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Ehrman and Brodie on Whether Jesus Existed: A Cautionary Tale about the State of Biblical Scholarship

Tom Dykstra

Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus. Memoir of a Discovery.

Thomas L. Brodie

Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd., 2012

Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth.

Bart D. Ehrman

New York: HarperOne, 2012

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are known as the patriarchs of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the modern state of Israel. Their stories lie at the very foundation of the entire sweep of biblical history and theology, including both Old and New Testaments. Indeed, being a Jew or a Christian is synonymous with being a “child of Abraham,”¹ understood metaphorically by some and literally by others. So an assertion that the patriarchs are fictional characters could naturally be expected to ignite a firestorm of indignation, and in 1971 it did.

In that year, a graduate student at the University of Tübingen in Germany submitted a Ph.D. dissertation making precisely that claim. The first two faculty readers assigned to it gave it the highest rating of *summa cum laude*. But when others learned about its radical ideas, a reaction set in, and ultimately Tübingen refused to grant the degree. The student was Thomas L. Thompson, and he would later recall:

. . . I was assigned to take my examinations in dogmatic theology from the professor of systematic theology, Joseph Ratzinger.² . . . he explained to me that a Catholic could not write such a dissertation as I had and that I would not be receiving my Ph.D. from their faculty in Tübingen. I must point out that the shock with which I met this statement, at the time, caused me to fixate my thoughts on the first phrase: that a Catholic could not write it . . . but I had! . . . and what then was I, if not a Catholic? . . . and then: why couldn't a Catholic write it? In that short time, I sensed the coming alienation from

¹ Gal 3:7.

² He later became Pope Benedict XVI.

friends and colleagues in the Catholic faculty with whom I had worked and shared my life with for nearly ten years.³

He had to go elsewhere to complete his Ph.D.,⁴ and he found himself blackballed by the academic community. All attempts to find a publisher for the dissertation failed. Review articles in academic periodicals unanimously condemned the dissertation's conclusions and questioned its author's competence and even his integrity. Some accused him of anti-Semitism. All of his applications to present papers at conferences were rejected, and forty-five job applications in two years led to not a single offer for a teaching position. The shunned scholar resorted to making his living by working as a painter.

All of this occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Today Thompson is widely recognized as one of the foremost scholars of the Old Testament, and his conclusions about the patriarchal stories not being historical are as universally accepted as they once were reviled. In fact, today critical scholars view the entire stretch of core Old Testament⁵ stories from Genesis through Joshua and into Judges as largely ahistorical. Some suggest that even much later characters in the biblical story – up to and including King David⁶ – are also fictional.⁷ Not everyone takes that view of Old Testament historiography, but those who do can write books and articles and dissertations without worrying about recriminations such as Thompson experienced.

This radical change in the attitude of academia came about in the course of just a few decades. The story is a stark reminder that reputed experts in any given field of scholarship can be mistaken, even en masse. Individual scholars who go against the grain within their field may be the vanguard of a movement that will eventually transition from the fringe into the mainstream. This is true even in the hard sciences,⁸ more so in the social sciences, and much more so in the field of biblical studies, for reasons I'll go into later.⁹

That story is relevant to the topic of this article because historical Jesus studies today are like historical Abraham studies in the 1970s and 1980s. The consensus of biblical scholars is that Jesus existed as a historical person, and those who assign him to the category of fictional character are still few and far between. Their ranks are growing, but their views are met with disdain by the majority. That disdain may be just as unjustified today as it was when directed toward Thompson a few decades ago.¹⁰

³ Thompson 2011.

⁴ Thompson eventually got his Ph.D. from Temple University in Philadelphia in 1976, *summa cum laude*, titled *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*.

⁵ I'm using the term "Old Testament" rather than "Hebrew scriptures" since this article is looking at the text from the standpoint of its role in early Christianity.

⁶ For more about the scholarly debate around David's historicity, see the bibliography entry for McKenzie 2000.

⁷ There are still individuals on the conservative fringes of scholarship who view these biblical texts as historically accurate, and who react vehemently to any suggestion that such is not the case. Regarding the word "fictional," among scholars there is much debate about what constitutes fiction and whether that word is appropriate for ahistorical biblical narratives. Here it simply means "not historical." See the discussion in Dykstra 2012, pp.183-88.

⁸ The classic text that examines how heresy becomes orthodoxy in the scientific community is Kuhn 1962.

⁹ On the susceptibility of biblical scholars to succumb to group-think, see below under the headings **Challenging the Experts** and **Disdain, Outrage, and Humor**.

¹⁰ For reasons explained below under the heading **Reframing the Question**, I do not myself take a stand firmly on either side of the question. However, I argue below under the heading **Disdain, Outrage, and Humor** that disdain in general is a counterproductive attitude for a scholar to take.

In this article I take a close look at two recent books by prominent scholars who take opposite sides in the controversy. Finding both strengths and weaknesses in each, I conclude that the minority view deserves more respect than it gets and that most biblical scholars are overconfident about their literary and historical interpretations. Ultimately, I question the value of both the “quest for the historical Jesus” and the opposing quest to prove that Jesus never existed. The whole debate seems a lost cause for both sides, with the unfortunate effect of diverting attention away from the only real Jesus who remains accessible to us, the literary character who is unique to each writing he appears in.

Background

But how is it even conceivable that someone could doubt whether such a major figure of world history as Jesus existed?¹¹ Consider the precedent of Abraham, who is also seen by many as an important historical figure. If the Old Testament authors presented fictional stories about Abraham as if they were historical in order to build a community and teach people how to behave, it is no great leap to suppose that New Testament authors steeped in Old Testament traditions could have followed suit. Today, critical New Testament scholars generally recognize that the literature about Jesus is rife with such fictional stories told to teach a moral or make a point against opponents. Some believe that to be the case with most or all of the Jesus stories.

In a nutshell, the idea is that one author or community created the initial Jesus story and then others built upon and embellished the story until eventually a whole body of literature arose that told the life story of a person who never existed in reality.

The thoughtful reader can find clues pointing to this possibility even in popular books about “the historical Jesus” that are written by mainstream scholars who do take Jesus’s historicity for granted. Consider Reza Aslan’s recent (2013) bestseller *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Again and again Aslan confidently tells his readers what the real “Jesus of Nazareth” said, did, or was like, but along the way he also repeatedly points out that entire sections of our only narratives about Jesus’s life are made-up rather than historical:

Simply put, the infancy narratives are not historical accounts, nor were they meant to be read as such. They are theological affirmations of Jesus’s status as the anointed of God.

Luke’s account of the twelve-year-old Jesus standing in the Temple of Jerusalem debating the finer points of the Hebrew Scriptures with rabbi and scribes . . . or his narrative of Jesus at the (nonexistent) synagogue in Nazareth reading from the Isaiah scroll . . . are both fabulous concoctions of the evangelist’s own devising.

The gospels present Pilate as a righteous yet weak-willed man . . . This is pure fiction.¹²

If the authors of the gospels felt free to fill out substantial parts of their texts with numerous “fabulous concoctions” of “pure fiction,” that at least raises a question about how much confidence we can have in the literal accuracy of anything they wrote.

¹¹ For a list of scholars who believe Jesus is a fictional character, see Godfrey 2009. For recent scholarly symposia that include articles by scholars who doubt Jesus’s historicity, see Hoffmann 2010 and Thompson and Verenna 2012.

¹² Aslan 2013, 33, 35, 47.

And in fact, scholars offer widely differing opinions on which parts of the gospels are literally true. Every scholar who reconstructs a “historical” Jesus does so by accepting and rejecting different parts of the gospels, and each one does that differently. As a result, various scholars have presented the historical Jesus as:

. . . an itinerant preacher, a cynic sage, the Essene's righteous rabbi, a Galilean holy man, a revolutionary leader, an apocalyptic preacher, a proto-liberation theologian, a trance-inducing mental healer, an eschatological prophet, an occult magician, a Pharisee, a rabbi seeking reform, a Galilean charismatic, a Hillelite, an Essene, a teacher of wisdom, a miracle-working prophet, and an exorcist, and the list continues to grow.¹³

Remarks by New Testament scholars Ben Witherington and John Dominic Crossan summarize the situation:

[A]ttempts to say what we could really know about the historical Jesus actually told us more about their authors than about the person they sought to describe. The authors seem to have looked into the well of history searching for Jesus and seen their own reflection.¹⁴

It seems we can have as many Jesuses as there are exegetes . . . exhibiting a stunning diversity that is an academic embarrassment. [This multiplicity] makes the prospect that Jesus never existed a welcome relief.¹⁵

It should be no surprise, then, if some contemporary scholars conclude that we can't say much of anything about the historical Jesus with a reasonable degree of confidence. Or if others go one step further and assert that our knowledge is so limited we can't know for sure whether there was a historical person at all behind the references to Jesus in ancient texts. Or if a few go further still and express great confidence that there never was a historical Jesus at all.¹⁶

Bart Ehrman's Did Jesus Exist

Bart Ehrman published *Did Jesus Exist?* in 2012 as a reply to the rising tide of historical Jesus naysayers. Ehrman is the author of numerous books about the New Testament, some for scholars and some for the general public.¹⁷ *Did Jesus Exist?* is one of the latter. In it Ehrman expresses absolute certainty that Jesus did exist, presents evidence in favor of that conclusion, and offers his own assessment of what Jesus did and said.

