

**Jesus of the  
Christians**  
in Christian Origins

WELLS

High Trevor-Roper writes:

... of the historicity of Jesus—whether he  
... person who founded the Christian religion  
... I 'saviour', like Osiris or Mithras,  
... inserted into it—is not new. It has long  
... been discussed by scholars. But Mr Wells is both  
... more active and more convincing than the  
... others. By combining an exact historical  
... knowledge of a wide and up-to-date knowledge of  
... the process which he supposes.

... patiently and scrupulously argued,  
... whereby the abstract saviour preached  
... gradually fitted into human body,  
... etc. I am deeply impressed by this  
... scholarly and lucid work.

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PEMBERTON BOOK

The Jesus  
of the Early  
Christians

G.A.Wells

PB

PEMBERTON

# The Jesus of the Early Christians

A Study in Christian Origins

Could Christianity have arisen if Jesus  
had never existed?

This is the question which Professor  
G.A.Wells seeks to answer, and it is not  
quite the same as the question of  
whether Jesus really did exist.

## G.A.Wells

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## Criteria of Historicity

We assume the historicity of Caesar and Mohammed because we possess so much and so varied testimony that the existence of these individuals is the simplest hypothesis that will explain it all and account for its high degree of consistency. I have tried to show that, with Jesus, this is not so clearly the case. Yet Frazer holds that the testimony of the gospels, confirmed by the hostile evidence of Tacitus and the younger Pliny, establishes that Jesus was a great religious and moral teacher who was crucified at Jerusalem under Pilate, and that the doubts which have been cast on his historical reality are 'unworthy of serious attention' (94, p. 412). I have examined the gospels, Tacitus and Pliny already, and am here concerned only with Frazer's further assertion that the historicity of Jesus is on a par with that of Mohammed, Luther and Calvin. I propose to consider first the case of Mohammed and then that of the Athenian statesman Solon in order to discover the type of evidence that has led historians to agree that they were historical personages. I shall then discuss a clear case of myth (Peter as bishop of Rome), and in a final section try to specify criteria of historicity.

## (i) Mohammed

It is believed that Mohammed was born at Mecca about AD 570 and was in the habit of spending periods in meditation on Mount Hira nearby, where he received his first divine communication in his fortieth year. At first the Meccans seem to have laughed at him, but finally they rose in fierce opposition, driving him and his few adherents to Yathrib, now called Medina. From the year of his

migration or Hegira the Moslem era is dated, so that AD 622 is AH 1. He soon came into serious conflict with the many Jews in Medina, and when the breach became past healing he ordered his supporters to turn in the direction of Mecca while praying, and no longer towards Jerusalem as formerly. From this time he assumes a more authoritative tone and demands obedience not only to Allah but also to himself.

The next years are marked by battles between the Koreish tribe at Mecca and Mohammed's supporters at Medina. The details are: the battle at Bedder, twenty miles from Mecca; that on Mount Ohud, six miles from Medina; the unsuccessful siege of Medina under Abu Sophian; then the capture of the town of Kheibar, the seat of the Jewish power in Arabia. While fighting the Meccans Mohammed was careful to protect himself from attacks from other quarters. As lord of Medina he concluded alliances with a number of Bedouin tribes in which the parties pledged mutual assistance. In AH 6 (AD 627) he signed a ten-year truce with the Meccans. But two years later his native city surrendered, and he was publicly recognized as chief and prophet.

