

Richard Carrier is one of the new breed of mythicists. He is trained in ancient history and classics, with a PhD from Columbia University - an impressive credential. In my book [Did Jesus Exist](#) I speak of him as a smart scholar with bona fide credentials. I do, of course, heartily disagree with him on issues relating to the historical Jesus, but I have tried to take his views seriously and to give him the respect he deserves.

Carrier, as many of you know, has written a scathing review of [Did Jesus Exist](#) on his Freethought Blog. He indicates that my book is “full of errors,” that it “misinforms more than it informs” that it provides “false information” that it is “worse than bad” and that “it officially sucks.” The attacks are sustained throughout his lengthy post, and they often become personal. He indicates that “Ehrman doesn’t actually know what he is talking about,” he claims that I speak with “absurd” hyperbole, that my argument “makes [me] look irresponsible,” that I am guilty of “sloppy work,” that I “misrepresent” my opponents and “misinform the public,” that what I write is “crap,” that I am guilty of “arrogantly dogmatic and irresponsible thinking,” that I am “incompetent,” make “hack” mistakes, and do not “act like a real scholar.”

Most of his review represents an attempt to substantiate these claims. Some readers may find the overblown rhetoric offensive, but I have no interest in engaging in a battle of wits and rhetorical flourishes. I would simply like to see if the charges of my incompetence can be sustained.

Let me say at the outset that I am not perfect, that as a full-blooded human being, I do make mistakes, and that nothing I say is an inerrant revelation from above. I sometimes try to convince my wife otherwise, but, frankly, I’ve made very little headway there. When I do make mistakes, I am not afraid to admit it. I don’t *like* admitting it, but my interest really is in discussing what we can know about history, not in proving that I’m always in the right.

One of the mistakes I make in the book I should state up front, because Carrier found it particularly offensive. I indicated in the book that Carrier’s degree was in Classics. I was wrong about that. His PhD is in Ancient History. I am not sure where I got the wrong impression he was a classicist; I think when I first heard of him I was told that he worked in ancient history and classics, and the “classics” part just stuck with me, possibly because I have always revered the field. In any event, I apologize for the mistake. His degree is in Ancient History, although he is trained as well in classics.

Contrary to what Carrier suggests, this mistake was not some kind of plot on my part, in his words: “a deliberate attempt to diminish my qualifications by misrepresentation.” I frankly don’t know why a classicist is less competent to talk about the ancient world of Rome than an ancient historian is, since most Romanists I know are in fact Classicists; and it seems odd that Carrier wants to insist that he is not “just a classicist.” My classicist friends would probably not appreciate knowing that they were “just” that. But in any event, it was an honest to goodness mistake, for which I apologize.

The bulk of Carrier’s harsh critique involves a set of “Errors of Fact” - including one that I have already dealt with in an earlier post, whether a bronze Priapus that is allegedly in the Vatican (but not actually, as one of the posts on this blog shows) was of Peter. I stated it was not, and Carrier agrees. He mistakenly thought I was arguing that no such statue existed, but that was not my intention or concern. I can see how my wording could be (mis)read that way, however. The other charges against me and my book are more damning - or at least they certainly seem to be on the surface.

I will not answer each and every single point Carrier raises (on this, see my closing comments), but will deal with the most serious ones in which he charges me with scholarly incompetence. I am always happy to answer questions about any of the others, should I be asked.

The Pilate Error

In my book I take the Roman historian Tacitus to task for claiming that Pontius Pilate was a procurator rather than a prefect. The question has little to do with my overall point – that Tacitus is one of the first Roman authors to refer to Jesus – but Carrier takes great offense at my assertion and indicates that it shows that I do not know what I’m talking about. According to Carrier, provincial prefects were often also imperial procurators. He indicates that “recent literature on the subject confirms this, as would any consultation with an expert in Tacitus or Roman imperial administration.”

I have to admit that I was surprised to see this objection – as I had never heard of this before, that procurators could be prefects. I am certainly not an expert on Roman imperial magistrates. But I do try to get my facts straight and work hard to make sure I do not get things like this wrong. But it was news to me. So I decided to look into it. I have acquaintances and colleagues who are among the world’s leading authorities on Roman history. I emailed one of them the following:

My question: The New Testament indicates that Pontius Pilate was a procurator; the inscription discovered in Caesarea Maritima indicate that he was a prefect. Is it possible that he could have been both things at once?

His answer was quick and to the point. I quote: ‘Not really’ has to be the answer to your question, because prefect and procurator are simply two possible titles for the same job. The initial growth of equestrian posts in the emperor’s service was a gradual, haphazard process, and there was little concern to fix titles for them [see, e.g., Talbert’s chap. 9 in CAH ed. 2 vol. X]. PP could just as well have had the title procurator, but evidently he didn’t ... PIR (ed. 2, 1998) P 815 sums it up neatly: “*praeses Iudaeae ordinis equestris usque ad Claudii tempora non procurator, sed praefectus fuit...*” [This comes from the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* (i.e., *The Prosopography of the Roman Empire*); I translate the Latin as follows: “Up until the time of Claudius [i.e., 41-54 CE], the provincial governor of Judea, a man of the equestrian order, was not a procurator but a prefect.”].

That would seem to settle it. This email acquaintance of mine is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of Roman history, so I trust his judgment. He asked not to be identified by name, I think because he too does not want to be subject to the kinds of attacks one faces on the Internet no matter what one says and on what grounds or authority. In any event, I think the quotation from PIR sums it up.

The Tacitus Question

While I’m on the Tacitus reference. At one point in my book I indicate that “I don’t know of any trained classicists or scholars of ancient Rome who think” that the reference to Jesus in Tacitus is a forgery (p. 55). Carrier says this is “crap,” “sloppy work,” and “irresponsible,” and indicates that if I had simply checked into the matter, I would see that I’m completely wrong. As evidence he cites Herbert W. Benario, “Recent Work on Tacitus (1964-68) *The Classical World* 63.8 (April 1970) pp. 253-66, where several scholars allegedly indicate that the passage is forged.

In my defense, I need to stress that my comment had to do with what scholars today are saying about the Tacitus quotation. What I say in the book is that I don’t know of any scholars who think that it is an interpolation, and I don’t. I don’t know if Carrier knows of

any or not; the ones he is referring to were writing fifty years ago, and so far as I know, they have no followers among trained experts today. In that connection it is surprising that Carrier does not mention Benario's more recent discussions, published as "Recent Work on Tacitus: 1969-1973," "Recent Work on Tacitus: 1974-1983," "Recent Work on Tacitus: 1984-1993," "Recent Work on Tacitus: 1994-2003." Or rather it is not surprising, since the issue appears to have died on the vine (one exception: a brief article in 1974 by L. Rougé). I might also mention that there is indeed a history of the question that goes before the mid-20th century. I first became aware of it from one of the early mythicists, Arthur Drews, whose work, *The Christ Myth* (1909) raises the possibility. But Drews did not invent the idea; it goes back at least to the end of the 19th century in the work of P. Hochard in 1890, *De l'authenticité des Annales et des Histoires de Tacite*. I'm not sure if Carrier is familiar with this scholarship or not. But my point is that I was not trying to make a statement about the history of Tacitus scholarship; I was stating what scholars today think.

But Carrier's objection to my view did take me a bit off guard and make me wonder whether I was missing something, whether there were in fact scholars of Tacitus who continue to think the reference to Jesus was an interpolation in his writings. I am a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity, not of Tacitus! And so I asked one of the prominent scholars of the Roman world, James Rives, who happens now to teach at UNC. Anyone who wonders about his credentials can look them up on the web; he's one of the best known experts on Roman religion (and other things Roman) internationally. He has given me permission to cite him by name, as he is willing to stand by what he says.

My initial email question to him was this:

I'm wondering if there is any dispute, today, over the passage in *Annals* 15 where he mentions Jesus (whether there is any dispute over its authenticity).

His initial reply was this:

I've never come across any dispute about the authenticity of *Ann.* 15.44; as far as I'm aware, it's always been accepted as genuine, although of course there are plenty of disputes over Tacitus' precise meaning, the source of his information, and the nature of the historical events that lie behind it. There are some minor textual issues (the spelling 'Chrestianos' vs. 'Christianos', e.g.), but there's not much to be done with them since we here, as everywhere in Tacitus' major works, effectively depend on a single manuscript.

