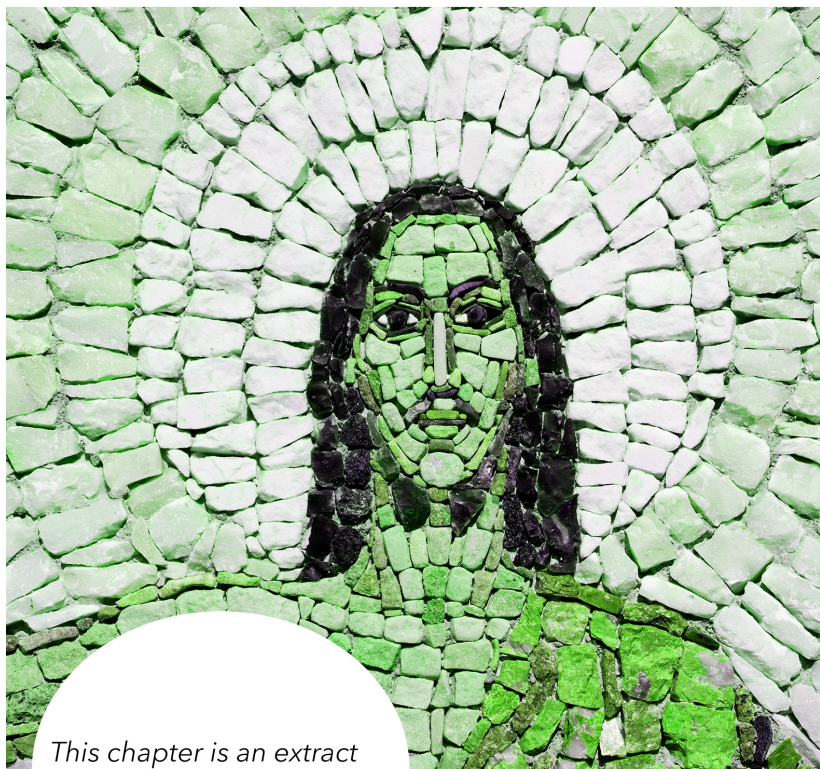


CHAPTER 15
FAITH'S RADICAL TESTING



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

LESLIE BADHAM WITH PAUL BADHAM

About this Extract

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Faith's Radical Testing

If the story of Jesus was at all parallel with the story of other great men of the past, we should have no hesitation in saying on strictly historical grounds that the Gospels have every right to be treated as a substantially reliable record ... The manuscript evidence for the reconstruction of the New Testament text is older, more plentiful, and more reliable than for any other ancient writing.

Dr G. B. Caird *Jesus and God*

Jesus Christ has been brought to trial many times in different courts and on different charges. In the nineteenth century there were a number of scholars heavily influenced by the ideas and assumptions of scientific materialism. They brought Christianity to trial on the charge that its records were untrue.

Lutheran Germany produced critics like Baur and Strauss, who are well described by Browning:

*They could not believe,
not statedly that is, and fixedly
In any revelation called divine.*

Accordingly, they excised or explained away, the supernatural elements in the Gospels. They believed that Christianity had borrowed heavily from the superstitious rites and beliefs of the Mystery Cults that had been imported into the Roman Empire. They sought parallels for Christ's sayings in other sacred and classical writings. They assumed that the New Testament writers were avid for miracles, and that these had been grafted wholesale onto the simple life of Jesus. By one theory or another, they sought to reduce him to manageable size, and this led inevitably to an all-round attack on the integrity and historicity of the New Testament as a whole.

However, the early critics did pioneering work of the first importance. They saved Christianity from being sheltered from scholarly scrutiny. They stimulated deeper inquiry. Thanks to the research they initiated we now see the Bible as a progressive revelation, and can place its writings in their approximate chronological order. If the early criticism seemed entirely destructive, the later scholarship has gone on to restore confidence both in the unity and the authority of the Bible.

Had the radical critics not been met, religion would not have been able to hold up its head, for as Erasmus trenchantly put it, 'To equate new learning with heresy, is to identify orthodoxy with ignorance.'

On the other hand, there were losses as well as gains, for the early critics brought to a subject formerly considered sacred, a scepticism of attitude, and a ruthlessness of method, that was new. Consequently it attracted a publicity not given to the scholarship that answered it. Doubt, of course, breeds

doubt. It gains ground under the adage 'no smoke without fire', and returns in slightly different shape. For this reason we recall the nineteenth-century attack on the Gospels, as having a family likeness to the twentieth century attack on their historical value.

