



Jesus: History or Myth?

*A talk by David Warden for the Anvil dialogue group,
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About the author

David Warden is Chairman of Dorset Humanists, an Honorary Member of Humanists UK, and Assistant Editor of *Humanistically Speaking*, a regional humanist magazine. He grew up as an Anglican evangelical Christian and graduated from the University of Kent with a Bachelor's degree in theology. His theological studies convinced him that theism is a construct of human psychology.

During his career as a corporate trainer he gained a Master's degree in Human Resource Management from Bournemouth University, he was a Chartered Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), and he was awarded the CIPD Wessex Prize for academic excellence. Since retiring, he has gained a Level 4 Diploma in humanistic therapeutic counselling.

David has given talks on Thomas Paine, Bertrand Russell, Don Cupitt, George Jacob Holyoake and numerous other topics to humanist and skeptic groups including Conway Ethical Society in London. He has spoken to thousands of school students about Humanism and engaged in debates with Christians, including the Bishop of Sherborne, on numerous questions including the existence of God and the historical evidence for Jesus. He has been interviewed by Ernie Rea for BBC Radio 4's *Beyond Belief* programme. He has written and delivered popular evening courses in Humanism, the science and psychology of happiness, the philosophy of friendship, and the philosophy of existentialism. He forged a unique friendship with a humanist school in northern India. He is married, lives in Bournemouth, and plays the piano for enjoyment.

Feedback on this talk

“David, not only was your presentation a stunning combination of the careful research you have done, but you expressed yourself in such a clear and non-aggressive way that no-one could have been offended whilst having much to take away and think about. Thank you so much.” *John Baxter, retired Head of the RS department at Bristol Grammar School, April 2021.*

“Your presentation was excellent in its depth of scholarship and neutral style of presentation. It was precise and powerful. The epitome of a ‘surgical strike’.”
Barry Newman, 2021

“Before this excellent talk I would have said that there was almost certainly a man called Jesus upon whom many myths and incredible stories were hung, but only crackpots would question his (His?) very existence. David has converted me! Mind you, even if he did exist he might as well not have existed given how little we really know about what he actually would have done or said.” *David Sharpe 2018*

“Thank you David for another outstanding talk, delivered with your trademark combination of authority yet humility. Chrissie and I both enjoyed it immensely and went home with plenty to think about.” *Barney Maunder-Taylor 2018*

Before we get going I will just say that this talk is pitched at a fairly challenging level. I'll have to assume a reasonable amount of background knowledge but I will do my best to make it as accessible as possible. So let's start with some definitions. The title of my talk is Jesus: History or Myth and this corresponds to two theories:

1. **Historicism** = Jesus was a real person in history. This can be subdivided into:
 - **naïve historicism** – the 'view from the pew' – ordinary churchgoers who believe that they are reading straightforward historical reports in the New Testament.
 - **sceptical historicism** – the expert academic view which is that very little if anything can be known about Jesus (the 'Jesus problem'). This is because experts recognise that the gospels contain a large amount of theological embellishment. Trying to get back to the 'original' Jesus is a scholarly quest which has been going on for at least 200 years. Scholars keep churning out books purporting to reveal the 'true' Jesus. It's a huge industry. I think it's a dead end.
2. **Mythicisim** = Jesus was a mythical person like Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome or King Arthur to use an example from England.

I started out as a 'naïve historicist'. I then graduated to 'sceptical historicism'. And since around 1995 I've been a convinced mythicist.

I'm using the word **Myth** in its technical sense to mean a story which conveys meaning (not a synonym for 'untrue'). [Note: it is possible to appreciate some of the teachings of Jesus whether he existed as a real person or not, just as one can identify with and appreciate admirable characters in fiction. But this talk is not about the teachings of Jesus.]

These two theories, historicism and mythicism, map onto two theories of Christian origins:

1. **Big Bang theory** – based on Jesus as a real person in history – there was a remarkable man (or son of God) in the first century called Jesus of Nazareth who went around performing miracles and teaching about the kingdom of heaven. He got himself into trouble with the authorities and he was crucified. On the third day he rose again and this spectacular miracle got Christianity off to a flying start.
2. **Religious evolution theory** – whereby Christianity is a product of religious evolution or syncretism (a blending together of two or more religious belief systems into a new synthesis). So in the case of Christianity what we're looking at is elements of Greek mystery religion and elements of Jewish messianic belief and if we mix these ingredients together we get a Jewish mystery religion which essentially is what Christianity is. Or so I will be arguing. The Big Bang theory is dependent on a real historical Jesus. But the religious evolution theory is not. We can account for Christian origins without a real historical Jesus. Again, as I will be arguing.

