

character of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He used against them language of such unsparing denunciation, I shall endeavour clearly to prove in a following paper the complete worthlessness, the radical baseness of their entire system ; and therefore that, if the Jews were to be saved from that formalism which had so dangerously replaced the old pre-Babylonian idolatry, it was absolutely necessary for Christ to "utterly abolish" these idols—Idola of the Forum, the Theatre, and the Cave—which had usurped the once-more desecrated shrines of heart-religion.

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A CHAPTER OF GOSPEL HISTORY.

2.—THE JUDGMENT OF JESUS ON JOHN. (*St. Matt. xi. 7-15.*)

THE central point of the judgment pronounced by our Lord upon John after the departure of the messengers is to be found in the words, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist : notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (*Verse 11*). It is a remarkable declaration, which has always been more or less a puzzle to interpreters. The statement seems to contradict itself, in making John at once the greatest and the least of men. It seems, further, to give too unfavourable a view of the spiritual condition of a godly man, by virtually excluding him from the kingdom of heaven ; for if even the least in the kingdom be greater than he, it would seem to follow that he is not in it at all. Some ancient interpreters, including Chrysostom, evaded the difficulty by making the words contain a

comparison between John and the Speaker, *Christ*. They read the passage thus : Among those that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist; notwithstanding, the less¹—that is, I myself, who as yet am less than John in public esteem—the less is greater than he *in the kingdom of heaven*, though not in the judgment of the world. The interpretation is ingenious, but not satisfactory. It is too easy, too superficial, too trivial. The comparison, without doubt, is between John and any least or less one in the kingdom; and we must try to find out a sense in which the forerunner of Christ was less not merely than He, the greatest in the kingdom, but *even* than the least therein. With due regard to the strong unqualified manner in which Jesus was wont to express Himself, especially on solemn occasions, when His feelings were deeply stirred, this ought not to be very difficult.

One thing is clear at the outset, viz., that the comparison is not absolute, but relative to certain aspects under which the parties compared are viewed; such as the happiness they respectively enjoy, the spirit by which they are respectively animated, or the nature of the spiritual movements with which they are respectively identified.

Christ's purpose in making the statement whose import we wish to determine, was not to assist the people to take full and accurate measure of John's genius and character. He did not discuss the question of the Baptist's comparative greatness in the spirit in which in a debating society youths might discuss the question, Who was the greater man and general—

¹ ὁ μικρότερος, the comparative, not the superlative.

Cæsar or Napoleon? He was concerned about far higher matters. His anxiety was to get people to understand the spiritual phenomena of their time, and in particular to form true, just, and wholesome opinions concerning the religious movements with which John and Himself were identified respectively. In this connection it was very needful to have a right opinion concerning John, to appreciate aright his merits and his defects, his greatness and his weakness. For the opinions we form of *men* very seriously affect our opinions concerning principles and movements, and an indiscriminate admiration or the reverse must necessarily exercise a biasing misleading influence on our judgments and sympathies. In this view it was most important that the generation among whom Jesus lived should think justly of the Baptist. To think too much or too little of him as a public man would be equally injurious in tendency. Those who thought too much of John—who saw in him only truth without error, strength without weakness, not merely the dawn but the day, not merely the burning and the shining lamp,¹ but the sun—would remain with him, and never join the society of the Christ whose harbinger he was. On the other hand, those who thought too little of John would think just as little of Christ. Looking on John possibly as a morose, austere, ungenial man, with a devil of censoriousness in him, they would in all probability regard Christ simply as going to the opposite extreme of licentious freedom in opinion and conduct, and so they would remain estranged from the society both of John and of Jesus; having no sympathy with the

¹ John v. 35 : ἐκεῖνος ἦν ὁ λόγος ὁ καὶ μένος καὶ φάινων.

moral earnestness of the one, and therefore not in a state for appreciating the philanthropy and grace of the other.

It was in view of such issues that our Lord made the character of John a subject of discussion. He spoke critically of John, because what men thought of him would have a most important influence on their thoughts of Himself, of the kingdom He announced, and of the good news He preached. For idle criticism of any man, and especially of such a man as the Baptist, He had neither inclination nor leisure. Nevertheless, to pronounce an opinion concerning John was for the Messianic King an inevitable task. Necessity was laid upon Him to criticize John not less than to preach the good tidings. He had to criticize just because He had to preach, the criticism having much to do with the effect of the preaching. John was the representative of a system which was not the gospel, but which was closely connected with it; and it was necessary to put John in his true place, in order to put the system with which he was identified in its true place.

