

The Messiahship of Jesus

by Alexander McCaul

Lecture IV (Slightly edited for clarity)

Luke XXIV. 25, 26

Then said he unto them, O fools, and slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?

The stone at which the Jewish nation in general, and our Lord's disciples in particular, stumbled in the time of the first advent was the absence of all that glory, peace, and piety which, from Moses to Malachi, formed the theme of Jewish prophets. It was not that they entirely rejected the divine word, but only that they overlooked one portion of it. It was not that they erred in that which they received. Their sin was that they did not receive enough; and hence it is that our Lord does not blame them for their expectations of glory, but gently reproves them for not believing also the predictions of humiliation: 'O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to have entered into his glory?' The same stumbling-block still remains. Is it not our highest wisdom to follow our Lord's method for its removal?

In the lectures already delivered, two arguments have been offered in proof that the predictions of the Old Testament are of divine origin and that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. The first [is] taken from those prophecies, the fulfilment of which we see with our own eyes; the second from those the accomplishment of which is recorded in the gospels. There remains one class more of prophecies to be considered--those, namely, which still continue unfulfilled; and upon this class the unbelieving Jew of every age and nation has based his most powerful objection to the truth of Christianity. The prophets, say they, announce the kingdom of Messiah as a kingdom of glory contemporaneous with the prosperity of Israel and the peace of the world. The kingdom of Jesus has, however, been a kingdom of humiliation and patience. The Jews are still a dispersed and suffering people, and to this hour the world groans under the sway of ignorance and violence. To this effect was the objection of the Jew of Ephesus, when, speaking of the seventh chapter of Daniel, he said: 'These and similar passages of Scripture give us reason to expect some great and glorious person, who, like the Son of man, is to receive from the ancient of days an everlasting kingdom. But this Messiah of yours, who is called Christ, was so inglorious, mean, and despicable, as to fall under the greatest curse in the law of God: for he was crucified;¹ and again, 'Because Elias is not yet come, we do not believe that he is the Christ.'²

To the same effect, after a lapse of thirteen centuries, the rabbinic polemic³ of Poland collects a multitude of prophetic declarations, and specifies particularly ten promises of God relating to the Messiah's kingdom but not yet accomplished in the history of Christianity. The first, announcing the restoration and union of the twelve tribes as predicted by Ezekiel; the second, the invasion and

1 Brown, Dialog. with Tryph., I. 135.

2 Ibid., p. 197.

3 R. Isaac, חזוק אמתה in Wagenseil's Tela Ignea Satanæ.

fall of Gog and Magog on the mountains of Israel; the third, the cleaving asunder of the Mount of Olives as announced by Zechariah; the fourth, the drying up of the Nile and the Euphrates, agreeably to the words of Isaiah; the fifth, the flowing of living waters from the sanctuary in Jerusalem as foretold by Ezekiel and Zechariah; the sixth, the adhesion of ten Gentiles to one Jew; the seventh, the ascent of all nations to Jerusalem to keep the feast of tabernacles, both promises found in Zechariah; the eighth, the similar declaration of Isaiah that the Gentiles shall go up from new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath to worship the Lord of Hosts; the ninth, the total cessation of idolatry; and the tenth, the universal dominion of the one true religion. These promises, he says, have never yet been fulfilled and hence infers that Jesus is not the Messiah.

In the same spirit, the more modern controversialist of Amsterdam⁴ says, 'No Christian divine has yet proved that any of these startling promises were fulfilled by the advent of Jesus, that any one of these signs and prophecies has been accomplished, or that the children of Israel are released from the painful slavery to which the just wrath of God condemned us for the expiation of our sins; and while this is the case--while we have no evidence to prove that this happy day, when we shall enjoy in peace all the blessings promised us on earth combined with beatitude on high, has yet arrived--we must still trust in the mercy and wait for the time of the Lord.' Such objections founded upon the plain word of God [have] re-echoed for eighteen centuries, and still the shield and the sword of Jewish unbelief demand attention; and whether we desire to maintain the integrity of our own faith or to remove the stumbling-block that stands in the way of their salvation, [these objections] require a full and sufficient answer.