Why does any of this matter? Well it matters because historical truth matters – I hope you will agree. Christianity is a world religion with supposedly two billion people

affiliated with it. So if Christianity is based on a falsehood then I think that matters and I hope you do too whether you're a Christian or not. [Note: Faith should not lower your critical faculties to the point at which you will believe anything favourable to your belief system – and that cuts both ways of course.]

But does radical mythicism have any credibility? Isn't it just 'fringe' or even a crackpot theory? Bart Ehrman, a biblical scholar who's written a book in defence of the historical Jesus wrote this: 'The view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet'. So that's the argument from consensus. But if we were to ask these experts what they believe I'm sure that the majority of them would opt for what I have called sceptical historicism – the view that Jesus was a real person but that we can know very little about him.

But Ehrman also wrote this: 'I was almost completely unaware – as are most of my colleagues in the field – of this body of skeptical literature devoted to the question of whether or not there ever was a real man, Jesus. Some of it is highly intelligent and well-informed – the smart ones among them need to be taken seriously.'

This is an astonishing admission of ignorance from the so-called 'experts'. I've been aware of this sceptical literature for thirty years. Why haven't they?

Mythicisism can be dismissed as a crackpot theory. But I prefer to think of it as a paradigm shift, a different way of looking at and solving the Jesus problem. And a crackpot view today can become the orthodoxy of tomorrow. The only thing that matters is whether it has any intellectual merit and that's what I will try to explore with you this evening in the short time available.

So who are these smart people making the case for a mythical Jesus? I'm going to mention just three but there are more.

Robert Price is Professor of biblical criticism for the Council for Secular Humanism's Center for Inquiry Institute. His title of his 2011 book *The Christ Myth Theory and its Problems* – looks as though he's attacking mythicism but actually he is just dealing with some of the objections to it.

Earl Doherty – A Canadian writer not a credentialed academic but his 800 page book *Jesus: Neither God nor Man* published in 2009 is recognised as a major contribution to the field. He also wrote a shorter version of this book in 2005 called *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* (380 pages).

Richard Carrier is an independent writer and historian. He's got a PhD in Ancient history so he has a relevant qualification. His 700 page book *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason to Doubt* published 2014 is a major landmark.

Let's set out the main historicist arguments. These are the typical arguments that you would hear from an evangelical preacher or if you go on the Alpha Course:

7 elements of evangelical apologetics (proselytizing historicism)

1. There were multiple independent witnesses of the life of Jesus and their testimony is faithfully recorded in the New Testament (the preface of the Gospel of Luke is often alluded to in this regard where Luke claims that his gospel is based on eyewitness traditions)

2. The gospels were based on oral tradition and written within the lifetime of some of these witnesses who could have checked their contents
3. The risen Jesus appeared to numerous people including 500 all at once (1 Corinthians 15:6)
4. We have thousands of copies of ancient NT manuscripts and the Bible today is a reliable rendering of the original documents
5. Lots of ancient non-Christian historians confirm that Jesus existed
6. Early Christians would not have been martyred for a pack of lies
7. Christians today experience the risen Christ

Now let's set out the main mythicist arguments. I've got 15 of these. We can't possibly look at all of these this evening so you will be pleased to know that I am only going to select a few of them. But I'm setting them out here just to give you a fleeting glimpse of some of the main arguments.

15 elements of mythicism

1. There are no actual witness testimonies in the New Testament
2. There is no evidence of an oral tradition – this is just a working hypothesis
3. Life expectancy in the 1st century was about 40 so any adult around in 33 would be dead long before the gospels appeared
4. When the risen Jesus appeared to 500 people this is in the same context as his appearance to Paul (in a vision)
5. It doesn't matter how many thousands of manuscripts you have if the original texts are myth not history
6. There is no *contemporary non-Christian* evidence for the existence of Jesus i.e. no secular sources around the year 30 when Jesus supposed to have been active.
7. Early Christians could have been martyred for their faith in Christ whether he was historical or not
8. Subjective experience of Christ today has no bearing on the topic
9. Jesus conforms to a mythic archetype
10. The earliest Christian documents place Jesus in a mythical setting, not an historical one
11. People in the ancient world believed that cosmically significant events could happen in the sublunary realm (i.e., between the Earth and the Moon)
12. The texts that became the NT were not 'scripture' from the beginning and they were subject to alteration in the 2nd century to conform to the emerging orthodoxy (historicist)

13. An historical Jesus and apostolic succession was necessary to stop the proliferation of 'revelations'
14. An historical Jesus was much more marketable than a supernatural one
15. Biographies of non-existent people were routinely written in the ancient world including Romulus, Coriolanus, Hercules, and Aesop.

