

Myth Versus History: Playing hide-and-seek with Jesus.



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Given the ubiquitous superstition of his era and the festering resentment of the Jewish populace in Roman occupied Palestine, there was nothing particularly noteworthy about the message or career of a certain Joshua of Nazareth, better known as Jesus of Nazareth—*Jesus* is the Latinized form of *Ἰησοῦς* (*Iēsous*), the Greek rendering of יהושוע (*Yehoshua*), *Joshua*, meaning “Yahweh delivers.” Joshua son of Nun, or *Jesus son of Nauē* (*Ἰησοῦς οὐ Ναυη*),¹ the eponymous hero of the book of Joshua, represented the mythic triumph of Jewish theocracy over gentile paganism. The name, which embodied the very hope

¹ Josephus, *Jewish War* IV, 459.

of salvation, of freedom, of rescue from the gentile Roman overlords, was understandably popular in 1st century Palestine.

It would appear that more than one Jesus imagined himself to be the instrument of Yahweh's deliverance—Josephus records a military confrontation between Vespasian's troops and “*a certain Jesus by name* (Ἰησοῦς τις ὀνομα), son of Saphat”² and recounts the story of another Jesus as well, “Jesus, son of Gamala (Γαμαλα...υἱος Ἰησοῦς),” also known as Joshua ben Gamla, one of the most eminent members of the priestly caste.³ Both Anan, the high priest, and Jesus ben Gamla were murdered in Jerusalem by the Zealot faction during the first Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE) and their naked bodies thrown out to be eaten by the dogs.⁴ We are also informed of “a certain son of Thebouthi, Jesus by name” (τις Θεβουθει Ἰησοῦς ὀνομα) who bought off the Romans during the final siege of Jerusalem and whose life was spared.⁵ Despite the relative profusion of figures bearing the common name Joshua (Jesus) in the 1st century, surviving records reveal very few details of their personal biographies.

Aside from being mentioned in texts, texts preserved by repeated copying, texts for which no originals have existed for many centuries, there is no physical evidence for Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus son of Saphat, or Jesus ben Gamla, or any of the other hundreds of Jesuses who probably lived in Palestine during the 1st century. Apart from his copied and recopied writings, there is no direct physical evidence for the existence of Josephus who wrote of Jesus ben Gamla, no tomb and no bones, to say nothing of original works in Josephus' hand, originals that disappeared a millennium ago—the oldest surviving manuscripts of Josephus' writings date to the 9th century, some 800 years after his death. In point of fact, Josephus, whose history is our principle source of information about the dynasty of Herod as well as the First Jewish-Roman war, is himself unmentioned by Roman historians of the era!

By modern standards there is sparse physical evidence for even some of the most notable actors of ancient history. The burial place of Alexander the Great, one of history's most famous figures, is unknown. The only physical evidence for the historicity of Pontius Pilate are coins and a partial inscription on a block of limestone discovered in 1961, a block that had been repurposed as building material sometime in the 4th century, proof of Pilate's existence as well as confirmation that the ancient world continuously cannibalized the material evidence of its own past—most of the ancient buildings in Jerusalem are built at least in part from the spolia of earlier structures.

² Ibid, II, 599, III, 450, IV, 450-451.

³ Ibid, IV, 8, 161, 238.

⁴ Ibid, IV, 324.

⁵ Ibid, VI, 387.

Three lines of evidence, lines that very seldom converge, might conclusively prove the existence of any given person from the remote past: forensic evidence, archaeological evidence, and textual evidence. The only cases of individuals from the ancient Middle East whose identities might be definitively established by such a concurrence of evidence are pharaonic mummies recovered from intact, unmolested tombs, but to the best of my knowledge no similar case of preservation has ever been recorded from Palestine.

PART ONE: “SOFT” MYTHICISM.

It bears saying right from the start that when it concerns particular individuals, historians of antiquity deal with archaeological evidence and texts, *and almost never with forensic evidence*. Portraits, statues and inscriptions document the existence of the most eminent, then as now a tiny fraction of one percent of the population, and texts, copied, recopied, and copied yet again, survive from the ancient world, but what would count as definitive evidence today is lacking and if discovered could only very tentatively be assigned to a particular person. It is almost certainly safe to say that no forensic evidence—bones, teeth, hair, or other sources of DNA—could be adduced as positive identification of any figure of the Greco-Roman era, evidence that would stand up in a present-day court of law. In short, evidence of personal existence in antiquity is almost always a matter of *probability* rather than fact. That the thousands of workers who built the pyramids or Stonehenge really lived may be safely assumed, but aside from the massive monuments on which they labored, every trace of them as particular living individuals has long since vanished and this is true of nearly everyone who lived in the ancient world, famous or not. In short, even the best documented figures of the antiquity inhabit a misty realm in which myth and historicity fade into each other and the reconstruction of their biographies is often a matter of conjecture.

The existence of Josephus, for whom no forensic evidence exists and who, despite his importance to us as a key historical source, passes unmentioned by contemporary historians, is widely regarded as so probable that it is unquestioned, but can his existence be *proven*? To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever seriously proposed that his extensive histories are forgeries, but is it not at least theoretically possible that they are misattributed or that some clever individual concocted them and passed them off as genuine? To put the issue another way, Josephus is accepted as the author of the histories attribut-

ed to him because there is no plausible evidence to the contrary, but his authorship is not, strictly speaking, a *fact* but a supposition supported by the preponderance of the evidence.

The reconstruction of events in the ancient world therefore falls back upon *probability* and even though the improbable doubtless occurred in the past as it does in the present, reported events as well as proposed explanations for events *must first pass the test of probability*. Raising a decaying body from the dead or being born of a virgin is exceedingly improbable now and, *ceteris paribus*, was presumably so in the past. Claims of resurrection and virgin birth may therefore be accepted as miracles, one-off events utterly outside normal experience and by their very nature not subject to verification, or rejected as so improbable as to be mere fable. The overwhelming majority of mainstream New Testament scholars, basing their conclusions on what is probable, reject the notion that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin or that he rose from the dead and regard these accounts as fables, part and parcel of a mythologizing process that can easily be traced through the documents of the New Testament itself. The majority of New Testament specialists working outside the mental fortress of evangelical literalism are therefore what I will call “soft mythologists,” rejecting the implausible elements of the gospels as mythic accretions, while accepting as *probable* a historic core that fits the circumstances of the era. More on this point in a bit.

As I have mentioned, there is no forensic evidence for Jesus of Nazareth; the evidence for Jesus’ existence, like the evidence for Jesus ben Saphat and Jesus ben Gamla, is *documentary*. However as documents the gospels have several obvious flaws, two of which are pointed out by New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman: “...none of the Gospel writers ever identifies himself by name or narrates any of his stories about Jesus in the first person...The Gospels are all written anonymously...we do not have any eyewitness report of any kind about Jesus, written in his own day.”⁶ The presumed oral sources for the gospels are unknown and unknowable and whatever written sources may have formed the basis for the gospels are likewise lost. The church historian Eusebius says of Mark, the putative author of the earliest gospel, “he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him.”⁷ On the best evidence, the gospels were not even composed in Palestine where the events of Jesus’ life took place. It is conjectured that Mark was written in Rome, Matthew in Syria, and John perhaps in Asia Minor. To make matter worse, the First Jewish-Roman War burst out in Galilee in 67 CE, culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, and smoldered in the hills to the south for several more years before finally ending with the fall of the last Jewish garrison at Masada in 73 CE. Given the vast devastation of the war, any surviving eyewitnesses of

⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 47, 49.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III, 39, 15.

Jesus' brief career were likely killed or scattered.

No sane person with even a passing acquaintance with the documents of the New Testament could fail to notice the emergence of a Jesus myth within them, a progressive accretion of the divine and corresponding fading of the human. Many examples of this process might be cited, but for the sake of illustration let's consider only a few of the more obvious.

According to Mark's gospel, the villagers of Nazareth ask, "Isn't this the *laborer*, the son of Mary and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and aren't his sisters here among us?"⁸ The Greek *tektōn* (τεκτων), usually translated "carpenter," basically means *laborer*, someone who works with his hands, generally with wood or stone. The gospel of Matthew, a revision and expansion of Mark, rephrases the question to avoid making Jesus out to be a mere laborer: "Isn't this *the son of the laborer...*?"⁹ The apologist Origen, writing in the early 3rd century, chided the pagan critic Celsus for calling Jesus a laborer, claiming that Celsus was "unaware that in none of the gospels proclaimed in the churches has 'carpenter' (τεκτων) been used to describe Jesus himself."¹⁰ Clearly Jesus' lowly origins were an embarrassment to the church, which from a very early period set about 'polishing,' i.e., *falsifying*, his résumé.

