

# The Twelve Axioms of Historical Method

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Though the following axioms pertain specifically to the theories and work discussed in my book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*, they apply generally to all historical inquiry. These twelve axioms represent the epistemological foundation of rational-empirical history.<sup>1</sup>

**Axiom 1:** The basic principle (the *sine qua non*) of rational-empirical history is that all conclusions must logically follow from the evidence available to all observers.

By ‘basic principle’ I mean *sine qua non* (‘without which, not’), a principle without which you cannot have a rational-empirical inquiry. This means (a) private intuition, personal emotions and feelings, inspiration, revelation, or spirit communications cannot be a primary source of evidence and (b) all conclusions argued from the agreed ‘evidence’ must be logically valid and free of all fallacies. It is for this reason that apologetic historicism must be rejected, along with illogical or polemical mythicism.

**Axiom 2:** The correct procedure in historical argument is to seek a consensus among all qualified experts who agree with the basic principle of rational-empirical history.

By ‘correct procedure’ I mean this is the only truth-finding procedure that performs well enough to trust—which means, the only procedure that gets us to the truth at a rate significantly better than

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<sup>1</sup> For the epistemology underlying these axioms and the concepts and assumptions within them, see my book *Sense and Goodness without God* (esp. pp. 21-62 and pp. 211-52) and my essay “Epistemological End Game” (29 November 2006) at <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2006/11/epistemological-end-game.html>. I further discuss the epistemology of history in my essay “Experimental History” (28 June 2007) at <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2007/07/experimental-history.html>.

chance. By ‘qualified expert’ I recognize this comes by degrees (e.g. there is a difference between being qualified merely as a historian and being qualified as a specialist in a specific field like ancient Roman history) and that merely being qualified is not a sufficient condition for knowledge (even the most qualified experts remain unaware of findings and developments in their own field, as there is often far too much even in highly specialized fields for any mortal to have read it all). Hence generating consensus is a slow process that radiates outward in circles of authority, from specialists to generalists, as an argument is continually advanced and publicized through proper channels.

Proper historical argument consists of seeking this growth of consensus, and entails everything this requires (diplomatically, rhetorically, and procedurally—hence the purpose of peer review, and my recommended twelve rules below). This process cannot be bypassed, as specialists in a field are the most qualified to assess an argument in that field, so if *they* cannot be persuaded, no one should be (unless their resistance can be *proven*, not merely assumed, to have other motives than truth-seeking). Conversely, if they *are* persuaded, everyone else has a very compelling reason to agree (unless, again, their acceptance can be *proven*, not merely assumed, to have other motives than truth-seeking). This is the social function and purpose of having such experts and specialists in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Such consensus-seeking results in a dialectic of criticism and revision, which allows errors and gaps to be identified and corrected, and arguments and evidence to be fortified, until, by the time an argument reaches a wide consensus, you will have an even stronger conclusion than you started with (since the probability of overlooked facts or errors declines with every peer who examines the case), or else you will have discovered your conclusion is incorrect or unwarranted (as you come to realize the criticisms amount to an adequate refutation). Hence the process of argument must be to make your best case, then ask the community of qualified experts to rebut it, and then respond to their critique, repeating this cycle of exchange until either of two things happens: you must reasonably accept that

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Carrier, “The Function of the Historian in Society.” *The History Teacher* 35.4 (August 2002): pp. 519-26.

your arguments, finally revised in light of wide criticism, do not suffice to justify your conclusion after all, or your critics will accept that their rebuttals are insufficient to warrant rejecting your conclusion. The latter results in a revised consensus, on which future scholarship can then build. The former results in putting away an interesting but ultimately untenable theory.

It is notable that *neither* myth *nor* historicity have actually undergone this process. Historicity is generally just assumed (resting on a few off-hand appeals to whatever evidence comes to mind), while mythicism is generally just ignored (being dismissed without proper examination).

**Axiom 3:** Overconfidence is fallacious; admitting ignorance or uncertainty is not.

Ignorance and uncertainty are common and normal. But asserting as known or certain what is not entails some fallacy in your reasoning. And yet I find such fallacies of overconfidence repeatedly among both mythicists and historicists.

One thing professional historians soon learn is how much we need to accept the fact that we will never know most of what we want to know—about Jesus or the origins of Christianity, or anything else in history. Compared to, for example, Richard Nixon or Mark Twain, the documentation for Jesus and the origins of Christianity is extraordinarily thin and problematic. And yet even knowing all we'd like to know about Nixon or Twain is impossible, as even for them the evidence is neither complete nor unproblematic—for Jesus and the origins of Christianity, vastly more so. Anyone who rejects this conclusion is not an objective scholar, but a dogmatist or apologist, whose voice needn't be heeded by any respectable academic community. Likewise, most of what we can say, especially about ancient history, we can only say 'maybe' or 'probably'—not 'definitely'. There is more than one degree of certainty. Some things we are more sure of than others, and some things we are only barely sure of at all. Hence, especially in history, and even more so in ancient history, confidence must often be

measured in relative degrees of certainty, and not in black-and-white terms of ‘true’ and ‘false’.

If this is so for historicity (and it is), then it must also be so for mythicism. Hence mythicists must not be expected to “know more” than historicists can honestly claim to know themselves. If a historicist can say “I don’t know” for any given fact, then so can a mythicist. Neither can be criticized merely for that. Conversely, if uncertainties prevail for any claim to historicity, they must also prevail for any claim of myth, and thus mythicists must embrace the same hesitance and humility they expect from historicists.

**Axiom 4:** Every logically possible claim has a nonzero epistemic probability of being true or false.

By ‘possible’ here I mean a claim that is possible *in any sense at all* (as opposed to a claim that is logically impossible), and by ‘probability’ here I mean ‘epistemic probability’, which is the probability that we are correct when affirming a theory or claim is true. For example, if (given all we know) a claim has a 25% probability of being true, then if we say that claim is true, there is a 75% chance we are mistaken, but if we say that claim is *false*, there is only a 25% chance we are mistaken. Therefore, if we say such a claim is false, we will more likely be correct, and so we say the claim is false. But it still has some probability of being true. Accordingly, when we say something is ‘probable’ we usually mean it has an epistemic probability much greater than 50%, and if we say it’s ‘improbable’ we mean it has an epistemic probability much less than 50%, and everything else we consider more or less uncertain.

If a claim is not logically impossible, then it has *some* probability of being true, however small. This is because we have only finite knowledge and we are not infallible, therefore some probability always remains that we are mistaken or misinformed or misled. Our challenge, then, is to only believe claims that we are very unlikely to be mistaken or misinformed or misled about. But many things have

different levels of certainty and thus different degrees of probability. And although the probability that a given claim is true (or false) may be vanishingly small and thus *practically* zero, it is never *actually* zero. It is vital to admit this. For the truth is not always what is most probable, since improbable things happen all the time. If we know nothing else, often we can at least say what's most likely. But that's *not* the same as saying the alternative can't be true. We may have to admit it *could* be true, even if we don't think it is. And we may have to decide just how likely or unlikely *either* conclusion is.

Almost everything that happens is in some sense improbable—from the specific conjunction of your own unique DNA to the specific sequence of people you might meet on any given day. And yet it happens. Though being struck by lightning is very improbable, it nevertheless happens to hundreds of people every year. And if your wallet turns up missing, regardless of which is more probable—it being stolen or your having misplaced it—*either* could turn out to be true. Arriving at a reasonable conclusion as to what is the more likely explanation of any conjunction of facts will require comparing the *relative* probabilities of all the pertinent evidence on different theories (as I demonstrate in chapter two of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*), which requires admitting that theories you don't believe in nevertheless have some probability of being true, and theories you're sure are true nevertheless have some probability of being false. And you have to take seriously the effort to measure those probabilities. For when you do, you may find you can't sustain the level of certainty you once had. Hence mythicists must be prepared to admit there *might* have been a Jesus after all, just as historicists must be prepared to admit there might *not* have been a Jesus after all, no matter what you end up thinking is more likely, and no matter how much more likely you think it is.

**Axiom 5:** Any argument relying on the inference “possibly, therefore probably” is fallacious.

This is a form of modal fallacy (*possibiliter ergo probabiliter*) that is so common in historical argument on this issue from *both* sides (mythicists and historicists) that it deserves particular attention. In fact, I expect it will be the most common fallacy resorted to by critics of this book. Just because you can conceive of a possible alternative explanation does not entail your alternative is actually more likely (or in any way likely at all).

For example, historicists will often dismiss an argument from silence by proposing some explanation for why a document is silent on that detail (I examine some typical examples in chapter eight of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*). Of course, knowing why we don’t have certain evidence still does not change the fact that we don’t have that evidence. All you can then say is that this lack of evidence is inconclusive, not that it supports your conclusion over another. But more importantly, just because you can think of a reason to explain away a document’s silence does not mean that reason is *probable*, and if it isn’t probable, it isn’t a valid objection to an argument from silence—so treating it as if it were is a fallacy (I discuss the logic of an ‘argument from silence’ in chapter two of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*). In the same way, mythicists often do little more than conceive of some possible symbolic scheme of interpretation for the content of the Gospels, and assume that because their interpretation fits, therefore it’s true. But that’s the same fallacy. An infinite array of possible explanations can be deployed for any set of evidence, and quite a lot of them will even seem an uncanny fit, yet at most only one of them can be true, which means merely finding a seemingly uncanny fit between evidence and theory is a completely unreliable method to employ.

In such ways as these, historicists and mythicists often assume they’ve won their argument if they can think of any possible explanation contrary to their opponents’. But this is all the same modal

fallacy—*unless* the alternative is shown to be not merely *possible*, but *highly probable* (or at least probable enough to carry whatever burden is required of the argument). For example, if a historicist has a very good reason to expect a document’s silence on a particular detail, then that silence cannot argue against historicism—though neither does this fact argue against mythicism. Likewise, if a fit between text and interpretation can be demonstrated not merely to *seem* uncanny, but to actually *be* uncanny (for example, by proving such a fit is very improbable unless it was the author’s actual intent), then that *does* support mythicism (on at least that one detail). I say more about this in *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*.

On the other hand, just as often overlooked (or downplayed) by historicists and mythicists alike is the fact that many theories we can posit may indeed be true, yet the evidence may still be insufficient to prove them or to warrant believing them. We thus must be willing to admit what we don’t know at all, and what we don’t know for certain, and not mistake our not knowing whether a theory is true for our knowing it is false. In other words, just because “possibly, therefore probably” is a fallacy doesn’t mean a conclusion produced by this fallacy is *false*, it only means a conclusion is not established by merely being possible. Consider the claim that Caesar shaved on the morning of May 12, 52 B.C., or that Caesar once played dice with a hooker named Maxsuma. We have no evidence of these facts. Yet not believing these things is not the same as believing they are false. Either claim may well be true, even if they were improbable. Indeed, even if they were very *probable* they may yet be false (a point I discuss in chapter twelve of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*). Even the fact that we can easily explain the silence of extant documents on these claims does not constitute a valid argument for believing them. And yet, ‘not believing’ those things is not the same as ‘not believing’ Caesar rode a winged horse or that Caesar once camped on the moon. We can express uncertainty on what days Caesar shaved or what hookers he may have dined with, allowing a great deal to be possible on either point without claiming to know, but we *wouldn’t* allow the same latitude for his flying horse or imperial

moonbase—knowing full well the prior probability of either of the latter is far too low to credit, unlike the prior probability of his shaving on any given day or ever having played dice with a hooker of a particular name.

Hence, though “possibly, therefore probably” is fallacious, there is no inherent evil in speculation, or in the exploration of possibilities. There are a great many things that are true about the ancient world and its people and events that we today have no evidence of at all, and we need to take seriously the range of what could yet have happened though remains unknown to us.<sup>3</sup> But such speculation must be used sparingly and appropriately. Theories and generalizations that are weakly supported need not be dismissed, if their plausibility can be adequately defended, but they must never be treated as anything more than they are: plausible possibilities, not confirmed facts.