Let's start with number 9 - Jesus conforms to a mythic archetype. This is called the **Rank-Raglan mythotype or hero type** which is quite intriguing. Otto Rank was a student of Sigmund Freud and Lord Raglan aka Fitzroy Richard Somerset was an amateur anthropologist. In 1909 Otto Rank published a book called *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* which outlined a set of 12 traits that are commonly found in hero myth narratives. In 1936, Lord Raglan published a book called *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* in which he outlined a set of 22 common traits he said were shared by many heroes in various cultures, myths and religions throughout history and around the world. When Raglan's 22 point outline is used, a hero's tradition is considered more likely to be mythical the more of these traits they hold. The traits include items like having a virgin mother, the hero is thought to be a son of God, there's an attempt to kill the hero when he is a child, he is hailed as a king, he loses favour with his subjects, he dies on a hill, his body goes missing and so on. Oedipus scores 21 out of 22, Moses scores 20 out of 22, King Arthur scores 19 out of 22, Robin Hood scores 13 and so on. And according to Richard Carrier, Jesus scores 20 out of 22. None of the other figures on the list are known to be historical. So why would we make an exception for Jesus? Well of course this isn't conclusive on its own. But it does suggest that even if Jesus was a person in history, a great deal of his so-called biography appears to be drawn from this mythical hero tradition.

Let's look at number 6 next. There is no contemporary non-Christian evidence for the existence of Jesus. I think this does a lot more damage to the historical case. Now you probably know that Christian evangelists usually mention a number of ancient historians who, they claim, mention Jesus in their books and this proves that Jesus was a real person in history. The usual list include Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and a few others. The most significant one arguably is Josephus so let's have a look at him.

Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote a 20 volume history of the Jews called *Antiquities of the Jews* around the year 93 or 94, already a good twenty years after Mark's gospel which I'm going to assume was composed around the year 70. There's a paragraph about Jesus in Book 18 chapter 3.

"About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared."

Well there's a huge industry devoted to debating whether this is genuine or not. I don't have time to go into all the nooks and crannies of the debate, but there are five fairly clear reasons to doubt the authenticity of this passage.

1. Josephus was a pious Jew and would not have written about Jesus in a reverential manner
2. The reference appears to have been derived from the Gospel of Luke
3. The reference is bizarrely brief, compared to Josephus's normal style
4. The reference is unknown to early Christian polemicists such as Origen of Alexandria who would have found a reference about Jesus in Josephus to be very useful when he was arguing against the Roman sceptics like Celsus
5. The reference interrupts the flow of the text

So it looks like the reference to Jesus has been spliced in at some later date. It would have been highly embarrassing for Christians to go back to Josephus and find there was nothing there about Jesus.

The situation for Roman historians like Tacitus is actually much worse because they were writing in the early 2nd century which means they are not contemporary sources. Let me give you an example. Andrew Roberts recently wrote a new biography of Winston Churchill based on new contemporary records which have been released including letters and diaries. Imagine if Roberts were writing a biography of Churchill without any contemporary evidence at all but was just rewriting earlier biographies. And imagine if those earlier biographies didn't have any contemporary records either.

But it gets worse. Because what Christians evangelists don't tell you, because frankly they probably don't know, is that genuinely contemporary writers who were in a position to know what was going on in Judea at the relevant time – around 30AD, have absolutely nothing to say about Jesus or Christians for that matter. These writers include Philo of Alexandria, Pliny the Elder, Seneca the Younger and at least 200 others.¹ Now when I mentioned this to a group of Christians at our dialogue group in Wareham they said 'Ah well you wouldn't expect contemporary writers to say anything about Jesus because he was an obscure itinerant preacher.' Well this doesn't really accord with Christians boasting about Jesus being one of the most significant people in history. If he existed, you would have expected him and his followers to at least have made some impact on contemporary records. But there's none. Check it out for yourself.²

[Note: I was challenged during the Q&A Session about the Roman historian Tacitus. In his *Annals* dated to 116AD we find this reference: "Christ... was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius" (that's 14-37AD). Needless to say there has been a great deal of debate about this passage, including whether Tacitus

