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A CHAPTER OF GOSPEL HISTORY.

3.—THE STORMING OF THE KINGDOM. (*St. Matt* xi. 12, 13.)

As we expected when we commenced this series of papers, we have found it necessary to reserve the saying of our Lord, recorded in the twelfth verse of the Chapter we are studying, for separate treatment. It is a saying not less remarkable than the one recorded in the verse immediately preceding, and also not less difficult of interpretation; and it will repay our trouble if we endeavour in a distinct essay to penetrate into its innermost meaning. The text has already indeed been admirably handled in the pages of THE EXPOSITOR;[1] but our readers, we believe, will not be unwilling to consider it anew, viewed as a part of a larger whole. The more remarkable *logia* of Jesus can hardly be too much studied; they run little risk of being rendered commonplace by repeated discussion; each successive student may contribute his quota to the illumination of a particular word; but after all have uttered their mind, the thought of Christ has not been exhausted.

Interpreters do not agree in the translation and interpretation of this text. Some take the verb rendered in the English version "suffereth violence"[2] in a hostile sense, and understand our Lord as meaning that the kingdom is assailed violently by unbelieving disaffected men, who do what they can to prevent its progress, and to hinder those who may be so disposed from entering into it. The greater number, however, understand the statement as having reference to violence of a friendly or favourable

[1] Vol. iii. p. 252. [2] Βιάζεται.

description; and among such interpreters the only point in dispute is the precise shade of meaning to be assigned to the words which express the truth that in some way or other extraordinary force is manifested in connection with the work and progress of the kingdom. Some, as, *e. g.*, Bengel, take the verb (*βιάζεται*) in a middle sense, as signifying to put forth force or energy, and the noun (*βιασταὶ*) as signifying men of energetic forceful character, and render, "The kingdom of heaven puts forth force, and men of force strongly lay hold upon it."[1] Others, such as Alford, take the verb in a passive sense, as implying that the kingdom is assaulted or stormed in a friendly sense by men determined by all means and at all hazards to get admission to the holy commonwealth, and render, "the kingdom of heaven is pressed into as by a storming party, and the stormers—eager ardent multitudes—seize on it."[2] It is not necessary to decide peremptorily as between these two interpretations, though, for our own part, our preference on the whole is for the latter of the two, that adopted by Alford, and clearly enough implied in the English Version. The important matter here is not the verbal but the *real* interpretation, the facts which Jesus had in his mind when He uttered this striking word; and as to these the patrons of the two last-named interpretations are pretty much agreed.

In endeavouring to grasp the thought expressed in any particular passage of Scripture it is always a great help to know the relations in which the passage

[1] *Vide* THE EXPOSITOR, vol. iii. p. 252. Bengel's comment on *βιάζεται*, is "Sese vi quasi obtrudit."

[2] *Vide* Alford *in loco.*

stands. That help fails us here to a certain extent, for the connections of thought are not fully indicated. It is impossible to say whether the statement in *Verse* 12 is to be taken as related to the immediately preceding sentence, or to the original occasion of the whole discourse, the doubting message of the Baptist. In the one case this saying might be eulogistic of John, in the other defensive and apologetic in behalf of the Speaker. In favour of the former connection is *Verse* 14, which pronounces John to be the promised Elias; perhaps also *Verse* 13, in which it is stated that the law and the prophets *prophesied* until John, implying apparently that John did something more important than mere prophesying, viz., helped to produce or create the events which fulfilled the prophecies. In favour of the other connection is the manner in which our text is brought in. It is introduced as a new thought or theme, one of several deep reflections which were in Christ's mind in reference to the times in which He lived, and which He then took opportunity to utter; related to all the rest simply as one phase or feature of several which together constituted a life-like picture of the age, and in common with all the rest having a bearing on the momentous question virtually raised by John's message: Is the kingdom come; yea or nay? Perhaps the best way will be to regard the text as a statement of fact which serves at once to mark the peculiarity of John's position as the immediate forerunner of Christ—as one who had not merely prophesied or foretold, but produced the new movement—and at the same time to *explain* John's doubt and by implication to vindicate the

Speaker. In the latter view the thought suggested by the statement now under consideration is this: John is great as one who has brought the kingdom to *birth;* but his limitation lies in this that he disowns his own child, and that just because of the vigour of the new creation. The kingdom is not only here, but here with violence, with revolutionary force and energy; and lo, John sends to ask if I am Messiah, and if the kingdom be come: and the very thing which makes him doubt is just the emphasis with which the kingdom demonstrates its presence.

What we have here, then, to pass from verbal disputes and questions of contextual connection, is this: The characterization and the apology of a new, great, creative epoch—of a grand revolutionary movement exceptional in the earnestness of its agents, in the unconventional nature of its methods, in the kind of people who were connected with it; breaking with preconceived notions of the ideal which it professed to realize, exceeding and disappointing the hope of well-wishers and promoters. In employing words suggesting the idea of violence, Jesus, though certainly not intending to express personal disapproval, did mean to point at features of the new movement which made it an object of aversion, astonishment, or at least of doubt to others. From his point of view all the phenomena referred to were simply signs that the kingdom was coming in power; but from the point of view occupied by opponents, or even by honest well-wishers, or quondam promoters like the Baptist, they were causes of offence, perplexity, disgust. It may be well to particularize some aspects of the work of

the kingdom which would not unnaturally wear an aspect of violence to minds not able to regard them with Christ's eyes, though to Christ Himself they were the *bright and hopeful side of an evil time.*

1. We may mention first that which most readily occurs to one's thoughts, viz., *the passionate earnestness with which men sought to get into the kingdom* heralded by John and preached by Jesus; an earnestness not free from questionable elements, as few popular enthusiasms are—associated with misconceptions of the nature of the kingdom, and in many cases fervent rather than deep, therefore likely to prove transient—still a powerful, impressive, august movement of the human soul Godwards. That this was one of the phenomena present to Christ's thoughts when He spoke the word we are studying, we learn from the testimony of the third Evangelist, who, quoting the same word, gives it this turn: "The law and the prophets were until John; since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it."[1] In his interesting work on the Gospel History, Reuss expresses the opinion that Luke has very well apprehended the sense of Christ's saying. He characterizes the expression *βιάζεται* as paradoxical, and even itself forced, and suggests as a possibility that in translating Christ's words into Greek the narrators have not been felicitous in the choice of a phrase; but at the same time he holds that in spite of the error of commentators, who, deceived by appearance, have found in the text a hostile violence, the sense cannot be

[1] Luke xvi. 16. The words *πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται* can only mean every one (the multitudes) eagerly strives to get into the kingdom.

doubtful. It is that since the time of John one class of men have earnestly surrendered themselves to the happy impulse communicated to them, and pressed into the kingdom, and *as the gate is narrow* they wear the air of men who wish to force it.[1] We are not inclined to agree with this distinguished theologian in thinking that the meaning put upon Christ's saying by himself, following the third Evangelist, exhausts its import, but we have no doubt that the thought above indicated exhibits one phase of the "violence," or volcanic revolutionary force, which had been exhibiting itself in connection with the kingdom of heaven. The nether forces of human nature, which ordinarily lie so deep and still that their existence is hardly suspected, had broken through to the surface, to the delight of Jesus, who "rejoiced in spirit,"[2] at the sight, and was sad only because the phenomenon was so rare and so fleeting, but to the surprise and the disgust of men who dislike all manifestations of force in society that are not measured and rhythmical, and whose life is tame, commonplace, and devoid of great emotions. What strikes such men is not the noble general purpose of the movement, or the grandeur of an enthusiasm in which the heart of a people is worked up to the white heat. It is the "violence," the unmeasured unmusical character of the movement, the rude boisterousness of the spiritual gale that sweeps over society. No matter what the nature of the movement may be: be it "a sustained tempest of moral indignation" against the atrocities of "the

[1] "Histoire Evangélique, Synopse des Trois Premières Evangiles" (1876), p. 300.

