

CT 171

# EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY.

THE MESSIANIC PROPHECIES.

BY

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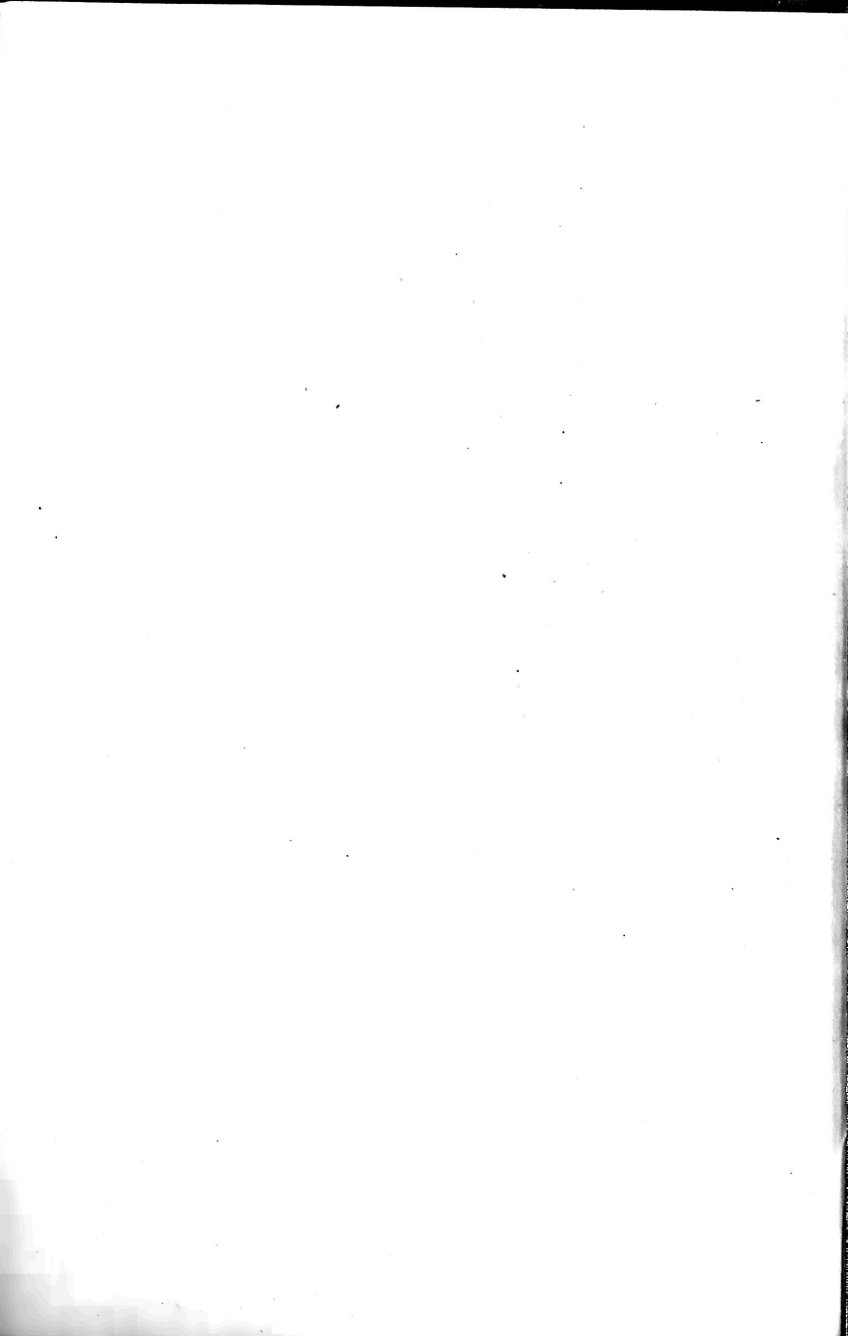
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## THE MESSIANIC PROPHECIES.

