

[The Ongoing Controversy: Was Jesus Real](#)

A CERN-Level Proof of Mythicism

[Don Wharton](#)

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This article will serve as a response to Bill Cooke's *Free Inquiry* article "Five Challenges to Christ Myth Theorists" (August/September 2024). I object to the slander of his first sentence when he claimed that American secular humanists who mythicists are following a siren call into an intellectual sinkhole. The claim that Jesus was not a historical person is both well-grounded and important. Although I strongly disagree with Cooke, I give my thanks to Cooke and his ill-considered "challenge" for giving me this setup for the mythicist case.

CERN is the most respected European center for nuclear research. They proved that the Higgs boson existed because their results were five standard deviations away from anything that could be expected by chance. I am promising to prove mythicism at that same level of statistical certainty.

My Criteria for the Historicity of Jesus

Richard Carrier in his *On the Historicity of Jesus*¹ made the point that there are as many bad mythicist theories as there are historicity theories. To be rigorous, we must have a coherent definition of what mythicism or historicism means. My theory of mythicism simplifies Carrier's definition² of mythicism to: Most of the Jesus narrative is within a mythic framework, and there is no means by which a modestly rigorous historicism can be demonstrated with existing evidence. My modestly rigorous criteria for a historical Jesus is:

- there was an actual man named Yeshua (Aramaic for Jesus) who acquired followers;
- these followers continued as a movement after his death;
- two or more events in this life can be confirmed at a 70 percent or higher probability; and
- this man is the same one worshiped as a living god by Christians.

My historicism differs from Carrier in that he requires for the plausibility of historicism only the singular fact that Jesus was executed by Jewish or Roman authorities, and he specifies no specific level of confidence for this to be true.³ A historical Jesus about whom we know this one fact at a 50 percent—a coin flip—level of certainty is just not worthy of attention. It is entirely reasonable for a secular supporter of scientific materialism to want modestly more evidence than one possible fact to maybe be true for a person to be accepted as historical.

Contrast my approach with Cooke's. Let's start with a quote from Cooke in his third challenge: "We know that the Gospels are successive accretions of dogma, mythology, wishful thinking, and political expediency that smothered the original story. It is a valid exercise to try and unravel the various layers in search of some reliable historical kernel of fact. But it is quite unjustified to suppose that absence of evidence is evidence of absence."

Is Cooke confessing that he has no evidence for a historical Jesus with this quote? He seems to be. If he wants to presume a theory of historicism that tells us nothing, we can agree that his theory tells us nothing. The absence of evidence is in fact evidence of absence if such an absence is improbable on historicity but significantly probable on mythicism. Something that never existed will leave no evidence. The probability of that absence can be used to show the “person” is fictional.

Cooke, in his “Claim Number One,” states that the “Romans saw Yeshua ... as a rabble-rouser and put him to death.” This claim presumes the historicist conclusion for which no evidence is provided. This is simply a cognitive forcing demand. The only “evidence” he has for this is the Bible. Any reasonably informed historian would be able to show how and why the specific bi story could never happen as claimed.

The Influence of Mythical Narratives on the Jesus Story

I will outline several arguments why the mythicist position is much more probable than the historicist position. My first argument points out how key aspects of the Jesus cult mirrors the elements of various other myths prevalent during this time.

Judaism experienced a very intense, diverse evolution in the centuries leading up to the first century and beyond. There were wholesale adoptions of mythical elements from the heady brew of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, and other surrounding Mesopotamian gods. The historical record shows substantial flows of those mythic elements from one belief system to another. The details of those mythic elements document the general predilections of people in this time and region to accept similar elements.

