

The Messiahship of Jesus

by Alexander McCaul

Lecture VI

Isaiah XLIV.26

*That confirmeth the word of his servant,
and performeth the counsel of his messengers.*

The man who can make a direct appeal to the Almighty and draw forth an immediate display of Omnipotence, has an unanswerable argument for the truth of his religion. When the son of Amram divided the Red Sea, his followers believed in the Lord and in Moses his servant. And when Elijah cried to his God and obtained an answer by fire from heaven, the waverers in Israel were convinced, and cried out--'The Lord he is the God. The Lord he is the God.' Men feel that such mighty deeds necessarily exceed the mightiest efforts of impostors, and necessarily imply an exertion of divine power. An appeal to God's attribute of foreknowledge is equally conclusive, inasmuch as it is equally the sole prerogative of God. It is just as impossible to counterfeit one attribute as the other. If, therefore, we can adduce a clear exertion of the Divine prescience in proof of our religion, we make as direct an appeal to Deity, and in this coincidence of prophecy and history have an argument for its truth as valid in the eye of reason as the suspension or change of the laws of nature. Such were the remarks with which these lectures were commenced, and such the appeal which we proposed to make on behalf of Christianity. In the subsequent lectures the appeal was actually made, and it now only remains to recapitulate the particulars, draw the conclusion, and press upon you the practical result.

The first great point to which your attention was drawn, was the existence of certain prophecies known to have been uttered and written centuries before the occurrence of the events referred to as their accomplishment. It is a known truth, that the revelation of St. John, and the writings of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other Hebrew prophets lay claim to the character of inspiration, and profess to know and to announce the future destinies of nations and of individuals. It is a fact which even the most ignorant sceptic would not deny, that the writings of St. John are at least 1600 years old, and that the very latest of the Hebrew prophecies was translated into Greek, and must therefore have existed at the least 180 years before the Christian era. The sceptic will, however, if learned, admit his conviction that the youngest of the prophets of Israel lived 500 years before Christ, and some at least 500 years sooner.

Your attention was directed, in the next place, to the coincidence between certain predictions and events which have since taken place, which coincidence in some most remarkable instances is open to our daily observation. The Hebrew prophets announced that one individual of their nation should be acknowledged as God, even to the very ends of the earth. The light of noonday is not more clear than the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is thus acknowledged. 'His hand is set in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers. They that dwell in the wilderness bow down before him. The kings of Tarshish, and of the isles bring presents.' The most notorious if not the most extraordinary fact in the history of our species is the divine worship paid by the most enlightened portion of the human race to the Son of Mary.

The Hebrews, however, went farther, and announced faith in the Gentiles, and the unbelief of the Jewish people, and sixty generations of the children of men have witnessed the wonderful coincidence. We still see with our own eyes, that to Christ has been the gathering of the nations--that the isles wait for his law--that he has been found of them that sought him not; and that, whilst he is still despised and rejected by his own countrymen, and one whom the nation abhorreth, kings see and arise, princes also worship; he has been made the head of the heathen, and nations whom he had not known serve him. Yea, the predictions which we have considered not only announce the relative position of Jew and Gentile, but predict a remarkable phenomenon in the history of those Gentiles who were to embrace the faith of Christ. Some of them foretel the relapse of a great and powerful Church into open and shameless idolatry, and not only particularize pseudo-catholicity and persecuting cruelty as the prominent features of her character, but describe her geographical position as seated upon seven hills; and lo, for six centuries and more the Church of Rome has been the mother and the mistress of all harlot-churches--drunk with the blood of the saints, and besotted with a senseless idolatry, 'to be abhorred of all faithful Christians.'

Thus in all the great outlines of divine honour given to a Jew, faith in the Gentiles and unbelief in the Jews, and the subsequent defection of a powerful Christian church, there is an astonishing coincidence between the announcements of professed prophets and the events of history. The testimony of writers, contemporaries of that Jew whose influence has been so wonderful, points out coincidences still more striking and more minute. The prophets name the family, the time, the place of his nativity, the mode of his betrayal, the manner of his death, his resurrection and ascension. The epistles of St. Paul, the genuineness of which is conceded even by the infidel, assure us that in the most important of these particulars, the history of Jesus coincides with the declarations of the prophets. He was of the family of David; he came in the time of Pontius Pilate, *i.e.* during the second temple; he was betrayed; he died a violent and ignominious death; and Paul saw that he had risen and ascended into heaven. The gospels, whose genuineness and authenticity remain unshaken, even by the latest efforts of infidelity, multiply particulars minutely coinciding with the announcements of the prophets. From them we learn that his hands and his feet were pierced; that he was sold for thirty pieces of silver; that lots were cast for his garment; that he was numbered with transgressors, and yet that his tomb was with the rich.

