"Proving History"

Shows that Jesus Never Lived on Earth

A look at the "Quest for the historical Jesus" and historian Richard Carrier's application of Bayes's Theorem

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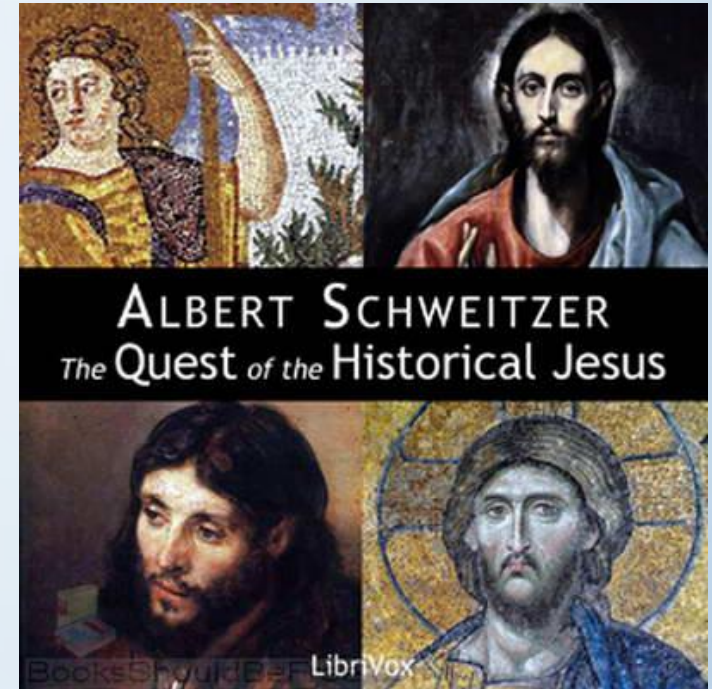BC Humanists Society, April 12, 2015

What We'll Cover

- Intro: Who am I to be telling you all this?

- Quest for the historical Jesus – scholarly history and theories:

  - Literalism (fundamentalism)

  - Historicity (mainstream consensus)

- Mythicism

- Richard Carrier and his use of Bayes's Theorem

- Conclusion – Bayes's Theorem finds near-certainty that Jesus was mythical

History of the "Quest"

- No questioning during Dark Ages and medieval times

- Enlightenment brought critical literary analysis, including to Bible

- **1774** – Hermann Reimarus – said Jesus was a mere human with messianic delusions

- **1784** – David Hume published his famous argument against miracles

- **1835** – David Strauss, German scholar, wrote "Life of Jesus" – he denied divinity of Jesus and miracles

- Three major "Quests": 1835 – 1906 • 1953 – early 1970's • 1980's – present

- Other influential early books:
  - Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jesus*, 1863
  - Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906
  - Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 1921

Historicity Theories

Literalism (fundamentalism)

- Gospels literally true

- Written by eyewitnesses or those who knew Apostles

- Contradictions are just expected differences in eyewitness accounts

- Adherents are "apologists":
  - Not objective scholars
  - Insular – they reject or ignore critical consensus
  - "Possible" = "probable" "Must" have happened this way
  - Starting point: Miracles true, resurrection not in question
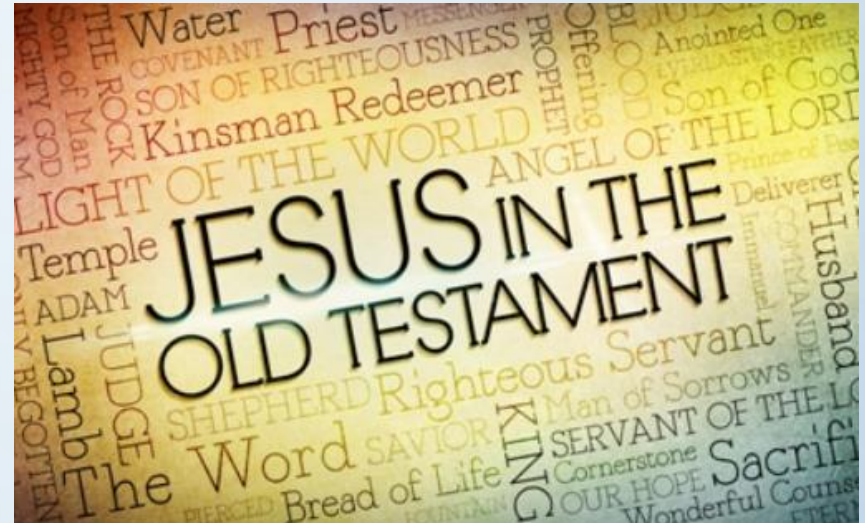
Historicity (mainstream consensus)

