WAS JESUS ONLY A MAN?

BY HOWARD CRAWLEY.

I

TAKE it to be evident that the measure of human greatness, using this term in its broadest sense, is the influence which its possessors exert upon mankind. It can then hardly be denied that Jesus was the greatest of all men. Paraphrasing a common saying, some men are great through their own inherent qualities, while others are great through circumstance. There are many kings whose names are known to us merely because they were born kings.

To which of these categories does Jesus belong?

He was born A. U. C. 749, in an obscure village in a remote province of the Roman Empire. In A. D. 27 he began his public ministry, which lasted three years, and was terminated by his death on the cross at Jerusalem. His wanderings were included within a territory perhaps one hundred miles long by fifty broad. His immediate and constant following consisted of twelve men, the Apostles, but he was frequently the center of multitudes, and there is no doubt but that his addresses were heard by a large number of the inhabitants of Palestine.

His teaching, while set forth in a novel and very striking manner, and well calculated to appeal to the heterogeneous gatherings he addressed, contains little or nothing which could have impressed his educated hearers as particularly original. Perhaps every thought he expressed may be found in Hebrew or heathen literature. To his Jewish hearers, the only new doctrine he taught was that of the worthlessness of their ceremonial observances, considered merely as such.

At least in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is much as another man might have been. He cast out "demons" and cured disease. His abilities in this respect are not unusual, and are not even claimed to be by the Evangelists. He has compassion for the weakling and for the repentant sinner, but his addresses to the scribes and Phari-
sees are bitter polemics. He rebukes the too impetuous Peter, and (Luke xiii, 32) applies a contemptuous epithet to Herod Antipas. He suffers from physical and mental weariness, he is unable at times to perform cures, he endures great mental suffering at Gethsemane, and the words, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, seem to be an expression of despair.

When Jesus was arrested by the authorities, the Apostles deserted him, and all four accounts of the last scenes show very plainly that his hold on the populace was of the slightest. Pilate yielded to the unanimous demand of the Jerusalem mob. The Jews, as a race, no more believed him to be the Messiah then than they do now.

What the Apostles did and thought between Friday and Sunday we do not know. Their conduct on Thursday night was not such as to arouse admiration. Peter's cowardice is related in some detail, but he was probably no worse than the others. With the probable exception of John, there is no evidence that any of them were present at the Crucifixion, although the Galilean women are said to have witnessed the tragedy from a distance. It was also a man hitherto unmentioned, Joseph of Arimathaea, who asked permission to care for the body. This same reluctance to come out from under cover was manifested on Easter Sunday, for it was only the women who came to the tomb.

We have here the history of a man who displayed no qualities which could differentiate him from other men in any unusual degree. His meagre following was recruited almost entirely from the lower classes. It is reasonable to suppose that along with the Twelve, a small number of others considered him to be the Christ. But he was not so considered by the educated Jews. Nor was their hostility to him the result of mere blind prejudice. It is absurd to suppose that the Jews would not have rejoiced at the coming of their Messiah. But Jesus did not fulfill their expectations, and the history of his ministry shows that while at first in doubt, they finally came to regard him as an imposter. On the day he died, Israel was almost a unit in rejecting him, and his few adherents were probably trembling for their lives.

It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that Jesus's greatness is not the result of any remarkable qualities which he displayed during his life. The alternative is that it was due to circumstance, and necessarily in his case to circumstance taking origin after his death. Let us examine this hypothesis.

At sunset, on Good Friday, 30 A. D., there was not the slightest reason to suppose that the name of Jesus would ever again be
brought to public attention. To all appearances, his ministry had been a complete failure. Like many men before and after, he had failed in his chosen task, and the penalty of his failure was death.

But fifty days later, his followers appeared in public, and started the movement afresh. Peter, who was not a brave man before Pentecost, now dared everything for the sake of the cause. But more than this, many of those very Jews who had sought Jesus's death now accepted him as the Messiah. During Passion week, the people followed the chief priests, and the disciples of the Nazarene feared to open their mouths. After Pentecost, these same disciples preached to, and won, these same people, and the chief priests and the Council were defied. Within the short period of seven weeks there was a very remarkable change of front on the part of considerable numbers of a race notable among all the races of mankind for the tenacity with which they cling to their opinions. That the Council had not experienced this same change of opinion, but deemed it politic to yield to the storm, is indicated by Acts iv. 21-22.