With what justification do we believe all this? First, the swift rise of Mohammed's religion to power—overrunning the whole of Arabia in his lifetime and defeating Christian armies in Palestine within two years of his death—is a relevant factor, for it meant that the evidence for his existence would be critically examined at an early stage, far earlier than could have occurred in the case of Christianity, which long remained an insignificant sect and took 300 years to attain state recognition. Second, although there are many legendary and traditional sources for Mohammed's biography, there are also contemporary records. Foremost among these is the Koran, the first compilation of which was made within two or three years of his death at the direction of the caliph Abu Bekr. According to the *Britannica*, 'when Mohammed died separate pieces of the Koran appear to have been already written down . . . But many portions had been committed to memory. The first complete written version is attributed to Zayd ibn Thabit, who had been Mohammed's secretary, and was instructed in the reign of Abu Bekr to collect the scattered portions into one volume.' This was done during the years AH 11-14. Deviations from this original text soon crept into the copies made from it. In the reign of Uthman, the caliph was warned to interpose and 'stop the people before they should differ regarding their

Scripture as did the Jews and Christians' (Quoted by Muir, 195, p. XXII). The caliph heeded the warning and Zayd was again appointed in AH 30—this time with three others—to prepare an authoritative version. Copies of this were sent to the chief cities of the empire, and earlier codices burned. This recension has been handed down to us unaltered. 'There is probably in the world no other work which has remained twelve centuries with so pure a text. The various readings are wonderfully few in number' (195, p. XXIII). The significance of this fact is enormous. Contending and embittered factions, originating in the murder of the caliph Uthman within a quarter of a century after Mohammed's death, have ever since rent the Moslem world. 'Yet but one Koran has been current among them, and the consentaneous use of it by all proves that we have now before us the self-same text prepared by the commands of that unfortunate caliph who was a Moslem martyr' (editor's note to 104, V, 240, Chapter 50). The contrast with the early Christians, where the written records are so late that rival sects could possess entirely different gospels, could hardly be more striking. Furthermore, the Koran has every appearance of being what it purports to be, namely a collection of isolated sayings of the master. Hence the 'interminable repetition the wearisome reiteration of the same ideas, truths and doctrines' (195, p. XXVI). The success of modern scholars in arranging these sayings chronologically depends partly on the fact that some of them can be related to his precarious situation in Mecca; thus the numerous passages urging toleration were revealed at Mecca, while the eighth and ninth chapters, which are the loudest and most vehement, point to Medina. As Gibbon notes: 'The prophet of Medina assumed, in his revelations, a fiercer and more sanguinary tone, which proved that his former moderation was the effect of weakness.' There is, then, evidence of his teaching before his period of success and notoriety. And finally, in the whole of the Koran, the master himself works no miracles, and makes no claim to divinity; only in the traditions of the following centuries do his features become magnified into supernatural proportions. In all these respects the book differs markedly from the gospels.

Further contemporary testimony to the existence of Mohammed is provided by a collection of treaties. An example is the one signed in AD 628 during the wars between Medina and Mecca, and providing for a cessation of hostilities for ten years. The text has been preserved by Wakidi, the biographer of Mohammed, who

died in 803. Wakidi's biography contains 'a section expressly devoted to the transcription of such treaties, and it contains two or three scores of them. Over and over again, the author (at the end of the second or the beginning of the third century) states that he had copied these from the *original* documents' (195, p. lxxii). Muir records Sprenger's assertion that some of these treaties were still in force in the time of Haroun al-Rashid (AH 170-93; AD 791-814) and were then collected. 'This,' he says, 'is quite conceivable, for they were often recorded upon leather and would invariably be preserved with care as charters of privilege by those in whose favour they were concluded.' He adds the following evidence that Wakidi's transcriptions are genuine:

Some of the most interesting of the treaties [e.g. those which specify] the terms allowed to the Jews of Kheibar and to the Christians of Nejran, formed the basis of political events in the Caliphates of Abu Bekr and 'Omar; the concessions made in others to Christian and Jewish tribes are satisfactory proof that they were not fabricated by Muslims; while it is equally clear that they would never have been acknowledged if counterfeited by a Jewish or a Christian hand.

