
Books

The Historicity of Jesus

A Symposium

The Historical Evidence for Jesus, by G. A. Wells (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 350 pp., cloth, \$17.95.

John Priest

In *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Prometheus, 1982), G. A. Wells restates and refines theses set forth in his two earlier works, *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (1971) and *Did Jesus Exist?* (1975). He writes:

My fundamental theses remain the same: namely, the earliest references to the historical Jesus are so vague that it is not necessary to hold that he ever existed; the rise of Christianity can, from the undoubtedly historical antecedents, be explained quite well without him; and reasons can be given to show why, from about A.D. 80 or 90, Christians began to suppose that he had lived in Palestine about 50 years earlier. [p. ix]

The author proposes to investigate the evidence for the historical Jesus exclusively from Christian documents of the first and second centuries. His method is to determine a relative dating of the material and then to discuss the witnesses in order of the chronology established. Paul is the starting point. Wells accepts Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon, and (probably) Colossians as authentic. Space does not allow for a detailed statement of the evidence, but his basic conclusions are that Paul is silent about events in Jesus' life, that he does not use events in Jesus' life or his words precisely at points where such would have supported Paul's own arguments, and that

Paul thought Jesus was a supernatural, pre-existent personage, crucified in the distant past, who in the time of Paul and his contemporaries had begun to make resurrection appearances as a sign of his imminent return in universal judgment. Paul shows no knowledge of the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel narratives.

Wells then turns to non-Pauline epistles, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and (possibly) James and the Johannine letters, which he dates earlier than A.D. 90. He concludes that these "refer to Jesus in essentially the same manner as Paul does" (p. 47). In this they contrast with letters he dates after A.D. 90. These include 2 Peter, the Pastorals, (possibly) the Johannine corpus, and the noncanonical letters of Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius. While some of these "go on portraying Jesus in much the same manner as the earlier documents" (p. 77), some also begin "to depict him [Jesus] in a way which shows significant resemblances to the gospels' portrait . . ." (p. 48). Yet it is in the Gospels themselves that the portrait is fully drawn. Where are they to be placed in the chronological table?

Wells accepts the traditional scholarly view that Mark is the earliest Gospel and that Luke and Matthew are dependent on Mark. Thus, to sustain his position that placement of a historical Jesus in a definite time, during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate, does not appear in Christian literature before A.D. 90, he must demonstrate reasons for dating Mark so late. His principal arguments are: (1) reference to the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 12:9) establishes A.D. 70 as the earliest possible date; and (2) the atmosphere of persecution could not have arisen prior to the reign of Domitian, 81-96 (p. 107 f.). If this date be allowed, then the lack of references in the literature before A.D. 90 and the presence of such references in later material becomes understandable.

The next five chapters of the book, "The Fourth Gospel," "Semitisms in Greek Gospels and in Acts," "The Lucan Docu-

G. A. Wells has written an important book in which he presents the argument that Christianity could have developed without the historical existence of Jesus. We've invited two scholars, John Priest and D. R. Oppenheimer, to review the book and G. A. Wells to respond. Their reviews, one critical and one favorable, and Wells's response follow.—Eds.

ments in Relation to the Pauline Letters," "New Testament References to Jesus' Family," and "The Shroud of Turin in the Light of the New Testament," are of interest but do not contribute directly to the theses Wells propounds in the Introduction. The final chapter, "Myth and Authenticity in the New Testament," will be discussed in the concluding section of this review.

The mainstream of contemporary New Testament scholarship would find little fault with Wells's dating of documents (except for the synoptic tradition) nor with his acute observation that "it is not just that Paul and other early writers are silent about this or that historical detail but what they do say about Jesus does not suggest that they had in mind the supposedly historical situation portrayed in the gospels" (p. 106). Indeed, Wells cites copiously from a wide range of scholars in support of most of his conclusions. I do not think, however, that many of them will be persuaded by his reasons for such a late date for Mark, nor will they abandon their conviction that there were from the earliest period vital and pervasive oral traditions, traditions which might not be historically accurate in a biographical sense (that was not their purpose), but which nonetheless point to a historical person who lived in Palestine at the time claimed by the Gospel narratives. And it is precisely on these points that Wells's historical reconstruction must stand or fall.

