

**BART EHRMAN**  
AND  
**THE CHESHIRE CAT OF NAZARETH**

By Frank R. Zindler

*Dubitando enim ad inquisitionem venimus; inquirendo veritatem percipimus.*

—Peter Abelard

When all that is left of a Cheshire cat is its grin, how can we be sure it is in fact the grin of a cat? To be sure, if we have watched a grinning cat disappear progressively until all we see is its grin, *we* can have some confidence that the aerial grin we perceive to remain is in fact that of a cat. As the grin further dissolves into the fog and mist of a perplexing day, however, it becomes harder and harder to determine if the motes that float before our eyes are still the remnants of the grin or just the random rubbish of polluted air. At some point, however, we will have to admit that the cat is gone—completely gone.

This all seems obvious enough and uncontroversial. But what if someone else were to walk by as you were standing at the wayside peering into the low branches of a tree and fixing your gaze on the fading remnants of the grin?

“What are you staring at?” the stranger might inquire.

“The grin of a Cheshire cat—a cat that used to live in Cheshire in England,” you reply.

“Really?” he might ask. “Where exactly is it?”

You might point to a branch where the faint pattern of glowing dust still hovered in the air. “Right there,” you’d explain. “A moment ago, the whole cat was on that branch, but he’s faded away to just the grin you see up there now.”

“What?!” the passerby might challenge you. “That’s no cat! That’s just a will-o’-the-wisp!”

“Well,” you affirm, “*I* know it’s a cat that grew up in Cheshire even though it’s gone now and not even a trace remains.”

Who would believe you? Who *ought* to believe you?

Just as with Alice wandering around in Wonderland, a walk through the field of New Testament studies comes again and again to faint, ethereal traces that one is told are remnants of the scowl, or grin, or grimace, or smirk, or leer, or glare, or smiley-face, or amorous glance, or winsome wink of another character of Western literature: Jesus of Nazareth.

Unlike the case of Alice and the Cheshire cat, no one now alive was around two thousand years ago to witness Jesus of Nazareth in his physical entirety before he started to fade into the blurry image of the past we now possess. Moreover, it certainly doesn’t help when we learn that many of the earliest Christians didn’t believe that Jesus ever *had* a physical entirety!

There is a further problem. Unlike Alice witnessing the fading of the Cheshire cat *from the beginning* and so being able not only to attest to the identity of the pattern glowing amidst the darkling leaves but even to confirm the *physical reality* of a feline philosopher of known provenience, no one today can even attest with certainty to the identity of the *character* they think they see in the Rorschach records of the past. Still less can they vouchsafe the reality of his physical existence. No two persons see the same Jesus, let alone the Jesus that Bart Ehrman describes in *Did Jesus Exist?*

One thing now seems certain to all scholars who are theologically free to follow the trail of evidence whithersoever it might lead: the original character whose jigsaw-puzzle image has fragmented and been scattered to the point where only a few pieces of the face remain in the puzzle-box of history could not possibly have been any of the Jesuses of the canonical New Testament.

From the time of the Enlightenment it has been understood that whoever Jesus of Nazareth might have been in real life, he could not have been the miracle-worker of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That is to say, he could not have performed actual miracles that violated the laws of science. The Rationalists, however, held on to the stories as being history of a sort, but history that misunderstood what was really going on. Jesus wasn't really dead in the tomb; he had merely swooned. Jesus wasn't really walking on the water; the stones just below the surface weren't visible in the fog. And so on.

The Rationalists rescued the various gospel Jesuses from deconstructive demise for a time. But then in 1900 L. Frank Baum's wonderful *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published, and the adventitious nature of Rationalist salvage efforts could eventually come to be seen as no more credible than arguments trying to prove that Emerald City isn't green because it is made of emeralds; rather, it is green due to paint pigments that exhibit high reflectance at wavelengths around 555 nanometers.

And so began the inexorable disintegration and disappearance of the Cheshire Jesus of Nazareth—a god long believed to have been a man but now known to have been no more real a man than was the Cheshire cat a real cat. After we briefly retrace the dissolution of 'The Historical Jesus' a bit later, we shall see that insoluble epistemological problems now rule out any possibility that Bart Ehrman—still less believing Christian apologists—can save the Savior long piously believed to have come from a place called Nazareth in the Galilee.

## **Problems Facing Historicists**

The greatest problem faced by modern questers of the Historical Jesus—the problem of lack of physical evidence—actually existed already close to the time their quarry is imagined to have lived. Practically from the beginning of the literary record still at our disposal, there were Christians—'heretics,' according to the victorious Orthodox Party—who denied that Jesus or Christ (not necessarily equivalent characters) had had any physical reality at all. This problem was made extremely embarrassing by the apparent fact that no physical remains at all existed that could attest to the historicity of any Jesus at all, let alone to the physicality of a Jesus of an unknown place called Nazareth.

It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that a thriving industry developed for manufacture and sale of holy relics—physical objects that could in some way be made to attest to the reality of Jesus, his Twelve Disciples, his parents, his step-siblings, his miracles, as well as the very geographical stage itself on which the drama of the ages was thereby certified to have been acted out.

Several foreskins of Jesus were produced for sacred edification of the faithful. Splinters of the True Cross, bones of the Apostles, and a mind-boggling array of artifacts soon filled the reliquaries of the churches of the Mediterranean world. All the relics were used to prove the unprovable—to bear false witness in support of a man whose existence had never been witnessed

by mortal man or woman. What was necessary even in ancient times has become even more necessary in modern times. Forgeries such as the Shroud of Turin, the James Ossuary, and the bones of Saint Peter at the Vatican<sup>1</sup> continue to be needed props if modern Christians are to maintain contact with the historical Jesus.

Although there were no unbroken traditions of habitation to tie present-day sites such as Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethany, Bethphage, *etc.*, to the New Testament venues of Jesus' supposed ministry, by the time of Constantine's mother Helena tour guides seem to have been doing a handsome business leading the faithful to the place where Baby Jesus was born, where Gabriel spoke to Mary, where Jesus was crucified, buried, and did everything else men do except... Well, Jesus apparently did *those* things too, but there probably would have been no tourism potential in memorializing the places where the Savior of the World did *that* sort of thing.

Before the tour guides could show credulous Christians the holy places of the gospels, of course, names of places to venerate had to be created by the reverend evangelists themselves. One of the places, Aenon,<sup>2</sup> was an unintentional invention resulting from dyslexia on the part of one of the authors of the Gospel of John trying to parse the sentences of a *Codex Bezae*-like manuscript of the Gospel of Luke. Nazareth was created to provide Jesus with a hometown in order to thwart the claims of the Docetists. Others, like Capernaum,<sup>3</sup> Bethany, Bethphage,<sup>4</sup> Bethabara, *etc.*, were created for symbolic purposes. Most of the holy places of the gospels were unknown to ancient geographers and other writers.

