the Gospels differ on the chronology of certain events in Jesus' life and ministry.

##### **4.4.1 Problems with Wording**

In some cases, the statements of Jesus and others are reported differently between the four Gospels. Price notes that at Jesus' baptism “Mark and Luke have Jesus alone as [God’s] audience, while Matthew turns it aside to speak to all the dripping crowd, and John omits it entirely.”<sup>222</sup> In Matthew, the voice from heaven says, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”;<sup>223</sup> in Mark it says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”<sup>224</sup> In Matthew, Jesus gives eight beatitudes; in Luke he only gives four.<sup>225</sup> In Luke, Jesus tells a great multitude, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”<sup>226</sup> Matthew

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<sup>221</sup> This point is made by Acharya S. in *Christ Conspiracy*, 34.

<sup>222</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 120.

<sup>223</sup> Matt. 3:17.

<sup>224</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>225</sup> Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?*, 34.

<sup>226</sup> Luke 14:26.

omits “hate” in his recounting, so Murdock believes he is trying to make Jesus appear less harsh.<sup>227</sup> For mythicists, the fact that the Gospel writers can change the very words of Jesus exemplifies the non-historical nature of the material.

#### 4.4.2 Problems with Details

Price notes that “each genealogy has its problems. Matt 1:11 has Jesus descending from King Coniah (or Jeconiah), despite the fact that the prophet Jeremiah had disqualified any heir of this king from ever taking the throne.”<sup>228</sup> Further, he finds the genealogies of Matthew and Luke to be irreconcilable. Apologists attempt to harmonize the differences by saying that Matthew recorded Joseph’s line while Luke recorded Mary’s, but Price rejects this solution on the grounds that both are tied to Joseph.<sup>229</sup> In the story of the Gerasene exorcism, Matthew has two demoniacs while Mark only has one.<sup>230</sup>

In Mark, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on one donkey at his triumphal entry; however, Matthew recounts how the disciples obtained a donkey and her colt, brought them to Jesus and “he sat on them.”<sup>231</sup> Carrier suggests that this change is made so that Jesus can literally fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O Daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a

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<sup>227</sup> Murdock makes this point in *Who Was Jesus?*, 36; Matt. 10:37.

<sup>228</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 48.

<sup>229</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 49.

<sup>230</sup> Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?*, 26.

<sup>231</sup> Matt. 21:6-7.

donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”<sup>232</sup> Carrier reads this to mean that Jesus rides into the city on *both* the donkey and its foal, which he calls a “a logistical impossibility.”<sup>233</sup>

In Luke, Carrier notes that “Luke redacts Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, conspicuously ‘reversing’ it into a Sermon on a Plain. How do we know Luke is redacting Matthew? Because both speeches are followed by the otherwise-unrelated narrative of Jesus healing the centurion’s son in Capernaum.”<sup>234</sup>

In the story of the empty tomb, Price writes that “Matthew has altered Mark’s unseemly ending so that the fleeing women obey the charge of the angel at the tomb. And he adds a sudden appearance of the Risen Jesus to the same women.”<sup>235</sup> He further wonders why, if it is historical, no other Gospel writers mention Matthew’s story of the guards at the tomb. Finally, he points out that while Matthew and Mark have only one angel, Luke has two. He writes:

Again, let us not emulate the O. J. Simpson defense team, the Clinton spin-doctors, by suggesting that there were actually two men or angels but that Matthew just didn’t happen to see one because the other was fatter and in front of him, or one was on a coffee break when Mark got there. Let’s be honest with the text. There weren’t ‘actually’ two, with Matthew and Mark choosing only one to mention.<sup>236</sup>

These are but a few of the irreconcilable differences that the mythicists identify in the Gospels.

#### 4.4.3 Problems with Omissions

The mythicists also notice that the Gospels leave out certain passages while adding others. Price notes several examples of this. In Matthew, Jesus is born in the home of Mary and

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<sup>232</sup> Zech. 9:9.

<sup>233</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 459.

<sup>234</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 471.

<sup>235</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 5.

<sup>236</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 7.

Joseph in Bethlehem. The family only moves to Galilee after fleeing to Egypt, living there for a few years in order to escape Herod the Great's slaughter of the innocents. "Luke knows nothing of this but instead presupposes that Mary and Joseph lived in Galilee and 'happened' to be in Bethlehem when the hour struck for Jesus' birth because the Holy Couple had to be there to register for a Roman taxation census."<sup>237</sup> Carrier explains that this is a redaction so that Luke can portray Jesus' family differently. He writes, "whereas Matthew depicts Jesus' family as essentially outlaws, fleeing Bethlehem and Herod's rule and cowering abroad for over a decade, Luke describes Jesus' family as *obeying* the law and *going to* Bethlehem in accordance with their Emperor's command (Luke 2:1-4)."<sup>238</sup>

Carrier further notes stories that were omitted from other Gospels but show up mysteriously in Luke: (1) Peter going to the tomb after hearing the women's story and handling the shroud;<sup>239</sup> (2) the risen Jesus showing the nail marks in his hands and feet;<sup>240</sup> and (3) Jesus remaining on earth for forty days before being taken up to heaven.<sup>241</sup> From this he concludes that "no prior Gospel, nor Paul, had ever heard of the peculiar and convenient details that suddenly make their first appearance in Luke."<sup>242</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Problems with Time Frames

Finally, mythicists notice chronological discrepancies between the Gospels. Fitzgerald writes, "The year of Jesus' birth and death are in irresolvable contradiction: if Luke is right when

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<sup>237</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 51.

<sup>238</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 472.

<sup>239</sup> Luke 24:11-12.

<sup>240</sup> Luke 24:36-43.

<sup>241</sup> Acts 1:29.

<sup>242</sup> All these examples are given by Carrier in *On the Historicity*, 469-70.

he states that Jesus was born in 6 C.E., then Matthew cannot be right when he just as plainly states that Jesus was born sometime before 4 B.C.E.”<sup>243</sup>

Another well-known example of chronological discrepancies is how John alters the timing of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. In the Synoptics, it is near the end of his ministry; in John it happens at the very beginning.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, Carrier notes that John has expanded Jesus’ “ministry from one to three years (with multiple trips to Judea and Jerusalem rather than only one).”<sup>245</sup> Finally, Price raises the question of the exact day on which Jesus was crucified: “according to the Synoptics, it was the day after Passover, but for John it was the Passover, since he understands Jesus as the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 19:36, referring to Exodus 12:46).”<sup>246</sup> John even changes the time of day for the crucifixion: according to Mark it was the third hour while John says it was the sixth hour.<sup>247</sup>

The mythicist case against the credibility of the Gospels does not end with the differences in the Evangelists’ sequences of events. They also allege that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John create customs, peoples, and events out of whole cloth.

#### 4.5 Evangelist Inventions

##### 4.5.1 The Silence of Secular Sources

Doherty argues that the events recorded in the Gospel birth narratives would have been noticed by the wider world if they had actually occurred. “As for the nativity stories in Matthew

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<sup>243</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 88. Fitzgerald does not specify where he gets these dates from.

<sup>244</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 491.

<sup>245</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 491.

<sup>246</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 321.

<sup>247</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 321.

and Luke, images of Jesus bombard us at every Christmas, but nowhere in the first century are such images discernable. Shepherds, angels, magi, mangers or overbooked inns are never mentioned; nor is the city of Bethlehem or the great census under Augustus.”<sup>248</sup> Extra-biblical sources are also silent about the star in the night sky and Herod’s slaughtering of the two-year-old boys.<sup>249</sup>

#### 4.5.2 Invented Places

Mythicists also claim that a number of the places mentioned in the Gospels never existed. For example, Fitzgerald notes that an “incongruous aspect of Jesus’ travels is often overlooked: why does an inordinate number of his adventures involve travel at sea[?] … [S]uch nautical episodes seem very out of place if you try to graft them onto a rural Palestinian setting as Mark did. Where do you have maritime adventures in landlocked Galilee?”<sup>250</sup> Fitzgerald’s answer is that Mark invented “a brand-new body of water, the Sea of Galilee.”<sup>251</sup> He claims that this body of water had never been called a sea before Mark’s Gospel and argues that “This modest body of water seems like an unlikely stand-in for the ferocious sea where Jesus and the disciples have to battle life-threatening storms and powerful waves.”<sup>252</sup> Even pagan authors such as Porphyry noticed this oddity in Mark.<sup>253</sup> Fitzgerald concludes that the stories of Jesus’ dangerous sea crossings did not happen because the sea never existed.

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<sup>248</sup> Doherty, *Jesus Puzzle*, 56.

<sup>249</sup> Doherty, *Jesus Puzzle*, 56.

<sup>250</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 104.

<sup>251</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 104.

<sup>252</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 104-5.

<sup>253</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 105.

Mythicists also suspect that Arimathea was a fictional town. American biblical scholar Roy Hoover says, “the location of Arimathea has not (yet) been identified with any assurance; the various ‘possible’ locations are nothing more than pious guesses or conjectures undocumented by any textual or archaeological evidence.”<sup>254</sup> In an e-mail correspondence between Fitzgerald and Carrier, the latter claimed that Arimathea is an Aramaic pun:

*Ari-* (best) *mathai-* (disciple) *-a* (town/place) … the *ari-* prefix meaning “best,” appears in such words as *aristocracy* (rule of the best), *aripikros* (best in bitterness, hence bitterest), *arideiketos* (best in display, hence glorious), as explained in standard Greek lexicons. The *math-* root forms the verb *mathein*, to teach, and the nouns *mathe*, lesson or doctrine, and the *mathetes*, disciple. The *-aia* suffix as town or place appears in such regions as Galilaia (Land of the Galiyl) and Judaia (Land of the Jews), and such actual towns as Dikaia (Justice Town) and Drymaia (Thicket Town).<sup>255</sup>

Fitzgerald then asks if it can be a coincidence that Joseph of Arimathea came from Bestdiscipleville, Judea. To him, it seems more likely that Mark was just being clever.<sup>256</sup>

If Arimathea is an invented location, then Joseph of Arimathea may not have existed either. Price agrees with MacDonald: Joseph “is based on King Priam, [from Homer’s *Iliad*], begging Agamemnon for the body of his son Hector. It is because he corresponds to the slain hero’s father that he is called *Joseph*.<sup>257</sup>

Aside from the issue of Arimathea’s existence, Price doubts Joseph’s historicity because of his character development from Mark to the later Gospels: “Mark 15:43 introduces him as a ‘respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God.’ Luke

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<sup>254</sup> Roy Hoover, “A Contest Between Orthodoxy and Veracity,” in *Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann*, ed. Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 133.

<sup>255</sup> Richard C. Carrier, email message to David Fitzgerald, August 10, 2010, quoted in Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 107.

<sup>256</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 107.

<sup>257</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 326.

noticed the problem: hadn't Mark made the Sanhedrin's condemnation of Jesus unanimous?"<sup>258</sup> So Luke adds the detail in 23:4 that Joseph "had not agreed to their plan of action." Matthew adds that Joseph is a rich man, and John finally says that he is a secret disciple.<sup>259</sup> This eventually leads them to deny the historicity of the burial story: Joseph of Arimathea did not exist, so he could not have requested Jesus' body from Pilate as he does in Mark 15. While these arguments do not directly cast doubt on Jesus' historicity, mythicists leverage them to call into question large parts of his life—which erodes confidence in him as a historical figure.

#### 4.5.3 Invented Customs

For Carrier, "A good example of how Mark is creating fiction about Jesus can be seen in the appearance of a previously unmentioned insurrectionist named Barabbas in his crucifixion narrative."<sup>260</sup> He is referring to Mark 15 where, in one last effort to save Jesus from the angry mob, Pontius Pilate offers to release either Jesus or Barabbas to the Jews.<sup>261</sup> For Carrier, "this is surely myth, not fact. No Roman magistrate (least of all the infamously ruthless Pilate), would let a murderous rebel go free, and no such Roman ceremony is attested as ever having existed; nor is it at all plausible."<sup>262</sup> Further, he notes that Barabbas himself has an unusual name, which means "Son of the Father" in Aramaic.<sup>263</sup> As for what inspired the Gospel writers to create all of these fictional accounts, the mythicists argue that they were engaged in Midrashic retellings of the Old Testament.

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<sup>258</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 327.

<sup>259</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 327.

<sup>260</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 402.

<sup>261</sup> Mark 15:6-15.

<sup>262</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 403.

<sup>263</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 404.

#### 4.6 Parallels with the Old Testament

Price has done extensive work in an effort to show the connections between the Gospels and the Old Testament. (1) “At Jesus’ Baptism (Mark 1:9-11) the heavenly voice conflates bits and pieces of Psalms 2:7; Isaiah 42:1; and Genesis 22:12 (LXX).”<sup>264</sup> (2) The Temptation narrative of Mark recalls both Moses’s forty-year exile in Midian and Elijah’s forty days after the Battle of Mount Carmel;<sup>265</sup> like Jesus, Elijah was also ministered to by angels. (3) Jesus rebuts the Devil by citing texts from Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13, which were all different trials that Israel faced in the desert. (4) “The recruitment of the First Disciples (Mark 1:16-20) comes from Elijah’s recruitment of Elisha in 1 Kings 19:19-21.”<sup>266</sup> (5) The cry of the demoniac in Capernaum echoes the widow’s defensive alarm in 1 Kings 17:18.<sup>267</sup> (6) “The story of a paralyzed man’s friends tearing off the roof and lowering him to Jesus (2:1-12) seems to be based on 2 Kings 1:2-17a, where King Ahaziah gains his affliction by falling from his roof through the lattice and languishes in bed.”<sup>268</sup> (7) Price locates the inspiration for the death of John the Baptist in Esther and Daniel. Herod Antipas’s words to his stepdaughter come from Esther 4:3. Herod’s being manipulated by his wife and stepdaughter parallels the story of Daniel in the lions’ den.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>265</sup> Mark 1:12-13.

<sup>266</sup> Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 39.

<sup>267</sup> Mark 1:21-28.

<sup>268</sup> Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 39.

<sup>269</sup> Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 39.

Carrier likewise finds parallels between Old Testament and New Testament accounts, particularly that of the empty tomb. He believes it is a retelling of Daniel in the lions' den. He writes, "We know from archaeology that the story of Daniel in the lions' den was a popular symbol of resurrection (and of Jesus) among early Christians."<sup>270</sup> He lists the following similarities: (1) Jesus and Daniel were both entombed. (2) Both tombs had a seal placed on them. (3) Both tombs had guards placed in front of them; Matthew's addition of the guard especially connects him with Daniel.<sup>271</sup> (4) The placing of a seal on Jesus' tomb in Matthew is described with the exact same verb used in the Greek edition of the Daniel story ..., which is in both stories a rather unusual detail. This evokes a meaningful parallel: Jesus, facing real death, and sealed in the den like Daniel, would, like Daniel, escape death by a divine miracle, defying the seals of man.<sup>272</sup>

(5) The women visit the tomb at dawn just as Darius does. (6) Jesus escapes the tomb, representing eternal life, and Daniel wishes the king eternal life. (7) An angel performs the miracle in both cases. (8) In Matthew, the guards become like dead men while in Daniel, Daniel's accusers are fed to the lions. (9) "The angel's description is also a clue to the Danielic parallel: in the Septuagint version of Daniel 7:14, an angel is described as 'and his garment white as snow'; in Matthew 28:3, the angel is described as 'and his garment white as snow,' in the Greek every word [is] identical but one (and that a cognate), and every word but one [is] in the same order."<sup>273</sup> (10) Matthew's story ends with Jesus' commission to go and make disciples of all nations; Daniel's ends with Darius's proclamation to all nations commanding reverence for

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<sup>270</sup> Richard C. Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), 199.

<sup>271</sup> Carrier, *Proving History*, 199.

<sup>272</sup> Carrier, *Proving History*, 199-200.

<sup>273</sup> Carrier, *Proving History*, 200.

the Jewish God.<sup>274</sup> Combined with the omission of the guard story from the other Gospels, the parallels have convinced Carrier that Matthew's story is an obvious copy and therefore a fabricated account—not a portrayal of something that actually happened in time and space.<sup>275</sup>

These are not the only stories out of which mythicists claim the Gospel writers constructed Jesus. They also see numerous parallels between the stories of Jesus and the pagan gods. It is to this final consideration that this chapter now turns.

