

The Mythicist Case: Weak and Irrelevant Claims

UP TO THIS STAGE in our quest to see if the historical Jesus actually existed, I have been mounting the positive argument, showing why the evidence is overwhelming that Jesus really did live as a Jewish teacher in Palestine and was crucified at the direction of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. It will be equally important for us to learn what the historical Jesus said and did, since the mere fact of Jesus's existence does not get us very far. Anyone interested in the history of Jesus very much wants to know the character of his teachings, the nature of his activities, the reasons for his execution, and so on. I will save the exploration of these other critical issues for the end of the book. For now I need to take on a more pressing matter. If Jesus did exist, why do mythicists say that he did not? The present chapter will look at the typical arguments used by mythicists that are, in my judgment, weak and/or irrelevant to the question. In the following chapter I will consider various ways mythicists have reconstructed the original "invention" of Christ and show why these views too are problematic and do not at all compromise the powerful evidence for the existence of the historical Jesus.

Irrelevancies in Historical Argument

ANYONE WHO SPENDS MUCH time dealing with controversial historical issues knows full well that many arguments are simply irrelevant. Just to give an example from the nonmythicist camp—in fact, from the opposite end of the spectrum: it is frequently argued by fundamentalist and conservative evangelical apologists for the Bible that since the New Testament is more frequently attested in ancient sources than any other book from antiquity, it can therefore be trusted. This argument, I'm afraid, contains a non sequitur. It is true that we have far more manuscripts for the books of the New Testament than for Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius—name your ancient author. But that has absolutely no bearing on the question of whether the New Testament books can be trusted. It is relevant only to the question of whether we can know what the New Testament books originally said.

Look at it this way. Both *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx and *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler are better attested than, say, the New Testament Gospel of John. Far better attested. There is no comparison. We have far, far more copies of each that were produced closer to the time of the originals than we do for any of the books of the New Testament, including John. Does the fact that both books are extremely well attested have any bearing on whether you can trust what either one has to say? Are the author's opinions therefore reliable? Are his teachings to be followed simply because we have a lot of copies of his work? The same applies to the Gospel of John or any other book of the New Testament. The fact that we have more copies of John than of, say, Plato's *Republic* has no bearing on whether we can trust it more or not. It only has a bearing on the question of whether we can reasonably think that we know what the author originally wrote. Whether what he wrote is right or not has to be judged on other grounds.

Fundamentalists and conservative evangelical Christians are not the only ones who make irrelevant arguments to score points with the reading public. So too—to return to our original side of the spectrum—do mythicists. In this chapter I will consider several

arguments typically made by mythicists in their effort to show that Jesus did not exist. My thesis is that most of these points are weak and some are irrelevant to the question.

Claim 1: The Gospels Are Highly Problematic as Historical Sources

MYTHICISTS SOMETIMES LIKE TO revel in the historical problems posed by the Gospels: we do not have the original texts of the Gospels, and there are places where we do not know what the authors originally said; the Gospels are not authored by the persons named in their titles (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) but were written by people who were not followers of Jesus living forty to sixty years later in different parts of the world; the Gospels are full of discrepancies and contradictions; and the Gospels report historical events that can be shown not to have happened.

Some scholars may disagree with some of these claims—conservative evangelicals will disagree with all of them—but I personally think they are absolutely right. And I think that these issues create genuine problems for the study of the New Testament, the history of the early Christian church, and the life of the historical Jesus. But I also think they are for the most part irrelevant to the question of whether or not there was a historical Jesus, for reasons I will explain. But first it is important to delve into the issues a bit.

We Do Not Have the Original Texts of the Gospels

To begin with, even though the Gospels are among the best attested books from the ancient world, we are regrettably hindered in knowing what the authors of these books originally wrote. The problem is not that we are lacking manuscripts. We have thousands of manuscripts. The problem is that none of these manuscripts is the original copy produced by the author (this is true for all four Gospels—in fact, for every book of the New Testament). Moreover, most of these manuscripts were made over a thousand years after the original copies, none of them is close to the time of the originals—within, say, ten or twenty years—and all of them contain certifiable mistakes.

I do not need to explicate all these problems here, as I have written about them in more detail elsewhere.¹ My point in this context is that for the question of whether or not Jesus existed, these problems are mostly irrelevant. The evidence for Jesus's existence does not depend on having a manuscript tradition of his life and teachings that is perfectly in line with what the authors of the New Testament Gospels really wrote. Suppose, for example, that it is true that the famous story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery was not originally part of the Gospel of John (the only Gospel in which the story occurs) even though it is found in the vast majority of manuscripts produced in the Middle Ages. What does that tell us? It tells us that the story was probably not originally in John; in turn, that probably means that it is not something that actually happened in the life of Jesus. But so what? That doesn't mean Jesus didn't live. It simply means this event never happened, as far as we can tell.

Think of an analogy. Suppose Barack Obama's birth certificate turns out to have been altered away from what it really said. (I don't believe it was, not for a second, but suppose it was.) What relevance would that have for the question of whether Barack Obama was born? One would probably want to look for other evidence of whether he came into the world, and the wording of the birth certificate is irrelevant to the question.

The manuscripts of the New Testament do indeed have large numbers of variations in them: alternative ways of wording a verse or a passage; omissions of words or sentences; additional insertions of words and sentences here and there. But the problem is not of such a scope as to make it impossible to have any idea what the ancient Christian authors wrote. If we had no clue what was originally in the writings of Paul or in the Gospels, this objection might carry more weight. But there is not a textual critic on the planet who thinks this, since not a shred of evidence leads in this direction. And I don't know even of any mythicist who is willing to make this claim. As a result, in the vast majority of cases, the wording of these authors is not in dispute. And where it is, it rarely has anything at all to do with the question of whether Jesus existed.

We Do Not Know the Authors of the Gospels

It is also true that we do not know who wrote the Gospels. Although they are attributed to two of Jesus's disciples (Matthew the tax collector and John the beloved disciple) and to two companions of the apostles (Mark the secretary for Peter and Luke the traveling companion of Paul) these ascriptions are almost certainly wrong. Something similar obtains for most of the rest of the New Testament. Of the twenty-seven books found in the New Testament, only eight of them almost certainly go back to the authors to whom they are traditionally ascribed. Either the others are all misattributed to people who did not in fact write them, or they were actually forged, that is, written by authors claiming to be famous people while knowing full well they were someone else.

Again, I have dealt with this issue more fully elsewhere and do not need to go into all the details here.² The one thing we can say with some assurance about the Gospel writers is that even though Jesus's own followers were lower-class Aramaic-speaking peasants from rural Galilee, who were almost certainly illiterate, the Gospels were written by highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians who lived outside Palestine. They were not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

But once again, this is irrelevant to the question of whether Jesus lived. In 1983 the famous, or rather infamous, Hitler Diaries came to public view, and they were immediately authenticated by experts. But they were soon shown to be forgeries, and the forger, a German scoundrel named Konrad Kujau, was then caught red-handed. He had been paid millions for the volumes and had done it for the money. The fact that he forged these sources about Hitler, however, has no bearing on the question of whether Hitler existed. That has to be decided on other grounds. In the case of the Gospels and Jesus, even though we don't know who the authors of these books were, we can still use them as historical sources for knowing about Jesus, as I argued in the earlier chapters.³ The Gospels are valuable to this end whether they were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John or by Fred, Harry, Sam, and Jeff.

The Gospels Are Filled with Discrepancies and Contradictions

It is absolutely true, in my judgment, that the New Testament accounts of Jesus are filled with discrepancies and contradictions in matters both large and small. Anyone who doubts that simply has to compare very carefully a story found in one of the Gospels with the same story found in another. You can pick any set of stories you like. Compare the genealogy of Jesus found in Matthew with the one found in Luke. They simply cannot be reconciled (they are both genealogies of Joseph, but who is his father,

grandfather, great-grandfather?). Neither can the stories of Jesus's birth (did his parents flee with him to Egypt, as in Matthew, or did they instead return to Nazareth a month after he was born, as in Luke?).⁴ Neither can those of his death (was he crucified the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten, as in John, or the morning after it was eaten, as in Mark?) or of his resurrection (were his disciples instructed to go north to Galilee and it was there that they met Jesus raised from the dead, as in Matthew, or were they instructed not to leave Jerusalem so that they stayed put, not only to see Jesus raised but to spend months there, as in Luke?).

