

# "THE SONS OF THUNDER"

## Chapter 4

### *Studies in the Gospels*

by

R. C. Trench

Mark iii. 17.

The mention of the new name given by the Lord to the two sons of Zebedee is one of the many precious notices which we owe exclusively to St. Mark. From him alone we learn that the three foremost apostles, equal in so much else, were also equal in this, that they all obtained a new name, and that name imposed on them by the Lord Himself. Yet this new and magnificent title of '*Boanerges*,' or '*sons of thunder*,' with which the two sons of Zebedee were adorned, is not without its difficulties and obscurities. For, leaving out of sight those of the formation of the word, which are not inconsiderable, it must strike every thoughtful reader as remarkable, that while the name Peter, or its Aramaic equivalent Cephias, just before recorded as added by the Lord to Simon, recurs continually in the sacred narrative, is so stamped upon him as in the end almost entirely to displace the name which he bore while yet a fisher not of men but of fishes, this name, the imposition of which is related in exactly the same language and with the same emphasis, never once reappears in Scripture; 'you never find James called Boanerges, or John so called, either by themselves or by others' (Lightfoot).

Various explanations of this fact have been offered. Thus it has been ingeniously suggested that the name was, so to speak, a dual name, and belonged to the two apostles, not severally and independently one of the other, but only as a brother-pair, and in this connexion one with the other, in the same way that Dioscuri belonged to Castor and Pollux, or to Zethus and Amphion; which being so, the occasions of its use must have been of rarest occurrence, and with the early death of James (Acts xii. 2) must have ceased altogether, the name itself becoming, as one might say, extinct with him.<sup>1</sup> And yet, ingenious as this explanation must be owned to be, it is doubly at fault. Even granting that this was such a dual name, and only proper as applied to the pair, yet of such opportunities for its use quite sufficient occur in the Gospel history to prove the inadequacy of this explanation. The two make together their petition that they may have the first and foremost places in Christ's kingdom (Mark x. 35). Together they propose to call down fire on the village of the Samaritans (Luke ix. 54). They are named together as accompanying Peter on that night made memorable by the second miraculous draught of fishes (John xxi. 2). But besides all this, the assumption on which the explanation rests is erroneous. There may be some ambiguity in our Version, '*He surnamed them Boanerges*;' but there is none in the original. Anyone turning to it will at once perceive that St. Mark distinctly implies that each of the twain, by himself and apart from the other, was by the Lord called a '*son of thunder*;' that, while the Evangelist records the '*name*' Peter as given to Simon, when he tells of James and John it is no longer the '*name*' (ὄνομα) but the '*names*' (ὀνόματα), '*sons of thunder*,' which they receive; and thus no room is left for such a

---

1 So Theodoret: υιοὺς βροντῆς τὴν ξυνωρίδα τῶν ἀποστόλων ἐκάλεσε.

solution of the difficulty. But may not this difficulty be of a much simpler solution? Of no other than this, that the surname Boanerges, being common to both apostles, would not have sufficiently designated which of them was intended; and that this inconvenience may have hindered it from ever growing into an appellation; which, indeed, there was no need that it should do, having been given with quite another object and intention.

A more important question lies behind this--What was the meaning and purpose of this name? That it was intended as a name of honour was never for an instant doubted by Christian antiquity; and indeed, since all acknowledge the title given to Simon, which immediately precedes it, to have been such an honourable superaddition, it seems wholly inconceivable that there should have been another name imposed on two other of the elect Twelve in quite a different intention and spirit. Indeed there are few interpretations of Holy Scripture more monstrous in their kind than that other supposition, namely, that the two sons of Zebedee acquired this addition, '*sons of thunder*,' from the untimely and passionate request of theirs, that they might be allowed to call down fire from heaven on the inhabitants of that churlish Samaritan village (Luke ix. 54). Calmet was, I believe, the first who started this explanation,<sup>2</sup> at least I have not seen it traced to an earlier source, but it has found much acceptance since. Thus Tholuck, as quoted below,<sup>3</sup> assumes it as certain, and affirms that the name was imposed upon them 'to remind them evermore of that inner foe with whom they needed to contend.'

