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THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOME STANDARD ASSUMPTIONS OF NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS: RESPONDING TO A MODERN ANTI-CHRIST

John Gee

Review of Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: Why a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2019). 508 pages. Hardback, \$210.

Abstract: *In a recent book, Raphael Lataster correctly argues that the acceptance of the general premises of New Testament scholarship, exemplified in the writings of Bart Ehrman, brings into question whether Jesus ever existed. Latter-day Saints who are serious about their witness of Jesus Christ need to be aware that acceptance of these presuppositions undermines their witness of the reality of Jesus Christ and his atonement and makes their faith vain.*

Why Should We Bother?

When the Proclamation on the Family came out in 1995, it was immediately attacked by those who would now probably characterize themselves as “progressive.” And the attacks have persisted. As a consequence, I expected a similar response when the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve issued a proclamation called “The Living Christ” back in 1999. More recently they have had the following to say about it:

In recent decades the Church has largely been spared the terrible misunderstandings and persecutions experienced by the early Saints. It will not always be so. The world is moving away from the Lord faster and farther than ever before. The adversary has been loosed upon the earth. We watch, hear,

read, study, and share the words of prophets to be forewarned and protected. For example, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was given long before we experienced the challenges now facing the family. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles” was prepared in advance of when we will need it most.¹

The importance of the Savior’s mission was emphasized by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who declared emphatically that “the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.” It was this very statement of the Prophet that provided the incentive for 15 prophets, seers, and revelators to issue and sign their testimony to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of the Lord’s birth. That historic testimony is titled “The Living Christ.” Many members have memorized its truths. Others barely know of its existence. As you seek to learn more about Jesus Christ, I urge you to study “The Living Christ.”²

These statements indicate that the Church leaders at the highest levels expect challenges when it comes to our understanding of Jesus Christ. The repeated emphasis on the name of the Church and its symbols should be seen as part of this effort.

Given these statements, we would do well to be aware of efforts to undermine our faith in Jesus Christ. I will examine one attempt to counter the doctrine of Christ. Though concerns about faith might motivate my examination, my treatment will look at the scholarship and misuse thereof.

The work under consideration here is not terribly well written and has not garnered a lot of attention. It desperately needed editing. The author — Raphael Lataster, a lecturer in Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sydney where he received his PhD — does not read any ancient languages and, despite his opinion to the contrary, is not in a good position to evaluate the historicity of Jesus. So why should we consider his arguments?

1. Robert D. Hales, “General Conference: Strengthening Faith and Testimony,” *Ensign* (November 2013): 7, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/general-conference-strengthening-faith-and-testimony>.

2. Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” *Ensign* (May 2017), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/04/drawing-the-power-of-jesus-christ-into-our-lives>.

First, he is a vociferous advocate for the intellectual position that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. He is thus “anti-Christ” in the Book of Mormon’s usage of the term³ rather than the current Christian usage of the term. He may ramble and repeat himself, but he does put forward an argument. If one wishes to deal with the arguments that Jesus never lived, one can at least find them in his book.

Second, unlike many who write on the subject, he is clear on his major assumptions. He does not attempt to hide them. It is useful to examine those assumptions.

Third, he makes some valid points worth considering. I agree with some of his minor premises while I disagree with his major argument.

Some have disparaged an “emphasis on propositional claims”⁴ and claimed that “the early church father Origen is one of the early authorities Latter-day Saints should study most appreciatively.”⁵ Origen is held up as a model because “Origen was reluctant to respond to the critics for the following reason. He insisted that ‘the doctrine [itself is] a better answer than any writing’ he could make by way of response. More to the point, he added, the strongest defense of Christianity ‘rests on ... that power of Jesus which is manifest to those who are not altogether devoid of perception.’”⁶ This individual thus calls for an apologetics that consists of “unfolding the full power and scope and beauty of Christ’s ongoing ministry,”⁷ whatever that may mean. This comes from a talk in response to the previous year’s speaker, who had told the same organization, “May I note plainly one thing we expect you to do because it is central to your *raison d’être*. It is to undergird and inform the pledge Elder Maxwell made when he said of uncontested criticism, ‘No more slam dunks.’ We ask you as part of a larger game plan to always keep a scholarly hand fully in the face of those who oppose us.”⁸ While the reluctance of Origen is praised, Origen, nevertheless, provided a point-by-point refutation

3. Alma 30:6: “[H]e was Anti-Christ, for he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken by the prophets, concerning the coming of Christ.”