The editing of details such as this can be multiplied: the gospel of Mark contains thirteen healing narratives and "the largest single category is that of exorcisms."¹¹ In the reworked narratives of Matthew¹² and Luke,¹³ however, the lurid physical effects in Mark—"Shrieking and convulsing him horribly, [the spirit] came out and left [the boy] like a corpse"¹⁴—have dropped out. Matthew and Luke also edit out the Aramaic healing formulas¹⁵ recorded by Mark—"he cast out the spirits with a word"¹⁶—but *the word* is never specified. Matthew and Luke also omit the story of the blind man cured with spit,¹⁷ a story immediately identifiable as an application of folk magic, almost certainly due to charges of sorcery. "Jesus' opponents accused him of black magic, an accusation which stands as one of the most firmly established facts

⁸ Mark 6:3.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Greek sources are my own.

⁹ Matthew 13:55.

¹⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI, 36.

¹¹ Dunn & Twelftree, *Churchman* 94 (1980), 211.

¹² Matthew 17:18.

¹³ Luke 9:42.

¹⁴ Mark 9:26.

¹⁵ Mark 5:41, 7:34.

¹⁶ Matthew 8:16.

¹⁷ Mark 8: 22-26.

of the Gospel Tradition.”¹⁸

Aune has proposed a motive for Mark’s retention of the Aramaic: “In view of the importance attributed to preserving adjurations and incantations in their original languages, these formulas were probably preserved for the purpose of guiding Christian thaumaturges in exorcistic and healing activities,”¹⁹ but as Hull observed in his landmark work, “Matthew has a suspicion of exorcism...This is because exorcism was one of the main functions of the magician. The magic consisted in the method; Matthew retains the fact without the method, trying in this way to purify the subject.”²⁰ Matthew’s editing of potentially embarrassing details is widely acknowledged: “Matthew excised not only the more blatant thaumaturgical traits but even whole incidents, such as the stories of the healing of the deaf mute (Mark 7:31-37) and of the blind man near Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26), both of which might lend themselves to magical interpretation...Luke seems to have made an intentional effort to distance Jesus and church leaders from magical notions.”²¹ The revisions of the later synoptics were almost certainly done in response to Jewish and later pagan claims that Jesus was a sorcerer, a charge documented in Mark, the earliest gospel:

The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He has Beelzeboul! He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons!”²²

The pagan polemicist Celsus, writing about 180 CE, knew that Jesus had been accused of sorcery: “After being brought up in obscurity, he hired himself out in Egypt and having become experienced in certain magical arts, he made his way back and on account of those powers proclaimed himself a god.”²³ Celsus concluded that Jesus was merely “a worthless sorcerer, hated by God.”²⁴

Fritz Graf: “...those who accused Jesus of being a magician (they were not few among the pagans) argued that he, after all, had spent part of his youth in the homeland of magic, after the escape from Palestine.”²⁵ It is likely that Matthew’s infancy story, which connects Jesus both with magicians and Egypt,²⁶ reflects past and current accusations that Jesus practiced magic and sought to disarm by explaining Jesus’ association with Egypt as circumstantial and not

¹⁸ Plumer, *Biblica* 78 (1997), 357.

¹⁹ Aune, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.23.2, 1535.

²⁰ Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, 73.

²¹ Kee, *Religion, Science, and Magic*, 143.

²² Mark 3:22.

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 71.

²⁵ Graf, *Envisioning Magic*, 94-95.

²⁶ Matthew 2:1-2, 13, 19.

the true source of his amazing powers—“...the story of the flight to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15), which [Matthew] strains to relate to an Old Testament prophecy...is perhaps a response to the Talmudic charge that Jesus had learned magic and sorcery in Egypt.”²⁷

Although the reason may ultimately remain a matter of speculation, exorcism is remarkable for its absence in the gospel of John. Plumer has suggested that charges of sorcery resulted in the omission of this key form of miracle,²⁸ and while questioning that conclusion, Piper admits that “control over spirits ...leaves Jesus himself sometimes open to suspicion and accusation” and concedes that “persons who had the capacity to perform exorcisms or control spirits in other ways were quite liable to be suspected of sorcery.”²⁹

Perhaps Celsus had the answer all along. The charge of sorcery spurred Origen into a frenzy of writing, pouring out page after page in his attempt to disprove it. It seems likely that the accusation of sorcery, which originated during Jesus’ own career, motivated the gospel writers to substantially alter the primitive tradition. Leaving aside the *facticity* of miracles generally, it is abundantly clear that the people of the New Testament *believed* demons were real, that magic was real, and that exorcists were casting out real entities. The controversy over Jesus’ powers, as well as the defensive posture assumed by the later gospel writers in the face of accusations that Jesus practiced magic, cohere perfectly with what we know of the era from multiple sources. While all this does not and cannot prove the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, it is completely consistent with what we know about similar figures from antiquity such as Apollonius of Tyana, widely conceded to have been a real person.

That Jesus is the Son of God is an essential Christian claim: “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing you might have life in his name.”³⁰ Surprisingly, if asked *when* and *how* Jesus became the Son of God, the New Testament provides no less than *four* different answers!

At the beginning of his epistle to the Romans, written around 55-56 CE, Paul appears to quote a pre-existing creed: “Through his prophets in the holy scriptures, [the gospel] promised beforehand about his Son, born from the seed of David according to the flesh, *declared the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ, our Lord.”³¹ According to the wording of this early confession, formulated mere decades after Jesus’ death, at least some of the first believers appear to have decided *the resurrection* was the

²⁷ Hoffman, *Jesus Outside the Gospels*, 40.

²⁸ Plumer, *Biblica* 78 (1997), 350-368.

²⁹ Piper, *Christology, Controversy and Community*, 259.

³⁰ John 20:31.

³¹ Romans 1:2-4.

momentous event by which God designated Jesus as his Son. The second Psalm—“You are my son; today I have become your father.”³²—is interpreted by Paul as applying to Jesus’ resurrection according to Acts.³³

The early Christians, searching for validation of Jesus in the Hebrew scriptures, appropriated the language of the psalm, “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.’”³⁴ The second psalm is taken as foretelling the exaltation and triumph of Jesus in both Hebrews³⁵ and Revelation.³⁶

Soon, however, the declaration of Jesus’ unique status moved back from the end of his career to its very beginning. According to Mark’s gospel, written around the year 70, Jesus’ sonship is affirmed at the moment of his baptism:

It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John and immediately as he came up out of the water he saw the heavens ripped open and the spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from the heavens, “You *are* my Son the beloved in whom I was pleased.”³⁷

The gospel of Luke, however, written toward the end of the 1st century, associates Jesus’ status as the Son of God with his very conception:

“And look! You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and be called Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father ...holy spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore what is conceived will be called holy, the Son of God.”³⁸

In the gospel of John, written at the end of the 1st century or early 2nd century, Jesus has become the pre-existent Word, the Son of God since the beginning of creation:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.³⁹ In the beginning this One was with God. Every-

³² Psalm 2:7 (NIV).

³³ Acts 13:33.

³⁴ Psalms 2:7-8. (NIV).

³⁵ Hebrews 1:5.

³⁶ Revelation 2:26-27.

³⁷ Mark 1:9-11.

³⁸ Luke 1:31-32, 35.

³⁹ “...the Word was God” (*θεος ην ο λογος*). The anarthrous construction of *θεος* im-

thing came to exist through him and apart from him not even one thing exists that came to exist...And the Word became flesh and dwelled in our midst and we beheld his glory, a glory such as an only-begotten from a father, full of grace and truth...for God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but to save the world through him...“Truly, truly, I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am.”⁴⁰

According to John, the Word was the Son *before* being sent into the world, and by making Jesus say, “before Abraham was born, I am (εγω εμμι)” the author is deliberately recalling Exodus 3:14 in the Greek Septuagint: “And God (ο θεος) said to Moses, ‘I am the One Who Is (εγω εμμι Ο Ων)...this is my name forever.’”⁴¹ As is well known, the process of Jesus’ deification finally reaches its *reductio ad absurdum* in the early 4th century at the Council of Nicaea.

The process I’ve briefly described, the tweaking of Jesus’ thin résumé, the exorcism of the magical details of his career, and the extension of his sonship ever backward in time from his resurrection to the very beginning of creation, are examples of myth making familiar to anyone conversant with the New Testament documents. However *none* of these features of the New Testament has convinced the vast majority of New Testament specialists that the *existence* of Jesus is likewise a myth and it is worth taking some time to understand why that is the case.

