COGNITIVE DISSONANCE:
THE EHRMAN-ZINDLER CORRESPONDENCE

By Frank R. Zindler

What did he know of the evidence against a Historical Jesus and when did he know it? Even though generally interested readers of Bart D. Ehrman's *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* would not have realized it, for them to really understand the nature and significance of the book they were reading they needed to know what Professor Ehrman could and should have discussed and evaluated but apparently chose not to face up to. Although many readers might well have perceived the inadequacy of Ehrman’s ‘evidence’ supposedly supporting the historical reality of ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they would have had no way to know about the many questions that Ehrman knew needed to be answered but are not even acknowledged, let alone adequately answered in *DJE*.

Specifically, readers would not know that I and other scholars had sent him books to critique—books that marshal evidence of many kinds to show not only that Jesus of Nazareth never existed, but that the city now called Nazareth was not inhabited at the turn of the era! Although Ehrman mentions some of these books in his recent attempt to refute Mythicist scholarship, readers have no way of knowing that almost all the most important arguments and evidence in those books go unacknowledged and unrefuted in *Did Jesus Exist?* Readers could not know that Ehrman deals with only a tiny fraction of the literature arguing against a historical Jesus of Nazareth.

Generally interested readers, however, are not the only ones who need to know what Ehrman knew and when he knew it. Even the authors of the books just mentioned could not really know, for example, if Ehrman actually chose not to deal with their various arguments or simply never got around to reading those parts of their books. Ordinarily, there would be no way to know if Ehrman was deliberately avoiding their arguments and evidence or simply was unaware of them. Ehrman himself states that he does not usually bother to read criticism of his work, and it could be that he also avoids reading material that might a priori be expected to call into question his traditional understanding of how Christianity began.

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2 “I sometimes get asked,” Ehrman breezily explains, “usually by supporters, why I do not make a practice of responding to scholars and bloggers who criticize my work and attack me personally. It’s a good question, and I have several answers. For one thing, there are only so many hours in the day. If I responded to all the crazy things people say, I would have no time for my other work, let alone my life. Anyone should be able to see whether a point of view is plausible or absurd, whether a historical claim has merit or is pure fantasy driven by an ideological or theological desire for a certain set of answers to be right” [*DJE* 142].

We see several defense mechanisms here at play. First of all, by labeling even scholars and bloggers who criticize him as “crazy,” he relieves himself of responsibility to recheck his assumptions and facts. Secondly, readers can only use their intelligence to evaluate his “point of view” or “historical claim” if they already have enough background information to be able to appraise the evidence he uses to support his claims. Will even the above-average reader be able to tell that Ehrman is wrong when he claims that Josephus wrote about “Jesus of Nazareth”? Once again, relying upon presumed readers’ intelligence and knowledge absolves him from the responsibility of perpetually reexamining and reevaluating his facts and assumptions.
With regard to my own work, however, I have a lot of information concerning Ehrman’s awareness and avoidance of my evidence and arguments, even though I too cannot know what he read—if anything—of my book *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, or how much he read of my *Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes From a World That Won’t Reason, Volume One: Religions & Scriptures*. The information that I possess and will present and discuss in this chapter is contained not in the books and papers I gave him, but in a voluminous and extensive e-mail correspondence that we exchanged going back to at least August of 2009.

Although it is lengthy, the correspondence record that follows can be read quickly—perhaps too quickly to grasp its significance. Generally interested readers will probably find the exchange interesting—perhaps even fascinating. Disinterested scholars, however, who seek to understand Ehrman’s motivations and methods when writing *DJE?* might possibly form a darker opinion of the significance of both the book and its author.

**The Correspondence**

On August 11, 2009, I wrote to congratulate Bart Ehrman on becoming an Agnostic/Atheist and for his then newly published *God’s Problem*:

Dear Prof. Ehrman,

Although you certainly will not remember me, we spoke briefly on at least two occasions at SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] meetings during the 90s. I have followed your career with increasing admiration since that period. I don't remember exactly why, but I do remember after listening to your papers on those occasions I fully expected that your own research would eventually turn you into an Atheist. (Since an Agnostic is without god-belief, an Agnostic is *a-theos*: an Atheist.) I did not, however, expect that you would lose your faith for much the same reason that I did: theodicy. I just read your book "God’s Problem" and am very moved and pleased to detect so kindred a spirit.

Over the years I have read just about all of your books, but I have not been able to follow your journal writings. … I sent for all your courses [The Teaching Company's Great Courses on DVDs] and have recently finished viewing all of them. … I must say that your courses seem to me to be about the best that main-line scholarship could produce.

It appears to me, however, that you may well have evolved past the views expressed in your courses. My guess is that you are now poised to re-examine all the "givens" in your field and rebuild your theories ab initio. However the truth may be, I have taken the liberty of attaching to the end of this e-mail the text of a talk I gave to Joseph Hofmann's THE JESUS PROJECT last December at Amherst. I hope you will be able to find the time and motivation to read it.

For Reason,
Frank

Ehrman replied on the following day:

Frank,

Thanks for your note. I'm glad you've enjoyed the books. …

And thanks for your lecture. I'm afraid I'm too crushed with a writing deadline to be able to give it written evaluation, but I very much appreciate your sending it along.

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3 For legal and/or personal reasons involving third parties or institutions, slight redaction of several of the following messages has been necessary.
For what it's worth, I don't think that agnostics are atheists, although I do lean more toward the atheist side of agnosticism ("strong" agnostic, I like to think of myself. :-)). All best,

-- Bart Ehrman

It wasn't until November 8, 2009, leading up to the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature that I was able to continue our correspondence:

Dear Bart,

… I hope you were able to finish your publishing project on time and I hope that you won't become indentured to another project before I have a chance to pick your brain. I suspect, however, that you are a multi-tasker and only told me of one of several simultaneous projects! :-)

Ann and I will be attending the SBL meeting in New Orleans and I am hoping against hope that you will be willing (and schedule-wise able) to be our guest for dinner on one evening of the convention. I see that you are speaking Sunday morning, and I don't know if you will be staying for the whole show or not. I have a bunch of books and papers I would like to give to you. I could have sent them to you by mail, but I am hoping I will be able to explain the purpose and utility of each item face-to-face. Naturally, I hope to be able to "pick your brain" on the historicity of Jesus issue.

It is always very uncomfortable to find myself in disagreement with scholars as prominent as you. Although I have been a mythicist since the mid-1980s, I try as best I can to keep up with the best thinking on the question, as well as continue my own research. The problem is, I have been a mythicist for so long that it is impossible for me now to put myself into the heads of scholars who still think Jesus was a real man once upon a time. That is why I am hoping you will indulge me by sharing your core reasoning on the historicity issue.

Perhaps because I have been a mythicist for so long now, it is difficult for me to understand why everyone else has not given up the historicity "game." Specifically, I hope to learn what remains for me to prove or disprove in order to get others to agree with me. I need to know what has to be shown in order for other scholars to agree that Jesus of Nazareth was not an historical figure. …

Please let me know if we'll be able to get together.

For Reason,

Frank

Although we weren't able to have dinner together, I did have a chance to give him a copy of my *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew* (an exhaustive examination of all Jewish literature prior to the Babylonian Talmud showing that the ancient Jews never heard of 'Jesus of Nazareth' or Nazareth either one!),

Ehrman probably had not read my book, he did not realize that a large part of it was devoted to an exhaustive critique of the entirety of Herford's book! It was absolutely necessary for Ehrman to provide an explanation of how it could have been possible for the founders of the rabbinic

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1 Ehrman devotes pages 66–68 to discussion of "Rabbinic Sources" relating to a historical Jesus. His endnote 24 on page 351 explains that "Here I am simply summarizing my discussion in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*... For fuller discussion, see the classic studies of R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Ktav, 1903), and Morris Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1950)."

Because Ehrman probably had not read my book, he did not realize that a large part of it was devoted to an exhaustive critique of the entirety of Herford's book! It was absolutely necessary for Ehrman to provide an explanation of how it could have been possible for the founders of the rabbinic
together in volume one of Through Atheist Eyes, and some papers I had presented to The Jesus Seminar back in the 1990s.

It was not until October of 2010 that I found occasion to renew my correspondence with Ehrman. A friend of mine received and forwarded to me an e-mail concerning Ehrman and me that was rather startling:

Sent: Thursday, October 14, 2010 4:01 PM  
Subject: Dr. Bart Ehrman Comments about Zindlerites on Radio Show

[Name redacted]. I listened to a radio interview with Dr. Ehrman yesterday. He was specifically asked what he thought about American Atheists and their backing of the idea that Jesus never existed and that Nazareth never existed in the first century AD. His response was "that's completely crazy!... they [are] not doing very well with their history lessons. What are they thinking? (laughs)." As to the claim made by the Zindlerites that Nazareth never existed, Ehrman said "he's making something up."5 (i.e., a fabrication).

He continued: "It's very hard to prove that Jesus did not exist. I think it is historically virtually certain that Jesus existed. I mean, there's just hummungous [evidence] ... 

This was very startling and quite unexpected. I forwarded the e-mail to Ehrman on October 14, 2010, with the following comment and request:

Sent: Thursday, October 14, 2010 9:06 PM  
Subject: FW: Dr. Bart Ehrman Comments about Zindlerites on Radio Show

Dear Bart,

A friend sent me the following account of a radio show you apparently did recently. Is this in fact an accurate account of what you said concerning my research? If so, does it involve a critique of my books and articles that I gave you in New Orleans? Does it involve an evaluation of Rene Salm's book showing that the Franciscan "evidence" for habitation at Nazareth at the turn of the era is pure fancy? Does it—working in Tiberias and other places in the Galilee—not to have known anything at all about the religious activist who had been stirring up trouble there just a few decades before them. He needed to explain why 'Nazareth' itself is unknown in the Mishnah and two Talmuds. If he had read my book, why did he not deal with my arguments?

5 It is interesting to note that Ehrman says the same thing in DJE? page 212. Criticizing my hypothesis that astrologers (the Magi) as the vernal equinox was moving into Pisces "left their cult centers in Phrygia and Cilicia... to go to Palestine to see if they could locate not just the King of the Jews but the new Time Lord," he opines that "Zindler says this in all sincerity, and so far as I can tell, he really believes it. What evidence does he give for his claim that the Mithraists moved their religion [sic!] to Palestine to help them find the king of the Jews? None at all. And so we might ask: what evidence could he have cited, had he wanted to do so? It's the same answer. There is no evidence. This is made up." Why did Ehrman think I was suggesting that the Magi would have moved their religious headquarters, when it was clear that an information-gathering expedition would have been meant? Ehrman offers no evidence to support his claim that I could not possibly have had evidence to support my hypothesis or the implied claim that I did not want to cite evidence for my hypothesis. Why did he not ask me about this as he later was to do concerning other Mithraic issues?
reflect a critical rejection of my article in the Journal of Higher Criticism showing that Capernaum was a purely literary invention?

As you know, in science the onus probandi rests with those who assert the existence of a think [sic] or process.

I would appreciate an explanation. I was disappointed that you did not have time to read my "Prolegomenon to a science of Christian origins" that I sent you almost two years ago when you were trying to get several books through the press. I would ask you now again to be so kind as to read it.

For Reason,

Frank Zindler
American Atheist Press

Seven minutes later, I received the following reply:

Sent: Thursday, October 14, 2010 9:13 PM
To: Zindler, Frank R.
Subject: RE: Dr. Bart Ehrman Comments about Zindlerites on Radio Show

Frank,

Yes, this is my position. And the position of every historian of the NT and early Christianity who teaches in a university or college or divinity school or seminary that I know (I know many hundreds, as you might imagine) in North America, Europe, or Asia, whether atheist, agnostic, main line Christian, or whatever. History is not a science, but there are some things that are beyond reasonable doubt, and I think this is one of them. Sorry you find it offensive!

BTW, I have not done any radio programs for about a year.

-- Bart

Bart D. Ehrman
James A. Gray Professor
Department of Religious Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

I was dismayed to see that he didn't even bother to say if he had read the articles and books I had given him or any of the evidence concerning Nazareth and Capernaum! He did not deny that he had accused me of "making something up." Alarmed, lest our dialogue be abruptly terminated before he might answer any of my questions at all, I answered Ehrman later that day:

Bart,

I don't really find it offensive, I find it hard to understand how someone who knows so much about Christian origins would simply appeal to authority and ad populum argumentation
without fairly evaluating the evidence against the majority opinion.

In the instant case, the evidence of Nazareth would seem to completely settle the issue. As you know, Nazareth is unknown to the OT, to the Talmud, to Josephus, and everyone else prior to Matthew’s gospel. It is unknown to "Paul," and is unknown to Mark. (The only mention of Nazareth in Mark is the interpolation 1:9; in that verse, "Jesus" is inarticulate unlike all other occurrences in Mark except for vocatives, etc.) In my articles "Where Jesus never walked" and "How Jesus got a life" I explain the origin of the name. If you have thrown those articles away but would be willing to read them, I would be happy to send them to you again.

The history of mythicist research is an honorable one, going back at least to Charles DuPuis in the 1790s. A very long list of eminent scholars has espoused the mythicist position but the scholars have never been refuted, only ignored and buried under claims of refutation.

I asked you several years ago why you thought Jesus was historical, what was the most

6 It is interesting that that Ehrman repeats this information in his criticism of René Salm on page 193: "Like so many mythicists before him, Salm emphasizes what scholars have long known: Nazareth is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the writings of Josephus, or in the Talmud. It first shows up in the Gospels." By hohummification of Salms’ argument—"what scholars have long known”—Ehrman neatly obscures the fact that scholars have never been able to provide a believable explanation for what they “have long known”!

7 In DJE?, on page 191, Ehrman criticizes my argument that the sole mention of ‘Nazareth’ in Mark’s gospel [Mark 1:9] is an interpolation. “Frank Zindler, for example, in a cleverly titled essay, “Where Jesus Never Walked,” tries to deconstruct on a fairly simple level the geographical places associated with Jesus, especially Nazareth. He claims that Mark’s Gospel never states that Jesus came from Nazareth. This flies in the face, of course of Mark 1:9, which indicates that this is precisely where Jesus came from (“Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee”), but Zindler maintains that that verse was not originally part of Mark; it was inserted by a later scribe. Here again we see history being done according to convenience. If a text says precisely what you think it could not have said, then all you need to do is claim that originally it must have said something else.”

