



Did Jesus Exist?

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A Summary Critique: Questioning the Existence of Jesus

Seldom have recent scholars questioned or denied the historical existence of Jesus. Of the very few who have done so, G. A. Wells is probably the best known. In this article, I will outline and then respond to some of his major tenets.

Before turning to this topic, I will first note that the vast majority of scholars, both conservative and liberal alike, generally disdain radical theses that question the very existence of Jesus. For example, theologian Rudolf Bultmann asserted, "By no means are we at the mercy of those who doubt or deny that Jesus ever lived."^[i]

Historian Michael Grant termed the hypothesis that Jesus never lived an "extreme view." He charges that it transgresses the basics of historiography: "if we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus' existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned." Grant summarizes, after referring to Wells as an example: "modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory." These positions have been "annihilated" by the best scholars because the critics "have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary."^[ii]

Digressing to a personal story, a potential publisher once asked me to contact a reviewer.

An influential New Testament scholar at a secular university, he had voted to publish my manuscript, but only if I deleted the section dealing with Wells's hypotheses. He said that Wells's suppositions were virtually devoid of serious historical content. He only relented after I convinced him that Wells still had some popular appeal.

Wells is aware of these attitudes towards his works. He acknowledges that "nearly all commentators who mention the matter at all, [set] aside doubts about Jesus' historicity as ridiculous."^[iii] He adds, "the view that there was no historical Jesus, that his earthly existence is a fiction of earliest Christianity ... is today almost universally rejected."^[iv] He concludes the matter: "serious students of the New Testament today regard the existence of Jesus as an unassailable fact" (HEJ 223). Even Michael Martin, one of Wells' few scholarly supporters, draws the rather restrained conclusion that "Wells' thesis is controversial and not widely accepted"^[v]

Of course Wells would be correct to note that scholarly opinions are not formulated by an academic head count. So the essential question concerns why many scholars find Well's position to be so fatally flawed. Why is he so frequently ignored?

This is the focus of this essay. It is my contention that Well's theses are a seedbed of informal logical errors, especially begging the question and special pleading. He must simply bend over backwards at many places in order to maintain his contentions. Rather than critique his overall proposal, which I have done elsewhere,^[vi] I will attempt a different approach here. I will list and discuss several of these unsupportable claims throughout his works. Most of these problems have the potential to seriously undermine or disprove his theses. In fact, in several places, Wells even admits the serious consequences for his view if he is mistaken.

Wells' Thesis

Briefly, Wells postulates four layers in early Christianity (with some overlap), starting with Paul's eight authentic letters written in the 50s and 60s AD.^[vii] But Paul knew exceptionally little about the historical Jesus, ignoring both where and when Jesus lived. The second level consists

of post-Pauline epistles like Ephesians, Hebrews, I Peter, and Clement of Rome's letter, all dating perhaps 80-105 AD. The third layer is composed of the pastoral epistles and Ignatius' letters, dated around 110 AD. The fourth level contains the canonical gospels, dated from 90 or 100 AD to some later time in the second century, perhaps decades later.

For Wells, historical claims about Jesus generally did not begin to accumulate until the third layer. Before 90 AD, Jesus remained an undated, mysterious figure about whom virtually nothing was known or reported (DJE, 47, 65; HEJ, 217-220).

Wells thinks that Jesus either never existed or, if he did, he had very little influence in his own time. The stories about him developed much later, over time. In sum, "Jesus is not linked with a recognizable historical situation in any document (Christian, Jewish or pagan) that can be proved to have originated before about AD 100" (DJE, 215).

A Critique of Wells' Hypotheses

Wells' ideas are wide open to criticism at a variety of junctures. Rather than attempt the more systematic approach I have employed in earlier writings, I will list problems that indicate significant flaws. At several places which he admits are integral, Wells resorts to almost any explanation, no matter how incredible, in order to disallow apparent textual meanings. If these texts are taken at face value, he realizes his thesis is in deep trouble. So Wells must disallow all time references to Jesus being a contemporary of New Testament persons.

(1) Wells' late-dating the earliest gospel (Mark) to 90-100 AD and the others to well into the second century certainly helps his thesis by divorcing Jesus from the early sources. For example, it allows him to remove Pilate's connection with Jesus until at least 90 AD (DJE, 47, 65; HEJ, 10-11). But these dates are opposed by virtually every other scholar writing on this subject, whether liberal or conservative. Even critical scholars usually date these four books from 65-100 AD. So Wells dates Mark about two or three decades later than almost everyone else, including those same scholars he cites so positively.

