

ence, that they either led to an entire indifference to the new life, or could only ascribe its appearance to some magical rite; but such doctrines find no support in the Epistle to the Romans. With the doctrine of the new life, including of course the earnest of the Spirit and the assured outlook to glory, the theology of the Epistle in the ordinary sense terminates. But the Apostle does not lay down his pen till he has vindicated the ways of God to men in face of the disconcerting historical fact that the mass of God's own people refused to submit to the revelation of His righteousness; and for him, at least, in the circumstances of the time, nothing was more essential in his theology than the daring argument of chaps. ix.-xi. The applied Christianity of the later chapters lies less in the theological field.

JAMES DENNEY.

NAZARETH AND BETHLEHEM IN PROPHECY.

THE very name of the fulfilment of prophecy has been brought into contempt by reason of the mistaken way in which the subject has been handled. Good people have erred herein in the most unfortunate manner, looking for such "fulfilments" as do not in fact exist,—or, if they do, are of very little value,—and ignoring such as do exist, and are often of superlative worth and beauty. That the Holy Ghost spake by the Prophets, they have been forward to acknowledge; but in their interpretations they have made Him speak so feebly and foolishly that men have turned their ears away and desired to hear no more. However well intended the conventional treatment of this subject may have been, it is certain (from its actual results) that it has run on altogether false lines.

A typical instance of such mistaken treatment may be

found in the case of Nazareth and Bethlehem, the two townships with which our Lord was specially connected before He was manifested unto Israel. One would say beforehand that no places can be so near to heaven, or so dear, as those in which "the Son of man which is in heaven" is born into the world, or spends His early years. And in fact all Christian people have looked back upon these two places with more or less of fondness and of desire to know more about them. One might compare them with one another, and magnify each in turn against the other, and yet wonder after all whether of the twain one ought to think most happy, most "exalted unto heaven."

There are, as St. Matthew tells us, "prophecies going before" upon both these places, prophecies from which we are certainly meant to learn something. For the office of prophecy is essentially a teaching office: no prophecy is mere vaticination (as though it were only an authoritative "Zadkiel"): it has always in it an element of revelation, showing us somewhat of God, and of His thoughts and ways.

Jesus "dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Prophets that He should be called a Nazarene."¹ The statement is quite general, "by the Prophets," and leaves us the whole field of prophecy in which to search. But in point of fact there is no prophecy extant in which the word Nazarene occurs at all. It is labour absolutely lost to try and find in the Old Testament any suggestion of a local connection between Nazareth and the Hope of Israel, the Messiah. In this strait it is suggested by some that what is really meant is not Nazarene, but Nazirite, or rather Nazir. These ascetics, concerning whom directions are given in Numbers vi., formed no doubt a peculiar and (at times) prominent class among the religious in Israel. They stood, apparently,

¹ St. Matt. ii. 23.

higher in popular esteem and in influence than is commonly believed. St. Matthew, however, could not possibly have confounded "Nazarene" with "Nazirite," (1) because the two words have very little resemblance to one another—much less in Hebrew than in English; (2) because our Lord was not in fact a Nazirite, as no one had better reason to know than Levi the publican. John the Baptist *was* a Nazirite, practically if not technically; and our Lord stood contrasted with him precisely in those points wherein John conformed to the distinctive character of the Nazirite.¹ This being so, it is suggested again that Nazareth (or Netzereth) means Branch-town, and that our Lord was "the Branch" so often foretold by the Prophets: that "the Branch" was, very appropriately, to live in "Branch-town." To which it is enough to reply that, however strange may be St. Matthew's methods of quoting prophecy, one ought to be ashamed to ascribe to him anything so puerile as this. There are plenty of instances in Scripture of play upon words—upon mere sound resemblances even—but not one of these instances is like to what is suggested here. It had been as reasonable to say that He should be called a native of Bethlehem because Beth-lehem means the House of Bread, and He is the true Bread which came down from heaven. Such fancies may not be out of place in a pious "meditation," but they have nothing in common with the narrative of St. Matthew. This method of escape is *not* open.