Based on evidence from the history of Josephus and what is known about religious ideas current in 1st century Palestine, I propose that the existence of Jesus fits the classic argument to the best explanation based on consilience, the convergence of evidence from multiple sources. The hypothesis that Jesus was a real person has greater plausibility and explanatory power than any alternative and is supported by a variety of data that fit the social and religious circumstances of the era. Based on the gospels, and possibly more importantly other writings of the time, I propose Jesus of Nazareth was a person of scant importance from a village of no importance, a man of humble beginnings who achieved a brief regional reputation as *an apocalyptic preacher who established his bona fides by wonder working*. He became a disciple of John the Baptist, and like John he drew excited crowds as well as the surveillance of the Jewish authorities.⁴² At Passover he went to Jerusalem, raised a ruckus in a religiously explosive atmosphere, and being marked as a troublemaker,

plies that the Word was not *identical* to God (ο θεος) but was more than merely *divine* (θειος), a grammatical subtlety impossible to capture in English.

⁴⁰ John 1:1-3, 14, 3:17, 8:58.

⁴¹ Exodus 3:14-15.

⁴² Compare Mark 3:22, 7:1.

got himself arrested, handed over to the Romans and executed. Basically that simple.

To clarify my position I believe it is sufficient—at least within the limits of an essay—to establish how Jesus garnered a following and to identify the gist of his message, both rather easily accomplished using the New Testament and early Christian writings as sources.

Jesus the miracle worker.

The powerful works by which Jesus secured his reputation are well documented—the gospel of Mark rapidly establishes Jesus’ regional fame as a master manipulator of spirits. Jesus teaches “as one who has authority (*ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἐχῶν*) and not like the scribes”⁴³ and lest any doubt remain about what Jesus’ *authority* encompassed, Mark has Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries answer:

“What is this? A new teaching *based on authority* (*κατ’ ἐξουσίαν*)—*he gives orders to the unclean spirits and they obey him!*” And instantly the report about him spread out in every direction into the whole region of Galilee.⁴⁴

It is clear that Jesus quickly established a regional reputation as an exorcist and healer—“he went through all of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and *casting out devils*.”⁴⁵ After the initial report from Capernaum,⁴⁶ news that Jesus has returned home causes a dense crowd to gather⁴⁷ and when Jesus leaves, a mob of Galileans follows, joined in turn by the curious from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, from villages across the Jordan, and from Tyre and Sidon.⁴⁸ By now Jesus’ renown is such that he can no longer openly enter a town,⁴⁹ and at this point Jesus chooses twelve disciples and sends them out “to preach and *to have authority to cast out demons*.”⁵⁰ Jesus’ fame as an exorcist continues to spread; soon other exorcists begin to invoke the power of his name—“for *his name* became known.”⁵¹ Jesus’ *name* is not merely his reputation, it is literally a name to conjure with:

⁴³ Mark 1:22.

⁴⁴ Mark 1:27b-28.

⁴⁵ Mark 1:39.

⁴⁶ Mark 1:21.

⁴⁷ Mark 2:1-2.

⁴⁸ Mark 3:7-8.

⁴⁹ Mark 1:45.

⁵⁰ Mark 3:14-15.

⁵¹ Mark 6:14.

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”⁵²

The use of Jesus’ name by other exorcists is “clearly an example of professional magical use,”⁵³ a practice that appears to have continued even after Jesus’ death.⁵⁴

Regarding the unknown exorcist of Mark 9:38, Schäfer observes, “using the powerful name of Jesus had nothing to do with believing in Jesus...the magical use of the name of Jesus worked automatically, no matter whether or not the magician believed in Jesus.”⁵⁵ Origen expresses just this understanding, common throughout the Mediterranean world; demons “*are spellbound, constrained by the magical arts*” and therefore forced to “obey magicians.”⁵⁶ Christian exorcists prevail by the name of Jesus: “demons and other unseen powers...*fear the name of Jesus* as superior” and the demons fly away “at the recitation of his name.”⁵⁷ Origen’s superstition coincides exactly with the nonsense derided by Lucian: “the fever or the swelling *is in fear of a divine name* or barbarous invocation and because of this flees from the inflamed gland.”⁵⁸ The Christian confessions of faith that Celsus regards as “vulgar words” are for Origen “just like spells that have been filled with power.”⁵⁹ This understanding behind the efficacy of Jesus’ name will eventually flow seamlessly into what Weltin described as “Augustine’s pseudo-magical theological speculations on the *ex-opere-operato* virtue of the sacraments.”⁶⁰

Josephus reports several rabble-rousing, wonder working, Kingdom-of-God types who authenticated their message by dramatic charismatic performance—given the long history of conflict between the Jewish masses and the Romans, it comes as no surprise that such ‘prophets’ were Jewish nationalists whose influence was feared and who were carefully watched. Theudas, for example, is described as a *γοης* (*goēs*), a *sorcerer* or *impostor*, as well as a *προφήτης* (*prophētēs*), a *prophet* whose followers expected the Jordan to part so they could cross on dry land.⁶¹ Theudas was killed and his head brought back to Jerusalem to be put on display *pour encourager les autres*.

⁵² Mark 9:38. (NIV.)

⁵³ Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, 72.

⁵⁴ Acts 19:13.

⁵⁵ Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 60.

⁵⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* II, 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, III, 36.

⁵⁸ Lucian, *The Lover of Lies*, 9.

⁵⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* III, 68.

⁶⁰ Weltin, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 3 (1960), 78.

⁶¹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX, 97.

Theudas and his fate are mentioned in Acts 5:36.

Josephus also informs us about a mob deceived by another man, “a magician” (γοης), who “proclaimed salvation and an end to their troubles.”⁶² This man and his followers were also promptly dispatched. Another character, “the Egyptian,” “a man, a magician who established a reputation as a prophet (ανθρωπος γοης και προφητου...)” led a throng of 30,000 in an attack on Jerusalem but was repulsed and escaped.⁶³ The gospel of Luke may contain an oblique reference to the suppression of yet another local independence movement: “Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.”⁶⁴ Since the Temple was the only place where Jews offered sacrifices, the report indicates that the rebellious elements had been slain within the Temple compound itself. It is probably not coincidental that around the same time the infamous Barabbas had been imprisoned along with “the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.”⁶⁵

Origen acknowledged the existence of charismatic figures who Celsus compared to Jesus—deceivers “of Jesus’ type” (οποιοις ην ο Ιησους)—among them Theudas, a certain “Judas of Galilee” who the Romans executed, Dositheus, a Samaritan who was supposedly “the one prophesied by Moses,” and the infamous “Simon the Samaritan magician [who] beguiled some by magic.”⁶⁶ It is clear both that Celsus recognized Jesus as belonging to a familiar category, and that Origen regarded ‘signs and wonders’ as the calling card of a prophet, even of a false prophet: “If there arise among you a prophet or one who receives revelations in dreams, and he gives you a sign or wonders...”⁶⁷ Regarding the terms πλανος (planos), *deceiver*, μαγος (magos), *magician*, and ψευδοπροφητης (pseudoprophētēs), *false prophet*, Stanton notes that “the most widely attested ancient criticism of Jesus: he was a magician and false prophet who deceived God’s people...accusations of magic and false prophecy are very closely related to one another.”⁶⁸

None of Christianity’s ancient critics denied the *existence* of Jesus, an obvious polemic tactic, likely because the ancient Middle East pullulated exorcists, prophets and magicians, characters that came along with the predictability of sunrise, and Jesus was simply another one among a multitude. “Many sources, especially the N[ew] T[estament] and Josephus, recount Jewish and Samaritan miracle workers at the time of Jesus. It is not even difficult to

⁶² Ibid, XX, 188.

⁶³ Josephus, *Jewish War* II, 259.

⁶⁴ Luke 13:1 (NIV).

⁶⁵ Mark 15:7 (NIV).

⁶⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 57, II, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid II, 53.

The reference is to Deuteronomy 13:1.

⁶⁸ Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ*, 166-167.

name more than ten of them.”⁶⁹ From a skeptical Roman point of view, the miracle working Jewish exorcist from Nazareth was basically a walking, talking banality, a Middle Eastern cliché. “Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, and he was executed by the Romans as a royal pretender. *Prima facie*, he invites comparison with the various prophets and messianic pretenders, such as Theudas and the Egyptian, described by Josephus.”⁷⁰

The writer Lucian describes the career of two notorious religious hucksters, Peregrinus, the *wonderworker* or *conjurer* (θαυματοποιος)⁷¹ who suckered credulous Christians during part of his career, and the false prophet Alexander of Abonoteichus, inventor of Glykon, the talking snake oracle.⁷² Lucian’s brilliant story, *The Lover of Lies*, may very well contain an oblique reference to the fame of Jesus as well—“everyone knows of the Syrian from Palestine, the master beyond compare,⁷³ how many moonstruck he takes in hand, their eyes rolling, mouths overrun with foam...he asks, ‘From whence have you come into his body?’ The sick man himself says nothing, but the demon answers,⁷⁴ in Greek or some barbarian tongue...uttering oaths,⁷⁵ and if it does not obey, by threats,⁷⁶ he drives the demon out.”⁷⁷ It is quite possible that Lucian based his account on Christian exorcists driving out demons in the name of Jesus⁷⁸ or on the stories from the gospels,⁷⁹ and when the symposiasts veer to a discussion of restless ghosts, it may be more than coincidence that “someone who hanged himself”⁸⁰ or was beheaded,⁸¹ or crucified⁸² are singled out as exemplary.

