

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE BAPTISM OF JESUS: ITS HIGHER MEANING.

(St. Matt. iii. 13-17; St. Mark i. 7-11; St. Luke iii. 21-23; St. John i. 32-34.)

The more we think of it, the better do we seem to understand how that 'Voice crying in the wilderness: Repent! for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,' awakened echoes throughout the land, and brought from city, village, and hamlet strangest hearers. For once, every distinction was levelled. Pharisee and Sadducee, outcast publican and semi-heathen soldier, met here as on common ground. Their bond of union was the common 'hope of Israel' - the only hope that remained: that of 'the Kingdom.' The long winter of disappointment had not destroyed, nor the storms of suffering swept away, nor yet could any plant of spurious growth overshadow, what had struck its roots so deep in the soil of Israel's heart.

That Kingdom had been the last word of the Old Testament. As the thoughtful Israelite, whether Eastern or Western, viewed even the central part of his worship in sacrifices, and remembered that his own Scriptures had spoken of them in terms which pointed to something beyond their offering, he must have felt that 'the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean,' could only 'sanctify to the purifying of the flesh;' that, indeed, the whole body of ceremonial and ritual ordinances 'could not make him that did the service perfect as pertaining to the conscience.' They were only 'the shadow of good things to come;' of 'a new' and 'better covenant, established upon better promises.' It was otherwise with the thought of the Kingdom. Each successive link in the chain of prophecy bound Israel anew to this hope, and each seemed only more firmly welded than the other. And when the voice of prophecy had ceased, the sweetness of its melody still held the people spell-bound, even when broken in the wild fantasies of Apocalyptic literature. Yet that 'root of Jesse,' whence this Kingdom was to spring, was buried deep under ground, as the remains of ancient Jerusalem are now under the desolations of many generations. Egyptian, Syrian, Greek, and Roman had trodden it under foot; the Maccabees had come and gone, and it was not in them; the Herodian kingdom had risen and fallen; Pharisaism, with its learning, had overshadowed thoughts of the priesthood and of prophetism; but the hope of that Davidic Kingdom, of which there was not a single trace or representative left, was even stronger than before. So closely has it been intertwined with the very life of the nation, that, to all believing Israelites, this hope has through the long night of ages, been like that eternal lamp which burns in the darkness of the Synagogue, in front of the heavy veil that shrines the Sanctuary, which holds and conceals the precious rolls of the Law and the Prophets.

This great expectancy would be strung to utmost tension during the pressure of outward circumstances more hopeless than any hitherto experienced. Witness here the ready credence which impostors found, whose promises and schemes were of the wildest character; witness the repeated attempts at risings, which only despair could have prompted; witness, also, the last terrible war against Rome, and, despite the horrors of its end, the rebellion of Bar-Kokhabh, the false Messiah. And now the cry had been suddenly raised: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!' It was heard in the wilderness of Judæa, within a few hours' distance from Jerusalem. No wonder Pharisee and Sadducee flocked to the spot. How many of them came to inquire, how many remained to be baptized, or how many went away disappointed in their hopes of 'the Kingdom,' we know not. But they would not see anything in the messenger that could have given their expectations a rude shock. His was not a call to armed resistance, but to repentance, such as all knew and felt must precede the Kingdom. The hope which he held out was not of earthly possessions, but of purity. There was nothing negative or controversial in what he spoke; nothing to excite prejudice or passion. His appearance would command respect, and his character was in accordance with his appearance. Not rich nor yet Pharisaic garb with wide *Tsitsith*, bound with many-coloured or even priestly girdle, but the old prophet's poor raiment held in by a leathern girdle. Not luxurious life, but one of meanest fare. And then, all in the man was true and real. 'Not a reed shaken by the wind,' but unbendingly firm in deep and settled conviction; not ambitious nor self-seeking, but most humble in his self-estimate, discarding all claim but that of lowliest service, and pointing away from himself to Him Who was to come, and Whom as yet he did not even know. Above all, there was the deepest earnestness, the most utter disregard of man, the most firm belief in what he announced. For himself he sought

nothing; for them he had only one absorbing thought: The Kingdom was at hand, the King was coming - let them prepare!

