

**Book Review:**  
***Varieties of Jesus Mythicism***  
**Edited by John Loftus and Robert M. Price**

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Independent Scholar

**Abstract:** The edited volume, *Varieties of Jesus Mythicism*, aims to present diverse approaches and theories to the debate on Jesus' historical existence. While it includes several enlightening and worthwhile contributions, there are too many amateur contributions employing dubious claims and methodologies. The result is that, apart from the few worthy contributions, the book as a whole is only useful for comparing poor with genuine scholarship. And some advice on how to make such a comparison, so as to distinguish the one from the other, is here provided.

**Keywords:** Historical Jesus, Mythicism, New Testament, Historicity, Methodology

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**Mixing the Sound with the Insane**

The *Varieties of Jesus Mythicism* anthology assembles brief summaries of over a dozen different attempts to argue that Jesus did not exist, and that Christianity began with either a mythical or imaginary figure—either inventing him whole cloth or experiencing him in visions and dreams, which then resulted in fabricating a biography for him later on. The theories presented in this book range from the completely crank to the serious and credible. They often contradict each other, but it was not the intention of the editors to produce a coherent case for its main thesis, but rather to sample the different kinds of cases that are being made for Jesus Mythicism. This is both an asset and a problem for the anthology.

I must inform the reader of my biases before proceeding with this review. I have had varying degrees of personal or professional relationships with the editors, as well as many of the contributing authors. I am also the first historian in a hundred years to publish a complete peer-reviewed, academic-press argument for the origin and development of Christianity that does not include a historical Jesus. My book, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield-Phoenix, 2014) was followed by a second mainstream peer-reviewed volume by analyzing the debate over Jesus'

historicity, which also found reason for doubt.<sup>1</sup> Hence, I am sympathetic to arguments against the historicity of Jesus. But I have also been notoriously and relentlessly critical of most such arguments, particularly when their amateurism and gross failures of logic, methodology, or fact (sometimes all three) make the job of real scholars so much harder. It is difficult to have a credible thesis taken seriously when the field is swamped with crankery. So, I am very *un*-sympathetic to most amateur attempts to prove the same core thesis.

I can be impressed by amateur work; my own thesis was inspired by that of Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle* (Canadian Humanist Publications, 2000). There are others I could mention; among them were contributors to this anthology. But I am more usually outraged by amateurs; for example, despite their fanatical popularity, none of the books on this subject published by D.M. Murdock (alias Acharya S) is worth the paper they were printed on, and real scholars to this day are still busy correcting popular misinformation she promulgated. Being now deceased, she could not be a contributor to the present volume; but some of its contributors naively express being convinced by her work, which bodes ill. If we are to believe writers when they argue for their thesis, we need to know we can trust their judgment. Yet, anyone who is convinced by Murdock's work does not have a judgment we can trust.

And this is the problem. The volume I am reviewing is a pop-market anthology of predominately amateur work, not a peer-reviewed academic monograph. And that warrants critical suspicion. Because I do believe if someone is going to produce such a thing anyway, they need to take much greater care in selecting what to include in it. This was the principal reason I did not contribute to this anthology. Mixing competent and sound work with crank lunacy gives the appearance that the editors cannot tell the difference, and taints the reputation of the competent essays that are included with the incompetent work. A critical reader will be inclined to suspect the entire anthology is amateur crankery, and that no diligence has been done in even selecting what is worth reading. A historian who is well versed in logic, method, and the pertinent material might be able to tell the difference, and thus know what in this volume can actually be trusted. But the average reader will not.

The producers of this volume also needed to perform more careful editorial work—not only in policing substantive content (having authors fix errors of clarity, logic, or fact in their contributions before going to press), but also in the trivia of style. I found few typos, which tells me hard work was taken,

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<sup>1</sup> Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* (Brill, 2019).

extant peer-reviewed critiques of the “Criterion of Aramaic Context,” as I documented in *Proving History* (Prometheus 2012, pp. 185–86). Widowfield’s chapter should be required reading for anyone keen to evaluate these kinds of arguments.