How did Jesus and early Christians gain followers? The documents of the

⁶⁹ Koskenniemi, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998), 465.

⁷⁰ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 256.

⁷¹ Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 17.

⁷² Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, addressed to a certain Celsus, perhaps the very Celsus who wrote a polemic against the Christians.

⁷³ “the master beyond compare” (τον επι τουτω σοφιστην). Elsewhere Lucian uses the term σοφιστης (*sophistēs*), *master* or *adept*, or *cheat*, *fraud*, of Jesus, “that crucified sophist himself” (ανεσκολοπισμενον εκεινον σοφιστην αυτον), *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 13.

⁷⁴ Compare Mark 5:9: “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied. (NIV)

⁷⁵ Compare Mark 5:8: “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!” (NIV)

⁷⁶ Compare Mark 5:7: “In God’s name don’t torture me!” (NIV)

⁷⁷ Lucian, *The Lover of Lies*, 16.

⁷⁸ That Christian exorcists still operated as late as the 3rd or 4th century is supported by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* VI, 43, 14; VIII, 6, 9.)

⁷⁹ Compare Matthew 8:29, 12:43.

⁸⁰ Matthew 27:5.

⁸¹ Matthew 14:10.

⁸² Matthew 27:35.

New Testament, starting with the letters of Paul, Christianity’s most effective missionary by far, provide a clear answer: by “works of power,” “wonders” or, if one prefers, *by magic*. As Jesus himself observed, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe”⁸³ and our sources completely support that claim that links miracles with belief.

...Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has been affirmed for you by God by powerful works and wonders and signs that God performed through him in your midst, as you yourselves know.⁸⁴

Many signs and wonders were performed through the hands of the apostles...so that a multitude of men and women began joining those who believed in the Lord with the result that the sick were carried into the streets on litters and cots so that as Peter passed by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. Crowds from the towns around Jerusalem congregated, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and all were healed.⁸⁵

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.”⁸⁶

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom...My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power⁸⁷...I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.⁸⁸

Eusebius corroborates the evidence from Paul’s letters: “The divine nature of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, proclaimed among all men by his *wonder-working power* (*παραδοξοποιον δυναμειως*), attracted countless numbers...”⁸⁹ “by the power of Christ through the teaching of those who follow him together with *amazing deeds* (*παραδοξοποιιας*)...”⁹⁰ “[the apostles] *were unskilled in speech* (*δε γλωτταν ιδιωτευοντες*)...but bold in the divine and *wonder-working power* (*παραδοξοποιω δυναμει*) that had been given them...they set their

⁸³ John 4:48. (NIV.)

⁸⁴ Acts 2:22.

⁸⁵ Acts 5:12-16.

⁸⁶ Romans 15:18-19. (NIV.)

⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:1,4. (NIV.)

⁸⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:12. (NIV.)

⁸⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 13, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, II, 3, 2.

hand only to a display of the divine spirit...and *the wonder-working power of Christ...*(θαυματουργω του Χριστου δυναμει)⁹¹ Narcissus of Jerusalem was alleged to have turned water into oil for lamps⁹²—the spread of Christianity “came to depend largely on widely disseminated reports of miracles that were performed either by Jesus himself or in Jesus’ name.”⁹³

“The form of early Christianity associated with Paul can be characterized as a spirit-possession cult. Paul establishes communities of those possessed by the spirit of Jesus.”⁹⁴ Paul assures the Corinthians, “*because you are zealous devotees of spirits* (υμεις επει ζηλωται εστε πνευματων), on that account I reveal to you that no one speaking by a spirit of God says, ‘Anathema Jesus!’ and no one is able to say ‘Lord Jesus!’ except by a holy spirit.”⁹⁵ “The worshippers and the attending spirits form a double assembly.”⁹⁶ The first Christians believed in a plurality of spirits: “...do not believe *every spirit*, but test *the spirits* to see whether they are from God.”⁹⁷ It is important to remember that at rock bottom ancient Christians and pagans shared an essential belief: spirits pulling the wires behind the scenes control the visible world.

In the New Testament the ‘holy spirit’ is conflated with the “spirit of Jesus”—Paul and his fellow missionaries are “prevented by the holy spirit from speaking the word in Asia...the spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”⁹⁸ “But you are not in flesh, but in spirit if indeed the spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ...”⁹⁹ The author of 1 Peter attributes the predictions of the Old Testament prophets to “the spirit of Christ in them,”¹⁰⁰ but receiving the spirit was somehow contingent upon Jesus’ resurrection: “For as yet there was no spirit because Jesus had not yet been glorified.”¹⁰¹

Paul’s discourse on the signs and wonders of the spirit is directed to people who had once worshipped the pagan deities¹⁰² and were familiar with manifestations of spirit possession such as ecstatic oracular speech.

⁹¹ Ibid, III, 24, 3.

⁹² Ibid, VI, 9, 3.

⁹³ Garland, *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, 89.

⁹⁴ Mount, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005), 316.

⁹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

⁹⁶ Thee, *Julius Africanus and the Early Christian View of Magic*, 382.

⁹⁷ 1 John 4:1.

⁹⁸ Acts 16:6-7.

⁹⁹ Romans 8:9.

Compare Galatians 4:6, Philippians 1:19.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Peter 1:11.

¹⁰¹ John 7:39.

¹⁰² 1 Corinthians 12:2.

...tongues are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers, and prophecy, not for unbelievers, but for those who believe. In the same way, if the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues and strangers or unbelievers enter, will they not say you are possessed?¹⁰³

Glossolalia is a *sign* for unbelievers because ecstatic speech, already familiar to pagans, is proof that Christians have a spirit—“that religious trances and ecstasy were the manifestations of possession by a god was one of wide currency in Greek and Near Eastern religions.”¹⁰⁴ It was no wonder and it requires no miracle to explain Christianity’s rapid incursion into the fabric of the Greco-Roman world, its explosive growth among the unlettered working class or its appeal to the despised and disenfranchised masses: the raving Christians of Paul’s churches imagined themselves talking to God, vouchsafed sacred mysteries “by the spirit.”¹⁰⁵ Christianity inverted the social norms—foolishness became the new wisdom,¹⁰⁶ the kingdom belonged to the poor,¹⁰⁷ the ragtag Christian rabble, derided by Lucian as, “half-baked philosophers drawn from cobblers and carpenters,”¹⁰⁸ are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood.”¹⁰⁹ “I do not know,” Origen huffed, “in what rank to place [a Christian believer] who has need of arguments written in books”¹¹⁰—burning books is one of the oldest documented Christian activities.¹¹¹ “Christians were constantly amazed to find themselves cast as enemies of the Roman order, but in retrospect we must admit that it was the Romans who had the more realistic insight...To Roman eyes, the obstinate and incomprehensible intolerance of Christians made them appear not only foolish but treasonable.”¹¹²

According to Eusebius, who may have exaggerated their numbers, Christian zealots rushed headlong to martyrdom, their fanaticism astounding Roman judges.

Jesus the apocalyptic prophet.

Apocalypticism is the bedrock of the earliest form of Christianity. Jesus predicts the imminent arrival of the kingdom: “some who are standing here will

¹⁰³ 1 Corinthians 14:22-23.

¹⁰⁴ Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds*, 46.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:2.

¹⁰⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:19.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 5:3.

¹⁰⁸ Lucian, *The Double Indictment*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ 1 Peter 2:9.

¹¹⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 4.

¹¹¹ Acts 19:19.

¹¹² Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 27-28, 124.

not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power”¹¹³ and “by no means will this generation disappear until all these things happen.”¹¹⁴ The High Priest “will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power.”¹¹⁵ These predictions “announce [the kingdom’s] arrival prior to the end of the generation to whom Jesus was speaking...the community which produced the Gospel of Mark [was] an apocalyptic millenarian community living in the imminent expectation of the end of the age.”¹¹⁶

The kingdom in question has nothing to do with heaven; it is the earthly kingdom of David: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.”¹¹⁷ Jesus’ disciples will receive “houses” and “fields” a hundred-fold “in the present age”¹¹⁸ and those that have followed him will sit on twelve thrones and judge the tribes of Israel.¹¹⁹ At some point in Jesus’ career it is quite likely the disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”¹²⁰

The conviction that the present religious and political order is soon to come to a violent end is reflected in the primitive tradition: the ax is ready to strike at the root of the tree,¹²¹ family members will turn on one another, becoming bitter enemies,¹²² the disciples must hate their families, their wives, children and parents,¹²³ and the disciples must not pause to say farewell to those left behind.¹²⁴ The nearness of the end abrogates even the most basic filial responsibilities: “Follow me and let the dead bury their dead.”¹²⁵ There is no time to gather possessions or even to pick up one’s cloak.¹²⁶

Nothing must distract the disciples from the imminent End. They must become like children¹²⁷ and disregard their standing in the community of the lost—“I swear to you that the tax men and the whores are going ahead of you into the kingdom of God!”¹²⁸ Ethics is reduced to a stark polarity of black

¹¹³ Mark 9:1.