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THE first in order of time of the evidences of Christianity are the celebrated predictions which gave to the chosen people, in ages long anterior to the event, the expectation of a Messiah. They are the first also in importance, because prophecy is an evidence of Christianity alone. There have been other teachers of religion and morality who have claimed to work miracles, who have suffered martyrdom, and who have received the honours of a posthumous deification. Nor is any religion, while it flourishes, without its seers, its medicine-men, its auguries and oracles. But it was the advent of Jesus alone which is said to have been the subject of previous prophecy, and to have been heralded during a period of four thousand years by the whole literature of an ancient people. Certainly this is evidence indeed. It is true that the people themselves, the fellow-countrymen and lineal descendants of the writers, while clinging fanatically to the prophecy, have always obstinately repudiated the application of it. It is true that they have asserted, with a resolution unparalleled for its trials and endurance, the right of understanding their own language. It is true that for all ecclesiastical purposes that language is with them and them alone a living tongue, and that, if they could conscientiously admit that the words of their old prophets as they still read them have not been unfulfilled, they would escape from a position which is getting every year more desperate, and gain for themselves and their

literature a place in the religious scale which would satisfy even the arrogance and patriotism of a Jew. But they will not. Because (it is said) two thousand years ago an excited section of their nation, which was then in a chronic state of disturbance, and was stumbling and wading on through blunders and bloodshed \* up to the climax of national and political suicide, mistook the character of a man whom his nearest friends did not understand, and were instrumental in putting him unjustly to death, therefore their descendants prefer still to deny the character of this man, than allow that even under such circumstances their ancestors could have made a mistake. With this theory, however improbable, we are not at the present moment concerned; for it stands to reason that, given an accurate translation of the Bible, † we are as capable of forming an opinion nowadays as any Jew in the first century as to whether the plain and natural meaning of a prophecy was fulfilled in the historical character and career of Jesus. It is only those who interpret the prophecies in a non-natural sense who must bear in mind that the interpretation which they advance is the interpretation of foreigners and aliens from the tongue in which those prophecies were written; and that other than the literal meaning of the words has ever been denied by those who formed and spoke the language, and by teachers whose minute study of every part of the national literature at the time when this new interpretation was first advanced, is a matter of history. Or to put the matter in a different way: No doubt there are in England and Germany scholars capable of interpreting Aristophanes better than any modern Athenian

\* Acts v. 36, 37.

† With regard to this, it must be remembered that the orthodox doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible means not only that each book of the Bible as originally written was the word of God, but that the compiled volume, and its remote descendant, the version of it that was translated in the days of James I., and our present version of that translation, are equally inspired.

can. But who would trust to the criticisms of an English or German professor who discovered in the "Clouds" points and allusions which we know were not recognised at the time the play was represented, nor by any contemporary or immediate successor of Aristophanes, however critically he might have studied the subject? Surely it was for the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus to say whether the Jewish prophecies were or were not fulfilled in him. Their leaders would naturally have come to some conclusion on the subject before they had committed themselves to one side or the other. There must have been at the time many "rulers in Israel" willing to be convinced, like Nicodemus, or like those who accepted the impartial and judicious advice of Gamaliel (Acts v. 34-40). What we propose to do, therefore, is to look at a few of the principal Messianic prophecies, and see for ourselves why it was such men were not convinced; whether, in short, according to the fair and plain meaning of these prophecies as they have come down to us, any one of them has been specifically and exclusively fulfilled in the character and career of Jesus.

Let us begin with the direct prediction of the Almighty himself, Gen. iii. 15: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

This prophecy is said to have been fulfilled so far as it is Messianic—

I. By the mission and teaching of Jesus.

II. By the triumph of Jesus over sin and death.

III. By the temporary humiliation and apparent defeat of Jesus in his trial and crucifixion.

It may be objected, first, that the order of the clauses in the prediction has not been observed in the order of the fulfilment, and that this point, so far from being immaterial, is really of the essence of the case; for it makes all the difference to mankind whether the

crowning victory rests with Jesus or with Satan. But waiving this point, has any one a right to say that this prophecy has been fulfilled specifically and exclusively in Jesus? That there always has been and always will be enmity between the seed of the woman (not Jesus only) and the Serpent is clear. The very name of Satan (adversary) or of Devil (confounder) implies this. It is also clear that man, in his progress onwards, is constantly let and hindered by the powers and effects which are represented under the symbol of the Serpent. And who can doubt that those powers are constantly being defeated, and good triumphs over evil? Was not the prophecy fulfilled ages before the Advent in the career of thousands and thousands of good men of all nations struggling against Ignorance, Superstition, and Selfishness—defeated in their own persons and in their own time, but in spite of that defeat, and frequently by their own sacrifice in the cause, ensuring the ultimate victory of those principles for which they had so manfully contended? What did Jesus more than this?