Such being the aim which Jesus had in view in expressing an opinion in reference to the Baptist, it is manifest that the judgment pronounced is a judgment not so much on a *man* as on an *era*. It is a judgment on the law which was given by Moses; and the comparison made between the last prophet of law and any little one in the kingdom signifies the immense inferiority of the legal economy to the era of grace which came by Jesus Christ. Paraphrased, the words of verse 11 mean: John, the last prophet of the old time, was a great prophet—none

greater. No one who went before ever did better justice to the law than he; ever preached it with more power and boldness, embodied it in a more upright blameless life, or gained for its claims more wide-spread and respectful attention. Like another Elijah, he was austere in habit and stern in will, fearlessly telling God's truth to kings as well as to peasants, come what might. No effeminate courtier was he, saying only things agreeable to royal ears; no feeble timid time-server, blown about reed-like by every breath of current opinion; but a strong, true, courageous, lion-hearted man—a true Hero of Moral Law, with the smallest possible amount of human weakness in his nature; less desponding or querulous than Elijah himself, though not without a touch of that infirmity, as his message of inquiry just received shews. Still, with all that, nay, just because he is a Hero of Law, John is a weak one-sided man. What he has is good, but he wants something of far more value, something which puts its possessors on a different platform altogether from that which he occupies, insomuch that it may be said without extravagance that those who possess it, though immeasurably inferior to John in other respects, are greater than he. He wants the spirit of the New Time, of the era of the Better Hope. Strong in zeal, he is defective in love; strong in denunciation, he is weak in patience towards the sinful; strong in ascetic abstinence, by his whole way of life a protest against sensuality, he is weak in the social and sympathetic affections; strong as the whirlwind, the earthquake, and the fire, he is weak in the moral influence that comes through the still small voice of a meek and merciful mind.

In these respects, any one in the kingdom of heaven animated by the characteristic spirit of love is greater than he.

Diversity of spirit carries along with it diversity of method in prosecuting a great common end. John and Jesus had one end in view, but they pursued that end by very different means ; and by comparing these we get further insight into the judgment pronounced upon the Baptist, and are enabled to understand how that confessedly great man could be inferior to any one, however insignificant otherwise, who only entered heartily into the mind of Christ. What, then, were the methods of Jesus and John as fellow-workers in the great cause of the Divine kingdom, which the one announced as approaching, and the other proclaimed as already come ? Each worker may be said to have had two watchwords. Those of John were repentance, or penance and reform ; those of Jesus, Divine mercy and regeneration. The programme of Jesus as in contrast to that of John might thus be summed up in these two principles—

- (1) Salvation by Divine mercy, not by penance.
- (2) New life by regeneration, not by reform.

These two principles constituted the gospel, the good news which Jesus delighted to preach to the poor, the labouring, the heavy-laden. Let us dwell on them a little, till they have assumed the due dimensions of importance in our minds.

“ Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee,” said Jesus on one occasion to a poor man who was brought to Him lying on a bed to be healed. “ Thy sins are forgiven, go in peace,” was his message on another occasion to a woman who was a “ sinner.”

Evermore this, or something like it, was what He had to say to men in quest of salvation. John had quite a different way of addressing men. His great word was Repent, and the word was used with such a meaning as to suggest the idea of penance. He spoke of forgiveness too, no doubt ; but forgiveness was in the background of his picture, something dimly visible on the far-off horizon to be painfully reached by a penitential pilgrimage. His baptism was a baptism of repentance, not of forgiveness. He took men bound by the sacrament of his baptism to make repentance their life-task ; while Christian baptism takes men bound to believe in the forgiveness of sins through Christ the Redeemer, and to a life of devotion in gratitude for salvation already received. The Evangelists express the exact character of John's baptism very well when they call it "a baptism of repentance for, or unto, the remission of sins."¹ In keeping with the character of his baptism was the style of his preaching. He spoke of an axe that was to be laid to the root of the trees, and of a winnowing fan, and of an unquenchable fire, and warned men to flee from the wrath to come.

