

## Did Jesus Exist?

The great majority of Jesus historians have one thing in common: they believe that there actually was a historical person behind all the stories and teachings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth in the Bible (and other documents). Even if they question the accuracy of some (or most) of those accounts, even if they believe the historical reality of Jesus to have been quite different than what Christian faith would make of him, they at least believe that there was a historical reality.

Not everyone believes this. Around the edges of historical Jesus scholarship there have always been a few individuals who question the basic premise that Jesus existed<sup>1</sup> and that position continues to have its advocates today.<sup>2</sup> These people are not taken very seriously within the guild of historians; their work is usually dismissed as pseudo-scholarship that is dependent upon elaborate conspiracy theories and rather obviously motivated by anti-Christian polemic.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many of the people who espouse the “Jesus never existed” thesis (e.g., on various websites) are not scholars in the traditional sense; they are self-taught amateurs who sometimes seem unaware of any critical, academic approach to evaluating the historicity of Jesus traditions. They often seem to assume that the only alternative to denying the historical existence of Jesus would be to accept everything the Bible reports about him as straightforward historical fact.<sup>4</sup> But “many” is not all—there have been scholars who have

questioned the historical existence of Jesus in ways that merit some mention in a review of historical Jesus scholarship.

The first major representative of this view to gain a hearing among biblical scholars was Bruno Bauer, a respected New Testament scholar of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Bauer began his work with critical examination of the Gospels and became convinced that they were all written by individuals intent on promoting particular theological agendas (as opposed to simply reporting facts). Eventually, he decided that the author of Mark's Gospel had created much of the story of Jesus and that the other authors had simply adapted his work (a position not too dissimilar from that of Burton Mack). But, then, in his later years, he moved into a realm of conjecture that, according to Albert Schweitzer, no longer evinced "any pretense of following a historical method."<sup>6</sup> He decided that the religion of Christianity had been invented by Seneca, Nero's tutor, who drew upon Philo of Alexandria. The letters of Paul were all forgeries, produced in the second century and backdated to give the impression that the Christian faith had originated earlier and that it had connections to Palestine. In fact, the Christian religion was a purely pagan faith, created in Rome, and Jesus was simply a mythical figure to whom philosophical ideas and remarkable events were attributed to connect the new faith with Judaism and give it a semblance of ancestry.

In 1910 a German philosophy professor named Arthur Drews published an influential book that presented a different version of what has come to be called “the Jesus myth theory” (i.e., the theory that Jesus did not exist as a historical person).<sup>7</sup> Drews suggested that the Christian religion was based on Persian mythology and that the figure of Jesus was based on an Ephraimite solar deity. Unlike most proponents of the Jesus myth theory, however, Drews did not want to attack Christianity but wanted to rehabilitate it. He claimed it was Christ as an idea, not as a historical person, that held vitality for modern humanity—a new Christian reformation would involve faith in the idea embodied by the mythical figure of Christ rather than faith dependent upon historical claims about a person who never actually existed. Some of Drews’ ideas have been taken up in the modern era by Earl Doherty, who claims that Christians originally envisioned Jesus as a heavenly figure who appeared to them through visions and who suffered a sacrificial death in the heavenly realm in a manner modeled on the death of Purusha in the *Rig Veda* (a Sanskrit collection of hymns sacred to Hinduism).<sup>8</sup>

Peter Jensen, a German Assyriologist, also sought the origin of Christianity in myth rather than history, but he espoused the distinctive thesis that the Jesus story was a retelling of the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic and that Christians, in effect, worship a Babylonian deity.<sup>9</sup> Notably, Jensen did not think it necessary to deny the existence of a historical Jew named Jesus entirely—he merely argued that everything we possess concerning such a person has

been so thoroughly transformed that nothing can be known of the man behind the myth. Such a position exemplifies a slight variation on the dominant Jesus myth theory. The usual claim is “Jesus did not exist”; the alternative version says, “Even if Jesus did exist, nothing historical can be affirmed regarding him.”

Those who hold to this latter, softer version of the thesis do not feel compelled to dismiss every possible reference to Jesus in all first-century writings; they grant that there could be some vague recollection that, for some unknown reason, a man named Jesus became the catalyst for the mythological speculation and/or visionary experiences out of which Christian religion evolved.