From this point on, the history of Christianity presents no unique problems. Jesus was accepted as the Saviour, and his worship followed naturally enough. The spark may have been ever so little, but it sufficed to kindle a great fire. The problem which is unique, however, is to determine how the spark itself was kindled, for it seems clear that it was dead on the day of the Crucifixion. That is, on the hypothesis that the "greatness" of Jesus was due to circumstance, to his being credited (falsely) with having risen from the dead, and thereby demonstrating that he was the Son of God, what happened between the Crucifixion and Pentecost to give rise to this impression?

It is generally accepted as historical that when the women came to the tomb, they found the body of Jesus gone. This is the fact which is supposed to have given rise to the "myth" that he rose from the dead. But the disappearance of the body introduced no new element into the situation, and according to both Luke and John was not in itself regarded by the women as evidence of anything strange. Following the accounts, neither they nor the Apostles believed until they had seen the Risen Christ, and we are to remember that the weight of evidence is in favor of the view that the Resurrection had not been anticipated. Indeed, it is improbable that the empty tomb would ever have been brought forward as a basis for the Resurrection "myth" but for the fact that there was no other event to serve.

Yet the "myth" did arise, and there must have been something
to give it birth. Nothing else in the world’s history has given rise to so much discussion. Doubtless every conceivable argument, pro and con, has been advanced times without number. Yet no conclusion satisfactory to all has ever been reached. On the one side we have the Resurrection, an event without parallel in human history, and supposedly thrown out of court by science. On the other is a wholly causeless but abrupt and complete change of opinion on the part of a large number of Hebrews. Yet on all other occasions the Hebrews have clung to their ways and beliefs with a stubborn fortitude which cannot but arouse both wonder and admiration. Each man is entitled to choose the one of these two alternatives he deems the more reasonable. But that the one choice indicates a critical, the other a credulous mind, is a proposition which I believe would be difficult to demonstrate.

But the entire problem as to whether Jesus was human or divine may be considered from another point of view. As all history shows, the profession of a prophet is one dear to the human soul. While few are chosen, it is beyond question that many are called. Jesus, having been accepted by mankind as the Christ, is the central figure of a vast literature. But had he not been so accepted, the modern world would not have known his name. He is not mentioned by any contemporary Gentile writer. Philo seems never to have heard of him, and the references in Josephus are not beyond cavil. It therefore seems a warrantable conjecture that there appeared in the ancient world a number of “Christs” whose names have not come down to us. It is further wholly credible that any one of these might have presented a history not unlike that of the “historical” Jesus.

Thus such men as Apollonius of Tyana are to be looked upon rather as examples of a class than as isolated cases. Apollonius is said to have lived from 4 B. C. to 97 A. D., and his travels included such distant places as Rome and India. He performed many miracles, was accepted as divine, and was worshiped for several hundred years. We have also Bar-Cocheba. This man was considered by many Jews to be the Messiah, was crowned king, and maintained an armed insurrection against Rome from 132-135. His downfall evidently convinced his compatriots that he was not the Messiah, for while his name was originally interpreted to mean “Son of a Star,” this was afterward altered to “Son of Lies.” Yet his advent appears to have been foretold in Numbers xxiv. 17.

Both of these men were far more prominent among their contemporaries than Jesus. And with the historical would-be Christs
is an unknown but probably large number of lesser lights. All of these, from the historical standpoint, are on precisely the same footing as Jesus. If it may be so expressed, each had an opportunity at least equal to his of being chosen as the Messiah. For according to Isaiah xlv. 28; xlv. 1, the Messiah might even have been a Gentile.

We may here call to our aid the theory of probability. If the number of rivals which Jesus had were ten, then the odds against his being selected as the Messiah are nine to one. Any increase in the number of these rivals (and the estimate of ten is absurdly low) and any greater prominence on the part of any of them (and some were more prominent) seem but to render the odds against Jesus so much the greater.

Or, in non-mathematical language, with so wide a choice, it seems to be incumbent upon those who deny his divinity to point out why Jesus was chosen, given that there was little or nothing in his life to set him apart from other men.