We now know that the earlier critics were prejudiced against traditional beliefs, and that their handling of the evidence was partial, and therefore unscholarly. They tended to theorise first and to search for the supporting evidence afterwards. Theorising, for example, that the entire supernatural element in the Gospels had been superimposed on what had been originally the simple narrative of an ethical teacher, they spoke of a 'heightening process'. But this presupposed an interval of time long enough for legend to accumulate. They sought to prove, therefore, that the Gospels were written long after the events they purported to describe. They placed them somewhere in the second century, implied that they were full of interpolations, and generally the work of unknown and unreliable hands.

Of the Epistles ascribed to Paul, only four—Romans, Corinthians 1 and 2, and Galatians—were allowed to stand, the remainder were ruled out. The Acts were regarded as of little or no historical value.

In short, we were invited to believe that Christianity arose, not on the rock of fact, but on the sand of credulity; that it was not the work of great first-century personalities, but of unknown second-century compilers. We were asked to believe that the noblest ethics were put together, and an intelligible faith fashioned, out of bits and pieces of otherwise unrelated material, by a scissors and paste

mentality. Even more incredible, it was suggested that the sublime and utterly self-consistent portrait of Jesus was a matter not so much of historical fact as of devout invention.

The turn of the tide came with the verdict of Harnack, one of the greatest of the German critics, that:

In all main points, and in most details, the earliest literature of the Church is, from the literary-historical point of view, trustworthy and dependable. One can almost say that the assumptions of the extremist school are now wholly abandoned... The chronological framework in which tradition has arranged the documents is, in all the principal points, from the Pauline Epistles to Irenaeus (i.e. from ad 50 to the last quarter of the second century) correct, and compels the historian to abandon all theories with relation to the historical course of things, that are inconsistent with this framework.³⁷

The vogue of the extremist criticism was drawing to its close. It was a time in which theological science learnt much, and after which it had much to forget.

A number of scholars, by a typically English combination of common sense with sound scholarship, were to establish the trustworthiness of the early records of the faith, and their successors were to confirm their work.

They confirmed Paul's authorship of the bulk of the Epistles that bear his name. They placed the Gospels in the first century, Mark about ad 65, Luke and Matthew between ad

³⁷ *Chronologie der Altchristlichen Litteratur*, 1897, pp. viii-x.

80 and ad 90, both employing earlier material, and the Fourth Gospel ad 100. By exhaustive analysis of the Third Gospel and the Acts they showed that both were written by St Luke, the physician, and for sixteen years the friend of Paul, his companion on the second and third missionary journeys. He was an historian of the first rank, and his chronological, geographical, and medical references carry an assurance of his integrity and care as a writer.

The long interval that was conjectured to intervene between the death of Jesus and the setting down of the record is now known to have no basis in truth. The supposed 'heightening of the portrait of Jesus' is the product of nothing more than heightened imagination on the part of the theorists.

The supposed 'reading back' into the days of the ministry of the faith and doctrines of a later time, together with the general infiltration of the Gospels with material from pagan sources, has not survived investigation. 'The historical perspective of the Gospels is genuine,' writes B. S. Easton in *The Gospel Before the Gospels*. 'The writers of the Gospels were profoundly respectful of the primitive testimonies.'

It is being widely recognised that the New Testament is wholly congruous with itself. Like the robe that Jesus wore it is 'all of one piece'. The supernatural elements are by no means separable from the rest of the material. The phenomenal is inextricably interwoven with the ethical teaching. It is an integral feature of the whole portrait of Jesus. Cut it out and what is left is incoherent, and in no way capable of giving rise to a movement like apostolic Christianity.

Early attempts to show that Paul and the Fourth Gospel give us a view of Jesus that is out of keeping with what is implied in the primitive sources, have not proved convincing. Jesus' claim to be the Messiah belongs to the earliest and most authentic traditions. The tremendous conception of him as the Son of God is embedded in the primitive testimony of Mark.

But what is the implication of these facts? That the one person that cannot be traced in the New Testament sources is the Jesus who was a mere ethical teacher, who did no mighty works, and made no disquieting theological claims, and who got pathetically crucified because he had the temerity to preach a kindly humanism and to go about doing good. What we discover is the towering figure of the Son of God invested with power, accompanied by mighty works, speaking parables of terrific implication, claiming nothing less than divine Sonship, the sceptre of judgment and the power of saviourhood.

We are not far from the 'earliest eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'. They alone were responsible for the kindling of the faith that dazzled and exalted the Apostolic Church. Here is the explanation of the place and authority accorded to them in the Church. They alone could testify to the historic evidence on which an enduring Church could stand.

