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Foreword to the 2007 Edition in Cadbury's "The Peril of Modernizing Jesus"

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FOREWORD TO THE 2007 EDITION

As one of the leading figures in producing the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Henry Joel Cadbury did much of the translation work himself. On occasion, when callers stopped by asking to see the Harvard professor, Mrs. Cadbury would declare: “I’m sorry, Henry cannot be disturbed just now; he’s upstairs rewriting the Word of God!” Indeed, the tendency of interpreters is to fill in the gaps where the biblical text is silent, or to skip over the awkward passages if not conducive to contemporary readers. Cadbury, however, fought long and hard to preserve the plain and simple diction of the Bible, even if that meant adding to our problems as interpreters. None of his subjects exemplified this passion for preserving the meaning of the unadorned text more than his treatments of Jesus, and the third printing of his first book on Jesus is as relevant today as it was nearly seven decades ago.

First published in 1937, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* broke against the grain in North American and European New Testament studies.¹ For one thing, it challenged what

¹ Appreciation is expressed to the Cadbury family for granting the permission to publish this book, as well as to the Macmillan Company for its original publishing of Cadbury’s

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Cadbury would later call “the eclipse of the historical Jesus” in the wake of Albert Schweitzer’s epoch-making coverage of Jesus scholarship from Reimarus to Wrede.² In this book Cadbury challenges the view that virtually nothing can be known of the Jesus of history, punctuating the Jesus-studies landscape between the “No Quest” sealed by Schweitzer and the “New Quest” inaugurated by Bornkamm. A good deal can be known about Jesus, even if it involves information about a leading rural figure in ancient Palestine.

On the other hand, Cadbury’s book also challenges our tendencies to sketch a portrait of Jesus created in our image as modernists. Did Jesus really have a programmatic goal, or did he respond primarily to occasional needs? Was Jesus interested in changing society as a social reformer, or was he an apocalypticist envisioning God’s sovereign fulfillment of history? Was Jesus really a salesman trying to gain adherents, or was he an apologist for truth and authenticity? Did Jesus have a set of teachings to propound, or was he primarily interested in responsive obedience to the divine will? In these ways and others, Cadbury challenges incisively our modern interests in relevance at the expense of sober historical-critical analysis.

Lowell Lectures delivered in Boston in 1935.

² Cadbury’s Haverford Library Lectures were published as Pendle Hill Pamphlet #133 as *The Eclipse of the Historical Jesus*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications (1963).

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One of the reasons for this set of critical challenges was the tendency for experts in related fields to offer relevant information in hopes of eliminating the vacuum left in the wake of Schweitzer's deconstructive challenge. As one reviewer put it:

While within the past generation the old-fashioned devotional "lives of Christ" have been less frequently written, they have been replaced by a constantly increasing flood of books by specialists in other fields than historical theology. When a scholar has attained competence in (say) sociology, economics, ethics, pedagogy, psychology in general or religious psychology in particular, he often feels that he has thus attained the key to the "Jesus problem" and sets forth his conclusions in print.³

On these inclinations, Cadbury's contribution is similar to that of Schweitzer's in that it challenges the supplanting of both the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history with "the Jesus of Modernism." And yet, Cadbury also extends a sympathetic hand to the modernizer, in that our interests in finding meaning in first-century gospel narratives will always lend themselves to making connections between the ministry of Jesus and the needs of our world today. "Anachronism in thinking about Jesus," says Cadbury, "has been largely due to an excusable ignorance.

³ Burton Scott Easton, review of *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* by Henry J. Cadbury, *Anglican Theological Review* 20 (1938) 143–44.

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The gospels do not give us all the information we need, especially for the inner life of Jesus” (p. 28). Nonetheless, the tendency to fill in the gaps must be resisted by those endeavoring to make adequate inroads into understanding the Jesus of history.

As perilous as is modernizing Jesus, however, is the tendency to archaize ourselves, and Cadbury addressed that problem as well.⁴ Is the best way to make connections with the Jesus of Galilee to emulate his diet, his dress, and all of his religious teachings? After all, Jesus was a first-century Galilean Jew, and it would be several generations before the religious movement founded in his memory became individuated from Judaism. As Cadbury later said, “The modernizer carelessly paints Moses in Oxford shoes, or the Virgin with a wrist watch. The archaizer will deliberately adopt the sandals, the phylacteries, and the whole garb both inner and outer of the biblical era. . . . The archaizer mistakes the portrait for a mirror while the other mistakes the mirror for a portrait.”⁵

While much of the thrust of this book is deconstructive, it also builds and emphasizes important historical considerations about the Jesus of history that are highly relevant for later cultures and times. First, he emphasizes the Jewishness of the gospels and Jesus. As an apocalyptic and “unmodern” prophetic figure, Jesus’

⁴ “The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves,” *Interpretation* 3 (1949) 331–38.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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worldview as an “ancient theist” was very different from our notions of natural law and cause-effect relationships today. Rather, God’s direct involvement in the playing out of worldly events, whether they be the ushering in of God’s kingdom or deliverance from physical illness and demonic oppression, was likely assumed by Jesus. This would have been the case with any first-century Jewish leader, and Jesus’ interest in partnering with God in the carrying out of the divine will personally seems to have taken precedence over programmatic notions of what that might involve.

It is at this point that Cadbury’s work will likely be the most challenging for the modern interpreter seeking to further an understanding of societal reform patterned after the works and teachings of Jesus. Just as Cadbury had elsewhere emphasized the informality of early Christianity in terms of its structures for organization and forms of worship,⁶ here he challenges social reformers as to the degree to which Jesus can rightly be yoked to our causes, and even helpful social programs. While Jesus’ words and works still speak to us today, we must confess that there is much we do not know, and we must acknowledge that we ourselves are involved in the making of meaning.

⁶ See one of his first essays, “Christianity in the Making,” *Present Day Papers* 2 (1915) 58–61; and his later essay, “The Informality of Early Christianity,” *Crozer Quarterly* 21 (1944) 246–55.

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In some ways Cadbury might overstep his bounds in criticizing what cannot be known about Jesus' mission and ministry.⁷ For instance, how do we really know that he wasn't interested in changing the world? He certainly sent his disciples out to be healers, exorcists, and proclaimers of the gospel. And an all-too-easy fallacy tends to be committed by modern positivism, of which Cadbury was a leading proponent among biblical scholars. Assuming that "not necessarily so" implies "necessarily not so" is just as fallacious as its corrected counterpart. The way forward begins with acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge, including a helpful describing of the gradations of our certainty and why. This replaces projection with authoritative analysis, and it also makes for profitable interpretation in sometimes surprising ways.

While Cadbury's criticisms of our modernist tendencies as gospel interpreters might be disturbing to some, they actually call us back to the center of the quest, which is to know something of the authentic mission and message of Jesus. Indeed, the New Quest for the Historical Jesus took off in the 1950s precisely where Cadbury's first Jesus book left off: emphasizing the religious experience and concerns of Jesus as a place to begin our historical inquiry. Of course, whether our investigations lead us

⁷ This was an insightful criticism in the review by Raymond E. Brewer, *Journal of Bible and Religion* 6 (1938) 92-94, where he raises questions about how it is known that Jesus was less than conscious about grades of selfishness, social motives, or laws of character.

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to the Jesus of history or the Jesus of modernism is a question yet to be decided. Yet any worthy “translation” project begins with distinguishing between the content and its packaging, and that’s precisely what Cadbury’s book on Jesus helps us do. This book is a must-read for all followers of Jesus studies—modern and postmodern alike!

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George Fox University, 2006