

interpreters of the Old Testament, who will utilize the results of Criticism, Assyriology, and other learning, in the spirit of the Orientalism that inevitably pervades the books.



The Baptist's Question.

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IT has long been a disputed point whether John the Baptist was faithful or not in sending his disciples to Christ to ask the question, "Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?" (Matt. xi. 3). The casual reader may think that a dispirited prisoner had given way to despondency, and that he who had been a most bold witness was fast becoming faithless and unbelieving.

A little investigation, however, shows that he was undoubtedly right and true in acting as he did.

Let us consider the general character of the Baptist. His was a very unusual combination of unbending firmness and boldness before men, with great humility before Christ. He sternly rebuked all sinners (Matt. iii. 7), and did not even spare King Herod (Matt. xiv. 4). Yet his delight was to magnify Christ (John i. 29), and to speak of himself in the humblest terms, when he said "I am not worthy to unloose" the latchet of my Master's shoe (John i. 27), and "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John iii. 30).

Let us for the moment exclude from consideration John's question to Christ, and let us turn to the many other facts recorded about him in the Gospels. Living alone and apart, he faithfully fulfilled his position of great trust; *he* received very many commendations and not a single rebuke from Christ, though Peter and the rest of the disciples who companied with Jesus frequently failed and were often blamed. The explanation appears to be that John was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb (Luke i. 15).

Well did he fulfil his office as forerunner on three memorable occasions—some months before His birth (Luke i. 41-44); shortly before Christ's ministry (Matt. iii. 11; John i. 26, 27); and about a year before the crucifixion, by his violent death (Matt. xiv. 10), for when Christ alluded to it, He said, "Even so shall the Son of man also suffer" (Matt. xvii. 12, 13).

Christ and the Baptist were closely associated in the minds of men; some even said that Christ was John (Matt. xvi. 14), and Herod also had stated the same (Matt. xiv. 2), thinking that John had risen from the dead. John and his teaching were held in high honour by Christ and His disciples; the latter asked to be taught to pray as John had taught his disciples (Luke xi. 1). Christ had alluded to His forerunner as "the lamp that burneth and shineth" (John v. 35). After the Baptist's death Christ asked the Pharisees if the baptism of John were from heaven or from men (Luke xx. 4); and shortly before His own death He went to "the place where John was at the first baptizing . . . and many came unto Him" (John x. 40-42); as Bishop Ellicott remarks on this passage, "the enthusiasm which John had kindled still burns." Also John was mentioned by Christ after His resurrection (Acts i. 5).

The Baptist had the high honour of being foretold by both the prophets Isaiah (xl. 3) and Malachi (iii. 1). In the latter passage we infer that he is compared to the Morning Star, and linked to Christ in figure, who is likened to the Sun (Mal. iv. 2). This beautiful simile has hitherto attracted little attention, but it is evident from Luke i. 76-78; John i. 8,¹ iii. 30,² v. 35, viii. 12; Isa. ix. 2, etc.³

¹ On this passage the Rev. F. B. Meyer writes in "Life and Light of Men," p. 42: "He (the Baptist) knew that he was *not* the Light, but sent to bear witness of it; *not* the Sun, but the star that announces the dawn, and wanes in the growing light."

² "Mimpriss's Gospel Treasury," section xii., p. 132.

³ See *Transactions Victoria Institute*, vol. xxxviii., article on "The Morning Star in the Gospels," p. 242; also "The Magi; how they recognized Christ's Star." Both by the author of this paper. Hodder and Stoughton; shortly to be published. In the former the employment of the figure, presumably when the Morning Star was shining, is used to confirm the date

We must, therefore, hesitate to impute a wrong motive to a man so very highly honoured in the Divine record unless the evidence of failure is clear and convincing.

But, though John possessed such a noble character, it was otherwise with his followers; they were not above petty feelings of jealousy when they had previously said to their master, "Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him" (John iii. 26). In his reply, John spoke most humbly of himself, rejoiced in the state of things, and stated that Christ must increase, but he must decrease.

Presumably, however, he did not convince his hearers, who must naturally have been much cast down when their leader was shortly afterwards imprisoned. They may have doubted that Jesus really was Christ, as He did not liberate His faithful forerunner. They may have doubted His power or His will. *They* fasted, as had been their custom before, but, even then, Christ's disciples fasted not (Matt. ix. 14). This had puzzled them. John had not made it clear, so they came to Christ; but apparently they were not convinced even by Him.

John *waited* for some time, until his disciples told him that Christ was performing very marvellous miracles of healing, even raising the dead (Matt. ix. 25, 26; Luke vii. 14-17); and *then* (Matt. xi. 2) he sent his disciples to Jesus, as we believe, for their own benefit.

Why did John send to Christ at that particular time?

John must have known from his earliest childhood that he himself had been foretold by the prophet Malachi (iii. 1), because the angel before his birth, and his father Zacharias at his circumcision, had said so (compare Mal. iii. 1 with Luke i. 17, 76).¹ Accordingly, we find him constantly referring to Christ as Him that "cometh after me" (Matt. iii. 11; Mark i. 7;

A.D. 29 for the Crucifixion. In the latter it is also used to help in determining the date of the Nativity.

