

The Heart of Christianity: An Apologetic Critiquing the Jesus Myth Theory

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Introduction and Approach

If there is one thing Christianity cannot do without, it is Jesus Christ. It is precisely this truth that renders George Albert Wells' thesis a serious threat to the Christian faith. He does not philosophize about the existence of God or postulate about the origins of the universe; instead, he attacks the throat of the Christian apologetic—the historicity of Jesus Christ. Wells does not simply relegate Jesus to the status of a wise teacher or herald him a prophet. He denies that the Jesus of the Bible ever existed.

This paper will exposit and critique Wells' defense of the Jesus myth thesis bearing two principles in mind. First, the exposition will attempt to express Wells' view in the most even-handed way possible. This is in light of Wells' complaints of misrepresentation by the majority of Christian apologists.¹ Second, both the exposition and critique sections will focus on the Wellian division of Paul's epistles and the gospel narratives, address particularly damning internal criticisms leveled at the biblical text, and briefly exposit a primary source defense of the Christian faith. Wells consistently relies on German higher critics (such as Conzelmann) to inform his interpretation of the evidence for the New Testament documents. Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, commenting on his debate against Wells, describes him as someone who,

. . . Has gorged himself on an indigestible diet of radical German critical scholarship and its English-language counterparts (in the latter category, he especially enjoys liberal

¹ G.A. Wells, *Religious Postures* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1988), 20-21.

Roman Catholic New Testament scholars Raymond E. Brown and Joseph A. Fitzmyer). Instead of attempting to look at the primary records of Jesus, he gazes at them through the colored glasses of the documentary, form, and redaction critics -- and the Bultmannian and post--Bultmannian efforts to apply existential anti-objectivism to the study of Christian origins.²

Debates utilizing higher critical techniques can go round-and-round, parsing sentences *ad infinitum*. At any rate, it is Wells' division of the Pauline epistles and the gospel accounts upon which his case most easily falls, followed closely by his mismanagement of important biblical texts. And, of course, it is the primary documents that are the most pertinent source material when discussing the historicity of Jesus, not higher criticism. After all, it is primary source documents that make the claim in the first place.

Biographical Information

George Albert (G.A.) Wells was born in England in 1926. He was exposed to German redaction criticism early in his academic life. As a student, he roomed with the family of a Swiss clergyman who studied under Albert Schweitzer. Wells studied at the University of London and Bern's University. He holds degrees in German, philosophy, and natural science.³ Interestingly, he does not have a history degree, despite the fact that his thesis is primarily historical in nature. That, by itself, is not warrant to dismiss his argument. He offers an adequate defense of his credibility in his book *Did Jesus Exist?*⁴ He is an Emeritus professor of German at Birkbeck, University of London, and is the former chairman of the Rationalist Press Association.⁵ He has published several respected works of German intellectual history but is most commonly known

² J.W. Montgomery, "Did Jesus Exist?" *New Oxford Review*, Vol. LX, No. 4 (May 1993).

³ "G.A. Wells," *Freedom From Religion Foundation*; available from <http://www.ffrf.org/day/?day=22&month=5>; Internet; accessed 20 October 2008.

⁴ G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 2.

⁵ G.A. Wells, *The Jesus Legend* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996), ii.

for his prolific writing in support of the Jesus myth theory. He has published ten books on the theory to date, most of which are cited in this paper. His two most pertinent works are *The Jesus Legend* and *The Jesus Myth*, because they reflect a significant change in his theory in the early 1990s.

Philosophical Background

In order to understand Wells' arguments concerning Christianity, one must first understand his overall philosophy. Wells is a quintessential atheist and rationalist. He holds that God is simply man's false attempt to find purpose.⁶ He regards man as nothing more than an advanced animal, writing, "Not only the burnt child but the burnt dog dreads the fire."⁷ In Wells' world there is no all-encompassing purpose to life. Man creates his own purpose: "In fact one cannot meaningfully ascribe a purpose to life as a whole. Life is filled with purposes of all kinds, objects to be attained, goals to be reached, tasks to be completed, yet all these are within life and form but episodes . . . But there is a natural tendency for men to try to interpret the world at large in terms of their own limited animal inclinations and habits."⁸

Wells has very little respect for Christian apologists. He finds them close-minded and deceptive: "Conservative apologists still do the same . . . There is more parade of erudition and open-mindedness. But the conclusions always turn out to be in accordance with desire, in harmony with what is regarded as essential doctrine."⁹ Though there may be some truth to Wells'

⁶ Wells, *Postures*, 199.

