A commentary on Shirley Jackson Case's *The Historicity of Jesus*

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Some defenders of Jesus' historicity like to say that mythicism was dispatched to the historical trash bin by competent scholars shortly after it was introduced in the late 19th century. Among those champions of the historical consensus was Shirley Jackson Case (1872-1947), a church historian at the University of Chicago Divinity School who was committed to a naturalistic account of Christian origins. He published *The Historicity of Jesus* in 1912, summarizing the mythicist arguments that were then most current and rebutting them with an argument that made no appeal to supernaturalism. I have seen no better argument for historicity presented by any modern defender of Jesus' existence. Modern mythicists have moved beyond Case's adversaries, finding new evidence and better arguments, but the defenders of orthodoxy have made no progress. They have nothing to say that Case was not saying, and they usually are not saying it as well as he did.

Case says in his preface:

> By way of approach, the characteristic features of more recent opinion regarding the historical Jesus have been surveyed, and, on the other hand, the views of those who deny his existence have been examined in detail. The negative arguments have been carefully analyzed in order accurately to comprehend the problem. In presenting the evidence for Jesus' historicity, an effort has been made both to meet opponents' objections and at the same time to give a fairly complete collection of the historical data upon which belief in his existence rests. (p. v)[1]

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[1]Embedded citations are to Shirley Jackson Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912. Online version: https://ia600409.us.archive.org/21/items/cu31924029312075/cu31924029312075.pdf. References to all other sources are footnoted.

I found the effort to be generally successful, making allowances for the state of scholarship when he was writing. The discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi library were decades in the future, occurring only barely within his lifetime. The fairness with which he treats the mythicists of his day, and the care with which he presents his own counterargument to them, are in great contrast to every modern effort I have so far encountered.

A theologian by academic training, Case's professional specialty was Christianity's early history, which he reconstructed from a naturalistic perspective. One of his students described him as "a scientific historian in the grand manner."[2] Today's historicists who so eagerly quote-mine him ought to try harder to emulate him.

There seems to have been no generic label for the ahistoricists[3] of Case's day. He identifies their thesis thus: "Jesus' life . . . is held to be entirely fictitious" (p. 1). That is precisely how I would put it myself, although as we shall see, Case was not thinking of quite the same kind of fiction that I and other mythicists have in mind. It needs to be kept in mind that none of the 19th- and early-20th -century mythicists to whom Case was responding had proposed an alternative thesis of Christian origins sufficiently similar to modern mythicism to allow a direct comparison. His arguments against those alternatives, even if cogent, are thus not entirely relevant to a critique of the current alternative, but it will be useful anyway to note some of the flaws in his criticisms. The greater focus of this essay, though, will be on Case's defense of historicity, as I judge it to be at least as good as any modern defense and better than most.

Much has been made of the general intemperance of today's historicists and their consequent tendency to misrepresent mythicist arguments. I take this opportunity to note parenthetically that the best advocates on our side can sometimes be guilty of the same. In his own critique of Case's book, Earl Doherty remarked, "Characteristically,

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[2]Paul Schubert, "Shirley Jackson Case, Historian of Early Christianity: An Appraisal," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1949), p. 30.

[3]"Ahistoricism" is my own preferred term for the proposition that Jesus of Nazareth did not exist. Conceding its relative inelegance, however, I will usually use "mythicism" instead.

Case accuses mythicists of 'displaying a partisan temper not consistent with the spirit of a truly scientific research.'"[4] But that was not Case's accusation, exactly. What Case said about ahistoricism was:

> Its advocates are occasionally accused, and perhaps not always unjustly, of displaying a partisan temper not consistent with the spirit of a truly scientific research, yet they sometimes vigorously declare themselves to be working primarily in the interests of genuine religion. Even though their position may ultimately be found untenable, the variety and insistency with which it is advocated cannot well be ignored. (p. 2)

It cannot be denied that many ahistoricists do argue in an utterly unscientific manner and with a partisanship that amounts to pure antireligious bigotry. The accusation that they all do this, which some historicists do make, is of course unjust, but Case makes it perfectly clear that he does not think they all do. Compared with the likes of R. Joseph Hoffman, James McGrath, the late Maurice Casey, or Bart Ehrman[5], Case concedes that the mythicists among his contemporaries could at least possibly have had some grounds for their skepticism in light of the scholarship of his day. "When one sees how radically the traditional conception of Jesus' person has been reconstructed by

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[4]Earl Doherty, "Responses to Critiques of the Mythicist Case." CritiqueFour-1, n.d. http://jesuspuzzle.humanists.net/CritiquesRefut1.htm.

[5]For examples of each, see: R. Joseph Hoffman, "Mythtic Pizza and Cold-Cocked Scholars," The New Oxonian, April 3, 2012, https://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2012/04/23/mythtic-pizza-and-cold-cocked-scholars/; James F. McGrath, "Mythicist Language Is Designed to Make Lies Sound Truthful," Exploring Our Matrix, June 30, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2013/06/mythicist-language-is-designed-to-make-lies-sound-truthful.html; Maurice Casey, "The Jesus Process: Maurice Casey," The New Oxonian, May 22, 2012, https://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com/2012/05/22/the-jesus-process-maurice-casey/; Bart D. Ehrman, "Did Jesus Exist?," Huffington Post, March 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html.

recent criticism," he observes, "the possibility of denying his very existence is at least suggested" (pp. 2-3). He allows that it could have seemed a natural extension of the scholarly trend that had discredited most of the historically orthodox portrayal of Jesus. Having established that he wasn't God, skeptics might have reasonably thought it wasn't much of a reach to conclude that he wasn't a real man, either. In any case, he says, "This seems to be the point from which the problem of Jesus' historicity must at present be approached" (pp. 3-6).

Most of us get it that it's a fallacy to insist on an all-or-nothing criterion of credibility. Jesus of Nazareth, or certain of his disciples, could have founded Christianity even if his mother was not really a virgin and he didn't actually walk on water or rise from the dead. Case presents an account of Christianity's origins that explicitly dismisses any supernaturalist suppositions, and something like his account is widely accepted by liberal Christians to this day, and by perhaps a majority even of atheists. In this account, the "Christ of faith"—what early Christians said about Jesus—had little to do with anything Jesus had said about himself. It was rather a product of the "Easter experience"—the conviction of certain of Jesus' disciples that they had seen him alive again after his crucifixion. How they might have acquired that conviction is a matter of much speculation for those who will not accept an actual resurrection, but liberal Christians and many non-Christians are sure that something happened to make those disciples think they had had an encounter with a risen Jesus sometime after he died.

Having described the historical Jesus of secular and liberal Christian thinking, Case makes the intriguing observation that more conservative Christians agree with the mythicists on one point: You can't get to historical Christianity from there. A man so ordinary, so like every other man, could not have been the source of such power as Christianity was destined to bear on subsequent world history. From this premise, traditional Christians infer supernatural intervention, while mythicists infer the nonexistence of such a man (pp. 29-30). So says Case, and it is indeed a critical component, though not the entirety, of the mythicists' argument. We'll have another look at their argument in due course.

The second chapter of *The Historicity of Jesus* is devoted to a review of mythicist theories current in Case's time and their antecedents. I have not read any of the authors on whose works he comments and so cannot assess the accuracy with which he reports their thinking. But I can note that he does not insult any of them. He impugns neither their motives nor their scholarly competence.[6] He identifies what he thinks are errors in their reasoning, and that is all he does.

Concerning his criticisms, though, a few observations are in order insofar as they may become relevant later. Concerning Bruno Bauer, he says,

> Summarized, the main items of his criticism are: (i) emphasis upon definite speculative presuppositions, (2) an unqualified treatment of the New Testament books as tendency writings, (3) stress upon the lack of non-Christian evidence for the existence of Christianity in the first century, and (4) a belief that all factors necessary to account for the origin of Christianity without reference to a historical Jesus can be found in the life of the ancient world. (p. 39)

Concerning (1): At some level, every work of history is an exercise in speculation. We have a certain body of evidence—some undisputed facts about the existence of certain documents, artifacts, etc.—and the historians are telling us what they think are the best explanations for how that evidence came to exist. Those explanations are based on certain background knowledge we all have about how the world works and what makes people tick. We see how people act today—what they do, what they sometimes do, and what they never do. We assume that people in the past had certain things in common with the people we now live among, and we use that assumption when we infer, from reading a certain kind of document reporting (for example) the assassination of a certain Roman emperor, that the emperor actually was assassinated.

In ordinary historical discourse, our background knowledge is just a set of presuppositions, things we assume for the sake of discussion. It's not that we can't defend them, but rather that we think we don't need to because nobody is disputing them. But sometimes they are disputed, and then they are no longer presuppositions, or

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[6]Well, hardly ever. An exception will be noted and commented on shortly.

at least not accepted as such by those who question them. And some of our presuppositions about the past, or about human nature, really should be questioned.

Concerning (2), one who admits, as Case does, that the NT books are tendency writings needs to explain how he would qualify the observation and why. Of course, the fact that their purpose is to advance a particular set of religious doctrines does not imply their complete lack of historical facts, but we need a basis on which to distinguish their facts from their fictions. Case is arguing, "We can't believe the gospels when they say X, but we should believe them when they say Y." But how come? He will attempt an answer later in the book, and we'll see why it's not a good answer.

As to (3), I'll admit that absence of evidence in this case is not good evidence of absence, but it's not irrelevant, either. On a naturalistic account of Christian origins, the silence is an anomaly if Jesus actually existed. A man who was deified almost immediately after his death should have done something that would have attracted significant attention among his contemporaries.

And as to (4), here we get to the real heart of the dispute. Considering everything else we think we know about the ancient Middle East, is there a plausible explanation for the origin and ultimate success of Christianity that does not presuppose the real existence of Jesus of Nazareth? If there is none, then mythicism has a problem, but otherwise it merits at least a respectful hearing. We can admit that some ahistoricists have found precedents that are indeed improbable. Case mentions one writer, for example, who thought he had found the ultimate source of Christianity in the Gilgamesh epic (p. 44). That writer was almost certainly mistaken, but it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that some version of every major element of Christian doctrine was being taught in one or another Middle Eastern religious cult that predated the ostensible lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth.[7]

After summarizing the various mythicist hypotheses current in his day, Case addresses their commonalities:

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[7]Richard Carrier summarizes the evidence for this in *Not the Impossible Faith : Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2009.