Dying and rising gods were endemic in the region. Inanna, a Sumerian goddess, was the earliest of resurrected gods, with resurrection occurring in three days, just like Jesus. Her worship continued into the recorded biblical times as cited in Jeremiah. Her death and resurrection were for some transferred to her consort Tammuz. Women weeping over the death of Tammuz are cited in Ezekiel 8:14. The Egyptian god Osiris died on a full moon. Passover is celebrated on the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have Jesus being put to death on Passover. Isis brings Osiris back to life three days later just like with Jesus. Dionysus was celebrated by the Greco-Roman Bacchus mystery cults starting around 200 BCE. He was brought back to life, in some versions, by Semele in a way analogous to Isis with Osiris. Zalmoxis was worshiped by Thracian cults. Adonis was an additional Greek resurrected savior. Romulus ascended into Heaven, becoming a god. Origen, Celsus, and Ovid all talk about how Zeus brought Asclepius back to life after he was killed. Baal was a major dying and rising God. His name was cited over ninety times in the Bible. Many passages have God displeased with Israelis worshipping Baal over himself. In Old Testament mythology, El was the god who recognized that Baal had come back to life. Apparently, Baal displaced El as the ultimate god in some stories. Ba'al Zebub (or Beelzebub) became Satan in some others. This shows more of the extremely chaotic meme evolution during the time of Jesus.

Besides the striking similarity of the story of Jesus's death and resurrection to the myths of various other divine figures, other aspects of early Christianity reflect the cults and practices prevailing at the time. Mystery cults, such as Mithraism, were a major part of religious practice throughout the Roman Empire. Isis/Osiris had its mystery cult. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Stroma* book, described local Christianity as a mystery cult with four levels of initiation. Origen, in his book *Against Celsus*, explained there were different ranks of initiation with secrets withheld until a prior rank had been achieved. Ignatius of Antioch said something similar in his epistle to the Trallians. The Mithra, Isis/Osiris, Bacchic, and Attis mystery cults used baptisms with water as part of their initiation rituals.

Carrier developed the Rank-Raglan hero type.⁴ This is a list of claims about various heroic figures, such as being born of a virgin, being the child of a god, being hailed as a king, etc. It has twenty-two criteria with only fifteen names satisfying over half the criteria. Removing Jesus, all fourteen of the remaining names on the list are clearly mythological figures with no reasonable suggestion that they were historical. But every one of them had stories portraying them as actors in historical events, just like the biblical gospels. Gospel stories about Jesus include the mythic elements of being born of a virgin, healing people from leprosy or blindness, raising people from the dead, or having precognition to see the future. Authors such as Carrier, David Fitzgerald, and Earl Doherty go on and on for many hundreds of pages describing the mythic elements that I have not covered.⁵

Admittedly, Roman emperors—persons who actually existed—were often legally declared gods. Also, various myths were sometimes associated with them. A comet appearing after the death of Julius Caesar was deemed a manifestation of him. Likewise, there were mini-analogues of mystery cults as part of the structured religious practices in some of these cases. This is a side effect of mixing religious practice with governance. All cases linked with real historical people required state resources.

In sum, the elements that mark other myths as myths are richly present in the Jesus narrative. Cooke wants us to imagine that there was a real story about a real Jesus that somehow got overlaid with many myths, like the zombies emerging from the grave (Matthew 27:52–53). Let's now look at the cited evidence for historicity.

No Credible Extra-Biblical Evidence for a Historical Jesus

For early church leaders selecting the books of the Bible and modern researchers, the earliest copies are deemed the most definitive. It is reasonable to examine the earliest biblical/Christian and non-Christian evidence. We will start with the only biblical evidence from the first century.

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote *The Jewish Wars* in about 75 CE and *Jewish Antiquities* in about 93 CE. Both were maintained by the Christian library at Caesarea. Origen was the leader of the library for a good span of time. Origen was followed by Pamphilus and then Eusebius. All the existing copies of *Antiquities* are presumed to be further copies of a version produced by Eusebius, much after Origen was in charge. Those copies had two references in *Antiquities* that were taken to be about Jesus. Carrier provides an excellent overview blog post, "Josephus on Jesus."⁶ In it he documents evidence that Eusebius (or possibly Pamphilus) altered the text by Josephus. Carrier's blog post lists many peer-reviewed articles supporting his position.