Arguments about date, authenticity, and historical reliability are not, in my judgment, the real points at issue. Indeed, such arguments have gone on inconclusively for more than a century and are likely to continue unabated. The significant (and I think fatal) flaws in Wells's contention lie elsewhere. First, his view of Paul is hardly satisfactory. I agree that Paul's central concern was a transcendental redeemer and that the figure of Wisdom in the Jewish tradition influenced him significantly. I further agree that he had little, if any, interest in

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the historical Jesus, except for the crucifixion and resurrection. I cannot see why this compels one to take the leap from a Jesus who lived c. A.D. 30 to an unknown person who died in obscurity a century or so earlier. Second, if it be true that the "historical" Jesus did not emerge until c. A.D. 90, Wells must demonstrate clearly why that process began then. What was the need for creating a Jesus who suffered and died under Pontius Pilate?

To be sure, Wells addresses this issue, both in this book and in *Did Jesus Exist?* But the answers given—*anxiety to establish the reality of the resurrection (p. 44); that Christian writers of the later period had no reliable ideas about Palestinian Christianity (p. 78 f.); that the development of myths in some Christian circles were rebutted by stressing the historical basis of faith (p. 89); that the threat of Docetism denied the humanity of Jesus (p. 100 f.); and the rise of persecution (p. 109 f.)—do not bear the weight which he has placed upon them. I do believe that some of the legitimate questions raised by Wells deserve more precise answers than are normally given by New Testament scholars, but I remain convinced that there are such answers that are more congruent with the evidence than the theses and conclusions here presented.*

I admire Wells's attempt to set forth to a broad audience the results of scholarship regarding the historical development of the New Testament literature. Christians, inquirers, skeptics, and unbelievers alike are all too often poorly informed on such matters and impartation of that information is a desideratum of the highest order. James Smart's words, addressed to the church but applicable to all, are to the point: "A Bible that is left in the medieval world and a membership that has moved on to the modern world are not likely to have much to say to each other" (*The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, p. 65). I am convinced that efforts to make known the results of biblical scholarship to the general public should be placed high on our agenda. Wells's research *could* have contributed significantly to that enterprise.

I regret that his presentation of the historical development should be so intimately linked to "proving" a particular thesis. Overtly, Wells is committed to the open presentation of data and the possibility of divergent interpretation of those data. Let the chips fall where they may. He concludes his book with the following, altogether admirable, statement: "Thus it is customary today to dismiss with amused contempt the suggestion that Jesus never existed. I have tried to show in this book that, *whatever*

the final upshot of the debate may be [emphasis added] there is no ground for such a confident attitude" (p. 223).

Yet, in the body of the text itself, I sensed all too often that the results of scholarly research were being presented primarily not to inform readers of that research but to build a case for a deeply held conviction. I can understand Wells on this point, for most New Testament scholars do not deign to investigate claims like those he is making. Kuemmel, in his standard introduction, notes that such views are so "arbitrary and ill founded" that he will not review them. Bultmann, who is extremely skeptical about retrieving any historical details about Jesus, wrote:

The doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder between the historical movement whose first distinct phase is represented by the oldest Palestinian community. [*Jesus*, p. 13 f.]

Understandable as Wells's reflex is, however, it does not serve the cause of free and frank inquiry. Perhaps I am asking of Wells a product that was not his intent, but my concern for the dissemination of informed conclusions of biblical scholarship is so profound that I cannot but regret that this book, so full of promise, falls short of that goal.

My final regret is probably idiosyncratic. I regret that Wells utilizes the same kind of historicism that dominates fundamentalist exegesis: "Prove that it is factual, and it is true. Prove that it is not factual and it is false." This theme particularly pervades the chapter on myth and authenticity. I am not enchanted by some of the excesses of the new hermeneutics, nor with radically existentialistic flights of exegetical fancy, but I remain convinced that the old distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power is valid and necessary for interpreting the Gospel narratives and that historical authenticity is a misleading guide to understanding them.

What is likely to be the impact of this book? No doubt those seeking confirmation of their skepticism about the origins of Christianity will be pleased by Wells's comparatively objective handling of New Testament research. Technical scholars will be so put off by the specific conclusions he draws from his analysis of that research that they will probably dismiss out of hand some of the genuinely acute observations he does from time to time make.