In the modern era, G. A. Wells, who prominently denied the existence of Jesus for many years, softened his thesis in later writings: he decided that the Q source probably did exist and that this fact alone indicates there probably was a historical man named Jesus who said things it would have contained—but the bottom line remains that historians can know next to nothing about this person.<sup>10</sup>

The most articulate modern proponent of the Jesus myth theory is Robert M. Price, a respected biblical scholar with two doctorates from Drew University.<sup>11</sup> He maintains that, in his critical work as a mainstream scholar, he was surprised to discover how difficult it was to poke holes in what he had once regarded as “extreme, even crackpot, theories.”<sup>12</sup> And, once convinced that those theories (denying the existence of Jesus) were probably correct, he felt no

need to abandon his faith: “I rejoice to take the Eucharist every week and to sing the great hymns of the faith. For me, the Christ of faith has all the more importance since I think it most probable that there was never any other.”<sup>13</sup> He bases this conclusion on a number of considerations, including: (a) the absence of historical analogy for much of what is claimed regarding Jesus; (b) the lack of attention to Jesus in secular sources; (c) the lack of clear historical references to Jesus in the New Testament epistles;<sup>14</sup> (d) the fact that everything in the Gospels can be read as serving the interests of the developing Christian church;<sup>15</sup> and, (e) the strong possibility that many stories of Jesus in the Gospels were developed as midrash on Old Testament passages and/or as Christianized versions of myths current in various Middle Eastern religions.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, the Jesus myth theory has taken somewhat different forms<sup>17</sup> and has been expressed in various ways and in service of different ends. Most advocates, however, deny that there are any early references to Jesus outside of the Gospels. The references in Roman writings are dismissed as Christian interpolations. References in the writings of Paul are also viewed as later interpolations or construed in such a way that Paul is talking about Jesus as only a concept or as a mythical or literary figure rather than a historical one. Thus the concept of Jesus as an actual historical person can be attributed to a single Gospel author (usually the author of Mark’s Gospel) from whom the others copied, and various motives for the innovation of presenting Jesus as an actual historical

person may be proposed: a devious motive may allege that the Gospel author had something to gain by deceiving people into believing historical falsehood; a more benign motive might suggest the author simply misunderstood an allegory or mythical tale and, so, innocently transformed fiction into biography; or that the Gospel writer/s intended his/their work to be read as allegory or myth but that it was misinterpreted as biography by later readers.

As indicated, the Jesus myth theory is not taken seriously by most historical scholars. Robert Price has gained something of a hearing because he presents his argument in a knowledgeable and nuanced manner, but historians have not found the argument persuasive.<sup>18</sup>

Dunn notes the intrinsic “improbability of the total invention of a figure who had purportedly lived within the generation of the inventors”<sup>19</sup> and Bock wonders why there would have been no challenge to Christianity from Jewish opponents if the actual existence of Jesus was a matter open to debate.<sup>20</sup> Crossan thinks that the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition often present a figure very different from the apocalyptic image central to Christian religion: if Christians had invented a historical figure for their faith, they would not have come up with two such divergent versions of that figure.

Johnson points out that Old Testament texts offer no precedent for the New Testament’s specific and nearly unanimous presentation of Jesus as a suffering and dying Messiah,<sup>21</sup> and Crossan indicates that pagan mythology provides no parallel for the resurrection of a hero that was not considered to be unique but instead the first fruit of

an imminent general resurrection.<sup>22</sup> Further, most historical scholars (Christian or not) find the attempt to explain away all apparent references to Jesus in Roman writings, much less New Testament epistles, to be an unconvincing tour de force that lapses into special pleading.<sup>23</sup>

Adapted from Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee*. 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 251–54.

1. On proponents of this thesis up to the early twentieth century, see Shirley Jackson Case, *The Historicity of Jesus* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1912); Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of the Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. B. D. Montgomery (1906; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1968), 124–42, 355–436.

2. See Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012) and Brent Landau, “‘Jesus Never Existed’: An Intellectual History of the ‘Jesus Myth’ Theory” (lecture, Historical Jesus Section, AAR/SBL annual meeting, San Francisco, November 2011).

3 An oft-quoted comment from Rudolf Bultmann would be typical: “Of course, the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder behind the historical movement” (*Jesus and the Word* [New York: Scribner, 1958], 13). Bultmann himself rejected the historicity of much (probably most) of what the Gospels report concerning Jesus, yet he thought “no sane person” could doubt the basic fact of Jesus’s historical existence.

