

On Richard Carrier on the Gospels

By Tim McGrew

These are a few quick, off-the-cuff reactions to a passage from Richard Carrier's contribution to John Loftus's book *The Christian Delusion*. Quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from Carrier. I'll intersperse some comments below.

I see no relevant difference between the marvels in Herodotus and the many and varied tales of the resurrection of Jesus.

Notice the beginning of a slide here – Carrier is about to quote a document that was written a hundred years after the events it purportedly describes. Some of those tales are indeed crazy and unsubstantiated. What of it?

Even the most fundamentalist of Christians don't believe half of them.

And why should they, when they come without proper credentials?

When the Gospel of Peter (yes, Peter)

Does he really think all Christians are such rubes that they will be flummoxed by this?

says a Roman centurion, a squad of his soldiers, and a gathering of Jewish elders all saw a gigantic cross hopping along behind Jesus as he exited his tomb, and then saw Jesus grow thousands of feet tall before their very eyes, there isn't a Christian alive who believes this.

Right. Therefore ... what?

And yet that was among the most popular Gospels in the Christian churches of the second century, purportedly written by someone who was alive at the time.

This claim is nonsense on stilts. See the discussion of Ehrman, below.

So why don't Christians believe Peter's Gospel anymore?

Except for the tiny community at Rhossos, there is hardly any evidence that they ever did.

Well, for many of the same reasons we don't believe the marvels of Herodotus.

Wrong: they disbelieve it because, as Ehrman himself acknowledges, it dates from about a hundred years after the events it purports to describe and does not have what the four canonical Gospels have – an unbroken chain of attestation of apostolic authorship (Matthew, John) or apostolic authority (Mark, Luke) reaching back into the lifetime of the last of the twelve apostles.

But why then believe any of the other Gospels, those according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

Because, by contrast to the “Gospel” of Peter, they have the kind of credentials of genuineness and authenticity that we look for in any historical work.

The Gospel of Matthew claims that as Jesus died:

‘The veil of the temple tore in two from top to bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rocks were rent, and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of holy men who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection they entered into the holy city and appeared to many. And then the centurion and those who were watching Jesus with him, when they saw the earthquake and the rest that happened, were quite terrified, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!”’ (Matthew 27:51-54)

How is this any less fantastic than the Gospel of Peter?

Figures hundreds of feet tall emerging from a tomb that one had to stoop to look into? Talking crosses?

None of the other Gospels report anything like this. Nor in fact does any other historian or writer of that place or period. Somehow all the educated men, all the scholars and rabbis of Jerusalem, failed to notice any rock-splitting earthquake, or any hoard of walking dead wandering the city, or any of the numerous empty tombs they left behind.

Pure argument from silence.

The lone exception among all these wonders is the miraculous tearing of the temple curtain, which Matthew and Luke both borrow from Mark, but still no Jew ever seems to have noticed this, apparently not even the priests whose only job was to attend to that very curtain.

Do we have any records where we should expect Jews to discuss the phenomenon?

Excursus on the “Gospel” of Peter and Bart Ehrman

There is no reference to the Gnostic “Gospel” of Peter in any work prior to Origen’s commentary on Matthew, written in the early third century. The claim comes from a seedy bit of misrepresentation that Bart Ehrman does in *Lost Christianities*, p. 22. There he punts to footnote 17. However, upon turning to p. 261 to read the footnote, this is what one finds:

There is no way to make such judgments for certain, of course. Our information about early Christianity comes from the surviving writings from Christians of the period and archaeological discoveries of manuscripts and material objects. Both kinds of sources are problematic in their own ways. The Christian writings that happen to survive are almost entirely those of the proto-orthodox. Their opponents surely wrote as much as they themselves did. But these works of "the enemy" were almost never copied through the Middle Ages, and so they have been largely lost to posterity. And so, for example, we can do little more than wish that we had a copy of the letter that the pastor of the church at Rhossus may have sent back to Serapion, telling him – we might imagine – that the Gospel of Peter actually was written by Peter, that it was not heretical, that it was sacred Scripture, Serapion's suspicions notwithstanding. But no such letter, or anything like it, survives.

That's not very helpful; "imagine the evidence there might have been that was destroyed by those obsessed Christians."

So how does Ehrman manage to support his insinuation that "there are indications that the Gospel of Peter was widely popular in the early church, arguably at least as popular as one of the Gospels that did make it into the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark"? Here is what he says, on pp. 22-23:

The archaeological finds of early Christian manuscripts bear out the conclusion that the Gospel of Mark was not widely read. Over the past hundred years or so, numerous fragmentary copies of ancient Christian writings have turned up, principally in the sands of Egypt, where the consistently dry climate makes preservation possible over the centuries. The earliest manuscripts of the early Christian literature were written, as was most literature, pagan, Jewish, and Christian, on writing material manufactured from papyrus, a reed that grows on the banks of the Nile and that can be made into a very nice writing surface resembling coarse paper. Since the 1880s, thirty manuscripts of the New Testament Gospels have been discovered that date from the second and third centuries. Most of them contain only one or the other of the Gospels, as these books were originally circulated separately, not as a collection. Of these thirty (fragmentary) Gospel manuscripts, only one contains the Gospel of Mark.

In contrast, from the same period, five (partial) unidentified Gospels have been discovered; these are texts that provide accounts of Jesus' words and deeds but that are too fragmentary to establish which Gospel we know about by name. In addition, there are three fragmentary copies of the Gospel of Thomas, allegedly written by Jesus' twin brother, Didymus Judas Thomas (the subject of chapter 3). And there are two fragmentary copies of a Gospel allegedly written by Mary Magdalene, in which she reveals the secrets that Jesus had given her as his closest companion. From the same period we also have three fragmentary copies of the Gospel of Peter (this is not counting the later copy found in the monk's tomb in Akhmim).

And so it is an interesting question to ask: Which Gospel was more popular in early Christianity, Mark or Peter? It is rather hard to say. But if the material remains are any gauge, one would have to give the palm to Peter, with three times as many surviving manuscript remains as Mark.

This is just jaw-droppingly dishonest. Ehrman has focused his readers' attention on a small sample and completely left out of the picture the ample record of use of Mark in the second century. Some probable uses:

* Clement of Rome, 1 Clement 15; cf. Mark 7:6, quoting Isaiah 29:13, beginning "οὗτος ὁ λαός," the demonstrative pronoun used in Mark but not in the parallel passage in Matthew 15:8

* Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 5:2: "... a servant of all (διάκονος πάντων)" (cf. Mark 9:35: πάντων διάκονος)

* Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 51: Jesus "must suffer many things from the Scribes and Pharisees, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (cf. Mark 8:31); see also *Dialogue with Trypho* 88 (Mark 6:3) and 106 (Mark 3:17) and *First Apology* 16 (Mark 12:30) as well as several passages that reflect knowledge of the disputed long ending of Mark 16, e.g. 39, 45, 49 (Mark 16:20), 50 (Mark 16:19), etc.

* Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8: "But Mark takes his beginning from the prophetic Spirit who comes on men from on high saying, 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet,' ..."

Clement was writing before the end of the first century; Polycarp dates from early in the second century; Justin Martyr is about the middle of the second century; Irenaeus is writing about AD 180. Every one of these references predates the first mention in any writer – orthodox or heretical, Christian or gnostic or pagan – of the "Gospel" of Peter.