A prominent feature of Ehrman's text is repeated expressions of disdain for “mythicists” (those who believe there was no historical person behind the Jesus stories) along with assertions

¹³ Thompson and Verenna 2012, 9.

¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁵ Quoted in Hoffmann 2009.

¹⁶ Once a scholar reaches a conclusion, no matter how many uncertainties were dealt with along the way, the conclusion tends to get presented as something quite certain. For example, scholars who produce reconstructions of the historical Jesus typically express great confidence in the reliability of their own reconstructions, although they know that other competent scholars have produced different reconstructions. I explain why such confidence is unjustifiable under the heading **Reframing the Question** below.

¹⁷ For a list of his books, see his website at <http://www.bartdehrman.com/books.htm>.

that no reputable New Testament scholar is a mythicist. In a blog post about the book he expresses clearly the confident and dismissive attitude that also pervades the book:

As most of you know, I'm pretty much staying out of the mythicist debates. That is for several reasons. One is that the mythicist position is not seen as intellectually credible in my field (I'm using euphemisms here; you should see what most of my friends *actually* say about it....) – no one that I know personally (I know a *lot* of scholars of New Testament, early Christianity, and so on) takes it at *all* seriously as a viable historical perspective (this includes not just Christians but also Jews, agnostics, atheists – you name it), and my colleagues sometimes tell me that I'm simply providing the mythicists with precisely the credibility they're looking for even by engaging them. It's a good point, and I take it seriously.

In that connection I should say that I can understand how someone who hasn't spent years being trained in the history of early Christianity might have difficulty distinguishing between serious scholarship that is accepted by experts as being plausible (even when judged wrong) and the writings of others that, well, is not. But experts obviously don't have that problem, and the mythicists simply are not seen as credible. They don't like that, and they don't like it when it someone points it out, but there it is.¹⁸

Throughout the book Ehrman leaves no room for the shadow of a doubt:

[The smart mythicists] need to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than to show why they cannot be right about their major contention. The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist. . . . he did exist, and we can say a few things, with relative certainty, about him.¹⁹

Thomas Brodie's Quest for the Historical Jesus

Also in 2012, Thomas Brodie published a book taking the opposite viewpoint, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Brodie is not well known among the general public, but among New Testament scholars he is widely esteemed for his brilliant and pioneering work in the area of biblical intertextuality. "Intertextuality" in this context refers to the full range of ways in which scriptural authors drew on earlier written sources – by quoting them, paraphrasing them, reworking them, alluding to them, etc.²⁰

Brodie is a lifelong Roman Catholic, a member of the Dominican order, and for many years was director of the Dominican Biblical Institute in Ireland. In *The Birthing of the New Testament* (2004), he had postulated that the entire New Testament was created by reworking Old Testament texts. In *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, he addresses what that means for historical analysis: Jesus was entirely a literary character and never existed as a historical person. Brodie reached that conclusion already in the 1970s but could not write about it without risking his academic career.

¹⁸ Ehrman 2013.

¹⁹ Ehrman 2012a, 4, 6. Expressions such as "Jesus certainly existed" on p.173 abound throughout the book.

²⁰ Luke's infancy stories about Jesus can serve as an example of the sort of intertextuality relevant to historical Jesus studies: Luke mined the Old Testament for stories of miraculous births, adopting and adapting details to create a new story for Jesus. On intertextuality in general, see also Moyise 2002; Brodie et al 2006.

He is now at retirement age and has had a long and distinguished career and wanted to publish on this topic before it was too late. As it happens, publishing this book did end his academic career. More about that later.²¹

Like Ehrman, Brodie expresses absolute confidence in the correctness of his conclusion. But he maintains a good-natured sense of humor and a courteous and considerate attitude toward those on the opposing side. Brodie was able to get a copy of Ehrman's book before his own was published, took that opportunity to write a chapter responding directly to Ehrman's arguments, and maintained his respectful stance in that chapter as well.

The Evidence For and Against

Brodie and Ehrman are both competent scholars, both are assessing the same body of literature acting as historical evidence, and yet they reach diametrically opposite conclusions. This is possible because each approaches the same literature with different assumptions. Two of the most important assumptions that determine how you interpret any given writing are related to its dependence on other literature and its literary genre, and it's in precisely these two areas that Ehrman and Brodie differ.

The Jesus-as-myth scenario is plausible if all of the writings about him can ultimately be traced back to a single source, meaning that all of them are ultimately inspired by a single original inventor. It's not likely that different people would independently invent the same imaginary person with the same name and a similar life story. Therefore, the strongest argument for Jesus's historicity is that multiple literary witnesses to his life are independent – that is, they are documents written by authors who had no knowledge at all of each other's writings.

The Gospels

That is precisely the approach Ehrman focuses on first in his book. He counts seven independent narratives about Jesus:

We have a number of surviving Gospels – I named seven – that are either completely independent of one another or independent in a large number of their traditions. These all attest to the existence of Jesus. Moreover, these independent witnesses corroborate many of the same basic sets of data . . .²²

All of these written sources I have mentioned are earlier than the surviving Gospels;²³ they all corroborate many of the key things said of Jesus in the Gospels; and most importantly they are all independent of one another. Let me stress the latter point. We

²¹ What happened to Brodie is discussed below under the heading **Challenging the Experts**.

²² Ehrman 2012a, 92.

²³ We actually do not have any ancient manuscripts of documents that narrate Jesus's life or recount his sayings and are commonly seen as having been written earlier than the gospels. What Ehrman is referring to is hypothetical documents, which of course makes his case weaker than he presents it here. For example, he isolates portions of each Gospel that contain data unique to that Gospel, or in some cases stretches of text common to multiple gospels, and then considers those portions to constitute earlier written texts. As I point out below, it's not necessary to postulate earlier written sources to explain these literary phenomena.

cannot think of the early Christian Gospels as going back to a solitary source that “invented” the idea that there was a man, Jesus.²⁴

His independent Gospel sources are “Mark, Q, M, L, sayings source, passion narratives, proto-Thomas, and so on . . .”²⁵ However, the independent status of each of these sources is more problematic than would appear from Ehrman’s confident statements about them.

Ehrman assumes Mark is the earliest Gospel, and he states unequivocally “Did Mark think Jesus existed? Of course he did.”²⁶ That is actually a debatable assumption about literary genre stated as if it were a fact. Many scholars believe Mark composed much of his narrative by reworking Pauline epistles and Old Testament texts.²⁷ If that is true, the evangelist was consciously treating Jesus largely as a literary character, rather than as a historical character, and it’s at least conceivable that for him, Jesus could have been entirely literary.

Ehrman cites “Q” as an independent witness. However, Q is a hypothetical source; no ancient manuscript containing the text of Q has ever been found. Scholars reconstruct Q by isolating sections of text in Matthew and Luke that are word-for-word identical but are not found in Mark. The Q hypothesis is based on the assumption that Matthew and Luke each used Mark and Q as sources but knew nothing of each other. The idea is that if Matthew and Luke are word-for-word identical in places, that can only be because they were both copying from one and the same written document. Speaking of a hypothetical document like Q as if its existence were an established fact misrepresents both the reality of the matter and Q’s actual standing among scholars. There is a vigorous debate among scholars as to whether such a thing as Q ever existed.²⁸ The crucial assumption behind Q is that Matthew and Luke are independent, but this is only an assumption, and there are alternative explanations for identical sections of text in Matthew and Luke. A viable alternative is to assume that Matthew copied from Mark, and Luke copied from Mark and Matthew. On this view, held by some prominent New Testament scholars,²⁹ four of Ehrman’s seven independent Gospel sources collapse into one.

Ehrman’s “L” has similar issues in that it’s a postulated source with no manuscript evidence. L is reconstructed by isolating stories and sayings in Luke that occur only in that Gospel. The assumption is that they must come from an earlier written source. However, Luke may have made up some or all of them. Some passages, such as the infancy narratives identified as “not historical” by Reza Aslan, may have been inspired by Old Testament stories. Ehrman asserts that “scholars have long offered good reasons for thinking Luke didn’t just make everything else all up.”³⁰ He implies that scholars are unanimous about this, but Brodie and others have also offered other good reasons for believing that Luke did “make things up.”³¹

²⁴ Ibid., 82.

²⁵ Ibid., 83.

²⁶ Ibid., 135.

²⁷ See the survey of literature in Dykstra 2012,26-27; see also Adamczewski 2014.

²⁸ See Goodacre 2002.

²⁹ The most comprehensive presentation of this view is Goulder 1989. Goulder’s scholarship is widely respected in the field of biblical studies but his arguments have not persuaded the majority of his peers. See his memoir (2009) for an account of how the field responded to his arguments, and see Goodacre 1996 for a detailed critique of Goulder 1989.

³⁰ Ehrman 2012a, 81.

³¹ See note 29.

Ehrman's "M," is yet another imaginary source, reconstructed by isolating the material that is unique to Matthew. Ehrman's "passion narratives" and "sayings sources" are also postulated sources. No manuscript of L, M, Q, the sayings source, or the passion narrative exists. In each case he is imagining a hypothetical source and then ascribing to it the weight of a separate and independent witness. If the reconstructed imaginary source contains unique information about Jesus not found elsewhere, he assumes literary independence on that basis. But that is never the only possible explanation for unique data: an author may have been embellishing earlier traditions by creating new stories or adapting stories from the Old Testament, as Luke did with the infancy narrative.

