

Mythicisism

By Robert Stewart, Ph.D. and Marilyn Stewart, M.Div.

Definition: The claim that Jesus never lived or that the story of Jesus as told by Christians is an amalgamation of various ancient mystery religions.¹

Founding: There is no founder or cohesive movement associated with the idea that Jesus never existed. The charge was raised mostly by lone voices or small pockets of skeptics over the last 200 years but has garnered an audience through internet productions such as *Zeitgeist, the Movie* and other postings.² Some names often associated with this position include Bruno Bauer, Arthur Drews, John M. Robertson, G. A. Wells, Earl Doherty, Richard Carrier, and Robert Price.

HISTORY

The claim that Jesus never existed is virtually unknown prior to the 18th century. Up to that time even Christianity's fiercest detractors did not deny that Jesus was a historical person.³ Most New Testament scholars have viewed the arguments behind this claim as too weak to merit a response or to merit anything more than a reference in a footnote.⁴ The radical English Deist Lord Bolingbroke in the late 18th century is known to have promoted this idea, followed by French Enlightenment thinkers Constantin-Francois Volney and Charles Francois Dupuis who argued that Christianity borrowed from ancient Persian and Babylonian myths.⁵

The notion gained some traction in the mid-1800s when German theologian Bruno Bauer attacked the historical merit of the Gospels and Paul's letters by insisting they were inventions of early 2nd century authors. Bauer claimed that early writings that mention Jesus [such as the Jewish historian Josephus and Roman historian Tacitus] were late, secondary or forged. Christianity, Bauer insisted, was the product of Roman Stocism, Greek Neo-Platonism and Judaism, and Jesus was invented as its founder.⁶ Though Bauer's arguments were effectively refuted by scholars, his teaching left at least one lasting mark: Karl Marx, Bauer's student and the father of Communism, incorporated Bauer's claims of a mythical Jesus into his ideology.⁷

Arthur Drews, a University of Karlsruhe philosophy professor, provided the earliest and most complete treatment in English of the claim in his early 1900s work, *The Christ Myth*. Drews, like the "Radical Dutch School," a group connected to the University of Amsterdam that was known for their extreme skepticism about the Bible's historicity, claimed Paul's letters were forgeries. Drews's influence is evident in the writings of John M. Robertson, a British rationalist, Freethought advocate and author of *Christianity and Mythology* (1911), the first of Robertson's many books attacking Jesus and claiming that the Gospels were composites of pagan myths.⁸

G. A. Wells, (1926-) emeritus professor of German at Birkbeck College in London, took up the idea and became an articulate critic rejecting the New Testament witness to Jesus and claiming that Roman and Jewish writings that mention Jesus have no value.⁹ Wells moved from doubting Jesus's existence to doubting that much could be known of him. Though Wells' book *Did Jesus Exist?* was not convincing to scholars, its quality set it apart from other works produced prior to that time.¹⁰

Earl Doherty, a Canadian, published *The Jesus Puzzle*, 1999, drawing from the work of the early 19th century mythicists. His website by the same name has garnered a sizeable following.

Robert Price, author of *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems* (American Atheist Press, 2012) is the only legitimate New Testament scholar known to hold this position. Similarly, Richard Carrier, Ph.D in ancient history from Columbia University and author of the recent *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*, may be the only other mythicist credentialed in a relevant field.¹¹

Online skeptic sites and atheists' popular writings continue to repeat the charge. New Atheist Richard Dawkins in his popular book *The God Delusion* wrote: "It is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all, as has been done by, among others, Professor G. A. Wells of the University of London in a number of books, including *Did Jesus Exist?*"¹²

DOCTRINE/TEACHING

New Testament scholar Robert E. Van Voorst noted that Bauer's three basic strategies are used by most, if not all, deniers of Jesus's existence:

1. **The New Testament is devalued.** Mythicists often insist that Scripture has been corrupted, denying that it was written by eyewitnesses or even that it is contemporaneous with Jesus. Bauer particularly discounted as evidence the Gospels and Paul's letters (the earliest books of the New Testament).¹³

