

'More Ingenious Than Learned'? Examining the Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus

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Abstract

This paper seeks to scrutinise the debate about the historicity of Jesus and identify aspects that merit critical reflection by New Testament scholars. Although the question is regularly dismissed, it is a salient one that was formative in the development of the discipline, and has become increasingly visible since the turn of the century. However, the terminology employed by the protagonists is problematic, and the conventional historiography of the debate misleading. The characteristic tropes evident in the contributions are also indicative of substantive issues within the discipline of New Testament studies itself.

Keywords: historical Jesus, historicity of Jesus, mythicism, Christ-myth

1. The Salience of the Question

Virtually no scholar working in the field of New Testament studies or early Christian history doubts the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ Indeed, the arguments of those that deny his

1 It is not the case that none do, as is often claimed or implied. See, for example, S. Byrskog, 'The Historicity of Jesus: How Do We Know That Jesus Existed?', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (ed. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; vol. 3, 4 vols; Leiden: Brill, 2011) III:2183–2212, at 2183; C. E. Carlston, 'Prologue', in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 3.

historicity are usually judged by most working professionally in the discipline to be 'so weak or bizarre that they relegate them to footnotes or often ignore them completely.'² Works advocating such a position are often dismissed 'with amused contempt'.³

However, the denial of the historicity of Jesus has become culturally prominent in recent years, and especially so since the turn of the century, with, for example, a recent poll in England finding that 40% of respondents do not believe that Jesus 'actually lived',⁴ a development that owes itself, at least in part, to the popularisation of a new wave of scholarship promoting this idea. Whilst G. A. Wells was 'almost a lone voice'⁵ in support of the non-historicity thesis⁶ prior to the year 2000, that is evidently not the case now, even if we decide to restrict ourselves to those qualified within the field.⁷ In more recent years, Robert M. Price and Thomas L. Brodie, both established and active

2 R. E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 6. E.g., J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991) 87.

3 G. A. Wells, 'The Historicity of Jesus', in *Jesus in History and Myth* (ed. R. J. Hoffmann and G. A. Larue; Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1986) 27–45, at 27.

4 Barna Group, *Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism in England* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015) 5, 9.

5 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 14.

6 See G. A. Wells, *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (London: Pemberton, 1971); idem, *Did Jesus Exist?* (London: Pemberton, 1975); idem, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982); idem, 'The Historicity of Jesus'; idem, *The Jesus Legend* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1996); idem, *Cutting Jesus Down to Size: What Higher Criticism Has Achieved and Where it Leaves Christianity* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2009); idem, 'Is There Independent Confirmation of What the Gospels Say of Jesus?', *Free Inquiry* 31 (2011) 19–25.

7 See B. D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012) 19.

New Testament scholars – the latter a notable figure in the field of Johannine studies⁸ – have published works arguing for the non-historicity of Jesus,⁹ as has Richard Carrier, a classicist.¹⁰ The late Thomas Harpur, a former professor of New Testament and New Testament Greek, did likewise.¹¹ Two substantive collections of essays containing contributions by those denying the historicity of Jesus, including some by established biblical scholars, have also appeared.¹²

8 See, for example, T. L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

9 R. M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000); idem, *Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003); idem, 'Jesus at the Vanishing Point', in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (ed. J. Beilby and P. R. Eddy; London: SPCK, 2010) 55–83; idem, *The Christ-Myth Theory and its Problems* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011). T. L. Brodie, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012).

10 R. Carrier, 'Thallus and the Darkness at Christ's Death', *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 8 (2011) 185–91; idem, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2012); idem, 'Origen, Eusebius, and the Accidental Interpolation in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2012) 489–514; idem, 'The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44', *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014) 264–83; idem, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014).

11 T. Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004); idem, *Water Into Wine: An Empowering Vision of the Gospels* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007). Harpur held his post at Wycliffe College, Toronto, from 1964 to 1971.

12 R. J. Hoffmann, ed., *Sources of Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010); T. L. Thompson and T. S. Verenna, eds., *'Is This Not the Carpenter?' The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (London: Equinox, 2012). Thomas Thompson, a Hebrew Bible scholar, has also written a volume arguing against the historicity of Jesus. See T. L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).

A small number of New Testament specialists have seen this growth in scholarship denying the historicity of Jesus as something that needs to be addressed and have published responses.¹³ This is not just the case for those who find the claim of Jesus' non-existence theologically as well as historically problematic, such as Stanley E. Porter,¹⁴ but also Bart Ehrman and Maurice Casey, both of whom have stated that they have no religious stake in the matter.¹⁵ Whilst addressing this thesis is not something that most New Testament scholars relish, or, indeed, have ever relished,¹⁶ it is clear that the subject should merit far greater attention from those working professionally in the field than is now the case. It is no longer tenable for most scholars to ignore it, given the wider context within which the academic study of the New Testament currently takes place. Nor, indeed, is it healthy for the discipline, given the formative role that the question of the existence of Jesus

13 For comprehensive responses see Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* and M. Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014). For Price see J. Beilby and P. R. Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (London: SPCK, 2010) 84–103. For Brodie see S. Freyne, 'Closing the Door Too Early', *Doctrine and Life* 63 (2013) 4–8; J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Understanding the World of the Ancients', *Doctrine and Life* 63 (2013) 9–15; G. R. Norton, 'A Question of Methodology?', *Doctrine and Life* 63 (2013) 16–24; J. Corley, 'Review Article: Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014) 177–94. For Harpur see S. E. Porter and S. J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ: An Evangelical Response to the Cosmic Christ Idea* (Toronto: Clements, 2006). For Carrier see especially D. N. Gullotta, 'On Richard Carrier's Doubts', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 15 (2017) 310–46. For a critique of one of the key arguments of those denying historicity, see S. J. Gathercole, 'The Historical and Human Existence of Jesus in Paul's Letters', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 16 (2018) 183–212. Brief references to the debate can also be found in some other works, e.g. M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, *Jesus und das Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 180, 206.