As shocking as these claims may seem, there is an even greater problem with which historicists must contend. In my *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*<sup>5</sup> I have shown that there is no evidence in all of Jewish literature surviving from antiquity to show that the ancient Jews had ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth, due to the simple fact that they had never heard of Nazareth!

In recent times, René Salm<sup>6</sup> demonstrated that the city now called Nazareth was not inhabited between the end of the Bronze Age or beginning of the Iron Age and Late Roman times, and that the sites venerated by Roman Catholic Christians were the remains of an ancient necropolis—a cemetery, not the kitchen of the Virgin Mary or of anyone at all. The historicist cause was not helped at all by the Israeli archaeologist Aviram Oshri,<sup>7</sup> who showed that

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<sup>1</sup> The bones now venerated in the basement of the Vatican are actually the bones of two men, an old woman, chickens, pigs, and a mouse, as I have shown in my essay “Of Bones and Boners: Saint Peter at the Vatican,” *THROUGH ATHEIST EYES. Volume One: Religions & Scriptures* (Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press, 2011, pp. 99—122)

<sup>2</sup> Details of how this came about can be found in my essay “Where Jesus Never Walked,” *ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>3</sup> An account of the outrageous ‘archaeological research’ that has been done at the present-day site of Tellhum as well as proof that Josephus did not in fact know of a town called Capernaum can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 38–44, and in my technical paper “Capernaum—A Literary Invention,” *Journal of Higher Criticism*, Volume 12, No. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 1–27.

<sup>4</sup> Could there be a more appropriate place to curse a fig tree than Bethphage—‘House of Figs’ in Hebrew?

<sup>5</sup> Frank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources*, Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press, 2003. It appears that Ehrman did not read the copy of this book that I sent to him.

<sup>6</sup> René Salm, *The Myth Of Nazareth: The Invented Town Of Jesus*, Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Aviram Oshri, “Where Was Jesus Born?” *Archaeology*, Vol. 58, No. 6, November-December, 2005.

Bethlehem in Judea also was not inhabited at the required time, even though a Bethlehem in Galilee was a going concern at the time in which the gospel stories are set.

Since no ancient writers had noticed the birthing and ministry of the Son of Man, a.k.a., the Son of God, it early on became necessary to forge witnesses by interpolating the texts of writers such as Josephus. Entire compositions such as “The Correspondence of Paul and Seneca” were needed to show that the Stoics had borrowed from Paul and not the other way around as it so strongly appears.

Perhaps most embarrassing of all, the historical Jesus never wrote anything—at least not during his lifetime. By the time of Eusebius [ca. 263–339 CE], however, Jesus had gotten around to dictating a letter in response to a letter sent to him by King Abgar of Edessa. The King, it became known, had written a letter to Jesus (now found in the *Doctrina Addaei*—‘the Doctrine of Thaddaeus’)<sup>8</sup> asking him to come and heal his ills and find asylum from “the Jews.” Jesus’ letter basically was a dust-off, explaining that he was too busy at the moment (“I ascend again to my Father who sent me”) but that he would have one of his secretaries attend to it.

It has become obvious at this point that there is nothing outside the canonical New Testament and the New Testament Apocrypha that can serve as a database from which to construct an image even of Jesus of Anyplace-At-All. Is that sufficient to create even the image of a disembodied grin? Let us see what historicists have to work with in the New Testament.

In the Pauline Epistles, there is no biographical material at all apart from creedal claims that the savior of the world was “born of woman” “according to the flesh”—passages that quite likely were put there to confute the Docetists.<sup>9</sup> There is nothing in the other epistles or the Apocalypse<sup>10</sup> from which one might infer the agenda of a coffee break, let alone important biographical details. That leaves only the Book of Acts and the Four Gospels in their disenchanting, demystified, skeletal forms. Is *that* enough to satisfy the ontological needs of historicists?

Enter The Jesus Seminar, a group of biblical scholars led by Robert W. Funk and John Dominic Crossan. Convened in 1985, the group met several times a year to evaluate the more than 1,500 sayings that have been attributed to the historical Jesus. The makeup of The Jesus Seminar slowly changed over time, and even I was able to take part in the debates for a number of years. Then, in 1993, the scholarly equivalent of detonating a nuclear warhead at a fireworks display occurred: publication of *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*.<sup>11</sup> Even though the scholars had included the noncanonical *Gospel of Thomas* in their database, a majority of them could only defend *about twenty percent* of the alleged Sayings of Jesus as likely to be authentic. (Of course, I argued that *none* of them were authentic, but being a mere geologist and neurophysiologist I repeatedly was voted down.) To this day, Fundamentalist Christians are trying to see if ‘The Jesus Seminar’ can be identified with ‘the number of the name of the beast’ of the Apocalypse—666.

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<sup>8</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I, xiii, ca. 325 CE.

<sup>9</sup> See my essay “Bart Ehrman and the Body of Jesus of Nazareth.”

<sup>10</sup> Although an astral account of the nativity of Christ or Jesus is to be found in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, it is so symbolic and allegorical that nothing resembling biography can be gleaned therein. It is, however, the sort of nativity narrative one might expect for a divine figure.

<sup>11</sup> Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, NY, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1993

*The Five Gospels* were followed in 1998 by *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*.<sup>12</sup> The findings this time were fairly predictable. Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead, the empty tomb is a fiction, Jesus did not walk on water, *etc.* Just as predictably, a majority felt that Jesus had been born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, at the time of Herod the Great. His mother's name was Mary, his father's name might not have been Joseph, and so on.

While The Jesus Seminar did not succeed in what I had expected would be a complete dismantling and deconstruction of the gospel Jesuses, it was the beginning of the end of the historical Jesus. One of the more important scholars who had taken part in the deliberations was Dennis Ronald MacDonald. He had discovered copious evidence that there had been a considerable amount of imitation of Homer's *Odyssey* in the Gospel of Mark and other early Christian literature such as *The Acts of Andrew*. This means that at the same time that The Jesus Seminar was showing that the great majority of the sayings attributed to Jesus were not authentic, MacDonald<sup>13</sup> was showing that a substantial amount of the Jesus storyline was not authentic either.

While MacDonald was busy identifying Homeric imitations in the Second Gospel (Augustus Caesar's was the first), I was focusing on the so-called Q-Document, the hypothetical sayings gospel from which most of the sayings of Jesus had been derived in the construction of the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Whereas Ehrman argues that Q is an independent witness of Jesus, I, would argue that although it came to include material about John the Baptist and rudimentary narrative, it began merely as a list of wise sayings or proverbs. Perhaps it was used in some ancient school or other and then became attributed to Jesus fairly early in the manufacturing of gospels. How can I say this?