[2] Luke x. 21.

unspeakable Turk," or a stirring of the popular mind in reference to religion, as in the Reformation of the sixteenth century or the Puritan revolt of the seventeenth, there are always many "wise and prudent" ones, accomplished, cautious, over-fastidious, or it may be only cold-hearted shallow-minded men, to whom such volcanic outbursts are simply unmitigated offences. An American divine of the last century, speaking apologetically of the religious movements of his own time, remarks: "A great deal of noise and tumult, confusion and uproar, darkness mixed with light and evil with good, is always to be expected in the beginning of something very glorious in the state of things in human society or the Church of God. After nature has been shut up in a cold dead state, when the sun returns in the spring, there is, together with the increase of the light and heat of the sun, very tempestuous weather before all is settled, calm, and serene, and all nature rejoices in its bloom and beauty."[1] The "wise and prudent" ones see nothing but the objectionable elements, and fancy that they have a monopoly of the insight which discerns, and of the taste which dislikes these; the fact being that others see them not less clearly and dislike them not less intensely, but have more of Christ's spirit of humanity and charity, and so keep the fastidiousness of wisdom and refinement within bounds. The late Frederick Robertson said: "My tastes are with the aristocrat, my principles with the mob."[2] In a similar spirit every Christian who

[1] Jonathan Edwards's Works, in Two Volumes. Vol. i. p. 372.

[2] Life, by Stopford A. Brooke, Chap. x. It were to be wished that many pondered and laid to heart the noble words of that truly Christian man which immediately follow those quoted in the text. "I know

combines with due measure charity and culture can say: In taste I am with the wise and prudent in their dislike of popular enthusiasms, but in heart and conscience I am with Christ in his benignant recognition of the good there may be in these mighty movements of the popular mind.

2. From the volcanic bursting forth of religious earnestness in the popular mind, we may naturally pass to speak of another respect in which the kingdom of heaven may be said to have suffered violence, viz., *the kind of people that had most prominently to do with it.* Publicans, sinners, harlots, the moral scum and refuse of society—such were the persons who, in greatest numbers, were pressing into the kingdom, to the astonishment and scandal of respectable, "righteous," religious, well-conducted, and self-respecting people. The kingdom of God was being made a regular cave of Adullam, whither every one that was in distress, or deep in debt morally, or discontented, resorted; the city of God was being taken possession of by "dogs," whose proper place was without—was, so to speak, being stormed by rude lawless bands, and taken from those who thought they had an exclusive right to it. What a violence, what a profanation! The *fact* was undeniable. Christ made no attempt to deny it: sometimes He obtruded it on the notice of self-righteous opponents and fault-finders, as when, interpreting the parable of the Two Sons who were bid go into the vineyard,

how the recoil from vulgarity and mobocracy with thin-skinned over-fastidious sensitiveness has stood in the way of my doing the good I might do. My own sympathies and principles in this matter are in constant antagonism, and until these can be harmonized true Christianity is impracticable."

He said, "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him."[1] That Jesus had this remarkable phenomenon in view when He spoke the saying in the passage now under consideration is intrinsically likely, and is virtually testified by Luke in the parallel passage of his Gospel, where, whether reporting Christ's words or giving his own comments we leave undetermined, he says, "And all the people that heard (him, John or Jesus?), and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves (frustrated that counsel so far as it concerned themselves[2]), being not baptized of him."[3] The meaning of the words is plain enough. It was God's plan that the people of Israel should by John's preaching and baptism of repentance be prepared for receiving as a boon the grace of the Messianic kingdom. The publicans and others, by repenting and being baptized, justified God, declared his plan or counsel to be good and wise, in the best and most emphatic manner, viz., by practically acting in accordance with it. The Pharisees, on the other hand, by holding aloof from John's ministry and baptism, and assuming the attitude of critics or judges, in effect despised and made void God's plan, virtually pronounced it neither based on truth nor wise, say-

[1] Matt. xxi. 31, 32.