Had Ehrman forgotten the evidence I cited back on October 14, 2010? Not at all! In footnote 9 [page 356] he completely reverses his charge and lightly comments, “I do not mean to say that Zindler does not cite evidence for his view. [Although in his main text that is exactly the implication.] He claims that the name Jesus in Mark 1:9 does not have the definite article, unlike the other eighty places it occurs in Mark, and therefore the verse does not appear to be written in Markan style. In response, I should say that (a) there are two other places in Mark where the name Jesus does not have the article; ...

This gives one the impression that Ehrman has researched the Greek text better than I did. But in my letter of October 14, I clearly say ‘Jesus’ is inarticulate unlike all other occurrences in Mark except for vocatives, etc. Actually, there are more than two other occasions of ‘anarthrous’ Jesus, as I discuss in my chapter “Jesus of Nazareth in Mark’s Gospel.” In all of those other cases, however, ‘Jesus’ could not carry the definite article for grammatical reasons. While the changing principles of using the Greek definite article are quite complicated, it is interesting that Mark’s use of “the Jesus” where the other gospels have simply “Jesus” gives the overall impression that in Mark Jesus is still a title—‘the Savior’—but has become a personal name in the other, later gospels.

According to Richard Carrier [Proving History: Bayes’s Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus, 2012: 142ff], “Eric Laupot makes a plausible case that the term was originally derived from Isaiah 11:1 as the name of the Christian movement (as followers of a prophesied Davidic messiah), which was retroactively made into Jesus’ hometown (either allusively or in error). J.S. Kennard makes just as plausible a case that it was a cultic title derived from the nazrites (“the separated” or “the consecrated”) described in Numbers 6 (and the Mishnah tractate Nazir).” It is regrettable that Ehrman is not likely to read Carrier’s book, which seeks to bring mathematical rigor to the writing of history.
important evidence in your opinion. To my disappointment, you did not answer me then but it seemed understandable at the time. But now I would really like to know why you think Jesus was a real man. Surely, you must have some reason better than the ad populum excuse.

I got my master's degree in geology at a time when none of my professors accepted my arguments for "continental drift." Yet they were all wrong and I proved to be correct. It is time that history became a science, as I argued in my "Prolegomenon to a science of Christian origins." It was never clear if you read that paper two years ago or not. In any case, I would like to know what you think is wrong with it—apart from the fact that most historians wouldn’t like it.

I know it is hard to go against something that is so totally embedded in one's intellectual memory and sense of "common sense." I too was horrified when Madalyn O'Hair announced she was going to write a book showing the non-historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. I immediately set out to find the evidence for Jesus so privately I could deflect her to prevent a public scandal.\(^8\) To my greater horror, however, I came up with exactly nothing; no evidence whatsoever survives from antiquity to indicate let alone demand the historicity of Jesus.

There is no reason to suppose Christianity began in any way different from Judaism, Hinduism, or the other mysteries to which it seems so closely related. Christianity did not begin at all in the way that say Mormonism began. It did not grow as a tree from a basal trunk. Rather, like most "great religions" Christianity grew as a braid woven from various fibers coming from various depths and directions in antiquity that twisted together, frayed out at different times, were joined by new threads, etc. At no time could one point out and say "Here is where Christianity is beginning."\(^9\)

You are a world-renowned authority on the early Christian "heresies," including Docetism.\(^10\) If Jesus was a real person as late as 33 CE, isn’t it odd that people as early as the time of the Pauline and Johannine epistles could be arguing that he had not had a real body? Indeed, the refutations of docetism one finds in the NT and church fathers (I very much admire your edition of Ignatius) all seem to imply that the Docetists "got there first," and the NT and early

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\(^8\) I freely confess that this was the ‘efficient cause’ of my immediate investigation into Mythicist claims. However, I am quite sure I would have done that even if the claim had come from someone less famous than Madalyn Murray O’Hair. I have always tried to understand why people believe crazy things—things that occasionally turn out not to be crazy at all. In decades of debating creationists, again and again I have been alerted to important problems in science that otherwise would have escaped my notice. Although the creationists in every case so far have misunderstood—or misrepresented—the evidence surrounding any given problem, it has always been well worth my while to get to the bottom of it—not only for the joy of being able publicly to explain a particular creationist’s error, but for the satisfaction of gaining deeper understanding of some point of science of which I hitherto had been ignorant. This would not seem to be a habit shared with Ehrman.

\(^9\) Arguably, this is the most important argument not dealt with in \textit{DJE}? Historians seem never even to consider the possibility that Christianity had no discrete beginning in either space or time. It could not possibly have developed the way the ‘heathen’ religions did! Detailed comparison of the braid-vs-tree models of Christian origins was urgently needed in \textit{DJE}? In that book, Ehrman does not even hint that his most fundamental assumption concerning Christian origins had been challenged by me two years before publication of \textit{DJE}? Was the braid model of Christian origins cognitively too dissonant for him to remember over so long a time? Was it perhaps too dissonant even to gain his full, conscious attention when he read my e-mail?

\(^10\) It is a shock to discover that despite this challenge, the word ‘Docetism’ or its derivatives is not to be found in \textit{DJE}? All the more is it shocking to see an authority on the earliest Christian heresiologists evading an argument so closely pertaining to his research specialty.
Christian orthodoxies are trying to prove their own "heretical" views that Jesus had a body, in contradiction to earlier teachings of the Christian mysteries. If Jesus had been a real man, how could Christianity have begun as a mystery cult? I suppose that is not impossible, but it certainly seems hard to imagine a scenario by which a real man created mysteries about himself.

I know you consider me to be a crank, but that doesn't really hurt my feelings. As a scientist, I have never had to worry about how I was being evaluated personally, only how my evidence was being evaluated. Although I was invited two years ago to speak on the mythicist position in Germany, at the University of Muenster, I have no claim to fame apart from that which should be accorded any honest seeker of truth. Your heroic "coming out" as an agnostic shows that you too are more concerned with truth than with reputation.

I hope very much that we can carry on a dialogue concerning the historical Jesus. I hope we can discuss evidence rather than customary opinions. Of course, one always wishes to know why customs are the way they are, but that too involves discovery and examination of evidence.

Please let me know if you are willing to read any of my stuff.

For Reason,

Frank

Later that same evening, I received the following reply:

From: Ehrman, Bart D  
Sent: Thursday, October 14, 2010 10:26 PM  
To: Zindler, Frank R.  
Subject: RE: Dr. Bart Ehrman Zindler reply

Frank,

I am absolutely not depending on authority! There are compelling grounds for thinking Jesus existed. I assume you know the arguments, or at least I hope you do. (These arguments are compelling to virtually every one who looks at them, and for good reason. You really should take that seriously.)

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11 During more than two years of dialogue, Ehrman never explained what “these arguments” were, and it was not until I read DJE? that I discovered that almost entirely he was relying on the arguments used by fundamentalist apologists, not real scholars, to support his historicity claims. Why didn’t he reveal his arguments to me? Did he understand at some subconscious level that an argument based on something silly such as the ‘criterion of embarrassment’ could easily be demolished, leaving him with nothing but his much-used appeal to authority? It is almost comical now to reread this e-mail denying that he is depending upon authority, claiming that there are evidentiary grounds for his position, yet giving not even a hint as to what they are. Moreover, I had already devoted hundreds of pages to criticism of the traditional arguments, and Ehrman had repeatedly been made aware of them.

I did not realize at the time the implication of his snide “I assume you know the arguments, or at least I hope you do.” All the arguments were dealt with in the books and articles I had given to him, so it is clear that he never read them. Nevertheless, he assures me that “you are presuming too much if you presume that I haven’t looked at your work”!
At the same time, I assume you would not trust geologists who in fact have no training in geology (or creationists who were fundamentalist Bible "scholars" rather than scientists). So let me ask you, since I don't remember (and you are presuming too much if you presume that I haven't looked at your work): what are your qualifications to talk about first century Palestine and the writings of the early Christians? Or do qualifications, in your opinion, not matter?

-- Bart

Bart D. Ehrman
James A. Gray Professor
Department of Religious Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The following day I answered his *ad hominem* message:

Subject: RE: Dr. Bart Ehrman Zindler reply2
Date: October 15, 2010 10:04:31 AM EDT

Bart,

I will answer your *ad hominem* questions, but still wonder why you do not state what the "compelling grounds for thinking Jesus existed" are. I do NOT know the arguments, because there simply aren't any good ones. I am quite certain now that I have researched this more deeply than you have.12 Your unwillingness to present any evidence at all is again very disappointing, given that it repeats the evasion of a year ago or so.

Now to the *ad hominem*: geology was merely a side excursion in my career. My doctoral studies were in Neurobiology although I never went on to a career in that field. Rather, after being driven from my post as Chairman of the Division of Science, Nursing, & Technology at SUNY-Johnstown because of my public Atheism, I have for nearly 30 years worked as a linguist and editor ... *for* a learned society chartered by Congress. I analyze ... research published in all the languages of Europe except for Hungarian, Estonian, Celtic, and Basque. My major assignments, though, are in the Slavic languages--hence my ability to feature Slavonic Josephus so much in my book *THE JESUS THE JEWS NEVER KNEW: SEPER TOLDOTH YESHU AND THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS IN JEWISH SOURCES.*

(I gave you a copy of the book in New Orleans. If you were to read it, you would see that I have probably produced the most thorough and extensive investigation of the *Testimonium Flavianum* ever done.)13

12 Despite my bragging at this point, it still came as a shock when *DJE?* was published and I could see not only that I had researched things more deeply than Ehrman but that *all* of the “amateurs” whom he criticized were more deeply studied in Historicist arguments than he.
13 Despite my hyperbole here, if Ehrman had in fact read my arguments against the *Testimonium Flavianum* (a passage in all extant copies of Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* mentioning Jesus) in my chapter "Faking Flavius," he could not have written his criticism of Earl Doherty [pages 59–66 of *DJE?*] the way he did. He would have had to explain why notice of the passage (as well as the death of James the Just or John the Baptist) is missing in the table of contents of a pre-fifth-century Greek manuscript of Josephus but a fifth- or sixth-century Latin version of the table of contents adds "Concerning John the Baptist." Moreover, he would have had to account for the presence of the *Testimonium* in the Slavonic version of *The Jewish Wars!* Oh, yes—he would also have had to explain
Because I am able to read all the major European languages in areas even outside of science, I have been able to cover historical Jesus studies in considerable breadth. I also am competent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. I get by in Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, and have dabbled in Sanskrit and other ancient languages. It must be noted that in almost all the languages with which I work on a daily basis I am entirely an autodidact. In several cases I took college courses in a language after I had already learned it, but for the majority of languages in which I work I am self-taught.

It is more than a bit dismaying that you judge me to be unqualified to write about 1st-century Palestine when you have not—indeed, it now appears, WILL not—read any of the voluminous materials I have given to you.\(^{14}\)

I ask you once again: what do you think is significant evidence for the historical Jesus? How do you account for Docetism at so early a date?

I also ask you once again to read something—anything—that I gave to you. Or, if you have thrown it all in the rubbish, please ask me to resend something. Do not prejudge me. If I have made mistakes in my writings, I genuinely want to know it. I have no axe to grind. At the age of 71 I am past the posturings of pride. I would like to know that I have glimpsed truth before I cash my chips in.

Still in friendship,

Frank

Not receiving an answer to my question about Docetism,\(^{15}\) I wrote to Ehrman again several days later:

Attached file: Did Jesus Have a Body?
October 19, 2010
Dear Bart,

I just have learned you will be speaking at the Humanist Conference next April 7-10 in Boston.\(^{16}\) Of course, I too will be there. I hope we can discuss historiography at some time during the meeting.

why Photius [c. 810–c. 893], Patriarch of Constantinople did not report in his Bibliotheca any version of the passage in his review of Antiquities of the Jews, even though he would have been highly motivated to exploit the passage had it been in his copy of Josephus.

\(^{14}\) In retrospect, it appears that Ehrman would not read my books and papers simply because I am not a doctoral graduate of a seminary or similar program. Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Of course not! Clearly, this hyperparochial attitude has protected him from coming in contact with disturbing stimuli that might “awaken him from his dogmatic slumber,” but it made the embarrassment of DJE? inevitable.

\(^{15}\) Docetism was an ancient form of Christianity that held that Jesus or Christ only appeared (Greek dokein, ‘seem,’ ‘appear’) to have a body of flesh and to suffer on the cross. The Docetists were the ‘antichrists’ of 2 John 1:7—“For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”

\(^{16}\) This was the conference Ehrman mentions on pages 332–334 of DJE? At the last minute, I had to cancel my plans to attend the meeting and so missed an opportunity to discuss historicity issues publicly with him.
I have just reread your first reply to me where you allude to all the authorities who believe in an historical Jesus. It now occurs to me that this has even less significance than ordinary ad populum arguments. The reason is that virtually all of the "authorities" who have pronounced upon the historicity of Jesus are handicapped and compromised by their employment by church-related institutions. Certainly, even an Atheist in the employ of a religious university or seminary would not dare to express mythicist theories. Almost all authorities were themselves educated at sectarian schools and were never exposed to the abundant mythicist literature that has appeared since the 1790s. Virtually all secular historians are not themselves authorities on Jesus of Nazareth, taking the word of religious authorities simply because they have never had any reason to do otherwise. They never had reason to do otherwise because of the effective suppression of mythicist writings.

Thus it is that only outsiders with respect to the sectarian university-seminary world are able even to explore the mythicist aspects of Jesus. You yourself are a rare exception to this, teaching as you are at a public university. You are one of the few scholars who would be free to "come out" with the news that Jesus of Nazareth never lived as a man of flesh and blood.

It also occurs to me that your questioning of my qualifications is beside the point. Why should one need special qualifications to ask a question? Why should one need special qualifications to announce what he thinks is a discovery? If he is unqualified in any genuine way, it is a small thing for a genuine expert to point out the errors of reasoning or failures of fact. While it is true that I would not expect someone with your professional background to be able seriously to challenge my understanding, say, of brain physiology, I would be intrigued rather than offended by such an inquest. I would patiently try to explain what specifically was incorrect about your claim—unless, of course, it turned out that you were correct. In that case, I would change my own mind and adopt your new information into my Weltanschauung. It sounds corny, I know, but I genuinely wish to discover truth. I don’t want to go through what remains of my life assuming errors to be truth.

I think you will have to agree that there isn’t a single fact that BY ITSELF requires Jesus of Nazareth to have been an historical figure. By contrast, the Res Gestae inscriptions of Augustus and Tiberius instantly confer reality upon those figures. The many coins of other rulers likewise BY THEMSELVES, even if only a single coin, confer reality. There is nothing concerning Jesus of Nazareth that can confer reality upon him in this way.

It is this very fact of the absence of proof-facts that puts the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth into a disputable position. It puts him into the same boat as Socrates, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zoroaster, and now, apparently, even Mohammed. (When I was asked to speak at the University of Muenster on Christian Origins, Stephen Kalisch, the head of the School of Religious Studies, turned out to be a Muslim who disputes the historicity of Mohammed! Since then, a considerable literature has accumulated arguing for the non-historicity of Mohammed.)

You indicate that you have in fact read some of my material. I am glad to learn that. However, I am puzzled even more as to why you haven't pointed out even a single error of fact or

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17 It surely is significant that Ehrman makes no effort to counter my claims here at any point in *DJE* but rather repeatedly chides Mythicists for not being properly educated and repeatedly citing the conclusions of the “authorities” here discussed! Because he makes no attempt to deal with this argument, the appeals to authority and *ad hominem* attacks of that book are more glaringly apparent than would be the case if he had tried fairly to deal with my argument here.
reasoning in whatever you have read. I certainly don’t think that everything I have written is perfect. I would truly like to know what errors I have made.

I have taken the liberty to attach a draft of a chapter of an up-coming book. The chapter is called "Did Jesus Have a Body?"18 It follows up my previous comments about Docetism. Since you are one of the few authorities in this field, I would appreciate your critique of this light-hearted essay.

For Reason,
Frank

Several days later, Ehrman sent me the following reply. After reading it, I ask readers to reread the letter above and form their own opinion as to whether or not Ehrman’s answer was either adequate or fair.

From: Ehrman, Bart D
Sent: Friday, October 22, 2010 7:47 PM
To: Zindler, Frank R.
Subject: RE: Dr. Bart Ehrman Zindler reply3

Frank,

Thanks for your follow-up. There are lots and lots of scholars of early Christianity who teach in secular settings. None of them is a mythicist. That should probably tell you something. Though I know it doesn’t. :-)

I certainly don’t challenge your right to ask hard questions. I challenge your authority to answer them confidently without serious training in the field. You would like an example where you obviously go wrong. OK. Your claim that Christianity started as a mystery religion. I’m afraid you don’t seem to know much about mystery religions.19 But why should you? It’s a very complex field.20

18 This was an early version of the chapter in the present book, “Bart Ehrman and the Body of Jesus of Nazareth.” Surely, had Ehrman read “this light-hearted essay,” he would have had to say something about how the Docetists could have claimed that Jesus didn’t have a real body—merely several decades after his supposed death!
19 It is amusing to note that in his scholarly works Ehrman has often had to deal with references to Christian mysteries, but has never been conscious of their significance. On page 267 of The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], for example, he discusses the Greek text of Colossians 2:2: “But it is difficult to know how to construe the syntax of the phrase; does it mean the “mystery of the Christ of God”? Or the “mystery of God, namely Christ”? Or “the mystery of the God Christ” (i.e. of God, who is Christ)? … Some fourteen variations are attested, virtually all of them eliminating the possibility of understanding the verse as equating Christ with God …[the Father] himself. Thus we have manuscripts that speak of “the mystery of God,” or “the mystery of Christ,” or “the mystery of God which (neuter, referring to mystery) is Christ,” or “the mystery of God the Father of Christ,” etc.” Do we not get a whiff of something mysterious here? A mystery cult, perhaps?
20 Considering all the books and essays I had given him displaying my technical competence in biblical studies, this insult was a wake-up call to me, warning me that some powerful defense mechanisms had suddenly been activated. By insulting me, he might get me to break off the annoying conversation and he would not have to come up with evidence for Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps more importantly, he wouldn’t have to read the materials I had given to him. Quite deliberately, I worked to keep the dialogue going.
All best wishes.

-- Bart Ehrman

Bart D. Ehrman
James A. Gray Professor
Department of Religious Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

For personal reasons, I could not reply to this provocative and insulting non-answer until several weeks later. Still thinking that I could engage him at a scholarly level, I wrote the following:

Subject: FWD: Dr. Bart Ehrman Zindler reply4
November 8, 2010 8:37:51 PM EST

Bart,

I meant to reply long before now ... In any case, I now have a moment to reply. Hopefully, we may be able to discuss some of these things in Atlanta in a few weeks.

It is true that the mystery religions are a complex subject, but certainly it is not as difficult as molecular genetics or neurophysiology. My library bulges at the seams with treatises both very old and very new on the mysteries, including their relationship to early Christianity. While my research is just getting off the ground, it almost certainly will establish that Christianity began as an esoteric cult that then spilled out to become an exoteric religion still using the parables and metaphoric scriptures externally associated with the esoteric cult.

As you may have noted if you read my Prolegomenon (It just has been published by Joe Hoffmann through Prometheus in a proceedings volume for a meeting of the Jesus Project.), I seek to make the study of Christian origins scientific. Step one for the mysteries, I am collecting ALL uses in Greek of the term "mysterion" ("musterion" for those who have forgotten why a "y" was used in Latin transcription) in the NT, apostolic fathers, apocrypha, church fathers up past Irenaeus, the surviving mystery religious texts, including Hermetic stuff in Greek, etc. (I have used your Loeb edition and will send you an errata list when I have time to compile it.) Also, I will do the same for Latin. Hopefully, I'll live long enough to include Coptic and Syriac.

In conjunction with collecting occurrences and usages of mysterion, I am also compiling statistical data from all the above sources on all the sacred names and titles. With this plus some other statistics, I plan to construct a phylogenetic tree showing the relationships of the various Gnostic, Christian, Jewish, and other ancient philosophic and religious texts (including Plato and the middle Platonists). Fortunately [sic], I can use the same software for this as I use to construct phylogenetic trees of arthropods, primates, or whatever. My use of Thesaurus Linguae Graecae is still rather clumsy, but it will make possible an EXHAUSTIVE survey of my subject field. The problem with historiography as practiced heretofore is that it was never possible to be exhaustive in dealing with any topic. Religious historians have been like the blind man with the elephant. In their arguments they have all been correct while simultaneously being wrong. With computers now we can create a bounded playing field.

As is the case with all scientific endeavors, I can't be certain in advance that my thesis will
prove correct. I won’t know until the study is finished. However, I will be extremely surprised if an hypothesis with so much heuristic and explanatory power should prove to be incorrect.

I do appreciate your response concerning my mystery-religion hypothesis. I really had hoped, however, that you might have indicated at least one bit of evidence strongly indicating the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. Lacking that, I discovered your earlier book "Jesus Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium." I hoped you would have presented some evidence of historicity therein. Although I haven’t finished the book yet, I must tell you I am disappointed.

The greatest problem seems to be that you repeatedly fall into the petitio principii fallacy. Consider, for example:

"My examples, then, have to do with accounts about Jesus that appear to be contradictory in some of their details. Let me stress that my point is not that the basic events that are narrated didn't happen. Since these particular accounts deal with the birth of Jesus and his death, I think we can assume they are historically accurate in the most general terms—Jesus was born and he did die!" (p. 32)

What’s wrong with this? You assume that which is in need of proof—proof that does not exist. Why do you suppose that if you take out all contradictions from two conflicting narratives that whatever remains is true or historical? Do you think that the conflicting accounts of Herakles' miraculous birth and atoning death certify the historicity of Herakles? Do you think the Infancy Gospel also can help to establish the historicity of Jesus? 21

Jesus of Nazareth lived his life backwards. The earliest documents have the least information about his life; the latest documents have the most. That certainly should give one pause for thought. 22

On pp. 35-36 you write:

"Eventually we'll need to see how we as modern historians—that is, those of us who want to know what actually did happen, and when, and by whom—can get behind these theologically molded accounts to uncover the actual events that lie underneath them."

Why do you beg the question that there ARE in fact historical events underlying them? Isn't it more reasonable, since these are "theologically molded accounts," to suppose that these stories are theopolitical aetiological tales concocted to justify the power structures of various religious groups?

I hope I can find time to finish your book before Atlanta and that we may have some time to discuss it together there.

Frank

21 Shouldn't Ehrman have kept this in mind when staking everything on his 'multiple-attestation' arguments, with his fanciful appeals to Mark, Q, M, L, Thomas, etc.? Shouldn't he have explained why he wasn't including the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and other infancy gospels in his arsenal of 'evidence'? He published a whole book about such scriptures!

22 Ehrman isn't the first apologist or scholar to avoid dealing with this embarrassing problem. In debates and publications I have been pointing this out repeatedly for thirty years. In my experience, no one ever has tried to explain why the earliest authors knew the least about Jesus of Nazareth and the latest knew the most.
It turned out not to be possible for me to attend the SBL meeting in Atlanta and, of course, Ehrman never answered my e-mail. It wasn't until the following spring that I had occasion to resume our correspondence.

Subject: Congratulations on FORGED
Date: March 27, 2011 4:45:17 PM EDT

Bart,

I just received my copy of FORGED and am very pleased. This is a job that was greatly needed and you were the perfect person to do it. It is an argument that needed to be done at book length. Back in 1979 I published a pamphlet "Is the Book of Daniel a Forgery?" in which I too called a spade a spade. From then on, at every opportunity I have used the F-word for many of the same works to which you apply the term. In addition, I routinely use the word "plagiarized" to refer to what "Matthew" and "Luke" did to "Mark." Over the years I have heard all the "explanations" that you demolish so masterfully. Truthfully, I was never very good at debunking them effectively. As I just said, this is an argument that needed to be developed at book length.

In any case, Franx thanx for doing this job!

As I think I told you several years ago, I have been following your career for at least twenty years now and have been gratified to see both your religious-philosophical and scholarly paths come closer to the road on which I have traveled now for almost thirty years. I know you take annoyed umbrage at my implied assertion that you are approaching closer and closer to the mythicist views I have held for so long, but I fully expect that before you retire (more likely, die of exhaustion!) from the exciting scholarly and public life that now is yours, you too will adopt the mythicist position.

There are many reasons for my bold assertion, such as:

(1) Now that you are an Atheist, you are free from the most compelling reason to believe in the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is true that the vast majority even of Atheist scholars still think he was real, but to someone who believes that Jesus was a benevolent god, historicity is sine qua non, but that no longer is an option.23

(2) Although using different methods and lines of inquiry, your research and that of many other modern scholars is converging on the results of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule that long ago found no need for an historical Jesus to explain the phenomena of Christianity. FORGED shows the theopolitical motives and purposes for which scriptures are created. It shows that ALL scriptures must be viewed with suspicion. Explaining why a particular work was forged and ascribed to "Peter" should give us clues as to why "Peter" himself was invented. Arthur Drews gave a number of reasons in Die Petruslegende and I won't rehearse them here.

Any of your research that involves understanding the origins of the canon shows how arbitrary the process of canonization was and that it served theopolitical agendas quite independent of historical reality. Indeed, the watch-word might appropriately have been History-be-Damned! If the Docetists had triumphed, just think how differently the gospel story would read! There' be no controversy at all over the Historical Jesus.

23 Could Ehrman have actually read this comment and then gone on to spill so much ink charging all Atheists with the moral crime of pursuing a nefarious "atheist agenda"?
Scholarship since Wettstein's Scholia Hellenistica in Novum Testamentum (a work much needed by modern scholars, IMO) inexorably has shown that the gospel stories are not the products of actual historical events but rather are midrashes or peshers that rework previous materials. Robert Price, Richard Carrier, Dennis Ronald MacDonald, and a host of other scholars have now derived virtually the whole of Mark from the LXX, Homer, Euripides, et al. Even I have made much hay out of the fact that the Q-saying ("We have piped unto you and ye have not danced..." Matt 11:17; Luke 7:32) derives from Aesop's story of the Fisherman and the Flute.

Virtually nothing remains of the Jesus story that cannot be shown to be a fabrication built by recycling of earlier fictions.

There are no contemporary extrabiblical notices of Jesus. Certainly Philo and Justus of Tiberias should have noticed—much to Photius' chagrin!

I have shown what Origen suspected: the geography of the NT is mostly fictive and symbolic, not real. Cheyne & Black were the first to question the historicity of first-century Nazareth. After I went through all the excavation reports published by the Franciscans, I concluded that there was no proof of habitation at the site at the turn of the era. René Salm (whose book The Myth of Nazareth I gave you last year) reinvestigated ALL the artifacts ever reported from the site and proves quite conclusively that the site was not inhabited when the Holy Family should have been living there. (Christmas 2009 reports of discovery of 1st-century buildings and artefacts from the Nazareth Farm Theme Park development have never been corroborated or published and quite certainly are either grotesque archaeological mistakes or frauds perpetrated to maintain the Christian tourist industry at "Nazareth.")

In my report for the Jesus Seminar "Capernaum—A Literary Invention" I showed that the text of Josephus has been badly misunderstood and misrepresented and that so-called Kfar-Nahum is relatable neither to Josephus nor the gospels.

The Israeli archaeologist Aviram Oshri has shown that there is no evidence of 1st-century habitation at Bethlehem in Judea, and Jodi Magness agrees with his assessment.

