

that so skilful a hand might some day give us as a *πάρεργον* the Psalms of Solomon in Hebrew, or indeed any other late Palestinian Jewish book only known to us in a translation. And if he only could prove his whole metrical theory (I fully appreciate his concession), I should be unfeignedly glad to argue backwards from it.

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[AUTHOR'S NOTE TO P. 320, L. 19.—Prof. Driver's words were about *twenty aphorisms*. As several of these aphorisms are of more than one hemistich, my sentence might be so interpreted as to attribute to him an inaccuracy of which he was not really guilty.]

### ABORTIVE ATTEMPT TO ARREST JESUS.

(JOHN VII. 30-36, 40-52.)

I TAKE these two passages together, although the one precedes and the other follows our Lord's great discourse on the water of life, delivered on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, because I wish to bring into one view a very remarkable incident of that week—I mean the abortive attempt of the authorities to arrest our Lord.

In order to a clear understanding of this occurrence, which marks the opening of a fresh stage in the story, it is needful to notice carefully the relations of Jesus to the court of justice which was called the Sanhedrim.

That body was more, to be sure, than a court of justice. It was likewise the highest council of legislation and of administration in ecclesiastical matters. It was the most venerable relic which the Roman conquerors had left standing of the ancient national constitution of Israel. But in the gospels, the character in which we have to do with the Great Council is that of a judicial body, competent to try the highest causes, though not to execute its own

capital sentences. Various classes of causes fell under its jurisdiction:—grave public disorders or revolts, the misdemeanours of high priests, civil rights in which the public interest was touched, as well as charges of blasphemy and all claims to the prophetic or Messianic office. Of course the case of Jesus fell under one or other of the two last named. In effect, it fell under them both. Jesus notoriously claimed to be a prophet sent from God and armed with Divine authority to teach. Had He claimed no more than that, it would have been the duty of the Council to investigate His claims, and decide on the miraculous signs by which they were supported. It was the fact that He went on to call Himself more than a simple prophet, or even the Messiah—called Himself the Son of God, in some sense which inferred Divine origin and honour, it was this which ultimately raised the accusation on which He was arraigned into one of blasphemy. But at first it had appeared likely that the case would offer itself for judgment merely as one of prophetic signs. At the former festival, when the Bethesda cripple was cured, the circumstance which appeared to invalidate that cure as an evidence of a prophetic call was that it was effected on a Sabbath day; and had the case come at that stage under formal investigation, this is the shape which it would have assumed. In point of fact, however, that earlier miracle was never before the Sanhedrim at all. Informally or unofficially it exerted a most powerful and damaging influence upon the members of the Council. Most of them probably made up their minds at that date against the pretensions of the Nazarene prophet. Many of them began already to plot against Him; and the whole policy of the ruling class from that day onwards had been distinctly hostile. But this was personal prejudice, literally a prejudging of the case; for, down to this Festival of Tabernacles in October before His death, no charge against Jesus had

been formulated in the Council, nor had He ever stood as yet at its bar to be tried.

None the less it was a current expectation in Jerusalem that His re-appearance there would be promptly followed by His arrest. Hence His very first words were met by certain citizens with the remark: "Is not this He whom they are seeking to put to death? See! He is speaking boldly, and they say nothing to Him." Possibly it was the skill which our Lord had shown in timing His arrival, not, like other pilgrims, before the festival week opened, but in the middle of its course, which rendered it more difficult for the authorities to interfere with Him. The rule was that the Sanhedrim held a daily session; but an exception was always made to this rule on Sabbaths and high festivals. On such holidays the court did not sit. Probably this vacation covered the whole seven or eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles. In that case, no formal meeting could be legally summoned till after sundown on the eighth day of the feast. But although Jesus could not be tried till then, He might be apprehended; for during the intervals of the court, the leading officials must have possessed a certain responsibility for public order, with authority, if they saw cause, to arrest supposed offenders. I imagine it was by some such exercise of provisional authority that the officers of the court received their order to arrest Him. The Sanhedrim was a large body of fully seventy members, made up of various orders. The heads of the twenty-four classes into which the priesthood was arranged had seats *ex officiis*; so had the acting pontiff and all ex-high-priests. A second order comprised the so-called "elders," or civil heads of houses, who represented the old tribal princes. A third order was made up of chosen jurisconsults, or men learned in the sacred law, under the name of "Scribes" or rabbis. Now we find that the officers received their instructions from some of

the first named or priestly order of counsellors, who were as a rule Sadducees in belief, and from some of the last, who were as a rule Pharisees (ver. 32).