My answer will probably seem even more shocking than my claim. If Q was a true listing of the wise sayings of Jesus, then Ehrman could probably argue that Jesus had been well educated in Greek literature—including Aesop's Fables! In fact, Jesus had had such a good Hellenistic education that he even quoted Aesop in one of his sayings that is reported in Q and adapted as Matthew 11:17 and Luke 7:32.

Luke 7:32: "They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, *We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept.*

Mat 11:17 And saying, *We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.*

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<sup>12</sup> Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and The Acts of Andrew*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994; Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

This passage incorporates a phrase from the Fables of Aesop, the fable of the “Fisherman Piping to the Fish” (Babrius 9 = Perry 11).<sup>14, 15</sup> In the fable, the fisherman plays his flute to attract fish, but it doesn’t work. So, he throws his net into the water and brings up many ‘dancing’ fish: “When I piped you would not dance, but now you do so merrily.”

As suggestive as the Aesop evidence might be to indicate that the Q sayings collection originally had nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth—Q material then being unavailable for Ehrman’s use—evidence from the Nag Hammadi ‘Library’ shows how originally non-Christian sayings actually came to be attributed to Jesus. James M. Robinson, the editor of the Nag Hammadi materials published in English, tells us that

The Nag Hammadi library even presents one instance of the Christianizing process taking place almost before one’s eyes. The non-Christian philosophic treatise Eugnostos the Blessed is cut up somewhat arbitrarily into separate speeches, which are then put on Jesus’ tongue, in answer to questions (which sometimes do not quite fit the answers) that the disciples address to him during a resurrection appearance. The result is a separate tractate entitled The Sophia of Jesus Christ. Both forms of the text occur side by side in Codex III.<sup>16</sup>

With so much of the ‘Historical Jesus’ now having been pared away we may imagine his total dissolution. For nearly two centuries, one scholar after another has claimed that this or that feature of the ‘Life of Christ’ was borrowed from some Pagan source, adapted from the Hebrew scriptures or Septuagint, modeled after Homer, other divinities, *etc.* A large part of ‘Jesus’ can be seen to be ‘The New Moses’ or ‘New Elijah,’ and it is easy to see how all the Old Testament ‘predictions’ of Jesus were actually the seeds that sprouted and turned into the various Jesuses of the various gospels.

Certainly, it is not possible to prove such a thesis in an essay such as this. Nevertheless, a fair number of scholars are busily at work adducing evidence to show that practically every detail of the Jesus biography is either borrowed and adapted from non-Christian sources, modeled after them, or was the creative fallout from ancient theopolitical equivalents of nuclear wars of attrition. What if these scholars succeed?

What will historicists such as Bart Ehrman do if it can be clearly demonstrated that eighty or ninety percent of the ‘biography’ of Jesus is bogus in the sense that it was created *ad hoc* to create a terrestrial itinerary for a heavenly being sojourning on our sublunary sphere? Some years ago I sent a questionnaire polling fellow members of The Jesus Project in which one question read something like “If it could be clearly demonstrated that the entirety of the gospel Jesus biography was inauthentic, would you still believe in the Historical Jesus? If 90%? If 80%? ...

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<sup>14</sup> Ben Edwin Perry, *Aesopica: A Series of Texts Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him or Closely Connected with the Literary Tradition That Bears His Name, Vol. One: Greek and Latin Texts*, Urbana, Univ. Illinois Press, 1952, p. 326

<sup>15</sup> I was surprised to discover that John S. Kloppenborg, the famous Q authority, was unaware of this Aesop borrowing. Neither his *Q Parallels* (Sonoma, Polebridge Press, 1988) nor *The Critical Edition of Q* with James M. Robinson and Paul Hoffmann (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000) notes the Aesopic origin of Q 7:32b.

<sup>16</sup> James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), pp. 8-9.

To my astonishment, more than one of those hard-headed, secular scholars indicated that they would continue to believe in the Historical Jesus even if his entire biography were proven to be a fiction!

## **What Historicists Must Try To Do**

Having no authority more credible than the fabled witness of the disembodied grin of a Cheshire cat, historicists must look to see if there are any dots or spots or splotches in the blurred and broken image of the past that they can connect in such a way that it can produce a convincing and unambiguous picture of even a *character* they might call Jesus of Nazareth. Then, the picture must be sharp enough to convince not just themselves but skeptics as well that the character was an actual man—*not just a description of a character in a work of fiction*. And most importantly: they must take care to insure that the picture at which they gaze is not their own image in a mirror.

Throughout the ages, millions of men and women have been able to convince themselves and others not only of the identity of a pattern (actually, *patterns*) of traces that they identify as the spoor of Jesus of Nazareth, but also of his physical reality in Palestine around the turn of the era. Bart Ehrman is but one of millions of Alices who have affirmed an antecedent physical reality behind the grins they have strained to see. He must find his virtual quarry not amongst the leaves of trees, of course, but rather amidst the leaves of codices and papyrus rolls. The James Ossuary and the Shroud of Turin can no longer be called as witness to the ‘physical entirety’ of Jesus of Nazareth.

The image historicists in desperation try to see is made more difficult to descry by the fact that the miracles ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth—what for Christian critics are the most illuminating features of the image—must be masked or eclipsed in the image at the outset. As a secular scholar who must always submit himself to the rule of reason, Ehrman knows that if he accepts the stories of Jesus of Nazareth raising the dead, healing the sick at a distance, walking on the water, *etc.*, he must then admit not only the possibility but the probability that all the miracles attributed to Asclepius, Dionysus, Isis, Buddha, Allah, and thousands of other divinities who have been worshipped and talked about since the Stone Age are just as credible. He probably also knows that he must not fall into the old Rationalist error of trying to find ‘rational’ explanations for the ‘miracles’ lodged in narrative frameworks that to all appearances are fairy-tale fictions.

Once all the wonders and marvels have been removed from the canonical gospels, what remains for historicists to use to demonstrate the historicity of a Jesus of Anywhere-At-All? What must they do?

Let us remember, as bearer of the historicist banner, Ehrman has to stake everything on the gospels and other documents of the canonical New Testament because there are no eyewitnesses or contemporary writers who could vouch for the existence of Jesus *or any of his twelve*

*disciples/apostles*.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, despite the thousands of fake relics ranging from body parts of Jesus and John the Baptist to splinters of the True Cross, no genuine physical materials are reliably traceable to Jesus of Anywhere-At-All. And then there is a further problem—a somewhat amusing one.