The more relevant Jesus reference is called the Testimonium Flavianum. G. J. Goldberg, in a peer reviewed 1995 article, outlined nineteen elements from Luke 24 that existed in the same sequence as the Testimonium Flavianum.⁷ This clearly suggests a parallel construction from a source not used by Josephus. He also cites eleven Christians who knew the works of Josephus and never mention this passage. This included Origen, who wrote a letter complaining about Josephus never mentioning Jesus and other writings cited no fewer than five other passages from chapter 18 of *Antiquities* (the one with Testimonium Flavianum). He is certain that Origen thoroughly knew the contents of chapter 18 and the Testimonium Flavianum was not there in his time.

In 2014, Paul Hopper wrote a peer-reviewed article showing that the verb forms used in Testimonium Flavianum did not match the usage in all other passages referring to Pontius Pilate.⁸ The surrounding narratives about Pontius Pilate make it clear that he did not do what the Testimonium Flavianum asserts. Quoting Hopper, "So Pilate, the decisive Roman boss of the other three Pilate episodes, ruthless scourge of the Jews and despiser of their laws, now appears as the compliant puppet of the Jewish hierarchy." Josephus, who was very bitter in his condemnation of the crimes of Pontius Pilate against the Jews, in this passage blames the Jews for killing Jesus and takes the side of Pilate. This makes not the slightest sense unless it is written by a Christian who blames the Jews for killing Christ.

Ken Olson documents seven phrases from the Testimonium Flavianum that are common in Eusebius but are rare or absent from Josephus.⁹ Much of the text of Testimonium Flavianum reflects the perspective of a Christian creed. Eusebius was the secular command of the Christians working with Emperor Constantine during the creation of the Nicene Creed. Josephus detested the crimes of Pontius Pilate, but Eusebius had every reason to insert something that blamed the Jews and took the side of the Romans.

In aggregate, these lines of evidence are conclusive proof that Josephus did not write the Testimonium Flavianum. However, this day many historicists still claim a "consensus" that this is extra-biblical "evidence" of a historical Jesus. What we have is proof of cognitive forcing by "experts" who refuse to process the published facts in peer-reviewed journals on the Testimonium Flavianum passage.¹⁰

In addition to the Testimonium Flavianum passage, there is a second, passing reference to "Jesus" in Josephus. In this passage the high priest Ananus is said to order the killing of James the "brother of Jesus, who was called Christ." Carrier had a peer-reviewed article showing that the second "Christ" reference in Josephus "is probably an accidental interpolation or scribal emendation." He has also argued that the Jesus mentioned in this passage is not the Jesus worshipped by Christians but rather Jesus ben Damneus, who replaced Ananus as high priest.¹¹

All other cited non-Christian evidence is dated in the second century and could easily reflect the mere fact that Christians existed, which is not in dispute. The most cited after Josephus is the *Annals* of Tacitus, dated 116 CE. It decries the Christian but says nothing about any life of Jesus. The "Chrestus" discussed by Suetonius around 119 CE is presumed to be a misspelled "Christ," but it could be a rabble-rousing Jew in Rome at that time. All other evidence outside the Bible is even later and more tenuous.

Biblical Evidence

Moving to biblical/Christian "evidence," Christianity in the Roman world is held to have been founded by St. Paul. The earliest written books of the New Testament were the epistles written by St. Paul: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. These have internal textual evidence that they were written by one man, roughly around the mid-first century and shortly after. The other New Testament writings ascribed to Paul may have been written either by people associated with Paul or by opportunistic emulators of Paul. Among all the passages in the valid epistles there is no clearly referencing any biographic activity of a historical Jesus.

There was no such historical activity, because Paul was channeling messages from a celestial source decades after the hypothetical period of an earthly life for Jesus. See Galatians 1:12: "For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught [it] I by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Given this claim, these "revelations" were creative imagination or hallucinations by any mo standards.