4. Terryl Givens, “Apologetics and Disciples of the Second Sort” in *BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Annual Report 2019* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 45–46.

5. *Ibid.*, 42.

6. *Ibid.*, 43.

7. *Ibid.*, 54.

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century,” in *BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Annual Report 2018* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2019), 14.

of his intellectual opponent and explicitly dealt with the propositions. Keeping a hand firmly in the face is more than just referring individuals to Church doctrine. It is actively refuting bad argumentation and providing counter arguments. Furthermore, a theological approach to an argument like Lataster's is worse than useless as it falls into the trap that he has laid.

Assumptions

Lataster works in the realm of Historical Jesus research, where he distinguishes three camps: "Lay fundamentalist Christians and conservative Bible scholars alike tend to believe in a miracle-working, divine, Biblical, Christ of Faith. Mythicists tend to cluster at the opposite end of the spectrum, proposing a 'mythical' (i.e., entirely fictitious) Jesus. Most secular scholars (such as Bart Ehrman) tend to lie somewhere in between, proposing a so-called Historical Jesus, devoid of divinity and miracles" (156). Lataster is a mythicist who argues that the middle ground of the secular scholars is incoherent and that they should join his camp.

Lataster's book is a response to the book by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Professor of Religious Studies Bart D. Ehrman, entitled, *Did Jesus Exist?*⁹ Ehrman, once an evangelical Christian and now an agnostic, and Lataster, an avowed atheist, share a number of assumptions:

1. There are no contemporary or near contemporary sources for the existence of Jesus (33–35).
2. There are no eyewitness accounts of Jesus's life (33).
3. We do not know who the authors of the Gospels were (33–34).
4. All the Gospel narratives are late (34).
5. Much of the Gospels and other sources about Jesus were fabricated (37).

To be fair, almost all these assumptions are shared by a majority of New Testament scholars. They are not idiosyncratic to Ehrman and Lataster.

Lataster also has his own assumptions that he may or may not share with Ehrman:

1. There is no God (15).

9. Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

2. There are no miracles: Lataster rejects “miraculous claims, appeals to the supernatural, or a theological assertion of the truth of the Christ of Faith” (156).
3. Scholarship must proceed on “naturalistic assumptions” (17).
4. Jesus is inherently implausible: “This book will certainly not focus on the implausibility of the Biblical Jesus. That will be taken for granted” (16).
5. We do not need to know ancient languages: “Academics and lay-people need not learn Greek or fully acquaint themselves with ancient Greek culture” (7).
6. Christians cannot be trusted to be objective and should not be permitted to discuss the matter of whether Jesus existed (14–22).

One argument about method on which I agree with Lataster is that history cannot be founded on speculated sources (39–68). Lataster takes Ehrman to task because “he has no way of verifying the contents of his non-existing sources that he is merely — and fallaciously — appealing to the possibility, and that he ought to be more reserved, despite this approach being the cornerstone of his entire case” (48). Scholars are free to speculate about sources that no longer exist. After all, most sources from ancient history no longer exist. But their content cannot be used for history because the content no longer exists. For example, we know that tax records from pharaonic Egypt existed, based on those that have survived, but we cannot reconstruct the content of those that did not survive.

The force of Lataster’s argument is that if one shares the five assumptions that Ehrman and Lataster share, then it is difficult to argue that Jesus was an actual historical person. Lataster is correct.

The Outgrowth of Assumptions

The five assumptions that Lataster and many — if not the majority of — New Testament scholars accept are the consequence of one particular solution to a very old problem. The synoptic problem can be stated as follows: How can one account for the similarities — in some cases verbatim — between the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Traditional solutions to the problem go back to historical evidence from the second century. Protestants, however, who only accepted scripture (*sola scriptura*) and rejected the use of tradition, rejected this solution. One proposed solution was that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all borrowed from a hypothetical earlier source denoted Q from German *Quelle*, “source.” There was no historical evidence for this source, but at least it did not follow Catholic tradition.

