

THE MINISTRY OF THE BAPTIST

CHAPTER II

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ALL the four Evangelists agree in representing the ministry of the Baptist as a deliberate preparation made by him for the coming of Another after him greater than himself. In all the Gospels the Baptist comes forward in fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight" (or "make ready") "the way of the Lord." And in all he points to Another who is to come after him, the latchet of whose shoes he is not worthy to unloose.* The scene of the Baptist's preaching is the valley of the

* Matthew has a slightly different expression.

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Jordan, and in the river Jordan he baptized those who came to him. In the Fourth Gospel a particular place named Bethany (i. 28) is mentioned, "These things were done in Bethany beyond Jordan where John was baptizing." This particularity of statement on the part of this Evangelist is noteworthy and is easily explicable if he were himself, as the narrative seems to suggest, a disciple of John. On this point more will be said presently. But we must throughout our investigation into the question whether our Gospel does or does not show true signs of being the work of a personal disciple and eyewitness, notice particularly those points in which the author gives details, lacking in the other Evangelists, in the scenes and events described both by him and by some or all of them. We draw attention, then, at this point to the particular mention of Bethany beyond Jordan.

But we must pass now to consider the

broad outlines of the story of the preaching and baptism of John in the Synoptists and the Fourth Gospel.

The account given in St. Mark is very short. He tells how John came in fulfilment of the words of prophecy, and baptized in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. He then tells of the crowds that went to his baptism, and gives a brief description of the appearance of the Baptist, who was clothed with camel's hair and had a leathern girdle about his loins, and he adds that his food was locusts and wild honey. He mentions the Baptist's proclamation of Him who was to come after him, mightier than he, and for whom he was unworthy to perform the most menial office. This One, when He came, would confer a baptism greater than the Baptist's. For while the Baptist baptized with water, this Greater One to come would baptize with the Holy Ghost. The Evange-

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list then passes on to tell of the baptism of Jesus by John. He records how, as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw the heavens rent asunder and the Spirit as a dove descending upon Him: and a voice came out of the heavens, Thou art my beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased.

The other two Synoptists utilise Mark, and they have information to give besides, derived from some other source. St. Matthew tells of Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John's baptism, and of the Baptist's insistence in their case on a true repentance. Claims of privilege, such as "We have Abraham to our father," were insufficient. St. Luke gives this same warning of the Baptist, though he speaks of it as addressed to the multitudes. He also gives details of the Baptist's requirements from special classes who came to his baptism asking advice: What shall we do? We may remark, too, that St. Luke represents the Baptist's reference to Him that

should come after him as being made at a time when the people were in expectation, and all men reasoned in their hearts concerning John, whether haply he were the Christ.

We now turn to the account given of these things in the Fourth Gospel. We will remark first of all that while the Evangelist, like the Synoptists, finds a place in his story of the Baptist for the words of the prophet Isaiah, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord," he does not simply say, as do the Synoptists, that the Baptist came in fulfilment of, or in accordance with, this prophecy, but he represents the Baptist as applying these words to himself. He tells of a mission sent to the Baptist from the religious leaders of the nation in Jerusalem requiring him to declare himself. The Jews, we read, sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed and

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denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou the prophet?* And he answered, No. They said, therefore, unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? It was then that the Baptist replied: I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.

Now we can gather from a later portion of the Synoptic narrative that the religious authorities at Jerusalem did not acknowledge the Baptist. For when they questioned the authority of Jesus to cleanse the temple, and indeed challenged Him with the question, by what authority He did these things, and He put to them the counter question, whether the baptism of John was from heaven or of men, they found themselves in a dilemma. They

* For the reference here see Westcott's Commentary.

feared to say that it was of men because the people took John for a prophet. And if they said that it was from heaven, then Jesus would ask them, Why then did ye not believe him? It is clear, then, that they had not believed in the mission of the Baptist. Thus this deputation to the Baptist of which we read in the Fourth Gospel is rendered a probable event by what we find recorded in another connection in the Synoptists.

And when we come to reflect on the matter, we can see that the application of the words of Isaiah to the Baptist which we find in the Synoptists is more likely than not to have been made by himself first of all rather than by others who regarded him as divinely sent. If the Baptist in his humility had made his own this appellation—a voice crying in the wilderness—we can well understand the application of it to him in the Synoptists, whereas it is not easy to understand that those

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who believed in his divine mission and took him for a prophet sent by God would have applied to him a description which might seem derogatory. I find, then, in his account of the mission from Jerusalem to the Baptist, recorded by our Evangelist, a mark that we have here to do with the words of one who knew. And we shall be able, I think, to go further than this and to say that we have here the record of one who heard and saw the things which he narrates. But of this presently.