> They all agree in treating the evidence for a historical Jesus as wholly unreliable. This involves in most instances the hypothesis of a second-century date for the New Testament writings. Robertson, Mead, and Drews hold to the genuineness of the principal Pauline letters, yet they so read them as to find there no proof for Jesus' existence. Much stress is usually placed upon the paucity of the non-Christian references to the new religion and its alleged founder in the first century a.d. On the positive side, a theory of Christianity's origin is constructed out of more obscure and remote data gleaned from the life and thought of the ancient world. Although at this point there are wide variations in the items chosen, the choice is regulated by a uniform principle, namely, ideas not persons are the significant factors in the origin of a religion. (56-57)

His remark about "ideas not persons" merits some attention. Case was perhaps under the influence of Carlyle's Great Man theory of history, which, while no longer regnant, still has its aficionados, particularly among people interested in Christian history. Among those who don't doubt Jesus' historicity are some doubt that he really founded Christianity, and their alternative founder is usually Paul. Considering Christianity's historical importance, somebody with a lot of personal clout had to get it started, the thinking seems to go, and if it wasn't Jesus, it had to be Paul. History's big events, we're supposed to think, couldn't have just happened, and ordinary people, even collectively, don't have what it takes to make them happen. Extraordinary changes require extraordinary people. But the trend of historiography since Carlyle's time has not been friendly to his theory. We don't have time here to analyze the debate, but it is not a given that Christianity could never have gotten started without somebody like Jesus of Nazareth to get it started.

That noted, Case's observation is a fair enough analysis, and it loses no relevance when applied to today's mythicists, except that we might quibble over how "obscure and remote" are the data used to construct an alternative theory of Christianity's origin. Case will present his rebuttal to these arguments in subsequent chapters, and we will discuss his presentation in due course. For the moment, though, a comment on one of his rare lapses into something approaching an ad hominem. He says:

> It is an obvious fact that the champions of this modern radicalism have not approached their task as specialists in the field of early Christian history, nor are they thoroughly equipped to use the tools of that science. Not only so, but they deliberately discard those tools and condemn the methods of the historical theologian as unscientific, because he allows Jesus an especially significant place and refuses to push critical skepticism to what they regard the logical issue—that is, the denial of Jesus' existence. This animosity toward the theologian sometimes leads to a misunderstanding, or even to a misrepresentation, of his position. (p. 59)

Case does not tell us what special tools are required for doing early Christian history as opposed to any other kind of history. Nor does he explain what is so unique about Christian history that the tools ordinarily used by secular historians are inadequate for discovering it. Of course, any researcher venturing outside his own specialty needs to do some homework. He needs to be familiar not only with the consensus of experts but also the evidence and arguments on which that consensus is based, and if he thinks the arguments are flawed he needs to explain why. If he thinks he has found a problem with the evidence, he needs to know whether anybody noticed it before him and what they had to say about it, and he needs to address any previous efforts to deal with that problem. But nobody needs credentials to do any of this. It takes time and hard work, but anyone can do it regardless of their c.v.

Of course many unbelievers are hostile to theologians, and their hostility has led some of them to commit egregious errors. But in this context, the appropriate response to mistreatment is simply to identify it. It is not to give special treatment to the victim. We have no reason to privilege theological history. The accusation that it is unscientific is either deserved or not. If it is not deserved, then well and good: the accusation can be dismissed as such. But if it is deserved, then theology is no excuse. Unscientific history is not reliable history.

In the next chapter, Case sets himself the task of answering two questions that should be addressed to any ahistoricist argument: "Does it successfully dispose of the traditional evidence for the origin of Christianity? and, Does it substitute an adequate

reconstruction of the history?" (p. 66) The phrase "dispose of" strikes me as prejudicial, rather like "explain away." It suggests that the conventional explanation for the evidence is the only possible explanation. But to offer an alternative explanation is not to ignore that evidence or pretend it doesn't exist. Now, perhaps Case intended "dispose of" just to mean "explain." If so, then I entirely agree that these two questions are what any theory of Christian origins, conventional or otherwise, must answer.

So he goes on:

> In the first place, is the explicit New Testament testimony to the existence of Jesus as a historical person adequately disposed of on the theory that he never lived at all? If he is not a historical character this supposed testimony to his existence is either fictitious or else it has commonly been misread. (p. 67)

Yes, exactly. Or close enough, at least, although we're going to see that Case sometimes seems to have trouble distinguishing fiction from fraud. This needs some attention, since so many of his critiques are still deployed against modern mythicists. A narrative is a work of fiction if, and only if: (a) the author knows it to be factually untrue and (b) the writer does not expect his readers to suppose that it is factually true. It is a work of fraud only if (a) obtains but (b) does not. A writer of fiction does not intend to deceive anyone. Of course historical fiction can deceive if it includes bad history, and it's true enough that some writers of historical fiction don't much care whether they get their facts straight. But carelessness should not be equated with dishonesty.

So then, how do we know what any writer expected of his readers? Until modern times, we couldn't always be sure. The standard disclaimer "This is a work of fiction" is a very recent development, and its primary purpose seems to have been to forestall litigation, not to practice truth in advertising. When reading an ancient narrative, sometimes we have good evidence of the writer's intentions and sometimes we don't, and if we don't, then we just don't know what he intended. And if we don't know his intentions, then we don't know whether we should believe what he wrote.

Case's defense of the canonical evidence for Jesus's existence is not well organized. He begins by opining that mythicists "commonly ignore, or unceremoniously dismiss, all external testimony for the early existence of the New Testament books" (p.

67). As already noted, it is not ignoring evidence to just disagree about what it proves. Furthermore, while many mythicists do think that the entire New Testament was written during the second century, not all of them are so unconventional. In particular, many if not most accept the consensus view of the Pauline corpus, and some date the gospels only a few decades later than does mainstream scholarship. The more extreme views might have been somewhat more popular in Case's time than our own, but we tend to hear the same objections that he raised to any revision of the conventional dating of the canonical writings.

We should also note that "earlier" does not always mean "more reliable." All else being equal, it is true that earlier sources are to be trusted more than later sources, but all else is almost never equal, and in the case of a work of fiction, contemporaneity becomes simply irrelevant.

Case also notes that mythicists "lay great stress upon alleged parallelisms between Christianity and earlier or contemporary heathenism, inferring that this proves the secondary character of the Christian literature" (p. 67). Whether this is a legitimate complaint depends on the intended meaning of "proves." In all the mythicist literature I have read, I cannot recall any claim that pagan parallels actually prove anything except insofar as they falsify any claims about Christian teachings being historically unprecedented. Of course they don't falsify Jesus' existence, but nobody actually says they do. They are simply evidence against the claim that the Christian narrative about Jesus was so unique for its place and time that it must have had a basis in some historical facts about a real Jesus of Nazareth.

Cases reminds us: "Even if the New Testament writers sometimes used gnostic nomenclature, or appropriated ideas and terms familiar to the worshipers of Adonis, it is still perfectly clear that they purport to be preaching a *new* religion" (p. 68). Yes, they so purport. And therefore, what? Case makes it very clear that he is no inerrantist. Of course he also doesn't think the NT writers were liars, but neither do I, and neither do most of the mythicists whose opinions I respect. So, these writers believed they were teaching something new. But so what? Obviously, it was not an exact duplicate of anything that was already on offer. Christianity certainly was new in some ways, so the

writers weren't lying when they said it was new. Automobile manufacturers are not lying when, as they do every fall, they advertise the new cars they're selling, notwithstanding the overwhelming similarity of those cars to the ones they had been selling throughout the previous year.

"Especially important in this connection," says Case,

> is the treatment of the Pauline letters. According to tradition they were written mostly in the sixth decade of the first century, and they are so definite in their reference to a historical Jesus that their spuriousness, either wholly or in part, is commonly admitted to be a necessary presupposition for the denial of Jesus' historicity. (p. 68)

Case was writing just after the heyday of the Dutch radicals, among whom the thesis that Paul wrote none of the letters attributed to him enjoyed a vogue. It's still a popular idea in some sectors of the skeptical community. But many mythicists, myself included, think this notion goes far beyond what the evidence supports. Indeed, a key premise of most modern mythicism is that the so-called undisputed Pauline corpus—no matter who actually wrote it—accurately reflects mid-first-century Christian thinking. Where we disagree with orthodox scholarship is over the claim that they are "definite in their reference to a historical Jesus." That claim, we think, must be grounded in a presupposition that the Jesus Christ about whom Paul was writing was the same man as the Jesus of Nazareth about whom the gospel authors wrote.

And Case knew this. Apparently quoting Arthur Drews, he says:

> Finally it is asserted that "the Pauline letters contain no compulsion of any sort for the supposition of a historical Jesus, and no man would be likely to find such there if it were not already for him an established assumption." (p. 73)

Like today's historicists, he has a handful of apparent counterexamples: the inauguration of the Eucharist in I Corinthians 11; the appearances of the risen Christ in I Corinthians 15; and references to the brothers of the Lord in I Corinthians and Galatians. Other proof texts favored by modern historicists include "seed of David" in Romans and "born of a woman" in Galatians. In each case, mythicists have had two

options, but to understand them we need to get a little more specific about the mythicist thesis at issue.

The most probable alternative to historicism, in my judgment, holds that the Christ preached by Paul and other Christians of the early to middle first century was a celestial being, either a god or something like a god, whose death and resurrection occurred in the heavens, not on earth. Some stories about an itinerant Galilean preacher, eventually assembled into a document now called Q, might or might not have been circulating at around the same time, but they did not become associated with the Pauline Christ until many decades later, probably near the end of the first century, when the original version of the first canonical gospel might have been written. This first gospel was not intended to be anybody's biography but was an allegory of the Christian message, or rather the message of one the many sects of Christianity that then existed. Within a few years other gospels were produced, presenting a similar allegory with variations in defense of various sectarian teachings. Near the end of the second century one sect, which we might as well call proto-orthodox Christianity,[8] declared four of these gospels to be authoritative, and its members meanwhile had come to believe that these four, along with the Acts of the Apostles, were historically factual accounts of the sect's origin.

It is not clear what was going on with the original Pauline Christianity during this period except that it apparently evolved into, or was subsumed by, the Marcionites. No document survives that we know to have been written by any Marcionite, although a few

[8]This was the branch of Christianity most directly ancestral to the Roman Catholic Church. According to orthodox (i.e. Eusebian) history, its leaders had inherited the authority given to the apostles by Jesus himself. But we have only Eusebius's word for this, and the way he treats his sources does not justify much confidence in his reliability. I therefore think we are justified in not assuming any congruence between original Christianity and historically orthodox Christianity. In particular, we're not obliged, when second-century patristic writers say in effect, "What we believe is what real Christians have always believed," to take their word for it. Eusebius apparently trusted them. We don't have to.

scholars think some canonical documents include Marcionite material.[9] Everything we know about them is told by people who hated them. From those sources, we hear that the Marcionites regarded Paul as the only true apostle and relied on some epistles they thought he had written. We also hear that they had a version of Luke's gospel, briefer than the version that became canonical, and considered it the only true gospel.