It is an unsolved enigma then—this asserted prophecy that our Lord should be called a Nazarene. So it shall remain for the present; and in the meantime it shall serve the very useful purpose of confounding the people who seek for "fulfilments" after their own heart, as much as possible in the letter, and as little as possible in the spirit.

We turn to Bethlehem, and recall the prophecy written

¹ St. Luke vii. 31-35.

of old by Micah, and quoted at length by St. Matthew.¹ Here surely there is no mistake. Here they have the very kind of prophecy which pleases them best—a prediction in which the very village is named in which the Christ should be born. With this prediction in one hand, and this fulfilment in the other, what does any man want more, or better? Thus spake the Holy Ghost by the Prophets, that He should be born in the interesting township of Bethlehem, whence David came; and so He was.

But if this be indeed the fulfilment of prophecy, two things are inexplicable. In the first place, what was the use of it? The mere prediction that a man should see the light in such or such a place has really little or no interest in it. It may awake a certain (more or less carnal) curiosity to see how Providence will arrange matters so as to bring it to pass, but that is all. The Jewish Rabbis, and Herod himself, knew of this prediction. What good did it do them, or any one else? And if there were use in it, why did not the prediction extend to the day of the month and of the week, and to other circumstances of that saving Child-bearing which had been so interesting to all of us? Such prediction, picking out a single circumstance from among so many, must always appear arbitrary and artificial, which is contrary to our fundamental conceptions of the true character of prophecy. In the second place, if this was indeed the fulfilment, why did our Lord Himself allow it to remain in oblivion? He never referred to His birth at Bethlehem; nay, He allowed the question of His having been born there to go against Him by default.² No one, as far as we can tell (His mother, of course, excepted), supposed Him anything else than a native of Galilee. It can hardly be thought that this prediction and fulfilment are sufficiently justified by that luxuriant undergrowth of poetry and legend—beautiful as it is in many ways—which

¹ Micah v. 2; St. Matt. ii. 5, 6.

² St. John vii. 41, 42.

has twined and festooned itself about the simple story of the stable cave of Bethlehem.

A study of Micah's prophecies—a study which is comparatively easy now even for the less learned of Bible students—seems to put the matter in a totally different light. Take Micah's view of things in general, and we see that it was characterized by antipathy to Jerusalem as the headquarters of tyranny and misrule in Israel. He remained quite loyal to the House of David, but he abhorred the policy which the actual rulers of Jerusalem pursued. He regarded Jerusalem much as many a provincial Frenchman may have regarded Paris—as though it exercised a disastrous tyranny first over the court, and then through the court over the country. To the old Judæan sentiment of Micah, Jerusalem was not ancient or venerable or holy as it was to the other southern Prophets; it was a comparatively new, and very unlovely, factor in the development of the political, social, and religious life of the chosen people. We, having in our minds the passionate love of the Psalmists for the city and the house of God—a love shared at least in some measure by our Lord—find it hard to enter into Micah's feelings. But there is no doubt about those feelings. Micah detested Jerusalem, and all that it stood for; he foretold with a certain fierce satisfaction that, for the sake of its evil rulers, Zion should be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem should become heaps, and the mountain of the house (*i.e.* the Temple area) as the high places of a forest.¹ On the other hand, he anticipated with joy the day when, willingly or unwillingly, the royal House should leave the new city, and go back to the old village, and to all that it stood for. Deliverance should indeed come to the daughter of Jerusalem, but not in or from Jerusalem. The ideal King, the Saviour of Israel, the destined One whom God had prepared from the beginning of the world, would be

¹ Micah iii. 9-12.