- Most of the Gospels cannot be trusted as history

- Very little can be known about the real Jesus

- But Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and his crucifixion must be the two *minimum* historical events

- 20% of Jesus' sayings are considered genuine

- Adherents mostly Christian scholars; some Jewish
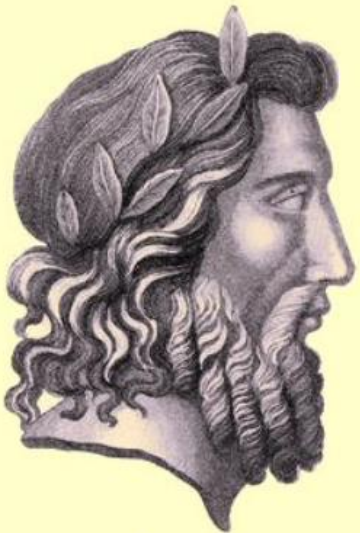
Mythicist Theory

- Jesus and his life story largely derived from Old Testament

- Every key element of the Jesus story found in these sources:
  - Daniel 9 and 12
  - Isaiah 52-53
  - Psalm 22
  - Zechariah 3 and 6

- Almost every miracle story adapted from Old Testament miracles of the prophets (but made bigger and better)

- Paul's letters are the earliest Christian documents (7 genuine), but his Jesus is celestial and divine

- Paul knows nothing of an historical Jesus, and tells us that all his knowledge of Jesus is "revealed" from scriptures
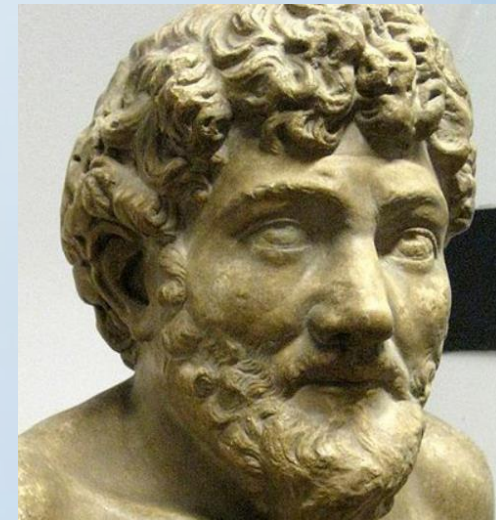
Mythicist Theory

- Christianity is a syncretism of pagan and Jewish salvation ideology

- It's a Jewish version of the mystery religions popular at the time – with dying and rising saviours – similar to "cargo cult"

- Many pagan influences, with elements drawn from prior mystery religions and hero narratives

Romulus.

- Gospel of Mark's Jesus character based mostly on Romulus (legendary founder of Rome), as well as Socrates and Aesop

- Mark also merged Homeric mythology with biblical mythology

- Matthew, Luke, and John all copied, adapted, or rewrote Mark

Aesop

Mythicist Theory

- Popular philosophies of the time also influenced Christian teachings, including Cynicism, Stoicism, Platonism, Aristotle

- "Seven heavens" cosmology

- God could come down to lower heavens – or send emissary to bridge gap – and even live "earthly" life there

- The heavens were a reflection of everything on earth, with the earth an imperfect version of the heavens.