To point out that answer is the object of the present lecture. It is found in the words of the text. But the blindness or the perversity of man has overlooked the answer given by inspiration, and [he has] turned aside to his own inventions. To show the insufficiency of these inventions is our first duty.

Some Christian writers have thought it sufficient to meet several of these Jewish objections by proving that the predictions referred to [a] promise that which is either useless or absolutely impossible. Thus a Dutch divine asserts that the cleaving asunder of the Mount of Olives (predicted by Zechariah) must be understood figuratively, because the actual separation into two parts would be useless; and [he] maintains that the ascent of the Gentiles to Jerusalem to keep the feast of tabernacles (foretold by the same prophet) cannot possibly be understood literally because, in his opinion, the length of the way for those who dwell at the antipodes and the difficulty of procuring ships for such multitudes as the prophecy includes prove the impossibility of its accomplishment.

But this reply, far from being satisfactory, is as objectionable as it is prejudicial to the cause of Christianity. It is founded in unbelief and leads directly to infidelity. To affirm that the promises contained in the prophets are useless or impossible is to deny at once that they have God for their author. To assert that they must be understood in another sense than the words imply is to charge the Divine Being with equivocation in the solemn language of promise, or inability to select language expressive of his will. It is to shake the unwavering stability of the divine affirmation and, by changing immutable into mutable, to take away that strong consolation which God intended for the heirs of salvation. If the plea of impossibility is a sufficient reason for departing from the plain sense of prophecy, [then] the infidel is justified in rejecting the predictions of a miraculous conception of the Saviour and the future resurrection of the body. These events he

4 Orobio's *Israel Vengé*, and Limborch's *Amica Collatio*.

pronounces to be impossible and concludes that they are false, and the Christian who adopts the same principle of interpretation must, if he has sufficient understanding and honesty to trace consequences, arrive at the same result. This mode of reply is, in fact, to concede the indefensibility of Christianity. If the Jew be told that his first step to the Christian religion must be the renunciation of his faith in God's power to fulfil his promises, or in his wisdom in making them, he has good reason for preferring his rabbinism to such Christianity. This reply, therefore, cannot possibly be received as a solution of the difficulty.

Another method of meeting this Jewish objection is to deny that the Scriptures referred to by the Jews contain any prediction of the future, and therefore to interpret them of the return from the Babylonish captivity. But to this the Jew justly objects that the language of the prophets announces a degree of glory, of happiness, and of piety, and an entireness of national restoration to which the return from Babylon does not present the feeblest outline of resemblance. Isaiah says, 'I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.'⁵ But after the return from Babylon, the theocracy was never restored--the city was never called faithful nor righteous, but was permitted to fill up the measure of her iniquity by crucifying the Son of God. In that remarkable passage to which the Church called our attention last Sunday, Jeremiah announces a return of Judah and Israel in the days of Messiah; after announcing the Lord our Righteousness as the righteous branch of David, he adds,

In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely . . . 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.⁶

Here are three great features impossible to be mistaken, not one of which is to be discerned in the deliverance from Babylon. The first, a general return of the two houses of Judah and Israel; the second, an universal restoration from all countries; the third, the fulfilment of all this at a definite time, the days of Messiah. Whereas the fugitives who came from Babylon were almost exclusively of the house of Judah; they returned from that region only, and the time of this partial restoration preceded by five hundred years the advent of Messiah.

The prophet Ezekiel is equally definite in prediction of the final settlement of the Jewish people in the land of their fathers, and the prediction to which I refer, contained in the thirty-seventh chapter beginning at the fifteenth verse, is particularly remarkable from its containing, first, a symbolic representation, and then a divine interpretation of the symbols. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel first with this command: 'Son of man, take unto thee one stick, and write upon it, for Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, for Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions: and join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand.' This is the symbolic action. How men might have interpreted it we know not; and it is now of little import, for God himself has in the following verses explained the meaning of the symbol.

⁵ Isaiah i. 26.

⁶ Jeremiah, xxiii. 6, 7.

When the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not show us what thou meanest by these? Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in my hand And say unto them, thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: and I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall no more be two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all. Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they also shall walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes. And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever.