¹¹⁴ Mark 13:30.

¹¹⁵ Mark 14:62.

¹¹⁶ Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 172, 194.

¹¹⁷ Luke 1:32. (NIV)

¹¹⁸ Mark 10:30.

¹¹⁹ Matthew 19:28.

¹²⁰ Acts 1:6. (NIV)

¹²¹ Matthew 3:10.

¹²² Matthew 10:34-37.

¹²³ Luke 14:26.

¹²⁴ Luke 9:61-62.

¹²⁵ Matthew 8:22.

¹²⁶ Matthew 24:17-18.

¹²⁷ Matthew 18:3.

¹²⁸ Matthew 21:31.

and white, anger is equivalent to murder,¹²⁹ desire to adultery.¹³⁰ This “intensification of ethical norms...is a phenomenon typical within communities committed to the belief that time is rapidly drawing to a close...This impracticality in turn allows us to glimpse the intensity of expectation that motivated Jesus’ mission and the community that formed around him: the Kingdom was *at hand*.”¹³¹

So intense was the expectation of Jesus’ quick return that his followers sold off their property and lived communally.¹³² Writing to the newly converted, Paul advised slaves to remain slaves and the unmarried to remain single “for the time allotted has become short.”¹³³ The sexual hysteria provoked by the impending End resulted in “a household of brothers and sisters rather than husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.”¹³⁴ Paul’s letters exhibit “numerous and sometimes astonishing parallels to apocalyptic texts, primarily to IV Ezra and Syrian Baruch...Paul is linked to the Qumran writings by his basic eschatological-dualistic attitude, his sense of an imminent end to this aeon and of the presence of salvation, concealed from non-believers...the eschatological gift of the Spirit, which among other things makes it possible to interpret scripture ‘congenially’ in terms of the eschatological present...”¹³⁵

Obviously the generation that heard Jesus preach, “this generation,” did not witness the return of the Son of Man despite Jesus’ promise, “Truly I tell you, by no means will you finish going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man arrives!”¹³⁶ As Paul’s generation began to die awaiting the Coming of the Son of Man, anxiety reached a peak. His letter to the Thessalonians, generally regarded as the oldest surviving Christian document, offers these words of false assurance:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the

¹²⁹ Matthew 5:22

¹³⁰ Matthew 5:28.

¹³¹ Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 100.

¹³² Acts 4:34-35.

¹³³ 1 Corinthians 7:21-31.

¹³⁴ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 108.

¹³⁵ Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, 49-50.

¹³⁶ Matthew 10:23.

trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort each other with these words.¹³⁷

Those who heard the reading of Paul's letter were led to believe that some of their number would be physically, corporeally, alive to witness Jesus' return—"we *who are still alive* and are left." "...the Second Coming of Jesus will occur in the immediate future...the hope that the vast majority of Christians would be living witnesses to Christ's return from heaven points to the likelihood of composition in the first decade of the Christian movement."¹³⁸ By the end of the 1st century, however, hope was fading. The promise, "We will not all sleep but we will all be changed,"¹³⁹ is met with skepticism: "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."¹⁴⁰

Like Christian apologists of the present, the Christian apologists of the past were great fans of "context." As the Second Coming threatened to become the grandest non-event of all time, the gospel writers "recontextualized" it. For Mark, writing a generation after Paul, the Roman invasion of Palestine was the latest 'sign of the times'—"when you see these things happening, know that he is near, right at the door."¹⁴¹ "The Temple's recent destruction clearly marks the beginning of that period that will terminate with the Second Coming of the Son of Man. In fact, the Lord has already shortened the days before the consummation for the sake of his elect (13:14): the Parousia could occur at any time, certainly within the lifetime of Mark's community."¹⁴² Whether written just before or after the Roman invasion, the prophesied destruction of the Temple is a *vaticinium ex eventu*, an attempt to rescue Jesus' failed prediction by continuously reframing it. "...the precision of the 'prophecy' in [Mark] 13:1-2 indicates that it has been written after the event."¹⁴³

For Luke the destruction of Jerusalem was a sign of fulfilled prophecy—Jerusalem surrounded by armies is the "fulfillment of *all* that has been written"¹⁴⁴ just as the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 was a "sign" for present day

¹³⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

¹³⁸ Lüdemann, *Paul*, 14,49.

¹³⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:51.

¹⁴⁰ 2 Peter 3:4.

¹⁴¹ Mark 13:29.

¹⁴² Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 50-51.

¹⁴³ Marcus, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992), 460.

¹⁴⁴ Luke 21:20-22.

Armageddonists. “Later Christians seem to have advanced a variety of inconsistent rationales for the delay [of the Second Coming]...We must see all these rationales, strictly speaking, as the defensive posture of a community challenged to provide evidence of its beliefs.”¹⁴⁵ By the end of the 1st century “no one knows the day or the hour, not even the angels, or the Son”¹⁴⁶ has been even further recontextualized: “to the Lord a thousand years is like a day.”¹⁴⁷ By that math, an hour of Jesus time would be about 42 years. Conveniently for the emerging Church, not to mention the religious Christ peddlers of the present, “no one knows the day or the hour” really means no one can guess which century or even which millennium the Son of Man might arrive, despite the clear meaning of Jesus’ promise: “You will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”¹⁴⁸

It is consistent with surviving sources to understand the career of Jesus and the emergence of the Christian movement as a logical outgrowth of Jewish apocalyptic expectations, a conviction fed by the continued Roman occupation of the ‘Promised Land,’ and disgust with the connivance of the Jewish elite, cooperation that could easily be understood by some as treasonous collaboration. The appearance of apocalyptic preachers of impending judgment such as John and Jesus would not only be a logical religious response on the part of the downtrodden, it would be *expected*. As Collins remarks, “there was also a popular eschatology, manifested in the activities of the prophets and messiahs described by Josephus...the eschatological hopes of the Gospels are couched in forms and language that reflect their origin in a popular movement in Galilee...the restoration of Israel is set in a context of cosmic upheaval, which typically includes the judgment of the dead.”¹⁴⁹ Given the brutality with which the Roman authorities crushed aspiring prophets and messiahs, it beggars the imagination to suppose the appearance of such figures was unexpected, much less unhistorical. Eusebius verifies this conclusion: “[Herod] therefore considered it much better, before a revolt should spring from John [the Baptist], to put him to death in anticipation, rather than be involved in difficulties through the actual revolution and then regret it.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Hoffman, *Celsus On the True Doctrine*, 9-11.

¹⁴⁶ Mark 13:32.

¹⁴⁷ 2 Peter 3:8.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 10:23.

¹⁴⁹ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 260-261.

¹⁵⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 6, 6. (I have retained Lake’s translation.)

PART TWO: “HARD” MYTHICISM

It bears reiterating that history in general and ancient history in particular is *not* “*what happened.*” Ancient history is what a literate person chose to record based on what he—it’s invariably a “he”—thought important at the time. That *partial* record, composed in response to a *particular* ambition, to advance a *particular* faith, or to achieve a *particular* objective, would necessarily have been considered of sufficient value to the *next* generation and the generations that followed to warrant the time and expense of repeated copying in order that the record be preserved. Supposing that enough copies were produced to survive wars, fires, vandalism, purges and the ravages of time, the work *might* by happy chance fall into the hands of some modern historian and its contents be studied and evaluated.

It is difficult to exaggerate how *little* we actually know about the ancient world, but as an example I would offer the fortuitous discovery of the Antikythera Mechanism, an analog computer and orrery that calculated up to forty-two different celestial events, found by accident in the Aegean Sea in 1900 by Greek sponge divers. The complex device defied analysis for nearly seventy-five years and its mysteries are still being unraveled. “It’s hard to overestimate the uniqueness of the find. Before the Antikythera mechanism, not one single gearwheel had ever been found from antiquity, nor indeed any example of an accurate pointer or scale. Apart from the Antikythera mechanism, they still haven’t.”¹⁵¹

Since the evidence for Jesus’ existence is documentary, one might well ask what percentage of the documents created in antiquity have survived? If we omit such categories as personal correspondence and business records and limit ourselves to works for public consumption such as plays, histories and gospels, the percentage that survives in any form is very small—I have seen estimates that come out to less than one percent. The writer of Luke-Acts, who claimed to base his account on what had been “handed down” to his generation by eyewitnesses, remarked that “many” before him had made a similar attempt.¹⁵² Besides the infancy gospels that are entirely spurious and gospels from the 3rd century on, I believe we can confidently say that there were at least twenty gospels, most now lost, in circulation by the mid-2nd century. How much of potential interest to historians they preserved is anyone’s guess.

