Did Jesus Exist? The Trouble with Certainty in Historical Jesus Scholarship

While Ehrman spends a great deal of time analyzing the evidence, he does so in ways which ignore the more recent critical scholarship which undercuts his entire position. In other words, the case for a historical Jesus is far weaker than Ehrman lets on.

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1. Some Caveats[1]

In a forthcoming volume, soon to be published in the Copenhagen International Seminar Series, a group of scholars contribute essays on the current crisis in the scholarship that is dedicated to the historical figure of Jesus.[2] Many of the contributors—most of them approaching the subject from a European mindset—seem to feel that historical Jesus scholarship has reached an impasse; while new studies continue to be published in the field, scholars are growing tired of the rehashing of old ideas which are reproduced in these studies anew. With the increasing number of scholars dedicating themselves to the theory of reception in Biblical Studies, and with the accessibility of literary criticism steadily becoming a major contender in the field of New Testament, older scholarship in the form of historical criticism—once ingrained in consensus—is being challenged in favor of a more literary approach, and the new approach is gaining ground. One of the problems associated with historical Jesus studies which has not really been addressed, in its current form, might be found in the inability to accept the probability that the figure of Jesus *might not have existed* historically. While it is clear that scholars accept the *possibility*, most conclude that the hypothesis for nonexistence is so meagerly supported that it can simply be ignored. While this position has been challenged in recent years, it remains, for reasons which shall be addressed below, a sturdy part of the field of New Testament. This paper, however, takes a position contrary to this and argues that not only is the position of ahistoricity possible, but *plausible enough* that it deserves more attention and more respect than it is currently given.[3] This contribution argues, hopefully persuasively, that by dismissing the position of ahistoricity, or by not taking into account its possibility, contributes directly to the problems associated with historical Jesus studies.[4]

2. Certainty and the Crisis in Historical Jesus Scholarship

Bart Ehrman, in his recent book *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 1-7, writes, problematically so, that "Jesus certainly existed"[5] and that he knows of no scholar of New Testament who would even raise such doubts. He repeats this in his Huffington Post article on the subject where he writes, again, of the certainty of the historicity of the figure of Jesus.[6] He adds in this little bit (emphasis added):

> "One may well choose to resonate with the concerns of our modern and post-modern cultural despisers of established religion (or not). But surely the best way to promote any

> such agenda is not to deny *what virtually every sane historian on the planet*...has come to conclude based on a range of compelling historical evidence."

One is left to wonder: is there no room left for doubt in the field of New Testament concerning the historicity of the figure of Jesus? Has the field become so static and immovable that to even doubt that Jesus lived is to warrant the label of insanity? And should academic freedom be sacrificed? Should the academy limit a critical position by intimidating and ridiculing those few scholars who do not believe Jesus existed historically into submitting to the consensus of the majority? Or, as Ehrman implies, should scholars who doubt the certainty of historicity be fired from academic posts or just denied work in academia?[7]

Have we here, in our modern world so many decades removed from the papal encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu*, the only unchallengeable subject in the whole of the vagaries of historical inquiry? Have we discovered the very grail upon which we place our proclamation, dogmatic as it is, that we have found--with certainty--an unassailable fact and an impregnable position: the historicity of the figure of Jesus?

This is disconcerting; how reminiscent of the sort of mistreatment minimalists received at the hands of those academics who were certain of the historicity of the Old Testament patriarchs and the patriarchal narratives.[8] So too those scholars who were certain of the historicity of Moses and the Exodus or those who found great biblical usefulness in Speiser's translation of the Nuzi tablets.[9] 'Certainty', as one should know, is a dangerous expression when dealing in a field as decidedly unpredictable as ancient history.[10] What may be consensus today could be considered the fringe perspective in a mere decade or two—roughly about how long it takes for a well-argued interpretation to spread through academia, to be republished or translated into a new language, to go through the process of peer review, of rebuttal and defense, and so on. This is why certainty, as a rule, should never be presumed. By the very notion of 'certainty' we have here the flaw in Ehrman's argument and the overall crisis about which I write this paper--that is to say, we have here the presupposition central to his argument by which he does not permit anything less than complete acquiescence.

It seems many scholars agree with him, some even likening mythicism to anti-religious ideology (which in many cases is quite true, but certainly not in all cases), to crankery (again, in many instances, this is true), and to amateurs outside the field (also true in many circumstances). To state openly that Jesus never existed is to automatically lump oneself into the same sort who denies the world is over 6,000 years old, or so Ehrman argues. As the argument goes, it is just as silly and absurd an idea as young earth creationism. After reading only some of the large amount of poorly-researched and naïve (if not highly opinionated) discussions on the internet about mythicism, I have a hard time faulting scholars for these sorts of reactions. And yet Ehrman actually seems to have attempted to read it *all*—from the most absurd argument to the most reasoned methodology. Overall, the good arguments and the credible scholars who offer them—few as they may be now—have been drowned out by the flood of junk. Yet while I can sympathize with Ehrman and appreciate his frustration, it does not excuse the rather curious problems in his article and book on the topic.[11]

Ehrman's article for the Huffington Post is rather incendiary, again the likely result of frustration; but he attacks mythicism the concept and the proponents of it personally rather than dealing with it and, as a result, makes several incredible mistakes that he might have otherwise caught had he been more cautious in his methodology. In the book Ehrman is much more civil and careful than the article and takes the time to address the difference between a credible scholar and an internet message board discussion of the subject, but in his apparent rush to accomplish his task of proving the historicity of his apocalyptic Jesus, he has made more than a few critical errors in his presentation of the data.