Hypothesizing a source Q forced scholars to date the gospels all later than that (assumption 4), which in turn meant there were no extant contemporary or near contemporary sources for Jesus (assumption 1) and, given the typical dates hypothesized for the gospels, no eyewitness accounts of Jesus (assumption 2). Rejecting tradition also meant we could not trust the traditional attributions of the gospels (assumption 3). We would also have to reject the correct handing down of the details of Jesus's life, so at least some of them must have been made up (assumption 5).

Lataster does not seem to realize that historically the acceptance of the five assumptions that he shares with Ehrman depends on the acceptance of a hypothetical source that he rejects. Be that as it may, he does take the assumptions to their logical conclusions. If the gospels are late, then the earliest New Testament source would be Paul, who never knew Jesus during his mortal life¹⁰ and who does not discuss Jesus's mortal life in his epistles (262–347). The burden then falls on Mark: “If the epistles and saying documents may be inauthentic, lack biographical detail, or are referring to a non-earthly Jesus, the gospels are crucial in establishing Jesus as a literal human being in a specific historical — and earthly — setting. Given that the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John come after and expand on Mark's gospel, the reliability of Mark's gospel as historical testimony is paramount” (221). Lataster dismisses Mark because “the author of Mark is unknown, and it was written around four decades or more after the death of Jesus. No original copy of Mark is extant” (246). “Like the author, the genre of Mark is unknown, though it does contain fabrications and myth” (248). Lataster substantiates most of this by reference to secondary or tertiary sources.

Having dismissed the New Testament sources, Lataster dismisses Josephus “as fraudulent, in whole, or in part” (193), Tacitus as “a later Christian interpolation” (203), Thallus because we “cannot be sure that Thallus mentioned Jesus” (207), Pliny as already referring to a celestial rather than an earthly Jesus (208), and the Talmud as offering “little to no useful information with regards to the historical Jesus” (211). Having rejected the possibility of any historical sources, it is unsurprising that Lataster finds nothing historical in the sources. He is merely taking the stated assumptions to their logical conclusion.

10. 1 Corinthians 15:8.

Bayesian Bunk

Lataster insists that true historians engage in probabilistic history. For this he resorts to a Bayesian analysis of a sort. He claims to present the following “Bayes’s Theorem in a natural language format” (164):

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{The probability our explanation is true} \\ \text{How typical our explanation is} \times \text{How expected the evidence is if our explanation} \\ \text{is true} \\ = \\ \text{\{repeat the above\}} + \text{\{How atypical our explanation is} \times \text{How expected} \\ \text{the evidence is if our explanation isn't true\}} \end{array}$$

When Lataster puts this into practice, he says, “I would argue that employing Bayesian reasoning without calculations is potentially more useful and reliable, given that a multitude of errors can be made when assigning quantitative values” (171). He then defines a historical hypothesis (that Herod was killed by an angel) as *h*. After some argumentation, he concludes, “So we can rationally and formally judge *h* to be extremely improbable; so close to 0% that we needn’t seriously entertain the notion, despite the lack of ‘absolute proof’ that Acts is inaccurate here. As this case study demonstrates, Bayesian reasoning can be formally and mathematically valid, even if accurate calculations are not actually carried out” (172). Sorry, that is cheating. If one is actually going to take a probabilistic approach, then one needs to deal with real numbers which, because they are probabilities, will be between zero and one. The Bayesian approach is not valid if one simply declares the result without actually doing the calculation.

Lataster’s equations look funny. The usual way that Bayes’ Theorem is expressed is:

$$P(A|B) = \frac{P(B|A) \times P(A)}{P(B)}$$

Where $P(A|B)$ means the probability that A is true given that B is true. One can substitute in the denominator by breaking down the probability of B being true whether A is true or not true:

$$P(B) = P(B|A) \times P(A) + P(B|\sim A) \times P(\sim A)$$

Thus, one gets the equation for Bayes’s Theorem as:

$$P(A|B) = \frac{P(B|A) \times P(A)}{P(B|A) \times P(A) + P(B|\sim A) \times P(\sim A)}$$