Sometimes the discrepancies are not simply about small details but about big issues. Did Jesus call himself God? It seems a rather important issue because if he did, one would have to figure out what to make of his claim. Was he crazy? Hopelessly self-important? Or possibly right? It is striking, however, that of all the Gospels, only John, the last to be written, reports that Jesus called himself God. If the historical Jesus really did spend his ministry revealing his divine identity to his disciples, as he does in John, isn't it a little strange that Matthew, Mark, and Luke never get around to saying so? Did they think it was unimportant? Or did they just forget that part?

Once again I have dealt with the discrepancies and the contradictions of the New Testament Gospels in another context and so do not need to delve more deeply into them here.⁵ At this point it is enough to reiterate that these issues are more or less irrelevant to the question of whether Jesus actually lived. The contradictions in our sources will make it difficult, or at least interesting, when we want to know what he really said and did. But the case that I built for the existence of Jesus in the previous chapters does not hinge on the Gospels being internally consistent or free from discrepancy. Again, think of an analogy. You will get very different accounts of the presidency of Bill Clinton depending on whom you ask. But the differences have no bearing on whether he existed.

The Gospels Contain Nonhistorical Materials

It is true that the Gospels are riddled with other kinds of historical problems and that they relate events that almost certainly did not happen. Think of Luke's account of Jesus's birth. Unlike the Gospel of Matthew, Luke indicates that Jesus's parents lived originally in Nazareth, in the northern part of Galilee (Bethlehem is in the south, near Jerusalem). According to Luke's story, a tax was imposed on "all the world" by Caesar Augustus, and everyone had to register for a census. Since Joseph's distant ancestor David was born in Bethlehem, that is where he had to register. While he was there his betrothed, Mary, gave birth.

There is no way this can be historically correct. There was no worldwide (or even empire-wide) census in the days of Augustus, let alone a census in which everyone in the Roman Empire had to register in the town that their ancestors had come from a thousand years earlier, as I explain in another context.⁶ And certainly no such census could have happened when "Quirinius was the governor of Syria," as Luke claims, if Jesus was born when Herod was king: Quirinius did not become governor until ten years after Herod's death.

So too it is completely implausible that when Jesus was put on trial at the end of his life, Pilate offered to release one of his two chief prisoners, Barabbas or Jesus, as was

allegedly his custom at Passover (see Mark 15:6–15). We have no historical record of any such custom being carried out by Pilate or anyone else. And it defies imagination that the ruthless Pilate, not known for currying favor among the crowds, would be willing to release a violent and dangerous insurrectionist every year just because the crowds wanted him to do so. This scene, like the census, almost certainly didn't happen. But that has little bearing on whether Jesus existed. It simply means that this alleged episode did not happen.

Back to our analogies. There are lots of stories about George Washington that may not have happened. Did he really cut down the cherry tree? Did he really have wooden teeth? Did he really stand in the prow of the boat as his troops crossed the Delaware? Did he really get sick after fleeing in his skivvies out the window of his lover's house when her husband came home, and did he die as a result? Some of these things may have happened (well, not the cherry tree), some of them not. But whether they did or not has little bearing on whether Washington lived. He did live, and we can say some things about him with certainty. So too with Jesus.

Are All the Stories of the Gospels Filled with Legendary Material?

The legendary character of the Gospel accounts of Jesus are stressed by almost all mythicists, but by none with the rigor and passion of Robert Price, whose recent *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* echoes, in this respect, many of the themes and restates many of the conclusions that he reached in his earlier work, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*.⁷ I will address important aspects of Price's case against the historical Jesus in the next chapter. For now I want to stress that his emphasis—hammered home page after page—that the Gospel accounts contain legendary material, when seen in a more balanced light, is only marginally relevant to the question of whether Jesus existed.

Price's argument is sophisticated, and it is a little difficult to explain in lay terms the basic methodological point that forms its backbone. In part it relates to what I mentioned earlier when talking about the form critics, German authors from the beginning of the twentieth century like Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. In their view, as we saw, communities shaped the traditions that they passed along about Jesus so that these traditions took specific "forms" depending on the context (the *Sitz im Leben*—the "situation in life") in which they were being told. Stories of Jesus's controversies over the Sabbath took one shape or form, stories of his miracles another form, and so on. One of the implications of this view is that early Christian communities told stories about Jesus only when these stories were relevant to their own communal life situations. Why tell stories that have no relevance? In the logic of Price's argument, this is the first point: communities tell stories only when they advance their own self-interests in one way or another.

His second point comes from developments in scholarship that happened in the wake of form criticism, especially among the students of Rudolf Bultmann. These students wondered if there was any way to get behind the stories that had been molded and shaped in the early Christian communities, to see if any surviving traditions escaped the Christian storytellers' influences. Suppose there existed stories about Jesus that show no signs of having been created by the communities that told them, stories, for example, that appear to stand at odds with what the early Christian communities would have

wanted to say about Jesus. Traditions dissimilar to what Christians were saying about Jesus would not have been created or formulated by the early Christian storytellers. And so those traditions, if they existed, would involve stories that were told not simply because they were useful in the life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of the communities in which they were passed along. Stories like that were probably told simply because they were stories about Jesus that really happened.

This is a standard principle used by scholars today to establish which of the stories in the Gospels almost certainly go back to the historical Jesus as opposed to being made up by later storytellers talking about his life in light of their community's concerns and needs. The principle is called the "criterion of dissimilarity." If there is a tradition that does not coincide with what we know about the concerns, interests, and agenda of the early Christian communities—or in fact stands at odds with these concerns—then that tradition is more likely to be authentic than a saying that does coincide with the community's interests. (I will give some examples in a moment.)

Price's *modus operandi* is to go through all the traditions of the Gospels and show that each and every story of Jesus can be shown to meet some need, concern, or interest of the early Christians, so there are no stories that can be shown to go back to a historical figure, Jesus. In other words, the first building block in every case trumps the second so that there are no historically accurate materials in the Gospels.

My own view is that this is completely wrong, for several reasons. For one thing, it is a misuse of the criterion of dissimilarity to use it to show what did not happen in the life of Jesus. The criterion is designed to be used as a positive guide to what Jesus really said and did and experienced, not as a negative criterion to show what he did not. That is to say, suppose Jesus in the Gospels predicts that he will go to Jerusalem and be crucified and then raised from the dead. Would this prediction pass the criterion of dissimilarity? Absolutely not! This is something that the community of Christians may well have wanted to put on Jesus's lips. Since it does not pass the criterion, we cannot use this criterion to indicate that Jesus really made this prediction. But can we use it to say that he did not make the prediction? Once again, absolutely not! The criterion may make us suspicious of this or that tradition, but it cannot demonstrate on its own merits whether or not it is historical. In other words, by its very character the criterion does not and cannot indicate what Jesus did not do or say, only what he did do or say.

My second point is related. This criterion—and others we will consider in a later chapter—is designed to consider probabilities, not certainties. And, as Price himself acknowledges, this is all the historian can do: establish what probably happened in the past. To demand a criterion that yields certainty is to step outside historical research. All we can establish are probabilities. And there are a number of traditions about Jesus that easily pass the criterion of dissimilarity, making their historicity more probable than their nonhistoricity.

I need to add, as a third point, that the probabilities that one establishes by using one criterion can be strengthened by appealing to others. For example, we saw in earlier chapters that in addition to the surviving Gospels (seven from a hundred years of his death), there are multiple independent witnesses to the life of Jesus, including the many written and oral sources of the Gospels and a large number of other independent Christian writings. Suppose a tradition about Jesus is found in only one of these sources

(the visit of the magi to Jesus, for example, found only in Matthew, or the parable of the Good Samaritan, found only in Luke). It is conceivable that the source “made up” that story. But what if you have the same or very similar stories in two independent witnesses? Then neither one of them could have made it up since they are independent, and it must then be earlier than both of them. What if a story or kind of story is found in a large number of sources? That kind of story is far more likely to be historically accurate than a story found in only one source. If you can find stories that are independently attested in multiple sources and that pass the criterion of dissimilarity, you can establish, then, a higher level of probability that you are dealing with a historical account. It may have legendary features, but the heart of the story may be historical.

Let me give three quick examples. We saw in an earlier chapter that it is highly improbable that the earliest Palestinian Jewish followers of Jesus would have made up the claim that the messiah was crucified. This passes the criterion of dissimilarity. And it is a claim found multiply attested throughout our tradition (Mark, M, L, John, Paul, Josephus, Tacitus). Conclusion? If what we want are strong probabilities, this is a highly probable tradition. Jesus was crucified.

