

QUEST AND QUESTION

Who is this fellow, Jesus of Nazareth? That question, and its near relatives, has been asked more often and answered more variously during the past century than any other question I can think of.

It even seems strange that, after uncounted hours and immeasurable energy expended for answering that question, the answers advanced can all be arranged on a gradient scale of satisfaction, ranging from mild to not at all. Seventy years after the publication of Schweitzer's *QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS*, the quest itself goes on. That is not an implicit evaluation of Schweitzer's work. Rather, it indicates the importance of the question -- and the difficulty of getting the answer.

For one endowed with the genius of hindsight and foresight, the question can be answered from the Biblical text. But, for one without that genius, the Bible alone may not answer the question, at least, not half of it.

The question, Who is this fellow, Jesus of Nazareth?, admits of two parts: Him as man and Him as God. While the second or latter part has been hotly debated, the first or earlier part has been the most perplexing, for the reason that it has been the most in doubt.

Why has the historicity of Jesus been in doubt? I believe the answer is simple: the record of His life is terse, enigmatic, incomplete,

apparently contradictory at points, and, withal, delivered to us in a literary style which, to say the least, feels archaic, remote, incomprehensible, try as we may to remove ourselves, emotionally and intellectually, to First Century Palestine.

Add to the Biblical Enigmata the tremendous diversity of interpretive tradition, including therein the various "heresies," as much for intellectual drill as for the natural inquisitiveness of the historical genius, and one has ramified the complexity of the quest for the historical Jesus quite beyond the ability of mere human reason to follow sanely, not to mention easily.

Finally, when one sits down to juxtapose the statements describing the person of Jesus found in Islamic and First Century Jewish tradition, on the one hand, with those in the Apostle's Letter to the Ephesians and those emanating from the Bishops convened in solemn convention at Nicaea, on the other -- giving at least equal weight to the probable veracity of both sets of statements ("200 million cows can't be wrong") -- the resulting and resounding dissonance will incline any careful man to take a little time -- if need be, a life-time -- to try to sort these matters out, to discover if within all this verdure of verbiage about Jesus there might be a few fictile facts that, singly or in combination, could account for the limitless variety of things that have been written, spoken, thought and done with Him as the central focus.

In his biography of St. Francis, Chesterton makes the point that things done or said by the Model (Jesus), which strike us as peculiar or puzzling,

when done or said by the Copy (Francis), strike us as familiar and factual, or, as Chesterton puts it, merely characteristic. And in this observation I concur with the incomparable litterateur most emphatically. However, I think it also but begs the question: Why does the Model appear peculiar, puzzling, prepositive?

That is the question. Who is the Jesus of History?

When I was attacking that question under the tutelage of my academic masters, I felt it was a worthwhile question. Others they led me to consider important I soon discarded as peripheral. But that question struck me and stuck in me as both central and obligatory. Naturally, many there were who felt confident in the answer or answers they propounded. The scholarship that was poured into the quest for answering the question was vast and impressive. The finest minds, the most honored wits, the most renowned intellects had invested their reputation in answers to that question. Some had given their results to the world and declared the whole issue as moot henceforward.

And me? I was favorably impressed with the results, but, I was not convinced as to their comprehensiveness or their particularity. For me, the answers given were neither broad nor simple enough to command intellectual certainty. As a surety, I could not answer for them, either as verity or as a guarantee of their authors' renown or even best efforts.

I felt that a certain amount of academic bull-dogging was going on, that conclusions were being reached before ends had been, that ultimates were

being declared when only penultimates -- at best -- were in view. And I tended to be more impressed with the academic anaemia of this procedure than with the intellectual inadequacy of its fruits.

SIX SUSPICIONS -- TWO INSIGHTS -- TWO RESULTS

Certain suspicions had been brewing among scholars, especially in Europe, for many years, in fact, back into the 18th Century. These suspicions were various and variously held, but, as they grew in currency, they all united toward one positive, peremptive question: How can we vouch for the historicity, the reality in history, of this fellow called Jesus?

As an aside, we can mention that many -- especially outside academe -- never were bothered by this question and its antecedent suspicions. And among these, there were -- and are today -- many for whom the lack of bother cannot be ascribed to intellectual insophistication or inertia, but, verily, to a genuine and convincing awareness of Jesus both as an historical figure -- familiar, not foreign -- and as God Incarnate in human flesh.

But the scholars, at least in their tomes, were not so contented. And I, for one, will not hesitate to own that I shared the discontent. The suspicions about the historicity of Jesus were altogether too well