

Stake your life on it

Reviewer: Greg Clarke

Peter Jensen began his first press conference after his election as Archbishop with the words, “I want to stake my life on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That's the agenda; that's the news as far as I'm concerned”. And a shiver went up and down my spine. It was a great moment of clarity—for I, too, believe what the archbishop believes: that Christ's resurrection is the lynchpin of life and that, if it were shown to be impossible or proven untenable in some way, I would cease to be a Christian.

Many down the years have abandoned such a belief, for a variety of reasons: fear of God, moral shame, laziness, suffering, or just a plain doubt that it happened. For those in the latter camp, Paul Barnett's book, *Is the New Testament History?*, ought to be administered as a drug every year or two.

For people who doubt whether the message of Christianity in the Bible is a true record of history, or want to know how strong are the historical foundations of the faith, this is the book to get you started. In the style of a sympathetic teacher, and with the conviction of a scholar whose feet are always on the ground, Paul Barnett guides the reader through what we do and don't know about the history of Jesus Christ. He examines how confident we can be in the Bible as an historical record, focusing on the superiority of New Testament data compared with any other historical work. It becomes quite apparent that if *any* historical document is a reliable transmission of the past, the New Testament is doubly so.

In this new edition of the book (which was first published in 1986), the author has added significant material on the subjectivity of history writing, the role of archaeology in assessing historical accounts, the historical origins of Islam, and the resurrection of Jesus. This new material is not as developed as the rest of the book, perhaps written more in response to the needs of our time than as the culmination of years of scholarship. Nevertheless, I gained a good deal from Barnett's focus on the contrast between the historical nature of the New Testament and what might be called the political nature of the Qu'ran. These are two very different 'sacred books'.

Barnett is strongest when assessing the *logic* of history (in fact, he wrote another book with that word in the title). If we can establish within the parameters of historical research that Jesus did in fact live, then what are we to make of his life? There is *not* an infinite

number of possibilities. As C.S. Lewis famously argued, Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or the Lord (or fourthly, as Paul Barnett notes, a legend). Barnett carefully presents the biblical and extra-biblical data that helps us to establish which of these options is the more believable. With an academic's even-tempered handling of the evidence, he works the reader towards the position that, historically speaking, there is a strong case for Jesus living, dying and rising from the dead as the New Testament describes. Within the logic of history, the 'Lord' option answers the most questions.

Is the New Testament History? is not a philosophical book. It will not answer curly questions about whether God can communicate to us through language, or whether Jesus' death forgives sins. These are questions best answered elsewhere, supported by the historical data Barnett provides. And Paul Barnett says early on that neither is he writing a theological book. He leaves the reader to draw conclusions from the message of the Bible itself. The aim of this book is to answer the question of the title: is the New Testament historically reliable? To this, a convincing and heartening 'sure is' issues forth.

This is an ideal book for someone who has watched too many ABC television documentaries in which the view is put that the Bible is a collection of folk tales about a 'good man' who may or may not have actually existed. After reading *Is the New Testament History?*, anyone bar the complete and utter sceptic will feel that there is at least a case for Christianity.

This book has been a starting point for many readers in securing the intellectual foundations of their faith. If more detailed information is required, there are plenty of books to turn to next. For those wanting more detailed historical discussion, Craig Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP) is a bigger version of Barnett's book, with more on the literary nature of history. Paul Barnett's own *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Apollos, 1997) provides much more on the nature of historical enquiry for the student of teacher of history. Gary Habermas's *The Historical Jesus: ancient evidence for the life of Christ* (College Press, 1996) gives an in-depth but readable response to attempts to undermine the historical validity of the New Testament, such as the Jesus Seminar.

There are different ways to respond to that shiver up the spine when you realise just how much hangs on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can decide it is all too hard and ignore the shiver until next you feel it. You can decide it is a longstanding legend and never consider carefully whether or not the New Testament stands up as history. Or, you can gather your courage and plough into the questions that history throws out about who Jesus was. A warning: you may, like C.S. Lewis was, be

forced into a corner. After reading a book like *Is the New Testament History?* it is hard to conclude that it is all made up, a religious folly and of no relevance to a twenty-first century person. That just isn't an option. As Peter Jensen said, the Jesus of history is the headline news of today.