



**DEMOLISHING THE
MESSIAH MYTH**

KENNETH HUMPHREYS

Demolishing the Messiah Myth

How far should the atheist buy into the story of Jesus?

Most, I suspect, reduce the Christian superstar to a dimly perceived "good man" of some description, who perhaps said some wise words, fell foul of Jewish and Roman authorities and managed to get himself crucified.

The answer from some, however, appears to be, rather more accommodating of the gospel yarn, accepting more or less everything minus the miracles and the claim to be Son of God. Like the rest of us, they erase all the bits that offend their own sense of the rational. But then, from what they think are the residual certainties of a life and death – a mother called Mary, a girlfriend called Mary Magdalen, a brother called James, etc., – they assemble their own secularized Jesus, mining freely from holy literature in an enthusiast's conviction that the "truth" is hidden there and one simply needs the key.

But there is a big difference between a reality embroidered with propaganda (for example, Caesar's Gallic Wars) and a fantasy placed into an authentic-sounding historical setting (such as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes). The Jesus tale is very much in the latter category – a fictional drama in which a stereotypic hero has been intruded into a more or less realistic historical landscape. And as we would expect of a fictional creation, there exists not a single contemporaneous reference to such a character, nor a single genuine artifact to substantiate that he ever walked the earth.

Creationism

The traditional, "authorized" version of Christian origins is a "big bang" theory: one fine day, the only begotten son of God materialized in a virgin's womb. He grew to manhood, assembled his acolytes, imparted his wisdom, made his redemptive sacrifice and rose again. A religion was born.

Secularized, this same big bang theory boils down to little more than, "Christianity exists, it must have begun somewhere; it began

with a single character, here's my version of who he really was." Favorites include an itinerant philosopher in the style of the Cynics and a social/religious reformer, either a pacifist like Gandhi or a militant like Che Guevara. In fact, like recovered meat from a defleshed carcass, Jesus has been "re-formed" a hundred times, often as a cypher for a genuine historical character, including, among others, Julius Caesar, Judas the Galilean, John of Gamala, and Titus Caesar. The very ubiquitousness of the idea of Jesus convinces many that "someone" must lie beneath the encrusted legends.

But before we build yet another Jesus in our own image what on earth can we trust as a firm handhold? For one thing, eliminating the miraculous is not as straight-forward as you might think. For example, consider the simple matter of Jesus calling his disciples. "They left everything and followed him", if to be understood as reportage, is in fact a miracle. In the normal world, people just don't do that! This transforming encounter of godman with fishermen, as written in the gospel, is just as unworldly as Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. If we regard the episode as shorthand for a protracted period of discussion and recruitment (by a merely "human" Jesus) then we begin the whole process of fabricating our own Jesus anyway.

And if a miracle is eliminated – for example, "the spirit driving him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan" – do we have any reason to suppose he went into the wilderness at all? Did he ascend a mountain if he didn't "transfigure"? Was he by the lake if he didn't walk on the water? Was he even at a wedding if he didn't turn water into wine? Few of the Jesus stories make sense without the miracle that defines the encounter.

Removing miracle after miracle doesn't leave a whole lot and yet we've only just begun to consider the difficulties of a "historical" Jesus.

Do the few non-miraculous episodes make any sense? "Cleansing the temple" sounds not wholly improbable until you realize that the temple had a vast concourse of thirty-five acres, enclosed by porticoes and at Passover thronging with thousands of pilgrims (and not a few temple guards). Did Jesus really – single-handedly – drive out all the moneychangers and herds of oxen, sheep and dove

sellers? Can you even imagine such a thing? Would he not have been wrestled to the ground in short order? The gospels describe a berserker's performance appropriate to a blockbuster superhero. What should we do, scale the event down to an acceptable melee – or recognize (correctly) that an imaginary incident has been worked up from a scriptural template (in this case, Zechariah 14.21 and Hosea 9.15)?

Even mundane and plausible-sounding details are problematic – for example, Luke's "census of all the world" (as if) or Matthew's "Slaughter of the Innocents" by Herod (not even his fellow evangelists noticed that one). A surprising number of Jesus venues (Magdala, Arimathea, Emmaus, Cana, etc.) are unknown either to archaeology or history. Even a 1st century Nazareth is in doubt (certainly, there was no "city" as claimed by the gospels). The placid Lake Tiberias (Chinnereth) is transformed into a storm-tossed Sea of Galilee so that Jesus can "calm the storm." The trial (six distinct hearings!) is incompatible with all that we know of ancient Jewish law. The gospel portrait of Pontius Pilate is totally at odds with the evidence from other sources. And the difficulties go on and on.

It is a big mistake to think that we can simply take the gospel stories, discard the miraculous and then assemble the residue into what we may fondly believe to be "the real Jesus."

Fabrication

Ancient testimonies quite freely weave propaganda, myth and probable fact but the gospels are a very different type of document. One oddity of the Jesus tale is its four-fold construction, presented by a deceitful Church as four unique witness statements. Blatant contradictions between the "witnesses" are waived off as "authentic" alternative viewpoints, but they are nothing of the kind.