The point of this digression has to do with the extent to which extant copies of the Pauline corpus are authentically Pauline. It seems probable that Paul, or some person that we might as call Paul, wrote some documents during the mid-first century that some Christians came to regard as authoritative. But the oldest known copies of those writings are from the early third (or possibly late second) century, and essentially nothing is known about who had custody of them during the first century and a half of their collective existence.[10] There was ample opportunity for redactions and interpolations that would support various sectarian dogmas. Of course the inauthenticity of any particular passage cannot be inferred from the mere possibility of its having been interpolated. But neither can its authenticity be defended merely by arguing, "You can't prove Paul didn't write it." The proper question is whether it is reasonable to doubt that it represents Paul's thinking. If the corpus as a whole clearly presents a certain way of thinking about Christ, then when we find a passage that, taken at face value, is inconsistent with that way of thinking, then we're entitled to at least suspect that it was not in the original version of the document, or else to infer that Paul intended some meaning other than its face value. Any analysis of the bare handful of statements cited by Case and his successors as constituting Paul's affirmation of Jesus' earthly existence needs to be done in the light of everything else Paul had to say about

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[9]Neil Godfrey, "How Might Marcionite Questions Affect Mythicism? (Bob Price in 'Is This Not the Carpenter?')." Vridar, September 10, 2012. http://vridar.org/2012/09/10/how-might-marcionite-questions-affect-mythicism-robert-price-in-is-this-not-the-carpenter/.

[10] Robert M. Price, "The Evolution of the Pauline Canon," n.d. http://www.depts.drew.edu/jhc/RPcanon.html.

him, and it must also be done without presupposing that he was talking about the Jesus of historically orthodox Christianity.

Modern historicists are wont to offer, as if it were the killer argument, Paul's reference to James as "the lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19). So does Case, though a bit less triumphantly, along with the reference to "brothers of the lord" in I Cor. 9:5. According to mythicists, Case says, these are "to be understood in the sense of community brotherhood" (p. 74). Then he objects:

> Yet we are not told why Paul in the same context should not have included Peter and Barnabas in this brotherhood. Moreover brothers *in* the Lord, not brothers *of* the Lord, is Paul's mode of thought for the community relationship. . . . It is difficult to take arguments of this sort seriously, particularly when they are presented so briefly and with no apparent ground of justification except the presupposition that a historical Jesus must not be recognized. (p. 74)

OK. We are not entitled to argue, "Jesus didn't exist, therefore Paul could not have meant to say that anybody was his brother." But neither are historicists entitled to argue, "Jesus really existed, therefore Paul must have meant to say that James and some other men were his brothers." The argument that "brother of the lord" could not plausibly have meant anything other than "sibling of Jesus of Nazareth," if it is to avoid blatant circularity, needs a better premise than "This is what orthodox Christians have always understood it to mean."

Having disposed of Paul for the time being, Case then takes up the "gospel evidence," beginning with the observation that "the earliest external testimony to the gospels' origin is set aside on the ground of Eusebius' 'notorious unreliability'" (p. 74). This looks very like a concession that Eusebius actually does provide our earliest datum, outside of the gospels themselves, for their provenance. Of course we also have Irenaeus, whom Eusebius does quote approvingly, but Irenaeus was not claiming, as was Eusebius, to be a historian. It does seem likely that no patristic writer came to be considered authoritative unless Eusebius treated him as an authority. Even secular scholars, by and large, have relied on Eusebius for at least a general outline of Christianity's pre-Nicene history: Whatever he said happened, something at least

vaguely like it must have actually happened. Like any historian, though, his testimony cannot be any more reliable than his sources, and if he doesn't tell us why he trusted them, then we can't know whether we should trust him.

Case admits that the gospel authors "combined interpretation with historical narrative," meanwhile lamenting the dismissal by mythicists of efforts of "critical study to determine more accurately the real historical background" that they presumably contain (p. 74). But what we don't get from Case, and have not gotten since his day, is a good reason for the presumption that they contain any real historical background. It is only a presumption, not an inference from any undisputed facts about when, where, and most especially by whom the gospels were written and what sources, if any, the authors relied on. Case laments:

> We are often reminded of the fact that none of our gospels belong to Jesus' own generation, that they are all admittedly more or less interested in expounding Christian doctrine, and that many of their ideas may quite likely be colored by current Jewish or heathen notions. But what would all this prove? The immediate conclusion can hardly be, as the radicals would contend, that there was no historical person Jesus. (pp. 75-76)

Quite so. But neither can the conclusion be that whatever is not provably unhistorical must probably be historical. We cannot just assume that. We need to demonstrate it with some facts about the gospels' provenance that are inconsistent with their being entirely unhistorical. There are no such facts to my knowledge, and I have spent years scouring the writings, online and offline, of historicist apologists.

After a long digression to rebut the Gilgamesh hypothesis, Case returns with: "When once the gospels and the Pauline epistles have been disposed of, the remaining traditional evidence for Jesus' existence is easily dismissed by similar methods" (pp. 85-86). Well, yes, it's easy, because the gospels and Pauline writings are supposed to be our best evidence for Jesus' existence. A defendant with an irrefutable alibi has to be acquitted no matter how many witnesses claim to have seen him commit the crime. No sensible mythicst claims to have irrefutable proof that nothing in the gospels is to be accepted as fact, but when your best evidence fails to prove your case, your next-best

evidence isn't going to make up the difference. If it could, then it wouldn't be next-best, it would be the best.

In Chapter IV, Case offers a more detailed critique of what he calls "the negative argument." He leads with this observation:

> Christianity from the beginning was unquestionably and pre-eminently a religion of salvation—a salvation which is primarily of divine origin and which is revealed and mediated in the career of a Jesus who thereby becomes the unique object of men's faith and reverence. These are essential items in Christian thinking at a very early date. (p. 89)

I agree 100 percent with just one amendment: change "career" to "story." And I don't mean the gospel story. I mean Paul's story, which was not about a martyred Galilean preacher. But yes, the conventional view, practically the unanimous view among academics in all relevant disciplines, is that the story was about a real man whose career, such as it was, inspired Paul's speculations and was the ostensible subject of the canonical gospels. But, says Case, "The critics whose views we are investigating . . . think it absurd to imagine that any historical individual could be given so elevated a position in the thought of men with whom he had been personally associated" (pp. 89-90). Whether any mythicists of Case's time were calling it absurd, I don't know, but today's mythicists don't usually put it so bluntly. They are more likely to say it's just improbable. And of course improbable things do happen. But if we can easily explain how an improbable story came to be widely believed, without assuming it to be a true story, then ordinarily we should prefer the easy explanation.

Case gives us what is actually, in my own judgment, a fair precis of one easy explanation:

> It is pointed out that belief in a redeeming divinity was current at an early date and had found expression in nature myths, in the tenets and practices of secret cults, and in gnostic speculations. Christianity represents the result of a borrowing and recasting of this fundamental conception. The beginnings of the process can no longer be traced with certainty, but they are assigned with confidence to pre-Christian times. This evolution went on both in Palestine and in Hellenistic

> Judaism, and attained the status of an independent religion at about the time Christianity is traditionally said to have come into existence. Such, in outline, is the radicals' understanding of Christianity's origin. (p. 91)

Right. And so, is this more improbable than the conventional hypothesis? The problem, as Case sees it, lies in the evidence for an appropriate antecedent. He claims to examine "with some minuteness the supposed evidence for a primitive belief in a pre-Christian Jesus," (p. 95), and I'm not faulting his thoroughness, not being competent to even judge it. But regardless of what that evidence might plausibly have demonstrated, scholarship over the past century has established beyond reasonable doubt that by the early years of the first century, Christianity's characteristic doctrinal parts were already in the intellectual air. There were dying and rising gods. There were salvation cults. Jesus was a popular given name, and the fact that it means "Yahweh saves" cannot be disregarded as just an irrelevant coincidence. It could have been, but there is no argument to be made that it must have been.

Case goes on for several pages discussing documents purportedly attesting either to a pre-Christian Jesus or to a recognizably Christian sect predating apostolic times, and he concludes that a smoking gun of that sort just isn't there. I will grant that there wasn't one a hundred years ago, and so far as I know none has been found since then. But we don't need it, and if some mythicists think they have found it, too bad for them. Every movement has its zealots who overstate the case for their cause. The evidence is not as conclusive as we wish it were, but that doesn't mean it proves nothing at all. It suffices to disprove the assertion that Christianity had too many new ideas, or some ideas too new, to have originated without a historical Jesus of Nazareth.

But Case might think he has his own smoking gun:

> The gospels show that Jesus' personal associates were utterly unprepared for his death, and Paul says that the early Christian preaching about a dying Messiah was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. This is a very strange situation if the notion was originally heathen and had been early adopted by Judaism. The primitive Christians had too much difficulty in defending their belief in a suffering Messiah to allow us to suppose that they found the idea current in

> Judaism, or even that the heathen notion of a dying and rising divinity was recognized as having any essential similarity with their preaching about "Jesus Christ and him crucified." (p. 119)

The gospel reference here exhibits the historicists' compulsion to assume their conclusion without any apparent awareness that that's what they're doing. If we could believe anything at all that the gospel writers say about Jesus or his associates, then we wouldn't be having this debate, because that is just what the debate is about. As for Paul, I have already mentioned the authenticity problem with the writings attributed to him, but we needn't argue about whether he actually made this particular statement. So what if he did? He is telling his readers what his adversaries are saying about his teachings. Are we supposed to just take his word for it that they were actually saying those things? If he was misrepresenting their objections, would that be "a very strange situation"? Of course not. Ideologues have always misrepresented their opponents. Pagans misrepresented Christians, and Christians did the same not only to pagans but to each other whenever some new sect arose. And they're still doing it. If you want to know what Catholics believe, the last person you should ask is a Protestant. Indeed, even if Paul's report was accurate, that doesn't mean his adversaries were raising any valid objections. If you want to see ridicule of the you-can't-be-serious sort, just look at how oneness Pentecostals and trinitarian Pentecostals talk about each other.

"What troubled the first missionaries of the new religion," says Case, "was not the reluctance of their hearers to believe that a god had become a man, but their hesitation about believing that a man, especially an obscure Jew who had been ignominiously put to death, was really the Son of God" (p. 128). But the debate is about what those first missionaries were actually saying, and a major premise of the mythicist argument is Paul's complete failure to say or even suggest that an obscure Jewish preacher had become the son of God. Case objects, "The oldest type of synoptic tradition does not connect either Jesus' activity or his teaching with a deified past" (pp. 128-29), but nothing about modern mythicism implies that it should. Almost no ahistoricist thinks that the gospel writers were getting their ideas from Paul. We have no reason to suspect

that any of them, except the author Luke's gospel, had even heard of Paul or, if he knew of him, was familiar with his teachings.