no child of Jerusalem, would have no connection with its pride, its injustice, its venality, its wealth and strength and splendour based upon cruelty and falsehood. He would spring—as David himself had—from the poverty and obscurity, the simplicity and hardihood, the modesty and straightforwardness, of the old-world village, of the little community of shepherds and rustics and small peasant proprietors—in a word, from Bethlehem Ephratah.¹ Take Micah's view of the coming One in particular, and it is evident that it was no direct vision of our Lord Jesus Christ.² Like all the Prophets, he foresees Him along his own line of vision, apart from time limitations—or, rather, with just those associations of time and place which belonged to his political and religious horizon. Like the rest, he saw the Christ amidst such surroundings as his own religious imagination furnished: and the imagination, even when inspired, *never creates*; it only combines with infinite fertility of design the materials supplied by observation and memory. Prophecy never escapes from this limitation, whether in Micah or in the Apocalypse: if it did, it would instantly become inoperative, like steam escaping into the open air. Micah therefore foresees the Christ as a Deliverer from the Assyrian terror. So, then, the prophecy about Bethlehem is not in fact a prediction about the place of our Saviour's birth at all, or is so only incidentally. It is a prophetic anticipation, springing (humanly speaking) out of the fervour of his own religious zeal and insight, that the destined Son of David, in whom God's everlasting purposes for His people are to be fulfilled, shall be as far as possible removed from what the kings of Judah were in Micah's days,—shall revert (in short) to the older and nobler type, the type set by David in his early life, before prosperity had spoilt him. Of this type of character Bethlehem—Bethlehem as contrasted with Jerusalem—was

¹ Micah iv. 8-v. 2.

² Micah v. 4-6.

the natural symbol and equivalent among places: it stood for all that in the earlier and better times which was capable of receiving the Divine benediction, and of expanding to the furthest breadth and length of the Divine purposes. With a thoroughly sane and sound insight Micah had appraised all the grandeur and the glitter of the royal establishment at Jerusalem at its true value, which was less than nothing. There was more real nobility—aye, and more abiding strength—in that poor open village than in this great city with all its wealthy houses, its walls and towers, its crowd of mercenary soldiers. “O Son of David,” Micah cries in effect, “leave those courts and palaces of Jerusalem, full as they are of insolence and cupidity; leave those walls and ramparts, manned as they are by hirelings and strangers; leave the shows and pretences, the greed and the violence, of Jerusalem; get thee back to the old-world village whence thy great father came: then shalt thou be poor, but strong; of little repute, but of honest worth; of small resources, yet destined to go forth conquering and to conquer.”

Such having been the motive and purport of Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem, it is a matter of profound interest to discover in what manner it was fulfilled. And herein it is a notable fact (curiously overlooked by commentators) that even from a political and military point of view Micah's prophecy completely justified itself. Deliverance came in truth to Judah, *not* from Jerusalem, *not* from princes and nobles commanding regular armies and holding fortified places; but precisely from that old popular militia, that association of volunteers fighting “in troops”—as neighbourhood or relationship united them—to which Micah points as Israel's resource and opportunity.¹ The extraordinary victories achieved by the Maccabees were exactly of this kind. These popular levies, supplied of their own

¹ Micah v. 1.

free will by the villages of Judæa, defeated the finest armies of the day. The troops of Antiochus certainly had everything that money and skill and military knowledge and the *éclat* of great achievements could give them; but they went down hopelessly before the onset of these undaunted rustics. Not from Jerusalem did they come—for Jerusalem was ever a weakness and a menace to the national cause—but from villages and hamlets like unto Bethlehem, poor, old-fashioned, simple and severe in faith and living. In this matter, history has of course repeated itself often enough. So the Swiss peasants broke the disciplined ranks of Austria; so the American farmers defeated the regular troops of England; so the Montenegrins flung back again and again the bravest soldiers of Islam. Always fighting “in troops”—*i.e.* in comparatively small and loosely-organized bodies of men who were really “brothers” in arms, knit together by those closest ties of kinship and neighbourhood; fighting, therefore, with that mutual understanding and trust which stimulates to so high a degree the courage of the individual—they have from age to age waxed mighty in war, and turned to flight armies of aliens, beyond all expectation. Even from a political and military point of view Micah was right. Israel’s strength for war, her hope for victory, lay in the unsuspected valour and resolution of a God-fearing and hardy peasantry, not in the towering defences of Jerusalem, nor in the mercenaries and household troops whom her princes kept in pay. Away then from Jerusalem! back to Bethlehem!

