

Did Jesus Exist?

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Introduction

G. A Wells, in his 1986 book *Did Jesus Exist?*, takes the rare position that Jesus did not exist¹. His 250 page long book covers a large amount of historical data and has been widely quoted by skeptics and agnostics in their arguments against Christianity. A recent search of the Internet Infidels web site² for "Wells" returned over 1,500 hits with the majority of these being quotes of one of several of Wells's books. While the Christian community has produced some fine replies to the arguments of The Jesus Seminar³, Wells has not received nearly the same level of scholarly attention.

Thesis

Most, if not all, of the points of Wells are fairly easily refutable. Wells is worth refuting because of the attention his work has received from those skeptical of the Christian truth claim. This paper will deal with several of the lines of argumentation Wells raises and provide some answers. Due to the scope of the Wells book, a complete treatment of his points is not possible.

¹ Wells himself admits his extreme position as rare on p. 1, "Most of these [alternative explanations to the historical Jesus] theories, however, do not impugn the historicity of Jesus, and there is a widespread belief that his teaching and character, as given in the gospels, could not have been invented."

² <http://infidels.org> - Search performed using the infidels.org site search engine Feb 1999.

³ A list of some of these books is in the bibliography.

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About G. A. Wells

George Albert Wells (1926-) was a professor of Applied Linguistics (German) at Birbeck College⁴, University of London. Wells described himself as "not a trained theologian", but as "an outsider." Wells has authored over 15 books as well as providing forewords for about a half dozen other books. These books are in several subject fields including the origin of languages, several biographies, and other subjects related to applied linguistics.

Wells's book, *Did Jesus Exist?*, passed through two major revisions. The original was written in 1975 and was expanded, corrected and republished in 1986. This paper will cover the 1986 edition. Wells has been a prolific writer on this subject. Other books by Wells include, *The Jesus of the early Christians: A Study in Christian origins (1971)*⁵ which is the prequel to this book, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus (1982, 1988)*⁶, *Who was Jesus? : a Critique of the New Testament Record (1989)*⁷, *The Jesus Legend (1996, 1998)*⁸, and *The Jesus Myth (1999)*⁹.

The Evidence

⁴ <http://www.bbk.ac.uk> is the Birbeck College homepage. The homepage for the Department of Applied Linguistics does not list Wells on the current faculty. According to the university, Wells has been retired for several years.

⁵ Published in London by Pemberton.

⁶ Published in Buffalo - unknown publisher.

⁷ Published in La Salle, Ill. by Open Court, 231 pages.

⁸ Published in Chicago by Open Court,

⁹ Published in Chicago by Open Court, 329 pages.

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Wells presents eight lines in his attack against the basis of the historical Christian faith. These are; 1) Jewish and Pagan Testimony to Jesus, 2) Early Christian Epistles, 3) The Origin and Nature of the Gospels, 4) Christologies, 5) The Twelve, 6) Galilee and John the Baptist, 7) Was Jesus a Political Rebel?, and 8) The Pagan and Jewish Background. Note that these categories are approximately the same categories that Christian apologetic books utilize in providing a defense of the historical Christian faith. Wells has produced counterarguments to the traditional Christian apologetical case.

The core argument of Wells is that if the historicity of Jesus is admitted, then a slippery slope is begun leading to the acceptance of the accuracy of the Gospels and on into Christian faith. Wells is correct in this fear since many of the converts to Christianity have been convinced by an examination of the New Testament evidence.

This paper examines each area of evidence to see the strengths and weaknesses of Wells arguments by selecting a key point from each of his chapters. Several examples of the same basic flaws in methodology could be cited from most of the chapters, but this paper is necessarily limited in size to examining the prime argument from each chapter.

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Josephus (Jewish Testimony to Jesus)

The central argument from the “Jewish and Pagan Testimony to Jesus” chapter of Well's book, is the writings of Josephus. Josephus wrote his *History of the Jews* in about 73 AD, thus he was a contemporary of the ministry of the apostles¹⁰. These writings of Josephus have two explicit references to Jesus. The longer of the two references is Wells's main target as it's widely considered the weaker of the two references:

Antiquities 18:3 - Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works,-a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had him condemned to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared alive to them again on the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

For Jesus to never have existed, as Wells contended, the references to Jesus as an actual historical person in the writings of Josephus need to be explained away. The most common way to explain these writings away, is to claim that they are Christian additions to the original text of Josephus, and Wells does just that in his book.

¹⁰ Although it could be argued that Josephus was actually ½ a generation later.

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Why is Josephus Important?

Josephus is referenced by a number of the Early Church Fathers as supporting the historical fact of the life of Jesus¹¹. For the thesis of Wells, that Jesus was not an actual historical personage to be true, any historical reference to the life of Jesus must be presumed to be invented.

