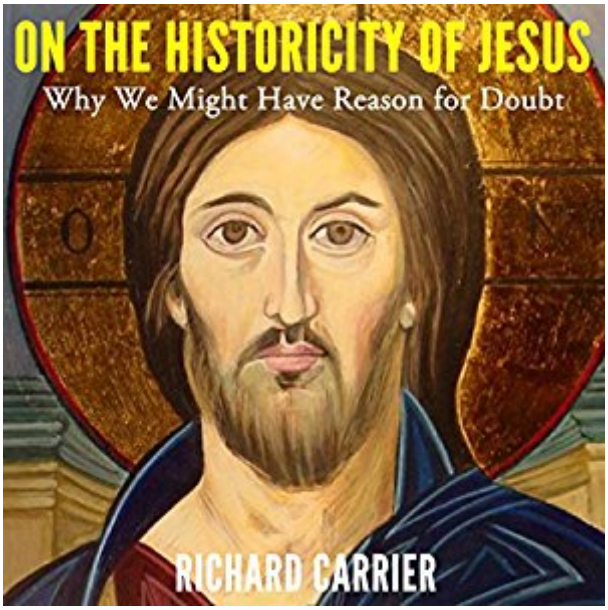
On The Historicity Of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason For Doubt



Synopsis

The assumption that Jesus existed as a historical person has occasionally been questioned in the course of the last hundred years or so, but any doubts that have been raised have usually been put to rest in favor of imagining a blend of the historical, the mythical, and the theological in the surviving records of Jesus. Historian and philosopher Richard Carrier reexamines the whole question and finds compelling reasons to suspect the more daring assumption is correct. He lays out extensive research on the evidence for Jesus and the origins of Christianity and poses the key questions that must now be answered if the historicity of Jesus is to survive as a dominant paradigm. Carrier contrasts the most credible reconstruction of a historical Jesus with the most credible theory of Christian origins if a historical Jesus did not exist. Such a theory posits that the Jesus figure was originally conceived of as a celestial being known only through private revelations and hidden messages in scripture; then stories placing this being in earthly history were crafted to communicate allegorically the claims of the gospel. Such stories eventually came to be believed or promoted in the struggle for control of the Christian churches that survived the tribulations of the first century. Carrier finds this theory more credible than has been previously imagined. He explains why it offers a better explanation for all the disparate evidence surviving from the first two centuries of the Christian era. He argues that we need a more careful and robust theory of cultural syncretism between Jewish theology and politics of the second-temple period and the most popular features of pagan religion and philosophy of the time. For everyone intent on defending a historical Jesus, this is the book to challenge them.

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Customer Reviews

I finished the Audible version of this book the other day and I have been trying to come up with an honest review of it since. I don’t know how to describe the quality and depth of the academic work represented in this book and it’s precursor "Proving History":https://www..com/Proving-History-Bayess-Theorem-Historical/dp/1616145595/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1504059764&sr=8-3&keywords=richard+carrierBoth represent some of the deepest, most honest analysis of Biblical study I have had the opportunity to enjoy. While the academic community has years of study and debate left in this realm (which is unfortunate, there are so many more important things to work on and Biblical studies have wasted many billions of educational hours already) I feel it has been conclusively proven that there is no reasonable proof of a historic Christ. The concept is an Arthurian-style legend at best and can now be, and should be, dismissed as such by the world at large.Don’t believe me? Read it yourself.