No one in early times ever described his physical appearance—even though according to 1 Corinthians 15:6 Jesus appeared to five hundred people at the same time. How did everyone know it was Jesus of Nazareth they were gawking at? How did they recognize him? Perhaps he announced himself in the words of Bart Ehrman<sup>18</sup>—“I am Jesus from a one-dog town called Nazareth”? Surely, if all five hundred had seen Jesus when he had been alive, someone would have left a record of what he looked like. But then, even if none of the ‘witnesses’ had ever known Jesus when he was alive, wouldn’t some of them have left a record of what his virtual image had looked like? But then again, Saint Paul himself—apparently on face-to-virtual-image speaking terms with Jesus—is curiously silent concerning the visual details of his visions. Only rather late in the story did Christians begin to imagine just exactly what Jesus looked like. Is it unreasonable to ask historicists if he was tall or short? Slim or stocky? Black-haired or blonde as in portraits painted by German Lutherans? Was his hair long and curly, or short and kinky?

The gospels are the historicists’ last hope. For, in spite of the existence of many Jewish, Greek, and Roman authors living and writing at the turn of the era and having reason to take notice of Jesus, none of them mentioned either Jesus or Nazareth. Even more inexplicable: if the Twelve Disciples/Apostles had done anything at all to evangelize the world, *they* would have been noticed even if their master had spent most of his life in the cave in which he is imagined to have been born.

Surely, if Jesus of Nazareth had been real, Philo of Alexandria [20 BCE–50 CE] would have known about him and his disciples. Philo was a major developer of the Logos theory of Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity. He had intimate ties to the goings on in Jerusalem, as his nephew Marcus Julius Alexander was the husband of the Herodian Princess Berenice who is mentioned in the twenty-fifth chapter of Acts. His other nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander became procurator of Judea [*ca.* 46-48] under Claudius. *Unless what Jesus and the Apostles were doing had no religious significance, Philo should have noticed them.* Historicists must try to find an answer to this problem that is more compelling than the answers one might get from a Josh McDowell or a Lee Strobel.

Justus of Tiberias [*second half of first century*], the great rival of Josephus living just fifteen miles from Nazareth as the angel flies, could not have been ignorant of Jesuine traditions in Galilee had there been any. Moreover, the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke should have

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<sup>17</sup> The absence of historical evidence of the Twelve is even more significant than the lack of evidence for Jesus. After all, what exactly would have been reported of Jesus if he didn’t do any of the miracles? The apostles, however, had as their main function attracting the attention of the Roman world. My essay “The Twelve: Further Fictions From the New Testament” [*Through Atheist Eyes*, Vol. I, pp. 81-98] examines this problem in some detail. I don’t know if Ehrman simply did not read this essay in his obviously hasty preparation for *Did Jesus Exist?* or if he was unable to answer my argument and so avoided mentioning it.

<sup>18</sup> “Nazareth was a little one-horse town (not even that; it was more like a one-dog town) that no one had ever heard of, so far as we can tell, before Christianity.” *Did Jesus Exist?*, page 189.



mentioned the controversial new city of Tiberias<sup>19</sup> had they ever been in the Galilee themselves and if Jesus had ever done anything there as claimed by the evangelist John.

Although the works of Justus of Tiberias were not preserved, Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople [ca. 810-893] published a great volume of book reviews called the *Bibliotheca* in which he commented on one of the writings of Justus, *The Chronicles of the Kings of the Jews*. Obviously disappointed by the work, he sadly recorded that “of the advent of Christ, of the things that befell him one way or another, or of the miracles that he performed, [Justus] makes absolutely no mention” (Codex 33, my translation).<sup>20</sup>

Historicists must try to make up for the fact that no biographical material at all is found in the Pauline Epistles except for the disputed “Brother of the Lord”<sup>21</sup> of Galatians 1:19. Even if Ehrman is correct about “Brother of the Lord” meaning “Brother of Jesus,”<sup>22</sup> however, we must wonder why that would be significant. After all, in the Gnostic traditions Jesus had a *twin* brother named Thomas! If James be accepted on flimsy evidence to be a brother of Jesus, what reason might we give for rejecting Thomas as his twin brother? Of course, some historicists might accept *both* James and Thomas, provided that Thomas be a fraternal twin, not an identical twin. It seems, however, that all historicists are faced with a dilemma. They must decide if the Catholics are correct—that Jesus had no full siblings at all—or that a Gnostic-*cum*-Protestant position must be defended: Jesus had brothers and sisters and a twin!

Although historicists need solid evidence to prove their Jesus, we must not fail to keep in mind that they are limited to the New Testament as a source of information concerning Jesus of Nazareth. To make matters worse, most of the data contained in the canonical New Testament are not of any use at all.

So, to return to the Epistles: No Jesuine biography can be found in the non-Pauline epistles—including the one supposed by some to have been written by James the disputed brother of Jesus. Although “The General Epistle of James” is often supposed to have been written by a certain

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<sup>19</sup> When Herod Antipas founded Tiberias as a Roman city sometime around 20 CE, he violated Jewish ritual law by building it on the top of graves. At the time Jesus should have been traveling in the area, there would have been great and noisy tumult concerning the propriety of Jews living in the new city. Curiously, there is no record of anyone asking Jesus for his opinion about the city, which is mentioned only in the Gospel of John. In John 6:1 the *Sea* of Tiberias is mentioned simply as another name for the Sea of Galilee. In John 6:23, the city of Tiberias is mentioned simply as a departure point for boats needed in the narrative. The Sea of Tiberias is mentioned once more in the anti-Docetic appendix added later to the Gospel, in the first verse of chapter 21. Nowhere is there any hint that the authors of this gospel had any real knowledge of the city and the religious controversy engulfing it at the time Jesus should have been in the neighborhood.

<sup>20</sup> Photius of Constantinople. *Myriobiblon Sive Bibliotheca*. In Vol. 103, cols. 65-66 of *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–1886).

<sup>21</sup> I have argued [*The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, pp. 75–88] that “Brother of the Lord” being understood as signifying “Brother of Jesus” is an anachronism dating from a later period when “Lord” had become an epithet or title of Jesus alone not just of Christ or Christ-Jesus. In the LXX—the ‘Old Testament’ for most early Christians it would appear—the word *Kyrios* (‘Lord’) was used as a pronounceable substitute for the unpronounceable power-name *Yahweh*. In the Hebrew Bible, the name is written as a so-called Tetragrammaton—the four unpronounceable letters YHWH usually being written in Paleohebrew script. When the Hebrew text had to be read aloud, under pain of death [Leviticus 24:16] YHWH must never be pronounced correctly (*Yahway* or *Yahweh*). Instead, the Hebrew word *Adonai* (‘my Lords’) was spoken in its place.