Later, in the same chapter, Paul cited a Jerusalem church and said he visited Cephas (or St. Peter), but Cephas likewise might channeled a celestial spirit. Paul wanted the approval of Jerusalem. That would have been unlikely if they did not like his messages from outer space. We have no record of anything taught in Jerusalem prior to Paul's epistles.

In the same passage where Paul mentions visiting Cephas, there is a reference to James, "the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:18). Some have taken this to be about a biological brother of Jesus. However, Carrier describes this as a fictive relationship, and I gives two peer-reviewed references backing up his interpretation.¹²

Paul has a great many passages in which he is thankful for the Christian message of redemption. In those, he gives thanks to and/or prophecy. In none of those passages does he thank a historical Jesus who walked the Earth to found his new religion.

Historicists assert that Jesus was killed in 30 or possibly 33 CE. If a historical Jesus in any way founded the Christian religion effort would have been appreciated and respected by subsequent believers and apostles. I do not think it is possible for Paul know of a historical "ministry" of Jesus and include nothing about this ministry in his epistles.

The silence of Paul, which is an accepted finding of Jesus scholars, on the historical Jesus becomes okay for historicists because Paul just wanted to convey his preferred message, a clear case of cognitive forcing on the part of historicists. But consider 1 Corinthians 1:22–23, where he says that "Jews demand signs" and [because] "we preach Christ crucified" [with no signs. The lack of signs became] "a stumbling block to the Jews." (The brackets are my interpretive thoughts as I read this passage and a probable meaning to it.) This would imply no knowledge of the many magical "signs" in the Gospels. This combined with other evidence from Paul would place the odds of Paul knowing and appreciating the stories of Jesus later found in the Gospels as extremely low.

It gets worse for those declaring Jesus is historical. Yes, there are the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. However, they do not explain why the other books of the New Testament say nothing about any possible historical earthly ministry of Jesus excepting two passages that are almost certainly redactions added at a later date. 1 Timothy 6:13 has a reference to Pilate. That one was not written by Paul, is dated in the second century, and the Greek may have referenced the time of Pilate rather than any interaction with Pilate. 1 Thessalonians 2:15–16 accuses the Jews of killing the Lord Jesus and the prophets. This one is known to be a probable redaction because "the wrath of God has come upon them (Jews)" is seen as referencing the war of 70 CE, well after the time of Paul.

There is a consensus in the peer-reviewed literature that Mark was the earliest gospel. There may be passages that are improbable if they were not written after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 CE. However, some researchers suggest an earlier year, such as 65 CE, is possible. There are a few outliers who suggest even earlier dates, but they have little support. Mythicists point out that there was no record of Christian observers making any comments on Mark or the other three gospels until well into the second century. First century date ranges of the Gospels may be mistaken. The consensus is that John was the last gospel written, very late in the first century or very early into the second century. Matthew and Luke were written between Mark and John. There is an astonishing diversity in the details and general pictures of Jesus among them.



Stained glass of the Resurrection of Lazarus. Source: Joan Sutter | Shutterstock.

The gospel of Mark was written in Greek for a Roman audience. The author of Mark lacked knowledge of Judaic law and the geography of the Levant supposedly traveled by Jesus. Mark is presumed to have been written outside that region, even possibly in Rome itself. Mark 7:31 is cited as the most egregious geographic blunder. There are the absurd "sea adventures occurring on the "Sea of Galilee." Quoting third century Porphyry of Tyre, "there is no 'sea' in the locality but only a tiny lake which springs from a river that flows through the hills of Galilee near Tiberias. Small boats can get across it within two hours. [And the lake too small] to have seen whitecaps caused by storm."

If there were any historical Jesus, the birth, death, and possible resurrection stories should be somewhat similar and compatible with known history. If these narratives were all made up as fiction, they are more likely to be divergent and incompatible with historical facts. Mark has no birth narrative, whereas Matthew and Luke did. (But more on the birth narrative in Luke below, in my discussion of Gnosticism.) There are radical divergences between John and the three Synoptic Gospels. Matthew had Jesus born under Herod the Great. His rule ended in 4 BCE. Luke had Jesus born under the reign of Quirinius (or Cyrenius in Greek). His rule started in 6 CE. The angelic messages announcing the birth in Matthew and Luke were very different.

and delivered to different people. There is no chance that anything like the reports of Herod being referenced by other historians of that time. There is no chance that the Jewish hierarchy described in Luke or that any travel would be required to participate in it if it happened. The first occur until Emperor Vespasian in 74 CE.