[2] The words are εἰς ἑαυτούς.

[3] Luke vii. 29, 30.

ing by their conduct, We do not need to repent; therefore such a ministry of repentance, so far as we are concerned, is not a suitable preparation for the citizenship of the Messianic kingdom.

Now, the passage just quoted and explained is substituted in Luke's Gospel for the text in Matthew's Gospel which forms the subject of our present study. May we not fairly infer from this that the saying in that text was understood in the Apostolic Church to refer to the fact stated by the third Evangelist, viz., that the low, socially and morally, responded to John's call, and so qualified themselves for admission to the kingdom and for membership in the society of Jesus, while the high in the social and the moral scale by their pride kept themselves out?

The fact, then, was undeniable, was admitted by Christ, is admitted in the text before us—the low were pressing in and the high were kept out. What an offensive fact it must have been. Why, it was a *revolution*, — society turned upside down, the last first, the first last, publicans and harlots admitted within, respectable righteous people left out; as great an overturn in principle, if not in extent, as when in France, in the eighteenth century, bishops, aristocrats, princes, and kings were sent adrift, and sansculottism reigned triumphant, believing itself to be in possession of a veritable kingdom of God. What wonder if wise and prudent ones looked on in wistful doubting mood, and sanctimonious men held up their hands in pious horror, and exclaimed, Call you this a kingdom of God? Blasphemy! It is a kingdom of Satan rather; it is a bad man casting out devils through the prince of the devils;

it is a society of profligates, headed by a glutton and winebibber, impiously calling itself by a venerated name. An utterly false view, we now know, but having just so much foundation as to be at the time plausible and natural. The members of Christ's society, after they joined his company, were, like Himself, pure and holy; but they had been bad enough, some of them. It might be said of them, as Paul said of the Corinthian Church, "Such *were* some of you, but ye are washed;" and it is so difficult, in judging individuals and communities, to give due heed to the tense, and so to avoid the error of condemning the "washed" as though they were still unwashed. This is the penalty which the kingdom of God had to pay for its magnanimous and heroic indifference to men's antecedents, moral or social, for pursuing the policy acted on by the founders of ancient Rome, when they threw wide open the gates to all comers, and made all welcome —thieves, robbers, murderers—on the sole condition of submitting to the laws of the city after they had entered within its walls. It was a policy worthy of a kingdom destined to world-historical celebrity and to world-wide dominion; but it involved the temporary drawback of exposing it to serious misunderstanding, and making it appear as if founded on violence done, not merely to social proprieties and conventional class distinctions, but even to the eternal distinctions of right and wrong.

3. In a third respect the kingdom of God may be said to have suffered violence at its starting. As it actually shewed itself in connection with the work of Christ, it differed widely from, did violence we may

say to, *preconceived notions of what it would be.* The kingdom even of prophetic ideals, still more the kingdom of contemporary Jewish expectation, suffered violence at the hands of the actual historical phenomenon. From this very cause arose John's doubt: he could not find himself at home in this kingdom of the actual appearance, his ideal and it were so far from corresponding. We may even say that not a few of those who actually entered the kingdom, in so far as they understood its true character, had to do violence to their own prejudices before they took the step. Such an experience, indeed, is supposed by some writers on the Gospel history to be the very thing alluded to by Christ in the saying before us. In a recent work by a French author[1] on the Messianic beliefs prevalent in Christ's time, we find the following version of our text: "Since the days of John, the great forerunner, whosoever, using violence, is able to divest himself of the ancient ideas [of the kingdom], may enter into the kingdom." This is an ingenious, but we are not sure that it is a correct interpretation, viewed as presenting the principal thought intended. But while we say this, of one thing we have no doubt, viz., that such a conflict with preconceived notions was one of the experiences through which men passed in those days, one of the spiritual phenomena of the time. There were conversions, not unaccompanied with inward pain, not merely from *sin* to righteousness, but from ideal mistaken to rectified notions of the kingdom of God,—from political dreams, noble, but

