



Ehrman, Bart D.

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

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth is Bart Ehrman's attempt to treat "mythicists" (i.e., people who deny the existence of Jesus) with respect and take their arguments seriously, "if for no other reason than to show why they cannot be right about their major contention" (4). On the one hand I can see why people might find a book like this necessary—mythicists are a vocal minority that make plenty of noise on the internet but have thus far failed to receive a fair shake from those in the academic community—so why not have a credentialed scholar address their arguments? But on the other hand, mythicist arguments deserve to be ignored, and for every internet mythicist there's ten internet apologists who have dealt with their nonsensical claims in some way, shape, or form (most notably J. P. Holding of Tekton Education and Apologetics Ministry, who has been debunking mythicist bunk for at least a decade).

So who is this book for? Ehrman recognizes that he won't convince the mythicist of Jesus' existence because they just don't want to be convinced, and Christians certainly need no convincing, so this is a book for people on the fence; for those who have never really looked into the subject but could possibly be persuaded by the mythicist if they're ignorant of the evidence in favor of Jesus' existence. And who better to present the evidence than Bart Ehrman? He's a credentialed scholar who has published broadly in the field of New Testament studies. He's acquainted with all of the relevant ancient and modern languages that one needs to be in order to assess the evidence and arguments relevant to the topic. And let's not forget that Ehrman is "not

a Christian, and [has] no interest in promoting a Christian cause or Christian agenda. [He is] an agnostic with atheist leanings” (5) so we can rest assured that he’ll handle the evidence fairly, right? Riiiiight...

Did Jesus Exist? is divided into three major sections. The first section discusses the evidence for Jesus. After first introducing the reader to mythicists and their arguments (chapter 1), Ehrman proceeds to look at early non-Christian testimony about Jesus in Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius, Josephus, and the Talmud (chapter 2); the Gospels (chapter 3); the rest of the NT and some of the Apostolic Fathers (chapter 4); before rounding the section out with an argument based on two key data, namely that Paul knew companions of Jesus (Peter & James) and that Jesus was believed to have been crucified, which of course, is not something that people would make up if they were creating some kind of hero to follow (chapter 5).

The second section turns to the arguments that mythicists mount against the existence of Jesus. Ehrman first deals with a number of arguments that he deems irrelevant to proving whether or not Jesus existed, such as the problematic nature of the Gospels as historical sources; the alleged non-existence of Nazareth; claims about the New Testament being haggadic midrash on the Old Testament; or the Gospel authors borrowing their stories from pagan myths about divine men (chapter 6). Ehrman proceeds to address supposedly relevant but insubstantial arguments about Christians creating Jesus based on pagan beliefs in dying/rising savior gods; inventing him as the personification of Wisdom; or his being a cosmic being who was not believed to have lived in the recent past (chapter 7); but these strangely resemble the arguments of the previous chapter. One wonders how they’re any more relevant.

The third and final section is devoted to identifying the historical Jesus. Ehrman first introduces the reader to the various Jewish groups in existence during the first century (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the Fourth Philosophy). He then gives a brief summary of Jewish apocalypticism before sketching out some of the criteria of authenticity used by historical Jesus scholars (chapter 8). This sets the stage for the penultimate chapter where Ehrman’s presents Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, a view he has argued at length in his monograph *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. The concluding chapter notes the ironically religious nature of humanists; the problem with trying to transpose the historical Jesus into modern culture; and the mythicist agenda, which is to undermine Christianity by destroying its center, again, an ironically religious endeavor. In the end, Ehrman considers himself a historian, and historians have to ask historical questions rather than theological or religious ones. This is why he can’t co-sign the mythicist agenda no matter how much sympathy he might have with it.

So how successful was Ehrman in accomplishing what he set out to do, which was present the positive evidence for the existence of Jesus, while debunking the arguments of mythicists? If we judge his success by simply pointing out the evidence then he has succeeded. He has pointed out the evidence. But if all one is looking for is evidence, then again, the internet is littered with apologetic websites presenting the same evidence. Was Ehrman successful in debunking mythicists? I guess, but that's not really all that impressive given the inane nature of mythicists and their arguments.

In truth, Ehrman has created more problems with this book than he's solved. He recognizes that he won't convince mythicists of Jesus' existence (5); it's not like they're unaware of this evidence. But he's lent his name and credentials to addressing a group that is best ignored. I get that he believes that they should be taken seriously (4, 132)—he's wrong—but as he points out (20-21), the vast majority of scholars with any kind of relevant training don't take them seriously, nor should they! Calling mythicist literature “highly intelligent and well informed” (2) or G. A. Wells, Robert Price, and Richard Carrier “serious authors” (30) is only likely to egg them on and encourage them to keep churning out their nonsense. Oh, and it's quite simply false! Mythicists are de facto not “serious authors” as long as they're writing about mythicism, and mythicist literature is de facto neither intelligent nor informed.

But let's address a couple of other issues, and please, permit me a few rabbit trails if you will. If Christians think they've found a friend in Ehrman because he has defended the existence of Jesus they can think again. He's as much an enemy of the faith now as he's ever been. Sure, he'd have us believe that he's to be trusted because he has “no vested interest in the matter” and his “life and views of the world would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed” (5 cf. 333), but that's nonsense with a capital non-! To start, contrary to Ehrman's protestations (1, 23, 110, 170, 183, 231-41), Jesus is, in fact, God. The Bible tells me so. Ehrman might not be able to ask theological questions (231, 262), but I am. So had Jesus never existed then this world that he created (John 1:1; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 3:14) and sustains wouldn't exist either. In such a case Ehrman's view would be very different than it presently is because it wouldn't exist!

