How Paul Converted Me to Christ Mythicism

(An Essay on the Plausibility of a Historical Jesus in the Writings of Paul)

Ed Morris, 10/25/2026

Introduction to Christ Mythicism

The historical Jesus paradigm is usually taken for granted by scholars of Christianity and the New Testament. This is the idea that there must have been a historical person named Jesus who was the original subject of the Christian religion, even if that religion's beliefs may not have been derived to any great extent from his specific teachings, much less from his actually rising from the dead. The alternative paradigm, known as Christ mythicism (or Jesus mythicism, or just mythicism for short), is often dismissed as a crackpot theory unworthy of serious consideration. Since I am not a qualified scholar in anything even remotely related to this field, I am generally hesitant to disagree with such a near-consensus view. For many years after my own deconversion from Christianity, the historical Jesus paradigm still made the most sense to me. Nevertheless, my continued interest in the subject eventually led me to a serious investigation of the arguments, and the difficulties I encountered in trying to craft a sensible version of the historicist position subsequently left me at least tentatively favoring the mythicist one instead.

The mythicist position comes in a wide variety of specific forms, including many that are indeed quite crackpot, but here I will use the term simply to refer to the general idea that Peter and the other originators of the messianic faith that later became known as Christianity were never personally acquainted with a man named Jesus whom they believed to be the messiah. In fact, they never even believed such a historical, earthly messiah figure had ever existed at all. Instead, their imaginative pesher-style interpretations of various Jewish scriptures, probably including some that did not later make it into the standard canon, and probably also influenced to at least some extent by their cultural familiarity with non-Jewish myths involving dying and rising gods, must have led them to speculate a heavenly messiah figure, and to form beliefs about this speculated figure that eventually coalesced and evolved into the Christian religion.

More concretely, the process may have started with the idea that the ultimate eschatological messiah (i.e., Christ, 'anointed one') was some kind of pre-existent archangel or similar divine being, perhaps the same 'logos' or 'wisdom' whom we know some Jews of the time already believed in (e.g., Philo), and who in their interpretation was held to be God's firstborn agent of creation who dwelt with him in the highest heaven (see Proverbs 8). But in contrast to Satan (the archangel who supposedly exalted himself and rebelled; see Isaiah 14:12-15), this archangel would humble himself and be given a human or human-like body specially prepared for him in order to accomplish God's redemptive will (see the Septuagint translation of Psalm 40:6, quoted in Hebrews 10:5). This would not happen in the ordinary way via the agency of a father and mother (possibly drawing from the story of Melchizedek; see Hebrews 7:3), but supernaturally in the heavenly or celestial realms. More specifically, it would probably not be in heaven itself, meaning the highest heaven where God supposedly dwelt, but in the lowest celestial realm, sometimes called the firmament, because this is where they likely believed the fallen Satan and his demonic forces had been banished but not yet defeated. There this incarnated messiah would be handed over to these demonic forces to be killed and hung on a tree in order to bear the curse of God (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) and thus serve as a sacrifice for sin (Isaiah 53:5-6, 10). His body would then be buried (Isaiah 53:9), presumably still in this same lowest celestial realm, though perhaps this would also involve his soul undergoing an even lower descent into Hades, but in any case it would not be for long. As foreshadowed by the promise that the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), he

would triumph over Satan and the demonic forces that killed him by rising from the dead in three days (possibly drawing from the story of Jonah; see Matthew 12:40). The name these first Christians or proto-Christians used for this dying and rising heavenly messiah was Jesus (i.e., Joshua, 'Yahweh saves'), likely based on their interpretation of Zechariah 6:11-12.

The idea that the original Christians would imagine all these very physical things happening in a celestial realm sounds bizarre to most people today, but it is important to realize that for many Jews of the time, if not all, these celestial realms were indeed thought of as physical places with physical geography containing physical beings. Even if they were normally imperceptible to earthly human eyes, God might occasionally open a person's eyes to see them, as he had opened the eyes of Elisha's servant to see the celestial horses and chariots of fire all around him (2 Kings 6:16-17). One of these celestial realms was even thought to contain the true tabernacle and its associated objects of worship, these things having served as the pattern for the earthly tabernacle Moses had been instructed to make as a copy (Hebrews 8:5, 9:23). Paul clearly considered the celestial realms to be what we would call physical, because he thought it entirely possible that a person might be able to be transported to one of them (specifically the one he called the third heaven), even while still "in the body" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

In any case, while it would be highly presumptuous to claim that the specific scenario I have outlined was the original Christians' exact reasoning, it is the general idea that matters. I only cited a few of the many scriptures they might have imaginatively stretched into messianic prophecies in order to arrive at the same basic theme of a dying and rising divine Christ figure who defeated Satan in a celestial scene by becoming a sacrifice for sin. This would especially be true if they read these scriptures with common mythological tropes of non-Jewish mystery religions in the backs of their minds, as was most likely the case, though I will leave it to others to speculate on the details of that.

Whatever their exact reasoning, it soon led Peter and the others to begin experiencing, or at least claiming to experience, various revelations or visionary 'appearances' of this speculated Jesus Christ, perhaps in dreams or hallucinations, or perhaps merely in exuberant imaginations. They presumably took these experiences as confirmation of the meanings they thought they had discovered in their scriptures, and also as encouragement to keep looking for more. In addition, they apparently took all these things as heralding Jesus's imminent apocalyptic *parousia*, meaning his coming to Earth, quite possibly in fulfillment of the famous 'timeline' prophecy of the seventy weeks (Daniel 9:24-27). It probably wasn't until after the Gospel of Mark had been written, perhaps as a creative allegoric myth to communicate the important ethical and soteriological beliefs of the Christian community rather than as a deliberate attempt to change Christian doctrine, that significant numbers of Christians began taking it literally and believing Jesus had been a historical figure from Galilee who was crucified in Jerusalem and would later be returning (instead of only coming) to Earth. Neither Peter nor Paul nor any of the other apostles had ever believed or taught such a thing.

This is the Christ myth paradigm in a nutshell. I believe it was first articulated in at least roughly the shape I have presented it by Arthur Drews in his 1909 book *The Christ Myth* (English version published in 1910), although I have not personally read that book. The idea was later notably popularized by G. A. Wells and Earl Doherty, among others, and probably the most rigorous case for it was made by Richard Carrier in his 2014 book *On the Historicity of Jesus*. I am highly indebted to that book, as well as to his more popularly accessible 2020 summary *Jesus from Outer Space*, for my own understanding of the subject. Most of the basic ideas I elaborate with my own thoughts and suggestions in this very limited-scope essay are also covered or at least hinted at in Carrier's much more scholarly and comprehensive examination of the arguments.

Main Reason for Skepticism

Those who hold to the historicist paradigm (i.e., the assumption that there was a historical Jesus) are understandably skeptical of the mythicist one. Why would anyone in their right mind believe such a wild speculation about the origins of Christianity, so radically different from the portrayal of Jesus by the canonical gospels and Acts, without any direct evidence? This was my initial reaction to the idea as well.

My reason for skepticism was not that I saw anything intrinsically implausible in the proposal that some religious Jewish outliers in the first century might have found the concept of a dying and rising divine messiah to be underneath the surface in their scriptures, however. On the contrary, as a former evangelical Christian who had been thoroughly steeped in the Bible and the belief that it was the practically oracular communication from God, I was well aware of the many passages in the Old Testament that could be interpreted as prophetic of just such a thing, if historical context was ignored or deemed to be beside the deeper, more spiritual point. For that matter, even on the historicist paradigm the early Christians were soon engaging in the very same imaginative kind of interpretation. The only difference is that the historicist paradigm had them rather improbably making a radical switch to this approach in response to their newfound belief that a historical person had risen from the dead, whereas the mythicist paradigm had them buying into the approach all along. So if anything, the latter scenario seemed less difficult to imagine, not more.

Nor did I see anything implausible in the proposal that the Gospel of Mark had been written as creative allegory rather than as loose history. I had already come pretty close to that conclusion myself, in the process of my deconversion from Christianity. Most of that gospel is set in the context of various miracles and exorcisms, which I see no reason for believing in, and even the parts that are not overtly supernatural often seem historically unlikely. Would the disciples really have dropped everything to follow Jesus the moment he called them, for example? Would they really have failed to ask him for an explanation after he supposedly foretold his crucifixion and resurrection? Would Pilate really have taken the time to personally conduct a formal trial of Jesus? Would he really have set a violent insurrectionist named Barabbas free, just to please the crowds in an otherwise unknown tradition so obviously reminiscent of the Yom Kippur scapegoat ceremony?