Many of the treaties in which Mohammed allied himself with bedouin tribes while he was fighting the Meccans from Medina are given by Sperber, who has transcribed a number of the earliest of these from Mohammed's biographer Ibn Sa'd. He remarks that they are neither dated nor preserved by other historians; nevertheless, he is able both to date them and prove them genuine on internal evidence. This is in part linguistic: the archaic language stamps them as very old (256, p. 8). He also shows that some of the treaties are purely political, and thereby distinguished from later ones, in which Mohammed demands that the other party accept his religion. This points to an early stage of his career at Medina, when he was still not powerful enough to demand religious allegiance. His motive in signing these treaties was to isolate his enemies, the Koreish at Mecca, and so he is glad to ally himself with bedouin tribes, even though they remain heathens. Only after the unsuccessful siege of Medina by the Meccans does he feel strong enough to demand religious conversion as a token of political allegiance, and Sperber gives a number of treaties where this demand is made.



Mohammed is also mentioned by contemporary poets whose works are extant.<sup>1</sup> Muir remarks that 'there can be no doubt as to the great antiquity of these remains, though we may not always be able to fix with exactness the period of their composition'. Their approximate age is fixed by their 'ancient style and language'. And 'their poetical form is a material safeguard against change and interpolation' (195, p. lxxiii). These early references do not paint Mohammed as a divine figure, but as a human individual with a biography. Several old poems, for instance, say that he belonged to the family of Hashim, one of the better-class families of Mecca. And 'that he was recognized by them as one of themselves is evident from the fact that only the protection of a fairly powerful family could have made it possible for him to stay in Mecca as long as he did in face of the hostility of his fellow-citizens' (86). The poet Hassan ben Thabit tells how, when the prophet's position in Mecca was becoming more and more difficult, Mutil b. Adi took him under his protection; and how later, during the skirmishes between Medina and Mecca, Mohammed's supporters continually harassed the Meccan caravans (ibid.). Hassan's odes on 'The Battle of the Ditch' and on 'The taking of Mecca' give more biographical details.

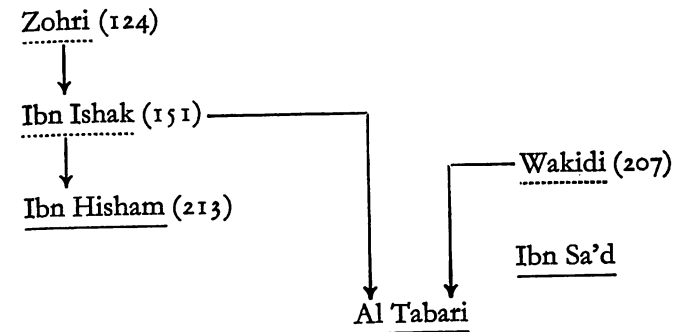
In the treaties in which Mohammed, as Lord of Medina, allies himself with bedouin tribes, he appears as a political strategist, not as a divine or semi-divine figure. Once again we must note the great contrast with Jesus. While Mohammed is mentioned by his contemporaries, Jesus is not, and the oldest Christian references to him are to a mystic sacrifice, not to a human individual who lived at a definite time and place.

The biographies of the prophet are admittedly later, but refer to early poetic and other material. I have taken my information from Rodwell (228, p. XV) and Bury (47), and the following table is an attempt to make the rather complicated statements of Bury clear. Biographers whose works are extant are underlined, those whose works survive as quotations in later writers have a dotted line beneath them. Arrows indicate sources, and dates the death of the writer (AH).

The table shows the importance of Al Tabari's work from which we can check the lost sources of the extant works of Ibn Hisham and Ibn Sa'd. Bury remarks that Tabari 'had no historical faculty,

<sup>1</sup> For details see C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, Weimar, 1898, I, 36-9.

no idea of criticizing or sifting his sources; he merely puts side by side the statements of earlier writers without reconciling their discrepancies or attempting to educe the truth'. His method thus reveals the nature of the now lost materials which he used. It was largely to his work that the loss of that material in its original form is due. 'His work was so convenient and popular that the public ceased to want the older books, and consequently they ceased to be multiplied.'