Position of Wells on Josephus

To this end, Wells makes the comment "But the longer of these has been shown fairly conclusively to be wholly a Christian interpolation." This claim is simply false. As John P. Meier wrote in "A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 1 (1991)":

Four basic opinions can be distilled. (1) The entire account about Jesus is a Christian interpolation; Josephus simply did not mention Jesus in this section of The Antiquities. (2) While there are signs of heavy Christian redaction, some mention of Jesus at this point in The Antiquities --- perhaps a pejorative one -- caused a Christian scribe to substitute his own positive account. The original wording as a whole has been lost, though some traces of what Josephus wrote may still be found. (3) The text before us is basically what Josephus wrote, the two or three insertions by a Christian scribe are easily isolated from the clearly non-Christian core. Often however scholars will proceed to make some modifications in the text after the insertions are omitted. (4) The Testimonium is entirely by Josephus¹².

Meier goes on to note that "The first opinion has its respectable defenders but does not seem to be the majority view¹³". Thus, Wells's claim about the text being "shown fairly conclusively to be wholly a Christian interpolation" is simply wrong. Wells does not prove his case that the text

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialog with Trypho*, 147 AD. Origin, *Commentary on Matthew*, 230 AD. Origin, *Contra Celsus*, 250 AD. Eusebius, *Demonstr. Evan.* 3.124 324, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1. 11 330 AD. Ambrose, 360 AD, Hegesippus, and others.

¹² Meier, John O. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 59.

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has been shown conclusively to be what he claims since the majority of scholars do not agree with his conclusions.

This is illustrative of Wells's historical methodology and why he's frankly not taken seriously by most historians. Wells starts with his presupposition, that Jesus did not exist, and shapes the historical data to fit his theory discounting all contrary data and never presenting a positive case for his thesis. Wells goes on to give the classic reasons for mistrusting the entire text of the longer passage in Josephus picking and choosing arguments which fit his case and ignoring any contrary evidence. Additionally, Wells never even quotes the actual passages in his book nor does he even provide references where they can be located in copies of Josephus' writings. This further reduces the credibility of Wells's writings.

The Shorter Josephus Passage

Even more problematic for Wells's theory is the shorter Josephus passage:

Antiquities 20:9 So he [Ananus, son of Ananus the high priest] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before him the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others (or some of his companions) and when he had formed an accusation against them, he delivered them to be stoned.

There is little scholarly disagreement about the authenticity of this passage. Contrary to the scholarly consensus, Wells lists three scholars¹⁴ who consider the passage to be an interpolation.

Wells's arguments are even less substantial on this point. Wells states "its unlikely that Josephus

¹⁴ Schurer, Zahn, and von Dobschütz.

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would have mentioned Jesus here simply - as it were - in passing, when he mentions him nowhere else. (p. 11)" But this presupposes that the passage two chapters earlier is completely inauthentic. Meier¹⁵ lists four reasons why this text is not a Christian interpolation. For instance, the Christian references to James don't refer to him in the same way that Josephus does, "the brother of Jesus", but rather as "the brother of the Lord¹⁶". This reduces the possibility this was a scribal addition to the margin of the text which later was accepted as part of the text.

Josephus on John the Baptist

Josephus also references John the Baptist. Wells quotes Barrett who thinks that "the Baptist" might be a Christian interpolation to the text and Wells then applies that argument out of the context of Barrett, and back to the shorter reference to Christ. Again, this argument is specious. The reference of Josephus to John the Baptist bolsters the historical case for Jesus. If the New Testament writers were looking to usurp the life story of an obscure historical figure, why would they pick someone who was so recent?

¹⁵ Meier, pp. 57-59.

¹⁶ Gal 1:19 and probably 1 Cor 9:5.

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Conclusions on Josephus

Several Christian authors have undertaken the task of answering Wells on the Josephus question.

Perhaps the best answer to Wells was given by Meier:

It is significant that the *Testimonium Flavianum* is quickly and facily dismissed without detailed examination by G. A. Wells in his popular and somewhat sensationalistic *Did Jesus Exist?*. Obviously, Wells's desire to maintain the thesis that Jesus never existed (pp. 205-7) demands such a treatment of Josephus who would otherwise destroy Wells's whole argument before it could really get started. Wells's presentation descends to simple affirmation, supported not by argumentation but by citation of generally antiquated authorities, in the case of the James passage, which is declared to be a brief marginal glass from a Christian, which was later incorporate into the text (p. 11). Wells's book, which builds its argument on these and similar unsubstantiated claims, may be allowed to stand as a representative of a whole type of popular Jesus book that I do not bother to consider in detail¹⁷.

