

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Claims of the First Christians

→ “The question, what happened? Is forced on us by the realization of how remarkable this phenomenon really was. Christianity began in obscurity. Its putative founder was executed and its first adherents scattered in fear and confusion. It was propagandized by provincials whose message appeared as nonsense to the sophisticated. With significant exceptions, its chief appeal was to the outcast and marginal elements of society, finding significant numbers of converts among transients, slaves, and women. From the first, it was violently persecuted. Yet, in the course of four centuries, Christianity became the dominant religious fact of Hellenistic culture. It swept all before it, becoming at last the established cult of the empire that had sought to extirpate it, the very form of wisdom for the sages, who had reviled it, a movement with such resilient and catholic embrace that it gathered all the charms of its cultic rivals and philosophy itself into a triumphant procession, securing at last the allegiance of the cultured, the rich, and the powerful.” (The key to Christianity’s success lies not in its teaching but in its **experience of power**. What distinguishes the movement is its claim to have actualized the ‘good news of God’ to humans. What accounts for its spread is its ability to make the claim plausible, persuasive, and ever present for others.”)

✓ “It is in the experience of the first believers that the origin of Christianity and the NT must be sought. **Something happened** in the lives of real men and women; something that caused them to perceive their lives in a new and radically altered fashion and compelled them to interpret it by means of available symbols. The NT is incomprehensible if seen as a collection of theological writings in an abstract or theoretical mode. The NT is the furthest thing from such a scholastic enterprise. There is theology to be found in it, to be sure, but it is theology that consists not in working out corollaries to propositions but in pursuing reflection on a present and continuing experience of the most fundamental sort – religious experience. It was because men and women of the first century Mediterranean world, both Jews and Greeks, found their lives suddenly and inexplicable transformed by a new and unsuspected power, from a new and confusing source; that they were forced to reflect on their lives in a new way and infuse the symbols of their world with a new content.”

The Resurrection Faith

“ The NT writings show us a variety of religious experiences; but behind them all is the first and fundamental experience, which found expression in this conviction: **Jesus is raised**. This is the one experience without which there would be no Christian movement and therefore nothing to explain and interpret. It is the necessary cause of the production of the NT....The primitive

Christian experience consisted in encountering the Other in the risen Jesus. *The resurrection faith is the birth of Christianity.* It deserves our close and repeated attention."

"The Gospel narratives are ancient and stem at least in part from eyewitness accounts. But in their present form, they are shaped by the continuing experience of the believing community over a period of some forty years, and in them the resurrection event is given a very definite cast. The point here is simple: the Gospel narratives are selective and are shaped to teach the community, the *claim* to have encountered the risen Lord or to have experienced the power of his presence is not coextensive with these *stories*."

"The resurrection faith, then, meant more than a conviction that Jesus had resumed his life for a time and appeared to some of his followers. It was a conviction, corroborated by the present experience of his power even years after his death, that he was alive in a new and powerful way; that he shared, indeed, God's life. He was Lord, and his lordship was exercised in the world through his life-giving Spirit."

* "For the sake of clarity, we can reduce the proposition to all its frightening simplicity. First, that a man who everyone knew was killed is now alive; that is bad enough. But further, that what happened and is still happening in this singular historical person affects radically and powerfully the existence of every human being, because the man now shares the life of the ultimate, transcendent power of God. That is too much for the mind to grasp without protest!"

* "The conviction that Jesus is alive and powerfully active in the believing community is the implicit, and sometimes explicit, presupposition of all the writings of the NT....The Jesus of the NT letters and Book of Revelation is not a static moral teacher or exemplar but a living and active presence, shaping through his spirit the community's identity: speaking through the church's prophets, teaching through its teachers, and healing through the hands of believers."

"It was not enough for the first Christians to experience the transforming transcendent power of the Spirit and proclaim that Jesus was Lord. They had also to find meaning, to interpret their lives in the light of this overwhelming experience. Out of the struggle of the first believers to find meaning in the paradox of the holy's being mediated to them through the death of a man, and the paradox of that power's being present to them in weakness as well as strength, emerged the interpretation of their existence."

Source: The Writings of the New Testament. Luke Timothy Johnson, Ph.D, Professor of New Testament, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta.