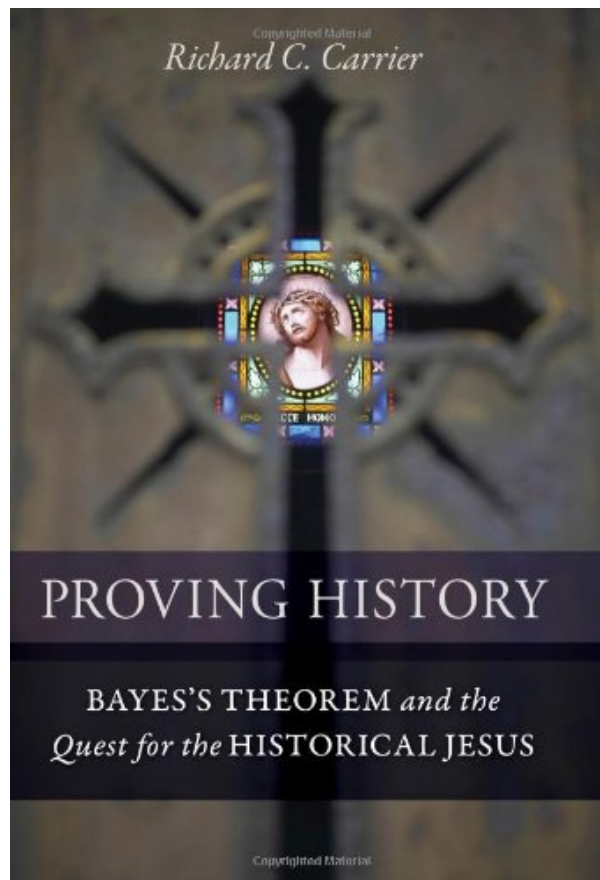
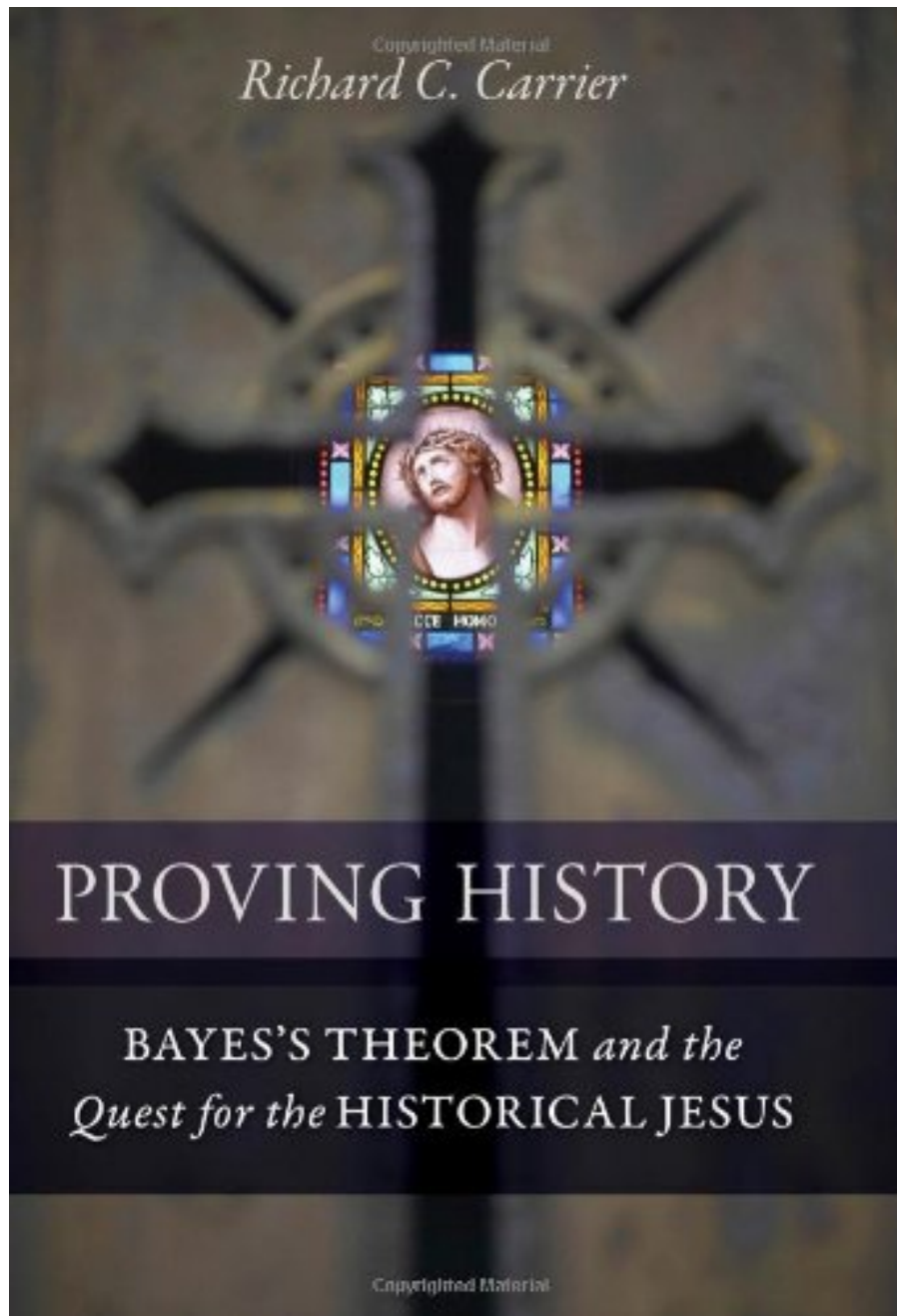