#### 4.7 Parallels with Pagan Myths

##### 4.7.1 The Rank-Raglan Hero Type

Human cultures have told countless stories across the ages about mythical heroes, many of whom share similar traits. Compiled by Lord Raglan, Otto Rank, and Alan Dundes, *The Mythic Hero Archetype* lists a number of characteristics shared by heroes from both Indo-European and Semitic myths.<sup>276</sup> There are twenty-two such characteristics in this list, in which Price italicizes the characteristics he thinks Jesus meets:

1. *Mother is a royal virgin.*
2. *Father is a king.*
3. Father unrelated to mother.
4. *Unusual conception.*
5. *Hero reputed to be son of god.*
6. *Attempt to kill hero.*
7. *Hero spirited away.*
8. *Reared by foster parents in a far country.*
9. *No details of childhood.*
10. *Goes to future kingdom.*
11. Is victor over king.
12. Marries a princess (often daughter of predecessor).
13. *Becomes a king.*
14. *For a time he reigns uneventfully.*
15. *He prescribes laws.*
16. *Later loses favor with gods or his subjects.*
17. *Driven from throne and city.*
18. *Meets with mysterious death.*
19. *Often at the top of a hill.*
20. *His children, if any, do not succeed him. (i.e. does not found a dynasty).*
21. *His body is not buried.*
22. *Nonetheless has one or more holy sepulchers.*<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Carrier, *Proving History*, 200-1.

<sup>275</sup> Carrier, *Proving History*, 201.

<sup>276</sup> Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 46; Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Myth*, rev. ed., trans. Gregory C. Richter and E. James Lieberman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>277</sup> Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 46-47.

According to Carrier, the lives of Jesus and fourteen others match this list to varying degrees, and the one key commonality shared by them all is that they were fictional characters.<sup>278</sup> ‘No known historical persons are on the list. *Only* mythical people ever got fitted to this hero type. *Yet every single one of them was regarded as a historical person and placed in history in narratives written about them.*’<sup>279</sup> Carrier thinks that Jesus should likewise no longer be considered historical. Murdock goes into extensive detail about how pagan gods such as Horus and Mithras also fit this mold.

#### 4.7.2 Jesus and Horus

Murdock has written numerous books asserting parallels between the life of Christ and various pagan gods. She assembles a list of supposed similarities that she is sure will make an impression on anyone familiar with the Jesus of Christianity: ‘Horus was born on ‘December 25<sup>th</sup>,’ (winter solstice) in a manger. He was of royal descent, and his mother was the ‘virgin Isis-Mery.’ Horus’s birth was announced by a star in the East and attended by three ‘wise men.’ At age 12, he was a child teacher in the Temple, and at 30, he was baptized.’<sup>280</sup>

As an adult, Horus was baptized by a figure in Egyptian mythology called Anup the Baptizer. He was followed by twelve companions, helpers, or disciples. Horus performed miracles, such as healings, exorcisms and walking on water. He was crucified. ‘He (or Osiris) was buried for three days in a tomb and resurrected. Horus/Osiris was also the ‘Way, the Truth,

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<sup>278</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 231. Aside from Jesus, Carrier lists ‘Oedipus (21), Moses (20), Theseus (19), Dionysus (19), Romulus (18), Perseus (17), Hercules (17), Zeus (15), Bellerophon (14), Jason (14), Osiris (14), Pelops (13), Asclepius (12), and Joseph [i.e. son of the patriarch Jacob] (12)’ as fitting this mold.

<sup>279</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 231-32; emphasis in original.

<sup>280</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 44.

the Life,’ ‘Messiah,’ the ‘Son of Man,’ the ‘Good Shepherd,’ the ‘Lamb of God,’ the ‘Word Made Flesh,’ and ‘Word of Truth,’ etc.”<sup>281</sup>

Horus’s personal name was Iusa, which means “ever becoming son” of the Father. Other names included “Holy Child” and “Anointed One,” and his father Osiris was called the KRST—which resembles “Christ.” Finally, Murdock says that Horus did battle with the “evil one” Set/Seth and that Horus was supposed to reign for a thousand years.<sup>282</sup> Since Horus was worshipped long before Christ, it is obvious to her that the Christians plagiarized the stories of Jesus from the Egyptian religions.

#### 4.7.3 Jesus and Mithra

Finally, Murdock (writing as Acharya S.) presents a list of similarities between the life of Christ and the life of the Mithra. Like Christ, Mithra was born of a virgin on December twenty-fifth in a cave, and his birth was attended by shepherds who brought him gifts. “He was considered a great travelling teacher and master. He had 12 companions or disciples. Mithra’s followers were promised immortality. He performed miracles. As the ‘great bull of the Sun,’ Mithra sacrificed himself for world peace. He was buried in a tomb and after three days rose again.”<sup>283</sup> His resurrection was celebrated annually.

Murdock also argues that Mithra bears similar titles to Christ, such as “The Good Shepherd,” the Lion, the Lamb, the “Way, the Truth and the Light,” the “Logos,” the “Redeemer,” the “Savior,” and the “Messiah.” His sacred day was on Sunday. Mithra’s principle festival was on Easter. “His religion had a eucharist or ‘Lord’s Supper,’ at which Mithra said,

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<sup>281</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 44.

<sup>282</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 44.

<sup>283</sup> Acharya S., *Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

‘He who shall not eat of my body nor drink of my blood so that he may be one with me and I with him, shall not be saved.’ His annual sacrifice is the Passover of the Magi, a symbolical atonement or pledge of moral and physical regeneration.”<sup>284</sup> Again, the parallels could not be more clear for Murdock. She concludes, “It is evident that Jesus Christ is a mythical character based on these various ubiquitous godmen and universal saviors who were part of the ancient world for thousands of years prior to the Christian era.”<sup>285</sup> The only reason people have not been made aware of these parallels is that the Christian church has suppressed the truth for so long.<sup>286</sup>

#### 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the mythicist case against the credibility of the Gospels. In summary, mythicists do not believe in the existence of the Christian God, or any other god. Since there is no god to cause supernatural events, all miracle stories are dismissed as legends. To dismiss the miracle accounts in the Gospels, mythicists argue that these documents were not written by eyewitnesses. To demonstrate that the Gospels give irreconcilable accounts, they allege many points of irreconcilable differences. Mythicists believe certain locations and customs to be historical fictions created by the Evangelists. They believe many stories were rewrites of Old Testament tales. Finally, the mythicists allege many parallels between Jesus and ancient mythical figures. The last chapter of this thesis will seek to answer these challenges and show that such conclusions are flawed.

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<sup>284</sup> Acharya S., *Christ Conspiracy*, 119.

<sup>285</sup> Acharya S., *Christ Conspiracy*, 125.

<sup>286</sup> Acharya S., *Christ Conspiracy*, 125.

## 5 Answering the Mythicists

### 5.1 Introduction

This final chapter refutes the mythicist arguments presented above in three ways. First, this chapter will show how the mythicists have a double standard for handling the Gospels alongside other ancient texts. Second, this chapter will provide apologetic answers from textual critics, historians, and theologians. Third, it will show that many of their arguments are irrelevant to the question of whether Jesus was a historical figure.

### 5.2 The Possibility of Miracles

#### 5.2.1 Carrier and the Problem of Evil

Carrier's argument against miracles rests on several questionable assumptions related to the Problem of Evil.<sup>287</sup> He is correct that God is all-powerful and can do whatever he wants. However, when he argues that God does not exist because he does not act how he himself (Carrier) would, he assumes that humans can know what God would desire for any given situation: in order to know this with any certainty, Carrier would have to be in the same position as God. As Stephen Wykstra notes, “if the God of theism exists, we humans should not expect to see or grasp very much of God’s purposes for divine actions—including the divine action of allowing or even causing events that bring much of the horrific suffering around us.”<sup>288</sup>

Suppose God desires for a given woman to grow in character, and that the only way to accomplish this is to allow a certain amount of hardship to enter her life. God cannot both allow

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<sup>287</sup> Atheist philosopher George H. Smith explains the problem of evil as follows: “If God does not know there is evil, he is not omniscient. If God knows there is evil but cannot prevent it, he is not omnipotent. If God knows there is evil and can prevent it, but desires not to, he is not omnibenevolent. If, as Christians claim, God is all-knowing, and all-powerful, we must conclude that God is not all-good.” *Atheism: The Case Against God* (New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016), 81.

<sup>288</sup> Stephen Wykstra, “A Skeptical Theist View,” in *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 100; emphasis in original.

and not allow that hardship. C. S. Lewis puts it well: “omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible.”<sup>289</sup> To assert that God could do otherwise is the kind of logical inconsistency that atheists regularly attribute to Christianity. “It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.”<sup>290</sup> Carrier responds to such answers by arguing further: perhaps no one can say exactly what God would do in a given circumstance, but Christian belief entails that he would act in at least some way in order to prevent suffering.<sup>291</sup> For Carrier, the fact that God does not do so is further proof that he does not exist.

It is not clear whether Carrier bases these arguments on his own personal experience or on human experience in general, but his answer is problematic either way. If he appeals to his own experience, then that is a very narrow definition of human experience. An appeal to human experience in general fares no better: while Western naturalistic scholars may perceive a world devoid of miracles, that is not the uniform experience of people everywhere.<sup>292</sup> To truly verify that God has not acted at any point in history, Carrier would have to go through each miracle account and show that it is false. Until he does that, the more honest recourse is to be agnostic about the possibility of miracles. Carrier’s *a priori* rejection of miracles—such as Jesus’ raising

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<sup>289</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1996), 18.

<sup>290</sup> Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 18.

<sup>291</sup> Carrier, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 20.

<sup>292</sup> This argument is based in part on Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd’s *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 67. Craig S. Keener has written a two-volume set on exactly this point, outlining miracles throughout the world and the evidence for them. *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.)

of the young girl from the dead and his cursing of the fig tree—does not provide a sufficient reason to reject the miracles recorded in the Gospels.

### 5.2.2 Price and the Principle of Analogy

#### 5.2.2.1 The Principle's Challenge Explained

Price's use of the Principle of Analogy is based on the writings of Scottish philosopher David Hume, who taught that miracles were a violation of the laws of nature—laws that regular experience had established as inviolable. While someone dying was not a miracle (everyone dies), “it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.”<sup>293</sup> The consequence of this for Hume was that no testimony was enough to establish that a miracle had happened, unless it would be more miraculous for the story to be false than true. He goes onto say, “When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact which he relates, should really have happened.”<sup>294</sup>

On the surface, the Principle of Analogy presents a serious challenge. As theologian Ted Peters explains,

The problem is that the events on which Christianity seems to rest (e.g. miracles, the resurrection of Jesus, etc.) are unique. But the historian who employs the principle of analogy precludes such uniqueness at the outset, i.e., he must assume that the events of the past, like all events, are analogous to those he experiences in the present.

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<sup>293</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 111.

<sup>294</sup> Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 112.

Furthermore, it is just this assumption that permits our knowledge of anything in the past at all.<sup>295</sup>

On the one hand, the Principle of Analogy appears to encapsulate an indispensable facet of doing historical work: all human knowledge must make sense of what is unknown in terms of what is already known. On the other hand, it calls into question the miraculous events on which Christianity rests. At a glance, Price's accusation appears to place belief in miracles deeply at odds with this basic requirement for knowing truths about the past.

### 5.2.2.2 The Negative Use Explained

In order to resolve this problem, Peters draws on the work of theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. He explains that it is possible to distinguish between the positive (proper) use of the Principle of Analogy, as a way of doing historical work by looking for points of connection between the past and present, and its negative (improper) use, which often serves as a mere tool for a naturalistic worldview.<sup>296</sup>

The negative use of the Principle of Analogy requires, absurdly, that "if in the process of historical investigation one is confronted with" something someone has not come in contact with before, "the gaining of historical knowledge becomes *ipso facto* impossible."<sup>297</sup> For example, Licona and James G. Van der Watt note that on such an approach, "we could not conclude that

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<sup>295</sup> Ted Peters, "The Use of the Analogy in Historical Method," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1973), 475.

<sup>296</sup> Peters, "Use of the Analogy." Specifically, he draws on the following: Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970-71); Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Response to the Discussion," in *New Frontiers in Theology*, vol. 3, *Theology as History*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1967), 264n75; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1986).

<sup>297</sup> Peters, "Use of the Analogy," 476.

dinosaurs existed in the past. After all, historians and scientists do not experience them today.”<sup>298</sup>

There are of course many events in history that do not match our common experience.

### 5.2.2.3 The Negative Use and Miracles

Hume’s attempt to disprove miracles exemplifies the negative use of the Principle of Analogy in that he dismisses their possibility without engaging with any evidence or reports. As Lewis points out, in doing so, he also engages in circular reasoning:

Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely “uniform experience” against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know the experience to be uniform only if we know all reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.<sup>299</sup>

Price protests: “Hume did not argue, as Rationalists had done, that we know natural laws are inflexible and do not allow of the barest possibility of miracles ever having occurred. … Hume simply pointed out that, faced with a report of a miracle, the responsible person would have to reject it … because he knows the propensity of people to exaggerate.”<sup>300</sup> But that is not Lewis’s point. He is talking about the circularity of Hume’s assumption that all miracle stories are false, which he has not demonstrated.

There thus appears to be no reason to accept the negative use of the Principle of Analogy—let alone Price’s use of it, which “requires unnecessary assent to an ontological world-view which precludes the existence of God or his activity in history from the outset.”<sup>301</sup> Price smuggles in naturalism from the outset; rather than making a case for naturalism, he effectively

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<sup>298</sup> Michael R. Licona and Jan G. Van der Watt, “Historians and Miracles: The Principle of Analogy and Antecedent Probability Reconsidered,” *HTS Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009): 58.

<sup>299</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996), 162.

<sup>300</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 199.

<sup>301</sup> Peters, “Use of the Analogy,” 477.

jumps from saying an event does not happen very often to saying it never happens at all. The mere fact that not all people have experienced miracles does not justify the conclusion that all miracle claims are false.

#### 5.2.2.4 The Positive Use Explained

The proper, positive use of the Principle of Analogy relies on human understanding of what normally happens, using this, as one criterion among others, to determine what most probably happened in the past. Specific events in history, such as the bombing of Hiroshima, or the sinking of the *Titanic*, cannot be repeated, but they are easily comprehended against the backdrop of contemporary human experience. For events that are entirely outside the scope of human experience, such as the Big Bang, or the existence of dinosaurs, the positive use of the principle requires us to look at the available evidence, applying various scientific methods. The Principle of Analogy is at work in the scientific assumption that observable processes today are similar to—*analogous* to—the processes at work in the past. So this builds a bridge between human experience today and past events that, in themselves, are outside the scope of human experience.

This does not, however, render the positive use of the principle unable to reject “every fairy-tale and political promise,” as Price puts it.<sup>302</sup> For example, suppose that a politician promises to lower taxes. If he does not follow through on this promise, one does not have to believe he did because there will be positive evidence that he has not followed through. Also, one does not have to take, for example, the tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* to be historical because there is positive evidence to show that that tale falls into the genre of folklore and was never meant to be taken as a historical record. For those who accept miracles, the

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<sup>302</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 199.

rejection of fairy tales is not a double standard at work, but rather critical thinking based on evidence.

#### 5.2.2.5 The Positive Use and Miracles

When it comes to the Gospel miracle accounts, such as the Resurrection, the positive use of the Principle of Analogy involves examining the available evidence,<sup>303</sup> which may well include comparing them to other miracle stories in ancient mythology. Along with Pannenberg, Peters affirms that “No significant positive analogies between Jesus’ resurrection and myths, legends or delusions have been established. Perhaps there is something unique about Jesus’ resurrection.”<sup>304</sup>

This analysis undercuts Price’s use of the Principle of Analogy as a way of dismissing the Gospel miracles as myths along with the neighbouring tales of dying and rising gods. Since the Gospel miracles do not appear to be just like every other myth that has ever been written about a supernatural event, his argument fails. Belief in miracles is at odds with naturalism, but not with the proper, positive use of the Principle of Analogy.<sup>305</sup>

### 5.2.3 Secular Sources and a Miracle-Working Jesus

The mythicists argue that the silence of non-Christian sources about a miracle-working Jesus forces historians to say either that he did not exist, or that he was not very famous, which contradicts the Gospels’ portrayals of him as a famous miracle worker (at least locally) with many followers. The mythicist line of reasoning commits two logical fallacies. First, it is an

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<sup>303</sup> See, e.g., Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004).

<sup>304</sup> Peters, “Use of Analogy,” 481; Pannenberg, “Response to the Discussion,” 264n25.

