

There may have been many who listened with awe to his prophetic summons, and presented themselves as candidates for his baptism in implicit faith that the ordinance was divine, who nevertheless in after years asked themselves what purpose it had served. It was a solemn scene doubtless, when crowds from every part of Palestine gathered by the side of Jordan, and there renewed, as it were, the covenant made between their ancestor and Jehovah. It seemed the beginning of a new age, the restoration of the ancient theocracy, the final close of that dismal period in which the race had lost its peculiarity, had taken a varnish of Greek manners, and had contributed nothing but a few dull chapters of profane history, filled with the usual chaos of faction fights, usurpations, royal crimes, and outbreaks, blind and brave, of patriotism and the love of liberty. But many of those who witnessed the scene and shared in the enthusiasm which it awakened must have remembered it in later days as having inspired hopes which had not been realised. It must have seemed to many that the theocracy had not in fact been restored, that the old routine had been interrupted only for a moment, that the baptised nation had speedily contracted new pollution, and that no deliverance had been wrought from the "wrath to come." And they may have asked in doubt, Is God so little parsimonious of His noblest gift, as to waste upon a doomed generation that which He did not vouchsafe to many nobler generations that had preceded them, and to send a second and far greater Elijah to prophesy in vain?

But if there were such persons, they were ignorant of one important fact. John the Baptist was like the Emperor Nerva. In his career it was given him to do two things—to inaugurate a new régime, and also to nominate a successor who was far greater than himself. And by this successor his work was taken up, developed, completed, and made permanent; so that, however John may have seemed to his own generation to have lived in vain, and those scenes on the banks of Jordan to have been the delusive promise of a future that was never to be, at the distance of near two thousand years he appears not less but