

A MESSIANIC PROPHECY.

(MICAH^v. 8—v. 6 [HEB. v. 5]).

[Chapter iii. closes with the announcement of a signal judgement on Zion: *Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps* (ver. 12). Chapter iv. opens (vers. 1-7) with a splendid vision of future glories. Thus a great gap in thought is left between the two passages, for we are not told how disaster is to issue in triumph. The explanation follows, however, in chapter iv. 8-v. 6, in which the Person is introduced through whom the transition is made from present distress to the great Restoration.]

THE PROMISE OF THE KINGDOM, IV. 8.

AND THOU, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come; yea, the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.

The sense of this verse is quite clear. A particular part of Jerusalem is addressed, namely, the Hill of Zion, the low south-east corner of the city, which was in a special sense *the City of David*. It was the spot which he had taken from the Jebusites, and made his own dwelling-place, moving northwards from his old capital Hebron, when he became king over all Israel. Thus at the outset the Messianic note is struck in this passage: *Back to David*, the king whom God Himself chose in the days of old.

But the cry of this verse is not only *Back to David*, but also *Back to the older Israel*, the Israel of David's day. The prophet addresses the hill of Zion by an unexpected epithet, *Tower of the Flock* or *Flock-tower*. He closes his eyes to the great walled city of his own day, to the Jerusalem, which after all (be it remembered) defied the Assyrian, the great taker of cities, and he sees in vision the little Davidic fort of old days, which just sufficed as a refuge for the nearest flocks when an enemy was ravaging the land. To the little Flock-tower of times long gone by,

not to the great fortress of the Present, does the Prophet make the great promise.

It is very important, if we wish to understand the prophets of the eighth century, to realize what an offence to these men of God were the strong cities of Israel and Judah. Jerusalem itself, as a fortress, was no exception. To take refuge in stone walls was, in the eyes of Hosea (viii. 14), Isaiah (xvii. 7-9, xxii. 8-11, xxvii. 9, 10, xxxii. 13-20) and Micah, *to forget JEHOVAH, Israel's Maker*. The prophet therefore makes his promise here not to the Great City, the pride of its inhabitants, but to one quarter of it, to which certain ancient memories were attached.

The promise made to the "Flock-tower" is that *the former dominion shall come to her*. In other words, the Davidic kingdom, rent in pieces under Rehoboam, shall be restored. It is just such another promise indeed as that cited by St. James in Acts xv. 16 from Amos ix. 11, *In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old*. We should call both promises "Messianic."

PRESENT SUFFERING, FUTURE DELIVERANCE, Vers. 9, 10.

NOW why dost thou cry out aloud? Is there no king in thee, is thy counsellor perished, that pangs have taken hold of thee, as of a woman in travail? Be in pain and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and shalt dwell in the field . . . ; there shalt thou be rescued; there shall the LORD redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.

In this passage as I have given it, an omission is to be noticed; the words, *and shalt come even unto Babylon*, are absent. After careful consideration I am driven to the conclusion of Drs. Driver (*LOT*, 1898), G. A. Smith (with a "perhaps," *The XII. Prophets*, 1896), and W. Nowack

(*Handkommentar*, 1897) that these words are a mistaken gloss, which has inadvertently been transferred from the margin to the text. There is nothing arbitrary in this view. The brief clause in which Babylon is mentioned constitutes a real and serious difficulty, for it is alien to the whole context in which it stands. That context speaks of Assyrians, not Chaldeans, of Invasion, not Captivity, of troubles which have already begun, not of those which are still far distant. The passage as a whole is attributed with good reason to Micah, the contemporary of Hezekiah and Sennacherib, but the clause which mentions deportation to Babylon as a present danger is not to be assigned on any reasonable ground to a prophet who lived more than 100 years before Nebuchadrezzar.