"When all the evidence brought against Jesus' historicity is surveyed it is found to contain no elements of strength," Case says (p. 130). Such was his judgment. Since I have not read the sources on which he relied, I cannot judge his judgment. But it's been a hundred years since he handed it down, and it is clear now, if wasn't then, that the evidence against historicity cannot be so easily dismissed. It is not conclusive, but it is strong enough to raise reasonable doubt.

Case complains that mythicism is an "unverified theory as to how the new religion might possibly have arisen" (p. 130), but it is not apparent how any theory about any past event could be verified without time travel. It is only a theory that Christianity arose in the first place somewhere in the Middle East during the first century. We treat it like a fact for the same reason we treat Julius Caesar's assassination as a fact: It is the only sensible explanation for the only evidence we have, and in each case we happen to have a lot of that evidence. But having established an approximate time and a place, the evidence for more specific details about the religion's origins gets more nebulous.

Having discredited mythicism to his own satisfaction, Case proceeds to his positive argument for Jesus' historicity:

> It may not be inappropriate to set forth some specific reasons for believing in his historicity, especially since those who adhere to the opposite view sometimes claim that they are not obliged to justify their skepticism unless a valid argument for historicity is advanced. (pp. 133-34)

There is a whiff of petulance here, as if he were saying, "I shouldn't even have to do this." But we're entitled to ask: Why not? When has any orthodoxy ever been accorded default status in scholarly discourse? If you're going to argue that a theory is orthodox for a good reason, you'd better know what that reason is and be prepared to explain what makes it a good reason. Lay people may have to assume that a scholarly consensus on some historical issue is well justified. I believe that England's Queen Elizabeth I was the daughter of Henry VIII because it says so in all the history books. I don't know why all the history books say so and I don't have time to find out. But then if somebody tells me

she wasn't, I'm not going to argue with them. I cannot defend the consensus without knowing what facts it is based on. In the case of Elizabeth's paternity, I assume that there are plenty of facts implicating Henry VIII, but for me, at this particular time, it is only an assumption. In the case of Jesus' existence, I have taken the time to find out what evidence the historicists are relying on, and I don't agree that it proves what they think it proves. But let's see what Case has to about it.

He begins, correctly:

> The radicals will not allow us to point as proof to the uniformity of Christian opinion today, or merely to cite the Christian tradition of the past. They insist, and quite rightly, that not the Jesus of history but rather the risen and heavenly Christ of faith has held the central position in believers' thought from the earliest times down to the present. . . . To be sure, it may be difficult to imagine that the Christ of faith could in the first instance have come to occupy the place he did without the reality of an earthly Jesus, but to assume this connection as a presupposition would be to beg the question at issue. (p. 134)

Good for him. But then he begins by addressing one key mythicist argument. If we grant (as Case does) that the supernatural elements of the gospel narratives are not credible, then what could Jesus have said or done to give his earliest known followers the idea that he was God incarnate? Case suggests that it was "his heroic suffering." Well, at this time in history, conquerors and emperors were deified, all right, but was any man ever called a god just because of the way he endured suffering? Case responds: If you think that's improbable, "is it not quite impossible to imagine a company of believers declaring themselves to have been companions of a fictitious person and reverencing him even to the extent of sacrificing their selves for his cause?" There are two problems here. First, no one is claiming that any early Christian claimed to be the companion of a fictional Jesus. That is not mythicism. It is a caricature of mythicism, and not even a good caricature. What mythicists are claiming is that some early Christians (but not the very first Christians) read some fictional narratives about Jesus and thought they were reading historical narratives, and that this happened too late for anyone still alive at the time to even pretend to have been a companion of said Jesus. Second: The argument

from martyrdom does not work any better for a liberal like Case than it does for evangelical Christians. Quite apart from any question about Jesus' existence, we have zero reliable information about how any first-century Christian died. Zero, unless we must believe the Tacitean anecdote about Nero and the fire, and Tacitus (if he did write it) doesn't tell us what those Christians were saying about Jesus. Tacitus himself does say that Jesus founded their religion, but he didn't get that information from Nero's victims.

Case admits, "The obscurity of Christianity's beginnings makes our task a difficult one" (p. 137), but he operates on an obvious assumption that the difficulty concerns only separation of fact from apologetic embellishment. Thus we get:

> And so far as our evangelists are concerned, it is evident that they were by no means solely interested in writing the bare outlines of history. Their aim was to make the history they related count in favor of the type of faith which they preached, and which appealed to them as the true interpretation of the data. (p. 140).

But what the historicist needs to demonstrate is that the evangelists were interested in writing any history at all. The mythicist claim is not that the gospel authors tried to write history but failed completely. It is that the gospel authors were not even trying to write history. Of course the claim needs to be defended and not just assumed, but so does the historicist claim that the authors tried to include some history with their apologetics.

Noting once more that the gospels "may indeed have been shaped to favor pragmatic interests," Case asks rhetorically, "What must the primitive Christians' gospel contain in order to insure its effectiveness in the thought-world of their day?" (p. 141) This is not quite the right question to ask, though, as it presupposes that the authors were asking themselves, How can I write this to make it as credible as possible? The question may well have occurred to them, but their answers would have depended on what exactly they wanted their readers to believe. Margaret Mitchell was not trying to convince anyone that a blockade-running sea captain named Rhett Butler married a socially rebellious Southern plantation belle and then deserted her because she was emotionally unfaithful. Mitchell had some other points to make, and she wrote *Gone with the Wind* to make

them, and her effectiveness in making them had nothing to do with whether any person mentioned in the novel had ever actually existed. So it was, mythicists think, with the people who produced the canonical gospels, at least initially.

Whatever else the Christians were trying to put into their message, Case says, they were conveying a message about salvation (p. 141). And that being so, he says, the gospel narrative about Jesus "could scarcely have commended itself even to his disciples." But if there was no Jesus, then there were no disciples for his story to commend itself to. Case is here again demonstrating the intransigence of historicist presuppositions. No mythicist is claiming that Christianity started with the gospel narratives. The conventional view is that it began with oral traditions about Jesus of Nazareth that eventually were incorporated into the written gospels. The mythicist position is that while there might have been some oral traditions circulating in Christian circles by the late first century, they didn't go back to the early first century or originate with anybody who knew any crucified preacher called Jesus of Nazareth.

Case admits that even the written gospels don't tell us why Jesus' followers would have thought he was the messiah (pp. 143-44). So, where did they get the idea? According to Case:

> The chief evidences that Jesus was the coming Messiah were not found at first in history but in the present experiences of the Christians themselves. At least in Paul's interpretation—and we have little reason to think that at this point he differed widely from other early Christians—the primary proofs offered are (1) Jesus' resurrection and (2) the spiritual gifts displayed in the lives of believers, thus attesting Jesus' present lordship. (p. 144)

But Paul doesn't say that. He says he knew that the messiah had been crucified and raised from the dead because God had told him so. Nowhere does he argue, "We know Jesus is lord because he rose from the dead," much less "because spiritual gifts are displayed in our lives." And Case knows this. "It would seem," he says, "that Paul did not ask his hearers to go back into Jesus' earthly career at all for evidence of Jesus' messianic dignity" (p. 145). And he then turns to Acts, "where the disciples' witness to the resurrection, and the ecstatic life of the community in consequence of Jesus' exaltation,

are cited as proof that 'God hath made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom ye crucified'." But why should we trust any particular thing Acts says about the church's history? Many modern scholars, including historicists, have decided that Acts was most likely a work of fiction, and even Case has conceded that its author is unreliable as a historian. He is persistently skeptical about the supernatural elements of the canonical record. He certainly does not think we should believe the author's account of the disciples watching Jesus ascend into heaven. Case thinks that didn't really happen. But then why should we take the author's word for it that the disciples later went around telling everyone that they had witnessed the resurrection? He admits that we can't believe any of Bible's miracle stories, but he does not explain how we ought to decide which of all the other stories are true. He seems to think he has a method, but he doesn't tell us what it is.

In any event, Case perhaps realizes that the Christians weren't going to win any converts by saying, "We know Jesus is lord and messiah because we witnessed his resurrection." He also realizes that during his own purported lifetime, the historical Jesus did not do or say anything that was obviously messianic or indicative of his divinity. And so, what were the Christians to do?

> But how could the Pharisees be fairly upbraided for disbelief if they were not given a sign in support of faith ? Christian apologists recognized this need, and offered, in place of the as yet impossible sign from heaven, other data which were held by believers to justify identifying the earthly Jesus with the future savior from heaven. Negatively, those features in Jesus' career which seemed to contradict this hope were explained away as divinely foreordained; while more positive evidences of Jesus' uniqueness were found in other features of his career. Not only was God's special sanction of him seen in his resurrection and his spiritual lordship over the community—the main pillars of the first Christians' faith—but early interpretation was able to exhibit sanctions from God during Jesus' lifetime, and also attestations of uniqueness given more immediately by Jesus himself. (pp. 151-52)

But this is the fallacy of affirming the consequent. It explains how, if there was a real Jesus, early Christians might have tried to persuade people that he was the messiah. Case says the gospel narratives arose because the early Christians' apologetic difficulties

"brought about a real demand for a 'Life of Christ'" (p. 152). But this presupposes that there was an earthly Jesus about whom to write such a life.

According to Case, the gospels were written to convince people for whom "He is risen" was unconvincing. But why was the resurrection not enough to convince people? In general, because almost no one was going to believe that a man had risen from the dead just because a few of his admirers said he had. But the gospel authors could not have imagined that they could remedy that situation, and they obviously were not even trying to. On that point, all they were doing was repeating the claim "He is risen," adding no more than ". . . as he said he would." Yes, they also told of things Jesus said and did before he was crucified, but they also made it perfectly clear that almost nobody during his lifetime—not even his own disciples, according to the earliest version (Mark's)—thought that any of it was evidence of his messiahship. That is why the gospel authors had to go to such absurd lengths to reinterpret an assortment of throwaway lines in Jewish scripture as messianic prophecies. The question again is raised: If it was so apparent that Jesus of Nazareth was anything but a messiah, then what possessed his disciples to think he was? What made them even suspect in the first place that he might have been? If they were convinced that he actually rose from the dead, maybe that would have convinced them, but it surely wasn't going to convince anybody else. They might possibly have convinced a few of their acquaintances that the resurrection had really happened, but we have no evidence of anybody supposing that rising from the dead was sufficient evidence of either messiahship or divinity. Yes, Christians were telling people that, according to the scriptures, the messiah must be killed and then raised from the dead. But nobody, as far as we know, was telling people that anyone who is killed and then raised from the dead must be the messiah. And Paul, in particular, was saying, "The messiah was crucified and resurrected." He never said, "This man who was crucified and resurrected was the messiah."