Here are promises as different from the state of things which followed the return from Babylon as health is from sickness, or the vigour of manhood from the feebleness of infancy. It is promised not only that the two tribes and the ten tribes should be restored but united for ever into one kingdom; not only that they should have a king but that this king should be the Messiah; not only that they should inherit the land but possess it, they and their children for ever and ever in peace and piety. The most careless reader of the prophecy will perceive that the history of the Jewish commonwealth from the going forth of the decree of Cyrus to its termination in the days of Titus and Adrian contains nothing like a fulfilment of these predictions. It is notorious that from the days of Shalmaneser no such united kingdom of the twelve tribes has ever existed, no such king has ever been the shepherd of Israel, and no such piety has been known amongst the sons of Jacob. The dispersion of the Jews in the midst of us, and the continued occupation of their land by strangers, attest to the most superficial observer that the promise of an eternal possession of the Holy Land has not yet found its accomplishment. The Jew, therefore, is right in asserting that some of the most remarkable of the prophecies remain still unfulfilled, and consequently some other answer must be sought which may invalidate the force of his objection.

The principle of allegoric interpretation is generally considered to supply the true and universal solution. For many centuries, and with few exceptions, controversialists have endeavoured to evade the difficulty by insinuating to the Jew that his faith in the words of the living God is an effect of national blindness, and that the divine promises are to be fulfilled not according to the expressed sense but mystically. Now however arbitrary, insufficient, and dishonouring to God's veracity this answer may appear to the Jew and to every other man of common integrity, its early adoption by a portion of the Christian Church, and the extent of its subsequent diffusion, give it a claim upon our attentive consideration.

The allegoric principle implied in it appears in the earliest Christian writers, and after the time of Origen attained to an almost universal empire. Its antiquity, its diffusion, and the lengthened term of its continuance seem to demand an unconditional assent; and he who starts at some of the monstrous productions to which it has given birth must also hesitate, lest in rejecting it he renounce a sacred deposit once committed to the saints. Examination will, however, show him the needlessness of his scruples and convince him that this principle, though general, was never

universal. On certain points the literal interpretation of the prophecies was maintained by apologists and martyrs of the first and purest ages of the Christian Church. The allegoric principle has therefore no catholicity which could compel its adoption. It appears merely as a matter of opinion, and as a matter of opinion must be examined and then received or rejected according to its intrinsic value. The most venerable name can claim for a private opinion nothing more than an attentive consideration. In such a case the question is not, Who held it, but, Why it was holden? In matters of interpretation, not only the piety and devotedness of a commentator, but his learning and judgment and general qualifications for this office must be taken into the account; and, after all, however high these may be, his opinion must still be received as that of a being limited in understanding, liable to the warping influence of prejudice and born to error.

With reference to the fathers, it must be confessed that however venerable [they were] for zeal and devotedness, however respectable for piety, and [however] authoritative when they appear as the bearers of a genuine catholic tradition, yet as private interpreters of Scripture--especially of the Old Testament--their qualifications are far from commanding our assent. Ignorant of the language of Moses and the prophets they were dependent altogether upon a defective translation; just emerging from Paganism their minds were far from being fully emancipated from the dogmas and ideal associations of heathen philosophy; [and] occupied by the arduous duties of their station or distracted by the calumnies and dangers to which their Christian profession exposed them, and led astray by erroneous systems when they sought help of the Jews, it is not to be wondered at if their progress in the interpretation of the Scriptures was slow and their labours in this department of questionable authority. To practise what they heard, faithfully to transmit the faith once delivered to the saints, and to seal their testimony with their blood, was the glory of the fathers.

As interpreters of the Old Testament, some of the greatest of them have stumbled at the very first elements of revelation. We find a defender of the Christian faith unable to interpret the word Israel, one most learned bishop giving a most unfounded etymology of the word Abraham, and another departing as widely from truth as from common sense when he attempts to explain the original names of the Deity. Their interpretations are sometimes the offspring of an exuberant fancy, not unfrequently the result of an incorrect translation. There is nothing, therefore, to induce us to adopt their interpretation of the Old Testament, or the principle from which it flowed. There is no such thing as a catholic exposition of the Scriptures, nor even a catholic principle of interpretation. The fathers differ from one another as freely as we may differ from them, and sometimes draw from sources of more than doubtful authority. The mysticism of an Egyptian Jew, the dreams of the Cabbalists, and even the extravagant and fictitious spirituality of the Gnostics, had no small influence in the production of that allegoric principle which, notwithstanding the condemnation of some of the errors flowing from it, became generally dominant in the Church.