The words, then, *and shalt come even unto Babylon* are alien from the general context, and ought to be struck out as a gloss and incorrect. This conclusion may be supported by a second consideration, namely, that the preceding clause remains meaningless so long as this reference to deportation to Babylon is retained. *Thou shalt dwell in the field and shalt come even unto Babylon* is at the best a *ὑστερον πρότερον*, for the removal to Babylon would naturally precede the settlement in new surroundings. But even so the expression seems too harsh to be possible. The clause, *Thou shalt dwell in the field*, taken by itself,¹ bears a sufficient meaning, which is only obscured by the second clause with its reference to Babylon.

How then are vers. 9, 10 to be interpreted? The verses contain (as we see at once) two things, (a) an announcement of a great crisis coming upon the daughter of Zion, (b) an attempt on the part of the prophet to administer comfort. We have to ask two questions, What is the nature of the crisis? and, What is the ground of the comfort?

¹ See below in the exposition of ver. 10.

To take the second question first, What is the meaning of the words of comfort which the prophet addresses to his people in their alarm, *Why dost thou cry out aloud? Is there no king in thee, is thy counsellor perished?* Zion's king, her counsellor, in the mouth of one of the great prophets of the eighth century, can be none other than **JEHOVAH** Himself. It is nothing to the point to say that Hezekiah was reigning in Jerusalem. Read the prophecies of the First Isaiah, and see how much (or rather how little) can by any means be supposed to refer to the reigning prince of Judah. To men like Isaiah and Micah, who had so vivid a sense of the presence of the Eternal King, the earthly king was a person of little significance. Their inmost thought rings out in the words, *The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King; he will save us* (Isa. xxxiii. 22). The comfort, then, which Micah gives in ver. 9 answers fully to another utterance of Isaiah, *Cry aloud and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee* (xii. 6).

We have now to ask, What is the nature of the crisis indicated in ver. 10? If (now that the gloss is removed) exile to Babylon is not threatened, what is the prospect to which Micah points and from which Zion averts her gaze? The words of the prophet are simple, so simple as at first sight to create a difficulty by their very simplicity: *Now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and shalt dwell in the field; there shalt thou be rescued* (תִּנְצֵלִי). We have here, as plainly expressed as may be, the great prophetic thought already referred to, that Israel's fortified cities are his weakness, not his strength; God's deliverance will not come to Zion until Zion has surrendered her confidence in human defences and has thrown herself upon her LORD. Micah's demand is for a transformed Zion, a disarmed Zion, looking to her Maker, and not to the

fortifications of Jerusalem. The prophet expostulates with the

“ . . . Heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard.”

Some interpreters give a more definite interpretation of the words than this. Thus Dr. Driver suggests that ver. 10 “ describes how the inhabitants, having been compelled to surrender their capital to the foe, encamp in the fields on the road for exile, when JEHOVAH interposes suddenly on their behalf, and there delivers them.” I must doubt, however, whether the words can be so precisely applied. The enemy, according to the context, has not yet entered Judah (chap. v. 5, 6), so that detailed references to the course of the campaign are not *à priori* to be expected. But there is a more serious consideration to be faced. The analogy of prophetic usage, and in particular the analogy of the usage of Isaiah in relation to this very crisis, is against such an interpretation of Micah’s words.

We do not find in the prophecies of the son of Amoz a string of predictions describing, months in advance, the exact course of the Assyrian invasion. Isaiah’s utterances are reiterated appeals for Faith in JEHOVAH, reiterated protests against putting trust in an arm of flesh, whether that *arm of flesh* is represented by the strength of Jerusalem, as in chap. xxii., or by the horses and chariots of the Egyptians, as in chaps. xxx., xxxi. Deliverance is promised in return for faith; but in his earlier prophecies Isaiah does not say how the deliverance is to come. Some of these utterances are consistent with an expectation that deliverance would be delayed, until Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of the Assyrians. The important fact to remember is, however, that Isaiah does not tie his promise of salvation for his people to some outward event, such as

a successful defence of Mount Zion. It is not till the Rabshakeh has summoned Jerusalem to surrender that the decisive promise is given, "I will defend this city to save it."

