

ARTICLE X.

JOHN THE BAPTIST.¹

THE work referred to in the note at the bottom of the page is one of much value. It is evidently the result of careful study and thorough research. Its style, however, is faulty in certain very important respects. The matter which it contains might easily, we think, have been presented in a form much more compact, and the author's drift and meaning been made much clearer. The subject of the book is one of unusual interest—one on which not a great deal has been written, at least in our language, and in regard to which, if we mistake not, the ideas commonly entertained are somewhat vague, not to say incorrect. We shall dwell for a brief space on a few of the topics treated of in this book; begging the reader to bear in mind that we present not our own views, but such as we understand to be those of Dr. Reynolds.

John is exhibited to us in the New Testament as a priest, a Nazarite, a prophet, and more than a prophet. John was a priest; he belonged to that particular line of the descendants of Levi to which by divine ordination priestly functions were restricted. We do not hear, indeed, of John's ever taking any part in the temple service; yet the conjecture is not an altogether unlikely one, that the mere fact of his belonging to the priestly class gave him a peculiarly strong hold on the minds of the people; that his words of warning and denunciation were, on this account, listened to with the more reverent spirit; that in this way they were the utterance of one who spake with authority. The office of religious instructor had been committed by divine appointment to the priests. It had not been altogether unusual, in previous periods of Jewish history, for prophets to be chosen from among the priests. This we know to have been the case with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These men spake with the more effective energy, because they felt that they had a prescriptive right to speak, and a corresponding claim to be heard. There was something in the very nature of their office to cause them to speak with the most emphatic energy, whenever the interests of religion and morality were at stake. We might reasonably presume that, conversant as they were obliged to be with moral and religious themes, their minds would be impressed beyond others with the untold importance of these themes, and that their language, while

¹ John the Baptist. The Congregational Union Lecture for 1874. By Henry Robert Reynolds, D.D. 8vo. pp. 525. London: Hodder and Stoughton; New York: A. S. Barnes and Co. 1874.

adverting to these themes, would have an energy which could not easily be resisted. Sometimes even a selfish motive might be mingled with these more elevated considerations. They might feel that as morality and religion decayed, so would the honor in which the priestly class was held be lessened; and on this account they might be prompted to speak on topics of a religious nature with an earnestness which otherwise they would not exhibit.

There was that in the functions appertaining to the priestly office which, in proportion as they were performed in honesty of heart and in a spirit fully in sympathy with their deep significance, or, on the other hand, with only a faint consciousness of this significance, could have had none other than the most ennobling and purifying influence, or else an influence the most hardening and debasing. The solemn ideas which the priestly functions were fitted to suggest relative to the immaculate holiness of God, to the infinite evil attached to all sin, to the limitless compassion of Jehovah, which could prompt him to pardon sin thus characterized by extreme turpitude — such ideas must either have been actually taken into the mind, and been made matter of earnest thought, and been allowed their proper effect upon the soul, or else, by a positive act of the will, been denied access to the mind — an act which none other than a will most depraved and corrupt could have put forth, and whose only result could be to extend and deepen the very corruption in which it had its source. One need not wonder at the vehement language in which the Psalmists and the old prophets were wont to denounce the temple services, when performed, as no doubt they too often were, as mere ritualistic observances, without any proper consciousness, on the part of the priests, of their moral import. This language of condemnation is none too pungent, whether one thinks of the offence which such affecting rites gone through with thoughtlessly and formally must have been to a pure Divinity, or of their degrading and hardening effect on the character of the worshipper. On the contrary, how benign that effect when these rites were discharged in a fitting mode, with a mind fully penetrated with the sentiment of humiliation, of penitence, of thorough devotion to Jehovah, which these rites were intended to represent. Are we not at liberty, then, to speak of John as emphatically a priest, even though no priestly functions were visibly and outwardly performed by him, because his was pre-eminently that character which corresponded exactly to the nature of the office — a character into which was incorporated that profound view of sin, that conviction of the need of thorough penitence and moral renewal, that earnest love of pure righteousness by which that character ought ever to be marked? There was in John well nigh a perfect embodiment of what a priest should be.