4. Robert Price, a proponent of the thesis that Jesus probably did not exist, notes that for some who hold this view, the options seem to be that there was a real superman or only a mythic superman; little consideration is given to alternative possibilities. See Robert M. Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” in *Historical*

*Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 55–104.

5. Bruno Bauer's books, including *Christianity Exposed* (1843) and *Christ and the Caesars: How Christianity Originated from Graeco-Roman Civilization* (1877), are rarely available in English. Summaries of his work can be found in Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 124–42, and in Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*, 32–132.

6. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 140.

7. See Arthur Drews, *The Christ Myth*, 3rd ed., trans. C. DeLisle Burns (1910; repr., Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998).

8. Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* (Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999); ten years later, Doherty self-published an 814-page updated version of this book titled *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man* (n.p.: Age of Reason Publications, 2009).

9. Peter Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur* (Strassburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1906), <https://archive.org/details/dasgilgameschepo01jensuoft>. Jensen also claimed that Abraham and Moses were figures derived from this epic (such that Jews also worship a Babylonian deity). His work was representative of a now-discredited view of history called “panbabylonianism.”

10. See G. A. Wells, *The Jesus Legend* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996); Wells, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

11. See Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point.” For a more in-depth presentation, see Robert Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000); *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003); *Jesus Is Dead* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2007).

12. Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” 55.

13. Price, “Jesus at the Vanishing Point,” 56.

14. Price dismisses the significance of those epistolary passages that most scholars do think refer to Jesus as a historical person. E.g., Paul's reference to James as "the brother of the Lord" (Gal. 1:19) could simply mean that James was part of a spiritual brotherhood who felt a close kinship with their spiritual Lord; Paul's references to Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26) could be a later interpolation into that letter, or could simply be Paul's account of something he saw in a vision (in which case, the text would evidence the beginning of the historicization of the Christ figure). See Price, "Jesus at the Vanishing Point," 63–66.

15. Price takes the "criterion of dissimilarity" to its logical extreme: since "every single Gospel bit and piece must have had a home in the early church . . . all must be denied to Jesus by the criterion of dissimilarity" (Price, "Jesus at the Vanishing Point," 60; emphasis in original).

16. E.g., Mark 6:7–13 (Jesus's mission charge to his disciples) could be modeled on passages from the Elisha stories (2 Kings 4:29; 5:22), and the passion/resurrection narratives may be based on myths regarding Baal, Osiris, and other dying and rising gods. See further Robert M. Price, "New Testament Narrative as Old Testament Midrash," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1:534–73; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 50 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001).

17. G. R. S. Mead and Alvar Ellegar suggest that Jesus did exist, but much earlier than is traditionally thought (thus the Christian myth focuses on a man who lived around 100 BCE). See G. R. S. Mead, *Did Jesus Live 100 BC?* (London: Theosophical Society, 1903), [http://gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/jesus\\_live\\_100/index.htm](http://gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/jesus_live_100/index.htm); Alvar Ellegar, *Jesus One Hundred Years before Christ: A Study in Creative Mythology* (London: Century, 1999). G. A. Wells expressed a similar view in his early work; see Wells, *Jesus of the Early Christians: A Study in Christian Origins* (London: Pemberton, 1971); *Who Was Jesus?* (London: Pemberton, 1975); *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Amherst, NY:

Prometheus, 1988); *Who Was Jesus? A Critique of the New Testament Record* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989).

18. James D. G. Dunn says that if Price's position represents "a true expression of the state of the health of the Jesus-myth thesis, I can't see much life in it." See Dunn, "Response to Robert M. Price," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 94–98. A more detailed and respectful rebuttal of Price, Wells, Doherty, and others associated with the Jesus myth theory is found in Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

19. Dunn, "Response to Robert M. Price," 95.

20. Darrell L. Bock, "Response to Robert M. Price," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 100–103.

21. Luke Timothy Johnson, "Response to Robert M. Price," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 91.

22. Crossan, "Response to Robert M. Price," in Beilby and Eddy, eds., *Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 85. Eddy and Boyd question the basic thesis that the Jesus story was influenced by pagan mythology in *Jesus Legend*, 91–164.

23. Dunn says that at this point he displays "a readiness to offer less plausible hypotheses to explain data that inconveniences his thesis" ("Response to Robert M. Price," 96). Compare Bock, "Response to Robert M. Price," 101–102; Johnson, "Response to Robert M. Price," 92. For a more detailed rebuttal of this essential plank of the Jesus myth theory, see Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, 165–236.