First he makes no real distinction between the types of mythicist arguments and instead lumps them all together, creating a 'guilt by association' effect that is neither appropriate nor reasonable.[12] For example, Carrier's arguments which are often sound and methodical are lumped in with the claims made by Acharya S whose arguments are usually poorly researched and lack in contextual understanding. So the mistakes of one are stretched across the spectrum, as if Carrier were making the same claims Acharya S does, which is just not true.[13]

Imagine if the same sort of method were applied to historical Jesus scholarship? What if the mistakes of, say, an amateur were attached to the otherwise excellent work of the rest of historical Jesus scholars? What if Ehrman were thrown under the same category with Robert Eisenman—a man with whom he clearly doesn't agree? Certainly that wouldn't be fair to him! One should hope that, if anything, Ehrman would be the first to offer corrections and, in those instances, the corrections would be highlighted. In this regard, Ehrman makes no effort to show how often the credible scholars like Thomas Thompson, Bob Price, or Carrier make an effort to educate the lay public on the many false arguments made by the internet denizens and various amateurs.

But deep-seeded presuppositions seem to have fabricated the illusion of certainty in a discussion about the historicity of the figure of Jesus. While Ehrman spends a great deal of time analyzing the evidence, he does so in ways which ignore the more recent critical scholarship which undercuts his entire position. In other words, the case for a historical Jesus is far weaker than Ehrman lets on. The criteria used to establish historicity, for example, have come under some rather withering fire over the past few years.[14] In addition to this, much of what historical Jesus scholars have relied upon for evidence has also been diminished through new investigations of these sources; these include textual critical sources like the hypothetical 'Q' which is no longer necessary for the development of the synoptic tradition.[15] Former extrabiblical sources like the Talmud,[16] Tacitus,[17] Suetonius,[18] and Josephus[19] which were used to support the historicity argument have shown to be much weaker evidence overall. Even the debate over the genre of the Gospel accounts has severely limited the case for historicity. If the Gospel of Mark was written as a performance piece, or a piece of Jewish fiction writing[20] akin to Tobit or Judith, or if it is simply a case of biblical rewriting[21]—a common genre in the Second Temple Period and into late antiquity—one would be hardpressed to argue that the Gospels are mythologized history; something which is commonly suggested by those claiming the Gospels represent Greco-Roman biographies (more on this below).

These challenges may not destroy the case for historicity, but they certainly don't help it. None of these critical arguments are 'fringe'; they are all legitimate criticisms which have run their

course through the academy in the proper way (through presented papers, peer-reviewed publications, doctoral theses, and so on). Yet these challenges so diminish the supporting structure for historicity that finding the figure of Jesus in these sources is nothing if not difficult, perhaps even impossible. And this is precisely why one should expect to find instances in Ehrman's book where he discusses, to even a minor degree, these rather pressing issues. It was disappointing, troubling in fact, to see prime opportunities for such discussions go ignored, time and time again, as if they had never been proposed; as if they didn't exist at all.

Still, there is a disconnect somewhere when it is still considered 'fringe' to doubt, even when taking in the massive amount of recent critical scholarship. The implication seems to be made that since many scholars believe mythicism to be 'a stretch' it is simply not sane to even consider it; Ehrman argues it is akin to denying a hard science like biology,[22] which is not only a fallacy of false analogy (since history and biology are completely different fields with different standards of evidence) but just absurd. Jesus isn't a specimen with recognizable parameters that one can analyze and from it draw conclusions, like a fossil in a museum. Even the best evidences archaeologically for his existence actually have nothing at all to do with the archeology of a figure of Jesus but rather with the period in which it is believed he lived—and even that period is devoid of any sort of Christian archaeological evidence. Jesus is a hypothetical entity, and one that admittedly is highly speculative and subjective—a problem that has plagued the field of New Testament and particularly historical Jesus scholarship whose historians, as they say, look down the well of their field and, upon seeing their own reflections staring back at them, believe they have found Jesus.

However Ehrman goes to great lengths in his book to try to show that mythicism *is insane* (or at delusional).[23] He spends chapters on the sources of evidence without once critically engaging any of them in a competent manner, as one would expect him to do. He seems as though he didn't check the primary sources at times, he makes huge leaps in logic, and makes rather bizarre errors which a respectable historian like himself should not make. He seems to want to so hide the fact that the sources are not sufficient that he seems completely unaware that he contradicts himself. That he does this in a book meant to expose the same errors in the mythicist community is not just a matter of irony, but perhaps may be symptomatic of the limitations of the historical Jesus enterprise.

3. How Certainty Can Affect Critical Scholarship

Over the past week or so I have read many positive reviews of Ehrman's books from a variety of New Testament scholars.[24] I have to say that I do not agree. My hopes were very high for this book when it first appeared on my recommendation list from Amazon and I bought it hoping that I would learn a thing or two, maybe be introduced to new methods, new source materials, and maybe even become convinced that one can actually prove the existence of a historical figure of Jesus. I am open to such a possibility. But when I started to read the book, I found a number of rather shocking problems throughout—problems that clearly show a lack of regard for the primary source material, a lack of regard for sound logic to play a role in forming ones conclusions, a lack of regard for the arguments and positions of those individuals which were being criticized—which greatly diminished my appreciation for the book. How can one find the good in the mix of so much bad?