Something of far less significance, at least to most people, is the question of Jesus’s brothers. The independent sources of Mark, John, Paul, and Josephus all say that he had brothers, and in all but John, one of these brothers is named James. The stories in which Jesus’s brothers appear are not tendentious, promoting any particular Christian agenda. So the tradition that Jesus had brothers passes dissimilarity as well as multiple attestation. Conclusion: Jesus probably had brothers, one of whom was named James.

A final example, which will become more important later in this chapter. Jesus is said to have come from Nazareth in multiple sources (Mark, Q, John, L, M). And nowhere in any of these stories is there any hint that the author or his community has advanced its own interests in indicating Nazareth as Jesus’s hometown. In fact, just the opposite: the early Christians had to explain away the fact that Jesus came from Nazareth, as seen, for example, in John 1:45–46 and in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, which independently of one another try to show that even though Jesus came from Nazareth, he really was born in Bethlehem. And why the concern? Because the Old Testament prophet Micah said the savior would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth (Micah 5:2). Moreover, John reflects a more general embarrassment about Nazareth (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”). Nazareth was a little one-horse town (not even that; it was more like a one-dog town) that no one had ever even heard of, so far as we can tell, before Christianity. The savior of the world came from there? Not from Bethlehem? Or Jerusalem? Or Rome? How likely is that? And so we have a multiply attested tradition that passes the criterion of dissimilarity. Conclusion: Jesus probably came from Nazareth.

I have explained these criteria used by scholars in part to show why Price’s opposing views are problematic. Contrary to Price, we do indeed have several traditions that probably reflect the life of the historical Jesus. In later chapters I will show there are many more. But at this stage I want to conclude by making an even larger methodological point: the question of whether many, most, or all the traditions about Jesus have been colored by legend is for the most part irrelevant to the question of whether Jesus existed.

You could make the case that every person who talks about another person puts his or her own slant on the story. Every story includes bias. We are humans, not machines, and we slant things the way we see them, necessarily. What that means, though, is that almost everything we say about another person is tinted with legend (our biases). It was no different with Jesus. People who told stories about him tinted his life with legend. Sometimes the legend completely took over, and the stories told were legendary through and through, with no historical core. Other times a historical core was shaped by a legendary interest. But there were indeed some stories with historical cores, and a scholar's ability to show that even these stories are shaped by legend does not have any bearing on the question of whether Jesus existed. For one thing, we have the cores themselves. Moreover, and this is my key point, the shaping of a story is not the same thing as the inventing of a story. You can shape a tradition about Jesus any way you want so that it looks highly legendary. But that has no bearing on the question of whether beneath the legendary shaping lies the core of the historical event.

And—another key point that I want to keep pressing—the evidence of the historical Jesus does not in the least depend exclusively on whether this, that, or the other Gospel story is historically accurate. It is based on other considerations, which I set out in the earlier chapters, including the witness of Paul and the speeches of Acts, which long predate the Gospels.

In short, the problems that the Gospels pose for scholars—the fact we do not have the original texts, that we do not know their actual authors, that they are full of discrepancies, that they contain nonhistorical, legendary materials—are not all that significant for the particular question we are posing, whether or not Jesus existed. These problems may seem significant (and altogether relevant). But when you dig deeper into the matter and think about it more closely, it is clear that they are not.

Claim 2: Nazareth Did Not Exist

ONE SUPPOSEDLY LEGENDARY FEATURE of the Gospels relates closely to what I have just argued and is in fact one of the more common claims found in the writings of the mythicists. It is that the alleged hometown of Jesus, Nazareth, in fact did not exist but is itself a myth (using the term as the mythicists do). The logic of this argument, which is sometimes advanced with considerable vehemence and force, appears to be that if Christians made up Jesus's hometown, they probably made him up as well. I could dispose of this argument fairly easily by pointing out that it is irrelevant. If Jesus existed, as the evidence suggests, but Nazareth did not, as this assertion claims, then he merely came from somewhere else. Whether Barack Obama was born in the United States or not (for what it is worth, he was) is irrelevant to the question of whether he was born.

Since, however, this argument is so widely favored among mythicists, I want to explore it more deeply. It is not a new argument. All the way back in 1906 Schweitzer addressed it when discussing the mythicists of his own day.⁸ Among the modern advocates of the view are several we have already mentioned. Frank Zindler, for example, in a cleverly titled essay, "Where Jesus Never Walked," tries to deconstruct on a fairly simple level the geographical places associated with Jesus, especially Nazareth. He claims that Mark's Gospel never states that Jesus came from Nazareth. This flies in the face, of course, of Mark 1:9, which indicates that this is precisely where Jesus came

from (“Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee”), but Zindler maintains that that verse was not originally part of Mark; it was inserted by a later scribe. Here again we see history being done according to convenience. If a text says precisely what you think it could not have said, then all you need to do is claim that originally it must have said something else.⁹

Zindler maintains that some early Christians understood Jesus to be the “branch” mentioned in Isaiah 11:1, who would come from the line of David as the messiah. The term branch in Hebrew (which does not have vowels) is spelled NZR, which is close (kind of close) to Nazareth. And so what happened, in Zindler’s view, is that later Christians who did not understand what it meant to call Jesus the NZR (branch) thought that the traditions that called him that were saying he was from a (nonexistent) town, Nazareth.

Zindler does not marshal any evidence for this view but simply asserts it. And he does not explain why Christians who did not know what NZR meant simply didn’t ask someone. Even more important, he doesn’t explain why they made up the name of a nonexistent town (in his view) to locate Jesus or how they went from “Jesus is the NZR” to “Jesus came from Nazareth.” The view seems completely implausible, especially given the fact, which we have seen, that multiple independent sources locate Jesus in Nazareth. Moreover, there is the additional evidence, which we will see momentarily, that Nazareth did in fact exist as a small Jewish town in the days of Jesus.

G. A. Wells advances a different argument to much the same end. In his view the key to understanding the nonexistence of Nazareth lies in the four occasions in which Mark indicates that Jesus was a “Nazarene” (1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6). According to Wells, Mark misunderstood what this meant. What it originally meant was that Jesus belonged to a pre-Christian Jewish sect called the Nazarenes, who were similar to certain Old Testament figures (like strong-man Samson) called Nazirites, who took vows to be specially set apart for God (they couldn’t touch corpses, drink wine, or cut their hair). Mark didn’t know this, though, and wrongly assumed that the term Nazarene must have indicated Jesus’s place of origin, and so Mark made up “Nazareth” as his hometown.¹⁰

Once again one looks in vain for any evidence or clear logic to support this view. Why would Mark invent a town that didn’t exist to explain how Jesus could be a Nazarene, when what the term originally meant was that he was a Nazirite? Moreover, Mark must have known the Old Testament. He does quote it on a number of occasions. Why wouldn’t he know what a Nazirite was? And if the sectarians that Jesus associated with were Nazirites, why did they call themselves Nazarenes (a word that is not etymologically related)? Moreover, it should be stressed that there are multiple traditions about Nazareth (Mark, M, L, John). Nazareth was not invented by Mark.

One of the things that these two examples show is that modern scholars seem to have no clue what Nazarene means or where the name of the town Nazareth could have come from if it is not original. So how can we posit some kind of ancient Christian motivation to invent Nazareth if we have no idea what led Christians to do so or even what the root of the term really meant? The problem is compounded by the fact, already mentioned, that Nazareth did exist in the days of Jesus, in the location that Mark and the other Gospels suggest it did.

The most recent critic to dispute the existence of Nazareth is René Salm, who has devoted an entire book to the question, called *The Myth of Nazareth*.¹¹ Salm sees this issue as highly significant and relevant to the question of the historicity of Jesus: “Upon that determination [that is, on the existence of Nazareth] depends a great deal, perhaps even the entire edifice of Christendom.”¹² Like so many mythicists before him, Salm emphasizes what scholars have long known: Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the writings of Josephus, or in the Talmud. It first shows up in the Gospels. Salm is also impressed by the fact that the early generations of Christians did not seek out the place but rather ignored it and seemed not to know where it was (this is actually hard to show; how would we know this about “every” early Christian, unless all of them left us writings and told us everything they knew and did?).