"One of the first necessities of primitive interpretation," says Case, "was to counteract the popular belief that certain well-known features of Jesus' career were contrary to messianic faith" (p. 153). But this assumes the historicist conclusion. Paul gives no indication that he ever had to argue with anybody who was saying, "That man

didn't look any messiah I ever heard of." Some of his adversaries apparently did say, "The messiah couldn't have been crucified," but his response was simply, "Nevertheless you must believe he was, because God has revealed to us apostles that he was." Paul's predecessors, whom Case (but not Paul) refers to as "the disciples," offered no apologetic for this belief

> other than to express their conviction that it had happened in accordance with the divine will as revealed in Old Testament prophecy. Thus it was an integral element in the scheme of salvation, even though no one chose to phrase it as Paul did, in the language of the Jewish sacrificial system. (pp. 153-54).

We don't know, actually, how any Christian before Paul was defending the faith. We have no document that any of them might have written, and Paul says nothing about their teaching except that their core message agreed with his. He also suggests that his teachings and theirs had a common source: interpretation of Jewish scripture and personal revelation. Nowhere does Paul so much as hint that anything taught by him or any other apostle originated with the teachings of a Galilean preacher who was crucified by Roman officials—or with any disciples of such a preacher. Nowhere in any writing attributed to Paul is anyone called a disciple of Jesus.

According to Case, "there were theologians, and some of them probably were contemporary with Paul, who recognized the desirability, and found themselves equal to the task, of presenting evidence from Jesus' lifetime in support of their messianic faith" (p. 155). Of course there were such theologians, but their probable contemporaneity with Paul depends on assuming historicity. There is no sign of them in the historical paper trail until the gospels show up. The evidence Case refers to was events such as the Transfiguration, the voice from Heaven at Jesus' baptism, and the angelic announcements associated with his birth. But Case doesn't believe any of these things actually occurred. He all but admits that Christians had to invent them in order give Jesus some messianic credentials of the sort that were conspicuously lacking from his real life. This does not demonstrate how the gospels constitute evidence of Jesus' historical existence. It rather shows how we might account for what the gospels say about Jesus on the assumption of his historical existence. Most of us mythicists will stipulate that the gospels are evidence

for historicity, in the strict sense that their existence can be explained on the assumption of his existence. What we deny is that this remains the most parsimonious explanation after all the other relevant evidence, including but not only the Pauline corpus, is accounted for.

This apologetic goes on for several pages until Case gets to the early Christian comparison of Jesus with Moses:

> Jesus was the new messianic lawgiver who, by way of fulfilling rather than abrogating the Mosaic dispensation, placed his word above that which they of old time had spoken. Hence Jesus was naturally described as exemplifying many superior traits of personality, surpassing even Moses. Josephus probably represents current Jewish opinion when he describes Moses as a prophet whose like had never been known, so that when he spoke you would think you heard the voice of God himself; while his life was so near to perfection that he had full command of his passions, and knew them only by name as perceiving them in others. Ultimately Christian tradition was able to say of Jesus that "never man spake as this man" and no one was able to convict him of sin. (pp. 163-64).

But Moses was a fictional character who, until quite recently, was thought even by most secularists to have been based on a real person. Nowadays, except for those committed to the notion that all mythology must have some basis in historical fact, the conventional wisdom is that there was no captivity of Hebrews in Egypt, no Moses, and no conquest of Canaan. The people who became the Jews were Canaanites from Day One and never lived anywhere but in Palestine. Secular and liberal Christian defenders of Jesus' historicity know this, but they think it unlikely that Christianity's origin myth could similarly be a complete fiction, since the stories were in circulation so soon after the origin. But the notion that people might read a work of fiction and take it to be a record of historical fact is not prima facie absurd. It has happened countless times, even when the story's events are contemporaneous with the readers' own lives.

Case allows that not everything in the gospels was an apologetic for Jesus' messiahship, as "there doubtless were many subsidiary interests at work even in the early period" (p.170). But for the gospels to constitute evidence of his existence beyond

reasonable doubt, we need some reason to think that, among those interests, whether subsidiary or primary, was a desire on the authors' part to present what they thought were some historical facts about the founder of their religion. And Case has not yet given us that reason. He has explained why they might have included material that we know to be unfactual, but no reason to believe that any of the rest of it is factual. The closest he comes to such an argument is in his chapter summary:

> In the first stage of the post-resurrection faith reverence was justified mainly by God's attestations of Jesus, and not until later reflection had done its work did believers come to appreciate that Jesus during his earthly career had really displayed qualities which made him worthy of the later faith. Then the disciples understood that they had been slow to comprehend his significance—a fact which they candidly admitted.
>
> It follows therefore that they had a distinct recollection of an earthly individual with whom they had associated, yet without placing upon him at that time the particular form of interpretation which was later evolved under the inspiration of belief in his resurrection. (p. 175).

But no, it does not follow without begging the historicity question—without assuming that Jesus had an earthly career, that he had disciples, and that some of those disciples came to believe, shortly after his death, that he had risen from the dead. Case says it is "not intrinsically improbable" that the gospels would contain "important historical information about Jesus" (pp. 176-77), and that is so. But we need a reason to think it probable that they contain such information, and we don't have one yet.

In Chapter VI, we return to "The Pauline Evidence for Jesus' Existence." Case begins by defending the "modern critical" consensus that a substantial portion of the Pauline corpus is genuine—a consensus that has not changed significantly since Case's lifetime. But the consensus assumes many facts not in evidence. Most crucially, it assumes a generally reliable transmission history from original composition to the oldest extant copies, which were produced around 200 CE, before which time we have no direct attestation of their content. There is no explicit testimony even to the existence of Pauline writings before the late second century, except that the author of I Clement (ca. 100 CE,

conventionally), seems to think he wrote something to the Corinthian church (p. 179). Case refers to Marcion as "a most significant witness" (p. 179), but we don't have Marcion's own word for anything. All we know about him is what we're told by people who hated him. That doesn't mean we can't believe any of it, but it does mean that we need to be extra careful about what we infer from what the extant sources tell us. Case reminds us that the patristic writers who mention Marcion "did not dispute his high estimate of these [Pauline] writings" (p. 179), but neither do they all corroborate his estimate. Justin, the first to mention Marcion, seems never to have heard of Paul even from his Marcionite sources.

Case seems most eager to discredit the Dutch radicals' thesis that the entire Pauline corpus is inauthentic. I agree with him to this extent: I don't think anybody has made a good argument that either (a) Paul didn't even exist or (b) he had nothing to do with any of the surviving documents bearing his name. But neither have I seen good argument for the consensus that the so-called undisputed epistles are entirely or substantially his work. That consensus, it seems to me, rests on a presumption of "authentic until proven otherwise" for every piece of them, and I haven't seen that presumption justified. This is not to endorse any particular thesis about what or how much was added to whatever Paul himself did write. Robert M. Price has offered one such analysis, which finds rather little of the corpus to be Paul's own work.[11] I suspect he is mistaken in at least a few specifics and possibly most, but I also think his overall argument is cogent: We don't really have a compelling basis for a default assumption of authenticity. In every case where one passage seems inconsistent with another—and there are many such cases—we are justified in supposing that at least one of them was written by someone other than the original author, no matter who that original author was, and that in many cases the interpolator was proto-orthodox. Furthermore, any argument that the inconsistency is only apparent, i.e. "He doesn't really contradict himself," needs to be defended by some argument that is

[11]Robert M. Price, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2012.

not just a secular version of scriptural inerrancy. As Price himself has noted, modern scholarship has no room for "a new Textus Receptus"[12]

Case offers a false dichotomy:

> On the strength of the internal evidence do the probabilities seem to favor the genuineness of this representation, or does close examination show that the picture is a later fabrication depicting an idealized period in the past? (p. 180)

According to Price, it is the internal evidence that argues against complete genuineness. Reasonable people might disagree, but nobody is ignoring the internal evidence. And "fabrication depicting an idealized period in the past" is not the only alternative to complete authenticity. Another is a co-opting of Paul's authority by second-century proto-orthodox redactors who, for whatever reason, felt it imperative to claim that Paul was one of them, teaching his followers about the very same "Jesus Christ and him crucified" as they were finding in the then-newly published gospels. It is thus irrelevant to point out, as Case does, that certain teachings attributed to Paul could not have been invented anytime after Paul's own generation. Any of Paul's actual teachings could have been left intact as long as proto-orthodox apologists could find an interpretation consistent with their own doctrines. Orthodox Christians have always been very good at reconciling the apparently irreconcilable.

Case also thinks the occasional autobiographical detail is evidence for authenticity because it is never relevant to any of Paul's apologetic objectives (pp. 183-85). Perhaps Case is imagining what he would or would not do if he were a forger, but this is only evidence that Case would never succeed as a forger. If a forgery is going to work, the whole point of the exercise is to make your work indistinguishable from what would have been produced by whoever you're pretending to be. Anyway, Case is wasting his time arguing against the handful of radicals who claimed that the entire corpus was a forgery. Even in his day, not all mythicists thought so. Indeed, the most cogent mythicist arguments, then

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[12]Robert M. Price, "Apocryphal Apparitions: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 as a Post-Pauline Interpolation." Apocryphal Apparitions, 2004. http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/art_apocapp.htm.

and now, stipulate the contrary: The corpus contains a core of authentic Pauline thinking, but this thinking is inconsistent with the presupposition that Paul's Christ was the man whose ministry is described in the canonical gospels.

A similar objection applies to Case's citing of "realistic elements in the general historical situation" (pp. 185-89). This is exactly the sort of thing a competent forger would have done, but again, mythicism does not depend on denying the authenticity of these passages.

Finally, Case addresses "those who wish to depreciate the significance of Paul as a witness to Jesus' existence" (p. 191). Given that we have some authentic Pauline material, is it evidence for Jesus' historicity?

"Certainly," Case admits, "Paul claimed to be preaching a gospel which looked to no human source for its authentication, but which had been received by him directly from the heavenly Christ" (p. 191). And Case responds as many continue to respond now: Paul was defending himself against "opponents who were ready on the slightest pretext to interpret his contact with earlier Christians as evidence of inferiority" (p. 191). The modern formulation usually goes something like: Paul needed a trump card to play against his adversaries in Jerusalem, who had the advantage of having known Jesus personally. In other words, Paul was saying, "Oh, sure, those guys were with Jesus every day for three years, but God himself has told me what I'm telling you." We are not told what might have possessed Paul to think this ploy would actually work—nor why, to hear him tell it, it did work. But whatever his motivations, the fact remains that he denies having learned anything about Jesus from any man, and he nowhere suggests that any man he knew had been a disciple of Jesus or had known Jesus personally, except just possibly for those ambiguous references to James and other "brothers of the lord."