Let us take next the prophecy contained in Jer. xxiii. 5-8: "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved and Israel shall dwell safely, and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness. Therefore behold the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt: but the Lord liveth which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land."

It may be objected that this prophecy is one of those which has not yet been fulfilled, but is to be so in due course. To that we reply, that if so, it is not, until

fulfilled, any evidence of Christianity, and should not be quoted at all; that if it alludes only to the Second Advent it cannot be adduced as a proof of any special interposition of God in the first Advent; but that, placed as it is in the Epistle for the 25th Sunday after Trinity, it is intended by the Church to commemorate the Feast of the first Advent. Otherwise it would be more appropriately placed for the Sunday after Ascension-day. Has, then, the prophecy been fulfilled by the coming of the Jesus of the gospels? If he was raised up "as a Branch unto David," he must have been the actual, not the putative son of Joseph. It is not here a question what the Jews thought, but what God said. These profess to be the words of the Almighty spoken through one of his chief prophets, and it would be what is called blasphemous to say that God meant, "I will pretend to raise up unto David one who shall be no relation to him; I will foist a child of my own upon the Royal stock, in order that you may listen to him under the belief that he is a lineal descendant of your Hero King." It is a dilemma from which there appears to be no escape, but which does not seem now-days to create any difficulty, viz., that either Jesus did fulfil the Messianic prophecies, in being the descendant of David, and in that case he was not the Son of God, or that, if he was the Son of God, he did not fulfil the prophecies.\* Next, Jesus did not become a "king," nor did he "reign," and certainly he did not "prosper;" and as for executing "justice and judgment upon earth," it was the very part which he indignantly repudiated (Luke xii. 14). In the days of Jesus Judah was not "saved," nor did Israel "dwell safely." On the contrary, they were rapidly preparing for themselves that

\* This difficulty must have been felt in the first ages of Christianity, and no doubt was the reason why Justin Martyr and the earliest of the fathers trace the genealogy of Jesus up to David through his mother. But the subsequent acceptance by the Church of the gospels of Matthew and Luke in their present form as inspired writings makes this no longer possible.

political destruction which soon after fell upon them. Lastly, when and by whom was Jesus ever called "the Lord our Righteousness?"

The 53d chapter of Isaiah is not a prophecy at all. It is written in the past tense, and professes to be a historical narration of the career of some one who had adopted in public life an unpopular cause and been its martyr. It seems to have been composed by a friend who had sympathised but not suffered with the martyr, and who, after the danger had passed, writes in terms of mild self-reproach of the want of courage of himself and the other followers of his hero. All this may have been written of several popular leaders whose followers have hung back when the cause became a dangerous one. But it must have already happened, and cannot be taken to have any reference to events which did not take place until seven or eight centuries afterwards. In the concluding verses there is a prediction of the ultimate triumph of the cause and of the martyr's reward; but this, if it is to be applied to the case of Jesus, has not yet been fulfilled, and forms no part of the evidence of Christianity. For it is not yet a matter of history that Jesus has "seen his seed" or has "prolonged his days," or that the "pleasure of the Lord hath prospered in his hand" (whatever that may mean). "He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied" will of course be attributed to the historical scene of the Agony in the garden; but it is equally applicable to the last hours of a thousand other martyrs who faced death with more courage and satisfaction than Jesus did.

So too of Isaiah ix. 6. Is this a prophecy—and if so, has it been exclusively fulfilled in Jesus? "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given," is a statement of fact, and of a very common one, not a prediction. It is true that a prediction follows, but is it applicable? What "government" ever rested upon the shoulders of Jesus? When was he ever called "Wonderful," or "Counsellor," the "Mighty God,"



the "everlasting Father," the "Prince of Peace?"\* All this and the predictions in the next verse are still unfulfilled. The more thoughtful and logical amongst the Christians recognised this, and conceived the Millennium as a period for the realisation of these visions. But the doctrine seems of late years to have fallen into disrepute, and nobody cares to maintain it. With this we have nothing to do more than to point out that such an idea is, at all events, an acknowledgment that these prophecies have not already had a fulfilment.

