QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Is it likely that the phrase " El Gibbor " (God the mighty) in Is. ix, 6, caused the Jews to have any suspicion that the Messiah would be God incarnate?

The questioner may be referred to an interesting article by Fr. W. H. McClellan, S.J., in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, for July 1944, Vol. VI, pp. 276—288, entitled " El Gibbor." It is a plea for maintaining the traditional interpretation in the sense of " Mighty God " as against Kissane's rendering " Divine-hero." Of this title Fr. McClellan writes: " It evidently startled the Jewish translators of the Greek Septuagint. They paraphrased the beginning of the last distich in such inexplicable fashion that St. Jerome wrote ' I believe that the Seventy, alarmed at the majesty of the names, durst not say of the Child that he would be plainly called God, and so on, but substituted for those six names something not present in the Hebrew.' " Certainly " El Gibbor " must have seemed to them an inconceivable thing for one of their prophets to have predicted of a new-born child. The other attributes, lofty as they were, did not surpass the unique dignity of the Anointed, but the Seventy would not be answerable for translating " El Gibbor " in the only meaning obvious to them. The subject, particularly on its textual side, may be pursued further in *The Book of Isaiah according to the Septuagint* by R. R. Ottley, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 1909, especially Vol. I, p. 25.

J. M. T. BARTON.

Catholic exegetes are agreed that Peter's words in Matt. xvi, 16 (" Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God ") are a confession of divinity and therefore merit Christ's praise. How is it, then, that Nathanael's similar confession (Jn. i, 49 : " Thou art the son of God, thou art the king of Israel ") is not similarly praised?

The assumption is, it seems, that the phrase " son of God " is patient of only one interpretation in the Gospel story. If this were really the case we should be confined to the Old Testament meaning : " one singled out for God's paternal love by an act comparable to the adoption of a child." So God loved Israel (Dt. xiv, 1f. cp. Ex. xi, 1—3) and favoured its royal representative (II Kings vii, 14) ; in a similar, though not identical, sense the just man also is the " son of God " (Wisd. ii, 13). To the expected Davidic king Yahweh says : Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee (ps. ii, 7) ; in this phrase the Jew saw no more than an outstanding expression of divine affection (*Origen, Contra Celsum* i, 49). Nevertheless the very nature of the phrase " son of God " empowers it, should the circumstances require, to break the artificial bonds of metaphor and assume its natural significance. It remains now to be seen if and when in the New Testament the attendant circumstances, verbal

or factual, do so require. When they do not we shall be unjustified in exceeding the Old Testament interpretation. In the light of these remarks we shall compare the confessions of Nathanael and of Peter.

At first sight the confessions are identical since Nathanael's " king of Israel " is, without doubt, the expected Messias (" Christ "); yet there are divergences which are at least suggestive. Thus the addition of the adjective " living " though strictly adding nothing to the notional content leaves the impression of a more emphatic conviction and possibly of a more exalted conception. Matthew's inversion of John's terms may also be significant. Everyday experience tells us that the second member of a doubled statement serves to fix the meaning of the first. Hence Nathanael's " son of God " is to be explained (and restricted) by the term " king of Israel " whereas Peter's " Messias (Christ) " is to be explained by the unrestrictive term " son of God." Equivalently Nathanael asks: What kind of son? And answers: King of Israel; Peter asks: What kind of Messias? and answers: Son of God. It may also be noted that the absence of " Israel," too, absolves Peter's words from the limited national outlook suggested by Nathanael's.

We must also remember the preparatory circumstances of each confession. On the one hand there is Nathanael meeting Our Lord for the first time and knowing Him only as a reader of hearts; on the other there is Peter, companion of his Master for more than a year, witness of signal miracles and striking claims (" Lord of sabbath," " Greater than the Temple," etc.). From the point of view of human probabilities (and there is no hint of direct revelation in Jn. i, 49) are we to say that Peter had not advanced beyond Nathanael's conviction?

It is however Our Lord's reception of the confessions that establishes the amplitude of Peter's and, to a lesser extent, the inadequacy of Nathanael's. Messiahship could have been argued by human reason (" flesh and blood ") on the grounds of miracle and prophecy; indeed a few hours' conversation with Our Lord had been enough for Andrew (cf. Jn. i, 39—41). If Peter's conviction was, as Christ said, the outcome of direct revelation, this was evidently because it implied much more than Messiahship. It even exceeded, as it seems, the conviction that Our Lord expected to follow the self-manifestation that he had so far made. It was the Father who had revealed rather than the incarnate Son. With this statement we should contrast Christ's quiet, almost cold, reception of Nathanael's profession as if He sees no great wonder in it. In fact He suggests that Nathanael has still much to learn about His true person (Jn. i, 51).

In conclusion we may add a word or two on an unasked but pertinent question. In Matt. xiv, 33, perhaps two or three months before Peter's confession, the Apostles declared: Truly thou art son of God. The force of this remark is clearly not to be urged too far, since Matthew himself is conscious of the singular novelty of Peter's declaration in chapter

xiv. Yet it appears that St. Thomas Aquinas has gone too far in distinguishing in this connection " adoptive " sonship (for Matt. xiv), and " natural " sonship (for Matt. xvi). This clear-cut distinction joined with the manifest superiority of Peter's confession has led in some commentators (e.g. Knabenbauer, cp. his notes on xiv, 33 with those on xvi, 16) to self-contradiction, in others (e.g. Lagrange, Prat) to a denial of the full (divine) significance of " son of God " in Matt. xiv, 33. In the ontological order the Thomistic distinction is, of course, exhaustive; in the psychological order it may be inadequate and therefore misleading. In the ontological order there is no question of degree in natural sonship but in the mind of the Apostles we may distinguish degrees of appreciation and motives which accompany or prompt an affirmation of natural sonship. Now from the surrounding circumstances (the only deciding factor) it is evident that the declaration of Matt. xiv, 33 excels Nathanael's even more than it falls short of Peter's. It needed no walking on the waters (Matt. xiv, 25—32) to convince the Apostles of Our Lord's royal Messiahship (cf. Jn. vi, 15), nor of His surpassing holiness. There is something more than this " adoptive " sonship here. In the enthusiastic atmosphere of Matthew's account it would be exegetically imprudent to set limits to the Apostles' outburst. Hence the Biblical Commission (June 19th, 1911; DB 2154) assumes that the confession of Matt. xiv, 33 is a confession of divinity (i.e. " natural " sonship). Nevertheless, the vagueness of the Apostles' words (the definite article is omitted) coupled with the fact that they are evoked by sudden shock keep them inferior in degree to the clear and calm pronouncement of Peter prompted by revelation from the Father.

A. JONES.

From Gen. ix, 13, may we conclude that no rainbow appeared before the Flood?

Neither the context nor the words of God in Gen. ix, 13, justify this conclusion. After the Flood God made a covenant with Noe and his sons (Gen. ix, 8—17), which was also to hold good for posterity: viz. that He would never again destroy mankind by a flood, nor should there be a flood to waste the earth. He appointed the rainbow as a token of His mercy, " which is over all his works " (Ps. cxliv, 9), and as a reminder of His promise. God is free to choose natural phenomena as symbols of His wrath or His mercy. In the circumstances, the rainbow was a particularly apt symbol. It is a sign taken in nature itself, visible to all men, and most suitable as a reminder of God's promise. The contrast between its soft beauty and the dark and lowering rainclouds fittingly symbolizes the Divine mercy. In the heavenly visions (Ezech. i, 28; Apoc. iv, 3), the rainbow is one of the chief ornaments of God's throne,