<sup>305</sup> This section on Price and the Principle of Analogy is in part indebted to Mark McEwan, in a conversation with the author of this thesis, April 11, 2020.

argument from silence: mythicists do not find the specific evidence they expect they should, such as texts or historical artifacts, so they assume an event never occurred. Second, the mythicist line of reasoning responds to the lack of secular accounts of Jesus' miracles by asserting a false dichotomy: either Jesus was famous *to the degree that mythicists expect*, or he did not exist at all.

This either-or reasoning overlooks a third option: perhaps non-Christian historians would not have wanted to give credibility to the Christian movement—especially given that, as David Marshall points out, Christianity “was a persecuted and outlawed sect within a marginal, broken, and failing ethnicity on the borders of the empire.”<sup>306</sup> Mythicist demands for secular treatments of Jesus’ ministry do not seem to appreciate that the Roman authorities were trying to stamp out the fledgling religion. Additionally, as Carrier himself recognizes, Jesus was not the kind of person who would likely have left behind a lot of archaeological evidence. British theologian and New Testament language expert Maurice Casey explains:

Jesus was a first century prophet who lived in a primarily oral Jewish culture, not a significant politician in the Graeco-Roman world. … Almost all our surviving primary sources about Jesus are Christian because most people who had any interest in writing about him were his followers. This is why he did not mint coins or leave epigraphical evidence, and a first-century Jewish prophet from Galilee cannot reasonably be expected to have done so.<sup>307</sup>

If anything, what little we do have about Jesus strongly contradicts mythicist claims: given how relatively unknown Jesus was in comparison with figures like Alexander the Great, the fact that Jesus’ biographies rival these biographies in historical trustworthiness is impressive.

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<sup>306</sup> David Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!: The Fingerprints of God in the Gospels* (USA: David Marshall, 2016), 82.

<sup>307</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 65.

#### 5.2.4 Secular Sources and Miraculous Events

Fitzgerald asks why the unusual events reported on Good Friday—such as the worldwide darkness, the temple curtain ripping at the time of Jesus’ death, and the mass raising of the dead—are not mentioned by anyone else. It is a good historical question, but there are several possible answers with which he does not engage. First, as Casey notes, “relatively few copies were made of any writing before the invention of printing in the medieval period, and there were a number of disasters in the destruction of books when libraries were destroyed, and in the Christian case, in persecutions by the Roman state.”<sup>308</sup> Given the facts that few copies were made of ancient texts and that many were destroyed, it seems very possible such references could have been lost.

Matthew’s report of the many saints rising to life at once in chapter 27 of his gospel poses this same challenge for this striking event. Not only is it unknown to other historians of the time, but it also goes unmentioned by the rest of the New Testament authors. The most straightforward option is to nonetheless take Matthew’s report to be an historical account of dead saints rising from the grave. As Charles L. Quarles points out, “The structure of the text presents the account as historical rather than fiction.”<sup>309</sup> This is also the way it was understood by the ante-Nicene Fathers.<sup>310</sup> Moreover, as will be discussed in a later section, ancient biographers were not exhaustive in their accounts, so it could simply be the case that Matthew included an event that the other Evangelists did not.

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<sup>308</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 49.

<sup>309</sup> Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew 27:51-53: Meaning, Genre, Intertextuality, Theology, and Reception History,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 2 (2016): 271.

<sup>310</sup> Quarles, “Matthew 27:51-53”, 285. He cites Ignatius (*Ign. Mgn.* 10), the Egerton Papyrus 3 (c. 225), Tertullian (*Tert. Adv. Jud.* 13, c.-198-206), Pseudo-Clement (Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* 1.41), Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 6:6), Julius Africanus (*Chronology* 18, c.225-250), Origen (*Cels.* 2:33), and others.

A second option, however, has been put forward by Licona, who suggests that perhaps the mass resurrection account of Matthew 27 is not a historical event and never was meant to be taken that way by Matthew. Instead, he suggests that Matthew is using apocalyptic, “special effects” language—descriptions of incredible events—surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus in order to show that it was an important event with theological implications.<sup>311</sup> Incredible phenomena are similarly reported during the deaths of other famous figures in ancient biographies—none of which are taken by historians to mean that the subject was not a historical person at all. Cassius Dio, for example, describes a few at the death of Emperor Claudius:

It seemed as if this event had been indicated by the comet, which was seen for a very long time, by the shower of blood, by the thunder-bolt that fell upon the standards of the Praetorians, by the opening of its own accord of the temple of Jupiter Victor, by the swarming of bees in the camp, and by the fact that one incumbent of each political office died.<sup>312</sup>

Licona notes this sort of apocalyptic language in Josephus as well. When the temple fell in AD 70, “Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet that continued a whole year. … At the same festival, also, a heifer as she was led by the high priest to be sacrificed, brought forth a lamb in the midst of the temple …, the eastern gate … was seen to be opened of its own accord. …”<sup>313</sup> Given that both Roman and Jewish historians used this sort of language in connection with a major event, it seems to Licona that Matthew was doing so as well.<sup>314</sup> The existence of these parallel passages strengthens Licona’s suggestion. If it is correct,

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<sup>311</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 550.

<sup>312</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 61.

<sup>313</sup> Josephus, *War of the Jews* 6.5.

<sup>314</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 550.

then the mythicist objection is moot: no one else, not even other New Testament writers, would have recorded these events because they did not happen at all.

The mythicist might object here that if Licona is correct that the event of Matthew 27 is nonhistorical, then perhaps the event of Jesus' resurrection itself is also "special effects" language on Matthew's part and should not be taken as historical either. A few things can be said in response. First, this would be to dismiss the Gospels as evidence based on their containing some apocalyptic language. Licona has shown that there is no reason to go this far. Documents can contain both types of language. Second, as Licona has also pointed out above, this type of language is actually used to point to the importance of a historical event. Jesus' resurrection was the main event that the special effects are meant to amplify; it would make no sense to have special effects alone, not referring to anything. Third, unlike the events of Matthew 27, there are other sources, some earlier than Matthew, that speak of Jesus' resurrection as a real event in history, such as Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church.<sup>315</sup> Finally, interpreting the Resurrection itself as merely apocalyptic language would not account for the reversal of hostile opinions toward Christianity, such as we see in the conversion of the Apostle Paul himself. Licona notes that Paul would have been knowledgeable about apocalyptic language and "would not convert based on a story" that he "would have known to be fictitious."<sup>316</sup>

With strong arguments on both sides, additional research would be required to determine whether Matthew's report of the mass resurrection of saints is intended as historical or apocalyptic language. Whichever decision an interpreter makes, the relevant evidence shows that the historicity of Jesus and his resurrection is not at stake.

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<sup>315</sup> 1 Cor. 15:3-8, 17, 19.

<sup>316</sup> Michael R. Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammad: A Christian-Muslim Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 99.

### **5.2.5 Paul and a Miracle-Working Jesus**

Finally, Doherty's concern that Paul does not mention Jesus' miracles is an argument from silence, based on a misunderstanding of the intent of an epistle. Paul's letters were not lives of Jesus; rather, they were written to Christian churches to deal with issues that had arisen within them. Furthermore, the churches were part of a high-context culture: people were adept at committing things to memory after hearing them once. Casey explains the significance of this: "to some extent, [Paul's] Gentile Christians had been taught about Jesus already, so he could take such knowledge for granted."<sup>317</sup> In other words, he would not have to keep repeating stories that he had already told them, including knowledge of Jesus' signs and wonders. When the mythicists argue that if Jesus were historical, historians would have more sources about his life and works, they are making an argument from silence—working from a faulty premise. One can *always* ask for more sources, but that does nothing to negate the existing sources.

### **5.2.6 The Authenticity of the Tacitus and Josephus Passages**

The mythicist charge that mentions of Jesus in Tacitus and Josephus are later interpolations appear to be mere conjecture. Although the earliest copies of Tacitus's *Annals* only come from the eleventh century, not one is missing that passage.<sup>318</sup> Moreover, given that the alleged insertion calls Christianity a "deadly superstition" that commits "shameful acts,"<sup>319</sup> it is unlikely to be the fabrication of a Christian scribe. It is further unlikely that a Christian scribe would end with Jesus' crucifixion, without any mention of the Resurrection. Carrier counters that no one seems to have heard about the passage before the fourth century: "Before then, no one

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<sup>317</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 134.

<sup>318</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 180.

<sup>319</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44.

Christian or non-Christian, ever heard of this persecution event under Nero or any reference to Christians in Tacitus; this event is not mentioned even when second-century Christians told stories of Nero persecuting the Christians!”<sup>320</sup> This is yet another argument from silence. First of all, it is not clear how well-known Tacitus’ work was to these Christian authors. Second, as discussed above, Christians would not be likely to quote a passage that is so polemical against themselves.<sup>321</sup>

As for the passage in Josephus, there are parts of it that are agreed to be Christian interpolations. Eddy and Boyd give this list: “(1) The allusion to Jesus’ divinity; (2) the confession that Jesus was the Messiah; and (3) the acknowledgment that Jesus rose from the dead on the ‘third day’ in accordance with Old Testament prophecy.”<sup>322</sup> However, this still leaves a good portion of the passage intact; there are lines that a Christian would be unlikely to insert, such as the use of the word “tribe,” to describe the Christian movement. Furthermore, it would not have been a problem for Josephus to call Jesus a wise man and “doer of surprising deeds” because it is well attested in the Gospels that Jesus had the reputation of a miracle worker and teacher. Mythicists may ask why no one mentions this passage before Eusebius in the fourth century.<sup>323</sup> But once all the Christian elements are taken out, it does not offer a strong apologetic for who Christians believed Jesus to be.<sup>324</sup> Therefore, there is no reason to think that they would have felt it necessary to quote it. Similar to the arguments the mythicists use about the silence of

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<sup>320</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 344.

<sup>321</sup> This discussion of the Tacitus passage is largely indebted to Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 180-81.

<sup>322</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 193.

<sup>323</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 1.11.

<sup>324</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 196.

Paul, they are not following the evidence where it leads. Rather, they dismiss actual evidence by means of weak and speculative arguments.

### 5.3 Defending Traditional Authorship

#### 5.3.1 No Need for Evangelists to Self-Identify

Carrier and Price give their readers the impression that when the Gospel authors fail to identify themselves, they act out of step with some common practice in ancient historiography. Canadian philosopher and apologist Michael Horner exposes the error in this reasoning: “In ancient times, the omission of an author’s name in the text was not an unusual practice. We have literature written by Plato, Plutarch, Lucian, Porphyry, that are every bit as ‘anonymous’ as the Gospels.”<sup>325</sup> The mythicists do not dismiss these other ancient authors or their writings on this basis, so it is inconsistent for them to dismiss the Gospels as they do. This seems to be another case of special pleading.

#### 5.3.2 Questionable Dating Methods

Without access to the autographs, it is true that the task of dating the Gospels will never be completely certain. However, there are several problems with the mythicist approach to dating Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The first issue is evident when Carrier and Price dismiss arguments in favour of earlier dates for the Gospels because such arguments, they (erroneously) claim, only come from fundamentalists.<sup>326</sup> Even if it were correct that only fundamentalist scholars make these arguments, this reasoning would fall

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<sup>325</sup> Michael Horner, “Are the Gospels Anonymous?” Power to Change, November 9, 2018, short video, 1:00, <https://vimeo.com/299990134>.

<sup>326</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 19; Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 264.

prey both to the genetic and ad hominem fallacies.<sup>327</sup> The mythicists are simply poisoning the well here against those who disagree with them. A more responsible approach to arguments and evidence would be to evaluate them on their own merits.

Contrary to Carrier and Price, it is not only fundamentalists who assign an early date to Mark, but also certain non-Christians. Casey, who is not a Christian, argues that Mark was written as early as the AD 40s.<sup>328</sup> His former student James Crossley, now a lecturer in the Department of Theology at the University of Nottingham, argues the same, and he is likewise not a Christian. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the dating of Mark's Gospel.

For Casey and Crossley, Mark can be dated to the AD 40s because the author takes it for granted that his audience would, without controversy, understand Jesus to be obedient to the Law of Moses. For example, Crossley notes that in 2:23-28, where Jesus gets into a dispute with the Pharisees about his disciples plucking grain, Mark seems to assume that Jesus was clearly one who observed the law:

there is an assumption that Jesus did not reject the Sabbath because plucking grain does not override any biblical law. It does however contrast with a stricter interpretation of the Sabbath. Matthew 12:1-8 and Luke 6:1-5 both have this tradition in their gospels and both have significant additions, in particular the emphasis that the disciples ate the grain immediately, which makes it clear, from their perspectives, that Jesus was not engaging in any kind of work in the biblical sense, on the Sabbath such as carrying grain home to prepare for food.<sup>329</sup>

The occasion necessitating Matthew's and Luke's clarifying additions was a rise in disputes over Torah observance due to Gentiles being included in the church after AD 50.

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<sup>327</sup> This logical error has to do with "not liking where an argument comes from." Pirie, *How to Win Every Argument*, 116.

<sup>328</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 66-90.

<sup>329</sup> James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2004), 182.

Writing earlier, Mark could assume that his audience would see Jesus as law observant; as later writers, Matthew and Luke could not. Thus, Crossley argues that Mark was written earlier.<sup>330</sup>

Casey provides a further example: “when Jesus had performed an exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum one sabbath, and healed Simon Peter’s mother-in-law at home, people brought other sick people and demoniacs to Jesus so that he could heal them (Mark 1:21-34).”<sup>331</sup> Mark carefully notes the time as being “after sunset,” Casey argues, because he was presupposing knowledge that burdens were not allowed to be carried on the Sabbath, which ended after nightfall.<sup>332</sup> Thus, just like the story of the disciples plucking the grain, Mark was taking for granted the fact that the people would see the time frame and understand that Jesus was not violating the Sabbath law. Again, this analysis does not prove an early dating beyond all doubt, but it does clearly show—contrary to mythicist assertions—that it is not only Christian fundamentalists who argue for an early dating of Mark.<sup>333</sup>

### 5.3.2.1 The Temple Destruction

The primary reason that mythicists assign a late date to the Synoptic Gospels concerns Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This proceeds logically from their mythicist denial of the miraculous—especially the possibility of anyone possessing divine knowledge of the future. However, they overlook an important fact: namely, that Mark, Matthew, and Luke never explicitly mention that Jesus’ prophecy was fulfilled. Given that the

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<sup>330</sup> Crossley, *Mark’s Gospel*, 182.

<sup>331</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 88.

<sup>332</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 88.

<sup>333</sup> Casey also makes arguments based on the presence of Aramaisms in the text.

Evangelists take the time to highlight the fulfillment of other such prophecies, American Professor of Scripture Brant Pitre finds this especially curious:

Isn't it strange that Luke would go out of his way to emphasize that the prophecy of a little-known Christian prophet named Agabus had been fulfilled in the days of the Emperor Claudius (the 40s AD) but fail to mention that Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the temple had been fulfilled in A.D. 70?<sup>334</sup>

The mythicist might object that there would be no reason to explicitly mention the destruction of the temple if the Evangelists wrote after AD 70: everyone would know about its destruction and immediately understand Jesus' prophecy to be successful.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, for Price, answers such as Pitre's above amount to "special pleading, since the gospels, at least *do* mention the fall of Jerusalem in the only appropriate way: as if Jesus had predicted it."<sup>336</sup> For mythicists, the fact that the events of AD 70 are mentioned *at all* constitutes evidence for late authorship.

However, as was just shown, Luke writes about a prophet named Agabus who "stood up and predicted through the Spirit that a great famine"—also a widely-impactful event that Luke's audience would know about—"would sweep through the entire Roman world," adding parenthetically that "this happened under Claudius."<sup>337</sup> This suggests that Luke certainly would have capitalized on the opportunity to highlight Jesus' successful prophecy if he had known about it. It is thus more likely that the Synoptics do not mention the events of AD 70 because they had not yet happened at the time of writing.

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<sup>334</sup> Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York, NY: Image, 2017), 92.

<sup>335</sup> Suggestion by Mark McEwan, in a conversation with the author of this thesis, February 15, 2019.

<sup>336</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 19.

<sup>337</sup> Acts 11:28.

Mythicists also overlook other parts of the text that point to Mark's composition being earlier than AD 70. For example, Mark records Jesus telling his disciples to "Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never be equalled again."<sup>338</sup> For Pitre, this is telling: "Why would Mark exhort his readers to pray that the desolation of the Temple not happen in winter (Mark 14:18) if they knew that it had already happened in the late summer?"<sup>339</sup> If Mark were writing after the fact, this would be a confusing and unnecessary warning.