Everest might be the highest mountain, but to climb it, you get to start high up in the Himalayas. Kilimanjaro is the longer climb, starting close to sea level. I draw this analogy because Carrier’s book doesn’t start at the bottom, but rather close to the top. For example, Carrier’s target reader will already be aware that Daniel was written closer to the second century BC, long after the purported events it depicts, rather than being written during the rise of the Persian Empire (rendering the ’prophecies’ rather less spectacular). A reader unfamiliar with the general trends in biblical scholarship will likely balk at many of the points Dr. Carrier takes for granted. Likewise, a member of the faithful might balk at the casual dismissal of miracle stories and the like as being simply absurd or obvious fabrications. I don’t mention this to discourage anyone from tackling this book, but if you’re coming from a faith-based method of reading the Bible, you’ll find a lot of points require additional study in order to evaluate the claims of this book - or just a really good ability to compartmentalize while you read (accepting some things as given, just ’for the sake of the argument’).In general, I found Carrier’s thesis worth serious consideration. I’m borderline persuaded, though there’s a few things I want to do some additional reading on before I give in completely. One thing Dr. Carrier is quite good at is reading scripture without importing extra ’context’ that might not be there. I’ll give one example: all the times when Paul says that such and such event in the life of Jesus happened ’according to scripture’. Growing up in the church, and reading Paul in light of the gospels (which weren’t yet written), I naturally import the context

’according to scripture’ = ’this thing that we have eyewitness accounts of happened and it also was predicted in scripture and therefore fulfilled prophecy’. But Carrier reads this to mean ’we know that such and such a thing happened because scripture said it would’. That is, scripture saying that a thing would happen is sufficient justification for Paul and his readers to believe that such a thing must have indeed happened; no appeal to eyewitnesses is necessary. ’According to scripture’ means exactly that and nothing more. This might not make sense until you dig into the book and see how Carrier connects the dots, for example (on the one hand) by seeing that this technique of reading the Old Testament and then inventing stories of the life of Jesus to fulfill those scriptures was a common technique for composing scripture in general (e.g. Jesus riding TWO donkeys into Jerusalem) and (on the other hand) how this method, along with personal revelation, would be the only techniques possible (and not strange or unexpected) if Jesus started as a deity whose ’ministry’ was conducted in the invisible spirit/celestial realm.You can’t get too far in New Testament studies without running into commentary about the similarities between Philo’s use of ’the Logos’ and John’s prologue, or that Christianity shared some features in common with Greco-Roman mystery cults, but the general impression given by the NT intros that I’ve read is that you shouldn’t push these connections too far, and that scholars have scoured these sources for whatever they’re worth, and there isn’t really much to pursue there. Boy, howdy! One of the more eye-opening features of Carrier’s book (to me) was seeing how strong these connections really are. Likewise, the exposition of 1 Clement and the Assumption of Isaiah, as well as reading between the lines a bit on early Church Fathers like Origin, to show that an entirely celestial Jesus would have made perfect sense out of the ’high Christology’ of Hebrews and many of Paul’s letters.Could I punch a few holes in this book? Yes, I think I can, but if I’m honest, the holes I noticed are not enough to topple the structure. For example, in Element 38, Carrier talks about how MOSES beheld the ’true Mount Zion and the city of the Living God’ etc, etc., but he seems to have missed the change of grammatical subject to 2nd person plural (you all) - the author of Hebrews is claiming that, in contrast to Moses, his readers have experienced this greater revelation. If there is some reason to shift the ’you (pl.)’ back to Moses, Carrier doesn’t explain himself. But despite what seems like a big gaff to me, it doesn’t knock down Element 38 - the concept that the things on earth are but reflections of a higher order in the heavens is supported by this passage even when you remove Moses from the picture.There are places where I feel that Carrier plays a little fast and loose with scripture to make connections seems tighter than they are, which is unfortunate because 1) often his point would have come across fine without pushing so hard and 2) it made me feel like I had to check him on ALL his citations to make sure that he was representing the text properly. A couple examples: in Element

