

2015

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Recommended Citation

Lataster, Raphael "Questioning the Plausibility of Jesus Ahistoricity Theories—A Brief Pseudo-Bayesian Metacritique of the Sources." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015). <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol6/iss1/5>

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‡ QUESTIONING THE PLAUSIBILITY OF JESUS AHISTORICITY THEORIES—A
BRIEF PSEUDO-BAYESIAN METACRITIQUE OF THE SOURCES¹ ‡

There have been recent efforts to introduce Bayes' Theorem, or at least Bayesian reasoning, to the Humanities and Social Sciences. Bayesian methods are becoming increasingly important in Philosophy of Religion, as evidenced by Richard Swinburne, Robin Collins, William Lane Craig and Herman Philipse.² Aviezer Tucker has argued that the professional study of history would benefit from a Bayesian approach.³ Richard Carrier has recently argued for the general use of Bayes' Theorem, and also notes that the methods already used by historians are essentially Bayesian.⁴ I have also argued for the broad adoption of Bayesian reasoning, as well as for its use in Biblical and Religious Studies, adding to the growing voices in opposition to the increasingly-maligned Criteria of Authenticity, which are oft-used in historical Jesus studies.⁵ Simultaneously, there have been recent efforts by so-called mythicist scholars (those positing that Jesus was an entirely fictitious figure) to bring their brand of Jesus scepticism to the mainstream.⁶

The more conventional Jesus historicists (those positing that Jesus' historicity is a certainty) have responded in kind.⁷ Some scholars argue for a moderate position, criticizing the mainstream Jesus

¹ While this article was in review, such an undertaking was completed. See Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason For Doubt* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014). My (positive) review of this book is expected to be published by the Journal of Religious History in December, 2014.

² Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).; Robin Collins, "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp202-281.; Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science?: A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes' Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

⁵ Raphael Lataster, "Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the 'Criteria of Authenticity' and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2013): 271-293.

⁶ Robert M. Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory and its Problems* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2011).; Carrier (PH).; Earl Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man* (Ottawa: Age of Reason Publications, 2009).

⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

historicists for their poor methodology and ad hominem argumentation.⁸ This paper intends generally to steer clear of this debate, and focuses on soberly critiquing the sources used to establish information about the historical Jesus at a very high level, employing the skepticism and privileged status quo that Bayesian reasoning encourages.⁹ This brief survey might be of interest to scholars on all sides of the historicity debate, with the historicists claiming that the sources undoubtedly establish a historical Jesus, and the mythicists claiming that the sources are too problematic to be considered reliable. These sources will be examined for these problems and some judgment passed on how significant the issues are.

The focus will be on sources from within one hundred years of Jesus' death (Jesus putatively having been born around 4 BCE and having died around 30 CE)—an approach used by biblical scholar Bart Ehrman.¹⁰ He argues that writings after that time “almost certainly cannot be considered independent and reliable witnesses,” though he acknowledges that that could also be the case with the sources from within one hundred years.¹¹ These sources usually include hypothetical sources, the Pauline Epistles, the Canonical Gospels, extra-biblical references to Jesus made among the works of Flavius Josephus, and potentially other early, non-Christian authors.

Critiquing the non-extant, hypothetical sources

Before critiquing the sources, it is worth identifying what scholars do not have access to. There are no primary sources (contemporary and eyewitness sources) for the life of the historical Jesus.¹² Primary

⁸ Hector Avalos takes offense at the field of Biblical studies in general, largely due to flawed methodologies and perceived motives. See Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).; Stephen Law, “Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 129-151.

⁹ Despite some philosophers of religion employing Bayes' Theorem to argue for God's existence, Bayesian reasoning encourages probabilistic theories in light of commonly accepted evidence. It is thus a particularly naturalistic approach. See Raphael Lataster, “Bayesian Reasoning: Criticising the ‘Criteria of Authenticity’ and Calling for a Review of Biblical Criticism,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2013): 271-293.

¹⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 30-31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹² Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 17-20.

sources are vital to historians, not only as they provide direct evidence, but also serve as the benchmark by which secondary sources are measured.¹³ Unfortunately, biblical scholars do not have access to primary sources, arguably rendering all of their conclusions about the historical Jesus as susceptible to doubt. That there are no primary sources for Jesus is generally accepted by ardent historicists.¹⁴ Bart Ehrman acknowledges the relative historical silence on Jesus: “What sorts of things do pagan authors from the time of Jesus have to say about him? Nothing.”¹⁵

Possibly as a response to this problem—and potentially accentuating it—biblical scholars have come up with a novel solution, the creation of early hypothetical sources. Ehrman provides the perfect example, in that he apparently solves the problem of having so few early sources on Jesus, by non-eyewitnesses long after the events in question, by simply inventing as many early sources as he desires. He claims that the canonical Gospels stem from “numerous” earlier written sources (from about the 50s CE), and an “enormous” amount of yet earlier oral traditions.¹⁶ Ehrman divides the book of Acts, claiming that it provides two independent witnesses.¹⁷ He believes that any time there is a different (in a later Gospel as compared to an earlier Gospel) or paraphrased story, he has convincing evidence of an earlier and independent account (which is assumedly reliable and trustworthy), which “obviously” must have even earlier sources behind them that go right back to Jesus. He overlooks the possibility that the same story is evolving over time, or that later writers are merely repeating the stories in their own words (and inventing details as they go along), and seems quite content to make such assertive claims using

¹³ Leopold von Ranke, Sarah Austin, and Robert Arthur Johnson, *History of the Reformation in Germany* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905), pxi.; Louis Reichenthal Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 165.

¹⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 42-46.

¹⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp56-57.

¹⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 77-97.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 117.

non-existent sources. Ehrman's brand of historical methodology, heavily reliant on non-extant sources, provides no certainty on the historical Jesus.

When it comes to these and other hypothetical or otherwise non-extant sources (such as oral tradition and the Q source), they cannot be verified, dated, or scrutinized and so cannot seriously be used as sources for reliable and accurate information on the historical Jesus. In any case, with the relatively early texts of Paul and the more complete narratives of the Gospels, it would be appropriate to focus more effort on analyzing the New Testament texts—on analyzing and scrutinizing sources that are actually available. It must be considered, however, that the sources scholars do have access to are not primary sources and cannot be compared to primary sources, and so ought to be analyzed with caution and skepticism. Another problem with the extant sources is the lack of autographs. With no access to the originals of these documents, historians cannot rule out that important changes were made, nor can they state composition dates with absolute certainty.¹⁸ Considering that the non-extant sources are hypothetical and their contents are either unknown or derived from later, extant sources, they could not be submitted as evidence in a Bayesian analysis.

