

CHAPTER 9
THE TEST OF HISTORICAL TRUTH



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

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About this Extract

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CHAPTER NINE

The Test of Historical Truth

I must understand in order to believe, and by doubting come to questioning and by questioning perceive the truth.
Abelard

I take sides decidedly with those who emphasise that Christianity is an historical religion and against those who say that the quest of the historical Jesus is irrelevant. I therefore unashamedly address myself to those who are prepared to allow to historical evidence a place in the considerations leading up to faith...

C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*

We owe a great deal to biblical criticism. It is an ongoing search for truth with scholars able to check and, where necessary, correct each other's work.

It began in German universities in the eighteenth century and spread generally in the nineteenth. Literary and historical methods of research were applied to the discovery of the sources, authorships, dates, and historical setting of biblical writings. We shall see, in Chapter 16—Faith's Radical Testing—that what at first appeared wholly

destructive, has stimulated deeper study, and better understanding.

We now know that the Hebrews were the first ancient people to practise continuous, objective, historical writing, and that we are dealing with substantially reliable records. It is clear gain to be able to place biblical writings in a fairly agreed chronological order. This in turn enables us to see the story of the Hebrew people leading up to the Christian Gospel as intelligible history. In so far as archaeological, linguistic, and historical checks have been applied it has been found that there is a basis of fact underlying the main pattern of Bible events.

This is of first importance, because it was within the framework of this historical record that the Hebrews had their vivid experiences of God. Similarly, we have carefully documented records of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, of his historical impact, and of the rise of Christianity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Karl Barth initiated a deeper inquiry. He ‘threw a bombshell’, as he described it in *The Epistle to the Romans* ‘into the playground of the theologians’, by insisting that they looked not only at the Bible as history, but concerned themselves with what made it worth looking at—its theological content, as the Word of God. His call led to a revival of biblical theology.

‘That which makes the Bible intelligible as a whole,’ wrote Dr A. G. Herbert in *The Authority of the Bible*, ‘is the connection that runs through it of a purpose of God in history.’

The call of Abraham, the Exodus under Moses, the giving of the Law, the kingdom of David, the Captivity in Babylon, the experiences of the Exile—were all steps in the Hebrews' developing religious experience.

Within this framework we meet that remarkable succession of inspired writers who saw truths for their time big enough to be truths of all time. Stage by stage ideas of God are enlarged and moral understanding advanced, as though, like a cantilever bridge, it was spanning forward to meet the teaching of Jesus. To the prophets we owe the phenomenon of the Messianic hope, which in actual fact brightened up to the time when Jesus came.

As in *A Light to the Nations* Professor N. K. Gottwald rightly says, 'One might as well attempt to evaluate the Greeks without considering their philosophy or art, or the Romans without regard for law or engineering, as understand the history of the Hebrews without regard to religious convictions.'

One of the strangest of these convictions is that God's love and power would be made manifest to the nations through Israel, or some supreme figure in Israel who, even at the cost of limitless suffering, would bring in a new relationship with God.

But the Old Testament, and the apocryphal literature, leave us with the Messianic hope unrealised. 'He who should come' does not come. The figure in whom the whole story of revealed religion was to culminate, fails to arrive.

The New Testament, however, rings with the proclamation of his arrival. 'The time is fulfilled.' John the Baptist, last of the prophets, is privileged to be the greatest, for he heralds the Messiah, identifying him as Jesus of Nazareth. The figure pointed to in the Old Testament is central in the New. He, too, is a fact of history, the Christ-event is the climactic happening in which God's hand is seen.

Here, therefore, the message of the Old Testament finds fulfilment in the New. There is a striking continuity. It suggests nothing less than an historical revelation.

Grotesque as it may appear, the idea is sometimes put about that the Jesus-story is something of a myth. Such an idea raises more problems for the serious historian than to accept the essential features of the Gospels as facts. The pendulum swings too far that emphasises that the Gospels are religious and not also historical documents, and tends to decry 'mere facts of history'. 'It belongs to the specific character of Christianity,' says Dr C. H. Dodd in *History and the Gospels*, 'that it is an historical religion, and cannot be separated from the actual truth of the events described and interpreted.'

Those who would loosen the bolts that hold Christianity to its massive implacement in history would make it dependent on their own subjective ideas, and part company even with the noteworthy evidences of Christianity in Jewish and Roman writings.³¹

³¹ The Talmud *Sanhedrin*, 43a. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18. 3. 3., 20. 9. 1.; Tacitus, *Annals*, XV. 44; Pliny's *Letter to the Trajan*; Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*. See Prof. J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity; the Witness of History*.