¹ Carrier p295-300

² If this is true, that Jesus made no impact on his contemporary chroniclers then that does not change the fact that we have no contemporary evidence. It's like claiming that Winston Churchill made no impact on his contemporaries in the early 20th century but he made an impact 40 years later when biographies start to appear.

should have referred to Pilate as a 'prefect' rather than a 'procurator'. Carrier argues that the *Annals* have been tampered with: two whole years from the middle of 29AD to the middle of 31AD is missing from the manuscripts. Mythicists argue that the only plausible explanation for this gap is that Christian copyists were embarrassed at its omission of any mention of Jesus or associated events. But this still leaves the reference to Christ and Pilate. Carrier argues at length that this could have been added to the manuscripts in the mid-4th century. But even assuming it was there in the original, it appears likely that by the year 116 it was based on hearsay from Christian sources rather than documentary evidence. It's highly unlikely that any documentary evidence of crucifixions under Pilate would have survived the great fire of Rome in 64 and another fire in the year 80. If you would like to read more about Tacitus go to Carrier (2014: pages 303 and 344).]

Let's look at number 15 next. Biographies of non-existent people were routinely written in the ancient world including Romulus, Coriolanus, Hercules, and Aesop. Richard Carrier writes that 'biographies and histories of non-existent people proliferated, and ancient literature flowered with attempts to assign mythic heroes and gods to real historical periods and places'. So are the gospels biographies of a non-existent person? Well we should be able to tell from the way they are written. Mark's gospel is universally believed to be the first gospel and all of the others are partial copies and revisions of Mark. So what do we know about the way Mark was written? Some scholars think that the gospels are a form of Midrash - a form of Jewish commentary on the scriptures which includes the crafting of new stories. So for example, maybe the figure of Jesus is just an updated version of the Old Testament figure of Moses or Joshua or Elijah. Joshua is a pretty good candidate because the name Joshua is the Hebrew version of the Greek name Jesus and both names mean 'Yahweh saves'. Yahweh is the name of the Old Testament God, written just with the letters YHWH in Hebrew. So stories about figures like Joshua and Jesus in the Bible can be interpreted as allegories about God's saving activity in the world rather than reports about real historical people. It's a bit like if Winston Churchill had been given the name Victor when he was a baby and then he went on to achieve victory the Second World War. It would be a bit odd for a real historical person to accidentally have been given a highly symbolic name.

Well let's test this theory out a bit. You've probably heard the one about the five small barley loaves and two small fishes which fed 5,000 people. You may have heard some old-fashioned rationalists who think they are being very rational by debunking this miracle by saying "Oh well course probably what happened is that all these people just shared what they had and so the real miracle was that they all shared their provisions with one another." OK but what if the point of this miracle story was for the character of Jesus to upstage one of the Old Testament patriarchs? According to Robert Price the basis for both of Mark's miraculous feeding stories (4000 and 5000) is the story of Elisha who multiplied twenty barley loaves to feed a hundred men in the second book of Kings chapter 4:42-44. Whatever Elisha can do, Jesus can do better. And you know the one about the Stilling of The Storm on the Sea of Galilee? According to Robert Price this is based on Jonah and the whale. Let's have a look at the Jonah story:

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. **5** All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. **6** The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. **16** At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Let's have a look at a similar passage in Psalm 107:

Some went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. **24** They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. **25** For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. **26** They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. **27** They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end. **28** Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. **29** He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.

Now let's look at the gospel of Mark chapter 4:35-41:

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." **36** Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. **37** A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. **38** Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" **39** He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. **40** He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" **41** They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Now obviously the stories are not identical but that's the point. What Mark has done is take stories which would have been familiar to his readers and he has embellished them to make Jesus the hero of an updated version of the story. You have to look fairly carefully for the correspondences. For example, in the Jonah story Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. And in Mark's version Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. In both stories, they were woken up because of a great storm. And in Psalm 107, the Lord stilled the storm. And in Mark, Jesus, who is the Lord, stilled the storm.

The other things we need to bear in mind when we are comparing stories like this is that we are looking at an English translation of the Old Testament which was written in Hebrew and an English translation of the New Testament which was written in Greek. Mark would have been writing in Greek and he would have been looking at a Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. So in order to do this work properly you do need to be doing it in Greek. Anyway, you get the gist of it I hope.