**Axiom 6:** An effective consensus of qualified experts constitutes meeting an initial burden of evidence.

The effective consensus of qualified experts (something in the vicinity of 95% agreement) is probably true unless a strong and valid proof arises that it is not. This is a straightforward fact of frequency: the methods that generate such a consensus far more frequently discover the truth than err, therefore any given result of that consensus is far more probably true than false. Even if we demonstrated (not merely asserted, but actually proved) that the consensus has been improperly generated (e.g. if we actually proved it is based on dogma or tradition rather than a genuine application of sound methods), that would only be sufficient to establish that the consensus position has not been properly established, *not* that it is false or that any alternative is instead correct. So even under those conditions one must *still*

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of this point using a real example, see Richard Carrier, “The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb,” *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. Robert M. Price & Jeffery Jay Lowder (Prometheus 2005): pp. 180-82.

present sufficient evidence for any alternative conclusion in order to reverse the consensus. Of course, if properly pursued, such an effort would then aim at *becoming* the consensus.

Hence the burden of proof here clearly falls on the mythicists, despite their repeated attempts to deny this. For historicists have already met the burden of evidence to produce a consensus of qualified experts. Therefore mythicists must overcome that burden with their own. Attempts to argue that the current consensus has been improperly generated have some merit (e.g. many historicists *do* make assertions out of proportion to the evidence, or simply cite ‘the consensus’ without checking how that consensus was actually generated). But such arguments are still inadequate, since there is certainly *prima facie* evidence for a historical Jesus (hence historicity need not be asserted dogmatically, even when it is). Moreover, such a claim (of an improperly generated consensus) must still meet its *own* burden of evidence. In fact, any claim that the consensus is actually *wrong* (and not merely unfounded) requires meeting an even *greater* burden of evidence (in defense of some alternative theory).

Ordinarily, a strong consensus of experts would entail a high prior probability the consensus theory is true. Yet occasionally this is not so. Accordingly, in chapters four and five, with support in chapter seven, of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* I show there is enough reason to conclude that the consensus is not reliable in this case and therefore cannot be appealed to as evidence for the conclusion. Yet I still bore the burden of proving that. And the *prima facie* evidence, which constitutes all the valid evidence the consensus could ever appeal to, still cannot be ignored. But it must be examined anew.

**Axiom 7:** Facts must be distinguished from theories.

A very common error I find among both historicists and mythicists is the conflation of facts with theories. Proper facts are actual tangible artifacts (such as extant texts and archaeological finds) and straightforward generalizations therefrom. Everything else is a theory as to how those facts came about.

Some such theories can be so well and widely confirmed that we consider them facts, but one should never assume a theory is that well confirmed before checking to ensure that it is (and merely having an effective consensus of qualified experts is not enough to confirm this). For example, “the first Christians found Jesus’ tomb empty” is not a fact. It is a theory, which is proposed to explain what actually *is* a fact: that certain later stories arose describing such a find, and now survive in various manuscripts. But there are alternative theories, e.g. that those stories arose originally to convey a symbolic meaning, and were embellished later as propaganda.<sup>4</sup> That there are alternative theories of the evidence does not mean those theories are true. It may well be that an actual empty tomb is far more likely. But that has to be argued. It requires sufficient demonstration to warrant belief. It cannot simply be assumed as a fact. Similarly, if a mythicist wants to propose that a certain name symbolizes a particular astrological sign, he cannot simply claim that as a fact. It’s a theory, and it can only be credible to the degree that it’s the best explanation of the facts alleged to prove it (which entails considering what some other explanations of that name might be). By conflating facts with theories, very often an entire burden of evidence that is actually required is ignored or never met. This distinction is all the more important for lay readers, who will not know the difference if it is not made clear to them. Consequently, historians on both sides of the present debate should be much clearer than they have been in distinguishing confirmed facts from proposed theories.

**Axiom 8:** A conclusion is only as certain as its weakest premise.

It’s essential to watch for the weakest link in any argument, because very often a single weak link will render all resulting conclusions just as weak. This frequently happens in historical reasoning when

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<sup>4</sup> I make a detailed case for this in Richard Carrier, “The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb,” *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. Robert M. Price & Jeffery Jay Lowder (Prometheus 2005): esp. pp. 155-97.

qualifiers are snuck in without accounting for their logical consequences. For example, in any argument, analyzed formally, if there is a premise of the form “maybe *x*” then any conclusion depending on that premise cannot be any more certain than “maybe.” This follows for any qualifying language (like “probably” or “possibly” or “perhaps”). For example:

MINOR PREMISE: Alexander might have wanted to assassinate his father Philip.