On pages 51-52, in his discussion of Pliny's letter to Trajan on the Christians, Ehrman confuses Book 10 (in which Pliny's correspondence with Trajan can be found) with *Letter* 10. I had at first assumed it was an editorial mistake or a typo but when I saw it was repeated twice, I started to wonder if Ehrman had even read the letter in question or if he had read it via a secondary source (who must have had the source quoted incorrectly). The letter number is actually 96 (so: *Epistulae* 10.96) and Ehrman never once cites it accurately which is either extremely sloppy or he just doesn't know what is the proper citation for the letter. And in the same breath he seems to believe that the letter discussing Christians contains mention of the fire in Nicomedia (which is entirely another letter, in fact 10.33-34); it may be that he meant to link the same governing law which may have affected the writing of both letters, but he is not at all clear about this and instead seems to openly lump both discussions together as if they were within the same correspondence. In truth, there is quite a large amount of unrelated discussion between those letters concerning the fire and the letter containing mention of the Christians (most of it having to do with this or that building project or this and that business matter). But Ehrman doesn't seem to know this or even hint that these are two separate letters at all, which again raises the issue as to whether he actually read the primary source he was using as evidence. This isn't a minor editorial mistake, this is rather egregious; this is precisely the sort of mistake Ehrman would call out a mythicist for making since it is amateurish and shows a lack of ability to fact-check one's own arguments. What is worse is that there are multiple instances of this sort of mistake throughout Ehrman's book.[25]

On top of that he often contradicts his own arguments.[26] On page 56, Ehrman writes:

> "It should be clear in any event that Tacitus is basing his comments on hearsay rather than, say, detailed historical research."

But on page 97, he contradicts himself:

> "Tacitus almost certainly had information at his disposal about Jesus, for example, that he was crucified in Judea during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. …. Indirectly, then, Tacitus…provide[s] independent attestation to Jesus's existence from outside the Gospels…"

Ehrman goes on at length explaining that Tacitus probably *did not* consult any independent source (like Roman records, which Ehrman aptly states probably didn't exist) and that he had some information wrong which, ironically, Ehrman *also* gets wrong.[27] If Tacitus is receiving his information about Christians and their Messiah from hearsay, then he isn't providing information that is independent of that tradition. And if he did not use any independent source, like Roman records (which, again, Ehrman states he did not), then the source is not an independent witness. These are some pretty serious errors for so many positive reviewers to miss. It suggests, to me at least, that perhaps some of those reviewing the book don't want to critically engage it—maybe because they want the book to conform to their already-determined conclusions about historicity. And if that really is the case, then it's a shame.

After all, when you are certain you are right, what need is there for fact-checking? What need is there for caution or accuracy? When someone confines critical thinking about a specific subject

to the realm of lunacy, there is no need to respect the critical voices at all; no effort is needed since one's mind is already set: they are wrong and that will never change. The real tragedy in all this is that it isn't limited to Ehrman. This sort of mentality permeates through a good portion of historical Jesus studies. As a result the scholarship takes a hit.

Consider this statement made by Sanders; 'we know more about Jesus than about Alexander [the Great]' and 'The sources for Jesus are better…than those that deal with Alexander.'[28] This association is just simply unreasonable. In order to make such a statement, Sanders needs to ignore large amounts of archaeological, epigraphic, and reliable textual data while, at the same time, favoring less accurate, highly problematic textual data which does not survive in any original form and has undergone redactions, copying, and rewrites over thousands of years.

For the sake of argument alone, if one takes into account all the evidence for Alexander the Great, a well-documented and attested figure in history, there is simply no comparison between him and the figure of Jesus. Take any one Gospel (or all four, if one would prefer) and examine it next to Arrian's history of Alexander's campaigns. Even as late as he is, Arrian uses methods that surpass those (if any at all) used by the Gospel authors. Arrian compares his sources which consisted of eyewitness (actual *written*) accounts from Alexander's generals (he explicitly cites his sources, even if they are now lost) and tells us why he is choosing one account of an event over the other, or why one seems to hold more weight.[29] Further, many of the citations Arrian uses are known from other contemporary and later sources.[30] In addition to Arrian's work, there are still perhaps hundreds of extant contemporary attestations of Alexander the Great from manuscripts,[31] artwork (busts), coins, and inscriptions.[32] If we had this sort of evidence for Jesus' life and ministry, there would be no need to write this paper, and that is precisely the point.

Now, one may make the argument that we cannot expect this sort of evidence for a historical Jesus, as he'd be relatively insignificant compared to a figure such as Alexander the Great. That's very true, assuming a historical, itinerant, impoverished Jesus as laid out by some historical Jesus scholars. Granting this objection's validity, there is an obvious contradiction. Why would any scholar so desire to suggest, erroneously, that the evidence for a historical Jesus is *greater than* that of Alexander when the fact is, quite clearly, the evidence for Alexander is *so* superior to that of any provided for Jesus? Not only is it superior, but it is improbable—near impossible perhaps—that a historian should expect anything similar between Alexander and an *insignificant* historical Jesus as far as evidence goes.

When he or she proceeds with a presupposition of superior evidence, it raises the question: what other assumptions might that scholar be making? How many other exaggerated claims about the figure of Jesus might the reader expect to find? These are serious questions that deserve to be treated with care and tenacity. One must wonder how anyone can be expected to write a solid history if the assumptions *about the evidence they are using—assumptions fundamental to their argument*--are already tainted with false presuppositions.