Case raises the rhetorical question, "If he had information about Jesus why did he not use it?" and he responds: "How do we know that he did not?" (p. 192). But we don't need evidence that he did not. Historicists need evidence that he did. They need to argue that an impartial reading of Paul's epistles shows that there can be no reasonable doubt that his Christ Jesus was the same man as the gospels' Jesus of Nazareth. But then we're reminded of the occasionalism of Paul's writings: "The occasions which called forth his

letters were not such as to demand detailed exposition of the life of Jesus" (p. 192). But surely some exposition was to be expected. If you're going to tell people that a man was God incarnate, you're going to tell them more than that he was crucified and buried and then rose from the dead, and more than that he was born of a woman and was a descendant of David. You also need to tell them more than that his brothers were prominent members of this new religion propagating his teachings, assuming that Paul really said those things about him.

Having virtually admitted Paul's silence about the earthly Jesus, and having argued that we should not think it anomalous, Case then suggests that it's an illusion.

> And is Paul so completely silent? Drews thinks so, and goes to the extreme of saying that a reader who had not prejudged the question would not be likely to suppose that the apostle ever thought of an earthly Jesus. A few passages from the more important Pauline writings may show the impropriety of this statement. (pp. 193-94).

Well, let's see. He begins: "Sometimes 'the Lord' is referred to in a way that suggests knowledge of events and teachings in the lifetime of Jesus" (p. 194). The question that Case himself has raised is: Does such a suggestion presuppose historicity or doesn't it? Mythicists will concede that if we assume historicity, then it is reasonable to think that Paul was alluding in those passages to things taught by Jesus of Nazareth. But it is pure question-begging, as Drews was pointing out, to conclude "Therefore, Paul was referring to the historical Jesus." Case then presents a portion of the usual litany about "seed of David" and "brothers of the lord," which we have already addressed. Without these "basal historical facts," he says, "Paul's interpretation of Jesus would have been impossible" (p. 195). But Case is clearly assuming his conclusion here, which is that the Jesus whom Paul was interpreting was a recently executed itinerant Galilean preacher, some of whose disciples and relatives were among Paul's acquaintances. The circularity of his argument shows up repeatedly in the following pages, as when he reminds us that "The Jerusalem council and Peter's visit to Antioch again brought Paul into intimate contact with those who had known Jesus personally" (p. 197). Indeed, Case is so persuaded by this evidence that Paul believed in a historical Jesus that he finds it necessary to argue against

the hypothesis that he had been deceived (pp. 197-98). Case assures us that "there never was a time when to deny the reality of Jesus' earthly career would not have been a fatal shock to Paul's entire interpretative scheme" (p. 200). But you don't deny what is never affirmed. According to mythicism, nobody during Paul's lifetime was claiming that Jesus ever had an early career.

In the next chapter Case returns to "The Gospel Evidence." We have already critiqued and found wanting his objections to the mythicist arguments that we're not justified in regarding the gospels as even poor attempts at biography or history. They could have been, but to argue that they probably were, let alone that they must have been, needs better evidence than Case offers, and nobody in the century since his time has had any more to offer than he did. It is practically undisputed by reputable scholars that we have no idea who wrote them, and the authors offer no credible claim to have used any reliable sources. At least two of them, and possibly all four, had access to some earlier document attributing various teachings to some itinerant sage who might or might not have been named Jesus. Aside from that, for all they tell us, they had nothing to rely on but their own imaginations and some things they thought they knew about Jewish prophecies. One of them also seems to have heard about a preacher named Paul who had something to say about a dying and rising savior god. None of this is the stuff of credible historiography.

"It is self-evident," says Case, "that the gospels, in their account of Jesus, purport to portray the career of a historical individual" (p. 202). They are so written, obviously, but to equate the gospel authors' purported purpose with their actual purpose is presuppose Jesus' historicity. "It is equally clear," Case goes on, "that the primitive assembly of believers, as described in the Book of Acts, included individuals who had been personally associated with Jesus during his life upon earth" (p. 202). Yes, that is what the author of Acts says, but Case is avowedly not an inerrantist. He cannot use the argument "The Bible says so, therefore it was so." In his day, the notion that Acts was a work of pure fiction might have been more radical than it is now, but these days, even scholars who don't doubt Jesus' existence have come to regard Acts as worthless as a source of Christian history.

Case tries to turn our ignorance of the gospels' provenance in their favor:

> Today it may seem a great misfortune that they do not bear definite self-attestation to their author and date, yet we may console ourselves with the thought that this very lack shows them to have been pioneers, belonging to that formative period of Christianity when the things of which they speak were more or less common property and did not need any artificial authentication. (pp. 204-5)

But this is just more question-begging. We need authentication, even if early Christians thought they didn't, and we don't have it. We need a reason, supported by evidence, for thinking that they were accepted because they were known at the time they were written to have been authentic. Case assures us that lack of early attestation to the gospels' existence "is no fair measure of the probability or improbability of their existence at that time" (p. 208). But if we don't have evidence for their early existence, it does not matter why we don't have it. Nonexistent evidence cannot prove anything.

According to Case, "both external and internal testimony yields some substantial results regarding the time and manner" of the gospels' origins (p. 205), but his arguments either continue to presuppose his conclusion or are just irrelevant. He begins with a summary of the patristic testimony and observes, "From this survey it is clear that the gospels were in existence before the close of the second century" (p. 206). But that much is not in dispute. He goes on, though: "They had, moreover, attained the status of canonical literature, and had even been given first place in the New Testament collection" (pp. 206-7). The proto-orthodox faction of Christianity seems to have so regarded them, but that only tells us that the books supported proto-orthodox doctrines.

"Early tradition," says Case, "does in reality connect the rise of the gospels, so far as Mark and Matthew are concerned, very closely with the age of Jesus" (p. 209). Maybe, but we have no direct knowledge of that early tradition. We hear about it in late tradition such as Eusebius, our primary source about Papias. And Case himself admits that we cannot take Papias at face value. After summarizing what is still the majority view of New Testament scholars about the order of composition of the canonical gospels, including Matthew's and Luke's use of the Q document, he declares it "evident that we cannot identify our Gospel of Matthew with the Matthean treatise referred to by Papias" (p. 214).

Case thus identifies two "genetic units of synoptic tradition": Mark's gospel and "other tradition which did not necessarily ignore Jesus' deeds but which was especially interested in reporting his teaching" (p. 215). He then observes:

> Since Mark stands at the beginning, and the non-Markan source of Matthew and Luke seems to be earlier than Mark, the justice of gospel tradition's claim to be heard in testimony for Jesus' existence will depend ultimately upon whether these earliest elements in the tradition may reasonably be assigned to a time and a situation in which personal knowledge of a historical Jesus was possible. (pp. 215-16)

But no matter when the gospels were written, there was no possibility of anyone having personal knowledge of a man who didn't exist. Mythicists are not arguing that the authors lived too late to have known the man. They are arguing that there was no man for them to have known. The gospels and Acts are conventionally dated to roughly the last third of the first century, and Case supports this consensus. Among his reasons is the prophecy attributed to Jesus by Mark (chapter 13) that the then-current generation would witness the end of the world. This could hardly have been invented, he suggests, by someone writing during a time by which the prophecy had obviously been falsified (p. 217). But this argument assumes that the writer wanted his readers to think he was writing Jesus' biography. This is the primary assumption that the historicist must defend, and Case offers no defense.

Other arguments for an early dating are similarly weak. Case also presents linguistic arguments for a Palestinian provenance of the synoptics, or at least of some of their source material, but this too is beside the point if our question is: Did the authors intend to be writing history, or were they writing fiction? And then he asks: "What is to be said of the validity of their claim to know a historical Jesus?" (p. 221). But there is no such claim. Matthew and Mark don't even offer a hint that they knew Jesus. Luke tries to drop a hint that he knew some people who knew him, but he doesn't pretend to have met the man himself. And the reference to the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in the Johannine appendix is ambiguous at best. The "primitive tradition," says Case, is "traceable to the same generation which claims to have known Jesus" (p. 221), but no such generation has

been confirmed to have existed. Obviously, there was such a generation if Jesus did exist, but even in that case, any connection between it and the oldest extant writings can only be hypothesized. Aside from Paul, nobody whose writings survive claims any personal acquaintance with anybody who was in a position to provide them firsthand knowledge about Jesus. And Paul denies that he learned anything about the gospel from anybody in such a position.

Case reminds us that earliest versions of the gospel narratives de-emphasize Jesus' otherworldliness in favor of "the prevailingly normal character of Jesus' actions" (p. 223). This apparently is to suggest that they are therefore more credible than, for example, the pre-existent divine logos served up by John. "Mark is clearly recognizing," he suggests, "that Jesus made no such impression upon his contemporaries as his later interpreters thought he ought to have produced" (p. 226). And perhaps so. But the mythicist argument is not that "Mark is not credible, therefore his Jesus didn't exist." It is rather that the argument "Mark said Jesus existed, therefore Jesus must have existed" is not supported by the available evidence. Christianity's historical paper trail, as we have it, does not justify a supposition that Mark even intended to write a factual history about the origin of his religion or the ministry of its founder, or that even if he intended to, he had access to any reliable information Jesus. Case has not yet produced one fact that is inconsistent with the hypothesis that the canonical gospels are works of fiction, not of well-intentioned but mistaken history. He instead gives us the speculation: "Had the primitive tradition been purely the product of fancy we should have had at first that free idealization which is more in evidence a generation or two later when death and time had largely removed the limitations which actual recollection of Jesus imposed upon his first interpreters" (pp. 226-27). But this assumes that if the authors weren't trying to write history, they were trying to perpetrate a fraud. History-or-fraud is a false dichotomy. Fiction does not intend to fool its readers. It may do so, but not because the author so intends.

Then we get this:

> As we have shown above, the early framers of the tradition bring Jesus upon the scene at a time when those who would have been his contemporaries are still living. Moreover they do this in the very land and among the very people where his

> activity was staged. Think of the absurdity of this procedure if his individuality were fictitious! Yet there is never an inkling that this claim of reality for him was contested or even doubted by either friend or foe. (p. 229)

This again conflates fiction with fraud. We've already addressed the question of whether the gospels were written within living memory of Jesus' generation, but that doesn't matter here. When Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*, many people still living in Atlanta had been there while the Civil War was happening. Nobody complained to her about Rhett Butler or Scarlett O'Hara not being real people. But here might be a better analogy. In 1863, Edward Everett Hale published a fictional story in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine titled "The Man Without a Country." Because of the story's realism, many readers thought that the protagonist, Philip Nolan, was an actual person, but nobody ever accused Hale of attempting anything absurd or of trying to fool anyone.

Case then asserts that certain of Jesus' teachings were too unique to have been the product of any mind but his own, but we get only the assertion, not an argument.