Salm’s basic argument is that Nazareth did exist in more ancient times and through the Bronze Age. But then there was a hiatus. It ceased to exist and did not exist in Jesus’s day. Based on archaeological evidence, especially the tombs found in the area, Salm claims that the town came to be reinhabited sometime between the two Jewish revolts (between 70 CE and 132 CE), as Jews who resettled following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans relocated in northern climes. Salm, like Zindler, wants to insist that Mark did not indicate that Jesus came from Nazareth: Mark 1:9, for him, is a later insertion.

Salm himself is not an archaeologist: he is not trained in the highly technical field of archaeology and gives no indication that he has even ever been on an archaeological dig. He certainly never has worked at the site of Nazareth. Still, he bases almost his entire case on archaeological reports about the town of Nazareth. In particular, he is impressed by the fact that the kind of rock-cut tombs that have been uncovered there—called *kokh* tombs, otherwise known as *locula* tombs—were not in use in Galilee the middle of the first century and thus do not date to the days of Jesus. And so the town did not exist then.

This is a highly problematic claim. It is hard to understand why tombs in Nazareth that can be dated to the days after Jesus indicate that there was no town there during the days of Jesus. That is to say, just because later habitation can be established in Nazareth, how does that show that the town was not inhabited earlier? Moreover, Salm fails to stress one of the most important points about these special rock-cut tombs: they were expensive to make, and only the wealthiest families could afford them.¹³ There is nothing in any of our records to suggest that Nazareth had any wealthy families in the days of Jesus. And so no one in town would have been able to purchase a *kokh* tomb. So what does the fact that none were found from the days of Jesus indicate? Precisely nothing. The tombs that poor people used in Palestine were shallow graves, not built into rock like *kokh* tombs. These poor-person graves almost never survive for archaeologists to find.

I should also point out that these *kokh* tombs from later times were discovered on the hillside of the traditional site of Nazareth. Salm, however, claims that the hillside would have been uninhabitable in Jesus’s day so that, in his opinion, the village that eventually came into existence (in the years after 70 CE) would have been located on the valley floor, less than a kilometer away. He also points out that archaeologists have never dug at that site.

This view creates insurmountable problems for his thesis. For one thing, there is the simple question of logic. If archaeologists have not dug where Salm thinks the village was located, what is his basis for saying that it did not exist in the days of Jesus? This is a major flaw: using forceful rhetoric, almost to the point of indiscretion, Salm insists that anyone who thinks that Nazareth exists has to argue “against the available material evidence.” But what material evidence can there be, if the site where the evidence would exist has never been excavated? And what evidence exactly is being argued against, if none has been turned up?

There is an even bigger problem, however. Many compelling pieces of archaeological evidence indicate that in fact Nazareth did exist in Jesus’s day and that, like other villages and towns in that part of Galilee, it was built on the hillside, near where the later rock-cut kokh tombs were built. For one thing, archaeologists have excavated a farm connected with the village, and it dates to the time of Jesus.¹⁴ Salm disputes the finding of the archaeologists who did the excavation (remember that he himself is not an archaeologist but bases his views on what the real archaeologists—all of whom disagree with him—say). For one thing, when archaeologist Yardena Alexandre indicated that 165 coins were found in this excavation, she specified in the report that some of them were late, from the fourteenth or fifteenth century. This suits Salm’s purposes just fine. But as it turns out, among the coins were some that date to the Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and early Roman period, that is, the days of Jesus. Salm objected that this was not stated in Alexandre’s report, but Alexandre has verbally confirmed that in fact it is the case: there were coins in the collection that date to the time prior to the Jewish uprising.¹⁵

Salm also claims that the pottery found on the site that is dated to the time of Jesus is not really from this period, even though he is not an expert on pottery. Two archaeologists who reply to Salm’s protestations say the following: “Salm’s personal evaluation of the pottery...reveals his lack of expertise in the area as well as his lack of serious research in the sources.”¹⁶ They go on to state, “By ignoring or dismissing solid ceramic, numismatic [coins], and literary evidence for Nazareth’s existence during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman period, it would appear that the analysis which René Salm includes in his review, and his recent book must, in itself, be relegated to the realm of ‘myth.’”¹⁷

Another archaeologist who specializes in Galilee, Ken Dark, the director of the Nazareth Archaeological Project, gave a thoroughly negative review of Salm’s book, noting, among other things, that “there is no hint that Salm has qualifications—nor any fieldwork experience—in archaeology.” Dark shows that Salm has misunderstood both the hydrology (how the water systems worked) and the topography (the layout) of Nazareth and points out that the town could well have been located on the hill slopes, just as other nearby towns were, such as Khirbet Kana. His concluding remarks are damning: “To conclude: despite initial appearances this is not a well-informed study and ignores much evidence and important published work of direct relevance. The basic premise is faulty, and Salm’s reasoning is often weak and shaped by his preconceptions. Overall, his central argument is archaeologically unsupportable.”¹⁸

But there is more. As it turns out, another discovery was made in ancient Nazareth a year after Salm’s book appeared. It is a house that dates to the days of Jesus. The discovery was reported by the Associated Press on December 21, 2009. I have

personally written the principal archaeologist, Yardena Alexandre, the excavations director at the Israel Antiquity Authority, and she has confirmed the report. The house is located on the hill slopes. Pottery shards connected to the house range from roughly 100 BCE to 100 CE (that is, the days of Jesus). There is nothing in the house to suggest that the people inhabiting it over this time had any wealth: there are no glass items or imported products. The vessels are made of clay and chalk.

The AP story concludes that “the dwelling and older discoveries of nearby tombs in burial caves suggest that Nazareth was an out-of-the-way hamlet of around 50 houses on a patch of about four acres...populated by Jews of modest means.” No wonder this place is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, Josephus, or the Talmud. It was far too small, poor, and insignificant. Most people had never heard of it, and those who had heard didn’t care. Even though it existed, this is not the place someone would make up as the hometown of the messiah. Jesus really came from there, as attested in multiple sources.

Again I reiterate the main point of my chapter: even if Jesus did not come from Nazareth, so what? The historicity of Jesus does not depend on whether Nazareth existed. In fact, it is not even related to the question. The existence (or rather, nonexistence) of Nazareth is another mythicist irrelevancy.

Claim 3: The Gospels Are Interpretive Paraphrases of the Old Testament

A NUMBER OF MYTHICISTS argue that the New Testament Gospels are little more than reworkings and paraphrases of passages of the Old Testament applied to an invented figure Jesus. Within Jewish tradition this approach to interpreting a text by paraphrasing, expanding, and reapplying it is called Midrash; if the text is a narrative rather than a set of laws, the Midrash is called haggadic (as opposed to halakhic). And so Robert Price has recently argued that “the whole gospel narrative is the product of haggadic Midrash upon the Old Testament.”¹⁹ The logic behind this assertion is that if the stories told about Jesus in the Gospels have been modeled on those of Old Testament figures, we are dealing with literary fictions, not historical facts, and that Jesus, as a result, is a made-up, fictional character.

Robert Price and Haggadic Midrash

There are significant problems with this view, as I will explain in a moment, but the ultimate problem again is one of scope and relevance. The fact that a story about a person has been shaped according to the mold of older stories and traditions does not prove that the core of the story is unhistorical. It simply shows how the story came to take its shape.

Take as an example the way the story of Jesus is told in the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. It has long been recognized that Matthew wants to portray Jesus as a “new Moses,” and so it is no surprise to find that the things that happen to Jesus in Matthew closely parallel the Old Testament traditions about Moses. Just as the ruler of the land, the Egyptian pharaoh, sought to destroy Moses as an infant (Exodus 1), so too the ruler of the land, the Jewish king Herod, sought to kill the infant Jesus (Matthew 2). Jesus and his family escape by going to Egypt, the land of Moses. Just as Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt to come to the Promised Land (Exodus 13–14), so too

Jesus returned from Egypt to Israel. Matthew emphasizes the point by quoting the prophet Hosea's declaration of the salvation of Israel: "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Hosea 11:1, quoted in Matthew 2:16), only now the "son" is not the nation of Israel but its messiah, Jesus. To escape Egypt, the Israelites had to cross the Red Sea at the exodus. The first thing that happened to the adult Jesus is that he too entered and then came out of the water at his baptism (Matthew 3). The Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years being tested by God, and so too Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted (Matthew 4). The Israelites traveled to Mount Sinai, where they were given the Law of Moses; Jesus immediately went up to a mountain and delivered his Sermon on the Mount, where he provided an interpretation of the laws of Moses (Matthew 5–7).