My concern, however, is for the inter-

ested, intelligent layperson who desires simply to know more about a body of literature that has had a profound effect on the shape of Western civilization and which continues to exercise a significant influence on that civilization. I believe he/she will be better served by turning to one of the many textbooks and introductions currently available for use in nonsectarian colleges and universities. Or perhaps Wells's efforts may stimulate another author to reexamine the New Testament evidence without a hidden agenda either for or against the historicity of Jesus. That task would, in fact, fulfill the promise proffered in the title of the present volume. •

D. R. Oppenheimer

Twenty years ago a Gallup survey was carried out on the religious beliefs and religious practices of adult English city-dwellers (*Television and Religion*, University of London Press, 1964). Of the 2,211 people interviewed, 67 percent belonged to the Church of England, 13 percent were non-conformist Christians, 9 percent were Catholics, 5 percent belonged to other sects, and 6 percent had no religion. Among the seventy-odd questions was one concerning beliefs about Jesus Christ. Sixty-four percent responded that they believed Jesus was the Son of God; 16 percent said that he was "just a man"; 5 percent said that he was "just a story"; and 15 percent were undecided. The proportion believing that Jesus was the Son of God was significantly higher (84 percent) among Catholics than in the general population.

One can only speculate on the reasons people hold these various beliefs—or, indeed, on the extent to which they are actual beliefs rather than trouble-saving verbal responses to questions lacking practical importance. "Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God?" is, to put it soberly, a rather difficult question that seems to presuppose the ability to conceive what kind of person the Son of God would be expected to be. On the other hand, one can readily sympathize with the feeling that a negative answer to the question might well give offense, and at the worst would border on blasphemy. The more basic question, "Do

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you believe that Jesus in fact lived a human life on earth?”—though it was not asked in that form—seems by implication to have received an overwhelming 80 percent “yes” response.

In *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*, Professor G. A. Wells scrutinizes the evidence for this view. He is by no means the first to do so. New Testament scholars—most of them German, and nearly all of them professing



Christians—have been studying the origins, dates, authorship, and general reliability of the Gospels and other New Testament writings for the past two centuries. As one might expect, many disputed points remain. On others, there is broad agreement; for instance, that the Gospels cannot be regarded as simple narratives of events written down by eyewitnesses or the direct testimony of eyewitnesses, but are rather compilations of stories, teachings, and traditions from various sources arranged and edited in accordance with the various purposes of the four narrators. There is also agreement that the identities of the narrators are unknown, the names of the four evangelists having been adopted long after the Gospels were written, and—perhaps the most important point affecting the historicity of Jesus—that the Gospels were almost certainly written later than the genuine Pauline Epistles. I do not know to what extent these conclusions of modern scholarship find their way into the religious

instruction of schoolchildren today. I only know that I was unaware of them after twelve years at Christian schools.

Professor Wells relies heavily on the work of these so-called higher critics and fully acknowledges his debt to them. His main point of difference is that, whereas the Christian scholars, however far they go in admitting the difficulty of ascertaining the facts about Jesus’s nature, circumstances, and career, all believe that a man or a man-god somehow corresponding to the Jesus of the Gospels once lived in Palestine, Wells is unconvinced that any such person existed. As against the view held by many Christians, and probably by most non-Christians, that Jesus was an exceptional man who was raised to the status of a god after his death by a band of myth-making devotees, Wells advances the view that Jesus started out as the savior-god described by St. Paul and only later acquired a human biography.

The main evidence for this view lies in the earliest Christian documents, namely the Pauline Epistles. Paul believed that Jesus had lived on earth at some time in the past (not necessarily the recent past), had been crucified as part of a divine scheme for the salvation of mankind, and had thereafter acquired the status of mediator between God and man. Of Jesus as a teacher or miracle-worker, it seems, Paul knew nothing. The biographical accounts belong to a later period, the first references occurring in later, non-Pauline, Epistles, the Gospel accounts coming later still.

