

QUESTIONS FROM THE PEW.

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THE BETHLEHEM PROPHECY.

(Micah, v. 2.)

“**B**UT thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, 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, ” or as in the margin, “from ancient days.”

When the writer was quite a large boy he recited the above verse in a public meeting, as an exercise that had been assigned him. The passage was of course understood as a prophecy of Christ. It was selected because of this fact. It was Jesus of Nazareth of whom it was here predicted that he should come from Bethlehem and be ruler in Israel, and whose goings forth had been from everlasting. In the warm enthusiasm of the occasion very possibly every one present considered this to be the true meaning of the passage. Nothing was said even intimating that the verse could have a different meaning, or in any way raising a question as to what its meaning was when it was first uttered. The remainder of the passage which this verse introduces was in no wise alluded to. Neither does the writer, with a church and Sunday school attendance of some considerable extent, remember that it was ever referred to at any church exercise at which he was present; and moreover he has never heard of its having been explained or set forth or referred to in any church upon any occasion whatever.

The passage continues as follows: “Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth; then the residue of his brethren shall return unto (or with) 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. And this (man) shall be (our) peace: when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our palaces, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds and eight principal men. And they shall waste the land of Assyria with the sword and the land of Nimrod in the entrances thereof: and he shall deliver us from the Assyrian, when he cometh into our land, and when he treadeth within our border. And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples as dew from the LORD, as showers upon the grass; that tarrieth not for man nor waiteth for the sons of men. And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations, in the midst of many peoples, as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, treadeth down and teareth in pieces, and there is none to deliver. Let thine hand be lifted up above thine adversaries, and let all thine enemies be cut off."

Of course this is a passage of plain meaning as regards Assyria and the "remnant of Jacob." Assyria was the great threatening power in the north-east. It was as real to the inhabitant of Palestine then as Germany is to a Frenchman now, and more to be feared. Certainly the words of our passage were adapted to produce definite impressions. Terms more matter-of-fact could hardly have been chosen.

Now our special point here is that whatever these words were specially or plainly *adapted* to produce, that they must have been *intended* to produce. This would have been true even if the intention had been to deceive. This conclusion seems unavoidable on any other supposition than that the responsible author of the words did not know what meaning they would convey, or what meaning they were properly adapted to convey. How can this be seen differently? The prophet was speaking in view of a clearly perceived and pressing situation; and he was speaking plainly. Nothing could have been further from his mind than speaking in enigmas. He had just predicted the capture of Zion; but there was also to be a return. "For now shalt thou go forth out of the city; and shalt dwell in the field, "and shalt come even unto Babylon; there shalt thou be rescued; there shall the Lord redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies. 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 thought of the LORD, neither understand they his counsel: for he hath gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion: for I will make thine horn iron, and I will make thine hoofs brass: and thou shalt beat

in pieces many peoples: and thou shalt devote their gain unto the LORD, and their substance unto the Lord of the whole earth."

With one intervening verse, the prophet continues, in further encouragement, with the passage which we are studying. It is with its plain meaning that we have now to do. What the passage meant then the responsible author of it told the people. Is not this perfectly evident? This ruler was to be a great military leader. He was to be of the Davidic dynasty, this fact at least being expressed by saying that he was to come out of Bethlehem. He was to deliver his people from all aggression of the Assyrians, and under his leadership the land of Assyria was to be wasted with the sword.

To claim a secondary and spiritual meaning as the more important and controlling one in this passage does not relieve the situation, even if the claim were to be granted. If we were to admit here any number of such meanings, whose brightness and power were to be manifested only after many centuries, we could not thereby be justified in failing to take account of the original meaning and force. That meaning no explanation of the passage or theory of the Christian Scriptures can permissibly ignore; and how can that meaning be dealt with on any view of the Scriptures that is taught in most of the churches?

Also, why, in simple fairness, has not this passage in its entirety, been regularly taught or presented in the churches and Sunday schools? Is not this a case in which the truth has not generally been sought out and shown? Has not the Church here in some considerable degree failed to make good its oft-made claim of being an institution characterized by the seeking and exposition of the truth?