

A Criticism of Some Passages in Isaiah which are interpreted by the Late J. B. Alexander, D.D., as predicting the Messiah.

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I.

CHAP. iv. 2 : "In that day shall the BRANCH of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel." Dr. Alexander contends that this passage refers to the Messiah, (1) because the word צֶמַח, *branch*, is used for the Messiah in Jer. xxiii. 5, xxxiii. 15 ; Zech. iii. 8, vi. 12 ; (2) because the adjunct Jehovah, branch of Jehovah, shows that the "branch" is the offspring of Jehovah as the parallel line shows that "fruit" is the offspring of the earth, the first showing his "divine," the last his "human nature."

Respecting the first argument it may be replied : (1) that *Isaiah* never uses צֶמַח (*branch*) for the Messiah. In Chap. xi. 1, another word, הַטֵּר, is used ; and also, נֶצֶר, translated *rod* and *branch* in the common version. In Chap. liii. 2, the original words rendered "tender plant" and "root" are different from either of those mentioned. (2) The word צֶמַח (*branch*) means produce of the earth, *harvest* in Hosea, viii. 7. The same meaning is found in Gen. xix. 25, Ezek. xvi. 7, Ps. lxxv. 10 ; and as it is never used in *Isaiah* for the Messiah, unless in this place, and as it is used once in Chap. lxi. 11, for produce of the earth, the connection and adjuncts must determine which of the two meanings given it has in this place.

The connection favors the same meaning as in Chap. lxi. 11. It is elsewhere the constant teaching of *Isaiah* and the other prophets that after the people had been punished by the Lord they would be blessed more abundantly than they ever had been before. The earth would then yield for them its increase, and more certainly and luxuriantly than previously. Now this verse is the commencement of a description of the blessings which will ensue after Jehovah has visited the nation in his displeasure.

The connection also favors the interpretation that by צֶמַח, *increase* or produce of the earth was meant. Nor do the adjuncts oppose this interpretation ; they rather favor it. "The increase of Jehovah" may mean wonderful, abundant increase, as the "trees of Jehovah" and "mountains of Jehovah" mean lofty trees, great mountains ; or it

may mean the increase which Jehovah gives. Either of these meanings is to the purpose and admissible by the laws of language.

Nor do the adjectives "beautiful and glorious" as applied to this abundant production of the earth, or as Dr. Alexander translates, "for honor and for glory," oppose this view. They also rather confirm it. For if, when the land was desolate and brought forth no fruit it was a "reproach," and caused the nations to distrust the power of Jehovah, certainly when it was "covered with flocks and clothed with corn" it would be "for honor and for glory."

The parallel line also strongly favors this view, "and the fruit of the earth shall be comely and excellent for them that are escaped of Israel." "Fruit of the earth" is never used of persons or a person anywhere in the Bible. Why should it be taken from its obvious meaning and be forced to signify the "human nature" of Christ?

The remark, that "*branch* and *Jehovah* stand related to each other in the same way as *fruit* and *earth*, and as the latter phrase means the offspring of the earth, so the first must mean the offspring of Jehovah, an expression which can only be applied to persons," is incorrect. The *fruit* of the earth is in no such sense the offspring of the earth as to be *another earth*, but something very unlike it; so the "branch" or "*increase*," as it should be rendered, "of Jehovah" is not another Jehovah, but something very unlike him. I think I have given the true meaning of the prophet; there is no reference to the Messiah in the passage.

II.

The Messianic character of the prediction in Chap. vii. 14-16 is strongly asserted by the late Professor Alexander. He says "there is no ground, grammatical, historical, or logical, for doubt as to the main point, that the church in all ages has been right in regarding this passage as a signal and explicit prediction of the miraculous conception and nativity of Christ." This is pretty strongly stated, and implies or asserts that many critics who have universally been supposed not to doubt without, at least, *some* reason, are very weak-minded. I propose to examine this passage, and the criticism whose truth is so strongly stated.

In the common version the passage reads thus: "Therefore [since you, King Ahaz, decline to ask a sign from Jehovah that Rezin and Pekah shall not prevail against Jerusalem] the Lord himself shall 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,

(that [until] he may know) 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 that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings."