The prophecy quoted from Micah v. 2 is an important one, because it is said to have been recognised at the time of Jesus' birth by those most competent to form an opinion on the subject (Matt. ii. 4) as applicable to the birth of the Messiah. And the fact that upon a report of the Christ having been born, Herod at once referred to the "chief priests and scribes of the people," proves that both he and they were keenly alive to the importance of the Messianic prophecies, and prepared to recognise as the Christ the person who fulfilled them. This is the prophecy: "And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda; for out of thee shall come a Governor that shall rule my people Israel." But has it been fulfilled in Jesus? The four biographies that we have of him, differing as they do in many other particulars, at least agree in this, that God's chosen Israel—the people who prided themselves on their descent from Abraham, the people who inhabited the land formerly allotted to the tribe of Juda, utterly and consistently rejected Jesus, and his pretensions, and his doctrine, and his disciples after him. "He came unto his own and his own received him not" (John i. 11). It is clear that they regarded him, if not as an impostor, at all events as a

\* As to this title compare what Jesus said of himself, Matt. x. 34, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword . . ." No one can dispute the fulfilment of *this* prophecy.

crazy and mischievous fanatic (John viii. 48), of no use to them in their schemes of turbulence and rebellion (Luke xx. 26). In no sense did Jesus himself aspire to rule God's people Israel, nor had he the slightest sympathy with them or their rulers, or their projects. His influence was confined to the hybrid population of Galilee, a simple people, ignorant of the old Jewish writings (John vii. 49), without any pride of race or national sympathy with the inhabitants of Judea.

The story of the flight into Egypt is, as is well-known, only given by the author of the first gospel, and it is inconsistent with the history given in the third of Jesus' early days. It winds up with the quotation, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Hosea xi. 1). Now this, we must point out, is no prophecy at all. It is like many other so-called prophecies, nothing more than the narration of a simple fact. In this case the fact is a well known one, in Biblical history at all events; but whether it were so or not, the words quoted are an allusion to the past, not an anticipation of the future. Is this so or is it not so? We can point here to no less an authority than that of Dr Farrar, who ("Life of Christ," vol. I. p. 39) says of this passage that the writer of the first gospel finds in this narrative "a new and deeper significance for the words of Hosea," and then adds in a note—

"Or in other words, totally misunderstands them,' is the marginal comment of a friend who saw these pages. And so no doubt it might at first appear to our Western and Northern conceptions and methods of criticism; but not so to an Oriental and an analogist. Trained to regard every word—nay, every letter of Scripture, as mystical and divine; accustomed to the application of passages in all senses—all of which were supposed to be latent in some mysterious fashion under the original utterance, St Matthew would have regarded his least apparently relevant quotations from, and allusions to, the Old Testament, not in the light of occa-

sional illustrations, but in the light of most solemn prophetic references to the events about which he writes. And in so doing he would be arguing in strict accordance with the views in which those for whom he wrote had been trained from their earliest infancy. Nor is there even to our modern conceptions anything erroneous or unnatural in the fact that the Evangelist transfers to the Messiah the language which Hosea had applied to the ideal Israel."

To our modern conceptions there is nothing erroneous or unnatural in a man's writing what he has been inspired to write. And if the author of the first gospel was supernaturally informed that Joseph was ordered by God to take the child into Egypt and keep him there, in order that a certain prophecy might be fulfilled, he had no option about his narrative. But Dr Farrar does not put the case so high as that, and we should like to ask so experienced and conscientious a scholar as Dr Farrar is well known to be, whether there is not to our modern conceptions something very erroneous and unnatural in the fact of a *historian* transferring to his own hero language which had been applied to a totally different character? And whether such a person as Dr Farrar describes the author of the first gospel to have been, can be considered a trustworthy biographer? Were not the natural and acquired tendencies of his mind apt to make him look upon as not sufficiently important the hard and fast lines of historical accuracy? In a word, is it not just possible that the whole story of this Egyptian expedition—upon which the silence of the author of the third gospel cannot be satisfactorily accounted for—was assumed both by writer and readers to have taken place in accordance with "this most solemn prophetic reference?" And though this may not be admitted, it is clear that language which Hosea had applied to the ideal Israel, and which had no objective relation to Christ, is not evidence of Christianity.

