

## ARTICLE IX.

## CRITICAL NOTE.

## THE PENITENT THIEF.

[Mr. Barton's theory concerning the penitent thief<sup>1</sup> is not satisfactory to all our correspondents. We give place to the essential features of a single rejoinder of special value.—EDS.]

1. AN important indication of the penitent thief's character is given by Luke (xxiii. 32, 33, 39), in the use of the word "malefactor" (*κακούργος*), which means a plain, unlimited evil-doer. Three times does this historian employ this word in writing of both men who were crucified with Christ; but nowhere else in the New Testament is it to be found, except in Second Timothy. The nature of the evil-doing is not determined by the word, nor in the present use of this author. If any inference is made, we must make it, for Luke is attempting no argument on the character of these "malefactors."

2. A second hint as to the character of this man is given by Matthew in the use of the word "robber," "two robbers (*λησται*) are crucified with him." These are the same men that Luke termed evil-doers; now they are robbers (Matt. xxvii. 38). So, also, in Mark (xv. 27).

The character of a robber we must infer from the usage of the word, which, although not frequent, occurs several times in the Gospels, and once in a Pauline epistle.

3. Again, according to Matthew (xxi. 13), Jesus addresses the traders in the Temple, with words of Jeremiah: "Ye make it a *den of robbers*"; and to those who come into Gethsemane to take him, he says: "Are ye come out as against a *robber* with swords and staves?" (xxvi. 55), while in the very next chapter (xxvii. 38) he relates, "Then are there crucified with him two robbers." Certainly the phrase, "*a den of robbers*," is very malodorous. The "den" (*σπήλαιον*) is the favorite abode of a class of people who fear the light.

4. The habits and reputation of the robber are evil. The chief-priest's servant and his band armed themselves with swords and staves, exactly as if going out in search of a robber, when they went to find Jesus of Nazareth. They went as if to encounter a man whose reputation had made him the terror of the country around. "There was no need in coming thus to take me," Christ would say. "I am no robber." "I was

<sup>1</sup> See An Appeal from a Verdict of History, pp. 100-116.

teaching daily with you in the temple." The *robber* was thus a *desperado*—a terrible, dreaded foe of society; to judge by the figure of our Lord.

5. The Parable of the Good Samaritan sheds further light on the habits of this class of men. The "certain man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho" "fell among robbers," who "stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead." These marauders are not spoken of as if worse than others of their order; and there is no fact that leads us to suppose that the companions of Christ in his sufferings were men above their fellows, or superior to their profession.

6. The robber is to be compared with the thief. It has been supposed that these two robbers were superior men, because above another order of social pests, known in the New Testament as "*thieves*" (*κλέπτης*). Our Master exhorts men not to lay up for themselves treasures on earth, where "*thieves* break through and steal" them; but the rather "in heaven, where thieves do not break through and steal." And again he remarks that "if the master of the house had known in what watch the *thief* was coming, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken through." "He that entereth not by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber." "All that came before me are thieves and robbers." "The thief cometh not, but that he may steal, and kill, and destroy"; not, perhaps, that Christ is trying to discriminate *thief* and *robber*, but in this last phrase is rather, by a single word, describing those that "climbed up some other way" and those who "came before him," i. e., "*thieves and robbers*." Hence we must see that the *thief* was a person who prowled around the houses of the people, breaking into their houses at midnight, stealing their treasures; going even so far as to kill, perchance, the master of the house in the attempt.

But from every other use of this word *thief*, excepting John x. 10, just mentioned, we learn that he was one who had less boldness than the *robber*; that he was less fierce, that the home and town, rather than the highway, were the scene of his operations; that he lived amidst more densely populated communities, instead of in *dens* and desert places. The thief caught his victim while asleep; his robber friend faced him openly. St. Paul described one of his perils as from robbers who infested the roads over which he toured in his wide missionary journeys. Thieves made no trouble for him. Hence it would appear that a robber is a big, bold thief. In this sense the robber is doubtless superior to the thief, although it were hard to find herein very conclusive evidence of any special excellence of character.

7. Reference to Barabbas also sheds some light on the moral worth of the class called "malefactor," "robber." For "Barabbas was a robber." The full name of this man is believed to be "Jesus Barabbas." The name would imply that he was a rabbi's son, but of this there is no certainty, for "Barabbas is a common name in the Talmud." His name

signifies, of course, "son of a rabbi," just as "Jesus" signifies "Saviour"; but on this account the one is no more an exact account of lineal descent than is the other of character or mission. And even if the robber Jesus Barabbas were son of a rabbi, learned and cultured, all this could hardly atone for his murderous deed. Luke does not seem to be quoting any authority, but in his plain narrative style tells at first hand that this man whom Pilate released in Jesus' stead, was one "who for a certain insurrection made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison." Hence this man who is conjectured to belong to the same band with the crucified thieves, was in prison on two counts; one "*insurrection*," one "*murder*." The history gives but little, if any, real ground for thinking that the *murder* occurred in connection with the insurrection; they *may* have happened months or even years apart. But whether this is so or not, the two facts are specified as accounting for Barabbas' imprisonment. The offense was therefore political *and* criminal, against the state and against society.

If now the dying robbers belonged to the Barabbas band, they were, quite likely, superior to him in few moral qualities. This insurrection is not represented as other than a robber-affair, instigated by a class that had been bold enough to leave their hiding-places in the hills and deserts, to conduct a perilous venture with their fellows in the crowded, inflammable population of an oriental city.