In point after point, Matthew stresses the close parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Moses. And his reason for doing so is clear: for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, who provides the authoritative interpretation of the Law of God to the people who choose to follow him. This portrayal is distinct to Matthew: the other Gospels do not include all of these parallels (no king sets out to kill the child; there is no flight to Egypt, no Sermon on the Mount, and so forth). It is the way Matthew personally shaped the story, for reasons of his own.

But the fact that Matthew shaped the story in this way has nothing to do with the question of whether or not Jesus existed. What the shape of the story makes us suspect are the many details, molded in such a way as to allow Matthew to make a theological point about Jesus (the new Moses). The historical existence of the object of the story is a completely different issue.

That is because stories are always shaped, not just by the biblical authors, but by everyone who tells them. And so we in the modern world shape the stories we tell in a number of typical ways. We have the rags-to-riches story, the feel-good war story, the downfall-of-the-great-man story. The shape of the story is not related to the question of whether the figure in the story actually existed.

It would be easy, for example, to tell the story of the demise of Richard Nixon in terms of Shakespearian tragedy. Many of the facts fit the mold well enough, and the facts that don't fit can easily be bypassed or altered to make them fit. Does our ability to shape the story in the way we want mean that Watergate didn't happen or that Richard Nixon never lived? No, it just means that Nixon's story is amenable to a certain kind of shape.

So too with Jesus. Some of the followers of Jesus believed he was the new spokesperson of God, like Moses of old, and so they told stories about him to make the connections with Moses obvious. Many other followers considered him to be a prophet of God and the Son of God. And so they naturally talked about him in the ways they talked about other Hebrew prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha and Jeremiah.

A good example of how this works appears in the story of Jesus and the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11–17, which is similar in many ways to a story told about the prophet Elijah and his encounter with another widow, this one from Zarephath, also in the northern part of the land of Israel (1 Kings 17:17–24). Elijah learns that the only son of the widow has died, and he tells the mourning mother to give him the corpse. He raises the child from the dead and returns him to his mother, who proclaims, "Now that I know

that you are a man of God and that the world of the LORD in your mouth is truth.” So too Jesus comes to Nain and learns that the only son of a widow has died. He tells her not to mourn, he goes up to the corpse, and he raises the young man from the dead. And the crowd’s reaction is similar: “A great prophet has risen among us and God has looked favorably on his people.” The crowd, in other words, realizes that Jesus has just performed a feat like his predecessor Elijah, and that he too, therefore, is a great prophet of God.

When a story about Jesus so closely parallels a passage in the Old Testament, it is reasonable to assume that the storyteller—in this case, Luke or his source—has shaped the story in light of its scriptural parallel. But is it fair to say, as Price does, that “the whole gospel narrative” is nothing but a midrash on scripture? That is going too far, as can be seen by the fact that in a number of cases the examples Price cites are far from obvious. For instance, as in the story of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17, Price indicates that the story in which Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31) is drawn from 1 Kings 17:8–16, where Elijah provides miraculous quantities of food for the widow and her son in the time of famine. Unlike the earlier account I mentioned, however, here there are so many differences between the two episodes and so few similarities that it is hard to see how one was drawn from the other. The Elijah story is about a widow; Mark says nothing about a widow. The Elijah story is about the prophet feeding a starving family. The Jesus story is about him healing a woman who is ill, who then feeds him (not the other way around). The Elijah story is about a prophet helping a non-Jew; the Jesus story is about a Jew. It is hard to see that one of the stories is modeled on the other.

Or take a second story, Jesus healing the paralytic in Mark 2, which Price says is based on an episode in 2 Kings 1:2–17, Elijah healing King Ahaziah. Really? Simply read the stories for yourself. The differences are so pronounced that it is hard to see one as the source for the other.

The overarching problem is this: Price, as we saw earlier, was correct in stressing that historians deal not with certainties but only with probabilities. But he seems to have jettisoned this view when actually making historical judgments. In his view, virtually any story about Jesus with the remotest tie to a text of the Old Testament is written off as a midrash. But where are the probability judgments? To illustrate the problem, consider two stories, one that can plausibly be thought to have been made up to provide a parallel to a text in the Old Testament, and the other not.

The story of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem has long been recognized by scholars as historically problematic. It is told in an especially interesting way in Matthew’s version (Matthew 21:1–11). Near the end of his life Jesus decides to make his fateful trip to Jerusalem; he instructs his disciples to find a donkey so that he can ride into town. In fact, in Matthew, the disciples are instructed to find two animals, a donkey and its colt. They bring the animals to Jesus, and he straddles the two and rides into Jerusalem to the acclamation of the crowds, who spread cloaks and branches on the road before him, shouting, “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” We are told that this extraordinary entrance scene was to fulfill a prophecy of scripture: “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey,” a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah (9:9).

In the other Gospels, when Jesus rides into town it is only on one animal, a donkey. Matthew has read the prophecy in Zechariah in an overly literalistic way, not realizing the poetic character of the passage. In the Hebrew Bible, poetry is written in sense lines, in which the statement of the first line either is contrasted with a statement in the second line or, instead, is restated in the second line in different words. Zechariah described the arrival of the holy one in two different ways in the two lines: he would come on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey. This is a standard form of Hebrew poetry. But Matthew read the passage literally, thinking that Zechariah was imagining two different animals (a donkey and a colt), and so when he wanted Jesus to fulfill this prophecy, he had him straddling the two animals, a rather uncomfortable and somewhat undignified entrance into the city, one might think.

This entire scene is built around the fulfillment of a prophecy, which may make it historically suspect. But there are other reasons for doubting that it happened the way Matthew describes it. If it is true that the crowds were shouting that Jesus was the messiah now arriving in the holy city, why didn't the authorities immediately take notice and have him arrested both for causing a disturbance and for claiming to be the Jewish king (when only Rome could appoint the king)? Instead, according to Matthew and the other Gospels, Jesus spent an unmolested week in Jerusalem and only then was arrested and put on trial. But it defies belief that the Roman authorities who were in town precisely in order to prevent any mob actions or uprisings would have failed to intervene if the crowds shouted in acclamation for a new ruler arriving in town.

Jesus almost certainly came to Jerusalem, as we will see later, but not like this. The story has been made up (or adopted) in order to show that he fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah.

Take now a second instance where the heart of the story—as I will argue in a later chapter—is almost certainly historical despite the literary embellishments around it. At the beginning of Jesus's ministry he is said to have been baptized by John the Baptist. The accounts in the Gospels are clearly amplified beyond historical plausibility: in the earliest version, Mark's, when Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens are said to rip apart, the Holy Spirit is said to descend upon him as a dove, and a voice comes from heaven: "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9–11). The scene, as narrated, is designed to show that here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is acknowledged by God as his unique son and anointed by the Holy Spirit from heaven to empower him for his preaching and miracles.

But the embellishments do not mean that the event itself is made up, as we will see later. How does Price explain the appearance of the baptism account in the Gospels? In his view,

The scene in broad outline may derive from Zoroastrian traditions of the inauguration of Zoroaster's ministry. Son of a Vedic priest, Zoroaster immerses himself in the river for purification, and as he comes up from the water, the archangel Vohu Mana appears to him, proffering a cup and commissions him to bear the tidings of the one God Ahura Mazda, whereupon the evil one Ahriman tempts him to abandon this call. (67)

Is this explanation really at the same level of historical probability as the explanation of the triumphal entry? Zoroastrianism? Vohu Mana? Ahura Mazda? These were the influences that determined how the story of Jesus's baptism were told? For one thing, how can Price say that the entire Gospel is a haggadic midrash on the Old Testament if what he means is that it is a paraphrase of Zoroastrian scripture? Even if it is not historical, the story of Jesus's baptism must go back to the very earliest Christian communities in Aramaic-speaking Palestine. How many Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews were influenced by accounts of Zoroaster's initiation in the presence of the archangel Vohu Mana?

In short, many of Price's explanations of where the Gospel stories came from are simply implausible. But my bigger point is that in many instances they are also irrelevant. Even if later storytellers chose to talk about Jesus's baptism in light of something that once happened to Zoroaster—which seems highly unlikely, but if they actually did—this has no bearing on the question of whether Jesus existed and, in this case, very little bearing on the question of whether he really was baptized by John the Baptist. Just because a story is molded by a storyteller or author in light of his own interests does not mean that the story at its core is nonhistorical or that the person about whom it is told did not live. There is other, quite abundant, evidence that Jesus lived. And as we will see, there are solid reasons for thinking he was baptized. None of this evidence hinges on whether he began his ministry like Zoroaster.