Critiquing the Epistles

Paul provides the earliest surviving Christian writings, with 1 Thessalonians usually dated to 49 CE, and his later works appearing around the early 60s CE.¹⁹ The Pauline Epistles are not primary sources for information on Jesus' life; they are not contemporaneous with the events of Jesus' life, and Paul, by his own admission, cannot be considered an eyewitness to the historical Jesus. The following verses from the Pauline epistles reveal how Paul knows the information he shares (Galatians 1:11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4):

11 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by

¹⁸ Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 117-118.

revelation from Jesus Christ. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

Not only does Paul never mention his possibly reliable, first-hand accounts, his only named sources are the Old Testament Scriptures and his claimed direct channel to the divine. Paul does not know of the few events of Jesus' life he mentions as a result of having witnessed them. It could even be concluded that he did not come to know of these events by learning from those who were closest to Jesus (such as his apostles or relatives), as Paul clearly mentions his sources and dismisses human sources. Paul did not have a pleasant relationship with Peter, presumably one of the most credible and sought-after eyewitnesses, as he "opposed him to his face" (Galatians 2:11). As Bayesian methodologies greatly oppose supernatural explanations, Paul's admission in Galatians chapter 1 is enough, if genuine and truthful, to cause scholars to express reservations on all his (few) comments on the historical Jesus. Of course, if the passage is not genuine, there is good reason to doubt the integrity of the text, and if it is not truthful, there is reason to question Paul's motives and doubt his reliability as a disinterested and objective historian. Scholar of religion James Tabor (University of North Carolina) also notes Paul's spurious sources:

This means the essentials of the message Paul preaches are not coming from those who were with Jesus, whom Paul sarcastically calls the "so-called pillars of the church," adding "what they are means nothing to me" (Galatians 2:6), but from voices, visions, and revelations that Paul is "hearing" and "seeing." For some that is a strong foundation. For many, including most historians, such "traditions" cannot be taken as reliable historical testimony.²⁰

It may be asked why scholars should assume that Peter and James could have taught Paul anything worthwhile about the historical Jesus; historians know of the prominent role they played largely because of the Gospels, which appear later in the historical record, and thus could be elaborating Paul's more minimal story. It is interesting then to consider what it is that Paul says about Jesus, without reading the

²⁰ James Tabor, "Paul as Clairvoyant," accessed 21/09/2012, <http://jamestabor.com/2012/05/23/paul-as-clairvoyant-2>.

Gospels (which were composed later) into Paul's writings. Religious scholar William Arnal also calls for such an approach, noting that the canonical Gospels and Acts (an even later document) have affected how early Christians and biblical scholars view the Pauline Epistles and Paul himself, arguing that Paul could be understood to be a somewhat independent evangelizing Jew rather than a Christian.²¹

It is noteworthy that Paul, supposedly being converted and writing so soon after Jesus' death, obtains all his information of Jesus from the Old Testament and his direct link to his god rather than from eyewitnesses or his own observations. Paul also has very little to say about Jesus' time on earth, such as explaining when the crucifixion happened; the Gospels do the work of filling in the blanks, attempting to explain Jesus' life story.²² Paul seems completely disinterested in a recent, historical Jesus, as if such a concept would be secondary to Paul's primary message. Some passages from these epistles (such as in Hebrews, which is actually anonymous) could hint that Jesus has not been on earth in recent history (Hebrews 8:4, Philippians 2:5-11):

4 If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The first passage implies that Jesus had not actually been on earth, while the second implies that he was only named Jesus after his death, which clearly contradicts the more traditional claims derived from the Gospels. This indicates a very different view of Jesus, such as a heavenly, celestial or non-literal Jesus, which is exactly what the mythicists argue for.²³ This theory is not necessarily without precedent;

²¹ William Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4 (2011): 193-215.; On perceptions of Paul and his writings, John Gager calls on scholars to challenge long-held beliefs and venture into 'unknown territory'. See John G. Gager, "Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 60-73.

²² Price, *The Christ-Myth Theory*, p. 32.

²³ It is a controversial idea that Christianity could have initially come about without a historical Jesus. Arthur Droge points to the example of Luddism as a movement that lacked a historical founder, and which stemmed from 'many origins'. He also

the 2nd-century Church Father Irenaeus seems to hint at the existence of Christians with such unorthodox beliefs in section 1.7.2 of his *Against Heresies*: “For they declare that all these transactions were counterparts of what took place above.”²⁴ Accounts of the Docetists confirm that early belief in Christianity did not necessarily rely on belief in a literal or fleshly historical Jesus.²⁵ Furthermore, the *Ascension of Isaiah* is a relatively early document that clearly lays out a salvific, but not necessarily earthly, Jesus.²⁶ Interestingly, the Pauline Epistles are generally dated substantially earlier than the Gospels, which leaves open the possibility that the more succinct Pauline Epistles provide the more accurate picture of Jesus. Given that Paul’s knowledge of Jesus comes from the Scriptures and his direct channel to the divine rather than first-hand eyewitness accounts, he can almost certainly be written off as a reliable and primary source of evidence for the historical Jesus. New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann (University of Göttingen) agrees: “In short, Paul cannot be considered a reliable witness to either the teachings, the life, or the historical existence of Jesus.”²⁷

Paul may have met James and Peter, but never claims them as sources. Given that he also never claims to have received this information from anyone who may have witnessed the events of Jesus’ life (potentially eliminating the possibility of primary sources), his status even as a reliable secondary source is questionable. Either Paul is indeed speaking straight from the Old Testament and from supernatural sources as he claims (leaving open the possibility of non-literal accounts), or he does utilize other sources

casts doubt as to whether there was a historical Jesus at all. See Arthur J. Droge, “Jesus and Ned Ludd: What’s in a Name?,” *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3, no. 1 (2009): 23-25.

²⁴ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 1*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William H. Rambaut, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), p. 325.

²⁵ Einar Thomassen, “‘Forgery’ in the New Testament,” in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp145-146.; Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 15.

²⁶ Jonathan Knight, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

²⁷ Gerd Lüdemann, “Paul as a Witness to the Historical Jesus,” in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), p. 212.

and is simply not being truthful. Either way, the credibility of his work is very much compromised. In any case, it is agreed by Jesus historicists and mythicists that the Pauline Epistles have very little to say about Jesus' teachings and deeds. This even applies when discussing topics that Jesus had supposedly already dealt with.