When YHWH had to be *transcribed* into Greek, however, the magical, secret name of God could not be spelled out with all its vowels showing. So the substitute word ‘Adonai’ was *translated* into Greek as *Kyrios*. I have argued that “Brother of the Lord” probably referred to a brotherhood of monk-like ascetics in special service to Yahweh. How this brotherhood became associated with early Christianity is unclear.

<sup>22</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 120 *et al.*

James the physical brother of Jesus, its author curiously does not even hint at any such privileged position. He does not begin his letter with anything at all resembling “James, a servant of God relaying to the twelve tribes the directives of his big brother Jesus the Messiah.”

Instead, the letter begins “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.” Then follows what can only be described as an essay in Stoic philosophy.<sup>23</sup> (We may note that this is the infamous “Epistle of straw” against which Martin Luther railed.)

An interesting feature of this letter is *the complete absence of any reference to Jesus as a man or as the Messiah of the Jews*. We have merely the formulaic “Lord Jesus Christ.” Whatever the title ‘Christ’ may have meant to this author, it seems impossible to read any messianic reference into it. To be sure, there is an apocalyptic purpose to this piece, but it looks very much like an adaptation of Stoic eschatology to Christian use.

The database available to historicists is shrunken further if, as we must, we eliminate the pseudopauline Epistle to the Hebrews. The first chapter does not even mention Jesus by name, but rather speaks of “The Son who is the effulgence of God’s splendour and the stamp of God’s very being, and sustains the universe by his word of power.” [Heb 1:3, NEB]. In this verse it is rather difficult to make out the image of a fellow who just a few decades earlier had been living in “a one-dog-town” that no one had ever heard of.<sup>24</sup>

Can this “Son” be Jesus of Nazareth? Can this Son have been the physical Christ (Messiah) of the Jews? *That* Christ has to be anointed with *real* oil. But we learn in verse 9 that this Son—assumed by historicists to be equivalent to Christ who in turn is equivalent to Jesus—has been anointed (*echrisen*) in heaven, not on earth. Moreover, the anointment is not with olive oil and

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<sup>23</sup> A masterful analysis of the Stoic dimensions of the Epistle of James is to be found in *Logos and Law in the Letter of James: The Law of Nature, the Law of Moses, and the Law of Freedom*, by Matt A. Jackson-McCabe (Supplements To Novum Testamentum 100, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2001). Although the author accepts the historicity of ‘James the Brother of Jesus’ and the priority of Jewish Christianity, he nevertheless demonstrates the pseudonymity of the letter. He concludes his analysis on page 253 with the observation that

James’s interaction with Pauline ideas provides a secure basis for locating it [the letter] within early Christianity. More specifically, the Letter of James was produced in some circle of Christians for whom the Torah remained the central expression of love of God, and thus a critical criterion for inheriting the promised kingdom that would be given to the “twelve tribes” at the Parousia of the messiah, Jesus. Its precise date and provenance, however, remain elusive. Clearly it was not written prior to Paul’s activity; and if it does assume some collection of Paul’s letters, this would likely place it well after Paul’s death, and thus after the death of James the brother of Jesus ca. 62 CE. In fact, while the letter’s emphasis on the Torah seems consistent with our evidence for Jesus’s brother, its enlisting, to this end, of the Stoic view of law seems more consistent with later developments in the Christian debates about the Torah. All things considered, it seems most plausible to view James as a pseudonymous work, written in the late first or early second century, perhaps in Syria or Palestine. In any case, the Letter of James provides important, if all too rare evidence for a form of the Christian movement where soteriology centered not on rebirth through “the Gospel,” but on observance of the Torah.

If Jackson-McCabe is correct, this eliminates the Epistle of James from the database available for reconstructing the Historical Jesus. Interestingly, by placing the Jewish Christian author after the collecting of Paul’s letters, he provides us with another example of Jewish Christianity being later than what has come to be viewed as proto-Orthodox Christianity.

A variety of views on the nature and significance of this epistle can be found in the symposium volume *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in Their Jewish and Christian Settings*, edited by Huub van de Sandt and Jürgen K. Zangenberg, Symposium Series No. 45, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, page 189.

essences; rather, the ‘oil’ is “the oil of gladness” (*elaion agalliaseōs*). Can this Son be the carpenter’s son?

As noted previously, no biographical data can be extracted from the astrotheological nativity brainstorm of the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse or Revelation of John. That leaves the Gospels and Acts, and I will argue that this limitation will prove lethal to the historicist cause. In trying to prove the quondam existence of any kind of gospel Jesus, it will be seen, historicists come face to face with the greatest problem of all: a problem in epistemology and philosophy of science.

## The Epistemological Jesus

The historicists’ problem in epistemology is straight-forward. It is even theoretically impossible for Ehrman—or anyone—prove the existence of Jesus of Nazareth on the basis of the evidence available to us this late in history without falling into a scientifically meaningless argument.

Before we go any further, I must explain what I mean by “scientifically meaningless argument.” Let us consider by way of illustration two propositions: (1) ‘The moon is made of green cheese’; (2) ‘Undetectable gremlins inhabit the rings of Saturn.’ Although a non-scientist would be likely to say that both propositions are false, a scientist would claim that only one of these claims is false—the green-cheese proposition. The Saturnian gremlin claim, a scientist would explain, is neither true nor false; it is scientifically meaningless. ‘True’ and ‘false’ can apply only to meaningful sentences.

Well, then, how does one tell if a proposition is meaningless or meaningful? To be meaningful a claim must in principle be falsifiable. That is, one must be able at least to imagine a test that could be performed that conceivably could show the proposition to be false.

The green-cheese proposition can easily be tested today. But even before our astronauts went to the moon and discovered that moon dust is no good in salad dressing, it was easy to imagine what one could do to see if the moon were, in fact, cheese. But the gremlin sentence, by contrast, cannot be tested even in the imagination. Were we to send a rocket to Saturn that was carrying the finest gremlinometers that the creation scientists at NASA were able to build, *ex definitio* they would not be able to detect undetectable gremlins. Undetectable gremlins are forever undetectable and thus unverifiable. The gremlin proposition is thus meaningless and is neither true nor false.

Thus, the sentence ‘Jesus of Nazareth once lived in Nazareth’ is a meaningful sentence. It can be tested and it has proven to be false. The sentence ‘The Jesus of the gospels once lived somewhere or other,’ however, is meaningless. There is no conceivable way to falsify it. Even if every square inch of Israel/Palestine were excavated and no genuine Jesuine artifacts were discovered, one could always be told “You didn’t search thoroughly enough,” or “All traces disappeared long ago,” or “He was too obscure to leave an identifying trace.” The Jesus of Somewhere-or-Other, thus, is just another undetectable gremlin.

Returning to Bart Ehrman and his book *Did Jesus Exist?*, we must look to see if his theses not only are correct or incorrect, but also we must see if any of them are *neither* true nor false—scientifically meaningless.