Such entire absorption in his mission, which leaves us in ignorance of even the details of his later activity, must have given force to his message. And still the voice, everywhere proclaiming the same message, travelled upward, along the winding Jordan which cleft the land of promise. It was probably the autumn of the year 779 (a.u.c.), which, it may be noted, was a Sabbath year. Released from business and agriculture, the multitudes flocked around him as he passed on his Mission. Rapidly the tidings spread from town and village to distant homestead, still swelling the numbers that hastened to the banks of the sacred river. He had now reached what seems to have been the most northern point of his Mission-journey, *Beth-Abara* ('the house of passage,' or 'of shipping') - according to the ancient reading, Bethany ('the house of shipping') - one of the best known fords across the Jordan into Peræa. Here he baptized. The ford was little more than twenty miles from Nazareth. But long before John had reached that spot, tidings of his word and work must have come even into the retirement of Jesus' Home-Life.

It was now, as we take it, the early winter of the year 780. Jesus had waited those months. Although there seems not to have been any personal acquaintance between Jesus and John - and how could there be, when their spheres lay so widely apart? - each must have heard and known of the other. Thirty years of silence weaken most human impressions - or, if they deepen, the enthusiasm that had accompanied them passes away. Yet, when the two met, and perhaps had brief conversation, each bore himself in accordance with his previous history. With John it was deepest, reverent humility - even to the verge of misunderstanding his special Mission, and work of initiation and preparation for the Kingdom. He had heard of Him before by the hearing of the ear, and when now he saw Him, that look of quiet dignity, of the majesty of unsullied purity in the only Unfallen, Unsinning Man, made him forget even the express command of God, which had sent him from his solitude to preach and baptize, and that very sign which had been him by which to recognise the Messiah. In that Presence it only became to him a question of the more 'worthy' to the misunderstanding of the nature of his special calling.

But Jesus, as He had not made haste, so was He not capable of misunderstanding. To Him it was 'the fulfilling of all righteousness.' From earliest ages it has been a question why Jesus went to be baptized. The heretical Gospels put into the mouth of the Virgin-Mother an invitation to go to that baptism, to which Jesus is supposed to have replied by pointing to His own sinlessness, except it might be on the score of ignorance, in regard to a limitation of knowledge. Objections lie to most of the explanations offered by modern writers. They include a bold denial of the fact of Jesus' Baptism; the profane suggestion of collusion between John and Jesus; or such suppositions, as that of His personal sinfulness, of His coming as the Representative of a guilty race, or as the bearer of the sins of others, or of acting in solidarity with His people - or else to separate Himself from the sins of Israel; of His surrendering Himself thereby unto death for man; of His purpose to do honour to the baptism of John; or thus to elicit a token of His Messiahship; or to bind Himself to the observance of the Law; or in this manner to commence His Messianic Work; or to consecrate Himself solemnly to it; or, lastly, to receive the spiritual qualification for it. To these and similar views must be added the latest conceit of *Renan*, who arranges a scene between Jesus, who comes with some disciples, and John, when Jesus is content for a time to grow in the shadow of John, and to submit to a rite which was evidently so generally acknowledged. But the most reverent of these explanations involve a twofold mistake. They represent the Baptism of John as one of repentance, and they imply an ulterior motive in the coming of Christ to the banks of Jordan. But, as already shown, the Baptism of John was in itself only a consecration to, and preparatory initiation for, the new Covenant of the Kingdom. *As applied to sinful men* it was indeed necessarily a 'baptism of repentance;' but not as applied to the sinless Jesus. Had it primarily and always been a 'baptism of repentance,' He could not have submitted to it.

Again, and most important of all, we must not seek for any ulterior motive in the coming of Jesus to this Baptism. *He had no ulterior motive of any kind:* it was an act of simple submissive obedience on the part of the Perfect One - and submissive obedience has no motive beyond itself. It asks no reasons; it cherishes no ulterior purpose. And thus it was 'the fulfilment of all righteousness.' And it was in perfect harmony with all His

previous life. Our difficulty here lies - if we are unbelievers, in thinking simply of the Humanity of the Man of Nazareth; if we are believers, in making abstraction of his Divinity. But thus much, at least, all must concede, that the Gospels always present Him as the God-Man, in an inseparable mystical union of the two natures, and that they present to us the even more mysterious idea of His Self-exinanition, of the voluntary obscuration of His Divinity, as part of His Humiliation. Placing ourselves on this standpoint - which is, at any rate, that of the Evangelic narrative - we may arrive at a more correct view of this great event. It seems as if, in the Divine Self-exinanition, apparently necessarily connected with the perfect human development of Jesus, some corresponding outward event were ever the occasion of a fresh advance in the Messianic consciousness and work. The first event of that kind had been his appearance in the Temple. These two things then stood out vividly before Him - not in the ordinary human, but in the Messianic sense: that the Temple was the House of His Father, and that to be busy about it was His Life-work. With this He returned to Nazareth, and in willing subjection to His Parents fulfilled all righteousness. And still, as He grew in years, in wisdom, and in favour with God and Man, this thought - rather this burning consciousness, was the inmost spring of His Life. *What* this business specially was, He knew not yet, and waited to learn; the *how* and the *when* of His life-consecration, He left unasked and unanswered in the still waiting for Him. And in this also we see the Sinless, the Perfect One.