The difficulty as to the prophecy quoted in Matthew ii. 23, "He shall be called a Nazarene," is of a different sort altogether. It was spoken "by the prophets." When, and by whom? No one is able to point out the passage in any book of our Old Testament, and it is mere assumption to say that it is a quotation from some prophetic work or works now lost. The explanation suggested—viz., that it was prophesied generally that Jesus should be a "Nētser," or "Branch" (of the house of David) is no explanation at all. The statement of the inspired Evangelist is that Joseph went "*and dwelt at Nazareth*" in order that the prophecy which called Jesus a Nazarene (*i.e.*, an inhabitant of Nazareth) might be fulfilled. But if the prophecy did not call Jesus an inhabitant of Nazareth, it was not fulfilled by his dwelling at Nazareth, and Joseph could not have gone there for that purpose. Moreover, it appears to be a historical fact that Jesus was called, perhaps in his lifetime, certainly after death, "the Nazarene," and we have therefore here a curious phenomenon. In other places it would appear that a history has been made to fit into the prophecies; but in this the reverse has taken place, and a prophecy has been coined to anticipate the history. And whatever explanation is given admits that what we have said of the prophecies in general is true of this one, at all events—viz., that the interpretation of it is the interpretation of foreigners and aliens from the tongue in which the prophecy was written.

Again, let us take the prophecy in Isaiah vii. 14, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know 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."

Here, if anywhere, would the expounders of Scripture have been justified in departing from the harsh literalism

of the text ; and by accepting a metaphorical interpretation, have avoided the reproduction of the grossest feature in Greek and Roman mythology. But the exposition unfortunately happened at a time when asceticism both in man and woman was looked upon as the height of moral perfection ; and the stainless purity of the young wife was supposed to occupy the in estimation of Him who had made woman simply as a helpmeet for man, a lower place than the crude innocence of the inexperienced virgin.

In order to give this passage more apparently the form of a prophecy, the future tense has been substituted for the present in the first paragraph. The proper translation is said to be, "is with child and beareth a son."\* Consequently here too what is called a prophecy is the statement of a fact. But is there any analogy here to the case of Jesus? According to the authors of the first and third gospels, Mary while still a virgin became *enceinte*, and bore a son. So far the prophecy may be said to have been fulfilled ; but beyond this there is no pretence for such an assertion. Mary did not call his name "Immanuel," nor anything of a similar signification, but called his name "Jesus," and that by the express direction of the angel Gabriel, who seems to have forgotten this prophecy of Isaiah—or, at all events, not to have been struck by its relevancy. As to eating butter and honey that he might know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, if this means the adoption of an ascetic diet (such as John the Baptist's, for instance), in order, according to the popular error of the day, to quicken the spiritual perceptions by mortifying the flesh, the description was singularly inapplicable to a person who was known amongst his contemporaries as "a gluttonous man, and a winebibber." Further, the event which was to happen before the child knew to refuse the evil and choose the

\* The Holy Bible, with a Commentary. By Canon Cook. Vol. V. p. 80.

good, happened, as every schoolboy knows, within a very short time of the prediction, and cannot be supposed to have been predicted by reference to another event which was not to happen for seven or eight centuries. The only pretence therefore of fulfilled prophecy here is the alleged virginity of Mary at the birth of Jesus. If this was really fulfilled in his case, we may at once grant that it was exclusively fulfilled, and constitutes evidence for Christianity, in comparison with which the failure of all other evidence would be immaterial.

What proof then have we of this miraculous occurrence? The appearance of Gabriel, according to the third Gospel, the dream of Joseph, according to the first Gospel, are the only occasions on which it was positively asserted. Neither do these two witnesses agree together. According to one, it was announced to the husband and not to the wife, according to the other, it was announced to the wife and not to the husband. Moreover, they are themselves miraculous, and a miracle (it is plain), cannot be evidence of another miracle unless confirmed itself by some independent testimony. We must look, therefore, for some such testimony of these visions. They are never again alluded to by the same evangelists, and never by Jesus nor any of his disciples, nor the two other evangelists. Still, indirect testimony of them it ought not to be difficult to find in the record of their effects. If first the mother and then the father of a child had received from God, before that child's birth, direct revelations of its Divine character, what would—what must—have been the result? Would they not have been themselves, and would they not have brought up their family as his earliest disciples? Any picture gallery of old Masters will answer this question. Look where you will what do you see? The Madonna in an attitude of rapt devotion over, or positive worship of, her wonderful Child. Joseph, Elizabeth, and other relations frequently accompany