The priest, under the Jewish dispensation, was a representative of the people. He entered in their name into the tabernacle; he sacrificed, he burned incense, he prayed, he acted out the proper symbol of repentance for

his own sins and those of the people. There are now certain moral perils ever attending the existence among a people of such an order of representative priests. The conviction not unnaturally comes to be entertained that the priests, in taking upon themselves this representative character, assume at the same time the moral responsibilities of those in whose name they act, and that the people are by this means relieved of them — that, if the priests perform with comparative faithfulness these delegated functions, the whole work is accomplished; the people who stand without are nothing but spectators. Perhaps not altogether consciously, but yet really, the feeling would exist that the priests alone were under obligation to pray, to repent, to devote themselves to Jehovah. Such a feeling is too much in harmony with a depraved mind not to be awakened. May we not conceive it, then, to have come within the proper scope of the priestly office, especially in the case of John, who was both prophet and priest, to rebuke in the most impassioned terms such a destructive moral perversion?

This perversion, if it were worth while to demonstrate its illogical and unscriptural character, was at variance with the scriptural idea of the priesthood. The priesthood was, indeed, in an important sense, of a representative character; but in assuming this character, the priests did not free those for whom they acted from the most solemn moral responsibilities. What the priest did each worshipper was also bound substantially to do. The priests audibly uttered words, they visibly acted out symbols, that were meant to represent feelings supposed as a matter of course to be active in the breast of every worshipper — feelings that ought to exist in the mind of each one, just as distinctly, and to be just as really the offspring of reflection gone through with by every one on his personal relations to the Divinity, and on his own transgressions, as could be the case if no mediating priest came between God and himself. Unless the spirit of the Jew corresponded fully to the outward act of the priest, the priest, for that Jew, might as well not have existed. Such a Jew did not, in any proper sense, worship, nor burn incense, nor sacrifice, nor repent.

It was, certainly, a very fitting element in the preparation for the advent of Christ, that a forerunner like John should appear, — himself one of the priestly class, and adorned well-nigh perfectly with all the substantial excellences of the priestly character, — to warn the people, both by words and by act, that no mere formal sacerdotal mediations could secure either to the priest or the people a participation in the kingdom of God; to imprint it on their minds that, although they were outwardly the people of God, and even a royal priesthood, and the very children of Abraham, yet, without personal repentance and personal faith in him that was to come, — a faith that would demonstrate its genuineness by the strictest obedience to every moral law, — they must inevitably all likewise perish. In no one did the elements of the priestly character of the true child of

Abraham, the outward sanctity, the elevation of spirit above the world, show themselves in a purer form than in John; and yet we hear even him avowing that he had need to come to Jesus Christ, that Christ was alone the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. We must believe that John made real to his own consciousness the peculiar significant features of the priestly office, its function as a mediator between Jehovah and sinful men, and that by this means there must have been given a startling emphasis to his declaration that Christ was the Lamb of God.

Of John it was declared that among those who were born of women there had not arisen a greater than he. There may have been, in this statement, a tacit reference to the priestly character of John, and to the pre-eminent degree in which the priestly qualities were exhibited in him; and yet it was added, by our Lord, that he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. The time for the cessation of the priestly office had come; the best of priests was to be the last. Sacrifices and offerings were to be required no more; and with them was to disappear all need of sacerdotal functions. A more spiritual kingdom was to be organized; and every man, independently of all human or angelic mediation, was to come boldly to the throne of grace, on which is seated the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls; and the man who can enter into the significance of this spiritual kingdom — a kingdom independent of meats and drinks and offerings and ritualistic services — is greater than the best of those who are subject to a law of ceremonial observances.

It can hardly be regarded as other than a fanciful supposition, that the severe and stern language in which John was wont to address his auditories, was due to a certain fierceness of temper characterizing the tribe of Levi. It has been ascribed, also, to a military element alleged to belong to the Jewish priesthood. One is altogether at a loss, however, to discern in the priestly character any traces of such an element. The severity of John's language may be attributed, with better reason, to the fact that his mind was engrossed to such a degree by that which is unearthly that he was thus in the habit of looking at moral evil in its true colors, divested of that deceptive show of unreal beauty with which one who is conversant with men, and busy in the eager pursuit of simply worldly purposes, comes at length to clothe it. John, so used to solitary communion with God and with spiritual objects, saw in sin only that which was evil and loathsome. He sympathized too thoroughly with the mind of Jehovah to regard it in any other aspect; and he could speak of it only in those stern tones which suited with such distinct conceptions of its odious qualities. And surely these tones of rebuke were none too stern and pungent in order to rouse to anything like a proper moral sensibility — such as was demanded by the near approach of him whose fan was in his hand — a nation so spiritually degraded as were the Jews.