An additional piece of evidence for dating Mark earlier than AD 70 relates to what appear to some scholars to be editorial comments placed in the mouth of Jesus throughout his Gospel, such as "let the reader understand" and "Have you not read?"<sup>340</sup> Mark 13:14 in particular is of interest for dating the Gospel: "When you see the abomination that causes desolation standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."<sup>341</sup> New Testament scholar Larry Perkins examines the apparent insertion:

The question that has intrigued interpreters is this: does the Markan narrator want his reader or listener to consider these words part of Jesus' discourse, or is the narrator providing explicit commentary to his reader, a kind of editorial parenthesis? Could these words in some sense fulfill both functions?<sup>342</sup>

Working through the language and context of Mark, Perkins argues that "this expression literally does fit Jesus' discourse, but its application rhetorically is broader than his immediate

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<sup>338</sup> Mark 13:18-19.

<sup>339</sup> Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 93.

<sup>340</sup> Mark 13:14; 2:25; 12:10, 26.

<sup>341</sup> Mark 13:14.

<sup>342</sup> Larry Perkins, "Let the Reader Understand: A Contextual Interpretation of Mark 13:14," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no. 1 (2006), 100.

followers.”<sup>343</sup> In other words, although Jesus was emphasizing the importance for his listeners to properly interpret the Jewish Scriptures, it serves a double purpose for Mark: he “invites the reader or listener to identify with the immediate followers of Jesus and respond as they were expected to.”<sup>344</sup> If this interpretation is correct, then it again suggests that Mark is giving his readers a timely warning *before* the events of AD 70.<sup>345</sup>

However, even if the mythicists were correct about an authorship somewhat later than AD 70, it would not undermine the historical reliability of the Gospels.<sup>346</sup> There is no reason to think that each and every eyewitness would have been slaughtered in Jerusalem: it is reasonable to think that younger eyewitnesses would still have been alive. “It would not be easy for a Gospel that misrepresents the life and teaching of Jesus to have gained widespread acceptance when many of his followers were still living and in a position to challenge distortions.”<sup>347</sup> That would include the major distortion of claiming that Jesus was a historical person—if, in fact, he was not. So even if a later dating were correct, the mythicist conclusion still would not follow.

Price objects that “conservative (*e.g.* evangelical pietist) scholars always reply that [views like his] of Gospel prophecy [are] just the disbelief of skeptics.”<sup>348</sup> However, as shown

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<sup>343</sup> Perkins, “Let the Reader Understand,” 103.

<sup>344</sup> Perkins, “Let the Reader Understand,” 104.

<sup>345</sup> This discussion of the Perkins article is indebted to Mark McEwan, in a conversation with the author of this thesis, April 11, 2020.

<sup>346</sup> Here and elsewhere in this thesis, certain mythicist positions are momentarily granted for the sake of argument. This should not be taken as agreement with said positions on the part of the author of this thesis. Rather, it is meant to expose the fact that even when certain mythicist positions are granted, their overall thesis—that Jesus was not a historical person—still does not follow. That is, *even when given a hypothetical advantage*, mythicist reasoning is still flawed. Correspondingly, *even when this thesis is at a hypothetical disadvantage*, it still succeeds. In sum, this maneuver is intended to underscore the strength of this thesis: if it succeeds even with a hypothetical disadvantage, then it surely succeeds under normal circumstances.

<sup>347</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 55.

<sup>348</sup> Price, *Jesus is Dead*, 19.

above, his quick dismissal of the miraculous overlooks a matter with genuine textual precedent. Since the foregoing arguments for dating the Gospels earlier are—just like the mythicists’ arguments—based both on what *is* and *is not* in the text (such as that Jesus’ prophecy of the temple destruction is recorded but not its fulfillment), it is difficult to see what makes the arguments of Carrier or Price any better.

### 5.3.2.2 The Amount of Time Having Passed

Finally, mythicists assign later dates to the Gospels because the authors seem to indicate that certain events happened long ago. This is unjustified. Yes, it is true that if one of the four Evangelists writes, “In the days of John the Baptist,” he is referring to times past. It is also true that if he reports that the story of the disciples stealing the body has circulated “until this day,” that he refers to his own time—the time when the Gospel in question is being written. However, in both cases the exact amount of time that has passed is formally indeterminate. It does not necessarily follow that generations have passed.

This sort of indeterminacy is present in other New Testament works. For example, in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, he writes that Jesus “appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, *most of whom are still alive*, though some have died.”<sup>349</sup> Scholars date this letter to around AD 54-55, about twenty years after the Crucifixion, which would hardly be several generations’ worth of time.<sup>350</sup> Luke also does not even say anything about a generation having passed before he wrote his accounts. He simply states that his sources were “from the beginning … eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”<sup>351</sup> In other words, Luke

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<sup>349</sup> 1 Cor. 15:6; emphasis added.

<sup>350</sup> Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014), 136.

<sup>351</sup> Luke 1:2.

asserts that “the eyewitnesses had been present throughout the events from the appropriate commencement of the author’s history onward.”<sup>352</sup> Thus, the mythicists’ claims that the Gospels were written in the second century seem unfounded.

### 5.3.3 Early Church Unanimity about Authorship

Even if the mythicists were correct that the Gospels did not have the authors’ *names in the text*, it would not automatically present a problem for their historical credibility. There is a good reason for thinking that the authorship of each Gospel was established and accepted by the early church: the early church was uniform in naming the authors, which suggests that they may have had a method apart from the Evangelists being identified in the texts. American pastor and author Timothy Paul Jones argues that the title of each Gospel was attached to its original manuscripts with a tag: “When titles *were* attached to ancient books, they often took the form of tags, sewn to the edges of the documents. Over the centuries, these tags could have been lost.”<sup>353</sup> This could explain how the early church knew who the authors were. Supposing that the Gospels were originally anonymous, and that the authors were made up (as Doherty and Murdock suggest), a more likely scenario than the church being so unified on the authorship is that different churches in different locations would have attached different names to them. Jones explains it this way:

[Consider] the factors that were present in the Roman Empire—no telephones or email to allow instant communication, and a postal service that took months to transport a letter across the empire. Plus, in the first and second centuries, there was no centrally recognized authority among Christians to force congregations to connect a certain name

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<sup>352</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 119.

<sup>353</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman’s “Misquoting Jesus”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 98.

to each Gospel—no executive director, no denominational board, no international convention of Christians.<sup>354</sup>

Thus, the mythicists appear to be projecting modern circumstances back onto church history.

#### 5.3.4 Papias's Reliability

Carrier rejects Papias's testimony about the authorships of Matthew and Mark, but his reasons for doing so are suspect. It is true that Papias does not claim to have known the apostles personally. Rather, it was Eusebius who wrote that Papias transmitted “other narratives of the words of the Lord which came from the afore-mentioned Ariston, and also the traditions from John the Elder.”<sup>355</sup> It is also true that Eusebius says that Papias “was a man who seems to have been quite small minded.”<sup>356</sup> However, it is important to note that Eusebius is not talking about Papias’s ability to write history. He is talking about some of the things that Papias believes doctrinally, such that “a thousand year period will occur after the resurrection of the dead, and that the kingdom of Christ will be set up corporeally on this very earth.”<sup>357</sup> Eusebius himself seemed to realize this: he “evidently valued at least part of what Papias said about the origins of the Gospels,” since he “quotes two passages from Papias, referring specifically to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew.”<sup>358</sup>

Carrier cynically refers to Papias as someone who prefers hearsay over written documents; however, it is more likely that Papias valued the words of the eyewitnesses themselves, the way any historian would. Since Papias could not hear the disciples personally, he

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<sup>354</sup> Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 101.

<sup>355</sup> Bettenson and Maunder, *The Documents*, 29.

<sup>356</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 3:39

<sup>357</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3:39.

<sup>358</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 202.

went with the next best thing, listening to “traditions that the elders had from the Lord’s disciples: Andrew, Peter, and the others.”<sup>359</sup> In other words, he wanted to get as close to the participants of the events as he could. In this way he was “portraying his inquiries on the model of those made by historians, appealing to historiographic ‘best practice.’”<sup>360</sup> Given that Eusebius trusted Papias for his information on the Gospel writers, this is a plausible explanation.

Carrier claims that Papias recounts wild stories. First, he records that “Papias … said Jesus promised us vast clusters of gigantic grapes, and other nonsense.”<sup>361</sup> He infers from this that Papias cannot be trusted for information about who wrote the Gospels. However, this tradition about the vast cluster of grapes allegedly came from John the Apostle, and it does not sound any more incredible than other traditions recorded in the New Testament about the promised paradise that will follow Christ’s return. It certainly is not clear from this statement that fabricated sayings placed in Jesus’ mouth “had gotten out of hand,”<sup>362</sup> as Carrier claims.

A second and more difficult story that Carrier brings up is Papias’s account of the death of Judas Iscariot. Papias wrote that “Judas walked about in this world a sad example of impiety; for his body having swollen to such an extent that he could not pass where a chariot could pass easily, he was crushed by the chariot, so that his bowels gushed out.”<sup>363</sup> This does seem unlikely, and it contradicts the earlier accounts of Judas’s death in the Gospels and Acts, in which he does die. But it does not affect Papias’s attestation of Gospel authorship. Jones continues, “The

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<sup>359</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 17.

<sup>360</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 24.

<sup>361</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 325. The word “nonsense” is Carrier’s word—not what Papias thinks of Jesus’ promises.

<sup>362</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 325.

<sup>363</sup> Papias, “Fragments of Papias,” 3, New Advent, accessed July 7, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0125.htm>.

importance of Papias's testimony is that it verifies that the type of authorial traditions cited by Irenaeus of Lyons—traditions that connected the four New Testament Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—existed long before the mid to late second century.”<sup>364</sup>

Next, Carrier claims that Paul practiced a less Torah-observant Christianity than Peter, and that the Gospel of Mark reflects Paul's type of Christianity—which undermines Papias's testimony that Mark wrote the Gospel with Peter as his source. However, as shown by Casey and Crossley above, there are many instances in which Mark portrays Jesus as law observant. Other examples of this are that Jesus fasts in the wilderness in 1:12-13; he presupposes the validity of the temple, the sacrifices, and Israel's holy days in 14:14; and he reads and quotes from Jewish scriptures in 10:19 and 12:24.<sup>365</sup> So it does not appear that Mark was all that antagonistic towards Peter's position. Therefore, Papias's testimony that Mark recorded Peter's remembrance in the Gospel is a valid possibility.

Carrier argues that since Mark was supposedly from Palestine, he should be expected to have some familiarity with local geography. However, Mark has Jesus going both north and south in 7:31 to reach a certain location, and Carrier argues that this betrays Mark's ignorance of Palestinian geography. Once again, this is said to count against Papias's testimony. This problem has been dealt with by Christian scholars. For example, Professor of New Testament Craig Blomberg acknowledges that though the route seems circuitous, “this would have been natural for an itinerant preacher.”<sup>366</sup> Carrier neither shows awareness of such solutions nor shows why

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<sup>364</sup> Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 148.

<sup>365</sup> These examples are given by Evans in *Fabricating Jesus*, 223.

<sup>366</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), 140.

these solutions are inadequate. Hence, his reasons for distrusting Papias's testimony about the authorship of Mark are unsound.

Finally, Carrier is simply wrong in thinking that the designation “Gospel according to …” was a way of identifying the source and not the writer. For example, the works of Josephus were entitled *Flavius Josephus, Historical Investigation of the Jewish Conflict*; and *Flavius Josephus, Regarding the Antiquity of the Jews*.<sup>367</sup> No one thinks Josephus was merely a source and not the author behind these works.

### 5.3.5 Literacy of the Evangelists

Acharya S. argues that since the traditional authors of the Gospels were fishermen, they could not have been written in “well cultivated Greek.” There are several points that might be offered in response. First, not all of the traditional authors were fishermen. As a tax collector, Matthew would have had to be able to collect and record information, likely in multiple languages, including Greek. Luke was a physician, and he would have at least been able to read summaries of the medical knowledge that existed at that time.<sup>368</sup> In other words, even if we assume that fishermen were illiterate, it would not apply to the others. Moreover, appealing to the likely fact that fisherman were generally illiterate does not tell scholars anything about specific individuals.<sup>369</sup>

It is a fact that John and Mark contain the simplest Greek of the four Gospels; this makes sense given that they may not have had educations like those of Luke or Matthew.<sup>370</sup> John was a

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<sup>367</sup> Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Stop Believing* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 132.

<sup>368</sup> Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 115-17.

<sup>369</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 36.

<sup>370</sup> Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 117.

fisherman, but he still could have been sufficiently literate to write his Gospel. We do not know what Mark's level of education was. Furthermore, even if Mark and John were illiterate, they could have relied on professional scribes to jot down what was dictated to them.<sup>371</sup> None of these mythicist allegations about literacy necessarily undermines authorship or a legitimate connection to eyewitness testimony.

Finally, while Carrier is likely correct that Peter preached in Aramaic, it is not at all certain that Peter expected his Gospel (Mark) to be written in the same language. After all, he would likely want it to be readable for a wide range of people. As for Matthew's Gospel, both Papias and Irenaeus agree that Matthew wrote his Gospel in his native language. Papias writes, "Matthew composed the sayings in the Hebrew language, and each translated them as well as he could."<sup>372</sup> Irenaeus concurs: "Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there."<sup>373</sup> Papias further tells us that Matthew was translated into Greek, though he does not tell us who did it, just that they did it as they were able.<sup>374</sup> Perhaps, then, someone translated it with Mark's help, and perhaps that is the version which has been preserved. It is not clear how the translation of a Gospel from one language into another necessarily undermines a traditional view on authorship as expressed by Papias.

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<sup>371</sup> Jones, *Misquoting Truth*, 117-18.

<sup>372</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 3.39.

<sup>373</sup> Bettenson and Maunder, *The Documents*, 29.

<sup>374</sup> Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 42.

### **5.3.6 The Irrelevancy of Authorship to Jesus' Historicity**

While there are good reasons to doubt mythicist denials of traditional authorship, it is worth noting that even if they were correct,<sup>375</sup> this would still not show that Jesus was not a historical person. As Ehrman notes,

In 1983 the famous, or rather infamous, Hitler Diaries came to public view, and they were immediately authenticated by experts. But they were soon shown to be forgeries, and the forger, a German scoundrel named Konrad Kujau, was then caught red handed. ... The fact that he forged these sources about Hitler, however, has no bearing on the question of whether Hitler existed. That has to be decided on other grounds. In the case of the Gospels and Jesus, even though we don't know who the authors of these books were, we can still use them as historical sources for knowing about Jesus. ...<sup>376</sup>

Therefore, the contention that the authors of the Gospels are unknown is another red herring in the mythicists' case.

## 5.4 Differences between the Gospels

### **5.4.1 A Double Standard on Differences**

Mythicist arguments capitalize on places where the Gospel accounts seem to contradict one another. However, as American historians and apologists Michael Licona and Gary Habermas make clear, the most that a genuine contradiction between the Gospels would call into question is biblical inerrancy. But inerrancy is not needed for a document to be historically reliable: "Historians do not conclude that, [just] because individual accounts contain discrepancies, an event did not occur. Other works of antiquity are not rejected when discrepancies exist. Rather, the data is more closely examined."<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> As mentioned earlier, momentarily adopting a hypothetical disadvantage is intended to underscore the strength of this thesis. This should not be taken as agreement with said positions on the part of the author of this thesis.

<sup>376</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 182.

<sup>377</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 231-32.

As an example of an event accepted as historical despite discrepancies between reports, consider the Roman historians Tacitus's and Suetonius's accounts of a very famous event in history: the fire of Rome. Who set the fire? Tacitus explains, "Whether it was accidental or caused by a criminal act on the part of the emperor is uncertain—both versions have supporters."<sup>378</sup> Suetonius, by contrast, is very certain who set it: "Pretending to be disgusted by the drab old buildings and narrow winding streets of Rome, he [Nero] brazenly set fire to the city. ...."<sup>379</sup> Where was Nero when the fire started? According to Tacitus, Nero was in another town, Antium.<sup>380</sup> But Suetonius says he was in Rome and "watched the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas, enraptured by what he called the beauty of the flames. ...."<sup>381</sup>

Not unlike the Gospel writers, ancient biographers of other persons did not record absolutely everything about their subjects, and historians today take no issue with the historicity of their subjects. For example, in his biography of Alexander the Great, Plutarch writes,

It being my purpose to write the lives of Alexander the king and of Caesar, by whom Pompey was destroyed, the multitude of their great actions affords so large a field that I were to blame if I should not by way of apology forewarn my reader that I have chosen rather to epitomise the most celebrated parts of their story, than to insist at large on every particular circumstance of it.<sup>382</sup>

Here Plutarch is admitting that he was not even capable of recording everything that Alexander did during his lifetime. This is similar to what John says at the end of his own Gospel: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that

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<sup>378</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals* 362.