Such were the facts pressed upon your attention. There were prophecies containing hopes, or conjectures, or presentiments of individuals of the Hebrew race respecting one of their nation: and the testimony of contemporaries, the course of the world's history for one third portion of its whole existence--and the evidence of our senses up to this very hour, concur in making known to us the extraordinary coincidence of the reality of facts with the visions of prophetic anticipation; how, then, is this coincidence to be accounted for, or what the conclusion which we ought to draw from it? Shall we be satisfied with the answer of the infidel, that the coincidence is imaginary--that the prophecies could be brought to bear with equal cogency upon many other of the prominent characters in history?

History and reason alike forbid us. Even a cursory perusal of the prophets proves beyond a doubt, that the Old-Testament writers expected one of their nation whose doctrine should have a wonderful influence upon the whole Gentile world. This is no imagination, no violent perversion of the text--no mystical interpretation, but the plain, grammatical, unsophisticated meaning of the letter of Scripture, and the imagination has just as little to do with the fact that the influence of Jesus of Nazareth has produced the great moral revolution which the world has ever seen. Nothing can be more real than the coincidence--nothing further from a forced accommodation of

prophetic hopes. The most ingenious rejecter of the gospel verity can find in the whole Jewish nation but one individual, whose name is great amongst the Gentiles, and honoured as the source of salvation to the ends of the earth.

But when to this one great and astounding fact you come to add all the limitations of family, time, place of birth, manner of life and death, you reduce all chances of a second similar coincidence to an absolute impossibility. Shall we then ascribe the agreement of history and prophecy to chance? All right reason rejects the attempt as a mixture of profanity and folly. Every portion of creation bears witness to the wisdom of the Creator,--every work of his hands carries on it the stamp of design, counsel, deliberate arrangement; and shall we suppose that the moral world alone is left to chance--that the great God of nature makes bountiful provision for the wants, the circumstances, and the convenience of the plant or the reptile, and leaves the moral wants of his noblest work to the fortuitous fulfilment of the reveries of enthusiasts or impostors?

Science would reject with scorn any theory which explained the physical revolutions of the earth's surface by the fortuitous operation of unknown causes, and reason equally compels us to reject as absurd the assertion that men accidentally foreknew, or not foreknowing, accidentally foretold, the most beneficial occurrence in the history of mankind. The most unscientific of men will scarcely be persuaded that the correct calculation of eclipses, or of the return of comets, has been the result of chance; and how can we believe that the foreknowledge of the mode, the time, the instrument of man's deliverance from the errors and vices of idolatry was accidental? Had one prophet alone drawn the general outline, fortuitous coincidences would have been in the highest degree improbable; but when we remember that one prophet foretold the family, a second the place of his birth, a third the time, and a fourth some other particular, and that it is by putting all these particulars together, that the complete prophetic portrait is made up, the difficulty of fortuitous agreement is infinitely increased, and must at last be pronounced impossible.

Shall we assert, then, that the prophecies are the dictates of ripened experience, or a penetrating sagacity in observing the affairs of men and in calculating the effects of existing causes? This supposition is as untenable as the last. In the days of the prophets, the most improbable of all events was the continued existence of the Jewish nation and religion, and its final triumph over the various forms of idolatry. From the days of Moses to the last of the prophets the tendency of the Jewish people was to approximate to the surrounding nations both in manners and religion, and as time rolled on, the total extinction of the Mosaic religion, and the absorption of Israel into the common vortex of universal heathenism, became more probable. Scarcely had the monarchy been firmly established in the family of David, and the possession of the land secured by the final conquest, before ten out of the twelve tribes openly declared for idolatry, and in a little time were finally lost amongst the nations.

The small remnant of the house of Judah, both kings and people, with few exceptions, showed the same decided aversion to monotheism, and in their political relations became every day less able to resist the advances of invading hosts, so that the sagacious observer, far from predicting the final triumph of the religion of Moses, would rather have anticipated its final and total extinction in the destruction of the national existence--or even if he hoped the preservation of the true religion, how could he possibly be led to the idea that the nations would ultimately renounce the religion of their fathers in order to acknowledge one of the despised nation of the Jews as their God and their Saviour? All existing causes intimated results directly opposed to the prophetic anticipations, so as to make it absolutely necessary for mere worldly sagacity to renounce all its

accustomed modes of reasoning before it could indulge in hopes apparently so chimerical.