Though we definitely cannot respond in detail here, just a brief line of reasoning will be mentioned. Most of the Book of Acts is devoted to the careers of Peter and Paul, with many chapters centering in Jerusalem. The deaths of Stephen (7:54-60) and the apostle James (12:1-2) are recorded, and the book ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (28:14-31). Yet nothing is mentioned about the deaths of Paul and Peter (mid-60s AD), or James, the Lord's brother (about 62 AD). Further, the Jewish War with the Romans beginning in 66 and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 are also absent. These five events are not arbitrary; each is absolutely central to the book's key persons and geography, making them absolutely integral to the theme.

So how could the author of Acts not mention these last five events, which dwarf many of the other items in the book? By far the best solution is that none of these things had yet occurred. These absences argue very strongly for an early date, before the mid-60s.

Since Luke was written prior to Acts,[viii] but after Mark and Matthew, we may then date all five books before 65 AD. Even if we are too early by ten or so years, this is still a serious challenge to Wells. If the majority of contemporary scholars is right, then Wells would still be crucially wrong by about 25 years on each book. This would indicate that facts regarding the historical Jesus circulated at a much earlier date than he asserts. The more Wells is mistaken on these dates, the closer our historical information gets to Jesus.

(2) Wells realizes that if Paul's reference to "James the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19) means that he met with Jesus' sibling, then this alone is very troubling to his thesis (HEJ, 167-174; DJE, 21). But here we perceive Wells' special pleading at its very best. Rather than admit Paul's straightforward meaning, he suggests that there was a zealous group in the early church who were not relatives but were called "the brethren of the Lord"!

Very surprisingly, Wells even admits the severity of his plight:

If Paul means blood brother of a historical Jesus, then it would suffice to establish - against my view - that Jesus had really lived in the first half of the

first century. Furthermore, I must admit that this interpretation of Paul's words does seem the immediate and obvious one. Here, then, is a case where what seems to be the plain sense of a text ... would weigh very heavily indeed against my view of Christian origins. (HEJ, 167)

But there are several reasons that Paul was referring to Jesus' brother. As Wells states, this is the normal way to understand this passage. Second, in I Corinthians 9:5, the Lord's brothers refer to individuals who are authoritative enough to be compared to Peter and the apostles, not to some obscure group of believers. Third, all four gospels refer to Jesus' physical brothers.[ix] James is even specified as one of them (Mk. 6:3; Matt. 13:55-56). Whatever date is assigned to these books, they plainly understood the tradition in a way that disagrees with Wells. Fourth, we will discuss below Jewish historian Josephus, who also calls James the brother of Jesus.[x] But Josephus would hardly be referring to a sectarian group of believers known within the church! Fifth, there is no historical evidence to support Wells' specific contention concerning James.

So this leaves Wells to face his own critique stated above. That he is clearly wrong about James weighs heavily against his entire thesis concerning the historical Jesus, just like he admits.

(3) Paul appears to refer to those who were physically present with Jesus, calling them the twelve (I Corinthians 15:4) and the apostles (15:7). As with James, Wells fully realizes that if this is so, then his thesis suffers at another key point: "If these words were really written by Paul, then it looks as though he was aware that Jesus chose twelve disciples; and if Paul in this respect corroborates what the gospels say, then it would be reasonable to infer that he also knows the principle facts of Jesus' life" (DJE, 124). But Wells contends that "apostle" does not mean a physical companion of Jesus (HEJ, 227, note 14). Further, "the twelve" was interpolated into Paul's epistle (DJE, 124), even without textual evidence for this conclusion! Again, Wells recognizes a crucial passage, and once again, the sense of special pleading is apparent. He is willing to say virtually anything to avoid a clear text opposing his view, even if he has to ignore the contrary evidence and hold that it was added, relying on little more than his own assertion.

(4) Wells' treatment of the many nonbiblical references to Jesus is also quite problematic. He downplays those presenting difficulties for his position (Thallus, Tacitus), and suggests late dates for others, again in contrast to the wide majority of scholars (Thallus [perhaps second century AD!], Polycarp [135 AD!], Papias [140 AD]). Yet, he provides few reasons why these dates should be preferred (DJE, 10-15, 78, 139; HEJ, 15-18).

The most important problem for Wells' treatment is Josephus' testimony. In order to dismiss this important Jewish documentation, Wells resorts to questioning both of Josephus' references to Jesus. Not only does he disallow them as interpolated comments, but he asserts that this is also "widely admitted" by scholars (HEJ, 18; DJE, 10-11). But he is so wide of the mark here that one is tempted to question his research altogether.

While virtually everyone thinks that portions of Josephus' longer statement in *Antiquities* 18:3 has been added, the majority also think that a fair amount still came from Josephus. Princeton Seminary's James Charlesworth strongly concludes: "We can now be as certain as historical research will presently allow that Josephus did refer to Jesus." [xi] John Drane adds that "most scholars have no doubts about the authenticity" of the passage's nucleus. [xii] Written about 93-94 AD, Josephus' statement, among other claims, clearly links Jesus to his disciples and connects his crucifixion to Pilate. It is independent of the gospels, according to Wells' dating.