⁷ *Ibid.* 215.

⁸ *Ibid.* 200-201.

⁹ *Ibid.* 20-21.

accusation, this paper's critical section will reveal the same weakness in Wells on the opposite side of the argument.

Exposition

1. The Jesus Myth

Essentially, Wells' original thesis states that the evidence for the existence of Jesus is not compelling, and so one should assume the opposite. He writes, "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 AD 80 or 90, Christians began to suppose that he had lived in Palestine about fifty years earlier."¹⁰ According to Wells, the Pauline epistles preceded the Gospels and were developed from the Old Testament Wisdom passages.

Wells' revision of his thesis in the early 1990s tempers his original position, making him receptive to the idea of a first century Galilean preacher named Jesus. This view is most clearly elucidated in his books *The Jesus Myth* and *The Jesus Legend*: "The Jesus of the Pauline and other early epistles is a basically supernatural personage about whose historical existence as man . . . very little indeed was known. . . . Some elements in the life there ascribed to him may derive ultimately from the life of a first-century itinerant Galilean preacher but to separate out such authentic material from the mass of unhistorical narrative is a well-nigh hopeless task."¹¹ His shift was in reaction to scholarship conducted concerning the Q document, a non-extant document that is hypothesized to exist based on the content of the gospels of Mathew and

¹⁰ G.A. Wells, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1982), ix.

¹¹ G.A. Wells, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999), 244.

Luke.¹² For our purposes, his shift does not significantly affect his overall position. While he concedes the possible existence of a first century Galilean preacher, he maintains his division between the Pauline epistles and the gospels, denies the testimonies of the gospel stories concerning Jesus, and believes it is impossible to discover the truth about this itinerate preacher.

A. The Pauline/Gospel Divide

According to Wells, the Pauline letters are the earliest New Testament texts dating to no later than 60 AD except for a few epistles of questionable Pauline authorship that are dated at sometime before 70 AD. The Gospel of Mark is dated after 70 AD and probably as late as 90 AD. Mathew, Luke, John, and Acts are subsequently written between 90 and 100 AD. This dating system creates a distinction between the Christ mentioned by Paul and the Jesus of the gospels. This point is essential to Wells' thesis because it provides the historical framework in which he places his facts. He holds that the earliest Christian documents (Paul's) speak nothing of the Jesus Christ referenced in the gospels.

Wells interprets Pauline works as describing Christ as a supernatural person God had sent into the world at some undefined time in the past. This Christ figure was based upon Jewish Wisdom Literature of the time (Enoch, Proverbs, Song of Solomon).¹³ He writes, "Paul supposes that he existed as a supernatural personage before God 'sent' him into the world to redeem it . . . He assumed human flesh sometime after the reign of David, from whom, Paul says, Jesus (as man) was descended (Rom. 1:3) – a Jew 'according to the flesh' (9:5), the scion of Jesse to govern the gentiles (15:12) predicted by Isaiah. [...] Paul gives no indication in which of them Jesus' early life fell."¹⁴

¹² Q comes from the German word "quelle," which means "source."

¹³ G.A. Wells, *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1971), 83.

Wells' argument is essentially one of silence. He holds that, given the content of Paul's letters, it is unthinkable the apostle would not include words of Christ from the gospels to support his conclusions: "But the dilemma they pose is clear: if the gospels were based on reliable historical tradition, how is it that Paul and other Christian writers of the first century make no reference to it?"¹⁵ Wells goes to great lengths to demonstrate the Pauline works' compatibility with the Jesus myth position. He argues the reference to "James, the brother of Jesus" is referring to a Jewish group called the brethren. He also uses redactionist methodology to deem Paul's reference to "the twelve" to be interpolation.¹⁶ According to Wells, the only way to reconcile this absence of pertinent information is to conclude Paul did not have access to the gospel accounts.

