



Not the Impossible Faith

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Dr. Richard Carrier is an expert in the history of the ancient world and a critic of Christian attempts to distort history in defense of their faith. *Not the Impossible Faith* is a tour de force in that genre, dissecting and refuting the oft-repeated claim that Christianity could not have succeeded in the ancient world unless it was true. Though framed as a detailed rebuttal to Christian apologist J.P. Holding (author of *The Impossible Faith*), Carrier takes a general approach that educates the reader on the history and sociology of the ancient world, answering many questions like: How did Christians approach evidence? Was there a widespread prejudice against the testimony of women? Was resurrection such a radical idea? Who would worship a crucified criminal? And much more. Written with occasional humor and an easy style, and thoroughly referenced, with many entertaining "gotcha!" moments, *Not the Impossible Faith* is a must-read for anyone interested in the origins of Christianity.

Not the Impossible Faith Details

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Landon says

Historian Richard Carrier has delivered the ultimate rebuttal of infamous Christian apologist J.P. Holding's argument in favor of the resurrection--which he detailed in an essay called "The Impossible Faith." Holding's argument was, essentially, that there were so many factors that should have worked against the success of Christianity in its early years, so much so that the actual success of the movement must entail that the earliest Christians had irrefutable evidence for the resurrection. He claims, for example, that the belief in a crucified God would have been repugnant to the ancients, so a religion that preaches such a God would have been rejected... unless they had evidence so compelling that it would overcome this concern. And there are many other factors in Holding's argument: nobody back then even believed resurrections were possible, nobody would want to join a strict moral order like Christianity, nobody would want to be persecuted, nobody would follow an ignorant savior like Jesus (who is said not to know the future on some occasions), etc. All of these factors, and more, would have ensured that Christian missionaries would have hit a brick wall of skepticism. But somehow that was overcome, and the movement was successful, so it must be because the evidence for the resurrection was so powerful that it defeated all of these objections.

This book leaves this argument nothing more than a pile of rubble. Ordinarily one would not write an entire book to refute an argument that an internet apologist puts on his website, but Holding is so obnoxious (and his argument is somewhat popular, apparently) that Carrier was paid good money to specifically write a book-length rebuttal.

Carrier dismantles the argument piece-by-piece, showing how none of these factors were great obstacles for the Christian movement to succeed. Each chapter is informative in its own right, but specifically addresses the argument made by Holding. And to ensure that Holding's argument is decisively refuted, Carrier constructs his counter-argument in such a way that it had many fallback positions. In many places, Carrier argues in this manner: (1) there is no evidence for Holding's assertions, and tons of evidence against them, and (2) even granting Holding's assertions, this does not prove his argument. This means that in order for Holding's argument to succeed, he has to not only cough up the evidence for his claims and dispute the evidence Carrier offers, but then he also has the burden of making the connection between the evidence and the conclusion. Rather than getting into specific instances of this argumentative strategy Carrier employs, I'll just mention a few other things and leave it to interested readers to find out the details for themselves.

First, most of the book's argument can be considered just "piling on" more and more problems for Holding's case, and not even essential to refute the argument. Carrier refutes the argument in one fell swoop in chapter 18, where he argues that, in fact, Christianity in its first hundred years was **not** a successful movement. Instead, it was remarkably unsuccessful, consisting of a relatively small number of converts. Even on the highest estimates of how many people converted to Christianity (which are absurdly high compared to what scholars actually think), it still remains that Christianity converted far less than 1% of the Roman Empire in the first century. And Holding's argument is premised on the notion that Christianity was enjoying a popularity so great that it needed supernatural backing. This alone is enough to dismiss the argument, so everything else Carrier writes in the book just compounds Holding's problems. In the end, the reader is left with the impression that Holding's argument is in more need of a supernatural resurrection than Jesus was! (But, in fairness, Holding is working on a book to argue for the resurrection, and in the book he will supposedly be revising his argument and responding to critics. So interested readers can see if he is able to breathe life back into the corpse that this book leaves behind.)