[1] Colani. "Jésus Christ et les Croyances Messianiques de son Temps," p. 95.

destined never to be fulfilled, to spiritual realities. We do not imagine that conversions of the latter sort were generally sudden, but slow and gradual rather, coming like the dawn of day, as time went on and events threw light on Christ's deep, suggestive, but often mystic utterances. But as a broad fact, it was undoubtedly true that the difference between the kingdom as it actually shewed itself in Jesus and his followers and the kingdom of expectation was so marked as to strike, not merely John, but, more or less, all spectators with surprise. What the disciples saw in the shape of a kingdom of heaven was, in more senses than one, what prophets and kings of olden time had not seen. The prophets of Israel had their glowing, bright, inspiring visions of an ideal kingdom; witness that one in the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah, which, if we recollect right, Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, said he never could read without tears; and no wonder. And the germs of the true conception of the kingdom, as *spiritual* and *universal*, are in their visions, whatever critics may say to the contrary.[1] Never-

[1] Reuss asserts that the prophets, while speaking sometimes of the conversion of the Gentiles, never say that that conversion implies the establishment of another law and of another worship than that which alone was legitimate in their time. It was always, he holds, the sanctuary of Zion that was to be the centre of the nations; it was always offerings to be deposited upon the Levitical altar. ("Theologie Chrétienne," i. 179.) It was oftenest so, but not always; witness Malachi i. 10, 11, which, according to the right rendering, runs thus: "O that some one would shut the temple doors, that ye may no more kindle in vain a fire upon mine altar. I have no pleasure in you, saith the Lord of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in *every place* incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts."

theless, we may say truly that it had not entered into the heart of Hebrew prophets to conceive the true kingdom with such exactitude of outline, that had they been confronted with the historical realization, they would not have hesitated a moment to identify their ideal with the reality. This is saying no more of the more ancient prophets than we know to have been true of John, the last in the series, though he stood on the very threshold of the realization. It is a general law that those who merely prophesy of things to come in the distant future see not the things with the same distinctness as those who stand near them. They see that land is yonder in the distance, with a blue haze resting upon it, but they see not clearly the actual features of the land. The Omniscient alone possesses the faculty of seeing clearly through all time. Distance creates for the prophetic eye dimness; it also lends enchantment, which reality dispels; and hence that doubt of John. Alas! how sadly disenchanting is the reality sometimes; how wide the disparity between the historical event and the visions of men whom we may without offence call the uninspired prophets of their age. Think, *e. g.*, of Rousseau and Lessing, those illuminist prophets of the eighteenth century. How different their visions of a better age to come from the age which did come, the age of the French Revolution! The former contemplated, as the *beau ideal*, a state of things in which an enlightened public should regard all particular religions as all alike useful, though none of them true, believing none, tolerating all; and he represents the Savoyard priest whom he employs in his *Emile* to expound the re-

ligion of Deism as saying: "I regard all the particular religions as so many salutary institutions, which prescribe in every country a uniform manner of honouring God by a public worship, and which may all have their justification in the government, in the genius of the people, or in some other local cause which renders the one preferable to the other, according to the times and places. I believe them all good when one serves God therein sincerely." Rousseau believed that the age of revolutions was approaching, and prophesied of its coming with passionate earnestness, fully expecting that when it came it would bring a veritable kingdom of God; and his idea of the coming kingdom included, as one of its features, the prevalence of such a genial all-tolerating charity as that which he ascribed to the free-thinking Romish *curé*. He thought that the Song of the Angels would be fulfilled,—"Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and good will among men." Alas! how little did he dream that the age of revolutions, when it came, would bring, not peace, but a sword, setting a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and smiting to the ground all existing institutions, all time-honoured "realized ideals." Not less pathetic is it to compare the oracles of the prophet Lessing with the fulfilment they received at the close of the eighteenth century. His ideal of the kingdom of God was the same as Rousseau's, and he foretold its advent with the same burning eloquence of intense conviction. "It will come," he exclaims at the close of his little book, "The Education of the Human Race," "it will come, it will certainly come, the time