<sup>379</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* 337.38.

<sup>380</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals* 363.

<sup>381</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* 337.38.

<sup>382</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander the Great* 1:1.

the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”<sup>383</sup> In fact, according to Pitre, the fact that the Gospel authors selected stories to include and leave out is one of the features that marks the Gospels as authentic biographies.<sup>384</sup>

Finally, in Plutarch’s *Lives* there is an example of an author repeating a story with differences. In both *The Life of Antony* and *The Life of Brutus*, the aftermath of Cicero being executed by Antony is described. In *Brutus*, the titular character’s suicide is described this way: “He placed Strato next to him, and then, grasping his naked sword by the hilt with both hands, he threw himself upon it and died.”<sup>385</sup> In *Antony*, however, we are merely told that Brutus took his own life.<sup>386</sup> Licona explains the differences in details by suggesting that “Plutarch provides more details in *Brutus*, due to its biographical relevance.”<sup>387</sup>

Despite these supposed contradictions, historians do not call into question whether there was any fire in Rome at all. Therefore, mythicists must demonstrate why it is permissible to hold the Gospels to a higher standard. Moreover, it is not clear that differences in the Gospels even constitute an error.

#### 5.4.2 Differences in Wording

Plausible harmonizations exist for many of the differences between the Gospels.<sup>388</sup> Harmonization of discrepancies is a legitimate and common way of doing historiography for

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<sup>383</sup> John 21:25.

<sup>384</sup> Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 75.

<sup>385</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Brutus* 52.

<sup>386</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Antony* 22.

<sup>387</sup> Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 106.

<sup>388</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case*, 232.

secular historians as well. But even if no plausible harmonization is available, it does not call into question the historicity of a key figure or event. The issue at hand for examining mythicism is not whether the Bible is inerrant, but whether Jesus existed at all.

Regarding the exact words of the voice from heaven, it could be the case that Mark and Luke copied them down with more precision while Matthew summarized their significance. As Bock explains,

In the ancient world the responsibility was not seen in quotation, but in getting the gist of the teaching right. This is technically known as the *vox* of Jesus (the voice of Jesus) and the *verba* of Jesus (his words). Historical reliability requires only the accurate summarization of Jesus' teachings. Though citation is more precise, the use of accurate summary is still historical.<sup>389</sup>

This shows the difference between directly quoting a teaching of Jesus and getting the gist of it. As Eddy and Boyd explain, memory in orally-dominant cultures, such as Palestine, was focused generally on

things, not words (i.e. on illocutions, not locutions.). ... Among other things, this suggests that scholars who strive to recover Jesus' *ipsissima vox* are, in most cases, pursuing the wrong quarry. While we can expect to find the essential *voice* of Jesus in the early church's tradition, we cannot, apart from certain cases ... suppose early Christians would have been invested in preserving the exact words of Jesus.<sup>390</sup>

This suggests that critical scholars are expecting too much of the text when they see differences in Jesus' wording as a genuine conflict.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Can I Trust the Bible?: Defending the Bible's Reliability* (Atlanta, GA: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 2002), 43-4.

<sup>390</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 429.

<sup>391</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 429.

Furthermore, Blomberg suggests that Matthew was likely rewording Mark “in order to highlight the fact that the Heavenly voice spoke not only for Jesus’ benefit but also for the benefit of the crowd.”<sup>392</sup> Nothing in either passage negates such a harmonization.

Getting the gist of the teaching down is also likely what happened when Matthew softened Jesus’ teaching about hatred in Luke 14:26-33.<sup>393</sup> Here, understanding the meanings of the words used is important. Blomberg notes that “Matthew’s paraphrase is a fair interpretation of what Jesus’ harsher-sounding statement in Luke meant. In Semitic language and thought, ‘hate’ had a broader range of meanings than it does in English, including the sense of ‘leaving aside,’ ‘renunciation’ or ‘abandonment.’”<sup>394</sup> This would mean that Matthew was not toning down the radical idea behind Jesus’ words at all, rather he was bringing out the meaning even more explicitly. Therefore, there is no contradiction here.

#### 5.4.3 Differences in Details

Before considering a few responses to the alleged contradictions in the details of the Gospels, an important principle needs to be laid out. In order for accounts to be contradictory, they have to be recording two stories that could not possibly both be accurate. Chamberlain explains: “When examining alleged discrepancies among parallel passages in the Gospel accounts . . . , it is important to ask whether the accounts in question are truly *contradictory* or merely *different* in such a way that they could both be correct.”<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, Academic, 2007), 158.

<sup>393</sup> Matt. 10:37.

<sup>394</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 161.

<sup>395</sup> Chamberlain, *Why People Stop Believing*, 140.

Price is not quoting Jeremiah correctly when he says that the prophet proclaimed Jehoiachin to be childless, in contradiction to Matthew's claim that Jesus was descended from him.<sup>396</sup> What Jeremiah actually says is, "enroll this man as if childless."<sup>397</sup> "As if" does not then mean the same as it being literally historical that Jehoiachin was childless. Jeremiah further prophesied that none of Jehoiachin's descendants would prosper, nor sit on the throne of David. This was indeed fulfilled: none of his immediate successors became king, and Jesus himself was only a legal son due to Joseph adopting him.<sup>398</sup> Finally, Price is correct that both genealogies in Luke and Matthew are tied to Joseph; however, that does not preclude Heli from being Joseph's father in law. Some ancients even thought that might be the case. Blomberg notes that

The Palestinian Talmud refers to the father of Mary as Eli (*j. Sanh 23c j. Hag. 77d*), while apocryphal Christian traditions call him Joachim (*Protev. Jas.*). But Joachim is a Hebrew variation of Eliakim (with *Joa* and *Eli* both coming from names for God), from which Heli could be derived. At any rate we know that ancient Israelites kept written records and oral traditions about their ancestries in meticulous details, so it is not difficult to imagine Jesus's genealogies being preserved.<sup>399</sup>

In other words, it is quite possible that Luke's genealogy could be tied to Mary, and that this would have been acceptable practice in Jewish eyes.

Regarding whether there was one Gerasene demoniac or two, none of the Gospels ever states that there was only one demoniac. As Geisler and Howe humorously put it, "There is a very fundamental mathematical law that reconciles this apparent contradiction ...[:] wherever there are two, there is [at least] always one."<sup>400</sup> It is at least possible then that Mark and Luke are

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<sup>396</sup> Matt. 1:12-16.

<sup>397</sup> Jer. 22:30.

<sup>398</sup> Normal L. Geisler and Thomas Howe put forward this suggestion in *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 277.

<sup>399</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 59.

<sup>400</sup> Geisler and Howe, *Big Book*, 337.

using a literary motif called spotighting where they focused only on the demonic that was speaking.<sup>401</sup>

Carrier goes out of his way to make Matthew's account of Jesus' triumphal entry seem ridiculous: Jesus supposedly rides into the city on both the donkey and its foal. However, when Matthew says that Jesus "sat on them," the word "them" could be referring to the clothes rather than the animals. For Blomberg, this confusing detail stems from ambiguous grammar.<sup>402</sup>

As for whether Jesus delivered his sermon on the mount or on the plain,<sup>403</sup> a definition of "plain" is helpful. A plain is an area of flat land with few trees. This would not rule out the top of a mountain, which makes the harmonization that Jesus taught on the flat top of the mountain possible. Blomberg's question shows the unnecessary lack of charity among those who demand more here: "are they [the critics] imagining him addressing throngs of people who are all trying to balance themselves on a steep slope without falling over and rolling downhill?"<sup>404</sup> There is no need to posit that the Gospel writers were simply redacting each other, as Carrier does, because there is no necessary contradiction. However, even if they *were* redacting each other, it would not matter unless we are measuring accuracy according to the modern standards of biography.<sup>405</sup>

Price argues that by having women leave the empty tomb without telling anyone, Mark was trying to account for why no one had heard about the empty tomb before his Gospel was

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<sup>401</sup> Michael R. Licona suggests this in *Differences*, 132. He describes spotighting as "When an author focuses attention on a person so that the person's involvement in a scene is clearly described, whereas mention of others who were likewise involved is neglected, the author has shined his literary spotlight on that person." *Differences*, 20.

<sup>402</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 194.

<sup>403</sup> Matt. 5:7; Luke 19:49.

<sup>404</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 118.

<sup>405</sup> Michael R. Licona, "Viewing the Gospels as Ancient Biography," in *Biographies and Jesus: What Does it Mean for the Gospels to be Biographies*, ed. Craig S. Keener and Edward T. Wright (Lexington KY: Emmeth Press, 2016), 327.

written. Furthermore, he argues that later Gospel writers like Matthew were not happy with this ending, so they expanded on it. However, it seems unlikely that the empty tomb is merely Matthew's later addition because Jews believed in a bodily resurrection, and that would imply an empty tomb.<sup>406</sup> New Testament scholar Michael F. Bird writes:

The reports of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances were anything but recent when Mark writes (probably in the 60s) as reports that Jesus 'died and rose' would have been in circulation for over a generation through traditional material of an early vintage, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:14.<sup>407</sup>

For Bird, Mark ends his Gospel this way with good reason. He is setting his readers up to expect Jesus' resurrection by means of his earlier predictions that he will die and rise again. Mark writes, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*"<sup>408</sup> This verse does not necessarily teach that the women did not tell the disciples, and there is no plausible reason why they would have been afraid to do so. What Mark likely means is that they did not tell anyone outside the community of Jesus' followers. "For example, in Mark 1:44 Jesus says to the healed leper: 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go show yourself to the priest.' By analogy the statement in Mark 16:8 might mean 'they said nothing to anyone *except the disciples.*'"<sup>409</sup>

Matthew's Gospel is the only one to mention the guards posted at the tomb. One explanation for this is that Matthew was specifically trying to counter an idea circulating in the area to which he was writing, namely Palestine. Scholars are fairly certain that Matthew was

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<sup>406</sup> N. T. Wright demonstrates this quite thoroughly in *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 209.

<sup>407</sup> Michael F. Bird and James G. Crossley, *How Did Christianity Begin?: A Believer and a Non-Believer Examine the Evidence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 41.

<sup>408</sup> Mark 16:8; emphasis added.

<sup>409</sup> Bird and Crossley, *How Did*, 42; emphasis in original.

writing in a Palestinian context because “It is rich in Jewish concerns. So it is only natural that this internecine element in the dispute appears only here.”<sup>410</sup> Jews in Palestine were most likely to have heard the rumor that the disciples stole Jesus’ body, so it was a specific concern for Matthew to address.<sup>411</sup>

Concerning the number of angels at the empty tomb, Price’s rebuttal to the spotlighting argument is a straw-man tactic. This was referred to as “spotlighting” earlier, and it has been shown to be a common practice in ancient historical writing. Proponents such as Blomberg and Licona are not suggesting that one writer did not see the second angel because the first one was too fat, or out on a coffee break. This is mockery on Price’s part—far from serious, scholarly engagement. What they are actually suggesting is that “one [angel] acted as a spokesman for the two and dominated the scene in a way that left the other easily ignored in narratives that so regularly omitted non-essential details.”<sup>412</sup>

#### 5.4.4 Differences in Events Included

Along with other Christian New Testament scholars, Blomberg admits that the Gospel writers omit certain passages and episodes from Jesus’ ministry. He also admits the frustrating fact that it “is almost always … impossible” to explain why they do this.<sup>413</sup> Nonetheless, it can be shown that Carrier’s and Price’s uncharitable conclusions about the four Evangelists’ motivations are neither the only ones possible nor the best ones available.

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<sup>410</sup> Bock and Simpson, *Jesus According to Scripture*, 502-3.

<sup>411</sup> Matt. 27:11-15.

<sup>412</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 194.

<sup>413</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 171.

First, there are plausible reasons for why the Gospel authors may have included some stories and not others. Carrier is right that Matthew and Luke portray Jesus' birth narrative differently; however, the focus in both books is consistently on Jesus himself—not on his family, which indicates a lack of understanding of the authors' intentions on Carrier's part. Moreover, Carrier gives the impression that Luke was engaged in some sort of coverup: "whereas Matthew depicts Jesus' family as essentially outlaws, fleeing Bethlehem and Herod's rule and cowering abroad for over a decade, Luke describes Jesus' family as *obeying* the law and *going to* Bethlehem in accordance with their Emperor's command (Luke 2:1-4)."⁴¹⁴ But even if Luke's intention was to focus on Jesus' family, it is unlikely such redaction was in his mind at all.

It is evident that Matthew is showing the relationship of Jesus to Israel. In the case of Jesus' childhood, Matthew emphasizes his relation to Israel's scriptures. Bock writes, "Most of the scriptural fulfillment that Matthew cites helps us understand who Jesus is and how he is realizing God's plan. Scripture is fulfilled as Jesus (1) is conceived of a virgin, (2) is born in Bethlehem, [and] (3) emerges from Egypt. . ."⁴¹⁵ If Matthew is trying to show that Jesus fulfills Jewish prophecy, it explains his emphasis on these three points in the birth narrative. As for Luke, one plausible interpretation is that he is comparing and contrasting the births of Jesus and John the Baptist.<sup>⁴¹⁶</sup> Indeed, the clues that point to Luke's and Matthew's emphasis being on Jesus, and not his family, seem to come from the texts themselves. Carrier's hypothesis that the emphasis is on Jesus' family must be read into the text.

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<sup>⁴¹⁴</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 472; emphasis in original.

<sup>⁴¹⁵</sup> Bock and Simpson, *Jesus According to Scripture*, 86.

<sup>⁴¹⁶</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 61.

Second, the stories about how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem are not as problematic as Price would have his readers believe. Yes, Luke narrates how Jesus' family ended up in Jerusalem while Matthew does not, but it does not follow from this that the two accounts are incompatible. For that to be the case, Matthew would have to begin his account in Bethlehem; only then would it conflict with Gabriel appearing to Mary in Nazareth, as he does in Luke. As things stand, Matthew simply skips over the events of Luke, picking up the story "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem."<sup>417</sup> As Bock notes, "it does not follow that Bethlehem is their residence just because they have found a place to reside by the time the Magi arrive. Thus, to argue error deduces too much from the accounts."<sup>418</sup>

Moreover, there is still room for the flight to Egypt in Luke's account. In Luke it says, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth."<sup>419</sup> What it does not say is how much time had elapsed. Blomberg notes that the next two verses in Luke summarize twelve years of Jesus' life, and the only reason scholars know this is that vs. 42 mentions it. "More dramatically still, 2:52 refers to a period of about eighteen years, as 3:23 discloses, as Luke jumps from the twelve-year-old boy Jesus to his life as a man at about the age of thirty."<sup>420</sup> Because of his tendency to summarize, there is no need to conclude that Luke omitted the story of the flight to Egypt out of ignorance.

Carrier asserts that Luke's unique material about the Resurrection, such as the story of Peter going to the tomb, was unknown to Matthew. But there are other, equally plausible

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<sup>417</sup> Matt. 2:1.

<sup>418</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1, 1:1-9:50, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 205.

<sup>419</sup> Luke 2:39.

<sup>420</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 61.

explanations for these omissions. Perhaps Matthew omitted certain stories to leave more space for his treatment of the guards at the tomb. Furthermore, he might not have felt the need to emphasize the physical nature of Jesus' resurrection to his Jewish audience, who already would have been familiar with this idea:<sup>421</sup> "when people from Jewish backgrounds spoke of resurrection, they envisioned what Daniel 12:2 describes: a bodily return to new life, once and for ever, at the end of the age."<sup>422</sup> As mentioned before, Palestine was one of the high context cultures of the time: once people heard information, they did not need it repeated over and over again. Jews believed in a bodily resurrection, so Matthew could safely assume that people would already be inclined to think in terms of a bodily resurrection at the end of time. Luke, by contrast, was writing to a Gentile named Theophilus, who might have needed the extra emphasis.