14 Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*.

15 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 5, see also 71, 333; M. Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument*, 3, see also 36–41, 203.

16 E.g., Albert Schweitzer's complaint that the scholarship of Albert Kalthoff, a leading mythicist of the early twentieth century, produced controversy that was 'wearisome and unproductive'. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. First Complete Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2001) 283.

has played since in its inception, even if this has largely been forgotten. Schweitzer, for example, could say of Bruno Bauer's *Kritik der Evangelien und Geschichte ihres Ursprungs* (1850–1851),¹⁷ a work which denied the historicity of Jesus, that it was 'the ablest and most complete collection of difficulties of the Life of Jesus to be found anywhere'.¹⁸ Indeed, the question of the historicity of Jesus could be said to be a foundational, or, at the very least, a pressing, prior question for those wishing to say *anything* about the historical Jesus.¹⁹ At the very least, it is pedagogically useful to address their arguments; as Stanton said of the work of Wells, the latter's position 'is worth taking seriously, for it raises important issues for the student of the gospels'.²⁰ Nor is the question quite as anachronistic as is often assumed: although no critic of early Christianity in antiquity ever doubted the historical existence of Jesus – it is not an argument used, for example, by Trypho, Celsus, Lucian or Porphyry²¹ – the docetist tendency within the early churches does bear some resemblance to such a position, even if there are significant differences.²²

17 B. Bauer, *Kritik der Evangelien und Geschichte ihres Ursprungs* (3 vols; Berlin: Gustav Hempel, 1850–1851).

18 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 142.

19 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 2.

20 G. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 144.

21 Carrier does, however, see Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8.4 as providing a 'hint' that some sectarian Christians may have doubted Jesus' historicity. See Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, 350.

22 As Goguel rightly noted, 'the question discussed by the Docetists was not whether there had lived a man in the time of Pilate named Jesus, who acted, suffered and died, but the problem was to determine the nature of His manifestation.' (M. Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene: Myth or History?* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1926) 90). The literature on docetism is extensive but see J. Verheyden et al., eds., *Docetism in the Early Church: The Quest for an Elusive Phenomenon* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

However, in what follows, I do not wish to address the specific arguments of those that deny the historical existence of Jesus. Other scholars within the field are doing this today,²³ and past contributions by S. J. Case,²⁴ F. C. Conybeare,²⁵ Maurice Goguel,²⁶ Albert Schweitzer,²⁷ H. G. Wood,²⁸ Walter Weaver,²⁹ and Robert Van Voorst³⁰ contain much of value. It would be a rather thankless and dispiriting tasking having to correct the egregious errors of fact, method and interpretation that characterise some of the most popular contributions to the subject in the past and present, seen in, for example, the work of Kersey Graves³¹ or Acharya S [*sic*],³² but it would be unfair for the contributions of Brodie, Price, Carrier and Wells to 'be tarnished with the same brush or be

23 See footnote 13.

24 S. J. Case, 'The Historicity of Jesus an Estimate of the Negative Argument', *The American Journal of Theology* 15 (1911) 20–41; idem, 'Jesus' Historicity: A Statement of the Problem', *The American Journal of Theology* 15 (1911) 265–68; idem, *The Historicity of Jesus* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1912).

25 F. C. Conybeare, *The Historical Christ or an Investigation of the Views of Mr. J. M. Robertson, Dr. A. Drews, and Prof. W. B. Smith* (London: Watts & Co., 1914).

26 Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene*.

27 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 124–42, 355–436.

28 Wood, *Did Christ Really Live?*

29 W. P. Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century: 1900-1950* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 45–71.

30 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 6–17; R. E. Van Voorst, 'Non-Existence Hypothesis', in *Jesus in History, Culture and Thought: An Encyclopedia* (ed. J. L. Houlden; vol. 2, 2 vols; Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 1.658–60.

31 Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors, Or, Christianity Before Christ* (4th ed.; Boston, MA: Colby and Rich, 1876).

32 Acharya S [*sic*], *The Christ Conspiracy*; idem, *Who Was Jesus?* (Seattle, WA: Stellar House Publishing, 2007); idem, *Christ in Egypt* (Seattle, WA: Stellar House Publishing, 2009); idem, *Was There a Historical Jesus of Nazareth?* (Seattle, WA: Stellar House Publishing, 2014). Acharya S. was the pen name of Dorothy Milne Murdock.

condemned with guilt by association',³³ indeed such scholars are generally as critical of the failings of the excesses of fellow mythicists as any others.³⁴ Rather, my concern in this paper is to reflect critically on some of the substantive characteristics of the scholarship that has been generated by the debate over the historicity of Jesus, notably its terminology, historiography, and dominant tropes. Nonetheless, given the general lack of awareness of this subject in contemporary New Testament scholarship, it is necessary to summarise briefly the arguments employed by those who deny the historicity of Jesus before doing this.

2. The Arguments of the Mythicists

Although there are substantial variations between those scholars that deny the historicity of Jesus,³⁵ nonetheless, most make use of a small number of core 'negative' arguments, contending that:³⁶

1. There is no independent, non-Christian evidence for Jesus. The references to Jesus found in the small number of non-Christian sources that appear to mention him³⁷ are judged to be either

33 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 30.

34 E.g. Wells, 'The Historicity of Jesus', 27.

35 Some have also changed their thinking. There are, for example, considerable differences between subsequent editions of A. Drews, *Die Christusmythe* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1909). See also Wells, *Cutting Jesus*, 329.

