

“The Everlasting Father.”

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In Isaiah ix. 6, 7, there is a remarkable prediction of a child who is justly to bear titles of a very extraordinary character. One of these titles is rendered in our Authorized Version, The Everlasting Father—the Hebrew being אֲבִי-עוֹלָם. The force of this phrase, it is proposed now to consider. It is agreed by all that the first noun is in the construct state, and that its primary meaning is *father*. The only questions that arise are as to the nature of the genitive and the meaning of the second noun.

1. An early opinion, originating with Abarbanel, and afterwards adopted by Hitzig, Knobel, and Kuenen, gives to אֲבִי the sense of *booty*, a meaning which it certainly has in Gen. xlix. 27, Isaiah xxxiii. 23, and Zeph. iii. 8, where, however, the connection imperatively requires it. In all other cases, nearly fifty in number, it denotes *perpetuity*. Nor is there any reason for departing from the ordinary sense here, since there is nothing in the attributes of the peaceful and righteous Ruler to suggest that he is a plundering conqueror who reigns by violence and fills his treasury with spoils, but, on the contrary, much that points in another direction.

2. A second rendering is that of the A. V., which retains the usual meaning of both words and makes the genitive one of attribute—Father of everlasting=Everlasting Father. Thus Gesenius, Ewald, Hengstenberg, Delitzsch, and Maurer. This is certainly a possible rendering, since we have in Hab. (iii. 6) אֲבִי-עוֹלָם, where no one doubts that the second noun represents a quality of the first, viz., perpetuity. The difficulty in adopting this view here is the fact that it gives to the subject of the prophecy a title which is never applied to the Messiah elsewhere in the S. S., and one which it is perplexing either to explain exegetically or to apply homiletically. Christ's relations to his

people are set forth in a vast variety of ways by the Sacred Writers, but never by any borrowed from the paternal tie—the word *father*, with all its boundless wealth of meaning, being reserved for the first person of the Godhead, the Father of all, while Messiah is over and over set forth in the New Testament as the brother of his people.

3. A third view makes the genitive one of authorship (*auctoris*).

a) Thus Grotius makes it=father of a numerous offspring.

b) The Douay version, with which Lowth agrees, identifying עִי with אֱלֹהֵי, makes the phrase mean father of a new age, or, as the older version has it, father of the world to come. (LXX. [Alex. text] πατήρ τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. Vulg. *Pater futuri sæculi*.)

This again is a possible rendering, but certainly not probable. For it gives to the second noun a meaning which it has nowhere else in the Scriptures, and if Isaiah had intended to convey this sense he would have used אֱלֹהֵי which was ready at his hand. Besides, the idea thus given makes no perceptible addition either in dignity or in efficacy to what has already been ascribed to the child whose name is wonderful. If he is mighty God, he is of course father or founder of the new age just as he was of all preceding ages.

(c) Another modification of this view regards the phrase as showing Messiah to be the author of eternity, *i. e.*, eternal life to his people. But while this is a certain and blessed truth, and one set forth with frequency and precision in the New Testament, it is not contained in the Old, except by implication. Nor does it seem natural to interject a purely spiritual conception like this into a description, which borrowing its terms from an earthly throne sets forth the inherent dignity of Messiah as a mighty, successful, peaceful and permanent monarch, the increase of whose government has no end. While the doctrine of immortality was certainly known to the ancient saints, yet it was not emphasized and repeated in such a way as to render it natural to expect that it would be identified with the person of Messiah so directly and distinctly as this interpretation would make it here.

4. A fourth view is that which makes the genitive one of possession. This is an Arabic usage of very common occurrence in ancient times and modern, but in Hebrew is found very rarely, and then only in proper names, *e. g.*, אבִי טוֹב אֲבִיטוּב father of goodness, *i. e.*, the good one. In Job xvii. 14, the patient man salutes the grave, saying, "Corruption, thou art my father," *i. e.*, corruption possesses me. And if we render אֲבִיטוּב by *pit*, as some contend that we always

should, the sense is the same. If this view be adopted then we have the phrase indicating eternity as an attribute of the Messiah. He is self-existing and ever-living—a sense which admirably accords with the whole connection, especially the preceding clause. The prophet after saying that the future deliverer is the mighty God, specifies one of the divine perfections, that incommunicable excellence by which Jehovah is the first cause and last end of all things. Father of eternity because it is He that gives substance and body to the conception of infinite duration. Duration implies something that endures. Now God is the Being who having neither beginning of days nor end of years gives to us the concrete meaning of the abstract statement. And to ascribe this attribute to the Messiah, to him who is to be born as a child, is exactly in line with the rest of the marvellous prediction, and gives increased emphasis and meaning to the startling collocation of human qualities and divine in the future ruler of Israel. Born in time and seated on the throne of David, he is yet the Everlasting One, whose goings forth have been from of old, even from the days of eternity. Of the increase of his government there shall be no end, just because of his existence there has been no beginning.

Finally, whatever be the meaning of the phrase, the English translation should be "father of eternity" in accordance with the ancient Arabic and the modern (Dr. Van Dyck's), the Syriac, ancient* and modern, the Chaldee Paraphrase, the French of Martin and the Dutch of the States Bible.

*That is, in the Ambrosian Codex, for the text in the London Polyglott omits the first word of the phrase and reads "mighty God of eternity."