One thing of which historians and New Testament scholars are well aware is the trajectory by which the Jesus tale developed from an original text. Matthew, Luke and even to some extent the fourth gospel, built on a brief original tale (*sans* miraculous birth and

postmortem appearances) written at an uncertain date by an anonymous author, which Church tradition alone identifies as Mark. Matthew took this story off in one direction, correcting Mark's "curious" errors of geography and Jewish practices, and packing the text with "prophecy". Luke, in contrast, trawled through the works of Josephus for his tidbits of "historical accuracy." John's Jesus is so different from the hero of the synoptics that he has a completely incompatible "biography."

Whatever else, eye-witness testimonies they are not and the tendentious story was all but unknown until the second half of the second century.

Aware of these difficulties, New Testament scholars posit a multiplicity of "traditions" that preceded the gospel tales. And what do these earlier traditions tell us of Jesus?

Pauline Christianity, with its emphasis on the "Risen Christ", has an all but total lack of reference to a human Jesus and is a very different animal from the Christianity of the "Pillars" in Jerusalem. Paul himself castigates several rival factions, including those who followed John the Baptizer, not Jesus. And this, before we step outside the parameters of traditional Christianity.

Though the New Testament fails to acknowledge even their existence, the Essenes, one of Josephus' four sects of the Jews, anticipated Christianity in a number of respects. The Therapeuts of Egypt (described in detail by Philo, though he made not a single reference to Jesus or Christianity) were hailed by Church historian Eusebius as "early Christian monks", yet they were widely established well before the opening of the Christian era! The Gnostics, a wide variety of esoteric fraternities, far from originating as heretics in the second century, were certainly active before orthodoxy got its boots on and generally held that their god could never have taken human form. Among them were the Docetae, sectarians that vexed Paul by denying a Jesus "in the flesh." What's very clear is that completely divergent forms of Christianity (or rather, proto-Christianities) were already widespread before Jesus took up his starring role.

And if a "Christian" movement existed before its purported

eponymous founder, what then are we to make of the thinly drawn "life of Jesus" which certainly appears to owe an extraordinary amount to Jewish scriptural precedents – whether drawn from Adam, Moses, Enoch, Melchizedek, Elijah, Elisha, et al – collectively, a vast anticipation of the words and deeds of Jesus? Let one instant stand for many: on the south side of the Hill of Moreh, Elisha raised the only son of an old woman (2 Kings 4.32,35); on the north side of the same hill Jesus also raised the only son of an old woman (Luke 7.11,15). Do we buy into the Christian apologetic of "fulfillment" when a simple "copying" explains the same? In fact, we know that Christian scribes trawled through Jewish scripture (the Greek Septuagint at that) for proof of their godman, but they were seeking not confirmation but inspiration!

What are we to make of the multitude of parallels to Jesus lore to be found in ancient world mythology? One enormous train of coincidences? I don't think so.

Even the embarrassed Church Fathers spoke of diabolical mimicry. It seems that Satan himself understood the true message of the Jewish prophets and was thus able to preempt Christianity centuries before the arrival of Jesus. And if the Devil could read the prophets and construct a Jesus or two could not Christian scribes do precisely the same?

The fact is, we have absolutely no trace or mention of Jesus' exploits anywhere until the gospels were written decades after the purported events. Desperate to penetrate the primordial fog, some scholars strive to identify an early "layer" of teaching said to derive from the mouth of an historical Jesus. But does a "sayings tradition" (as in the Gospel of Thomas) really point to a single author of wise words? The Bible itself provides an answer. We have a sayings collection in the Book of Proverbs (attributed to Solomon) and another in the Book of Psalms (attributed to David). Neither accreditation is historically valid; rather, we know it was standard practice in the ancient world to lend authority and prestige to new material by falsely accrediting a prestigious figure from the past (even, as in this case, to personages who are historically dubious!) But even more fatal to the claim of a "sayings tradition" is the patent failure of anyone to record any of the supposed astounding new teachings at the time! If "great multitudes" throughout Syria,

Galilee, the Decapolis, and Judea heard and believed, how odd that not one recorded those sparkling gems of wisdom! Not even Paul, the great proselytizer, quotes his Lord, but instead habitually turns to Jewish scripture for divine endorsement!

Below Critical Mass

If we still insist on some sort of flesh-and-blood progenitor we now run into another difficulty.

A Jesus who did nothing of consequence and said nothing of consequence would not have been the catalyst for a religious revolution.

A nonentity of a Jesus, even a gifted carpenter, simply could not have inspired an overturning of established belief systems that had held sway for centuries, if not millennia. A minimalist Jesus (and in fact there were hundreds of men of that name!) obliges us to look elsewhere to explain the religious sea change.

The truth is that Christianity grew from neither a god nor a man but out of what had gone before; a human Jesus was no more necessary than was a human Horus, Dionysos, Mithras, Attis, etc. Can we explain the emergence of Christianity without its humanoid superstar? Of course we can. Christianity, like all religious movements, was born from myth-making and many currents fed the myth, including astrological speculation, pagan salvation cults, Hellenistic hero worship, and the imperial cult itself, manufactured at precisely the "time of Jesus", with its own sacrificed saviour (Divus Iulius), its own gospel of a son of god (Res Gestae Divi Augusti), its own priests and temples, established in the very same urban centres which later witnessed the emergence of early Christianity. In its various rival incarnations the Christian movement languished for two centuries. Thanks to civil war it got its big chance and finally triumphed in an omnibus edition of all that had gone before, the ultimate product of ancient religious syncretism.

Ken Humphreys