36 What follows is indebted to the useful summary found in Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 30–34.

37 The key non-Christian witnesses to Jesus' historicity that are the subject of debate are: Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63–64, 20.200–201; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.2–4; Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96; Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus* 11, 13. See R. E. Van Voorst, 'Jesus Tradition in Classical and Jewish Writings', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (ed. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; vol. 3, 4 vols; Leiden: Brill, 2010) III.2149–80.

dependent upon Christian testimony for their knowledge of Jesus, and therefore irrelevant, or interpolations by later Christian scribes.

2. The earliest Christian sources that appear to mention Jesus, the letters of Paul, do not demonstrate any knowledge of an earthly Jesus. On the few occasions where they appear to do so, this is a result of poor exegesis or interpolation by later Christian scribes.

3. The gospels cannot be trusted as sources for historical data. They are full of contradictions, discrepancies, supernatural claims and obvious bias.

4. The gospels are not independent witnesses to Jesus but all go back to one, unreliable source, Mark. Mark is a work of fiction not history. Mark was also written far too late to give any authentic historical facts.

In addition to these arguments, a 'positive' case is usually made to explain how, if there is no evidence for the historical Jesus, we should account for the emergence of the early churches and their beliefs, especially those they held about him.³⁸ The answers provided range widely, from the influence of astrological mystery cults and pre-Christian gnostic sects,³⁹ to the literary activity of a

38 Although this may not be strictly necessary. See K. L. Noll, 'Investigating Earliest Christianity Without Jesus', in *'Is This Not the Carpenter?': The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (ed. T. L. Thompson and T. S. Verenna; London: Equinox, 2012) 233–66.

39 Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*; T. Freke and P. Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was The Original Jesus A Pagan God?* (2nd ed.; London: Thorsons, 2000); Acharya S [sic], *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold* (Kempton, IL: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999).

religious community.⁴⁰ They rarely possess the virtue of economy and, except in cases that posit some kind of conspiracy⁴¹ (something not found in the scholarly contributions), they do not tend to identify a specific, proximate cause,⁴² something that sets them apart from most accounts that have a place for the historical Jesus, and emphasise the significance of events around his life and death.

If one is tempted, unwisely, to dismiss the arguments of those that deny the historicity of Jesus *en masse* based on some of the wilder flights of fancy that are more likely to stick in the mind, such as those of Edwin Johnson⁴³ or his more modern equivalents, it is helpful to remember 'The Minimal Jesus Myth Theory' proposed by Carrier. This is far less complex and therefore far less improbable. This is summarised by him as this:

Jesus was originally a god, just like any other god (properly speaking, a demigod in pagan terms; an archangel in Jewish terms; in either sense, a deity), who was later historicized, just as countless other gods were, and that the Gospel of Mark (or Mark's source) originated the Christian myth familiar to us by building up an edifying and

40 Brodie, *Beyond the Quest*, 185.

41 E.g., J. Atwill, *Caesar's Messiah: The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2005).

42 E.g., Brodie, *Beyond the Quest*, 185.

43 Edwin Johnson was a professor of Classical Literature at New College, London. His initial, relatively sober critique of early Christianity, *Antiqua Mater: A Study of Christian Origins* (London: Trübner, 1887), advocated the non-existence of Jesus, but was followed by other, more adventurous works, including *The Pauline Epistles: Re-Studied and Explained* (London: Watts & Co., 1896), a book that dated the Pauline epistles and the gospels to the 1500s.

symbolically meaningful tale for Jesus, drawing on passages from the Old Testament and popular literature, coupled with elements of revelation and pious inspiration.⁴⁴

Having summarised the arguments of those denying the historicity of Jesus, let us now move on to some critical reflections on the scholarship that has been generated by the debate.

3. Terminology

The terminology commonly used in the debate to label the two positions is problematic. Those who reject the historicity of Jesus are often referred to as 'mythicists'⁴⁵ and such scholars regularly label those who disagree with them 'historicists'.⁴⁶ However, the first term is one that is rarely the subject of sustained critical reflection from participants and its meaning is seldom defined.⁴⁷ It appears to be used primarily to mean one who believes that Jesus was a myth and the term 'myth' is taken to mean 'a story that has no historical basis, a history-like narrative that in fact did not happen'.⁴⁸ Although most definitions of myth across disciplines do associate it in some way with a story,⁴⁹ the notion that the defining feature of a story for it to be classified as a myth is that it has

44 Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, 52–53.

45 It is important to note that this label is not one that is necessarily accepted by proponents of this position. Price, for example, has argued that he would prefer the position to be called 'New Testament Minimalism', stressing, as he sees it, the continuity with an approach found in the Hebrew Bible scholarship of Thomas L. Thompson, Philip L. Davies and others.

46 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 3. See, for example, Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, 4.

47 There are exceptions. Harpur, for example, does dedicate a chapter in *The Pagan Christ* to the term (15–26). However, his understanding of myth is indebted to that of Joseph Campbell, whose work is popular but problematic. See R. A. Segal, 'Joseph Campbell's Theory of Myth: An Essay Review of his Oeuvre', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978): 97–114.

48 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 3.

49 R. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 5.

no historical basis is a rather narrow, etiolated understanding of the term, even if it does have the benefit of reflecting lay usage.⁵⁰ For anyone involved in the critical study of religion or biblical studies⁵¹ and has an awareness of the range of ways that myth has been defined and theorized from antiquity to the present,⁵² this does seem a missed opportunity; limiting our thinking to whether myths tell stories that lack historical veracity fails, for example, to address questions around their genesis and mutability.⁵³

The second term widely used, but which is also problematic, at least for these purposes, is 'historicist'. This label is given, almost exclusively by mythicists, to those who defend the historicity of Jesus. Given the meanings usually ascribed to the term within the humanities and social sciences, none of which seem obviously relevant to what mythicists wish to convey, this seems

50 For the importance of lay definitions in the study of religion, see S. Bruce, 'Defining Religion: a Practical Response', *International Review of Sociology: Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 21 (2011) 107–20.