As for why Luke omitted Jesus' appearances over forty days, this could plausibly be explained by the use of another literary motif, known as *compression*: "when an author knowingly portrays events over a shorter period of time than the actual time it took for those events to occur, the author has compressed the story."<sup>423</sup> Even today, if a friend asks how the hockey game went last night, one answer might be simply to give the name of the winning team—compressing the answer. Leaving out certain details does not necessarily mean that a writer does not know them, as Carrier suggests. There may well have been other reasons for such compressions. For example, Luke simply might not have had room for all of the information, so

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<sup>421</sup> Thielman, *New Testament*, 84.

<sup>422</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 139.

<sup>423</sup> Licona, *Differences*, 20.

he might have left some of the stories for Acts.<sup>424</sup> Since Luke apparently wrote both pieces without a problem, scholars do not have to find one either.

Aside from these suggestions, however, the remarkable thing is not how little material is repeated between the Gospels, but rather how much. Even the mythicists seem to acknowledge this. Examples abound, such as the parallel passages of Mark, Matthew, and Luke where Jesus' maltreatment at the hand of the guards in the passion narrative is described. Mark writes, "Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, 'Prophesy!' The guards also took him over and beat him."<sup>425</sup> In Matthew, "Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, 'Prophesy to us Christ. Who hit you?'"<sup>426</sup> Finally, Luke writes, "The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, 'Prophesy! Who hit you?' And they said many other insulting things."<sup>427</sup>

Carrier recognizes these similarities and writes, "Except for dropping 'unto us, Christ' to economize the passage, the Greek of Luke here is identical to that of Matthew. ... Luke then combines this with Mark's detail that they covered his eyes, which Matthew omitted (or rather altered, having them spit 'in his face' rather than cover 'his face'))."<sup>428</sup> However, rather than this solving the problem of the Gospels being too different for Carrier, it creates a new issue. Now it looks to Carrier as though Luke is simply using Matthew as a source and then changing it.

Carrier suggests that Luke might have been trying to unify two significantly divided factions of

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<sup>424</sup> Pitre explains that average scrolls were about 30-35 feet long, which amounted to about 10,000 to 20,000 words, in *The Case for Jesus*, 72.

<sup>425</sup> Mark 14:65.

<sup>426</sup> Matt. 26:67-68.

<sup>427</sup> Luke 22:63-64 (NIV).

<sup>428</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 471.

Christianity: the Jewish, Torah-observant sect and the Gentile, less Torah-observant sect. He writes, “Luke is thus in effect a ‘rebuttal’ to Matthew. … Luke promotes a harmonious church, one that is a good and faithful evolution of Judaism into what is essentially (but carefully never said to be) the Gentile church.”<sup>429</sup>

Two things can be said in response to this. First, it must be pointed out that Carrier finds reasons to doubt the Gospel accounts both when they are too different and when they are too similar to one another. It is unclear what the perfect balance would be for him. Second, there is an anachronistic aspect to Carrier’s arguments. He is thinking with a Post-Gutenberg mindset where everyone has easy access to these works and can scan through them to catch such subtleties as polemics and rebuttals. When the Gospels were written, (with possibly the exception of Luke) they were not written for individuals, but for communities that would hear them read out loud. As Eddy and Boyd argue, “orally oriented texts were used largely as preservation tools and memory cues for future oral/aural performances, not as closely and constantly consulted texts in the way we often use them in the modern, literate world.”<sup>430</sup> It is unlikely that people hearing it read in such a context would have a chance to even process all these subtle polemics.<sup>431</sup>

#### 5.4.5 Differences in Chronology

Carrier and Price are correct that determining a strict chronology of Jesus’ life can be difficult, but this is not some new problem that they have uncovered. Blomberg writes, “at least as long ago as the time of St Augustine, it has been recognized that the Gospels did not set out to

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<sup>429</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 473.

<sup>430</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 402.

<sup>431</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, 404.

supply a detailed itinerary of Jesus' ministry with every event in its proper chronological sequence. Instead, they frequently arrange passages in topical or thematic order. . . .”<sup>432</sup> Blomberg suggests that one should deal with these differences by assuming a chronological connection only when the text explicitly provides one.<sup>433</sup>

#### 5.4.5.1 When Was Jesus Born?

Regarding the date of Jesus' birth, Fitzgerald finds it impossible to reconcile Matthew's date of 4 BC with (what he takes to be) Luke's date of AD 6, neither of which lines up with the West's conventional dating system. Albeit complex, with a bit of work this matter can be untangled. The first step in solving this problem is to acknowledge that, contrary to the popular misconception, Jesus was not born in AD 1. Going by Matthew's report, it was probably between 6 and 4 BC. Blomberg explains that

According to Josephus's information about the death of Herod the Great and the start of the reigns of his sons, Herod must have died in what we know as 4 B.C. Because, shortly before his death, he had the babies in Bethlehem slaughtered “who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi” (Matthew 2:16), it may be that Christ had been born up to two years earlier.<sup>434</sup>

Now, Fitzgerald is correct that this is ostensibly at odds with Luke's chronology: Luke 2:2 reports that Christ was born when Quirinius was governor, which both Jewish and Roman sources place during AD 6-9—about ten years after Matthew's date. However, there are a couple of different options for resolving this. (1) The Greek word for governor could generally refer to many leadership roles that Quirinius had taken on. “Some ancient sources . . . speak of Quirinius leading military expeditions in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire a decade earlier in a

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<sup>432</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 168.

<sup>433</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 169.

<sup>434</sup> Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 222.

manner most naturally explained if he held some official post in Syria.”<sup>435</sup> A decade before AD 6 would line up perfectly with Blomberg’s proposed time frame for Christ’s birth. (2) Blomberg notes that it is also possible, albeit less likely, that “we should translate this verse [Luke 2:2] as ‘this was the census that took place *before* one under Quirinius, governor of Syria,’” in which case it would not be necessary to make Jesus’ birth line up with the time Quirinius was in office.<sup>436</sup> Neither of these options is certain, but they again provide arguable alternatives to the assertion that Luke was merely ignorant of history. Fitzgerald does not even interact with such alternatives.

#### 5.4.5.2 When Did Jesus Cleanse the Temple?

Carrier wonders whether readers are meant to believe that Jesus cleansed the temple at the beginning or end of his ministry. A likely explanation is that it happened in the time given by the synoptic Gospels and that John relocated the story for other purposes. This is supported by one of the criteria for historical authenticity: multiple attestation. Stories that are reported about by more than one source are less likely to be the creative product of one author.<sup>437</sup> In this case, there are indications in the text itself that John was not trying to say that it happened at a different time frame. First, John 2:13-25 is the only passage in his first four chapters that is not linked to what comes before or after it. Second,

many commentators recognize a major division in John’s Gospel between chapters 11-12, and chapter 12 introduces the second ‘half’ of the gospel with a chronologically dislocated passage. ... One could therefore assume that the cleansing of the temple

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<sup>435</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 248.

<sup>436</sup> Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 222.

<sup>437</sup> Evans explains this criterion in *Fabricating Jesus*, 48.

introduces the first ‘half’ in the same way with the six-day sequence of 1:1-12: as an introduction.<sup>438</sup>

The important thing to note is that such a relocation does not reflect poorly on the historical credibility of a document. In fact, this practice is found in other historical sources from the time. Licona tells us that “Plutarch displaces events and even occasionally informs us he has done so.”<sup>439</sup> In Plutarch’s *Cato the Younger*, he tells the story of how Hortensius, an admirer of Cato’s, desired to marry his wife and all of the steps he took to make it happen. As an editorial aside, Plutarch puts in, “This incident occurred at a later time, it is true, but since I had taken up the topic of the women of Cato’s household I decided to anticipate it.”<sup>440</sup> In other words, Plutarch felt free to move events around as suited his subjects. John might have as well. This does not trouble historians with respect to Roman history, so neither should similar displacements in the Gospels trouble historians of biblical history.

#### 5.4.5.3 How Long Did Jesus’ Ministry Last?

Carrier wonders whether Jesus’ ministry lasted one year, as the Synoptic Gospels seem to suggest, or three years, as is found in John. First, it is important to note that nothing in the Synoptics explicitly limits Jesus’ ministry to one year. Mythicists who bring this up are creating a problem where none exists. Furthermore, “the Synoptics contain remarkably few references to time, place or sequence of events, whereas John is replete with chronological and geographic details.”<sup>441</sup> From this Blomberg concludes that a strong case can be made that John organized his

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<sup>438</sup> Both lines of evidence come from Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 217.

<sup>439</sup> Licona, *Differences*, 20.

<sup>440</sup> Plutarch, *Cato the Younger* 25.4.

<sup>441</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 214-15.

gospel *almost entirely* in chronological order, while the synoptics were organized according to topic.<sup>442</sup>

#### 5.4.5.4 What Day Was Jesus Crucified?

Price wants to know whether Jesus was crucified on the Passover or not. The answer might be to take John 19:14 to be referring to the day before the Sabbath, not the day before Passover began. Blomberg explains that “The parallel in Mark 15:42 further reinforces this conclusion.”<sup>443</sup>

#### 5.4.5.5 What Time of Day Was Jesus Crucified?

Mark 15:25 does say that Jesus was crucified at the third hour and died at the ninth. It is also true that, according to John 19:14, Jesus is still on trial before Pilate at that time. While the writer of John’s Gospel was interested in chronological details, that does not mean that he had the tools to keep time as accurately as we do today. Carson cautions that “we are in danger of insisting on a degree of precision in both Mark and John which, in days before watches, could not have been achieved. The reckoning of time for most people, who could not very well carry sundials and astronomical charts, was necessarily approximate.”<sup>444</sup> In other words, John could have been striving for accuracy in the big picture while being unconcerned about smaller details. He could also have been emphasizing just how long Jesus’ trial dragged out.<sup>445</sup> Given that there

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<sup>442</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 215.

<sup>443</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 254; Mark 15:42 reads, “It was preparation day (that is, the day before the Sabbath).”

<sup>444</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 605.

<sup>445</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 605.

does not seem to be a theological or apologetic underpinning behind the time that Jesus was crucified, it is unlikely that John would have made it a different hour on purpose.<sup>446</sup>

#### **5.4.6 Failure to Engage with Criticism**

Mythicists raise many more examples of differences between the Gospels in order to show their lack of historical credibility. In most cases, apologists, philosophers, historians, and theologians have offered plausible explanations. However, the mythicists do not seriously engage with these suggestions or show why they do not accept them. Instead, they just treat their own interpretations as the only ones likely to be accurate. This is a major weakness for their case.

#### **5.4.7 The Irrelevance of Differences to Jesus' Historicity**

Similar to mythicist concerns over whether the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses, the charge that the Gospel accounts contradict one another is irrelevant to whether Jesus was a historical person. As Ehrman writes, “You will get very different accounts of the presidency of Bill Clinton depending on whom you ask. But the differences have no bearing on whether he existed.”<sup>447</sup>

### **5.5 Alleged Inventions and Legends**

#### **5.5.1 A Double Standard on Sources**

Mythicists reject Jesus’ existence on the basis of what they see as later, legendary material; however, they accept the historical reality of other figures who are also known to be subjects of invented stories or legends. The absence of good reasons for discriminating against Jesus this way suggests that a double standard is at work.

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<sup>446</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 228.

<sup>447</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 183.

Carrier emphasizes that there is better historical evidence for Washington and Alexander than for Jesus; however, Jesus is not the type of figure historians would expect to leave behind a similar wealth of physical evidence. Nonetheless, given his humble station, the amount of evidence that does exist is remarkably impressive. Better reasons are thus required for rejecting Jesus on the basis of possible legends being added to his story. Otherwise, the mythicists engage in special pleading: they reject the sources for Jesus while accepting sources for other historical figures who had legends attached to them.

### 5.5.2 The Historicity of the Christmas Story

For Doherty, the lack of outside sources mentioning angels, shepherds, magic, or the census indicates that these events did not occur at all. This argument from silence is lacking for a number of reasons. In the first place, there may in fact be some outside corroboration for the census in Luke: “Augustus himself refers to a census he ordered in 8 B.C. (*The Deeds of the Divine August 8.2-4*).”<sup>448</sup> As discussed earlier, it is more likely that Jesus was born about 6-4 BC and that the census Augustus ordered was still going on at that point. His decree would then itself be an outside source, mentioning the very same census as Luke.

As for the fact that no outside sources mention Herod’s slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem, this might not have been important enough to draw the attention of historians. Blomberg cautions against “exaggerat[ing] the numbers involved; in a town this small there may have been no more than about twenty children two years old or younger.”<sup>449</sup> It is also worth noting that such an action would not have been out of character for Herod. Macrobius, in *The*

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<sup>448</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 248.

<sup>449</sup> Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 236.

*Saturnalia*, records that when Augustus learned Herod had put his own son to death, he remarked, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.”<sup>450</sup>

Finally, perhaps there were mentions of these events in sources now lost to historians: “there were a number of disasters in the destruction of books when libraries were destroyed, and in the Christian case, in persecutions by the Roman state.”<sup>451</sup> Carrier himself acknowledges this kind of destruction while discussing Tacitus:

it is very unlikely any such records [about Jesus’ crucifixion] would have survived in Rome for Tacitus to consult, the capitol’s libraries having been burned to the ground at least twice in the interim, once under Nero and again under Titus.<sup>452</sup>

Given that so many historical documents have been lost, it seems strange to draw strong conclusions based on what historians do not have—especially over and against the evidence we *do* have for Jesus’ existence.

### 5.5.3 The Historicity of Peoples and Places

Carrier and Fitzgerald suggest that Mark invented the Sea of Galilee so that Jesus would have a body of water to cross, but their reasoning is weak. In the first place, it is inaccurate to say that this lake was never referred to as a sea before Mark. Antedating the Evangelists by centuries, the book of Numbers includes instructions about a “boundary [to] go down and reach the eastern slope of the sea of Chinnereth.”<sup>453</sup> Numbers uses the name appearing in Luke (not Mark), but it clearly refers to this body of water as a sea. Therefore, Mark was not at all inventing or renaming

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<sup>450</sup> Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, *The Saturnalia* 2:4.

<sup>451</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 49. This should not be understood as an argument from silence. An argument from silence says that because there is a lack of evidence, something did not exist at all. Casey is not doubting that such evidence existed.

<sup>452</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 344.

<sup>453</sup> I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 395; Num. 34:11.

a sea—even though modern people would categorize it as a lake. This shows that the mythicist dismissal of Jesus’ water travels is based on a faulty premise. Though they question whether any lake could be so dangerous, they fail to demonstrate that Mark’s portrayal of the region is inaccurate—much less invented.

There are also several problems with the mythicist argument against the existence of Joseph of Arimathea. First, as Chamberlain points out, Joseph was reported to be a prominent member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. If he had either not buried Jesus or not even existed at all, it would have been easy for anyone checking the facts to find out.<sup>454</sup> Here again, the mythicists may point to the idea that the Gospels were written late in the first century so it would have been easier for writers of fiction to get away with such things, but there is no good reason to accept such a late dating.

Second, if the town of Arimathea did not exist, as Price and Carrier argue, then it remains possible that Joseph came from somewhere else.<sup>455</sup> Moreover, to claim that Arimathea did not exist merely because ancient sources do not mention it is another argument from silence; the mythicists need to demonstrate that historians should reasonably expect it to have been mentioned. Furthermore, to conclude it did not exist based on lack of consensus or evidence on its exact location is simply unwarranted.<sup>456</sup> Lack of scholarly knowledge of the precise location of a city in no way proves that the city did not exist at all.

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<sup>454</sup> Chamberlain, *Why People Stop Believing*, 107.

<sup>455</sup> This is a paraphrase. Ehrman is responding to the mythicist claim that since Nazareth did not exist, Jesus of Nazareth did not exist. *Did Jesus Exist*, 191-97.

<sup>456</sup> Mythicists have employed a similar argument against the existence of Nazareth, saying there was no archaeological evidence for its existence either. However, evidence for Nazareth has since been found, which shows how risky these types of arguments can be.

Third, Carrier's deconstruction of the name of Arimathea is inventive, but there is no concrete evidence that the authors were merely making a pun as he claims. In other words, his claim comes across as pure conjecture. In the same way, Price provides no evidence that the Gospel writers borrowed the burial story from Homer's *Iliad*. His only basis is certain parallels he finds between the two. This is an example of what Samuel Sandmel calls parallelogomania: "that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable predetermined direction."<sup>457</sup>

Fourth, the fact that Matthew, Luke, and John give details about Joseph of Arimathea not in Mark does not prove legendary development. A plausible alternative is that this is another case of one author including details that another was not as concerned with. The mythicists need positive evidence for their assertion that these texts are legendary, especially when plausible harmonizations have been put forward. Now this principle can be applied to the tension Price sees between what Matthew, Mark, and Luke report about Joseph.