Besides these kinds of implausibilities, Mark also contains some other fairly obvious literary clues that it was written in the genre of historical fiction rather than actual biography. In particular, it seems to be related by an omniscient narrator who knew his subjects' internal thoughts and motives, as well as their private conversations and other actions even when nobody was around to report them (e.g., 1:12-13, 1:35, 2:8, 6:34, 12:12, 14:2, 14:35-36, 15:5, 15:10, 15:31-32). Furthermore, the longest speech of Jesus in the gospel, the one usually referred to as the Olivet Discourse, appears to have been composed in response to the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 CE, to make it sound as if Jesus had foreseen this event and tied it to the prophecy of Daniel. Most historicists, except for the conservative Christian ones, acknowledge all this, viewing significant portions of the gospel as fictional. So I saw no reason to rule out the idea that it was actually the entire story line that was fictional, even though set in a real time and place, and imagining a few interactions with real historical people, as is the case for most other historical fiction as well. To my mind, this was the proposal that actually respected the author's motive and talent, unlike the traditional view which had him pretending to write authentic history but either deliberately or incompetently making a terrible job of it. It also explained why the later gospel authors felt so free to modify his story where it suited their purposes.

My main reason for being skeptical of the mythicist paradigm in spite of all this was that it just didn't seem to square very well with the writings of Paul. The seven commonly-designated 'undisputed' epistles of Paul are the only writings we have that most scholars agree we can fairly confidently date back to the time of the original Christians. This includes all of the epistles attributed to Paul in the New Testament except for the pastorals (which almost all scholars regard as pseudepigraphal, meaning authored by a later writer under a false name) and Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians (the authenticity of which is at least questioned by most scholars). Even the remaining presumably authentic ones show some signs of having been edited in various ways, and we can't be absolutely sure of any of them, but they are still generally believed to be at least mostly from the genuine pen of Paul. These epistles are therefore by far the most important writings we have for trying to figure out what the first Christians actually believed. In the mythicist paradigm, they have to be interpreted as presenting a messiah who was incarnated and crucified and buried in a celestial realm rather than on Earth. Could such a strange interpretation of Paul's original intent really stand up to scrutiny? This is the crucial question on which the mythicist paradigm almost entirely hinges.

I had to admit there was something tantalizing about the possibility, mostly because I was well aware of the puzzle of the surprising paucity of references to the historical Jesus in the writings of Paul. This was one of those things scholars wrote about that was also so obvious even a layperson like me couldn't help noticing. I could see that

the mythicist interpretation would be a compelling resolution to the puzzle, if it worked. But I also knew there were passages in Paul that seemed incompatible with the mythicist paradigm, and on first glance, at least, the mythicists' interpretations of those passages seemed fairly strained to me. So I set about trying to show how the traditional understanding of Paul's portrayal of Jesus, the one assumed by the historicist paradigm, was more plausible. The rest of this essay is the result of that effort, which led to my change of mind.

Paul's Assumed References to the Historical Jesus

If we assume the historicist paradigm, holding that Paul understood Jesus to be a historical person, what did he write about him? More specifically, what references did Paul include in his writings to Jesus's historical existence, meaning his existence on Earth before his supposed resurrection appearances, gleaning information only from the epistles that are generally considered to be authentic? These references would constitute the most obvious potential problems for the mythicist paradigm. I have compiled what I believe to be a complete list of them here, organized by subject:

What the historical Jesus believed or taught: On this subject, there is only one item. Paul only unambiguously claimed to quote Jesus one time, specifically in his brief reference to what is traditionally called the last supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-25). The mythicist paradigm has to interpret Paul as claiming a revelation about some other event here, instead of as passing down a tradition involving what Jesus had said in a last supper with his disciples. Besides this one quote, the silence in Paul's writing on the subject of what Jesus taught is rather deafening. There are no explicit references to anything Jesus said about being the messiah, for example, or anything he prophesied about the end times, or even anything he taught about ethics and morality.

Note: There are three occasions where Paul rather enigmatically attributed a command or teaching to "the Lord" without providing any quotation (1 Corinthians 7:10, 9:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:15), but I am not counting them as potential problems for the mythicist paradigm, because in these cases it is arguable whether he was intending to refer to something the historical Jesus had supposedly said, or whether he was just claiming to know the mind of the risen Jesus on the subject. The ambiguous wording in all three cases inclines me to the latter interpretation, as does Paul's general warning in 1 Corinthians 14:37 to regard all of his written instruction as the command of the Lord (presumably excepting the instances where he specifically said he had no command of the Lord, i.e., 1 Corinthians 7:12 and 25).

I am also not counting any of the occasions sometimes cited by apologists where Paul taught some doctrine or ethical principle, without attributing it to Jesus, that happens to coincide with something the gospel writers later attributed to Jesus. In these cases we cannot just assume Paul got the teaching from Jesus. The doctrine or principle may have been put in the mouth of Jesus at a later date by the gospel writers instead, quite possibly specifically because it had been earlier taught by Paul.

What the historical Jesus did: On this subject, there is nothing to add. Paul's mention of the last supper is not only the sole reference in his writings to anything Jesus said, but also the sole reference to anything he did. Paul wrote absolutely nothing about the historical Jesus's supposed career as a preacher or teacher or rabbi or prophet or miracle worker, for example, or even about him having disciples or other devotees of any kind.

What the historical Jesus was like: On this subject, Paul only wrote that Jesus "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), an assertion which obviously poses no problem for the mythicist paradigm.

Note: There is also an arguable reference to Jesus being materially poor (2 Corinthians 8:9), but I am not counting it, because I consider that interpretation extremely doubtful. It wasn't material riches that Jesus had supposedly given up by becoming a man; it was something more to do with spiritual status or privilege.

The historical Jesus's ancestry and relations: On this subject, there are some very obviously difficult items for the mythicist paradigm, though not as many as we might expect. First, Paul wrote that Jesus was descended from David, or more literally that he was "become of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3). Similarly, he also wrote that Jesus was "of" or "from" the Jewish people (Romans 9:5), that he was the descendant or "seed" of Abraham (Galatians 3:16), and that he was "become of a woman, become under the law" (Galatians 4:4, often translated less literally as "born" in both cases). The mythicist paradigm has to propose a different meaning for these descriptions than normal biological descent. Finally, Paul also arguably mentioned that Jesus had some number of brothers (Galatians 1:19, 1 Corinthians 9:5). The mythicist paradigm has to interpret this as referring to spiritual rather than physical kinship.

Events in the life of the historical Jesus: On this subject, there is of course the general topic of Jesus's death by crucifixion, including a few references to his sufferings, which were presumably connected with that, but nothing else. Even with respect to the crucifixion, there are surprisingly few details about what actually happened. Paul only mentioned that it was the probably demonic "rulers of this age" ("princes of this world" in the KJV translation) who killed Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:8), and that he was later buried (1 Corinthians 15:4). This poses no difficulty for the mythicist paradigm, but rather even suggests it, at least if we take the demonic interpretation of the 'rulers of this age' reference. It is also worth noting that the Greek word for crucifixion simply means being hung or impaled on a stake, and Paul never clarified that the kind of stake he was specifically referring to was the Roman one with its characteristic crosspiece. He also never mentioned any other event that supposedly accompanied the crucifixion, like an arrest, or trial, or scourging, or darkness, or anything Jesus said from the cross. So even on the historicist paradigm there is nothing to suggest that Jesus's death was anything but a routine execution conducted without fanfare and witnessed only from a curious spectator's typical distance, as any other Roman crucifixion (or even non-Roman corpse display) likely would be.

Note: There is also a reference to Jesus being killed by "the Jews" in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16, but I am not counting it, because its authenticity is questionable to say the least. Although there is admittedly not a scholarly consensus on the issue, I think the whole passage was very likely a later scribal addition. The specific accusations it makes against the Jewish people, as well as the general hostility it exhibits toward them, seem strikingly out of character for Paul to have written in my judgment (see Romans 10:1-2, 11:1-5, 11:11-12). Its last sentence also seems to be an allusion to the defeat of the Jewish revolt culminating with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, which Paul obviously would not have known about nor referred to in the past tense even if he was predicting.

I am also naturally not counting the reference to Jesus testifying before Pontius Pilate in 1 Timothy 6:13, because that book is almost universally held to be pseudepigraphal, as already mentioned.

The historical Jesus's mere presence on Earth: On this final, catch-all subject, there is really nothing to add. In all of Paul's writings about the future *parousia* or coming of Jesus, he never referred to it as 'return' or 'second' coming, for example, as I already alluded to in my introduction.

Note: Paul did mention that we no longer know Christ "according to the flesh" as we formerly did (2 Corinthians 5:16), which some take as a reference to his presence on Earth, but I consider that interpretation very unlikely, so I am not counting it. This is part of a larger contrast Paul was drawing

between regarding fellow Christians "according to the flesh" (or "from a worldly point of view" as the NIV translates it) and regarding them from a more spiritual point of view, as new creations in Christ. The switch in points of view does not come when the people being regarded leave the physical Earth; it comes when the person doing the regarding is converted to the Christian faith. So Paul's likely thought here is that we similarly once regarded Christ from a pre-conversion, worldly point of view (perhaps with contempt, or perhaps expecting him to be an earthly warrior after the pattern of David), but after conversion, we now see him differently (presumably as the divine Lord).