We now know that the limits in which the earlier critics moved were inadequate. Obsessed with historical and textual problems, they lost their sense of proportion. They almost wholly ignored the religious importance of their work. Looking back on their omissions, Adolf Deissmann says in *The New Testament in the Light of Modern*

Research: 'I can only confess the guilt of my own science. We have followed one-sided doctrinaire interests, strained our eyes with doctrinaire matters, until, unfortunately, we have become, too often, religion-blind... so we dealt with secondary derivative aspects, instead of with powerful, living, primary facts.'

* * * *

Were these 'assured results' to last? What more could we wish, for example, than to know that Mark had taken down his Gospel from the very lips of Peter? Just as Papias had said he had done. Peter's recollections were of photographic clarity. What could be better?

Starting from the time of the First World War, however, German scholars like Dibelius, Schmidt, Rudolf Bultmann and others, used the Gospel traditions first of all as evidence of what was taught in the early Christian communities. Then came the question if a Gospel taken down from the lips of people was strictly history? Had not several decades passed before there was a written record? Here was a time when the traditions about Jesus could have hardened into forms. Here was a likely interval, they thought, when the needs and convictions of the earliest Christian groups could have influenced the form, selection, and transmission of what was set down in the Gospels.

This is arguing in a circle. It looks to the Gospels to find what was taught on their authority in the first Christian communities, then it alleges that the Gospels are poor history since they only contain matters taught in the first

Christian communities. This idea meets with increasing incredulity.

Some of the negative judgments of Form Criticism have been astonishing. Bultmann, for instance, stated in *Jesus and the World* that 'we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either.' True, he goes on to say, 'that Jesus is the one in whom God's word encounters man.' But what, if we 'know almost nothing about Jesus,' can 'the encounter' amount to? Something very different from the effect it has undoubtedly had on the Christian mind.

Anyone who knows communities, knows too how limited are their creative powers. Could the life and personality of Jesus that the Gospels present have been the composite work of a community? Or have been 'made up' at all? 'Who among the disciples,' asked John Stuart Mill, 'was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus, or of imagining his life and character?'

One can imagine Peter recalling, for Mark to take down, actual Aramaic words that Jesus had used like, '*Talitha cumi* — Get up, my child', '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*—My God, my God, why have you deserted me.' Peter still had the sound of the words in his ears; and he told Mark that Jesus had held a small child 'in the crook of his arm'. He could still see it. But the later Christian community would not have known Aramaic anyhow, and could never have imagined the captivating human detail about the child. What the later Christian community worried about was Baptism, the Holy

Spirit, the Gentile mission, and these are not the things the Synoptic Gospels emphasise.

No one would deny that stories passed on by word of mouth might vary a little. But that is far from saying that the Christian community invented, or read back, into the life of Jesus things that he had never said, and never done. Their main concern was for the truth, and they had plenty of access to the truth through the presence among them until the Synoptic Gospels were safely in writing, of eyewitnesses and first preachers of the word.

Far from casting doubt on the records, the facts of oral transmission made the record of Jesus' teaching and life, and the details of his death and Resurrection, an affair of the whole community, and everything shows that they were anxious to sift the truth as much as they could, and for as long as they could.

Here is a careful man like Papias, writing sometime before ad 135:

I shall be willing to put down along with my own interpretations whatever instructions I received with care from the elders and stored up in my memory, assuring you at the same time of their truth. If then, anyone who has attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples; what things Ariston and the Presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord say For I imagined what was to be got from books

*was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice of the Lord's disciples.*³⁸

It is clear that it is not what is believed in the Christian groups around him that he thinks authoritative, but what single detail he may yet learn from the Apostolic time.

There is a self-correcting factor in scholarship, and the period that has been dominated by secular thinking about Jesus is probably ending. Professor Ernst Kasemann may be seen as 'a sign of the times'. He began as a follower of Bultmann, and was almost completely doubtful about knowing anything of the historical Jesus. But he now writes in *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*:

We have been told by the Form Critics, that the early Church was not interested in history, that the glorified Christ had practically swallowed up Jesus of Nazareth, and that events in the earthly life of Jesus had but little interest for Gentile believers in post-Resurrection days. Yet the plain fact is we have four Gospels that relate a great deal about that life on earth. They had their feet squarely in the footsteps of the Man of Nazareth. They were not willing to let a myth take the place of history, or to substitute a heavenly being for the historical Jesus. We no longer think of the Evangelists as pale compilers, but as men giving a true impressionist portrait of Jesus as he was in the years between 6 BC and ad 29.

In Kasemann's view there is enough in the Synoptic Gospels 'to confront us with a figure so awe-inspiringly outstanding

³⁸ The Ante-Nicene Fathers, i. 153.

and significant that we begin to understand why those who knew Him did not find it impossible to believe about Him that He had triumphed over death and been raised to the right hand of God.’