The Gospels give the picture of a definite, potent awe-inspiring personality. They carry a conviction of reality. Of course there are difficulties and obscurities, and some irreconcilable differences in detail between one Gospel and another. There was no on-the-spot reporter. Stories, teaching passed from lip to lip. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospels are in Greek. Before the invention of printing texts suffered from copyists who made mistakes. But in the main we may have confidence in the teaching ascribed to Jesus. He was frequently addressed as Rabbi, and we now know that it was the custom of the Jewish Rabbis to encourage their disciples to memorise their teaching. Jesus made this easy, since much of his teaching can be translated back into Hebraic verse forms, as Dr Burney points out in *The Poetry of the Gospels*.

Eyewitnesses saw his mighty works. He was actually seized in their presence in the Garden of Gethsemane and, before the eyes of those he loved most, he was actually crucified. To the same people he appeared again in recognisable form, and 'was seen of many'. Paul refers, as to a fact of unquestioned and general knowledge, to 'over five hundred brethren' who had seen the risen Jesus for themselves, and who were alive, and presumably ready to be questioned, at the time he wrote (1 Cor. 15).

There is no evidence that those who had the strongest motives for denying the Resurrection were able to do so. The historical perspective of Peter's first speech in the Acts (Chapter 2) is generally accepted. But it was delivered in the very city where the memory of Jesus was most vivid, and before an audience to whom the recollection of the

crucifixion must have been most painful. Nevertheless, Peter unhesitatingly appeals to their sensitive memories:

Men of Israel, listen to me: I speak of Jesus of Nazareth, a man singled out by God and made known to you through miracles, portents, and signs, which God worked among you through him as you well know. When he had been given up to you, by the deliberate will and plan of God, you used heathen men to crucify and kill him. But God raised him to life again, setting him free from the pangs of death, because it could not be that death should keep him in its grip (Acts 2: 22–24)

and there is no evidence that they howled Peter down for being preposterous. On the contrary, ‘They were smitten to the heart,’ cowed, we must assume, by the unassailable truth of Peter’s words, and were baptised in their thousands.

On such facts as these Christianity is based. ‘These things’ said Paul to King Agrippa, ‘were not done in a corner.’ Obedient to these facts the doctrines of the Church were fashioned. The Creeds are not complicated exercises in metaphysical speculation. They are attempts to grapple with and to state, certain facts that were real and vivid in historical experience.

‘The theological interpretation which sees the life of Jesus as an act of God, is not something arbitrarily added to the bare facts,’ writes Dr C. B. Caird in *Jesus and God*. He continues:

There never were any bare facts. The life of Jesus was experienced at the time by those who knew him as an act of God. More than that, the religious interpretation was

present to the mind of Jesus before even the events happened, and thus was built into the very structure of the events, and in no place is this more obvious than in the account of the supreme event of the Resurrection.

The Resurrection resulted without question in Jesus being decisively recognised as the Messiah. The disciples were absolutely convinced that the cross on which he died had not terminated the pattern and purpose of his God-given life, and as Dr Ramsey put it:

It is not too much to say that without the Resurrection the phenomenon of Christianity in the Apostolic Age, and since, is scientifically unaccountable. It is also true to say that without the Resurrection, Christianity would not be itself, as its distinctiveness is not its adherence to a teacher who lived long ago, but to its belief that 'Jesus is Lord' for every generation throughout the centuries.³²

We may dislike these facts, and may wish to shape Christianity apart from them but what would result would not be Christianity, it would be speculative, man-made, and without authority. Those who gave their lives 'to bear witness to the truth' were not at liberty to teach what they liked about Christ. They were pinioned down by the historical and well-known happenings of his life, death, and resurrection.

It should be apparent, therefore, that it was not the Church that created the facts but the facts which created the Church. 'This thing we are declaring unto you,' said John, 'this Word

³² *God, Christ and the World*, pp. 77, 78

of life, we heard it, gazed upon it, yes, our own hands handled it.' If the Church were dealing with theories of fine spun fancies, it could retract or modify its doctrines at will, it could prune its beliefs to suit the turn and twist of criticism and popular taste, but as it is dealing with facts of history, its doctrines are ready made, and it has to forgo a heady desire to be popular for a hard-headed effort to be accurate. It remembers how Peter in his Epistle broke out hotly, 'It is no cunningly devised fable we are giving you, for we were eyewitnesses.'

It is tempting to scale down the records of historic Christianity, to cut out or explain away passages that challenge the dominant assumptions of a secular age. But it is also an age that claims to be objective in its search for reality. We have, therefore, to present it with the phenomenon of the New Testament. We cannot present it as other than it is. We certainly cannot say that the portrait of Christ is hidden from history.

Professor D. Nineham is no easy believer, but his summing up in *St Mark* is impressive:

Our basic picture of Christ is carried back to a point only a quarter of a century or so after his death; and when we bear in mind the wonderfully retentive memory of the Oriental it will not seem surprising that we can often be virtually sure that what the tradition is offering us are the authentic deeds, and especially the authentic words of the historic Jesus.