We referred above to the fact that St. Luke places the Baptist's references to Him that was mightier, and who was to come after him, at the time of expectation on the part of the people when men were questioning in their hearts whether John was the Christ. We may notice now that with this accords the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. The members of the mission sent from Jerusalem having obtained from the Baptist the confession that he

was not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, proceed to question him, and ask him why then he is engaged in baptizing. And John answered them: "I baptize with water: in the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not, even He that cometh after me, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to unloose."

It may perhaps appear strange that the fourth Evangelist, if he had accurate knowledge of the work of the Baptist, should not mention the baptism of Jesus which all the Synoptists record. But silence on the part of a writer as to any particular event does not prove that he did not know of it, and indeed a careful reading of our Gospel seems to show that the Evangelist did know of the baptism of Jesus, and that, though he does not record it explicitly, it is very clearly implied in what he says. We read that on the day after the Baptist's reception of the deputation from Jerusalem, he saw Jesus coming unto him, and

said, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is become before me: for He was before me. And I knew Him not; but that He should be made manifest to Israel, for this cause came I baptizing with water." And John bare witness, saying, "I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him. And I knew Him not: but He that sent me to baptize with water, He said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon Him, the same is He that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

This section of the narrative requires careful consideration. In the first place we note that it implies all that the Synoptists say about the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist. "John bare witness, saying, I have beheld the Spirit

descending as a dove out of heaven, and it abode upon Him." It may be said that the Evangelist does not associate this descent of the Spirit upon Jesus with His baptism. But surely this is implied very clearly in the words that follow: "He that sent me to baptize with water, He said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending and abiding upon Him, the same is He that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit." The words suggest that the descent of the Spirit upon the chosen One was to take place in the course of the administration of the baptism. *He that sent the Baptist to baptize with water* had given him a sign—a sign which (as the association of ideas seems to imply) was to take place at the baptism of Him thus marked out.

Again we note that if our Evangelist says nothing of the voice from heaven which was heard at the baptism of Jesus, this, too, is implicit in his story. That voice, according to the Synoptists, had declared:

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This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And here in the Fourth Gospel we have the testimony of the Baptist: I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. This title "Son of God" may well not have meant to the Baptist all that we read into it, but at any rate it implied Christhood or Messiahship, and the use of it by the Baptist is a faithful witness on his part to the voice from heaven, if indeed that voice had proclaimed "This is my beloved Son."

We may, then, without forcing the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, say that the baptism of Jesus, the descent of the Spirit upon Him in the form of a dove at His baptism, and the voice from heaven, declaring Him to be the Son of God, are all implicit in it. But we must face the objection that in our Gospel the Baptist says that he knew Him not until the sign was fulfilled, whereas in the narrative of

Matthew John is represented as saying to Jesus, who came to be baptized by him: "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." This seems to show that the Baptist already knew the superiority of Jesus—knew, in fact, that He was the one to whom the Baptist had pointed, and for whom he had prepared the way.

There are two possible explanations of the difficulty which here confronts us. In the first place it might be said that it is extremely likely that the Baptist was already acquainted with Jesus, seeing that, according to St. Luke, their mothers were related to one another. The Baptist may well have been impressed by the character and personality of Jesus, and may even have had a presentiment, which was now to be converted into a certainty by the fulfilment of the sign that had been given

to him, that this was indeed He for whose coming he was preparing men's hearts. Or, secondly, it might be said that we cannot be expected to accept every statement in Matthew as true in historical detail. The Evangelist may be expressing what seemed to Christians a very proper sentiment on the part of the Baptist. Such an explanation would, I confess, be no shock to me, and would in no way upset my faith in the general reliability of the Gospel narrative. I regard the First Gospel as principally valuable to us for the sayings of Jesus which it records rather than for its statements of historical fact. And certainly I cannot discredit the very plain statement of the Baptist recorded for us in the Fourth Gospel, for I believe on other grounds that we have here the witness of a personal disciple of the Baptist. I cannot accept it as a principle of criticism of the Gospels that the Synoptists are to be preferred in every detail, and that the

Fourth Gospel is to be discredited if anywhere its statements do not accord with those of the other three. The value which we attach to the Fourth Gospel will depend in large measure on whether or not we are persuaded by a careful examination of its contents as a whole that it is the testimony of one who knew, who had seen and who had heard. This is its claim, and it is this claim that we are engaged in examining and carefully weighing. We have so far made but little way in the task we have set ourselves. The conclusion which every one must form for himself will depend upon a careful examination of the whole evidence. Weak points in it, if such there seem to be, must be noted by each inquirer. An honest attempt will be made in these pages to face all the facts of the case and a purely *ex parte* statement of it will be carefully avoided. The reader has already understood that it is our object to defend the traditional authorship of the Gospel, but

we would be preserved in our task from any suppression of the facts.