But not to urge that there is no mention of thunder, or allusion to it, in that passage, nor yet at 2 Kin. i. 9-12, to the precedent of which the two apostles avowedly refer ('as Elias did'), the deriving of their name from this fault of theirs goes counter to the whole tenour and analogy of Scripture. The new name there is evermore the expressing and fixing of the new nature; it is the record of some notable achievement, some glorious confession by word or deed, through which the servant of God, who thus wins this name, has been permanently lifted up into a higher region of being than that which he moved in before (Gen. xxxii. 28; Judg. vi. 32; Acts iv. 36, 37; Matt. xvi. 18; Rev. ii. 17). It marks some signal epoch or crisis of his spiritual life, which with its results by aid of this new title is stamped upon him for ever (Num. xiii. 16; Gen. xvii. 5, 15). The essence then of the new name being everywhere else in Scripture the expressing at once and the fixing of the new nature, it is quite impossible that here it should be exactly the reverse; namely, the seizing of a transient and momentary outcoming of the old nature, and the imparting of a fixity and permanence to that. Simon's habitual firmness, not his momentary weakness, his confession, not his denial, of his Lord, was incorporated in his name, Cephas, or Peter, or the Rock; nor can we doubt that in like manner the Lord expressed at once the noblest and most characteristic features of these two apostles in this designation which He gave them. Even in the kingdoms of this world a king does not fasten on one of his noblest and most honourable captains a title which shall remind of his single defeat, but rather one which shall be the abiding record of the most glorious victories which he has won. Not Teneriffe, but the Nile, is bound up with Nelson's title. And if thus in this lower world of ours, how much more certainly in the kingdom of grace.

---

2 In his *Dictionnaire*, 1730.

3 Wir finden ein blindes natürliches Feuer bei ihm [Johannes] in jenem Zuge, der Luc. ix. 54 erzählt wird. Die hierbei bewiesene Gesinnung scheint tief aus seinem Character hervorgegangen zu sein, denn Christus legte wegen dieses Unfalls ihm und seinem Bruder denn Namen *βοανεργές, υἱὸν βροντῆς* bei, um sie immer an ihren innern Feind zu erinnern.

It is not easy to see what the motive was for abandoning the earlier exposition. It is true that we cannot link the giving of this name with any particular incident in the lives of these two, as we can the new name which Abram (Gen. xvii. 5), which Jacob (Gen. xxxii. 28), which Gideon (Jud. vi. 32), which Simon (Matt. xvi. 16-18), which Joses (Acts iv. 36, 37), and perhaps also which Saul (Acts xiii. 7-9) acquired, with incidents and epochs in *their* lives. It must be allowed also that the usual conception of St. John, and of the character of his ministry, is somewhat different from that of a '*son of thunder*.' And yet a little deeper insight into the matter will, I am persuaded, afford us much which will help to explain and justify the bearing of this name by his brother and by himself.<sup>4</sup>

There can, of course, be no difficulty in regard to St. James. We have not, indeed, very much in his history accounting for and illustrating this name; but then we have not much in any shape about him; and in what we have there is nothing which does not perfectly agree with, or even confirm, we may say, its fitness. And here, indeed, when we are gathering notices which should account for their being so called, that fiery zeal of his and of his brother, who would have burnt up the village that refused the shelter of a night to their Lord, may be fitly adduced as illustrating this title, though utterly misleading when cited as explaining and justifying it. It illustrates this title, because it shews us what in these two apostles was the natural groundwork of their character; a groundwork which Christ certainly did not dissolve; but rather, calling them these '*sons of thunder*,' recognized; even while by the same act He pledged Himself to purify it from whatever of earthly and carnal mingled with it, and threatened to spoil it. The very failings which on that memorable occasion the brother apostles displayed were failings of no common souls; were as luxuriant weeds, which, weeds as they were, testified for the richness of the soil out of which they sprang and its capacity for bearing the very noblest fruits. In their sense of righteousness and judgment, in their indignation against sin,--all this, indeed, displaying itself in an impatient and untimely severity, which would have consumed the sinners and the sin together, rather than the sin alone, with a saving alive of the sinners,--we see the '*sons of thunder*' on their natural side, and as they would have been but for that grace, which, retaining and exalting all the good of the natural character, did at the same time transform it from human to divine, separate all the drossy elements of earth, and retain only the pure gold of heaven.

And the early martyrdom of James, the fact that he, first of the apostles, stained with his blood the persecutor's sword (Acts xii. 2), we may accept this as a further attestation that he indeed *was* all that his name implied. A '*son of thunder*,' and, as such, arousing, startling, terrifying, he may have caused the thunders of the divine displeasure against sin to be heard with a clearness and an energy which drew on him the peculiar and early hatred of the ungodly world<sup>5</sup>--the holiness of his life lending additional weight and terror to his words--for in him, no doubt, that saying will have found its fullest application, '*Cujus vita fulgor, ejus verba tonitrua.*'

Then too much of the embarrassment which some feel, when they would make an estimate of

4 Tillemont: Jésus-Christ en les appellant à l'apostolat, leur donna le surnom de Boanerges pour marquer la fermeté et la grandeur de leur foy, et parcequ'ils étoient destinés à faire éclater la majesté de Dieu dans tout l'univers, à ne pas aimer la terre, mais à la faire trembler pour la soumettre à Jésus-Christ, à ne point craindre toute la puissance des hommes, mais à se tenir toujours élevés au-dessus d'eux.