Professor Price has gone through the whole of the gospel of Mark and reconstructed virtually the whole gospel in this way out of narrative ingredients from the Old Testament.³

So where does this leave the Gospel of Mark? I guess we've got three possibilities:

1. The first is that all of this is just coincidence – Jesus really did do things which have a superficial resemblance to stories in the Old Testament and we shouldn't take too much notice of it.
2. The second possibility is that the Old Testament writers actually prophesied what Jesus would do and this is what Christians believe. They recognise all of these textual correspondences between the Old Testament and the New Testament. My Christian friend Dave has got a whole list of them on his blog. And he writes that 'Jesus is the unique fulfilment of hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament, written hundreds of years before he was born.'
3. The third possibility is that the author of Mark's gospel was writing Midrash which means that he was working up a compelling story about Jesus based on stories and narrative ingredients from the Old Testament.

Well maybe you would like a few more examples before you make up your mind. Remember the one about Jesus cursing the fig tree? You may have thought how horrible of Jesus to go around cursing fig trees. According to Price this is based on Psalm 37:35-36:

35 I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a luxuriant native tree, **36** but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found.

In Mark's gospel we read this: **12** The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. **13** Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. **14** Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. **20** In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

In Mark there is a kind of reversal of the story. In Psalm 37, wicked and ruthless men are like luxuriant native trees who will pass away. And in the gospel of Mark, Jesus curses a barren native tree which means that wicked and ruthless men will soon be no more.

And what about Jesus walking on the water? Well you've probably heard rationalists explaining this by saying there was probably a sandbank or something like that. According to Price, it's based on the book of Job 9:8:

"He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea."

So Mark would have thought yeah that sounds pretty good. That's the sort of thing Jesus should be doing so he gets Jesus to walk on the lake.

³ *The Christ Myth Theory and its Problems* (2011)

You may have heard of the Transfiguration when Jesus went up a mountain. This is what we read in Mark:

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. **3** His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. **4** And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

According to Price, this is Mark's version of Moses ascending Mount Sinai

Exodus 24 and 34:29

13 Then Moses set out with Joshua, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. **18** Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. **34:29** When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.

There seems to be a symbolic correspondence here between the radiant face of Moses because he had spoken with the Lord, and the dazzling white clothes of Jesus who is the Lord.

You've probably heard the one about the empty tomb? According to Robert Price the empty tomb narrative is based on Joshua chapter 10:

17 When Joshua was told that the five kings had been found hiding in the cave at Makkedah, **18** he said, "Roll large rocks up to the mouth of the cave, and post some men there to guard it. **22** Joshua said, "Open the mouth of the cave and bring those five kings out to me." **26** Then Joshua put the kings to death and exposed their bodies on five poles, and they were left hanging on the poles until evening. **27** At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the poles and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day.

Obviously the details and sequence of events are not identical with the story of Jesus but you can see how Mark might have borrowed some of these ideas and rearranged them into his narrative about Jesus who was king of the Jews, he was left hanging on a cross or a stake, in the evening he was taken down and placed in a cave tomb, and Roman guards were posted outside. The kings in the Joshua story are still dead and buried but Jesus has triumphantly been raised from the dead and his tomb is empty.

Well I could go on and on with these examples but hopefully this is enough to make you curious to say the least about these correspondences. Professor Price asks this question: Which is more likely, that a man walked on water, glowed like the sun, and rose from the dead, or that someone has rewritten a bunch of well-known miracle stories?

Another tell-tale sign that Mark is writing fiction rather than history is that the story teller knows things that no one else could know, such as what Jesus was praying about in the Garden of Gethsemane when the disciples were asleep. And one of my favourites is the fact that the name Judas is also a symbolic name. Poor old Judas. According to Matthew's gospel he hanged himself after betraying Jesus but there's

another version of the story in Acts chapter **18** 'With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.' The name Judas is symbolic – it means that Judas is the symbolic Jew and it was the Jews who crucified Jesus. So Judas wasn't a real person either – he is a character in a highly symbolic religious fiction. It's possible to go through all the names of the disciples and decode the symbolic meaning of their names.

You may be inclined to believe that Professor Price is right, or you may remain unconvinced by the examples I have shared with you. So let's assume you think I'm talking a load of rubbish so far and that the Gospel of Mark is history not fiction, I have to ask you now, where are your historical sources? Where are your primary sources? Your eyewitness reports, your contemporary documents? And the answer I'm afraid is that there are none. Mark is the bedrock. There are no earlier sources, other than the ones I have just been talking about. So the choice really is between a fictional gospel which has a rich amount of source material in the Old Testament or a historical gospel with a complete absence of source material.