Although this essay is focused primarily on the writings of Paul, it is also worth noting that this feature of containing surprisingly few references to the historical Jesus is shared by most of the other New Testament epistles as well. For example, there is nothing in the doubtfully-Pauline epistles of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians that would add to my list. The same goes for Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter, with only a few arguable exceptions at best. On the other hand, 1 Timothy clearly assumes the historicity of Jesus in one passage, as already mentioned, and the idea of his historicity is particularly stressed in 2 Peter and both 1 and 2 John, but these are generally thought to have been among the last-written of the canonical books of the New Testament, probably dating well into the second century.

Main Difficulty for the Historicist Paradigm

Before assessing the potential problems this list poses for the mythicist paradigm, it is worth further emphasizing how strange it is on the historicist paradigm that the list is so short. The writings of Paul take up a good fifty or more pages in most English Bibles, so one would think they would include more references to the historical Jesus than this. Given Paul's professed obsession with knowing Jesus (e.g., Philippians 3:10), as well as his claim to be an exemplary imitator of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), how is it that he had so little to say about him, especially about what he believed and taught, whether explicitly or by example? Except for his one reference to what Jesus said at the last supper, it is as if Paul knew nothing about Jesus's teachings at all.

This difficulty is highlighted by the fact that Paul's writings contain many doctrinal claims and arguments of far more theological import than his fairly minor point about the last supper, and for most of these an appeal to the teaching or example of Jesus would seem a very useful strategy. Consider his extensive writing to combat the idea that Gentile converts to the new Christian faith needed to be circumcised and instructed to keep the Torah, for example. This was apparently a very common view among the Jewish believers at the time. Paul even seemed to have some trepidation that the other apostles, who viewed their mission as being either exclusively or at least primarily to the Jews, would go along with it (Galatians 2:2, 9). His fears were partly realized when Peter and even Barnabas were, at least for a time, "led astray" by "certain men from James" into the practice of separating from the Gentile converts, to the point of not even eating with them (Galatians 2:11-14). If Paul had been able to point out that Jesus himself had eaten with Gentiles, or that he had commented about seeing as much faith in Gentiles as in Jews, or that he had taught in a parable that the kingdom of God would be taken away from Israel and given to another people, surely this would have been the place to do so. But in fact there is nowhere in any of Paul's writing on this subject where he made any appeal to the teachings or practices of the historical Jesus at all. Did he regard this strategy as invalid or unconvincing for some reason? Or did he literally not know of anything in the teachings or example of Jesus that was relevant to his point?

These questions are the obvious ones, but not the full extent of the difficulty. Digging a little deeper, we can also pose the question of why Paul had to engage in this argument in the first place. It is difficult to imagine such a necessity if the argument could have been easily settled by appeal to Jesus's teaching. At the very least, this shows the implausibility of the historical Jesus imagined by many progressive Christians, who commonly assume he was primarily dedicated to teaching and demonstrating a new kind of morality centered on radical inclusiveness and unconditional acceptance of all people. If this idea had been the centerpiece of Jesus's teaching, one would think the original apostles who were actually disciples of Jesus's teaching would have been champions of the view instead of somewhat reluctant-seeming late adopters of it.

The recognition that the historical Jesus had very probably not advocated any such thing as the radical inclusion of all people does not really solve the difficulty, however. Paul's silence about the historical Jesus in this context also suggests that Paul's opponents in this argument couldn't point to anything in Jesus's teaching or example that supported their side, either. If the historical Jesus had ever clearly taught, or even only demonstrated, dedicated submission to the Torah instead of radical inclusion of all people, surely they would have argued their case from that fact. This means Paul would have been forced to address their argument, perhaps by insisting that the historical Jesus's practices were not relevant because he himself was still under the old covenant, or some such thing. But there is nothing in Paul's writing to suggest such a need.

All this is very difficult to explain on the usual historicist position that there not only was a historical Jesus, but also that he was someone who preached and taught and had twelve disciples who basically considered themselves his devoted students. In this case these disciples must have known a great deal about what he believed and taught, and they must have passed many of his beliefs and teachings on to their hearers in Jerusalem who later came down to Paul's home base at Antioch to oppose his view. So even if we assume Paul was the odd one out, the only apostle who had never learned much about the historical Jesus, it really wouldn't be a satisfactory solution to the puzzle of how he conducted this argument.

The assumption that Paul simply failed to learn very much about the historical Jesus from the original apostles also seems unlikely in light of his fairly significant interactions with them, especially with Peter. Even if learning about the historical Jesus hadn't been Paul's primary interest, it is difficult to see how he wouldn't have picked up a good bit of information from these interactions anyway. Paul had not only stayed with Peter for fifteen days a few years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18), he had also had a very doctrinally important meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem about fourteen years later, specifically regarding the very question of whether his Gentile-inclusive interpretation of the gospel differed fundamentally from theirs (Galatians 2:1-10). They came to the perhaps somewhat uneasy conclusion that it did not, but however they reached that conclusion, surely any knowledge of Jesus's teachings they may have had that was relevant to the issue would have come up in the discussion. In addition, Peter had spent time with Paul and the other Christians in Antioch, presumably teaching them or at the very least conversing with them, sharing his recollections of Jesus, if he had any. We know he interacted with them socially, in a way that initially included eating even with the Gentiles among them (Galatians 2:11-14). Are we to suppose they simply had more important things to talk about than Jesus and the implications of his teachings and practices on the Gentile question?

Even if that were plausible, the assumption that Paul was the only apostle to not know or care much about the historical Jesus still fails to explain the rest of the data in my judgment. I have already mentioned that the other early epistles are also notable for their silence on the subject of the historical Jesus, not just the ones authored by Paul. This would be very unexpected on the assumption that the original apostles knew a great deal about the teachings of Jesus and disseminated that knowledge widely, but Paul hadn't learned much. The more natural explanation is that even the first apostles had little to say about the teachings of the historical Jesus, which means the later authors' gradually increasing references to what he taught are the result of myths or legends growing over time.

The bottom line is that the historicist paradigm has a serious problem on its hands. I don't see any way to make it work except by proposing that the original Christians either knew very little about what the historical Jesus believed and taught, or cared very little about what the historical Jesus believed and taught. In other words, we'd essentially have to hypothesize that the historical Jesus had not really been a very useful or instructive teacher, at least in the minds of the original Christians. The later reports of his extensive teachings and memorable parables and demonstrations were therefore mostly legendary rather than actual traditions from the first apostles.

This is not impossible, of course. Perhaps Jesus's preaching had been more inspirational or exhortational than informative. He might very well have made no claims to be a prophet or a messiah or even a moral authority, for example, but just a devout man with a simple message, urging people to faith and repentance in preparation for the kingdom of God. Perhaps his disciples had been content with that simple message, not bothering to ask him what that faith needed to consist in, or what sins needed to be repented from, or what the kingdom of God actually meant or

what it would be like. For that matter, perhaps he hadn't even had any disciples at all, at least not in the teacher-student sense portrayed by the gospels. Perhaps Peter only knew him casually, not in a close and devoted way. Or perhaps he had only met him recently, and had spent just enough time with him to be impressed, not to find out much about what he believed.

These are fairly radical suggestions for most people who hold to the historicist paradigm, but not really for those of us who are prepared to take the gospels as creative fiction rather than historical biography. The question for us is how these kinds of solutions we are driven to propose for the difficulties in the historicist paradigm compare to the kinds of solutions we have to propose for the difficulties in the mythicist paradigm. Only after this comparison will we be able to judge which paradigm offers the more coherent and probable picture. To that end, we now turn to the specific potential problems I previously noted for the mythicist paradigm.

Potential Problem #1 for the Mythicist Paradigm: David's Seed

Perhaps the most obvious difficulty for the mythicist paradigm comes from Paul's reference to Jesus being "of the seed of David according to the flesh," usually interpreted to mean biologically descended from David. Here is the relevant passage, in a translation that clearly assumes that interpretation:

> *...regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Romans 1:3-4, NIV)

More literal translations usually render the relevant part of this passage as something like "made of the seed of David according to the flesh" (KJV). There is no explicit statement here that Jesus was actually born the descendant of David. The word for "made" is a form of *ginomai*, which according to Carrier is not Paul's normal word for being born, but simply means "to happen, become." Vine's Expository Dictionary agrees, giving "to become" as the primary meaning. Marshall's interlinear translation renders the phrase "come of the seed of David according to the flesh," as does Young's literal translation (YLT). Paul used the same word in Galatians 3:13 when he spoke of Christ "having been made" or "having become" a curse. Clearly this latter becoming had nothing to do with Jesus's biological descent, but rather with the redemptive role Paul viewed him as fulfilling. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Paul thought of Jesus as becoming "of the seed of David" in some sense, and this is the potential problem for the mythicist paradigm that must be addressed.

