



STATEMENT DJ025

**A Summary Critique:
Jesus: The Evidence
Ian Wilson (Harper & Row, 1984)**

Jesus: The Evidence is one of the latest unsuccessful attempts to “demythologize” Jesus Christ. British journalist Ian Wilson, who has also written on reincarnation and on the Shroud of Turin, was willing, he said, to question everything he had heard about Jesus Christ. Wilson, having investigated the evidence, presents what he thinks is “an honest, fair -minded attempt” to answer questions about the “real” Jesus.¹

Jesus: The Evidence follows in the “tradition” of such popularized treatments of Jesus Christ as Hugh Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot*, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and Morton Smith’s *Jesus the Magician*. There are differences in these treatments of Christ but each seeks to get behind the supernatural Christ to the “real” Jesus.

In summary, Wilson’s story is this: Since there is no supernatural, we cannot trust the Bible. Wilson, instead, will tell us the truth about Jesus. Jesus was a good Jewish man, convinced that God had called Him to show God’s love. He was a consummate hypnotist and charismatic leader. He was not virgin-born, performed no actual miracles, was not resurrected, and is not God. The virgin-born-miracle-performing-resurrected-deified Jesus Christ was a myth begun by Paul and developed by the fourth-century church bishops at the Council of Nicea. This critique will concentrate on four major topics: 1) Wilson’s anti -supernatural bias; 2) his belief that the New Testament is unreliable; 3) his faulty depiction of Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection; and 4) his denial of the deity of Christ.

MIRACLES ARE NOT POSSIBLE

Wilson does not explain or prove his bias against miracles. Rather, his book assumes that a genuine miracle could never happen, and therefore, some other explanation for the miracle accounts in the Bible must be found. Wilson explicitly states his presupposition against miracles when he quotes Matthew Arnold approvingly as having said that “miracles do not happen.”² What is Wilson’s alternate explanation? Jesus was a consummate hypnotist!

Wilson’s anti-supernaturalism is indefensible both philosophically and historically. Wilson’s bias is a philosophical presupposition. His world view is naturalistic. But why should we adopt Wilson’s world view? What makes his (naturalistic) world view more valid than a Christian (supernaturalistic) world view? Naturalism may be more popular among agnostics and secular humanists, but popularity does not determine truth. The reasonableness of the theistic world view has been argued capably by many Christian philosophers. I would recommend especially Norman L. Geisler’s *Christian Apologetics* (Baker), Richard Purtill’s *Reason to Believe* (Eerdmans), and C.S. Lewis’ *Miracles* (Macmillan). Once we have shown that the supernatural is possible, then we can look objectively at the historical evidence.

Wilson claims to look at the evidence as an historian would, objectively. The flyleaf of the book accuses those with other views of Christ of being reluctant “to subject the ‘facts in the case’ to the same critical review applied to all other major historical figures and events.” However, when the “facts in the case” concerning Jesus Christ and His resurrection are examined objectively, without any bias (either naturalistic or supernaturalistic), the historical occurrence of miracles fits the evidence better.

In conclusion, Wilson has not supported his antisupernatural bias, nor can he. Without this bias, there is no need for him to seek any explanation for the events recorded in the New Testament other than what those records claim. If Jesus could have performed real miracles, then He didn’t need to be a hypnotist.

IS THE BIBLE UNRELIABLE?

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Because he rejects the possibility of miracles, or that Jesus actually could be God, Wilson must question the reliability and inspiration of the New Testament. Wilson borrows and modifies a number of stock criticisms in an attempt to undermine the trustworthiness of the New Testament. None of these criticisms is valid, and all have been answered (most many times) by well-qualified scholars over the years.

Wilson appears to have some familiarity with liberal criticism of the New Testament, including a familiarity with the destructive higher criticism which was especially popular during the 19th century. However, he does not display any familiarity at all with scholarly responses to the higher critical approach. One does not even have to read volumes of complicated scholarship to see the bankrupt condition of destructive higher criticism. One need only read the classic 1922 booklet, *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?* by the famous linguist Robert Dick Wilson (*Sunday School Times*), or the 1977 short Lutheran book, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (Concordia) by Gerhard Maier.

Most of his other criticisms of the New Testament are in three categories: 1) the transmission of the text; 2) internal textual contradictions; and 3) contradictions between the text and external history and/or geography.

The Transmission of the Text

Wilson spends one whole chapter on “Discovering the Documents,” but this chapter does nothing to inspire the confidence of the reader in the New Testament documents. Wilson notes correctly that we have very few manuscript pieces of substance from before the fifth century, but he completely omits noting that we can produce the entire text of the New Testament except for eleven verses from quotations in the early church fathers from before the fourth century.³ (Of course, such an admission on Wilson’s part would mean that he could not, with consistency, deny later in his argument that the New Testament ever taught the virgin birth and the deity of Christ, which were added, he maintains, by the fourth century church.)