¹ See also Mark i. 2 and Acts xiii. 24.

Luke iii. 16 (inferentially); John i. 15, 27, 30; Acts xiii. 25; xix. 4). His followers also must have made themselves fully conversant with the writings of the prophet Malachi.

Can we not, therefore, see that there was a special fitness in sending his disciples to Christ, who is the Sun of Righteousness with *healing* in His wings (Mal. iv. 2), at a time when His miracles of curing the sick were attracting the very greatest attention? John would thus carry out his rôle of forerunner, figured by the Morning Star announcing the Sun, in sending his disciples to Jesus at such a time.

In accordance with his usual reference to the prophet Malachi, the Baptist framed his question in the words, "Art Thou He that cometh?" He did *not* ask if Christ were the King of the Jews, the title given to Him by the Magi, neither did he employ any other of the many names for the Messiah used by the prophets of old.

Christ replied, as we suppose John had expected, by drawing attention to His marvellous cures. The casual reader may not see the connexion; but when we remember the familiarity of the questioners with the Book of Malachi, we must plainly see the reference to Malachi iv. 2 already alluded to. Christ's appeal to His miracles was, consequently, a strong assertion of His Divinity, by showing that He fulfilled the prophetic Scripture; indirectly, too, it was a tacit confirmation of John's position, as the same prophet who spoke of the Sun of Righteousness had also mentioned "My messenger . . . before Me" (Mal. iii. 1), which John applied to himself.

Then Christ added a blessing on whomsoever was not stumbled in Him; we have seen that John's disciples had been tempted in this direction. The multitude, also, had been stumbled by finding Christ, who mixed freely with the people, acting so differently from the ascetic John; doubtless they said that both could not be right (Matt. xi. 16-19).

There does not appear to be any ground for supposing that John himself had ever been offended or stumbled at Christ. On the contrary, he seems to have been endeavouring to remove

the cause of stumbling from others ; John, who himself did no sign (John x. 41), on this occasion drew attention to the wondrous miracles which attested Christ's divinity.

Just after John's disciples had gone, Christ spoke with the utmost approval of His forerunner. He Himself most plainly confirmed the statements of the angel and of Zacharias that John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi iii. 1 : "My messenger . . . before Me" (Matt. xi. 10). Thus, even though he was in prison, Christ stated that His faithful herald was bearing a bright witness. What an unparalleled and unique honour for a man, not only to be foretold by a prophet of old, but to be assured by Christ that the prophecy really applied to him !

Christ followed this up by asserting that among them that are born of women there is none greater than John. It is, therefore, surely impossible to suppose that any unworthy motive could have lurked in John's mind at this time, or Christ would not have bestowed these extraordinary honours.

All the people and the publicans evidently understood that high praise was given to John, as we read they "justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John" (Luke vii. 29).

Though his messengers had gone back, some report of his Master's words of high commendation must have reached the captive herald. We can well understand how those words must have solaced him in the following months of his dreary imprisonment, which was only to end with his cruel death, and how cheerfully he must have "despised the shame," in view of the high praise given to him by his Lord.

Christ, however, loaded John with further honours in this short discourse ; again did He allude to Malachi's reference to the Baptist, this time under the figure of Elias (compare Mal. iv. 5 with Matt. xi. 14), and He concluded the subject by graciously classing together the opposite characteristics of Himself and of John, declaring that wisdom is justified of all her children (Luke vii. 35).

The heaped-up encomiums given to John on this occasion negative the idea that Christ intended to convey the faintest

hint of rebuke to him, when He used the words, "Blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me" (Luke vii. 23).

Christ never hesitated to rebuke His disciples when they erred; witness His unmistakable words to the disciples in the storm: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" (Matt. viii. 26); to Peter, sinking in the water: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (Matt. xiv. 31); to Peter, who had dared to rebuke Christ: "Get thee behind Me, Satan" (Matt. xvi. 23); to doubting Thomas: "Be not faithless, but believing" (John xx. 27). In none of these instances do we find praise at the *same* time. Conversely, when Christ praised His disciples, as, for instance, when He said to Peter, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xvi. 17), there was no blame at the *same* time.

Hence, we conclude, when John the Baptist sent to ask his question, since he received such very great praise from Christ, that true and faithful motives prompted his action.



Literary Notes.

"LITERARY Rambles in France" is the title of a book by Miss Betham-Edwards, which was published a little while since. I suppose Miss Betham-Edwards knows as much about the intellectual side of the French people and their country as anyone living. She has studied their ways and their homes, and seems to know every phase of their life. The volume is excellently illustrated. It was about the time of the appearance of this delightful book that Miss Betham-Edwards was the recipient of a testimonial in recognition of her twenty years of literary work. It may surely be accepted as a concrete fact that she has done not a little in cementing the firm friendship which now happily exists between our own nation and that of France by the writing of so many delightful, refined, and cultured books about the French people. Possibly she has achieved some of her charm of writing from the Lambs; for she is the niece of Sir William Betham, Ulster King-at-Arms, and Matilda Betham, who were great friends of Charles and Mary. This new edition contains several photogravures.

