

ARTICLE VII.

CRITICAL NOTE.

A DIFFICULT MESSIANIC PROPHECY.

"THE prophecy of Immanuel in Isaiah vii. 14-16," says Dr. Milton S. Terry, "is probably the most difficult and enigmatical of all the Messianic prophecies." It reads as follows: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, when he knoweth to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land whose two kings thou abhorrest shall be forsaken." Of this passage Matthew says: "Now all this came to pass [the miraculous birth of Jesus], that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel."

The alleged difficulties may be stated as follows: The record in Isaiah calls for a fulfillment shortly after the making of the prophecy and in the lifetime of Isaiah. Matthew alleges a fulfillment hundreds of years after the death of Isaiah. No passage of Scripture has or can have a double meaning. Therefore these writers are in hopeless conflict. We must accept Isaiah and reject Matthew, if we would be loyal to the historic method. The difficulty is further emphasized, since but part of the Isaiah prophecy fits the Christ-child. Nor is this all, for there is no virgin in the Isaiah passage. The child is the son of Isaiah, and its mother is the wife of Isaiah, and they have a child some years old at the time of the prophecy. The word in Isaiah vii. 14 translated "virgin" is not the Hebrew word to describe Mary and her alleged vir-

ginity (Matt. i. 18; Luke i. 34). Is it any wonder that the difficulties seem insurmountable?

If all these difficulties really exist, I know of no rational solution of the problem. I know of no defense for Matthew. He misrepresents the Lord or blasphemes when he quotes Isaiah vii. 14. Fortunately for Matthew and his friends, two items are manufactured. There is no reality back of them. They are fictions, pure and simple.

Double meanings are a well-known characteristic of literature and cannot be ignored. Puns would be impossible without double meanings. The sibylline oracles brought gain to crafty priests, and led kings into ruin, because of really existent double meanings, Biblical literature is full of types and antitypes. Such literature is impossible in its finest forms without the principle of double meanings. Thus the son of Isaiah, under both his names, is a type of the son of Mary. If the first child is a sign that God is with his people in their trouble, the second child is a more significant sign in an hour of greater trouble. If the first child is named Immanuel, God-with-us, the second fills it more completely full. If the second child does not fit into some of the words of the original prophecy, the first one does. So long as the lesser of two is a type of the greater, how can every word in such a prophecy be applied to the second or find its perfect fullness in the first?

Now let us follow Matthew into this problem. Through him we get the larger, more important part of the double meaning. Where did he get it? Not from Isaiah, for he shows no consciousness of any meaning beyond his day. In other portions of his writings we find him conscious of the distant future and its coming Messiah, but not in this prophecy. Where then did Matthew get his part of the double meaning? Did he get it by revelation? If so, he is abundantly justified in saying, "Which was spoken *by the Lord* through the prophet." Since there are methods of revelation, what is the most probable in this case? How did Matthew receive this revelation? I find a good answer in

Luke xxiv. 44, 45: "These are my words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their mind, that they might understand the scriptures." Having heard from Jesus himself that Isaiah vii. 14 had a meaning that the prophet probably had never dreamed of, Matthew (i. 22, 23) gave us that meaning. And he credits that meaning to the Lord, not to Isaiah. Matthew did not originate it. He is not giving his own inferences or opinions. He is a witness—a witness testifying to things revealed. Notice that he leaves plenty of room for all the meaning which Isaiah saw. Speaking as a philosopher, he might have crowded that out or have spoiled it. As a witness, under providential guidance, he did not.

What then have we found? We have learned that Isaiah vii. 14–16 belongs to that large body of Old Testament prophetic literature which carries from its origin a second stratum of meaning to be revealed after the lapse of time, longer or shorter in duration. Such is the description of the tabernacle, with its secondary meaning unfolded in the Book of Hebrews. Such is the historico-prophetic literature of the passover with its lambs and their blood. The Isaiah passage is not alone. It falls under laws and is governed by literary principles. It should be studied accordingly.

In the difficulties filed by the critics, what is the other fiction? The following facts will prepare us for a better understanding of the answer. In the Old Testament the thought of virginity is usually expressed by one or the other of two words *עלמה* (*Almah*) and *בתולה* (*Bethulah*). The former is used in the Isaiah prophecy. The latter occurs more frequently than the former. The latter is sometimes supplemented by these words, "Neither had any man known her" (Gen. xxiv. 16 and Judges xxi. 12). The former is never thus supplemented. Why? Most probably because it does not need these words to hold it down to the thought of pure virginity, while the other sometimes does. *Almah* is the

word used to designate Miriam, the girl-sister of the babe, Moses (Ex. ii. 8). In the story of Isaac and Rebekah, it (Gen. xxiv. 43) is used as an equivalent of *Bethulah* and its supplement, "Neither had any man known her" (ver. 16). In no case outside of Isaiah vii. 14 is *Almah* used to designate a married woman. From Proverbs xxx. 19 some have tried to prove that it departs from the idea of strict virginity. A careful analysis of this passage with its context fails to show a particle of evidence for the alleged departure. One should verify this for himself. The paragraph covers three verses (18-20). Upon what thought do they focus? Upon the adulterous woman of verse 20. What is the puzzling thing about this woman? It is this, she sins and does not feel it. She says, "I have done no wickedness." How so great a sinner can feel innocent puzzles the writer of these proverbs. He cannot understand such a woman. It is "too wonderful for me," he says. And he illustrates the incomprehensibility of it in four ways. He uses the eagle in the air,—not because there is impurity in the eagle, but because there is mystery. There is no sin in the serpent on the rock, but there is mystery; so he uses it. In like manner he uses the way of a ship in the sea. Then comes the way of a man with a virgin. Why? Because there is mystery in it, not because there is sin or wrong. With such a man as Joseph before him and such a virgin as Mary, the writer of these proverbs would have found a fitting climax for his background of mystery. And on this background he would have inscribed his central thought: "How is it possible for an adulterous woman to escape the feeling of her sin, and claim the purity of such a virgin and such a man!" Neither in Proverbs xxx. 19 nor in Isaiah vii. 14, as we shall soon see, is there any call for departure from the thought of pure virginity. In the light of these facts, how can Dr. Terry and others declare that *Bethulah* should be in Isaiah vii. 14 instead of *Almah*, if the prophet had in mind a pure virgin? This declaration is without foundation in fact. It is a fiction, and the second of the two mentioned above.

Isaiah furnished the exact thought needed by Matthew in speaking of Mary, and used the very best word in the Hebrew language for that thought.

We are now ready for the key which unlocks the real problem. That the mother of Isaiah's second son was also the mother of his older son is an assumption. It has never been anything else. It is neither necessary nor natural in this setting. It is only rendered possible by removing from Isaiah vii. 14 the word *Almah*, and by ignoring the technical meaning of Isaiah viii. 3. If the first wife of Isaiah was dead and he was about to marry a second, if at the time of his prophecy he was espoused to a virgin, we have the conditions necessary in the light of all the facts. We see why he used the word *Almah*, and that it was demanded by the "prophetess" whom he later married (viii. 3). Such marriages are not unknown in Hebrew literature. Abraham reared a family, probably after the death of Sarah. His own mother was not the first wife of Terah. The mother of Jochebed was not the first wife of Levi. In historic criticism why not be deeply and thoroughly loyal to all the history? Matthew has absolutely nothing to fear from "the historic method." In order to put him in a bad light that method must first be sacrificed in whole or in part. I doubt if any of the Old Testament difficulties are as serious as "the expert critics" would have us believe.

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