When Paul recommended celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7-8), he could have quoted Matthew 19:10-12. When he indicates that Christians should pay their taxes (Romans 13:1-6), Paul could have referred to traditions appearing in Mark 12:17. When discussing circumcision (Romans 3:1, Galatians 5:1-12), Paul could have referred to Jesus' own circumcision in Luke 2:21. When Paul (and also Peter) promotes obedience to the Roman authorities who generally punish only the wicked (Romans 13:3, 1Peter 2:13-14), he does not reference what they did to Jesus. Doherty points out that instead of scoffing at the Jews who were demanding miracles (1 Corinthians 1:22), Paul could have mentioned the multitude of miracles that Jesus supposedly performed.²⁸ Ehrman acknowledges the greater issue that there are instances where Paul actually seems to be quoting Jesus without giving him due credit—though Ehrman concludes that Paul is paraphrasing later documents; a surprising and perhaps presupposed conclusion.²⁹ Gerd Lüdemann comments:

One must record with some surprise the fact that Jesus' teachings seem to play a less vital role in Paul's religious and ethical instruction than does the Old Testament...not once does Paul refer to Jesus as a teacher, to his words as teaching, or to Christians as disciples. In this regard it is of the greatest significance that when Paul cites "sayings of Jesus," they are never so designated; rather, without a single exception, he attributes such sayings to "the Lord."³⁰

Critiquing the Canonical Gospels

²⁸ Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, p. 67.

²⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 127.

³⁰ Gerd Lüdemann, "Paul as a Witness to the Historical Jesus," in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, ed. Hoffmann (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), pp. 211-212.

Younger than the earliest Pauline writings, the Gospels were written around forty or more years after the theorized death of Jesus,³¹ which could eliminate the possibility of them being written by eyewitnesses long after the fact, considering life expectancies in the 1st century CE. The Gospel authors are anonymous, so it cannot simply be presumed that they are eyewitnesses or reliable historians.³² The only Gospel which even gives a clue as to who may have written it is the Gospel of John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20-24), which still does not provide a name or a list of the author’s credentials or previous works, and is the latest of the four canonical Gospels. The importance of knowing the author in regards to determining reliability and potential bias, and perhaps the genre of the work, need not be seriously questioned.

The Gospel writers do not claim to be using trustworthy primary sources and do not name them; neither do they show skepticism with these hypothetical sources nor demonstrate critical methodology (Bayesian or otherwise). Even if they did, scholars do not have access to primary sources, and thus have no way to determine, with certainty, if the Gospels are truly reliable. Bart Ehrman describes the Gospels as few, relying upon each other, written decades after the alleged events, problematic, contradictory, biased, and written by anonymous authors who were not eyewitnesses. He says that the Gospels are not the kind of sources historians would want in establishing what probably happened in the past.³³ These issues cast doubt on many aspects of the historical Jesus, considering that the Gospels are the main sources used in historical Jesus research.

In his book *Lost Christianities*, Ehrman mentions that the Gospels lack first-person narrative and lack any claim of being companions of eyewitnesses.³⁴ He goes on to say that most scholars have

³¹ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p. 235. Note that much of Ehrman’s work is sound. My main criticism of him is his use of non-existing sources to support his otherwise unsubstantiated claim that there must have been a historical Jesus.

³² Einar Thomassen, “‘Forgery’ in the New Testament,” in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. Lewis and Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 141.

³³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 42.

³⁴ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p. 235.

abandoned the Church-given identifiers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, clarifying that the Gospels are anonymous works. When it comes to the third-person narratives, readers could be forgiven for thinking that the Gospel writers seem more like omniscient narrators (akin to authors of fiction), even when they speak of events in Jesus' life when he was alone—such as the temptation in the wilderness or the prayer at Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42, Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 22:45). This could be a crucial issue; if the stories in the Gospels are not intended to be interpreted literally, sifting through them with criteria to determine what could be authentic and historical may well be an exercise in time-wasting, and scholars (and also believers) might inadvertently overlook the true meaning and purpose of the Gospels in the process.

With regards to the miraculous and supernatural claims found in the Gospels, such as the virgin birth (some scholars may prefer the term divine conception), and Jesus' walking on water (Matthew 1:18-25, 14:22-36), many scholars find them to be problematic. Ehrman asserts that history can only deal with what is most likely, while miracles are, by their very nature, unlikely.³⁵ Robert Price and many other scholars make use of the principle of analogy. Price describes this as a historical method whereby claims that are not analogous to what scientists and scholars currently know of the world, such as the laws of physics, can be dismissed by the historian.³⁶ Hector Avalos introduces the idea that the Gospels cannot be assumed to contain accurate and reliable historical information due to the abundance of legendary material contained therein.³⁷ Philosopher Stephen Law concurs, framing his "contamination argument" whereby sources contaminated with obviously ahistorical information should be viewed with suspicion—even when it comes to the more natural and mundane portions of the text.³⁸ A Bayesian framework is

³⁵ Bart D. Ehrman and Michael Licona, *Debate - Can Historians Prove Jesus Rose from the Dead?* (Matthews, NC: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), DVD.

³⁶ Robert M. Price and Luke Muehlhauser, *How to Study the Historical Jesus* (Luke Muehlhauser, 2010), Audio recording.

³⁷ Avalos, *End of Biblical Studies*, p. 119.

³⁸ Stephen Law, "Evidence, Miracles and the Existence of Jesus," *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2011): 129-151.

in alignment with these scholars' comments, heavily discounting supernatural and other implausible claims and the sources asserting them.

While the Gospels are anonymous, meaning historians cannot be sure of the authors' reliability or motives, their supernatural claims makes it easy for critical scholars to see them as being far from secular and sober authors of history, whilst having no intention to evangelize. If these supernatural claims are indeed false, and historians remain critical and consistent, it is reasonable to avoid accepting them as gospel, especially when there are no extant primary sources to determine the accuracy and validity of these works. Many scholars have commented on mythic parallels between Jesus' story as told in the Gospels and the stories of earlier gods and mythical heroes. Such parallels include the dying-and-rising god motif; like Jesus, Osiris' death is also associated with the full moon (John 19:14), and tradition holds that he returned on "the third day" (Luke 24:7 cf. *Isis and Osiris* 39-42).³⁹ While Jesus preached the so-called golden rule (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31), so too did the Buddha and Confucius.⁴⁰ And like Jesus (Matthew 5:43-47), Laozi also encouraged the loving of enemies (*Daodejing* 49).⁴¹

While even secular scholars today might counter-intuitively downplay the significance of these parallels, important and influential early Christians not only admitted to these similarities, but attempted to convert pagans to Christianity by making reference to such parallels, and assumed that demonic forces keen on confusing believers were responsible for them.⁴² There are also a number of similarities between

³⁹ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), *Isis and Osiris* 39-42.

⁴⁰ Marcus J. Borg and Ray Riegert, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 1999), p. 13.; Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 1999), pp. 176, 249.

⁴¹ Laozi, "The Lao Tzu (Tao-Te Ching)," in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 162-163.

⁴² Justin, "The First Apology," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 1*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), pp. 170, 181.; Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 3*, trans. Peter Holmes, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), pp. 262-263.