This was close to being a four-star book because of the fact that it has a bit of an unprofessional feel, given that it is part of an internet debate. Carrier could have written the book in such a manner that it both decisively refutes Holding *and* stands on its own as a book on early Christianity. It comes a little too close to being too much of the former and not enough of the latter. For example, Carrier does not really give a good summary of Holding's argument in each section before refuting it in the chapter. Instead, he seems to jump right in to the response as if we had all just read Holding's essay, and then flipped over to this book to see the response. I think the book would be better if the first section of each chapter gave a good summary of what Holding is arguing, what claims he is making, etc. Likewise, after Carrier gives the basic argument in each chapter, he sometimes has a section in which he responds to *Holding's* response to what he just wrote (since his original response was posted online for years, and Holding wrote a response to it). And when he gets into these sections, he sometimes seems to assume that the reader paused after reading the previous material, went and read Holding's response to that material, and then came back to see Carrier's counter-response. Although it would have taken more pages of writing to fix this problem, I think it would have made for better reading. Other than that, I have minor concerns about areas where Carrier might overstate some of his claims, though I can give no specifics on that because I didn't write them down when I read past them. In any case, I'm not the historian, so there's a good chance I'm wrong anyway.

Overall, this is a good book that deserves to be read.

Misha says

Two thousand years passed you would think people have changed... Nope... Religious virus is still strong and deadly. Now I began to understand why America is so religious. Despite of high living standard compering to others it is a country of misery. It is beyond of my comprehension how in the most pro-capitalist society the utopian christian communistic ideals can flourish in minds of the majority of population.

Ashwin says

The book is a bit of a drag to read at some points, but this work is nevertheless like kryptonite to apologetics. I've consulted this book many times already when listening to Christian apologetics and it covers pretty much every topic that might come up.

Peter says

Dissects JP Holding's book, steamroller over the apologist's blather. Solid, deals directly with the holding book yet much is applicable to apologetics nonsense in general , ie the evidence as presented by apologists ain't necessarily so.

Steven Williams says

In this book Richard Carrier uses his historian's skills to counter arguments from J. P. Holding that Christianity was so unlikely to succeed without it being true, so it has to be true. Carrier shows that this

assumption is not true. He presents lots of evidence for Christianity succeeding without Christ's resurrection to have actually occurred. Holding claims that it had to for Christianity to be true. In the process of countering Holding Carrier ask a series of questions divided into eighteen chapters. Some of the questions asked are "Who Would Believe in a Crucified God?"; "Was Resurrection Deemed Impossible?"; "Was Christianity Vulnerable to Disproof?"; "Who Would Want to be Persecuted?"; "Did No One Trust Women?"; and "How Successful Was Christianity?"

I have about a handful of comments based on specific parts of the text. Kindle locations are in brackets in front of a quote [].

[159] "J. P. Holding is something of a dark horse [not Trojan?] in the in apologetics community. He is very popular online. I have traveled the country, speaking to humanist groups near and far, and I always meet people who know his work." However, I have never heard of him before reading this book. Then again I do not belong to any humanist groups, and I am not in the habit of reading apologetic works. I find it sufficient to read the reasonable critiques of these works and their authors from qualified scholars, such as Carrier.

[846] In explaining why Jews would follow a carpenter [Jesus] Carrier states: "In the Mishnah [the core of the Talmud], Rabbi Gamaliel said, 'Fitting is learning the Torah along with a craft, for the labor put into the two of them makes one forget sin.' Indeed 'all learning of Torah which is not joined with labor is destined to be null and cause sin.'" Modern yeshiva students and rabbis seem not to pay attention to Gamaliel even though they must know about what he said. This would also be true of most priests, ministers, and preachers, but they have the accuse that they never read him. This does not let them off the hook though because Paul set them an example of working at a trade while doing his missionary work.

[3307] "It's human nature to long for peace, love, justice, and the control of your own life. Take all that away from millions of people, and it's just a matter of time before rebellions break out." This maybe true of some societies, but if you considered most modern totalitarian states, change often comes about from within the government, as with Gorbachev in the USSR, or force upon them by victors in a war, as with Germany and Japan after World War II.

[5118] Speaking of the supposed evidence of Acts, Carrier says: "All that is needed was the same three-point sales pitch: "scripture says Jesus would rise, our ability to prophecy, heal, and speak in tongues proves we're not lying . . ." He goes on to say: "That would not fly today. Scripture is hopelessly ambiguous, and can be used to prove anything—especially if you cherry-pick . . ." Evidently it does fly for many Christians today.