Similarly, there is no archeological confirmation for Bethany, Bethpage, Aenon, etc. It is also curious that Jesus never has any adventures in Sepphoris or Tiberias. What does this do to verisimilitude?

In summary: the gospel geography largely ignores the real geography of the 1st century and replaces it with a highly symbolic, fictive landscape.

Although I have not yet gotten all the data into my Excel spreadsheet, it is becoming quite clear that the evolution went from Christ to Jesus, not from Jesus to Christ. My survey of the Greek and Latin texts of the NT, Apocrypha (not yet including the Coptic stuff), the Apostolic Fathers, and the Greek and Latin Fathers of the first few centuries indicates quite clearly that the evolutionary sequence went from Christ to Christ Jesus, to Jesus Christ, to Jesus with the definite article, to Jesus without the article, to Jesus of Nazareth.

Christ at the beginning was a heavenly character and the subject of an astral mystery cult that formed about the same time the Cult of Augustus formed, in response to the movement of the vernal equinox out of Aries into Pisces. As you know, Augustus was the first to use the word euaggelion, and we have much to learn about Christian origins from the study of the Imperial Cults. (Since few biblical scholars have taken on the task of learning about ancient astronomy or astrology, this admittedly will seem quite kooky, and I won’t defend the astral

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24 Although Ehrman claims in DJE? that Jodi Magness disagrees with my Nazareth claims, he gives no hint that I am wrong about her opinion concerning Oshri and Bethlehem. I wonder why. Although I personally gave her a copy of René Salm's The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus, it seems certain that she never read the book.
idea further in this letter, other than to note that earliest Christian iconography supports it.)

The bottom line: Earliest Christianity was more like Docetism and earliest forms of Gnosticism. "Jesus," originally a title (still retained in many of the Nag Hammadi MSS that speak of "The Savior" instead of "Jesus") that became a personal name (in Greek it became identical to "Joshua") and then reified into a man with a biography. Docetism is older than Orthodoxy.

(6) It is easier and more parsimonious to reconstruct an evolutionary sequence leading from a Docetic mystery cult with Gnostic affinities than from an historical Jesus to Gnosticism. How can you evolve Thomas the twin of the Savior from Jesus of Nazareth? How could you have people asserting that Jesus of Nazareth didn’t have a body—merely several decades after his supposed death?

(7) Only around 18% of all the characters of the NT are known to history, and in most cases the historical characters seem to have been portrayed unrealistically in the NT. Many of the remaining characters clearly are supernatural or made up as symbols. Is it not astounding that—with the arguable exceptions of James the Just and John the Baptist—he is no historical evidence for the major players of the story? Shouldn’t we have evidence of the Twelve Apostles/Disciples? Aren’t they zodiacal figures surrounding the center of a solar cult? Aren’t Mary and Joseph clearly made-up characters known only to some of the gospel authors? The silence of history regarding twelve trouble-making apostles amplifies the silence concerning the silence regarding Jesus of Nazareth.25

Reading FORGED prompts me to make note of a number of particular things that you might find interesting and relevant to what I have said above.

First of all, Consider 1 Peter 5:1: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed..."

Is not the use of "Christ" anachronistic?26 Would not the "real Peter" have spoken of the sufferings of his master Jesus? Wouldn't he have recalled a man rather than a title?

Secondly, the pericope adulterae: are you aware that this story jumps around? It can also be found in John 21 and Luke 21 in some MSS.

Thirdly, concerning the supposedly authentic Pauline letters: Have you ever read L. Gordon Rylands or van Manen and the other Dutch "Radical Critics"? They make a powerful case against the authenticity of ALL Pauline letters. In reading your discussion of Galatians 6:11 ("See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand") I am struck by the fact that this exemplifies so well the forger’s use of verisimilitude—the technique you identify so masterfully as a forger’s ploy. When "Paul" says "I am not lying," doesn't that give cause for suspicion?

On page 193, concerning James the Just, you say that "The best historical records indicate that he died around 62 CE, after heading the Jerusalem church for thirty years." What "best historical records" are you referring to? Are you referring to Eusebius? I hope not. In a header somewhere in his Praeparatio Evangelica he notes that it is sometimes okay to deceive.

25 It is truly surprising that no Historicist known to me even notices this problem, let alone explains it adequately. Yes, I know that this sentence is repetitiously redundant. I have given up all hope of winning a Nobel Prize in literature.

26 By “anachronistic” I meant in terms of the traditional presumption that theological evolution went from ‘low’ Christology to ‘high.’ In fact, however, it appears that ‘Judaizing,’ low Christologies are the end of the evolutionary line.
On page 155 you discuss The letter of Pilate to Claudius. I confess, I did not previously know of this letter. You say that "It may seem strange for Pilate to be writing to Claudius, in particular, given the fact that it was Tiberius, not Claudius, who was emperor when Pilate condemned Jesus to death..."

Does this not, however, support Irenaeus' contention that Jesus lived to be around 55 years old and lived into the reign of Claudius? Does not his fundamental disagreement on the placement of the "Historical Jesus" in history itself cause suspicion that we are not dealing with an historical character?

On page 167 you say that "... since the majority of Christians were from the lower, working classes, the weekly meetings as a rule took place either before the work day began, before, dawn, or after it was over, after sundown, that is, when it was dark." What actual evidence do you have that the first Christians were lower-class? This recently has been questioned and someone (I forget who, just now) has found that on the contrary, a very large number of earliest Christians were people of importance. This is of importance since it would undermine the argument against mystery-cult origins of Christianity by supporting the humble explanation for the "secret meetings" of early Christians. I wonder if you have actual data to support this claim or are just following the scholarly tradition.

I especially enjoyed your discussion on page 130 of the argument that falsely using the name of one's patron or teacher in the composition of a pseudepigraphon was common practice:

"I should point out that, as happens so often, neither of these commentators actually provides any evidence that this was a common practice in philosophical schools. They state it as a fact. And why do they think it's a fact? For most New Testament scholars it is thought to be a fact because, well, so many New Testament scholars have said so! But ask someone who makes this claim what her ancient source of information is or what ancient philosopher actually states that this was a common practice. More often than not you'll be met with a blank stare."

I could not have stated the argument against the ad populum fallacy better. It applies a fortiori to claims of the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. Where is the evidence? Ten thousand historians accept the historicity of Jesus. Even Atheist historians say so. It's stupid to go against the evidence of so many authorities.

I ask you to perform a Gedankenexperiment. Imagine you are preparing to debate a mythicist. Since you will be affirming the positive existence of something, the onus probandi rests upon you. The mythicist need only show that your evidence is either not compelling or isn't even evidence.

You begin by listing a hundred or so historians and biblical scholars who affirm the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth. After that, you...? What beyond the ad populum "evidence" could you possibly adduce? Surely, after all the debunking you yourself have done, you cannot use the NT as evidence. What else is there? In my book The Jesus the Jews Never Knew I show that the ancient Jews never heard of Jesus of Nazareth or even Nazareth. You have a copy of my book and can read it to see if my claim holds water or not.

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27 The fact that this goading never elicited any response should have told me that no new arguments would be forthcoming in DJE? It really looks as though he knew that any 'evidence' he might present in an e-mail would easily be deconstructed and demolished. On the other hand, because of his conviction that I was completely unqualified to understand such matters, he may have thought he would be able to floor me with a book full of Josh McDowell apologetics and wanted to surprise me.
I know that I am an annoyance to you, and I don't relish playing the role of being an annoyance. However, you arguably now are the most famous NT scholar in America and for perhaps the first time in history you are succeeding in obtaining broad popular and scholarly acceptance for "radical" ideas in NT studies. You are perhaps the only scholar whose reputation could survive the advocacy of the mythicist position. More importantly, you would induce a paradigm shift in NT studies. This paradigm shift almost succeeded in the late 18th century and several times before WWII. Now, however, mythicist studies are building to a critical mass. With your contribution it could sustain a chain reaction and achieve liftoff.

I hope you have been able to read this far. Congratulations again on an excellent book.

Frank

It was of course a wan hope that Ehrman might become a Mythicist so quickly. Nevertheless, I kept the communication channel open.

On Jun 22, 2011, at 1:42 PM, "Zindler, Frank R." wrote:

Bart,

Six or eight weeks ago I ordered your Apocryphal Gospels texts book from Amazon and have kept getting notices that the book is not yet available. Do you have an estimate of when it will be out?

Frank

From: Ehrman, Bart D
Sent: Wednesday, June 22, 2011 2:00 PM
To: Zindler, Frank R.
Subject: Re: Publication date?

July 17, I *think*.

-- Bart

Sent from my iPad. Apologies for typos.

Bart,
Franx thanx for the quick reply. I am assuming the book includes the Coptic texts also. Is that correct?

Frank

From: Ehrman, Bart D
Sent: Wednesday, June 22, 2011 3:08 PM
To: Zindler, Frank R.
Subject: Re: Publication date?

We decided not to include Nag Hammadi texts, since they are already so easily accessible in a bilingual edition. But with one proviso: anyone using a book like this would be upset if we didn't include at least the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary (not NH, of course, though included in NHL for the same reason)); so we included them, along with everything
else, including the History of Joseph the Carpenter (and Gospel of Judas, etc.) Don't know if you know my collaborator Zlatko Plese. He's a premier coptologist.

-- B

Sent from my iPad. Apologies for typos.

RE: Publication date? Coptic
Date: June 23, 2011 9:18:51 AM EDT

Bart,

Although I have encountered Plese's name several times, I do not own any of his works nor have I ever met him. He might have been sitting right beside me at the Coptic sessions at an SBL meeting and I would not have known it. My Coptic is still rudimentary, but I know enough to be able to zero in on items of interest for my research. As soon as I complete Volume V of my THROUGH ATHEIST EYES: Scenes From a World That Won’t Reason, I have vowed to develop full working knowledge of at least Sahidic.

(By the way, did you get the four volumes of my collected short works that I sent to you several months ago? I hope they didn’t get lost at the University.)

Also of interest: a year or two ago at an SBL meeting, a PhD candidate at Cambridge named Christian Askeland gave a paper titled "Was there a Coptic Translation of John's Gospel without Chapter 21?" Indeed, there was and he passed out photocopies of the last leaf of a codex(?) that ends with chapter 20. Curiously, instead of viewing this as confirmation of the long-understood fact that chapter 21 is a later addition, Askeland concludes

"The most likely explanation for the low quality of the papyrus, the rapid cursive hand, and the frequent rate of errors is that this manuscript was the product of an exercise in scriptural memory."

Indeed.

Hope you are enjoying a vacation. Are you in Greece?

Frank

Several weeks later, René Salm informed me that Ehrman was actually going ahead with a book to refute the Christ-Myth theory. Given the potentially pivotal position of Nazareth archaeology in that theory, and—quite frankly—doubting that he would actually read Salm’s technically challenging book, I wrote a summary of the evidence against a settlement at ‘Nazareth’ at the turn of the era.

Subject: Comments on Nazareth
Date: July 14, 2011 9:26:29 PM EDT

Bart,

I am very pleased to learn that you are going ahead with your book on the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth and are willing to make a serious effort to refute the Christ-Myth Theory. Even before your book is finished, I am certain it will be a valuable contribution to NT scholarship.
Rene Salm has told me that he is in communication with you concerning Nazareth. I am delighted to hear that you have read his book. As you already know, I am very pleased with his book and feel that it makes a powerful argument against the historicity of Nazareth at the turn of the era. It is perhaps of interest to you to learn that both Rene and I were led to question the historicity of Nazareth by reading Cheyne and Smith's ENCYCLOPAEDIA BIBLICA. In my own case, that led me to question the geographic reality of many other gospel sites, including Capernaum. (A popularized version of my Jesus Seminar paper on Capernaum can be found in Volume I of my collected short works in the chapter "Where Jesus Never Walked," if you care to learn the gist of my geographic studies.)

While most of what I wish to comment on here is found in Rene's book, reasoning is often more effective when condensed into lists of arguments and evidences than when scattered throughout a book. Consequently, I would like to itemize some important points relating to the reality of turn-of-the-era Nazareth.

(1) There is no isnad-like chain of attestation to support the Nazareth identity of the present city of Nazareth. There are at least several centuries separating the gospel habitation from the first verifiable and datable attestations of its location at the present site. (With the exception of Jerusalem, Jericho, Tiberias, and one or two other places, this is true also for nearly all the gospel towns and places.)

(2) Origen, although he lived at Caesarea, just 30 miles from Nazareth, did not know where it was located—even though he had made serious efforts to study the biblical sites. "We have visited the places to learn by inquiry of the footsteps of Jesus and of his disciples and of the prophets."

(3) Origen could not decide if the place was called Nazareth or Nazara, and the MSS of Luke show a stunning uncertainty as to the exact spelling of the name. Reuben Swanson's NT Greek MSS: Luke gives the following variants:

Nazara, Nazaret, Nazareth, Nazarat, and Nazared, and I think more variants could be found in MSS of the other gospels and Church Fathers.

If there actually had been a town with a definite name, how could such differences in spelling have arisen? To be sure, the difference between Nazaret and Nazareth ( unaspirated vs. aspirated /t/) are minimal to our English ears, but to a speaker of Koine or Aramaic the difference between /t/ and /th/ was phonemic and would not likely have been confused. But how could Nazaret(h) be confused with Nazara? What actual city name could have given rise to both spellings? (I will discuss the origin(s) of the name later on below.)

(4) Eusebius, like Origen, lived at Caesarea and had occasion to concern himself with Nazareth. Interestingly, he almost certainly never visited the site himself, even though he mentions it in his Onomasticon. When one reads the Greek text concerning Nazareth, it sort of makes sense—until one tries to map out Eusebius' directions onto a map of Roman-era Galilee. It cannot be done. As I indicated, Eusebius himself was substituting hand-waving for personal experience.

(5) Like many other holy places of the NT, Nazareth seems to have been discovered by Constantine's mother, with the aid of willing-to-please tour guides.

(6) Nazareth is unknown in the OT.