Philo's Logos figure (which appears in the literature before any mention of Jesus Christ), and the heavenly Christ portrayed in the Pauline Epistles. For example, this Logos figure is variously described by Philo of Alexandria as the "firstborn son of God" (Romans 8:29 cf. *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent* 1.215), the celestial "image of God" (2Corinthians 4:4 cf. *On the Confusion of Tongues* 62-63), God's agent of creation (1Corinthians 8:6 cf. *The Special Laws, I*, 81) and God's high priest (Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 4:14 cf. *On Dreams, That They are God-Sent* 1.215).⁴³ While not necessarily eliminating a historical core behind the Jesus story, it should be of interest to determine just how much of the Gospel story could have been borrowed from earlier and contemporary writings. The more that can be dismissed from the Gospel story as being inauthentic, the more reason there is to question whether that which remains must be a true and accurate account of actual historical events.

Mark is considered to be the earliest of the four Gospels, with Matthew and Luke borrowing heavily from it.⁴⁴ John appears later and could thus be borrowing from all of the Synoptic Gospels. Given this information, and the fact that the Gospels are anonymous, it would be over-reaching to claim that a particular saying or action of Jesus is authentic because of multiple independent attestation. Considering the dependence on Mark, it is noteworthy that this Gospel has clear Evangelical intent. The very first verse of Mark's Gospel labels the work as the "good news" (euangélion) rather than as an accurate and objective historical account. Historian Richard Carrier also raises the possibility (and perhaps the need to be cautious) that all sources dated after the Gospel of Mark could have been tainted by it, and that this simply cannot be ruled out.⁴⁵ It is clear that there are question marks over the Gospels' reliability, as admitted by David Noel Freedman:

⁴³ Philo, *The Works of Philo Judæus: The Contemporary of Josephus, Translated from the Greek*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854).

⁴⁴ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Richard Carrier. "Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity," accessed 02/04/2012, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.html.

When it comes to the historical question about the Gospels, I adopt a mediating position—that is, these are religious records, close to the sources, but they are not in accordance with modern historiographic requirements or professional standards.⁴⁶

Ehrman also points out the biases and contradictions of the Gospel authors:

It is also true that our best sources about Jesus, the early Gospels, are riddled with problems. These were written decades after Jesus' life by biased authors who are at odds with one another on details up and down the line.⁴⁷

Gager also declares the Gospels to be unreliable sources for the historical Jesus:

The Gospels are the final products of a long and creative tradition, and the earliest Gospel (for most Mark, for some Matthew) is customarily dated about forty years after the death of Jesus. During these years not only was old material reworked, expanded, collated, and reinterpreted, but new material was regularly interpolated. Eschatological pronouncements of Christian prophets, ex post facto predictions, Old Testament proof texts, and ethical maxims were attributed to Jesus and thereby “authorized” for believers.⁴⁸

To briefly summarize on what scholars lack with regards to the evidence of Jesus' historicity: the Gospels make mention of Jesus' humble birth, teaching of elders, teaching of multitudes, healing of the sick, casting out of demons, raising of Lazarus from the dead, being raised from the dead by God, glorious entry into Jerusalem, clashes with the Roman and Jewish authorities, death, triumphant return, and many other wonderful and much-cherished stories. Of all this, and other details of Jesus' life, miraculous or mundane, there is not a single secular, contemporary, eyewitness account. Perhaps this is why Robert Funk, noted biblical scholar and co-founder of the Jesus Seminar,⁴⁹ said the following:

⁴⁶ Hershel Shanks, “How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament Differ: An Interview with David Noel Freedman - Part 1,” *Bible Review* 9, no. 6 (1993): 34.

⁴⁷ The Huffington Post. “Did Jesus Exist?,” accessed 12/04/2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

⁴⁸ John G. Gager, “The Gospels and Jesus: Some Doubts about Method,” *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 256.

⁴⁹ The Jesus Seminar sought to gather scholarly and also lay opinions on the authenticity of various sayings and deeds of Jesus.

As an historian, I do not know for certain that Jesus really existed, that he is anything more than the figment of some overactive imaginations.... In my view, there is nothing about Jesus of Nazareth that we can know beyond any possible doubt.⁵⁰

Before making a passing reference to the remainder of the biblical texts, and moving on to analyze the extra-biblical sources, the issue of the Gospels' genre should be briefly discussed. It is not a foregone conclusion that the canonical Gospels are historically reliable biographies. Given the anonymity of the Gospels (among other problems), it may never be known with certainty what genre they fall into, how reliable the authors were, what the authors' intentions really were (apart from their seemingly obvious Evangelical intent), and, crucially, whether they intended readers to take them at face value. There is no complete agreement over what genre the Gospels actually fall into.⁵¹ Many biblical scholars assert that the Gospels are largely fictional.⁵² Crossan concurs, and criticizes the idea that oral tradition is accurate and can be relied upon.⁵³ Such criticism is not limited to non-believers; early Christian theologian Origen, who seemed to favor allegorical readings, acknowledges that the Gospels contain discrepancies and need to be understood "spiritually."⁵⁴

The only Gospel that arguably makes some attempt to indicate source material is Luke (Luke 1:1-4), and that is a far cry from Philostratus' relatively lengthy discussion of the reliability of sources on

⁵⁰ Robert Walter Funk, "Bookshelf: The Resurrection of Jesus," *The Fourth R* 8, no. 1 (1995): 9.

⁵¹ Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 240.

⁵² Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), p. 260; Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 8; Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), pp. 10-12.

⁵³ PBS. "John Dominic Crossan: Evolution of the Four Gospels," accessed 02/04/2012, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html>.

⁵⁴ Origen, "Commentary on the Gospel of John," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 9*, trans. Allan Menzies, ed. Allan Menzies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), pp. 382-384. Cf. Origen, "De Principiis," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 4*, trans. Frederick Crombie, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), pp. 252, 341, 361-369. That modern believers would barely consider Origen a Christian is beside the point. There existed numerous Jewish and Christian sects in antiquity.

Apollonius of Tyana.⁵⁵ The anonymous author of Luke claims to have “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (Luke 1:3),⁵⁶ though a literal rendering of the Greek ἀνωθεν (rendered in the NIV as “from the beginning”), is “from above.” Given the subject matter, such as the supernatural claims of Luke’s Gospel, it would be appropriate that this Gospel’s author is claiming that his knowledge of Jesus comes from his direct channel to the divine. If, like Paul, Luke’s source is actually revelation “from above” or “from Heaven” (cf. James 3:17), his credibility as a historian is highly questionable. Instead of demonstrating his sound historical methodology, Luke’s introduction betrays his belief in the supernatural and his clear Evangelical intent.