- For example: Two Adams – a perfect celestial version, and an earthly copy

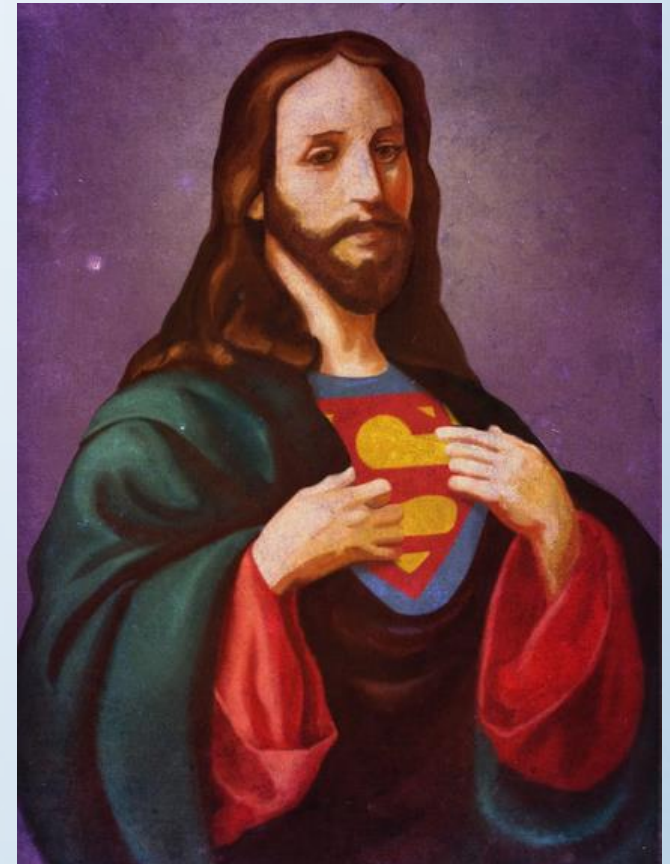- Jesus: pre-existent, spiritual son of God or "righteous king"

The Hero Myth
(See handout: "Pagan Precedents for Jesus")

Jesus conforms very well to classic hero myths, including:

- **Socrates and Aesop** – Their stories were widely revered among pagans 100's of years before Jesus.
  - 18 parallels to Jesus.

- **Romulus** – Mythical founder of Rome; "ascension to godhood" tale.
  - 20 parallels to Jesus.

- **Rank-Raglan hero** – Fable of the divine king. Most common tale, repeated for at least 15 known mythic heroes.
  - Jesus meets 20 of 22 criteria.

The Problem

"The scholarly consensus is that the Christ myth theory has been refuted, and that Jesus indeed existed as a historical figure."
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Jesus)

- The refutations of mythicism are weak, but mythicists and historicists alike have often failed to use sound historical methods.

- All three quests for the historical Jesus have failed spectacularly. All experts agree that Jesus is buried in myth and legend.

- There are no reliable criteria to separate authentic from inauthentic Jesus traditions.

- Historians can't agree on a method, and invalid methods continue to be used.

- Methodology often biased, based on unquestioned assumptions, ignores contrary evidence

- Many accounts of the "life of Jesus" exist – all different and mutually exclusive

Writing of New Testament
(Please see handout)

- Earliest documents date from 50's to 60's CE:
  - Seven (or 8) genuine letters of Paul (50's)
  - Anonymous letter to the Hebrews (50 - 66 CE)

- Rest of New Testament dates from after 70 CE to 2nd century

- Except for Paul's genuine letters, all letters are forgeries, and all NT authors unknown.