Carrier's preferred solution to this difficulty is admittedly a little strange. He proposes that the original Christians held Jesus's body to have been literally fashioned by God out of the sperm of David in the celestial realm. The key prophecy that the messiah had to fulfill was the promise made to David that God would raise up one of his offspring from his body (Carrier translates it sperm from his belly), and this person would build God's house, and his kingdom would last forever (2 Samuel 7:12-13). The obvious reference was to David's immediate son Solomon, who built the temple, but since Solomon's kingdom had not lasted forever, a literal interpretation of the prophecy required another person to be made from David's sperm. Therefore, Carrier infers, the original Christians must have interpreted this to mean God had saved some of David's semen in a kind of "cosmic sperm bank" in heaven, for later use in manufacturing Jesus's body.

Despite how bizarre this might seem, I do not consider it totally implausible. Anyone who believed God had made Eve's body from Adam's rib would presumably be open to the idea of him making Jesus's body from David's sperm, after all. I'm not personally convinced we have to resort to such an imaginative proposal, however, because I just don't see any evidence that Paul and the other Christians of his time necessarily would have taken the prophecy so literally. We know at the very least that the later gospel writers did not take the prophecy this literally, because their proposal of a virgin birth would not constitute such a literal fulfillment of it, with no sperm being involved. They apparently did not have a problem with this, any more than do most Christians today.

More specifically, I suggest Paul was perfectly willing to take some parts of the prophecy as having a literal fulfillment in Solomon, and other parts as signifying a more important, though not as literal, fulfillment in Jesus. Consider the fact that Paul also referred to Christ as the seed of Abraham in fulfillment of a similar prophecy (Galatians 3:16), and I don't think even Carrier interprets him to be implying that Jesus's body had been made of Abraham's literal sperm along with David's. So at the very least, Paul clearly had no problem with taking the word 'seed' to simply mean a descendant rather than a direct offspring. But more than that, he also evidently had no problem with taking it to mean a figurative descendant rather than a literal one. Gentile converts could be considered Abraham's 'descendants' or 'seed,' too, by virtue of their belonging to Christ (Galatians 3:29). Importantly, they were not made to be physically related to Jesus (and thereby to Abraham) in order to merit this designation; they were simply identified with Jesus (and also with Abraham) by faith. It was God's promise that gave them the kinship status (Romans 9:8).

To me this suggests an alternate explanation for the passage, namely that Paul simply counted Jesus as being the descendant or seed of David (as well as of Abraham) by virtue of God's promise instead of by virtue of anything physical. If Jesus was the messiah, then he was the promised seed of David, and that was that. He counted as the prophesied seed of David by virtue of the role he was playing in God's redemptive plan. (This is not all that different from how a later gospel writer would have Jesus insinuating that John the Baptist counted as the prophesied return of Elijah by virtue of the role he played; see Matthew 11:14.)

The difficulty with this view, as opposed to Carrier's, is the 'according to the flesh' qualification Paul used when he referred to Jesus as the seed of David in this passage. I admit Paul used this qualification essentially to mean biological relationship in a different passage, when referring to his own "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3), so this is a legitimate argument against my proposal. But I don't think it is a strong one. I'm not convinced that this is the only way Paul could have intended this very broadly interpretable qualification in connection with the 'seed of David' passage. After all, on the mythicist paradigm, there was no danger of his readers interpreting the phrase to mean biological kinship in this context, because they thought of Jesus as a celestial being, not a historical one. Which means it's not like Paul would have had to avoid using the phrase in a different sense here in order to not confuse his readers.

Suppose, for a strictly hypothetical example, that Paul had said the devil was the seed of the serpent according to the flesh, but the fallen archangel Lucifer according to the spirit. Virtually no one would interpret him to mean the devil was biologically descended from the serpent, because virtually no one thinks of the devil as the kind of being who was biologically descended from anything. We would instead probably interpret Paul's 'according to the flesh' qualifier to mean that there is a common or perhaps superficial point of view in which the devil could be seen as the seed of the serpent, in that he was playing that role, but the deeper reality is that he was the fallen archangel.

Similarly, Paul may have simply meant that Jesus could be seen as the seed of David from a common or superficial point of view, in connection with the role he was playing, but the son of God in a deeper sense ("according to the spirit of holiness," in a more literal translation of the NIV's "through the Spirit of holiness"), in connection with his resurrection from the dead. This suggests to me that Paul was essentially answering a question later put in the mouth of Jesus by the author of Mark, namely, that if the messiah is to be viewed as this exalted Lord whom the Christians in this author's time were proclaiming him to be, how could he also be viewed as David's son, as the prophecy required (Mark 12:35-37)? Wouldn't that lower his status to David's, or even below? Paul's answer, as I read it, was that Jesus was the seed of David in one way of looking at it, in view of his having been given a human body of flesh to take on that 'seed of David' role, but this didn't mean he had a lower status, because he was also appointed the son of God in the deeper sense, as indicated by his resurrection.

Paul may have even been implying here that Jesus did take on a lower status for a time ("for a little while lower than the angels," as Hebrews 2:9 puts it), but was then exalted to the higher status at his resurrection. This interpretation would explain his description of Jesus being "appointed" the son of God by his resurrection, as the NIV renders it. Even if not, however, I suggest his main point was still that in Jesus's act of taking on a human body, even

in the celestial realm, he was also taking on the messianic role of the promised seed of David. He was therefore the fulfillment of the prophecy, the seed of David according to the flesh, but the son of God in the deeper-reality sense.

Counterpoint to Potential Problem #1: Difficulties for the Historicist Paradigm

I admit that both Carrier's explanation for this passage and mine are a little speculative, and for that reason perhaps less than totally convincing, regardless of which one is preferred. I think it is therefore fair to count the passage as a genuine interpretative difficulty under the mythicist paradigm. But I wouldn't call it evidence for the historicist paradigm, because I think it poses some genuine difficulties for that paradigm as well, perhaps even bigger than the one it poses for the mythicist paradigm.

The first difficulty I see for the historicist paradigm comes from Carrier's point about the specific wording. As already mentioned, he says that the *ginomai* term in the passage is not the one Paul normally used to refer to literal birth (see Romans 9:11, Galatians 4:23, 29). It is, however, the one he used to refer to the direct construction of Adam's body, which obviously involved no parentage (1 Corinthians 15:45). Carrier points out that this would therefore be a very natural choice of wording for the direct construction of Jesus's body envisioned in the mythicist paradigm, but a rather strange choice of wording for the normal birth of Jesus's body envisioned in the historicist paradigm.

The second and more significant difficulty I see for the historicist paradigm involves the inherent improbability in the idea that the historical Jesus had in fact been a known biological descendant of David. I'm no expert, but I find it rather hard to believe that ordinary peasant Jews in Jesus's time could trace their ancestry back that far. I don't recall reading anything in Josephus about anyone being able to do that, for example. I suppose historicists could speculate that the descendants of David were a special case who did keep track of that fact, but this seems doubtful to me, especially if these descendants of David were very numerous (perhaps numbering in the tens of thousands or more) by then. But if they weren't so numerous by then, then it is incredibly unlikely that the historical Jesus would have just happened to be one of them. So while this speculation might do for those who are willing to take Christianity on faith, it hardly seems like a satisfactory explanation for those trying to do serious analysis of the most likely meaning of the claim.

This makes it far more probable in my judgment that even if we assume the historicist paradigm, Paul was still attributing the 'seed of David' status to Jesus by virtue of his messianic role, not by virtue of knowing his ancestry. Even if he might have tacitly assumed this meant Jesus was also biologically descended from David via some unknown genealogical path, his basic claim was still that Jesus counted as the seed of David because he was the person the prophecy had in view. But if the best solution to the difficulty for the historicist paradigm is to propose that this is what Paul was fundamentally saying, it virtually negates the difficulty for the mythicist paradigm, since the most likely solution is essentially the same either way. In fact, I might even go so far as to say the solution makes more sense under the mythicist paradigm than the historicist one, since under the historicist one it would lead to questions about the legitimacy of the claim given Jesus's unknown lineage, whereas under the mythicist one there was no lineage involved, and so there could be no such objection.

The bottom line is that I can't consider the difficulty this passage poses for the mythicist paradigm to be evidence for the historicist paradigm, because I think it actually poses more difficulties for the historicist paradigm, including substantially the very same one it poses for the mythicist paradigm.