Compared to the earlier works by Paul who provides the earliest sources of information about Jesus and the Gospels (which offer the most complete accounts of his life), the remainder of the New Testament (namely the apocalyptic book of Revelation and the General Epistles) offers very little in the way of useful information on the historical Jesus.⁵⁷ It is possible that, in general, later religious writings (both biblical and extra-biblical) could simply be borrowing from and embellishing on the information in the Gospels and the writings of Paul. As with the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles, there are no extant primary sources with which to validate the few claims made by the remainder of the New Testament. One example of the lack of information on the historical Jesus among the General Epistles is provided by the epistle of James (possibly the brother of Jesus, though he never claims to be).

⁵⁵ Philostratus, a known author, claims to have gathered information on Apollonius from a number of sources, including: letters and treatises from the hand of Apollonius himself, a history of Apollonius written by Maximus of Aegae, and memoirs written by Damis and furnished by Julia Domna, the wife of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. Philostratus even goes so far as to mention his scepticism over Moeragenes’ four books about Apollonius. By comparison, the anonymous Gospel accounts of Jesus only offer Luke 1:1-4 where no specific (and non-supernatural) sources are cited, and where scepticism and criticism is generally found wanting. See Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana: Books 1-4*, trans. C. P. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.2-3.

⁵⁶ Note that Luke does not discuss his methods, name his sources, or show any scepticism with the various claims made about Jesus. Luke also fails to clarify his credentials, or even his identity. Combined with his evangelical intent and his belief in the supernatural, he clearly does not have the makings of an excellent historian.

⁵⁷ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 137-138.

James fails to provide details for the historical Jesus, including his death; he also seems uninterested in Jesus' alleged resurrection. Religious Studies scholar Matt Jackson-McCabe recognizes this and alludes to James placing far greater importance on the parousia (presence or arrival) of the "heavenly Christ."⁵⁸ Not only does James' portrayal of Jesus in one of the earliest Christian writings leave open the possibility that his Jesus is primarily a heavenly or celestial figure, he also provides insight into the fragmentary nature of early Christianity. These Jamesian Christians seem less interested in Christ's ultimate redemptive act for all of mankind and more interested in national restoration, "the reestablishment of a twelve-tribe kingdom" by a vengeful heavenly being.⁵⁹

Critiquing the extra-Biblical sources

The following extra-biblical (and generally non-Christian) sources share a number of characteristics that raise doubt as to their reliability as evidence for the life of Jesus. All these sources are secondary sources. They are written decades to centuries after the events of Jesus' life by non-eyewitnesses. Many of these authors were born after Jesus' death. Furthermore, there are no extant primary sources to compare them with and to validate them, so modern historians cannot be absolutely certain about their reliability and integrity. Some of these sources may have been susceptible to pious fraud. Modern historians also do not have access to the original autographs, so cannot be absolutely certain about which parts are authentic and which are forged. Even if genuine, these sources merely reiterate what is already known from the Gospels, or simply repeat what a Christian contemporary believed.

That Christians would spread stories of Jesus in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries and beyond would not be particularly surprising. There are other potential sources not examined in this article, such as the so-called Gnostic Gospels and writings of the early Church Fathers, but they are generally seen

⁵⁸ Matt Jackson-McCabe, "The Messiah Jesus in the Mythic World of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (2003): 729.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 729-730.

as being inauthentic or very late; the main Christian sources remain the canonical Gospels.⁶⁰ The one exception may be the Gospel of Thomas, which appears to be a sayings document rather than an actual narrative of Jesus' life,⁶¹ and interestingly manifests no interest in Jesus' salvific death and resurrection, which are generally seen as key to the Christian faith.⁶² Ehrman goes as far as to agree that, generally, extra-biblical sources contain nothing that cannot be taken from the earlier sources, such as the canonical Gospels.⁶³ Scholars offer other arguments that raise more questions about these sources' reliability, which shall be surveyed below.

Josephus

Among the works of Josephus, scholars find two disputed passages on Jesus. First, from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, is the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum*:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.⁶⁴

This is such a powerful passage that would seemingly confirm Jesus' status as the Messiah, that it sounds almost too good to be true. Many scholars have expressed their doubts. With references to Jesus such as "if indeed one ought to call him a man" (alluding to his divinity) and "He was the Messiah," it

⁶⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 98-104.

⁶¹ Marvin W. Meyer and Charles Hughes, eds., *Jesus: Then & Now - Images of Jesus in History and Christology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 73.

⁶² William Arnal, "The Collection and Synthesis of 'Tradition' and the Second-Century Invention of Christianity," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4 (2011), pp. 193-215.

⁶³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 97.

⁶⁴ In a footnote, Feldman notes that a principal argument against the passage's genuineness is that the "passage breaks the continuity of the narrative, which tells of a series of riots." See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books 18-19*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 18.3.3.

would seem that Josephus not only confirms Jesus' historical presence, but was a Christian believer also. Any doubt is dispelled with his allusion to the resurrection. One obvious problem is that Josephus was a Pharisaic Jew, and the Jews were slandered by Jesus as the "children of the devil" (John 8:44). It is highly unlikely that a historian, let alone a Jewish historian, would hint that Jesus was divine, that he was resurrected, and would call him "Messiah." Many scholars see this passage as fraudulent, in whole⁶⁵ or in part.⁶⁶ One reason is that early Christian theologian Origen, writing after Josephus, claimed that Josephus did not believe Jesus was the Christ.⁶⁷ Historians might also expect Origen to make use of this Josephus quotation, if it existed during his lifetime. Other early Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr, also fail to quote this passage, which does considerable damage to its reliability when viewed through a Bayesian lens. Highly respected Josephean scholar Louis Feldman discusses the historical silence surrounding the *Testimonium Flavianum*:

The passage appears in all our manuscripts; but a considerable number of Christian writers—Pseudo-Justin and Theophilus in the second century, Minucius Felix, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Origen in the third century, and Methodius and Pseudo-Eustathius in the early fourth century—who knew Josephus and cited from his works do not refer to this passage, though one would imagine that it would be the first passage that a Christian apologist would cite.⁶⁸

If this passage contains Christian interpolations to some extent (agreed upon by both mythicist and historicist scholars), it might not be surprising if the whole passage was fraudulent, especially considering the relative historical silence. The precedent has already been set that the text was tampered with, raising serious questions as to its reliability. Ehrman also suggests that the removal of the entire

⁶⁵ Steve Mason, review of *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times*, by Alice Whealey, *Phoenix* 58, no. 3/4 (2004): 383-386.; John G. Gager, "Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 64.

⁶⁶ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 56ff.

⁶⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum: Translated with an Introduction & Notes by Henry Chadwick*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 43.