Meier devotes an entire chapter to Josephus in his definitive analysis of the current state of the historical question. Two additional useful sources are *Josephus and the New Testament*, by Steve Mason¹⁸, and the dissertations at the end of *The Works of Josephus*, by William Whiston¹⁹.

¹⁷ Meier, p. 87.

¹⁸ Mason, Steve. *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992)

¹⁹ Whiston, William, *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987)

Wells on The Early Christian Epistles

Wells proceeds to pick and choose between points of various liberal scholars on the Pauline Epistles in an eclectic fashion. Wells trots out the classical liberal arguments against the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles²⁰, produces late dates for the Epistles²¹, and late dates for the Gospels²². Since Wells deals with dating issues in chapter three, that's where this will be dealt with in this paper.

Historical Jesus and the Mystical Christ

The main point Wells raises in this chapter is to create an antimony between the "historical Jesus" of the Gospel writers and the "mystical Christ" of Paul's writings. At its core, this is an argument from silence which does not take into account the facts of the biographical life of Paul. Although Paul was roughly a contemporary of Jesus, he was not a companion or follower during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Thus, we should not expect the same level of detail in Paul's letters of the life of Christ as we find in the biographical Gospels themselves, which were written by companions of Christ or by those who interviewed the eyewitnesses.

²⁰ One of the reasons given for separation of the Pastoral Epistles from Pauline authorship is the explicit mention of Pilate by the author of 1 Timothy. Eta Linnemann has a book out in German which should be translated in the next year or so to English on the subject of the liberal arguments against Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles.

²¹ Wells dates the main Epistles at 55 - 60 AD.

²² Mark, which Wells says was first, he dates at later than 70 AD, placing the synopses after the timeframe of eyewitnesses and introducing necessary time gaps to allow for legendary development and the death of contrary witnesses.

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Contrary to Wells, Paul does clearly portray Jesus as a historical person. Paul's argues against Gnosticism by affirming the reality of the fleshly existence²³ of Christ. The least credible part of this argument is that Paul, who is admittedly the earliest writer, would have a mystical view of Jesus and that the later Synoptic Gospel writers would have such a concrete view of Christ. This is a reversal of the expected progression.

Mikolaski notes that “From the earliest days of Christianity attempts have been made to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith²⁴.” Mikolaski properly points out that 1 John denounces those who deny Jesus is Christ come in the flesh.

Ad Hoc Explanations

Further, the book of John portrays Christ as both a concrete person and as God in human flesh. This entire scheme is explained by Wells as a sort of filling back in of the details by the early Christians. However, this theory is contradictory to the typical legendary progression expected where the person who is merely a human is projected by future generations to be a god²⁵. On this point, Wells's argument is ad hoc.

²³ Used in the sense that Christ was a real person who lived in both time and space.

²⁴ Mikolaski, *Theological Sentences*, 5.0.1.

²⁵ A good example of this would be the Buddha. There were no claims by his contemporaries that he was a deity, but these claims grew with succeeding generations reaching legendary proportions many years later.

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Paul on the Historical Jesus

Wells claims that the writings of Paul never suggest "that he [Jesus] lived on earth in the recent past. Even if this was the case, this does not support Wells's thesis which is that Jesus never lived on the earth. To the contrary, all it does is cast doubt on the traditional dating. Wells's goal is to push the timeframe back allowing much needed time for development of legend. The 20-30 years between the events of the life of Christ and Paul's writings simply way too short a time for this sort of legendary development. Witnesses could be interviewed who could refute the story. The environment itself was hostile to the Christian message.

"That Generation"

On the other hand, Wells's argument contradicts the thesis of those atheists who quote Wells, since most use the writings of the Olivette Discourse as found in Matt 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 as proof that Jesus promised to return in that same generation. If Paul is prior to the Gospels, as Wells suggests, than this common atheistic argument would make no sense.

Thus, whether Paul puts an exact date on the life of Christ relative to his own is not relevant.

Again, the genre of Paul's writings is not biographical, as Paul was not a witness to most of the life of Christ²⁶, but to presume that Paul had no knowledge of the biographical details of the life of Christ is to make, at best, an argument from silence.

²⁶ This has been explained by many Christian apologists by the reference to "Saul of Tartus". Paul was not a resident of Jerusalem and thus would not have witnessed Christ personally except perhaps at a yearly feast.

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Other Data Points on the Matter

The approach of Wells also ignores the general order of events as described in the Book of Acts, which Wells simply dismisses out of hand as inaccurate. Paul, as Saul, was an eyewitness to the stoning of Stephen, an event which fits very early in Church history, only a few years, perhaps, after the passion of Christ.