This looks at least superficially similar to the equation that Lataster produced, but it is not. In translating Bayes's Theorem into words, Lataster has changed the meaning of the equation. Lataster is simply copying the mistakes of Richard Carrier.¹¹ Carrier tries to use Bayes's Theorem to support his adoption of the logical fallacy of negative proof.¹² It is difficult to decide whether Carrier is incompetent in his use of mathematics (as illustrated by his nonstandard notation and misinterpretation of the equations),¹³ or if he knows what he is doing but is being disingenuous about it (as illustrated by his "even more generous numbers" that make it appear that a made up case is more probable than a historical one).¹⁴ Neither Lataster nor Carrier states or uses Bayes's Theorem correctly.

To see what difference it makes, consider the conditional expression in the numerator of Lataster's equation (which is the $P(B|A)$ in the mathematical equation). For Lataster, $P(B|A)$ is "how expected the evidence is if our explanation is true." Thus, A is "our explanation is true" and B is "our evidence is expected." Thus, if Lataster were following Bayes's Theorem, then with his $P(B|A)$ defined as he does, what he would be calculating is the probability of whether our explanation is true if the evidence is expected. Since, for Lataster, the evidence that Herod would be killed by an angel is so unexpected as to equal zero, then $P(B) = 0$ and Lataster would be dividing by zero, which is allowed neither by Bayes's Theorem nor mathematics. One can see why Lataster says that "employing Bayesian reasoning without calculations is potentially more useful" because it allows him to use mathematics to bamboozle his audience without actually doing the math.

Mathematically, for Lataster's conclusion to actually be true following his own formula, either the explanation must be completely atypical, or the evidence must be unexpected for the truth of the explanation. In Lataster's case, however, the hypothesis (h) he is considering is the report in Acts that Herod was killed by an angel. All one has to do is look at ancient medical manuals —say the first two preserved tablets of the *Diagnostic and Prognostic Series* (DPS) — to see that being afflicted with diseases is often considered to be by the hand of a supernatural being¹⁵

11. Richard Carrier, *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), 50.

12. *Ibid.*, 52, 117–19; for the fallacy, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper, 1970), 47–48.

13. Carrier, *Proving History*, 50, 67, 69.

14. *Ibid.*, 56–60.

15. DPS 3.10, 12, 13–14, 15–16, 17, 18, 19, 43, 44, 47, 53, 64, 65, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 89, 90, 93, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 4.1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19,

and is thus a typical ancient explanation. Or one can look at the so-called magical texts and find explicit references to angels being able to kill and destroy.¹⁶ Looking at this from a modern medical point of view, Lataster may attribute the death of Herod as being from other causes, but he is not doing ancient history. If he were, he could not see the explanation in the book of Acts as atypical or the evidence ancient authors provided as unexpected. One can see why Lataster does not see the need for either himself or his audience to be acquainted with ancient culture (7).

Comparative Ancient History

Lataster's naiveté about the practice and challenges of ancient history is in large part because he has not actually tried to do any ancient history outside the narrow confines of the New Testament, whose historical authenticity he rejects. A broader exposure to the actual discipline might have tempered his certitude. I will highlight only three examples: the historicity of the Old Testament, the anonymity of historical sources, and the gap between a text and manuscripts for the text.

(1) Lataster often draws a parallel to the Old Testament, where he follows the minimalist position to assert that it was all made up late (e.g., 2, 63, 156n112). In this regard it is instructive to read what Israel Finkelstein, the archaeologist most appealed to by minimalists, says about the subject:

It is inconceivable that the [biblical] authors invented stories — that they made up history. The biblical history was written to serve an ideological platform, and as such, it must have been written in a way that would sound reliable to the reader and/or listener. ... Needless to say, the authors would have otherwise lost their credibility and failed to transmit their messages and achieve their goals. It follows that one cannot simply assume that Abraham, or Moses, never existed.¹⁷

The ancient historical record is incomplete. It is very selective both in terms of what was originally recorded and what has survived. The

20–21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35–36, 37, 38, 39a, 39b, 40, 41, 44, 50, 54–55, 56–57, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66–67, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 115, 116–17, 123, 124, 125, 143, in JoAnn Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 13–41.