I then asked him about the article Carrier mentioned with respect to Benario, and this was his reply:

Benario's article cited below is one of a series he did over a period of decades, in which he summarizes other people's work on Tacitus; they're an extremely useful bibliographical resource (although there's no reason that a non-specialist would be aware of them!). I've just checked this particular article, and can only assume that the particular work to which your adversary makes reference is mentioned on p. 264: Charles Saumagne, 'Tacite et saint Paul', *Revue Historique* 232 (1964) 67-110, who according to Benario 'claims that the Christians are not mentioned in 15.44, that there is an ancient interpolation, taken from book 6 of the *Histories*, which were written after the *Annals*, and that Sulpicius Severus was responsible for the transposition'. So I'm wrong that no classicist has argued that the passage is not authentic. Saumagne may not be alone: Benario cites another article on the same page whose author 'recalls that Christians are not linked with the fire before the time of Sulpicius Severus'. Nevertheless, I would still point out that 1) Saumagne does argue that this is an interpolation, but only from another of Tacitus' works; 2) the whole thing sounds like a house of cards to me, since *Histories* Book 6 doesn't exist and so can't provide a firm

foundation for an argument; 3) this is clearly a minority opinion, since I've never encountered it before.

He then pursued the matter further (he's a *great* colleague!), and wrote me this:

I've had a quick look at the two articles in question. Saumagne does think that the text has been interpolated, but also that the reference to Christ being killed under Pontius Pilate comes from a lost portion of Tacitus' Histories. His argument seems very shaky to me, but in either case it doesn't affect your own, since Saumagne thinks that Tacitus knew about and referred to Jesus, which is the main thing for you. The other article, by Koestermann (an editor of Tacitus), argues that Tacitus made a mistake in associating the Chrestiani with Christ, but doesn't say anything about the reference to Christ not having been written by Tacitus himself. There may be scholars who've argued that the reference to Christ is a later interpolation into the text, but neither of these two did, and I certainly don't know of any others.

I think that's enough to settle it. I really don't think what I said was "irresponsible," "sloppy," or "crap."

The Dying and Rising God:

In my book I argue that there is very thin evidence indeed for anything like a widespread pagan belief in a dying-rising god, on which Jesus was modeled. In the context of showing the shortcomings of Freke and Gandy's book *The Jesus Mysteries*, I make a passing comment on the Egyptian god Osiris, first by asking a series of questions: "What, for example, is the proof that Osiris was born on December 25 before three shepherds? Or that he was crucified? And that his death brought atonement for sin? Or that he returned to life on earth by being raised from the dead? In fact no ancient source says any such thing about Osiris"

Carrier does not seem to disagree with most of this statement, but he takes very serious issue indeed with the claim that Osiris was not raised from the dead to return to life on earth. He indicates that I received this information entirely from an article by Jonathan Z. Smith, and that if I had been "real scholar" I would have looked up the ancient sources themselves. As it is I made a "hack mistake" showing that I was "incompetent." His counter claim is that "Plutarch attests that Osiris was believed to have died and been returned to earth... and that he did indeed return to earth in his resurrected body." He gives as his reference Plutarch "On Isis and Osiris," 19.358b.

Carrier is wrong on all points. I did not get this information just from J. Z. Smith (who, by the way, is one of the most eminent and distinguished historians of religion walking the face of the planet, and certainly no hack) and his charge that I have not behaved as a "real scholar" is completely unfounded. I have read Plutarch's account of Osiris many times. For years I used this text in the graduate seminars I taught on Graeco-Roman religion. In my reading of the myth of Osiris, he does not rise from the dead back to life here on earth.

One of our principal sources of knowledge of the myth of the gods Isis and Osiris, brother and sister but lovers, is the famous second century pagan philosopher and priest Plutarch. The myth as Plutarch recounts it is not long; most of his treatise *De Iside et Osiride* consists of a range of ways people had interpreted the myth, in particularly the various allegorical interpretations. A convenient translation of the treatise can be found here:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/

I do not need to relate all the details of the myth in this context. Suffice it to say that Osiris is killed by an enemy and hidden away in a chest/coffin that was lost. Isis finally finds

it and mourns the loss of her dead lover. But (another) enemy finds the body and does something unspeakable. Here is the passage from Plutarch, in the Babbitt translation of the Loeb Classical Library:

18 As they relate, Isis proceeded to her son Horus, who was being reared in Buto, and bestowed the chest in a place well out of the way; but Typhon, who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it. Recognizing the body [of Osiris] he divided it into fourteen parts and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus. This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess. The traditional result of Osiris's dismemberment is that there are many so called tombs of Osiris in Egypt; for Isis held a funeral for each part when she had found it. Others deny this and assert that she caused effigies of him to be made and these she distributed among the several cities, pretending that she was giving them his body, in order that he might receive divine honours in a greater number of cities, and also that, if Typhon should succeed in overpowering Horus, he might despair of ever finding the true tomb when so many were pointed out to him, all of them called the tomb of Osiris. Of the parts of Osiris's body the only one which Isis did not find was the male member, for the reason that this had been at once tossed into the river, and the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon it; and it is from these very fishes the Egyptians are most scrupulous in abstaining. But Isis made a replica of the member to take its place, and consecrated the phallus, in honour of which the Egyptians even at the present day celebrate a festival. 19 Later, as they relate, Osiris came to Horus from the other world and exercised and trained him for the battle.

In this telling of the myth - the one the Carrier refers to - Osiris's body does not come back to life. Quite the contrary, it remains a corpse. There are debates, in fact, over where it is buried, and different locales want to claim the honor of housing it. It is true that Osiris "comes back" to earth to work with his son Horus: ἔπειτα τῷ Ὀρῷ τὸν Ὅσιριν ἐξ Ἅιδου παραγενόμενον. Literally, he came "from Hades." But this is not a resurrection of his body. His body is still dead. He himself is down in Hades, and can come back up to make an appearance on earth on occasion. This is not like Jesus coming back from the dead, in his body; it is like Samuel in the story of the Witch of Endor, where King Saul brings his shade back to the world of the living temporarily (1 Samuel 28). How do we know Osiris is not raised physically? His body is still a corpse, in a tomb.

Evidence to that comes from various places in the treatise. For example, section 20, 359

not the least important suggestion is the opinion held regarding the shrines of Osiris, whose body is said to have been laid in many different places. For they say that Diochites is the name given to a small town, on the ground that it alone contains the true tomb; and that the prosperous and influential men among the Egyptians are mostly buried in Abydos, since it is the object of their ambition to be buried in the same ground with the body of Osiris. In Memphis, however, they say, the Apis is kept, being the image of the soul of Osiris, whose body also lies there. The name of this city some interpret as "the haven of the good" and others as meaning properly the "tomb of Osiris."

It is his soul that lives on, in the underworld. Not his body in this world. Carrier wants to argue that the body comes back to life, and points to a passage that speaks of its

“revivification and regeneration.” But that is taking the Plutarch’s words out of context. Here is the relevant passage:

35 364F-365A Furthermore, the tales regarding the Titans and the rites celebrated by night agree with the accounts of the dismemberment of Osiris and his revivification and regeneration ὁμολογεῖ δὲ καὶ τὰ Τιτανικὰ καὶ Νυκτέλια 5 τοῖς λεγομένοις Ὀσίριδος διασπασμοῖς καὶ ταῖς ἀναβιώσεσι καὶ παλιγγενεσίαις. Similar agreement is found too in the tales about their sepulchres. The Egyptians, as has already been stated, point out tombs of Osiris in many places, and the people of Delphi believe that the remains of Dionysus rest with them close beside the oracle;

Note: whatever his revivification involves, it is not a return to his physical body, which remains in a tomb someplace. It is his soul that lives on, as seen, finally in a key passage later:

54 373A It is not, therefore, out of keeping that they have a legend that the soul of Osiris is everlasting and imperishable, but that his body Typhon oftentimes dismembers and causes to disappear, and that Isis wanders hither and yon in her search for it, and fits it together again; for that which really is and is perceptible and good is superior to destruction and change.

Carrier and I could no doubt argue day and night about how to interpret Plutarch. But my views do not rest on having read a single article by Jonathan Z. Smith and a refusal to read the primary sources. As I read them, there is no resurrection of the body of Osiris. And that is the standard view among experts in the field.

The Other Jesus Conundrum

In my discussion of G.A. Wells’s work I have occasion to consider his claim that Paul did not think Jesus was a person who lived just a few years before his conversion, but 150 year or so earlier. In that context I indicate that Paul thought that “the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were recent events.” I go on to “stress that this is the view of all of our sources that deal with the matter at all” (p. 251).

Carrier jumps on this last statement, stating that it “is false” and that by making it I “arrogantly and ignorantly” mislead my readers. As evidence he points out that in the writings of Epiphanius there is reference to a group of Christians who held that Jesus lived in the days of the Jewish king Jannaeus (103-76 BCE), and that this was the view as well in the Jewish writings of the Talmud and the Toledot Yeshu.