Wells believes the gospel narratives emerge from the Q document and the Gospel of Mark. Mathew and Luke "are not eye-witness reports but redactions of previous narratives," namely, Mark's.¹⁷ Although Wells does not have a clear model to explain how Christianity developed from Old Testament Wisdom passages, he believes it developed like other myths develop: "religious symbols and rites handed down through many generations are no longer understood in terms of the conditions which gave rise to them . . . Such elements receive new interpretations in terms of contemporary ideas, and the fantastic results of such interpretations fail to be corrected because they refer to past events which no experience can directly reproduce."¹⁸

¹⁴ Wells, *Jesus Exist*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Wells, *Early Christians*, 140-141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 116.

¹⁸ Wells, *Jesus Exist*, 178.

B. Primary Sources

Wells takes an extreme position on the primary source materials concerning the biblical text. He argues that the references of Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny to Christ do nothing to validate the historicity of Jesus. These references are either examples of interpolations (e.g. Josephus) or repetition of second century beliefs about Christ, not based on credible evidence. He also argues for the late dating scheme for Thallus, Polycarp, and Papias for similar reasons.¹⁹ In sum, Wells believes that "Jesus is not linked with a recognizable historical situation in any document (Christian, Jewish or pagan) that can be proved to have originated before about AD 100."²⁰ It is on this basis that he finds belief in Jesus Christ to be irrational and unjustifiable.

Criticism

1. Higher Criticism

Wells commits the same error of numerous liberal theologians. He relies entirely too much on form criticism and modern scholarship. As already noted, Wells is a quintessential supporter of higher criticism. His views are based on strong rationalism and atheism, and he rejects arguments that point towards support of the supernatural. Dr. Montgomery observes how this type of form criticism has been rejected in literary circles based on its dismal performance in analyzing Homer and the Iliad.²¹ It proved equally inadequate for the task of analyzing English ballads, which had a much longer oral tradition than any of the gospel accounts.²² Higher critical techniques distort a more accurate, textual based criticism of the New Testament.

¹⁹ Ibid. 1-15, 78, 139.

²⁰ Ibid. 215.

²¹ J.W. Montgomery, *History, Law, and Christianity* (Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, 2002), 33.

2. Negative Assumptions

Wells approach to the historicity of Jesus can hardly be considered a balanced treatment of the evidence. He interprets data in such a way as to make it maximally supportive of his thesis and damning to his opposition. Biblical scholar Robert Van Voorst writes that Wells "advanced the non-historicity hypothesis, not for objective reasons, but for highly tendentious, anti-religious purposes."²³ This bias is evident with the ease in which he identifies inconsistencies between the Pauline letters and the gospel accounts. For example, he claims that Paul's statement, "'we do not even know how to pray as we ought' (Rom. 8:26) implies his ignorance of this prayer which the gospel Jesus introduces with the words: 'Pray then like this.'"²⁴ This is just one of many points where Wells ignores obvious explanations for a passage in order to fit it into the constructs of his theory. Paul could have easily been referring to the deceitfulness of man's heart and his inability to articulate the deepest sentiments of the spirit, which does not at all take away from Christ's model of prayer for his disciples. This also serves to demonstrate how easily higher criticism can lead to absurd results. The strategy Wells seems to employ is that if he can provide overwhelming, tenuous, literary criticism of the Bible it will overwhelm the opposition. But, this is a case in which quality is preferable to quantity.

Wells' primary defense for dividing the Pauline epistles from the gospel narratives is an argument from silence. He writes, "Paul never suggests that Jesus had been a teacher or miracle-worker, nor active in Galilee, but portrays him as a supernatural personage who had come briefly to earth as a Jew descended from David, had lived obscurely and been crucified in circumstances which Paul never specifies, but which he does not seem to regard as recent." Aside from the

²² Ibid. 34.

²³ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 15.

²⁴ Wells, *Jesus Exists*, 19.

inordinate number of disclaimers he employs, such as “suggests” and “seems” (the natural end of literary criticism), Wells' argument is representative of his tendency to assume the opposite of the historicity of Jesus. Christian apologist, Professor James Holding, does a fine job explaining why Paul was largely silent concerning many gospel stories. He argues that Paul’s silence is understandable because the New Testament was written in a high-context society.²⁵

Anthropologist Edward Hall defines “high-context” as a “message ... in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in that person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.”²⁶ Holding applies this definition to the historicity of Jesus by writing, “Readers were required and expected to ‘fill in the gap’ because their background knowledge was a given. Extended explanations were unnecessary. Details were superfluous unless they served a specific purpose in communication, or were being related to someone new to those details.”²⁷ Because the west is a low-context society,²⁸ scholars must be careful not to impute western society’s method of communication to ancient Israel.