Let us consider the problem of Nazareth. René Salm and I have argued that Nazareth was not inhabited at the turn of the era. Ehrman rejects our evidence, siding with Franciscan

archaeological apologists (who have destroyed most of the archeological stratigraphy at the venerated sites they control and made further truly scientific excavations impossible) and some recent archaeologists who have made claims of habitation at Nazareth at the turn of the era but never have shown their data for critics to evaluate. (It would, after all, be devastating to Christian tourism in Israel if it became certain that the present city called Nazareth was not the “one-dog-town” of Jesus that Ehrman claims it to have been.<sup>25</sup>

Just to be safe, however, Ehrman claims that it doesn't really matter if Nazareth of today isn't the Nazareth of Jesus or if Jesus didn't actually come from there. He would still be Jesus, merely Jesus of Someplace-Else!

“One supposedly legendary feature of the Gospels relates closely to what I have just argued and is in fact one of the more common claims found in the writings of the mythicists. It is that the alleged hometown of Jesus, Nazareth, in fact did not exist but is itself a myth (using the term as the mythicists do). The logic of this argument, which is sometimes advanced with considerable vehemence and force, appears to be that if Christians made up Jesus's hometown, they probably made him up as well. I could dispose of this argument fairly easily by pointing out that it is irrelevant. If Jesus existed, as the evidence suggests, but Nazareth did not, as this assertion claims, then he merely came from somewhere else.”<sup>26</sup>

It is not clear in the above passage whether Ehrman has simply misunderstood the argument that I and other mythicists have advanced or if he misunderstands the logic of science. The former possibility seems likely from the fact that even though on the page cited he discusses my article “Where Jesus Never Walked,”<sup>27</sup> he incorrectly summarizes the mythicist argument by the statement “The logic of this argument... appears to be that if Christians made up Jesus's hometown, they probably made him up as well.” Whether such a claim would in fact be “irrelevant” could be debated, but it is not the argument I would make and it is not the usual argument I have found other scholars to use.

Rather, the argument I have made is simply the fundamentally *scientifically relevant* argument that if Nazareth did not exist when Jesus and the Holy Family should have been living there, then of logical necessity *Jesus of Nazareth* could not have existed. By extension, that would mean of course that the Jesus of Matthew and Luke also could not have existed.<sup>28</sup> Why is this argument not only relevant, but relevant in a way that is *sine qua non*? Let us see.

The difference between *Jesus of Nazareth* and practically all the other gods and goddesses whose existence has ever been claimed is this. By being a character *who was defined* as being *physically* associated with a specific town at a specific place at a specific time, his existence

<sup>25</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, page 189.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 191. It must not be thought that Ehrman is being facetious or alone in his judgment here. Some years ago I polled my fellow members of The Jesus Project, asking them the question: “If it could be shown conclusively that present-day Nazareth was not inhabited at the time of Jesus, would you continue to believe in his historical reality?” A large fraction answered “yes” to the question.

<sup>27</sup> *Through Atheist Eyes, Volume One*, Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press (2011) pp. 27–56.

<sup>28</sup> Were it the case that Mark 1:9—“...Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee...”—was (contrary to my opinion) *not* an interpolation, then the Jesus of Mark also could not have existed.

could in principle be tested. Claims of his existence would thus be meaningful in the scientific sense. Exhaustive archaeological surveying of the site claimed to be Nazareth could in principle determine the existence claim to be false if the site showed no evidence of habitation at the requisite periods. On the other hand, it could only add a tiny bit of weight to the truth side of the claim if the archaeological evidence of habitation at the turn of the era were positive.

Claims of the existence of a Jesus of Someplace-Else, however, like claims of the existence of Zeus, or Thor, or Yahweh would be scientifically meaningless *since in principle they could not be tested or falsified*.<sup>29</sup> They are scientifically meaningless. It is unfortunate that so many biblical scholars have not had adequate training in the philosophy and logic of science. If Ehrman had read more of the first, second, and fourth volumes of my recent *Through Atheist Eyes: Scenes From a World That Won't Reason*, he could have avoided blunders such as the Jesus of Someplace-Else.

Nevertheless, Ehrman is still able to assert he could identify *some* Jesus, even if not Jesus of Nazareth. But just exactly which Jesus would that be?

## The Face of Ehrman's Jesus

The image that Ehrman thinks he sees and describes in great and enhanced detail in the last part of his book *Did Jesus Exist?* most certainly is not the Yeshu of Jewish writings of late antiquity that can be interpreted to mean that Jesus was born a bastard at the time of Alexander Jannaeus [r. 103–76 BCE]. According to one version of the *Sepher Toldoth Yeshu*,<sup>30</sup> the scurrilous antigospel some have claimed was cited by the Greek philosopher Celsus around the year 177 CE, “In the year 671 of the fourth millenary (of the world), in the days of Jannaeus the king, a great misfortune happened to the enemies of Israel. There was a certain idle and worthless debauchee named Joseph Pandera, of the fallen tribe of Judah...” According to this version of the *Toldoth*, Miriam gave birth to Yeshu/Jesus at the time of Alexander Jannaeus—around a hundred years ‘Before Christ’!

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<sup>29</sup> Because they are not defined with respect to specific times, places, and physical properties, one is perpetually on a wild-goose chase trying to find them. No matter where we might look, we are told that we simply didn't look in the right place or at the right time. All such gods are the equivalents of undetectable gremlins. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth, however, an exhaustive search is possible in principle, and René Salm has done an exhaustive analysis of the Roman Catholic ‘venerated sites’ owned and operated by the Franciscans and has found no compelling evidence of habitation at the turn of the era. Desperate claims are now being made that the right spots haven't been examined, and other parts of the Nazareth hill are being claimed to show proof of habitation at the proper time. Alas, by admitting that the venerated sites are not the correct locations for the holy homes of the Jesus family, it must now be admitted that the Roman Catholic Church was wrong in its profitable claim to the property deeds for Mary's home and Joseph's workshop. Perhaps an Evangelical Protestant-run theme park such as The Nazareth Village Farm Project will be able to stake a more durable claim.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the Gospel of Luke makes the claim that the Nazareth of Jesus had a synagogue at the top of the hill at the edge of a cliff. [Luke 4:28–30] These details absolutely rule out present-day Nazareth as the town of Jesus. Are there *any* hills in Galilee with first-century synagogue remains atop them bordering a cliff? I don't think so, but tour guides carrying out archaeological research might be able to find one. Or create one.

<sup>30</sup> Two thoroughly annotated versions of this antigospel have been reprinted as appendices A and B of my book *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press, 2003).

