

2008

Foreword to "Jesus: What Manner of Man" by Henry J. Cadbury

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Recommended Citation

Published in Henry J. Cadbury's "Jesus: What a Manner of Man," 2008. Wipf & Stock Publishing.

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Foreword to the 2008 Edition

In addition to being a New Testament scholar of the first order, Henry Cadbury was also a leading Quaker historian in his day. As Friends in America were preparing to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the death of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, a question arose about the exact date of his death. Given that Cadbury was on one of his trips to London at the time, during the winter of 1940/1941, he did a bit of sleuthing and sent a telegram to Anna Brinton in America. Western Union called Howard Brinton first, however, informing him that the news of the telegram must be broken very carefully to his wife. Upon inquiring about the content of the message, the gentleman broke the news in somber tones: "George Fox died January 13. Signed, Henry Cadbury."¹

Here the telegram messenger was troubled by what he thought was a timely message, when it actually pertained to events a quarter of a millennium earlier. Indeed, the historical death of George Fox produced its own set of problems for early Friends, but not the ones anticipated by the contemporary interpreter. Likewise, when looking at Jesus through modern eyes, the tendency is either to elevate him to match our theological investments or to force him into "relevant" categories that would have been altogether unfamiliar to a first-century Jew and his original audiences. Cadbury resisted both of these movements. By refusing to expand our portraits of Jesus beyond what their first-century witnesses allow, Cadbury's 1946 Shaffer Lectures at Yale Divinity School challenge our embellished readings of Jesus with the bare simplicity of his presentation in the Gospel texts themselves.

In that sense, Henry Cadbury followed his first book on Jesus, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (1937), with a second a decade later. While still challenging our tendencies to confine the Master of Galilee to familiar programs and strategies, *Jesus: What Manner of Man* poses a more constructive approach to what might be known about the Jesus of history. In doing so, Cadbury focuses not simply on *what* he said and did, but more incisively on *how* Jesus taught and operated. Building on pressing questions about Jesus within the Gospels themselves, Cadbury brings their inquiry to bear on contemporary quests for Jesus with striking relevance:

- Is this not Jesus?
- Whence this wisdom?
- Why speakest thou in parables?
- What is this? New teaching!
- How knoweth this man?
- By what authority?

Indeed, the modern reader is just as likely to be scandalized by the Jesus of the Gospels as were his original audiences, especially if the thrust of his ministry is taken seriously. What if Jesus came to connect humanity with the reign of God as a living presence and

¹ Cited by Mary Hoxie Jones, "Henry Joel Cadbury: A Biographical Sketch," in Anna Brinton, ed., *Then and Now* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 46; also mentioned in Margaret Hope Bacon, *Let This Life Speak: The Legacy of Henry Joel Cadbury* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 130.

power in the world rather than coming to set up a religious platform or a social program? What if his ministering to people's needs was occasional and spontaneous rather than organized and strategic? What if Jesus taught in parables not to deliver graphic answers but to pose enduring questions? What if Jesus taught a view of dependence on God to inspire our action rather than to await divine intervention? Such workings challenge religion as much as furthering it, both then and now.

Cadbury also challenges our conventional measures of success and our tendencies to apply them to Jesus. How would Jesus score nowadays on an aptitude test? How would he be graded on a personality inventory? Did Jesus have a sense of humor? If so, what sort, and how did he use it? Would Jesus do well in a job interview? Would a conventional employer *really* want the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels working for his or her company? If Jesus taught in a seminary today, what would have been his subject? Certainly the Old Testament instead of the New; and, ethics instead of theology would have been his special focus. While some of these questions might seem trivial, Cadbury uses them to get at the question of what sort of person Jesus was likely to have been. In our idealized images of Jesus the Christ, worshipped by Christians and respected by others, we all too easily lose track of the counter-conventional Jesus—what he did and what he demanded.

With a watchful eye on the details of Jesus' ministry in the Synoptic Gospels, Cadbury challenges many a commonly-held view. The biological growth metaphors in Jesus' parables often reference the slowness of growth rather than its explosiveness. Further, the images in Jesus' teachings often conceal as well as reveal. The absent landlord motif emphasizes the importance of faithfulness amidst the perception of divine absence, and Jesus often refused to answer questions put to him. Silence and questions are given in place of answers, at least if we take seriously the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels.

The radicality of Jesus' teaching was not its originality but its independence. Jesus spoke with hyperbole, quantification, and contrastive measures—often adding something new to familiar understandings. Rather than extol balance, Jesus emphasized above-and-beyond commitments. He intensified the tensions between extremes as opposed to diminishing them. Rather than showing the measure of virtue, Jesus emphasized going beyond measures. Jesus taught neither utilitarianism nor altruism; rather than heightening the result, Jesus emphasized the requirement. While noting that Cadbury sometimes overstates the understatement he infers in the Gospels, Bruce Metzger declared after the book came out, "This is a thoughtful and a thought-provoking book, the kind (of which, alas, there are too few) that deserves to be read slowly, with many a re-reading of weighty sentences."²

While some reviewers faulted Cadbury for his omission of Jesus' divinity and a more lively sense of God's action in his ministry, this trend would find its full flower in the "New Quest" for Jesus, beginning within the decade following the publication of this book. Nonetheless, Jesus' authority is a factor of his self-assuredness, and his miracles punctuate his claims with attesting power. His authority, however, finally rests on the capacity of Jesus' teachings to appeal to our consciences and to resonate with the sense of revelation they claim to convey. Here is no interim ethic excusing extreme loyalty, but

² *Theology Today* 5 (1948-49), 127.

the impending urgency of the Kingdom that calls for discipleship at all costs---even when the reward is not in sight.

It is precisely the unfamiliarity of Jesus to our modern sensibilities that makes following him a matter of faith. According to the review by John Knox,³

One despairs of suggesting the richness of this book. It is full of penetrating insights and what is said in passing is likely to be as illuminating as the point which at the given moment is being intentionally made.... This is honest and constructive interpretation---searching, often disturbing, but both cleansing and creative. Although this is a small book, I shall be surprised if it does not soon take its place as one of the most important in the study of the life and teaching of Jesus.

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September 2008
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³ *Journal of Bible and Religion* 16:2 (1948), 130-31