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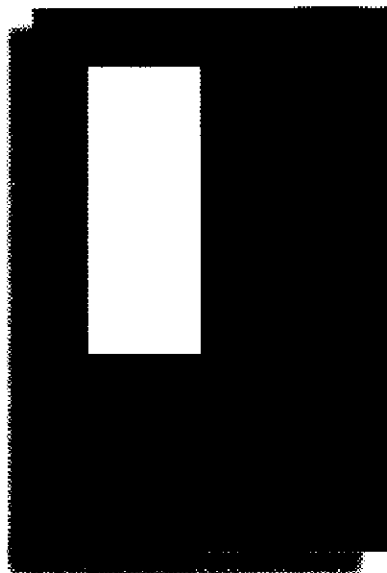
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A Summary Critique: Questioning the Existence of Jesus



Did Jesus Exist?

G. A. Wells
Pemberton



The Historical Evidence for Jesus

G. A. Wells
Prometheus Books

Seldom have recent scholars questioned or denied the historical existence of Jesus. Of the very few who have, G. A. Wells is probably the best known. Actually, Wells, a professor of German at Birbeck College, University of London, is not a specialist in this area, but a self-proclaimed "amateur."¹ Nonetheless, since his books are actively promoted through Prometheus Press in New York and widely read by critics and lay people alike, his arguments bear examination.²

The vast majority of scholars, both conservative and liberal alike, generally disdain radical theses that question the very existence of Jesus. As far as most scholars are concerned, the historicity of Jesus is an established fact. For example, even theologian Rudolf Bultmann asserted, "By no means are we at the mercy of those who doubt or deny that Jesus ever lived."³

Historian Michael Grant termed the hypothesis that Jesus never lived an "extreme view." He charged 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."⁴

Wells is aware of these attitudes toward his works. He acknowledges that "nearly all commentators who mention the matter at all, [set] aside doubts about Jesus' historicity as ridiculous."⁵ He adds that "the view that there was no historical Jesus, that his earthly existence is a fiction of earliest Christianity... is today almost universally rejected."⁶ Wells concludes the matter: "Serious students of the New Testament today regard the existence of

Jesus as an unassailable fact."⁷ Even skeptical philosopher Michael Martin, one of Wells's few scholarly supporters, draws the rather restrained conclusion that "Wells's thesis is controversial and not widely accepted."⁸

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

Wells's theses are a seedbed of logical errors, especially begging the question and special pleading. He must bend over backwards at *many* places in order to maintain his contentions. Rather than critique his overall proposal, which I have done elsewhere,⁹ I will take a different approach here. I will list and discuss several of these unsupportable claims from throughout his works. Most of these problems have the potential to undermine or disprove his theses. In fact, in several places, Wells even admits the serious consequences for his view if he is mistaken.

Wells's Thesis. Wells postulates four chronological layers of literature in early Christianity (with some overlap), starting with what he considers Paul's eight authentic letters written in the 50s and 60s A.D.¹⁰ According to Wells, Paul knew exceptionally little about the historical Jesus, ignoring both where and when Jesus lived. The second and later level consists of post-Pauline epistles such as Ephesians,¹¹ Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Clement of Rome's letter, all dating from perhaps A.D. 80-105. The third layer is composed of the pastoral epistles¹² and Ignatius's letters, dated around A.D. 110. The fourth level contains the canonical gospels, dated by Wells from A.D. 90 or 100 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 A.D. 90, Jesus remained an undated, mysterious figure about whom virtually nothing was known or reported.¹³

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 over time, much later. 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 A.D. 100."¹⁴

A Critique of Wells's Hypotheses. Wells's ideas are wide open to criticism at a variety of junctures — historical, literary, and logical. This survey of some of his significant flaws illustrates this observation. At several places that he admits are integral to his theses, Wells resorts to almost any explanation, no matter how incredible, in order to disallow apparent textual meanings that would contradict him. If these texts are taken at face value, he realizes his theses fail. So, for example, Wells must disallow all references to Jesus being a contemporary of New Testament persons.

1. Wells's late-dating of the earliest gospel (Mark) to A.D. 90–100 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 A.D. 90.¹⁵ 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 gospels from A.D. 65–100. So Wells dates Mark about two or three decades later than almost everyone else, including the same scholars he very favorably cites in other places.

Even a cursory examination of the texts shows their historical intricacy. 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 A.D.), or James, the Lord's brother (about A.D. 62). Further, the Jewish War with the Romans beginning in 66 and the fall of

Jerusalem in 70 are also absent. These last five events are not arbitrary; each is absolutely central to the persons and geography of Acts, making them absolutely integral to the theme if they had already taken place.

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 most reasonable solution is that none of these things had yet occurred. These significant absences argue very strongly for an early date, before the mid-60s.

Since Luke was written prior to Acts,¹⁶ but perhaps after Mark and Matthew, we may then date all five books before A.D. 65. Even if we are too early by 10 or 20 years, this is still a critical 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 indicates 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.¹⁷ But here we perceive a most blatant example of Wells's special pleading. 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 historiographical 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.¹⁸

There are several good reasons to believe that Paul was referring to Jesus' brother. First, as Wells admits, this is the normal way to understand this passage. Second, in 1 Corinthians 9:5, "the Lord's brothers" refers 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.¹⁹ James is even specified as one of them (Mark 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, I will discuss below the Jewish historian Josephus, who also calls James the brother of Jesus.²⁰ Josephus would hardly be referring to a sectarian group of believers known only within the church! Fifth, there is no historical evidence to support Wells's specific contention concerning James or this zealous group of believers.