There being such a difference between the respective messages of John and of Jesus, it was to be expected that there should be a corresponding difference between those who received their messages in their whole temper and way of life. And such in fact there was. The disciples of John, like their master, were a sad austere company : by their own confession they fasted oft, and were punctilious about purifications, and on the whole lived a painful ascetic

¹ Mark i. iv. Βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. Comp. Luke iii. 3.

life, putting new wine of moral earnestness into old bottles. On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus behaved like men who had received good news. They *were* of good cheer, they *did go* into peace. As they walked along the way, following their Master, they resembled a bridal party going to a wedding feast, making the welkin ring with laughter and song, rather than a band of pilgrims in monkish garb, trudging along with rueful look and weary feet towards the shrine of some saint, to do penance for their sins. The figure may seem a bold one, but it is Christ's own; for it is plainly suggested by the question He asked when defending his disciples for neglect of fasting. "Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?" The question leads us to think of just such a scene as has been described; and it gives us an interesting glimpse of the bright, happy, joyous life of Jesus and his companions as they fared on their way; poor, sometimes not having where to lay their heads, yet without care, for all was right within, conscience at peace, and the sunlight of a Father's love resting on them.

Happy the man who had any hand in producing such a blessed state of mind, by taking part in the ministry of the kingdom! The Twelve were very insignificant men in gifts and strength of character as compared with John. They were only little ones in the kingdom as yet, one and all of them; the greater number of them were never to be anything but little ones, even after they had become apostles. Yet little as they were, these disciples, the men of the Galilean mission, were greater than the Baptist, be-

cause they sympathized with their Master's watchword (mercy to the sinful), and took pleasure in repeating it, and had the honour to bring comfort to heavy-laden hearts by repeating it. Or, to express our meaning in terms borrowed from a Chapter in the Apostle Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which is a most instructive commentary on the saying of Jesus now under consideration — These humble disciples were greater than John because they were ministers of the *New Testament*, because they had part in the ministry, not of death and condemnation, but of life and pardon, and because with Paul they gloried in their ministry.¹

The other principle in the programme of Jesus was new life by regeneration, not by reform from without. John was a reformer, and his preaching in its details consisted in the enforcement of the need of reformation in particular directions. He looked around and saw what was wrong, and said, "Get this made right and that made right, and by degrees all will be right." To the common people who asked what they must do then to satisfy his demand for amendment, he preached the duty of good neighbourhood, saying, "He that hath two coats let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat let him do likewise." To tax-gatherers asking a similar question, his answer was, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." To soldiers, touched with compunctions of conscience, his message was, "Oppress no

¹ The statement in the text is made in unqualified form merely for the purpose of bringing out our meaning. In reality the Twelve as yet had entered only very partially into their Master's mind. But it is true that in proportion as they had entered into that mind they were greater than John.

man, neither accuse any falsely ; and be contented with your pay." ¹ To Herod, a flagrant sinner against the seventh commandment, he said, sternly, " It is not lawful for thee to have her." ² Now it does not need to be stated that there is nothing to find fault with in these counsels : on the contrary, John was doing an important duty manfully and bravely ; and we may add it is well for a community when it has within it men who feel constrained, as by a voice from heaven, thus plainly and emphatically to shew the people their transgressions, and to summon them in God's name to amendment. In thus preaching reform John was fulfilling his mission, was doing the work for which he was fitted, and which needed to be done just then. And in doing that work with exemplary faithfulness and admirable energy, John was indeed playing the part of a forerunner to Jesus, and preparing the way of the Lord ; even as all men who come in his spirit, like Thomas Carlyle, *e.g.*, in our own day, ever prove to be the preparers of the way for a new forthputting of life and power by the Christian Church. Nevertheless, this zealous, faithful, powerful reform-preaching on John's part was but a poor gospel. It is not much of a good news to tell men that in this and that way they are bad, and that they ought to live differently, and must, if a worse thing is not to befall them. All this may be a good preparation for a gospel, but a gospel in itself it is not. For to tell men that they ought to be good does not make them good ; most likely it only makes them miserable, raising their consciences against them, and making them sensible of a slavery from

¹ Luke iii. 10-14.