⁶⁸ Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus (c.e. 37–c. 100)," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume Three, The Early Roman Period*, ed. William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 911-912.

passage makes the surrounding text flow more smoothly and that the first person to quote it is Eusebius of Caesarea, a 4th century Christian bishop.⁶⁹ This could be significant as Eusebius was arguably tolerant of pious fraud (*Preparation for the Gospel* 12.31),⁷⁰ and by his own words raises questions as to his reliability as a historian (*Church History* 8.2.3): “Hence we shall not mention those who were shaken by the persecution.... But we shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterwards to posterity.”⁷¹ Given that Eusebius is the first to make mention of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, it is no wonder why some scholars would not only suspect that the passage is entirely fraudulent, but that it was Eusebius himself who fabricated it.⁷² A second passage from the works of Josephus that mentions Jesus is also from *Antiquities of the Jews*:

Upon learning of the death of Festus, Caesar sent Albinus to Judaea as procurator... Possessed of such a character, Ananus thought that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus was dead and Albinus was still on the way. And so he convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.... King Agrippa, because of Ananus’ action, deposed him from the high priesthood which he had held for three months and replaced him with Jesus the son of Damnaeus.⁷³

Apart from the phrase “called the Christ,” this passage does not seem to offer any useful information on Jesus. The Jesus mentioned need not necessarily be Jesus of Nazareth. After all Jesus (or Joshua) and James (or Jacob) are very common Jewish names, and there are quite a few people named Jesus mentioned in the works of Josephus. In fact, soon after the “called the Christ” reference, Josephus

⁶⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 60-64.

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1981), p. 657.

⁷¹ Eusebius, “The Church History,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume 1*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890), p. 324. For more indications of Eusebius’ dishonesty and/or incompetence, see pp. 88, 98, 100, 111, 112, 114, 127, 194.; Cf. Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, pp. 556-562.

⁷² Ken Olson, “Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 305-322.

⁷³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books 20-General Index*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 456 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 20.9.1.

makes mention of “Jesus the son of Damnaeus,” who became the high priest. It could be (or is even more likely) that this is the Jesus referenced earlier, as some mythicists speculate,⁷⁴ and this would explain why James’ brother is mentioned; the high priest being a noteworthy figure.⁷⁵ Hoffmann is one mainstream biblical scholar who also believed “called the Christ” is a Christian interpolation and that this passage merely discusses Jesus bar Damnaeus.⁷⁶ The usefulness of this passage hinges on the authenticity of the phrase “called the Christ.” Interestingly, even if “called Christ” was genuine, there is no necessary link to Jesus of Nazareth; there were many Jesuses in 1st century Palestine, and perhaps a few of them claimed to be or were perceived as being Messiahs. It cannot be reasonably assumed that any Jesus or Joshua who is called a Messiah or Christ must relate to the allegedly historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth—since a purely historical Jesus of Nazareth (sans miracles and divinity) is a virtually insignificant historical figure, barely mentioned, if at all, in contemporary or near-contemporary historical accounts.

Given that this book does show signs of tampering (that is, in the *Testimonium Flavianum*), it would not seem all that unlikely, or difficult, that two (but very important) words were inserted into the text by an over-eager Christian scribe. Perhaps it was included in an early copy as a speculative footnote, and was later incorporated into the body of the text. This is made all the more possible by the fact that all copies of these Josephean works have their origins in the medieval period, at the earliest. It is interesting to note however that the phrase “called the Christ” is less assertive than the “was Christ” of the first passage. This would seemingly conflict with the *Testimonium Flavianum*, but would also perhaps be a more likely statement from a non-Christian, possibly supporting its authenticity. It is also interesting to note that the second Josephean passage on Jesus is of less importance than the first. If the first passage

⁷⁴ Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, p. 572.

⁷⁵ Note that – unlike most Christian believers – critical and scholarly Jesus historicists typically assume that Jesus was a relatively insignificant figure, which would go some way to explaining the lack of primary sources. Surely the high priest is more worthy of mention than yet another relatively insignificant itinerant apocalyptic preacher.

⁷⁶ R. Joseph Hoffmann. “The Jesus Tomb Debacle: RIP,” accessed 26/08/2012, <http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2009/05/15/the-jesus-tomb-debacle-rip/>.

is genuine, the second is far less detailed and noteworthy. If the *Testimonium Flavianum* is fraudulent, it is also possible that the second passage is fraudulent. Indeed, with the possible or likely fraudulent nature of the first passage, the second passage potentially raises questions as to who Josephus thinks this Christ is, given that he had otherwise not mentioned him.

There is also some measure of doubt as to Josephus' reliability as a historian, given his sympathy towards supernatural concepts. Josephus retells a story about how Onias prayed for rain, with his god positively responding (*Antiquities* 14.2.1). Josephus goes on to claim that he witnessed Eleazar drawing out a demon from a possession victim's nostrils (*Antiquities* 8.47). It is also noteworthy that while scholars understand Josephus could not have been an eyewitness to any event of Jesus' life, he fails to mention his sources for his information on Jesus. If authentic in the first place, it may never be known whether Josephus received accurate information from official government records, or whether the information is simply hearsay from Christian believers. If it would have been rare for ancient historians such as Josephus to name their sources, scholars need to accept this limitation and accept the resulting uncertainty rather than lower the standards of evidence and critical thinking for convenience.

Tacitus

In his *Annals* (15.44), Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus makes a possible reference to Jesus:

To dispel the gossip Nero therefore found culprits on whom he inflicted the most exotic punishments. These were people hated for their shameful offences whom the common people called Christians. The man who gave them their name, Christus, had been executed during the rule of Tiberius, by the procurator Pontius Pilatus.⁷⁷

It is the phrase referring to Christus and his death under Pontius Pilate that is of great interest. It could be that this phrase (or even the whole passage and its context) could also be a later Christian interpolation. While some scholars could argue that this passage must be genuine because it does not

⁷⁷ Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, trans. J. C. Yardley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 359.

portray Christians and Christ in a totally positive manner, there are reasons to have doubts over the authenticity or legitimacy of this passage. It is interesting that the name Jesus is never used, and that this is Tacitus' only reference to Jesus. It is questionable if a non-Christian historian would refer to this person as Christ rather than the more secular Jesus of Nazareth. A Christian scribe, however, would have no issue in calling him Christ. Given that Jesus is not specified, there may also be a small possibility that this could refer to another Christ or messiah-figure. Though *Annals* covers the period of Rome's history from around 14 CE to 66 CE, no other mention is made of Jesus Christ.⁷⁸ This passage is also ignored by early Christian apologists such as Origen and Tertullian, who actually quote Tacitus in the 3rd century.⁷⁹

Like Josephus, Tacitus was born after Jesus' alleged death, so could not have been an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. He could merely be repeating what a Christian believer is claiming. Richard Carrier theorizes that Tacitus may have received this information from his colleague, Pliny the Younger, who had received it from Christians.⁸⁰ Ehrman also somewhat dismisses Tacitus' witness as Christian hearsay.⁸¹ Also of interest is that this supposed reference to the death of Jesus is made in Book 15 (covering CE 62-65) rather than in Book 5 (covering CE 29-31). Though Tacitus supposedly claims the death of Christ happened during the reign of Tiberius, he makes no mention of Jesus in the book covering the reign of Tiberius; he only makes this one comment among the books covering the later reign of Nero.