In spite of his inadequate treatment of the transmission of the New Testament text, Wilson does admit that the text we possess today is very close to what was written originally. He concludes this chapter by writing, “But on the whole, errors and textual variations are relatively minor, and the canonical gospels can be judged to be very much as their authors wrote them.”⁴

However, Wilson rejects the traditional view that the books of the New Testament were written by apostles and their associates, appealing to higher criticism again to show that numerous, mostly anonymous writers, sometimes removed from the events by a century or more, contributed to the New Testament text. The “proofs” he offers for this view have been answered over and over again by competent New Testament scholars. For example, Wilson writes, “Recent computer tests have clearly confirmed what theological scholars have long suspected, that whoever wrote Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus was not the person (indisputably Paul) who wrote Galatians, Romans and Corinthians.”⁵ This argument has been met *and* answered many times before.⁶

Internal Textual Contradictions

Wilson’s text is peppered throughout with casual references to internal contradictions in the New Testament. All of these “contradictions” (and hundreds more) have been answered by many excellent Bible scholars, both contemporary and in the past. I refer the interested reader especially to the 1874 classic *An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* by John W. Haley (reprinted by Baker), or to the recent *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* by Gleason L. Archer (Zondervan).

One example Wilson gives of internal contradictions concerns the nativity of our Lord. Wilson lists three important “contradictions” between Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts: 1) In Matthew, the announcement of Jesus’ birth is given to Joseph; in Luke, it is given to Mary. 2) In Matthew, Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem and leave only when Herod begins the slaughter of the innocents; in Luke, Mary and Joseph leave their home in Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem for the census. 3) The genealogies in Matthew and Luke contain a number of different names; most difficult is the fact that in Matthew Joseph’s father is called Jacob, whereas in Luke his father is called Heli.⁷ Pages have been written by a variety of scholars answering the above objections, so I will comment here only briefly.

1) Luke does not state that the angel told Mary and that *no one* told Joseph. Matthew does not state that the angel told Joseph and that *no one* told Mary. In fact, Matthew assumes that Joseph already knew about Mary’s pregnancy before his dream, since he records Joseph as having already decided to divorce Mary quietly for her “indiscretion” before the angel explained to him the *true* nature of the conception. Far from contradicting each other, Matthew and Luke complement each other.

2) Matthew does not say that Mary and Joseph lived in Bethlehem *before* Jesus’ birth. He merely states that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that the family lived in a house there at the time the magi came. Luke begins his story earlier than does Matthew,

explaining how Mary and Joseph came to be in Bethlehem for Jesus' birth. While Luke gives more information about the time before Jesus' birth, he does not mention the escape to Egypt after the birth. For this we have Matthew's account. Again, far from contradicting each other, the two accounts complement each other.

3) The two genealogies of Jesus do not contradict each other. For something to be a contradiction, there cannot be *any* possible reconciliation. Several viable explanations are possible, such as this one suggested by Gleason L. Archer:

Matthew 1:1-16 gives the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph, who was himself a descendant of King David. As Joseph's adopted Son, Jesus became his legal heir, so far as his inheritance was concerned....

Luke 3:23-28, on the other hand, seems to record the genealogical line of Mary herself.... This seems to be implied by the wording of v. 23: "Jesus. . . being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph? Jesus was not really the biological son of Joseph. . . . Mary. . . must of necessity have been the sole human parent through whom Jesus could have descended from a line of ancestors. Her genealogy is thereupon listed, starting with Hell, who was actually Joseph's father-in-law, in contradistinction to Joseph's own father, Jacob (Matt. 1:16.... Therefore Jesus was descended from David naturally through Nathan and legally through Solomon."⁸

We find, then, that each of the three "contradictions" raised by Wilson are not contradictions at all. The same is true of the other internal problems Wilson raises.

External Textual Contradictions of History and/or Geography

The third kind of problem Wilson finds with the New Testament is contradictions between the New Testament and history and/or geography. While he appears to have a passing acquaintance with some biblical archaeology, he ignores the vast majority of information and argumentation raised over the last 100 years which answer his external "contradictions." One example will illustrate this point.