In this case Carrier has attacked one of my statements by taking it completely out of its context - as would be clear had he simply quoted my next sentence. After speaking of Paul and the other sources, I say “it is hard to believe that Paul would have such a radically different view from every other Christian of his day, as Wells suggests. That Jesus lived recently is affirmed not only in all four of our canonical Gospels.... It is also the view of all of the Gospel Sources - Q...M, L - and of the non-Christian sources such as Josephus and Tacitus.”

When I refer to “all of our other sources” in the sentence that Carrier attacks, I was referring to the sources I then enumerate, those of “every other Christian of [Paul’s] day.” In other words, As a careful reading of this entire section of my book makes crystal clear, in this context I am talking about our earliest sources of information about Jesus: Paul, Q, the Synoptics and their sources, and the non-Christian sources. I am not referring to every source that ever existed at any time whatsoever. Epiphanius, whom Carrier cites as an alternative source, was writing at the end of the fourth Christian century; the Talmud and the Toledot Yeshu were later than that.

Maybe I could have made this a bit more clear by saying that the view I was referring to could be found in “all our sources from Paul’s time and in the decades that followed, not sources written 300 years later that have no bearing on Paul’s thinking.” But frankly, I didn’t think it was necessary since I went on to enumerate the sources that I was referring to. What I meant, of course, was that all of the relevant sources have this view.

“No Roman Records”

In the course of my discussion of Freke and Gandy’s *The Jesus Mysteries*, I fault them for thinking that since the Romans kept such detailed records of everything (“birth notices, trial records, death certificates”), it is odd indeed that we have no such records from Roman hands about Jesus. My response is that it is a complete myth (in the mythicist sense) that Romans kept detailed records of everything. Carrier vehemently objects that this is altogether false, indicating that in fact we have thousands of such records, and that he has “literally held some for these documents in my very hands.” And he points out that some of them are quoted and cited in ancient books, as when Suetonius refers to the birth records for Caligula.

What Carrier is referring to is principally the documentary papyri discovered in Egypt, which I am in fact very familiar with and some of which I too have held in my hands. Over the years I have frequently referred my PhD students to these important records, and have often perused accounts of them, such as the many volumes of the *Oxyrynchus Papyri*, in the course of my research. We do indeed have many thousands of such documents – wills, land deeds, birth records, divorce certificates, and on and on — from Egypt.

Several points need to be made about these documentary papyri. First, they are, in fact, largely from Egypt – in no small measure because climactic conditions allow for their preservation there. Second, most of these are not in fact records of Roman officials, but made by indigenous Egyptian writers / scribes. And third, this is not what I was talking about.

In this case the misunderstanding is understandable, but easily explained, and shown by considering my comments in their larger context. My book is about Jesus, a Palestinian Jew of the first century. Throughout this entire book, I was thinking about Jesus, in everything I said. And his environment and context. That is why, as I pointed out in an earlier post, when I was disputing that a bronze ithyphallic rooster represented the disciple Peter, I could say “There is no penis-nosed statue of Peter the cock in the Vatican.” I wasn’t even thinking about whether there was a penis-nosed statue in the museum; I was thinking about whether it had anything to do with Peter. No, it doesn’t. (And it turns out, it is evidently not even in the museum; but I have no first-hand knowledge of that one way or the other.)

When I denied that we had Roman records of much of anything, or any indication that there ever were Roman records of anything, I was thinking of Palestine. That becomes clear in my other later reference to the matter where I explain in detail what I was thinking, and that Carrier, understandably, chose not to quote in full: “I should reiterate that it is a complete “myth” (in the mythicist sense) that Romans kept detailed records of everything and that as a result we are inordinately well informed about the world of Roman Palestine [Note: I’m talking about Palestine] and should expect then to hear about Jesus if he really lived. If Romans kept such records, where are they? We certainly don’t have any. Think of everything we do not know about the reign of Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea...” (p. 44)

I go on to detail what we have no record of about Pilate from Roman records: “his major accomplishments, his daily itinerary, the decrees he passed, the laws he issued, the prisoners he put on trial, the death warrants he signed, his scandals, his interview, his judicial proceedings.” In talking about Roman records, I am talking about the Roman records we are interested in: the ones related to the time and place where Jesus lived, first-

century Palestine. It's a myth that we have or that we could expect to have detailed records from Roman officials about everything that was happening there, so that if Jesus really lived, we would have some indication of it. Quite the contrary, we precisely don't have Roman records - of much of anything - from there.

