

"What Shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"

An Essay read before the Preachers' Association, at Delta, Iowa, by A. C. Corbin.

That this question should have been wrung from Pilate, in his perplexed state of mind, is not strange. Satisfied of the innocence of his prisoner, and of the envy which prompted his arrest, and no doubt, impressed with his combined dignity and meekness in the face of his accusers, he was more than willing to heed the warnings of his wife and the promptings of his conscience to set him at liberty. But all such feelings and convictions were stifled when he faced that determined, relentless mob and heard their hypocritical threat, "Thou art not Caesar's friend."

Coward that he was, every true and noble impulse was suffered to crouch abjectly before the basest in his corrupted nature. Every one sees why the Roman governor must do *some thing* with "Jesus who is called Christ." The issue was forced upon him, and, in spite of his futile hand-washing disavowal, the world holds him guilty of the murder of Jesus. But is it not strange that this question of Pilate should be the question which has agitated the world more than any other? How many questions the world has asked concerning him who, in his mock robes and crown, asserted his kingly character!

Enemies and friends, sages, philosophers and historians, men of profound wisdom, the most brilliant, and of the purest piety, have sought for nearly two thousand years the answer to Pilate's question. All classes have freely spoken; ample time has been given for study and thorough research; every nook and corner of the land of his birth and ministry has been explored, by Christian and Infidel, by ancient and modern, for facts which can in any way aid in solving the problem. About him more has been written, and he has been the subject of more eulogies, than any other of the world's heroes. The history of the religion of which he is the foundation, the inspiration and only perfect example involves the history of the world's progress and civilization for eighteen hundred years. The church which he has built is one of the largest forces which moulds the society of to-day.

When this Jewish Captive sent forth a dozen obscure fishermen to establish his kingdom, the empire of Caesar was still in his glory. Through her mailed legions Rome gathered tribute from the habitable world. Her navy rode proudly on every known sea. She wielded the most potent scepter to which the nations had bowed. That empire is fallen. The evidences of her splendor and power are buried beneath the dust and rubbish of fifteen hundred years. A thousand revolutions have convulsed the nations; languages have died and new ones been born; religions then vigorous and popular are decayed, neglected and forgotten; superstition ignorance and vice; false religions, philosophies and governments; grasping dynasties and devastating armies, have deluged the earth with blood and dug the sepulchres of nations. But the man over whose crucified form Pilate wrote, "The King of the Jews" has, through death, founded an empire which has survived these convulsions of society, which has withstood unflinchingly every opposition from foes, and has endured the perversions and misrepresentations of her friends, whose glories are undimmed by years whose scepter is to-day at least nominally acknowledged by more than three hundred and fifty millions of subjects.

But the question is not yet settled. Philosophers, men of the world, skeptics, rationalists are eagerly discussing the claims of a man dead more than eighteen centuries. They feel that, like Pilate, they must do something with Jesus called Christ. Regardless of the remoteness of his death, it is pre-eminently the question of to-day,

as it has been of the ages past and as it promises to be in the years to come.

Our laws, customs, pursuits, domestic and educational institutions, literature, benevolent and charitable arrangements, in short, our whole civilization, in every department, has felt the potent influence of Jesus, and can neither be appreciated nor accounted for without reference to him. But these things being true, what then? what explanation of them can we give? Can these facts, influences and wonderful results be accounted for on the supposition that he was only a man? What think ye? whose son is he? How will the facts of history harmonize with the supposition that he was divine? the "Son of God?" what he was man, he himself affirmed, but was he more? for this he also claimed. If indeed, he was more, if he was all he claimed to be, if Heaven's voice on Jordan's banks and on the Mount did own him Son Divine, then unquestionably, here is a sufficient and satisfactory cause for results however wonderful or great. But if we reject this, can we find a better one?

Other explanations have not been wanting. The world has spread before it for its consideration and acceptance the best endeavors of the human mind. To whom, then, shall we go?

It is within the plan of our discussion to call attention to some of the attempts which the world has made to answer Pilate's query.

Let us first note the facts that, if there ever was a time when Jesus was thought by any considerable number to, have been a myth or phantasm, that day has passed away. The advanced skepticism of to-day holds no such ground. It gives to the founder of christianity a real, human personality. He was born, grew to manhood, taught the people, under Pontius Pilate died. This is the verdict of the learned world as it is the common belief of mankind. Whosoever to-day writes of Jesus writes, not simply of doctrines, but of a person; it is not so much, what shall be done with Christianity, but what shall we do with Christ?

We cite, now, some of the sayings of the enemies of Christ.