Potential Problem #2 for the Mythicist Paradigm: Become of a Woman

If my proposed solution for the 'seed of David' passage is correct, I think it also works for at least two of the three other passages that seem on first glance to refer to a historical Jesus's ancestry. Specifically, I already mentioned how it similarly applies to the 'seed of Abraham' passage, and Jesus being considered the seed of both David and Abraham also explains the reference to him being "of" the Jewish people. The third passage, however, is a little different in character, and calls for further examination:

> *So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.* (Galatians 4:3-5, NIV)

Once again there is no explicit statement here that Jesus was actually born, as this is the same word used in the 'seed of David' passage that is more literally translated something like "become." But unlike in that passage, in this one there is not such an obvious reference to a specific prophecy Jesus was fulfilling in virtue of his messianic role, so in my view it poses a more serious difficulty for the mythicist paradigm. Why would Paul, in this paradigm, view Jesus as being not only the promised seed of David and of Abraham, but also "made" (KJV), "come" (YLT), or "become" of a woman?

One possible answer is that even though the reference to messianic prophecy is not so explicit in this case, it is still implied. Specifically, it is quite possible that Paul had the famous 'protoevangelium' passage of Genesis 3:15 in mind, where the woman (Eve) was promised that her seed would be at enmity with the serpent and his seed, yet would also crush the serpent's head. This was a fairly obvious candidate for messianic interpretation, and might even be suggested by Paul's immediately preceding reference to "slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world," as this could be seen as an allusion to humanity's enmity with the serpent, and perhaps more particularly to the 'law' or curse of slavery and death that went along with this condition of enmity. To say that Jesus was "become of a woman, become under the law" in this proposal was therefore simply to mean Jesus was the one whom the protoevangelium passage had prophesied. I have to admit this seems like a strange choice of words to convey that idea, however. The implication would have been much clearer if Paul had said something like "become of the seed of the woman, become under the curse" instead.

Another possible answer is suggested by the fact that the 'born of woman' idea, in slightly various particular wordings, seems to have been a fairly common idiom for referring to someone simply as a human being. We see this in both the Jewish scriptures (Job 14:1, 15:14, 25:4) and the gospels (Matthew 11:11, Luke 7:28). So perhaps Paul was just saying here that Jesus became human. More specifically, given that Paul had just explained that even the natural heirs (i.e., Jews) were in the same practical situation as the slaves (i.e., Gentiles) before their full adoption to sonship, which presumably implied that Jesus had to redeem both Gentiles and Jews, I would suggest he may have been saying that Jesus can therefore be viewed as representing or being identified with both humanity in general ("become of a woman") and Jewish humanity in particular ("become under the law"). This idea that Jesus could be thought of as "becoming" the two categories of humanity he was identifying with in his sacrificial death may seem a little strange, but it is not all that dissimilar from Paul's thought that Jesus also "became" a curse (Galatians 3:13) and even sin itself (2 Corinthians 5:21), so that we might similarly "become" the righteousness of God. Nevertheless, I have to admit that while Paul's play on this 'born of woman' idiom would be totally unsurprising under the historicist paradigm, it does seem like an odd choice under the mythicist paradigm.

Carrier takes a very different approach and interprets the passage as being part or preview of the allegory Paul later proceeded to expound, in which Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants (Galatians 4:22-28). Christians, according to Paul, are set free from the slave parentage of Hagar, representing the present Jerusalem and the old covenant. In Christ they are made children of promise instead, children of Sarah, representing the heavenly Jerusalem and the new covenant. In this interpretation, Jesus was allegorically thought of as a child of Hagar ("become under the law") by virtue of his acquisition of a human body, because this was before the new covenant had been instituted by his sacrificial death and resurrection, which enabled the transfer to the parentage of Sarah. This approach does not seem totally implausible to me, but it does seem fairly strained. If this was what Paul intended his 'become of a woman, become under the law' phrase to signify, I have to wonder why he used it so far ahead of his explanation, before his readers would know what he was talking about. For that matter, even if he had put it in the same paragraph as his explanation, I would have expected him to say something like "become of the slave woman," instead of just "become of a woman," to make the meaning clear.

Finally, the most radical solution is to read the 'become of a woman, become under the law' phrase as a gloss or interpolation, a later addition by someone seeking to either clarify or alter Paul's meaning. This approach has been taken as at least a live option by a few commentators, including Earl Doherty in his *Supplementary Article No. 15* to *The Jesus Puzzle.* He argues for the suggestion in three ways, from the superfluity of the phrase (in his opinion) to Paul's thought, from Paul's usual usage of 'under the law' and the unlikeliness that he would apply this usage to Jesus, and from the idea that the ancient church father Tertullian apparently thought the earlier writer Marcion (the first known collector of Paul's epistles) had maliciously deleted the phrase from his text of Galatians. More specifically, although Tertullian did not explicitly say this was one of the phrases he was accusing Marcion of having deleted, he did skip over it in his argument against Marcion's theology from what he said even Marcion's own version of this section of Galatians had faithfully retained (*Against Marcion*, book V, chapter 4). As provocative as this observation might seem, however, it is generally agreed that Marcion did in fact make several alterations to his now lost text of Galatians, so the argument that his rendering of this passage was actually the authentic one is rather dubious. Still, I would not call it totally implausible, as the phrase does seem a little strange even under the historicist assumption (unless Paul was indeed playing off of the 'born of woman' idiom).

I do not have a strong opinion on which of these possible solutions is the most likely. Even though all of them seem at least plausible to me, I have to admit that none of them seems especially convincing. While this passage is therefore not to my mind a decisive argument against mythicism, I do think it is probably the strongest evidence there is for the historicist paradigm.

Potential Problem #3 for the Mythicist Paradigm: The Lord's Brothers

For this potential problem there are two references:

> *Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.* (Galatians 1:18-19, NIV)

> *Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?* (1 Corinthians 9:5, NIV)

The usual interpretation for both of these passages is that Paul was calling James and the others the biological brothers of Jesus. The alternate interpretation, held by a few even in the historicist paradigm but practically required in the mythicist one, is that he was merely calling them spiritual brothers of the Lord in some sense, perhaps even in the very same sense he often referred to his readers and fellow Christian workers as his own spiritual brothers.

Carrier points out that Paul regarded all Christians as not just brothers of each other, but more fundamentally brothers of the Lord (see Romans 8:29), so it would be perfectly understandable for him to use the phrase 'brother of the Lord' (which the NIV translates "Lord's brother") when referring to any Christian. If we follow this interpretation, then Paul simply meant in the first passage that Cephas (i.e., Peter) was the only apostle he visited on this occasion, but he did also see an ordinary Christian named James. (This would have to be a different James from the one he later referred to as a reputed 'pillar' in Galatians 2:9, at least if a 'pillar' also counted as an apostle, but James was a very common name, so there's nothing implausible about that.) Similarly, in the second passage, Paul simply meant that not only the other apostles and Cephas regularly took their wives along with them in their ministry, but also even the ordinary Christian traveling ministers who weren't apostles at all. How much more, then, the implication would be, should he and Barnabas also be granted that right?

The only difficulty I see with this interpretation is that if 'brother of the Lord' was a common term for an ordinary Christian, why did Paul only use this term in these two specific instances? It could have just been a coincidence, I suppose. I notice that Paul often used the simpler 'brother' (or 'brothers') form in his writing, but there were a handful of occasions where he switched it up to 'my brother' (or 'my brothers') for no apparent reason. So maybe he occasionally switched it up to 'brother of the Lord,' too, for no apparent reason. It is also possible that he only used the formal 'brother of the Lord' designation instead of the simpler, more casual form when referring to

Christian ministers of a specific rank or status, perhaps similar to what many Christians today call a priest or reverend. I tend to think the most likely explanation, however, is that these were the only two instances where Paul was specifically distinguishing ordinary Christians from apostles, and that perhaps in this context Paul typically referred to ordinary Christians using the fuller, more dignified 'brothers of the Lord' term in order to avoid any appearance that he might be denigrating their non-apostolic status. It is not hard to imagine even evangelical Christians today adopting a similar habit, saying something like "our pastors, Tom and John, and our brother in Christ, Jim" when introducing them all, for example, but sticking with the more casual 'our brother Jim' designation when the higher ranking pastors aren't part of the context.

Counterpoint to Potential Problem #3: Difficulties for the Historicist Paradigm

This interpretation of Paul's references to the Lord's brothers being ordinary Christians is admittedly a little speculative. I acknowledge that these references therefore count as a bit of a difficulty for the mythicist paradigm. But Carrier notices a number of ways in which they pose difficulties for the historicists' usual interpretation, too.

First, one would think Paul would have called these people brothers of Jesus instead of brothers of the Lord if he had meant Jesus's physical kin, since 'brother of the Lord' would more naturally connote a person who specifically acknowledged Jesus as the Lord, not who just happened to have the same parents. Relatedly, but in my opinion more significantly, if the historicist paradigm assumes Paul's use of the 'according to the flesh' qualifier in the 'seed of David' passage was to signify biological kinship, why did he not similarly use that qualifier in these 'brothers of the Lord' passages? (Or conversely, if Paul did not feel the need to say "brothers of the Lord according to the flesh" in these passages, why would he feel the need to say "seed of David according to the flesh" in the other one, on the view that biological kinship instead of spiritual was the meaning that qualifier signified?)