We do indeed have lots of records from someplace else that doesn't matter for the question I'm interested in (Egypt; even though even there most of the records are not Roman or from Roman officials). I can see how my first statement on the matter could be construed (without my fuller explanation of what I meant some pages later) and how it could be read as flat-out error. But yes, I do indeed know about our documentary papyri. A better way for me to have said it is that we do have records for other places - at least Egypt - but it's a complete myth that we have them, or should expect to have them, for the time and place Jesus lived.

The Doherty "Slander"

Carrier finds fault with my claim, about Earl Doherty, that he "quotes professional scholars at length when their view prove useful for developing aspects of his argument, but he fails to point out that not a single one of these scholars agrees with his overarching thesis" (p. 252). He points out that Doherty does in fact indicate, in various places throughout his book, that the argument he is advancing at that point is not accepted by other scholars. As a result, Carrier states, my claim is nothing but "falsified propaganda."

I am afraid that in this case Carrier misses my point. It is true that Doherty acknowledges that scholars disagree with him on this, that, or the other thing. But the way he builds his arguments typically makes it appear that he is writing as a scholar among scholars, and that all of these scholars (with him in the mix) have disagreements on various issues (disagreements with him, with one another). One is left with the impression that like these other scholars, Doherty is building a tenable case that some points of which would be granted by some scholars but not others, and that the entire overall thesis, therefore, would also be acceptable to at least some of the scholars he engages with.

The reality, however, is that every single scholar of early Christianity that Doherty appeals to fundamentally disagrees with his major thesis (Jesus did not exist). This is completely unlike other works of true scholarship, where scholars are cited as having disagreements on various points - but not, universally, as an entire body, on the entire premise and virtually all the claims (foundation and superstructure). I was urging that Doherty should come clean and inform his readers in clear terms that even though he quotes scholars on one issue or another, not a single one of these scholars (or indeed, any recognized scholar in the field of scholarship that he is addressing) agrees with the radical thesis of his book.

This criticism of Doherty applies not just to his overall argument but to his argument in the details, at the micro level. The way Doherty uses scholars is just not scholarly, since he often gives the impression that the scholars he quotes agree with him on a point when they expressly do not. Just to give a typical example: at one place in my book I discuss Doherty's claim that Jesus was not crucified here on earth by Romans, but in the spiritual realm by demonic powers (p. 252). In his book *Jesus: Neither God Nor Man* Doherty quotes New Testament scholar Morna Hooker in support of his view. In the sentence before he introduces her, he says: "this self-sacrificing divinity (who operates in the celestial spheres, not on earth) is a paradigm for believers on earth" (p. 104). In other words, Christ was sacrificed in heaven, not on earth. Then he quotes Hooker: "Christ becomes what we are (likeness of human flesh, suffering and death), so enabling us to become what he is (exalted to the heights)." Here he cites Hooker to support his claim that Christ was paradigmatic for his followers (a fairly uncontroversial claim), but he does not acknowledge that when she

says Christ became “what we are (likeness of human flesh)” she is referring to Christ becoming a human being in flesh on earth – precisely the view he rejects. Hooker’s argument, then, which he quotes in favor of his view, flat-out contradicts his view.

In short, I am not denying that Doherty sometimes acknowledges that scholars disagree with him; I am saying that he quotes them as though they support his views without acknowledging that in fact they do not.

The Pliny Confusion

Carrier indicates that he almost fell out of his chair when he read my discussion of the letters of Pliny. Sorry about that! He points out that when I talk about letter 10, I really meant Book 10; and when I summarize the letter involving Christians, I provide information that is not found in the letter but is assumed by scholars to apply to the letter based on another letter in Book 10.

To the first charge I plead guilty. Yes, when I said letter 10 I meant a letter in book 10. This is what you might call a real howler, a cock-up (not in the Peter sense). I meant Book 10. This is the kind of mistake I’m prone to make (I’ve made it before and will probably make it again), that I should have caught. A more generous reader would have simply said “Ehrman, you say letter 10 but you mean a letter in book 10,” and left it at that. Carrier takes it to mean that I’m an idiot and that I’ve never read the letters of Pliny.