Now what I've just said isn't quite right. I was lying a bit. There are some Christian documents which predate Mark and they are called Epistles or letters. But one of the main planks of Jesus Mythicism (which is what this talk is all about) is that the Epistles are almost completely bereft of the kind of biographical material we find in the gospels. In other words, the Epistles do not provide corroborating evidence for the gospels. In fact, if anything, they falsify the familiar picture which has come down to us in the gospels. But this truth has been carefully concealed from Christians for millennia by the way in which the New Testament was arranged in the first place. The gospels come first, Matthew Mark Luke and John, and the Epistles come second, as if they are a kind of theological commentary on the gospels. But if you put them in the right chronological order, Epistles first and Gospels several decades later, a very different picture emerges. The Jesus you find in the epistles of Paul for example is a figure without a human biography which is extraordinary seeing as Paul was writing in the 50s – much closer in time to the Jesus of history if there was one. There are a few scraps of information in Paul's writings. Jesus had a last supper with his disciples, he was crucified, and he was raised. That's about it. No dates, no locations, no parents, no empty tomb, no Pontius Pilate.

Now you know the one about the Second Coming. Jesus is supposed to be coming back on the clouds to sort everything out. Well one of the odd things about Paul is that he writes several times about the coming of the Lord or when the Lord comes or the manifestation of the Lord, or 'as you wait for the revealing of our Lord' not when he comes again or when he returns (1 Thess 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1; 1 Cor 17; 1 Cor 4:5; 11:26; 1 Tim 6:14; Titus 2:13). Even the First Letter of Peter uses similar language: 'When Jesus Christ is revealed' – not revealed again. So the clues are there in plain sight in the text that Jesus has not yet come! And in Second Letter of John verse 7 we read this: Many deceivers have gone out in to the world those who do not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh. So there were plenty of Jesus mythicists around even at the time of the NT!

But admittedly there are also some counter-clues. Paul writes about Jesus as a man, that he was born of woman and had the likeness of sinful flesh, that he was a

descendant of King David, that he was handed over to death, and that he was raised. It sounds as though he is writing about a real person, not a fictional character. And yet he doesn't write about Jesus as someone who lived a couple of decades previously who's known about because of the historical record or because of the testimony of eyewitnesses. He writes this: '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 it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Gal 1:11-12). He writes that it's a 'mystery' that was 'kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known' Romans 16:25-26. In other words, all of this information about Jesus Christ was a mystery but now it's been found in the Scriptures – just like Mark found all of his information about Jesus in the scriptures – and also by direct revelation to Paul from Jesus Christ.⁴

So what we appear to be dealing with here is some kind of mystery religion. It's mystery not history!

So how can we make sense of Paul's references to Jesus being a man in the flesh who was handed over to die and who was raised. Well it does seem farfetched to us but what we appear to be looking at is a drama which takes place not on the earth but somewhere between the earth and the moon. Paul and his contemporaries had a completely different understanding of the cosmos to our understanding today. Typically they believed in seven heavens which refer to seven layers of the sky. These layers contained planets and stars but they were also where deities and demons carried out their activities. So it's possible that Paul's Jesus was a supernatural deity, a son of God in the likeness of man, who enacted his saving activities somewhere in the sky or in one of the seven heavens. And we do find some backing for this in the New Testament. In the book of Hebrews we read this: "...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God... when Christ came as a high priest he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption (Heb 4:14; 9:11,12). And here's the smoking gun: 'If he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one.' So in other words, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice to end all the temple sacrifices on earth. No more blood of goats and calves are required. Jesus, the unblemished Son of God, has offered his blood in a heavenly sanctuary.

So here's the idea: early Christianity was a Jewish mystery religion. A great drama involving the blood sacrifice of the Son of God had taken place somewhere in the sky as a way to end or supersede the sacrificial system of the Jewish Temple. This was just in the nick of time because the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70 and all that's left to this day is the western wall. This mystery religion had a

⁴ It's like the original version of the Bible Code – if you go looking for things in ancient scriptures you can usually find what you are looking for. The Bible Code is a book from 1997 by someone called Michael Drosnin. This is the publicity for the book: "For 3000 years a code in the Bible has remained hidden. Now it has been unlocked by computer - and it may reveal our future. The code, broken by an Israeli mathematician, foretells events that happened thousands of years after the Bible was written. It foresaw both Kennedy assassinations, the Oklahoma bombing - everything from World War II to Watergate, from the Holocaust to the Moon landing."