The present work is Wells’s third major venture into New Testament scholarship. His first book, *The Jesus of the Early Christians*, published in 1971, consisted of two parts. The first pointed to the inconsistencies and contradictions in the Gospel narratives, and the difficulty of deriving a coherent account of the origins of Christianity from the books of the New Testament, the writings of the early Christian fathers, and the scanty references in ancient pagan literature. The second part attempted to explain how Christianity might have arisen, on the basis of earlier Jewish and pagan beliefs and practices, without the aid of divine intervention or of a single founder, divine or human.

The book, predictably, evoked mainly hostile reviews, ranging from straightforward abuse to serious criticism, the main point of attack being the implausibility of the speculations contained in the second part. Regarding the first part, it was pointed out that Wells had relied chiefly on the work of scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ignoring more recent

work. Wells’s response was to embark on a further course of reading, followed by a second book, *Did Jesus Exist?* (1975), in which he thanked his critics for their help, modified his views on the relative importance of Jewish and pagan traditions in Christian origins, and produced further reasons for doubting the historicity of Jesus. On this occasion the reviews were on the whole less shrilly combative and included frank admissions by Christian theologians that here was a case requiring a careful, reasoned, and scholarly answer.

Whereas the two earlier books were primarily addressed to biblical scholars, the present one is directed toward the general reader. It is designed, as the preface makes clear, as a guide to the books of the New Testament (excluding the Revelation) for the *uncommitted*, that is, for readers without firm commitment either to dogmatic Christianity or to militant atheism. The author’s own position is made clear on page x of the preface:

Nearly all the authorities whose views I quote in this book are New Testament scholars; they are Christian theologians writing in standard biblical commentaries or in theological journals. My purpose in quoting them is not to settle any issue by a mere appeal to their authority, but to show that many, indeed most, of the propositions on which I build my case are not laymen’s aberrations, but are accepted—even widely accepted—by scholars who are within Christianity. Many such scholars have had the detachment and objectivity to study the books of the New Testament as historical documents, just as one would any records of a bygone age. In the few instances where I have been able to meet some of these theologians personally, I have learned to respect them not only as scholars but also as men.

Wells’s findings add scholarly support to the 5 percent of Englishmen who believe that Jesus was “just a story.” Judging from the tone of his writing, he appears to be neither depressed nor elated by the fact that his conclusions cut at the roots of Christian beliefs.

From early times a great proportion of writings on religious matters, whether orthodox or heretical, has been rancorous, dotty, or both. In Wells’s book there is no rancor or dottiness; instead, there is a spirit of stubborn inquiry, respect for facts, and cool common sense. A book on the New Testament, intended for the general reader, that is free from piety, propaganda, malice, and humbug is something of a rarity and should be welcomed as such by open-minded readers. •

G. A. Wells Responds

John Priest's informative review of *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* is a model of the manner in which Christians and rationalists may profitably address each other. His brief summary of the major evidence on which I base my conclusions is both clear and fair. If it is thought that this is only what an author is entitled to expect from a reviewer, then it must be replied that many other comments on my work on the New Testament, likewise made entirely without malice, have brought home to me how difficult it is to do anything like justice to views that treat familiar material from a standpoint very different from the writer's own.

Priest notes that I "investigate the evidence for the historical Jesus exclusively from Christian documents of the first and second centuries." I would merely add that my reason for treating pagan and Jewish references to Jesus so briefly was that I have dealt with them fully elsewhere and was able to show that a number of Christian theologians concede that they are based on Christian tradition and therefore not independent witnesses to Jesus' historicity.

Priest regrets that my account of the New Testament is to a considerable extent influenced by my overall thesis that Christianity did not arise as the result of the activities of a historical Jesus. This thesis was, however, not conceived prior to study of the evidence. I found myself unable to make sense of the evidence without it. I can claim to have shown that, if it is not true, much in the New Testament appears very perplexing. Priest seems to admit the perplexities when he says that some of the legitimate questions I raise "deserve more precise answers than are normally given by New Testament scholars."