Thomas Thompson and the Messiah Myth

Thomas Thompson recently published a book that advances a view similar to Price's but approaches the matter from a slightly different angle. In *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David*, Thompson argues that just as Old Testament notables such as Abraham, Moses, and David were legendary, not historical figures, so too with Jesus, whose stories in the Gospels are not the result of oral traditions dating back to near his own time but are literary fictions invented by the Gospel writers and their predecessors.²⁰

Thompson is a trained scholar of the Hebrew Bible and is well known in those circles for being what is called a minimalist, meaning that he thinks there is a very small amount of historical information in the Hebrew Bible. I do not need to enter into that debate here, as I am interested instead in how he transferred his understanding of the Old Testament traditions to the Gospel stories about Jesus. His book on Jesus (and David) consists of little more than a close reading of the Gospels, and he argues that the Gospels try to formulate their stories about Jesus in light of traditions found in the Old Testament. In his view the Gospel stories are constructed specifically as literary texts by authors who wanted to put their views of Jesus in written form. They are not, therefore, based on oral traditions that go back to near the time of Jesus himself. This is especially the case because in his view Jesus did not exist but was a literary invention of the early Christians.

Thompson's book is not easy for a layperson to follow. It involves a close reading of texts, a reading that at times is excessively thick and virtually impenetrable. Those without training in biblical studies are not likely to be able to follow his argument let alone be persuaded by it. But his basic view is clear. The Gospel stories have literary functions that depend heavily on intertextual influences (meaning they are based on

other texts—in this case, those of the Hebrew Bible). To understand these stories, the interpreter has to understand where the stories came from. From this assertion Thompson leaps to the conclusion that since the Jesus traditions are textual and literary, they are therefore not rooted in oral traditions and have no basis in actual history. To read the stories as historical narratives, in his opinion, is therefore to misread them.

In my judgment this view goes too far (way too far) and is based on a non sequitur. To say that our Gospel stories are based in many instances (he would say all, but that is surely an exaggeration) on earlier literary texts does not necessarily mean that the stories were invented as written traditions instead of existing first as oral traditions. Even people telling stories, as opposed to writing them, could be influenced by earlier writings that were in broad circulation. And it needs to be remembered always that we have solid and virtually incontrovertible evidence that the stories of Jesus were circulated orally before being written down. For one thing, there is no other way to explain how Christianity spread throughout the Roman world, as followers of Jesus converted other people to believe, not by showing them books (almost all of them were illiterate) but by telling stories about Jesus. Moreover, we have a number of authors who explicitly tell us that stories about Jesus were being transmitted orally. Paul says that he is passing on traditions he has heard (1 Corinthians 11:22–24; 15:3–5); Luke indicates that his predecessors based their accounts on oral traditions (1:1–4); the author of the Fourth Gospel indicates that he had an oral source for some of his stories (19:35); and even later the church father Papias indicates that he interviewed people who had been companions of Jesus's disciples.

These oral traditions about Jesus did not arise twenty, thirty, or forty years after the traditional date of his death. On the contrary, as we have seen, they began in Aramaic-speaking Palestine, and we can give reasonably hard dates: at the very latest they started in the early 30s, a year or two after Jesus allegedly died. They almost certainly started even earlier.

But apart from this question of whether the Gospel stories are purely literary inventions (rather than written accounts of earlier oral traditions), with Thompson as with Price we have to ask whether the view he sets forth is all that relevant to the question of Jesus's historical existence. It is one thing to say that a story has been shaped in light of an account in the Hebrew Bible. It is another thing to say that the event never happened at all or, even more, that the person about whom the story is told never existed. The fact that stories are molded in certain ways does not necessarily mean that there is no historical information to be found in the stories. That has to be decided on other grounds.

An analogy may yet again be useful. Today the historical novel is a widely accepted genre of literature. Over the past few years I have read *Sarah's Key*, by Tatiana de Rosnay, based on events in France during the Holocaust; *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, about the French Revolution; and *Romola*, by George Eliot, about Savonarola in fifteenth-century Florence. These books are all shaped as novels. They are not meant to be disinterested historical accounts of the Holocaust, French history, or a famous Italian heretic. But to deny that they have some connection with historical events or the persons involved in these events is to miss a basic literary premise. No one would claim that the French Revolution never happened because it is discussed in a

work of fiction created by Charles Dickens or that the Holocaust was made up because there is a novel about it. One instead needs to look for other evidence.

So too with the Gospels of the New Testament. They do indeed contain nonhistorical materials, many of which are based on traditions found in the Hebrew Bible. And to understand the gospel stories you do indeed need to understand the intertexts on which they are based. But that has little bearing on the question of whether or not Jesus actually existed. It has to do rather with how reliable some of the stories told about him are. To decide whether Jesus existed, you need to look at other evidence, as we have done.

Claim 4: The Nonhistorical “Jesus” Is Based on Stories About Pagan Divine Men

THIS FINAL ARGUMENT, UBIQUITOUS among the mythicists, is analogous to the preceding, but now rather than arguing that Jesus was made up based on persons and prophecies from the Jewish Bible, it is claimed that he was invented in light of what pagans were saying about the gods or about other “divine men,” superhuman creatures thought to have been half mortal, half immortal. As was the case with the earlier claim, I think there is a good deal to be said for the idea that Christians did indeed shape their stories about Jesus in light of other figures who were similar to him. But I also think that this is scarcely relevant to the question of whether or not he existed.

The Claim and Its Exposition

In my textbook on the New Testament, written for undergraduates, I begin my study of the historical Jesus in a way that students find completely surprising and even unsettling. I tell them that I want to describe to them an important figure who lived two thousand years ago.

Even before he was born, it was known that he would be someone special. A supernatural being informed his mother that the child she was to conceive would not be a mere mortal but would be divine. He was born miraculously, and he became an unusually precocious young man. As an adult he left home and went on an itinerant preaching ministry, urging his listeners to live, not for the material things of this world, but for what is spiritual. He gathered a number of disciples around him, who became convinced that his teachings were divinely inspired, in no small part because he himself was divine. He proved it to them by doing many miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. But at the end of his life he roused opposition, and his enemies delivered him over to the Roman authorities for judgment. Still, after he left this world, he returned to meet his followers in order to convince them that he was not really dead but lived on in the heavenly realm. Later some of his followers wrote books about him.

But, I tell my students, I doubt if any of you has ever read any of these books. In fact, I say, I don't think you even know this man's name. He was Apollonius of Tyana, a pagan philosopher, a worshipper of the pagan gods. His story was written by a later follower named Philostratus, and we still have the book today, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.²¹

The followers of Jesus, of course, argued that Apollonius was a fraud and a charlatan and that Jesus was the Son of God. The followers of Apollonius argued just the opposite, that it was Jesus who was the fraud. And these were not the only two divine men in antiquity. A number of divine men were thought to have roamed the earth, some of them in the recent past, people born to the union of a mortal (human) and an immortal (god), who could do spectacular deeds and who delivered amazing teachings, who at the end of their lives ascended to heaven to live with the gods.

My students, of course, have a hard time getting their minds around the fact that in the ancient world Jesus was not the only one “known” to be a miracle-working son of God. There were others. Mythicists, as you might imagine, have had field day with this information, arguing that since these others were obviously not real historical persons, neither was Jesus. He, like them, was invented.

But there is a problem with this view. Apollonius, for example, really was a historical person, a Pythagorean philosopher who lived some fifty years after Jesus. I don’t really think that Apollonius’s mother was impregnated by a God or that Apollonius really healed the sick or raised the dead. But he did exist. And so did Jesus. How do we know? We don’t base our judgments on the way later followers made Apollonius and Jesus out to be semi-or completely divine. We base our judgments on other evidence, as we have seen. The fact that Christians saw Jesus as a divine man (or rather, for them, as the only true divine man) is not in itself relevant to the question of whether he existed. Still, since this is a major point among the mythicists, I need to give it some consideration.

I will be dealing with a very similar point in the next chapter, where I consider arguments of the mythicists that do strike me as highly relevant to the question of Jesus’s existence. There I will ask whether Jesus was invented like one of the dying-rising gods of the ancient world. Here, however, I am more interested in the mythological parallels to the traditions of Jesus (his birth, his miracles, his ascension, and so forth) and their relevance to the question of whether he existed. My view is that even though one can draw a number of interesting parallels between the stories of someone like Apollonius and Jesus (there are lots of similarities but also scores of differences), mythicists typically go way too far in emphasizing these parallels, even making them up in order to press their point. These exaggerations do not serve their purposes well.