- **Significance**:
  - Celestial Jesus came first, Historical Jesus created at least two generations after his alleged death
  - Anonymous and forged sources lack credibility; difficult to date accurately
  - No corroborating sources outside NT
  - Gospel of Mark is **sole** source for historical Jesus

Bayes's Theorem

- **Richard Carrier**: Independent scholar, Ph.D in ancient history, Columbia University

- Newest mythicist; author of 2-volume set:
  - *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus"*
  - *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We might Have Reason to Doubt*

- Bayes's Theorem – a mathematical equation that uses probability estimates to calculate the likelihood of a hypothesis

- Bayes's Theorem applied to history:
  - Helps eliminate bias and expose bad methodology
  - Incorporates the best of critical historical methods
  - Requires expertise in the field, including a good grasp of the background knowledge and evidence

- Carrier constructs the most defensible version of each theory (mythicist vs. historicist) and tests their merits

Canon of Probabilities

Given all background knowledge and known evidence:

– Decide on most reasonable probability for your hypothesis (*a fortiori*).
– Plug score (P) into Bayes's Theorem.

Does not have to be precise – will still be better than arbitrary guess.
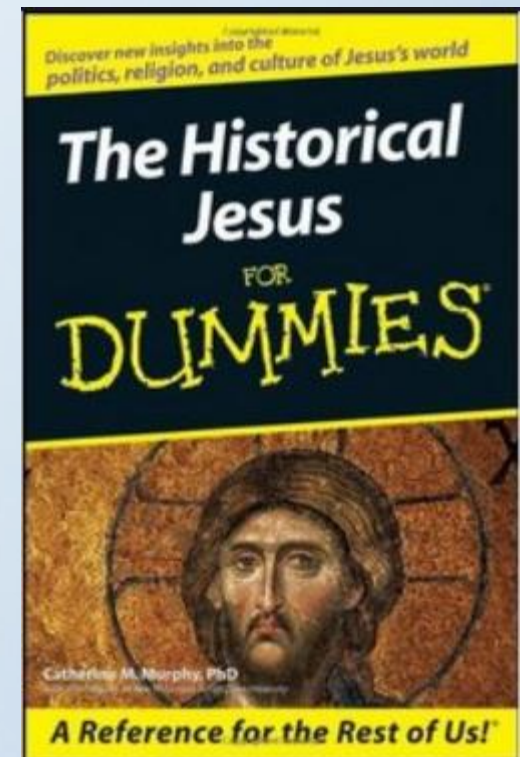
Probability	Percent	Odds	Score (max 1.0)
Virtually Impossible	= 0.0001%	1 in 1,000,000	= 0.000001
Extremely Improbable	= 1%	1 in 100	= 0.01
Very Improbable	= 5%	1 in 20	= 0.05
Improbable	= 20%	1 in 5	= 0.20
Slightly Improbable	= 40%	2 in 5	= 0.40
Even Odds	= 50%	50/50	= 0.50
Slightly Probable	= 60%	2 in 5 chance against	= 0.60
Probable	= 80%	1 in 5 chance against	= 0.80
Very Probable	= 95%	1 in 20 chance against	= 0.95
Extremely Probable	= 99%	1 in 100 chance against	= 0.99
Virtually Certain	= 99.9999%	1 in 1,000,000 chance against	= 0.999999

The Two Competing Hypotheses

Minimal Theory of Historicity:

h = "Jesus was a historical person mythicized."

1. An actual man at some point named Jesus acquired followers in life who continued as an identifiable movement after his death.

2. This is the same Jesus who was claimed by some of his followers to have been executed by the Jewish or Roman authorities.

3. This is the same Jesus some of whose followers soon began worshipping as a living god (or demigod).

The Two Competing Hypotheses

Minimal Theory of Mythicism:

~h = "Jesus was a mythical person historicized."

1. At the origin of Christianity, Jesus was thought to be a celestial deity.

2. Like other deities, Jesus communicated with his subjects only through dreams, visions, and other forms of divine inspiration (e.g., prophecy).

3. This Jesus was originally believed to have endured an ordeal of incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection in a supernatural realm.

4. An allegorical story of this Jesus was then composed and told within the community, which placed him on earth, in history, as a divine man, with an earthly family, companions and enemies, complete with deeds and sayings and an earthly depiction of his ordeals.