certain degree of esoteric appeal but when the author of Mark wrote his gospel around the year 70 this laid the foundations for the new religion to really take off. A few decades after the historical setting of Mark's gospel, it wasn't difficult for Christians to believe that Mark's fictional Jesus was a real figure in history who had been crucified by the Romans. We don't know how quickly Mark's gospel started circulating but we do know that the genre caught on. Matthew wrote a revised version of Mark and he would have been extremely irritated to see that Mark's inferior product was still in circulation today. Then Luke, then John, then Thomas and a whole host of other gospel writers jumped on the bandwagon. All of them are derived from Mark's original and none of them are based on independent historical sources. Was Mark a charlatan or a fraud? I don't think so. He may not have made the same distinction that we do today between history and fiction. But clearly he was working up a story from narrative ingredients not from historical sources.

Christians do have a couple of trump cards to play however. One is the opening verses of Luke's gospel addressed to someone called Theophilus. It goes like this:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Well this is often taken to mean that Luke is recording eyewitness testimony. But what Luke is actually saying here is that he is writing an account of what has been handed down, originally from eyewitnesses. It's not eyewitness testimony as such. But this preface is contradicted by the nature of the gospel. Textual analysis of Luke reveals that it's exactly the same kind of document as Mark – Luke's source material is not history or eyewitness testimony but stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, mostly from Deuteronomy. If you want the full run down you can read Robert Price's book. My hunch is that this preface to Luke's gospel was added sometime in the second century to reinforce the growing belief that Jesus has been a real person in history.⁵

The final Christian trump card is why would all these early Christians have willingly died horrible deaths for the sake of a fictional Jesus? Well no one is claiming that the original Jesus was a fiction in the minds of the early Christians. For the very earliest Christians he was a supernatural Son of God figure who had shed his blood in a heavenly sanctuary. For a later generation of Christians, who now had the benefit of listening to the gospels read out in church, Jesus was a real historical person who

⁵ My Christian friend Dave thinks that the author of Luke's gospel is the same Luke referred to by Paul in some of his letters. The original gospel of Luke was an anonymous document just like all the other gospels. It only acquired the Luke moniker sometime in the second century when the church wanted to authenticate these anonymous gospels by attaching them to named individuals who were closer in time to Jesus. So we don't actually know who wrote the gospel of Luke. It was ascribed to the figure of Luke for marketing purposes. Nor do we have the original manuscript of the gospel of Luke. The earliest manuscripts we have are at least a century after the gospel was written. We know that textual transmission in the second century was very fluid and a lot of the changes which were introduced into the texts were put there to promote the emerging orthodoxy. So my hunch is that the first few verses of Luke were added at some later date to give the gospel an air of authenticity.

had been crucified under Pontius Pilate. History not mystery proved to be a much more powerful marketing strategy. It was also an effective way to stop the proliferation of revelations to private individuals. Christianity became a historical religion because that was the only way it could be stabilised.

So my conclusion is this: If we go looking for the historical Jesus in the gospels we can't find him. If we go looking for the historical Jesus in the epistles, we can't find him there either. And if we go looking for the historical Jesus in contemporary historical records, we can't find him there either. So what's left? The inner conviction that you are having a personal relationship with Jesus today? Well I suppose that's a possibility but it doesn't address the historical question.

I think what we are looking at is a Copernican or a Darwinian revolution in New Testament studies. The vast majority of biblical scholars who are Christians anyway believe that Jesus is a figure in history because that's what the church has believed since the second century. There's too much invested in it. But this assumption has been holed beneath the waterline by a number of scholars and historians who have done all the painstaking detective work. It's a bit like a fascinating crime thriller and I've only been able to scratch the surface this evening.

I hope I've whetted your appetite to find out more for yourself but you have to be a bit of a nerd to want to read all of these books for yourself! Probably the better bet is to look for videos on YouTube.

Thank you for listening.