Wells neglects the value of the relative independence of Paul's revelation as corroborating, rather than contradictory. Paul claimed to have had his revelation directly from the Lord²⁷ and yet it was substantially the same as the other apostles. Paul's own personality and intellectual state may well have allowed for a more sophisticated understanding of the Gospel message than some of the other apostles, but they all had the same essential message.

Additionally, Paul clearly portrays Christ in Romans as being "a Jew according to the flesh"²⁸. This very point refutes Wells's theory. Even if Paul did not know Christ personally prior to the passion, Paul never questioned the historical facticity of the existence of Christ. Not only that, but Paul places him in the line of David which presupposes some knowledge of the historical situation. Paul relates knowing Peter and the other apostles who he recognizes as eyewitnesses²⁹.

²⁷ Gal 1:12.

²⁸ Romans 1:3

²⁹ 1 Cor 15:5

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Additionally, Paul mentions 500 people who were eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection as mostly still being alive at the time of his writing³⁰. This places the writings in a narrow historical context, but does not allow precise dating. A reasonable upper limit based on the "many of which are still living" would be 40 years and a lower limit might be 20 years. This is a narrow gap.

1 Cor 15 contains a clear description of the key biographical details of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Christ. This section is recognized by most scholars as preserving an even earlier creedal – confessional tradition due to its form. Phil and other places contain other probable creedal statements.

³⁰ 1 Cor 15: 6

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Contrary Scholarship

Additionally, Wells does not account for the conservative scholarship on the life of Paul, including William M. Ramsey's book *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*.³¹ Ramsey makes the case that the historical account of the life of Paul as contained in the book of Luke is accurate. Ramsey states that:

The chronology of early Christian history 25-65 AD, while complicated like ancient chronology generally, is far from being so difficult as it has been considered. The simple truth is that no period in ancient history is so assured and so well attested as this³².

Also noteworthy is *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul: With Dissertation on the Life and Writings of St. Luke, and the Ships and Navigation of the Ancients*, by James Smith³³. There has been very little liberal response to the conservative scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries on these points.

The Epistles Themselves

There is evidence in the epistles themselves that Paul viewed the life of Christ as recent. In Eph 3, for instance, Paul writes of the mystery of Christ, which was "now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit."³⁴ Paul, in Galatians, recalled his trip to Jerusalem to meet

³¹ Ramsey, William M. *St Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

³² *Ibid*, p xiii.

³³ (Longmans, Green, and Co, 1880).

³⁴ Eph. 3: 5.

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with Peter and James, the brother of the Lord³⁵. This clearly sets the timeframe for Paul's writing since he met Peter and James. Peter was a disciple and companion of the Lord and James was the half-brother of the Lord³⁶.

Even More Extravagant Claims by Wells

Wells makes some even more extravagant claims about a possible time gap between the life of Christ and the epistles of Paul. For instance Wells wrote, "There are many centuries between David and Paul, and Paul gives no indication in which of them Jesus' earthly life fell."³⁷ This is clearly a stretch beyond any recognition. For Paul to have written about personally meeting James, the brother of the Lord, and then for Wells to claim that Jesus could have lived in any of the prior centuries, is an unbelievable stretch of the imagination ignoring all of the textual evidence. This is one of those moments that it takes more "blind" faith to be a skeptic, than to be a believer. The evidence is certainly not present for the assertions Wells makes.

Paul mentions the cross and crucifixion of Christ³⁸. Crucifixion is a practice limited in geographical and historical scope as well. Churches already existed in many cities of Asia Minor at the time of the conversion of Paul as they are described as being in fear of Paul and fearful of

³⁵ Gal 2: 18- 19.

³⁶ Some traditional accounts represent James as the cousin of Jesus and others represent James as the son of Joseph by a prior marriage. All accounts show him a contemporary of Christ.

³⁷ Wells, p. 18.

³⁸ 1 Cor 1: 17, Gal 5: 11, 6: 12, 14, Eph 2: 16, and others.

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the sincerity of his conversion, so there was at least several years between the passion and his conversion.

Contrary Evidence

Wells does not adequately account for contrary evidence. His arguments are merely the rehashed liberalism of the past century. He does not effectively deal with the arguments of conservative scholarship which refute the points of liberalism. The Gospel as presented in 1 Cor 15 is a serious threat to Wells's theory as well.

The Gospel Evidence

In his third chapter, Wells takes on the Gospels. An assumption Wells uses is that Mk. was composed first and the other Synoptic Gospels were confections of Mk. The traditional understanding is that Mt. was written first. Wells notes that the earliest writers to quote the Gospels, Ignatius and Polycarp, don't quote from Mk, but quote from Mt., but this point does not seem to concern him. However, Wells accepts the dating of Ignatius as 110 AD and reasons that if Mt. borrowed from Mk, and Mk. was written before Mt., then Mk. had to be written even earlier.