> His great theme is God's nearness and love, heart righteousness, and man's divine sonship to be realized through a godlike life. . . . Whence came it? Not from some fortuitous concourse of abstract ideas crystallizing of themselves above the heads of men and falling upon them as snow from the clouds. Great thoughts do not come to humanity that way. They are rather the product of some great soul, reacting upon the actual problems of his world. (pp. 232-33)

Let's go ahead and stipulate that it took a great mind to come up with those ideas. It does not follow that we would know whose mind it was, or that a story about a man teaching those ideas must be a story about their actual origin. There are some great ideas in *Les Miserables*, and they may or may not have been original with Victor Hugo, but we know for certain that they weren't original with Jean Valjean.

Finally, we get the how-else-can-we-explain-Christianity-itself argument. "The new faith at the very beginning emphasizes its loyalty to a personal founder who soon after his death is accorded divine honors amounting practically to worship," says Case (p. 233). But no, that is reading Paul through gospel glasses. Christianity at the very beginning says not a word about a personal founder. Paul's dying and rising Christ was revealed to the

church, but he did not found the church. Case notes the mythicist objection that no real man could have been exalted so soon after his death and responds with some semantic legerdemain. He grants that "if Christians had rendered worship to the man Jesus as such," this objection might work. "It was, however, the exalted Messiah to whom godlike homage was paid" (p. 234). Are we to imagine that the entire Christian community of Paul's time could have so disassociated the man from the godlike messiah, and so quickly that the man was essentially forgotten within a decade or two of his death? Yes, we can imagine it, but our imaginations are not evidence for anything. It possibly did happen that way, but possibility is not probability.

Case tries to bring us back to Easter:

> The transition of thought from the earthly Jesus to the heavenly Christ was not a gradual process requiring centuries of growth; it was effected almost in the twinkling of an eye by the *tour de force* of the resurrection experiences. Believers were now confident that God had done something for Jesus which had not been done for any other man—Jesus had been miraculously raised from the dead—and those who believed this honored Jesus accordingly. Doubtless a high estimate of him while on earth has to be presupposed as the antecedent of the latter attitude, but the notion of deification, so far as the early believers were concerned, rested upon faith in his resurrection. (p. 234)

But then we're back to the question of what the man Jesus did or said before his death to mentally prime his followers for those resurrection appearances—and not just to have the experiences, but also to construe them as proof that he was God or something like a god. Jesus of Nazareth, if he lived, was not the only person in history with whom loved ones thought they had posthumous encounters, and deification of the departed is not the usual outcome of these encounters. And we should remember that Paul does not attest to the sorts of visitations reported in the gospels. All he says is that the risen Christ "appeared" to Cephas, James, the apostles, etc. No chats behind locked doors in an upper room, no fish fries along the lakeside, no meetings on Galilean mountaintops. Just appearances. He was seen, nothing more.

If the Pauline Christ actually was Jesus of Nazareth, then yes, he must have done or said something very special in order for his followers to have come to believe the things they were saying about him, even if we can no longer figure our what it was. And this is what Case's argument boils down to. But it assumes his conclusion. Furthermore, it fails to explain why we cannot figure out, from the surviving record, what that very special thing was. The conventional thinking is that Christianity originated as a Jewish sect. What would an itinerant Jewish sage have had to do to make some fellow Jews talk about him the way Paul talked about his Christ Jesus? Surely it was not just a charismatic preaching style.

"The Christ-idea alone is not equal to the task of producing Christianity, it is not sufficiently real, human, vital," says Case (p. 236). Right, and the Christ-idea alone, i.e. Pauline Christianity, did not produce the Christianity we're familiar with. Paul's Christ was too esoteric to have attracted a large following. It needed a more human Christ, and some Paulinists, or some people attracted to Paulinism, thought they found him in the stories that found their way into our gospels during the early second century.

In his next chapter, Case considers the extra-biblical evidence: patristic writings, apocryphal gospels, and secular witnesses. I have argued that the biblical evidence fails to establish Jesus' historical existence beyond reasonable doubt. It could have happened that some noncanonical documents would have eliminated such doubt. We could have had some unambiguous contemporary reference to Jesus of Nazareth. It need not have been an eyewitness account, but some account obviously derived from an eyewitness or other reliable source. A report from Pilate to his superiors about the crucifixion of a seditious preacher would have been great, as would a followup report in which he complained about the preacher's disciples telling everyone that he had risen from the dead. But we don't have that, or anything like it. We have no letter from anyone who heard Jesus preach, or who had a conversation with anyone who heard him preach, commenting on his teachings.

Apologists will assure us that such evidence is too much to ask for. This objection is irrelevant, except in response to an argument from silence that claims we ought to have such evidence. Sensible mythicists will concede that we should not expect contemporary

evidence for someone who attracted scant attention from his contemporaries. But then we have to explain how someone so inconsequential in his own lifetime, and who died in such a notoriously ignominious manner, came to be so exalted within a generation of his death. Historicists cannot do that, or at least they haven't done it yet in a way that doesn't assume their conclusion.

Case's review of the extra-biblical evidence is rife with such question-begging. He assures us, for instance, that the patristic writings and all the apocryphal gospels take Jesus' historic existence for granted (pp. 238-39). I think there are some exceptions, but let's suppose they all do. Is this inexplicable except on the assumption of Jesus' existence? It is not. There is a credible alternative. After the gospels were written during the late first or early second century, many Christians came to believe that they were stories about the founder of their religion. The apocryphal gospels, and practically all of the patristic literature, were produced during or after the second century. That suffices to explain why they take a historical Jesus for granted.

Case offers the following quotation from Clement of Rome:

> The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God and the apostles are from Christ. Both therefore come of the will of God in the appointed order. Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and confirmed in the word of God with the full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come. (From *Cor*. 42:1-3, Case p. 239)

I think there is room for skepticism about conventional dating of Clement's letter, but aside from that, the question arises: What made the author think these things? What were his reasons for thinking that any of this was true? We may assume that he believed what he wrote, but if we don't know why he believed it, then we don't know whether his testimony gives us a good reason to believe it.

According to Case, "the tradition of an actual earthly career of Jesus was uniformly accepted" by the Apostolic fathers and the authors of the apocryphal gospels (pp. 239-40). And it does seem so, with some possible exceptions that we can ignore for now. But Case

says this is to be expected "as the natural outcome of the teaching of Paul and other early missionaries" (p. 240), and now he's back to begging the question. Reading Paul without any historicist presuppositions, we certainly do not expect any subsequent talk of Jesus' earthly career, and aside from Paul's writings, we have almost no record at all of what other early missionaries were saying about Jesus. Other NT epistles that could have been written during the first century, if we suppose they are products of missionary efforts, are as silent Paul about what Jesus might have done or said before he was crucified.

Of course we would expect second-century Christian writers to be talking about the earthly Jesus if there was an earthly Jesus, but we would no less expect it if they had heard some stories about an earthly Jesus and believed that they were true stories. "Even the heretics . . . were not questioning the fact of Jesus' actual appearance upon earth," Case tells us (p. 240), but why suppose they would have known any better? By the second century, no person alive could have had any factual knowledge contradicting the assertion that Christianity began among the disciples of an itinerant Galilean preacher who was crucified by Roman authorities. The most cogent argument anyone could have raised would have been something akin to, "My grandfather was living in Jerusalem back then, and he never told me about any of this." How many Christians would have lost their faith if they'd heard that?

Christianity "would seem to have been the world-stirring movement of the age," Case assures us—but only if we must believe "its own documents" (p. 240). The church selected those documents for preservation, and for nearly a thousand years, the church, practically alone of all institutions in Europe, decided which documents from the ancient world would be preserved. We have no reason to just assume that the church's account of its own origins is accurate, and far less reason to assume that the account is complete. I don't claim that the church would have intentionally destroyed all evidence contrary to its party line. It didn't have to. All it had to do was fail to make any effort to preserve that evidence. Once the imperial government collapsed, there was nobody else left to do the preservation work.

Case then moves to the secular record and admits it to be scanty (pp. 241-42). He argues that this should come as no surprise, and I don't mind stipulating that for the sake

of discussion. I'll agree that if Jesus actually existed, then he didn't do anything that would have gotten the attention of contemporary intellectuals (except that I find it odd that Philo would have ignored him). But the pertinent question is: Are any of the secular references that survive hard to explain without supposing Jesus of Nazareth to have been a real person?

On to the particulars. *Pliny*: "Of the founder of the [Christian] movement Pliny tells us nothing"; *Suetonius*: "Christian origins appear to have been of little moment, and his references to Christianity itself are very obscure"; *Tacitus*: "Here we at last find a Roman historian (writing before 115 A.D.) bearing unequivocal testimony to the existence of the Jesus of gospel history" (pp. 245-46). Case peremptorily dismisses suggestions that the Tacitean reference was a forgery. I don't think its authenticity is as undisputable as most historicists claim, but it hardly matters. Case himself puts it as well as I could:

> Accepting the genuineness of Tacitus, it is still a question whether his testimony is based on anything other than current Christian tradition. He may have had access to official records in which the facts he records were mentioned, yet in the present state of our information this is purely a matter of conjecture. On the other hand, we have already seen that gospel tradition by the year 115 a.d. had taken the form in which it is at present known, and had been carried broadcast over the Roman Empire by word of mouth if not in written documents. And the death of Jesus under Pontius Pilate was one of its most persistent items. Tacitus' reliability does not suffer by admitting that he may have had his information from current Christian tradition; this possibility merely robs us of the convenience of citing Tacitus as an independent witness. (pp. 248-49)

In other words: Tacitus confirms that Christians during the early second century believed that the founder of their religion was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Therefore, we know that Christians did believe it, and therefore we know that it was so. But mythicists don't deny that second-century Christians believed in a historical Jesus. We just deny that they had a good reason for their belief.

And we're not so sure that belief in a historical Jesus was universal in the early second century. Let's have another look at Pliny, who according to Case "tells us nothing"

about Christianity's founder. Having said that, he goes on: "He [Pliny] knows that Christians reverence one called Christ to whom they sing hymns in their assembly and whom they refuse to curse, but nothing more is said of this individual" (p.244). Well, not exactly *nothing* more. Here is everything Pliny actually wrote about this Christ:

> Those who [when interrogated] denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do—these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.
>
> They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ *as to a god*, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so [emphasis added].[13]

As Case implies, there is nothing here about a human founder of the sect. But surely it is improbable that during all those interrogations, nothing would have been said about him or, if said, been disregarded by Pliny as irrelevant? He could hardly have thought it beside the point that they had deified a man executed by a Roman governor for sedition against the empire, or have taken their word for it that the execution was a miscarriage of justice. The most parsimonious construal of this letter is that the Christian community in Pliny's jurisdiction had never heard of any Jesus of Nazareth, or didn't believe in him if they had heard of him.

So much for the Roman witnesses. There are none from the first century; second-century witnesses do not confirm a historical Jesus but confirm that some Christians of

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[13]Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html

their time believed there was a historical Jesus, but they say nothing about why those Christians believed so.

