

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Cambridge												
Unit of Assessment: UoA 31												
Title of case study: Demonstrating Jesus as a historical figure in the public arena												
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2001-2019												
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:												
<table border="1"> <tr> <th>Name(s):</th><th>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</th><th>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</th></tr> <tr> <td>Dr James Carleton Paget</td><td>Reader in Early Christianity and Ancient Judaism</td><td>01.10.1995-</td></tr> <tr> <td>Professor Simon Gathercole</td><td>Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity</td><td>01.10.2007-</td></tr> <tr> <td>Dr Justin Meggitt</td><td>Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion</td><td>01.01.2003-</td></tr> </table>	Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:	Dr James Carleton Paget	Reader in Early Christianity and Ancient Judaism	01.10.1995-	Professor Simon Gathercole	Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity	01.10.2007-	Dr Justin Meggitt	Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religion	01.01.2003-
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Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-2020												
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No												
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Carleton Paget, Gathercole, and Meggitt have engaged in research both on the historical Jesus and on the “Jesus mythicism” school and its popular manifestations. Subsequently, the <i>Guardian</i> commissioned Gathercole to write an article on the historical evidence for Jesus’ life and death (published 2017). This article was read by over a million people around the world within five days. The piece led to greater public awareness of the sources for the historical Jesus among non-Christians and Christian lay-people, and provided easily-digestible academic research for clergy to use in talks and sermons. It also strengthened the faith and improved the well-being of Christian readers. The article’s success led to greater public engagement with Gathercole’s scholarly work and an interview in the <i>Independent</i>. This is a case of scholarly research having, via a clear pathway, immense reach and deep significance among a variety of beneficiaries.</p>												
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>One significant disparity between scholarship on early Christianity and public opinion consists in their views of the historical existence of Jesus. While virtually every ancient historian and biblical scholar regards Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure, a recent survey (“Talking Jesus: Dig Deeper”) noted that 40% of the UK public doubted this (including 46% of under 18s). There is also a small fringe of scholars who doubt Jesus’ historical existence. In recent years, James Carleton Paget, Simon Gathercole and Justin Meggitt have investigated both scholarly and popular manifestations of this so-called “Jesus mythicism”.</p> <p>Carleton Paget has had a long-standing interest in the history of Jesus research [R1], and one of his articles discusses the controversy over the historicity of Jesus between Albert Schweitzer and Arthur Drews, probably the most important twentieth-century advocate of the “non-existence” of Jesus [R3]. Carleton Paget has also produced a study of the references to Christianity in Josephus [R2], the earliest non-Christian evidence for Jesus.</p> <p>It was at Carleton Paget’s suggestion that the <i>Guardian</i> article referred to the lack of debate in the ancient world about the existence of Jesus. Additionally, Carleton Paget’s work shaped the argument in the <i>Guardian</i> piece that the famous reference to Jesus in Josephus was probably originally a negative notice later adapted by scribes in a more positive direction. The value of such non-Christian evidence for Jesus becomes clear in the impact detailed below.</p> <p>Meggitt’s research has likewise focused on historical Jesus questions, in particular through his contribution to an international “Jesus Project” (2007-2009), part of the remit of which was to investigate whether Jesus existed. Meggitt 2010 [R4] is one of the fruits of this Jesus Project, and Meggitt 2019 [R8] is a more detailed study of the non-existence debate. The latter, an oral version of which Gathercole heard and drew upon for the <i>Guardian</i> piece, discusses extensively both the history of the non-existence debate and also the sociology of contemporary “mythicist” viewpoints. It details difficulties with the position that have not been</p>												

recognised elsewhere, such as the danger of the mythicist framework potentially erasing non-elites from the historical record.

Gathercole has also had a long-standing interest in Albert Schweitzer, stemming back to when he was taught by Carleton Paget in the 1990s, as well as a concern with historical Jesus questions especially as they relate to non-canonical Gospels [e.g. R6]. As a Paul specialist, Gathercole had earlier written an essay on Paul's understanding of Jesus, a section of which treats the historicity of Jesus and which fed into the *Guardian* piece [R5]. The response to the *Guardian* article led him to write a more detailed study of the evidence for the historical existence of Jesus in Paul, whose epistles are the earliest evidence for Jesus [R7]. The response to the *Guardian* article has thus fed back into the scholarly research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [R1] Carleton Paget, J. (2001). Quests for the historical Jesus. In M. Bockmuehl (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Jesus* (pp. 138-155). Cambridge University Press). [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R2] Carleton Paget, J. (2001). Some observations on Josephus and Christianity. *Journal of Theological Studies*, 52(2), 539-624. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R3] Carleton Paget, J. (2006). Albert Schweitzer's second edition of *The quest of the historical Jesus*. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 88(1), 3-39. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R4] Meggitt, J. (2010). Popular mythology in the early Empire and the multiplicity of Jesus traditions. In R. Hoffmann (Ed.), *Sources of the Jesus tradition* (pp. 53-80). Prometheus Books. ISBN: 9781616141899.
- [R5] Gathercole, S. (2011). Pauline Christology. In S. Westerholm (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to Paul* (pp. 172-187). Blackwell. ISBN: 9781405188449.
- [R6] Gathercole, S. (2015). Other apocryphal gospels and the historical Jesus. In A. F. Gregory & C. M. Tuckett (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of early Christian apocrypha* (pp. 250-268). Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780199644117.
- [R7] Gathercole, S. (2018). The historical and human existence of Jesus in Paul's letters. *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 16(2-3), 183-212. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R8] Meggitt, J. (2019). "More ingenious than learned"? Examining the quest for the non-historical Jesus. *New Testament Studies*, 65(4), 443-460. [\[DOI\]](#)