We now return to the narrative of the Evangelist. We have considered the witness of John to himself as a mere Voice to proclaim One who was to come after, and we have seen him in the presence of this Other whom he declared to be the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. I know that it has been said that this is the language of later Christian devotion and worship, and that it is an anachronism to put such a saying into the mouth of the Baptist. But there is nothing incredible to one who believes John the Baptist to have been a Heaven-sent prophet to prepare the way of the Christ, that he should have had an insight, divinely given, into the sin-bearing office that this Other would have to assume.

This testimony of the Baptist to "the Lamb of God" is repeated on the following day when Jesus again walked by, as John stood

with two of his disciples. And the two disciples, we are told, heard him thus speak, and they followed Jesus. "And Jesus turned and beheld them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? And they said unto him, Rabbi, where abidest Thou? He saith unto them, Come, and ye shall see. They came, therefore, and saw where He abode; and they abode with Him that day: it was about the tenth hour." We notice this particularity of statement, which is intelligible if the writer had himself a share in these events. And that he had a share in them has been surmised with good reason from the words which follow: "One of the two that heard John speak and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother." The other he does not name, and, as we have seen, it is according to his manner to preserve his own anonymity. It has been inferred, then, that the other was John himself, the writer of the Gospel.

A difficulty, however, arises at once, for

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it would seem from the Synoptists that the call by Jesus of John, the son of Zebedee, to discipleship came at a later time, as did also that of Andrew and his brother Simon Peter, both of whom are associated with Jesus at this earlier stage in the Fourth Gospel. For we read that Andrew "findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah (which is, being interpreted, Christ). And he brought him to Jesus, who looked upon him and said, Thou art Simon the son of John: thou shalt be called Cephas (which is, by interpretation, Peter)."

Now this whole passage has seemed to the opponents of the Johannine authorship of the Gospel to present serious and insurmountable historical difficulties; for not only, as we have said already, does it antedate the call to Simon Peter and Andrew (and John, too, if he be intended by that other disciple), but it antedates too by a long way the recognition, by

these disciples of Jesus, of His Messiahship. It is not to be denied that these are serious difficulties which must be properly faced, but I doubt whether they are as formidable as is often imagined.

Let us at first put on one side the difficulty presented by the disciples' too early acknowledgment of the Messiahship of Jesus and consider the question of the time of their call to be disciples.

Mark's account is as follows: "And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they left the nets and followed him. And going on a little further, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending the nets. And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee

in the boat with the hired servants, and went after him." Matthew borrows his account from Mark, and adds nothing to it. The only small point of difference is that Matthew omits mention of the hired servants. St. Luke, however, gives a much fuller account of the call of these disciples at the sea of Galilee and places it in connection with a miraculous draught of fishes (St. Luke v. 1-11). I think it cannot be denied that the fuller narrative of St. Luke here is to be preferred to the very cursory and, as it stands, hardly intelligible account given by Mark, and copied by Matthew. It seems extremely unlikely that Jesus was unknown to Peter before the call at the sea of Galilee to become a fisher of men. Indeed in St. Luke the order of events is so given that the healing of Simon's wife's mother in the house of Simon precedes the call associated in that Gospel with the miraculous draught of fishes. It is true that in Mark the order of events

is reversed, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law follows the call by the sea of Galilee. Historical probability is, however, all in favour of some previous acquaintance of Peter with the Master before he would be ready to obey the call to follow Him and to become a fisher of men, and the account given in Mark of these things is altogether too fragmentary to enable us to get a true perspective of the progress of events.

We may say, then, that the Synoptic narratives, collectively considered, do not exclude the possibility of a prior acquaintance of Peter and Andrew and James and John with Jesus before their call by the sea of Galilee: and this acquaintance may not have been lacking in intimacy; and an informal discipleship and partial companionship may well have preceded the final call which followed upon the miraculous draught of fishes. Then the disciples threw in their lot with Jesus to

be trained by Him to become fishers of men.