I think Carrier does an excellent job of demolishing Holding's case. He shows how he either misused or did not understand other scholars whose works Holding believed to support his case. In my opinion Carrier is a very good scholar and is well worth listening to. He is also a good writer, and so the book never really bogged down in the reading of it, seeing this I enjoyed the book a lot.

If you are interested in the debunking of a group of apologetic works, whether Holding's or others, or you would just like to read a good scholar in action, than I think you would like the book.

Greg says

Enjoyable, but when refuting ignoramuses

Mike Day says

Have you ever been so pissed off at someone you were arguing with on the internet that you felt like you had to drop everything and type up a 456 page response to correct their stupidity? Richard Carrier knows how you feel, and if that someone happened to be the enthusiastic internet nobody with delusions of apologetic grandeur named Robert Turkel, aka J.P Holding (JP Holding= JP Moreland?), Carrier has done all the work for you. But don't get me wrong- as far as 456 page rebuttals to somebody nobody was listening to in the first place, this is the gold standard. Carrier brings to bear his expertise in ancient history and arguing obsessively with Christians to completely level every one of Turkel's arguments for the "impossibility" of Christianity's rise as a major world religion. Taken for what it is, this book shuts the door on the argument from impossibility/improbability. It really is the final word on the matter.

But is this a book that had to be written? A lot of the subject matter will be familiar to anyone who has spent five minutes engaged with Christian apologetics (female witnesses to the empty tomb, for example), but a lot more will feel hopelessly obscure and a little too narrowly "on topic". Turkel/Holding is a very minor player in the world of apologetics, and nobody cares enough about what he has to say to read this much about why he's wrong. It really feels like Carrier is punching below his weight a lot of the time, and his tone is occasionally peevish and small.

All that being said, Carrier really does back up his arguments with a lot of research and sound logic and, as far as I'm concerned, his efforts win the day. There are three essential chapters that the reader should avoid skipping past if she's looking for practical counter-apologetic material. Chapter 11 deals with the "argument from embarrassment" frequently offered by Christians which states that the testimony of women was held in such low regard across all sectors of Roman society that the "decision" to place female witnesses at the empty tomb would have been apologetic suicide for Christianity. Therefore it must be true! This is such a common argument, and Carrier does such a wonderful job demolishing it, that it really is a must read. Chapter 13 discusses the importance and possibility of fact-checking in the ancient world. He examines every instance of conversion in the book of Acts and concludes that facts and arguments had very little to do with anyone's decision to embrace the gospel, and the Bible makes no effort to hide that. Finally, chapter 18 undermines Turkel's entire theses by showing that Christianity did NOT in fact enjoy major success until the third century, which is well after all the arguments for the impossibility of Christian success would be moot.

Five stars for scholarship, readability and thoroughness. Minus one star for WHY IS IT SO DAMN LONG?

Cindy May says

Mostly a personal rebuttal to specific criticisms.

Kahawa says

This was one of those books I didn't want to end. Carrier's logic was thorough, covering just about every possible angle of a given topic, and I almost felt sorry for JP Holding.

Holding had written a book basically arguing that Christianity shouldn't have been successful by natural means, therefore it was successful because of supernatural means, or something. What does that even mean anyway? No one would have wanted Christianity, so god made them do it?

Carrier showed that he has a really good grasp on the history of the early church and Roman empire. He was also able to cut through Christian fancies that get thrown around by pastors and non-scholars, and expound the data that gave rise to them - for example, there's this common idea that the Bereans were super smart and looked critically into everything that Paul said. But all they really did was listen to Paul's stories and see if they could fit with received dogma in the old Scriptures. That's not critical investigation! They wrote no letters, sent no people to confirm Paul's stories and investigate the resurrection, etc. They simply looked in their bible and found Paul's ideas of the Messiah to be plausible. They can be forgiven for not understanding critical scientific methodology, but present day Christian leaders cannot. Admittedly, it's probably not their fault. I was never taught critical methods in my seminary.

Other fallacious ideas held today are:

No one would believe in a crucified god (there were gods dying and rising all over the place)

No one believed resurrection (there were all sorts of stories of this, including Herod's belief that John the Baptist had been raised!)

People could have 'dug up Jesus's bones' (who could have? When? 50 days after burial? Who does that anywhere ever? Who's to say people *didn't* do that, and *rejected* Christianity?)