Ehrman also cites as an early independent source another hypothetical document, the "core" of the extra-canonical Gospel of Thomas. But here again, he ascribes more scholarly consensus to his view than exists in reality. When Brodie investigated the evidence that Ehrman cited for his early dating of the core of Thomas, he found that it didn't check out.³²

In sum, the Gospel evidence is far more ambiguous than Ehrman admits. The state of the evidence in narrative texts about Jesus is arguably insufficient to absolutely rule out the possibility that a single author created Jesus or a particular image of Jesus which later sources embellished. That possibility is also enhanced by new research into intertextuality which, as Brodie points out, Ehrman's book doesn't discuss. This new research increasingly shows the extent to which the Gospel texts that we actually have manuscripts for were constructed largely by reshaping earlier texts, primarily from the Old Testament.³³

Paul

The New Testament is also composed of letters purporting to be written by the Apostle Paul to Christian churches he or others founded. These epistles are generally considered to be much earlier than the Gospels, possibly dating back to the 50s AD, and of course they mention Jesus. It's well-known that Paul says precious little about what the human Jesus said or did, but Ehrman asks, ". . . how else would someone like Paul have known to persecute the Christians, if Christians didn't exist? And how could they exist if they didn't know anything about Jesus?"³⁴ These rhetorical questions entail at least two questionable assumptions.

The first questionable assumption is that if there were Christians, then Jesus had to have been historical. However, a sect of Christians could have rallied around a literary corpus that was based on created and embellished Jesus stories.

The second questionable assumption is that the Pauline literature is itself historically accurate. Brodie argues that to a large extent it isn't. The epistles aren't really informal letters; they're too carefully crafted:³⁵ ". . . down-to-earth details concerning Paul are composed on the basis of specific Old Testament texts ~ details of plot and scene and emotion."³⁶ For example, Paul calls the Galatian Christians "mindless," which sounds like anger, but:

³² Brodie 2012, 228.

³³ Ibid. 229.

³⁴ Ehrman 2012a, 85.

³⁵ Brodie 148.

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

. . . when you reconnoiter in the Old Testament, especially in the Greek version, you find a similar text in Jeremiah, where the great prophet effectively calls the people mindless, and then repeats it with intensified effect (Jer. 5:21, 23). . . . Galatians is not raw emotion. It contains a rehearsed literary adaptation of ancient Jeremiah.³⁷

For Brodie, the stories about Paul, whether autobiographical in the epistles or about him in the book of Acts, are historicized fiction.³⁸ "Pauline autobiography is part of a larger literary practice . . . the epistles deliberately use material that appears autobiographical for pedagogical purposes."³⁹ The same can be said of the narrative about Paul in the book of Acts. For example, the voyage and shipwreck story in Acts 27-28 is based on storm stories and Old Testament stories of people being deported to captivity in Babylon (2 Kings 25). Thus, for Brodie, Paul as well as Jesus may be to some extent fictional. But here Brodie hedges his bets:

The idea that Paul was a literary figure did not remove the possibility that behind the epistles lay one outstanding historical figure who was central to the inspiring of the epistles, but that is not the figure whom the epistles portray. Under that person's inspiration - or the inspiration of that person plus co-workers - the epistles portray a single individual, Paul, who incorporates in himself and in his teaching a distillation of the age-long drama of God's work on earth.⁴⁰

Brodie believes that the name and history of the historical individual behind Paul are irretrievable, and that it's more likely that the 13 epistles came from "some form of group or school."⁴¹

What Brodie doesn't acknowledge is that something similar could be said of Jesus. For some reason he is open to the "unknown historical figure behind Paul" but not to an "unknown historical figure behind Jesus" or perhaps "unknown historical figure behind Paul and Jesus."

Oral Tradition

Ehrman frequently uses expressions like "of course" and "the reality is" as ways of saying, "this is beyond question, no one in their right mind thinks otherwise." One of these statements is about oral tradition.⁴² The argument is that we can see traces of orality in written documents and this indicates oral tradition which reliably goes back to a historical Jesus. Once again, things are not as obvious as Ehrman presents them. Brodie has argued extensively and persuasively that "oral tradition" in the sense meant by scholars today is an invention from the nineteenth century that is highly suspect.⁴³ Oral speech forms may be artificially injected into literary texts, and if stories can be made up for written presentation, they can also be made up for oral presentation. There are no guarantees of historicity merely because a part of a text displays apparently oral speech patterns.

³⁷ Ibid., 141.

³⁸ Ibid., 145.

³⁹ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 146-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 153.

⁴² Ehrman 2012a, 73.

⁴³ See Dykstra 2012, 41-64

Other Christian and non-Christian Sources

There are other early written sources that mention Jesus which Ehrman refers to, including the church fathers Ignatius and Clement, but Brodie argues that all of them could have gotten their information from the gospels. As he puts it,

In any case, to claim in effect that neither Clement (c.90), nor Ignatius (c.110), nor Papias (c. 125) had ever learned directly or indirectly from any of the canonical gospels is high-risk history.⁴⁴

Non-Christian sources that mention Jesus are often cited as a particularly strong proof of Jesus's existence, but there too Brodie points out that a dependence on the Gospels can't be ruled out, and many so-called references to Jesus in non-Christian sources are actually just references to what Christians were saying. For example,

[Tacitus provides] the kind of information that would have been commonplace, or that could have been distilled or inferred from the work of Josephus, written twenty years earlier. . . . At a time when some of the Gospels were decades old, basic contact with Christians would have yielded such information.⁴⁵

Often considered the strongest evidence in a non-Christian source is the reference to Jesus in the first-century Jewish author Josephus, and Brodie addresses that in detail. He points out that independent witnesses generally add something new that isn't known about a subject, but Josephus doesn't tell us anything we don't already know from the Gospels or Acts. The only thing different in Josephus is style and vocabulary, which would result from adapting his sources to his own writing. On the other hand, it's plausible that Josephus had access to the gospels. He and the evangelists were experts in the Old Testament scriptures and were writing similar content. People like that were part of a small literary community in the ancient world, and it's possible they managed to circulate their writings to each other. In addition, Josephus lived in Rome and was thus in close proximity to a Christian community.

Summarizing the character of the references to Jesus in non-Christian sources, Brodie writes:

Of the five writers frequently cited as independent witnesses to Jesus, none ever met him; none said they met anyone who had met him; or said they met anyone who had known someone who had met him.⁴⁶

Generic Conventions in Scripture

One of Brodie's strongest points is to call out the didactic intent of scripture. Ehrman blithely asserts that "the reality is" that the gospel authors didn't know they were writing scripture, and so it was coincidental that the gospels became documents of faith, meaning that scriptural status has "no bearing" on their historicity.⁴⁷ But the gospel authors may well not have been quite so ignorant of how what they were writing would be used. In fact, a good deal of evidence suggests

⁴⁴ Brodie 2012, 230.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 167. See also Verenna 2012a.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ehrman 2012a, 72-3.

they were deliberately writing scripture, that is, authoritative texts intended to build a community and provide a guide for behavior.⁴⁸ And if so, that should have a profound impact on how we interpret what they wrote. As Brodie explains:

If a newspaper announces cheap flights to Mars, it is important to note whether the advertisement occurs in the Travel Section or in the Cartoons-and-Jokes Page. Clarity on the literary factor is Rule One.⁴⁹

Brodie asserts that gospels are precisely didactic texts designed to look like history. The presence of known historical events and places in such writings doesn't prove otherwise. The fact that Virgil's *Aeneid* mentions real places doesn't make it a work of history.

The Crucified Messiah and James the Brother of Jesus

For Ehrman, the fact that the story of Christ includes his crucifixion and references to his brother are the strongest nails in the coffin of mythicism: "each of them shows beyond a shadow of reasonable doubt that Jesus must have existed as a Palestinian Jew who was crucified by the Romans."⁵⁰ He asserts that no Jew would have made up a crucified messiah story. And no early Christian would have given his divine messiah a brother. For Ehrman this is so obvious it's beyond dispute.

Brodie disputes it.

For Brodie, crucifixion makes perfect sense as a fresh synthesis of Old Testament texts that "deal with the tension between suffering and God's hope."⁵¹ A new adaptation of that same message in a new cultural milieu would use symbols and forms native to the new culture.

So when there was a need to express the ancient contradiction or paradox between God-based hope and life's inevitable sufferings it was appropriate to express those sufferings in a clear contemporary image ~ Roman crucifixion. It was doubly appropriate in the context of a rhetorical world that sought dramatic effect and *energeia* (graphic presentation) (Walsh 1961: 188).⁵²

Ultimately, the problem with taking references to crucifixion and Jesus's brother as absolute evidence of historicity is that we can be mistaken when making judgments about what would have been embarrassing to early Christians.⁵³

In these ways, Brodie either neutralizes or at least casts doubt on all of Ehrman's evidence and arguments. However, the question arises: how does he get from questioning Jesus's historicity to denying it with such apparent confidence? The answer is that he employs Ockham's Razor.

⁴⁸ Dykstra 2012, 201ff.

⁴⁹ Brodie 2012, 122.

⁵⁰ Ehrman 2012a, 143, 156.

⁵¹ Brodie 2012, 230.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 230-1.

⁵³ I go into more detail this later in under the heading **The Criterion of Dissimilarity**, below.