## Conclusion

*Varieties of Jesus Mythicism* is half-good, half-bad. It contains contributions it never should have—or at the very least, the editors did a poor job of controlling the scholarly quality (and in one instance, even the relevance) of every entry. Cranks should not be published alongside respectable scholars, unless they agree to uphold (and be held to) proper methodology. Otherwise, they unfairly benefit from stolen glory, while degrading public trust in the quality of the other scholarship. But this volume also contains essays that are valuable reads, including some that make an important point well worth heeding, referencing, or building on. Even though some do not fully convince me of their conclusions, their contributions at least competently establish the plausibility of one scenario or another, as well as teach a lot of interesting and useful side-facts in the process.

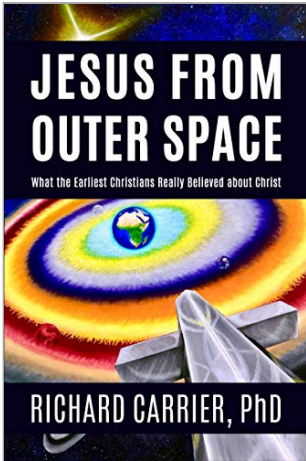
One could also use all the chapters in this volume as teaching tools exhibiting the difference between arguments that are worthwhile and sound, or poor or wasteful—because it has diverse examples of both. And if one wishes to explore or debunk the crank theories included, this book will serve as the best starting point (except in the one case of psychedelic theory, as this volume’s one contribution there won’t help even with that; better to interact in that case with Brian Muraresku’s *The Immortality Key* published in 2020 by St. Martin’s Press). This volume’s lack of any of the peer-reviewed specialists on the subject of historicity (which includes not only myself and Lataster, but Thomas Thompson, Thomas Brodie, and others) is not entirely a defect, as their positions are well-enough represented by some of the contributors it does have, and a valid function of this book can simply be to supplement our work rather than repeat it.

In all these respects, despite its faults, anyone who wants to have a complete bookshelf of essentials on Mythicism should include this one, with all the caveats maintained here in mind.

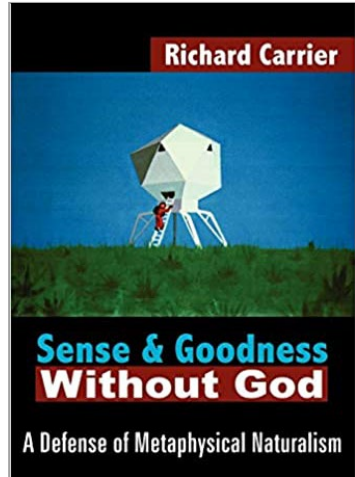
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Richard Carrier](#) is the author of *Sense and Goodness without God* (AuthorHouse 2005), *On the Historicity of Jesus* (Sheffield-Phoenix 2014), *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire* (Pitchstone 2017), and many other books, chapters, lectures, and articles, including peer-reviewed work in philosophy and the history of Christianity. As an independent scholar, he teaches online courses in philosophy and history and regularly publishes articles on his namesake blog [richardcarrier.info](http://richardcarrier.info). He holds a B.A. in history with a minor in classical civilizations from U.C. Berkeley, and an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. in ancient intellectual history from Columbia University. He is a fellow of the Westar Institute and a current member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Global Center for Religious Research. He specializes in the modern philosophy of naturalism, the origins of Christianity, and the intellectual history of Greece and Rome, and is a veteran of the United States Coast Guard.

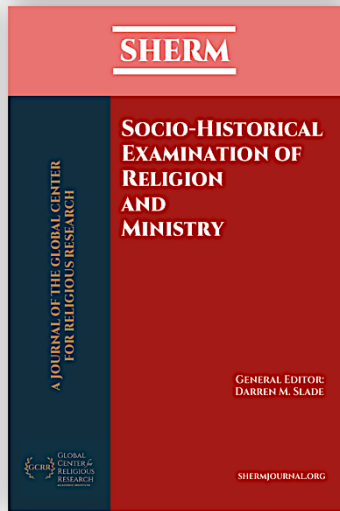
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