This prophecy of Micah (which synchronizes with the earlier prophecies of Isaiah) is, I believe, of the same character with them. We may say, if we will, that ver. 10 is consistent with an expectation that Jerusalem would be forced to capitulate, but we shall find ourselves in grave difficulties if we take the words as a direct prediction of a surrender. We shall miss the connexion with the great prophetic thought of which I spoke at the beginning.

The verse speaks broadly of a return from the life of cities, a life corrupting to simplicity and corrupting to Faith, back to the earlier life, the simple country life of the Davidic age. Micah asks for a turning away from the luxury of great cities and from confidence in stone walls, back to a lowly life in the field and to faith in the God of David, *Now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and shalt dwell in the field.* We may compare Isa. xxxii. 14, 16, *The palace shall be forsaken, the populous city shall be deserted . . . Then judgement shall dwell in the wilderness* (i.e. in the pasture lands), *and righteousness shall abide in the fruitful field.* Thus shall the new redeemed Israel dwell.

THE GATHERING IN OF THE NATIONS, Vers. 11-13.

And now many nations are assembled against thee that say, Let her be defiled, and let our eye see its desire upon Zion. But they know not the thoughts of the LORD, neither understand they his counsel: for he hath gathered them as the sheaves to the threshing-floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion: for I will make thy horn iron, and I will make thy hoofs brass: and thou shalt beat fine many peoples; and thou

shalt devote their gain unto the LORD, and their substance (or their host) unto the Lord of the whole earth.

At first sight these verses seem to describe the overthrow and spoiling inflicted upon Israel's foes; Zion turns upon her enemies and pulverizes them. I doubt whether this is an adequate interpretation of the words, I doubt whether it is right even in the main. The words, indeed, describe a judgement on the heathen, and express a thought which is found also in Isaiah, namely, that judgement on Israel is followed by judgement on Israel's foes (Isa. x. 12). But is it a judgement unto death? Here the nations (be it noted!) are not burnt like stubble, nor cast out into the street like clay, they are gathered as wheat into the threshing-floor, and after a process of severe trial their gain, and their host, are devoted to the LORD. In the light of the conversion of the Gentiles mentioned at the beginning of the chapter (vers. 1-3), I believe that the main thought of these final verses is that the nations, after judgement has been held, will be gathered in to the people of God.

A FRESH CONTEMPLATION OF THE PRESENT DISTRESS,

Chapter v. 1.

Now shalt thou perform thy mourning, O daughter of mourning: he hath laid siege against us: they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek.

With this we may compare Isaiah xxii. 12: *In that day*

¹ The translation *assemble in troops* (A.V. and R.V.) for the Hebrew *hithgōdēd* is very uncertain, even in Jeremiah v. 7, where some reference to Adonis-worship is probable, and the alternative translation *cut oneself* (in sign of mourning) is entirely suitable. On the other hand, *daughter of mourning* (*daughter of troops*, A.V. and R.V.) for the Hebrew *bath gedud* must stand on its own merits derived from the immediate context. If *hithgōdēd* be rightly explained as "perform thy mourning," *gēdād*, which is derived from the same root, can hardly mean anything else than *mourning*. At the same time it must be acknowledged that the only direct support for this rendering is derived from the occurrence of a plural *gēdādō'h*, "cuttings made in mourning" in Jeremiah xlviii. 37:

did the Lord GOD of Hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth. The words announce that the crisis is at hand. For "he hath laid siege" we should translate "he is about to lay siege." As to the result nothing is said except that the judge of Israel, i.e. Hezekiah will soon be exposed to reproach which he cannot turn away.

THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID,

Vers. 2-4.

AND THOU, Bethlehem Ephrathah, which art little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting. Therefore will he give them up, until Time which travaileth hath brought forth: then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel. And he shall stand, and shall feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God: and they shall abide; for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.

