

THE HEALING OF THE TWO BLIND MEN AT CAPERNAUM.

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FEW, I suppose, among the miracles of Our Lord have attracted so little attention from critics and commentators as the story of the blind men of Capernaum. It is a story, however, which opens a door of investigation into more than one subject of considerable interest and importance. My present purpose is, first, to discuss the general subject of the healing of the blind, as it is presented to us in Scripture, and more particularly in the Gospels, secondly, to ask why Our Lord, on this and on certain other occasions, laid an injunction of silence upon the recipients of His mercy, and thirdly, to urge that there is good reason for regarding the story as authentic. The second of these questions is so closely connected with the third, that the discussion of the one must be incorporated in the discussion of the other. Something will also be said, incidentally, as to the historicity of the three other narratives in which Jesus is represented as giving sight to the blind.

The healing of the blind appears, as Bishop Westcott has pointed out, to occupy a position of peculiar interest and prominence among the Gospel miracles. In the first place, it is a miracle peculiar to Our Lord Himself.¹ Neither in the Old Testament, nor in the apostolic history, is any similar miracle recorded. The restoration of sight to the Syrian host in Samaria, and to Saul of Tarsus in Damascus cannot be said to furnish a real parallel. The Syrians, at least, were not the victims of disease; their blindness was only a temporary disability, miraculously inflicted for a special purpose, and then removed; and Saul's case may naturally be regarded in the same light.

But, further, there seems to be, in the Gospel narrative, a special stress laid upon this particular type of miracle. Four cases are recorded, and no more than two of any other.² This, in itself, is

¹ Westcott, *Characteristics of the Gospel Miracles*, pp. 39, 40.

² I mean, of course, among the miracles of healing, as distinguished from the exorcisms. There may be three recorded cases of paralysis, but it is better to regard the case in John v. (where the word *παραλυτικός* is not used) as being of a different type.

worthy of note. No one, I think, who has closely studied the miracles of Our Lord will hastily conclude that it is a mere accident, or that it can be explained by pointing to the prevalence of ophthalmia in Eastern lands. The miracle stories are not selected at random, nor with a view to showing which kinds of disease were most prevalent in Palestine at the time of Our Lord's ministry. And the same prominence appears in the allusions made by the Evangelists and by Jesus Himself, to the miracles of healing. We ought not, perhaps, to lay much stress on the fact that in each enumeration of these miracles this particular cure finds a place—a statement which can be made of no other—but it can hardly be an accident that in Luke vi. 21 it is actually put in a category by itself—"In that same hour He cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind He gave sight."

Yet again, there is no individual miracle of healing which occupies so conspicuous a place in the Gospel narrative as the case recorded in John ix. of the man who had been born blind. A whole chapter is devoted to it, and it is made the occasion of the enforcement of the spiritual truths which it symbolized.¹

The prominence of this particular miracle is, as Westcott has reminded us, in accordance with Old Testament prophecy. The opening of the eyes of the blind figures conspicuously among the works there assigned to the coming Messiah; and it was one of these very passages that Jesus, in His first public address, applied to Himself and His Messianic ministry.

And if we ask why this type of miracle occupies so distinctive a position alike in Old Testament prophecy and in the Gospel narrative, the answer is not far to seek. It appears, perhaps, most conspicuously in the ninth chapter of St. John. It can hardly be doubted, quite apart from the evidence of the Fourth Gospel, that Our Lord's miracles were meant to have a typical significance. Both in the Old Testament and in the New, sickness is a type of sin, and as in the one Jehovah, so in the other the Lord Jesus is the Physician of the soul. But the discourse in John ix. is really unintelligible on any other supposition.

Now of all the metaphors which might have been drawn from bodily sickness or infirmity to describe the spiritual condition of

¹ I am disposed to find a partial parallel to this in Mark viii. 22-26 (*v. infra*), where again the case was one of blindness.