(7) The Talmud, although it mentions 63 Galilean towns, does not know anything of Nazareth.
(8) Josephus, although he waged war within two miles of Nazareth and fortified the town of Japha nearby, does not list Nazareth among the 45 cities and towns of Galilee in his experience.

(9) No geographer or historian before the 4th century mentions Nazareth.

(10) According to Luke 4:16-30, Nazareth was built atop a hill: 4:28 "And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, 29 And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong." The Franciscans, whom Rene Salm critiques, accordingly built their shrines on the side of the hill at "Nazareth." Unrealistically, the Biblical city had to be located on the top of the hill, not on the fertile floor of the valley below.

(11) Rene has shown that the Franciscan sites on the hill are not datable to the turn of the era. In doing so, he has refuted the Biblical claims at the same time that he has refuted the Franciscans. (Interestingly, no synagogue has ever been found atop the hill as would follow from Luke 4:29. Indeed, no buildings of any kind existed atop the hill until early modern times.)

(12) Although there doubtless was a city somewhere on the valley floor at the times of the tombs evaluated by Rene, it is extremely unlikely the valley floor was inhabited at the turn of the era. If it had been inhabited, abundant mortuary and agricultural remains clearly datable to that period would be found on the hillside. As you (Bart) well know, the task of the historian is to discover what is or was PROBABLE, not just what is or was POSSIBLE. In science, the onus probandi rests upon the one positing the existence of a process or thing. Without sufficient evidence forthcoming, the scientist cannot accept the reality of the process or thing posited.

(13) Unlike the case of other archaeological sites that date with certainty to the first centuries BCE and CE, virtually no coins datable to that period have ever been found at Nazareth. By contrast, hundreds to thousands of coins are typically recoverable from other sites inhabited at that period.28

(14) Rene has shown that the excavation techniques at Nazareth were completely unscientific, lacking all knowledge of stratigraphic techniques--or at least scorning such techniques in favor of what might be called apologetic archaeological methods. When one reads Bagatti’s publications, the Tendenz is palpable—even in Italian! Like "creation scientists," the Franciscan "archaeologists" knew what they needed to find before they started to dig. What a surprise! They found it!

(15) After the publication of Rene’s book, a Christmas announcement was made of the discovery of "new evidence" dating from the days of Jesus. Rene gives a full explanation of the "evidence" in a supplement to his book. I hope he will supply a copy of that to you, as it completely deflates the claims. The claims are related rather closely to the projects of the Nazareth Farm Project, a multimillion-dollar theme park29 planned for the Nazareth Hill. Interestingly, to date none of the claims have yet been published in any scientific journal. Even

28 Recently, claims have been trumpeted about alleging that a small number of Hasmonean coins have been discovered somewhere at Nazareth. Unless those coins are confirmed by at least hundreds of other, contemporary coins, we must conclude that the reports derive either from archaeological incompetence or from something even more sinister.

29 Despite this warning, Ehrman uncritically cites the ‘evidence’ from this commercial operation on page 195 of DJE?
Jodi Magness has taken note of this "evidence," although she agrees with me that Bethlehem of Judea was not inhabited at the turn of the era (as shown by Aviram Oshri, the Israeli archaeologist.) It is important that you get this supplemental information from Rene.

(16) Nazareth is never mentioned in ANY of the epistles. Paul NEVER talks about "Jesus of Nazareth," and probably wouldn't have had any idea as to who that might have been. It is clear to me, at least, that even the name "Jesus" was the end of the titular evolutionary line. First was "Christ" (although probably spelled chreistos or chrEstos, not christos). Then came "Christ Jesus," then "Jesus Christ." Belatedly came the name of power, the magical name "Jesus" at which every knee would bow. (I'm sure you are well aware of the early magical literature in which "Yaaysooos" is like the shem: a magical word of command and power.) Although "Lord Jesus" is moderately frequent, "Jesus" alone is rare compared to "Christ" alone. Again, the evolution of divine epithets never gets up to "Jesus of Nazareth."

(17) Nazareth is not mentioned in the Apocalypse.

(18) Nazareth is found only in the Gospels and Acts.

(19) Nazareth is found only ONCE in Mark, Mark 1:9. This seems clearly to be an interpolation made at a time when "Jesus" had become a name instead of a title meaning "Savior." The name "Jesus" is inarticulate in this verse, as opposed to at least 80 other places in Mark where the name carries the definite article: "the Jesus," as in "the Savior." It is well to ask the question here, "If verse 9 is authentic, why is it that Mark never mentions Nazareth again, even though he reports events that the other gospels site at Nazareth?"

(20) I have already noted that it is almost impossible to account for the variants "Nazara" and "Nazaret(h)" deriving from a single name of a single place. Rather, it seems evident that both names have been formed by back-formation from an adjective or title in the way "Paris" could be derived from "Parisian" or "Greece" from "Jimmy the Greek." The question is, what might that descriptive word have been? As you know, the Greek epithets given to Jesus in the gospels are "NazOraios," "NazarEnos," and variants thereof. Presumably, these should be derivable from Aramaic or Hebrew terms that would be of relevance to our character. Rene and I differ somewhat in our derivations, and so I speak only for myself at this point.

In my opinion (and also in the opinion of William Benjamin Smith, who also had the nom-de-plume of "Criticus"), the Hebrew antecedent is the word "netser"--meaning "sprout, shoot," or "branch." It is found most prominently in Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a BRANCH shall grow out of his roots." As you know, this verse was popular at Qumran. You may not know, however, that according to Epiphanius, before Christians were called Christianoi, they were called Iessaioi--Jessaeans. I think this clearly relates the word "netser" to early Christianity.

The relationship between "netser" and both "NazOraios" and "NazarEnos" seems very strong. The sequence N-Ts-R and N-Z-R is very close when one remembers that the Greek zeta was pronounced [dz] at the turn of the era. That would make it the voiced equivalent of tsadi [ts] in Hebrew. I do not know if tsadi was voiced in intervocalic position in ancient Hebrew or not, but almost certainly [ts] would have become [dz] when dragged into Greek. Thus, Jesus of Nazareth would originally have been "Jesus the Branch"--as in "Branch Son-of-David-ian."

(Actually, "Branch Son-of-Jesse-an")

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30 Ehrman unfairly ridicules my argument concerning the lack of the definite article before 'Jesus' in Mark 1:9, apparently refusing to mention this important point.
Before continuing with this very lengthy e-mail message, it is necessary that we stop to see what became of this technical linguistic argument on page 192 of DJE? Ehrman’s misunderstanding or misrepresentation of point 20 above would be embarrassing even if it were written by an undergraduate at a mediocre college:

“Zindler maintains that some early Christians understood Jesus to be the “branch” mentioned in Isaiah 11:1, who would come from the line of David as the messiah. The term branch in Hebrew (which does not have vowels) [sic!!!] is spelled NZR, which is close (kind of close) to Nazareth. And so what happened, in Zindler’s view, is that later Christians who did not understand what it meant to call Jesus the NZR (branch) thought that the traditions that called him that were saying he was from a (nonexistent) town, Nazareth.

“Zindler does not marshal any evidence for this view but simply asserts it. And he does not explain why Christians who did not know what NZR meant simply didn’t ask someone. Even more important, he doesn’t explain why they made up the name of a non-existent town (in his view) to locate Jesus or how they went from “Jesus is the NZR” to “Jesus came from Nazareth.”31 The view seems completely implausible, especially given the fact, which we have seen, that multiple independent sources locate Jesus in Nazareth. Moreover, there is the additional evidence, which we will see momentarily, that Nazareth did in fact exist as a small Jewish town in the days of Jesus.”

Where to begin? Hebrew doesn’t have vowels? Even if what was meant was that the word for ‘branch’ would have been written without vowels, could so sloppy a sentence have been written by the same person who edited and translated the Loeb Classical Library edition of the Greek text of the Apostolic Fathers? Why is Ehrman showing me as using NZR as a Hebrew word, instead of the consonantal skeleton of a Greek word representing the Hebrew N-Ts-R (netser), the word for ‘branch’? Why does he not understand that I was deriving the names Nazara and Nazaret(h) by ‘back formation’ from the Greek epithets Nazoraios or Nazarenos, not directly from N-Ts-R—and not at all from N-Z-R (although other scholars whom I respect do thus derive the names)? Why doesn’t Ehrman criticize my linguistic/phonetic argument? Why doesn’t he even mention that I have such an argument?

Ehrman quips, “Zindler does not marshal any evidence for this view [!] but simply asserts it. And he does not explain why Christians who did not know what NZR meant simply didn’t ask someone.” Neither Josh McDowell nor Lee Strobel could have made a sillier comment. Exactly whom would those Christians have asked? When and where and under what circumstances would they have made such inquiry? Would anyone even think to ask someone “Where does Jimmy the Greek come from?”

But to return to my e-mail of July 14, 2011:

(21) It seems clear that “Jesus of Nazareth” was the end of the evolutionary line for this character in the canonical NT. Almost certainly, he started as a heavenly Christ, but probably not a Christos having messianic signification. The Sibylline double acrostic spells the name

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31 Although I had no firm opinion at the time I wrote the e-mail above as to why N-Ts-R would be turned into the name of a town, in the course of research for the present book I think I have come up with a convincing explanation: Nazareth was invented to provide a home town as well as a physical existence for Jesus in order to counter the claims of Docetic Christians who believed that Jesus had no real, flesh-and-blood body. If a home town name was not a made-up name, it is hard to explain the two competing variants of the name found in the New Testament and church fathers—Nazaret(h) and Nazara. If the town had really existed, how could the first Christians have become confused as to its real name?
It is likely that early MSS of the epistles would have spelled the title Chreistos, not Christos. The latter would have evolved out of the iotacism that overtook the Greek language at this time. "Chreistos" and "Chreistos" would both have been pronounced "Christos," and once a messianic connection had been made, would have been the spelling thereafter. The Gnostics, however, seem here as elsewhere to have retained many early traditions and usages. Exactly what "Chreistos" would have meant in early Christianity, however, I do not know and am trying to discover. It is maddening that the MS traditions are of little help here, as only rarely are nomina sacra spelled out. One cannot tell from the written symbols how the words might actually have been spelled.

All for now.

Frank

PS: Beelzebul has just taken possession of me and is making me type the following comment: "If the Docetists had won the theopolitical battles of the first four centuries, no one today would be debating the physical historicity of Jesus."

Readers who have managed to read my detailed and lengthy message and are still awake at this point may wonder if they will be able to make it through Ehrman's critique and rebuttal to my exhausting arguments. I ask them, however, to persevere to the end. As they say in Italian opera, Coraggio! You can do it! Here is his reply:

Sent: Friday, July 15, 2011  3:59 AM  
Subject: RE: Comments on Nazareth

Frank,

Interesting argument. Thanks for passing it along. All best,

--Bart

To be fair, though, please note the time stamp on the message. Several hours later the same night, he sent the following message:

From: Ehrman, Bart D  
Sent: Friday, July 15, 2011 5:38 AM  
To: Zindler, Frank R.  
Subject: your book

Frank,  

As it turns out, I’ve started this morning reading through some of your essays in vol. 1 of your multi-volume magnum opus. Question: is your c.v. available anywhere? And could you explain (would you mind?) how supporting Madalyn Murray O’Hair forced you to leave SUNY? Sounds like there’s an interesting story in there.

-  Bart
The next night I sent him the following reply, attaching a chapter from my yet unpublished memoirs detailing how I was forced by county politicians in Upstate New York to give up a nearly twenty-year career as a teacher and professor at SUNY because of my Atheism and support of Madalyn Murray O’Hair in a lawsuit to remove “In God We Trust” from American currency. Not giving up hope that he was still genuinely interested in understanding Mythicist evidence and arguments, I recommended for study my article demonstrating that the Twelve Apostles/Disciples were every bit as unknown to history as was their master.

From: Zindler, Frank R.
Sent: Saturday, July 16, 2011 1:06 AM
To: Ehrman, Bart D
Subject: Zindler story

Bart,
I’m pleased to hear you are looking at some of the stuff in Volume I of my collected short works. (Actually, it doesn’t contain any of my papers for the Jesus Seminar and a bunch of other things such as my legal writings.) Among the things you might want to critique is my chapter “The Twelve: Further Fictions From the New Testament.” As you know, I notoriously deny the historicity not only of Jesus of Nazareth but also of the Twelve Apostles/Disciples. As I love to say, the silence of history concerning Jesus is amplified by the silence concerning the Twelve Apostles. The whole purpose of the Twelve was to get attention and be noticed, yet history knows no more of them than of their alleged master.

In any case, it is an honor to have a scholar of your caliber read what I have written even if only to continue to disagree.

Concerning my c.v. and the SUNY/O’Hair epic. I am in the throes of writing my memoirs and will take the liberty of copying parts of several chapters into the message below. These are not finished and will doubtless have to be revised as other parts of the book materialize. Even so, there doubtless will be more here than you really want to know. But I would assume you are a speed-reader even in Greek. :-)

Frank

Six hours later, it appears he had read my story, but not my comments on “The Twelve.”

From: Ehrman, Bart D [mailto:behrman@email.unc.edu]
Sent: Saturday, July 16, 2011 7:12 AM
To: Zindler, Frank R.
Subject: RE: Zindler story

Thanks. Scary!

Bart

Bart D. Ehrman
James A. Gray Professor
Department of Religious Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Because American Atheist Press was about to publish Dr. Robert Price’s *The Christ-Myth Theory and Its Problems*, it seemed desirable to send a pre-publication copy of the book to Ehrman.

Subject: RE: Zindler story2
Date: July 18, 2011 11:14:44 AM EDT

Bart,

The printing of Bob Price’s *THE CHRIST-MYTH THEORY AND ITS PROBLEMS* is being delayed. I expect that I will have a pdf of the book to send him for proofing by the end of the week or early next week. At that time I will send it to you also, so you can include it in your critique. Bob sums up a lot of history of the theory and includes quite a bit of original research as well. It is a rather definitive statement.

Frank

PS I’ll try to find a c.v. for you.