51 See, for example, D. E. Callender, ed., *Myth and Scripture: Contemporary Perspectives on Religion, Language, and Imagination* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014). It is perhaps all the more surprising given how significant debates about myth have been in the study of the New Testament, most famously provoked by Rudolf Bultmann's project of demythologisation (R. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (ed. S. M. Ogden; London: SCM, 1985)) or, more recently, Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1988); idem, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic and Legacy* (London: Continuum, 2001).

52 E.g., L. Honko, 'The problem of defining myth', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 6 (1972) 7–19; R. A. Segal, *Theorizing About Myth* (Amherst, MA: University Massachusetts Press, 1999); idem, *Myth: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (4 vols; London: Routledge, 2007); B. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000); R. Ellwood, *Myth: Key Concepts in Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008).

53 See J. J. Meggitt, 'Popular Mythology in the Early Empire and the Multiplicity of Jesus traditions', in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth* (ed. R. J. Hoffmann; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010) 53–80.

somewhat eccentric (in crude terms, a historicist is normally said to be someone who insists 'on the prime importance of historical context in the interpretation of texts of any kind', something that few mythicists would wish to eschew).⁵⁴ The use of this term is emblematic of the distance between some of those espousing mythicism and standard academic discourse.⁵⁵

4. Historiography

This is not the place to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of those who have denied the existence of the historical Jesus and document the responses that they have generated; there are helpful surveys of the most influential contributions in the works of Casey, Ehrman, Van Voorst, and Weaver⁵⁶ and those by Case, Drews, Goguel, Robertson, Schweitzer and Wood⁵⁷ provide useful summaries of previous scholarship. Nonetheless, a number of characteristics of the way in which the history of the debate is usually told invite comment.

54 P. Hamilton, *Historicism* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2004) 2.

55 The use of the term by mythicists does have a long pedigree. See, for example, W. B. Smith, *Ecce Deus: Studies of Primitive Christianity* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1913).

56 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 14–19; Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument*, 10–41; Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 6–17; Weaver, *The Historical Jesus*, 45–71.

57 Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*, 32–61; A. Drews, *Die Leugnung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Karlsruhe: G. Braun, 1926); Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene*, 1–28; A. Robertson, *Jesus: Myth or History?* (London: Watts & Co., 1946) 41–92; Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 124–42, 355–436; Wood, *Did Christ Really Live?*, 18–28. It is important to note the importance of the second German edition of Schweitzer's work in this respect. See J. Carleton Paget, 'Albert Schweitzer's Second Edition of The Quest of the Historical Jesus', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 88 (2006) 3–39.

Normally, those who attempt to write a brief history of mythicism begin with some perfunctory remarks about it starting in earnest with the work Bruno Bauer, move on to the contributions of some of the 'Radical Dutch School', such as Allard Pierson, Abraham Loman and Gustaaf van den Bergh van Eysinga⁵⁸ and, then, in the English-speaking world, J. M. Robertson in the UK,⁵⁹ and perhaps W. B. Smith in the US,⁶⁰ before make remarks about Albert Kalthoff⁶¹ and Peter Jensen,⁶² culminating, at least initially, with Arthur Drews⁶³ or possibly, a little later, in France, with Paul-Louis Couchoud.⁶⁴ Then follows silence, more or less, with perhaps some mention given to Alvin Kuhn,⁶⁵ but with G. A. Wells depicted as the leading and almost only advocate of the theory in the later 20th century until the sudden explosion of publications from about the 2000. Sometimes the origins of the movement might be dated slightly earlier than Bauer, with the claim that Constantin François Chassebœuf de Volney or Charles François Dupuis were the first to deny the historicity of

58 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 10. Studies of the 'Radical Dutch School' are lacking. However, see

G. A. van den Bergh van Eysinga, *Radical Views About the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1912); H.

Detering, 'The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles', *Journal of Higher Criticism* 3 (1996) 163-93.

59 J. M. Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology* (London: Watts & co., 1900); idem, *Pagan Christs: Studies in Comparative Hierology* (London: Watts & Co., 1903); idem, *The Historical Jesus: A Survey of Positions* (London: Watts & Co., 1916).

60 W. B. Smith, *Der vorchristliche Jesus* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906); idem, *Ecce Deus*.

61 A. Kalthoff, *Das Christus-Problem. Grundlinien zu einer Sozialtheologie* (Leipzig: Deiderichs, 1902); idem, *Was wissen wir von Jesus?* (Schmargendorf-Berlin: Renaissance-Otto Lehrman, 1904).

62 P. Jensen, *Hat der Jesus der Evangelien wirklich gelebt?* (Frankfurt: Neuer Frankfurter, 1910).

63 A. Drews, *Die Christusmythe*.

64 P.-L. Couchoud, *Le mystère de Jésus* (Paris: Rieder et Cie, 1924); idem, *Jésus. Le Dieu fait homme* (Paris: Rieder et Cie, 1937).

65 Kuhn was a prolific author producing over 150 works. Those denying the historicity of Jesus include: A. B. Kuhn, *Who is this King of Glory?* (Elizabeth, NJ: Academy Press, 1944); idem, *Shadow of the Third Century* (Elizabeth, NJ: Academy Press, 1949).