Wilson spends several paragraphs⁹ asserting that it is impossible to reconcile the different gospel accounts of the date of Christ's death with each other or with secular history. His argument is complicated, only because the documents and history discussed are complicated. However, he has again failed to prove a contradiction, either among the gospels or between the gospels and secular history. In fact, there have been a number of reasonable reconciliations of these passages.¹⁰

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Wilson has a complicated system for uncovering what he says is the real Jesus. He assumes that the New Testament itself cannot be a source of hard fact about Jesus. While he mentions some of the extra-biblical sources of information about Christ, he neglects other sources. He finally decides that certain modifications of Josephus provide us with the best information about Jesus Christ. He comments on the "high degree of detail" in Josephus' writings, which he says "are impressively accurate."¹¹ It is incredible to the knowledgeable reader that Wilson would accord such reliability to Josephus when the reliability of the New Testament documents, which he rejects, is attested much better by archaeology than is Josephus! This treatment of the textual evidence outside the new Testament concerning Jesus Christ pales in comparison to scholarly treatments of the subject like F.F. Bruce's *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Eerdmans).

Wilson's fanciful speculations are far from the mark of responsible biblical interpretation, as when he speculates that the reason four harlots are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Christ could have been that Mary herself was a harlot!¹²

Not only does Wilson claim that Jesus accomplished his so-called miracles through the use of hypnotism and the power of his charismatic personality, he claims Paul's resurrection experience was actually a posthypnotic hallucination.¹³ The fact is that there is no evidence for this claim. Paul's Pharisaism, his hatred of Christianity, and his confident assurance of his own integrity before becoming a Christian, together rule out any naturalistic explanation of his conversion.¹⁴

Wilson's speculations concerning the resurrection of Christ are no more reasonable. He continues to reveal his anti-supernatural bias, saying, for example, "If the hypothesis that Jesus did rise from the grave is set aside as being impossible to prove, the only remaining theory meriting further consideration is that the disciples somehow hallucinated Jesus' resurrection appearances."¹⁵ There are numerous comprehensive, logical, and evidential presentations of the argument for the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ. I especially recommend Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* (Zondervan), Gary Habermas' *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Baker), William Lane Craig's *The Son Rises* (Moody), and George Eldon Ladd's *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eerdmans).

THE DEITY OF CHRIST

Jesus: The Evidence contains an entire chapter titled, “How He Became God.” Ian Wilson believes that Jesus Christ is not God and never claimed to be God, and that neither the original Gospels nor Paul taught Jesus was God.¹⁶ According to Wilson, the deity of Christ was just one idea about Jesus which one segment of the early church embraced. It just happened that this one segment of the church gained the upper hand at the Council of Nicea, largely because of the friendly persuasion of Emperor Constantine. At that time, the deity of Christ was established as a doctrine of faith, despite its being unbiblical.¹⁷

The facts, however, are otherwise. The New Testament consistently claims that Jesus Christ is God (e.g., His deity is unequivocally affirmed by the Gospel writers (Matt. 1:23; John 20:28), the Apostle Paul (Rom. 9:5; Col. 2:9), and Jesus Himself (John 8:24 and 58). In addition, the early church fathers, long before the Council of Nicea, all affirmed the deity of Christ, in much the same way that the doctrine was *reaffirmed* (not created) at Nicea in 325 A.D. Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria, to name only a few, all explicitly and emphatically taught that Christ was God.¹⁸ As for Constantine, although he convened the Council of Nicea, he did not preside over it, nor did he dictate its theological pronouncements.

Conclusion

Ian Wilson’s *Jesus: The Evidence* is misnamed. It should be titled something like *Jesus the Charismatic Hypnotist: A Fairy Tale*. Far from providing us with evidence about Jesus Christ, this book provides us with Wilson’s own subjective fiction.

—Bob Passantino

1 Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 11.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

3 Charles Leach, *Our Bible: How We Got It*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1898), pp. 35ff.

4 Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 154

6 See, for example, James R. Moore, “Computer Analysis and the Pauline Corpus,” in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *Christianity for the Tough-Minded* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1973), pp. 280-288.

7 Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

8 Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 316.

9 Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-58.

10 Roger Rusk, “The Day He Died,” *Christianity Today*, March 29, 1974: pp. 4-6, argues for Thursday, April 6, A.D. 30, as the date of the crucifixion; more recently, Colin J. Humphreys and W. Graeme Waddington, “The Date of the Crucifixion,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, March 1985: pp. 2-10, argues for Friday, April 3, A.D. 33. The latter date is also supported by Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), pp. 65-114.

11 Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

13 *ibid.*, p. 144.

14 Boyce W. Blackwelder, *Toward Understanding Paul* (Anderson, IN: The Warner Press, 1961), pp. 53-54; see also Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965).

15 Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 168, 176-181.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 166-170.

18 For example, Ignatius (30-107 A.D.) said of Jesus, “By the first fact He showed that He was God, and by the second that He was also man.” Justin Martyr (110-165 A.D.) said, “Now I have proved at length that Christ is called God.” (A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. [ed.], *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.], Vol. 1, pp. 118, 262; see also pp. 104, 449; Vol. 2, p. 173.)