The order was given on the very day of our Lord's first appearance in the temple. It must have been late in the afternoon, because the step was not taken until the more active Pharisees, mingling with the throng of pilgrims, had time to observe how favourable was the impression which His words had created, and thereafter to concert measures with the leading members of the hierarchy. Obviously the suggestion emanated from the Pharisaic doctors, but was acquiesced in by the priestly officials who were more immediately responsible. Yet it was not so late in the afternoon when this was done, but the constables still found our Lord engaged in public discourse. No sooner had they joined the outskirts of the throng which hung upon His words than His quick eye saw them, and divined their object. Therefore, pausing in His address, He broke out on the instant into ready words, which were a virtual answer to the new step just taken by His adversaries. They were confident, and withal they were melancholy, words. Secure beneath Divine protection till His time should come, Jesus could say as He looked at the officers of justice on His track: "Yet a little while longer am I still to be among you"; but He instantly added, with that sharp prevision of early death which never failed Him, "then I go unto Him that sent Me!" It was not for Himself that this prospect awakened any alarm. For Himself it meant only release—the home-going of a home-sick Son. If even among us the pure of heart grow weary of earth, and turn with a frequent wistfulness to the homestead of the pure, how much more must He have longed to spread His wings like a dove and be at rest! But a Saviour's heart carries without ceasing the burden of others' fate. The close of His life could only mean to His

unbelieving countrymen the close of their noblest opportunity and the loss of their best hope. It meant that they should be left without His word to guide, His arm to shield, who, if they had received Him, would have been more than a Moses in their extremity and more than a David against their enemies. "There comes a day," He mournfully adds (and He means, "you are in your folly hurrying it on"), "when you shall seek Me, your Messiah, and shall not find Me: for where I am going ye cannot come." Like so many of our Lord's suggestive sayings, this language wears an air of obscurity, which veiled its meaning from the frivolous or prejudiced minds that did not care to understand. But from the comments and foolish guesses of His audience, one gathers with what impressiveness these few touching words must have been uttered.

Thus closed in sadness the evening of that first day of His appearance in the temple, 15th or 16th of October (according to Caspari). How the time was spent till the 19th or 20th, when the festival ended, we do not know. Very likely the fragment which tells us that the Lord's nightly place of refuge was the Mount of Olives, and His daily place of resort the temple court (vii. 53-viii. 1), describes the situation correctly enough. But if so, the officers must have hung about His audiences day after day in search of a favourable chance to do their office. At last came the morning of the last and great day when, at the drawing of Siloam water, Jesus startled the throng and made the wide area ring with His wonderful self-witness: "Come unto Me, and drink." Possibly these few words were no more than the opening or the burden of a long discourse. Possibly, too, they were left unexplained in startling brevity and obscurity in order to stimulate inquiry. At any rate, they did not fall in vain. Although it was the time for pilgrims to break up their encampments and make preparations for

leaving, still in every booth the wonderful Prophet was the single theme of conversation. With His singular claims discussion was no less busy than ever, and the opinion of the people was no less divided. Nay, the evangelist permits us to see that on this closing day the controversy over Jesus' pretensions had grown hotter than ever, and that His partisans were both more numerous and more confident than on the day of His first appearance. On that first occasion, the loudest voices had been theirs who shouted, "Thou hast a devil," or theirs who boasted, "We know this fellow whence He comes." Then the well-disposed from Galilee and elsewhere, overborne by the local opinion of the capital, had ventured only such a remonstrance as this: "When the Messiah does appear, will he do more signs than those which up in the north we have seen this Man perform?" Now, however, under the cumulative impression of four days' teaching, the friendly voices are in the ascendant. The least bold of His favourers urge that at the lowest He must surely be the expected Prophet who was to herald Messiah's advent. Others more daring bluntly asserted, "He is Himself the Messiah." No doubt while the well-disposed were thus divided in opinion, there was not wanting a different class to insinuate doubts by bringing up afresh the usual mistake about His birthplace. It is clear that the presumed Galilæan nativity of One who was best known as the Man of Nazareth told heavily against His acceptance with the people, as we shall soon find it urged to His disadvantage by the rabbis as well; for few points in Messianic prediction were more firmly established or more widely understood than this, that the Christ, as a descendant of Bethlehem's royal townsman, should Himself be born in Bethlehem. Those who raised this objection were probably honest though ignorant doubters, and they had some excuse for their hesitation. There was still however a party in the crowd, though overborne for the

moment, who wanted not will, had they only dared, to arrest Him on the spot. But it shows how completely the prevailing sentiment ran in His favour that day, that, not only did none of these zealots lay on Him an unauthorized hand, not even the officers told off on duty for the very purpose had the heart to execute their errand.

From that heated oriental crowd which thronged the pavement of the sacred courts in noisy, loud debate beneath the open sky, we are next carried into the solemn council chamber hard by, where at length, the sacred season over, a hurried session had been convened to try the Prophet. The high priest was the usual president. The members sat around in a semi-circle; the officers were in attendance. No other business intervened to damp the eagerness of the bigoted party, those most hostile to Jesus, at whose instance the warrant had been issued. One hears their cry of disappointment: "Why have ye not brought Him?" Is there not something quite extraordinary about this Man? Not only has He turned the people on His side, the spell of His words has fallen likewise on the very constables. Compelled by their duty to keep for days within earshot of Him, these rough fellows are somehow disarmed by the mingled sweetness and majesty of His discourses, or—shall we say?—by the superhuman pathos and purity of His demeanour! Perhaps by both. His solemn, tender words of searching spirituality, enforced by the charm of a personality wholly unearthly, because sinless, had touched their hearts. A new-born enthusiasm for the Prophet contends with their professional fear to offend their masters, and prevails. No; they can better brave the court's displeasure than the face and the words of that Speaker. On Him they can lay no hand. "Never did a man speak like this One."