The Mark resurrection narrative originally ended at Mark 16:8. The NIV Bible actually includes this assessment in its text for Mark. Up to that point, the only report of a risen Jesus is said to be delivered by an anonymous angel. The three women who received that message then fled in terror but told no one. This was unacceptable to later scribes, who wanted a more evangelistic message. So, the added Mark 16:9–20 has him appear to Mary Magdalene and cast out seven devils. Why seven? Who knows? He goes on to appear to the eleven and tells them, “Go ye into all the world and teach the gospel to every people.” The resurrection stories told in the other three gospels have different people in totally incompatible sequences. There is also the resurrection story of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8. Paul did not get involved with Christianity until about the middle of the first century, much after any possible time for him to interact with a historical Jesus. However, in this passage Jesus appeared to Cephas, the twelve, a group of 500, and Paul himself. This one is likewise incompatible with all the other resurrection stories. If a historical Jesus should imply some similarity in the birth, death, and resurrection narratives. Instead, we have a wild diversity of facts on each point. Such differences are improbable on independent observations of shared experience but likely on author exercising creative freedom. These anomalies in the Gospels are a small fraction of the inconsistencies within the Gospels, between the Gospels and the epistles, and in comparison with known history.

Ninety percent of the passages in Mark appear in Matthew, and about 50 percent of them appear in Luke. The word-for-word equivalence of many of them confirms the raw copying of text with no independent reporting of what happened. The nature of agreements and disagreements between the Gospels are both highly improbable on the assumption of the authors being independent witnesses. The differences represent raw differences of fact rather than the normal differences in the nuances covered and words chosen to describe them. Raw copying of text is not agreement about events independently witnessed. There are substantial divergences from real, honest, independent observation. This is fable mongering by people wanting to entertain an audience desiring such fables.

Doherty and Fitzgerald document a very long silence concerning any supposed life of Jesus among Christian leaders.¹³ Ignatius the Bishop of Antioch, in epistles of 107 CE talked about Jesus. He had nothing biographical beyond being born of Mary and killed under Pontius Pilate. Later in the first century, there are some quotes from the Gospels that differ from the final canonical versions. There are no accurate direct quotes from any of the four Gospels until Justin Martyr in the 150s. Acts is not quoted until later in the second century about when Irenaeus is credited with first stating its current name, *Acts of the Apostles*.

Christianity started with the celestial Jesus of Paul. Very gradually in the 150 years after the supposed death of Jesus, a few started to believe in an itinerant preacher born of an earthly Mary. The Council of Nicaea in 325 CE marked an orthodoxy that excluded the celestial Jesus. Historicity uses cognitive forcing statements to demand that we ignore that this evolutionary world belief ever existed. Their desired historicity barely even existed among Christian leaders for over a century after the supposed death of Jesus. The claim that we can know anything reliable with this background is just not credible. The New Testament is at least as mythical as Aesop fables or Harry Potter stories.

In addition to all the differences and contradictions among the accepted gospels, epistles, and other New Testament writings: there were about forty “gospels” and twenty “acts” that were written. The accepted four gospels and one acts book were selected for the canonical Bible very late in the fourth century. This again shows the chaotic, creative diversity of the religious fiction: these times.