No one trusts women's testimony (enlightening and thorough discussion)

Christianity was a runaway success (it wasn't)

I got the kindle version with whispersync audio so I could look up his references. I did this from the very first page where Carrier argues that Inanna (aka Ishtar) was crucified, when actually her dead body was placed on some kind of hook or stake. I didn't think it was fair to call this crucifixion, but after chasing down his sources, and then realising that Paul compares Jesus's crucifixion with the OT directive not to leave someone hanging on a tree overnight (who would have been executed *before* being hung up), I decided the comparison was fair enough. My remaining criticism is that Carrier should have explained all this, because most people will not consider that Jesus's *death* by crucifixion should be compared with Inanna's post death debasement. Inanna was, technically, crucified, but she wasn't killed by crucifixion, and it wasn't Roman crucifixion, which is what most people think of when they think of Jesus's execution.

All in all, fantastic scholarly book. A totally different league than internet apologists and YouTube 'scholars'.

Marcus says

Richard Carrier tears JP Holding's thesis (i.e. **The Impossible Faith**) a new rectal cavity in this very complete examination of just how non-miraculous was the rise of Christianity. Carrier is frequently repetitive, beating a point like a dead horse, but he certainly cannot be faulted for glossing over any of Holding's arguments. Christianity is shown to be a not-all-that-remarkable cult among a myriad of similar cults that happened to win the day in the Roman Empire due to mundane circumstances in its favor. Just like every other major religion that points to its founding and growth as some sort of divine miracle, the evidence shows nothing of the sort.

Joshua says

The book has a bit of a strange structure, as it's a criticism of another work which I hadn't read. However, Carrier provides more than enough context in his responses to understand the original argument.

He's responding to the claim that Christianity must be true, because it's growth was wildly improbable. In so doing (and very effectively disproving this claim) he provides many fascinating explorations into Christianity's origin story and the context that it "grew up" in.

Things I found particularly interesting:

- * The linkage between Zoroastrianism and the "import" of the Resurrection concept into the Jewish religion
 - * The extremely late authorship of the (very odd) book of Job
 - * The many similar-to-Christ deity figures around in that context
 - * The popularity of baptism and symbolic death/rebirth in other similar cults of the time
 - * The contradictions in Acts's telling of Paul's conversion story
 - * The evolution of the roles of women in the early to 3rd century church
 - * The relative quality of the historians at the time (it was common to cite sources, check facts, express skepticism, and yet e.g. Luke does none of these things)
 - * The genre fit in the non-Luke gospels to "mythic biography", more than history
 - * The incredible hidden meaning in the names of the women who discovered the missing body of Jesus in Mark (you'll have to read it, don't want to spoil it)
 - * The actual population growth of Christianity (tiny through the 1st century, and scaling up only as fast as similar groups have done many other times in history)
- that's probably enough.
-

Steve says

This is a book about the growth of Christianity in the 1st & 2nd centuries, written as a response to work by one J.P. Holding who made a number of claims about that growth. A common claim made by Holding and others is that Christian origins were too improbable for it to be false. Carrier pretty much demolishes these arguments, one by one, in such exhaustive detail that you almost feel sorry for Holding, except for the fact that Carrier repeatedly shows him to be a liar at best and a very poor scholar at worst. On the one hand, the book is kind of shackled by this structure; in having to structure it according to the claims of Holding, Carrier is limited in how he can tell the story. But what emerges is a rounded picture of society and religion in the first couple centuries of the Common Era, and is well worth reading. I'll keep my eye out for more of his books. The truth is always more interesting and rewarding to read than propaganda.

Doug McCleary says

Interesting naturalistic historical discussion of Christian origins. It's only weakness is that it's written as an answer to Holden's "The Impossible Faith" and thus has a polemical style that can be off-putting at times.

Stephen Griffiths says

Evidence wins again over apologetics.

Jeffrey McKinley says

I spent some time in Seminary learning all the supposed arguments why Christianity had to be true in order to thrive in the time period it was unleashed on humanity. Richard Carrier, a scholar of Roman history, is just the man to examine those assumptions and destroy them. This book is a powerful tool to use when faced with bible and McDowell quoting evangelists who seek to take advantage of people's lack of learning. I own this book in soft cover and kindle. Highly recommend it.