Ockham's Razor

Ockham's razor is the idea that the simplest explanation for a set of facts or phenomena is generally the best explanation. As an example, Brodie cites the remark in the gospels about Jesus being a *tekton* (carpenter); it's simplest to take that as an Old Testament reference:

Wisdom 13, particularly its account of people failing to discern the Creator and of seeing only the works of a *tekton*, provides an adequate explanation for Mark's use of *tekton*; it accounts fully for Mark's data. In essence: once the literary connection is seen, the historical explanation is unnecessary; it goes beyond what is needed to explain the data.⁵⁴

The same principal applies to the question of Jesus's existence in general:

Explaining the data does not require invoking the historical existence of Jesus. The explanation that suffices without invoking Jesus' historical existence is the simplest, therefore, in respect for a basic rule of method, it is to be preferred.⁵⁵

However, this argument is just as questionable as so many of Ehrman's are. It's just as easy to argue that the "simplest" explanation points to a historical person who inspired the earliest Jesus stories, even if much of the literature is interrelated and is embedded in a genre that is known for its historicizing fiction.

Reframing the Question

There is a lot of disagreement among scholars about what the historical Jesus said and did, but that excites relatively little emotional energy. Most of the expressions of indignation, outrage, and contempt center around the question, "Did he exist or didn't he?" But despite the apparent obviousness and simplicity of this question, any answer to it is inevitably misleading. A corollary from modern literature will illustrate the point.

As a young lawyer, John Grisham was involved in a rape trial. The victim was a 12-year-old girl whose testimony was so moving that it inspired him to write a novel exploring the scenario. In a few years he produced his first book, *A Time to Kill*.⁵⁶ That book is the story of a ten-year-old black girl named Tonya Hailey who is raped by two white men. Tonya's father kills the rapists, and most of the book is about the legal battles surrounding the murder charges against the father.

Did Tonya Hailey exist? In a sense, yes. There was a real historical person who inspired the fictional portrayal, and some of the details in the fictional portrayal correspond closely to reality. In another sense, no, she didn't exist. Tonya Hailey is fictional and we won't learn very much about the historical person who inspired the literary creation of Tonya by reading *A Time to Kill*. So how useful is the question, "Did Tonya Hailey exist?" Is either a "yes" or a "no" answer accurate and helpful?

Suppose Grisham's inspiration wasn't one particular case, but that he drew on a broad knowledge of a number of rape cases. The same problem exists because there is still some genuine historical background. In this situation, a yes-or-no question and answer would only mask the

⁵⁴ Brodie 2012, 159.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Grisham 2010.

reality of how his book came to be written. The key point here is that regardless of the historical background, you have no reliable means for working your way backward from the Grisham text to the history behind it, because the text was not written to report “what actually happened.”

Neither were the gospels.

As Brodie puts it, the gospels are historicized fiction, and therefore the question, “Did Jesus exist?” poses the very same problems as “Did Tonya Hailey exist?”⁵⁷ We know that many of the gospel stories are pure fiction. We don’t know how many. Scholars who reconstruct the historical Jesus do so by creating and applying criteria for rejecting or accepting parts of the gospels. They disagree about which criteria to use and how to apply the criteria, and they often reach contradictory conclusions. What if most of the stories and sayings are fictional? What if only 5% of the sayings are accurate? What if there was a historical person behind the gospel stories but he never actually preached in parables?⁵⁸ What if there was a historical person who was crucified, but virtually none of the details about him that are presented in the gospels are accurate? What if the first Christians chose to use the name Jesus for its symbolic value, even though the historical person’s actual name was Mordecai? How meaningful and accurate would it be to say “yes, Jesus was a historical person” in such cases?

Or to look at it from another angle, what if it’s possible that most of the gospel stories are historically accurate, but we just can’t be sure? What if determining the historical reality is based largely on guesswork and probabilities and we’re not even sure about the degrees of probability? How much difference is there between “yes, of course Jesus was a historical person, but we know nothing certain about him” and “no, Jesus as we know him in the New Testament was not a historical person”? What do expressions like Ehrman’s “of course he existed,” actually mean?

Ehrman’s Criteria for Historicity

Ehrman indirectly acknowledges the problem, yet wants to keep the question and an absolute “yes” answer to it:

In my view, humanists, agnostics, atheists, mythicists, and anyone else who does not advocate belief in Jesus would be better served to stress that the Jesus of history is not the Jesus of modern Christianity than to insist - wrongly and counterproductively - that Jesus never existed. Jesus did exist. He simply was not the person that most modern believers today think he was.⁵⁹

The problem with this statement is not only the lack of clarity as to what “Jesus did exist” actually means. The greater problem, which pervades Ehrman’s entire book, is overconfidence in our ability to know which parts of the Jesus traditions are historically accurate and which are not. Speaking with authority as a historical scholar, Ehrman informs the lay reader of the Huffington Post web site that his academic field has methods that can reliably do just that:

⁵⁷ For a fuller treatment of this issue, see Lindsay 2010.

⁵⁸ Goulder points out that the parables are different for each evangelist, suggesting that the evangelists themselves composed them. See Goulder 2009, 58.

⁵⁹ Ehrman 2012a, 336.

The question is not whether sources are biased but whether biased sources can be used to yield historically reliable information, once their biased chaff is separated from the historical kernel. And historians have devised ways of doing just that.⁶⁰

In his book, he promises to use these reliable methods to unveil for us the historical kernel of the Jesus traditions.

I will discuss the various criteria that scholars use to determine which of the many traditions about Jesus are probably historically reliable . . . and . . . I will provide an overview of what the rigorous application of these criteria yield, explaining the most important features of Jesus's life that we can know about with relative certainty.⁶¹

Ehrman is speaking of relatively objective ways for deciding if any given story about Jesus is true or false. From Ehrman's presentation you might think he is speaking of an approach to history that can be accepted as reliable, one that only uneducated lay people or fringe scholars might have serious doubts about.

In making such assertions Ehrman is not out of line with the majority of biblical scholars, but the matter is more complicated. As another biblical scholar, Joel Willitts, observes, "Overconfidence in what the tools of the historical-critical method can satisfactorily produce pervades Jesus research."⁶² An article Willitts published in 2005 carefully examined the historical criteria used by six different Jesus scholars. Willitts found that each scholar used different criteria and even where they agreed on some criteria they ended up with different results because they applied the criteria differently. He concluded by despairing even of the possibility of creating reliable criteria, let alone applying them consistently. The article title summarizes the nature and outcome of his investigation: *Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the 'Historical Jesus'. Or, Why I Decided Not to Be a 'Historical Jesus' Scholar.*⁶³

The best way to show that the so-called "reliable criteria" are actually unreliable is to take some specific examples and show how they might be misleading. To that end it's worth taking a closer look at some of Ehrman's examples of "the most important features of Jesus's life that we can know about with relative certainty," which he establishes by "the rigorous application of these criteria."

He primarily uses two criteria. One is the criterion of multiple independent witnesses, which means that if multiple sources say the same thing about Jesus, and the sources didn't get the information from each other, the report is probably accurate. As I pointed out earlier, this is already problematic because we don't know for sure how independent our sources actually are. The criterion of dissimilarity is the second one, and it basically means that if a source conveys something about Jesus that the early church would have found embarrassing, the most likely

⁶⁰ Ehrman 2012b.

⁶¹ Ehrman 2012a, 271.

⁶² Willitts 2010. See also Keith and Le Donne 2012, a recent symposium dedicated to exploring the limitations of historical criteria.

⁶³ Richard Carrier (2010) also points out other difficulties with applying criteria. Given that even if you accept certain criteria as valid, they can't give you absolute certainty, so how can you assess the relative probability of a conclusion reached by applying a criterion? When different criteria point in different directions, how would you weigh different probabilities in order to decide what you think is historically accurate?

reason is that they had no choice but to report it because it was true. Some examples will serve to illustrate the problematic character of this criterion too.

The Criterion of Multiple Independent Witnesses

Three assertions that Ehrman establishes by the criterion of multiple independent witnesses are that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, that Jesus taught his apocalyptic message by telling parables, and that Jesus had a conflict with the residents of his home town.⁶⁴ Each of these assertions has problems, entirely aside from the fundamental issue that the literary independence of the sources is actually questionable.

By apocalyptic prophet, Ehrman means that Jesus preached about the imminence of the end times. Paul too was an apocalyptic prophet in this sense. Given the scholarly consensus that the epistles were written many years before the gospels, it is at least possible that the first evangelist could have created an apocalyptic Jesus by crafting a narrative based on the teachings in Paul's epistles. Jesper Svartvik describes the earliest gospel in precisely that way: "The Gospel of Mark may best be described as a narrative presentation of the Pauline Gospel."⁶⁵

There are equally serious issues with the assertion that Jesus must have spoken in parables. Michael Goulder has pointed out that the parables in each gospel have a character unique to the gospel in which they occur, which suggests that the evangelists composed them.⁶⁶ Moreover, suppose each evangelist was in fact writing his narrative as historicized fiction, trying to address issues that came up in his own day. Making Jesus explicitly and literally speak about issues that didn't exist in the earlier period would have been too obviously anachronistic. But as a creative author, an evangelist could start or continue a tradition of Jesus speaking in parables which could get a contemporary message across subtly without being so obviously anachronistic.⁶⁷

Ehrman asserts that "antifamily traditions are too widely attested in our sources to be ignored," and cites Mark, Q, and Thomas in support of this claim. But this lumps together disparate traditions about Jesus's home town rejecting him and general references to intra-family conflict in the end times ("a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother . . .").⁶⁸ As Jesus's rejection by his relatives and home town, those stories are not independently attested,⁶⁹ and it's plausible to interpret them as historicized fiction: they may represent the rejection of Christianity by the Jews.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Ehrman 2012a, 298ff., 269, 295, 320-21. Ehrman asserts that hometown conflict meets the criterion of multiple independent witnesses because of evidence in both Mark 3:31-34 and the Gospel of Thomas 99.