For Price, Mark's portrayal of Joseph constitutes a contradiction: Joseph is described both as the man who claimed Jesus' body for burial and as a respected member of the very council that condemned Jesus to death. Price accuses Luke of attempting to explain this oddity away by adding that Joseph was not in agreement with the Sanhedrin's decision.<sup>458</sup> However, Mark never mentions that Joseph was present at Jesus' trial in the first place; it is at least possible, if not probable, that he did not attend the trial precisely because he disagreed with the

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<sup>457</sup> Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelogomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81, no. 1 (March 1962): 1.

<sup>458</sup> Price, *Incredible Shrinking*, 327; Luke 23:51.

rest of the Sanhedrin—a detail that Luke decides is worth mentioning. Therefore, there is not necessarily any oddity in Mark’s account for Luke to cover over with “new information.”

As for the mythicist claim that Matthew invented the detail about Joseph’s wealth, this may simply be a case of Matthew bringing out what is already implied in Mark. As Garland notes,

It would have been politically risky for anyone to make a request to bury him, lest they be suspected of being a sympathizer. Victims of crucifixion were given dishonorable burials if they were buried at all. As a “prominent member of the Council” and presumably a wealthy man, however, he is likely to be above suspicion.<sup>459</sup>

Joseph’s wealth and power could explain why he had enough credibility in Pilate’s eyes to be trusted with the body. Presumably, Joseph buried Jesus in his own rock tomb, which further indicates his wealth. All these details are recorded in Mark, and yet he does not give any overt indication that he is trying to highlight Joseph’s wealth. Thus, it does not seem like the Gospel writers are straining to get all of their stories straight the way Price is suggesting. Rather, they corroborate each other well, and it is these sorts of details that philosophers like William Paley, and most recently Lydia McGrew, call undesigned coincidences: “A notable connection between two or more accounts or texts that doesn’t seem to have been planned by the person or people giving the accounts. Despite their apparent independence, the items fit together like pieces of a puzzle.”<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> David E. Garland. *A Theology of Mark’s Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 176-77.

<sup>460</sup> Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishers, 2017), 12; William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity: In Three Parts*, ed. Richard Whately (1859; repr., Murfreesboro, TN: Denhoff Publications, 1952); William Paley, *Horae Paulinae, or the Truth of the Scripture History of St. Paul [...]*, ed. J. S. Howson (London, EN: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1877).

#### 5.5.4 The Historicity of Pilate's Custom

As noted earlier, Carrier finds it unlikely that a bloodthirsty tyrant such as Pilate would have released Barabbas—much less a prisoner annually. However, when one looks at other historical sources about Pilate, the Evangelists' description only seems unlikely if one limits his or her reading to the criticisms of Pilate found in Philo and Josephus. Digging deeper, a more nuanced picture of Pilate emerges. Josephus tells the story about Pilate putting up Caesar's effigies in the city of Jerusalem, which went against the Jewish law about graven images. It was done at night, so the Jewish people did not know about it. But when they woke up and saw the images

they came in multitudes to Caesarea, and interceded with Pilate many days, that he would remove the images; and when he would not grant their requests because it would tend to the injury of Caesar, while yet they persevered in their request, on the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, while he came and sat upon his judgment seat, which seat was so prepared in the open place of the city that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them; and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them round, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their deaths very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed; upon which Pilate was deeply affected with their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable, and presently commanded the images to be carried back from Jerusalem to Caesarea.<sup>461</sup>

Pilate was ready to slaughter them, but once he realized that they were not going to back down, even if it meant dying, he called off his soldiers. For Evans, this shows that Pilate was capable of mercy if the situation called for it, which he clearly thought it did in the case of Jesus.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.55.

<sup>462</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 169.

The mythicists charge that Pilate had no such annual custom because no evidence explicitly supports it apart from the Gospels. This is another argument from silence since it assumes that if this custom existed, there would surely be evidence of it outside the Gospels. But as the adage states, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” It might merely be that one does not have evidence *yet*. For some time, there was no evidence for Pontius Pilate outside the Gospels and the passage in Tacitus. Since then, a stone with Pilate’s inscription has been found along with a ring bearing his name.<sup>463</sup>

It is premature to say with any certainty that Pilate’s custom is an invention of the Evangelists just because archaeologists have not found evidence of it thus far. More importantly, the Gospels themselves count as evidence for this custom. All four Evangelists describe the custom, and it would have been problematic if they were simply making it up. As Evans writes, “If Pilate had not released prisoners on the Passover or on other holidays, or at least on one occasion, the Evangelists’ claim that he did so could have been quickly and easily shown to be false and would therefore have occasioned embarrassment for the early church.”<sup>464</sup> Here again the mythicists might reply to Evans that the Gospels were written so late that there would have been no way for people to check on whether Pilate had such a custom; however, the burden of proof is on them to show that their dating is correct.

Finally, Evans provides examples of events that are very similar to what Mark records of Pilate’s custom. The Mishnah, a written collection of ancient Jewish oral traditions, allows the Jews to slaughter a lamb on behalf of a prisoner to be released on the Passover (*m. Peshim* 8:6).

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<sup>463</sup> Robert Cargill, “Was Pontius Pilate’s Ring Discovered at Herodium?,” Biblical Archaeology Society, February 22, 2020, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/inscriptions/pontius-pilate-ring-herodium/>.

<sup>464</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 174-75.

Additionally, archaeologists have discovered a papyrus from AD 85 (P.Flor 61, c. AD 85) with the words of a Roman governor in Egypt, which inform a certain prisoner that although he is worthy of scourging, he will be released to the crowd.<sup>465</sup> These examples undermine the mythicist allegation that Pilate's practice must be an invention of the Gospel writers.

### **5.5.5 The Irrelevancy of Invented Stories to Jesus' Historicity**

No ally of Christian apologetics himself, Ehrman makes a helpful point: even if the Gospels did contain a number of invented stories or legends, the conclusion that Jesus never existed would not at all follow. Considering stories about George Washington, he notes,

There are lots of stories about George Washington that may not have happened. Did he really cut down the cherry tree? Did he really have wooden teeth? Did he stand in the prow of the boat as his troops crossed the Delaware? Did he really get sick after fleeing in his skivvies out the window of his lover's house when her husband came home, and did he die as a result?<sup>466</sup>

Clearly, it takes more than the presence of alleged legends about a person to prove that he or she never existed at all. Ehrman agrees with the mythicists about the presence of certain non-historical episodes in the Gospels, but there are good reasons to question whether such non-historical episodes exist in them.

## **5.6 Alleged Shaped Narratives**

### **5.6.1 A Double Standard on Shaping**

Price asserts that the Gospels were fashioned out of Old Testament stories, undermining Jesus' existence as a historical person; however, he does not seem to appreciate the impact his methodology would have on the study of other historical figures if it were applied consistently. Ehrman notes that "It would be easy, for example, to tell the story of the demise of Richard

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<sup>465</sup> Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 174-75.

<sup>466</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 185.

Nixon in terms of Shakespearian tragedy. Many of the facts fit the mold well enough, and the facts that don't fit can easily be bypassed or altered to make them fit.”<sup>467</sup> Clearly, “our ability to shape the story in the way we want” does not “mean that Watergate didn’t happen or that Richard Nixon never lived.”<sup>468</sup> Therefore, Price needs to explain why the Gospels should be treated differently; it is not enough to merely point out that they appear to be shaped by Old Testament material. In the absence of a good reason for doing so, it appears that he is applying a double standard.

### **5.6.2 Alleged Old Testament Parallels**

Price and Carrier give examples where the Gospels appear to them to be suspiciously similar to Old Testament stories. However, when one studies the examples that they give, it becomes clear that there are some very important differences being left out.<sup>469</sup>

#### **5.6.2.1 A Response to Price**

Price has listed several Old Testament passages that he believes suspiciously parallel the stories in the Gospels. First, Price claims that the words God says at Jesus’ baptism come from Isaiah, the Psalms, and Genesis. The voice in Mark may seem to quote Psalms, where the Lord says, “You are my son; today I have begotten you,” and Isaiah where it is written, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”<sup>470</sup> However, the angel in Genesis says, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not

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<sup>467</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 199.

<sup>468</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 199.

<sup>469</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson suggests being alert for these differences in “Response to Robert M. Price,” in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 93.

<sup>470</sup> Mark 1:9-11; Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1.

withheld your son, your only son, from me.”<sup>471</sup> God calls Jesus his “beloved” son in Mark, not his “only” son. None of these Old Testament passages explains where the baptism story itself came from.

Second, mythicists claim that Jesus’ temptation narrative borrows from different Old Testament accounts of prophets hiding in the wilderness, but there are two key differences that Price does not mention. (1) In the cases of both Moses and Elijah, each is in the wilderness because he is in *hiding*; this is not the case with Jesus.<sup>472</sup> Mark reports, “And the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”<sup>473</sup> Jesus is there because God has directed him to go there. (2) Neither Moses nor Elijah undergoes temptations as Jesus does.

Third, in the account of Elijah calling Elisha, there is no record of Elijah speaking to Elisha—unlike Jesus, who speaks to his disciples in Mark. Furthermore, Elisha returns home to say goodbye while the disciples immediately drop what they are doing to follow Jesus. Finally, while Elisha slaughters his oxen and gives them as food to the people, there is no parallel action on the part of the disciples. Finally, King Ahaziah falls through his roof and injures himself, but the paralyzed man in Mark is already bed-ridden; the former dies because of his sins while the latter is forgiven and healed.<sup>474</sup>

#### 5.6.2.2 A response to Carrier

Carrier goes to great lengths to identify parallels between Matthew’s narrative of the empty tomb and the Old Testament account of Daniel in the lions’ den, but these do not hold up

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<sup>471</sup> Gen. 22:12.

<sup>472</sup> Exod. 2:14-15; 1 Kings 19:1-3.

<sup>473</sup> Mark 1:12.

<sup>474</sup> The full stories are found 1 Kings 19:19-21 and Mark 1:12-13.

under scrutiny:<sup>475</sup> while Jesus is entombed, Daniel is not; Jesus dies while Daniel survives the experience; Daniel's action of wishing the king a long life significantly differs from Jesus' resurrection and gift of everlasting life to his followers; in the Daniel story, an angel shuts the lions' mouths, while in Matthew the angel rolls the stone aside; the tomb guards becoming "like dead men" in Matthew is not the same as Daniel's accusers being fed to lions and dying;<sup>476</sup> and finally, Jesus' call to his disciples is for them to fulfill the Great Commission, while Darius' decree is not even a call for mass conversion to the Israelite religion. Rather, it is a command to give respect to God, acknowledging, as British Old Testament scholar Joyce G. Baldwin writes, that "there is a God ... [whose] *kingdom* is conceived not so much territorially as dynamically, for his rule overrides the agitations of men and accomplishes his will."<sup>477</sup>

### 5.6.3 Real Old Testament Parallels

The existence of real parallels between the Gospels and the Old Testament would not prove the mythicist thesis. Rather, as biblical scholar James D. G. Dunn notes,

early Christian narrators were telling stories about events in Jesus' mission but were doing so in order to bring out such Old Testament echoes and parallels as they discerned. ... Where the evidence is ambiguous, one way forward ... is to take account of the data in the Jesus tradition that are not readily explained by creation from Old Testament precedents and building blocks.<sup>478</sup>

Mythicists need to provide better evidence to show that the biblical writers were simply re-writing the Old Testament stories. A lack of evidence for a connection also undermines their view that the church invented Jesus by copying pagan mythology, as the next section shows.

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<sup>475</sup> It is best to compare Dan. 6 to Matt. 27-28.

<sup>476</sup> Matt. 28:4.

<sup>477</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Donald J. Wiseman, vol. 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 146.

<sup>478</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "A Response to Robert M. Price," in Beilby and Eddy, *Historical Jesus*, 97.

## **5.6.4 The Irrelevancy of Shaped Narratives to Jesus' Historicity**

Mythicists work to show that the Gospels were fashioned out of Old Testament stories, but this is irrelevant for determining whether Jesus was a historical person. Ehrman agrees: “the fact that a story about a person has been shaped according to the mold of older stories and traditions does not prove that the core of the story is unhistorical.”<sup>479</sup>

### **5.7 Alleged Parallels with Pagan Myths**

#### **5.7.1 The Weakness of the Parallels**

Mythicists allege that Jesus is just another dying-rising god, modeled on similar deities from the pagan world. For Ehrman, “there are serious doubts about whether there were in fact dying-rising gods in the pagan world, and if there were, whether they were anything like the dying-rising Jesus.”<sup>480</sup> Often the case is that the gods either never died, or never came back to life—unlike Jesus who did both.<sup>481</sup>

#### **5.7.2 Jesus and the Rank-Raglan Hero Archetype**

Price and Carrier claim that Jesus shares many features in common with other mythical heroes. These common features the mythicists have compiled into a list that they call the Rank-Raglan Hero (RRH) model. For mythicists, the fact that Jesus shares so many RRH criteria in common with mythical figures is very telling. Jesus meets twenty of the twenty-two criteria, well

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<sup>479</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 198.

<sup>480</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 222. The second problem Ehrman sees is that “Jesus could not have been invented as a dying-rising god because his earliest followers did not think he was God.” *Did Jesus Exist*, 222. However, to respond to Ehrman on that point would be outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>481</sup> The ways the gods rose after dying in the pagan stories were nothing like the resurrection that the Jews believed in. An earlier criticism of the mythicists was that they failed to use primary sources to show the parallels between Jesus and the pagan gods. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 222. In response, they have changed their methodology, and now it is more a matter of looking at whether their interpretation of the primary sources stands up to scrutiny.

over half. Eleven is Carrier's cut-off for setting aside historical persons who match the criteria by accident.<sup>482</sup> However, there are at least six problems with this approach to Jesus.

First, a historical person might just fulfill these criteria by coincidence. To this Carrier responds that "it doesn't matter what the probability is of scoring more than half ... by chance coincidence. Because even if it can happen often by chance coincidence, then the percentage of persons who score that high should match the ratio of real persons to mythical persons."<sup>483</sup> Carrier's reasoning here is somewhat opaque, but he clarifies further: "it would be *very unusual* for any historical person to fit more than half the Rank-Raglan criteria—because if it were *not* unusual, then many historical persons would have done so. But not even one did."<sup>484</sup>

For Carrier, Jesus cannot be a historical person if he meets more than half of the RRH criteria because of the following: (1) excluding any middle option, he asserts that *either* no real person can score over fifty percent on the RRH scale, *or* many would; (2) he knows that no historical person can meet so many criteria because, in fact, "not even one did."<sup>485</sup> But this includes Jesus, the very person in question. Effectively, Carrier knows his use of the RRH is valid because it only identifies mythical people like Jesus, and he knows Jesus is mythical because he is identified by the RRH. This is circular reasoning, for it assumes the very thing that Carrier is trying to prove. At most, the RRH approach shows that Jesus would be an unusual figure in history, which is agreed upon by Christians everywhere.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 229.

<sup>483</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 231.

<sup>484</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 232; emphasis in original.

<sup>485</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 232.

<sup>486</sup> This and the preceding paragraph are indebted to Mark McEwan, in a conversation with the author of this thesis, October 18, 2019.

Second, the mythicist contention that the number of high-RRH-scoring mythical figures outnumbers any high-RRH-scoring historical figures is based on incomplete data and is irrelevant to their case. As Marshall points out, “the relevant question is not how many people lived, but of how many people do we have sufficient knowledge to say whether they fit Rank-Raglan. We can only evaluate a classification based on positive knowledge of what does or does not fit it.”<sup>487</sup> The data is simply incomplete to show that there are many more mythical heroes who fit that mold than historical ones. Therefore, the mythicist charge does not carry the statistical weight needed to significantly associate Jesus with mythical figures—especially not to the degree required to question his existence in history.

Third, the RRH model yields results unfriendly to mythicism when applied to known historical persons: “we [would] have more reasons for judging Abraham Lincoln to be a mythical figure than we do Oedipus, Theseus, or Moses—for Lincoln fits the ‘hero myth pattern’ better than they!”<sup>488</sup> Others have added Winston Churchill and Napoleon to the list. Carrier does not include these figures in his equation, which slants the results in one direction by making Jesus look uniquely qualified for mythical status.

Fourth, Marshall notes that many people make up myths throughout their lives. Since any individual person might create many myths, there may well be many more mythical stories floating around than historical stories.<sup>489</sup> So, the fact that more mythical people fit this archetype than real people is not as surprising as Carrier thinks.