As a matter of routine, historians don't generally ask for more than this. All else being equal, this would be quite enough to settle the question of Jesus' existence. We have a religious sect, at least some of whose members believed their founder had lived in Palestine and died by execution about a hundred years earlier. It is not prima facie improbable that their belief would be based on historical fact, and if we had no other relevant evidence, parsimony would lead us to suppose that it was a historical fact. But we do have other evidence, and all else is not equal. At around the same time, some members of the same sect, or at least calling themselves by the same name, show no awareness of that historical founder, and the sect's earliest documents, produced within a generation of the purported founder's lifetime, in substantial part also show no awareness of that founder's life prior to his execution. Furthermore, documents that do purport to record some biographical information about the founder are manifestly not credible in their entirety, and nothing is known about their provenance that should compel us to treat any of their content as historically reliable.

Case moves on at this point to the Jewish witnesses. We know of three who could have had something to say about Jesus if they had known about him. It can be argued that we should not be surprised if they decided he was not worth mentioning, but an explanation for missing evidence does not itself constitute evidence. Anyway, Case gives us three candidate Jewish historians who all lived during the first century: Justus of Tiberias, Philo of Alexandria, and Flavius Josephus, originally of Jerusalem. Justus apparently wrote a history of the Jewish nation through the First Jewish War. It does not survive, but in the ninth century a Christian patriarch, Photius, who apparently had a copy, commented that it made no mention of Jesus. Many of Philo's works do survive, but they too make no mention of Jesus (pp. 249-50).

That leaves Josephus. As virtually everyone who cares about this topic knows, all extant copies of his *Antiquities of the Jews* (none older than the 11th century) contain two apparent references to Jesus. The longer reference, called the *Testimonium Flavianum*, briefly mentions his ministry and execution by Pilate and says that his followers

continued, in Josephus's own time, to be devoted to him. In the other, Josephus describes the unjust killing by the Jewish high priest of a man named James, "brother of Jesus who was called Christ."

Of the *Testimonium*, Case observes:

> It would seem that we have here either an out and out fabrication, or a radical recasting of some statement whose original import was less favorable to Christianity.
>
> Each of these opinions has been advocated. The former is more commonly adopted nowadays, yet the latter still has adherents. (p. 252)

The consensus has reversed since Case wrote that. The majority view now holds the *Testimonium* to include an authentic core, admitting as interpolations only those passages about which it is most patently obvious that no non-Christian would have written them. Case, however, endorses what was the majority opinion of his day:

> [There is] one serious difficulty, namely the foreignness of the passages to its context. Its motive is neither to record a sample of Jewish "sedition," nor is it a "calamity which put the Jews into disorder"—the topics treated in the context. It is rather a distinctly biased note aiming to glorify Christianity, a note such as a Christian might write on the margin or a scribe insert into the text. This is all the more probable since it is not so much to Jews—who looked upon Josephus with suspicion after his part in the war with Rome—as to Christians that we are indebted for the preservation of Josephus' works. In fact the earliest Christian references to Josephus are against the originality of the paragraph in question. Twice Origen affirms that Josephus did not acknowledge the messiahship of Jesus, and in each instance the phrase "Jesus, the so-called Christ" (from Antiquities, XX, ix, I) is the ground of Origen's statement. Evidently he is not acquainted with the earlier paragraph, since so outspoken a testimony to Jesus' messiahship from the Jew, Josephus, would have been a deadly weapon to employ against the Jew, Celsus. This weapon was, however, forged not long after Origen's day, for Eusebius cites the paragraph on two occasions and evidently thinks it genuine. (pp. 253-54)

As noted, the majority of scholars nowadays disagree with Case. But is this because they have found some evidence that Case either ignored or was unaware of? Not so I can tell. The only obvious change has been in the intellectual climate in which Christian history is studied. Both sides of the debate are too readily available online to need summarizing here, but I will address what seems to be the most popular argument in favor of partial authenticity. That is the claim that the "authentic core," which is what remains after merely deleting the most obvious interpolations, is consistent with Josephus' style and inconsistent with the language that any Christian would have used when talking about Jesus. This to me smacks of desperation. It is fatuous to suggest that no Christian could ever talk about Jesus without parroting his favorite creedal statement. It is particularly ludicrous to think that a Christian who was pretending to be a Jewish historian would be incapable of imagining what a Jew might say about Jesus and how he might say it. Obviously, this forger (if there was only one—we don't know how many cooks prepared this dish) had a problem being consistent, but the whole idea of a forgery is to seem to be someone other than who you really are.

Of course we cannot prove conclusively that Josephus wrote none of the *Testimonium*, at least until we find a pre-Eusebian copy that doesn't have it. But we know that the passage was at least altered by a Christian scribe, and that suffices to raise reasonable doubt about all of it. The presumption that every phrase must be presumed authentic unless provably inauthentic is unjustified. Maybe Josephus did say something about Jesus. He could have, if we assume that Jesus really existed. But to say he possibly did is not to say he probably did, and the evidence that he did has been tampered with.

"There is less reason to doubt that Josephus himself mentioned James, 'the brother of the so-called Christ,'" says Case (p. 254). Maybe less reason, but not no reason, I think. The modern consensus in this case is solidly on Case's side, but it is not unanimous, and I think the minority has the better argument. Again, the reader can with trivial effort find all the arguments presented by both sides, and so I forgo further comment.

With only the James reference remaining, Case concludes, "Josephus proves to be of only slight value as a source of information about Jesus. He appears to have known of Jesus' existence, yet he mentions him only casually and on but one occasion. This

comparative inattention to Christianity and its founder has occasioned frequent comment" (p. 260). Case addresses some of those comments and find Josephus's indifference easy enough to explain, then moves on to later Jewish references. For these he considers three sources: the Talmud, the *Toledoth Jeshu*, and Christian responses to Jewish criticisms (p. 264). They can be briefly dispensed with. As to the last, I have already commented on the unreliability of a group's adversaries as a source of information about their beliefs. In any case, Christian writings that are undisputably from the first century provide no indication that contemporary Jews knew any more about a historical Jesus than Christians themselves did. All of Case's other sources are from the second century at the earliest possibility, and as far as we can infer from them, Jews by that time had no sources of information about Jesus except for what Christians were saying at that time. Case admits that the Talmud "in its present form does not carry us back beyond the fourth and fifth centuries A.D." (p. 266), and while it probably includes some much older material, we have no grounds for assuming that its references to Jesus originated during the first century. The *Toledoth*, meanwhile, "is a much later product, which it seems vain to attempt to connect with primitive tradition" (pp. 266-67). So what is Case's point here?

> The one fact which impresses us in this conflict of argument between Christians and Jews is the common acceptance of belief in Jesus' earthly existence, and the offense taken by the Jews at the reverence rendered him by Christians. In this respect Jewish sources corroborate the early Christian testimony to Jesus' existence. (p. 267)

But no, they don't corroborate the testimony of Jesus' existence. They accepted the Christians' supposition of his existence because they had no reason not to. Jews from the second century onward had no more information than Christians did about who was or was not alive in early-first-century Palestine, and nobody had a list of all the people executed by Pontius Pilate.

And Case gets this, because he immediately addresses the problem: "It may be urged by the radicals that this whole survey of the extra-biblical sources yields no testimony which is independent of Christian influence" (p. 267). Even Josephus, he concedes, might have known nothing about Jesus except what some Christian

acquaintances had told him. But granted all that, he says, it does not constitute "a positive argument against Jesus' historicity" (p. 267). And he's right. It does not constitute an argument against anyone's historicity that many or even all of our sources about him are secondary. But if the primary sources are insufficient to establish historicity, either of a person or an event, then secondary sources are of no help.

Case concludes this chapter with some well-taken observations about historical certainty. Neither Jesus' existence nor his nonexistence can be demonstrated with the rigor of a mathematical theorem, and this is so for any historical question. Even such apparently indisputable facts as the assassination of Julius Caesar, or for that matter his very existence, are just the most parsimonious explanations we have for whatever evidence has survived to our own time. We could be mistaken about any of it. Given the evidence we have, it is possible that there was no Julius Caesar, nor even a Roman empire. But the evidence we have clearly implies otherwise with a probability close to unity. Considering that evidence, it would be intellectually perverse to doubt that Caesar died at the hands of several people who had conspired to assassinate him. The evidence is both voluminous and consistent, so that any account of its origins that denied the assassination would have to be in gross defiance of Occam's razor. That is what any historical hypothesis must do: explain how the evidence came to exist in its present form while keeping our assumptions to a bare minimum. Many ancient documents are most parsimoniously explained by supposing that their authors were recording what they knew or thought they knew. For other documents, other suppositions might better satisfy the need for parsimony.

In any case, having shown to his own satisfaction that Jesus of Nazareth really existed, Case devotes his last two chapters to reflecting on what he was like and why it matters to us moderns. Since they add nothing to his argument for historicity, I'll not comment on them here.

Additional reflections

Parsimony is difficult to quantify. Many of our assumptions are only implicit in our arguments, and we can't enumerate them if we don't even notice them. Besides, not all assumptions are equal and should not be counted as such. Five well-justified assumptions

might be preferable to one improbable assumption. Advocates for an intellectually responsible mythicism are arguing that some version of their theory of Christian origins is more parsimonious than any theory that assumes Jesus of Nazareth was a real person. The debate is not over yet, and for good reason. Many of the advocates on both sides are guilty of rhetorical excesses and sloppy reasoning, probably attributable to emotional investments. This is not an easy subject for anyone to be impartial about, and it's always easier to see the fallacies in someone else's arguments than in one's own. This is no excuse for not even trying, though.

There is a story in Acts that, while almost certainly untrue, still makes a good point. Some Christians have been hauled before the Sanhedrin and are about to be sentenced. During the council's deliberations, its most esteemed member, Gamaliel, warns his colleagues thus: "If these men are preaching foolishness, then their movement will die of its own accord without our having to do anything. But if they're teaching the truth, then anything we do against them, we do against God. So, let's not do anything."[14] Obviously, I don't believe that anyone who opposes the truth is opposing God. Nor do I believe that foolish teachings invariably die of their own accord. Astrology is only one obvious counterexample. But if historicists actually do have the evidence on their side to the extent that they claim, then they ought to feel Gamaliel's confidence that mythicism will sooner or later prove to be its own worst enemy, at least in those circles where well-reasoned arguments are taken seriously. Astrology may be refusing to die, but it lives today only among the scientifically ignorant. If mythicism is, as the historicists would have us think, as intellectually bankrupt as astrology, then in due course it will find no place to live except among the historically ignorant. But in the meantime, it is up to the historicists themselves to prove that that is where it ought to live. Shirley Jackson Case tried to prove that, and he failed. His successors are still trying, and still failing.

[14]Acts 5:25-42.

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