PROVING HISTORY: BAYES'S THEOREM AND THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS BY RICHARD CARRIER



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Review

"[C]arefully exposes what happens when sound methodology meets biblical studies. . . . Proving History is a brilliant lesson in the proper proportioning of belief to evidence. Even minimal attention to Bayesian probability theory reveals just how much of Jesus scholarship confuses 'possibly true' with 'probably true.' The only miracle Richard Carrier has left to explain is why so few appreciate that extraordinary claims require extraordinary support."

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"Carrier applies his philosophical and historical training to maximum effect in outlining a case for the use of Bayes's Theorem in evaluating biblical claims. Even biblical scholars, who usually are not mathematically inclined, may never look at the 'historical Jesus' the same way again."

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About the Author

Richard C. Carrier, an independent scholar with a doctorate in ancient history from Columbia University, is the author of *Why I Am Not a Christian: Four Conclusive Reasons to Reject the Faith; Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed*; and *Sense and Goodness without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism*. He has also contributed chapters to *The End of Christianity*, edited by John W. Loftus; *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History from Myth*, edited by R. Joseph Hoffmann; *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails*, edited by John W. Loftus; and *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave*, edited by Robert Price and Jeffery Lowder.

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This in-depth discussion of New Testament scholarship and the challenges of history as a whole proposes Bayes's Theorem, which deals with probabilities under conditions of uncertainty, as a solution to the problem of establishing reliable historical criteria. The author demonstrates that valid historical methods—not only in the study of Christian origins but in any historical study—can be described by, and reduced to, the logic of Bayes's Theorem. Conversely, he argues that any method that cannot be reduced to this theorem is invalid and should be abandoned.

Writing with thoroughness and clarity, the author explains Bayes's Theorem in terms that are easily understandable to professional historians and laypeople alike, employing nothing more than well-known primary school math. He then explores precisely how the theorem can be applied to history and addresses numerous challenges to and criticisms of its use in testing or justifying the conclusions that historians make about the important persons and events of the past. The traditional and established methods of historians are analyzed using the theorem, as well as all the major "historicity criteria" employed in the latest quest to establish the historicity of Jesus. The author demonstrates not only the deficiencies of these approaches but also ways to rehabilitate them using Bayes's Theorem.

Anyone with an interest in historical methods, how historical knowledge can be justified, new applications of Bayes's Theorem, or the study of the historical Jesus will find this book to be essential reading.

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Studies

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Most helpful customer reviews

98 of 112 people found the following review helpful.

Brilliant Book but Not For Everyone

By Book Fanatic

This is an amazing book by Richard Carrier. It is important to note that this book is not a book on whether or not Jesus was a historical person. Dr. Carrier is writing a second book to follow up this one called "On the Historicity of Jesus Christ" that will address that question. He does touch on the subject somewhat in this book, but the purpose of this book is to lay the theoretical groundwork for the next volume.

The present volume argues, and argues quite persuasively that historians should employ Bayes's Theorem in their work and of course that includes work on the historical Jesus. Regardless of what you think about that subject, if you are a thinking person, I think you should read this book. If you care about how we know what we know and how likely your beliefs are to be correct you should read this book. In that regard it is excellent. It does have a fairly narrow focus but that focus is on something that has incredibly wide application.