We will hear briefly Mr. Strauss: "This Christ, as far as he is inseparable from the highest type of religion, is historical, not mythical; is an individual, not a mere symbol. To the historical person of Christ belongs all in his life that exhibits his religious perfection, his discourses, his moral action, and his passion. He remains the highest model of religion within the reach of our thoughts, and no perfect piety is possible without his presence in the heart. As little as humanity will ever be without religion, a little will it be without Christ." Though we have read from the author of the so-called "mythical hypothesis," it is plain that he felt he was dealing with a person—a person too, without whose "presence in the heart," there can be no "perfect piety." According to him, Jesus not only was in the ages past, but "remains the highest model of religion within the reach of our thought." And so sure as humanity will never be "without religion," so sure it will never be "without Christ. Christianity, then according to this very high infidel authority, is both the highest and best possible religion, and the final. This is modern skepticism; but a still more modern affirms that Christianity has had its day; it may have had a mission, but, if so, it has been fulfilled and must now give place to something else. It matters not, of course, that skeptics disagree. That is a fault only when the parties are Christians.

Of modern infidel authors, perhaps no one has been more read or admired than Mr. Renan.

Upon the problem of Pilate's inquiry he says: "The highest consciousness of God which ever existed

in the breast of humanity was that of Jesus." "Christ, for the first time, gave utterance to the idea upon which shall rest the edifice of the everlasting religion. He founded the pure worship—of no age—of no clime—which shall be that of all lofty souls to the end of time. If other planets have inhabitants endowed with reason and morality, their religion cannot be different from that which Jesus proclaimed at Jacob's well. The words of Jesus were a gleam in a thick night; it has taken eighteen hundred years for the eyes of humanity to learn to abide by it. But the gleam shall become the full day; and after the passing through all the circles of error, humanity will return to these words, as to the immortal expression of its faith and its hopes."

Repose now in thy glory, noble founder! Thy work is finished; thy divinity is established. Fear no more to see the edifice of thy labors fall by any fault. Henceforth, beyond the range of frailty, thou shalt witness, from the heights of divine peace, the infinite results of thy acts. For thousands of years the world will defend thee. Banner of our contests, thou shalt be the standard about which the hottest battle will be given. A thousand times more alive, a thousand times more beloved since thy death than during thy passage here below, thou shalt become the corner stone of humanity so entirely, that to tear thy name from this would be to rend it from its foundations. Complete conqueror of death, take possession of thy kingdom, whither shall follow thee, by the royal road which thou hast traced, ages of worshippers."

"Whatever may be the surprises of the future, Jesus will never be surpassed. His worship will grow young without ceasing; his legend will call forth tears without end; his sufferings will melt the noblest hearts; all ages will proclaim that, among the sons of men, there is none born greater than Jesus."

What lofty strains! What praise from such a source!

What must be the character that can call forth such unmeasured praise from an enemy! Possibly Mr. Renan would consider it unjust to represent him as being an enemy of the subject of his eulogies, but, doubtless, Jesus so regards him. With him it is, "Trust me not at all or all in all," and this Mr. Renan does not.

He calls him divine, it is true, but, we may suppose, only in the infidel sense. In spite of his just and well meant praise, therefore, he robs him of his chiefest glory. In the estimation of this man, Jesus is a true object of worship. He is the author of a religion universal as humanity, the purest and highest the world will ever know, which shall satisfy the loftiest souls "to the end of time." He is the very "corner stone" of humanity, and will never "be surpassed." In the hands of this writer he is a very god, and yet his book was written to strip him of his godhood. He was imperfect, he was not sinless, he was both deceiver and deceived. This man of transcendent genius, who could give to the world a deathless religion, was yet the subject of "unconscious illusions." He thought he was the "Son of God," but was mistaken; he thought he was without sin, but in this he erred.

We certainly are justified in believing that, to any one else than himself, Renan's Christ is an impossibility; his theory is suicidal, incongruous. Jesus was not so much, or else he was more, than his biographer makes him.

If, now, these are the best efforts which can be made—and they are avowedly the best which have been made—to explain his life and his religion on the supposition that he was a fallible man, we may rest assured that the vast majority of souls, in this and every age, will cast about for something else. We feel there must be something better somewhere. But

that something better is nowhere, unless it be found in the Christ of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The sinlessness of Jesus was not called in question by the earlier infidel writers. It remained for modern skepticism to realize that this admission is vital. They have discovered that if Christianity has produced a perfect life—if its principles carried out will do this—it is vain to offer something else instead. An effort is made, therefore, by some modern infidel writers to prove the imperfection of Christ's life. They make him incomparably the best man who has ever lived—far in advance of his own or any succeeding age. There was almost nothing in his eventful life to censure; still, on a few occasions, he showed that he was merely human in that he erred. But when we turn to notice the specific acts to which exception is taken, we find it a very meager catalogue indeed. We cite the following:

His conduct towards his mother when, at the age of twelve, his parents found him conversing with the doctors and lawyers in the temple, and at the Cana wedding feast; his expulsion of the money changers from the temple; his cursing the fig tree; the destruction of the herd of swine; his bitter denunciations of the Pharisees. These are not merely specimens, but pretty well exhaust the bill of indictment against him.