her, all deeply impressed by the sight of One, whom, ordinary child as he was to others, they knew, on evidence they dared not question, to be the Incarnate God. No wonder the greatest painters could choose no more fitting subject for the highest exercise of their art. No wonder that they should have succeeded so well in a conception at once so natural and so sublime, and that the constant realization of so vivid and deep-rooted an idea never palled from repetition on the profession or the public! At the time when these pictures were executed, art was fostered, patronised, and directed by the Church, and this therefore is the answer which the Church has given over and over again to our question. And being the natural and acknowledged result of these appearances, do we find in the biographies of Jesus (written, be it remembered, by his own friends and disciples), that it ever took place? Quite the reverse. Nothing is clearer from the Gospels than that Jesus' own family and relations were, if at all, among the latest of his disciples. Mary and Joseph "marvelled" at the "Nunc me dimittis" of Simeon. Mary sharply rebuked Jesus, just as an ordinary mother would an ordinary child, for leaving them after the feast, and when by way of reply Jesus asked them if they did not know that he must be about his Father's business, they stared in his face in utter ignorance of what he was talking about! At a very early period of his public career, when his biographers assert that his fame had gone through all Syria, they are forced to acknowledge that Nazareth was not convinced (Luke iv. 23). His friends said "He is beside himself" (Mark iii. 21). His mother is not mentioned as among the women who followed and ministered to him (Luke viii. 3). Indeed, his adversaries could point to his mother, and his brothers and sisters, and say—"Are they not all *with us?*" and that there should be no misunderstanding on the subject, we read, in reply, the bitter sarcasm

of the disappointed enthusiast—"A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, *and among his own kin and in his own house*:" Matt. xiii. 56; Mark vi. 4; see also John vii. 3-10. What other meaning can we attach to the sneers which Jesus was constantly pointing at the obligations of relationship both in his own case—Matt. x. 35-37, xii. 48; Luke xi. 27, 28—and that of others—Matt. viii. 21-22; Luke ix. 59-62, xxi. 16; and his public adoption of the ties of sympathy in preference to those of blood—Matt. xii. 49, 50; Luke viii. 21? Was it not Mary's incredulous curiosity as to the powers of the Prophet which brought upon her the rude rebuke—"Woman! what have I to do with thee;" and her tardy recognition of the suffering Martyr, the curt dismissal from the Cross? \*

After this, we are not surprised to find that not one of Jesus' brethren is named among his apostles, and only one, years after, among his disciples. Then, too, his mother is mentioned as being among his followers, Acts i. 14, so it would appear that it was the death of Jesus rather than his birth which converted his own family.

But there is still another quarter in which we should expect to find confirmation of the stories connected with the Miraculous Conception, and that is in the sayings and doings of John the Baptist. He is said to have recognised Jesus before the birth, he publicly proclaimed him before the baptism, he died when Jesus was in the full swing of his career, and by that time he had learned

\* It is worthy of remark how invariably distrust of, or disbelief in, the power or mission of Jesus aroused in him the roughness of language, which, when addressed to his mother, seems so unaccountable, Matt. xii. 34, 39. Even his most intimate disciples were not spared, Matt. xvi. 23, Luke xxiv. 25. How else can we account for the cruel speech to the poor broken-hearted Syro-phœnician, Matt. xv. 26? And so in contradistinction we may notice the gracious replies which always followed an acknowledgment of his power and position, Matt. xvi. 16-19, xv. 28; Luke xxiii. 43.