Nevertheless, Paul is not silent concerning Christ and the twelve apostles. In I Corinthians 15:3-6 Paul writes, “. . . Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”²⁹ Paul

²⁵ James Patrick Holding, ED, *Shattering the Christ Myth: Did Jesus Not Exist?* (United States: XulonPress, 2008), 96.

²⁶ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Doubleday: 1981), 91.

²⁷ Holding, *Shattering*, 97.

²⁸ Most information is placed in a clear code.

²⁹ 1 Cor.15:5 NKJ.

appears to clearly place Christ in a historical context, citing hundreds of individuals who can testify to His actual existence in history. Wells recognizes that this passage would be devastating to his position, writing, “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.”³⁰ Nevertheless, Wells, without textual support, asserts that the mention of the twelve apostles was interpolated into the passage. In response to this, Dr. Habermath writes, “[Wells] is willing to say virtually anything to avoid a clear text opposing his view, even if he has to ignore the contrary evidence and hold that it was added, relying on little more than his own assertion.”³¹ Wells does the same thing with 1 Corinthians 4:5 in which Paul writes, “. . . I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.”³² If Paul spoke to Christ’s brother, it would defeat the whole of Wells' thesis. Thus, Wells interprets the word “brother” to refer to those who zealously served the Lord (in the “Pauline understanding” of the word).³³ Wells chooses to reject the obvious meaning of a passage on scant, higher criticism grounds in order to uphold his thesis.

3. Bibliographic and Primary Sources

Wells' third problem is that he is flat-out wrong on both the bibliographic and documentary evidence for the New Testament. The New Testament has significantly more manuscript copies than any work of the classical world, and, the range between the date of composition of the gospels and the earliest substantial text is negligible. Former director and

³⁰ G.A. Wells, *Jesus Exist*, 124.

³¹ Gary R. Habermas, “A Summary Critique: Questioning the Existence of Jesus,” *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2000), n/a.

³² 1 Cor. 4:5 NKJ.

³³ G.A. Wells, *Early Christians*, 142.

Principal Librarian of the British Museum, Sir Frederic Kenyon, concluded, “The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible.... Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”³⁴

Wells downplays the value of Papias, Irenaeus, and Eusebius as supporting sources, accusing them of exaggeration or writing down the general thoughts of the 2nd century, apart from any link to a primary source. However, he never refutes the clear link of the Apostle John to both Irenaeus and Eusebius. John taught Papias and Polycarp (early 2nd century) who in turn taught Irenaeus and Eusebius. Not only was Irenaeus the most reliable theologian of the Patristic period and Eusebius the record keeper during the council of Nicene, but original Papias material has turned up verifying the works of both Eusebius and Irenaeus.³⁵ Fortunately, Wells' views have not become mainstream. Dr. David Aikman notes, “Wells is not a New Testament specialist at all but a professor of German and a former chairman of the Rationalist Press Association. He has written several books rejecting the historicity of Jesus, a position almost no New Testament scholar endorses, even those who are radically opposed to Christianity.”³⁶

Conclusion

Christianity without Jesus Christ is a religion without substance. Christ stands at the core of Christian belief. G.A. Wells attacks Christianity on its most essential point—the historicity of Jesus Christ. Fortunately for Christian faith, Wells' attacks do not shake its solid foundations. Wells' thought is so steeped in German higher criticism that it drifts further and further away

³⁴ J.W. Montgomery, *History*, 27.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 30-32.

³⁶ David Aikman, *The Delusion of Disbelief* (Nashville: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 201.

from objective evidence. His scholarship is certainly not objective, for he almost always interprets evidence to work against the historicity of Christ—even though it doesn't fit. Perhaps most appallingly, he dismisses strong bibliographic and primary source evidence on little more than literary criticism of the text. Wells writes his works from a strongly redactive, rationalist, and atheistic worldview, and everything is interpreted from that light. Holding aptly commented, “Wells could construct his thesis from a mosaic of skepticism to produce the overall conclusion that Jesus never existed. That none of the scholars he based his case on would have agreed meant Wells was no longer being taken seriously by the scholarly mainstream.”³⁷ Jesus Christ maintains a secure place in Christian thought despite the best attempts of German higher critics.

³⁷ Holding, *Shattering*, xvi.