

THE JESUS OF HISTORY

P. F. JENSEN

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

Would you take a butterfly net to catch an elephant? Would you try to fight a shark with your bare hands? Would you stand against a charging rhino with a cap pistol? Would you try to lasso a fierce bull with an elastic band? Would you try to paint a picture with a house brick? Would you try to build a telephone exchange out of suitcases?

Ludicrous? True; but no more ludicrous than the attempts of certain historians recently seen again on television to capture the majesty that is Jesus Christ. You may have watched the programme - it was a group of English scholars discussing the historical reliability of the gospels and many a sceptical assessment of the traditional view of Jesus. But the methods they used were wildly inappropriate to the task they were attempting.

Take the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. How can a scholar cope with that? It passes beyond the bounds of his competence, for the rules of his research begin by excluding the supernatural. He cannot believe it and continue to play the game of history. The truth is larger than the game; that is fair enough as long as we do not let the game swallow up the truth. It simply means that historians are sometimes the last people to understand the truth about the past. There is some sense, anyhow, in Henry Ford's infamous remark 'History is bunk'.

That is the very point about Jesus Christ. On the one hand, if he was simply an unhistorical, mythical figure like Santa Claus or Robin Hood, he might do the human race some good, but not much. He could not be for us; because he was never with us. A real saviour must possess a real, human

history. On the other hand, if we find him simply cooped up in history just like us, a noble man, but unable to break out, a native but not a visitor, a victim but not a victor, he would not be a Saviour either.

But the New Testament provides a perfectly balanced assessment of the reality that is Jesus Christ. He comes to us, virgin born, from beyond ourselves. He is one of us, and eats and drinks, laughs and dies. From now on, he is always one of us - even in heaven he is man. But he is more, far more. For Jesus Christ has broken the back-bone of history and revealed the pretensions of human wisdom, including even the wisdom of historians. He has begun the process of the end of the world, for he is the first man to rise from the dead. The end of the world has no history, for it is the final fact when all that is fiction will disappear, and the historians will stop being judges and will be judged themselves. Give us the truth about Jesus? The historians can never improve on the Gospel; they are like men taking a butterfly net to catch an elephant. Though, come to think of it, there are elephants you can catch with a butterfly net - pink ones!

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