Questions and challenges from the audience

One participant argued that the author of John's gospel claims to be an eyewitness. I'm afraid this is an example of naïve historicism – taking the text at face value. Carrier writes extensively about this. He argues that 'the Beloved Disciple' in the Gospel of John is Lazarus who is a fictional character lifted from one of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke. The author (or authors) of John's Gospel had complex theological reasons for this reference to Lazarus which I won't attempt to summarize here. If you would like to follow this up have a look at Carrier (2014: 500-505)

A participant argued that John's Gospel is not based on Mark, implying that John is an independent witness. Of course, the Gospel of John is very different from the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Luke, and Matthew) but Carrier argues that there are extensive correspondences of John to the Synoptic Gospels. The larger problem is that if the contents of John are unique to John and not corroborated by any other source then they can hardly count as historical evidence, especially as we do not know who the authors and editors of John's Gospel were (or any gospel for that matter – we only have pious guesses dating from the 2nd century). The Gospel of John is a highly theological, even gnostic, gospel which makes Jesus say all sorts of things which are not found in the other gospels. Familiar sayings like 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' are found in John. But scholars have no reason to believe that these are authentic sayings which go back to a real Jesus. Carrier has a whole chapter on John (10.7).

One person agreed that, of course, we do not have hard evidence of an oral tradition between the time of Jesus and the time when the gospels were written but we may assume that there was one because this is how stories were transmitted in a pre-literate age. OK good point. But we can only assume there was one if there was a real Jesus to start with. What I did in my talk was to show that the sources of the gospels are stories in the Old Testament. That's the evidence we do have and it shows that Mark and the other gospels are literary constructions, not collections of oral traditions.

The chairman argued that 'history' is usually at least 30 years after the event. True, but history needs to be based on contemporary evidence such as newspaper reports, official records and so on. We have none of this for Jesus. The contemporary record around the year 30 is silent and it appears that Christian copyists even went so far as to excise portions of history in Tacitus because of its embarrassing silence (Carrier (2014: pages 303 and 344.)

A participant said that the biblical scholar John A T Robinson argued for a much earlier dating the gospels, pushing them back into the 50s. It seems unlikely that any scholars today would agree with Robinson's unusual dating. But this is missing the point. The problem is not the gap between the gospels and the events they record. The problem is that the events cannot be shown to have happened *at all* based on the evidence we have.

Richard Bauckham was mentioned a few times in the discussion. He is the author of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness* (2007). One of his main arguments, I recall, is that there appears to be a substrate of Aramaic in the Gospel texts which suggests an oral tradition going back to a real Jesus. Richard Carrier provides a list of critiques of Bauckham (Carrier 2014: 397).

Further reading

The sceptical literature is enormous and technically quite daunting. But if you would like to have a go here are a few suggestions:

- *Gospel Fictions* (1988) by Randel Helms is a good place to start if you are interested in a discussion about the nature of the gospels.
- *The Mystery of Acts: Unraveling Its Story* (2008) by Richard I. Pervo is a good discussion about the literary nature of the Acts of the Apostles.
- *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (2009) by Robert Funk is a fantastic primer on the Jesus problem. Funk led the so-called 'Jesus Seminar' symposium of scholars which attempted to identify the authentic sayings of Jesus (they calculated about 17% of the total known sayings on average). Jesus emerges as a Cynic sage rather like Diogenes.
- *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* (2005) by Earl Doherty is a cracking good read.
- *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man - The Case for a Mythical Jesus* (2009) is Earl Doherty's masterpiece 800-page blockbuster.

- *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (2014) by Richard Carrier is the most important contemporary work on the topic. If you are unfamiliar with Bayesian probability you should also read his primer *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (2012). It's not too difficult to grasp the basics even if you are a non-mathematician.
- *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (2013) by Bart Ehrman is not very good but you ought to read the opposition. Richard Carrier's online article *Ehrman on Jesus: A Failure of Facts and Logic* (2012) provides a critique.
- *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2009) is a much better book by Bart Erhman on what happened to the New Testament source documents in the second century.
- *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery* (2012) by Thomas L. Brodie is a technical work of textual analysis arguing that the New Testament is a literary creation based on the Old Testament.
- *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (2012) Robert M Price. Price is an evangelical preacher and a credentialed biblical scholar. Technical stuff but a very entertaining writer.
- *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?* (2003) Robert M Price
- *Deconstructing Jesus* (2000) Robert M Price
- *Jesus: The Unanswered Questions* (1988) John Bowden. Bowden was managing director of SCM Press and this book, when it came out, pushed me to the edge of the sceptical precipice. I then started reading books by Professor G A Wells such as *Did Jesus Exist?* (1975) which converted me to mythicism. Wells eventually modified his stance and argued that Jesus may have been a real person around 100BC. This was in fact believed by some of the earliest Christians as discussed by Carrier (2014:285).
- *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) Albert Schweitzer. A landmark book documenting the 'quest'.