The perpetuation of this false principle in after ages can therefore add nothing to its authority, nor impose any limit to the freeness of our search into the true meaning of the word of God. He who of all the fathers was the best qualified as an interpreter, frankly acknowledges that his exposition of the prophets has no intrinsic authority. 'Thus,' he says in one place, 'Thus have I delivered unto you my sense in brief: but if any one produce that which is more exact and true, take his exposition rather than mine.' And in another place he gives similar advice, saying, 'We have now done our utmost endeavour in giving an allegorical exposition of the text; but if any other can bring that which is more probable and more agreeable to reason, than that which we have delivered, let the reader be swayed by his authority rather than by ours.' The opinions of the

fathers, therefore, concerning the interpretation of Scripture are not to be received as authoritative, but examined according to the dictates of reason, revelation, and the analogy of the faith; and this examination necessarily terminates in a rejection of the allegorical interpretation as subversive of some articles of the primitive faith and contradictory to the express declarations of the Almighty, both in the Old Testament and the New.

There is testimony that cannot be doubted to prove that the primitive Christians believed in the rebuilding and future glory of the city of Jerusalem, in the millennial reign of Christ, and the advent of the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Indeed, the doctrine of the coming of Elijah was never banished, even by the allegoric ascendancy, but constituted a part of the catholic faith for the first fifteen centuries. Those who allegorized the other prophets without scruple maintained unanimously the literal interpretation of the prediction of Malachi. But if the allegoric principle be admitted, [then] these articles of the faith must be rejected, as they uniformly have been wherever it has fully prevailed. The two cannot exist together. In such an alternative every considerate Christian, as well as every sober reverer of ancient catholic doctrine, will reject that which is mere matter of uncertain opinion and retain that which rests upon certain and universal testimony; that is, he will reject the allegoric principle of interpretation and retain the catholic doctrine contained in the plain and obvious meaning of the word of God.

There is, however, another testimony of more authority still than even that of the whole united Church of every age and nation, if such could be obtained, and that is the testimony of God himself. He who has given the Scriptures of truth has, in some instances, condescended also to give a written and inspired interpretation, which necessarily precludes all controversy and admits no appeal. What God has interpreted is fixed and settled for ever; and no man can, without the most extraordinary forgetfulness or the most daring impiety, presume to offer a different interpretation.

An instance of such inspired comment is found in one of the passages of the prophet Ezekiel already alluded to. In the vision of the two sticks, which were to become one in the hand of the prophet, we have noticed that there is first a prophecy and then subsequently the divine explanation. The prophecy itself was symbolic, and consequently obscure. The people who beheld Ezekiel take one stick and write on it, 'For Judah and the tribes of Israel, his companions,' and then take another stick with an inscription for Joseph, and the tribes his companions, and unite them into one stick in his hand, could not easily understand the purposes of God thus symbolized. The Lord foresaw that they would not understand and therefore, in the eighteenth verse, he prepared the prophet for the people's inquiries, saying, 'And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not show us what thou meanest by these? Say unto them, Thus saith the Lord,' and then follows the explanation promising the restoration and reunion of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel under the Messiah, and their eternal possession of the land of their fathers in the covenant of the gospel. This explanation therefore is final; it does not require another. It was intended for the instruction of Ezekiel's contemporaries as a help to the understanding of the vision. The words in which it was conceived were dictated by Infinite Wisdom, and consequently the best possible that could be adopted for the purpose. No man therefore can, without impiety, give another explanation or interpret that given in any other sense than that which the words would have had in the minds of Ezekiel's countrymen.

In what sense they understood the words is evident beyond all dispute. The men of that generation certainly did not understand by the promised reunion of Judah and Israel the

admission of the Gentiles to the privileges of God's people; nor did the words, 'The land given unto Jacob where their fathers dwelt,' convey an idea of the true Sion the Christian Church. The men for whom the explanation was given took all these terms literally, and thus must they be taken by all who believe that the Divine Being is able as well as willing to explain to men the mysteries of his will. If the divine interpretation require another interpretation to make it intelligible--and that it certainly does if the ten tribes mean Gentile believers and the land of Israel stands for the Christian Church (for of such signification neither Ezekiel nor his hearers had any conception)--then must it be pronounced insufficient, and this insufficiency must be ascribed either to want [lack] of power or will; that is, an allegorical interpretation of this passage cannot be adopted without an implication of blasphemy.