Likewise after the most detailed study of all the evidence concerning the historical Jesus, Dr Howard Marshall, an outstanding New Testament scholar, affirms:

So the reader of the Gospels is brought face to face with the biblical Jesus as the Son of the living God. These accounts, seen in the light of the resurrection, call out for the reader's decision and invites them to faith. And the object of their faith is then the Jesus whose existence and ministry have been confirmed and illuminated by their historical research, but whose significance is only fully seen in the light of that experience of the risen Lord which has coloured the interpretation of Jesus offered in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament and which continues to illuminate the mind of the believer.³⁹

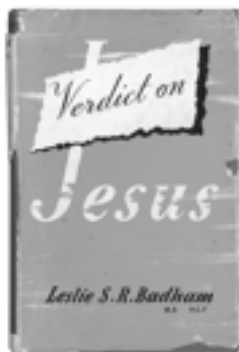
³⁹ I. H. Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*.

PART THREE: Synthesis

The nature of the universe – evidence of Mind and purpose – grounds of Theistic belief – reasonableness of revelation – significance of Old Testament – preparation – expectation – evidence of fulfilment in Christ – historic character – claims of uniqueness – portrait of man in highest definition – truest mirror of God – possibilities Christianity opens up for fullest development of humankind. Jesus ‘speaks for himself’. His affirmation in the Court of the Sanhedrin.

7 Decades

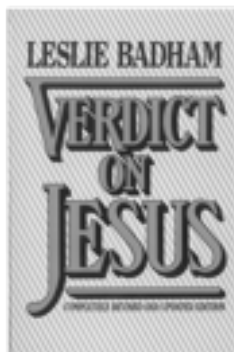
Verdict on Jesus through the years



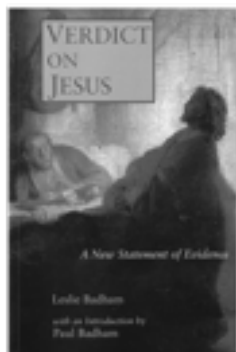
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

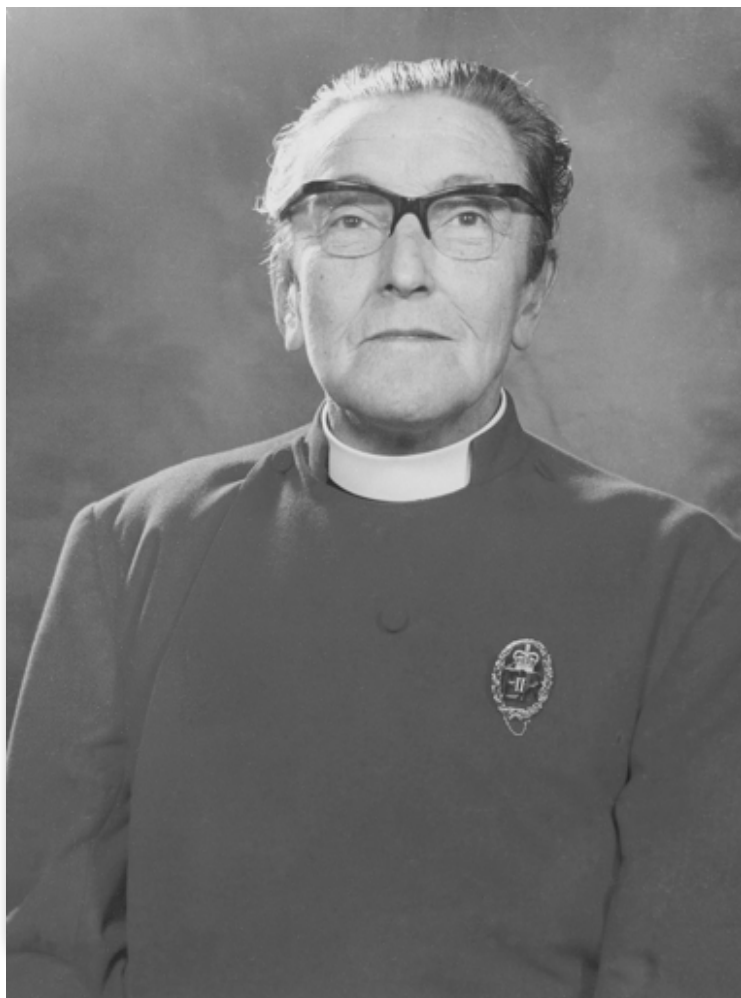


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

Top right: Leslie and Effie Badham with their children David, Christine, Clare and Paul in 1963

Middle: Leslie Badham with Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Parish Church in 1965

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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- * 'Was Jesus a Liberal?'
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