Frank

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**From:** Ehrman, Bart D  
**Sent:** Monday, July 18, 2011 11:51 AM  
**To:** Zindler, Frank R.  
**Subject:** RE: Zindler story2

OK, thanks. Are you the publisher at American Atheist Press?

B

Bart D. Ehrman

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Subject: RE: Zindler story3  
Date: July 18, 2011 12:36:34 PM EDT

Yes, since the murder of the Murray-O’Hair family in 1995 I have been the managing editor of American Atheist Press.

Frank

Several weeks passed and then I received the first-ever request for evidence concerning Mythicism and Historical-Jesus studies. It was mildly challenging and had the odor of Church-of-Christ apologetics—apologetics that for many years has denied not only that Christianity began as a mystery cult—certainly a justifiable thing to deny—but also that Christianity at no time had ever absorbed mystery-cult elements.

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**From:** Ehrman, Bart D  
**Subject:** evidence question  
**Date:** August 5, 2011 10:01:10 AM EDT

Frank,
I have a question about some of your claims; I'm not disputing them at this point – but I'm wondering what your authority for them is (i.e., how you know that what you say is right?). Just to pick an example, on p. 64 (of vol. 1 of *Through Atheist Eyes*) you indicate that Mithra was said to have been born of a virgin on Dec. 25. What makes you think so? I.e., who says that in the ancient world? And so on – that Mithra was worshipped on a Sunday; that he was depicted with a halo; that the leader of his cult was called pope and ruled on the Vatican hill; that his followers celebrated his atoning death; and that he was resurrected on a Sunday. What's the evidence for any of these statements/claims?

Many thanks,

Bart

As welcome as the inquiry was, its timing was awkward. I was away from my library and felt an urgency in supplying the requested information. For reasons now forgotten, I was expecting his book to be published in November or December of that year and knew that he would have to complete his book well ahead of that time. I had to tread water, although as everything turned out his book came out much later than expected and none of the information I would eventually supply to him would find a place in *DJE*?

From: Zindler, Frank
Subject: Mithraism
Date: August 9, 2011 12:26:32 AM EDT
To: Ehrman, Bart

Bart,

Sorry to be so late in reply. I'm traveling in Northern Michigan and haven't checked my e-mail in several days. On top of that, for some reason my Blackberry isn't sending out e-mails reliably and so I had to wait to get to a hotel with Wi-Fi so I could use a lap-top.

As you realize, Volume I is composed of articles written for a popular audience, not a scholarly one. While some of the work in them goes back to primary sources, often the press of deadlines forced me to rely on what appeared to be reliable secondary sources such as Cumont and Ulansey. Such was the case with many of my claims concerning Mithras, although I did examine a large amount of iconographic and archaeological evidence at the time and spent some amount of time puzzling over the so-called Greek "Mithras Liturgy." Over the years, however, I have collected many books giving primary sources for much of the Mithraic mysteries, mostly Greek and Latin authors such as Gregory Nazianzen, Plutarch, Porphyry, Tertullian, Julian the Apostle, Fermicus Maternus, Plutarch, Statius, Dio Cassius, and even Justin Martyr. (I can't remember off-hand if Irenaeus weighs in on Mithras or not.)

The stuff about haloes, December 25, virgin birth, etc. has been "common knowledge" amount [sic] anthropologists, comparative mythologists, religionsgeschichtliche scholars, and others for over a century now, and until recently I had little reason to question these claims. Many of them derive from Mithraic art and iconography and it is only necessary to cite the particular artifacts and summarize the interpretive arguments associated with them. The case of Mithras is made difficult and confusing by his pleiomorphic nature. Like most deities, he was associated and equated with a host of other deities at one time or place or another. Multiple myths attach to his origins: born of a rock, born of a virgin, born in a cave/stable, etc. In any case, little or no textual material used by the Mithraists themselves has survived (it was, after all, a secret mystery cult), and all we have are the descriptions and invectives of the church fathers and some other ancient writers.

I think I will be able to find an ancient source for all of the stuff you have queried when I get back home this coming weekend. If there are any for which I cannot find a source, I'll have to eat some non-Mithraic crow. [The crow was one of the Mithraic icons, probably the constellation Corvus.]

I hope you will be able to comment on my Prolegomenon as a statement of method. I also hope you will read my "The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources"-including the two appendices containing multiply annotated versions of the Toldoth. Many of my commentary notes therein have broad significance beyond the Toldoth.
If you have other questions, please don't hesitate to ask them.

Frank

A day later, I heard from Ehrman again. For once, he was actually taking notice of something I had written and was actually expanding the focus of discussion. I was overjoyed.

From: "Ehrman, Bart D"
Date: Wed, 10 Aug 2011 17:20:50 +0000
To: Frank Zindler
Subject: RE: Mithraism

Frank,

Thanks. Yes, I know Ulansey’s work quite well, and Cumont, who is no longer regarded as a reliable source. Roger Beck is more “the guy” now. Since all the evidence is archaeological / material (no texts at all!) I don’t know where Dec. 25 to a virgin, pope, etc. etc. comes from, although I know everyone repeats it. My suspicion is that everyone thinks it’s right because everyone says so!

All best,

8

Although this note seemed reasonable at the time, after the publication of DJE? some things are worth noting. For one thing, Ehrman’s reference to authority is not the sort of citation of authority found in scientific practice. In science, “authority” is cited not only to avoid having to reinvent the wheel, but also to give credit or blame for information not the reported discovery of the instant author. “Cumont, who is no longer regarded as a reliable source” not only reveals Ehrman’s fixation on authority qua authority but betrays his ignorance of Cumont’s work apart from his popular The Mysteries of Mithra. He seems not to understand that Cumont published most of the primary, factual data upon which most interpretations of Mithraism depend. While one may argue that Cumont misinterpreted or misunderstood the significance of the artifacts he reported, could Beck or anyone else dispute the reality of the “Mithréum de Sarmizegetusa” whose partial floor plan is depicted on page 280 of Vol. II of his Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra [1896]?

While it is arguable who had the responsibility to supply the evidence requested, the final sentence of this note is of interest: “My suspicion is that everyone thinks it’s right because everyone says so!” Why is it his mere suspicion? Why doesn’t a famous scholar have a firm, knowledge-based opinion? Did he himself make any preliminary investigation that turned up nothing—as I did for a Historical Jesus in my first encounter with Mythicism—and then decide that there was little point in further searching? Or was he confident that the claims of the traditional apologists were correct and simply did what I would have done in such circumstances—put the burden of proof on the person making an outrageous ontological claim?

It certainly appears that Ehrman had no real knowledge of the primary sources concerning Mithraism let alone the voluminous literature investigating possible mystery-religion ties to primitive Christianity. In any case, I eagerly commenced the search to find answers to his questions.
Bart,

To facilitate this conversation it would be greatly appreciated if you would respond to all 3 of my e-mail addresses above. That way, whether I’m at home, at work, or on the road I will be able to respond in a timely manner. I know it’s a bother, but I hope you won’t mind doing that.

I have had Roger Beck’s work for several years now but have never had time to see exactly where he claims to correct Cumont and Ulansey. I know some of his criticisms but will have to check them out this weekend.

Concerning Cumont, however, his great 2-vol. Textes et Monuments, etc., gives a great deal of documentation for most of these claims, if not all. (I’m still checking.) There are actually quite a few comments and descriptions by church fathers and other early authors. However, a lot can be inferred from ancient coins, inscriptions, remains of mythraea, artwork, etc. For example, coins and bas-reliefs depicting Mithra as sol invictus sporting a halo would clearly indicate a winter solstice birth. I’m still tracking down specific artifacts to cite.

You may be amused to learn that Ulansey disagrees strongly with my precession theory. Even though he argues that “later Mithraism” was created in response to the movement of the vernal equinox from Taurus into Aries, he completely rejects my claim that Christianity was the response to precession from Aries into Pisces, despite the fact of the sacrifice of the lamb replacing the sacrifice of the bull and the fishes (plural) being the earliest symbol for Christianity (except possibly for the chi-rho cross of Chronos, or the simple chi-cross that I think symbolizes the intersection of the celestial equator with the ecliptic). He was quite shocked when I proposed this at an SBL meeting some years ago. So, at least there is one thing in Ulansey’s thought with which you might agree! ;-) 

While the great scholars of the 19th century and early 20th century certainly made a number of mistakes about all kinds of things, for the most part they were really smart cookies and it is always wise to check them out carefully before rejecting their claims. It is possible, of course, that virgin birth etc. has just been repeated endlessly without foundation, I think that is not probable. In fact, I think I have already found an explanation for the virgin birth part, but I need yet more documentation. I hope I’ll be able to give you a reasonable report by Sunday night or Monday. I’m having trouble locating books and manuscripts in my library, which is not cataloged and pretty much fills up 11 or 12 rooms of my house. …

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

32 It is really quite shocking to realize that a scholar as famous as Ehrman would not have known of the classical and patristic literature concerning the mysteries. Surely, if he had ever taken a course in epigraphy he would have understood the importance of inscriptions, coins, art, etc. not only with regard to Christian origins but for understanding as well the social world of the first Christians. Surely, he would have encountered some Mithraism-related information. It is unfortunate that I had to tell him about this. It is much more unfortunate to discover that none of the information I was to him had any effect on what he wrote in DJE?
I had hoped this evening to send you a first installment of my answers to your questions but will only be able to make a bare beginning. Just when I planned to start writing, I received an important e-mail from Robert Eisenman and have spent nearly two hours dialoging with him on important matters … (By the way, he agrees completely with Salm and me that "Nazareth" was not inhabited around the turn of the era.)

I regret that there will be little logic in the sequence with which I deal with your questions. You would really chuckle, if not laugh out loud, if you could have seen me this weekend running upstairs and downstairs from library to library and file cabinet to file cabinet trying to locate books and papers. My whole house is a repository for books and manuscripts and the tons of correspondence associated with AAP publishing as well as with my research. In any case, I have not yet nailed all the questions but have at least some worked out to my own satisfaction and hopefully to yours as well.

My general impression in looking through Roger Beck's books is that although we disagree on some astrological specifics in interpreting the tauroctony, we agree on many essential points. He is not as rejecting of Cumont as general opinion would have it. Curiously, though, he seems not to have paid much attention to numismatics, which brings me to the question concerning halos.

[At this point I break off conversational discourse and merely present data.]

HALOS


His Figure 1 shows the head of Mithra on a Bactrian coin of Soter Megas (ca. 80-100 CE) in profile with short rays emanating from his hat and an indented halo surrounding not only his head but the entire representation of his head and shoulders.

Grenet's Figure 2 shows a figure of Mithra on a Bactrian coin of Huvishka (ca. 153-91 CE). Mithra is standing and a rayed nimbus surrounds his head. In addition a whole-body indented halo surrounds the whole picture. It is sort of like the whole-body halo painted around the Virgen de Guadalupe.

His Figure 5 shows the Sassanian monumental bas-relief at Taq-e-Bostan commemorating Shapur II's victory over Julian the Apostate. Mithra, with long-spiked radiate halo, stands on the left behind the king who receives a ribboned ring from Ahuramazda.

Figure 6 shows a royal seal of the Greco-Bactrian king Plato (ca. 145 BCE). This shows Mithra as Helios driving a quadriga. The head and shoulders of Mithra are surrounded by a simple-line halo from which in turn emanate rays.

Figure 7 is a Sogdian wood relief depicting Mithra as Helios with his quadriga (only two horses showing).

Figure 8 is a drawing of the painting of Mithra that once decorated the soffit of the niche that contained a 38-meter Buddha at Bamian until 1999 when it was destroyed by the Taliban even before the destruction of the buddhas themselves. It too shows a whole-body indented halo around Mithra being born from the top of Mt. Hara, as described in the Mihr Yasht.

Last, but not least, Grenet's Figure 9 depicts an Eastern Sasanian seal depicting Mithra petrogenus. The visible part of Mithra is surrounded by a single-line halo from which emanate long solar rays.

Thus, like all solar beings, Mithra was often depicted with halos.

That's all for now. More to follow tomorrow.

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

From: Zindler, Frank
Subject: Fwd: Zindler reporting2
Bart,

In trying to track down sources with which to answer your questions I have stumbled into a number of Iranian Web-sites dealing with things Mithraic. It appears that there is a substantial apologetic industry thriving in Iran that seeks to discredit Christianity as being derived from Mithraism. What a hoot! It doesn't seem to occur to the Web-sites that by discrediting Jesus they are discrediting one of the Qur'an's prophets as well. Of course, the writers may not really be believing Muslims.

There is, as you probably are aware, a major evangelical apologetics industry in America that seeks to prove that Christianity owes nothing to Mithraism and even that Mithraism is later than Christianity and stole its doctrines from Christianity! Twenty or so years ago I debated a Church of Christ apologist on Cincinnati radio who claimed just that. I pointed out that many Christian churches were built on the ruins of Mithraea, indicating that on those sites, at least, Mithraism got there first. I also pointed out that Mithra [Vedic Sanskrit mitra] was mentioned as a major god in the Rig Veda around 1,500 BCE, and that an entire hymn was devoted to him [Book III, Hymn 59].

I cannot remember the name of my opponent, but I asked him something like "what do you call the pointy hat that Roman Catholic bishops and some popes wear?" He answered "A miter." "Why is it called a miter?" I asked. He not being able to answer me, I explained: "The name of the hat in Latin is mitra, exactly the same as the Latin name for Mithra. Why do you think that is? Do you think the Mithraists named themselves after a Christian hat?" 33

[Concerning the mutation Skt. mitra > OPrs. mithra > Gk. mithras > Lat mitra I would suggest that the Vedic Sanskrit /t/ probably was a dental /t/. In Avestan and other Old and Middle Persian languages, the cognate sound would also have been a dental, but could have been aspirated or even a fricative /θ/. At the time this would have been borrowed into Greek and spelled with a theta, it is well to remember that theta at that time was not the dental spirant θ of Modern Greek. Rather, it was simply an aspirated dental /θ/ such as the English /θ/ in art. In Latin, /t/ and θ were not separate phonemes. A Roman would not have perceived any difference between mitra and mētra. Both would be pronounced mitra.]