Of course, historicists routinely dismiss this source as fanciful anti-Christian Jewish polemics—as though the canonical sources are measurably less fanciful. Nevertheless, Gibbon somewhere speaks of “the anachronism of the Jews, who place the birth of Christ near a century sooner.” It is amusing to note that according to the Jewish calendar, which was not standardized until the fourth century CE,<sup>31</sup> the Julian year 1 CE corresponds to Hebrew year 3762, so that the year 3671 of the *Toldoth* would place the birth of Yeshu around the year 90 BCE.

Obviously, Ehrman’s picture of Jesus of not-Nazareth does not look at all like the old photographs of Yeshu ben Pandera. Still less—here’s no surprise—the Ehrman image exhibits no similarities at all to that of the early Jewish Christians discussed by Shlomo Pines in his famous paper “The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source.”<sup>32</sup> According to Pines, those early Christians placed the ministry of their Jesus approximately *five hundred years* before the Council of Nicaea, which was held in the year 325 CE! Doing the easy subtraction, we find that Jesus lived around 175 BCE. Even *I* can agree with Ehrman that *that* Jesus could not have existed. After all, archaeological evidence<sup>33</sup> shows that Nazareth was not inhabited in 175 BCE.

Ehrman’s Jesus also does not match up with that of the unknown author of “The Letter of Pilate to Claudius”<sup>34</sup> who thought that Jesus was done in during the reign of Claudius instead of Tiberius as everyone ‘knows.’ More importantly, he disagrees with Irenaeus, the Church Father [120–202] who also thought that Jesus lived into his late 40s, and thus into the reign of Claudius [r. 41-54]!

As if this all does not create enough confusion concerning the position Jesus of Nazareth may have occupied in Roman chronology, there is another oddity of history that seems somehow to relate to ‘the Historical Jesus’ and should have been investigated by Ehrman. This is the peculiar fact that Iberia for a long time used a calendrical system for which the commencement year corresponded to 38 BCE. According to an article in the on-line edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*,<sup>35</sup>

Spain, with Portugal and Southern France, observed an era of its own long after the rest of Christendom had adopted that of Dionysius [Exiguus]. This era of Spain or of the Cæsars, commenced with 1 January, 38 B.C., and remained in force in the Kingdom of

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<sup>31</sup> *The Book of Calendars*, Frank Parise, Editor. Facts On File, Inc., New York, NY, (1982), pp. 12–43.

<sup>32</sup> Shlomo Pines, “The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 237-310.

<sup>33</sup> See the extended arguments and evidence of René Salm in his *The Myth Of Nazareth, The Invented Town Of Jesus* (Cranford, NJ, American Atheist Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Not having taken the time to read my explanation of the tradition of Jesus living into his forties or even fifties [*The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, pp. 127–29], Ehrman writes in his introduction to “The Letter of Pilate to Claudius” [*The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (with Zlatko Pleše, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 511], “It is not clear what to make of the anachronistic reference to Claudius as the emperor at the time of Jesus’ death (rather than Tiberius; Claudius would not assume the throne for another decade). The author of this letter, living so long after the fact, may simply not have known the facts of Roman imperial history.” Actually there appear to have been *many* attempts *post hoc* to locate Jesus in the frame of human history. *This is hard to understand only if he had actually lived.*

<sup>35</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03738a.htm>), article “Chronology, General,” section “Beginning of the year.”

Castile and Leon till A.D. 1383, when a royal edict commanded the substitution of the Christian Era. In Portugal the change was not made till 1422. No satisfactory explanation has been found of the date from which this era started.

Wouldn't it be reasonable to conclude that the Iberians and their neighbors on the north began their era on a date they took to be the year of Jesus' birth? Remember, these were *very* Christian nations. Why would they so long resist the general 'Christian Era' of the rest of Europe unless they had reason to believe they had better information than did Dionysius Exiguus when he set the starting point for his Christian Era at what so long has been reckoned as the year AD 1? It certainly looks as though an important part of Christendom believed that Jesus had been born 38 years 'Before Christ'!<sup>36</sup>

Despite these problems in natal chronology, Ehrman seems quite certain that the dots and spots and splotches he has connected into the image of a man are traces of an actual man who was born and lived at the time the Gospel of Matthew says he lived, before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE. Or, maybe, at the time the Gospel of Luke says—during the Augustan census of Quirinius in 6 CE. Or, at any rate, *some* time around the turn of the era. Yes, he lived somewhere some time around the turn of the era.

But there is a far more interesting and historically important Jesus whom Ehrman has not called to sit to have his portrait sketched: the Jesus of the Docetists and Gnostics. Although he gives no reasons for his manifest preference, Ehrman doesn't think the true Jesus of Christian origins was the Jesus of the Docetists or Gnostics—traces of whose Jesus or Christ (sorting out the two is a difficult and daunting task) form a large chunk of the picture we might be able to reconstruct of any Jesus. Removal of the Docetic and Gnostic evidence from the data-set with which we might seek to test the historicity of the Jesus of some place and some time around the turn of the era makes that testing more difficult—and probably less meaningful. (By ruling out evidence that could disconfirm his hypothesis of historicity, Ehrman comes dangerously close to making his thesis scientifically meaningless by making it less open to testing and falsification.)

How comes it then that an expert in the apocryphal literature would ignore his own scholarship when trying to reconstruct his Jesus of Not-Nazareth? I am guessing that Ehrman ignored the Jesus of the Docetists and Gnostics because he realized their writings would be of no use whatever in reconstructing a *historical* Jesus or Christ. Given his powerful historicist bias and the relative narrowness of his education, it probably never occurred to him to weigh the significance of those documents as evidence *against* historicity. Had he read my essay "What does it mean to be scientific?"<sup>37</sup> he would have realized the need to think like a scientist in order better to understand the relevance of his own research.

Ehrman has shown in his magisterial *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*<sup>38</sup> that a large number of passages in the New Testament were altered to refute the Docetists and Gnostics. How shall we evaluate this? If my thesis that both the genealogies and birth narratives in the New

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<sup>36</sup> The Egyptologist Margaret Morris (personal communication) has informed me that 38 BCE corresponds to the year in which worship of Octavian (Augustus Caesar) began in the Iberian Peninsula.

<sup>37</sup> Frank R. Zindler, "What does it mean to be scientific?" *Through AtheistEyes: Scenes From a World That Won't Reason, Volume Two: Science & Pseudoscience*, (Cranford, NJ, American Atheist press, 2011) pp. 110-126.

<sup>38</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption Of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press (1993).