Wells creates a false dilemma by stating that "everyone must assume that the gospels are based on the reports of eye-witnesses or on tradition."³⁹ On the contrary, there's no reason that the

³⁹ Wells, p. 78.

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Gospels could not be based on both eye-witness testimony and tradition. Even if the Gospels were written by the persons named as the traditional authors, there would have been a need even for those authors to fill in detail from accounts of others since no one person was at all of the events described in each of the Gospels, other than Christ Himself.

Another key assumption is that Mark could not have been written prior to 70 AD because Mark refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in Mark 13. Wells notes that "most scholars insist that Mk. must have been written before 75 AD."⁴⁰ This is based on an anti-supernatural bias of the liberal scholar. The idea that Jesus could have predicted a future event accurately is considered by these scholars to be patently unacceptable and presuppositionally impossible. Prophecy, in the sense of foretelling of future events is simply rejected as irrational. However, there's nothing irrational about it. It may be unusual, or even abnormal, but it's not against reasoning unless a materialistic, naturalistic bias is presupposed. Like Hume, they assume that miracles can't happen because the author has never been a witness to one.

Exegetical Issues

Wells raises concerns about various exegetical aspects of the Gospels. For instance, Wells questions how the apostle who describes the buildings of the temple compound could have viewed them with astonishment, as if he had never seen them before. This ignores the explanation that there was building and renovation program that lasted over 40 years and, quite

⁴⁰ Wells, p. 80.

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significantly, was just completed in that year. The apostle is asking for the response of Jesus to the splendor of the newly renovated temple and gets the response that the temple was to be torn down by the Romans within a generation.

Wells creates other contradictions, which a plain reading of the text easily refutes. For instance, Wells⁴¹ notes that Mk. has the disciples mentioning the buildings of the temple area, and Lk. has some in the crowd mentioning it. Wells presents this as evidence that Lk. toned down an obvious gaffe in Mk. The problem for Wells is that the context in Lk. does not bear out his assertion. It is true that Lk. 20:45 shows Jesus speaking to the crowds and that Lk 21:5 has "some spake of the temple" as a reference. However, this ignores a plain reading of the context. Lk. 20:45 shows Jesus was speaking to His disciples in the hearing of the crowd. Thus, the audience is the disciples, not some secret or small group.

For the explanation of His saying, Mk shows Jesus went to the Olivette Mount opposite the Temple Mount with the select group of disciples, but that was his common practice. The second thing that this ignores is that the person answering is not necessarily someone from the crowd, since the context does not say so, but rather one of the disciples. For that matter, one of the persons in the crowd, could be a disciple, but not one of the center group of disciples. It's these sorts of enigmatic statements which Jesus made publicly which fueled His critics who used the statement about the temple being torn down against Him at His own trial and later against the

⁴¹ Wells, p. 80.

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martyr Stephen.

Wells's alleged contradictions are really just apparent and most have been answered long ago in Christian apologetic materials. Wells's late dating has been refuted by the liberal scholar John A. T. Robertson, in his *Redating the New Testament*, where Robinson dates the NT at pre-70 and also in John Wenham's book, *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke*. Wenham places Mt. at ca 40 AD, Mk. at ca 45 AD, and Lk. at ca 54 AD which is considerably sooner than Wells. Placing the Gospels after 70 with no explicit mention in the text of "see how Jesus was right", is itself an argument against post 70 AD dating. Why would the authors choose to not emphasize the past tense nature of the predictions of the destruction of the Temple if they were really dated later? This makes the Gospels into a deliberate fraud.

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Shifting Christologies

In chapter four, Wells repeats his claim that the Jesus of Paul was different from the Jesus of Mk. The details of the Gospels such as the triumphal entry, the portrayal of Jesus as “well known” in Palestine, the "us or Him" concerns of the Jewish leadership, and His miracle working power are contrasted with Paul's writings.

Paul’s writings have statements which show Christ as obscure and not all that well known, such as "if the leaders of this world knew who He was they never would have crucified the Lord of Glory", Paul does not portray Jesus as a miracle worker, etc.

As already mentioned these arguments from silence can easily be accounted for with the fact that Paul was not a companion of Christ during His earthly ministry. The obscurity of Jesus in the Gentiles forced Paul to keep the biographical information to the bare essentials. Everywhere that Paul went, the Jews already had synagogues where the recent life of Christ was known.

The genre of the epistles and the Gospels accounts for the other differences. Epistles are written as exhortation and don’t focus on the life of Christ. The Gospels are biographical and don’t draw as many theological conclusions.