40, his rendering of Zechariah 6:11 from the GREEK, he translates as mentioning 'Jesus the son of Jehovah the Righteous', but it does no such thing. In the Greek, the word 'son' is dropped completely (and even the Gottingen critical apparatus seems unaware of any manuscripts that add it back in - the genitive article being sufficient to establish a relationship between 'Jesus' and 'Iosedek', even if it doesn't explicitly state the relationship like the Hebrew text does), and the name Iosedek is left as that - a name roughly transliterated from the Hebrew, not translated into the Greek words for 'Jehovah the Righteous', so then assuming that the Greek speaking readers of the Septuagint would know enough Hebrew to gloss that in their heads and render it the way Carrier suggests seems like a stretch. Which is not to say that NO Jews would have read it this way. But his quote of the Greek text is doctored (unnecessarily) to make a tighter fit to his theory. (In fairness, the first time he introduces the Hebrew text of this verse early in the book, he does hedge his view properly, it's just that when he returns to it many chapters later, it's expressed without a doubt, and presented as if this is just what the Greek says.)Another example, in Chapter 8 Carrier uses 1 Cor 2.8 to back up the idea that the Prince of This World killed Jesus, when 1 Cor 2.8 is plural: Princes. Again, this doesn't defeat Carrier's point - the plural Princes could still refer to demons/fallen angels/etc. rather than human authorities, and he does a good enough job of defending why this supernatural reading makes more sense (if we're bringing logic into the picture) than a more pedestrian reading (where 'princes' refers to Pilate and the Sanhedrin/Jewish authorities). So why the switch in number from plural to singular? It makes a tighter fit with the passage in Ignatius that he is examining.In Chapter 9, Carrier claims that Paul was said to have died and rose from the dead, citing Acts 14:19, which only says that his persecutors 'thought' he was dead. The text makes no claim that Paul actually died. Again with the tweaking Scripture to form a tighter connection, this time to the ministry of Jesus in Luke.Carrier's point in Chapter 10 where he makes a deal out of Mark's use of the word 'trader' rather than 'Canaanite' in the allusion to Zechariah 14:21 is just plain wrong. That the same word can be translated as 'tradesman' is plain from Proverbs 31:24 as well as the word it derives from 'Canaan' being used in the phrase translated 'land of traders' meaning not Canaan but Babylon in Ezekiel 16:29 and 17:4, see also Hos 12:8 and Zeph 1:11, where 'Canaan' is translated as 'traders' or something similar in many modern translations and modern lexicons. If it was only the one verse, one might wonder if the lexicographers were playing fast and loose to make Mark more accurate by projecting his gloss back on the Hebrew, but some of these verses really make no sense on the 'Canaan/Canaanite' translation and perfect sense on the 'trader' translation. Appeal to the Targums is of (probably) no help (I haven't looked), because if 'Canaanite' could mean a people group or just 'traders' in Hebrew, it could have carried the same connotations in

Aramaic. Or the Targum could have simply made the same mistake Carrier makes in assuming the word only had one meaning.It seems to me like it's pushing a little hard to assert that a reasonably common word for 'breathing one's last' is a sharp parallel to a mention in another passage of the Holy Spirit descending. Sure, there is a shared root, but to translate exepneusen as 'exhaled the spirit' makes the root do double duty - the word already means simply 'exhale' (the 'pneu' root referring to 'breath'), and if the author wanted to be explicit about what was exhaled, he could have added 'pneuma' (other Greek texts have characters exhaling their psyche, for example, using the same verb but with an object). Maybe the connection is there, maybe it isn't. Seems like a stretch and maybe an etymological fallacy, but given the creative nature of some of the connections that I don't dispute on the part of the gospel authors, I suppose I can chalk this one up as a maybe.Sometimes Carrier treats later sources as relevant support for his criticism of the Biblical story without justification. For example, at least twice he makes kind of a big deal of how a capital sentence (like Jesus') could not have been carried out in one day, because that would violate Jewish Law, according to the Mishnah. There are many problems with this: 1) The Mishnah was written down at least 130 years after the destruction of the temple, and a correspondingly longer time since Israel was autonomously run according to its own theocratic principles. There's an open question in Mishnah studies whether the rulings therein were EVER practiced in the real world, or if they represent an attempt to codify a sort of ideal Jewish society with the hopes that someday they might follow those laws if they ever gained a temple and a degree of autonomy again. But even if Carrier can successfully argue that we should take the Mishnah's laws on capital trials seriously for the early 1st century, he's got the problem that Jesus wasn't sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin, he was handed over to the Romans/Pilate, who could hardly be expected to follow Jewish religious law on capital trials. So any way you cut it, the Mishnah doesn't seem relevant. Likewise on the Mishnah, making a big deal out of a particular law being the 39th in a list codified a hundred years after the gospels were written stretches credulity (and the idea that John would expect his Greek speaking readers to add 1 to the 38 years of the man's illness to arrive at this connection, one that they'd have to be intimately familiar with the Mishnah to make...). Whatever oral sources you suppose were accurately handed down to constitute the Mishnah, its final arrangement was a creative, literary work. Elsewhere Carrier ably demonstrates that the Gospels themselves are inherently literary, not oral traditions, but he fails to see the literary nature of the Mishnah's final arrangement.Some of Carrier's 'arguments from silence' should have been skipped entirely. For example, making a big deal out of the lack of tax receipts for homes used for services or meetings (chapter 8) is strange. How many cults do we have similar receipts for? Do we have them for the