⁶⁵ Svartvik 2000, 345. This is also the conclusion I reach in Dykstra 2012.

⁶⁶ Goulder 2009, 58ff.

⁶⁷ See Dykstra 2012, 127ff.

⁶⁸ Ehrman 2012a, 322.

⁶⁹ They appear in the synoptic gospels, i.e., Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Matthew and Luke are generally considered to be dependent on Mark.

⁷⁰ See Dykstra 2012, 105ff.

The Criterion of Dissimilarity

Another criterion that leads to highly questionable conclusions is the criterion of dissimilarity. Here too it will suffice to point out problems with three conclusions that Ehrman asserts on the basis of this criterion: Jesus thought the main commandment of the Torah was love of God and neighbor, Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, and Jesus was betrayed by Judas.⁷¹

Ehrman refers to Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats⁷² as a saying that had to have come from the historical Jesus because it is contrary to early church thinking. The idea is that the church would not have liked it because according to church dogma God's judgment is based on belief in Christ rather than behavior toward others. However, this analysis fails on multiple counts. In the first place, our earliest witness to the primary importance of the command to love God and neighbor predates the Gospel of Mark. It's found in Paul's epistles, where it is not attributed to Jesus.⁷³ So once again, the gospels could have been narrativizing the teaching of the epistles rather than reporting historical reality. Even more importantly, the whole New Testament is shot through with both kinds of texts - references to belief and trust in God and references to doing good to others as God's commandment to be obeyed. Any given section of a text, including one containing a parable, may emphasize one aspect or the other. Each parable doesn't necessarily contain the whole of the gospel message but rather focuses on a key point. So it makes no sense to assume that we can be confident an early Christian author wouldn't have made up the parable of the sheep and the goats. Likewise it makes no sense to assume that an early Christian author wouldn't identify the commandment to love neighbor and God as primary. Paul did. This example illustrates one of the problems with the criterion of dissimilarity: multiple viewpoints easily coexist within the same community and even within one and the same text produced by such a community.

Ehrman doesn't think that Jesus's followers would have made up the stories about him eating with sinners and tax collectors. But these stories can be seen as a way to defend Paul's mission to the Gentiles, a way of showing that Jesus was accepting of social outsiders, which Gentiles were to the Jewish community. According to the epistles, Paul was constantly fighting battles with Christian Jews who thought of non-Jewish Christians as at best second-class citizens who really needed to become Jews in order to be full members of the new Christian communities. Given that this struggle over including Gentiles as first-class citizens in Christian communities didn't arise until Paul began converting Gentiles, portraying Jesus dining with social outcasts had the function of making it appear as though he would approve of what Paul was doing, were he alive in Paul's day.⁷⁴

And so once again, the criterion of dissimilarity falls apart on closer examination. The belief that we can know what the early church would have found embarrassing is fundamentally flawed. It assumes we have more knowledge and understanding of the way people thought than we actually have, and it assumes more uniformity of thought among those people than they actually had. Even

⁷¹ Ibid., 311, 317, 328.

⁷² Matt 25:31-46. The parable portrays a last judgment scene at which people who did good to those around them, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, etc., go to heaven and those who failed to do good deeds go to hell. There is no mention of what the members of each group "believed in."

⁷³ Gal 5:14.

⁷⁴ See Dykstra 2012, 87ff.

if we knew the people well and they were all uniform automatons, we might be interpreting a particular text wrong. A text about eating with sinners might be about openness to Gentiles, which is highly “similar” to early Christian thought, not “dissimilar” at all.

Ehrman doesn’t think Jesus’s followers would make up betrayal by Judas because it would add a negative aspect to Jesus’s image: “Jesus had no more authority over his closest followers than *that*!”⁷⁵ But Judas’s betrayal can be seen as a way to symbolize what Mark conceived of as the Christian Jews’ “betrayal” of Christ – that is, their rejection of Paul’s view that Gentiles should be accepted as full members of Christian communities without having to become Jews.⁷⁶ In Paul’s view, the Jew who insisted that a Gentile had to become a Jew in order to be a full-fledged Christian was betraying Christ – just as Judas (whose name also means Jew) betrayed Christ. Once again, merely by interpreting the motivation for the story differently, it becomes highly “similar” instead of “dissimilar.” How then can the criterion of dissimilarity be a reliable arbiter of what is historically accurate or not?

The unreliability of our interpretation of a text and the unreliability of our knowledge of its original authors’ and readers’ patterns of thought is one reason why the criterion of dissimilarity is itself unreliable. But it’s not just ambiguity in interpretation that’s the problem. As Brodie explains, a well-known characteristic of scripture is to deliberately include multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives.

Contradiction and discontinuity are integral parts of a biblical literary artistry that, from Genesis to the epistles, is pervaded by multiple forms of dialogue and dialectic. In Genesis 1-2, for instance, humankind is shown first as image of God, then as made of clay (Gen 1:26; 2:7); first as ruling the earth, then as serving it (Gen 1:28; 2:5, *abad* in Hebrew, literally, ‘serve’ rather than ‘till’).

Even if we find something in one scriptural book that we’re certain conflicts with what we know about Christianity in other books, that doesn’t necessarily mean the “dissimilar” item is historical; it could simply be that the author wanted to make a complementary point.

Brodie’s Rule One

Even more importantly, Brodie points out that Ehrman’s book applies criteria of historicity while conveniently overlooking criteria of literary relationships that have been developed more recently:

But Ehrman’s study does not take account of this new research. It does not concentrate on discerning the literary nature of the various documents and so breaks Rule One of historical investigation. It summarizes the criteria developed in the 1950s for tracing the historical Jesus, but makes no mention of the criteria developed since the 1980s for detecting literary dependence.”⁷⁷

Brodie’s Rule One means you have to understand the literary nature **before** applying criteria of historicity. If you apply criteria that help determine intertextual relationships and reach the

⁷⁵ Ehrman 2012a, 328.

⁷⁶ Dykstra 2012, 116ff.

⁷⁷ Brodie 2012, 229. Thompson and Verenna (2012, 8) make the same point.

conclusion that Mark was created by reworking Pauline epistles and Old Testament texts, and if he was writing in a genre characterized by historicized fiction, that changes your whole approach to interpreting Mark. It forces you to recognize that the text does not have a historical focus, but rather has a didactic or polemical focus. The Gospel was written in order to build or strengthen a community and tell people how to behave within that community. It was written to provide an authoritative argument against opposing views of how the community should be constituted. History, if present at all, is taking a back seat to making a point. Even if you find that something in Mark is historical, that doesn't reflect on the historicity of everything else in it. If the cartoons-and-jokes page in the newspaper advertises imaginary flights to Mars and has them taking off from Seattle, that doesn't mean you can actually hitch a ride on one of those flights.

What can we know with certainty about Jesus

If you take seriously Rule One and the fallibility of historical criteria, you end up shelving the "Did Jesus exist?" question in favor of others such as "How much can we know about the historical person behind the New Testament depiction of Jesus?" and "How certain are we about what we think we know?" The best answer to those questions is "precious little" and "not certain at all."

That is the conclusion reached by most of the scholars who contributed articles to the recently published book, *Is This Not the Carpenter?: The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*.⁷⁸ In his review of that book Brodie states: "And the most basic question raised by this book is whether Jesus existed historically or whether he is a literary figure."⁷⁹ It would be more accurate to say, "The most basic question raised by this book is whether there is any value to the quest for a historical Jesus, or whether we should focus on the literary Jesus." The point is we've wasted enough time on a futile quest trying to separate a historical Jesus from the literary Jesus. It can't be done and it's time to move on.

Brodie is far from the first major New Testament scholar to reach that conclusion. Albert Schweitzer already said as much a century ago:

[S]trictly speaking absolutely nothing can be proved by evidence from the past, but can only be shown to be more or less probable. Moreover, in the case of Jesus, the theoretical reservations are even greater because all the reports about him go back to the one source of tradition, early Christianity itself, and there are no data available in Jewish or Gentile secular history which could be used as controls. Thus the degree of certainty cannot even be raised so high as positive probability. . . . Seen from a purely logical viewpoint, whether Jesus existed or did not exist must always remain hypothetical. . . . Modern Christianity must always reckon with the possibility of having to abandon the historical figure of Jesus.⁸⁰

A sea change in scholarly consensus moving in this direction is not likely anytime soon, but some movement has begun. A book like *Is this not the Carpenter* with well-known and respected scholars contributing to it would have been all but unthinkable just a decade or two earlier. So the

⁷⁸ Thompson and Verenna 2012.

⁷⁹ Verenna 2012a, np, reviewing Thompson and Verenna 2012.

⁸⁰ Schweitzer 1910, 401-402

tide has changed and it's reasonable to expect further progress toward the conclusion that we know very little about Jesus, and that any effort at achieving certainty is futile. As Philip Davies writes:

I don't think, however, that in another 20 years there will be a consensus that Jesus did not exist, or even possibly didn't exist, but a recognition that his existence is not entirely certain would nudge Jesus scholarship towards academic respectability.