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Wells lists several pages of alleged contradictions between the three Gospels. For the most part, these are best dealt with in the standard literature on the subject, such as the 19th century work Haley's *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*⁴² and are out of the scope of this paper.

OT Cart Lead by NT horse

Wells presents a scenario where the Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah are incorporated into the legendary accounts of the life of Christ as found in the Gospels. So instead of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem being shown a fulfilled in Christ by Luke, the actual case, per Wells would be that the writers of Luke, knowing that they needed to make the biographical account of the life of Christ match the Old Testament, fudge the data to make it fit the Old Testament. Thus, Wells portrays the New Testament as dependent on the Old Testament to fill in the biographical details of the life of Christ.

This is another reason why late dating is so important to Wells and the liberal scholars. The later the date, the fewer the number of live witnesses to contradict the historical evidence of the story. The problem is that there are no contradictory historical claims from those hostile sources which were able to know whether the story was false. If the whole story was made up, then why is there no evidence to support that claim? This is where the incredible powers of the Roman Catholic Church are typically invoked. The ability to hunt down all contradictory information and destroy

⁴² Haley, John W. *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981 - reprint). Other works include Geiser, Norman L. *When Critics Ask*, (Wheaton, Ill: Victor, 1992) and Archer, Gleason. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1982).

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it creates an incredible conspiracy spanning hundreds of years and many thousands of conspirators, none of which ever leaked the story. This is another example where belief in the alternative to Christianity is rougher to swallow than belief in the accounts of the Gospels.

Manuscript Evidence

Wells deals some of with the manuscript evidence that was available at the time his book was written. Subsequently, there has been interest in the subject which has yielded additional scholarship suggesting that one of the fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls contains a piece of a copy of part of the Book of Mark. The fragment of 7Q5 is from Mark 6:53. This claim is well summarized in the book *Eyewitness to Jesus*⁴³, by Carsten Peter Theide. This book has met with some critical objections which have been answered for the most part. This evidence is particularly interesting because of the dating of the manuscript to the late 60's. This is prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, and if true would be the deathblow to late date advocates.

⁴³ **Theide, Carsten Peter and d'Ancona, Matthew.** *Eyewitness to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence About the Origin of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

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Church Fathers

The inclusion of portions of Mt. in the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp in the early 120 timeframe quoted in an authoritative manner, is problematic for late dating advocates. The fathers are almost unanimous in affirming that Matthew was written first⁴⁴. This forces liberal scholarship to admit earlier dates than their presuppositions would like. The earlier the date, the more likely that there would be people who would be able to contradict the reports.

The Role of the Twelve

The traditional Christian understanding of the twelve is that they were hand picked by Jesus and accompanied Christ on major portions of His three-year ministry. They are portrayed in the New Testament as generally uneducated, from a mix of working class backgrounds, and not belonging to the top of the society. At the cross, the twelve were scattered and became disorganized. They returned to their homes with their hopes shattered. The New Testament asserts that they were eyewitnesses to the events described⁴⁵.

This background provides a testimonial to their belief in the resurrection since they somehow changed into a cohesive body proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to the nation of Israel. The best explanation for this change is that they had really met the risen Savior.

⁴⁴ Wenham, p. 116.

⁴⁵ Luke 1: 2, 24: 48, Acts 2: 32, 3: 15, 5: 32, 10: 39-41, 10: 39-41, 13: 31, 23: 11, 1 Cor 15: 15, 2 Tim 2: 2, 1 Peter 5: 1, 2 Peter 1: 16, 1 John 1: 2 and others.

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Wells attacks this traditional understanding on several grounds. Wells goes so far as to state that "we have seen that neither gospels nor Acts give convincing evidence that Jesus as accompanied by twelve disciples⁴⁶". Of course Wells, does not believe that there was a historical Jesus at all, or if there was one, He bore little to no resemblance to the Jesus of the New Testaments.

One of the reasons Wells gives for his conclusion include variants between the names of the lists which can be understood by the apparent fact that people in many cases were known by several different names. The Scriptures themselves list some of these variants.

Another reason Wells gives is that the roles of the disciples are different between the various Gospels. This is merely an argument from silence since there's no demonstrated contradiction between the personalities, only the fact that some give more information on particular individuals, and others give less information. The disciples were not the focus of the writers of the Gospels, Christ was. His interaction with the people around Him is crucial to understanding Him, but the point is understanding Him, not the disciples.

⁴⁶ Wells, p. 124.