John the Baptist was a Nazarite, as well as a priest, in spirit, if not in

name and form. He was to be great in the sight of the Lord, and was to drink neither wine nor strong drink. We know how well his life tallied with this prediction. He was in the deserts; his raiment was of camel's hair; a leathern girdle was about his body; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. He acquired in this way a resemblance to the old prophets. It has been affirmed that he was literally a Nazarite, and had taken upon himself their peculiar vows. The principle on which these vows are said to have been based,—that evil is the necessary concomitant of matter and the result of contact with it, that the soul can attain to perfect purity only as it keeps the flesh in subjection and suppresses every appetite and desire whose seat is in the body,—is not exclusively an Oriental doctrine. Few doctrines have been of wider influence than this. It has been maintained not by Christians exclusively; for it is well known how thoroughly pervaded with this doctrine are Brahminism and Buddhism. It is not strange, then, that its presence should be discerned among the Jews at a very early period. At the same time, we are not at liberty to believe that the Bible at all countenances the idea of any necessary connection between matter and moral evil. Matter, in all its manifold forms, and with all its properties, whether essential or accessory, is the product of God's creative energy. The body of man, with all its appetites and susceptibilities, is the offspring of the same Divine power; and these various forms of material existence were all pronounced by the Creator to be very good. False and unscriptural, therefore, as we conceive the underlying principle of asceticism to be, yet its existence is by no means an astonishing fact. Fruitful of evil as the bodily appetites have ever been found to be in many of their manifestations, it is not wonderful that their utter subjugation, and that by the most violent means, should often have been aimed at, because regarded as the necessary condition of moral growth.

The abstract principle on which asceticism rests—that the body must not be allowed to gain control over the spirit—no one, of course, can blame. The exaggerated forms which this principle has often taken, and the violent means by which it has attempted to secure its intended results, alone deserve censure.

One would not, perhaps, be justified in affirming that all the manifestations of an ascetic spirit which we detect in John were exactly in accordance with the Divine mind in regard to him. He may, or may not, have been left in regard to this, to a certain extent, to the freedom of his own will. It is enough that an ascetic spirit was manifested by him. His favorite dwelling-place was in the desert. His food and apparel were of the coarsest description. In every way he mortified the flesh. As his raiment was not such, so neither were his manners such, as were found in kings' houses. Few things would be so likely to give him a strong influence over men as these peculiarities. They were among the causes which gained for him the title and the influence of one of the old prophets.

It is a very obvious thought, that John's peculiar mode of life was not that in accordance with which the children of the kingdom were expected to model theirs. Jesus Christ did not so model his. There is nothing in his teachings, there is nothing in his example, to warrant the notion that a literal abandonment of the world, or the violent extinction of every natural instinct, is required of men. There are enjoyments in which the follower of Christ is justified in participating; Christ so took part in a marriage festival, and mingled in banquets with his fellow-men. He condemned no one merely for engaging in worldly pursuits. So far, indeed, as the life of John indicated a comparative contempt for that which is earthly, so far as it showed that moral good, that rigid conformity to the law of God was preferable to any worldly emolument, so far it merits universal imitation. The spirit which animated John should be cultivated, even if it fail to manifest itself in the same outward form. One of the final causes of John's asceticism may have been to illustrate in a striking and palpable, not to say exaggerated, form, the nature of that unworldly temper which all men are required to cultivate; just as it was one of the final causes of the character of Christ to show that it was not needful, in order to reach a spiritual elevation above the world, to sever one's self literally from the world. One can be in the world without being worldly, can mingle with men without being sinfully like them.

The vow of the Nazarite, such as we may suppose to have been assumed by John, in spirit, if not in form, involved, as one of its most important features, a complete consecration to the special service and worship of God. This, very obviously, was the import of the vow in the case of Samuel. Even before his birth he was devoted to the life of a Nazarite; and his whole subsequent career bore witness to the correct insight into the nature of the vow which had been gained by him, and to the thorough and uncompromising earnestness with which that vow, in all its comprehensive significance, was fulfilled by him. A similar consciousness we may suppose to have actuated John. And it is not difficult to recognize the fitness of such a spirit — involving, as we have seen that it did, the complete consecration of one's self to God — to John's special function as the forerunner of Christ. It seems to have been a matter of importance that a perfect ideal, at least so far as that was practicable, of a sanctity that could be reached without a personal knowledge of the historical Christ should be held up to the view of men, so that they might see that, as in this respect as well as others, there had not risen a greater than John the Baptist, yet even the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he.