Israel at that period, none was so obviously appropriate as that of blindness. Leprosy may be regarded as a symbol of the uncleanness of sin, fever of the thirst and restlessness which it breeds, and paralysis of the moral incapacity to which it reduces the will ; but while all these might have been found in abundance in the Palestine of the first century—as in all countries and at all times—the supreme and crucial indictment against Israel was that she had not the spiritual insight to recognize her own Messiah when He came. It was wilful blindness, no doubt. The light had come into the world, “and men loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.” But it was blindness, none the less. Unwillingness to see reacts swiftly and surely upon the power of seeing. Those who yesterday would not see, to-day cannot. And there is no mistaking the emphasis laid by Our Lord upon the blindness of Israel. Again and again He refers to the subject, and sometimes with a note of hopelessness in His voice, as though the evil were incurable. After all, it was the one thing that really mattered. Had Israel known Him for what He was, all else would speedily have been put right ; the one fatal disease was the blindness that failed to recognize the great Physician.¹

Nor does the charge of blindness lie only against unbelieving Israel ; it is brought against the Twelve also :—“Having eyes, see ye not ?” (Mark viii. 18). And here an interesting point comes into view. A connection has been suggested between the words just quoted from St. Mark, and the healing of the blind man which is recorded in the verses immediately following. But there may perhaps be more in this connection than appears at first sight. Why did Jesus perform two acts of healing on the blind man ? Dr. Swete suggests that the man’s faith was not at first sufficient for a complete cure. This explanation seems to me unconvincing, or at least inadequate, and I would venture, though with considerable diffidence, to suggest another. In the rebuke already quoted, Our Lord seems to lay marked stress on the fact that He had fed the multitudes *twice*, and this would appear to be the point of *ὄψω* in verse 17—“perceive ye *not yet*, neither understand ?” Would not this rebuke be driven home by the unusual method adopted, apparently very soon afterwards, in healing the blind man ? After the first touch,

¹ To St. Paul also the supreme and fatal sin of Israel is her blindness. V. Rom. xi. 7, 25, and 2 Cor. iii. 14, 15.

the man saw *something*, and was able to reason about what he saw ; he realized that he was still partially blind ; after the second, " he was restored, and saw every man clearly." Is not the Lord here once more saying, in effect, to His disciples, " I have, not long since, performed two acts which ought to have cleared your spiritual vision ; after the first you remained as blind as before, and now, after the second, you are blind still " ? The physical miracle, even where there was, apparently, most difficulty, was an easy thing compared to the task of opening the eyes of their souls.

But now, what are we to say of the historicity of the four narratives, and in particular of the miracle at Capernaum ? The narrative in John ix. stands, of course, in one sense, by itself. Stamped as it is throughout with marks of authenticity, it is not likely to be accepted by critics who minimize the general historical value of the Fourth Gospel. But even the instances recorded by the Synoptists have not all escaped adverse criticism. The narrative in Matthew ix., which is the main subject of this paper, has been confidently asserted to be a " doublet " of the story of blind Bartimæus at Jericho. Sir John Hawkins has argued the matter at length in his famous work, *Horæ Synopticæ*.¹ No one, I think, is ever likely to present the case against the narrative more ably or thoroughly than this learned and sober-minded critic, and we cannot do better than take his argument as the basis of the present discussion.

But before examining the argument in detail, it may be well to make one or two preliminary remarks on the subject of doublets. The first is, that life is full of coincidences which are at least as striking as any that exist between similar incidents in the Gospels, and which, if they had occurred in the Gospels, would have been confidently set down by many critics as due to confusion on the part of the Evangelists. Harnack has shown us, in a comparatively recent work, how dangerous it is to assume such confusion, even when the details of two narratives absolutely coincide. Nor will readers of Freeman's *Methods of Historical Study* be likely to forget the really extraordinary parallel which he points out between the reigns of our own Kings Henry I and Henry II.

In the second place, I would remark that those who hunt—as I think some critics really do—for " doublets " in the Gospels, could hardly find a more unpromising field for their activities than the

¹ And previously in the *Expository Times*, vol. xiii.

miracles of Our Lord—except, indeed His sayings. He must surely have performed multitudes of miracles so exactly like each other that one narrative, however detailed, would have described them all. And, as a matter of fact, no such similarity exists between any two miracle-stories in the New Testament.

I am conscious, as I read Sir John's arguments, of an uneasy suspicion that they are partly controlled by a major premiss which never, so to speak, appears in public, but pulls the strings from somewhere behind the scenes, and is perhaps not clearly present even to the writer's own mind. Probably, if it had been, he would have perceived its weakness; major premisses, like measles, are never so dangerous as when they are suppressed. Sir John appears to think that obvious coincidences of detail and of phraseology are the characteristic marks of a doublet. I shall return to this point later, but in the meantime I would suggest that in a real doublet the differences would be obvious and probably superficial, while the resemblances would be real and significant, but not always obvious. It appears to me that in the narrative under discussion we have just the opposite of this.