Furthermore, most information from Book 5 and the beginning of Book 6 (covering CE 32-37) is lost.⁸² The *Annals* is suspiciously missing information from around 29 CE to 32 CE, a highly relevant

⁷⁸ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, pp. 596-600.

⁸⁰ Richard Carrier. "Herod the Procurator," accessed 15/04/2012, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/132>.

⁸¹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 56.

⁸² Cf. Tacitus (*Annals*), pp. 179-182.

timeframe for those that believe (historically or religiously) in Jesus. It is equally suspicious that the *only* section missing in the space dedicated to Tiberius' rule happens to coincide with what many Christians would consider to be the most historically noteworthy event(s) to occur during Tiberius' reign.⁸³ Robert Drews theorizes that the only plausible explanation for this gap is "pious fraud;" that the embarrassment of Tacitus making no mention of Jesus' crucifixion (or associated events such as the darkness covering the world or the appearances of resurrected saints) led to Christian scribes destroying this portion of the text, and perhaps later fabricating the Book 15 reference.⁸⁴ Richard Carrier further argues that Tacitus' later discussion on Christianity (in his coverage of 64 CE) gives historians confidence that this gap cannot be merely explained by the removal of embarrassing claims made about Jesus (with the silence potentially being the most embarrassing point of all), and points to missing (relevant) books by Philo and another suspicious gap in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*.⁸⁵

Despite Cassius Dio (a Roman historian of the 2nd and 3rd centuries) having elsewhere discussed King Herod's death,⁸⁶ *Roman History* is missing the years from 6 BCE to 2 BCE. Carrier theorizes that Christian embarrassment over the lack of mention of Jesus' birth (and associated events such as the Massacre of the Innocents) led Christians to remove this portion of the text. Historians can speculate as to how coincidental it could be that historical works preserved in the hands of Christians would be specifically missing years coinciding with Jesus' birth and death (and the Bayesians among us will be justifiably suspicious that it is a handful of anonymous and less reliable texts that do discuss these supposed events); these sections would presumably be the most precious and protected. Justin Martyr, when supposedly arguing with Trypho, curiously fails to mention the Tacitean passage (as well as the

⁸³ Indeed, many would consider Jesus' atoning death and resurrection to be the most significant events of all time.

⁸⁴ Robert Drews, "The Lacuna in Tacitus' *Annales* Book Five in the Light of Christian Traditions," *American Journal of Ancient History* 1984, no. 9 (1984): 112-122.

⁸⁵ Richard Carrier, personal communication, June 7, 2012.

⁸⁶ Peter Michael Swan, *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History, Books 55-56 (9 B.C.-CE 14)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 36-38, 188.

Josephus passages), relying instead on “doctrines that are inspired by the Divine Spirit.”⁸⁷ Finally, Josephus and Tacitus bestow scholars with the earliest non-Christian references to Jesus. Unfortunately, the best manuscripts date to the Middle Ages, so it cannot be known just how much Christian scribes may have manipulated them during the intervening centuries:

As with Josephus, so with Tacitus our observation must be tempered by the fact that the earliest manuscript of the *Annals* comes from the 11th century.⁸⁸

Thallus (and Phlegon)

The 9th-century Byzantine historian George Syncellus allegedly quotes 3rd-century Christian chronicler Sextus Julius Africanus—whose works are lost—who allegedly quoted 2nd-century historian Thallus—whose works are also lost.⁸⁹ According to Syncellus, Julius (*Chronography* 18.1) said the following:

On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun... Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth...⁹⁰

Thallus, of whom little is known, allegedly mentioned a “darkness” which Christians may like to think refers to the darkness around the time of Jesus’ death (Mark 15:33). Historians do not know what Thallus said (for example, if he mentioned Jesus), if he said what Julius supposedly claims he said, if Syncellus is accurately reporting Julius’ words, or when Thallus may have said it. This is at least a third-hand report, appearing centuries after Jesus’ death, and so offers no convincing information about Jesus.

⁸⁷ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

⁸⁸ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Cf. Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, p. 643.

⁹⁰ Julius, “The Extant Fragments of the Five Books of the Chronography of Julius Africanus,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 6*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1886), pp. 136-137.

Julius also supposedly comments on Greek historian Phlegon (reported among the works of Syncellus and Origen), which generally shares the same issues as with the Thallus passage.⁹¹

Pliny, Suetonius and Mara bar Serapion

There exist a handful of indefinite reports that add very little to the debate over Jesus' authentic sayings and deeds. In his 2nd-century discussions with Emperor Trajan, Roman author Pliny the Younger (CE 61-ca.112) made some references (book 10, letter 97) to Christians, such as the following:

They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they met on a stated day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity...⁹²

Praying to what seems to be a divine Christ (or any other activity directed towards such a Christ) says nothing of whether this divine Christ existed or not, any more than worshipping a god in any other religion would prove the existence of that god. As with the Tacitean passage, the identity of the Christ is not made explicit. Jesus historicist Bart Ehrman acknowledges that Pliny does not provide evidence that confirms the historical Jesus.⁹³ From Suetonius' (CE ca.70-ca.130) *Life of Claudius*:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.⁹⁴

Chrestus is a Greek-derived proper name meaning "good," so does not necessarily have to refer to Jesus. What word is actually used here is controversial due to the numerous variant manuscript readings. Jobjorn Boman discovered that the majority of early manuscripts indicate a proper name, while the few manuscripts that allude to the title Christ are typically late, noting that "it can be concluded that the occasional Christ-spellings in the MSS most likely are the conjectures by Christian scribes or scholars."⁹⁵ He also found, while surveying the writings of medieval chroniclers, that "most Christian works—

⁹¹ Cf. Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, pp. 647-651.

⁹² Pliny, *Letters of Pliny*, trans. William Melmoth and F. C. T. Bosanquet (London: Echo Library, 2006), pp. 156-157.

⁹³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 52.

⁹⁴ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, vol. 2 (London: Heinemann, 1914), Life of Claudius 25.4.