¹⁵¹ Marchant, *Decoding the Heavens*, 40.

¹⁵² Luke 1:1.

The “hard mythicist” perspective, the denial that Jesus was a real person, was comparatively slow to emerge. The claim that early Christianity was a brew concocted from various ancient Eastern mythologies, a polemic first advanced in France in the 18th century, is the product of a naïve armchair anthropology that may be safely dismissed out of hand. There is no evidence that the illiterate villagers of Galilee, the Judean Pharisees, or anyone else in 1st century Palestine knew or cared anything about Persian or Indian theologies, much less that they concocted a Jesus narrative from them.

The first mythicists with training in New Testament studies were the German theologians David Friedrich Strauss and Bruno Bauer. In *Das Leben Jesu*, Strauss argued for a ‘soft’ mythicism that denied supernaturalism as an explanation of the miracles and took a rationalist approach to the Christian *ex eventu* appropriation of Old Testament ‘prophetic’ material. Bauer eventually took the position that Jesus was entirely mythical. The decades that followed witnessed a steady production of books that argued for the mythicist position, most written by cranks and dabblers making very imperfect use of the tools of the emerging disciplines of anthropology, philology and comparative religion. Like Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, those works have proven to be very much a product of their times. Aside from their flawed methodology, a number of the mythicists appear to have been motivated by unsavory agendas that further vitiate their historical claims.

My work, which has focused on the role of magic in the career of Jesus and early Christianity,¹⁵³ has not escaped summary dismissal by one of the more ardent of the current mythicists—“We also have Jesus the Folk Wizard (championed most famously by Morton Smith in *Jesus the Magician*, and most recently by Robert Conner in *Magic in the New Testament*.)”¹⁵⁴ However unwelcome Smith’s investigation was in 1978, I doubt many of his conclusions would raise an eyebrow in mainstream New Testament studies today. In point of fact, Samain had published on the accusation of magic directed against Jesus as far back as 1932¹⁵⁵ and Carl Kraeling, writing in 1940, proposed that Jesus had been accused of necromancy.¹⁵⁶ Four years before *Jesus the Magician* appeared, Hull published his classic, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*.¹⁵⁷ Today the bibliography on magic in primitive

¹⁵³ Conner, *Jesus the Sorcerer* (2006), *Magic in the New Testament* (2010) *Magic in Christianity* (2014).

¹⁵⁴ Carrier, *Proving History: Baye’s Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 13.

¹⁵⁵ Samain, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 15 (1932), 449-490.

¹⁵⁶ Kraeling, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940), 147-157.

See <https://www.scribd.com/doc/316377158/Was-Jesus-Accused-of-Necromancy> for a defense of Kraeling’s conclusions.

¹⁵⁷ Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*.

Christianity is extensive and growing nearly by the day and the role of magic in the spread of Christianity widely acknowledged.¹⁵⁸

More disturbing, from an evidentiary point of view, is Dr. Carrier's implication that ancient history can be *proved by a theorem*. To the extent that they contain information of potential historical interest, it must be recognized that the gospels in particular, like memoirs, "are similarly selective accounts, always highly edited versions of the life being recorded, almost always highly teleological in structure."¹⁵⁹ The gospels and other documents are written to explain what happened—*as well as what didn't happen* in the case of the much-delayed Parousia—from a later apologetic point of view. From my perspective, rather than endlessly debate the authenticity of the dubious *Testimonium Flavianum*,¹⁶⁰ et cetera, it is more revealing to note what near contemporary sources say about the religious climate of Roman Palestine.

Eusebius recounts the appearance of "a certain Jesus by name" (Ἰησοῦς...τις ὄνομα), "a commoner from the countryside" (τῶν ἰδιωτῶν ἀγροικὸς), who, four years prior to the outbreak of the Jewish-Roman War, began incessantly preaching imminent judgment on Jerusalem. Regarded by the religious leaders as demon-possessed, Jesus son of Ananias was hauled before the Roman governor Albinus and flogged to the bone with whips.¹⁶¹ According to some manuscripts of Josephus' *Jewish War*, on which Eusebius' account was based, Albinus finally pronounced the wretched man insane and released him.¹⁶²

Jesus son of Ananias bears more than a passing similarity to Jesus of Nazareth, another rustic from the hinterlands,¹⁶³ who likewise prophesied a series of woes on Jerusalem,¹⁶⁴ and was considered either insane or demon-possessed:

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

¹⁵⁸ For example, Kannaday's discussion in *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition*, 119-129.

¹⁵⁹ Howell & Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, 21.

¹⁶⁰ See particularly Goldberg's "The Coincidences of the Emmaus Narrative of Luke and the *Testimonium* of Josephus," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 13 (1995), 59-77.

¹⁶¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III, 8, 7.

¹⁶² Josephus, *Jewish War* VI, 305-306.

¹⁶³ Compare John 7:52: "No prophet comes from Galilee!"

¹⁶⁴ Mark 13:1-37.

And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”¹⁶⁵

Jesus of Nazareth was also delivered up by the Jewish authorities to a Roman governor, also flogged, but was crucified rather than released. I would suggest that the several similarities between the two men are anything but coincidental—Jerusalem “was the eschatological centre of the world, the destination of the homecoming Diaspora and of the pilgrimages of the nations, the place of the coming of the messiah...the place of judgment in Gehinnom and the metropolis of his coming kingdom” and as Hengel also noted, Jerusalem was also the focus of “eschatologically motivated attempts at rebellion.”¹⁶⁶ It would appear that being a persistent and obnoxious religious pest constituted ‘rebellion’ in the case of Jesus son of Ananias, but in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, who drew excited crowds,¹⁶⁷ the situation might have been more serious.

As all Sunday schooled children are aware, Jesus was crucified between two “thieves.” Except that the two men crucified on either side of Jesus weren’t “thieves”—*κλεπτης* (*kleptēs*), the usual word for *thief*, is not the term Mark uses: “And with him they crucify two *lēstas*, one on the right and one on his left...‘Let the Anointed (ο χριστος), the King of Israel (ο βασιλευς Ισραηλ) come down now from the cross so we may see and believe!’”¹⁶⁸ Mark informs his readers that the men crucified on either side of Jesus, “framing” him as it were,¹⁶⁹ were *lēstai* and that the derision of the Jewish authorities was directed particularly at Jesus. Luke also hints that Jesus was considered a *lēstēs*: “Did you come out with swords and clubs *as against a lēstēs* (ως επι ληστην)?”¹⁷⁰

To provide some plausible historical context for this term we must look outside the gospels, to near contemporary sources. Josephus used the word *ληστης* (*lēstēs*) nearly eighty times, particularly to describe the “members of the Jewish revolutionary bands”¹⁷¹ in the First Jewish-Roman War that broke out in the generation following Jesus’ death. Although *lēstēs* is translated as *brigand*, *bandit*, or *highwayman* in older works, *insurrectionist*, *guerilla fighter*, or *terrorist* comes much closer to capturing their militancy and wanton violence

¹⁶⁵ Mark 3:21-22. (NIV)

¹⁶⁶ Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, 54-55.

¹⁶⁷ Matthew 4:25, 8:18, for example.

¹⁶⁸ Mark 15:27, 32. (I have retained Mark’s tenses and syntax.)

¹⁶⁹ Made somewhat more explicit by the *Gospel of Peter*: *και εσταυρωσαν ανα μεσον αυτων τον κυριον*, “and they crucified the Lord between them.”

¹⁷⁰ Luke 22:52.

¹⁷¹ Marcus, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992), 449.

that included murdering and plundering the civilian population,¹⁷² murder of prisoners,¹⁷³ and arson.¹⁷⁴ As is often the case with modern terrorists, their number included career criminals,¹⁷⁵ and like the warlords of modern conflicts, figures such as Judas the Galilean gathered followers who fell to fighting with rivals such as Eleazar¹⁷⁶ and the Galilean, John of Gischala.¹⁷⁷ Having briefly sketched the meaning of *lēstēs*, we can ask what features of Jesus' career might have caused the Roman authority to regard him as an insurrectionist, a danger to public order.