The house of David, however, had no part in this uprising of the people. Had there been any worthy representative of the old royal family at that time, doubtless the nation would have gathered round him with a wonderful devotion. It may even seem strange that prophecy did not “fulfil itself” (as people say) in this matter; strange that the national expectation did not awake a corresponding ambi-

tion in the breast of one or another of David's descendants ! At no period of Israel's history were the conditions so favourable for such a self-fulfilment of prophecy. But, indeed, the capacity of prophecy to fulfil itself has been greatly exaggerated ; and in this particular case there is no hint of any such thing occurring. David was wholly wanting to his people. The Deliverer came, quite in the spirit of Micah's prophecy, quite in the spirit of the old hero of Bethlehem in his best days, when he was poor and simple and fearless, trusting only in God and in his right ; but he did not spring out of Judah, nor had he any local association with Bethlehem. It was *a* fulfilment therefore, and a remarkable one—under the Maccabees—but not the one which God had in view.

That our Lord was born in David's old village, and so fulfilled the prophecy literally, was the least part of its true fulfilment. His birth at Bethlehem—rather than at Nazareth, let us say—had no influence upon His life, had nothing really to do with His manifestation. The very fact remained (as we have seen) unknown. What gave colour and character to our Lord's life upon earth was not at all the romance of that stable-cave at Bethlehem, but the prosaic plainness of that cottage home in Nazareth, wherein He grew up to man's estate. He was and is “ of Herod's jurisdiction.” Galilee claims Him as her own, and not merely as her adopted. The title upon His cross does not lie when it proclaims Him once and for ever Jesus Nazarene. Exactly herein was Micah's prophecy made good in the essential meaning and spirit of it. The plainness and poverty ; the simplicity and obscurity ; the total indifference to all that ministers to pomp and pride and luxury and love of ease ; the entire unconcern with all that artificial opinion, that false judgment of men and things, which always grows up in courts and cities ; all this, which Micah connected with Bethlehem, belonged in the highest degree

to the Prophet of Nazareth. Whatever stress one may lay more than another upon our Lord's commendations of poverty and obscurity, there is no question that they had a real attraction for Him. He Himself, speaking of John the Baptist, pointed the contrast "they that wear soft raiment are in kings' houses." Whatever good there may be in "soft raiment" (and the things which go along with it), it was not *His*; it was as much out of His line as out of John the Baptist's. True, He fettered Himself not with the artificial restrictions of the ascetic; but all the same His life was essentially, and was by choice, poor and simple and hardy in its conditions. His neighbours and associates were peasants, plain and God-fearing folk, who worked hard, fared simply, enjoyed no luxuries. What they were, He was also in His human life. In this narrow circle, and amidst these common surroundings, He moved, and moved with a freedom, a courage, a straightforwardness, a directness of speech and action, which could not (humanly speaking) have been His had He lived "in kings' houses," had He surrounded Himself with the accessories and associations of earthly grandeur, had He been born "in any high estate." Micah looked not, it may be, so high as the sphere in which our Lord lived and moved; he thought rather of other victories on a far lower level; but beyond his range of vision his true prophetic insight was justified and was fulfilled in the life and ministry of the Son of man.

To this real fulfilment that birth at Bethlehem served as a picturesque frontispiece, a standing illustration merely, and therefore, although it was the *literal* fulfilment of the prophecy, He Himself laid no stress upon it, suffered others in His earthly lifetime to lay no stress upon it. For in His day to be born at Bethlehem had been no humiliation, but quite the contrary. Micah living would have abhorred the scribes and lawyers, and they would have detested him; but Micah dead was clothed in honour and glory, and his