8. Another indication of the character of the so-called *penitent thief*, is furnished us by himself. In no way did he justify himself, either directly or indirectly. Contrarily, the robber emphasized to his fellow-sufferer the justness of their punishment; that it was commensurate with their crime. "We receive the due reward of our deeds." We suffer "justly, indeed." Then according to his own words the penalty was commensurate with their common crime. Therefore the acts for which they were suffering were very serious. The malefactor did not speak like a Jewish patriot, uttered no word to suggest his loyalty to country or race. By his own testimony, and Jewish training, "the reward" (death) was "*due*" "our deeds" (murder).

Notice also the "malefactor's" contrast of himself with Jesus as to guilt and innocence. "This man," said he, "hath done nothing amiss." Had it been possible, would not the robber make a similar declaration of himself and of his companion, whom he rebuked! Surely this man could expect to gain no advantage of any sort by making his case worse than it really was. If Jesus and these poor men were suffering for the same crime, for insurrection against Roman authority, or other, where would be any opportunity for such contrast? Jesus had occasion to complain of injustice; the others found no ground for any complaint, but the rather set their own seal to their doom.

9. *His Prayer* gives us further evidence for a reasonable decision on the character of this particular robber. For, if there is a time when a

man will not juggle with words, it must be at the moment when soul and body are at the height of conflict for dissolution. And so we incline to think that the last words of this malefactor to Jesus Christ disclose better than any others, that his present attitude towards the expiring Saviour is the most reliable witness of all on the question of moral worthiness or unworthiness.

One of the malefactors called to Jesus: "Art not thou the Christ? Save thyself and us." And of these words a recent writer has said that, they display a "most wonderful faith." But Luke (xxiii. 39 f.) makes it quite impossible for any one to hold such an opinion, however willing one might be to be generous with these men. The error of treating these words as a prayer does not appear until we read the narrative. Apart, they do sound like a humble petition unto the Christ, do seem to show sweet humility and "wonderful faith." But when we read that "one of the malefactors which were hanged *railed* on him, saying, Art not thou the Christ? Save thyself and us," we hear other tones than those of supplication, we hear the scornful lip, and behold the evil eye. Then, too, these words were probably those of the *impenitent* thief, and for the spirit and tone of them "the other answered, and rebuking him said, Dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

Thereupon we are introduced to the prayer of this now respectful robber. "And he said: Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy Kingdom." Hitherto "*they* that were crucified with him reproached him." But, since, a change was taking place in the mind and soul of one. And now, turning himself towards the world's Sin-Bearer, this self-confessed, self-condemned murderer truly prays.

Between the period of reproach and that of genuine prayer there began to be laid the foundation of faith. It was from the Spirit that led one to reprove another, from confession of their common sin, from profession of Jesus' perfection,—"from this basis of fact," says Edersheim, "the penitent rapidly rose to the height of faith." We are here reminded of Peter, when, suddenly and truly beholding the superhuman character of Jesus at the draught of fishes, he cried, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Now it is that worthiness is awakened in the dying malefactor; that is, the only real worthiness that God accepts. His sense of sin, just confessed (Luke xxiii. 41), opens up to him his need of the *Man* whom he had just declared to be sinless. *Therefore* to him he cries: "Jesus, remember me." And the cry comes upon us suddenly, unexpectedly, just as it came from his lips. It must have proved to the onlookers a mighty witness for the Saviour, and doubtless played *some* part in the centurion's admission as "he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man."

The abruptness of the dying criminal's prayer shows the *sudden change* that had occurred in his character. Whether the material of this brief

petition had been gathered before the event we study, or at the crucifixion, we are unable to tell, but the miserable man had full opportunity to get the content of his prayer there on Golgotha.

During the few hours of his presence at Calvary, prior to insensibility, before and after being nailed to his cross, the robber had witnessed the *Center* of attraction; His attitude, His words; the cries and bitter insults of the excited spectators, official and other.

Here he could have learned for the first time the name of this third victim, separating himself from his fellow. Matthew and John say that the name "Jesus" was inscribed in three languages upon the cross above that Dear Head. "This is *Jesus*," "read many of the Jews," says John. And if the robber did not read for himself, others must have read it for him. Jesus of Nazareth's name must have been upon many lips. To most of them he was neither Christ nor Lord—only *Jesus*, the Nazarene.

How beautiful his appeal for consideration of Jesus. "Remember me." The dying man has somehow had his confidence or his hope fixed on the Suffering Saviour. Could this all have been done for him during the few closing hours of his life on earth? Let us see. His language implies a conception of the gracious, merciful spirit of the Fellow-Victim; it implies the idea of Jesus' magnificence and magnanimity of character. "Remember me," regard *me* with favor; do not forget *me*; in kindness and mercy deal with *me* (*μνησθητι μου*).

Did the dying thief probably learn from the cross that he could expect favor of this sort from the maligned, despised, pitiful Object at his side? He was almost sure to note that "when he was reviled, he reviled not again," that he had no controversy, no quarrel, no unlovely word for his chief foes.

He could scarcely fail to hear that God-like prayer of the blood-stained Lamb of God. To their jibes and insults, he hears returned the soul-rending petition to this *Man's* Heavenly Father: "Father, forgive them."

Surely the unspeakable patience, the indestructible love, the divine mercy, of the Man of Sorrows, as the robber saw them might easily be conceived to persuade *him* to ask in faith for Jesus' favor. With Dr. Godet we think that "especially Christ's prayer for His executioners had taken hold of the robber's conscience and heart"; and also that it imparted to him faith to venture his cry for pardon, favor, help, salvation—all, whatever his poor soul and miserable predicament might require.

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