² Matt. xiv. 4.

which they cannot rid themselves. For habit is strong, and law is weak through the flesh, and the imperative of conscience, "Thou shalt not do this or that," is but too apt to remain unexecuted, unless somehow and somewhence there come into the heart a power to burst the bonds of sin asunder, and verily enable me to be a son of God. If you can tell me of such a power, I hail your message as a genuine God-sent gospel. I see in you one who can do for me what the law cannot do for me, in that it is weak through my flesh; what political or social reformers cannot do for me; no, nor any penalties of sin, temporal or eternal, not even "the wrath to come" itself. Wretched man that I am, who *can* deliver me? Thanks to God, Jesus Christ can do it. He has a gospel, a good news of God which suits my case. He preaches to me not outward reform in detail, but a new birth which makes all things new, by no external law, but by an inward spirit of life. Is it asked, What better am I with this message than with the other, for how shall I attain unto that new birth? Christ meets this difficulty also. For He is not merely the Preacher of regeneration, but the Regenerator. He Himself received into the heart as an object of faith and love is the Power that makes us sons of God. Would you see how this happens? Look into the house of Simon the Pharisee. What mean those gushing tears, those demonstrations of passionate affection? They signify "a sinner" not merely reformed but renewed, the devil cast out by "the expulsive power of a new affection" for Christ, who has dawned on her mind as the incarnation of Divine charity, and as the fair image of perfect moral

beauty. Christ in the fulness of his grace dwells in the heart, and the demons of desire have taken their flight, and the regenerated one goes into peace, and into a life of devoted service among those who followed Jesus and ministered unto Him of their substance.¹ Blessed, beneficent result! To be envied, the rare power of producing such a result! The man who has such a power in any degree is greater than John, with all his mighty moral energy. The least in the kingdom of God who has the cunning to make Christ appear to any degraded child of Adam as He appeared to the woman in Simon's house, has a secret of power which no Elijah-like man, armed with the earthquake, the whirlwind, and the fire, can command. It is a power possessed by some very little ones in the kingdom, and not possessed by some who are great otherwise: great it may be even in zeal for righteousness, but not in the Divine art of actually turning men from evil to good.

We have now satisfied ourselves that there are some important respects in which the statement that the less in the kingdom of heaven were greater than the Baptist, has a true, intelligible, serious sense. What we have said amounts to this, that the very thing which made John great was the thing that made him weak. His distinction was to be the forerunner of Christ, going before his face and crying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord; and the work of a fore-

¹ Luke viii. 1-3. The statement in the text seems a fair inference, from the fact of this historical notice being brought in immediately after the story of the sinful woman. The Evangelist means to say: This was the way those who had much forgiven to them loved much, and went into peace by the way of devotion, among whom this woman was one.

runner was such that the man who did it well was not likely to be strong in his sympathies with the movement whose advent he proclaimed and promoted—with its spirit or with its methods. On a review of what has been said, it is a comfort to find that we have been able to make good this position without needing to pronounce any harsh judgment on John's spiritual state. We said at the outset that one of the perplexing points in the saying of Jesus now under consideration is that it seems to give too unfavourable a view of the spiritual condition of a godly man, inasmuch as if even the least in the kingdom be greater than he, it would seem to follow that he is not in it at all. We must now look a little more closely into this point. Does then Christ deliberately mean to place John outside the kingdom—near it, but not in it; though great in many respects, yet only once born; born of woman, not twice born,—born from above as well as of the flesh,—therefore not in that kingdom which no man can see unless he be born of the Spirit? We must reply in the negative. We do not believe that Christ meant to exclude John from the kingdom *in the sense explained*, and it appears to us a mistake to imagine that the expression "born of women" is meant to suggest such a contrast between John as irregenerate and those in the kingdom as all regenerate, and therefore, however insignificant, greater than he in spiritual condition and privilege. In the sense explained, we say; for there is a sense in which it could be said, and probably was intended to be said, that John was outside the kingdom. He was outside the kingdom in the same sense in which