But God has not only vouchsafed an occasional explanation in the Old Testament; in the New he has pointed out so many prophecies fulfilled as to enable us to recognise the divine principle of interpretation. Messiah's miraculous conception and birth of a virgin, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, the casting lots for his raiment, the piercing of his hands and feet, and many other particulars which we have not time to enumerate, all formed the subject of prophecy, and certain predictions are referred to by the New-Testament writers as fulfilled by these events. The simple question therefore is, on what principle are these prophecies expounded in the New Testament? Is the allegorical or the literal principle the rule of interpretation? Is Israel in these prophecies made to stand for Gentile, or Jerusalem for the Christian Church? [The answer must be no.] These prophecies are all interpreted as the Jews would themselves understand them. They are taken in their most simple and obvious sense. If therefore we are to follow the example of the New Testament, the allegoric principle must be rejected.

Yes, if we would not be accounted as deceivers, if we have any regard for consistency, if we would place our own faith above suspicion or preserve a single hope of ever communicating it to the Jewish people, if we would follow the footsteps of our Lord, [then] we must adhere to the old Biblical method of interpretation. [Would] We endeavour by an appeal to the prophecies to prove that the Scriptures are the word of God and our Lord Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world? Upon what is this appeal founded? What is presupposed as a first principle in the whole investigation? What is the cornerstone of the whole fabric of our argument? Beyond all doubt, the turning-point--the root and foundation of our proof--is, first, the supposition that the prophecies are simple in their enunciation, that is, unambiguous in their language and of easy understanding; and secondly, that the fulfilment has taken place according to their unsophisticated grammatical meaning. Without these indispensable conditions a proof of the Christian religion from prophecy is impossible. Introduce allegory and mystery, change the meaning of words, tell the unbeliever that to prove Christianity it is necessary to affix an unusual meaning to the names of men and to the geographical designation of cities and countries, [and] he will laugh you and your argument to scorn; he will regard you--and that with good reason--as one of those two characters with which mankind is least in love.

The whole force of our argument, when we refer to prophecies fulfilled before our eyes or to those whose accomplishment is recorded in the New Testament, depends upon the unambiguity of the prediction and the exactness of its accomplishment. When therefore the Jew comes with objections founded on unfulfilled prophecy, we must not resign the sword with which we have hitherto conquered and grasp at a shadow; but with full confidence in the heavenly temper of our weapons, and in all good faith towards even an opponent, we must allow [for] the force of his objection and the legitimacy of his hopes founded on the word of God, and see whether a closer

examination will not turn this objection into an argument for the truth.

Such was the method pursued by an early apologist of the Christian faith. When Tryphon the Jew argued that Jesus could not be the Messiah because the promises of glory and the mission of Elijah had not been accomplished, Justin Martyr did not meet him by a spiritual interpretation or an hypocritical reproof for the carnality of his expectations, but by distinguishing between times and seasons; and such is the course pointed out in the text by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When the Jew objects, we must say in reply, The prophecies which you cite are equally sacred in our eyes with those which we have ourselves adduced in proof of our faith. The hopes built on them are equally well founded, the blessings promised equally secure of accomplishment. We have no desire to shake your faith in these unfulfilled predictions. We blame you, not for believing too much, but too little. We think that your mistake is that of Christ's disciples, when he said to them, 'O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.' Those holy men of old who foretold Messiah's glory have also announced his humiliation. The God of your fathers has made known a twofold advent of Messiah--one to suffer, the other, after a long interval, to reign. The absence, therefore, of the glory is not only not an objection to, it is a negative proof in favour of Christianity. Time does not, however, permit us to enter into the further discussion of this argument at present; it must be reserved for another occasion.

Lecture IV in Alexander McCaul, *The Messiahship of Jesus: The Concluding Series of the Twelve Lectures on the Prophecies* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1952).