When tidings of John's Baptism reached His home, there could be no haste on His part. Even with knowledge of all that concerned John's relation to Him, there was in the 'fulfilment of all righteousness' quiet waiting. The one question with Him was, as He afterwards put it: 'The Baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?' (St. Matt. xxi. 25). That question once answered, there could be no longer doubt nor hesitation. He went - not for any ulterior purpose, nor from any other motive than that it *was of God*. He went voluntarily, because it was such - and because 'it became Him' in so doing 'to fulfill all righteousness.' There is this great difference between His going to that Baptism, and afterwards into the wilderness: in the former case, His act was of preconceived purpose; in the latter it was not so, but 'He was driven' - without previous purpose to that effect - under the constraining power 'of the Spirit,' without premeditation and resolve of it; without even knowledge of its object. In the one case He was active, in the other passive; in the one case He fulfilled righteousness, in the other His righteousness was tried. But as, on His first visit to the Temple, this consciousness about His Life-business came to Him in His Father's House, ripening slowly and fully those long years of quiet submission and growing wisdom and grace at Nazareth, so at His Baptism, with the accompanying descent of the Holy Ghost, His abiding in Him, and the heard testimony from His Father, the knowledge came to Him, and, in and with that knowledge, the qualification for the business of His Father's House. In that hour He learned the *when*, and in part the *how*, of His Life-business; the latter to be still farther, and from another aspect, seen in the wilderness, then in His life, in His suffering, and, finally, in His death. In man the subjective and the objective, alike intellectually and morally, are ever separate; in God they are one. What He is, that He wills. And in the God-Man also we must not separate the subjective and the objective. The consciousness of the *when* and the *how* of His Life-business was necessarily accompanied, while He prayed, by the descent, and the abiding in Him, of the Holy Ghost, and by the testifying Voice from heaven. His inner knowledge was real qualification - the forth-bursting of His Power; and it was inseparably accompanied by outward qualification, in what took place at His Baptism. But the first step to all was His voluntary *descent* to Jordan, and in it the fulfilling of all righteousness. His previous life had been that of the Perfect Ideal Israelite - believing, unquestioning, submissive - in preparation for that which, in His thirteenth year, He had learned as its business. The Baptism of Christ was the last act of His private life; and, emerging from its waters in prayer, He learned: *when* His business was to commence, and *how* it would be done. That one outstanding thought, then, 'I must be about My Father's business,' which had been the principle of His Nazareth life, had come to full ripeness when He knew that the cry, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,' was from God. The first great question was now answered. His Father's business was the Kingdom of Heaven. It only remained for Him 'to be about it,' and in this determination He went to submit to its initiatory rite of Baptism. We have, as we understand it, distinct evidence - even if it were not otherwise necessary to suppose this - that 'all the people had been baptized,' when Jesus came to John. Alone the two met - probably for the first time in their lives. Over

that which passed between them Holy Scripture has laid the veil of reverent silence, save as regards the beginning and the outcome of their meeting, which it was necessary for us to know. When Jesus came, John knew Him not. And even when He knew Him, that was not enough. Not remembrance of what he had heard and of past transactions, nor the overwhelming power of that spotless Purity and Majesty of willing submission, were sufficient. For so great a witness as that which John was to bear, a present and visible demonstration from heaven was to be given. Not that God sent the Spirit-Dove, or heaven uttered its voice, for the purpose of giving this as a sign to John. These manifestations were necessary in themselves, and, we might say, would have taken place quite irrespective of the Baptist. But, while necessary in themselves, they were also to be a sign to John. And this may perhaps explain why one Gospel (that of St. John) seems to describe the scene as enacted before the Baptist, whilst others (St. Matthew and St. Mark) tell it as if only visible to Jesus. The one bears reference to 'the record,' the other to the deeper and absolutely necessary fact which underly 'the record.' And, beyond this, it may help us to perceive at least one aspect of what to man is the miraculous: as in itself the higher Necessary, with casual and secondary manifestation to man.