Time did not allow elaboration, but I mentioned that early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr [Dialogue with Trypho, 70], Tertullian [De corona, 15], Origen [Contra Celsum, 3:33], and Firmicus Maternus [De errore, 22:1] as much as admitted the priority of Mithraism and other mystery religions when they fumed that the rituals and doctrines of the mysteries were counterfeits of Christianity laid out by the devil.

Unfortunately, I did not think of Robert Price's argument of many years later [Night of the Living Savior, "The ruin of rationalism," p. 186]: "Had the early Christian apologists been aware of pagan poaching of Christian themes, would they not have made as much of it as modern apologists make when they merely surmise it? Would the ancient Christians ever have fielded such a suicidal argument as this? It is fully as ridiculous as the ancient claim of Philo of Alexandria, who liked to allegorize the Torah as teaching Greek philosophy, that Plato had derived his metaphysics from the Pentateuch of Moses."

I also could have used to advantage the argument of Richard Reitzenstein [Hellenistic Mystery-Religions, English translation 1978, p. 149 as cited by Price, op. cit., p. 183]: "... in procedures and perspectives in which Christianity is in agreement with several different pagan mystery-religions, the priority is probably to be credited to the latter. A borrowing of cultic terms from Christianity by paganism is more difficult to conceive; here the burden of proof always falls on the person who would assert the priority of Christianity... By way of justification I may add only that most of the Christian authors probably knew something of pagan literature, while only very few of the pagan writers would have known anything of Christian literature, and that in general conversion from paganism to Christianity was more common than conversion from Christianity to paganism. Until this is proved to me to be erroneous, I shall hardly be able to abandon these guidelines, and I must wait for proof that Christianity has

33 It was a crushing disappointment that Ehrman didn't mention this fact when he misrepresented and criticized my claims about Mithraism [D/E? 212]: “According to Zindler, the cult figure of the Mithraists, the Persian god Mithras, was said to have been born on December 25 to a virgin [my actual words were "born of a virgin on the winter solstice—frequently December 25 in the Julian calendar"]; his cult was headed by a ruler who was known as a pope, located on the Vatican hill; the leaders of the religion wore miters..." [emphasis mine]
influenced the pagan mysteries."

**THE EUCHARIST**

It is clear from the protestations of Christian apologists that the Mithraic Eucharistic rite was very similar to that of Christianity. Since we know that Mithraism in some form or other goes all the way back to the Bronze Age, we can be sure that this similarity was not due to Mithraism borrowing from Christianity. Consider Justin Martyr's *First Apology* [Chapter 6]:

"For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, 'this do ye in remembrance of Me; this is My body;' and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, 'This is My blood;' and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn." [Ante-Nicene Fathers]

Then there is the wide-ranging denunciation of the Mithraists by Tertullian [*De paraescriptione haereticorum*, 40:3-4, Geden translation]:

"The devil (is the inspirer of the heretics) whose work it is to pervert the truth, who with idolatrous mysteries endeavours to imitate the realities of the divine sacraments. Some he himself sprinkles as though in token of faith and loyalty; he promises forgiveness of sins through baptism; and if my memory does not fail me marks his own soldiers with the sign of Mithra on their foreheads, commemorates an offering of bread, introduces a mock resurrection, and with the sword opens the way to the crown. Moreover has he not forbidden a second marriage to the supreme priest? He maintains also his virgins and his celibates."

**VIRGIN BIRTH OF MITHRA** This will have to wait for tomorrow.

Good night for now.

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

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From: Zindler, Frank
Subject: Fwd: Zindler reporting3
Date: August 18, 2011 12:46:08 AM EDT
To: Ehrman, Bart

Bart,

Sorry again for the delay. Ann's computer died, … and I haven't had any time for fun. In any case, the delay has caused my train of thought to become derailed and all my plans to organize my reports have unravelled. Consequently, I shall have to report answers and partial answers as they come off the piles of books and printouts.

First, a postscript on the priority of Mithraism: Cassius Dio, in Bk 63, Ch. 10 of his *Roman History* tells of the visit of the Armenian king Tiridates to Nero: "I, my lord [Nero], am son of Arsaces, and brother of the kings Volegeses and Pacoras, and thy servant. And I am come to thee as my god, to worship thee as I worship Mithra, and I will be as thou shalt determine. For thou art my destiny and my fate." [Geden translation] So, Nero was being worshiped as Mithra long before we have any epigraphic or historical record of Christian worship.

Before going into virgin births, I want to reprise the quote from Tertullian and make a few further comments.

Tertullian [*De paraescriptione haereticorum*, 40:3-4, Geden translation]:

"The devil (is the inspirer of the heretics) whose work it is to pervert the truth, who with idolatrous mysteries endeavours to imitate the realities of the divine sacraments. Some he himself sprinkles as though in token of faith and loyalty; he promises forgiveness of sins through baptism; and if my memory does not fail me marks his own
soldiers with the sign of Mithra on their foreheads, commemorates an offering of bread, introduces a mock resurrection, and with the sword opens the way to the crown. Moreover has he not forbidden a second marriage to the supreme priest? He maintains also his virgins and his celibates."

This shows that Mithraism practiced baptism to wash away (original) sins. As you know, the Romans had the idea of original sin before it came into Christian theology. Tertullian (De Baptismo, 5) notes that "For in certain rites also of an Isis or Mithra initiation is by means of baptismal water."

Mithraism practiced chrismation—the mark on the forehead. (My guess is that the mark was either the chi-cross [the figure imitating the angle of intersection of the celestial equator with the ecliptic path of the sun through the zodiac] or the chi-rho cross, the original symbol for Chronos/Kronos according to a papyrus found at Pompei/Herculaneum. Mithra was equated with Kronos as well as Apollo and Sol Invictus as I shall show below.)

While the "mock resurrection" does not explicitly imply the resurrection of Mithra, it is entirely compatible with the idea. Moreover, since Mithra was a sun god (proof to follow shortly), he would have been a dying and rising god like all the other sun gods. We must remember here, that we are not considering biological, terrestrial events. We must put our minds into the skulls of the average ancient educated person who knew more practical astronomy—and astrology—than the average modern person with a BS majoring in astronomy. [I currently am doing computer modeling of the positions of the planets, constellations, and movements of the vernal equinox along the zodiac at the turn of the era to get a better handle on what exactly the Mithraists and first Christians would have seen and pondered over when they looked up to the sky at night.]

For well over a century, mythicist scholars have argued that the "resurrection" of sun gods phenomenologically is simply the rising of the sun above the celestial equator at the time of the vernal equinox. "On earth as it is in heaven." That is why the Christian resurrection is celebrated in spring around March 21. The "death" of a sun god occurs, correspondingly, at the time of the autumnal equinox, when the sun sinks below the celestial equator. Thus, even without the slightly cryptic comment of Tertullian about mock resurrection, we would know that Mithra died and was resurrected by virtue of the simple fact that he was a sun god.

While I'm on the subject of astronomy/astrology, I might as well add a few more points. Just as sun gods must die in autumn and be resurrected in spring, so too they must be born at the winter solstice, when the sun is at its lowest point below the equator. From that low-point, it "grows" as it climbs to the equator. The sun's fire is rekindled around December 25 (the approximate date of the winter solstice in the Julian calendar).

It is curious that when Christianity trumped the growth of the Baptist cult it had JB be born exactly six months before JC. JB's feast day is the summer solstice! Jn 3:30: "He must increase, but I must decrease." When Jesus the sun is rising upwards toward the celestial equator beginning on December 21/25, JB has already arrived at the summer solstice and is beginning his descent toward the equator. "He must increase, but I must decrease." Interestingly, the Synoptics give JC a sun god's "life" of just one year. Because his life-path is a circle (the circle of the ecliptic), JC is simultaneously the Alpha and the Omega—as is the case for every point in the circumference of a circle!34

I must tell you that it wasn't easy for me to get into an astrological frame of mine, especially after having studied astronomy (and even taken an honors course in astrophysics) at the University of Michigan. However, studying the ancient philosophers and poets I became convinced that they all were thinking in an astrological world of reference. I have just finished a close reread of the Aeneid and the Eclogues and am seeing astrology all over the place.

MITHRA THE SUN GOD

Since much of the above argumentation requires Mithra to have been a sun god, I shall now make good on my promise above. Consider, first, the Clementine Homily VI.10:

"And I must ask you to think of all such stories as embodying some such allegory. Look on Apollo as the wandering Sun (Peri-Polon), a son of Zeus, who was also called Mithras, as completing the period of a year. And these said transformations of the all-pervading Zeus must be regarded as the numerous changes of the seasons, while his numberless wives you must understand to be years, or generations."

34 I fear that all this information pertaining to astronomy and astrology must have generated far too great cognitive dissonance for Ehrman even to understand my arguments let alone treat them fairly in DJE?
So, Mithra is Apollo, the sun god, and acquires all the characteristics of that deity.

Before proceeding to other proofs of the solar equivalence of Mithra, I must again bemoan the problems and tribulations encountered when dealing with ancient religion/mythology. The rules of scientific or mathematical logic simply do not apply. One is three and three are one, and yet each one remains separate and distinct. Mithra is Sol Invictus is Apollo is Helios is Kronos is Saturn is... (and Saturn can be equated with Yahweh!) And yet each god keeps his name. So, if Sol Invictus was born on December 25, Mithra was born on that date also. However, if it could be shown that one of those equivalent gods had been born on some other date, Mithra too could have acquired that other birth date was well! Are you getting dizzy?

Strabo (Geographica, XI.14) tells us that "The Persians therefore do not erect statues and altars, but sacrifice on a high place, regarding the heaven as Zeus; and they honor also the sun, whom they call Mithra, and the moon and Aphrodite and fire and earth and the winds and water." [Geden translation]

Quintus Curtius (History of Alexander, Bk 4, Ch. 13) describes the scene before the battle of Arbela: "The king himself with his generals and staff passed around the ranks of the armed men, praying to the sun and Mithra and the sacred eternal fire to inspire them with courage worthy of their ancient fame and the monuments of their ancestors."

Cumont cites several scholia on Lucian's Zeus Rants and The Parliament of the Gods:

"This Bendis... Bendis is a Thracian goddess, and Anubis is an Egyptian [god], whom the theologoi call 'dog-faced.' Mithras is Persian, and Men is Phrygian. This Mithras is the same as Hephaestus, but others say [he is the same as] Helios."

"Mithrēs [Mithras]... Mithras is the sun [Helios] among the Persians.

Then there is the Oxyrhynchus papyrus POxy 1802, a glossary of foreign words: "Mithras: Prometheus, according to others the sun among the Persians."

The Wikipedia article on Mithraism notes that "An altar or block from near SS. Pietro e Marcellino on the Esquiline in Rome was inscribed with a bilingual inscription by an Imperial freedman named T. Flavius Hyginus, probably between 80-100 AD. It is dedicated to Sol Invictus Mithras." [The reference here is confusing. This is either CIMRM 593 or CIMRM 362.]

The Web-site of the Vatican Museum carries a photograph of a bas-relief of a tauroctony [no catalog number given] with the dedication to SOLI INVICTO DEO. 'Nuff said.

MITHRAISM AND VATICAN HILL

The Vatican Museum holds at least three tauroctonies, but no provenances are given. Many books from the 19th and early 20th centuries make the claim that there was a Mythraeum on Vatican Hill, and it seems likely that one of these tauroctonies was taken from it. In this regard, I would like to quote two pages of my translation of Arthur Drews' Die Petruslegende of 1910 [The Legend of Saint Peter: A Contribution to the Mythology of Christianity, by Arthur Drews, translated by Frank R. Zindler, Austin, American Atheist Press, 1997]:

"In Rome there exists a so-called 'chair of Peter,' allegedly connected to the 'first Roman bishop.' In reality, however, its decoration shows it to be derived from the Mithra cult. In particular, it shows the zodiac as well as the labors of the sun god on its front side,[94] and allows absolutely no doubt that the priest who exercised his powers of office from the chair was not the Christian, but rather the Mithraic Pater Patrum [Father of Fathers] or the Pater Patratus—as the high priest of the Persian rock god chose to be called. Like the present ruler of Roman Catholic Christianity, he too had his See upon the Vatican Hill. Moreover, he enjoyed the protection of Attis, the dying and resurrecting young god of the Phrygian mysteries formerly recognized by the state, who with his mother Cybele, the archetype of the Christian Mary, had long been worshipped upon the Vatican Hill.[95] Attis also bore the name of Papa, i.e., "Father." And "Father" simultaneously is the name assumed by the high priest of this god who, like the "Successor upon the throne of Peter," wore a tiara upon his head and likewise possessed the power "to bind and to loose." [that from page 40; on page 65 Drews returns to the subject of the chair: "There is, of course, the so-called sella gestatoria, 'the chair of peter,' which he is supposed to have used when he was the first bishop. It was exhibited publicly for a while in the sixties of the last century, but then prudently it was withdrawn again from the gaze of the profane crowd. That it had no relationship with Peter was only too apparent."
"There upon the Vatican Hill, where the faithful were 'absolved of their sins' by means of a solemn baptism in
blood in the sanctuary of Attis and Mithra—upon that spot is where Peter is supposed to have found his end during
the Neronian persecution of Christians. It is the place where the dome of St. Peter's was erected over the so-called
'grave of the Apostle.' [See my chapter "Of Bones and Boners: Saint Peter at the Vatican" in Volume I for more
information about this spot.] It is where originally stood the temple not of the Christian, but rather the pagan, 'man
of rock.' It is simply Attis under the name Agdistis, as we have said, a stone-god, one born from rock, a Peter. [96]"

The references given are:
[94] See the illustration in Franz Xaver Kraus' edition of La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana, by Giovanni Battista de
Rosse, p. 505.
[95] The Phrygian Cybele is the same as the Babylonian Ishtar, the Egyptian Isis, etc. All these Near Eastern
goddesses of earthly abundance and fertility serve simultaneously as mothers and virgins (in consequence of the
fact that the constellation Virgo rises in the eastern sky at the time of the winter solstice, when the sun god is born.
See Alfred Jeremias: Babylonisches im Neuen Testament, p. 35, Note 1; p. 47) and are represented as sitting with
the heavenly infant upon their laps.