This leaves Wells to face his own critique. That he is clearly wrong about James weighs heavily against his entire thesis concerning the historical Jesus, just as he admits.

3. Paul seemingly refers to those who were physically present with Jesus, calling them the twelve (1 Cor. 15:5) 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."²¹ But Wells contends that "apostle" does not mean a physical companion of Jesus.²² Further, Wells hypothesizes that "the twelve" was interpolated into Paul's epistle,²³ even without textual evidence for this conclusion! Wells recognizes a crucial passage and, once again, resorts to special pleading to maintain his thesis. 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, relying on his own preconceptions, argue that it was a later addition.

4. Wells's treatment of the many nonbiblical references to Jesus is also 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. (According to Wells, Thallus was perhaps second century A.D., Polyarp A.D. 135 [?], and Papias A.D. 140.) Yet, he provides few reasons why these dates should be preferred.¹⁴

The most important problem for Wells's treatment is Josephus's testimony. In order to dismiss this important Jewish documentation, Wells resorts to questioning both of Josephus's references to Jesus. Not only does he disallow them as wholly interpolated comments, but he asserts that this is also "widely admitted" by scholars.¹⁵ This statement is so wide of the mark that it raises questions about his research altogether.

While virtually every scholar thinks that portions of Josephus's longer statement in *Antiquities* 18:3 have been added, the majority also think that a fair amount still came originally from Josephus. Princeton Seminary's James Charlesworth concludes, "We can now be as certain as historical research will presently allow that Josephus did refer to Jesus."¹⁶ John Drane adds that "most scholars have no doubts about the authenticity" of the passage's nucleus.¹⁷ Written about A.D. 93-94, Josephus's 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's dating.

Josephus's second statement refers to James as the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ (*Antiquities* 20:9). This also hurts Wells's thesis significantly, because it likewise links Jesus to a first century person who was known to Paul and other apostles.¹⁸ Despite Wells's dismissal (without citing a single scholar who agrees¹⁹), Edwin Yamauchi concludes, "Few scholars have questioned the genuineness of this passage."²⁰

It is no wonder that Wells would dearly like to squelch Josephus's two references to Jesus. Both clearly place Jesus in a specific first century context connected with the apostles and Pilate, are not derived from the gospels on Wells's dating, and come from a non-Christian source. Wells even notes that independent data would be of "great value."²¹ 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 is very clearly nowhere close. Charlesworth specifically refers to Wells's treatment of Josephus, saying that

"many solid arguments can be presented against such distortions and polemic."²²

Other problems abound with Wells's attempt to disconnect Jesus from a first century A.D. context. For example, he tries to dismiss Paul's dating of the resurrection appearances to the third day after Jesus' death in 1 Corinthians 15:4.²³ While Wells readily admits that many like Peter and Paul claimed to be witnesses of resurrection appearances, he still says that this fails to connect Jesus to the first century!²⁴ While earlier he compares Christianity to ancient mythology,²⁵ he later criticizes such efforts.²⁶ Further, he regularly stumbles when attempting to summarize recent scholarship, as with his treatment of Josephus.

The entire subject of the Resurrection is also troublesome for Wells. Responding to my debate with atheist Antony Flew,²⁷ and noting that Flew did not do well, Wells wrote a response that repeats his tired thesis.²⁸ Still he struggles, trying to explain the Resurrection by the same discredited methods discussed here. Although he notes the repetition during the debate,²⁹ this did not keep him from repeatedly misunderstanding my arguments.³⁰

Why do scholars reject Wells's thesis? Because it cuts out Christianity's heart, and even critics refuse to face this!³¹ 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 disproves one's view. Even ally Martin realizes that Wells's arguments may sometimes seem "ad hoc and arbitrary."³² Yet, 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, such as in his treatments of James, Jesus' disciples, and Josephus. Add to this many other scholarly deviations, such as dating the gospels decades later than almost everyone else does, and Wells's theses can only be viewed as anachronistic argumentation. This undermines his system and erodes his credibility. Card by card, his house of cards collapses. This is precisely why the vast majority of scholars reject Wells's claims: he fails to deal adequately with the historical data, literary context, and rational argumentation.

— Gary Habermas

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- 14 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 215.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 47, 65; Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 10-11.
- 16 Compare Luke 1:1-3 with Acts 1:1.
- 17 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 21; *Historical Evidence*, 167-74.
- 18 Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 167.
- 19 Matthew 12:46-47; Mark 3:31-32; Luke 8:19-20; John 7:5.
- 20 *Antiquities* 20:9.
- 21 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 124.
- 22 Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 227 n. 14.
- 23 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 124.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 10-15, 78, 139; Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 15-18.
- 25 Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 18; *Did Jesus Exist?* 10-11.
- 26 James Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 96.
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- 29 Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 18.
- 30 Edwin Yamauchi, "Josephus and the Scriptures," *Fides et Historia* 13 (1980), 53.
- 31 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 14.
- 32 Charlesworth, 98. For further details, see 90-98; Yamauchi, 42-63; Drane, 138; and Habermas, 43-44, 192-96.
- 33 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 31.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 32; Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 43-44.
- 35 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 182-93.
- 36 Wells, *Historical Evidence*, 218-19.
- 37 Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, ed. Terry Miethe (San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 1987).
- 38 G. A. Wells, *A Resurrection Debate* (London: Rationalist Press, 1988), 3-4, 44-46.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 40 *Ibid.*, especially 23-26.
- 41 Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* 205.
- 42 Martin, 55.

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