As the publisher names and journal titles indicate, this research is all of international quality, and meets the 2* minimum requirement.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impacts of the three scholars' research into the mythicism debate and the historical evidence for Jesus, via the pathway especially of the *Guardian* article (published 14 April 2017 online, 15 April in print), can be seen in the extraordinary reach of the article internationally, and – in terms of significance – in its effects on popular awareness, transformative pastoral impact, private discussion, clergy addresses, and contribution to further media coverage.

Immediate reach

According to figures from the *Guardian*, the online version of the article [E1] attracted "5000 readers in the first half hour" [E2] on Good Friday (14 April) 2017. Moreover, "by Tuesday 18 April, it had been read by over a million viewers (50,000 viewers is usually considered good) and attracted 82,000 facebook links" [E3]. A *Guardian* memo (Tuesday 18 April) commented: "1,163,000 views. That's insane. 40% of readers UK, 18% US, 13% EU (excl. UK). 0.6% of people in the UK read the story. (Unique users as a percentage of population) That means more than 1 in 200 people read it!" [E3]. Notable here is that 29% of readers were therefore outside Europe and the US. On 15 April 2017 a paraphrase entirely based on the *Guardian* article (with a shamelessly similar title!) was published in *Metro* [E5], a free newspaper which has a readership very different from the *Guardian*. The unusually and unexpectedly high interest in this article demonstrates that even if a large proportion of the UK claims to be non-religious, very many people clearly have questions about Christianity that the article addressed.

Significance in immediate discussion on first publication

The “comments” section below the article was open for two and a half hours after publication online, attracting 959 comments [E1]. Gathercole’s piece was therefore the second most commented-on article in the “Unanswered Questions” series (published April 2016–May 2017): comments for the series averaged around 250. Gathercole’s article provoked extremely lively debate over the research evidence. Readers debated (a) how much evidence we might expect to find for non-elites from the ancient world (comments clocked at 14:42+14:47; 15:33+15:54+16:02; 16:44). This was a key theme in Meggitt’s [R8] above. Debate also covered (b) Josephus’s evidence (14:42+15:49+16:16; 15:01), relating to Carleton Paget’s [R2]. The evidence of (c) Paul was also contested (16:14+16:21+16:33); cf. Gathercole’s [R5] and [R7]. Key themes of Meggitt’s, Carleton Paget’s and Gathercole’s research thus provoked widespread engagement, shaping debate over the evidence for Jesus among general readers.

Subsequent reach after republication

The article was reposted on the *Guardian* website on Boxing Day 2017 by Mark Rice-Oxley, headed, “The most read article I published in 2017”. Kate Lyons of the *Guardian* reported, on 8 January 2018: “276,821 views since Christmas [2017] … Plus a 60% reading time (i.e. average reader spent enough time on the page to read 60% of the story), which is VERY good” [E6]. The article was then republished again on the *Guardian* website at Easter 2018.

Evidence of sustained influence is clear from the *Guardian* site’s figures for social media links/shares, e.g. by 18 April 2017: 82,000 links; by 27 Dec 2017: 113,000 links; by 7 June 2018, 146,000 links; by 28 Jan 2019, 157,000 links; at some point, the figure was reset, and at 18 June 2020 the figure was a further 27,000 [E4]. As of 15 January 2019, the total number of shares/links for the 43 other pieces in the “Unanswered Questions” series was 26,424, *making Gathercole’s piece shared around 6 times more than all the other 43 pieces combined*; even after four days (18 April 2017) it was already three times that figure. (These figures only include links made directly from the *Guardian* website, excluding links from external sites where the article was reposted.) The average number of shares for the other pieces in the series was therefore 615, which, when compared with over 150,000, illustrates (at January 2019) the article’s astonishing reach.