Apart from the fact that St. Luke in his account places the healing of Simon's mother-in-law before the call at the lake (an order of events, however, reversed in Mark), we may observe that the reply of Peter to Jesus, when the command to let down the nets was given, suggests previous knowledge of, and confidence in, Jesus: "Master, we have toiled all night, and took nothing, but at thy word I will let down the nets."

So, then, we cannot discredit the Fourth Gospel on the ground that it brings these future apostles into a position of discipleship under Jesus in the neighbourhood of the Jordan and before the ministry in Galilee. But there is the further difficulty. It has been objected that the recognition and confession of the Messiahship of Jesus on the part of these disciples in the Fourth Gospel is premature. It is said that according to

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the Synoptists this recognition did not come until a later stage, when Peter made his great confession at Cæsarea Philippi (Mark viii. 27, Matt. xvi. 13, Luke ix. 18). And further, it is pointed out that when the confession was made, Jesus strictly charged His disciples not to make it known that He was the Christ, whereas in the Fourth Gospel the claim to Messiahship is everywhere prominent and public.

Now if it be the case, as the Fourth Gospel represents it to be, that some of the first disciples of Jesus were led to Him by the influence of the Baptist, who directed them to Jesus as the One for whose coming he had been preparing, it is almost inconceivable that, even at that early stage, there should not have been some sort of recognition, or at any rate hope, of His Messiahship. Surely the Baptist knew that he had come to prepare the way for the Messiah, nor did he make any secret of the fact. And the story of

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the baptism of Jesus as we have it in the Synoptists finds a place for the assertion of His Messianic office; for the voice from heaven proclaims Him to be the Son of God, which title at least implied Messiahship, whatever further depth of meaning it might contain. There is, of course, the question: For whom was this voice meant? Who heard it? It is not quite clear from the narratives of Mark and Matthew whether it was Jesus or John who saw the Spirit like a dove descend, and it is not said who heard the voice, but only that there was a voice. In Mark the voice addresses Jesus: Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased. In Matthew it speaks of, but not to, Jesus: This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. St. Luke makes the voice address Jesus, but he does not say who heard it, nor who saw the Spirit. He merely says that the heaven opened and the Holy Spirit came down in bodily

form like a dove upon him, and a voice came out of heaven: Thou art My beloved Son, &c.

According to the Fourth Gospel it was the Baptist who saw the Spirit descend on Jesus, and there is no reason to suppose that any other bystanders witnessed the sign. It was for the Baptist; and it must have been from him that the story of the baptism of Jesus came. He saw and he bore witness that this was the Son of God (John i. 34). It is a mistake to suppose that this title thus applied to Jesus at this early stage in the Fourth Gospel goes beyond anything which we find at the corresponding stage in the Synoptists. In their pages Jesus is declared thus early to be the Son of God, and there is no suggestion that this was a title to be kept secret. Nor is there anything at all improbable in the statement of the Fourth Evangelist that the Baptist testified that he had seen the sign of the descent of the Spirit like a

dove, and that He bore witness to the Son of God.

Is it unlikely, then, we ask, that some of the disciples of the Baptist, having been thus directed by him to Jesus, should have gone over to Him in the belief that He was the Messiah? If Andrew believed the testimony of the Baptist, would it not be quite natural that he should say to his brother Simon, as in the Fourth Gospel he is represented as saying, We have found the Messiah? As yet he believes Him to be the Messiah only on the testimony of another. His is at present a discovery of hope rather than an assurance of faith, which could only come later on when he had learnt to know his Master. Perhaps those first disciples were too ready at first to call Jesus Messiah without realising what it meant. And we find Jesus almost rebuking Nathanael for a too hasty confession. When Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus, who showed by His words addressed

to Nathanael that He knew what he had been doing and of what he had been thinking and perhaps also reading, Nathanael is so struck by this that he acknowledges that Philip must have been right when he said to him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write. He too readily confesses: "Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art King of Israel." Then comes what sounds like a rebuke from Jesus: "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these." And then he adds—and the plural pronoun seems to show that the words, though addressed to Nathanael, were meant not for him alone but for his fellow-disciples too: "Verily verily, I say unto you, ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." So, then, until they knew Jesus to be the true link between earth and

heaven, the one Mediator between God and man, they were incapable of making a full confession of faith. If their hope was already set on Him, they must pass through much discipline and experience before they could be said to know Him.