16. PGM I 98–127, in Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zuberpapyri* (Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1928–31), 1:8.

17. Israel Finkelstein, “A Short Summary: Bible and Archaeology,” in *The Quest for the Historical Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 185.

vast majority of ancient people left no historical trace. In terms of most ancient historical individuals, Jesus of Nazareth is comparatively well attested. Do I wish that we had more information? Of course. Am I willing to completely discount the information we do have based on Lataster's arguments? If I were and were consistent, I might as well abandon ancient history entirely.

(2) Lataster complains that "the gospel authors are also anonymous, so it cannot be simply presumed that they are eyewitnesses, reliably appealing to eyewitnesses, or even otherwise well informed" (213–14). Not knowing the author of historical sources is not that usual, nor does it necessarily invalidate the history. For example, none of the authors of the twenty-four Assyrian or Babylonian chronicles is known,¹⁸ but that does not make the events narrated in them fabricated. Sixty-three anonymous historical works are known from papyri,¹⁹ but this does not automatically make them invalid or inaccurate.

(3) Lataster argues that the gap between text and manuscript somehow invalidates or brings into question its reliability: "No original copy of Mark is extant; the oldest manuscript which contains some sections of Mark's Gospel, *Papyrus 45*, dates to the third century" (246). This would be about two centuries later.

Let's look at the time lag between text and manuscript. It is not unusual to have a gap of several centuries between when a text was written and the earliest manuscript of that text. Let us consider some examples from the genre of history (arranged from shortest to longest span):

- The Roman historian Dio Cassius may have lived in the late second century AD,²⁰ but the earliest manuscript of his work is fifth or sixth century.²¹ There is thus a gap of 300 or 400 years between the writing and the earliest manuscript.
- Xenophon lived from about 428 BC to 354 BC.²² A third century AD fragment of his *Anabasis* survives, and the first

18. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975).

19. Orsolina Montevicchi, *La Papirologia* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1988), 363.

20. Alexander Hugh McDonald, s.v. "Dio (2) Cassius," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., eds. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1970), 345.

21. *Dio's Roman History I: Fragments of Books I–XI*, ed. E. Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), xxviii.

22. Derek J. Mosley, s.v. "Xenophon," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1141.

full manuscript dates to the fourteenth century.²³ Thus there are about 500 years between the historian and the earliest surviving manuscript of his work.

- Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (ca. AD 61–112) at the end of the first century generated a mass of correspondence with the emperor Trajan (ruled AD 98–117), which he then collected and published at the beginning of the second century.²⁴ This is a useful treasure trove of primary documents, but the earliest surviving manuscript dates to the ninth century,²⁵ at least 700 years later.
- Cornelius Tacitus was born about AD 56 and died apparently after AD 115.²⁶ The earliest manuscript of his *Annals* dates to the ninth century.²⁷ Thus there are about 700 years between the two. His *Histories* are first attested later, in the eleventh century,²⁸ with at least 900 years between the two.
- Gaius Julius Caesar was born about 100 BC and was assassinated in 44 BC.²⁹ The earliest manuscript of his Gallic Wars dates to the ninth century,³⁰ about 900 years after it was written. The earliest manuscript of his account of the civil war is tenth century.³¹ This makes it about 1,000 years after it was written.
- Herodotus of Halicarnassus was born a little before the Persian War (499–449 BC) and lived until the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC).³² The earliest manuscript of Herodotus dates to

23. *Xenophontis Opera Omnia*, ed. E. C. Marchant (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1904), 3:xiv.

24. A. N. Sherwin-White, s.v. “Pliny (2) the Younger,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 846–47.

25. *C. Plini Caecili Secundi Epistularum Libri Decem*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), 3.

26. Martin P. Charlesworth and Gavin B. Townend, s.v. “Tacitus,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1034.

27. *Cornelii Taciti Annalium*, ed. C. D. Fisher (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1906), viii.

28. *Cornelii Taciti Historiarum Libri*, ed. C. D. Fisher (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1911), viii.

29. G. Edward F. Chilver, s.v. “Caesar,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 189–90.

30. Caesar, *The Gallic War*, ed. H. J. Edwards (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), xvii.

31. *C. Iuli Caesaris Commentariorum*, ed. Renatus du Pontet (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1901), 3:iii.

32. John D. Denniston and Lionel Pearson, s.v. “Herodotus,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 507.

the end of the first century or early second century AD,³³ about 500 years later. The earliest manuscript upon which editions are based of Herodotus is tenth century AD,³⁴ at least 1,300 years later.

- Thucydides was born between 460 and 455 BC and probably died about 400 BC.³⁵ The earliest manuscript for Thucydides, however, is fourteenth century AD,³⁶ at least 1,700 years later.

The length of time between the writing of the gospels and their earliest manuscripts is less than any of these, no matter when one dates the gospels.

The Date of the Gospels

Lataster accepts the assumption of Ehrman that the gospels are late. This assumption, which I do not share, is widespread if not dominant among New Testament scholars. It is part of a number of assumptions and theories I have already enumerated. It is important to remember that they are all hypotheses and that there is not a shred of historical evidence for any of them. Some of the hypotheses can be questioned on other grounds.

Because some will find my assertion that there is no historical evidence for these hypotheses offensive, perhaps I should explain what evidence counts as historical and why it fails on those counts. The assertions are not those that one can cite historical evidence from an ancient text to demonstrate; they must be argued. The gospels themselves carry no historical dates or facts about their writing. This is not unusual for two reasons. The first is that ancient documents carrying dates are generally either legal or commemorative in nature. Even things we customarily date in the modern world, like letters, were usually not dated back then. Writings might carry indications of date but not generally the dates themselves; they are datable but not dated. Thus the date of most ancient documents is not given but must be argued from those indications of date. The second is that the focus of the gospel writers was on Jesus, not themselves. The historical evidence for the writing of the gospels is

33. Montevicchi, *La Papirologia*, 361.

34. *Herodoti Historiae*, 3rd ed., ed. Carolus Hude (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1927), 1:v.

35. Henry Theodore Wade-Gery, s.v. "Thucydides," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1067.

36. *Thucydidis Historiae*, ed. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1942), 1:ix.

preserved in a variety of testimonia of later Christian authors³⁷ rather than in some narcissistic scene-stealing attention grab by the ancient authors. Most ancient historians — like Herodotus or Plutarch — do not talk much about themselves. Even Julius Caesar, who did, talked about himself in the third person rather than the first person. The focus remains on the subject of investigation not the investigator.

Since the gospels themselves are not dated, every date applied by modern scholars presumes an argument about the date. This is the argument behind my dates.

Lataster cites with approval the following statement: “Of the hundreds of Christian works that survive from the first three centuries of the Common Era, no reliable histories exist aside perhaps from fragments of the five books of Papias” (224). Given that we share so few initial assumptions, this is at least a common starting point. Papias lived and wrote in the early second century, having heard the apostle John himself and being an associate of Polycarp.³⁸ According to the Papias, “Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down exactly as much as he remembered of the things that were said and done by the Lord, though not in order. For he had neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but later, as he said, of Peter, who fitted his teaching according to the requirements but did not make an ordered account of the things of the Lord so that Mark did not mistake in writing down what he remembered for he took care to omit nothing that he heard or to falsely state anything in them.”³⁹ Though Mark’s account is secondhand, it was made with the intention of being accurate. Mark had first been a companion of Paul,⁴⁰ and then Barnabas,⁴¹ and these events apparently occurred before he was a companion of Peter. Thus, Mark’s gospel would have been written a number of years after the council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. This provides us a *terminus post quem*, a date after which the gospel of Mark must have been written.

Papias records the following of Matthew: “Matthew ordered the accounts in the Hebrew dialect; each interpreted these as he was able.”⁴² According to Papias, Matthew originally wrote in Hebrew, and in the

37. These are conveniently gathered in *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 12th ed., ed. Kurt Aland (Stuttgart, DEU: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1976), 531–48.

38. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, V.33.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39.1.

39. Papias, fragment 3, cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39.15.

40. Acts 12:25.

41. Acts 15:37–39.

42. Papias, fragment 3, cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39.16.

beginning there were variant translations into Greek, but most of the quotations come from a standardized translation.