of perfection, when man, more sure than ever of a better future, will not need this hope as a motive to virtue, but will do the good because it is good, not because the doing of it has attached to itself certain arbitrary rewards. It will certainly come, the time of a new everlasting gospel, which is promised in those very elementary books of the new covenant."[1] How pathetic to hear earnest gifted men thus prophesying until 1789 of the everlasting Gospel of Reason, and then to think how the beautiful evening twilight of Illuminism darkened into the night of the general overturn, and for the kingdom of heaven came sansculottism, Robespierre, and the guillotine. What would the prophets have thought of the fulfilment of their prophecies?

4. We can do no more than allude to a fourth respect in which the kingdom of heaven may be said to have suffered violence, viz., *in so far as its coming was promoted by the use of irregular methods and agencies.* In this respect John and Jesus were themselves stormers, though in different ways, to the scandalizing of a custom-ridden generation. John's baptism was an innovation, and, as such, an annoyance and a perplexity to the Pharisees, who knew not what to make of it, feeling it equally inconvenient to approve or condemn it. John's way of life, which, like his baptism, was a sort of symbolic

[1] "Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts," §§ 85, 86. Lessing regarded revelation as a means of making known to man, more easily and sooner, truths of reason which he could, and ultimately would, have discovered for himself. The Old and New Testaments he looked on as the first and second elementary lesson-books by which the child —the human race—was being trained for the era of the everlasting Gospel of Reason, when the lesson-books could be dispensed with altogether.

preaching, reinforcing his spoken message, and pressing home its main lesson — repent: John's way of life, we say, was also an innovation and an offence to men who wished all things to run in the groove of fixed established habitude. John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, "He hath a devil." Jesus, too, was a daring innovator. His life of love was a grand sublime innovation; his free, genial, sympathetic, social habit of associating with publicans and sinners, "eating and drinking" like other men, was another innovation. "The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they said, Behold a man gluttonous and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners." The Galilean mission, in which the twelve disciples were employed as agents, was yet another innovation. Altogether, these two servants of the Most High, John and Jesus, so original in their character and way of life, endowed with such amazing moral energy, so utterly unconventional in their thought, speech, and manner of action, could not but be a distress to many contemporaries. We shall have something more to say on this in our next paper; mean time we note it simply as another respect in which the kingdom of heaven might well seem to suffer violence.

And now, let us make one or two reflections suggested by the saying we have been studying, concerning Him who uttered it.

(1) It is very evident that one who spoke thus had a very clear conception of the deep significance of the movement denoted by the phrase "the kingdom of heaven." Christ knew well that it was a revolution that was taking place, that a new world

was beginning to be. "Behold I make all things new."

(2) How calmly He takes it all. Nothing surprises, scandalizes, or disgusts Him, though He sees more clearly than any other the things which offend others. That calmness is the fruit of wisdom united with unexampled charity.

(3) Yet how magnanimously He bears Himself towards the doubters. "Violence"—the very word is an excuse for their doubt. No great wonder that men of honest worth should stand in doubt in presence of a revolution with all the boisterous energy and fermentation of thought characteristic of creative epochs. What wonder if a man of gentle meditative spirit like Archbishop Leighton should find it hard to adjust himself to the parties and movements of the confused troublous times in which he lived! One who feels himself isolated and perplexed in such an age may thereby shew himself to be weak, but he is not on that account to be deemed wicked. Thus did Jesus judge his contemporaries, who were perplexed by the "violence," unregulated energy, fermentations of opinion, innovation in action they saw all around them. His worst thought and speech about them was that they were *children*.

A. B. BRUCE.

THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN CHRIST AND THE ORAL LAW.

THE Gospels recount several occasions on which our Lord came into direct conflict with the principles of the Oral Law. I will briefly touch on these, and then will proceed to shew, in far less familiar mat-