A terrific example of an exaggerated set of mythicist claims comes in a classic in the field, the 1875 book of Kersey Graves, *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors: Christianity Before Christ*. Early on his “study” Graves states his overarching thesis:

Researches into oriental history reveal the remarkable fact that stories of incarnate Gods answering to and resembling the miraculous character of Jesus Christ have been prevalent in most if not all principal religious heathen nations of antiquity; and the accounts and narrations of some of these deific incarnations bear such a striking resemblance to that of the Christian Savior—not only in their general features but in some cases in the most minute details, from the legend of the immaculate conception to that of the crucifixion, and subsequent

ascension into heaven—that one might almost be mistaken for the other.²²

Graves goes on to list thirty-five such divine figures, naming them as Chrisna of Hindostan, Budha Sakia of India, Baal of Phenicia, Thammuz of Syria, Mithra of Persia, Cadmus of Greece, Mohamud of Arabia, and so on. Already the modern, informed reader sees that there are going to be problems. Buddha, Cadmus, and Muhammad? Their lives were remarkably like that of Jesus, down to the details? But as Graves goes on:

These have all received divine honors, have nearly all been worshiped as Gods, or sons of Gods; were mostly incarnated as Christs, Saviors, Messiahs, or Mediators; not a few of them were reputedly born of virgins; some of them filling a character almost identical with that ascribed by the Christian's Bible to Jesus Christ; many of them, like him, are reported to have been crucified; and all of them, taken together, furnish a prototype and parallel for nearly every important incident and wonder-inciting miracle, doctrine, and precept recorded in the New Testament, of the Christian's savior.²³

This is certainly an impressive statement, and one can see how an unwary reader may easily be taken in. But note, for starters, the exaggeration of the last two lines (“nearly every important incident...”). Such sensationalist claims are repeated elsewhere throughout the book, as when, for example, we are told that pagan sources provide parallels for “nearly every important thought, deed, word, action, doctrine, principle, precept, tenet, ritual ordinance or ceremony.... Nearly every miraculous or marvelous story, moral precept, or tenet of religious faith [told about Jesus].”

Graves then sets out these fantastic (not to say fantastical) parallels in forty-five chapters, including discussions of such things as messianic prophecies, immaculate conceptions, virgin mothers, the visit of angels, shepherds, and magi to see the newborn infant, birth on December 25, crucifixions, descents to hell, resurrections, ascensions, atonements, doctrines of the trinity, and on and on. Possibly the most striking thing about all of these amazing parallels to the Christian claims about Jesus is the equally amazing fact that Graves provides not a single piece of documentation for any of them. They are all asserted, on his own authority. If a reader wants to look up the stories about Buddha or Mithra or Cadmus, there is no place to turn. Graves does not name the sources of his information. Even so, these are the kinds of claims one can find throughout the writings of the mythicists, even those writing today, 140 years later. And as with Graves, in almost every instance the claims are unsubstantiated.

Just to pick a more recent example, I might mention the assertions of Frank Zindler, in his essay “How Jesus Got a Life.”²⁴ Zindler is not as extreme as Graves, but he does make unguarded claims without providing the reader any guidance for finding the supporting evidence. In Zindler’s view, Christ’s biography started as a set of astrological and comparative mythological speculations in a pagan mystery cult, based to a large extent on the ancient “mystery religion” of Mithraism. According to Zindler, the cult figure of the Mithraists, the Persian god Mithras, was said to have been born on

December 25 to a virgin; his cult was headed by a ruler who was known as a pope, located on the Vatican hill; the leaders of the religion wore miters and celebrated a sacred meal to commemorate the atoning death of their savior God, who was said to have been raised from the dead on a Sunday. Sound familiar?

The cult was centered, Zindler claims, in Tarsus (the hometown of the apostle Paul). But then the astrologers involved with the cult came to realize that the zodiacal age of Mithra was drawing to a close since the equinox was moving into Pisces. And so they “left their cult centers in Phrygia and Cilicia...to go to Palestine to see if they could locate not just the King of the Jews but the new Time Lord” (that is, they invented Jesus).²⁵ Zindler says this in all sincerity, and so far as I can tell, he really believes it. What evidence does he give for his claim that the Mithraists moved their religion to Palestine to help them find the king of the Jews? None at all. And so we might ask: what evidence could he have cited, had he wanted to do so? It’s the same answer. There is no evidence. This is made up.

Scholars of the Mithraic mysteries readily admit that, as with most mystery religions, we do not know a good deal about Mithraism—or at least nearly as much as we would like to know. The Mithraists left no books behind to explain what they did in their religion and what they believed. Almost all of our evidence is archaeological, as a large number of the cult’s sacred shrines (called mithraea) have been uncovered that include a bull-slaying statue (called a tauroctony). These statues portray what was evidently the central act within the mythology of the group. The cult figure Mithras is astride a kneeling bull, his bent knee on its back, pulling its head toward him while he himself looks away and plunges a knife into its neck. A dog is shown lapping up the blood from the wound, which has an ear of wheat coming out with it; also present is a snake, and a scorpion is seen biting the bull’s scrotum. On either side of the statue is a human torchbearer, one holding his torch upward in the normal position, the other holding his downward.

There are enormous debates among Mithraic scholars about what all this means. It clearly involves the study of the zodiac, and a number of interesting theories have been propounded. Unfortunately, we do not have Mithraic texts that explain it all to us, let alone texts that indicate that Mithras was born of a virgin on December 25 and that he died to atone for sins only to be raised on a Sunday.²⁶

As I pointed out earlier, the reason a religion like Mithraism is called a mystery cult by scholars is that the followers of the religion were bound by a vow of secrecy and so never revealed the mysteries of their religion, either their practices or their beliefs.²⁷ It is true that later writers sometimes indicated what, in their opinion, took place in the religion. But these later writers were not involved personally in the cult, and historians are highly reluctant to take them at their word as if they had real sources of information. They, like their modern counterparts, were often simply speculating.

This is true as well of some of our Christian sources who claim that there were similarities between their own religion and the mystery religions. These later authors, such as the church father Tertullian, started making such claims for very specific reasons. It was not that they had done research and interviewed followers of these religions. It was because they wanted pagans to realize that Christianity was not all that different from what other pagans said and did in their religions so that there would be

no grounds for singling out Christians and persecuting them. The Christian sources that claim to know something about these mysteries, in other words, had a vested interest in making others think that the pagan religions were in many ways like Christianity. For that reason—plus the fact that they would not have had reliable sources of information—they generally cannot be trusted.

Many mythicists, however, take what these later sources say at face value and stress the obvious: Christian claims about Jesus were a lot like those of other cult figures, down to the details. But they have derived the details from sources that—in the judgment of the scholars who are actually experts in this material—simply cannot be relied upon.

Other Problems with the Parallels

There are other problems with the mythicists' claims that Jesus was simply invented as another one of the ancient divine men. In many instances, for example, the alleged parallels between the stories of Jesus and those of pagan gods or divine men are not actually close. When Christians said that Jesus was born of a virgin, for instance, they came to mean that Jesus's mother had never had sex. In most of the cases of the divine men, when the father is a god and the mother is a mortal, sex is definitely involved. The child is literally part human and part deity. The mortal woman is no virgin; she has had divine sex.

In other cases the parallels are simply made up. Where do any of the ancient sources speak of a divine man who was crucified as an atonement for sin? So far as I know, there are no parallels to this central Christian claim. What has been invented here is not the Christian Jesus but the mythicist claims about Jesus. I am not saying that I think Jesus really did die to atone for the sins of the world. I am saying that the Christian claims about Jesus's atoning sacrifice were not lifted from pagan claims about divine men. Dying to atone for sin was not part of the ancient pagan mythology. Mythicists who claim that it was are simply imagining things.

My main objection to this line of argumentation, however, is the one with which I began. There certainly are similarities between what pagans were saying about their divine men and what Christians were saying about Jesus, as we have seen in the case of Apollonius. But the parallels are not as close and as precise as most mythicists claim. Nowhere near as close. True, some similarities are significant. But that is not relevant to the question of whether there really was a Jewish teacher Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. As we saw earlier with respect to parallels to Old Testament figures, when Christians told stories about Jesus, they shaped the stories in light of stories they already knew.