I'm just a lay person interested in science, history, and philosophy among other things. I'm not a professor or specialist in any relevant fields. I found this book an incredibly helpful guide to rigorous thought. This book is definitely not for everyone. Sometimes the author talks too much, but the points are valid and you just need to work through them. This is not light reading, although it is written in a way to be accessible to intelligent readers. You must be willing to put in some work if you are not already well versed in the theory.

I can't wait for the follow up volume where Dr. Carrier actually applies all this to the subject of a historical Jesus. I've now read several of Carrier's books and seen him on some video clips. He's a very articulate man and always seems to have something brilliant to say. I admit that I'm a fan.

Highly recommended to serious readers.

60 of 70 people found the following review helpful.

A Long-Overdue Contribution to the Historical Jesus Studies Field

By C. Murphy

When I first became interested in studying the historical Jesus for myself, I decided to get a quick overview of modern scholarship by reading *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*. What I quickly came to realize after reading only a few chapters is that the study of the historical Jesus is a mess. Not only is there almost no consensus on who the historical Jesus was but there seemed to be very little hope of resolving these differences in any sort of objective or scientific manner. While present-day Jesus scholars have attempted to develop criteria to evaluate what bits of data actually go back to a historical Jesus, as Carrier notes, "the concept of Jesus we're supposed to believe existed is actually getting more confused the more people study it

(p.12)." Enter Richard Carrier's book.

Carrier does not set forth a view of the historical Jesus in this volume. Rather, his goal is to "present a new method that solves the problem... so progress can finally be made in the field of Jesus studies (p.15)". His new method is Bayes's Theorem (BT). One need not be an expert in mathematics or even statistics to follow along in the book: a basic understanding of multiplication, division, and fractions will suffice. However, even if your eyes tend to glaze over once Carrier begins to plug in some numbers in the formula, he still adequately conveys conceptually the arguments he is defending.

The main arguments that an amateur reader like myself can take away from Carrier's work are the following:

- 1) Contrary to what some (most recently, Bart Ehrman) say, history IS a science. "The fact that historical theories rest on far weaker evidence relative to scientific theories, and as a result achieve a far lower degree of certainty, is a difference only in degree, not in kind (p 48)." Thus, when evaluating historical claims and evaluating when the evidence should cause us to believe the claim, history, like science, is Bayesian.
- 2) Precision is not necessary to apply Bayes's Theorem. "Rules of thumb" will work just fine and be accurate enough for all historical inquiry.
- 3) Rather than increasing the amount of disagreement among historians due to quibbling over probabilities, BT will actually expose historians' biases and force them to argue for their premises.
- 4) All current historical methods in Jesus studies (arguments from evidence, arguments to the best explanation, etc..) reduce to Bayes's Theorem. In other words, whether or not something really is the "best explanation" can only be determined by running the probabilities through BT.
- 5) Current historical Jesus criteria have failed to solve what Carrier calls the "Threshold Problem". In other words, do any of the historical Jesus criteria (dissimilarity, embarrassment, multiple attestation, etc...) in and of themselves tell the historical whether the claim is to be believed? Only by applying BT, argues Carrier.

I highly recommend this book. You need not agree everything Richard Carrier has ever written to recognize that this work is a great contribution to the field of Jesus studies. If it does nothing more than force current scholars in the field on all sides of the debate to abandon the unwarranted certitude many employ to their conclusions and put all arguments through the same, objective test then this book will have served its purpose.

68 of 86 people found the following review helpful.

A new methodology for historical Jesus studies!

By Dr Alexander Youngwurz@

CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

Carrier wastes no time before describing the moribund state of current historical Jesus studies. He cites various analyses which conclude that the recent 'method of criteria' fail to produce a consensus. "The entire field of Jesus studies has been left without any valid method". The reason being either invalid criteria, invalid application or a 'Threshold Problem' involving the number & weight of criteria and their significance.

THE CONSEQUENCE of this FAILURE is the current multiplicity of plausible Jesus types which abound in the literature. Carrier cites Jesus the Jewish Cynic Sage, Rabbinical Holy Man (or Devoted Pharisee, or Heretical Essene, etc.), Political Revolutionary, Zealot Activist, Apocalyptic Prophet. Messianic Pretender, as well as many other more exotic contenders.

"When everyone picks up the same method, applies it to the same facts, and gets a different result, we can be certain that that method is invalid and should be abandoned."

THE SOLUTION is the application of Bayes's Theorem (BT).

CHAPTER 2: THE BASICS

In **WHY HISTORY REQUIRES EXPERTISE**, Carrier describes four stages of historic analysis. Textual, literary, source and only last, is historical analysis proper. He then sets down a set of 12 core epistemological assumptions. **THE AXIOMS OF HISTORICAL METHOD** and discusses them in turn with some illustrative examples mostly derived from ancient times. These are then followed by **12 RULES OF HISTORICAL METHOD** which are simply stated without individual comment.