With this address to Bethlehem, the second city which bears the title of *the City of David*, the prophet recalls his hearers to the Messianic hopes which were heard in chap. iv. 8, the hopes which give the keynote for this whole passage. The prophet passes over the Present, and passes by Hezekiah the ruler of the day, and looks back to the beginnings of the ancient house of David for an ideal king, for one who is truly Davidic. The prophets of Judah never forgot that JEHOVAH had once chosen David to be king. His house had received the Divine promises, and with his house was bound up a hope which could never be quenched. The anointed king, King Messiah, was expected from this ancient source; He is described as one *whose goings forth are from of old, from ancient days.*

As to the time at which the Deliverer is expected, the

prophet speaks with prophetic reserve. It will be, he says, in the fulness of time, *when Time which travaileth hath brought forth*. Then, he adds, the exiles of the Northern Kingdom will return home. The ideal king will rule, and rule long, for he does all in the strength of JEHOVAH; his kingdom shall make itself felt to the ends of the earth.

We are often told that the Prophets prophesied to their own age, and stood in direct relation to their own time. This statement is true, and it needed to be stated with all the more emphasis in modern days, because there *was* a tendency (old-fashioned now) to read prophetic books as though they had little or no context in the history of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. But by this time I think we have learnt to read our history of Israel for the illustration of the Prophets of Israel, and perhaps the day has come for caution in the opposite direction. We must beware of trying to read references to a particular historical situation into a particular prophecy, where no such references exist. The Prophets (if I read them aright) were not moved by every eddy in the tide of events. They proclaimed great principles of the righteousness of God, and of the need men have of steadfast faith in Him, and they were not shaken in their presentation of these principles by the fall of a Judaeon town or the overthrow of an Israelite army. They did not doubt that God fulfils Himself in many ways; Jerusalem might be held or surrendered, but Israel was still God's people, and His hand was still over them.

If we grasp this fact firmly, we shall not misunderstand the calmness and detachment from the Present which mark vers. 2-4. The Prophet has forgotten altogether the advance of the Assyrian devastator in the vision of the reign of the Messianic King. The seer looks *through the Present* as through glass, and sees the great final purposes of God working themselves out.

A HELP WHEN OTHERS FAIL, Vers. 5, 6.

And this man shall be our peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our palaces, (and we shall have raised against him in vain seven shepherds, and eight princes of men, that they might waste the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod through her open gates,) then he shall deliver us from the Assyrian, even when he cometh into our land, and when he treadeth within our border.

I have slightly paraphrased this passage, which, as ordinarily translated, is all but impossible to understand. Dr. George Adam Smith (*XII. Prophets*, vol. i. pages 416-7) seems almost to give up the task as impracticable. He writes, "There follows upon this prophecy of the Shepherd a curious fragment which divides His office among a number of His order, though the grammar returns towards the end to One. The mention of Assyria stamps this oracle also as of the eighth century."

Now the main difficulty in the Hebrew arises from the well known poverty of the language in particles, i.e. adverbs and conjunctions. In the passage put in brackets above there is no conjunction used throughout but ׀ "and." The E.V. paraphrases the "and" in two places first by "when" and secondly by "then." In my own revised translation I have in the same two places used first "and" and secondly "that" (i.e. "in order that"). This paraphrasing of the conjunction "and" is not only permissible, but necessary; it is done many times on almost every page of the Old Testament in our translation. In fact the particular shade of meaning to be given to the Hebrew ׀ has to be fixed from the context. If the clauses follow one another in direct simple sequence of thought, we may translate by "and" following "and," until we are reminded, of the reiterated *καί* in the Epistle of St. John; but, on the other hand, if some clauses

stand in contrast to others, English conjunctions must be used in the translation which set forth the contrast.

Now the clauses bracketed in vers. 5, 6, certainly do stand in contrast with the clauses which precede and follow them. Notice, in the first place, a change of person in the verbs. Outside the bracket the discourse is of what one person, He, the Great Shepherd, will do; inside this unity is lost; the word is of what *we* do, and our seven or eight shepherds or princes. Within the bracket, again, the thought is of offensive, perhaps vainglorious war; whereas in the rest of the passage we are shown one who rises to deliver, when the Assyrian has already entered Judah. The contrast, I believe, is between fruitless human effort and Divine *fiat* executed without a struggle. I have therefore introduced the words *in vain* into the translation of verse 5.