Second, if the James in the first reference was considered one of the apostles, as the historicist interpretation usually assumes, then the sentence structure Paul used is rather awkward, at least in Carrier's view. It is true that many translations say "except James" instead of "only James" as the NIV does, which would imply James *was* considered an apostle along with Cephas, but Carrier argues against that translation being the most faithful to the original Greek. I can only make a note of this instead of providing any further comment on it, however, as I am not qualified to evaluate the argument.

Third, if the Lord's brothers in the second reference referred to Jesus's biological kin, how would that example serve Paul's argument that he and Barnabas ought to have the same privileges they did? In this case the natural rejoinder would be that the Lord's brothers merited more privileges than Paul and Barnabas by virtue of their kinship with Jesus. For the argument to work, Paul had to use those who were clearly of his own rank or below as his examples, not those of arguably higher rank. Carrier also points out that it was common in the Greek language of the day to put the strongest example in an argument like this in the middle of the list, instead of at the beginning or the end as we tend to do today. This is exactly what Paul did here if we take his 'Lord's brothers' reference to mean ordinary Christian ministers, but the pattern would be broken if we take the reference to mean Jesus's biological kin.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, if James was really the biological brother of Jesus, it is difficult to explain the lack of references to this idea in other early Christian literature. We have a New Testament epistle supposedly written by this James, for example, but its author never referred to himself as the brother of Jesus. The fact that this epistle is probably pseudepigraphal, at least in the opinion of most scholars, does not diminish this difficulty in the slightest, as it just goes to show that the actual author probably wasn't aware of the idea that James had been the biological brother of Jesus, which is hard to believe on this assumption. Similarly, in the epistle supposedly written by Jude (almost certain to be pseudepigraphal), that author only referred to himself as the brother of James, not the brother of Jesus. Even the book of Acts, which does claim Jesus had biological brothers (Acts 1:14, presumably following Luke 8:19-20), never refers to James as one of those brothers, despite mentioning him several times throughout the book. It seems likely, then, that the author of Acts did not interpret Paul's description of James as signifying biological kinship.

In my judgment, these difficulties for the usual historicist interpretation of these passages are probably more substantial than the ones for the interpretation required by mythicism, not less. I don't think Paul ever intended his references to the Lord's brothers to mean there was a historical Jesus with biological brothers. I therefore do not consider these passages to be evidence for the historicist paradigm.

Potential Problem #4 for the Mythicist Paradigm: The Last Supper

The full text for this potential problem is as follows:

> *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."* (1 Corinthians 11:23-25, NIV)

Before proceeding to an explanation of what this 'last supper' passage means under the mythicist paradigm, there are a few possible misconceptions to clear up. First, Paul never actually called the event a last supper. I only use that designation for it because it is the traditional name. (Paul did call the Christians' subsequent performances of the ritual "the Lord's supper," but that is a more general term and should not be confused with the original event itself.) Second, Paul never explicitly said that it happened on the night Jesus was betrayed. The more literal translation is that it was on the night he was "delivered" or "handed over," the same word that Paul used to describe God himself "delivering" or "handing over" his son in Romans 8:32, and that the Septuagint translation used to describe the suffering servant's soul being "delivered" or "handed over" to death in Isaiah 53:12. So there is no reason to presume Paul intended this as a reference to the Judas Iscariot story told in the gospels. In fact, there is no reason to presume Paul understood this last supper, whatever it might have involved, to have been in the company of any of the supposed twelve disciples at all.

In the mythicist paradigm, Paul's description of having received this information "from the Lord" is taken at face value: This was not a tradition Paul had learned from others, but a revelation he claimed to have received directly from the Lord, presumably in the form of some kind of dream or vision. In other words, it was probably something similar to the dream or vision that the author of Acts later claimed Peter had experienced, involving the sheet filled with animals and the voice of the Lord telling him to eat (Acts 10:9-16). This does not necessarily mean that Paul was the one who originally started the early Christian tradition of celebrating Jesus's sacrifice with an 'agape feast' (such feasts being a rather common religious trope), but he may well have been the first to claim a revelation that Jesus had specifically imbued the bread and the cup of that feast with such significance by saying these things about them.

Historicists often object to this idea by insisting that Paul's specific language of having "received" and "passed on" this information was his way of identifying it as a tradition he learned from others, despite his explicit claim to have received it from the Lord. But the evidence for this is not convincing. The only other example of Paul using this language is in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, where he said the information he "received" and "passed on" was "of first importance," presumably because it was the contents of the gospel itself (verse 1). The specific 'first importance' information was, at minimum, "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures." It may also have included the first two of the appearances Paul then cited (i.e., "and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve"), but it cannot have included the entire list of appearances, since that list ends with the one to Paul himself. In any case, Paul was very insistent elsewhere that he had not received the gospel from men, but from a direct revelation of Jesus (Galatians 1:11-12), so I think it is reasonable to infer that even in the 1 Corinthians 15 passage, he was saying he had received this core information from a revelation of Jesus, not from the teachings of others. For that matter, it really doesn't sound like information received from others at all, as it twice identifies its own source as an interpretation of prophecy, using the phrase "according to the scriptures." Granted, the additional information about the appearances

was something Paul presumably learned from others, not from a revelation about the proper interpretation of scripture, but this probably wasn't the core 'first importance' information he was talking about having received and passed on. Therefore I see no reason to assume that he only used the 'receiving' and 'passing on' language in connection with a tradition he learned from others.

The more significant difficulty for the mythicist interpretation is in trying to imagine a sensible context in which Paul could have thought this strange event that was revealed to him had taken place. More specifically, who was Jesus supposedly speaking to when it happened? Presumably the only beings in the celestial realm where he was "handed over" were the demonic forces who killed him, and it certainly doesn't make sense to imagine Jesus as having said these things to them. So perhaps he was supposed to have said them immediately before he descended all the way to the realm of those demonic forces, possibly to the patriarchs and others in 'Abraham's bosom' (see Luke 16:19-31). Or perhaps he was supposed to have just said them to no one in particular, in a kind of soliloquy that served no other purpose than to be a record that he said them, for when the whole scene would later be revealed to Paul in a vision.

This last option would make sense of the fact that in Paul's claimed revelation, Jesus was obviously intending his statements for the entire Christian community, not just whomever he was immediately speaking to. There's no way he could have been literally speaking to the entire Christian community on the night that he was handed over to be executed in the celestial realm, with at most only the already-dead in his presence to hear what he said. But in the mythicist paradigm this is not really a concern, since in this paradigm it makes sense for Paul to have imagined Jesus announcing those things into thin air, knowing his audience wasn't around to hear him, but also knowing that he was later going to reveal what he said, to Paul.

An arguably more straightforward possibility in my view is that Paul was simply combining the things Jesus said to him in the vision with the events Jesus was showing him in the vision. In other words, the vision may have showed Jesus taking the bread and the cup in the night that he was handed over, but narrating the event in voice-over fashion to explain its significance, so that the 'this is my body' and 'this is the new covenant in my blood' parts were addressed in the present to Paul. Paul's wording admittedly could be described as an awkward or possibly even misleading choice for this scenario, however, so I'm not completely convinced it is a better option than the previous suggestion, despite its attractively straightforward interpretation of Jesus's speech being directly to Paul.

Finally, an even more straightforward option might also be possible, if the relevant phrase could mean in the night when this information itself was handed over or delivered, rather than in the night when Jesus was handed over or delivered. In this case Paul would simply be saying he had a revelatory dream in which Jesus did and said these things, in the present, not on the night he was handed over. Carrier briefly mentions in a footnote (*OHJ*, p. 560) that this reading might be valid, but he does not seem to regard it as very probable for some reason, which suggests to me that he might regard it as grammatically doubtful.

Counterpoint to Potential Problem #4: Difficulties for the Historicist Paradigm

I acknowledge that this passage does indeed pose a difficulty for the mythicist paradigm, in the sense that it requires a rather speculative solution, regardless of which specific speculation is preferred. Nevertheless, once again, it does not for that reason constitute strong evidence for the historicist paradigm, because on closer examination we see that it poses some genuine difficulties for that paradigm as well.

The first thing to note in this regard is how unlikely it would have been for a historical Jesus to have actually said these things. Can we really imagine him knowing that he was about to die and asking his disciples to regularly remember him in such a fashion? Can we imagine him not only doing this, but also announcing that his death was going to be for his disciples in some way, and that his blood would be instituting a new covenant? Even if we could imagine that, can we imagine his disciples just silently taking it all in instead of asking him for an explanation of what he meant? Or even if they did ask, can we imagine them choosing not to remember his answer but only the announcement itself? It all seems rather implausible to me.