Jesus at the end of eighteenth century,⁶⁶ and perhaps some space might be given to the nineteenth-century lay Egyptologist Gerald Massey,⁶⁷ who continues to be influential amongst some mythicists.⁶⁸ Otherwise there is little variation in this story, this myth of mythicist origins. However, this way of telling the story has its problems.⁶⁹

The 'Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus' is usually said to have had its high-water mark in 'the first decades of the twentieth century'⁷⁰ and is usually associated with what is customarily referred to as the 'First Quest for the Historical Jesus'. However, Bermejo Rubio has acutely observed that this prevailing periodisation of historical Jesus scholarship, with its familiar three quests, the stuff of countless New Testament introductory textbooks, might well 'serve certain ideological (more specifically, theological) interests',⁷¹ effectively consigning certain critical problems to 'oblivion'⁷² by making it appear that questions that had been raised in the past had somehow been settled; that,

66 C.-F. Volney, *Les ruines ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (Paris: Desenne, 1791); C. F. Dupuis, *Origine de tous les cultes* (Paris: H. Agasse, 1795). Despite publishing earlier, Volney was heavily dependent upon a manuscript version of Dupuis. See G. A. Wells, 'Stages of New Testament Criticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (1969) 147–60.

67 Massey published widely but his views on the historical Jesus can be seen in G. Massey, *The Natural Genesis* (vol. 2, 2 vols; London: Williams and Norgate, 1883) II.378–503; idem, *The Historical Jesus and Mythical Christ* (Glasgow: Hay Nisbet & Co., 1887).

68 Notably Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*. For a critique of his use of Massey see Porter and Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 25–31.

69 There are some surprising omissions in most accounts. The work of Robert Taylor is usually ignored as is that of John Allegro, the Dead Sea Scrolls scholar. See R. Taylor, *The Diegesis: Being a Discovery of the Origin, Evidences, and Early History of Christianity* (London: R. Carlile and J. Brooks, 1829); J. M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: a Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity Within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970).

70 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 13.

for example, Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* was a definitive contribution that rendered all that preceded it obsolete. If Bermejo Rubio is correct, it seems especially telling that the question of the non-historicity of Jesus is traditionally presented as belonging to this first phase of critical scholarship, as though the questions it raised were settled a century ago. Indeed, there were substantive scholarly contributions *after* Drews, notably from the Soviet Union, where the theory was actively promoted, something well known from the opening pages of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967).⁷³

However, if we are tempted to rectify this ideologically-loaded narrative of the history of the question, by providing a smooth, linear, diachronic account of the development of the Christ-myth theory, from de Volney and Dupuis, or Bauer, to the present day, this would also be misleading. In the case of the denial of the historicity of Jesus we are dealing with a *way of thinking* about the origins of Christianity not, for the most part, a self-consciously academic *tradition*. On occasion those who advocated the idea did think in terms of it possessing a discernible intellectual lineage; Drews, for example, could explicitly acknowledge his debt to the works of Robertson and Smith in *Die Christusmythe* (1909) and some years later publish a study entitled *Die Leugnung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (1926), a work that attempted to legitimise

71 F. Bermejo Rubio, 'The Fiction of the "Three Quests": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7 (2009) 211.

72 Bermejo Rubio, 'The Fiction of the "Three Quests"', 247.

73 See, for example, I. A. Kryvelev, *Christ: Myth or Reality?* (Moscow: Editorial Board Social Sciences Today, 1987); E. C. Haber, 'The Mythic Bulgakov: The Master and Margarita and Arthur Drews's The Christ Myth', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 43 (1999) 347–60. The work of the journalist Rudolf Augstein also had a considerable impact in Germany. See R. Augstein, *Jesus Menschensohn* (München: Bertelsmann, 1972).

his thesis by situating it within a much larger, long-established body of similar scholarship.

However, genealogies, as Biblical scholars know for other reasons, can be a little misleading. For example, although Bauer is often credited with being the first making a sustained, critical case for mythicism, his own work seems to have had little influence, at least initially, on the 'Radical Dutch School', some of whom became prominent academic advocates of the thesis a few decades later.⁷⁴ Telling the story diachronically also fails to make sense of those who have arrived at their position apparently without the knowledge of *any* preceding mythicist scholarship. This is evident, for example, in the work of Brodie, who, in *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (tellingly subtitled 'Memoir of a Discovery') describes reaching his conclusion with no reference to earlier advocates of mythicism. Instead, for him, the denial of the historicity of Jesus came as a natural consequence of the development of his own thinking about the literary nature of the gospel texts in reaction to assumptions within the field, not least its presumption of oral tradition.⁷⁵

Identifying the earliest appearance of the Christ-myth theory is also not straightforward. Given that the denial of the historicity of Jesus was sometimes a rather dangerous idea to hold, if we are to tell the story solely with reference to publications that *explicitly* advocate the position we miss much. There is evidence of developed mythicist beliefs in a variety of sources prior to de Volney and Dupuis, though it often comes to us indirectly. The emergence of British and Irish deists are especially significant in this respect. Their role in initiating the critical study of Christian origins has only recently been rediscovered by biblical scholars,⁷⁶ but so far little attention has been paid to the evidence that at least some deists clearly held mythicist views, even if none did so openly in

74 Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene*, 53.