Returning to a point glossed over briefly at the beginning of the article, there yet is another form of 'false association hyperbole' which is even more insidious and most easily missed, which involves a discussion of genre. What genre are the Gospel accounts? In more modern, critical times, the genre of the Gospels have gone from the genre of 'Gospel' put forth by Bultmann—

who claimed the genre was *sui generis* and had come about *ex nihilo*, to Greco-Roman biography (proposed by C.H. Talbert and favored by many New Testament scholars like Ehrman), to Jewish fiction novels like Tobit or Judith proposed by Michael Vines, to the genre of the rewritten Bible argued by Thomas L. Thompson (see above for specific citations). Thus the association is made between figures like Apollonius of Tyana or Socrates or Pythagoras who, while probably historical, are highly mythologized.

For the time being, this article will consider the proposition that the Gospels fit the genre of Greco-Roman biography; the intent here by the historical Jesus scholar is to validate the historicity of Jesus through association. Darrell L. Bock writes:[33]

> What specific type of literature is a gospel? How would an ancient reader have classified it? …recent work has shown that the gospels read much like ancient Greco-Roman biographies and that the issue of bias does not preclude a discussion of historicity. A…concern for truth is present in the Gospels. When we encounter a gospel, we are reading a literary form that the ancient world recognized as biographical…. Ancient biography gives us the portrait of a key figure by examining key events of which he or she was a major part as well as giving us glimpses of the hero's thinking. They tend to present a fundamental chronological outline of key periods starting with the birth or the arrival on the public scene…. Such biographies often concentrate on the controversies surrounding the key figure, especially the events that lead to a dramatic death, if that is part of the history. It is this kind of work that we read as we turn out attention to the Gospel accounts as they present to us, as history, the life of Jesus.

Bock's position, as is the position of many scholars of the historical Jesus, is one that visualizes the Gospels as histories—though not very good ones—of the life of the figure of Jesus. So, the argument goes, there is something in the Gospels about a historical figure; it may not be much, which is the view of many scholars particularly those involved in the so-called 'third quest' and the Jesus Seminar, but there is *something*.

Paula Fredriksen writes that Jesus "was born in Nazareth in one of the most turbulent periods of Jewish history…received John's message…was baptized in the Jordan…and…during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover…and…on the night of Passover…a posse of Roman soldiers, assisted by some officers of the Temple guard, surprised Jesus and arrested him. Interrogated briefly by the High Priest, Jesus was condemned by Pilate, who executed him as a messianic pretender."[34] This is, according to Fredriksen, "the historical Jesus."[35]

Crossan writes:[36]

> Suppose that in such a situation you wanted to know not just what early believers wrote about Jesus but what you would have seen and heard if you had been a more or less neutral observer in the early decades of the first century. Clearly, some people ignored him, some worshipped him, and others crucified him.

And Sanders *opens* one of his books with the following narrative history:[37]

> On a spring morning in about the year 30 CE, three men were executed by the Roman authorities in Judaea. Two were 'brigands,' men who may have been robbers, bandits or highwaymen, interested only in their own profit, but who may have also been insurgents, whose banditry had a political aim. The third was executed as another type of political criminal. He had not robbed, pillaged, murdered or even stored arms. He was convicted, however, of having claimed to be 'king of the Jews'—a political title….It turned out, of course, that the third man, Jesus of Nazareth, would become one of the most important figures in human history.

Due in part to the overvaluation of the Gospels as some sort of biography, the figure of Jesus, it is taken for granted, *lived*. All of these 'facts' presented by these scholars about the historical figure of Jesus come mainly from the canonical Gospels. But the error of argument here is that underlining presumption that Greco-Roman biographies were always written about historical figures. This is simply not the case.

There was no law or edict in antiquity about what one could or could not write or how they could write it. Authors emulated the parts of works they liked and were not limited by genre. Such was the process of imitation, even going back to the days of Aristotle (*Poetics* 1447a-b). Still, the best example one might find on a fictional hero who is historicized in biography is Lycurgus, legendary lawgiver of Spartan lore. Plutarch dedicates a biography to him, complete with genealogy; but his attestation goes well beyond this. Lycurgus gets honorable mentions and is discussed by Plato (*Republic* 10.599d), Aristotle (*Politics* 2.1270a, *Rhetoric* 2.23.11), Xenophon (*Constitution of the Lacedaimonians* 1), Polybius (Histories 4.2, 6.10), Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.220), Isocrates (*Panathenaicus* 12.152), Epictetus (*Discourses* 2.20), Tacitus (*Annals* 3.26), and Livy (*History of Rome* 38.34) to name a few. But it is unlikely that Lycurgus was any more real than Romulus, of whom several Greco-Roman biographies are extant (Plutarch, *Romulus*; also Livy dedicates his first book of *From the Founding of the City* to the life of Romulus); stories of his life and deeds can also be found in ancient historiographies (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2). The figure of Romulus is attested in works from Ovid (*Fasti*), Cicero (*Laws*, *Republic*), and to Tertullian (*Apology*). It may also be worthwhile to note in passing that among these selected works mentioning Romulus there exists a tale of his death, resurrection, and rebirth to the figure of Quirinus—a tale which is completely missed in Ehrman's discussion of pagan parallels (along with Inanna, whose mythical archetype was known to the Jews vis-à-vis Ezek. 8.14).

Of course there are differences between the Gospel narratives and these ancient authors, but the differences do not discount the fact that simply because the Gospels might have been understood as Greco-Roman biographies that they are automatically useful, or even partially useful, histories of the figure of Jesus. The fact that histories were written and rewritten containing fictional events and fictional characters suggests that the authors of these narratives were not at all concerned with 'what happened' but were more involved in 'telling a story'. Yet there is a good chance that the genre of the Gospels is not best explained by their association with Greco-Roman biographies.