Attis cult, for example? What would such a receipt look like? Might we have those receipts without any mention of the specific religion making use of such homes? Why would the Romans need to know what the home was being used for as long as the taxes were being paid? What is particularly strange about some of these digressions is that in the end, he does NOT use these types of tenuous arguments in his mathematical calculation of probability - he determines they are irrelevant or inconclusive. So why bring them up? The existence of the early church itself is not the question here, and nowhere does Carrier argue that there was no early church at all: irrelevant digressions like this made me feel a little glimmer of what I feel when I read apologetics books that throw lots of bad arguments and data in the mix to overwhelm the reader, even if Carrier is honest enough to admit that these arguments have no bearing on the end result of his calculations.Some assertions seem to rely only on Carrier's own sense of credulity/incredulity, and thus could have been left out entirely. Example: the assertion that Jesus turning out the tables of the moneychangers has to be fiction because there were guards who would have killed him on the spot. Why do we assume that the temple guards were murderous jerks? Enforcing a law code of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', what evidence do we have that Jesus would have been summarily executed just for causing a raucous? These tidbits seldom contribute to the argument, so why bother unless you have sources to back it up? What's the point of the digression on how the names of Jesus' brothers in the Gospel are all the most common names in Judea as if his brothers were 'Tom, Dick and Harry'? If those are the most common names, how odd is it really to find a family with all those name? We don't run into too many American families with 'Tom, Dick and Shaniqua'. If they're common, they're common, and it's useless to make a big deal out of it, as it can't tell you anything about historicity.But in the end, none of these types of nitpicks knock down Carrier's argument. One wishes that he were more careful on points like this because it would encourage critics to focus on the bigger issues, but his argument really stands or fall on bigger issues. One that I need to think about is whether I'm convinced that ALL the focus of Jesus being explicitly 'in the flesh' in Paul's writings can be adequately explained by the idea that there's no conflict between being 'in the flesh' and being an invisible celestial being. That the 'flesh' talked about might be a more perfect human flesh in the celestial realm - somehow less than the angels, but more than the mundane flesh that is our lot in life. This was an issue Carrier addresses early in his book, but doesn't actually return to at the end (where he's more focused on the problematic references to James being the 'brother of the Lord' in Paul's writings, and mentions of his mother. It's interesting to me that McGrath, in his blog criticism of Carrier focuses so much on the 'brother of the Lord' point, even calling it the best evidence for a historical Jesus (or perhaps he was arguing the inverse, that Carrier's treatment of