to doubt, if not to deny, that the Messiah had really come. Is it possible that John, if he had known from his infancy the stories that we have heard—John, whose own birth, whose own name, must have constantly recalled them,—could have ever wavered in his belief? John was, at the time we speak of, in prison, and the events that were going on beyond the walls he could only become acquainted with by the reports and descriptions of others, a very unsatisfactory basis of reasoning, and one never to be adopted in preference to one's own experience. John, it must be remembered, had been no ordinary child. He was "filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb," and "the hand of the Lord was upon him," Luke i. 15, 16. In his early days he must have heard and appreciated the wonderful stories of Jesus' birth and childhood. Consequently, though he himself did not know Jesus by sight, he announced to the people his coming and greatness (Luke iii. 16), and yet, so little conviction did all these reminiscences carry with them, that he actually sent to ask Jesus whether he was really the Messiah,\* or whether, with his sanction and that of the Holy Ghost, John had introduced an impostor to the public? And what said Jesus in reply? Did he appeal to John's experience and faith? Did he remind him of what he must have heard over and over again from their common relations? Did he appeal to John's own life—for if Jesus was not the Messiah, John's career as the Forerunner (John i. 31) was a total mistake. Not at all! He told the disciples to go back and "shew John *again* those things which ye do see and hear." Jesus knew that John had heard it all before (Luke vii. 18), but he had nothing to add, nothing to appeal to, but the sights of

\* The character of John the Baptist was too honest and straightforward to render possible the ingenious explanations usually given of this question. Besides the little sting added by Jesus to his eulogy on John (Luke vii. 28), proves that Jesus at all events looked upon the question as a simple one and resented it.

the streets and the gossip of the synagogue. This might have been evidence to one who knew no better, but to John, who, as a babe unborn, had acknowledged the Divine Embryo, who had been kept acquainted all along with the Messiah, when he no longer knew the Man, such "signs" as these were very weak. They had failed to convince him before, probably they failed again, and John the Baptist died an unbeliever.

This, then, is some of the indirect negative evidence against the authenticity of the first chapters of the first and third Gospels, in which the Miraculous Conception is respectively asserted. Indirect negative evidence is not evidence of a very strong order, but here there is a good deal of it, and none of a stronger sort on either side. No allusion is ever made afterwards in the New Testament to the story. John would be the best authority on the subject, as being the constant companion of Mary after the Crucifixion, and it is never hinted at in any of the works attributed to him. Paul never notices it, though it would have been a useful foundation upon which to build some of his dogmatic teaching. These chapters might be left out without, in either case, doing the slightest violence to the commencement or contents of the rest of the Gospels of which they now form a part. Taking the prophecy, (Isaiah vii. 14) therefore, as it stands, and acknowledging that it was fulfilled according to its primary signification, we are justified in asking, had it any other, or is the story of the Miraculous Conception an invention and interpolation of a later date by some one "trained to regard every word, nay every letter, of scripture, as mystical and divine, accustomed to the application of passages in all senses," and determined to see in the idea which engrossed his mind, the fulfilment of every allusion in the Old Testament?

That the evangelists took liberties with the histories they professed to be writing, in order to bring them into agreement with the predictions, is clear from two episodes

related by them all. The first is the ride of Jesus into Jerusalem. The authors of the second and third gospel relate the story as that of a simple incident. The author of the fourth is struck with the idea that something of the kind had been predicted,\* and accordingly (quoting apparently from a very bad memory), adds to the story—"As it is written, 'Fear not, daughter of Sion, behold thy King cometh sitting on an ass' colt.'" Then the author or interpolater of the first gospel takes up the story, with this addition, and referring to the passage, and, not understanding the tautological idiom of Hebrew poetry, fancies that two animals are mentioned. Consequently, looking at every word of scripture as mystical and divine, he not only puts a second ass into the scene, but actually makes Jesus ride upon both at once (Matt. xxi. 7). Again, the authors of the second and third gospels mention that the soldiers divided Jesus' clothes amongst themselves by lot. The author of the first gospel tells the same story, but sees in it the fulfilment of a prophecy, and adds—"That it might be fulfilled which was written: They parted my garments amongst them, and upon my vesture they did cast lots." The author of the fourth gospel takes it up at this stage, but (also misunderstanding the Hebrew idiom), thinks the prediction must have been more exactly fulfilled. Consequently, he makes two separate transactions of it, the soldiers divide the garments, and cast lots for the coat. In order that this may appear reasonable, he minutely describes the coat; and it is but the natural conclusion to the story that we find to this day the preservation of the identical article at Treves, where it has been exhibited for centuries to comfort the faithful and confound the sceptic!