CHAPTER 3: INTRODUCING BAYES'S THEOREM

WHEN DID THE SUN GO OUT? is an interesting example from the Gospels that Carrier analyses both historically and scientifically and then contrasts with a similar hypothetical event from 1983, for the purpose of extolling the different evidentiary probabilities involved. He also introduces the question of lack of evidence or silence from expected sources. Finally concluding that this is "a slam-dunk Argument from Silence" with respect to the nonhistoricity of the Gospel account.

FROM SCIENCE TO HISTORY begins the discussion of BT: "all valid historical reasoning is described by Bayes's Theorem". A gentle nonmathematical exposition canvassing a variety of historical scientific disciplines to purely historical. **WHAT IS BAYES'S THEOREM** applies more lubricant until at last pg.50 exposes the reader to "this rather daunting equation:", which I shall spare you. There follows immediately a translation "into English" and several pages of explanation where prior probability and what Carrier refers to as consequent probability are discussed.

A BAYESIAN ANALYSIS OF THE DISAPPEARING SUN re-examines the Gospel and 1983 (now assumed fully observed) examples by employing the 'daunting equation' in thorough detail with the unsurprising result that the simple arithmetic yields Gospel event 0.01%, 1983 99.9%. As an introduction to BT methodology this is a painless, interesting and instructive exercise and should cause no problem for anyone with a genuine interest in the subject.

WHY BAYES'S THEOREM? further discusses the advantages of employing this methodology and then answers some initial reservations which Carrier has clearly been exposed to over the years.

But what has math to do with history? But math is hard. But history isn't that precise.

Carrier's reply to these legitimate concerns are fulsome and reasonable as he patiently explains the whys & wherefors.

MECHANICS OF BAYES'S THEOREM is "the most math-challenging section of the book". In truth there is very little more in the way of equations, and even then merely a mild extension of the forgoing. Rather there follows an extensive exposition of usage. That is mechanics of prior probability, mechanics of consequent probability, a Venn diagram, consequent probability and historical contingency, the role of conditional probability, the problem of subjective priors, arguing a fortiori, mediating disagreement and a canon of probabilities.

CHAPTER 4: BAYESIAN ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL METHODS

As specified Carrier proceeds to use BT to analyse;

The Argument From Evidence (AFE)

The Argument to the Best Explanation (ABE)

The Hypothetico-Deductive Method (HDM)

Then is given a Formal Proof of Universal Applicability which is quite brief, except for the caveats and explanatory discussion, but eventually all is well. Next follows,

Bayesian Analysis of the 'Smell Test', and the most fun of all,

Bayesian Analysis of the Argument from Silence.

CHAPTER 5: BAYESIAN ANALYSIS OF HISTORICITY CRITERIA

Carrier identifies "at least eighteen distinctive criteria", such as Dissimilarity, Embarrassment, Coherence,

etc.

Embarrassment receives the most extensive treatment and falls under the BT axe for a variety of reasons. There follows a SPECIFIC INADEQUACY OF THE CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT involving a detailed examination of; Jesus' crucifixion by Romans, Jesus birth in Nazareth, John's baptism of Jesus, Jesus' ignorance of the future, Did Jesus know he was the Son of Man?, Jesus betrayal by Judas Iscariot, And so on ...

The remainder of the criteria fall with increasing rapidity, as do some OTHER CRITERIA.

However, a BAYESIAN ANALYSIS OF EMULATION CRITERIA survive (with modification) and prove most instructive when "Daniel in the lion's den" becomes "Jesus in the empty tomb".

Finally in BAYESIAN DEMONSTRATIONS OF AHISTORICITY "... at first glance it seems surely "Jesus existed" would win out as the most probably hypothesis on BT. In my next volume (On the Historicity of Jesus Christ) I'll reveal that on second glance, that conclusion is not so obvious, and might even be wrong".

CHAPTER 6: THE HARD STUFF

The final chapter addresses "deeper issues regarding the application and applicability of Bayes's Theorem generally". It contains some new maths but is mostly concerned with technical aspects of BT and its use in historical research.

The book is well written with a clear and logical progression of argument. The mathematical development could hardly be more benign and there are many illustrative and entertaining examples to elucidate the details of both methodology and application. A brief Appendix provides a handy summary of the maths. The extensive notes constitute more than 10% of the book and there is a useful index. From a technical and logical perspective it very adequately covers the ground required to underpin Carrier's next volume.

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