The common objection made to referring this prophecy to Christ is, that a child to be born seven hundred years afterward could be no sign to Ahaz that Jerusalem would not be taken by the approaching army. To this Professor Alexander replies that if a child was to be born to occupy the throne of David any time thereafter, it would be proof that the kingdom would not be overthrown. This may be, but it would not prove that Ahaz might not be overcome, Jerusalem be taken, and these kings for a time make the land a spoil and desolation; and *this* was what filled Ahaz with terror. To remove this terror was the sign given; and the presumption therefore is that it was something then to transpire. This presumption is confirmed by the connection, for it is said that notwithstanding this rescue from Rezin and Pekah, the Lord would bring upon him and his people and his father's house, days such as had not been since Ephraim departed from Judah, even the king of Assyria. What then was this sign? It was, that a young female there present should bear a son, and that, before he should have learned to choose the good, and refuse the evil, the land of Syria and Israel, over which Rezin and Pekah ruled, should become desolate; be overcome by the enemy, and their kingdoms destroyed. Such is the obvious meaning of this prophecy. Is there anything to awaken a doubt that it is not the correct meaning?

Dr. Alexander does not lay as much stress upon the word "virgin," **עלמה**, as many commentators have done, for he says that it does not imply necessarily that she would not be married and thus the birth be in the ordinary course of nature, though it is rendered by the connection extremely improbable. Still he insists that a "virgin or unmarried woman is designated as distinctly as she could be by a single word." This may be questioned. When the "tests of virginity" are spoken of in Deut. xxii. 14-23, the word **בתולה** is invariably used; so also Judges xi. 37, 38, Ezek. xxiii. 3, 8, Lev. xxi. 13, 14; and the word is *never* used in but one instance of a married person, and then poetically. Joel i. 8. The word **עלמה** means of marriageable age, and not necessarily unmarried. As far as the word used is concerned there can no argument be drawn that the time for the child to be born was not even then very near, so that Dr. John Pye Smith thinks she was the "wife of Ahaz."

The name "Immanuel" is also supposed, by Dr. Alexander, to furnish support to his interpretation. Although he admits that "it might be used to signify God's providential presence merely," he still thinks, that when we take into view other prophecies, especially "that remarkable expression of Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Micah, (v. 1), *until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth*, immediately following the promise of a ruler, to be born in Bethlehem, but *whose goings forth have been of old, from everlasting*, the balance of probabilities preponderates" in favor of a "personal" presence, a "miraculous conception and nativity."

But the selection made from Micah is not appropriate to the purpose for which it is quoted. The translation given would imply that the being here to be born was eternal, "from everlasting." The true rendering is as follows: "Whose origin is from the ancient age from the days of old"; that is, he is a descendant of Jesse, a family of ancient date. The words rendered "from everlasting," מִיָּמֵי עוֹלָם, are never thus rendered except in this passage,—Micah vii. 14, "Let the flocks feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the *days of old*." So also Is. lxiii. 9, 11, Mal. iii. 4, Deut. xxxii. 7. The passage, therefore, has no reference to the Messiah.

One more reason given by Dr. Alexander for not accepting the obvious meaning as the real one is, that "we read in the gospel of Matthew, that Jesus Christ was actually born of a virgin, and that all the circumstances of his birth came to pass that this very prophecy might be fulfilled," and Dr. Alexander further declares that it "is impossible to prove the existence of any quotation, in a proper sense [*i.e.*, in a sense implying that the writer referred to had the object in view which the writer making the quotation applies his words to] if this be not one." This last remark may be very true, and yet the inference to be made may be directly opposite to the one that the writer intended. It may prove that you cannot determine by the form of quotation that it is a prophecy of the event to which it is applied in the quotation, and not that the event is certainly the one in the prophet's mind, because his words are applied to it. The truth is: "*No one of the formulas of citation* furnishes any conclusive reason in favor of considering the texts quoted as predictions." The last pillar of the structure falls. The obvious meaning of this prophecy is the true meaning. Christ was not referred to by the prophet, but a child to be born in the time of Ahaz. The language used by the prophet was *appropriate* to describe the birth of Christ, and the Evangelist uses it for that purpose.