⁹⁵ Jobjorn Boman, "Impulsore Cherestro? Suetonius' *Divus Claudius* 25.4 in Sources and Manuscripts," *Liber Annuus* 61(2011): 376.

Haimo, Reginon, Herman, Orderic, Flores Historiarum, Godfrey, Magnus(?), Sicard, Alberto, Riccobaldo and all the above-mentioned annals—allude to the Suetonian sentence *without* connecting it to Christ or Christianity.” Also, while many early Christians were undoubtedly Jews, Christians are not specified in this passage. In any case, this passage offers little to no information about the historical Jesus.⁹⁶ From *A Letter of Mara, Son of Serapion*, by Syrian philosopher Mara bar Serapion, scholars find:

For what benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death, seeing that they received *as* retribution for it famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, seeing that in one hour the whole of their country was covered with sand? Or the Jews *by the murder* of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven *away from them*?⁹⁷

There is no reference here to a Jesus or a Christ, but only to an unnamed “wise king.” Furthermore, the historical philosophers Pythagoras and Socrates are specifically named, unlike the unknown “wise king.” This passage also seems to blame the Jews for murdering this figure, while the canonical Gospels claim that it was the Romans who killed Jesus (Mark 14-15)—although “the Jews” could also be seen to be responsible (Matthew 27:12). Doherty also questions the likelihood that a pagan writer such as Mara would place the seemingly insignificant Jesus on the same level as “household names” such as Socrates and Pythagoras.⁹⁸

The Talmud

There are a number of references to various characters called Jesus in the Jewish Talmud (specifically from the *Gemara*), which may or may not reference Jesus of Nazareth. Given that the *Gemara* is among the latest of all these sources (around the 5th and 6th centuries), and is a religious text that possibly makes use of other religious texts (such as the canonical Gospels and the Old Testament

⁹⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 53.

⁹⁷ Mara, “A Letter of Mara, Son of Serapion,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to CE 325, Volume 8*, trans. B. P. Pratten, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), p. 737.

⁹⁸ Doherty *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man*, p. 655.

scriptures), it offers little to no useful information with regards to the historical Jesus.⁹⁹ One factor that may support the Talmud's use is an unflattering portrayal of Jesus, rather than no Jesus at all; though that would depend on knowing that these are indeed references to Jesus of Nazareth. This cannot be known with certainty as Jesus is a very common Jewish name, found often in the Talmud and among the works of Josephus, with one example being Jesus bar Gamaliel (*Antiquities* 20.9.4).

Conclusion

None of the sources used to establish Jesus' historicity or to provide authentic historical material regarding Jesus' sayings and deeds are beyond scrutiny. All of the sources offer multiple challenges to historians. Many of the sources show clear signs of allegory, interpolation, fraud, myth, and subjectivity. The non-extant and hypothetical sources that supposedly precede the Gospels cannot be accurately dated or scrutinized, so ought not to be seriously considered as useful for historical Jesus research. The authors of the majority of the Epistles, mainly Paul and James, give very little reason to the historian to accept their testimony as historically accurate, or even as referring to an earthly Jesus. Even if the authors were reliable, the Epistles offer paltry information on the historical Jesus, especially when contrasted with the Gospels. The Gospels are anonymous, demonstrate clear Evangelical intent, contain considerable ahistorical and mythical material, contradict each other, influence each other, and appear decades after Jesus' lifetime.

Except for the references among the writings of Josephus and Tacitus, the extra-biblical sources are very late. All these sources demonstrate some element of fraud or ambiguity, and generally do not tell us any more about Jesus than what is already known from the Gospels. None of the sources stem from Jesus' own time. None of the sources come from proven eyewitnesses. These issues allow significant justifiable doubt on what Jesus said, what he did, who he really was, and if he even existed at all. There

⁹⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, pp. 66-68. I should clarify that the Talmudic references offer no useful information regarding Jesus as traditionally interpreted by mainstream historicists. It could prove valuable in arguing for a radically different Jesus, as mythicists might do.

should be no issue, then, in noting that Jesus' ahistoricity is an epistemic possibility, and therefore expressing some reservations over his historicity is reasonable. From a Bayesian perspective, the earliest sources' portrayal of Jesus in an entirely supernatural manner, and the complete lack of contemporary and secular accounts of Jesus, do considerable damage to any hypothesis that asserts the existence of a historical Jesus. The issues raised herein do not necessitate that the sources are of no use, or that Jesus did not exist historically; the critic will note that history deals not in certainties, but with probabilities. It is thus all the more pertinent for biblical historians to be transparent with their theories by employing Bayesian methodologies. The problems with the sources used in historical Jesus research render the possibility of authenticating any aspect of Jesus extremely difficult, if not impossible. Price speculates that the sources should point historical Jesus scholars in the direction of "complete agnosticism:"

One wonders if all these scholars came to a certain point and stopped, their assumption being, "If Jesus was a historical figure, he must have done and said *something!*" But their own criteria and critical tools, which we have sought to apply here with ruthless consistency, ought to have left them with complete agnosticism, which is where we have ended up.¹⁰⁰

It is not within the scope of this article to argue for Jesus' historicity or ahistoricity. The issues discussed do seem to indicate, however, that entertaining the idea of Jesus' ahistoricity is not an exercise in madness, as many historicists would assume. Given the problematic sources that historical Jesus scholars have access to, and the failings of many of their methods, it seems appropriate to call for a thorough, and Bayesian, analysis of the evidence in order to determine if Jesus' historicity or ahistoricity is more probable. Indeed, just such a task has been completed by independent historian Richard Carrier, whose recent book on the matter is currently being analyzed by scholars. If, in the future, similar reviews of the methodologies and sources of historical Jesus research would lead to a very skeptical, agnostic position, New Testament scholars might wonder what would become of their field and their jobs.

¹⁰⁰ Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable is the Gospel Tradition?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 351.

Such a move, however, could lead to new and honest research into the origin (or origins) of the Christian faith, and the development of the various Gnostic traditions. Furthermore, a positive implication could be that the focus of research by biblical scholars moves from unnecessarily and unsuccessfully authenticating various unlikely sayings and deeds to the intended messages of the teachings.¹⁰¹ These scholars may even find a home among Religious Studies departments, whose personnel are well aware that orthopraxy is often far more relevant to religious adherents than orthodoxy. Just as the Daoist need not exalt Laozi, or the Buddhist believe in the Buddha, the Christian's religion need not be grounded in a literal Christ, or even an earthly and historical Jesus.

¹⁰¹ Gager and Flusser also allude to the importance of the teachings, which have "the potential to change our world." See John G. Gager, "Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 1 (2005): 66.; Hector Avalos also encourages Biblical scholars to focus on solving worthwhile "problems." See Avalos *End of Biblical Studies*, p. 314.

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