Some quick background: in 1977, Charles Talbert,[38] while not the first *ever*, was the earliest contemporary historian to argue persuasively for Greco-Roman biography as the genre of the Gospels; a work more recently published, though still over fifteen years old, was published by Richard A. Burridge addressing the same issue.[39] But in the time between Burridge's first publication and the present, several other investigations have been made into the study of genre and the Gospels. Most notably is the analysis by Michael Vines, where he takes Burridge, and David Aune as well, to task.[40] His most relevant point, in this author's opinion, is that the Gospels do not focus on biographical aspects but on theological ones. Burridge's case rests on whether or not the Gospels imitate, unconsciously or purposefully, the genre of Greco-Roman biography (though he admits that the option is there that they only do so coincidentally). However, the Gospels do not imitate Greco-Roman biography as Burridge, Aune, and Talbert believe and this is easily demonstrated.

The Greco-Roman biography of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus is not one continuous narrative but, rather, the story of his life *as discussed by* Philostratus. Philostratus not only gives us his sources (personal letters and the will of Apollonius himself—whether real or not, reports about him located at shrines, Damis of Hierapolis, Maximus of Aegeae, and so forth), he analyzes his sources (why he chose not to use Moeragenes), debates points of Apollonius' life against his sources (*cf.* 1.23-24), inserts anecdotes; there is no question that the story is being recounted by Philostratus. Most important, perhaps, is that Philostratus is not telling us the story to explain a theological point (though, as any piece of ancient literature, it is designed and rhetorically structured), but he is *engaging* the source material for the purpose of writing about the life of Apollonius.

The Gospels, however, present a continuous story line with no pause, no discussion of method, no discussion of sources, no anecdotes, and make appeals to theological nuances like Jesus' divine mission (Mark 1:1-3, for example). These sorts of traits go against the grain of Greco-Roman biography. As dubious as the historicity of Apollonius may be, his biography is actually sounder and more credible than that of the Gospels precisely because (a) we know who wrote it and (b) our narrator discusses his sources, allowing us to analyze his methods.

Returning to Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandri*, his work contains many elements commonly associated with the genre of Greco-Roman biography. If one were looking for an example of Burridge's ideological history written with coincidental and, perhaps, even unconscious links to Greco-Roman Biography, Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandri* is the best one will find; yet it is dramatically unlike anything we see with the Gospel accounts. In the very opening of his first book, he explains part of his method to the reader:

> Wherever Ptolemy and Aristobulus in their histories of Alexander, the son of Philip, have given the same account, I have followed it on the assumption of its accuracy; where their facts differ I have chosen what I feel to be the more probable and interesting. (*Anabasis Alexandri* 1.1)

Like Philostratus, Arrian compares his sources (see earlier discussion). His sources are, therefore, also subject to criticism and evaluation (since we actually know what they are).

Here with Arrian, as before with Philostratus, there is a direct engagement with the sources; one is not reading a story. While some events display traits of a narrative, the reader is able to interact with it, to analyze the history *with* the narrator. With the Gospel accounts there is no interaction with the narrative; the reader is moved along with the story, unable to analyze and critique it and, instead, is told that how the author of the Gospels wrote it is precisely how it occurred.[41] There is never an instance where the Gospel authors take two separate accounts of an event and openly discuss which is more likely to have occurred, even though each Gospel portrays similar events differently, in different chronologies, with different individuals, and sometimes within different contexts and even locations. What one reads is what one gets and, in almost every instance, what one gets is a theologically-driven exegetical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.[42]

4. Some Concluding Thoughts

In the spirit of fairness, what must be remembered by all parties is whether the narrative is fictional or not, it does not change the fact that there might have been a historical figure upon which it was based; a figure lost to posterity. In other words, it is entirely possible that the figure of Jesus existed as a historical entity, but is not presently available in any of the historical data scholars currently interpret. But this should not be mistaken as an approval for the assumption of historicity about such a figure; in fact it proves only that the existing evidence—if this were indeed the case—is such that *more* doubt is necessary than is currently given or accepted.

But what we cannot do, what we cannot allow to happen, is let our presuppositions cloud our judgment to the point where we claim 'certainty', a word which can be so ideologically driven in and of itself, about something for which the case is far from definitive. One should never seek to limit their scholarship the way Ehrman does in this book where, instead of the exceptional and lucid research of his other work on textual criticism, he argues that the Jews in the Second Temple period were only expecting a Davidic messiah—a point which has been thoroughly contended and, dare I say, refuted for the better part of 20 years.[43] Nor would we see anyone argue that a heavenly messiah was an impossibility to Second Temple period Jews, as Ehrman does.[44] Whatever valuable contribution to the discussion Ehrman might have brought to the conversation is lost to us because he started from a position of certainty.[45]

Some might argue that the case for historicity is still there. Some argue that a case can still be made despite the fact that much of what was used previously to support historicity has come under the critical lens. Maybe they find all the critical arguments of the past decade completely unconvincing or not at all compelling, or maybe they just haven't cared since completing their doctoral theses two or three decades ago. But that doesn't mean that there is not also a case to be made that, along with other theologically rich Jewish narratives from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, what we have here is an edifying narrative figure euhemerized into history. Perhaps such a position is only acceptable in Old Testament; perhaps New Testament studies are not yet ready for such a perceived secular position. But simply because an idea, based on some very valid scholarship, goes against the grain is no reason to dismiss it. I find a lot of positions argued in the academy unconvincing. That doesn't mean I will seek to have those adhering to these positions ridiculed to the point where they are forced to agree with me. That is nothing short of a form of coercion which ultimately leads to the complete disintegration of academic freedom.

