ELIAS AND THE MEN OF VIOLENCE.

THE phrase of Matthew xi. 12–15 = Luke xvi. 16, is one whose obscurity calls for investigation of its history. The context, whether of Matthew or Luke, affords but little help. The two Evangelists differ as to the occasion and neither context is satisfactory in itself. Matthew is clearly self-contradictory in making this positive, public identification of the Baptist with Elias by Jesus Himself precede His private, mysterious intimation of the same fact to the Twelve in xvii. 9–13. Luke's context in xvi. 14–18 is perhaps the most striking instance in the Gospels of complete irrelevancy. The most that can be gathered from it is that Jesus excludes from the kingdom the self-righteous Pharisees, in favour of those who are not "justified in the sight of men." The two versions of the saying agree, then, in scarcely more than the three main points: (1) John the Baptist terminates a dispensation of "the law and the prophets." (2) Entrance into the kingdom of God is now general. (3) Men of violence are making it their prey. Who these "men of violence" are, and whether commended or condemned for forcing their way to the places taken by them in the kingdom, are questions in debate among the commentators.

It is safe to say that the fuller form of the saying given by Matthew adds something more than irrelevant details. Even in the brief and obscure form of Luke it is clear that John stands midway between the era of "the law and the prophets" and that of the "preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God," in his capacity of usher-in of the Messianic Kingdom; so that the omission by Luke of the direct identification of the Baptist with "Elias which was for to come" is not indicative of interpolation in Matthew, but must be judged rather in the light of the

systematic treatment our third Evangelist has given to this doctrine.[1] On the contrary it is just the function of Elias in current Jewish legend, which throws the needful light upon the "men of violence," who seize places in the kingdom as their booty, as well as on their relation to John the Baptist and his gospel of the kingdom of God for repentant sinners.

In *Edujoth* viii. 7, which Schürer, whose translation is here quoted,[2] designates "the chief passage in the Mishnah" on the subject of Elias as forerunner of Messiah, Elias is specifically charged with the duties of doorkeeper of the Messianic Kingdom, much as is St. Peter in Christian legend. But he does not act as arbiter in all cases; it is only to redress the grievances of those who have been unjustly excluded by the scribes in their exercise of the power of the keys (Matt. xxiii. 13; Luke xi. 52), or conversely. The passage is as follows:

"R. Joshua said: I received the tradition from R. Johanan ben Sakkai, who received it from his teacher as a tradition in the direct line from Moses at Mount Sinai, that Elias would not come to pronounce clean or unclean, reject or admit, families in general; but only to reject those who had *entered by violence*, and to admit those who had been *rejected by violence*." The passage then proceeds to cite cases in illustration. "There was, beyond Jordan, a family of the name Beth Zerefa, which a certain Ben Zion had excluded by violence. There was there another family (of impure blood) whom this Ben Zion had admitted by violence. Therefore he comes to pronounce such clean or unclean, to reject or admit them. R. Jehudah says: only

[1] In my article "The Transfiguration Story" (*American Journal of Theology*, April, 1902), I have shown that in the later Gospels the identification of the Baptist with the Apocalyptic figure of Elias the "witness of Messiah" is greatly modified, or absolutely denied, Luke i. 17, ix. 19, 28–36, xvi. 26–31, xxiii. 46; John i. 21, 25, v. 33–35, 37–47, x. 41.

[2] *History of the Jewish People*, § 29, iii. 2.

to admit, but not to reject. R. Simon says: his mission is merely to arrange disputes. The learned say: neither to reject nor admit, but his coming is merely with the object of making peace in the world. For it is said (Mal. iii. 4), "I send you Elijah the prophet to turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers."

According to the indications of this very ancient tradition, which even in its earliest form concedes to Elias the supreme power of the keys, and contends only for the highest measure of subordinate authority for the scribes, the Baptist fulfils the function of Elias in that he puts an end to the usurpations of the scribes in the matter of admitting to or excluding from the theocratic commonwealth. The "men of violence" may possibly be the victims of this tyranny, and hence commended for pressing in by (what to the scribes and Pharisees is) violence. More probably the epithet is turned upon its coiners, who since the days of John seize upon the kingdom of God as their booty (*βιασταὶ ἁρπάζουσιν αὐτήν*), so that till now it "suffereth violence."[1] But Elias who had suffered at their hands "even as it was written of Him,"[2] like Messiah, who must also suffer at their hands, will rise again from the dead, and reverse the wrong.

What then is the true context of this saying? Not that of Matthew, for, as we have seen in xvii. 9–13, the Twelve are still in ignorance on the subject, and the open reference to the usurpations of the religious authorities, even if there be not allusion to the expected fate of Messiah, suggests a

[1] Compare the "thieves and robbers" who force an entrance, John x. 1–10, in sequel to the story of the casting out from the synagogue of Jesus' disciples as "sinners," John ix. 22–41.