many excellent men are outside the *visible* Church, though not, thank God, on that account outside the *invisible* Church. John was not identified with the kingdom of heaven as a *new historical movement inaugurated by Jesus*, and embracing as yet among its avowed adherents only a small number of very obscure and insignificant people. In former times he had proclaimed the near approach of the kingdom, but at this moment he was in doubt whether either the King or kingdom had come, the actual characteristics of both being so different from what he had expected. In the beautiful language of a French writer, "John had seen the Messiah, was even sure he had seen Him. He had levelled the mountains before his feet, he had laboured ardently to multiply the number of the citizens of his kingdom, he had been able to discover around him the first traces of the grain of mustard-seed sprouting out of the earth; but his eyes, dazzled by the splendour of an ideal image, saw not the light, more feeble in appearance, which was about to disperse the chill dark shadows of a long night: they closed under the stroke of the executioner in the act of searching all round the horizon for the rising sun, and without having observed the thousand drops of a brilliant dew, which at a few steps from his prison announced already the awakening of the dawn and of the spring." ¹

In this sense John was outside the kingdom; he was not connected with it as a visible historical movement called by this name. Forerunner of the Christ, preparer of his way, herald of the approach-

¹ Reuss, "Histoire de la Théologie Chrétienne au Siècle Apostolique," vol. i. p. 145.

ing kingdom, he held aloof from the very cause which he had laboured to promote, not recognizing in it the legitimate fruit of his labours, *and being misled by the very qualities of mind which had fitted him admirably for the task of a pioneer*—not the only instance of the kind which has happened in the world's history. But in the highest sense John was an alien from the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was *in him*, in his heart, in his thoughts continually. His very message of doubting inquiry shewed this; for his was a case in which there was more faith in honest earnest doubt than there is in the belief of many men. And in what He said Jesus had no thought of calling this in question, or of so much as hinting a suspicion as to John's spiritual state. And we must strive in this respect to imitate our Lord, and to bear in mind that because a man is outside the visible Church he is not therefore unsaved; that there may be many who from one cause or another are alienated from the visible Church who nevertheless are children of God and citizens of his kingdom, though in many respects too probably erring, one-sided, defective men. We are all the more under obligation to remember this, that the shortcomings of the Church, her distorted presentations of truth, her lack of holiness and charity, her divisions, may to a large extent be the cause of alienation and misunderstanding. "Blessed," said Christ, "is he who shall not be offended in me," conscious when He uttered the words that He had given no cause of stumbling. His Church on earth cannot use such language, for she has given too many causes of stumbling. If then Christ, who had given

no just occasion of offence, whose offences were really merits, consisting essentially in this that He had come full of grace, rather than of the fury of the Lord, not to judge or destroy but to save—if Christ judged John leniently and charitably, though John stood in doubt of Him, how much more should we abstain from judging those who are without, and full of prejudices against Christianity, when too probably the blame of their prejudice and alienation lies at our own door! Surely this is a very legitimate lesson to draw from the striking saying we have been studying.¹

THE BOOK OF JOB.

III.—THE FIRST COLLOQUY. (CHAPTERS IV.—XIV.)

(4.) JOB TO BILDAD. (CHAPTERS IX. AND X.)

CHAPTER ix. contains Job's real reply to Bildad. Bildad had argued that God was and must be just,

¹ A comparison of the text Matt. xi. 11 with Matt. v. 19, 20 might throw some light upon the question who in the judgment of Christ were within, and who without, the kingdom. In the earlier text that man is pronounced least in the kingdom (*ελάχιστος*, not *μικρότερος*) who himself sets aside or teaches others to set aside any of the commandments, even the least; and on the other hand, the man whose action is not destructive, but positive and upbuilding wholly, is pronounced great (*μέγας*) in the kingdom, while the Pharisee with his sham righteousness is declared to be outside the kingdom altogether (verse 19). Under this scheme John might come in as a least one, for he was a destroyer of little commandments in zeal for the great ones, and the teacher of others to do the same; for he lived in isolation in the desert, and took no part in the religious services of the temple, so by his way of life as a hermit entering his protest against the prevalent religious hypocrisy. The text Matt. xi. 11 is not incompatible with this view, for *μικρότερος* leaves room for an *ελάχιστος*. Accepting this view then, we get the following graduated scale: The Pharisee outside, the iconoclast, or destroyer of shams, in the lowest place within, the positive upbuilder great in the kingdom. Finally, the greatest in the kingdom is He who came not to destroy but to *fulfil*, and to destroy the destructible only by fulfilling.