No one supposes that God endows men with supernatural powers except for some purpose, and no one ought to believe that in spite of his supernatural interference that purpose should miscarry. Now, what could have

\* Zechariah ix. 9.

been the object of these so-called prophecies, if it were not that when the Messiah came he should be at once recognised by those who were best acquainted with the writings of the prophets? But was this the result? Not at all; these were the very persons upon whom no impression was made! *We* quote the prophecies as evidences of Christianity, it is true: but to address prophecies to Jews in order eventually to convince Gentiles would surely have been a great waste of power, such as is inconceivable in the God of Nature! Did Jesus ever use these prophecies as a proof of his mission? His object was to seek and to save those who were lost—he was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Would he not, therefore, when exhibiting his credentials to the scribes and rulers of Israel, be likely to appeal to tests the validity of which they would be most anxious to maintain and to see fulfilled? We are told that he did so constantly in support or illustration of his argument. But he never appealed to what have since been looked upon as the great Messianic prophecies in support of his own pretensions.\* In their worst treatment of him he asked that they might be forgiven on account of their ignorance (Luke xxiii. 46), but why, with such crushing arguments at his command, had he not taught them better? There must have constantly been among his audience persons old enough to have heard the stories “which were noised about throughout all the hill country of Judea,”—to have remembered the taxing, the visit of the Magi, the Song of Simeon, the witness of Anna. Why, when Jesus was accused of having come out of Nazareth, of being born of fornication, of having a devil, of making himself equal with God, did he not appeal to the pro-

\* The quotation from Psalm cx. is hardly a Messianic prophecy, though Jesus claimed it as appropriate to himself. Our idea of the functions of a Messiah is an attitude of constant intercession between an erring people and an angry God—not one of dignified repose while the angry God makes for him a footstool of the erring people.

phesies, and then point triumphantly to their wonderful fulfilment?

There must have been many members of the Sanhedrim before whom Stephen was tried, who remembered, and none who had not heard of, the wonderful child who at twelve years of age was found in the Temple sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. What better argument could Stephen have used than to show that this child, at whose understanding and answers they had been so astonished, was in reality the Ruler that their prophets had said should come out of Bethlehem, should be born of a virgin, and be the promised Branch of the house of David? He might have reminded them of the voice that "was heard in Ramah," and explained how Jesus was preserved from the massacre, and how, in compliance with the prediction of Hosea, he had returned from Egypt. He might have pointed out that the very name "Jesus of Nazareth," used by his accusers on this occasion, was itself a fulfilment of prophecy, and unimpeachable evidence in his own favour. The events preceding or at the crucifixion, the Betrayal by the friend, the thirty pieces of silver, the being numbered with the transgressors, the parting of the raiment, were all too recent to have been forgotten. He would have shown that, so far from destroying that place, and changing the customs which Moses had delivered, the whole career of Jesus had been to fulfil the spirit of the Law, and all the deep and mysterious sayings of the greatest and wisest of their prophets. If he had had such materials at hand, is it conceivable that he should have made the inane, rambling speech which the writer of the Acts has put into his mouth? As to the result is it possible to blame the Sanhedrim? They had an imperative duty to perform under Deut. xiii. 10. Stephen had it in his power to show by quotations, by facts, by living witnesses, that Jesus was the very Lord God who had brought their ancestors out of the

land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage, and thus have ensured his own acquittal—and converted his judges and Paul besides. If he refused to do this, and even to attempt it, he can have no right to the honoured name of Martyr, simply because he refused to bear witness to the Truth, upon the only question which was then at issue.

Had Paul known of the Messianic prophecies we have quoted, how gladly would he have verified the fulfilment of them, how gladly would he have used that fulfilment in his arguments with the Jews, and in his epistles. How valuable they would have been to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who has strung together out of the Old Testament every passage in which he fancies he finds a type of or allusion to Christ—to whom it was “evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah” (Hebrews vii. 14), which obviously he could only do by being the actual son of Joseph. And as they are not used by Jesus himself, nor by his followers after him, we can only conclude that their application to Jesus is the result of ecclesiastical research and ingenuity in post-apostolic ages. The gospels, as we have them now, cannot be identified within a hundred and fifty years of the last events they profess to commemorate, and so far, therefore, from being supported in any way by the old writings of the Prophets, we have every reason to believe that they have themselves been moulded in many of their most important particulars to suit the fancied requirements of those ancient Oracles.