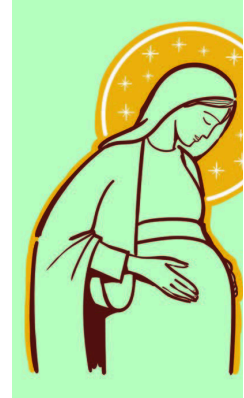
Modern preachers richly use the four Gospels in their sermons and writings. The words of Jesus in those gospels can be powerful tools to convey religious meaning. The dozens of Christian leaders and the many writers of the New Testament after Paul would have seen the same value in those gospels if they had access to them. No book of the New Testament (outside the Gospels and Acts) included any knowledge of Jesus as a historical person. We need to clarify the meaning of this absence of evidence. Bart Ehrman is the single most prolific and visible scholar supporting historicism. In a blog post, he declared that there are “some like twenty-five authors” who “know that Jesus was a historical person.”¹⁴ He included all New Testament authors and other century Christian documents such as 1 Clement and the Didache. (The authors of these last two documents likewise include knowledge of a historical Jesus.) Ehrman is locked into his cognitive forcing assumption that Christian belief includes a historical Jesus, even if the text reports no such thing. Christian belief was confirmed in these writings, but—outside the Gospels and Acts—belief in a historical Jesus was not confirmed by any of them. What is the likelihood that so many authors failed to note any confirming evidence?

A Jesus of some sort may still be important in the founding of Christianity. However, his efforts would just happen to use the same name as the celestial Jesus cult and his efforts were merged and included late in the second century. We have a celestial Jesus cult primed to appreciate salvation messages from Jesus. They were likely enthusiastic to accept fictional stories about

Jesus person echoing that message while walking the earth of Judea (and including many popular mythic elements popular for the region). Because all other mythical gods in the region evolved similar earthly stories, this second possibility is exactly what is probable given the history of the region. The absence of evidence in this case powerfully implies that Jesus was likely purely fictional, even in all earthly narratives about him.

Relevance of Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a diverse religious movement in the early centuries CE. In general, Gnostics believed that one could obtain secret knowledge about one's true self and the divine order; this knowledge included the recognition of a sharp separation between the material world and the spiritual realm. Because of its diversity, Gnosticism can be philosophically messy. I am specifically relying upon just the Docetist version of Gnosticism in which Jesus is a preexisting celestial being who appears as if flesh and blood but is never born of woman. That thesis is supported by several aspects of the canonical Luke when properly interpreted.



But before I discuss the proper interpretation of Luke, a few words about another version of Luke. Marcion of Sinope was an early Christian theologian. Marcion taught that Jesus was an always existing celestial being, never born of a woman, but appearing to be a man. Marcion was the first to try to put together a scriptural canon, which, in addition to including ten Pauline epistles, apparently incorporated a proto-Luke that had, like Mark, no birth narrative. We do not have this document, but we have so many detailed complaints from detractors that scholars are able to create a moderately good reconstruction.

Now back to the canonical version of Luke. Luke 1:5–2:52, with the birth narrative, has been confirmed by more than five scholars (including Ehrman) as a redaction added at later date. Jason David BeDuhn, author of *The First New Testament*, and another scholar confirm that the Greek used in those passages was entirely different than the Greek used in the rest of Luke elsewhere in the New Testament. Moreover, Luke 3:22 originally had “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” This explicitly says God has “begotten” Jesus as his son at that moment just prior to being baptized. Ehrman has a blog post on this change. The original saying of God was replaced with the current, “You are my son, in you I am well-pleased.” Other sources confirm all citations of this passage by church leaders prior to the Council of Nicaea used the prior version.¹⁶

BeDuhn did a very detailed and sophisticated analysis of the wording of the canonical Luke and Marcion's ur-Luke.¹⁷ His evidence confirms that Marcion did not redact the canonical Luke and the writer(s) of the canonical Luke did not redact the Marcion version. Both versions evolved from a common prior ancestor. BeDuhn's analysis of the passages added later notes that they specifically included many anti-Marcion elements. Marcion was massively influential, but not before about 144 CE. This is powerful evidence that church leaders or copyists were redacting their prior version(s) of Luke to push back against Marcion in the mid to late second century or later. It was probably not until the fourth century that the Gnosticism of Luke 3:22 was definitively redacted.