The history of Christendom has echoed the testimony extorted from these poor fellows' lips. The spell of Jesus

has been laid upon many a heart since then: on many a gentler and more susceptible heart than theirs, and also upon many rude and dark and evil ones, which it has charmed into mildness and obedience. We too will be sure to feel it, if, with open minds, we subject ourselves to His influence, listen to His teaching, or draw near enough to sit day after day at His gentle feet. Nothing so Divine is to be met with anywhere else, no words so spiritual or so living, no personal character so divinely high in its unselfishness and piety. The road to the heart of Christianity lies in steady familiarity with Christ Himself. "To whom else can we go?" said Peter, after two years of fellowship; "Thou hast the words of life eternal!" After two days only of listening said these men, "Never spake any man like Him!"

It was easy for the councillors, balked of their prey, to browbeat the messengers; easy to taunt them with being silly, ignorant fellows, readily gulled by an impostor. Nor do I know in literature any words which better condense the scorn and conceit which characterize all priestly and privileged orders in their decline than these of the angry Pharisees: "Are ye also led astray? Has any one of the rulers believed on Him, or any one of the Pharisees? But this multitude—this crowd of common people—knowing nothing of the law, are accursed!" It positively makes one shudder to hear such language from lips that professed to be the most pious as well as the most scholarly in Israel! Words more diabolic are hardly on record; certainly no words more saturated with the hierarchical temper! Is this what comes of sacred castes, and guilds which monopolize religious learning and privilege? this full-blown arrogance? this bitter scorn of common men? Alas, yes! I suppose it is. If there is anything human nature cannot bear without deterioration, it is to be a monopolist—of profit, of power, of honour; but there is



one monopoly worse than any of these: it is the presumed monopoly of the favour of the Almighty and of the knowledge of His ways. Let us be right thankful that Christ has for ever abolished in His kingdom the system of *privilege* which wrought such mischief before He came, and has planted here among men a city of God's grace which stands foursquare, and has a gate that is open to every comer from the four quarters of the globe!

But what was to be done? When their anger was spent, it must have grown clear that for the present nothing more could be done. Only the language used in the debate by the fanatical anti-Jesus party made it equally clear that they looked already upon His guilt as a settled question, and that they were prepared to go any length against Him. Now no large body of responsible and experienced men of affairs ever existed which did not number a certain proportion with cool enough heads and fair enough tempers to see that this was the grossest possible violation of justice and even of decency. It was condemning a man before he had been so much as put upon his trial. How many honourable men there were in the Sanhedrim whom the violence of their colleagues outraged, we do not know: possibly a larger number than we have been accustomed to assume. At any rate their views found one—and only one—timid exponent. The same aged councillor who two years before had ventured to interview the young prophet at the very outset of His mission, and who in six short months more was to assist at the burial of His dead body, he was the man among the secret favourers of the Galilæan to interpose a modest *caveat*. No remonstrance could have been more mild; yet such was the rawness and exasperation of the majority, that they turned even on their venerable colleague almost with fury, at least with insolence. They roundly accused him of sympathy with the new Galilæan sect, and with ill-mannered words sent him to the Scriptures to find

out if ever a prophet had come out of Galilee. Unluckily for their own credit, they were too angry to be quite accurate. Otherwise they might have recollected that Jonah of Gath-hepher had been a Galilæan. But what mattered a trifling error of memory when the mouth of a troublesome objector was to be stopped?

The whole scene is extremely painful. It is pitiable, as well as scandalous, to see the graybeards of the State, men clothed with high office, so far forget themselves through the blinding influence of fanatical passion. But for the moment (and this is the important point) the danger had passed. To the precious life of our Redeemer was granted a brief respite, for yet more deeds of mercy, yet more words of truth. Even Jerusalem and its neighbourhood was still comparatively safe ground for a couple of months to come. So perplexed had now become the position of the authorities, that they were not at all likely at present to attempt His arrest again. Hence we find Him next morning calmly pursuing His work in the temple court as if nothing had transpired, nor did He finally quit the vicinity of the capital till after the middle of December.

Safe in the presence of plots, calm in the midst of passions, how perfect an illustration does our blessed Lord afford of that beatitude of the upright man :

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace,  
Whose mind is stayed on Thee:  
Because he trusteth in Thee.”

“He shall cover thee with His feathers,  
And under His wings shalt thou trust:  
His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”

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