Longer-term significance on understanding and well-being

The *Guardian* piece has had a longer-term significance for both Christians and non-Christians, clergy and laity, as evidenced from emails to Gathercole responding to the article (2017–2020), and from a survey in November 2018 of those who had by then sent email responses.

1. Impact on public understanding among Christian lay-people.

A great many Christian lay-people commented on how the article had addressed their questions. After the first publication one reader wrote in an email: “Apologies for the intrusion, I would just like to thank you for the excellent article on historical evidence on whether Jesus existed or not, it answered a lot of questions I always wondered about.” This illustrates the piece meeting an existing need for answers, as does another: “So simple but told me what I wanted to know.” One correspondent was struck by the fact of the article itself: “the article changed my thinking on the extent to which it is possible to defend the historical Christian faith in popular media, even in a newspaper like the *Guardian*.” Another wrote that “the references to Arthur, Pliny, Josephus, Paul and the Gospel writers helped put into context the relevant time periods involved in the documentation of historical figures, mythical or others” [E7]. Clarity about relative historical distance is crucial in our post-*Da-Vinci-Code* world in which everything ‘old’ is thought to be equally historically useful. A number of readers cited in this case study especially valued understanding the first-century evidence of Josephus (discussed in [R2]).

2. Impact on well-being of Christian lay-people.

In terms of well-being benefits, there is evidence of the article reassuring Christians, e.g. “Articles like this are encouraging to my faith, as evidenced by the motivation it gave me to write and thank the author.” Another commented that the article elicited both private discussion, self-critical reflection, and pastoral reassurance: “I’ve mentioned it to others/referred them to it and thought about the nature of my own beliefs/ knowledge … the onslaught of criticism I endure (around this time of year and at Easter, every year) gets repetitive and wearying. To have some more facts, more evidence, given that this is not my area of knowledge academically, is very helpful.” There are further testimonies of personal benefit/well-being: “the provocative line at the end I found very

encouraging in matters of my personal faith. And I was happy to share the article enthusiastically on social media” [E7].

Most movingly, one reader wrote in 2020 that his 85-year-old father’s “faith was rocked by scandals in the Irish Catholic Church”; he writes: “It was very difficult to provide him with any comfort. I happened to see your article on line and used it for discussion with Dad thereafter ... it rekindled a belief within him that made his last year much easier ... *Thank you for truly helping at least one person.*” [E7] There is clearly life-changing impact on well-being in these cases.

3. Use of material in the article by clergy. Among church leaders, one commented about the article: “I used it in a talk at church and encouraged people to read it.” Another, a vicar at Holy Trinity, Brompton, one of the largest churches in the UK, cited the article in two Easter sermons, in 2017 and 2018 [E8]. He commented: “around 1,250 people would have been at each service live, with around another 1,000 watching each online. So roughly 4,500 people in total.” He also quoted the article in talks at universities, at Oxford, Nottingham and Imperial, estimating that around 900 students heard the talks. He explained the significance of the article for him as a clergyman: “The reason the article is useful for me as a minister is that it is founded on strong academic research; is written in an engaging and accessible style; encourages the reader to weigh the different arguments in play, and invites the reader to form their own conclusions beyond the established propositions. It’s a brilliant model for how to apply scholarship in the public sphere.”

Outside the UK, a clergyman in Canada based the first four paragraphs of his 2018 Easter sermon on the article [E9], later reporting: “As parish priest I’m always looking for ways to help bring the gospel home to my parishioners ... I’m also interested in the exercise of theology in the public square ... Dr. Gathercole’s article in *The Guardian* (April 2017) ticked all of the boxes I mentioned and influenced my 2018 Easter Day sermon ... I am grateful for theologians that help to bridge the gap between the academy and the church.” [E7]

A number of clergy also shared the article on social media, including the prominent church leader Rev Nicky Gumbel, creator of the “Alpha” course, who retweeted the article to his 122,000 followers on Twitter. Clergy, therefore, saw the access to academic research in the *Guardian* article as highly significant for their pastoral ministries.

4. Impact on public understanding among non-Christians. The article also introduced the evidence for Jesus to sceptics and adherents of other religions. One identifying as an atheist commented that “the article gave me insight” and said, “I have passed on information from the article to others.” Beyond that, there is clear evidence of both addressing a need, and an effect on or change of understanding: “the article answered specific questions I had regarding Jewish and Roman writers/historians and the nature of their references to Jesus. I had often wondered what these sources said about Jesus, what their motivations were, and when the references were written”, and: “My thinking was changed by the article as I learned that the non-Christian references [to Jesus] were less scarce than I had thought.” [E7]

Among members of other religions, one Jewish reader commented that the article provided material for discussion: “At various dinner tables and when comments are made this is an interesting article to mention. The discussion relating to King Arthur is an interesting point, and one I found my friends ready to engage with.” One vicar commented: “I’ve been reading the Bible with a local businessman for a while now, non-Christian from a Hindu background, but interested in looking at Christian things. A few weeks ago as we met he enthusiastically told me about a *Guardian* article I must read, as he found it very compelling—thank you for writing it!” Finally, a Jewish reader commented on email discussion with Gathercole about the article: “I greatly appreciated the fact that Dr. Gathercole was willing to discuss this with a member of the public. I think it is of huge importance to have such a link between academia and the general public.” [all E7] Again, the theme of bridging the gap between the academy and the public sphere is extremely important for these audiences, which especially appreciated understanding the evidence of non-Christian sources for Jesus.