75 Brodie, *Beyond the Quest*, 117.

76 See F. S. Jones, ed., *The Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012).

print. For example, we can see this as early as 1677 in the complaint made by Edward Stillingfleet, the Anglican latitudinarian, against an unnamed deist:⁷⁷

But you seem to imply, That all this Story concerning Christ was invented long after the pretended time of his being in the World, Why may not you as well suspect, that Julius Caesar lived before Romulus; or that Augustus lived at the Seige of Troy? For you might as well reject all History upon such grounds as those you assign; and think Mahomet as right in his Chronology, as the Bible. It is time for us to burn all our Books, if we have lived in such a Cheat all this while. Methinks you might as well ask, whether Lucretia were not Pope Joan? Or Alexander the sixth, one of the Roman Emperours? Or whether Luther were not the Emperour of Turkey? For there is no greater evidence of any History in the World, than there is, that all the things reported in the New Testament were done at that time, when they are pretended to be.⁷⁸

We also learn from Voltaire that in the early eighteenth century a number of those associated with the exiled English deist Henry St John Bolingbroke denied the existence of Jesus. They appear to have done so on the grounds that the gospel accounts of Jesus' life were unbelievable and contradictory. Voltaire found their position unconvincing and judged them 'more ingenious than learned.'⁷⁹

77 In my judgement, probably Herbert of Cherbury.

78 E. Stillingfleet, *A Letter to a Deist, in Answer to Several Objections Against the Truth and Authority of the Scriptures* (London: W. G., 1677) 53–54.

79 Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (vol. 33; Paris: De L'Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire-Typographique, 1784) XXXIII.273. Although Voltaire likewise believed that the New Testament was riddled with contradictions, and a 'derivative compound' of pre-Christian myths (J. Marshall, 'Voltaire, priestcraft and imposture: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam', *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2018) 168), he rejected their position on two grounds: i) the

Indeed, if we look solely for texts that *openly* denied the historicity of Jesus, we are not paying attention to the mode of discourse common at the time, especially amongst religious radicals, which was often deliberately indirect. In the words of George Berkeley, freethinkers tended to make 'use of Hints and Allusions, expressing little, insinuating much'⁸⁰ with the aim of undermining religious belief by 'slow and insensible Degrees'.⁸¹ This is, perhaps, best epitomised by a famous footnote found in the first volume of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), which reads: 'Apollonius of Tyana was born about the same time as Jesus Christ. His life (that of the former) is related in so fabulous a manner by his disciples, that we are at a loss to discover whether he was a sage, an impostor, or a fanatic.'⁸²

Such writers often employed ridicule to distance the reader from their previous convictions, and to introduce them to possible ways of thinking that could not necessarily be spelled out.⁸³ This is especially apparent in Thomas Woolston's *Six Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1727–1730) where 'ridicule was a key component in his new critical approach',⁸⁴ and a characteristic of

fact that people wrote for and against Jesus indicates he existed; ii) none of the early opponents of Christianity ever doubted his existence.

80 G. Berkeley, *Alciphron or, the Minute Philosopher* (vol. 1, 2 vols; Dublin: G. Risk, G. Ewing, and W. Smith, 1732) 10.

81 Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 13.

82 E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (vol. 1, 6 vols; London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776) I.309, fn. 63. A similar intent is evident, for example, in Charles Blount, *The Two First Books of Philostratus concerning the Life of Apollonius Tyaneus* (London: Nathaniel Thompson, 1680).

83 J. Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

84 J. A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680-1750* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997) 85.

his hermeneutics that he happily acknowledged.⁸⁵ Woolston attempted to show how absurd a literal reading of the miracle stories could be, only to offer in their place ludicrously strained and involved allegorical interpretations, often constructed from erroneous or fabricated patristic quotations. The effect, that Woolston fully intended, was to undermine the authority of the gospel accounts and he was, as James Herrick has observed, more than happy to 'cast doubt even on the historical existence of Jesus' in his exegesis.⁸⁶

Of course, such scepticism about the historicity of Jesus was not solely the preserve of some deists, and there is evidence of its presence in other radical circles too, long before the words of de Volney and Dupuis. For example, the anonymous author of *Historical and Critical Reflections on Mahometanism and Socinianism* (1712) complained, in the context of an attack on William Vorstius, a notable antitrinitarian, that some people regarded the words of Suetonius, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger concerning Jesus — key non-Christian testimony for his existence — as interpolated.⁸⁷

85 T. Woolston, *A Fourth Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour* (2nd ed.; London: Thomas Woolston, 1728) 28. For Woolston's hermeneutics see J. A. Herrick, 'Blasphemy in the Eighteenth Century: Contours of a Rhetorical Crime', in *Atheism and Deism Revalued: Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800* (ed. W. Hudson, D. Lucci, and J. R. Wigelsworth; London: Routledge, 2014) 104–8.

86 Herrick, 'Blasphemy in the Eighteenth Century', 106. Later deists would be more blunt: Jesus 'did not even exist as a man, he is merely an imaginary of allegorical character, as Apollo, Hercules, Jupiter and all the deities of antiquity were'. (T. Paine, *Examination of the Passages in the New Testament* (New York, NY: Thomas Paine, 1807) 48).

87 Anon., 'Historical and Critical Reflections on Mahometanism and Socinianism', in *Four Treatises Concerning the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of the Mahometans* (ed. Anon.; London: B. Lintott, 1712) 197. These classical references to Jesus were regarded as the work of 'neutrals' in religious polemic of the seventeenth century (e.g. J. d'Espagne, *The Joyfull Convert* (London: I. Leach, 1658) 12) and so such accusations of interpolation were, as today, especially significant for arguments over Jesus' historicity.

5. Tropes in the Scholarship

In addition to matters of terminology and historiography, a handful of recurrent themes or motifs are evident in the arguments presented by the protagonists in the debate and warrant further critical reflection. Three in particular stand out: irrationality, history, and authority.

