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BOOK REVIEW

Richard C. Carrier. *Jesus from Outer Space: What the Earliest Christians Really Believed about Christ*. Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020. 232 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-6343-1194-6. \$28.00.

Mythicist literature has seen no shortage in recent years, especially popular books written for the average reader, and in fact, this area of study has long been known for such popularizations. Rather than making an impact in the academy, it has set its sights on the general populace, as evidenced by early mythicists such as Robert “the Devil’s Chaplain” Taylor, Eliza Sharples, Arthur Drews, and others. The latest book from Richard Carrier, who has a PhD from Columbia in Roman Intellectual History, is his own contribution to this legacy of attempting to sway public perception and opinion on the historicity of Jesus. This book is primarily a popularization and abridgment of his (atheist organization-funded) monograph *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (2014).

The preface tries to make the case that mythicist work once again warrants a response and deserves its place in academia, that conservative Christian scholars are “fanatics,” and that the response to his earlier work was due to academics’ irrational hostility and fear about what it would do to the field. The first chapter of the book argues that there may have been a mythical Jesus and that this possibility should be investigated; for instance, Carrier states that Philo of Alexandria had a celestial Jesus as his Logos and that there may have been an original celestial gospel that was preserved in the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah. The second chapter provides a rather loose interpretation of the Osirian tale of the god’s “resurrection” according to Plutarch and claims that this could be analogous to what happened with Jesus. Carrier then makes the case that Christianity

was a “savior cult.” The third chapter is largely a polemic against scholars such as Fernando Bermejo-Rubio and it attempts to dismiss the idea that Jesus was a revolutionary. Chapters 4 and 5 make the dubious argument from silence that is often found in mythicist works (indeed, it probably their only universally accepted argument; for examples, see Yan, “Yesu–chuanshuo Zhong de xugou renwu,” *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 2 [1983] 122–28; Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* [Leiden: Brill | Rodopi, 2019]). Chapter 6 largely repeats the questionable and discredited category of dying-rising gods and its application to Jesus. Carrier speculates (without any evidence) that these vegetative and cyclical god concepts could have been syncretized into Judaism and then turned into a one-time, non-vegetative, non-seasonal event. Chapter 7 makes the case that Jesus was mythical and became human through a complicated process of euhemerization. Chapter 8 argues that Rom 1:3 indicates that Jesus was not historical but was made through use of the “cosmic seed hypothesis” (172–73). He supplements this with a reading of *b. Nid.* 16 that semen is taken to heaven by the angel of conception. Chapter 9 argues that early Christians were called “the brothers of the Lord,” although this title is unattested.

There are numerous issues with this book. Much of the evidence that Carrier provides is, in fact, misconstrued or misread by the author. For example, *Nid.* 16 nowhere states in explicit terms that the “drops” of semen are ever taken up into heaven; it says they are taken “into the presence” of the Lord in some fashion. Furthermore, this is the fate of earthly offspring, so even if the angel takes the semen up to heaven, it is not stored there for later use (as required by Carrier’s interpretation of Rom 1:3) nor used to create celestial figures. In addition, the tale is said to stem from Hanina ben Pappa, a rabbi in the third or fourth century CE. As such, it is too late to have any interpretive value for Rom 1:3. Using the document this way would be wholly anachronistic, even if the text attested to such a concept. It simply is not evidence. Additionally, Carrier’s Rom 1:3 argument requires him to read the Greek verb *γίνομαι* literally instead of contextually. Other Jewish authors use this verb to indicate birth on

multiple occasions. Furthermore, whether or not Gal 4:4 is allegorical, as Carrier argues, the best contextual reading is still “born of a woman.” The idea that humans are “made” of a woman does not seem to be attested even by pagan authors who use this verb (Josephus, *Ant.* 1:150; 1:304; 7:154; 20:20–21; Philo, *Moses* 2:192; Plato, *Resp.* 8.553). Therefore, Paul would still use γίνομαι for “born,” and it is irrelevant whether or not the text is allegorical; its semantic range is still intact.

Carrier also misreads 1 Cor 15:45. This is a reference to Adam’s soul coming into being, citing LXX Gen 2:7. In this case, γίνομαι is denoting a change of state in Adam, not the body being made. The verb πλάσσω is used to describe Adam being made. Furthermore, in context, 1 Cor 15:37 does not use γίνομαι to refer to bodies being “made,” but bodies that “will be.” In this case, the body is not “made” (γίνομαι); it is “sown” (from σπείρω). Lastly, the prophecy of 2 Sam 7:12–14 was still interpreted as referring to a human Jesus in Jewish literature of the time (Christopher Whitsett, “Son of God, Seed of David: Paul’s Messianic Exegesis in Romans 2:3–4,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 [2000] 661–81).

Other instances of misconstruing evidence include his argument that Romulus was a dying-rising god. If one actually reads Plutarch’s narrative that Carrier uses, one will find that there are three distinct accounts given of Romulus’s “end,” two where he is murdered and one where he is taken up into the heavens *alive* (Plutarch, *Rom.* 27). The only way to get Carrier’s reading is to harmonize the *different* accounts, something he would probably object to Christians doing in order to solve contradictions in the Gospels. His argument that Osiris is a dying-rising god has likewise been dismissed by Egyptologists, as shown earlier this year by Thompson (Stephen E. Thompson, “The Myths of Osiris, Isis, and Horus Were the Basis for the Accounts of Jesus Found in the Christian New Testament,” in *Ancient Egypt: Facts and Fiction* [Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2020], 193–223). In fact, it should be noted that Tryggve Mettinger (Carrier’s only major source on the issue) seems to have discounted Osiris’s status as a dying-rising god shortly after his monograph was published (Tyggve Mettinger, Review of *Quando un dio muore: Morti e assenze*

divine nelle antiche tradizioni mediterranee by Paolo Xella, in *History of Religions* 43 [2004], 341–43).

Another issue is the pre-Christian celestial Jesus in Philo of Alexandria's work. In *Confusion*, Philo briefly quotes Zech 6:12's statements on how the "branch" (Ἀνατολή) would come to assemble the new temple and bring peace between the crown and priesthood. Carrier argues that Philo conceptualized his Logos as being named Jesus because, supposedly, the prophesied figure who is the "branch" in this passage is the high priest Joshua/Jesus. Of course, this is actually not true, since the "branch" who will build the temple in Zechariah is a Davidic descendant, Zerubbabel (Zech 4). Furthermore, since Joshua is the priest, he is not the one building the temple. It is noted that the king will do this and bring peace between both king and priest (Zech 6:13). This means that for Carrier's argument to work, Philo would have to misread the whole passage and then think his Logos was named Jesus, despite never actually, in any extant writings, calling his Logos "Jesus" explicitly. We also note that there are no angels ever recorded with the name "Jesus," so there is an exceptionally low probability of this being the case with Philo.

The dying-rising-god discussion further demonstrates another major issue with Carrier's book and his earlier monograph: unfamiliarity with current scholarship. He ignores recent scholarship by Nicholas Wyatt on Baal that demonstrates that M. S. Smith was likely correct and also a newer Arabic discovery by Ahmad Al-Jallad that shows that later conceptions of Baal did not perceive him as dying in his confrontation with Motu (Nicholas Wyatt, "The Problem of 'Dying and Rising' Gods: The Case of Baal," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 48 [2017] 819–45; Ahmad Al-Jallad, "Echoes of the Baal Cycle in a Safaito-Hismaic Inscription," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 15 [2015] 5–19). To quote from the text (Al-Jallad's translation), "Baal is cut off; cut off indeed, but not dead" (7). Carrier insists that historical figures do not score twelve or more points on the Raglan Hero archetype (which he uses for his Bayesian reference class), ignoring mounds of scholarship that has demonstrated otherwise (e.g., Alwyn D. Rees, "The Divine Hero in Celtic Hagiography," *Folklore* 47 [1936] 241–60). In addition, his book makes no use of

recent work on cosmology in the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah. For instance, his views on this text are easily dismissed if one consults any of the leading scholarship on cosmology in the text (such as Jan Dochhorn, “‘World’ in the Ascension of Isaiah,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 94 [2018] 241–56; L. R. Lanzillotta, “The Cosmology of the Ascension of Isaiah: Analysis and Re-Assessment of the Text’s Cosmological Framework,” in Jan N. Bremmer et al. [eds.], *The Ascension of Isaiah* [Leuven: Peeters, 2016], pp. 235–58).

Another issue is that Carrier repeats the same attempts made by other mythicists to boost their numbers by misconstruing various academics as agnostic or mythicist. For example, once again Kurt Noll has been inaccurately counted among them. However, I have confirmed via email correspondence that this is not a reflection of reality, as he said:

In my view, a historical Jesus likely existed because otherwise it is difficult to explain Paul's agitation with James in Gal. Paul was on the defensive, clearly, because James could claim access to the historical Jesus (Email from Kurt Noll, March 10, 2020).

These issues are not trivial, but, in reality, are representative of most claims and arguments Carrier makes. Almost every single argument contains these errors, misreadings, misconstruals, and harmonizations, and shows a lack of interaction with scholarship.

This book will, like others Carrier has written, probably be heralded by atheists and secularists looking for a death knell to Christianity. However, the work does not evolve from the first monograph, does not accept the criticisms Carrier has received, and overall serves as little more than an abridged version of his seven hundred-page tome from 2014. The vitriolic tone toward Christianity, poorly executed research, and misconstrued evidence will likely all serve to make it mostly unused and unheeded by academics, but it is not a surprise from the atheist publisher Pitchstone, which is known for the dubious-quality projects it releases regularly. This book cannot be recommended, as it largely does not add anything constructive to the debate. If one feels a need to respond to Carrier, the 2014 monograph should be sought out instead.

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