Am I inclined to accept that Jesus existed? Yes, I am. But I am unable to say with any conviction what he may have said and done, or what his words and deeds might tell us about who or what he thought he was. Even what his followers thought about him is highly coloured with hindsight, embellishment, rationalization and reflection.

Two articles in *Is This Not the Carpenter?* (by the two editors, in fact) amass a great deal of evidence that the profile of Jesus in the New Testament is composed of stock motifs drawn from all over the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. These parallels are valid: in trying to provide an account of who and what Jesus was such resources were inevitably drawn upon, consciously or unconsciously by the gospel writers. But one should not argue from these, as do Thompson and Verenna, that Jesus was invented.⁸¹

Challenging the Experts

If Davies is right, how is it that Ehrman can cite the consensus of all biblical scholars as being in support of his position? That is a major recurring theme in his book. He goes so far as to assert that no reputable New Testament scholar is a mythicist. The true experts are unanimously against mythicism:

I should say at the outset that none of this [mythicist] literature is written by scholars trained in New Testament or early Christian studies teaching at the major, or even the minor, accredited theological seminaries, divinity schools, universities, or colleges of North America or Europe (or anywhere else in the world). Of the thousands of scholars of early Christianity who do teach at such schools, none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed.

I hardly need to stress what I have already intimated: the view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet.

Serious historians of the early Christian movement – all of them – have spent many years preparing to be experts in their field. . . . Expertise requires years of patiently examining ancient texts and a thorough grounding in the history and culture of Greek and Roman antiquity, the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, . . . and, well, lots of other things. It is striking that virtually everyone who has spent all the years needed to attain these qualifications is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is a real historical figure.⁸²

⁸¹ Davies 2012.

⁸² Ehrman 2012a, 2, 4.

There are two distinct ideas here. The first is that a consensus of experts is reliable. The second is that the only reliable experts on this question are scholars who specialize in the field of New Testament or early Christianity, and more specifically scholars who earn their living in the field by teaching at accredited institutions. In each case, reality is more complicated than the assertion makes it sound.

Consensus

A consensus of professional “experts” certainly carries some weight, but as Philip Davies points out a consensus is fallible:

[Stressing consensus of experts] is precisely the tactic anti-minimalists⁸³ tried twenty years ago: their targets were ‘amateurs’, ‘incompetent’, and could be ignored. The ‘amateurs’ are now all retired professors, while virtually everyone else in the field has become minimalist (if in most cases grudgingly and tacitly). So, as the saying goes, déjà vu all over again.⁸⁴

Even today the consensus around Jesus’s historicity has begun to decay. Thomas Brodie fits all of Ehrman’s criteria for being ranked as an expert – specializing in New Testament and teaching at an accredited institution.⁸⁵ And in 2010 and 2012, two collections of articles were published in which several established scholars expressed the conviction that Jesus might not have existed or that we can’t know much of anything about him.⁸⁶

Specialization

More importantly, though, Ehrman’s criteria for determining who is an expert are too narrow. Many of the professional scholars who openly question Jesus’s historicity today specialize in Old Testament studies. To Ehrman they don’t qualify as “experts.” However, Old Testament history and literature is the immediate background to the New Testament history and literature. Brodie points out the increasing amount of literature in recent years showing direct literary connections between the New Testament and the Old Testament. You could reasonably make the opposite contention: an Old Testament scholar who has some education in New Testament might be better qualified to make judgments about Jesus’s historicity than a New Testament scholar with minimal Old Testament knowledge.

Also, Old Testament scholars have typically gone through a full course of New Testament studies just to get their Ph.D. Thomas L. Thompson, the brilliant Old Testament scholar spoken of in the introduction, is a good example. Ehrman explicitly writes him off: “Thompson is trained in biblical studies, but he does not have degrees in New Testament or early Christianity. He is,

⁸³ “Minimalist” is a title that has been ascribed to scholars who see minimal historical content in biblical narrative.

⁸⁴ Thompson 2012.

⁸⁵ He did at the time he published his book. His status changed later, which I’ll go into later.

⁸⁶ Hoffmann 2010; Thompson and Verenna 2012.

instead, a Hebrew Bible scholar who teaches at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark.”⁸⁷ Contrast that with Thompson’s own account of his credentials as a New Testament scholar:

I studied New Testament in Tübingen from 1963 to 1972, where my teachers were Karl Hermann Schelkle, Otto Michel and Ernst Käsemann. I also studied at Temple University in 1975/6, where I took my doctoral examinations in New Testament studies with Gerald Sloyan. My teachers were, internationally, well-recognized scholars.⁸⁸

Thompson also asserts his qualifications to write about the New Testament based on his extensive knowledge of literary and historical background that applies to both testaments:

Ehrman pompously ignores my considerable analytical discussion, which was rooted in a wide-ranging, comparative literary classification and analysis of the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern inscriptions. Apparently to him, the more than 40 years I have devoted to research in my study of the primary fields of Old Testament exegesis, ancient Near Eastern literature and ancient history - not least in regards to questions of historicity - leaves me unqualified and lacking the essential competence to address such questions because they also come to include a comparison of such an analysis with these same stereotypical literary tropes as they occur in the Gospels.⁸⁹

On the other hand, New Testament scholars can be too specialized, lacking a broader picture of related academic fields. The academic field of New Testament studies itself comprises a broad array of sub-fields and is closely related to many other fields, such that no one can cover them all. Yet many of those sub-fields and related fields involve knowledge crucial to understanding the New Testament. Brodie observes that Ehrman seems unaware of the literature about intertextuality.⁹⁰ Thompson observes that Ehrman seems unaware of ancient Near Eastern motifs that are repeated in the New Testament.⁹¹

In other words, even the experts, the so-called “professionals,” are amateurs in one area or another, and it might be a critical area. Compared to Brodie, Ehrman himself is an amateur in the area of intertextuality, and it’s Brodie’s contention that understanding intertextuality is key to making a judgment about historicity. Thompson agrees:

I think a less polemically minded Bart Ehrman would recognize that this project . . . can only be furthered by one who is familiar with Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern literature. Nevertheless, his crude dismissal of the relevance of inter-disciplinary perspectives undermines my confidence that he understands the problems related to the historicity of a literary figure, except from a historicist—even fundamentalist—perspective.⁹²

⁸⁷ Ehrman 2012a, 18.

⁸⁸ Thompson 2012b. See also Casey 2012 for a similar assertion that Thompson is “incompetent” to write about New Testament studies.

⁸⁹ Thompson 2012.

⁹⁰ Brodie 2012, 229.

⁹¹ Thompson 2012.

⁹² Ibid.

Professionals versus Amateurs

Ehrman accords special status to the opinions of scholars who teach at accredited educational institutions. Brodie was just such a person, and for four decades he doubted Jesus's historicity but didn't say so publicly. Why? Might there be others who are waiting until retirement age to say what they really think, or who maybe never will?

That possibility weakens Ehrman's point here. There are good reasons why some of the best scholarship about the New Testament is written by people who don't earn their livelihood by teaching in the field.

Professional scholars have vested interests that they have to protect. A scholar's livelihood depends in part on his or her reputation, and both can be lost if they say the wrong thing publicly. For many scholars, acknowledging doubts in Jesus's historicity would be just such a "career-limiting move." It's not just a matter of losing your job. Any scholar who comes out for "mythicist" is likely to endure vilification and ridicule.

In the nineteenth century Bruno Bauer lost his job for openly stating his doubts about Jesus's historicity,⁹³ and ever since there have been many cautionary tales that are not lost on present-day professional scholars.⁹⁴ The danger has persisted into the twenty-first century, for Thomas Brodie lost his job for the same reason.⁹⁵ Not only did Brodie lose his job, his own Dominican order devoted an issue of its official journal to a collection of articles attacking Brodie personally as well as his book *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus*.⁹⁶ Brodie's experience explains part of the reason why people who teach New Testament don't openly espouse mythicist views. What Brodie published in 2012 was something that he had believed for 40 years but had never dared to put in print. He did so only at retirement age, at a time when he had little to lose. How many others like him are there?

It's not just a monetary matter. It's also a question of academic reputation. No one wants to endure aspersions on their competence and integrity as Thomas Thompson experienced, or accusations of dishonesty as Thomas Brodie experienced.

The result is self-censorship: people voluntarily refrain from saying what they believe, in order to avoid loss of income, loss of respect of their peers, or fear of unpleasantness. What Richard Carrier says about this could be repeated by many others:

I personally know a few professors who themselves also feel this way [lean toward mythicism]: they do not touch this topic with a ten foot pole, precisely because they fear the kind of thing Ehrman is doing and threatening. They do not want to lose their jobs or career prospects and opportunities. They do not want to be ridiculed or marginalized.⁹⁷

In addition, professionals who have lived their lives teaching a particular interpretation of literature or history have staked their reputation on that interpretation and often have included it

⁹³ Ehrman 2012a, 16.

⁹⁴ Gerd Lüdemann faced repercussions for asserting that only 5% of the sayings attributed to Jesus were historical (see the Preface in Lüdemann 1999). Anthony Le Donne's book questioning the possibility of attaining certainty in reconstructions of a historical Jesus cost him his job (see Goodacre 2012). See also Verenna 2012b.