Mythicists frequently give the Gospels a late date, pushing them to the end of the 1st century or into the 2nd century. Some have argued that Christ was invented by Christians around 100 CE or claim that Paul mentions few details of Jesus's life because he knew virtually nothing about him.¹⁴ Wells often focused on the chronological order of the New Testament and other writings to make a case that "Christ" was an idea that developed later, and over time.¹⁵ The writers of the synoptic gospels, according to Wells, freely adapted material having "no hesitation in making Jesus say and do what is in fact representative of their own theology..."¹⁶ Wells went so far as to write that Jesus's teaching "is widely admitted to be totally unoriginal" and that his character is "a mixture of violence, intolerance, pity, pride, patience" requiring as much imagination to invent as that "needed by the authors of the Arabian Nights."¹⁷

Robert Price credited Wells's book *Jesus of the Early Christians* for convincing him Jesus was not an historical person. In an online video produced by the San Jose Atheist society, Price said, "There was so little left of any apparent historical figure once you trimmed away the analogous myths and legends and stories that appeared to be based on rewrites of Old Testament stories. There was just nothing left, really."¹⁸

2. **Other first-century evidence for Jesus is devalued.** Bauer dismissed the mentions of Jesus by 1st century pagan, Jewish and Roman writers as insufficient evidence. Further, Bauer put no value on the mentions of Jesus in 2nd century non-Christian writings.¹⁹ Wells dismisses all references to Christ and his followers in Josephus and in rabbinical writings, and calls the reference in Tacitus "the one pagan reference to which appeal is still commonly made."²⁰

Earl Doherty, on his website "The Jesus Puzzle," explains Tacitus's mention of a Christ crucified by Pilate in Annals 15:44 as something "probably derived from Christian hearsay about a human founder of the movement, newly circulating in . . . Rome."²¹ Doherty also contends that the Jesus of the Gospels is not mentioned in the surviving records of Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish historian Justus of Tiberias, Pliny the elder, Roman satirists and philosophers, and considers that evidence of his non-existence.²²

Robert Price contends that the secular record is too thin to support belief in a historical Jesus, citing Caesar Augustus and others as comparison. "The difference is that Jesus has left no footprint on profane history as these others managed to do. The famous texts of Josephus and Tacitus, even if genuine, amount merely to references to the preaching of contemporary Christians, not reporting about Jesus as a contemporary."²³

3. **Christianity is claimed to have borrowed from ancient pagan mystery religions.** Bauer argued that the Gospels contain legendary tales or myths. This objection is discussed in greater detail in a separate Watchman Fellowship Profile.²⁴

HISTORICAL RESPONSE

"The view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet." – Bart D. Ehrman²⁵

Bart Ehrman, himself a New Testament scholar and self-described "agnostic with atheist leanings,"²⁶ penned his book *Did Jesus Exist?* (2012) in response to this recurring claim. Pleading that "evidence matters,"²⁷ Ehrman wrote: "The reality is that every single author who mentions Jesus—pagan, Christian, or Jewish—was fully convinced that he at least lived."²⁸

Scholars are almost unanimous that Jesus did in fact live, but this alone doesn't prove Jesus existed. A better response is to bring to light the faulty method mythicists use to reach their conclusions. Mythicists use a method that "poisons the well" and if applied to other ancient figures, would bring the existence of a very large number into doubt. Mythicists 1) state what sort of evidence they insist is necessary to believe that Jesus existed 2) insist this sort of evidence doesn't exist 3) then, conclude Jesus never existed.

If the issue is weighed using the tools and methods historians use, it is easy to understand why experts readily accept Jesus's existence. Historians, like scientists and detectives, examine all available evidence and then ask: What is the best explanation of the available data? Historians look for an explanation that is consistent with everything else known, simple enough that conjecture and additional theories aren't needed to explain it, accounts for all relevant data and explains previous

questions and issues, and has the ring of authenticity. In light of this criteria, historians have concluded that the following are reliable witnesses that show Jesus lived:

The Gospel writers and Paul – Skeptics often insist the Gospel writers were biased. Everyone is biased on some things to some degree, but even biased witnesses can give testimony. The real question is whether the bias prevents the witness from telling the truth.

Ehrman wrote “The fact that [the Gospel writers’] books later became documents of faith has no bearing on the question of whether the books can still be used for historical purposes. To dismiss the Gospels from the historical record is neither fair nor scholarly.”²⁹ Insiders generally are in a position to know the truth of which they write. The Gospel writers are insiders accepted by historians as valid witnesses. “Once it is conceded that the Gospels can and should be treated as historical sources, no different from other historical sources infused with their authors’ biases, it starts to become clear why historians have almost universally agreed that whatever else one might say about him, Jesus of Nazareth lived in first-century Palestine and was crucified by the prefect of Judea.”³⁰

Josephus – Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (ca. 37-97 CE) was a Pharisee, a Jewish soldier, and later, a court historian for the Roman emperor Vespasian. He mentions Jesus twice in his important work, the *Antiquities*.