But let's suppose that Jesus wasn't God and didn't create the universe and everything in it; let's, for the sake of argument, pretend to be Unitarians and say that he was just a man that may or may not have existed. What are the chances that a movement devoted to him would have even gotten off the ground had he not existed? Slim, I'd bet. How much slimmer are the chances that a third of the world's population would claim to be followers of said man? Even less! The point here is that had Jesus, even a merely human Jesus, never existed, then Ehrman never would have

been converted to Christianity and subsequently apostatized. His life would be *very different*, or, at least the beginning of every popular book he's written would be! And let us not forget that Ehrman has made a career of teaching and writing about Jesus, and for all his qualifications, he's hardly qualified to do anything else! Could you imagine the existence of this book if the mythicists were right about the non-existence of Jesus? Yeah, me neither.

Now back to the question of Ehrman's success against the mythicists. Just how successful was he really? Throughout this book Ehrman assures us that the Bible is an uninspired (37) collection of errant human texts that are full of contradictions (33, 36-37, 71, 179, 183) and historical problems (184); containing Gospels written after the fact by biased followers of Jesus (73) who were not eyewitnesses to the recorded events (46-50, 101, 268); and somehow this is his best source for making a case that Jesus existed?!! It's no wonder mythicists won't be impressed by Ehrman's arguments; he constantly cuts his legs out from beneath him. One can argue, as Ehrman does, that Scripture needn't be correct in everything it says in order to glean some historical info, but as John Frame cogently argued 40 years ago, "No Scripture, No Christ."

Evidence isn't brute fact; it has to be interpreted within one's worldview. The Christian can simply say, "God said it, that settles it," and I defy you to find a better apologetic than that. The evidence is certain because God said it in Scripture and God's not a liar. The best that Ehrman can do is "probably" because he's stripped his best sources of their inherent authority. Jesus probably existed, and most scholars with training in the relevant fields would agree, but so what? "Probably" will always leave enough room for the mythicist to feel confident in their doubt. "Probably" still requires faith on the part of the believer, and Ehrman is still a believer, just not a Christian one. The problem is that his faith is not placed in something ultimate and unerring (God and his word) but rather in his own ability to make the best guess.

This, of course, speaks to the inconsistency of Ehrman's worldview. He places his faith in the flawed canons of historical criticism and trusts in sources that he doesn't consider all that trustworthy to begin with. In truth, one could argue that the mythicist is more consistent with the atheist worldview than Ehrman is, even though they're ultimately inconsistent as well. But this is what makes it so amusing to watch Ehrman wax eloquent about just how religious humanists and mythicists are (332-34) right before launching into a sermon that I've heard preached by no less than a dozen pastors about creating Jesus in our image and likeness (334-36). Ehrman is essentially arguing against idolatry, suggesting that if Jesus looks like Christians then they've invented him in their image, but he doesn't seem to consider that just maybe Christians have been conformed to his image and made to look like him (Rom. 8:29)!

Back to Ehrman being an enemy of the faith. Throughout the book Ehrman comes against historic orthodox Christian beliefs about Jesus. He tries to do some damage control by saying that he doesn't consider himself anti-Christian or an attacker of Christianity (35-37), but rather an attacker of a particular flavor of Christianity, namely "highly conservative Protestant Christianity, whether fundamentalism or hard-core evangelicalism" (36). So the pages are littered with pejorative references to fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, which are repeatedly paired together throughout the book (35, 47, 69, 71, 168, 178, 179, 231) as if they are the same thing, yet he strangely contrasts fundamentalists with radical skeptics (72) while acknowledging similar approaches to handling the Bible. How come the skeptics aren't fundamentalists but the evangelicals are if their methods are the same?

But the constant references to conservatives and fundamentalists are really smokescreens (aside from being *ad hominem*). He'll say something like, "other than conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists, scholars are unified in..." (47, 231). The idea is that there is some kind of consensus on whatever the issue, but he never tells us how many conservatives evangelicals and fundamentalists are being written off in comparison to the scholars who hold the opposing view and he never approaches anything even resembling an actual argument for why the non-conservative evangelical/fundamentalist view is to be preferred. And let's be honest, Ehrman says he's not writing to convince the convinced mythicist, but secretly he is. These kinds of jabs are there as a way to say, "Hey, I'm still one of you; you've just gone a bit overboard."

So Ehrman is confident that Jesus existed. So what? His confidence is certainly not in the Jesus of history, who is one and the same as the so-called Christ of faith. To adapt a verse from the Letter of James, "You believe that Jesus existed, you do well—even the demons believe and shudder!" (Jas. 2:19). Concluding that someone named Jesus existed in first-century Palestine is about as remarkable as concluding that water is wet or that even bad pizza is still kinda good. Unless Ehrman's conclusion led him to a recognition of and submission to the Lordship of Christ then we have to wonder what exactly he's accomplished. It's not as if mythicists will be silenced by Ehrman's case; they've been aware of this evidence forever and it hasn't fazed them at all. And it's not as if Ehrman is doing something in this book, in terms of collating this evidence, that hasn't been done in dozens of other books or on most apologetics websites the world over. So what has he really accomplished? Other than once again proving that he can take somewhat technical subject matter and render it into readable prose, I'd say he's accomplished book sales, which entail more money and fame, but other than that I can't think of anything else.