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A third reason Wells offers is that the Gospels have indeterminate number of "disciples" listed. In some accounts it's listed that Jesus had many disciples and in other account, it lists the twelve, or the three of the inner circle. Wells neglects to include the Gospel of John's explanation for why this is the case. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches about eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood⁴⁷. When asked to explain, He makes it clear that faith in Him is the key to salvation. John tells us that many of His disciples left Him at that point and only the twelve remained. Yet, we know that at the day of Pentecost there were 120 gathered and Jesus appeared in His resurrected body to over 500 people.

Like many others of Wells's points this is an illustration of a simple time and circumstances fallacy. Jesus had varying numbers of people around Him at all times, but the twelve were the core group.

A final point Wells makes is that the prominent position of the twelve disappears somewhere in the middle of the book of Acts (about Chapter 9). Wells does not mention that Luke was a traveler with the Apostle Paul and that the book of Acts is centered around Paul's missionary journeys and not the events of the city of Jerusalem. Nor does Wells accept the traditional explanations that the apostles went into the world spreading the Gospel. Wells's goal is to destroy the basis of the historical continuity between Christ and the apostles.

⁴⁷ **John 6: 53**

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John the Baptist and Galilee

On this point, Wells seriously contradicts the harshest parts of his own thesis. Wells comments about the connection of Jesus with Nazareth and writes, "an association with Nazareth seems to be a brute historical fact which the evangelists did not find particularly edifying, but which was too well attested to be denied." If the connection between the historical Jesus and Nazareth is so strong that the Gospel writers are forced to admit it, then what about other similar connections? If the connection with Nazareth is such an embarrassment, they why does Mark mention it 6 times, Matthew 4 times, Luke 8 times, John 5 times, and Acts 7 times?

This is an arbitrary decision on the part of Wells. When a historical point appears to go against the Christian message, not that there's really anything about Jesus being from Nazareth that's inconsistent with that message, Wells trumpets it as a brute historical fact, but when the evidence says the contrary, it becomes an invention of the early church.

The repeated use of the phrase "Jesus of Nazareth" demonstrates the historical person of Christ and contradicts Wells's central thesis. Wells admits this but turns it around into a claim that Christians took this the actual historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and turned him into something to fit their perceived requirements. This begs a simple question. If Jesus was such a poor fit for the job of Messiah, then why not make up someone with a more fitting pedigree? Wells wants to have it both ways on this point and he can't.

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Wells notes sources which believe that the Gospel accounts are an amalgamation of some historical information with added legends about Jesus [143]. For instance, the claim of one scholar quoted by Wells is that Herod's ferocious behavior towards pretenders and his dealing with wise men from the east were known by the Christian writers of the Gospels and woven into the accounts.

Wells repeats the same traditional liberal scholars arguments from silence against the nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke. In particular the issue is the silence of Mark as to the birth in Bethlehem of Jesus. However, the requirement that Messiah come forth in Bethlehem is spelled out in Micah 5:1 (as Wells notes), yet Wells makes a point that was a wide variety of opinion about the expected details, such as this, of the Messiah prior to Jesus. There should be no variance on this point and Wells would be better served to simply claim that this claim was after the fact.

At this point, Wells progresses from arguments from silence to claims that Mark's writings were changed by the authors of Matthew and Luke on the extent of the ministry of Jesus. However, this is again simply an argument from silence. Because the writer of one Gospel shows scenes from one geographical area and the writer of another Gospel shows the scenes from another, there's not a contradiction. As long as the same events are not portrayed in both places. A careful study such as can be found in most *Harmony of the Gospels* [see AT Robertson for one example of this] would set these contradictions straight.

Like most critics, Wells does not select a standard *Harmony of the Gospels* as a point of

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criticism, perhaps since there are a number of Harmonies and no standardized account of the Chronology. This is still not an excuse to ignore the work of the harmonizers. Perhaps, Wells is playing to his audience when he does not include those works which actually deal with his points? In point of fact, this author has yet to see an effective analysis of any harmony of the life of Jesus, or Paul for that matter, but skeptical authors. The harmonies simply remove too many layers of their arguments by showing the time and circumstance fallacies that they are exploiting.

Jesus as Political Rebel?

Even a blind pig finds an acorn once in a while. As part of his agenda of refuting the historical evidence of the life of Christ, Wells devotes a chapter to the thesis of some modern liberals that Jesus was a political rebel. Mikolaski⁴⁸ credits S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967) as the source of this thesis. Wells presents the arguments of several of the advocates of this position and shows how they use selective reading of portions of the New Testament to make their case. Unfortunately, Wells does not apply these same techniques to his own thesis. On the whole, this chapter has some interesting, but well worn arguments against the thesis that Jesus was a political rebel.