Mythicism Is Not an Eccentric Belief

Cooke claims that mythicists are a “small group of enthusiasts” and that our views are not shared elsewhere, such as in Britain. Mythicists have won among secular lay demographics everywhere. The Episcopal Church is not anti-Christian. A poll they conducted in 2022 showed that only 38 percent of those who are not religious believe in a historical Jesus. The poll is no longer on their website. But it did document that 62 percent with no religious belief either explicitly reject a historical Jesus or report such knowledge. A majority (57 percent) of those who are religious but not Christian either reject Jesus as historical or report such knowledge. Astonishingly, 15 percent of nonevangelical Christians either actively reject a historical Jesus or do not know and do not care.

Those who identify as atheists/humanists or actively join a secular group presumably will have less than the 38 percent believe in historical Jesus. There was a October 31, 2015, BBC report declaring, “Forty percent of people in England do not believe Jesus was a real person, a Church of England survey suggests.” The secular lay public in England will likewise have still lower belief. Cooke's claim of only “a small group of enthusiasts” is another of his cognitive forcing statements made without foundation.

Conclusion

The historicist claim is there was a Jesus who worked to establish the Christian religion. What is the normal process by which someone decides if a hypothetical historical person actually existed? In World War II, there was a goofy graffito saying "Kilroy was here." It had an odd drawn face with a big nose hanging over a wall with his eyes looking at the viewer. GIs around the world would draw this graffito to leave a message that GIs were there. More than forty people have claimed to be the one who originated it. It could also be an accidental response to something and the sheer goofiness of it caught on. Obviously in the fuzziness of history, it is possible that someone actually started it. However, if we do not have proof of one option having more than a coin flip chance of being right, the only rational response is to say we just do not know. We would want odds modestly above the coin flip to believe in any one choice. My definitions of mythicism and historicity are designed to support precisely this model of belief in a hypothetical historical Jesus.

FI readers probably have much lower belief in a historical Jesus than the 38 percent level reported for U.S. nonreligious people. The three principal references I used each give me a gut-level certainty that Jesus never existed. That was because I was using the model of knowing a historical person as real described above. There are many different varieties of Jesus described in the Bible. Some claim to be God. Some claim not to be God. There are many other differences in the implicit theologies, supposed facts of the matter, and possible motivations for Jesus. They cannot all be right, but they can all be wrong. Cooke believes that it is possible to find "some reliable historical kernel of fact." This is what cannot be done if we use my Kilroy normative theory of knowing. Does that "historical kernel of fact" in any possible case rise above a coin-flip chance of being true? I say no. And I do not have a level of certainty equal to that of CERN scientists when they declared the Higgs boson proven to exist.

There is no valid extra-biblical evidence for Jesus. The problems with Josephus were covered in depth in this article. When I was twelve and went to confirmation class, the preacher said, "How do we know the Bible is true?" His answer was, "Because the Bible says so." With no extra-biblical evidence, we are left with historicity being true "because the Bible says so." The Jesus studies community fully realizes how absurd such claims are when other religions make them with their sacred texts. Sacred texts in general are supremely unreliable stores of historical knowledge. This should be our starting assumption prior to any explicit evidence of problems with any given historical truth claim from a sacred text.

The silence of Paul and most of the rest of the New Testament is only slightly marred by two likely redactions. This establishes the celestial Jesus model for most of the New Testament. If so many extremely devout authors show no knowledge of a historical Jesus, why should we assume that they had any such knowledge? The most likely thesis is that they believed in a celestial Jesus only.

The only action by Jesus in Acts is to ascend to Heaven. As that is unlikely, we are left with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. John was the first one authored. It was written by a Greek speaker who was not connected with the area and culture of his writing. Moreover, well over 90 percent of the people in first century Judea were totally illiterate. Most communication was oral, person to person. There could easily be a half dozen or more oral transmissions before any narrative first reached the writer of Mark. Many Mark problems with Jewish customs and knowledge of geography show that the hypothetical chain of oral transmission got it garbled if it happened.