MAJOR PREMISE: If Alexander wanted to assassinate his father, then  
he probably arranged his assassination.

CONCLUSION: Alexander probably arranged Philip’s assassination.

This is a fallacious conclusion, since the minor premise does not say “probably” but “might,” which makes it a weaker premise than the major premise requires. But the conclusion cannot be more certain than the weakest premise. Therefore, the only valid conclusion one could produce here would be “Alexander *might* have arranged the assassination of Philip,” which is such a trivial conclusion as to be useless (since it’s true of literally anyone, and predictive of nothing).

This may seem an obvious point to make, but ignoring it is a frequent error among both historicists and mythicists, who often make bold assertions from more hesitant premises, forgetting that somewhere along the line of their argument one of their key supporting points was more speculative than their conclusion would suggest. And it only takes *one* weak premise to render all resulting conclusions equally weak, no matter how strong every other premise may be or how many other strong premises there are. Yet I’ve seen both sides take ambiguous evidence like this and derive unambiguous conclusions from it, making this a remarkably common error.

**Axiom 9:** The strength of any claim is always proportional to the strength of the evidence supporting it.

The strength of a claim means the likelihood of it being true, which (as already noted) is the likelihood of our being mistaken if we denied it was true. The strength of the available evidence is measured not just by quantity. In fact, quantity can mean little if the evidence is not independent, e.g. having a thousand copies of a letter does not make the claims in that letter any more true, but having ten different witnesses reporting a fact independently of each other *does* (provided nothing else calls their testimony into question). But apart from quantity, strength is also measured by the certainty, credibility, and uniqueness of any potential causal connection between the evidence and what it is claimed to support, or by how securely and abundantly the evidence establishes a broader generalization that makes a particular claim more likely or unlikely (all of which I explore in *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*). But in every case, our conclusions must be proportionate. We must never assert a claim to be more certain than the evidence warrants.

**Axiom 10:** Weak claims that contradict strong claims are probably false.

Any weak claim will by definition have a lower probability of being true than a strong claim. Therefore, if a weak claim contradicts a strong claim, more probably than not the weak claim is false. This does not entail the strong claim is true. But it does entail that only the strong claim could then be asserted as the most likely of the two. Which means a strong claim cannot be refuted with a weaker one.

**Axiom 11:** Generalizations must be supported by evidence, and that evidence must consist of more than one example (or of an example that strongly implies a general trend), and once supported, cannot be ignored.

All too often generalizations are declared (such as about what Romans or Jews typically did or thought or said) without any supporting evidence at all—or with only one instance, which is insufficient to demonstrate what was typical, unless the character of that instance strongly supports a conclusion that it is in fact an instance of what was typical. One should also not confuse what was typical with what was possible, not only because of Axiom 6, but also the converse: for there will be exceptions to any generalization. If you assert a generalization as absolute (i.e. without exception), that carries a far greater burden of evidence than any ordinary generalization. For every generalization entails its converse, which must be just as defensible on the same evidence: e.g. the converse of the generalization “everyone always read aloud” is the generalization “no one ever read silently.” If the evidence is insufficient to support the latter, it is insufficient to support the former. By contrast, evidence supporting “everyone *usually* read aloud” is not sufficient to support “no one *ever* read silently.”

Importantly for this Axiom, generalizations are not limited to historical trends but also include all rules of inference. If you apply a general rule of inference in some cases and not others, then when you don't apply the rule you must be able to apply *another* general rule of inference to justify not applying that rule in that special case. And that *other* general rule must itself be demonstrably exceptionless or (ultimately) supported by one that is. Hence any system of general rules of inference that you construct and employ must be internally consistent. Which means you cannot arbitrarily apply or fail to apply a rule simply when it suits you. To the contrary, any such negation of a rule must be justified by another valid rule. Thus Axiom 11 invalidates ‘cherry-picking’ and ‘special pleading’ and

other abuses of logic and evidence.

**Axiom 12:** When I cite a scholar, it should only be assumed I agree with what they say that is essential to the point I cite them for.