The Pagan and Jewish Background

In this chapter Wells argues that Jesus did not exist from the fact that there have been persons who have been believed to be historical persons with complicated stories which later scholarship

⁴⁸ Mikolaski, *Theological Sentences*, 5. 0. 25

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has demonstrated to be mere legends. Wells lists Hercules, Attis, Horus, and others as examples of this.

There are several problems with this line of reasoning, however. The apostolic witness and continuity present in the historical churches argues against this. The Gospels portray Jesus as an actual figure, not cast into the role of a mythical hero. What sort of hero dies on a cross? Of course, this is where the connection is made by Wells and others to the pagan gods who died and rose again⁴⁹. Wells repeats the same arguments as others in this regard.

The sequence of historical development is also lacking in the Christian paradigm. Stories like Hercules may become accepted with the passage of time as true, but the Christian witness to the Gospels is continuous throughout the entire history. The multifaceted witnesses of the Gospels present a different situation than epic poems of the ancient days.

Wells's argument an example of chronological snobbery as well, which is the notion that these people were ignorant and that we have arrived at the truth today.

The Debate Continues

In the final chapter of Wells's book he deals with the points that arose from his critics between 1975 when the first edition was published and the current edition in 1986. Wells notes that his critics take exception to his inability to explain how belief in a dying Messiah led to belief in a

⁴⁹ Nash, Ronald. *The Gospel and the Greeks*. **Book deals with this subject in detail.**

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historical Jesus, reversing the typical process of mythologizing. Wells attempts to show that he does account for these problems, but it's merely an assertion as even the updated version of his book is inadequate in that respect.

Wells fails to distinguish between scholarly debates about points of the historical record and his own extreme historical agnosticism. Wells attempts to cast his opinion in the continuum of the early 20th century when scholars were busy making Jesus into their own image (Jesus as revolutionary, Jesus as peasant, etc.) Wells himself in later books casts Jesus as the peasant and at least partially rejects his own thesis from this book.

This chapter serves as Wells's conclusion and he reiterates some of the arguments he made previously. For instance, he notes that the critics of the 1975 book tore him apart on the Josephus point (as did the author of this paper), but shifts the burden of proof to one requiring "enormous weight⁵⁰". Of course, he never explains why there should be an extraordinary level of proof except, one assumes, the generally accepted adage that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. Trouble is that the real test should be that historical claims require historical proof using historical testing methods. Wells never steps back from his own argument and tests his own methods. Wells repeats the same form of arguments from silence.

For instance, Wells notes that the Gospels show Jesus eating with sinners. The writings of Paul

⁵⁰ Wells, p. 207.

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show Paul taking exception to Peter separating himself from the Gentiles when the Jews were around. Wells then makes the unwarranted step to show that this evidences that Paul was unaware of the historical life of Christ. After all, Wells asserts, if Paul was aware of the historical life of Christ, why did Paul not point out to Peter that he was living a life inconsistent with what he had personally witnessed with Christ? There's no evidence of whether Paul mentioned this or not.

Also, this fails to account for the record of Acts which records that Peter had to learn the same lesson in several ways. Ultimately, Peter had to receive it as a vision from the Lord Himself to understand that the Gospel was to go to the Gentiles. There's no need to bring Paul into the account to explain the reaction of Peter, and whether Paul knew the brute historical / biographical details of the life of Christ is not particularly relevant. Paul was in a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, who revealed to Him that the Gospel was to go to the Gentiles, and revealed to Peter the same thing.

As a whole, Wells completely fails to account for the conversion of Paul and Paul's belief in the historical Jesus. However, this is another book that is now being written as people move from discrediting the historicity of the life of Christ to discrediting the greatest witness of the early Church, Paul.

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Conclusions

Wells can be answered, but each point takes a lot of effort. Unfortunately, Wells's writings have grown in popularity within the atheist community. There's a definite need to answer Wells from intellectual Christians. The prolific career of Wells and the fact that there's a continuing audience for his books merits an appropriate response to his points. Unfortunately, this response, in order to be adequate to those who accept Wells's conclusions, would require a response which is much longer than Wells's book itself.

This paper has taken on representative points from each of the chapter in Wells. Each of these points have been honestly and simply answered from Christian materials. Wells does not have any great secrets in his books and shows little originality. The main strength which is the great weakness of Wells's position, is that he gathers materials from a wide variety of sources. In most cases, the different sources have entirely different readings of the evidence from the portions that Wells selects.

It is the opinion of the author of this paper that Wells fails to make the case against the Historical Jesus as presented in the Gospels. At the very least, the overall case that Jesus did not exist has certainly not been made to this author, nor to any other credible historian. Thus, Wells fails in the stated case of disproving the existence of Jesus. This leaves the conclusion that Wells is merely interested in the goal of discrediting belief in Jesus in general.

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