It has been suggested that the retirement and long residence of John in the wilderness may have had, as one of its impelling motives, the wish to fulfil more completely that portion of the Nazaritic vow which forbade all contact with a dead body. The Nazarite was required to shun such

contact in every conceivable instance, and with the most scrupulous care. He could not close the eyes of his dead parents, nor stand by the side of their graves. So far as he was concerned, the dead were to bury their dead. That natural affection which ordinarily prompts one to linger by the side of a dying friend, and to be eager to perform every service even to the lifeless remains, the Nazarite was required to suppress. Was it meant, in the fact that John in spirit, if not in form, took this vow, to give an outward illustration of what Christ required of his disciples — that they should hate father and mother, compared with him, and not stop, when the summons to duty was given, to bury even the parent? Did not John give in this a real, it may be outwardly an exaggerated, pattern of what every one is required to be in spirit, if not in outward form? John practised this self-renunciation, this disengagement of himself from all earthly ties, by a literal separation of himself from the world. In this point of view, no one had surpassed him. But the man who enters into the kingdom of heaven learns to practise the same virtue in a higher and nobler form. He learns how to be in contact with the world, and yet not to be polluted by it. He does not avoid the sin of excessive attachment to worldly kindred by literally forswearing that attachment, but, what is better, by restraining it within its proper bounds. It has been said that the best safeguard against temptation is distance from temptation. But this maxim is unworthy the man of a truly Christian courage. The one who actually confronts the enemy, and overcomes him, deserves more honor than he who remains unhurt by shunning the sight of his foe.

It would be a rash assertion that Nazaritic asceticism has no features in view of which its adoption as a mode of life may be recommended. There have, without question, been periods in the world's history when a resort to asceticism on the part of individuals may certainly have been expedient, if not obligatory. That it was ever meant to be the common mode of life, that the religion of Christ properly understood leads to it or justifies it, that the avowed end of the honest ascetic — the strictest moral purity, the closest communion with God — cannot be gained save by means of asceticism, are assertions which the scriptures do not uphold. There never, probably, was a better illustration of the power of asceticism in the production of Christian virtue than what was given in the person of John the Baptist; and it still remains true that, while among those who were born of women there had not risen a greater than John the Baptist, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

John, also, was a prophet. The process through which one who was called to be a prophet gained the requisite knowledge was neither the deductive and syllogistic nor the inductive method. There is a region of truth where neither of these processes can have play. The spiritual world, — the infinite God by whose presence it is pervaded, the intense hopes and fears, the aspirations after holiness, and the conviction of sin,

the consciousness of a close relation to the eternal, and of a capacity for, and a yearning after, moral perfection, — the spiritual world is one in which truth is reached by another method. It is here that the intuitional power is called especially into exercise. Truth is seen. The intrinsic evidence which it ever possesses compels the assent of the mind. It is not deduced as an inference; it is not a generalization from observed facts. The conviction of its being the truth is not the result of a comparison of the intuitions of one mind with those of another. Such a comparison is scarcely possible. One man cannot always give to another such a verbal statement of his convictions as shall exactly and completely represent them, and thus render a comparison practicable. One cannot so give utterance to his emotions in view of some pre-eminently beautiful object or some singularly glorious achievement as to make it sure that the hearer shall apprehend the exact quality and intenseness of his emotions; and yet, whenever such honest utterances are made, even in an inadequate and imperfect form, they give rise to a corresponding mental condition in the susceptible hearer, such as enables him to verify their justness by the perception of their harmony with his own consciousness, and, at the same time, may have the effect, in their turn, of giving intenseness and purity to his emotions, and of widening the field of intellectual vision which he is able to traverse. If it be not true that in every mind, however constituted and however circumstanced, religious sentiments and religious knowledge exist in some degree of purity, it would still seem indisputable that in all minds there is the susceptibility of religious sentiment, that in few minds is there a perfect lack of that sentiment. There are objects around every man — the sky over his head and the earth beneath his feet, the sunshine and the storm, the processes of growth and decay everywhere going on, the inscrutable relations he sustains to others, the affections and modes of conduct felt by him to be obligatory even in spite of himself, the anticipation of recompence and the dread of retribution sure to arise in view of the discharge or the neglect of such obligations, — these are sure to awaken into action the religious sentiment. They conduct the mind to religious truth. They arouse the belief in a holy Jehovah. They create, almost necessarily, the conviction of an existence beyond the grave, on the one hand, of bliss; on the other hand, of suffering, as the unavoidable result of a godly or a sinful life.