In *Antiquities* 20.9.1, Josephus names Jesus alongside some familiar New Testament characters: Festus, Ananus (or Annas), James (Jesus’s brother), and Herod Agrippa. It is unlikely that every name is non-historical or that a fictional name (Jesus) would be inserted.

In *Antiquities* 18.3.3 (known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*), Jesus is called a miracle worker who rose from the dead. Most scholars believe this part was added by a Christian later on, but even without the disputed text the passage still speaks of James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ”³¹ and states that Pilate condemned Jesus to die on a cross and that Jesus’s followers remained faithful after his death.³² Because Pilate is the primary subject in this passage, the mention of Jesus is not likely invented.

The testimony of Tacitus – The Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 55-120 CE) references early Christianity twice, and Christ, at least once. The most important is Tacitus’s reference in *Annals* (115 CE) to Christians taking their name from “Christus” who “suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . .”³³ This supports the Gospels and Acts at several points: (1) Pilate crucified Jesus; (2) Christianity began in Judea; and (3) Christians were named after Christ. Again, Tacitus’s primary focus is Nero and thus the mention of Christ is not likely an invention.

Space does not permit a thorough treatment of every mention of Jesus but according to Gary Habermas and Michael Licona there are over 42 sources within 150 years after Jesus’s death which mention his existence and record many events of his life.³⁴

Worship on Sunday and Christian persecution – Early Christians did what would have been unconscionable for a 1st century Jew by worshipping on Sunday, the day of Jesus’s resurrection, rather than on the Sabbath.³⁵ Many were martyred. The likeliest explanation for their willingness to suffer great persecution is to concede at least that Jesus did live.³⁶

Form and Source Criticism – Non-evangelical and even non-Christian scholars date the earliest gospel, Mark, to around the 70s CE. Scholars think that the authors of Matthew, Mark, and Luke used written sources and creeds that predate Mark, sources that were produced as oral stories of Jesus were repeated, then standardized, then written down. Most scholars date the earliest oral forms to within 10 years of Jesus’s death, such as the Christian creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. This is significant because 10 years is not enough time for outlandish stories about a fictitious person to develop.

Further, terms used in the Gospels identify the stories as originating in Palestine where Jesus was crucified. While this line of argument is difficult to grasp without formal training in biblical studies, it is so devastating that G. A. Wells actually changed his opinion on the historicity of Jesus.

“In my first books on Jesus, I argued that the gospel Jesus is an entirely mythical expansion of the Jesus of the early epistles. The summary of the argument of the *Jesus Legend* (1996) and the *Jesus Myth* (1999) given in this section of the present work makes it clear that I no longer maintain this position. The weakness of my earlier position was pressed upon me by J.D.G. Dunn, who objected that we really cannot plausibly assume that such a complex of traditions as we have in the gospels and their sources could have developed within such a short time from the early epistles without a historical basis. My present standpoint is: this complex is not all post-Pauline (Q, or at any rate parts of it, may well be as early as ca. A.D. 50); and if I am right, against [Earl] Doherty and Price—it is not all mythical.”³⁷

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Paul doesn't speak about the historical Jesus – Paul knew of Jesus. He states: Jesus was born (Gal 4:4); was a Jew (Romans 1:3-4); had brothers (1 Cor. 9:5); was crucified (Phil. 2:5-8); was executed at the instigation of Jewish leaders (1 Thess. 2:14-15); appeared to witnesses after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-8); and was a teacher (1 Cor. 11:23-25), all evidence of a real, historic person.³⁸ The textual evidence is clear that Paul wrote them.³⁹

Jesus is a legend embellished over time, like a child's game of "telephone" – The short amount of time from the crucifixion to Paul's writings (the earliest New Testament books) and the Gospels is far too short to allow for legends.⁴⁰ Christian creeds quoted within the New Testament date to the 30s, within a decade of Jesus's death.

There are myths in the New Testament – Numerous scholars have rebutted this claim, but even if true, it would not mean Jesus never lived, it would only mean false stories about an historical person were included in the Gospels.