We may say, then, that the faith of these early disciples of Jesus, who had passed to Him from the Baptist, was, at this early stage, of a very elementary character, and I do not think that if the first chapter of our Gospel be carefully read, it can be said that the Evangelist represents it as otherwise. There is plenty of room left for development, and that could only come by their personal intercourse with the Master. What gives special value to the great confession of St. Peter at the later stage is that it proceeds from personal knowledge. He is not repeating what another has said to him. Flesh and blood have not revealed it to him, but the Father in heaven. It is an act of personal

faith, proceeding from personal knowledge and experience. This could not be said of these confessions, really little better than expressed hopes, which are recorded in the first chapter of St. John. They are worthy to be recorded, not because of what they were then, but because of what they developed into later.

It may perhaps seem useless to speculate why our Lord should have made use of the figure of the ladder in His conversation with Nathanael, but something may be said on this point in passing. It would appear from the conversation that Nathanael's thoughts had been running on the patriarch Jacob. It is difficult otherwise to understand the bearing of the greeting of Jesus: "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile," and Nathanael's answer, which seems to show that Jesus had read what was going on in his mind, Whence knowest thou Me? We learn from what follows that Nathanael

had been sitting under a fig-tree when Philip called him, and Nathanael was as much, if not more astonished that Jesus knew this than that He was able to read his thoughts. What was Philip doing under the fig-tree? Possibly he had been engaged in meditation or in reading, and the subject that occupied him may well have been the story of Jacob. Such a supposition—it is but a conjecture after all—gives unity to the whole incident and would explain our Lord's reference to Jacob's ladder, to which it hardly admits of doubt that His words (i. 51) do refer. This underlying unity may seem fanciful. It was suggested to me many years ago by one who has now been long dead. The impression it made upon me as in itself very likely is as strong now as it was then.

I do not propose in the present chapter to discuss the point, referred to above, which is made against the Fourth Gospel, namely, that the Messiahship of Jesus is so much

to the fore and so widely talked about, whereas in the Synoptists Jesus is represented as urging silence on the point. It is an objection which does not properly concern us here, and it will be best to reserve it for consideration at a later stage. But we shall do well before closing this chapter to say something about the story of the ministry of the Baptist as given by our Evangelist, regarding it, as we shall now do, as proceeding from one who had himself been a disciple of the Baptist, from whom he passed to become a disciple of Jesus.

Indeed, the whole point of view taken by the Evangelist seems to me to be that of a disciple who honoured and revered his master, and that not blindly, but with a real appreciation of his powers and of his limitations. He gave up this his first master to follow and to be taught by Another, but he remembers the former one with gratitude and affection. He recognises

that the Baptist was divinely sent, but he was not the light, nor did he claim to be what he was not. He bore witness of the light, and faithfully directed men away from himself to that Other for whom he came to prepare the way. He confessed, and denied not—there is no wavering, no uncertainty, no self-seeking—he confessed, I am not the Christ.

It is this same Evangelist who records the noble words of the Baptist spoken when he was confronted by the growing popularity of Jesus: "A man can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy, therefore, is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (iii. 27-30).

What our Evangelist tells us of the Baptist does not, then, concern his outward appearance, nor his meat and drink, nor does he say anything of the crowds that came to him. He tells rather how the Baptist led some of his disciples away from himself to follow Another. His theme is the testimony of the Baptist to the Christ. He is not ashamed to have given up his first master to follow that Other, because for this very purpose had he been a disciple of the Baptist, that by him he might be led on to become a disciple of Jesus. From the Synoptists we learn nothing of how some of the Baptist's disciples became disciples of Jesus. But if the work of the Baptist was what the Synoptists declare it to have been, namely, to prepare the way for the Christ, it is hardly conceivable that this work, faithfully carried out, could have failed of this result—to supply disciples for Him. The first chapter of the Fourth Gospel shows the Baptist making this

supply, and he who wrote it was, I believe, one who passed to discipleship under Jesus through the faithful witness borne to Him by the Baptist. He had learnt what the Baptist had to teach him, which was to follow Jesus. By transferring his allegiance to the new Master he was really continuing, in the only true way, his allegiance to the old.

It is one of the objections urged by Schmiedel against the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel that the picture which it gives of the Baptist and his ministry does not accord with historical probability. In the Fourth Gospel, he says,* the Baptist knows not only the superior dignity of Jesus as does Matthew (the reference here being of course to the Baptist's protest, "I have need to be baptized of Thee," which Schmiedel regards as a later addition to

* See his pamphlet in the series *Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher* entitled *Das Vierte Evangelium gegenüber den drei ersten*, p. 64. I have given a somewhat free rendering of his words.

the original story) and that He was destined to be the redeemer of the whole world, but also his previous life with God in heaven (St. John i. 15, 30). The task of the Baptist, then, is exclusively confined to bearing witness to Jesus. Not for a moment has his baptism value for those who have a share in it; he practises it only that he may be able to witness for Jesus. There is no mention anywhere of his preaching of repentance. His later question, whether Jesus were the Messiah, would, therefore, be altogether impossible, for he would then be guilty of a sinful doubt respecting that which had been revealed to him by God. According to the original account of the Synoptists, on the other hand, he knew nothing up to this time which put him into a position to decide this question (for Schmiedel considers the voice at the baptism to have been addressed to, and heard only by, Jesus). In short, he says, instead of a strong,

though in its spiritual outlook limited personality, worthy of honour in His tragic death, the Fourth Gospel exhibits nothing but a secondary figure endowed with supernatural knowledge, but wanting in colour true to life, who merely has to serve to reveal the majesty of Jesus.

I consider that these objections are in large part answered by what has been already said of the Evangelist's point of view in recording the Baptist's ministry. It is perfectly true that the interest, for the Evangelist, of the Baptist is in the witness he bore to the Christ. This witness had, indeed, as we believe, been the first step towards the writer's discipleship with Jesus. But Schmiedel overstates his case when he lays so much stress on the supernatural knowledge of the Baptist, and certainly when he says that the Baptist knew of the previous life of Jesus with God in heaven. The Baptist's witness as recorded by our Evangelist runs (i. 15): "This was He of

whom I said, He that cometh after me is become before me: for He was before me (*ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν*)." And again in verse 30: "This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a man (*ἄνθρωπος*) which is become before me, for He was before me." To interpret these sayings, as Schmiedel does, as if they evidenced the Baptist's knowledge of the previous life of Jesus in heaven, is to make the thought of the prologue of the Gospel the thought of the Baptist, instead of the ripe belief of the Evangelist himself. It seems fitting to quote the words of the late Bishop Westcott*: "'After' and 'before' are both used in a metaphorical sense from the image of progression in a line. He who comes later in time comes 'after,' and he who advances in front shows by that his superior power. The supposed reference to the pre-existence of the Word, as if the Baptist said, 'He that cometh after me in respect of my present mission hath already

* Commentary on **I**St. John.

been active among men before I was born,' seems to be inconsistent with the argument, which points to a present consequence (*is now come to be*), of an eternal truth (*He was before me*)."

Then next, Schmiedél considers that the Baptist's knowledge of the Messianic dignity of Jesus, as represented in St. John, is inconsistent with the message of inquiry recorded in the Synoptists: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" But it is surely a mistake to imagine that this question proves that the Messiahship of Jesus was something which had not engaged his mind before, something as to which he had had no information hitherto. The very answer of Jesus, "Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me," points to the fact that the Baptist's faith was being sorely tried as he lay in his prison. And what otherwise, we ask, would be the meaning of the question of Jesus after the disciples of John had departed—

“What went ye out into the wilderness to see, a reed shaken with the wind?” It is surely true to experience that the spiritual enlightenment of one period of life seems insufficient at a later time of deep spiritual depression and that he who experiences this is ready to seek for fresh assurances of his former certainty, which has become dimmed.

Something has already been said on the question, To whom was the voice at the baptism of Jesus audible? Schmiedel considers that it was heard by Jesus only. But the Synoptists, if they do not state that it was so, certainly do not exclude the possibility that the voice was audible to the Baptist. And I can see nothing at all unlikely in the testimony which the Baptist gives, according to the fourth Evangelist, respecting the sign of the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus.

If it had been the purpose of our Evangelist to write a history of the Baptist's

ministry, then, knowing what we do of this from the Synoptists, we should say that he had failed. But, as it is, his purpose was to give the Baptist's witness to Jesus as the Christ, which witness had meant all that it had done for the Evangelist himself. In this he has certainly not failed; nor is there, so far as I can see, in the narrative portion of the first chapter of our Evangelist anything which goes beyond the bounds of historical probability. Indeed the more I consider it, the more probable does the whole story become, filling up, as it does, what are undoubtedly gaps in the Synoptic narrative, and affording us an explanation of the story of the baptism of Jesus in the other three Gospels. If our account of the matter be correct, then that story goes back to the testimony of the Baptist himself.