This is an Axiom we should apply to all scholars and authors, but I assert it here directly of myself. Though I may agree with many of the scholars I cite in this book on much else besides what I cite them for, it's still a fallacy to *assume* I do without evidence to that effect. Of course, proving I agree with some additional point by adducing evidence that I do is not assuming I do but arguing I do, which is valid. But beyond that, it will be a fallacy to argue against me by arguing against something said by someone I cite which is not necessary to anything I myself have said.

This kind of 'baggage' fallacy (often deployed as a variety of the textbook fallacy of 'poisoning the well') is common enough to warrant particular condemnation. In fact, I see this fallacy committed so regularly, so widely, by accomplished scholars who ought to know better, that I feel the need to call particular attention to it now, in the hopes it will forestall a repeat performance. If you cite a scholar as proving point A, and that same scholar also argues B, but B is not necessary to A, then it is a fallacy for anyone to assume you agree with B, and a fallacy to employ this assumption to argue that if B is not credible then A is not credible. I call this the 'baggage' fallacy because it amounts to saddling an author with all the 'baggage' attached to the scholars he cites or the views he defends, when such attachment is neither entailed nor warranted. Just because I take certain positions or arrive at certain conclusions is no excuse to impute to me all the baggage that is usually supposed to come along with those positions or conclusions.

For example, when I argue a point (such as that distinct elements of Osiris cult can be seen in early Jesus cult), it might be assumed I agree with something else that supposedly goes along with this

(such as that *all* elements of Osiris cult were in early Jesus cult, or that Jesus is merely Osiris under another name, or that Christians just ‘borrowed’ and ‘revamped’ an Egyptian religion). That would be mistaken. It would likewise be mistaken to assume I agree with every other alleged parallel that has in the past been made between Jesus and other pagan gods, or that I agree with every theory as to why or how such parallels came to exist, simply because I agree there are some meaningful parallels with pre-Christian gods. The same fallacy also results when I agree with something a particular book said, or cite it as a reference of importance on a specific subject, and then it’s assumed I agree with *everything* that book said or that its author elsewhere defends.

I emphasize Axiom 12 in *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* for a particular reason. To keep that book as short as possible and littered with as few distractions and digressions as possible, I employed a rule of removing the inessential and sticking to a clearly defined structure. Which means I cite or quote many scholars and works there even though I may disagree with them substantially on other matters, even matters discussed in the very same works I cite or quote. It’s common to mention these disagreements in the text or notes, but such a practice only clutters, and my material is already overlong. Hence I often omit these disagreements. But my omitting them should not be mistaken for my having none.

This caveat also applies to that book’s overall content. I emphasize what I believe is most defensible (even if many scholars try to contest them in current literature, the evidence will be insurmountable in my view, and hence their objections unreasonable), and build a case therefrom. But such a procedure leaves out countless details, about which countless questions could be asked. Again, my omitting such things should not be mistaken for my not being aware of them. But if any of these omitted details (which could fill volumes) undermine my core argument, it is still valid to call attention to that fact. My omission of such questions and details may be taken as indicating that I don’t believe they undermine or seriously challenge my core argument. In other words, as my research in this matter

has been extensive, I believe anything I have omitted can be resolved or worked out in ways perfectly consistent with my core argument. But I could be wrong about that, hence my call for a critique from my peers.

Nevertheless, Axiom 12 cannot justify relying on gratuitously bad scholarship. One class of scholar I won't even mention (other than to denounce) are the many contemporary mythicists (and occasionally historicists as well) who do not employ an adequate method of citation and referencing, and who consequently make countless dubious or false claims or claims incapable of confirmation. Consequently, their work is of no use to laymen (who can't assess which claims are credible or dubious), and of little use to experts (who have to redo all their research anyway before trusting what they say, which negates the point of reading them). One expert who straddles the border between those worth citing and those not is Robert Price, who is nevertheless a well-qualified expert who often has valuable observations worth considering, but is too inconsistent in his references and often too hyperbolic in his conclusions. Hence I cite him only sparingly. He is an entertaining writer often with useful insights, but although I frequently found his work of considerable use, I typically had to fact-check anything he said before relying on it myself—the punishment for which is that I don't cite him if I had to do the work. I just cite the evidence instead.