It is often overlooked that one of the most common reactions to Jesus was *fear*, a reaction shared by his disciples,¹⁷⁸ outsiders,¹⁷⁹ and the Jewish authorities.¹⁸⁰ Hailed by “this mob that knows nothing of the law”¹⁸¹ as “the prophet from Nazareth,”¹⁸² the Temple authorities feared both the reaction of the crowd,¹⁸³ and that the tumult incited by Jesus' reputation for wonder working would provoke a Roman intervention—“Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”¹⁸⁴ According to the muddled account of his ‘trial,’ even Pilate was afraid of the reaction of the crowd.¹⁸⁵ Herod, who feared John the Baptist,¹⁸⁶ also wanted to kill Jesus.¹⁸⁷

Significantly, Jesus' arrest was thought to require a well-armed force. According to the gospel of John, Judas knew where Jesus and his immediate entourage could be found “because Jesus often went there with his disciples. Accordingly, Judas came there at the head of a *cohort* (*σπειραν*) and some of the subordinates of the high priests and Pharisees, bearing lanterns and torches and weapons.”¹⁸⁸ The term *σπειρα* (*speira*), the Greek equivalent of the Latin *cohors*, the tenth part of a legion or about five hundred men, clearly

¹⁷² *Jewish War* II, 232-235, 275, IV, 132-134, 198-199,

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, IV, 145.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, II, 57.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, II, 228-229, 587, IV, 138-142.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, II, 433.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, IV, 84-86.

¹⁷⁸ Mark 4:41, 6:49-50, 9:6

¹⁷⁹ Mark 5:16-17.

¹⁸⁰ Mark 11:18, 32, 12:12.

¹⁸¹ John 7:49.

¹⁸² Matthew 21:11.

¹⁸³ Luke 22:2.

¹⁸⁴ John 11: 47-48 (NIV).

¹⁸⁵ John 19:8.

¹⁸⁶ Mark 6:20.

¹⁸⁷ Luke 13:31.

¹⁸⁸ John 18:2-3.

suggests that the party sent out by night to arrest Jesus and his closest disciples expected to meet serious resistance—the synoptic gospels all agree that Jesus’ disciples were armed with swords.¹⁸⁹

This account coincides with another circumstance to produce a narrative supported by external sources, *Jesus’ appearance in Jerusalem at Passover*. Thanks to Josephus we understand that the annual festivals were tightly connected to outbreaks of rebellion—“for it is on these festive occasions that sedition is most apt to break out.”¹⁹⁰ At Pentecost Jerusalem swarmed with “people from the country...the majority bearing arms.”¹⁹¹ According to Josephus it was during Passover, “the festival of unleavened bread,” when the dreaded *sicarii* emerged from Masada to make a fatal raid on Engedi.¹⁹²

Following the death of Herod, Archelaus, faced with revolt over the excesses of his father, attempted to appease the anger of the crowds but his officials were met with a volley of rocks. As Passover approached, “an endless mass of people from the country” entered Jerusalem and Archelaus “ordered in *a tribune with a cohort* (μετα σπειρας χιλιαρχον) commanded subdue the leaders of the revolt by force.”¹⁹³ Josephus recounts yet another episode of rebellion when a mass of people—including many from Galilee—surrounded the terrified Roman garrison in the Temple during the festival of Pentecost.¹⁹⁴ Put in the context of a restive population of immiserated rural subjects, an urban ruling class very much on edge, and the nationalistic essence of Passover that celebrated the deliverance of Jewish slaves from the oppression of their Egyptian masters following manifold signs and wonders,¹⁹⁵ it is small wonder that a prophet up from Galilee who announced a coming kingdom, created a disturbance in the Temple and excited the crowds with reports of his own signs and wonders would be met with a decisive response.

Additionally, we must consider the details of Jesus’ execution. Whatever he knew or didn’t know about Jesus’ biography, Paul was spot on about the manner of Jesus’ execution: his crucifixion, like crucifixion generally, was a *public notice*, a προγραφη (*prographē*),¹⁹⁶ an exhibition meant to send a message.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, public execution had the makings of an art form that involved a certain degree of macabre creativity as well as more than a little symbol-

¹⁸⁹ Mark 14:47, Matthew 26:51, Luke 22:49.

¹⁹⁰ Josephus, *Jewish War* I, 88. (Thackeray’s translation.)

¹⁹¹ Ibid, I, 253.

¹⁹² Josephus, *Jewish War* IV, 402.

¹⁹³ Ibid, II, 10-11.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, II, 42-44.

¹⁹⁵ Exodus 11:10, Deuteronomy 34:11.

¹⁹⁶ Compare Galatians 3:1.

¹⁹⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War* V, 289.

ism—Titus’ troops took to crucifying a multitude of prisoners of war in a variety of humiliating postures “as a joke.”¹⁹⁸ In addition to mass slaughter of combatants by the sword—a thousand at Gerasa¹⁹⁹—a rebel might be first tortured and then burned alive in the case of Jonathan, “a weaver by trade” who led his indigent followers into the desert, promising to produce “signs and portents.”²⁰⁰ Herod burned alive the rioters who cut down the Roman eagle mounted over the gate of the Temple.²⁰¹

At times the sheer numbers of the publicly crucified verged on parody; Demetrius III removed eight hundred captives taken at Bemeselis to Jerusalem and crucified them “in the midst of the city, their women and children slaughtered before their eyes.”²⁰² The ill-omened Varus, who would die at the hands of German insurgents in the Teutoburg forest, crucified two thousand Jewish rebels and burned Emmaus to the ground.²⁰³ When appointed procurator of Judea, Felix crucified an “incalculable number” of insurgents as well as their supporters.²⁰⁴

The evidence we can glean from the accounts in the *Jewish War* suggests that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was not only a historical event, it represented a *common* event. Jerusalem, the seat of the Davidic kings, became the focus of the world’s first recorded religious war during the Maccabean revolt and has remained a trigger of religious conflict ever since. The national festivals generally and Passover in particular were evidently occasions for popular uprisings, and provocations from would-be prophets and messianic pretenders could expect a decisive response. Other evidence speaks to the religious background of these disturbances.

The *Psalms of Solomon* are of particular interest, having been composed in Palestine, originally in Hebrew, nearly a century before Jesus; Pompey’s conquest of Palestine (63 BCE) as well as his death (48 BCE) were already past.

Behold, O Lord, and raise up their king for them, a son of David, *at the time which you appoint* (εις τον καιρον²⁰⁵ ον ειλου), O God, that he may rule over your servant, Israel...the sinner’s arrogance he will crush like a clay vessel, he will shatter their very confidence with a

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, V, 451.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, IV, 488.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, VII, 438, 450.

²⁰¹ Ibid, I, 655.

²⁰² Ibid, I, 97.

²⁰³ Ibid, II, 75.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, II, 253.

²⁰⁵ “one of the chief eschatological terms. ο καιρος the time of crisis, the last times,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 396.

staff of iron...and he [is] a righteous king over them, instructed by God, and there is no unrighteousness in them in his days because all are holy and their king [is] *the Anointed* (χριστος) of the Lord...Another psalm of Solomon about *the anointed of the Lord* (του χριστου κυριου)...your love is toward the seed of Abraham, the sons of Israel... your discipline is upon us as a firstborn son, only-begotten...cleanse Israel, O God, for the day of mercy, of blessing, for the day of election, when *he will raise up his anointed* (αναξει χριστου αυτου).²⁰⁶

“The expectation [of *Psalms of Solomon* 17] is one of the imminent reversal of fortune...The rule of the expected Son of David will be realized in Jerusalem and in Palestine, the promised land...the decisive turn which will be brought about by God, cannot be far off.”²⁰⁷ Early Christians clearly shared in these apocalyptic expectations—“today a savior was born for you in David’s city, who is *Christ the Lord* (χριστος κυριος),”²⁰⁸—Israel’s history was “written as a warning for us on whom the end of the ages has arrived.”²⁰⁹ “[The coming of the “son of David”] looks for its fulfillment in a new perfect age, but in one that is firmly rooted in the land, specifically in Jerusalem.”²¹⁰ It is perfectly consistent with such expectations that Jesus of Nazareth, like so many before and since, would set his face toward Jerusalem, perhaps as an act of self-immolation.²¹¹

Was Jesus of Nazareth insane?

It is difficult to read Josephus’ account of the events of the first Roman-Jewish war without wondering if many of the characters he described were not, in fact, simply sociopaths and madmen, clinically insane. Indeed it would appear that a very similar notion might have crossed Josephus’ mind as he recorded his history.

Deceivers (πλαυνοι)²¹² and fraudsters, under the pretense of divine inspiration, instigated revolutionary changes and persuaded the multitude to act like madmen and led them out into the desert under the belief that God would there display signs of their deliverance.²¹³

²⁰⁶ *Psalms of Solomon* 17:21, 23-24,32, 18:0, 3-4.

²⁰⁷ de Jonge, *Neotestamentica* 23 (1989), 98-99, 101.

²⁰⁸ Luke 1:11.

²⁰⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:11.

²¹⁰ Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*, 342.

²¹¹ Compare Mark 9:30-33.

²¹² Compare Matthew 27:63: “*that deceiver* (εκεινος ο πλαυνος) said...”

²¹³ Josephus, *Jewish War* II, 259-260. (Thackeray’s translation retained with some changes.)