Similarly Howard Marshall argues in *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* that 'there could be no Christian faith in

Jesus if it could be shown that he never existed or that he never rose from the dead or that his career was substantially different from that recorded in the Gospels'. Marshall believes that 'historical study confirms that Jesus lived and ministered and taught in a way that is substantially reproduced in the Gospels'. Yet he insists that the 'Jesus of the historians is not enough'. We need also to experience Christ as the risen Lord who continues to illuminate the mind of the believer. Stephen Neill in *The Interpretation of the New Testament* makes the point neatly. 'The New Testament, he writes, 'bears witness to one historical figure, unlike any other that has ever walked this earth, and although much about him must remain unknown, and even more, must remain mysterious ... he is not so much the unknown, the problem, as the one who to the believer is well known. In the words of Alice Meynell, 'he is the one we know by heart'.

The second reason is that Christianity not only allows, but demands progress, by the germinal nature of Christ's teaching, and by the doctrine of the activity of the Holy Spirit, 'that works unceasingly to lead us into all truth'.

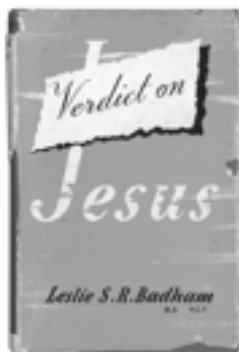
We shall not here enter into that weighty doctrine save to say that at an historical date in history that doctrine began to be a decisive factor in Christian experience (Acts 3)

In the light of much evidence then, we understand the missionaries, who tell us of the joy and conviction with which people turn from religions of speculative opinion, to greet the solid grandeur of a faith that meets them with a mass of documentary and factual evidence of its truth and relevance. They face an historical person, the testimony of

an historical community, the impressive witness of an unbroken historical spiritual experience, and the challenge of a religion that continues to awaken an ever-deepening perception.

7 Decades

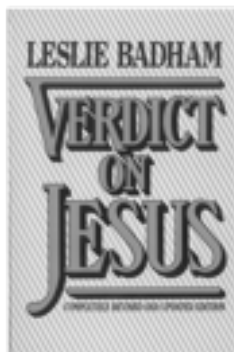
Verdict on Jesus through the years



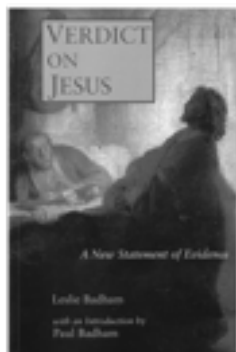
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

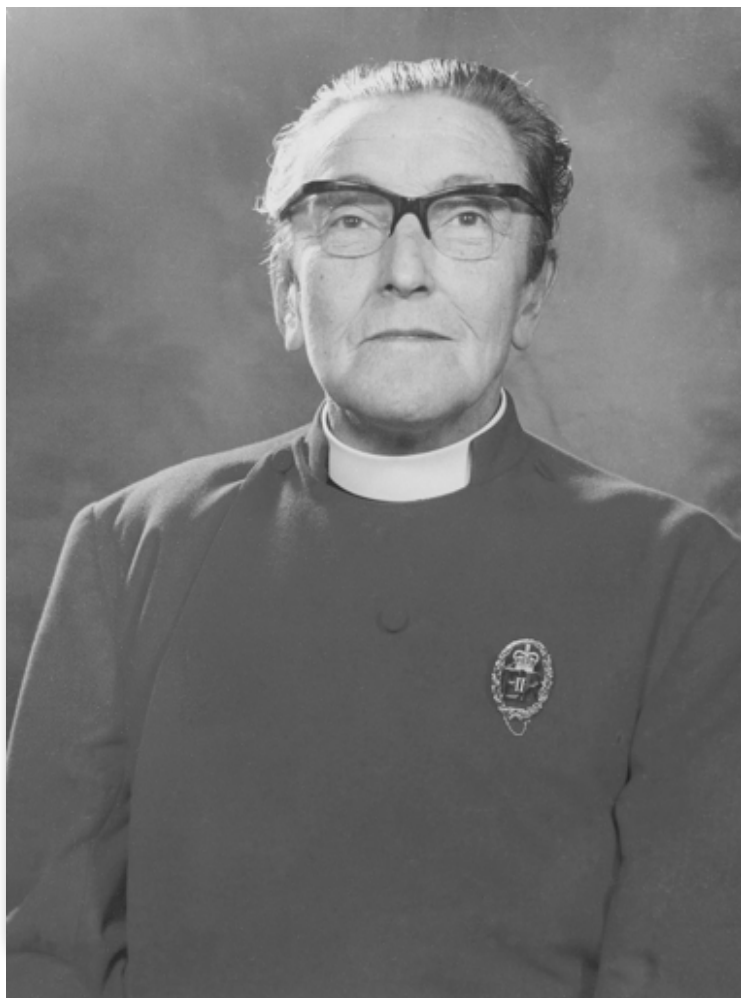


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

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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