Before we get to the date of Matthew, let's date a non-canonical text: the *Didache*. At the end of the first century, Ignatius knows of the following ecclesiastical offices: apostle,⁴³ bishop,⁴⁴ elder,⁴⁵ and deacon.⁴⁶ The office of apostle already seems to be in the past rather than the present.⁴⁷ After the time of Ignatius, only the offices of bishop, elder, and deacon remain. The time of Ignatius at the end of the first century marks a firm date after which only those offices remain. Other offices, like prophet⁴⁸ and evangelist,⁴⁹ which are current in the middle of the first century, are not found in the church after the first century.

The *Didache*, however, treats both apostles⁵⁰ and prophets⁵¹ as current offices as well as bishops⁵² and deacons.⁵³ These are attested in book of Acts⁵⁴ and the epistles of Paul⁵⁵ in the middle of the first century. The *Didache* must date to sometime in the first century.

The *Didache* is labeled as “the teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles through the twelve apostles”⁵⁶ It cannot date before the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles recounted in Acts 10. Based on the chronology of Paul's life, this would have to be before Paul's mission to the Gentiles in Tarsus.⁵⁷ The *Didache* also refers to disciples as “Christians”⁵⁸ which occurs after the mission of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch.⁵⁹

43. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.1, 6.1, 7.1.

44. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 2.2, 3.2, 4.1, 5.2, 6.1; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 2–3.2, 6.1–2, 7.1, 13.1, 15; Ignatius *Epistle to the Trallians* 2.2; 3.1; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 2.1; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrniacs* 8.1.

45. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 2.2, 4.1; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 2–3.1, 6.1, 7.1, 13.1.

46. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 6.1, 13.1.

47. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.1.

48. Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; 1 Corinthians 12:28–29; Ephesians 4:11.

49. Acts 21:8; Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5.

50. *Didache* 11.3–6.

51. *Didache* 11.3–12; 13.1–7; 15.2.

52. *Didache* 15.1.

53. *Didache* 15.1.

54. Acts 13:1, 6, 15; 15:32; 21:10.

55. 1 Corinthians 12:29; 14:29; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11.

56. *Didache* title.

57. Acts 9:30.

58. *Didache* 12.4.

59. Acts 11:26.

Significantly, however, the *Didache* contains none of the instructions to the Gentiles on circumcision deriving from the Jerusalem council.⁶⁰ The instructions of the Jerusalem council also contain none of the basic Christian teachings and practices enumerated in the *Didache*. The pronouncements of the Jerusalem council seem to be an appendix to the *Didache*. The *Didache* thus predates the Jerusalem council.⁶¹ This places the *Didache* sometime between Acts 11 and 15.

The *Didache* three times refers to something it calls “the gospel,”⁶² which is in the singular. It knows only one. When it quotes Jesus, the quotations are from Matthew 6:9–13⁶³ and 7:6,⁶⁴ not from Luke or Mark. The gospel of Matthew must predate the *Didache* and thus must date sometime before Acts 15 at latest, which puts it before the gospel of Mark.

Matthew, however, preserves the injunction of Jesus to his apostles not to preach to the Gentiles.⁶⁵ Such prohibitions are absent from Luke and Mark, which were written after the permission to preach to the Gentiles. Thus, Matthew must have been written before the prohibition was lifted in Acts 9–10. This puts the writing of Matthew within a few years of the resurrection.

Other individuals date Matthew differently, and some may wish to dispute my arguments. I, however, have provided my reasoning for dating Matthew when I do. Those who disagree have an obligation to provide reasoned arguments for their dates.

This dating of Matthew based on historical sources has an unintended benefit when applied to the presuppositions that Lataster, Ehrman, and most New Testament scholars share. It will be remembered that they presuppose:

1. There are no contemporary or near contemporary sources for the existence of Jesus (33–35). Dating Matthew within a few years of the resurrection means that it is a near contemporary source.
2. There are no eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s life (33). Putting Matthew as a near contemporary source means that it can be an eyewitness source as Papias claimed it was.

60. Acts 15:20–24.

61. This does not preclude the possibility that the text has been tampered with. *Didache* 7.3 is an example of such a passage.

62. *Didache* 8.2, 15.3, 4.

63. *Didache* 8.2.

64. *Didache* 9.5.