The Roman soldier who flung a piece of burning timber into the Temple, sealing its fate, was moved by a “daemonic impulse”²¹⁴ and the city magistrates concluded that the aforementioned Jesus, son of Ananias, was impelled by some “utterly supernatural motivation (*δαμονιωτερον το κινημα*).”²¹⁵ After a fire broke out in Antioch, Antiochus inflamed the citizenry against the Jews by accusing them of setting the blaze. The excited populace began “to imagine that they had all but seen with their own eyes the Jews setting fire to the town” responded “like maniacs, in a wild frenzy.”²¹⁶ Josephus also described, “the insanity of the Sicarii” (*η των σικαριων απονοια*) that spread “like a disease.”²¹⁷ Palestine, then as now, was a steaming platter of crazy with a heaping side order of crazy.

Tellingly, the question of Jesus’ sanity and that of his followers is raised within the founding documents of Christianity. Jesus’ family said, “He’s out of his mind!” and the religious authorities claimed he was possessed.²¹⁸ In his hometown, where the people knew him best, he could perform no miracles.²¹⁹ Jesus’ preaching—or at the very least the words attributed to him—often sound like the ravings of a lunatic: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”²²⁰ Not surprisingly at this point many of his disciples abandoned him²²¹ and his own brothers did not believe in him.²²²

When Paul appeared before Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea, and described his conversion, “Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you’re raving! *Too much learning* (*τα πολλα...γραμματα*) is driving you out of your mind!”²²³ The implication, elided by Luke, was that Paul’s obsession with *scripture*—*τα ιερα γραμματα*, “the sacred writings”²²⁴—had unbalanced him mentally. Christianity reflected a crucial difference between Greco-Roman and Jewish religion: in the Greco-Roman world, as is the case today, thinking about religion often made people *less* religious, but among the Jews the more

²¹⁴ Ibid, VI, 252.

²¹⁵ Ibid, VI, 303.

²¹⁶ Ibid VII, 57-58. (Thackeray’s translation.)

²¹⁷ Ibid, VII, 437.

²¹⁸ Mark 3:21-22.

²¹⁹ Mark 6:1-5.

Compare John 6:42.

²²⁰ John 6:53-54.

²²¹ John 6:66.

²²² John 7:5.

²²³ Acts 26:24.

²²⁴ As at 2 Timothy 3:15.

one thought about religion, the more religious one became. “The major reason for this difference was the Jews’ possession of scripture.”²²⁵ In addition to its bibliolatry, the early Christian community had a fascination with “gifts of the spirit” which lead Paul to caution the house church in Corinth, “So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?”²²⁶

Often overlooked is *the role of Jerusalem itself*, well summarized by Montefiore:

All three Abrahamic religions believe in the Apocalypse, but the details vary by faith and sect. Secularists may regard all this as antique gobbledygook, but, on the contrary, such ideas are all too current. In this age of Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism, the Apocalypse is a dynamic force in the world’s febrile politics...The darkness of this city of the dead stems not just from a sort of necrophilia, but also from necromancy: the dead here are almost alive, even as they await resurrection. The unending struggle for Jerusalem—massacres, mayhem, wars, terrorism, sieges and catastrophes—have made this place into a battlefield, in Aldous Huxley’s words the “slaughterhouse of the religions....Jerusalem defies sense, practical politics and strategy, existing in the realm of ravenous passions and invincible emotions, impermeable to reason.”²²⁷

Recently the recognition of a distinct “Jerusalem Syndrome” has emerged, a constellation of obsessive-compulsive beliefs described after “1200 tourists with severe, Jerusalem-generated mental problems”²²⁸ required medical intervention in a psychiatric clinic over a period of thirteen years due to the severity of their symptoms. In some cases the delusional self-identified with biblical characters—asked who the “Son of Man” might be, Jesus’ disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”²²⁹ Evidence of Jerusalem Syndrome, the “behavioral phenomena observed in eccentric and psychotic tourists with religious delusions” has since been located in accounts dating back to the 19th century.²³⁰ In one case a subject made multiple attempts at self mutilation after his arrival in the city—“Two years before his arrival in Israel, he had experienced a

²²⁵ Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version*, 116.

²²⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:23 (NIV)

²²⁷ Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, xxiii, xxv.

²²⁸ Bar-El, et al., *British Journal of Psychiatry* 176 (2000), 86.

²²⁹ Matthew 16:14.

²³⁰ Witztum & Kalian, *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 36 (1999), 260.

religious revelation after watching an evangelical TV program...he became intent upon castrating himself, basing himself on literal interpretation [sic] of verses in the New Testament.”²³¹

Before dismissing out of hand the possibility that Jesus was simply of unsound mind, we might compare the findings in subjects with Jerusalem syndrome with Jesus’ reported behavior. One subject “felt it imperative to bring [his] message to the people of Jerusalem” and during a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre “succumbed to an attack of psychomotor agitation and started shouting at the priests...the confrontation developed into a violent struggle.”²³² Immediately after his baptism, according to Mark, “the spirit drives [Jesus] out into the desert (εκβαλλει εις την ερημον)”²³³—εκβαλλω (*ekballō*) is next used of “driving out” demons²³⁴—and soon Jesus proclaims, “The appointed time has come to an end and the kingdom of God has arrived!”²³⁵ Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem,”²³⁶ convinced that “everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled.”²³⁷ As his entourage approached the city, “the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once”²³⁸ and after reaching Jerusalem at Passover, Jesus precipitated a violent confrontation, causing the Temple authorities to fear his effect on the crowds and look for a way to kill him.²³⁹ Were Jesus to appear next Easter in Jerusalem accompanied by an ecstatic band of evangelical End Timers, a series of the events like those recorded in the gospels would barely merit inclusion in the psychiatric literature.

Perhaps no one has expressed this issue better than Sam Harris:

Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor...We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them “religious”; otherwise, they are likely to be called “mad,” “psychotic,” or “delusional.”...It takes a certain kind of person to believe what no one else believes. To be ruled by ideas for which you have no evidence (and which therefore cannot be justified in conversation with other

²³¹ Zislin, et al., *Transcultural Psychiatry* 39 (2002), 258.

²³² Bar-El, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 176 (2000), 88.

²³³ Mark 1:12.

²³⁴ Mark 1:39.

²³⁵ Mark 1:15.

²³⁶ Luke 9:51.

²³⁷ Luke 18:31 (NIV).

²³⁸ Luke 19:11 (NIV).

²³⁹ Mark 11:15-18.

human beings) is generally a sign that something is seriously wrong with your mind. Clearly, there is sanity in numbers.²⁴⁰

So, historical or not? There is nothing about Jesus' slender biography that can be plausibly gleaned from the gospels, his lowly Galilean origins, his regional reputation as an exorcist and healer, his apocalyptic fixation, his appeal to the poor and downtrodden, his disciples of dubious loyalty, or his conviction that the Davidic kingdom would somehow be restored in Jerusalem, that cannot be replicated in the careers of other would-be saviors. None of his detractors seems to have been impressed with his credentials or amazed that such a figure had appeared—messiahs, prophets, magicians and soothsayers, like the demons they expelled, were legion. Every Passover, or so it would seem, brought with it more “sons of David,” yet another batch of self-appointed Elijahs and Jeremiahs, imposters and frauds the beleaguered Romans nailed up like shingles.

Pace the “hard” mythicists, the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth does precisely nothing for Christian apologists who labor under the delusion that eyewitness testimony indubitably proves anything. Real historians, like defense attorneys, are well aware that eyewitness testimony is often defective—“scholars must not imagine that a firsthand report is ‘true’ or that later interpreters might not have understood the event better than firsthand observers ...the physical, social, and cultural environment of a person determines what he ‘knows’ and how he ‘knows.’”²⁴¹ As Ehrman points out in an extended discussion of the memory of Jesus' early followers, individual memory of the past is partially subsumed by and shaped by collective memory according to the needs of the community's *present*.²⁴² There is little doubt that process of ‘recontextualizing’ the events of Jesus' life began within days of Jesus' crucifixion—“Were not our hearts burning within us *while he talked with us* on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”²⁴³

If, by some technological miracle, a team of archaeologists were to produce the real burial shroud of Jesus, locate both his tomb and the manger in which he lay, and confirm every physical detail of his life down to each place he sat or shat, the display would do exactly nothing to confirm the religious claims of Christianity. Such a marvelous series of relics would not reverse the failure of Christianity's central prophecy or the failure of innumerable predictions Christians have made since, nor would it resolve the multiple contradictions and inconcinnities of the gospels, or address Christianity's many centuries of

²⁴⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 65, 72.

²⁴¹ Howell & Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 65, 68.

²⁴² Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels*, 232.

²⁴³ Luke 24:32 (NIV).

moral failures. History cannot save Christianity.

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