We can understand how what he knew of Jesus, and what he now saw and heard, must have overwhelmed John with the sense of Christ's transcendentally higher dignity, and led him to hesitate about, if not to refuse, administering to Him the rite of Baptism. Not because it was 'the baptism of repentance,' but because he stood in the presence of Him 'the latchet of Whose shoes' he was 'not worthy to loose.' Had he not so felt, the narrative would not have been psychologically true; and, had it not been recorded, there would have been serious difficulty to our reception of it. And yet, withal, in so 'forbidding' Him, and even suggesting his own baptism by Jesus, John forgot and misunderstood his mission. John himself was never to be baptized; he only held open the door of the new Kingdom; himself entered it not, and he that was least in that Kingdom was greater than he. Such lowliest place on earth seems ever conjoined with greatest work for God. Yet this misunderstanding and suggestion on the part of John might almost be regarded as a temptation to Christ. Not perhaps, His first, nor yet this His first victory, since the 'sorrow' of His Parents about His absence from them when in the Temple must to the absolute submissiveness of Jesus have been a temptation to turn aside from His path, all the more felt in the tenderness of His years, and the inexperience of a first public appearance. He then overcame by the clear consciousness of His Life-business, which could not be contravened by any apparent call of duty, however specious. And He now overcame by falling back upon the simple and clear principle which had brought him to Jordan: 'It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.' Thus, simply putting aside, without argument, the objection of the Baptist, He followed the Hand that pointed Him to the open door of 'the Kingdom.'

Jesus stepped out of the baptismal waters 'praying.' One prayer, the only one which He taught His disciples, recurs to our minds. We must here individualise and emphasise in their special application its opening sentences: 'Our Father Which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name! Thy Kingdom come! They will be done in earth, as it is in heaven!' The first thought and the first petition had been the conscious outcome of the Temple-visit, ripened during the long years at Nazareth. The others were now the full expression of His submission to Baptism. He knew His Mission; He had consecrated Himself to it in His Baptism; 'Father Which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.' The unlimited petition for the doing of God's Will on earth with the same absoluteness as in heaven, *was* His self-consecration: the prayer of His Baptism, as the other was its confession. And the 'hallowed be Thy Name' was the eulogy, because the ripened and experimental principle of His Life. *How* this Will, connected with 'the Kingdom,' was to be done by Him, and *when*, He was to learn *after* His Baptism. But strange, that the petition which followed those which must have been on the lips of Jesus in that hour should have been the subject of the *first temptation* or assault by the Enemy; strange also, that the other two temptations should have rolled back the force of the assault upon the two great experiences He had gained, and which formed the burden of the petitions, 'Thy Kingdom come; Hallowed be Thy Name.' Was it then so, that all the assaults which Jesus bore only concerned and tested the reality of a past and already attained experience, save those last in the Garden and on the Cross, which were 'sufferings' by which He 'was made perfect?'

But, as we have already seen, such inward forth-bursting of Messianic consciousness could not be separated from objective qualification for, and testimony to it. As the prayer of Jesus winged heavenwards, His

solemn response to the call of the Kingdom - 'Here am I,' 'Lo, I come to do Thy Will' - the answer came, which at the same time was also the predicted sign to the Baptist. Heaven seemed cleft, and in bodily shape like a dove, the Holy Ghost descended on Jesus, remaining on him. It was as if, symbolically, in the words of St. Peter, that Baptism had been a new flood, and He Who now emerged from it, the Noah - or rest, and comfort-bringer - Who took into His Ark the dove bearing the olive-branch, indicative of a new life. Here, at these waters, was the Kingdom, into which Jesus had entered in the fulfilment of all righteousness; and from them he emerged as its Heaven-designated, Heaven-qualified, and Heaven-proclaimed King. As such he had received the fulness of the Spirit for His Messianic Work - a fulness abiding in Him - that out of it we might receive, and grace for grace. As such also the voice from Heaven proclaimed it, to Him and to John: 'Thou art ('this is') My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.' The ratification of the great Davidic promise, the announcement of the fulfilment of its predictive import in Psalm ii. was God's solemn declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, His public proclamation of it, and the beginning of Jesus' Messianic work. And so the Baptist understood it, when he 'bare record' that He was 'the Son of God.'