My overall thesis is based on a distinction between the vague way Christians up to c. A.D. 90 wrote of Jesus' life and the highly specific references to historical circumstances that characterize Christian accounts of it after that date. I was able to make this distinction by positing a chronological order in which the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written, and then showing what new ideas about him were introduced into the later ones, and on what basis. Priest concedes that the mainstream of New Testament scholarship will accept my datings, except in the case of the earliest extant gospel, that of Mark. This is, of

course, the first major document to give details of Jesus' ministry and to represent him as a definitely historical figure who lived early in the first century. It is therefore important for those who accept Jesus' historicity to date this gospel as early as possible—c. A.D. 70 is the date most widely accepted—so that at any rate some of the oral and perhaps even written traditions (not extant) underlying it can be supposed to have been current a generation earlier (contemporary with, or even earlier than, the earliest extant Christian writings, which are so vague in their references to Jesus' life). On this basis, the distinction between the vague way admittedly early Christian authors write of the historical Jesus, and the plenitude of biographical detail of admittedly post-A.D. 90 Christian references to him, can be made to seem trivial.

The commonly accepted dating of Mark c. A.D. 70 is very insecurely based. Kümmel, for instance, in his standard handbook, accepts it simply because he can find "no overwhelming argument" for an earlier or later date. I can claim to have given better reasons than this for putting Mark at c. A.D. 90. Twenty years may seem a trivial interval, but by A.D. 90 Palestinian Christianity had been overwhelmed by the Jewish War with Rome, and the gentile Christians who then first linked Jesus with Pilate, and first gave his life altogether a real historical setting, could have had only very imperfect knowledge of what had really happened in Palestine c. A.D. 30. Priest does not think that the evidence I give for my dating of Mark will convince many scholars. I agree that they are likely to continue to prefer the traditional dating, and I have already indicated why.

Priest agrees that Paul, the earliest extant Christian writer, "had little, if any, interest in the historical Jesus, except for the crucifixion and resurrection," but "cannot see why this compels me to take the leap from a Jesus who lived c. A.D. 30 to an unknown person who died in obscurity some century or so earlier." I agree that, in itself, Paul's lack of interest compels no such inference. But when we find that neither Paul nor any other very early extant writer gives indications of time, place, or attendant circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion that in any way corroborate the Passion narratives of the gospels, then it is not unreasonable to sup-

pose that the earliest Christians had but vague ideas about Jesus' life and death and did not regard them as recent events.

Although Priest has taken the trouble to indicate ways in which New Testament scholars are likely to disagree with my historical reconstruction, and to intimate his own points of disagreement with it, historical fact is not, for him, what really matters. He declares that "arguments about date, authenticity and historical reliability are not . . . the real points at issue." He goes on to make a distinction between "the literature of knowledge and the literature of power"—a distinction, he says, that is "valid and necessary for interpreting the gospel narratives," whereas "historical authenticity is a misleading guide to understanding them." I agree that a document can have powerful emotional and other effects whether it records truth or fantasy. But I happened to be concerned with what light the New Testament throws on the manner in which Christianity originated; and for that purpose the relative dates of composition of its twenty-seven books and their "historical authenticity" are of decisive importance.

While complaining that so much in my book is subordinated to presenting my overall thesis, Priest nevertheless maintains that five of its ten chapters do not contribute directly to this thesis. Here I think he is wrong; at any rate, the ground covered in these chapters has often been used in defense of Jesus' historicity. Thus the fourth gospel (Chapter 5) has sometimes been regarded as based on early and authentic tradition; and the Semitisms in the gospels (Chapter 6) have been held to establish a Palestinian and therefore (so it has been argued) an early and reliable origin for the traditions embodied in them. Again, if one accepts Paul's view of what Christianity was like about A.D. 60, it is necessary to show (Chapter 7) why his account is much more likely to be reliable than that of the same period given in the Acts of the Apostles. And if Paul could be interpreted as saying that Jesus had a blood brother whom Paul himself knew personally (Chapter 8), then my thesis that Paul had no real knowledge of when or where the Jesus of his faith lived and died collapses. The Shroud of Turin (Chapter 9) would surely also, if proved authentic, establish Jesus' historicity.

Priest says that his concern for the dissemination of informed conclusions of biblical scholarship is profound. I share this concern, and hope that his review will direct readers to my book with critical eyes and make them try to see if the problems I have raised can be resolved by an alternative hypothesis to mine. •