In further justification of this gloss appeal may be made to two other points of language. The expression is "*we* have raised" or "*we* shall raise"; we may vary the tense in translating or paraphrasing the passage, but we cannot vary the person. Now if Micah were (as some think) speaking of a real deliverance granted to Israel by God by the hand of seven or eight great captains, is it possible for a moment to suppose that he, a prophet, would say "*we* raised up" these deliverers? It does not ring true. God alone gives Saviours.

Again, if the deliverers of Israel were spoken of as *seven*, we might with some reason think of *seven* as a number implying completion or perfection, and look upon the seven as true deliverers. But it is not so. It is *seven* shepherds, *eight* princes, i.e., to translate the Hebrew parallelism into plain dull prose, *seven* or *eight* leaders. This variation of number implies one of two things, *either* that leaders are raised up in succession, a new one as the old one falls, or that all is confusion, seven or eight different princes are

summoned, because no one of them is sufficient by himself to give confidence. *Seven* and *eight* then imply struggle, not victory. In homely English things are at *sixes and sevens*, as long as Judah seeks to deliver herself.

Once again, the expression *princes of men* (*nēsīchē adam*) implies that these would-be deliverers are of no avail.¹ The words might be paraphrased *princes of flesh and blood*. The natural contrast to these princes is the Shepherd who *feeds his flock in the strength of the LORD*.

The force of verses 5, 6, then, is that the Deliverer from the Assyrian, when all other deliverers have failed, is to be a Prince of the House of David. This deliverance, however, in Micah's eyes is but one of the Prince's functions, a mere incident of His reign. The Reign in the strength of the LORD, the Dominion to the ends of the Earth is the real subject of Micah's vision.

A prince of the House of David, Hezekiah, did indeed, in some sense, guide his people through the Assyrian crisis, and under God deliver them from the complete destruction. But a true spiritual rule, such as Micah saw in vision, was not established on earth until the Messiah came. The Prophet speaks in fact with what has been called the prophetic foreshortening of the future. His eye is fixed on the distant glories which his God shows him, and he pays little heed to the measure of time which separates that Future from his own present. The reign of peace which he foresees is the reign of a prince yet to come of the house of David, and when he turns to the distress of the present with words of sympathy and comfort for his contemporaries he attributes even the near deliverance from Assyria to the prince of his vision. But God has more than one "Anointed King" (Messiah), and it

¹ I suspect that the kings of Egypt and of Philistia are meant; cf. Isaiah xxxi. 3, "Now the Egyptians are men (*ādām*), and not God." But the reference of *her open gates* may be to an attack on the rear of Assyria by Babylon and Elam.

was by a lesser hand that He saved Zion from the wrath of Sennacherib. But Hezekiah is no subject for a prophet to dwell on. The prophecy we are studying has indeed its historical connexion with events which happened seven centuries before Christ came, but its true subject is a universal spiritual kingdom, and that kingdom is the Kingdom of Christ.

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LITERARY ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE BIBLE.

I. THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.

i. 1 f. "There is an old Eastern fable about a traveller in the steppes who is attacked by a furious wild beast. To save himself the traveller gets into a dried-up well; but at the bottom of it he sees a dragon with its jaws wide open to devour him. The unhappy man dares not get out for fear of the wild beast, and dares not descend for fear of the dragon, so he catches hold of the branch of a wild plant growing in a crevice of the well. His arms soon grow tired, and he feels that he must soon perish, death waiting for him on either side. But he holds on still: and then he sees two mice, one black and one white, gnawing through the trunk of the wild plant, as they gradually and evenly make their way round it. The plant must soon give way, break off, and he must fall into the jaws of the dragon. The traveller sees this, and knows that he will inevitably perish; but, while still hanging on, he looks around him, and, finding some drops of honey on the leaves of the wild plant, he stretches out his tongue and licks them." After quoting this fable (translated, by the way, from Rückert, into English verse by Archbishop Trench, in his *Poems*, p. 266), Tolstoy (in *My Confession*) proceeds to apply it to modern life. He quotes the opening chapters