prophecies were revered—in the letter of them. To be able to say, “I was born in Bethlehem—I, of the house of David,” had been a matter of boasting indeed for any one whom the people accounted as a prophet and a leader. But Bethlehem, in the Prophet’s conception, stood precisely for what was poor and simple and unsophisticated, and did not rely upon any artificial advantages, nor lean itself on titles and observances. Because the Son of man came in the *letter* of Micah’s prophecy He was actually born at Bethlehem; because He came in the *spirit* of Micah’s prophecy (which was vastly more important) He forewent all advantage of His birth at Bethlehem, and chose to be known, in life and death, as Jesus of Nazareth—*Nazareth*, of which no Prophet made mention, out of which (as the learned and religious said) no good thing could come. This abnegation was made possible and easy for Him by those events of His infant years—the massacre of the innocents, the flight into Egypt, the return to Nazareth. These occurrences completely cut all known or suspected connection between the Carpenter’s Son at Nazareth and the Babe of so much wonder and expectation at Bethlehem. So was Micah’s prophecy really and truly fulfilled.

We return to Nazareth, and to that other prophecy, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” It may be taken for granted that none such exists, in the letter. But in truth, if we substitute for “Nazarene” its *equivalent* in character and estimation, this was spoken of Him at large by the Prophets. It was most picturesquely intimated by Micah himself in that passage about Bethlehem. It was most pathetically described by Isaiah, speaking of Him that “hath no form nor comeliness, and when we see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him.” Take the common feeling about Nazareth in our Lord’s time, as signified in the Gospel story, and a whole world of prophecy runs together into that name, “a Nazarene,” as

belonging to the Christ of God. It is one of the striking features of the Scripture that it uses such an astonishing freedom in *the interchange of religious equivalents*, wherein it seems often to pay no regard at all to what we consider the paramount duty of being *accurate* in quotation and statement. A very simple example may be seen in the apology of St. Stephen. In quoting from the Prophet Amos, he substituted "beyond Babylon" for "beyond Damascus."¹ That was indefensible in one way, because the prophetic vision of Amos certainly did not extend beyond Assyria as the arch-enemy of Israel. But in another way it was wholly justified, because, in fact, for the later Jews Babylon had altogether taken the place of Assyria as the name of terror and of chastisement. "Babylon" had become the accepted religious equivalent of "Assyria" or the vaguer "beyond Damascus." A far more interesting example may be found in St. Paul's great argument about the unity of the Church.² The whole matter turns upon the analogy of the human body, and this is declared in verse 12. At the end of that verse, according to every law of reason, ought to stand "the Church." It is so obviously called for, that no one can have read the passage without expecting it, without a sense of surprise at not finding it. But, in fact, the Apostle, without a word of explanation or apology, substitutes for "the Church," Christ! That is to say, he spoils his own argument, in the letter of it, in order to throw into the highest possible relief a great spiritual truth. "Christ" *is*, in this sense, the religious equivalent of "the Church"—so much so that the one name may be substituted for the other—because the Church (as here spoken of) is the *alter ego* of Christ, enjoying His prerogatives, living with His life. The mystical identity betwixt Christ and the Church (elsewhere dwelt upon) enabled the

¹ Acts vii. 43; Amos v. 27.

² 1 Cor. xii. 4-27.

Apostle to make so startling a substitution ; but, in fact, he *did* make it without a moment's hesitation and without stopping to justify it. Many other examples might be adduced, in which we find (it may be) a single name or word substituted, with wonderful effect, for a multitude of things or of ideas, because it stands as the embodiment, as the accepted religious equivalent, of them all.

Such seems to be the case with this citation from the Prophets, which nobody can find in any of their writings. Certainly St. Matthew's extreme indifference to what we call accuracy is surprising to all modern and western readers. Certainly the sacred writers (and he in particular) do seem to combine an occasionally remarkable devotion to mere literal fulfilments with a more frequent and more remarkable freedom in dealing with the letter of prophecy. Probably we shall never quite get to their point of view. But, at any rate, Bethlehem and Nazareth may help us to see in what direction we ought to look for the true fulfilment of prophecy—that fulfilment in the spirit, rather than in the letter, which alone is of profound and permanent importance.

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