Josephus' second statement refers to James as the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ (*Antiquities* 20:9). This also hurts Well's thesis significantly, because it likewise links Jesus to a first century person who was known to Paul and other apostles. [xiii] In spite of Wells' dismissal (without citing a single scholar who agrees - HEJ, 18), Yamauchi concludes, "Few scholars have questioned the genuineness of this passage." [xiv]

Thus it is no wonder that Wells would dearly like to squelch Josephus' two references to Jesus. Both clearly place Jesus in a specific first century context connected with the apostles and Pilate, cannot be derived from the gospels on Wells' dating, and come from a non-Christian. Wells

even notes that such independent data would be of "great value" (DJE, 14). So it is exceptionally instructive, not just that Wells dismisses both, but that he clearly wishes his readers to think that contemporary scholarship is firmly on his side when it very clearly is nowhere close. Charlesworth specifically refers to Wells' treatment of Josephus, saying that, "Many solid arguments can be presented against such distortions and polemics." [xv]

Other problems abound with Wells' thesis that attempts to disconnect Jesus from a first century AD context. For example, he tries to dismiss Paul's dating the resurrection appearances to the third day after Jesus' death in I Corinthians 15:4 (DJE, 31). While Wells readily admits that many like Peter and Paul claimed to be witnesses of resurrection appearances, this fails to connect Jesus to the first century (DJE, 32; HEJ, 43-44)! While earlier he compares Christianity to ancient mythology (DJE, 182-193), he later criticizes such efforts (HEJ, 218-219). Further, he regularly stumbles when attempting to summarize recent scholarship. But Wells recognizes his lack of specialization, as a self-proclaimed "amateur" (DJE, 2), having taught German.

The entire subject of the resurrection is also troublesome for Wells. Responding to my debate with atheist Antony Flew, [xvi] noting that Flew did not do well, Wells wrote a response that repeats his tiered thesis. [xvii] Still he struggles, trying to explain the resurrection by the same discredited methods discussed here. Although he notes the repetition during the debate (4), this did not keep him from repeatedly misunderstanding my arguments (especially 23-36).

Conclusion

Why do scholars reject Wells' thesis? Because it cuts out Christianity's heart and even critics refuse to face this (DJE, 205)? I have argued that there is another reason. One does not impress scholars by maintaining a thesis at all costs, consistently resorting to extraordinary means to overlook any bit of data that would disprove one's view. Even ally Martin realizes that Wells' arguments may sometimes seem "ad hoc and arbitrary." [xviii]

But at several points, this is clearly what Wells

does. He often admits that a natural textual reading devastates his theories. Then he dismisses every historical reference linking Jesus to the first century, making some bizarre moves in the process. This most obviously occurs in his treatments of James, Jesus' disciples, and Josephus. Along with dating the gospels decades later than almost everyone, these and other factors combine to produce the sense of ad hoc argumentation. But it all seriously undermines his system, as well as eroding his credibility.

Wells appears to declare virtually anything rather than admitting Jesus' historicity. Yet, one by one, his house of cards collapses. This is precisely why the vast majority of scholars reject Well's claims: he fails to deal adequately with the historical data.

Endnotes

- [i]. "The Story of the Synoptic Gospels," *Form Criticism*, trans. Frederick Grant (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 60.
- [ii]. *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 199-200.
- [iii]. *Did Jesus Exist?*, Revised edition (London: Pemberton, 1978, 1986), 213 (abbreviated in text as DJE).
- [iv]. *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988), 218 (abbreviated in text as HEJ).
- [v]. *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 67.
- [vi]. See Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996), Chapter 2, which also critiques Martin's treatment.
- [vii]. Wells identifies these as Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, Philemon, and probably Colossians (HEJ, 19-22).
- [viii]. Compare Luke 1:1-3 with Acts 1:1.
- [ix]. Matthew 12:46-47; Mark 3:31-32; Luke 8:19-20; John 7:5.
- [x]. *Antiquities* 20:9.
- [xi]. *Jesus Within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 96.
- [xii]. *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 138.
- [xiii]. Galatians 1:19; I Corinthians 9:5; Acts 15:1-20.

[xiv]. "Josephus and the Scriptures," *Fides et Historia*, Vol. 13 (1980), 53.

[xv]. Charlesworth, 98. For further details, see 90-98; Yamauchi, 42-63; Drane, 138; and Habermas, 43-44, 192-196.

[xvi]. *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, ed. Terry Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

[xvii]. *A Resurrection Debate* (London: Rationalist Press, 1988), 3-4, 44-46.

[xviii]. 55.

Originally published in the *Christian Research Journal* / vol. 22, no. 3, 2000.