

Did a Historical Jesus Exist?

An Executive Summary of the Bayesian Historicity Assessment

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The paper asks a narrower question than whether Christianity is true: did an identifiable first-century person supply the historical nucleus of the earliest Jesus movement?

Two competing explanations

The historical hypothesis requires a first-century Jewish man whose life, followers, and death contributed substantially to the movement's origin. It does not require accepting miracles or the Gospel narratives as literal biography. The broad mythic hypothesis instead allows a movement that begins primarily with scripture, revelation, or a celestial figure and later acquires earthly biography. That family contains several accounts; it is not identical to any one detailed mythicist reconstruction.

The paper's controversial result

The central assessment is approximately 38% historical and 62% broadly mythic. A serious range considered in the paper places historicity roughly between 25% and 55%, depending on the disputed assumptions. These are subjective model judgments, not calibrated confidence intervals. The result conflicts with the predominant scholarly conclusion, which favors a historical Jesus. Its purpose is to expose the assumptions behind a contrary judgment, not to make the disagreement disappear behind a percentage.

The strongest evidence for historicity

Paul's references to James as the "brother of the Lord" and to the Lord's brothers are central. Read as biological kinship, they are difficult for a purely celestial-origin account. The paper retains substantial positive weight for that reading rather than explaining it away by definition. Later public traditions and documentary references also matter. An alternative hypothesis must explain why earthly identification emerged and why these references have the forms they do.

What moves the model in the other direction

The paper assigns negative weight to the combination of Paul's revelatory emphasis and limited biographical detail, the unusually myth-shaped narrative profile, and documentary asymmetries. It examines whether the later material independently corroborates a person or repeats a tradition already circulating. These are contested inferences. Silence is informative only when the writer would plausibly have mentioned the missing fact, and literary elaboration can occur around real people as well as invented figures.

Did a Historical Jesus Exist? | The argument and its limits

An explicit chain, not a vote among authorities

The central model begins with a 70% prior probability of historicity, then applies a dependence-adjusted net likelihood ratio of about 0.26. That produces the approximately 38% result. The calculations make it possible to challenge a prior, a particular evidential judgment, or the treatment of dependence separately. They do not turn disputed interpretations into observed historical frequencies. The size of the update needs to be defended in the prose, not merely calculated correctly.

Important constraints on the skeptical case

The paper does not treat docetism, the view that Jesus only appeared human in some sense, as equivalent to denying that an earthly Jesus existed. It does not infer that the absence of an early surviving denial proves mythicism. It also recognizes that later dating of Pauline material can weaken both the value of kinship testimony and the force of arguments from Pauline silence. An assumption should not be used only in the direction that helps the preferred conclusion.

Where the real disagreements lie

The leading questions concern the meaning and independence of the kinship references, the appropriate background rate for a movement of this kind, the likelihood of sparse biography under a historical origin, and how much later narratives and external references add. A myth-pattern classification cannot be used once to create a skeptical prior and again as an independent reason for the same update. Nor can Josephus, Tacitus, and Christian traditions automatically be multiplied as independent witnesses without examining how they could have obtained their information.

What the result does not establish

A 62% allocation to a broad mythic family is not a 62% probability that a particular author's complete theory is correct. It does not settle the theology of resurrection, moral teaching, or religious experience. It also does not remove the historical case's strongest evidence. The full paper is most useful to readers willing to inspect where a minority judgment departs from mainstream scholarship and how strongly those departures drive the result.

A test of method as well as a historical argument

Malpert pressed religious context, documentary comparisons, Pauline interpretation, and adversarial treatment of the historical and mythic cases. AI supplied synthesis, probability bookkeeping, and repeated revisions. Richard Carrier's feedback formed part of the project's critical history, not an endorsement of every subsequent conclusion. The contribution is a revisable argument with visible disagreements, rather than a claim that model agreement has settled an ancient question.

Source: The Historicity of Jesus: A Bayesian Reassessment, September 2026, 11 pages. See the hypotheses, evidence groups, central calculation, sensitivity discussion, and contribution record. No probability in this summary is newly elicited.