[2] Mark ix. 13. A reference, as J. R. Harris has shown, *Independent*, 1898, p. 1218, and *Jewish Quart. Review*, vol. x. 1898, p. 277 f., to current apocalyptic literature, wherein the returned Elias not merely works wonders (Mark vi. 14, cf. John x. 41) but is martyred and rises from the dead (Mark vi. 14). So in later Christian legend Elias—John the Baptist, risen from the dead—appears as forerunner of the *parousia*. See Bousset, *Legend of Antichrist*, the chapter on The Two Witnesses.

date in the very latest instead of the earliest period of Jesus career.

It is the context of Luke which we must adopt, but with a proviso. I have endeavoured to show elsewhere[1] that the discourses on the right use of wealth, Luke xvi. 1–9, 10–13, 14–15, belong to a different connexion. This leaves the saying now under consideration, Luke xvi. 16, to follow immediately the group of parables uttered in defence of "the publicans and sinners" against the Pharisees and scribes who murmured saying, "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them" (Luke xv.). More specifically it will follow that of the Prodigal Son. All these have but very remote parallels in Matthew; but if, nevertheless, we place the two side by side, we shall meet a very striking result.

Matthew's parallel to the parable of the Prodigal Son is the parable of the Two Sons, of whom the one, bidden by his father Go, work in my vineyard, and at first refusing, but afterwards penitently obeying, represents, according to Jesus' own application of the parable, the class of "publicans and harlots," outcasts from the synagogue, who had yet "repented at the preaching of John." The other son, who professed obedience but went not, represents the self-righteous, self-appointed guardians of the gates of the theocracy. These were neither baptized by John, nor were they even later moved by the sight of the repenting "sinners" themselves to believe at "the sign of Jonah,"[2] repent and be forgiven. But in Matthew this parable and the connected sayings form an inseparable group with that of the Usurping Husbandmen, *uttered after the purifying of the Temple.*

It is in fact in the larger connexion of Matthew xxi. 23–46

[1] *The Sermon on the Mount*, Macmillan, 1902, pp. 149–156, 186–199.

[2] That is, the Baptist's summons to repentance, whose rejection by that "evil and adulterous generation" lays it open to condemnation even by "the men of Nineveh," who "repented at the preaching of Jonah," Matt. xii. 38–39, 41–45. See my *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 232.

that the saying on Elias and the men of violence finds its true context. "It is the story of how Jesus, in Jerusalem, challenged by the chief priests and elders" for His authority in venturing to reclaim to its use as a house of prayer the temple which they had transformed into a den of robbery to fleece the poor, bade them pronounce first, since they claimed this right of judgment, on the mission of the Baptist, whether he had, or had not, authority from God to summon Israel to a baptism of repentance before the Messianic judgment. Then it is, when they have flinched from this challenge, that He propounds the *two* parables of the vineyard, first that of the workers, professed and real, symbolized by the Two Sons; then that of the Usurping Husbandmen. Between these two, unless all internal evidence be at fault, as well as the grouping which underlies Luke's Gospel, is the true place for Matthew xi. 12–15.[1] After uttering the parable of the Two Sons, Jesus applies it to the emissaries of the Sanhedrin who are challenging His authority: "Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God[2] 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 saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterward, that ye might believe him." Then, challenging in turn *their* usurped authority, and making them a present of the solution of the problem they had professed themselves unable to solve—"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence seize it as their booty. For all the prophets and

[1] It is a curious corroboration of this proposed transposition of Matthew xi. 12–15 after xxi. 32, that in Luke the converse has occurred. For the Lukan parallel to Matthew xxi. 31–32, that is, Luke vii. 29–30, is found in the passage corresponding to Matthew xi. 2–19.

[2] In all but four cases out of 36 Matthew substitutes for the expression kingdom of God, universally employed elsewhere in the New Testament, the phrase "kingdom of heaven." Of the four exceptions two (xxi. 31, 43) occur in our passage and its proper context.

the law prophesied until John. And, *if ye are willing to receive it, this is Elias which is to come* (*scil.*, to admit those who have been excluded by violence and to exclude those who have seized a place by violence). He that hath ears, let him hear." After this followed the parable of the Usurping Husbandmen, who, after slaying the messengers of the Master of the Vineyard, at last cast out and slay the Heir also, in the vain hope to seize the inheritance as their booty; with it also the doom that overtakes them from the Lord of the Vineyard.

It makes no small gain in significance both to the saying on Elias and violent entrance into the kingdom, and to the whole context of Jesus' challenge to the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem, when they are thus brought together and interpreted in the light of current eschatological ideas.

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