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<sup>487</sup> Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!*, 32.

<sup>488</sup> Francis Lee Utley, *Lincoln Wasn’t There, or, Lord Raglan’s Hero*, CEA Chap Book (Washington DC: College English Association, 1965), as summarized by Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, 149.

<sup>489</sup> Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!*, 32.

Fifth, it is problematic for Carrier and Price to draw on Matthew instead of Mark for some of the parallels in Jesus' life, given the priority that they place on early sources. For example, their understanding of very early Christian beliefs about Jesus is based on Paul's writings—specifically because they are earlier than the Gospels.<sup>490</sup> Price and Carrier ought to be consistent in their preference for the earlier source, and yet they look to Matthew's accounts for a portrait of how the earliest historical Jesus was conceived. For Marshall, their motivation seems to be that Jesus would only meet fourteen of the twenty-two RRH criteria using only the earliest source: Mark.<sup>491</sup> If they include Matthew, Jesus fulfills twenty of them.<sup>492</sup>

Marshall wonders why Carrier sees himself as justified in including Matthew's supposedly mythical elements. He suggests it is because Carrier thinks "probability calculus does not allow us to discriminate."<sup>493</sup> But this raises the question of how later legends can undermine earlier accounts. Marshall calls this "magical thinking" on Carrier's part.<sup>494</sup> Recall Ehrman's example about George Washington: historians would not be taken seriously if they took later legends to throw earlier material in doubt.<sup>495</sup> Such an approach exposes every historical figure to

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<sup>490</sup> Fitzgerald, *Nailed*, 128. Recall that since Price and Carrier take Paul (and therefore the earliest Christians) to believe in Jesus as a celestial being, they argue that the Gospel portrait of Jesus was a later legend.

<sup>491</sup> Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, 149.

<sup>492</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 230.

<sup>493</sup> Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!*, 32. When Carrier talks about probability calculus, he is talking about using Bayes's Theorem to determine what likely did and did not happen in history. He is including later, supposedly mythical, elements into his background knowledge and concluding that the Christians were likely making up myths even earlier.

<sup>494</sup> Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!*, 32-33.

<sup>495</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 185.

the possibility of reaching the maximum RRH score over time. Therefore, the mythicists unfairly appeal to Matthew, which is potentially *much* later than Mark in their own estimations.<sup>496</sup>

Finally, Jesus does not meet as many criteria as Carrier and Price would have readers think, even including Matthew. In fact, after a careful analysis of Matthew and Mark, Marshall concludes that Jesus only ends up fulfilling six of the RRH criteria in total.<sup>497</sup> This means that Jesus is not as good a candidate for an RRH hero as Carrier and Price make him out to be.

### 5.7.3 Jesus and Pagan Gods

Murdock attempts to show many parallels between Jesus and the pagan gods Horus and Mithras. She draws two conclusions from what she sees as established. The first is about the story of Jesus, which she claims is not original to Christianity. Second, in a similar vein to Price and Carrier's RRH approach, she claims that since all the gods in these tales were mythic characters, it is highly likely that Jesus Christ was mythical as well. However, upon examining the stories of the pagan gods alongside the Gospels, the supposed parallels quickly vanish.

#### 5.7.3.1 Jesus vs. Horus

Murdock claims that the story of Jesus matches the story of Horus in many details. However, her interpretation of Egyptian beliefs is highly inaccurate. First, there is no specific date (December 25th) given for the birth of Horus in Egyptian mythology, nor do the Gospels make such a claim about Jesus. Second, Horus was not born of a virgin. In the “Great Hymn to Osiris,” his mother, Isis, was said to have “Raised the weary one’s inertness, received the seed, bore the heir, raised the child in solitude, his abode unknown.”<sup>498</sup> “Raising the weary one” refers

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<sup>496</sup> At the earliest, Carrier dates Mark to the AD 70s and Matthew to the AD 80s. *On the Historicity*, 264.

<sup>497</sup> Marshall, *Jesus Is No Myth!*, 33-37.

<sup>498</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2, *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 83.

to the murder and subsequent revival of Horus's future father, Osiris. "Isis already knows that she is destined to bear a child who will be king. In order to bring this about, she has to revive the sexual powers of Osiris."<sup>499</sup> This could not be called a virgin birth without changing the meaning of the word *virgin*.

Third, there are numerous problems with Murdock's claim that—*before the Gospels were written*—pagan mythology had described Horus's birth as being announced by a star in the East and attended by three wise men. Even if there had been a pagan mythology that talked about three kings, this would not have any bearing on the Gospels since Matthew never claims that three kings visited Jesus. He only claims that they brought three kinds of gifts.<sup>500</sup> Furthermore, Murdock offers no primary sources to back up her claim that this story is part of the Horus mythology. The way that she shows that Horus taught in the temple is convoluted and based on pure conjecture. She contends that Horus was viewed as the rising sun "during which time, it could be said, 'He dwelt on earth as mortal Horus in the House of Seth (earth) until he was twelve years of age.'"<sup>501</sup> Then, when he rose into the sky at twelve noon, twelve being the age of the sun, he entered the house of his father Ra who was also Osiris. She adds, "The fact of Horus attaining so quickly to such maturity certainly may impress his elders, the older suns, as he literally *becomes* them. ... *It could thus be said that Horus does his father's work in the temple at the age of twelve.*"<sup>502</sup> This seems to be what scholars J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace call the terminological fallacy, in which vocabulary—Christian and

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<sup>499</sup> Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 80.

<sup>500</sup> Matt. 2:11.

<sup>501</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 214.

<sup>502</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 214.

Egyptian in this case—is being manipulated so that parallels can be created. The (flawed) method is to “first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels.”<sup>503</sup>

Fourth, there is no mention in Egyptian texts of Horus being baptized by a figure named Anup the baptizer. Fifth, Murdock claims that Horus had twelve disciples, which is only partially accurate. He did have followers, but they were neither called disciples nor specifically numbered as twelve.<sup>504</sup> Sixth, there are no stories of Horus doing healings and exorcisms. Seventh, Murdock’s claim that Horus was crucified derives mostly from depictions on Egyptian temple walls, in which he has his arms outstretched. However, this in no way proves that the Egyptians believed Horus to be a crucified deity.<sup>505</sup>

Eighth, Murdock is right that there were some similar titles given to Osiris that Christians later applied to Christ. They are mentioned in the *Book of the Dead*, such as “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords.”<sup>506</sup> But even supposing that later Christians had borrowed these titles, this could simply be a case of a Christian polemic against the false gods: in the same way that the plagues of Egypt showed Yahweh was the one true God, over against the gods of Egypt, so Christians show Jesus is the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords over and against Osiris. Furthermore, in the case of Osiris being referred to as “KRST,” this was an Egyptian word that meant “burial,” not a title such as “Christ.”<sup>507</sup> Ninth, Murdock claims that Horus was called “Iusa,” but as Casey

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<sup>503</sup> J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2006), 225.

<sup>504</sup> Raymond O. Faulkner, Ogden Goelet Jr., Eva Von Dassow, and James Wasserman, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2015), Plate 3-B.

<sup>505</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 367-75.

<sup>506</sup> Faulkner, Goelet, Dassow, and Wasserman, *Book of the Dead*, 2-B.

<sup>507</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 206.

writes, no references are made “to any primary sources from Egypt. This is important, because ... [this] claim about Iusu or Isua, has not been supported by any modern Egyptologist.”<sup>508</sup>

Finally, while it is true that Horus prevailed in battle over Seth, it is not factual that his reign was prophesied to last for a thousand years.

Although Murdock presents these ideas as facts about Horus and other Egyptian gods, they were merely created by one Gerald Massey—who “never was a competent Egyptologist, and he is now more than a century out of date.”<sup>509</sup> Murdock defends her use of Massey, saying that he studied the works of “Sir Dr. Budge; Dr. Brugsch-Bey; Jean-Francois Champollion; Dr. Eugene Lefebure; Dr. Karl Richard Lepsius ...,” and others.<sup>510</sup> However, these sources are also out of date for contemporary Egyptology. In the case of Dr. Budge, it is now known that he “published too quickly, before having a thorough understanding of the material, often not distinguishing his own opinions from scientific fact.”<sup>511</sup> The point that Murdock seems to miss is that while these men may have been respected scholars in their time, Egyptology has advanced since then. Whether or not Massey’s arguments were supported back then, they have not stood the test of time.

#### 5.7.3.2 Jesus vs. Mithra

Acharya S. makes much of supposed similarities between Mithra and Christ, but these also turn out to be wanting. American scholar of Mithraism Edwin M. Yamauchi explains:

As [members of] a mystery religion ... members [of Mithraism] were initiated and pledged in secrecy. It is because their teachings were closely guarded secrets that so little is known about the mystery religions. Whereas there are extensive texts ... about

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<sup>508</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 204.

<sup>509</sup> Casey, *Jesus*, 204.

<sup>510</sup> Murdock, *Christ in Egypt*, 13-14.

<sup>511</sup> Faulkner, Goelet, Dassow, and Wasserman, *Book of the Dead*, 20.

Mitra/Mithra in pre-Roman times, few sources provide information about Mithras in the Roman period apart from incidental passages in pagan and Christian writers, dedicatory inscriptions, and some enigmatic graffiti.<sup>512</sup>

Accordingly, while there are a few things that can be known, unilateral claims about the stories of Mithras should be treated with caution.

Again, Acharya is fabricating stories when she says that Mithras was born of a virgin.

Mithra was born from a rock, not a woman who had never had sex. Moreover, in the one source where it looks like shepherds are present, it is not clear that they are shepherds.<sup>513</sup>

Acharya holds that Mithras had twelve disciples, but she again offers no primary sources as evidence for this. As for her claim that Mithras promised eternal life to initiates of the cult, it is a fact that there is a “particular taurobolic inscription (CIL. 6.510), which speaks of an *aeternum renatus* (‘reborn for eternity’).”<sup>514</sup> At first glance, it is easy to see how this might suggest the Christian concept of rebirth. However, as Yamauchi notes, “the fatal flaw … [is] their disregard of the dates of the sources they [cite] and the implications of these dates for the possibility of influence. … The *renatus* inscription is dated after AD 375.”<sup>515</sup> If anything, this is a case of pagans borrowing from Christians.

Craig finds claims about how Mithra rose from the dead baffling because “Mithraism does not even purport that Mithras was raised from the dead.”<sup>516</sup> In fact, there is no mention of Mithras dying whatsoever in the primary sources about him. Contrary to Acharya, therefore, there certainly would not have been any celebrations or meals to commemorate his death or

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<sup>512</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 495.

<sup>513</sup> Casey details these matters in *Jesus*, 211.

<sup>514</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia*, 513.

<sup>515</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia*, 513.

<sup>516</sup> Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong, *God*, 71.

resurrection.<sup>517</sup> Once again, these alleged parallels between Mithras and Christ are not borne out by the available evidence.

#### 5.7.4 Acharya S.'s Place in Mythicism

Price and Carrier seem to want to distance themselves from Murdock. Carrier criticizes the arguments made by Acharya S. (D. M. Murdock's pseudonym) as being characterized by a "rampant obsession with indemonstrable 'astrotheological' theories of Gospel interpretation"—theories for which he has no sympathy.<sup>518</sup> Price was initially leery of her as well, even writing a critique of her book, *The Christ Conspiracy*.<sup>519</sup>

However, while decrying Acharya's approach, Carrier makes the same mistakes of creating parallels where there are none. For example, he goes on to write that, "the basic thesis of every competent mythicist, then and now, has always been that Jesus was originally a god, just like any other god ... who was later historicized, just as countless other gods were."<sup>520</sup> One example he gives is Osiris. However, as Pinch notes, Osiris's origins could have been a predynastic king, "a vegetation spirit, a jackal god of an early royal necropolis, or a mother goddess. Even the etymology of his name is uncertain, though it may simply mean the Mighty One."<sup>521</sup> In other words, the origin of Osiris is unclear. The first option for Osiris is a case of a

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<sup>517</sup> I am not sure about the factuality of their worshipping Mithras on Sunday, the use of those titles, or the importance of Easter. Again, she does not list any primary sources. Her source is Albert Pike, who was not a historian, but a lawyer and soldier.

<sup>518</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 53. "Astrotheological" refers to the belief that Jesus was originally a sun god or connected to other heavenly bodies.

<sup>519</sup> Acharya S., *Christ Conspiracy*; Robert M. Price, "Aquarian Skeptic: *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold* by Acharya S.," *Free Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 66-67.

<sup>520</sup> Carrier, *On the Historicity*, 52.

<sup>521</sup> Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 178.

human from history becoming deified in later myths, not the other way around. Carrier reaches for a parallel that is not there.

As for Price's criticism of Murdock, he later wrote the following:

I disliked what I deemed the militantly anti-Christian tone of the book and considered it a sign of adolescent or village atheist behavior (not that my own writings are always without it!). Now I think such things are utterly beside the point. It is the content that matters. Plus, she no longer writes with such evident and understandable rage. If it was immature to begin with, she has matured since then. (I hope I have, too!)<sup>522</sup>

He even went on to do a forward for her book, *Who Was Jesus?*.<sup>523</sup>

Despite wanting to distance himself from Acharya S. and her approach, Price himself makes similar mistakes. He points to the story of *Callirhoe* where he finds a parallel to the empty tomb narratives: a man runs to a tomb, finds a boulder rolled aside, finds his lover's body missing, and is amazed. Once others hear about it, they come and check it out. The man decides that one of the gods spirited her away, though in truth she has been kidnapped by grave robbers who have discovered her alive.<sup>524</sup>

At first, the similarities with the Gospels seem clear, but important differences arise. First, Callirrhoe did not die, so this is still not a story about a dying and rising person. Second, as Wright says, the writer Chariton "claims to be writing in Aphrodisias, a city in Caria roughly halfway between Ephesus and Colossae. ... [T]he likelihood of such borrowing must be adjudged remote in the extreme."<sup>525</sup> In other words, Price is not considering which way the borrowing most likely went—the same mistake Acharya S. makes repeatedly. Regardless of

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<sup>522</sup> Robert M. Price, "What I think of Acharya S/D.M. Murdock," *Freethought Nation* (blog), December 1, 2012, <https://freethoughtnation.com/what-i-think-of-acharya-sdm-murdock/>.

<sup>523</sup> Murdock, *Who Was Jesus?*, v-viii.

<sup>524</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection*, 69-71.

<sup>525</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection*, 72.

disagreements with Acharya S., Carrier and Price have not significantly improved on her approach.

### 5.8 Conclusion

This final chapter has responded to the mythicist attacks on the credibility of the Gospels. Each of their charges has proven to be unfounded or ultimately irrelevant to whether Jesus existed. The Gospels cannot be dismissed as problematic sources simply because they contain miracle stories. There are no strong reasons to think the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses. The differences in the accounts can be harmonized and even add to the Gospels' credibility. There are no compelling reasons to reject the stories within the Gospels as unhistorical as the mythicists do. The Evangelists did not just create the Gospel stories from Old Testament narratives. Finally, the parallels that the mythicists claim exist between the Gospels and the stories of pagan gods are not as thoroughgoing as they initially appear. From this it can be concluded that the evidence for a historical Jesus in the Gospels is unaffected, and the mythicist case against the Gospels is unconvincing.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis has conducted a study of the mythicist case that Jesus of Nazareth was not a historical person. Chapter two presented a history of myth, which showed why the Gospels did not fit into that category. Chapter three looked at the history of mythicism and how proponents eventually whittled Jesus down to the point where he seemed non-existent. Chapter four gave an overview of key mythicist arguments against the credibility of the Gospels. Finally, chapter five showed why the mythicist arguments are not successful.

For today, as in the first century, there are lots of opinions about who the man from Nazareth really was. Apparently, it has always been that way, and it probably always will be. But the question Jesus poses to his disciples—the question of his identity—abides. It does not pass away. Despite almost two thousand years that have transpired since the writing of the Gospels, Jesus' words to Simon Peter at Caesarea Philippi echo down through the centuries, inviting each and every one of us to encounter him as a real historical person and to answer the question he once asked a lowly fisherman from Galilee: “But who do you say that I am?”<sup>526</sup>

In summary then, it has been shown that *the evidence set forth by mythicists does not reasonably support their conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was never a human being in history.* Therefore, there is no reason for a Christian's belief in Christ as a historical person to be undermined. Christians believe he was much more, but he was surely nothing less.

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<sup>526</sup> Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 198; Mark 8:29.

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