5 So Chrysostom (*Hom. 56 in Matt.*): οὕτω γὰρ ἦν σφοδρὸς καὶ βαρὺς Ἰουδαίους, ὡς καὶ τὸν Ἡρώδη ταύτην δωρεὰν μεγίστην νομίσαι χάρισσασθαι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις, εἰ ἐκεῖνον ἀνέλοι.

what in St. John there is to justify this title, arises from their leaving the Apocalypse out of consideration (it is singular how often this is done), and regarding the beloved apostle as though he were the author of the Gospel and Epistles alone. Certainly those who forget the Apocalypse, or adjudge its authorship to some other than the 'beloved disciple,' must find this word of the Lord's inadequately fulfilled in the writings which will then remain to him. For, without denying that much in his Gospel also is like thunder out of a clear heaven,--the Fathers were especially fond of quoting in proof the very opening words of the Gospel,<sup>6</sup>--it is yet in the Apocalypse that those which eminently may be called the thunder-voices make themselves heard. This they do there with a greater loudness and distinctness than in any other book of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> It needs hardly be observed that the thunder in Scripture is no mere natural phenomenon. We do not read there that *it* thunders, but that *God* thunders;<sup>8</sup> the thunder being contemplated there as his voice (Ps. xviii. 13; xxix. 3; lxvii. 33; lxxvii. 18; civ. 7; cxliv. 6; Job xxvi. 14; xxxvii. 4, 5; xl. 9; 1 Sam. vii. 10), as the voice above all of his displeasure against the sins of men (1 Sam. xii. 17, 18). The terror which the thunder inspires springs from the interpretation of it which everyone unconsciously makes, from the sense which everyone has, that it is this voice in nature, with which God is speaking, and speaking in anger, to a sinful world.<sup>9</sup> And what book is there in Scripture so full of these voices of God as that with which the Canon is sealed? Nor certainly can it be regarded as a mere accident that, with the exception of this passage *about* St. John, only in his own writings is there any mention of thunder in the New Testament at all. In his Gospel, it is but a passing notice (xii. 29); in the Apocalypse, however, the thunders constitute a prominent part of the divine machinery and symbolism (Rev. iv. 5; vi. 1; viii. 5; x. 3, 4; xi. 19; xiv. 2; xvi. 18; xix. 6). Surely he whose ear was opened, first himself to catch, and then to give back to the Church and to the world, these thunder-voices, must be allowed to have approved himself, even to our understanding, that '*son of thunder*,' which the Lord has named him.<sup>10</sup>

---

6 See Suicer, *Thes.* s.v. βροντή.

7 Βροντόφωνος is an epithet given in the Greek Church to St. John. The brothers received the name of '*sons of thunder*,' in Theophylact's words, *ὡς μεγαλοκήρυκες καὶ θεολογικῶτα*. Epiphanius says of St. John: *υἱὸς ὄντως βροντῆς τῆ οἰκεία μεγαλοφωνία ὥστεο ἐκ τινῶν νεφελῶν τῶν τῆς σοφίας αἰνιγμάτων τὴν εὐσεβῆ ἡμῖν ἔννοιαν τοῦ Υἱοῦ ἀνῆκε*. See the valuable collection of passages from the Greek Fathers in Suicer, *Thes.* s.v. βροντή. Bengel among moderns has well expressed the same: *Magnifica appellatio. Tonitruum in Scripturâ et terribile et festivum quiddam est. Evangelium item mundum terret, piis lætitiâ et fructum affert. That there is a natural fitness in such an application of βροντή, the parallel use of βροντᾶν in profane Greek attests. Pericles had the name of Ὀλύμπιος, as, like Zeus himself, lightning and thundering (ἤστραπτ' ἐβρόντο, Aristophanes, *Acharn.* 531; cf. *Vestp.* 624) over Greece. In the '*geminos, duo fulmina belli, Scipiadas*,' of Virgil we have not the identical, but a closely cognate, image.*

8 J. Grimm, in an article, *Ueber die Namen des Donners*, in his *Klein.Schrift.* vol. ii. p. 421, has some interesting proofs of the many nations among whom the same language prevails.

9 Gregory the Great (*Moral.* xxix. 24): *Quid enim per tonitruum nisi prædicatio superni terroris accipitur?*

10 There is an able and interesting article by Gurlitt in the *Theol. Stud. und Krit.* 1829, pp. 715-738, on the word '*Boanerges*,' and the intention with which this name was given to the sons of Zebedee. It is more valuable, however, as containing a history of the past exegesis, than as itself arriving at any satisfactory results.