⁹⁵ See Dykstra 2014.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Carrier 2012a.

in their published writings. They tend to not be receptive to new proposals that involve a shift that would make much of what they taught and wrote over the years obsolete. New Testament scholar Dennis MacDonald discovered this when he proposed that the Gospel of Mark was written by reworking themes from Homer's Iliad and Odyssey:

A Homeric-mimetic reading of the Gospels is a seismic paradigm shift with enormous implications. As is the case with all paradigm shifts, one must expect resistance from those who have benefited from business as usual. I no longer expect scholars of my generation to accept my work with open arms; if acceptance occurs at all, it will come from future generations.⁹⁸

Michael Goulder faced the same resistance when he proposed that everything in Luke could be explained by borrowing from Mark and Matthew combined with Luke's own creativity. He later recounted early resistance to proposals that 20 years later were accepted:

My disappointment was due in large part to my inexperience. I had supposed that scholars were dedicated to the pursuit of truth, wherever that might lead, and that new ideas would always be welcome. This however is only partly true. Before new ideas come, scholars have reached a consensus, and their position as authorities depends upon their agreeing with that consensus. Their teachers, whom they normally honoured, had taught them the consensus; they had written their books assuming it, and they had often helped to develop it themselves. They were not at all likely, therefore, to think that they and their fellow experts had been wrong, and that a new scholar, of whom they had not heard, was in a position to put them right. But there is another problem: most scholars of the New Testament have religious loyalties: they want the text to be orthodox, or historical, or preachable, or relevant. So any new interpretation which does not fulfil those conditions is not likely to be approved. I had to wait nearly twenty years for my vindication.⁹⁹

Elsewhere Goulder relates paradigms in biblical studies to paradigms in the hard sciences:

But once a paradigm is accepted it shapes all scientific work; to be a scientist is to accept the paradigm. It is taught in A-level textbooks, and all experiments are simply its further working out. . . . The history of the subject is told in terms of the paradigm; its professors have made their reputations by assuming and extending it, and will not lightly abandon it. . . . counter-evidence can be accommodated, or will be found erroneous, or can no doubt be explained in time. In this way it is extremely difficult for a shift of paradigm to take place. But anomalies and tensions will build up, and eventually someone will propose an alternative paradigm; and then the Ph.D. students and the young of all ages will suddenly accept it. Shifts of paradigm do not come from professors; they come from young men, and from those on the margin of the subject.¹⁰⁰

In other words "amateurs" may well have an advantage over the professionals. They are clearly at a disadvantage in many of the hard sciences; not just anyone can build a Large Hadron Collider

⁹⁸ MacDonald 2006b.

⁹⁹ Goulder 2009, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Goulder 1989, 4. Goulder here summarizes findings from a famous study on paradigm shifts in the hard sciences, Kuhn 1962.

in order to validate a hypothesis. But that doesn't apply in academic fields related to biblical studies, where virtually everything depends on interpreting the primary sources, and special archival access isn't required because the sources are published. Some excellent works of scholarship are produced by people who have learned the languages and background history in a university setting but make their living in some capacity other than that of a New Testament professor.¹⁰¹

Disdain, Outrage, and Humor

Another unique feature of the controversy over Jesus's historicity which reflects more generally on the field of biblical studies is the ill will which many on both sides bear toward the other side. Responses to both Ehrman and Brodie are marked by expressions of disdain and outrage. Richard Carrier's condemnation of Ehrman's book is an example:

It is for all the reasons documented in this article (which are again just a sample of many other errors of like kind, from false claims, to illogical arguments, to self-contradictions, to misrepresentations of his opponents, to errors of omission), especially this book's complete failure to interact with even a single complete theory of mythicism (which alone renders the book useless, even were it free of error), that I have no choice but to condemn this thing as being nothing more than a sad murder of electrons and trees.¹⁰²

Ehrman's book is so full of egregious factual errors demonstrating his ignorance, sloppiness, and incompetence in this matter, it really doesn't even need a rebuttal. It can be thrown straight into the trash without any loss to scholarship or humanity. It is, quite simply, wholly unreliable.¹⁰³

Ehrman alludes to this sort of thing in a blog post where he explains his reluctance at first to get into the debate about Jesus's historicity:

The other reason for staying out of the fray is that some of the mythicists are simply unpleasant human beings – mean-spirited, arrogant, ungenerous, and vicious.¹⁰⁴

But much of the language coming from the other side of the debate also lacks civility, as evidenced in these examples condemning Brodie:¹⁰⁵

. . . bizarre results of taking that approach to the extreme . . . into the realm of unchecked paralellomania. . . . bizarre extremes . . . botches ancient authorship completely . . . illustrates the bankruptcy of Jesus mythicism, and the fact that it has the potential to ruin

¹⁰¹ For an excellent example of generally high-quality scholarship by someone who isn't a biblical studies professor, see Neil Godfrey's work posted on the website vridar.org. The site has a mix of articles and some are polemical in tone, but many are book reviews of scholarly books, and the reviews are more thorough and insightful than many printed in peer-reviewed academic journals.

¹⁰² Carrier 2012b.

¹⁰³ Carrier 2012c. For a list of responses to Ehrman, see Salm 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Ehrman 2013.

¹⁰⁵ Similar invective is often directed against anyone who questions Jesus' historicity; see, for example, P. M. Casey's (2012) denunciation of Thomas Thompson as "radical to the extent of bordering on lunacy." The title and text of Casey's article brands Thompson as incompetent.

careers, not because there is ingrained antipathy to it in the academy, but because the case for it is based on thoroughly unpersuasive arguments, and the complete disregard for other possibilities . . . I found myself wondering whether anyone actually told Brodie that he was using dubious methods and criteria to produce dubious results . . .¹⁰⁶

[Brodie's book is] an extended exercise in non sequitur . . . simply appalling scholarship . . . Brodie's dishonesty . . . This parallel is both forced and dishonest. . . . This is dishonest . . . Brodie is a person not in control of his emotions and who overstates and overplays matters to an obsessive degree. . . . Brodie's heart would never have been troubled had he received a contextual education and used some critical thinking skills beforehand. . . . Brodie manifests a tremendous egotism, one that is often needed for a fringe theorist to ply his trade. . . . The reasoning is thus that others simply cannot see the truth of Brodie's ideas because he's a tremendous prodigy and we're just a bunch of unintuitive, lazy, brainless peons. . . . that's the sort of attitude one has to have in order to live life as a Christ-myther.¹⁰⁷

Awareness of the kind of invective flying back and forth makes the level of disdain Ehrman displays in his book look relatively tame by comparison, but he too tends to brand all mythicists as intellectually dishonest:

Jesus existed, and those vocal persons who deny it do so not because they have considered the evidence with the dispassionate eye of the historian, but because they have some other agenda that this denial serves.¹⁰⁸

By staking out a position that is accepted by almost no one else, they open themselves up to mockery and to charges of intellectual dishonesty.¹⁰⁹

It is no accident that virtually all mythicists (in fact, all of them, to my knowledge) are either atheists or agnostics. The ones I know anything about are quite virulently, even militantly, atheist. . . . Their agenda is religious, and they are complicit in a religious ideology. They are not doing history; they are doing theology.¹¹⁰

. . . the mythicist position is not seen as intellectually credible in my field (I'm using euphemisms here; you should see what most of my friends *actually* say about it...) – no one that I know personally (I know a *lot* of scholars of New Testament, early Christianity, and so on) takes it at *all* seriously as a viable historical perspective . . .¹¹¹

Ehrman blithely lumps together those who doubt Jesus's historicity with those who deny the Holocaust and asserts that "virtually every sane historian on the planet" agrees that "Jesus certainly existed."¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ McGrath 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Holding 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Ehrman 2012a, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 334.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 337-8.

¹¹¹ Ehrman 2013.

¹¹² Ehrman 2012b.

Anyone who chooses to believe something contrary to evidence that an overwhelming majority of people find overwhelmingly convincing – whether it involves the fact of the Holocaust, the landing on the moon, the assassination of presidents, or even a presidential place of birth – will not be convinced. Simply *will* not be convinced.¹¹³

Such expressions of contempt, disdain, and condescension are counter-productive. Anyone who reads them may well suspect, with good reason, that the person who expresses such attitudes has a closed mind on a subject and is not taking the opponents' arguments seriously. Likewise, anyone who reads sharply derogatory comments by a writer about an opponent may well suspect that the writer has an emotional investment in the subject that clouds his judgment.

It is no accident that the most insightful scholars also happen to have the most well-developed senses of humor – and by that I mean good-natured humor, not sarcasm. In history, as in the hard sciences, sometimes things that everyone takes for granted one day turn out to be wrong the next day, and those who keep a sense of humor about their beliefs are among the most ready to relinquish them when they don't work anymore.

Anyone who thinks scholarly writing can't express a lively sense of humor about serious subjects should read Michael Goulder's books. A good example is Goulder's writings on the theology of the incarnation (the idea that God became human in Jesus Christ). In the 1970s that was still a highly contentious topic, and people could lose academic jobs for espousing the wrong position. For Goulder, incarnation belief is fundamentally nonsensical in the same way that for Ehrman mythicist belief is fundamentally nonsensical. Yet Goulder never takes offense at or derides incarnationists. When he dismantles beliefs that he sees as nonsensical, he does so playfully. Imagine the different impact Ehrman's book would have had on its readers if he had rendered his arguments in a manner similar to this extract from Goulder:

Modern kenotic theologians,¹¹⁴ like Professor E. L. Mascall or Fr. H. McCabe, seem to opt instead for vacuity: Jesus is metaphysically the Word of God, in his person, in his ego, but his human nature or consciousness is not affected by this. I will return to Mascall shortly, but perhaps I may make the general point with a parable. Returning from abroad with a friend, I hear that the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bedlam is Lord Beaver. 'What!', I say, 'A new V-C?' No, replies my friend, 'the old V-C, Sir Robert Badger, must have become a peer'. In the distance Lord Beaver looks like Sir Robert, and the voice is similar, and the same conspicuous probity governs all his actions; but on closer acquaintance the differences seem obvious. 'Oh', says my friend, 'he must have had a face-lift; and his voice is pitched deeper because of the new dignity; and he *will* have had a new central nervous system put in for the job: but It is the same chap.' Soon I feel driven to ask 'But what is in common between the V-C we knew and the V-C we know?' If I am told, 'Nothing. But metaphysically they are the same: It is a paradox', two consequences will follow: first, I shall feel totally mystified, and second, I shall suspect that what began as a misidentification is being maintained from a reluctance to confess error.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Ehrman 2012a, 5.