Then we must ask ourselves, if this is how we treat our colleagues, if we start limiting their critical voices, then why are we even here? What is the point in studying to become a scholar at all? If academia only exists to reinforce preconceived notions and stifle original thinking through coercion and ridicule, then where does that leave the guild? Is there no room left for doubt? Can there not be made some room for those of us who remain agnostic about the historicity of the figure of Jesus?

I echo the words of Thompson:[46]

> The best histories of Jesus today reflect an awareness of the limits and uncertainties in reconstructing the story of his life…. Whether the gospels in fact are biographies—narratives about the life of a historical person—is doubtful.

He's not wrong. And yet so much is found wanting in the recent exchange between mythicists and historicists. Perhaps the problem has to do specifically with the certainties of individual interpretations on both sides. But this problem cannot be solved by limiting critical voices. The doubters, those who see Jesus as a literary construct or as an edifying archetypal figure or as an intertextual character or who just don't believe that a historical Jesus will ever be found because of the limitations of the evidence, need to have a voice. They need to be allowed to express their views in order to prevent stagnancy, in order to open up new pathways of investigations. But most important of all, the doubters need a voice so that 'certainty' over the historicity of Jesus can be laid to rest—at least, that is, until more evidence presents itself.

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[1] I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Mark Elliot and Bible and Interpretation for their fair attitude towards this discussion and continuing to allow this dialog to build, despite the controversial status of the subject. It is truly to their credit. In addition, I'd like to thank those scholars goodly enough to review this paper prior to submission to help me vet out my ideas; Thomas L. Thompson, Niels Peter Lemche, James Crossley, Ingrid Hjelm, Thomas Bolin, Mark Goodacre, and Richard Carrier. When I felt their advice warranted a change in my draft, I complied. When I was not convinced, I left it the same. Therefore any and all faults with this paper are my own, though if the reader is feeling generous, they are encouraged to blame someone else.

[2] T.L. Thompson and T.S. Verenna, eds., *'Is this Not the Carpenter?' The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (CIS; London: Equinox, Forthcoming 2012). The pre-galley introduction can be read online at B&I: ''Is This Not the Carpenter: A Question of Historicity?'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/carp358009.shtml.

[3] It seems that this dismissal is more symptomatic of American schools (though not in all instances) than the predominant European framework, in this authors' opinion. It has always seemed as though European scholars have been more critical of the historicity of figures of the past, from King Arthur to the Patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible.

[4] Though it isn't necessary, it may be pertinent to define a bit of the terminology in the article; 'mythicists' are those who hold that Jesus probably never existed historically—though some go so far as to argue that Jesus definitely did not exist (it is important to remind the reader that the opinions amongst mythicists vary as much as those amongst historical Jesus scholars). But there are also those of us who are agnostic on the question—I use the term 'historical Jesus agnostic' to define myself, though the less-catchy label —yet more apt description of what I am—may be 'Jesus as Literary Construct'-ist. I am approaching this subject not as a mythicist (because that isn't what I am), but as someone who critically doubts the certainty of the historicity of the figure of Jesus, though I recognize the possibility is still great *enough* not to dismiss it.

[5] Specifically, p. 4; also p. 173.

[6] B. Ehrman, 'Did Jesus Exist?'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html; Whether or not the evidence is compelling is really what this whole debate is about. It is clear that Ehrman finds it compelling, but is the evidence compelling enough to warrant 'certainty'?

That question remains to be seen, though some of it has been addressed elsewhere and will also be addressed in this article to a degree. See n.11 below for additional criticisms. Carrier shows some extremely troubling errors in Ehrman's HuffPo article as well: 'Ehrman Trashtalks Mythicism'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/667.

[7] Ehrman writes: "These views are so extreme and so unconvincing to 99.99 percent of the real experts that anyone holding them is as likely to get a teaching job in an established department of religion as a six-day creationist is likely to land on in a bona fide department of biology."

[8] So T.L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (BZAW 113; Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1974). For specific mistreatment, his article on B&I is sufficient enough; *idem*., On the Problem of Critical Scholarship: A Memoire'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/critscho358014.shtml. For additional subject material, P.R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History-Ancient and Modern* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 145-170. Cf. B&I's collection of articles about the debate, 'Essays on Minimalism from Bible and Interpretation'. Accessed 15 April 2012. http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Minimalism_essays.shtml.

[9] *Ibid*., but see also the brief discussion in I. Finkelstein,A. Mazar, and B.B. Schmidt, et al., *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel* (SBLABS 17; Atlanta: SBL), 44-45.

[10] Some may contend that the difference between OT minimalism and NT minimalism is with the proximity of the texts to the events they describe. In other words, that there are hundreds of years separating the narratives Hebrew Bible from the events portrayed as historical, but the NT contains texts written within decades of the supposed events. So the argument would go that it would be impossible to fabricate a person or story (like the crucifixion) in that short of a time and be able to convince people who might have been contemporaneous of the time that this person lived and was crucified and died. But this sort of argument makes no sense. The Gospels contain all sorts of highly exaggerated events, like the darkness that covered the Earth, the slaughter of the infants, the rising of the saints at the crucifixion, the shaking of the whole Earth—if events like this could be wholly fabricated and never once contended by anyone, especially those contemporaries of the period, then clearly a person could be fabricated as well. Chronology of the text is completely irrelevant. If it were relevant, then Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John could never have gotten away with the sort of grandiose claims they made to those early Christians who would have been alive at the time, or would have been within the following generations. See R. Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Prometheus, 2012), 41-60, for a useful discussion.