Many Bible verses are mythic because they are factually impossible or include documented mythic elements from that time and region. Many of those mythic elements are shown by historians to be heavily used and transmitted between other religious myth-mongering groups in that region and time. The Christian mystery cult was just one of many doing this myth mongering. Modern historicists do not like to think about the Gnostics. The Gnostics had their theology that explicitly denied that Jesus was a historical person. He was a celestial being who "became flesh." They had a ur-Luke that suggests that their early gospel creations were the precursors to the eventual canonical gospels.

The Gospels themselves provide much evidence that the authors were not objective, independent witnesses to real events. The Gospels were significantly evolving through the early second century, because copyists could change things if they wanted to do so. That continued until the late second century when Christian leaders started to recognize the Gospels as important and so their versions became supported as a standard that should no longer be changed at the whim of a copyist.

All arguments from historicists suffer from the appeal to possibility fallacy. They imagine that some claim might plausibly be true and convert it into a cognitive forcing argument that demands we accept it as true. They do this however improbable their claim might be. They hide behind a crumbling "consensus" in Jesus studies that a historical Jesus is real. To deal with this problem, we need some mechanism to very civilly force them into actually evaluating the facts. I propose we do that by showing our model of mythicism is confirmed at a level of scientific certainty. If they object, we can ask them to show us how and where our proof is merited. If they dig into the facts with us, they will need to share reasonable assessments of the probabilities. Historicism falls apart if they do that.

CERN proved that the Higgs boson was real when their evidence exceeded five standard deviations from anything that could happen by chance. Those odds are about 34,000 to one. My proposed minimal standard of historicism includes a 70 percent likelihood of some "historical kernel of fact" being true to a neutral judge. There is no significant positive probability that any biographical event in the life of a hypothetical historical Jesus was accurately captured and reliably transmitted through these many hurdles to the modern world. Certainly, none that comfortably reaches anything moderately above a coin-flip level of reliability.

Historicists will not accept this assessment. Moreover, they are likely to dogmatically demand that we accept their singularly most important premise that Pontius Pilate crucified Jesus. The historical record shows how and why that is highly improbable. But we can finesse their claim about Pilate by noting that our criterion for historicity asks for at least two true life events. We politely disagree about Pilate and ask what the second one that they wish to demonstrate is likely. If they move to a claim that he was born of Mary, only Matthew and Luke reference that, and they differ a lot. Which one is right?

We need to end the current debate, which allows for too many "because expert" or "because consensus" claims to avoid discussing the background facts. Cooke attempts this in the first "challenge" when he asks: "Why should we ignore the major consensus of Jesus scholarship around the world?" We should not ignore it. We should end it by claiming and supporting scientific certainty for mythicism. My definitions of mythicism and historicism and my Kilroy norm for judging a historical person as real make that level of certainty easy to demonstrate. Only a minority of U.S. non-Christians believe in a historical Jesus now. Perhaps that there is no possible "historical kernel of fact" that can be known with even moderate reliability should help us establish future world consensus that Jesus is a pure myth.

History is not usually considered a science. Proving scientific certainty would be a step toward making it respected as a science in this case. Mathematics is a very modest part of this article. To fully complete this proof, we need to more rigorously characterize the math and have it published in a peer-reviewed journal. Historicists will still claim a "logical possibility" of a historical Jesus. If we have proven 34,000 to one odds in favor of our mythicism, it will be a proven fact of scientific realism. Their "logical possibility" can then be dismissed as similar to the chances that the speed of light might change next week.

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Notes

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 229–234.
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11. *Ibid.*
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16. See <https://listenbelieveandfollow.com/luke-322-you-are-my-belovedson-today-i-have-begotten-you/>.
17. Jason D. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament Marcion's Scriptural Canon*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013.

Don Wharton

Don Wharton has twenty-five years of service in multiple roles as secular leader and activist primarily with the Washington Area Secular Humanists. His prior work was as an IT professional, including Director of Information Systems Planning for the National Academy of Sciences.

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