Tabari and other Arabic writers can be compared with the Greek authorities for the Moslem conquests, namely the patriarch Nicephorus and the monk Theophanes who both lived at the end of the eighth century. Theophanes' *Chronicle* covers the period AD 284-813 and Nicephorus' *History* the period 602-769. They both used a common source of which we have no record. In sum, then, early Arabic evidence has been preserved by Tabari, and although the two Greek writers were not contemporaries of the Moslem expansion, their evidence agrees in the main with his. For instance, Mohammed's forces suffered a serious defeat in the first considerable attempt to extend his authority over the Arabs on Byzantine soil, at Mu'ta in Transjordan in AH 8. Al Tabari, Ibn Hisham and Wakidi tell us what happened, and their narration is confirmed by the independent testimony of Theophanes (268, p. 335). And both Tabari and Nicephorus date the Arab conquest of Syria as beginning in AD 634.

The following table sums up what has been established in the above pages; the figures indicate the number of years that have elapsed since the alleged beginning of Jesus' public ministry, taken as *c.* AD 30; and since the beginning of Mohammed's move to Medina, AD 622 or AH 1.

- | Jesus   | Mohammed  |
|---|---|
|   | 5 Moh. allies himself with bedouin tribes against Mec-cans (letters extant). AD 626.  |
|   | 7 Treaty with Meccans (sur-vives in Wakidi's transcrip-tion from the original). AD 628.   |
|   | 8 Moh.'s forces defeated at Mu'ta (proved by indepen-dent Arab and Byzantine testimony). AD 629.                                |
|   | 9 ff. Moh. mentioned in extant poems. AD 630 ff.  |
|   | 13 Arabs defeat Christians in Syria (proved by indepen-dent Arab and Byzantine testimony). AD 634.                              |
| 30 Paul refers to the god Jesus, but gives no indication of where or when he lived on earth. AD 60?   | 30 Definitive edition of Koran available (proof of this date is that all later Moslem factions have the same edi-tion). AD 651. |
| 63 Bare mention of Jesus as the brother of James in Josephus' <i>Antiquities</i> , with no biographical details. AD 93. Probably a later, Chris-tian insertion.   |   |
| 66 Clement refers to Jesus as a teacher who was either recently on earth, or who recently promulgated his teachings by means of su-pernatural revelations. AD 96. At about this same time, I Peter and Hebrews both allege that Jesus was re-cently on earth. |   |
| c. 70 First rabbinical allusions to Jesus. (c. AD 100)  |   |

- | Jesus  | Mohammed  |
|--|---|
| 80 Ignatius alleges that Jesus was crucified under Pilate. AD 110. | c. 80 Christian formula for ab-juration of Moslem religion extant. AD 701.  |
| 82 Pliny mentions Christians. AD 112.                              |   |
| 87 I Tim. alleges that Jesus was crucified under Pilate. AD 117.   |   |
| 90 Tacitus mentions execution under Pilate. AD 120.                | 93 Death of Zohri, Moh.'s biographer, whose work survives in quotations of later writers. AD 714.   |
|  | 120 Death of Ibn Ishak, bio-grapher of Moh., whose work can be reconstructed from the independent quo-tations given by Hisham and Tabari. AD 741. |

### (ii) Solon

The earliest Greek statesman of whom we have anything like reliable information is said by Meyer (183, p. 600) to be Solon, one of the archons of Athens at the beginning of the sixth century BC, at a time, that is, when Greek art and literature had hardly begun. Consequently, we cannot expect to find contemporary mention of him. The first appearance of his name in extant Greek literature is found in a fragment of two lines from a comedy of Cratinus (quoted by Diogenes Laertius, I, 62) and in Herodotus' history. Both were written about the middle of the fifth century, that is, more than a hundred years after Solon's prime. Aristophanes and Plato, a little later, mention him a number of times, but Thucydides, writing about the same time as Herodotus, does not, and since I have relied a good deal on arguments from silence, it will be necessary to show that his silence is compatible with Solon's historicity. Thucydides is concerned almost exclusively with the Peloponnesian war, of which he was a contemporary. The only sections of his work which do not deal with it are the