5. Subsequent communities of worshipers believed or taught that this invented sacred story was real, and not allegorical.

Bayes's Theorem for "Proving History" by Richard Carrier

Short form:

$$P(h|e.b) = \frac{P(h|b) \times P(e|h.b)}{P(e|b)}$$

Long form:

$$P(h|e.b) = \frac{P(h|b) \times P(e|h.b)}{[\,P(h|b) \times P(e|h.b)\,] + [\,P(\sim h|b) \times P(e|\sim h.b)\,]}$$

(The hypothesis being tested)

(Total of all possible hypotheses – 2 in this case)

Equation roughly translates to: **"Given all we know so far, then…"**

$$\text{The probability our explanation is true} = \frac{\text{How typical our explanation is} \times \text{How expected the evidence is if our explanation is true}}{\left\{\text{Repeat the above}\right\} + \left\{\text{How \textbf{atypical} our explanation is} \times \text{How expected the evidence is if our explanation \textbf{isn't} true}\right\}}$$

P = **Probability** Probability that the explanation is true

    Prior Probability: The probability of a hypothesis being true (based on Background Knowledge), before looking at any of the specific evidence for it. (Or, how typical our explanation is, given the evidence for comparable explanations.)

    Consequent Probability: The probability that we would have the specific evidence we do, if the hypothesis were true. (Or, how expected is the evidence we have if our explanation is true; how well does it match the hypothesis.)

h = **Hypothesis** The explanation being tested in light of the evidence.

~h = **Hypothesis** All other hypotheses that could explain the same evidence. Or, the opposite of our hypothesis ("not h").

b = **Background Knowledge** Everything we know about science, history, human nature, society, culture, etc. that is relevant to hypothesis. (Also includes a "Reference Class" of cases comparable to our hypothesis, if any.)

e = **Evidence** The specific evidence (including absence of evidence) that would help support the hypothesis (or not).

| = **Conditional Probability** E.g.: **h|b** = h, given b. The probability of the Hypothesis being true given our Background Knowledge.

Probability that Jesus Existed as an Historical Person

Richard Carrier, from *On the Historicity of Jesus* (pg. 596):

"I have made two estimates in every case, one a *fortiori* (the most favorable to historicity as I can reasonably be), and the other realistic (closer to what I honestly think those probabilities actually are.) That gives us an upper and a lower bound. But the probability that Jesus existed could be even lower still, since my most critical estimates are perhaps higher than they should be."

Upper Bound: "On the most outrageously generous estimates possible, there is **barely a 1 in 3 chance** Jesus existed."	*Lower Bound*: "Using more judicious estimates … the odds Jesus existed are **less than 1 in 12,000**."

Probability that Jesus Existed as an Historical Person

	Prior Probability: *Upper Bound*	Prior Probability: *Lower Bound*	Consequent Probability: *Upper Bound*	Consequent Probability: *Lower Bound*
Historicity	33%	6.25%	33.2%	0.12%
Mythicism	67%	93.75%	34.7%	100%

Upper bound: Strongly biased to historicity
Lower bound: More realistic

Concluding probability comes from estimating 3 other probabilities:
- The prior probability that Jesus existed.
- The consequent probability (likelihood) of the existing evidence if Jesus did exist.
- The consequent probability of that same evidence if he didn't exist.

Concluding Probability	Strongly Biased to Historicity	More Realistic
Historicity	32%	0.008%
Mythicism	67%	100%

The Power of Myth

- Myths reflect a deep need for meaning, and something greater than oneself

- The hero myth is a way to reconcile the fact of human suffering and death, and overcome it

- This could help us have more compassion for religious believers

- Atheists can still experience the power of myth:
  - In our sleep, dreams bring us back to mythological imagery
  - We can be inspired by novels and movies, science fiction, art, romantic love

- Much of our contemporary art, literature, and film is filled with mythological themes – Star Wars, Superman, etc.

- Myths are like "shared fantasies" – they still hold deep meaning for us