Quite intelligible as all this is, it is certainly miraculous; not, indeed, in the sense of contravention of the Laws of Nature (illogical as that phrase is), but in that of having nothing analogous in our present knowledge and experience. But would we not have expected the supra-empirical, the directly heavenly, to attend such an event - that is, if the narrative itself be true, and Jesus what the Gospels represent Him? To reject, therefore, the narrative because of its supra-empirical accompaniment seems, after all, a sad inversion of reasoning, and begging the question. But, to go a step further: if there be no reality in the narrative, whence the invention of the legend? It certainly had no basis in contemporary Jewish teaching; and, equally certainly, it would not have spontaneously occurred to Jewish minds. Nowhere in Rabbinic writings do we find any hint of a Baptism of the Messiah, nor of a descent upon Him of the Spirit in the form of a dove. Rather would such views seem, *à priori*, repugnant to Jewish thinking. An attempt has, however, been made in the direction of identifying two traits in this narrative with Rabbinic notices. The 'Voice from heaven' has been represented as the '*Bath-Qol*,' or 'Daughter-Voice,' of which we read in Rabbinic writings, as bringing heaven's testimony or decision to perplexed or hardly bestead Rabbis. And it has been further asserted, that among the Jews 'the dove' was regarded as the emblem of the Spirit. In taking notice of these assertions some warmth of language may be forgiven. We make bold to maintain that no one, who has impartially examined the matter, could find any real analogy between the so-called *Bath-Qol*, and the 'Voice from heaven' of which record is made in the New Testament. However opinions might differ, on one thing all were agreed: the *Bath-Qol* had come *after* the voice of prophecy and the Holy Ghost had ceased in Israel, and, so to speak, had taken, their place. *But at the Baptism of Jesus the descent of the Holy Ghost was accompanied by the Voice from Heaven.* Even on this ground, therefore, it could not have been the Rabbinic *Bath-Qol*. But, further, this 'Daughter-Voice' was regarded rather as the echo of, than as the Voice of God itself (Toseph. Sanh. xi. 1). The occasions on which this 'Daughter-Voice' was supposed to have been heard are so various and sometimes so shocking, both to common and to moral sense, that a comparison with the Gospels is wholly out of the question. And here it also deserves notice, that references to this *Bath-Qol* increase the farther we remove from the age of Christ.

We have reserved to the last the consideration of the statement, that among the Jews the Holy Spirit was presented under the symbol of a dove. It is admitted, that there is no support for this idea either in the Old Testament or in the writings of Philo (*Lücke*, Evang. Joh. i. pp. 425, 426); that, indeed, such animal symbolism of the Divine is foreign to the Old Testament. But all the more confident appeal is made to Rabbinic writings. The suggestion was, apparently, first made by *Wetstein*. It is dwelt upon with much confidence by *Gfrörer* and others, as evidence of the mythical origin of the Gospels; it is repeated by *Wünsche*, and even reproduced by writers who, had they known the real state of matters, would not have lent their authority to it. Of the *two* passages by which this strange hypothesis is supported, that in the Targum on Cant. ii. 12 may at once be dismissed, as dating considerably after the close of the Talmud. There remains, therefore, only the one passage in the Talmud, which is generally thus quoted: 'The Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters, like a dove.' That this quotation is incomplete, omitting the most important part, is only a light charge against it. For, if fully made, it would only the more clearly be seen to be *inapplicable*. The passage (Chag. 15 a) treats of the

supposed distance between ‘the upper and the lower waters,’ which is stated to amount to only three fingerbreadths. This is proved by a reference to Gen. i. 2, where the Spirit of God is said to brood over the face of the waters, ‘just as a dove broodeth over her young without touching them.’ It will be noticed, that the comparison is not between the Spirit and the dove, but between the *closeness* with which a dove broods over her young without touching them, and the supposed proximity of the Spirit to the lower waters without touching them. But, if any doubt could still exist, it would be removed by the fact that in a parallel passage, the expression used is not ‘dove’ but ‘that bird.’ Thus much for this oft-misquoted passage. But we go farther, and assert, that the dove was *not* the symbol of the Holy Spirit, but that of Israel. As such it is so universally adopted as to have become almost historical. If, therefore, Rabbinic illustration of the descent of the Holy Spirit with the visible appearance of a dove must be sought for, it would lie in the acknowledgment of Jesus as the ideal typical Israelite, the Representative of His People.

The lengthened details, which have been necessary for the exposure of the mythical theory, will not have been without use, if they carry to the mind the conviction that this history had no basis in existing Jewish belief. Its origin cannot, therefore, be rationally accounted for, except by the answer which Jesus, when He came to Jordan, gave to that grand fundamental question: ‘The Baptism of John, whence was it? From Heaven, or of men?’