I am still trying to find archeological evidence for a Mithraeum on Vatican Hill. There are Mithrea near by on the
Campus Martius, and all over the rest of Rome. If there weren't any on the Vatican Hill, that itself would by [sic] a
mystery in need of explanation! But in any case, I am continuing to search.

Partial support for Drews' claims come, of all things, from the Web-site of the Vatican Museum, which shows an
altar dedicated to Cybele and Attis: "The shrine of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, from which numerous inscribed
altars come, was situated in an unidentified place near the Vatican Basilica."

Well, I still haven't gotten to Virgin births. Oh, well, perhaps tomorrow...

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

From: Zindler, Frank
Subject: Re: Zindler reporting4
Date: August 19, 2011 12:05:10 AM EDT

Bart,

I haven't gotten any "hopped-the-pond" automatic responses, so I assume you're receiving these reports. I will
tonight, in fact, finally get to the virgin birth of Mithra. I don't have it nailed down to my complete satisfaction, but
I'm getting close.

Temporarily I have stopped paging through my fifty-some books relating to Mithraism and the other mysteries and
have been searching on-line as faster, albeit sometimes quite frustrating as in the instant case. There is a popular,
English-language women's Web-site called www.irandokht.com. On it I found an article by a certain Manouchehr
Saadat Noury, PhD, titled "First Iranian goddess of productivity and values," dealing with the ancient Iranian
goddess Anahita. After showing a picture of the great Temple of Anahita at Kangavar, the article says that

"By the HELLENISTIC era (330—310 BC), if not before, Anahita's cult came to be closely associated with that of
MITHRA.

"The ANAHITA TEMPLES have been built in many Iranian cities like Kangavar, Bishapur (an ancient city in
south of present-day Faliyan) and other places during different eras. An inscription from 200 BC
dedicates a SELUCID temple in western Iran to "Anahita, as the Immaculate Virgin
Mother of the Lord Mithra." The ANAHITA TEMPLE at Kangavar city of Kermanshah (a western
province in present-day Iran) is possibly the most important one. It is speculated that the architectural structure of
this temple is a combination of the Greek and Persian styles and some researchers suggest that the temple is
related to a girl named Anahita, the daughter of din Mehr, who enjoyed a very high status with the ancient
Iranians."
This nicely takes care of the virgin-birth question and points out further parallels between Mithra and Christ/Jesus, the title "Lord" and perhaps even an immaculate conception notion anterior to that of the Virgin Mary Theotokos. Unfortunately, the article doesn't even say what language the dedication is written in, although being Seleucid one would suppose it to have been in Greek. It doesn't say exactly where in "western Iran" this temple is, nor, perhaps not surprising for a popular article, does it give a reference to pursue. I have e-mailed IranDokht to see if I can get more information on this. Meanwhile I will continue to search the standard works.

How, then, can Mithra be born of a virgin (Anahita) and yet be born of rock? Again, caution must be exercised: we cannot expect logic. Rather, something akin to stream-of-consciousness may be the metaphor of choice here. Websters-dictionary-online.org may unknowingly supply an answer. In its article on Anahita, we read:

"As a cosmological entity"

"The cosmological qualities of the world river are alluded to in Yasht 5 (see in the Avesta, below), but properly developed only in the Bundahishn, a Zoroastrian account of creation finished in the 11th or 12th century CE. [Worrisomely late!] In both texts, Aredvi Sura Anahita is not only a divinity, but also the source of the world river and the (name of the) world river itself. The cosmological legend runs as follows:

"All the waters of the world created by Ahura Mazda originate from the source Aredvi Sura Anahita, the life-increasing, herd-increasing, fold-increasing, who makes prosperity for all countries. This source is at the top of the world mountain Hara Berezaiti, "High Hara," around which the sky revolves and that is at the center of Airyanem Vaejah, the first of the lands created by Mazda. ...

"In the Bundahishn, the two halves of the name "Ardwisur Anahid" are occasionally treated independently of one another, that is, with Ardwisur as the representative of waters, and Anahid identified with the planet Venus.[20] In yet other chapters, the text equates the two, as in "Ardwisur who is Anahid, the father and mother of the Waters" (3.17).

"This legend of the river that descends from Mount Hara appears to have remained a part of living observance for many generations. A Greek inscription from Roman times found in Asia Minor reads 'the great goddess Analitis of high Hara.' [21] On Greek coins of the imperial epoch, she is spoken of as 'Analitis of the sacred water.[20]"


As I noted in my first report, there are coins depicting Mithra emerging from the top of "High Hara." That being a concrete datum from which to begin, we may imagine the mythic mind to reason forward that since Mithra was born of Mt. Hara, and since Mt. Hara is also the virgin goddess Anahita, Mithra was born of the virgin Anahita. Reasoning backward from Mt. Hara, one might argue that since Mt. Hara is made of rock, Mithra was born from rock(s).

Another way to look at the virgin/rock puzzle is the following: Anahita is the goddess of waters, yes, but also she is a mountain of rock. She seems to be the equivalent of Gaia. You don't have to be a Hesiod to see the similarity between a god being born from an earth-goddess and a god being born of a rock-goddess.

I can't remember what else you wanted me to document. Let me know if there are other points I should address. As I explained, some of my answers are not yet complete, and I am continuing to search as time allows. Nevertheless, I am increasingly confident that all the major claims about Mithraism made by the major mythicists of the last 150 years can be documented. I am increasingly in admiration of their scholarship. Fully documenting some particulars might, however, be difficult and time-consuming. Imagine being challenged to demonstrate conclusively that George Washington crossed the Delaware River on December 25, 1776. To be sure, you would be able to do it, but I don't think it would be very easy.

While I must confess that I have not completely been able to give fully satisfactory answers to your questions, a solid beginning has been made. It is well to pull back and get a more panoramic view of our discussion. In some of my writings I try to demonstrate that there is no good evidence to indicate the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth, the Twelve Apostles, much of Gospel geography, etc. I point out that the onus probandi of necessity is on the person who claims the existence of a thing or process. That is the rule of science, and it must be the rule of any credible
historiography.

In other writings such as the one presently in dispute I attempt to explain how the Jesus biography could have come into being if there was no Jesus of Nazareth to serve as a condensation nucleus. **Even if it could be shown that every one of my hypotheses were false, it would not add one whit of evidence to support the claims of the historicity of Jesus.** In fact, my theory (I use the term advisedly) is constantly evolving. While there is little in my "How Jesus Got a Life" that I think is wrong, I now would markedly alter the emphasis on certain points and add a lot of extra components to the mix. I am not stuck to any Tar-Baby hypothesis. I am free to admit errors and set out on any new path that leads to better evidence. I am confident that you can do this too.35

Please let me know that you have received this stuff.

All the best,

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

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35 To my profound dismay, Ehrman gave no hint that I ever told him anything like this when he ridiculed and misrepresented this essay in *DJE*?
Bart,

I think I found one of the references to Mithriaaca on the Vatican Hill that I failed to cite when writing my "Of Bones and Boners: Saint Peter at the Vatican." I was heavily involved with the epigraphic and other works of Margherita Guarducci at the time and I just came across a related item in M.J. Vermaseren's Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriaeae (Martinus Nijhoff, 1956, Vol. I, p. 205.)

The entry is #515:

**Marble altar, found in S. Peter's square some meters northern of the Apostle's statue in 1949.**


Diis magnis / M(atre) d(eum) m(agnae) I(daeae / Attidi sancto menotyranno / Alfenuis Ceionius Julianus / Kamenius v(ir) c(larissimus) VII vir epul(onum) / pater et hieroceryx / sacerdotum) s(summi) i(invicti) / Mitrae hierofanta / Hecatae / arch(i)buolus dei Liberti / aram taurobolio criobolio/que percepto dicabit / die XIIII kal(endis) aug(ustis) d(omino) n(ostro) Gratiano /Aug(usto) III et Equitio cons(ulibus).

19th of July 374 A.D.; *cf. CIL VI 499 = Dessau, No. 4147* from the same provenance and of the same date. The exact situation of the Phrygianum in the Vatican city is unknown, but Margherita Guarducci, *Crasto e S. Pietro in un documento preconstantiniano della Necropoli Vaticana*, Roma 1953, 66 holds it to be situated probably "a sinistra dell' odierna gradinata fra l'arco delle Campane e il Camposanto Teutonico."

Alfenius Ceionius Julianus Kamenius died in Antium in 395 A.D. (*see No. 206*). He occurs in the following inscription, which certainly belongs to the same sanctuary. *Cf. O. Seeck in RE III col. 1864 No. 31; H.Bloch in HThR XXXVIII, 1945, 211.

Item 206 is found on page 111 of Vol. I and contains a touching poem and a dedicatory inscription:

Inscription from Antium, found at San Donato in 1884.

*Eph. Ep.* VIII, 648; *MMM II* No. 147.

Inter avos provosque tuos sanctumque parentem
Virtutem meritis et honoribus emicuisit,
Ornamentum ingens generis magnique senatus.
Sed raptus propere liquisti, sancte Kameni,
Aeternos fletus obiens iuvenalibus annis.
Te dulcis coniunx lacrimis nocteque diesque
Cum parvis deflet natis, solacia vitae
Amisisse dolens casto viduata cubili;
Quae tam extremum munus, solacia luctus,
Omnibus obsequiis ornat decoratque sepulcrum.

Alfenio Ceionio Iuliano Kamenio v(io) c(larissimo) quaestori candidato / pretori triumfali, VII viro epulonum, *patri sacrorum summni / invicti Mitre, hierofanta* Aecatae, archibucolo dei Liberti, XV viro / s(acris) f(aciundis), tauroboliato deum Matris, *pontifici maiori*, consulari / Numidiae et vicario Africae qui
vixit annos XLII m(enses) VI d(ies) XIII. / Rec(esit) II nonas septembr(es) d(omino) n(ostro) Archadio et Fl(avio)
Bautone v(io) c(larissimo) cons(ulibus).

385 A.D.
Kamenius is also stated in two inscriptions from Rome (See our Nos 515; 516), but there he is still *magister et pater sacrorum*, whereas at his death he bears the grade of *pater patrum*.

*Sancte*: No. 486.
I won't bother copying the text of #516 as it covers much of the same ground as the inscription just quoted.

I really see no need to doubt that the Mithraists were on Vatican Hill. They were on every other hill in Rome, and some very special explanations would be required to account for their absence on just one of the seven. What better place to stash a Pontifex Maior?

Will your book be available on more than one electronic platform? Kindle?

Frank

Ehrman did not acknowledge receipt of this e-mail.

**CONCLUDING DISSONANCE**

Bart Ehrman is a scholar who thinks and works in the same ‘paradigm’—the same common-sense framework—as that in which Scholastic philosophers, theologians, biblical scholars, poets, romantics, and humanistic historians work. I, on the other hand, gave up thinking in that paradigm at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Since then, I have come to think and work in a hard-headed scientific paradigm. That means that I, when faced with a claim that some thing or process exists or occurs (or once existed or occurred), lay the burden of proof on the person making the existential claim. Ehrman, however, would seem to think that any claim is ‘innocent until proven guilty’—that it can be taken seriously until conclusive proof against it is forthcoming. As a scientist, when I make an existential claim I must not only offer compelling evidence to support it, I must work hard to see if anywhere there lurks evidence against my own claim. As a bible scholar, however, Ehrman not only sees evidence supporting his own views in the flimsiest of arguments, he simply cannot see the evidence against his claims even when they are clearly pointed out to him. Not only does he not seek out disconfirming evidence on his own, he seems not to recognize or apprehend disconfirmation when it is right in front of his nose.

Ehrman thinks within a religious paradigm in which appeal to authority not only is valid, it is a requirement. “Sola scriptura!” “The Bible says...” “Every qualified historian knows...” I, however, cite ‘authority’ for two purposes: (1) to avoid having to reinvent the wheel, and (2) to indicate where credit or blame should be assigned for work not done by me personally. For me, ‘Seeing is Believing’—seeing must come before belief. For Ehrman, ‘Believing is Seeing’—what he believes shapes what he sees.

When anyone is suddenly translated from one frame of reference to another—from one paradigm to a different one—the result is usually what is called ‘cognitive dissonance.’ Cognitive dissonance is a state of confusion in which one can neither reorient the self in the new landscape nor even locate the major landmarks within it. Cognitive dissonance is the mental condition in which one writes books like Did Jesus Exist? after reading the e-mails reprinted in this chapter. It is the mental condition in which one transforms the simple arguments and evidence of my correspondence with Ehrman into the outrageously distorted and misleading representations of them to be found in his book.

Fortunately, cognitive dissonance is an unstable state—it cannot last forever. If Ehrman continuously is forced to deal with arguments and corrections emanating from the world of science, eventually he will be able to attain a new equilibrium. Experiments in sensory psychology have shown that people made to wear glasses with inverting lenses at first cannot even walk without falling down. Eventually, however, their whole world turns ‘right-
side-up’ and a new perceptual normality asserts itself.

No evidence exists that is sufficient to prove the Historicist thesis, and Mythicists with compelling evidence against it will not give up and go away. The dispute between Mythicists and Historicists is like the struggle between a starfish and a clam. The muscles of the starfish are not very strong, but they have extraordinary endurance. The muscles of the clam, however, are very strong, but tire out quickly. The starfish clasps the clam and tries to pull its shells apart in order to inject digestive enzymes between them to digest the clam. The clam clams up more tightly to resist the starfish. Eventually, however, the massive muscles of the clam become enfeebled. The result? Except for the shell, the clam itself becomes transformed into a starfish. Eventually, the cast-off empty shell may come to be seen as having been functionally useless and empty all along.

Not unlike the clam, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ will also be transformed. Almost certainly, the scholars of the future will not call him ‘The Jesus of Oz,’ but that surely is how he will be classified.