5.1. Irrationality

It is common in this debate to see accusations of irrationality regularly deployed, either directly or by analogy. N. T. Wright, for example, when invited to discuss a popular mythicist work by the BBC, declined, replying 'that this was like asking a professional astronomer to debate with the authors of a book claiming the moon was made of green cheese.'⁸⁸ Indeed, it is not uncommon for New Testament scholars to make a further, but related, accusation about those advocating the Christ-myth theory are indistinguishable from conspiracy theorists.⁸⁹ Claims of irrationality are regularly made by advocates of the Christ-myth thesis too. The title of a book by Frank Zindler, a prominent figure in the movement,⁹⁰ which contains many essays on the subject, is indicative of this: *Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes From a World That Won't Reason*.⁹¹

88 N. T. Wright, 'Jesus' Self-Understanding', in *The Incarnation* (ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 48. See also R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (2nd ed.; New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 13.

89 M. A. Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigates the Life of Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 180; idem, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (2nd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013) 251. See, for example, Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 5.

90 See, for example, Zindler and Price, *Bart Ehrman*.

91 F. R. Zindler, *Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes From a World That Won't Reason. Volume I: Religions & Scriptures* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011).

In the case of a number of mythicists, the use of such language unsurprising. Some of those denying the historicity of Jesus are writing from a tradition which explicitly identifies itself as 'rationalist'⁹² and for whom the criterion of rational validity is not just a methodological foundation but also has considerable symbolic value.⁹³ However, the accusations of irrationality made by those defending the historicity of Jesus are of a rather different kind and have a different function, and are indicative of significant problems. On the one hand, they are often very wide of the mark. Whilst some works by mythicists could be said to be characterised by a particular explanatory or rhetorical style common to conspiracy literature⁹⁴ and contain conspiracies that would make Dan Brown blush,⁹⁵ most do not. Indeed, Robertson, a popular advocate of the Christ-myth theory in Britain in the early 20th century, wrote books against the belief that Bacon authored Shakespeare, allegedly distressed that Mark Twain had gone to his grave believing in this popular conspiracy.⁹⁶ However, even more importantly, accusations of 'madness' (like those of 'badness' or 'magic')

92 It is important to note that not all are. Drews was, for example, a monist. See G. S. Williamson, 'The Christ Myth Debate: Radical Theology and German Public Life, 1909-1913', *Church History* 86 (2017) 728–64. Brodie is a theist.

93 Indeed, some of the most significant contributions to the Christ-myth debate have, in the British context, been published by the Rationalist Press Association (through its publisher Watts & Co.), e.g., see fn. 59. Interestingly, Conybeare's *The Historical Christ*, an attack on mythicism, was also published by that press. For Conybeare, an Oxford biblical scholar and rationalist, his work provided 'a middle way between traditionalism on the one hand and absurdity on the other' (*ibid.*, vii). See B. Cooke, *The Gathering of Infidels: A Hundred Years of the Rationalist Press Association* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004) 50–52.

94 See J. Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 4.

95 E.g., R. W. Bernard, *Apollonius Of Tyana The Nazarene* (Mokelumne Hill, CA: Health Research, 1964); Acharya S, *The Christ Conspiracy. A strain in contemporary white supremacism also believes the historical Jesus was the product of a conspiracy* e.g. B. Klassen, *A Revolution of Values Through Religion* (Otto, NC: Creativity, 1991).

96 E.g., J. M. Robertson, *The Baconian Heresy, a Confutation* (London: H. Jenkins, 1913).

often reflect and enforce inequitable relationships of power,⁹⁷ stigmatising those who have less, and in this case marginalising and delegitimising both the questioners and the question itself, however unintentionally. This does not seem a very helpful way to proceed when faced with a question that, at base, is a perfectly reasonable one for any intelligent person to ask.

5.2. History

It is hard to read far in this debate without encountering fierce arguments about what does or does not constitute good history and who is or is not a historian. This trope has been present from the outset, and is evident in, for example, the plethora of contributions that include substantial discussions of historical method, or dedicate initial chapters to this subject.⁹⁸ Emblematic of this concern is the recent attempt by Richard Carrier to promote the use of Bayes' theorem when making judgements on the historicity of Jesus, a theory of probability widely used in statistics, and perhaps better known amongst epidemiologists than biblical scholars, and something that he believes will establish a historical method that will not be constrained by the prior commitments of the protagonists.⁹⁹ Most of the current contributors to the debate are keen to also identify themselves as 'historians' in their texts,¹⁰⁰ or to seek approval of their arguments from historians working in other fields, and also to deny that opponents merit that designation.¹⁰¹ In doing this,

97 See J. J. Meggitt, 'The Madness of King Jesus', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29 4 (2007) 379–413.

98 E.g., Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument*, pp. 43–59.

99 R. C. Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012). See also R. Lataster, 'Questioning the Plausibility of Jesus Ahistoricity Theories—A Brief Pseudo-Bayesian Metacritique of the Sources', *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (2015) 63–96.

100 E.g., Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 5–7, 338.

101 E.g. R. Lataster and R. Carrier, *Jesus Did Not Exist: A Debate Among Atheists* (Scotts Valley, CA: Raphael C. Lataster, 2015).

they share something with significant contributors of the past too – Goguel, for example, famously referred to the influential work of Couchoud in the early twentieth century as 'the dream of a poet rather than the work of a historian.'¹⁰²

Although this interest in 'history' is hardly surprising as we are dealing with historicity, arguments about 'history' in this debate are not just about professional expertise or about technical disagreements about method but indicative of a deliberate rhetorical strategy too. Many claims to being a historian are about self-presentation, about being the person who can legitimately claim those somewhat antiquated but still significant mantles of objectivity or neutrality, something, for example, evident in Ehrman's words: 'Jesus existed, and those vocal persons who deny it do so not because they have considered the evidence with the dispassionate eye of the historian, but because they have some other agenda that this denial serves. From a dispassionate point of view, there was a Jesus of Nazareth.'¹⁰³

But New Testament scholars should concede that the kind of history that is deemed acceptable in their field is, at best, somewhat eccentric. Most biblical scholars would be a little unsettled if, for example, they read an article about Apollonius of Tyana in a journal of ancient history that began by arguing for the historicity of supernatural events before defending the veracity of the miracles ascribed to him yet would not be unsurprised to see an article making the same arguments in a journal dedicated to the study of the historical Jesus.¹⁰⁴

102 Goguel, *Jesus the Nazarene*, 45.

103 Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 6–7.