65. Matthew 10:5–6.

3. We do not know who the authors of the Gospels were (33–34). If the gospel of Matthew dates so early, there is no reason to doubt Papias's attribution.
4. All the Gospel narratives are late (34). If the dating of Matthew is correct, it is not late.

Dating Matthew when I do has the added benefit of eliminating both the possibility of and need for the hypothetical sources to which both Lataster and I object.

Eyewitnesses

There is one argument for the historicity of Jesus that Paul puts forward which Lataster did not adequately deal with. Paul argues that “if Christ is not risen,” if the resurrection is not an actual historical event, “our faith is worthless.”⁶⁶ The early Christians suffered at a distinct disadvantage in the society and the culture around them. They gave up a number of pleasures and suffered privations and persecutions to live their faith. Their reward would be in the resurrection, the assurance of which was Jesus's resurrection. If they did not have that, why were they suffering through what they did? Paul appeals to the literal historical resurrection because otherwise the whole faith was a waste of time. The mythic Christ that Lataster promotes was neither comfort nor salvation to the early Christians. The earliest Christians were clear on this point.

This is why Paul points out the number of witnesses to the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth and his resurrection who were still alive when Paul wrote.⁶⁷ Paul had personally delivered this message to his audience and thus did not repeat it in a letter. Ancient letters generally presume a great deal of knowledge in common between the sender and the recipient and deal only with essential matters. The letters preserved in the New Testament did not need to repeat material everyone already knew, which would include the life of Jesus. Reminders would be included only as relevant.

Paul's argument points to the impotence of theology to deal with Lataster's argument and thus the risks inherent in the discipline of theology. In the past the Church of Jesus Christ has not had much use for what other denominations do when they do theology. More recently, certain individuals in the Church have tried to do theology the way that theologians in other denominations do theology: impose on the

66. 1 Corinthians 15:17.

67. 1 Corinthians 15:3–8.

Church human reasoning devoid of revelation; theologians usurp the role of prophets and apostles. The discipline of theology goes back to Plato, who saw it as applied to texts that were myths (*mythous*) that were mostly false (*pseudos*).⁶⁸ Theology assumes that the texts which it studies are not historical, or at least see whether or not they are historical as being irrelevant. This is the same position held by Lataster, who also sees the gospels and Jesus as myths, devoid of any historical reality. Paul, on the other hand, argues that the acceptance of such a line of thought makes faith in Jesus Christ futile. According to Paul, there is no point in accepting Jesus Christ or being a Christian if Jesus's life and resurrection did not really happen.

Conclusions

Whatever Lataster's failings as a writer, he is at least clear on his assumptions and correctly takes them to their logical conclusions. I agree with Lataster that if one accepts the assumptions of most scholars of the New Testament, it is difficult to argue that Jesus ever existed. Those assumptions are worth examining, and Latter-day Saints would do well not to take them uncritically. Based on historical evidence, I do not accept his assumptions.

I also agree with Lataster that one cannot argue history on the basis of the content of nonexistent or hypothetical sources.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who accept the presuppositions of New Testament scholars such as Bart Ehrman need to be able to articulate how or in what way they can accept those assumptions and still bear any sort of witness of Jesus Christ. If we wish to be "valiant in the testimony of Jesus",⁶⁹ we might consider what sort of obligation that entails on us. Whatever his other faults or failings, we can thank Lataster for articulating the assumptions and clearly pointing to their logical conclusions.

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68. Plato, *Republic* 2.377a.

69. D&C 76:79.

the Egyptological Seminar, Enchoria, Ensign, FARMS Review, Göttinger Miszellen, Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy, Journal of Academic Perspectives, Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt, Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Journal of Egyptian History, Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities, Lingua Aegyptia, Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur, and Interpreter, and by such presses as American University of Cairo Press, Archaeopress, Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, E. J. Brill, Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies, Czech Institute of Egyptology, Deseret Book, de Gruyter, Harrassowitz, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Macmillan, Oxford University Press, Peeters, Praeger, Religious Studies Center, and Society of Biblical Literature. He has published three books and has edited eight books and an international multilingual peer-reviewed professional journal. He served twice as a section chair for the Society of Biblical Literature.