I may have moments of idiocy, but I have indeed read the letters of Pliny, especially those of Book 10. I’ve taught them for years. When he accuses me of not knowing the difference between a fact and a hypothetical reconstruction, though, he is going too far. I do indeed know that the context scholars have reconstructed for the “Christian problem” is the broader problem outlined elsewhere in Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan. The problem here is simply that I was trying to summarize briefly a complicated account in simple terms for readers who frankly, in my opinion (right or wrong) are not interested in the details about Pliny, Trajan, provincial disorder, and fire brigades when the question is whether Pliny knows about Jesus or not.

This relates to a bigger problem. Carrier seems to expect Did Jesus Exist to be a work of scholarship written for scholars in the academy and with extensive engagement with scholarship, rather than what it is, a popular book written for a broad audience. There is a big difference. I write both kinds of books. My scholarly books would never be mistaken for books that would be read by a wide, general public. But Carrier indicates that the inadequacy of Did Jesus Exist can be seen by comparing it to two of his own recent books, which, he tells us, pay more attention to detail, embrace a more diverse range of scholarship, and have many more footnotes.

I did not write this book for scholars. I wrote it for lay people who are interested in a broad, interesting, and very important question. Did Jesus really exist? I was not arguing the case for scholars, because scholars already know the answer to that question. I was explaining to the non-scholar why scholars think what they do. A non-scholarly book tries to explain things in simple terms, and to do so without the clutter of detail that you would find in a work of scholarship. The book should not be faulted for that. If I had wanted to convince scholars (I’m not sure whom I would then be writing for, in that case) I would have written a different kind of book.

Conclusion

I have not dealt with all the myriad of things that Carrier has to say – most of them unpleasant – about my book. But I have tried to say enough, at least, to counter his charges that I am an incompetent pseudo-scholar. I try to approach my work with honesty and scholarly integrity, and would like to be accorded treatment earned by someone who has

devoted his entire life to advancing scholarship and to making scholarship more widely available to the reading public.

I am absolutely positive that Carrier and his supporters will write response after response to my comments here, digging deeper and deeper to show that I am incompetent. They will expect replies, so that then they can write yet more comments, to which they will expect more replies, so that they can write more comments. I am finding, now that I am becoming active on the Internet, that engaging in discussion here can mean entering into a black hole: there is no way out once you hit the event horizon. Many critics of my work have boundless energy and, seemingly, endless time. I myself have lots of energy, but not lots of time. I have had my say now, in an attempt to show my scholarly competence. I do not plan on pursuing the matter time and time again in this medium. My main energies - and my limited time - need to be devoted to the two ultimate goals of my career: to advance scholarship among scholars and to explain scholarship to popular audiences. That requires me to write books, and that takes massive amounts of time. That is where I will be putting the bulk of my energies, not to writing lengthy responses defending myself against unfounded charges of incompetence.

I close by quoting a passage that Carrier himself wrote in one of his earlier books, as provided to me by a sympathetic reader. In the Introduction of his book *Sense and Goodness Without God* (pp. 5-6), Carrier makes the following plea:

“For all readers, I ask that my work be approached with the same intellectual charity you would expect from anyone else.... [O]rdinary language is necessarily ambiguous and open to many different interpretations. If what I say anywhere in this book appears to contradict, directly or indirectly, something else I say here, the principle of interpretive charity should be applied: assume you are misreading the meaning of what I said in each or either case. Whatever interpretation would eliminate the contradiction and produce agreement is probably correct. So you are encouraged in every problem that may trouble you to find that interpretation. If all attempts at this fail, and you cannot but see a contradiction remaining, you should write to me about this at once, for the manner of my expression may need expansion or correction in a future edition to remove the difficulty, or I might really have goofed up and need to correct a mistake.”

I like very much the idea of “intellectual charity,” and I think that it is a good idea to contact an author about problems that might be detected in her or his writing. I wish Carrier had followed his own advice and contacted me, in fact, rather than publish such a negative and uncharitable review. But I do hope, at least, that fair minded readers will see be open to the arguments that I make and the evidence that I adduce in *Did Jesus Exist*, and realize that they are the views, in popular form, of serious scholarship. They are not only serious scholarly views, they are the views held by virtually every serious scholar in the field of early Christian studies.



[The Text of the New Testament: Are the Textual Traditions of Other Ancient Works Relevant?](#)

[Response to Carrier](#)