104 E.g. M. R. Licona, 'Historians and Miracle Claims', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014) 106–29.

Indeed, the lack of conventional historical training on the part of biblical scholars may well be evident in the failure of any scholar involved in discussing the Christ-myth debate to mention any long-established historiographical approaches associated with the study of the poor in the past, such as History from Below, Microhistory or Subaltern Studies,¹⁰⁵ approaches that might help us determine what kind of questions can be asked and what kind of answers can reasonably be expected to given, when we scrutinise someone who is depicted as coming from such a non-elite context.

For example, given that most human beings in antiquity left no sign of their existence, and the poor as individuals are virtually invisible,¹⁰⁶ all we can hope to do is try to establish, in a general sense, the lives that they lived. Why would we expect any non-Christian evidence for the *specific* existence of someone of the socio-economic status of a figure like Jesus at all? To deny his existence based on the absence of such evidence, even if that were the case, has problematic implications; you may as well deny the existence of pretty much everyone in the ancient world. Indeed, the attempt by mythicists to dismiss the Christian sources could be construed, however unintentionally, as exemplifying what E. P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'¹⁰⁷ in action, functionally seeking to erase a collection of data, extremely rare in the

105 V. Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2012); S. G. Magnússon and I. M. Szi­jártó, *What is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013); A. I. Port, 'History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory', ed. J. Wright, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015) 108–13.

106 See, for example, R. C. Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (London: Profile Books, 2011); J. J. Meggitt, 'Sources: Use, Abuse and Neglect: The Importance of Ancient Popular Culture', in *Christianity at Corinth: The Scholarly Quest for the Corinthian Church* (ed. D. G. Horrell and E. Adams; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 241–53.

107 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) 12.

Roman empire, that depicts the lives and interactions of non-elite actors and seems to have originated from them too.

5.3. Authority

The subject of authority is also something to which the protagonists in the debate regularly return. It is not uncommon for individual contributors to make much of their qualifications and professional standing within disciplines that they believe to be relevant, or, occasionally, to claim the opposite, that somehow *not* possessing the requisite skills and qualifications means that they are blissfully free from disciplinary presuppositions and entanglements.¹⁰⁸ However, it is the claims to *collective* authority as it appears in the debate that is especially worthy of note.

For those who are professionally trained in biblical studies, it is not unusual to find them referring to their membership of something that they refer to as 'the guild'; and consensus within the 'guild' is regularly invoked to make it clear that the Christ-myth position is one that is untenable.¹⁰⁹ On the one hand, this is perfectly understandable. Although some mythicists are adamant that 'truth is not a democracy' or complain about the 'fallacy of consensus', some, such as Carrier, are aware that this consensus of experts is a very serious matter and weighs heavily against the plausibility of their position.¹¹⁰ However, unlike 'guilds' in professions such as law or medicine, other than the subject of study – the bible – and some assumptions about competency in a few requisite linguistic skills, it is not apparent what members of this 'guild' necessarily have in common and therefore what value an alleged consensus within it really has, especially on what is a historical rather than a

108 See the remarks of Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument*, 9 concerning E. Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man - The Case for a Mythical Jesus* (2nd ed.; n.p.: Age of Reason Publications, 2009).

109 E.g. S. Byrskog, 'The Historicity of Jesus', 2183, fn. 1; Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*, 251.

110 Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, 21.

linguistic matter. Indeed, whilst it is true that some members do have the academic freedom to arrive at any position they find convincing about the question of Jesus' historicity,¹¹¹ this is clearly not the case for many who are also members of the 'guild' and carry out their scholarship in confessional contexts, as the apparent silencing of Brodie indicates.¹¹²

6. Conclusion

The question of the historicity of Jesus is unlikely to go away in the near future, however much some scholars of the New Testament may wish otherwise, and nor should it. The question does not belong to the past and nor is it irrational to raise it. It should not be dismissed with problematic appeals to expertise and authority and nor should it be viewed as unwelcome, as a 'lurking monster present wherever critical studies are recognized and proceed'.¹¹³ Just as Schweitzer took it seriously in the early twentieth century, so should those working on the historical Jesus today. The limited number of specialists who have engaged in the debate in recent years should be thanked for what has often been a somewhat thankless and fraught undertaking, though clearly, as with any question in the study of the New Testament and the origins of Christianity, there is considerably more to do. Indeed, if we decide, *pace* Voltaire, that at least *some* contemporary advocates of the non-historicity of Jesus are indeed, 'more ingenious than learned', taking this question seriously may, at the very least, prove beneficial in raising the standard of debate and the

111 See Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument*, 4–5.

112 Brodie's religious order has now prohibited him from writing anything further. See B. Treacy, 'Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Official Dominican Response to a Controversial Book', *Doctrine and Life* 64 (2014) 2–4.

113 Weaver, *The Historical Jesus*, 71.

wider understanding — indeed, even self-understanding — of what New Testament scholars do and how they do it.¹¹⁴

114 Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at seminars in the universities of Cambridge, Durham, and Stockholm, as well as at the British New Testament Conference. I would like to thank participants for their constructive feedback and encouragement.