5. Significance of *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* article (2018). The extraordinary response to the *Guardian* article was an impulse, as noted above, for the further shaping of Gathercole’s previous research on Paul, leading him to write a longer scholarly piece on the historical evidence for Jesus in Paul’s letters [R7]. Surprisingly, this article was read by a number of Christian lay-people, who wrote to Gathercole with their comments [E7].

Impact case study (REF3)

In terms of public debate over mythicism, two remarked upon “a number of subtle arguments that I hadn’t noticed before”, or “a number of the novel arguments” which made the article “very persuasive”.

There was significant well-being impact for one reader: “I just want to thank you for the wonderful scholarly article you wrote contra mythicism. I’m a Christian (18), and my faith has been somewhat shaken by mythicist claims for quite a few months. It’s been difficult to say the least. Your article was fantastic and I can’t thank you enough for it.” This is surprising testimony that a clearly written scholarly article (published in a Brill journal) can have a strong pastoral impact.

The influence of this article shows that the audience of the *Guardian* article was eager for more detailed discussion than could be provided in a short piece, with the longer essay equipping readers to respond themselves to mythicist claims.

6. Impact on 2019 media debate. In February 2019, the tabloid press resurrected interest in a 2016 Amazon Prime documentary (*Bible conspiracies*), which argued that Jesus did not exist but was a mythical figure whose biography is based on the life of the ancient philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana. A journalist with the *Independent* had noticed Gathercole’s *Guardian* article and interviewed him about this documentary, which led to the *Independent*, in contrast to some other newspapers, taking a more sceptical view of this outlandish theory. After a summary of the documentary, the rest of the *Independent* article is a series of (acknowledged) quotations from the interview [E10].

Material from this interview was repeated in a variety of media including Microsoft News (MSN) and Yahoo News, and led to an interview with Gathercole on Colombian radio (RCN Radio); RCN journalist Alejandro Villegas explained how the interview placed the debate in its historical context [E11]. A translation of excerpts of the *Independent* article appeared in *Republika*, an Indonesian national newspaper and website, in the “Islamic World” section, thereby reaching a new audience for the arguments [E12].

Overall, the research of these scholars, through the pathway of the Guardian article, has had a very significant impact internationally on public understanding of the historical Jesus, pastoral well-being of Christians, clergy addresses and further media debate. This is a clear case of the serendipitous impact of academic research satisfying a widespread hunger for historical evidence, and bringing life-changing impact.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] Newspaper article: Gathercole, S. What is the historical evidence that Jesus Christ lived and died? *The Guardian*. Print version: 15 Apr. 2017, p. 38. Online version with comments: 14 Apr.2017 [\[Link\]](#)

[E2] Email (14 Apr. 2017) from Head of Special Projects, *The Guardian* regarding E1.

[E3] Memo (18 Apr. 2017) from a reporter, *The Guardian*, giving stats for E1.

[E4] Historic screenshots of the article page for E1 on the *Guardian* website, showing statistics over time.

[E5] Newspaper article: Tamplin, H. Here’s the evidence that Jesus Christ lived and died.

Metro, 15 April 2017. [\[Link\]](#)

[E6] Memo (8 Jan. 2018) from a reporter, *The Guardian* giving further stats for E1.

[E7] Emails from readers to Simon Gathercole.

[E8] Easter sermons delivered by Revd Stephen Foster at Holy Trinity Brompton, London: (i) 2017 [\[Link\]](#) (ii) 2018 [\[Link\]](#). Transcripts provided.

[E9] Sermon delivered by Revd Jonathan Turtle at St Matthew’s Riverdale, Toronto, Canada). [\[Link\]](#)

[E10] Barnes, T. Low-budget Amazon Prime documentary prompts explosion of interest in theory Jesus was a Greek man called Apollonius. *Independent*, 12 Feb. 2019. [\[Link\]](#)

[E11] Testimonial: a journalist, RCN Radio (Colombia).

[E12] Newspaper article: Film dokumenter Ungkap Yesus adalah Apollonius dari Yunani? *Republika*, 14 Feb. 2019. [\[Link\]](#)