Jewish Christians in particular may have been inclined to portray Jesus in Old Testament terms. As soon as Christianity moved outside Judaism, however, and became a religion largely made up of converts from among the pagans, these new converts told stories about Jesus in terms that made sense to them. They increasingly shaped the stories so that Jesus looked more and more like the divine men commonly talked about in the Roman world, men who were supernaturally born because of the intervention of a god, who did miracles, who healed the sick and raised the dead, and who at the end ascended to heaven. If you wanted to describe a son of God to someone in the ancient world, these were the terms you used. You used the vocabulary and conceptions found

in the idiom of the day. What other idiom could you use? It was the only language available to you.

The fact that Jesus was cast in the mold of pagan divine men does indeed create a difficult situation for historians who want to get beyond the idiom of the stories to the historical reality that lies behind them. But the mere fact that the idiom is being used does not mean that there is no reality there. The question of whether Jesus is portrayed as a Jewish prophet or as a pagan divine man is completely independent of the question of whether he existed.

Robert Price and the Mythic Hero Archetype

Robert Price in his recent book, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, uses parallels to pagan divine men in a more sophisticated way. Price argues that an ideal archetype of the “mythic hero” was “shared by cultures and religions worldwide and throughout history.”²⁸ This ideal type comprises twenty-two characteristics, many of which apply to Jesus. Like many of these other figures from around the world, Jesus was made up according to type.

I do not need to belabor my criticism of this view since many of the points I made earlier apply here as well. I can say, though, that when social scientists talk about an “ideal type,” they are not referring to an actually existing entity but to a scholarly construct that is useful for classifying phenomena. Anyone who is “true to type” is not necessarily “made up” to fit the type. This is significant because some of the figures that Price uses to establish the type were certainly actual persons, such as the famous Peregrinus discussed by the ancient author Lucian of Samosata (as Price admits in Chapter 2: *Eyewitness Accounts?*). Jesus too could be true to type and be a real person. Here again, then, we need to differentiate between two questions: (a) How was Jesus talked about and portrayed by his later followers, and (b) did he really exist as a historical figure?

Price knows that these are separate questions, and he anticipates the objection by claiming that unlike other figures who really lived, such as Peregrinus, with Jesus we have no “neutral” information about his life. In Price’s view, “Every detail [of the Gospel stories] corresponds to the interest of mythology and epic.” And so the whole thing looks like it is made up.

This is another place where I seriously part company with Price. It simply is not true that all the stories in the Gospels, and all the details of stories, promote the mythological interests of the early Christians. The claim that Jesus had brothers named James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, along with several sisters, is scarcely a mythological motif; neither is the statement that he came from the tiny hamlet of Nazareth or that he often talked about seeds.

Price goes on to say that one other thing that makes historical figures stand out from those who are completely true to type is that they have left a “footprint on...profane history.” That is, we have records of Caesar Augustus and Apollonius of Tyana, who are mentioned in other (profane) sources.

The first thing to stress by way of response is that it really is not fair to use Caesar Augustus as the criterion by which we evaluate whether one of the other sixty million people of his day actually existed. If I wanted to prove that my former colleague Jim Sanford really existed, I would not do so by comparing his press coverage to that of Ronald Reagan. Moreover, in the ancient context I do not even know what the term profane (as opposed to sacred) is supposed to mean. The ancient world did not divide the sacred from the profane or even imagine these as discrete categories. And even if they had, why would a profane historical source be more valuable than a nonprofane one (whatever that is)? And which of the two is Philostratus, our chief source of information about Apollonius? Philostratus clearly sees Apollonius as an important religious figure, and he holds deep religious convictions about him. Does that mean Philostratus is not a valuable source? The same could be said about many of the sources for Augustus, who was widely seen as a superhuman being who eventually came to be deified.

Here again, however, my biggest problem with this mythicist approach is the question of relevance. Yes, early Christians told stories about Jesus in light of what they thought about other divine men in their environment—or used to think before they converted. Modern critical historians have noted these parallels, which are nowhere near as numerous as the mythicists have typically contended. And scholars have long discussed why the parallels create problems for knowing exactly what Jesus really said and did. The early storytellers shaped their stories about Jesus according to the models available to them, making up details—and sometimes entire stories—or altering features here and there. But the fact they did so does not have any bearing on whether Jesus really existed. That has to be decided on other grounds.

Or to put the matter more concretely: what if it were true, historically, that the followers of Mithras portrayed him as having been born on December 25, as wearing a halo, and as having followers who were headed by a pope on Vatican Hill? What does that have to do with whether there lived a Jewish preacher from Nazareth named Jesus who was crucified by Pontius Pilate? This entire set of arguments, as with those that I noted earlier, is simply not relevant to the question of whether or not there was a historical Jesus.

Notes and References

[1.](#) See Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005).

[2.](#) See Bart Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God: Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010).

[3.](#) The difference, of course, is that no one would use the Hitler Diaries as historical sources for the life of Hitler, as my student Stephen Carlson has pointed out to me. But that is because we have so many other sources, including those used by Kujau to construct his forgeries. If we did not have these other sources, though, a careful study of his forgeries could help us reconstruct his sources, and to that extent the Hitler Diaries would be like the Gospels: they would be evidence of earlier historical accounts. But my main point is that what matters is not the name of a book's author (real or false) but the nature of its contents.

[4.](#) Luke indicates that Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth after they had completed the necessary rites of purification. This is a reference to the law found in Leviticus 12, which indicates that thirty-two days after giving birth the woman was to make an offering to God for cleansing.

[5.](#) Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, chap. 2.

[6.](#) See Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 29–39.

[7.](#) Robert Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011); Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

[8.](#) Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (1906; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), chaps. 22 and 23.

[9.](#) Frank Zindler, “Where Jesus Never Walked,” *Through Atheist Eyes*, vol. 1 (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011), 27–55. I do not mean to say that Zindler does not cite evidence for his view. He claims that the name Jesus in Mark 1:9 does not have the definite article, unlike the other eighty places it occurs in Mark, and therefore the verse does not appear to be written in Markan style. In response, I should say that (a) there are two other places in Mark where the name Jesus does not have the article; (b) if the problem with the entire verse is that the name Jesus does not have article, then if we posit a scribal change to the text, the more likely explanation is that a scribe inadvertently left out the article. Nazareth has nothing to do with it; and (c) there is not a single stitch of manuscript evidence to support his claim that the verse was interpolated into the Gospel. This latter point is worth stressing since it is the reason that no serious scholar of the textual tradition of Mark thinks that the verse is an interpolation.

[10.](#) George A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), 146.

[11.](#) René Salm, *The Myth of Nazareth* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2008).

[12.](#) Salm, *Myth of Nazareth*, xii.

[13.](#) As I have learned from my UNC colleague Jodi Magness, one of the premier archaeologists of Roman Palestine in the world today.

[14.](#) Stephen J. Pfann, Ross Voss, and Yehudah Rapuano, “Surveys and Excavations at the Nazareth Village Farm (1997–2002): Final Report,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 25 (2007): 16–79.

[15.](#) René Salm, “A Response to ‘Surveys and Excavations at the Nazareth Village Farm (1997–2002): Final Report,’” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008): 95–103. The responses were compelling (based in part on their communications with Alexandre): Stephen J. Pfann and Yehudah Rapuano, “On the Nazareth Village Farm Report: A Reply to Salm,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008): 105–8; and Ken Dark, “Nazareth Village Farm: A Reply to Salm,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008): 109–11.

- [16.](#) Pfann and Rapuano, “Nazareth Village Farm Report,” 108.
- [17.](#) Pfann and Rapuano, “Nazareth Village Farm Report,” 108.
- [18.](#) Ken Dark, “Review of Salm, Myth of Nazareth,” in the *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008), 145.
- [19.](#) Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 34.
- [20.](#) Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- [21.](#) A convenient abbreviated version of *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* can be found in David Cartlidge and David Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
- [22.](#) Kersey Graves, *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors: Christianity Before Christ* (1875; repr., New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 29.
- [23.](#) Graves, *Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, 30–31.
- [24.](#) Frank Zindler, “How Jesus Got a Life,” *Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes from a World That Won’t Reason* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011), 1:57–80.
- [25.](#) Zindler, “How Jesus Got a Life,” 66.
- [26.](#) For interesting works of real scholarship, see Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), and the speculative but fascinating work of David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).
- [27.](#) The literature on the mystery cults is extensive. For a most recent and accessible introduction by an authority in the field, see Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010).
- [28.](#) Price, *Christ-Myth Theory*, 44–46.