The various systems of religion which have existed in the world, instead of being the result of any scientific process, would seem rather to have been the product of moral intuitions. The religious susceptibility is quickened, the action of which sooner or later gives birth to notions and doctrines that at length shape themselves into a system of religion. The product of this mental state is Brahminism and Buddhism and the Grecian and Roman mythology; and we are not wrong in believing that that action of the Holy Ghost on the mind whose result has been the system

which we denominate Christianity is analogous, in important respects, to this condition of aroused religious susceptibility. Christianity as to its principles, though not its distinctive historical facts, has become in this way an object of human knowledge.

The Hebrew prophets were men in whom this faculty of moral intuition existed in its highest and purest forms; and their views of moral and religious truth, consequently, were characterized by unusual distinctness and a peculiarly vivid consciousness of moral obligations resting upon them. Their office was one of the strongest influences which shaped alike the intellectual and the religious character of the Hebrews. No literature has had more to do in moulding the religious destiny of the entire race than that of the Hebrews; and this literature, to a very large extent, is the offspring of what may be termed the prophetic mind. And in an age such as that in which the Hebrews lived, and relatively to an end like that for which they were set apart as a peculiar people, this influence of the prophetic mind may justly be affirmed to have been indispensable. It would not have been enough to deposit in certain written documents those historical facts and that doctrine of God which constitute the Hebrew faith, and to leave them to be studied by each successive generation for itself. Religious belief, on this condition, would speedily have died out. What was needed was, that there should be an order of men in every generation who, by means of their quickened religious susceptibilities, the clearness of their own intuitions, should get a knowledge of these truths, and proclaim them with that force and earnestness which can be possessed only by him who has in this way gained a knowledge of them; who can testify to that which he has himself seen and heard; to whom, as it were, the word of God has been directly spoken, and who thus should preach the preaching which God should bid him.

The prophet is one who speaks for God, and not one who merely predicts future events. The words, indeed, which he uses may be, and indeed must be, those in which moral truth is wont to be clothed, and whose significance therefore could be apprehended by the hearer; but the thought must be that which only God could inspire. God talked with Moses as a man talketh with his friend; and there was to be raised up afterwards a prophet like unto Moses. There floated in the mind of the Jewish people, in every period of their history, an expectation, sometimes quite definite and at others more obscure, that this prophet was to appear. The day for the fulfilment of this hope it was the work of John to usher in.

There was an unlikeness between the priestly office and the prophetic at which it is worth while to glance. The functions of the priest were formally of a ceremonial character. They could be outwardly discharged by men in whose hearts none of the sentiments of which they were symbolic had a place. The prophetic office was of an entirely different character. The prophet had no ritualistic services to go through. He was only to

speaking that which his own mind, controlled by the divine energy, prompted him to utter. His ministry was confined to no place, and had no limit of time. Yet one can easily conceive that the functions of both priest and prophet may have been united in one individual; and in the event of such a conjunction, a moral dignity and sacredness must have been given to the priestly office such as would make even its ritualistic services to become a most forcible religious instructor. He must have been a cold-hearted spectator indeed who could have witnessed unmoved the performance of priestly duties by one in whose mind existed at the same time the convictions and feelings peculiar to the prophet. And, on the other hand, the stern tones of denunciation, such as the prophet was commissioned to employ, must have lost somewhat of their repulsive character as they came from the lips of a true priest, of a mediator between God and the sinner. John was, indeed, a prophet, and there had not risen among men a greater than he; but, in order to attain to the full excellence both of prophet and priest, it was needful to enter into sympathy with the spirit of the kingdom of God.

A very prominent trait in the character of the prophet was its independence. He was the mouth-piece of God. He was to utter nothing but what God spake. There was no responsibility to man resting on him. The sorest evil which men could inflict on him because he spoke to them faithfully was utterly unworthy of regard when put in contrast with the fearful woe which unfaithfulness to Jehovah would bring upon him. We can scarcely conceive of a temptation to swerve from the line of duty which could have been effective on the mind of one who like the prophet was an ambassador from God to man. In no prophet that had arisen had this spirit manifested itself more strikingly than in John. It was this which gave him power to speak in such fearless tones of rebuke to the supercilious Pharisees and to the haughty and tyrannical Herod.

We have dwelt in this somewhat desultory manner on certain topics treated by Dr. Reynolds, for the purpose of giving an idea of the matter which his work contains. The work, in our judgment, will repay thorough study, more, perhaps, for its stimulating qualities and for what it may suggest, than for the absolute value of the opinions which it advances. We are happy to see that an American edition of the volume has been published.