[11] See my preliminary overview of the book at my blog: T. Verenna, 'Preliminary Overview of Bart Ehrman's 'Did Jesus Exist?''. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://tomverenna.wordpress.com/2012/04/11/preliminary-overview-of-bart-ehrmans-did-jesus-exist/.

[12] He does this in a very obvious fashion in his article for HuffPo; he writes: "This unusually vociferous group of nay-sayers maintains that Jesus is a myth invented for nefarious (or altruistic) purposes by the early Christians who modeled their savior along the lines of pagan divine men who, it is alleged, were also born of a virgin on Dec. 25, who also did miracles, who also died as an atonement for sin and were then raised from the dead." But that is not what ether Carrier, Thompson, or Price argue. It may be that Ehrman is attacking mainly the internet "cadre" (if I may steal his word) or the likes of Acharya S, but when he follows up this claim with "Few of these mythicists are actually scholars trained in ancient history…" it becomes obvious he is not taking any steps to differentiate the claims made by mythicist scholars and those made by amateur mythicists with no background in the field.

[13] R. Carrier has in fact criticized Acharya S on multiple occasions and has done his best to correct her often misleading or wholly inaccurate claims. Two most recent criticisms can be found on his blog: 'That Luxor Thing'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/294, and 'That Luxor Thing Again'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/580.

[14] For examples of how the criteria for historical Jesus studies have been criticized, see M. Goodacre, 'Criticizing the Criterion of Multiple Attestation: The Historical Jesus and the Question of Sources' in Chris Keith and Anthony LeDonne, eds., *Jesus, History and the Demise of Authenticity* (London & New York: T & T Clark, forthcoming, 2012), R. Carrier, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed* (Lulu Press, 2009) and his *Proving History*, and R. Rodríguez, 'Authenticating Criteria: The Use and Misuse of a Critical Method', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7/2 (2009), 155-6.

[15] M. Goodacre, with his influential work *The Case Against Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), has been the main critical voice, but he is not alone. D.R. MacDonald has written on the subject in his article 'An Alternative Q and the Quest of the Earthly Jesus' in R. Joseph Hoffmann, ed., *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2010), 17-44. Interestingly enough, he only mentions Mark

Goodacre in a footnote and claims that his work on Q has failed to convince most of scholarship (352, n.10). But this is silly; Mark's arguments stand on their own weight. Simply because a large chunk of historical Jesus scholarship may refuse to engage his arguments (probably more out of self-preservation than anything else–after all, no Q = one less hypothetical source for Jesus) in no way suggests that they are incorrect. It may likely be that scholars have simply chosen not to read the arguments; it is unclear if Ehrman has read them or understood them since he doesn't engage the arguments.

[16] Thankfully Ehrman recognizes this in his book.

[17] See my discussion here: 'A Secunda Facie Analysis of Tacitus on Jesus and as a Historian'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://tomverenna.wordpress.com/2010/02/15/a-secunda-facie-analysis-of-tacitus-on-jesus-and-as-a-historian/. See further on for Ehrman's discussion of Tacitus.

[18] Ehrman also recognizes the uselessness of this reference since Chrestus was a common name in and of itself for freemen. Also, Jesus was never in Rome.

[19] An excellent refutation of the current arguments in favor of authenticity—even partial authenticity—of the Testimonium Flavianum and the minor Testimonium (linked with that of James) is forthcoming by R. Carrier, 'Origen, Eusebius, and the Accidental Interpolation in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200'. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20.4 (Winter 2012).

[20] M.E. Vines, *The Problem of Markan Genre: The Gospel of Mark and the Jewish Novel* (Academia Biblica 3; Atlanta: SBL, 2002) and even by M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989).

[21] A case made most recently by T.L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); but also by T.L. Brodie, *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings* (NTM 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

[22] In his HuffPo article, he writes: "These views are so extreme and so unconvincing to 99.99 percent of the real experts that anyone holding them is as likely to get a teaching job in an established department of religion as a six-day creationist is likely to land on in a bona fide department of biology." In his book, Ehrman writes: "In the field of biology, evolution may be 'just ' a theory…, but it is a theory subscribed to, for good reason, by every real scientist in every established university in the Western world." He intimates here that, again, those who would deny this are the same sorts of people who deny historicity. While this may be true of some mythicists out there, it would not degrade the arguments made by those with credentials in the fields relevant to the subject.

[23] See n.12, n.22; also p. 1 above, the first quote from Ehrman.

[24] James McGrath and I tend to agree on a lot but unfortunately this is one issue with which we disagree. See his two-part review here: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/04/review-of-bart-ehrman-did-jesus-exist-part-one.html, and here: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/04/review-of-bart-ehrman-did-jesus-exist-part-two.html. He has also come to the defense of Ehrman's arguments in the HuffPo article (against Carrier's criticisms mentioned in n.13 above) here: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2012/03/responding-to-richard-carriers-response-to-bart-ehrman.html, though Carrier has offered a rebuttal here: http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/749.

[25] At one point he writes, "Where does Paul get all this received tradition, from whom, and most important, when? Paul himself gives us some hints. He indicates in Galatians 1 that originally, before his conversion, he had been a fierce persecutor of the church of Christ….After three years, he tells us, he made a trip to Jerusalem, and there he spent fifteen days with Cephas and James….For now I simply want to point out that this visit is one of the most likely places where Paul learned all the received traditions…." But Ehrman completely misrepresents Paul's own words where he states he received his information from no man but only through revelation, despite the fact that Paul states this in Galatians 1:11! Ehrman not only cited the place where Paul states definitively that he never received his information from men, but he never once addresses it, while completely contradicting Paul. This is highly problematic. For more information on this, I devote a large amount of time to this in my discussion of Paul 'Born Under the Law: Intertextuality and the Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus in Paul's Epistles' in *'Is This Not the Carpenter?'* (Op.cit.).

[26] One might claim that Ehrman isn't contradicting himself here, but keep in mind he is claiming Tacitus is an independent witness, even if it is indirectly. An independent witness means something beyond the Gospel tradition in this instance, and if Tacitus did not get his information from Roman records, as Ehrman admits, then from where did he receive it? The Pilate story had to come from somewhere and we only know if it from the Gospels. So even if Tacitus heard it from a fellow nonChristian Roman, where would that person have received this information? The likely place: the Gospel tradition, probably from a Christian. So without Roman records, Tacitus cannot be considered an independent witness of that tradition.

[27] Ehrman states that Tacitus is wrong that Pilate was a procurator, and instead Ehrman argues that he was a governor. But in fact Pilate was both. A cursory glance at the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1251-2) under 'procurator' would have been sufficient to see that this was the case for praesidial procurators (who were also *prefecti*); interestingly the article in the OCD (perhaps an apt three-letter acronym) uses Pilate *as an example* of just such an instance. I would think this is something that a veteran scholar like Ehrman would know. Certainly it should not be left to someone like me, a mere student, to point out this sort of mistake. Once again one is left wondering if Ehrman researched his conclusions thoroughly when writing his book. For additional information, see Carrier's discussion of both Herod's and Pilate's roles in governing the region [PDF Format]: 'Herod the Procurator: Was Herod the Great a Roman Governor of Syria?'. Accessed online: 15 April 2012. http://www.richardcarrier.info/HerodSyrianGovernor.pdf.

[28] E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 3-4.

[29] He also compares conflicting accounts for the reader; e.g. *Anabasis Alexandri* 3.30.4-6.

[30] While Arrian's methods are exceptional, they fall short of modern standards. Even though he is a step above the typical ancient historian, his work is not perfect. He openly equates "interesting" stories with "probable" stories and, as one of his reasons for choosing Ptolemy as a source, states that it is because he was a King and "it is more disgraceful for a king to tell lies than anyone else." (*Anabasis Alexandri*, Preface 1-3) Still, if a good historian like Arrian, whose methods are far superior to those of his contemporaries, those before him, and many after, can succumb to these sorts of biases, one should be more concerned with how much bias and error effects those writers of lesser quality.

[31] The authors preserved who were contemporaries of Alexander and mention him or facts about him include: Isocrates, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides, Dinarchus, Theocritus, Theophrastus, and Menander.

[32] Not only are there inscriptions dedicated to Alexander the Great and his victories which are contemporaneous to him, several inscriptions commissioned by Alexander *himself* still exist; e.g., there is one at the British Museum from Priene in Asia Minor, dedicated to Athena Polias. See B.F. Cook, *Greek Inscriptions* (Berkeley: UCP, 1987), 21-22.

[33] *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic: 2002), 214.

[34] Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* (2d Rv. ed.; Yale: YUP, 2000), 127-130.

[35] *From Jesus to Christ*, p. xv

[36] J.D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), xi.

[37] E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 1.

[38] *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)

[39] *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

[40] Op. cit. 7-19

[41] Even the evangelist Luke, with his brief preface to Theophilus, does not come close. Carrier argues that Luke does not function well as a historian or biographer; see his discussion in *Not the Impossible Faith*, 173-87.

[42] This author tends to agree with the statement on the Gospels by Samuel Sandmel, "If the historical statements they make chance to be reliable, this is only coincidence," from 'Prolegomena to a Commentary on Mark,' in *Two Living Traditions: Essays on Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 149.

[43] Op.cit. 159-164. Ehrman argues this point in other works he has written on the historical Jesus. See the discussion in B. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93. And he is not alone; see also, R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 44–45. However the view that the Davidic messiah was the dominant view of ancient Jewish messianic thought has proven to be fruitless. Anyone familiar with the slightest amount of scholarship on the issue could confirm this; see the collected essays in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); so too the discussion in G. W. Bromiley, 'Messiah,' *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: K–P* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 333: 'This survey of the intertestamental period has shown that Judaism had never reached agreement on what to expect of the future, except that all believed that God would eventually vindicate His people. In turn, none of the eschatological or messianic views claimed exclusive authority; thus divergent views could easily coexist. Modern attempts to reduce this multiplicity to one system do violence to the evidence.' In addition, J. Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), ix, and the essays in J. Neusner, W. S. Green and E. Frierichs, eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), provide excellent discussions of this subject.

[44] Op. cit. 165-174. For a rebuttal to this, any discussion of 11Q13 will do. L.L. Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 103-5. Interestingly enough, 11Q13 discusses not only a heavenly messiah but interprets the suffering servant (i.e., Isa. 52-53) via Dan. 9.26 (the anointed of the spirit) who is to be 'cut-off' (i.e., 'killed' vis-à-vis Onias III) as this heavenly messiah—precisely the sort of interpretation Ehrman claims does not exist in the many Judaisms of the Second Temple period.

[45] Ehrman's scholarship has clearly suffered from such a presumption; the tragedy here is that thousands of readers, many who do not have access to the resources that I do as a student or that many of my friends and colleagues have as professionals in the field, will not be able to analyze his arguments as I have done. They will not be able to critically engage the text, or determine if a citation is correct. Many will likely just take his word on it regardless of whether or not he is correct. This means that Ehrman is committing the same basic error that he claims mythicists make—spreading

[46] *The Messiah Myth*, 3.