¹¹⁴ "Kenotic" here is a synonym for incarnationist.

¹¹⁵ Goulder 1979, 54-55.

Goulder could have accused his opponents of incompetence or dishonesty, but didn't. Saying "I feel totally mystified" by the opponents' position conveys a similar degree of dissatisfaction with that position, but with a very different emotional feel to it.

That's the feel you get from reading Brodie's book. His epilogue directly responds to Ehrman's book, and in it he dispassionately summarizes Ehrman's arguments and responds to them without engaging in any kind of personal attack.

Historicity and Christian Faith

The emotional charge behind the controversy over Jesus's historicity comes in part from a widespread assumption that a negative stand is damaging to Christian faith. Brodie thinks otherwise.

Brodie cites Copernicus as a precedent. When Copernicus asserted that the earth was not the center of the universe but rather the sun revolved around the earth, the church opposed that position as contrary to the faith. When attempts to suppress the new idea failed, people reconsidered the impact of the idea on the faith, and the faith survived along with the new idea.

Today anyone who takes seriously the degree to which Jesus is not a historical person has some similar rethinking to do. But Brodie asserts that such rethinking need not end in rejection of Christian faith or the Christian religious tradition.

Ehrman's book could seem to set up a false dilemma: stay with a claim to a historical Jesus, or lose Jesus and, with him, lose God. But there is a further option. Rediscover Jesus as a fresh scripture-based expression of suffering humanity's deepest strengths and hopes, and thereby rediscover a new sense of the reality we often refer to glibly as God.¹¹⁶

For Brodie, abandoning the search for a historical Jesus frees us to find the real Jesus in the text of the New Testament. All the work that is devoted to trying to tease out what's historical versus what isn't is wasted effort that could better be spent trying to understand the message the scriptural authors were trying to convey.

The tragedy with the quest for the historical Jesus is not just that it is seeking something impossible, but that . . . the historical reconstructions present forms of Jesus that are desperately reduced. . . . The quest for the historical Jesus installs the flicker of a matchstick in place of the aurora borealis. And many forms of talking about Jesus, instead of expanding people's lives, make them constricted.¹¹⁷

For those who might react negatively to the idea that the scriptural writers wrote things that weren't literally true, Brodie cautions that they were focused on deeper truths:

The undertaking [that produced the New Testament] contained the building of a story-narrative, historicized-fiction ~ especially about Jesus and Paul, and such story-building can be described with terms such as fiction, myth, invention, conspiracy, and forgery (Ehrman 2012a: 82, 114). The same terms can be used of the Torah, the Book of Moses, which was not written by Moses. At one level these terms are true, but used pejoratively

¹¹⁶ Brodie 2012, 231.

¹¹⁷ Brodie 2012, 213.

they miss the heart of the matter, namely that, despite their use of story and their limitations, the Torah, Gospels, and Epistles contain deepest wisdom.¹¹⁸

Today, literalist historical views are just not supportable for anyone with enough intellectual curiosity to investigate the evidence and weigh it dispassionately. If a person's faith depends on the gospels' being a reliably accurate literal historical record, and if that person is at all inquiring and open-minded, his or her faith is doomed without the approach taken by Brodie.

Brodie's approach is to see Jesus as a symbol of deepest wisdom that transcends particular religions, a symbol which, if we accept it as intended, shows the way to true life:

Jesus is in a sense historical, and also for all humans. This shadowed living beauty that we call Jesus Christ is not a specific human being. It is visualized as a Jewish-born carpenter, and at one level it is personal and history-related. Jesus Christ is historical insofar as he symbolizes the aspect of a personal God that is interwoven with the fierce particularity of history and with the bloodied beauty of individual lives.

But the full reality of Christ is a universal presence and is not owned by any religion, nation, class, colour or gender (the masculine 'he' is a temporary convention). Christians have played a central role in visualizing and naming this presence, but Jews had done so first – though without using the name Jesus Christ – and despite the variations in subsequent Jewish and Christian formulations, despite occasional better insights by one or the other, it is often the same Jesus who underlies both religions.

Likewise other religions. Formulations may vary, and from time to time one may be more insightful than another, but it is the same Jesus Christ who underlies all formulations, no matter what name we use. . . . in the final analysis, Islam reveres much of what is otherwise signified by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, and so, despite important differences, Islam has a huge overlap with Christianity. It contains Jesus far more than its picture of Jesus as simply a prophet.

And likewise also further religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. . . . some of their truths and values overlap with those of the biblical tradition, especially some of the universal truths expressed by the figure of Jesus, and to that degree, they carry Jesus within them.

As for Christians, they may indeed carry Christ's name, but perhaps little more. Many do not necessarily reflect the deep reality of Jesus. Other Christians, however, bear not only something of the reality of Jesus but also some of the universal truths and values of other religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam.

What is important is that, while the loss of Jesus as a specific individual human may bring sadness, union with the living Jesus – the universal living figure of truth and goodness and shadowed beauty, the Gospel figure who touches the leper, embraces the children, and lays down his life for our sins – union with this Jesus brings new life.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Brodie 2012, 231, n.2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 218.

Conclusion

While the New Testament authors sought to create an image of Jesus that symbolizes universal wisdom, modern scholars typically seek to create an image of Jesus that gets as close as possible to literal reality. One is about conveying wisdom, not knowledge; the other is about conveying knowledge, not wisdom. Brodie bridges the gap between the two. *Beyond the Quest* does have its shortcomings. It's not as tightly organized as *Did Jesus Exist?*, nor is it as easy to read, nor does it present as much evidence and argumentation. *Beyond the Quest* is too narrowly focused to serve well as a general introduction to the subject, some of its arguments are less convincing than others, and few readers will leave it feeling as certain about Jesus's nonexistence as the author does. And yet it conveys crucially important knowledge that Ehrman's book omits. And it conveys not just historical knowledge, but wisdom. By always maintaining a respectful stance toward opponents in the midst of a highly charged atmosphere, it shows how to engage in a controversy in a positive as well as effective manner. And by respectfully offering thoughts about the greater *meaning* of the knowledge that it conveys, it helps make the practical wisdom of the New Testament accessible to modern readers.

As for the question of whether Jesus existed, the best answer is that any attempt to find a historical Jesus is a waste of time. It can't be done, it explains nothing, and it proves nothing, as Philip Davies observes:

Does this matter very much? After all, the rise and growth of Christianity can be examined and explained without the need to reconstruct a particular historical Jesus. The persistence of Christianity owes most, in fact, to Constantine, who opted for it as the imperial cult, and endowed it, creeds and fancy dress included, with imperial trappings. Next to him, we should credit S/Paul [sic] and his missionary and literary efforts, and finally Jesus, in whose name all this was done, but who might not have wanted to answer for the consequences. And it is how he was understood that matters, it is that which created Christianity. And clearly, he was understood in many different ways, many of them obviously wrong since not all can be right. All of the historical Jesuses can explain what follows, or are made to explain what follows. Does it matter to the historian who or what he was, beyond mere curiosity?

What I can see, but not understand, is the stake that Christians have in the unanswerable question of Jesus' historicity and his true historical self. Religious (as distinct from cultural) Christians are serenely placed (my born-again mother is word-perfect on this) to testify that Jesus is alive now and that absence of proof is precisely what faith means. I have respect for this position (nothing to do with my mother) and no ability nor desire to prove such religious experiences wrong. I think they are wrong, but who knows (certainly not Richard Dawkins)? What I do find ridiculous are those so-called believing Christians who are trying to prove from 'historical' reasoning that what they believe is true . . .¹²⁰

But if the quest for the historical Jesus is not itself worthwhile, observing how others conduct the quest is rewarding for anyone interested in the Bible. The spectacle of what scholars have been doing in the drive to answer the unanswerable, and of how so many of them reacted disrespectfully

¹²⁰ Davies 2012.

to Brodie's sober and respectful assessment of that drive, is a cautionary note about the character of scholarly writing in the field of biblical studies. To a degree greater than that in many other academic fields, you have to take pronouncements of fact by biblical scholars with a grain of salt. And those who express the most confidence in historical reconstructions or the sharpest disdain toward contrary opinions are precisely the ones to be most wary about. The truth is elusive and can best be approached by reading multiple viewpoints, judging the evidence critically, and remembering that ultimately all biblical history is a matter of highly debatable possibilities and probabilities.

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For additional reading about the historical Jesus, see the recent scholarly symposia containing articles that question the quest (Hoffmann 2010, Verenna and Thompson 2012), Philip Davies' internet article (2012), and Joel Willitts' account of why he abandoned the quest (2005).

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