this issue was the weakest link? Seems to amount to the same thing). If that's really the best evidence there is, we really do need to think this through! But I'm not sure McGrath counts as the most powerful defender of historicity). So the bits about 'in the flesh' I'm going to have to go back and read again, and probably do some additional research on.A lot of fuss has been made about Carrier's use of the Rank-Raglan Hero scale. Most of it is just that: fuss. Don't like that reference class? Fine: pick another one. Then everything you leave out of the class used to establish prior probabilities has to go into the evidence pile. So you can make a broader class like 'characters with resurrection stories', but then you have to calculate the effect of also having a 'miracle birth story' on the evidence side of the equation (even if only to argue that it can have 'no effect' on minimal historicity). Same for (most of) the other line items on the Rank-Raglan scale. I'm not saying I'm thrilled with the Rank-Raglan thing, but it seems like an OK 'back-of-the-napkin' place to start. I spent some time dreaming up alternate categories: they all seemed harder to get solid numbers on, and I'm not sure that they'd make a difference. But Carrier teaches his method for anyone who wants to give it a try with a different reference class.*SPOILER ALERT* in the end of the day, Carrier's technique of giving the opposition favorable odds at each step in his calculation produces an estimate that it is 60% likely that there was no historical Jesus, but rather stories about a celestial being that were later placed in a more mundane historical context. It's clear that Carrier thinks the real probability is much higher, but I think this demonstrates a reasonable amount of humility, given how much we don't and can't know about the distant past. Though I MIGHT be the first person to call Carrier 'humble'. :)Despite my nitpicks, I found this to be an engaging read, and am inclined to think that the conclusions are reasonable. At the very least, what we need now is a response from the mainstream historicists that addresses Carrier's main points. Reading bits of debate after Ehrman's book (in 2012?) was depressing because there was a lot of ego bruising and ego defending but a fair bit of ignoring the most interesting points of conversation; but perhaps the historicists can be forgiven since Carrier had not yet laid out his whole thesis start to finish for evaluation. I hope now all parties involved can shake off the acrimony of the blog wars and reboot the conversation now that all the cards are on the table.2 final notes: 1) be prepared to pick up Carrier's other books, including volumes he merely contributed essays to, in order to get his complete thesis, as sometimes he simply declares a problem 'already solved' (but note that some of this present volume will correct or supersede SOME of his earlier thoughts) and 2) boy do I wish this book were available in a good Bible software platform like Logos with all the hundreds (thousands?) of references to Bible passages, Early Church Fathers, Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, etc. linked so that they'd be a click away. At least half my reading time was spent looking up references

that I’m used to having just a click or tap away. First world problem, yeah?Congrats, Dr. Carrier. I’d been waiting rather impatiently for this ever since reading ’Proving History’. Worth the wait.

Excellent background information and hypothesis

The reader might have come across several books in the recent past addressing the historicity of Jesus. These range from the disingenuous apologists (Strobel) to more scholarly works by authors such as Ehrman (his most recent work notwithstanding) supporting historicity to good but slightly less scholarly works by various authors such as Doherty, Lataster who argue for a mystical Jesus. There is Robert Price who provides a more detailed analysis in his arguement for a mystical Jesus. Dr Carrier adds to scholarly analysis in the latter group having written two books which mutually support the use of Bayesian analysis in this endeavor. The first book: Proving history details use of this method as well as it’s value when looking at an emotionally charged issue such as this.The second book being reviewed here addresses the historical information we have available and rates it according to probability. What is of value here to the average reader is a detailed analysis of various elements that make up the story of Jesus. Carrier goes into such depth on any given piece of evidence (the Josephus forgeries, the supposed references in Pliny and Tacitus) as well as the general effect of missing details to strongly suggest a non historical figure.Honestly I don’t think this book is for the christian reader but more for the questioning reader who wishes to see what is behind all this. It was both amazing and disheartening to see what was behind a religion the has over 2 billion followers. Be warned though, this book is not easy going and when Dr Carrier goes into details in the gospels and epistles it is almost essential to have some background in New Testament. The other areas where he looks into more general background are valuable to any reader seriously looking into this subject.

This is the book that Christian Apologists will have to address in the upcoming decade. It is one of the most thoroughly researched books on the Christian religion that is available. Richard’s background in ancient history and his extensive readings of authors of the last century makes it a reference book for anyone who wants to explore the idea that, like many mystery religions before it, Christianity is a product of man, based on a non-historic figure.

I didn’t expect much more than a conspiracy theory when I was first led to Carrier’s work, but a few people recommended it and directed me to several of his lectures. I must say, this is more than a

merely plausible argument. The book is also extensively footnoted, so readers can easily check his claims against their sources. This book is also written for laymen, so newcomers to the scene of Biblical studies or Christian origins need not feel intimidated. A thorough analysis of the many problems with arguing for Jesus's historicity, and of why we indeed, have reason for doubt.