Testament were made up to thwart the Docetists and Gnostics, the veracity of a large amount of textual evidence is involved and so these passages now become unavailable for constructing an image of Jesus. We cannot know *a priori* who was correct—the proto-Orthodox or the Docetists and Gnostics.<sup>39</sup>

Ehrman is also the author of a *New York Times* Best Seller titled simply *Forged*, with the more expansive subtitle *Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. Although I am not certain he would agree with me that the genealogies and birth legends were invented to confute the Docetists and Gnostics, nevertheless he agrees that that material is not suitable for use in any residue of data points to be used in connecting the dots of the Jesus picture:

“With regard to the stories of Jesus’s birth, one does not need to wait for the later Gospels, mentioned above, to begin seeing the fabricated accounts; they are already there in the familiar versions of Matthew and Luke. There never was a census under Caesar Augustus that compelled Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem just before Jesus was born; there never was a star that mysteriously guided wise men from the East to Jesus; Herod the Great never did slaughter all the baby boys in Bethlehem; Jesus and his family never did spend several years in Egypt. These may sound like bold and provocative statements, but scholars have known the reasons and evidence behind them for many years. . . .

It is almost impossible to say whether the people who made up and passed along these stories were comparable to forgers, who knew full well that they were engaged in a kind of deception, or whether they, instead, were like those who falsely attributed anonymous books to known authors without knowing they were wrong. . . . They may not have meant to deceive others (or they may have!), but they certainly did deceive others. In fact, they deceived others spectacularly well. For many, many centuries it was simply assumed that the narratives about Jesus and the apostles—narratives both within and outside the New Testament—described events that actually happened.<sup>40</sup>

It is unlikely that Ehrman realized what he had admitted here when later he composed *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth*. We must emphasize the sub-title of the book here. For it is precisely in the birth narratives that we find all but two references to

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<sup>39</sup> We are debating the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth merely because the Orthodox won the war. If any one of the non-Jewish ‘heresies’ had won out, the notion that Jesus of Nazareth had ever been born would then be the heresy. We have no reason to believe the Orthodox more than we believe the Docetists or Gnostics. There is danger in believing any of them. *Caveat creditor!*

<sup>40</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*, New York, NY (2011) HarperOne, pp. 140-41.



Nazareth<sup>41</sup> in the entire canonical New Testament! When we eliminate the birth legends from our database we no longer have any compelling support for the existence of Jesus' purported hometown, and without Nazareth, Jesus becomes inevitably the Jesus of Someplace-Else—who, as we shall see, is a meaningless and identity-less character. It is hard to estimate how much of the Jesus of (Not)-Nazareth database is left now for Ehrman to use in reconstructing the face. Fifty percent? Forty percent? Even less?

It cannot be stressed too strongly: the more data Ehrman has to exclude from his database, the less likely it is that he can produce a meaningful hypothesis concerning a historical Jesus. By excluding all data that might argue against or falsify his thesis, his thesis is in danger of becoming worse than wrong; it risks becoming meaningless.

### The Jesus of Nowhere-At-All?

The more Jesus becomes an ordinary component of the anonymous population inferred to have existed in first-century Palestine, the fewer falsifiable statements concerning him become possible. If Ehrman had understood this simple principle of science, he would not have written that

It is also true, as the mythicists have been quick to point out, that no Greek or Roman author from the first century mentions Jesus. It would be very convenient for us if they did, but alas, they do not. At the same time, the fact is again a bit irrelevant since these same sources do not mention many millions of people who actually did live. Jesus stands here with the vast majority of living, breathing, human beings of earlier ages.<sup>42</sup>

The fallacious nature of this comparison is obvious to anyone educated in the sciences. By placing Jesus in the class of beings who could not be mentioned by ancient writers because nothing was known about them—not even how many of them there were, when they existed, where they existed—he is putting Jesus into the category of beings about whom nothing specific can be said. From our point in time, nothing can meaningfully be *specifically* said about any particular one of those millions of people we infer to have lived at the time in question. We can only make meaningful claims about the entire population and then, if we are lucky, we may make general, probabilistic claims about hypothetical individual members of the population.

It might be possible to say, for example, that a person selected at random from that population was 56% likely to be a woman over the age of 30, 92% likely to speak Aramaic, and

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<sup>41</sup> The first passage is Mark 1:9, that says that “Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.” For important technical reasons presented in my chapter “Bart Ehrman and Mark’s *Jesus apo Nazareth*,” I have argued that this passage is an interpolation, but Ehrman considers it authentic. The other passage is in Acts 10:38, where the Lucan author has made up a speech in which Peter says “You know about Jesus of Nazareth how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power.” (Readers may be warned that in reading the KJV books of Mark and Acts many more occurrences of the word ‘Nazareth’ are to be found, but they are mistranslations from the Greek text which uses titles that should be rendered *Nazarene* or *Nazorean*. Interestingly, Ehrman has also made such a mistake at least once. In his translation of “The Letter of Tiberius to Pilate” [*The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, Oxford U. Press, 2011, pp. 532-33] he mentions “Jesus of Nazareth.” This, however, is a KJV-type mistranslation of *Iēsou ton [sic] Nazōraiou*—‘of Jesus the Nazorean.’

<sup>42</sup> *Did Jesus Exist?*, page 43.

so on. But we could not make any specific claim about a person who is completely and totally unidentified and unidentifiable. The nameless millions of whom Ehrman writes are an inference, not an observation. If Jesus is one of those unnamed millions, we can know nothing of him and can make no specific claims about him.

Carl Sagan's aphorism "Exceptional claims require exceptional evidence" was never more apt than in the case of the historical Jesus—even without his miracles. What test could we do to learn if any claim regarding *any* one of the unknown millions of the past is true or false if he evaded the notice of all the writers of the time and left no physical remains that could yield clues to his identity? Could the Jesus of Nowhere-Specific be detected if we had a time machine? How would we recognize him if none of the gospels' identifying features were left for which to search and we couldn't know for sure that we had parked the Tardis at the right place and time?

We have come now to a point where the Historical Jesus is not yet completely gone, even though Ehrman himself has helped to cause the disappearance of his arms and legs and most of his torso. Nevertheless, soon all that will be left will not be the face of the Historical Jesus; it will be the grin of a cat that can't be traced to Cheshire.

Like Alice in Wonderland, the reader of this essay has just witnessed the progressive dismantling and dissolution of a fascinating creation of the human mind. Like the Cheshire cat, Jesus of Nazareth was never a real, living organism. Like the Cheshire cat, who could not be beheaded because he had already lost his body, Jesus of Nazareth could not be 'beheaded' by the loss of his Nazareth identity. New Testament critics including Bart Ehrman had already hacked away most of his body by the time that empty excavations at Nazareth had erased the testimony of the empty tomb at Jerusalem. All that now remains is the fictive face on the Shroud of Turin—the laser display-like death mask of the Cheshire cat of Nazareth. Sometime soon, everyone including Bart Ehrman will have to admit that the cat is gone—completely gone.