The world, then, for eighteen hundred years has studied the life of this man as no other life ever has been studied, and concludes with Pilate that there is no fault in him.

Compared with this voice of the world, they who offer the above objections are so few that the statement need not be qualified. Just how these criticisms on the character of Christ may impress an infidel I am not prepared to say, but I do know how they impress a Christian. He arises from a perusal of such objections more a believer than ever. He is surprised that such objections are apparently seriously entertained by otherwise intelligent men. How infidelity succeeds in making such a tremendous smoke with so little fuel or fire he can never quite understand. He feels like turning away from the whole question as unworthy of countenance. There is no danger to Christianity so long as the attack is made against the life or character of Christ. Nor is there danger until the attack is directed against him, for to leave us Christ is to leave us his religion.

Joseph Cook, in one of his Monday lectures says: "Some of the profoundest treatises that the last half century has produced have aimed to create a doubt on the point of Christ's sinlessness; and treatises yet more profound although not, perhaps, equally popular, have come forward to establish this circumstance, so far as human evidence can go to establish it. The impression made on intellectual circles is, that any attempt to throw doubt on the character which we call man at his climax, has been a failure." This he asserts to be the "stupendous outcome of modern criticism."

Jesus was certainly conscious of no sin, weakness or imperfection. Every sound mind is conscious of only what is true. Jesus was either without imperfection, therefore, as he was of unsound mind—a monomaniac. To this extreme has infidelity sometimes been driven. So in the most transcendent genius of any age, in the founder of an immortal religion, without whose "presence in the heart there can be no perfect piety," who is the "climax of humanity" and will "never be surpassed," whose "worship will grow young without ceasing," we have after all, if we may adopt the views of these men, only a monomaniac—a mad man! That any one can see only a crazy man in Christ, can be accounted for only on the principle that to a drunk man all

others are drunk. But upon what point, let us ask, was Jesus demented? Upon this: He thought he was divine—the "Son of God." But upon this he disagreed with skeptics. He was therefore unsound!

We consider but one other point.

The verdict of the ages is, that the evangelists have drawn the picture of a perfect life. How did they do this? Were they inspired or not? The supposition that they were and that they gave the history of a real life explains all. On the supposition that they were not inspired and that their picture is a fabrication, what have we? Somehow, we have a perfect picture. It stands alone—absolutely alone. In all history, in all literature—biographical or fictitious, there is nothing like it. Genius and learning have exhausted themselves in drawing the lineaments of human nature. But they have nowhere produced an unblemished picture. In the vast gallery of the ages, there hangs many a noble picture, many a worthy one, many to admire. Here and there every sentiment, emotion and passion of the soul—from the basest to the divinest—is vividly painted or delicately carved. In long review the generations have passed through, to look, to admire, to wonder, to applaud, to sigh, perchance, at sight of painted suffering or love, to weep; but at one—only one—in all the throng, have they been constrained, by common impulse, to bow down and worship, in token that the hand that drew it was divine. For that picture Jesus sat; the brush was held by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; but the strokes were made by an invisible hand.

A royal crown—two blended in one—crown of true deity and glorified man—pressed the brow which sometimes wore a crown of thorns. The world may in a moment of madness or phrensy, forget the Christ, to follow blindly some treacherous will-o-the-wisp, but like the needle to the pole, the true heart and conscience of mankind must at last return to its only helper and only hope. Let no Christian doubt as to final results. God's hand will do God's will. The friends and the enemies of Christ are approaching the ground where, on this question, the last battle must be fought. The church is getting rid of superstition, tradition, and much useless dogma. When the armies are met on the final field, the friends of faith will go stripped for the fight. Nor will the advocates of no faith encumber themselves with issues not vital.

Our posts will be little esteemed by either side. Between the marshalled hosts will stand a cross; hard by the grave of Jesus. Is his moldering form within, or did the angel roll the stone away? This is the anxious question. This is the final crusade. On its issue hangs the destiny of the world.

If infidelity shall find the tomb of Jesus sealed and the crucified within, the spell of the cross is forever broken and the sun of its empire will set to rise no more. Blank despair will seize and so harass the souls of men, that wildest passion and keenest, basest appetite let loose, they will quickly make on earth the hell they vainly hoped to shun beyond the grave. But if the army of God shall find an empty grave, know ye that the Lord is risen indeed, that he has defeated the powers of death and hell, to give gladness, good will and peace on earth, and all the soul of man can have, or wish or be, in the eternities beyond.

In the presence of the open, empty grave of the Son of man, skepticism is dumb.

—The Appletons, of New York, sell a million copies of Webster's Spelling Book annually, and have done this for forty years.

—It is easier to blame than to do better ourselves. Every one knows good counsel except the man who hath most need of it.