What this means is that if we assume the historicist paradigm, we pretty much also have to assume that the tradition of what Jesus had said in his last supper had been thoroughly infused with legendary development by the

time it reached Paul. Perhaps it was correct in its general idea that Jesus had eaten a last supper with his disciples, but the further idea that Jesus had specifically spoken of the significance of the bread and the cup must have been invented later, as the Christian community came to their new beliefs about what Jesus's death had accomplished. This would therefore indicate that the early Christians were not especially careful about accuracy as they passed on their traditions about the historical Jesus. And Paul also must not have been especially careful about accuracy, because he apparently cited the tradition without any realization of how contaminated it was.

The implications this carries for the possibility of knowing anything about the historical Jesus are significant. On the one hand, if Paul only had two major traditions to remember (the two he referred to with his 'receiving' and 'passing on' language), this seems to reinforce the same conclusion about the historical Jesus paradigm I suggested before, that if a historical Jesus existed at all, he must not have been a very instructive teacher. He may have taught some general principles, but very little in the way of anything remarkable enough for his disciples to specifically recall after his death. On the other hand, however, this conclusion is very difficult to reconcile with the idea that Paul believed Jesus to have actually said these particular things.

Specifically, if Paul came to believe through a corrupted tradition that Jesus had announced the sacrificial nature of his death, he must have regarded Jesus as a very remarkable teacher, not an uninstructive one. For Paul, the historical Jesus could not have been a covert kind of messiah who kept his identity secret. He was a very open messiah, one who had prophesied his own death and explicitly taught his disciples that it involved the institution of a new covenant. But if that's how Paul regarded the historical Jesus, one would think he would have been very interested in learning all he could about him and anything else he may have taught. So this proposal only serves to heighten the difficulty of why Paul said literally nothing else about the historical Jesus's teaching, if we assume the historicist paradigm.

In the end, therefore, while the mythicist paradigm's possibly-narrated vision interpretation of this passage is admittedly speculative and perhaps even a little strange, I'm not convinced it is stranger or less plausible than the idea that Paul, despite generally knowing or caring very little about the historical Jesus's teaching, nevertheless believed a tradition that he had said these things to his disciples in a last supper setting. It seems to me that the passage poses as much difficulty for the historicist paradigm as for the mythicist one.

Additional Difficulties for the Mythicist Paradigm

Besides these specific potential problems for the mythicist paradigm, most of which turn out not to be very good arguments against it in light of the similar difficulties they pose for the historicist paradigm, what other difficulties for the mythicist paradigm might we need to address? I can think of three.

First, there are all the arguable references to the historical Jesus that I said I was not counting in my list. I do not personally regard these as problems for the mythicist paradigm, because I would not interpret them as references to the historical Jesus even under the historicist paradigm. But for those who do not share my evaluation, one or more of them might be considered a significant or even fatal difficulty for the mythicist paradigm.

Second, perhaps the more significant difficulty is not in anything Paul wrote, but rather in what he did not write. Specifically, if Paul believed Jesus had been incarnated and crucified in a lower celestial realm, why did he never explain how it happened, or even mention which specific realm he imagined it to involve?

Carrier believes it likely that Paul considered these kinds of things to be secret information reserved only for Christians who had achieved a higher rank or status than those he was writing to. This was apparently quite common in many other religious sects of the day, particularly those known as the mystery cults. There may be a hint of it in Paul's story of being caught up into the third heaven, which he also identified as "Paradise," to hear inexpressible things that no one is permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Interestingly, the apocryphal book of 2 Enoch imagines Enoch being given a revelatory tour through the seven heavens (or possibly ten, depending on the textual variant), and it also identifies the third heaven as the location of Paradise, apparently envisioning it as a restoration or possibly a relocation of the original Garden of Eden specifically prepared as an inheritance for the righteous (2 Enoch 8-9). This

book was probably written after Paul, so it would be very tenuous to infer that Paul shared its exact understanding of the different heavens or levels of heaven. Still, the idea that Paul might have similarly imagined himself being given a tour of the first (i.e., lower) three heavens is at least a plausible one, and if so, his insistence that he was forbidden to speak of the details about what he saw there could easily explain his silence on the subject of which level of heaven Jesus had been executed in.

This proposed solution is admittedly quite speculative, however. The more straightforward alternative, which may therefore be preferable, is simply that in Paul's mind, perhaps the exact details had not been revealed. Perhaps he didn't talk about how the crucifixion had taken place, or in what exact realm, or where the grave was specifically located, because all that minutiae was still mysterious. It wasn't important. It wasn't what God had chosen to communicate, either by prophetic scripture or other revelation. This is a far more plausible explanation for Paul's silence on the details about the celestial Jesus than anything the historicist paradigm can offer as an explanation for his silence on the historical Jesus, because on that paradigm there were far more details to be known about what Jesus taught and did. Moreover, on that paradigm these details actually *were* known, in the very ordinary, historical way; they just weren't mentioned by Paul for some reason (or really by anybody else either, until the gospels were written).

It is also entirely possible that Paul actually had explained some of these things about the celestial Jesus, but only in epistles or parts of epistles that haven't been preserved. This solution goes along with the third additional difficulty for the mythicist paradigm, which is why we know so little about this belief from other sources besides Paul that we might naturally expect to be able to find on the mythicist paradigm. Carrier doesn't view this as surprising, however, because he considers it undeniable that later Christians did in fact destroy, or at least fail to preserve, all the sources that had clearly presented or defended the celestial messiah view of Jesus.

The evidence for this is that we actually do have a number of fairly persuasive hints that such a view existed and that it had become quite controversial by around the beginning of the second century, enough so that its advocates must have written about it, yet we do not have any of their writings. (Or barely any; Carrier considers an obscure text known as *The Ascension of Isaiah* to be a quite remarkable exception, though even it was apparently doctored by later Christians who believed in a historical Jesus.) These hints appear even in the New Testament itself. The very late epistles of 2 Peter and 1 and 2 John are particularly devoted to combating the ideas that the gospel stories about Jesus were "cleverly devised myths" (2 Peter 1:16) and that Jesus had not actually "come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2, 2 John 7), implying that these ideas were in fact circulating among the Christian communities in that time. Comparably dated or slightly later non-canonical sources, such as Ignatius's epistle to the Trallians, exhibit a similar concern. Subsequent Christians often interpreted this concern as being about a kind of nebulous proto-gnosticism or proto-docetism, but we don't really know the details of what the people involved actually believed.

In any case, if we adopt the historicist paradigm, we have to postulate that a non-historical celestial messiah view of Jesus, or at least something suspiciously similar to that view, developed after the original Christians died off, and gained enough followers to be considered a significant heresy that needed to be combated. If we adopt the mythicist paradigm, on the other hand, it was the historical view of Jesus that developed after the original Christians died off, and the celestial view persisted for a least a while alongside, perhaps before evolving into various other positions. But either way, it was the historical view of Jesus that eventually gained enough influence to be considered orthodox and to control which documents got preserved and which didn't. And either way, it was the documents that disputed the historical Jesus view (possibly even including some written by Paul himself, as we know he wrote more epistles than we have) that evidently did not make the cut. So we can't know exactly what those who held to a non-historical Jesus believed, or how their beliefs may have evolved over time, but we also can't cite the non-existence of their writings as evidence for the historicist paradigm.

Further Considerations and Conclusion

In the end, which paradigm makes better sense of the evidence? In my judgment, the historicist paradigm does have one significant (though certainly not decisive) point in its favor, namely the 'become of a woman' passage.

Nevertheless, as I read Paul's epistles, I think they are generally better explained under the mythicist paradigm than the historicist one. Some of the features or ideas I notice in Paul's thought that seem to support this conclusion are the following:

Jesus and the mystery of the gospel revealed by scripture, not disciples or tradition: Paul several times referred to the gospel or at least a significant part of the gospel as a revealed mystery (Romans 16:25-26, 1 Corinthians 2:7, Galatians 3:23). He never implied that this revelation had involved the teachings or even the mere existence of a historical Jesus, however, as if the traditions passed down from knowledge of Jesus by the original disciples were the key. Instead, the revelation was always through scripture, apparently not properly interpreted in the past but now finally understood. The gospel was "the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed, and made known through the prophetic writings" (Romans 16:25-26).

Paul also looked forward to a more complete revelation of Jesus at his future coming, of course (1 Corinthians 1:7, 13:12), but again, he never referred to that supposed future event as a 'return' or 'second' coming, just like he never wrote of Jesus already being revealed in any sense at all by his supposed earthly life. This is not what we would most naturally expect under the historicist paradigm, but makes perfect sense under the mythicist one.