Let us begin with a glance at the resemblances, as noted by Sir John. Some of them need not detain us long. He notices, for instance, that in both stories the men called after Our Lord. Of course they did. It was the simplest and most obvious way of attracting His attention. There may have been scores of similar incidents in His ministry. Another similarity is found in the words, common to both narratives, "Have mercy on us." Here, again, there is nothing whatever noteworthy in the coincidence. The phrase was a very natural one to use, and there are other instances of it in the Gospels.¹

The same remark applies to yet another coincidence, the use by the blind men of the title, "Son of David"; but as this introduces us to what I believe to be a real and important difference in the narratives, we may leave it on one side until we have discussed the other resemblance.

Sir John marks in black type the words which in the story of Bartimaeus are peculiar to Matthew and which occur also in his ninth chapter; and, speaking of the last portion of the earlier narrative, he says, "In the account given of the disobedient pro-

¹ Luke xvii. 13; Matt. xv. 22; Mark ix. 22.

mulgation of the miracle we seem to find Matthew, here as elsewhere, transferring the familiar language of Mark from one place to another (e.g. *διαφημιζειν* is a rare word). If that view is accepted, there remains nothing distinctive and unparalleled in the narrative."¹

But this argument from coincidences of language is even weaker than the arguments we have already discussed. In the first place, its details will not stand cross-examination. We have only to sift it to find that by far the greater part of it disappears at once. Granted, provisionally, that there were actually two blind men, both at Capernaum and at Jericho, who asked Jesus to heal them, the coincidence of phraseology is fully explained, and in part even demanded, by the coincidence of fact. How could Matthew, in either narrative, have dispensed with the words *δὺο* and *ἡμᾶς*? What possible argument can be drawn from their occurrence in both? Nor is there anything in the least noteworthy in the recurrence of such words as *κράζειν* and *παράγει*.² The only rare word adduced is *διαφημιζειν*, and that does not come from the Jericho narrative at all, but from Mark.

But, as a matter of fact, the whole argument is a fallacy. The major premiss is even more unsound than the minor. Even if the verbal resemblances adduced are anything more than coincidences, they do not furnish any support whatever to the doublet-theory. The first Evangelist was admittedly familiar with St. Mark, from whom he borrowed not merely isolated words, but whole sentences. What could be more natural than that he should borrow in this way, consciously or unconsciously, where the similarity of incident was sufficiently close to bring the familiar words to his mind? If anything more natural can be imagined, it is surely the repetition of his own vocabulary, when he has to narrate the same *type* of incident twice over, though with certain differences of detail. And it is obvious that the greater the similarity of the incidents, the greater, as a rule, would be the coincidence of language.

But is there really nothing distinctive in the Capernaum story? Must we acquiesce in Sir John's verdict that it is so "comparatively

¹ I have not attempted in this paper to deal with all Sir John's arguments, but the omissions are few, and, I think, unimportant. Those who desire to look further will find his own statement in *Horæ Synopticæ* and in vol. xiii. of the *Expository Times*.

² *παράγει* has been used previously by Matthew in this very same ninth chapter, verse 9.

colourless and uninteresting," and "so very similar" to the story of Bartimaeus, that it is "almost impossible not to regard them as doublets"?

Now, if by distinctiveness we mean the presence of one or more features which occur in no other miracle-story, this is surely something more than we are entitled to demand, and something which we do not always find even in more generally accepted narratives. That the story in Matthew ix. has distinctive features as compared with that in chap. xx. is obvious—I hope to show that there is a marked difference between them in one matter where Sir John sees only a resemblance—but it is not merely to isolated features that we must look; we must consider the narrative as a whole, and we must consider it in relation to its context. This latter consideration alone would redeem it from the reproach of being without point or colour. It forms one of a closely linked chain of events which extends from verse 10 to verse 34.¹ Jesus is interrupted in a discourse by the arrival of Jairus, who asks Him to come and restore his daughter to life. So much is He in request that a crowd follows Him as He goes, and He is even, so to speak, compelled to perform a miracle on the way thither. On the way back His help is again solicited. Two blind men cry after Him in the street and follow Him into His own house, there to receive the healing which they sought. As these are in the act of departing, a demoniac is brought in to be cured.

What a picture we have here of the crowded life which Jesus lived at that period in Capernaum! And what a commentary it supplies on the curse denounced later (Matt. xi. 23) upon the guilty city which had enjoyed and rejected such unique opportunities of salvation! Had this story been only a link in such a chain, there would have been sufficient reason for its insertion.

¹ With a possible, but not, I think, probable break at verse 14.

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(To be concluded.)