No 1st century accounts/no eyewitness accounts/no writings by Jesus – Consider other prominent 1st century figures: There are no eyewitness reports of Pilate, no writings produced by him, and though a Roman prefect, Pilate is mentioned only in passing by Tacitus, in the same passage that mentions Jesus.⁴¹ The only archaeological evidence of Pilate's existence is a fragmentary inscription discovered in Caesarea Maritima in 1961 that mentions him, and some coins. And, "...we have far more information about Pilate than about any other governor of Judea in Roman times."⁴² Similarly, Josephus, the primary source for all that is known about life in 1st century Palestine and a figure of prominence, is not mentioned in 1st century Greek and Roman sources. There are no eyewitness accounts of his existence.⁴³ Socrates also authored no texts or books. Our only serious sources of information about Socrates come from biased sources, his students, Plato and Xenophon. Few serious scholars would dare to claim Socrates never existed.

Notes

- ¹ A separate Profile has been published discussing the story of Jesus in relation to various ancient mystery religions: Marilyn Stewart & Dr. Robert Stewart, "Zeitgeist: The Movie," Profile Notebook, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1997-2015). A complete Profile Notebook (over 450 pages) is available at <http://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileZeitgeist.pdf>.
- ² Zeitgeist the movie, transcript. http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Zeitgeist_the_movie/Transcript, accessed May 18, 2015.
- ³ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15; Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 2.
- ⁴ Van Voorst, 6. In a footnote, Van Voorst notes that the "two most influential histories of the New Testament" don't mention the claim. See Werner G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) and Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986* (Oxford University Press, 1964).
- ⁵ Ehrman, 14.
- ⁶ Van Voorst, 8-9.
- ⁷ Ibid., 9-10.
- ⁸ Ibid., 11; James Hannam, "A Historical Introduction to the Myth that Jesus Ever Existed," in *Shattering the Christ Myth: Did Jesus Not Exist?*, ed. James Patrick Holding (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2008), xiv-xv.
- ⁹ Van Voorst, 13-16.
- ¹⁰ Ehrman, 19.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 19.
- ¹² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 97.
- ¹³ Van Voorst, 9.
- ¹⁴ Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 28; Van Voorst, 14-15.
- ¹⁵ G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (London: Elek, 1975), 65.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 157.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 1.
- ¹⁸ The Atheist Community of San Jose. "Did Jesus Exist? Dr. Robert M Price, Dr. Richard Carrier, David Fitzgerald Interview Part 1," *YouTube* video, 1:08:33, May 22, 2015.
- ¹⁹ Van Voorst, 9.
- ²⁰ Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 13.
- ²¹ Earl Doherty, "The Jesus Puzzle: Pieces in a Puzzle of Christian Origins," <http://www.jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/jhcjp.htm>, accessed October 23, 2015.
- ²² Earl Doherty, "The Jesus Puzzle: Pieces in a Puzzle of Christian Origins," <http://www.jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/jhcjp.htm>, accessed October 23, 2015.
- ²³ Robert Price, "The Quest of the Mythical Jesus," *Mountain Man Graphics*, n.d. http://www.mountainman.com.au/essenes/article_005.htm, accessed Nov. 2, 2015.
- ²⁴ Marilyn Stewart & Dr. Robert Stewart, "Zeitgeist: The Movie," Profile Notebook, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1997-2015). A complete Profile Notebook (over 450 pages) is available at <http://www.watchman.org/profiles>.
- ²⁵ Ehrman, 4.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 5.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 6.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 171.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 73.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 74.
- ³¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1
- ³² Habermas, 193-94; Ehrman, 61-63. [known as *Testimonium Flavianum*, *Antiquities* 18.3.3]
- ³³ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. trans. Michael Grant (Baltimore: Penguin Classics, 1956), 15.44.
- ³⁴ Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 233.
- ³⁵ Habermas, 158.
- ³⁶ Ehrman, 157-58.
- ³⁷ G. A. Wells, *Can We Trust the New Testament: Thoughts on the Reliability of Early Christian Testimony* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003), 49-50.
- ³⁸ Ehrman, 172-73.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 133. Ehrman accepts Paul as the author of each of these books though he maintains that Paul was not the author of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why The Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011): 92-93.
- ⁴⁰ A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 188-91.
- ⁴¹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44
- ⁴² Ehrman, 45.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 49.



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