No hint of any special category of apostles: Although Paul did mention the risen Jesus appearing to a group of Christians called 'the twelve' (1 Corinthians 15:5), he never so much as hinted that they were a special category of apostles, those who had actually known the historical Jesus, or those whom the historical Jesus himself had explicitly chosen to be his protégées, as the historicist paradigm almost always presumes. For that matter, 'the twelve' would be a very strange designation for such a group if it was really only eleven of them who had remained faithful, and experienced the appearances, and become apostles, as the canonical gospel story has it. Two of the canonical gospels also seem to have the original disciples being promised the unique future position of sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:29-30), which further highlights the difficulty. But Paul apparently knew nothing of any apostles having such a special status or role. On the contrary, he was quite insistent that his role was not inferior to that of the other apostles in any way (2 Corinthians 11:5, Galatians 2:6). This is a strange claim to make under the historicist paradigm, but makes total sense under the mythicist paradigm.

Relatedly, to my mind there is also an inherent improbability baked into the historicist paradigm, namely that all eleven of the original twelve except Judas would be so impressed by Jesus's earthly life and whatever they regarded as his resurrection 'appearances' that they would all start seeing him as a totally new kind of messiah soon after his death. I think it is more realistic to assume that the twelve first notable proponents of the new heavenly messiah idea simply (or perhaps pompously) took on the designation of 'the twelve,' as the mythicist paradigm proposes.

Enigmatic incarnation: Paul's clearest and most famous reference to Jesus's incarnation describes him as "being made in human likeness" and "being found in appearance as a man" (Philippians 2:7-8). While this phraseology is not necessarily incompatible with a normal human birth, it does seem like an odd choice of words to describe such an event. Wouldn't he first be found as an infant in that case? And why was he only made in the "likeness" and "appearance" of man? It is not that Paul didn't consider Jesus truly human; he elsewhere described him as the "man of heaven" (or "from heaven"), in contradistinction to Adam as the "man of earth" (1 Corinthians 15:47-49). So I'm not sure exactly how Paul conceived of Jesus's pre-resurrection body, or whether he thought it was precisely the same as a normal, earthly human's body. But in either case, the strangeness of the wording is considerably ameliorated if we see Paul as describing a heavenly Jesus being given a fully-formed human body (whether or not it was exactly the same as a normal

earthly one) in a celestial realm, rather than being made a man in the usual way, starting with conception and birth.

The sinlessness of Jesus and the sinfulness of humanity: Paul wrote that Jesus "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). If we assume this doctrine was also held by the other apostles, and that they had been close acquaintances of a historical Jesus, it must mean they had never seen Jesus do anything they would consider wrong or sinful. This is not impossible, of course, but it seems unlikely to me. It is even more unlikely if we take James to be Jesus's biological brother as the historicist paradigm usually assumes, which would probably imply he knew him even in childhood. How many of us have never seen any evidence of occasional selfishness or crankiness or pettiness in our childhood siblings? Realistically, I think it is much easier to imagine the early Christians coming to the conclusion that a celestial messiah was perfectly sinless than that a historical Jesus whom some of them had known all their lives was perfectly sinless.

For Paul himself, of course, the sinlessness of Jesus was a theological requirement for his atoning sacrifice, not a conclusion from an examination of his life. Such an examination could not possibly establish the doctrine anyway, because for Paul, even the inward sins of the heart, like coveting, still counted as serious offenses against God (Romans 7:7-8). So when Paul wrote his lengthy discourse on human sinfulness against God, culminating in "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), it is a little surprising on the historicist paradigm that he did not feel the need to mention that there was one historical person, namely Jesus, who was the exception to the rule. He also neglected to mention the exception on the other occasions he similarly wrote about all being sinners (Romans 5:12, Galatians 3:22). One could say the exception was simply supposed to be taken for granted, but it is easier to see why he felt no need to make it explicit if we assume the mythicist paradigm instead of the historicist one.

Warnings about other Jesuses and gospels: In 2 Corinthians 11:4 Paul wrote of his concern that others were preaching "another Jesus," with the result that their listeners might receive "another spirit." This would be a strange way to word it if he were thinking of Jesus as a historical person. In that case you would think even the false teachers Paul was warning about would still be referring to the same Jesus in their objectionable teachings about him. But under the mythicist paradigm, the wording is not so strange. In this case, the objectionable teachings could very easily be thought of as referring to an entirely different proposed heavenly personage, or even a different 'Lord,' from the one true Lord who Paul was convinced had revealed himself in contradistinction from all other spiritual beings (see 1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Similarly, Paul warned against listening to another gospel, even if preached by "an angel from heaven" (Galatians 1:8). This would be a strange hypothetical under the historicist paradigm, where the authority behind the true gospel derived from the historical tradition of what Jesus had done and taught. The wording makes more sense under the mythicist paradigm, where even Paul and the other apostles were appealing to the authority of direct revelation, not historical tradition, for their understanding of scripture and the gospel.

Jesus's crucifixion as a portrayal to all: For Paul, even the Galatians (in modern-day Turkey) had witnessed God's public portrayal or presentation of a crucified Jesus (Galatians 3:1). This couldn't have been in a physical way, but must have been through the revelation of prophetic scripture, suggesting in itself a crucifixion in a celestial realm rather than on Earth, a crucifixion that was only viewable through the spiritually opened eyes of faith. Even more importantly, however, this was what he insinuated the Galatians were foolishly forgetting in their forsaking of the implications of the gospel. It seems that for Paul, the point of the prophesied cross (or wooden stake) was not so much to be the instrument of Jesus's death, but rather to portray the significance of his execution, to present Jesus as a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice (Romans 3:25), to display the idea that he was bearing the curse of God for sin (Galatians 3:13). This was entirely consistent with his quotation of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, which implied that those executed for their crimes should be hung on a tree until nightfall to serve as a public display of their guilt. A Roman cross could have

served that purpose on this one specific occasion, too, of course, but it would not have obviously done so. A person who was convinced of a historical Jesus's innocence would not have naturally concluded that a wrongful Roman crucifixion must have involved Jesus bearing the curse of God for sin. A celestial crucifixion, on the other hand, being such a unique event, and involving Jesus being specifically handed over to Satan and his minions for that purpose (as 1 Corinthians 2:8 probably implies), could more readily be endowed with such cosmic significance.

A possibly related idea to this is referenced in Colossians 2:15, which says that Jesus made a public display or spectacle of the demonic rulers and authorities he had triumphed over on the cross, suggesting a sort of reversal or counterpart to the public display or spectacle they had made of him. Although likely not written by Paul himself, if this author imagined the crucifixion and resurrection as earthly events, it is hard to see how these events would have involved making a public display or spectacle of these beings. It sounds more like a display in the celestial realm of those very beings who had executed Jesus, exactly as would be expected under the mythicist paradigm.

Paul's faith in the Roman government: In Romans 13:1-6, Paul wrote a whole paragraph on how those in governmental authority are God's instruments (literally "ministers" or "servants"), put in place by him to punish wrongdoers, and how we therefore have no need to fear them if we are properly submissive and careful to do what's right instead of what's wrong. This would be a very strange thing for him to say (especially so casually, without qualification) under the historicist paradigm, in which his message centered around a totally unjust crucifixion of a sinless man by the Roman government. But the strangeness completely disappears under the mythicist paradigm.

While I would not claim any of these features in Paul's thought as particularly strong evidence for the idea that Paul regarded Jesus as a purely celestial messiah rather than a historical one, I do think they add to the impression that this is the paradigm that generally makes more coherent sense of what he wrote. There are a few passages in his writing that admittedly present interpretative difficulties under this paradigm, but only one for which the difficulties are not comparable or even greater for the alternative assumption in my judgment.

I'm not sure we can say the same of the historicist paradigm, which offers no easy explanation for the persistent lack of references to Jesus's teachings across all of Paul's writings, contrary to what we would expect on that assumption. We could postulate a fairly unremarkable Jesus, who apparently wasn't really remembered for any specific or significant teaching, as the solution. But I'm not sure how to make coherent sense of the idea that such a nondescript historical Jesus nevertheless managed to inspire those who knew him best to change their whole approach to scripture and to begin thinking of him as the divine Christ, simply because they started seeing visions of him risen from the dead. I'm not saying this would be impossible, but I don't think it has the same explanatory power for the origins of the Christian religion that the mythicist paradigm offers. Nor do I think it explains why the early Christians in the first few generations had such a diversity of views as naturally as the mythicist paradigm does.

In practice it doesn't make much difference to me which paradigm is correct. Even if Jesus was a real, historical person, there still wouldn't be much we could discover about him in my opinion, and absolutely nothing to suggest that he was even a particularly notable or insightful teacher, let alone an actual representative of God. My best guess, however, is that he never even existed at all. I'm not claiming confidence beyond all reasonable doubt, but it seems more likely to me that the idea of Jesus as a historical person on Earth was a later myth, and not something Paul and the original Christians ever taught or even imagined. I think their Jesus was a merely speculated, otherworldly being.