## **The Twelve Rules of Historical Method**

In addition to the twelve axioms just explained, there are also twelve rules I would like to see all historicists and mythicists consistently follow, in order to make their work more credible and worthwhile, and to make progress possible. Though mythicists are more frequently guilty of not following these rules, historicists are not always without sin on this score, and we all fail at them from time to time (myself included). But none should be controversial. As with the axioms just surveyed,

this list is repeated in *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* and pertains to the subject addressed therein, yet obviously can be generalized to apply to all historical reasoning on any subject.

**Rule 1:** Obey the Twelve Axioms (given above) and Bayes' Theorem. This does not mean you must use Bayes' Theorem in any mathematical sense, only that any historical argument you employ must not violate Bayes' Theorem.<sup>5</sup>

**Rule 2:** Develop wide expertise in the period, topics, languages, and materials that you intend to blaze any trails in, *or else* base all your assumptions in these areas on the *established* (and properly cited) findings of those who have.

**Rule 3:** Check all claims against the evidence and scholarship, especially generalizations and assumptions (i.e. don't assume that because you heard or read it somewhere or it just seems plausible, that therefore it's likely or true).

**Rule 4:** Confirm that an argument follows from the original language of a text with as much assurance as from your preferred translation. And confirm that your preferred translation fits the original context (both textual and sociocultural).

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<sup>5</sup> For an articulation and defense of Bayes' Theorem in application to historical reasoning see chapter two of *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*, and Richard Carrier, "Bayes' Theorem for Beginners: Formal Logic and Its Relevance to Historical Method," *Caesar: A Journal for the Critical Study of Religion and Human Values* 3.1 (2009): 26-35 (reproduced in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth* (Prometheus 2010), ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann), with the associated adjunct document "Bayes Theorem for Beginners" (2008) at <http://www.richardcarrier.info/CarrierDec08.pdf>. I also provide a discussion and application of the theorem in the endnotes and text of Richard Carrier, "Why the Resurrection is Unbelievable," in *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails*, ed. John Loftus (Prometheus: 2010).

**Rule 5:** Phrase all your claims for optimal truth value. Use all necessary qualifications, avoid hyperbole, do not state as fact what is not fact or as certain what is not certain, always express degrees of certainty or uncertainty when appropriate, acknowledge the difference between a speculation and an assertion, and concede when more research is needed.

**Rule 6:** Don't conflate weakly supported claims with strongly supported claims, nor confuse theories with facts, or speculations with theories. Always be explicit in all your writings as to which is which.

**Rule 7:** Address all relevant and significant evidence *against* what you claim (including any relevant arguments from silence against what you claim).

**Rule 8:** Take into account problems of chronological development. Everything changed over time, and documents written much later may or may not reflect earlier views or practices, regardless of what they claim. Hence any argument for influence requires evidence not just of parallels and similarities but of the causal direction of that influence.

**Rule 9:** Always cite your primary evidence, or cite sources that either cite the relevant primary evidence themselves or cite further sources that collectively do. Never make controversial assertions without leaving a trail of sources and evidence sufficient to confirm those assertions are true.

**Rule 10:** Avoid reliance on scholarship published prior to 1950 and rely as much as possible on scholarship published after 1970. Work published prior to 1950 need not be ignored, but should not be relied upon if at all possible. Except for archaeology and philology (e.g. observational reporting and textual editing), old work should be avoided altogether or employed only when supported by later work (or your own).<sup>6</sup>

**Rule 11:** Always report what the most recent general scholarship says on a subject, or what the current leading consensus is, if either is different from your own view. Do not give the impression that a view contrary to the leading consensus *is* the consensus or that a maverick view is a normal view.

**Rule 12:** Admit when you are wrong and publish a correction or revision. Constantly seek expert criticism to refine your work in this very respect.

Adherence to all twelve axioms and all twelve rules should consistently produce reliable history, which will continually improve with constructive debate.

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<sup>6</sup> I explain why in Richard Carrier, "History Before 1950," *Richard Carrier Blogs* (30 April 2007) at <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2007/04/history-before-1950.html>.