Besides, the conjecture can only be admitted in the generality of idea, as soon as we come to the minuteness of detail respecting the person, the family, the time, the manner of an individual's death, into all which detail the prophets have entered, the possibility of solving the phenomena by sagacious conjecture ceases entirely and finally. If it were possible for a Hebrew prophet to entertain the hope that the Gentiles would ultimately worship his God, it was totally beyond his power to conjecture that the individual by whom this mighty change should be effected, should be descended from David, born at Bethlehem, appear in Galilee, be abhorred by his own people, and die a violent death, and purchase the glory of his triumph as the reward of the most profound humiliation.

Who that does not follow the decisions of revelation, can declare the religious history of the world in futurity?--who can point to the individual who shall, a thousand years hence, like the Messiah of the prophets, influence the faith and practice of all the families of the earth for two millenniums after his death,--who can specify his nation, his family, and the time of his birth?--who is there that has so skilfully unravelled all the intricacies of national and individual destinies, obtained so clear an insight into the consequences, the disturbing forces, and the momenta of human contingencies, as to hazard a conjecture respecting the continuance of any one existing family, or to particularize the history of that individual of its descendants who shall exercise the most influence upon his own and succeeding generations. None but the fool or the enthusiast will have temerity to enter on such speculations. The wise and the sagacious will readily confess that all such contingencies are far beyond the ken of human foresight, and cannot reasonably be made the subject of present conjecture.

To attempt to account for the agreement of history with prophecy on the supposition that the prophecies have wrought their own accomplishment, or have been forcibly fulfilled by impostors, is equally difficult. They were not written in a language known to the nations of the earth, and when translated there was nothing in themselves or the nation from which they emanated to command the acquiescence, much less the active co-operation, of men in effecting their accomplishment. To confess themselves to be in error, to acknowledge the falsehood of their religion, and mortify the dearest lusts of the human heart, and all this at the command of a Jew and at the risk of honour, property, and life, was what the prophets required of the heathen, and was certainly not alluring to the multitude, and must have been as unpalatable to the taste as it was beyond the power of any number of impostors.

If some native of Bethlehem and descendant of David had been found willing, for the sake of personating the Messiah, to offer himself to a violent death, yet to produce faith in the Gentiles, and unbelief in the Jews, and at the same time to effect the preservation of his own supposititious religion, and the continued existence of the Jewish nation for many centuries after his decease, was clearly impossible. It exceeded the power of man; and as a lie and an imposture could not have obtained the power and the co-operation of the Divine Being, there is, therefore, only one rational solution, and that is, that the coincidence between history and prophecy is the effect on the one hand of the Divine prescience, and on the other of the almighty power, of the Creator.

Necessity drives us to the conclusion, and there is nothing in the Divine character or attributes by which it is opposed. Even had there been no prophecy going before, the beneficial results produced by the overthrow of polytheism, and the triumph of the religion of Christ, the salutary

tendency of his doctrine would lead us to infer that this great moral revolution is the Lord's doing, and would therefore make it marvellous, *i.e.*, supernatural in our eyes. But when to all this is added that this change in its causes, its progress, and its results has been the subject of prophecy for above a thousand years before its commencement, we are compelled to conclude that it has God for its author--that the prophecies were the dictates of his wisdom, and that Jesus of Nazareth, in whose history they have been fulfilled, is the true Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

However, in the popular sense, the age of miracles may be past, God hath not left himself without witness, nor us without a supernatural manifestation of his immediate superintendence of the affairs of men. The coincidence of history and prophecy is a perpetual miracle, ever new in every generation, and yet as certainly the operation of Divine power and wisdom as the dividing of the Red Sea by the staff of Moses, or the descent of fire from heaven, in answer to the prayers of Elijah; as palpable to the senses, and as far above the reach of fraud or imposture; and whenever asked for a reason of the hope that is in him, or perplexed by the cunning craftiness of those who lie in wait to deceive, the Christian can here point to the finger of God, and here find a sure warrant for his faith. There were prophecies going before. There is in the history of Jesus an accurate and wonderful fulfilment. The coincidence can be ascribed to nothing but the will and power of the Almighty. The prophecies, therefore, are divine, and Jesus is the Messiah.

Such was the result proposed to be established by these lectures. We cannot, however, dismiss the subject before us, without adverting to some other important results which flow from the past fulfilment of prophecy. The coincidence which we have just considered is of use, not only in confirming our faith, but in animating and regulating our hope, and guarding us against serious practical error. The literal and accurate accomplishment of so many prophecies leads us to expect with confidence the fulfilment of those which still remain, and thus fills the mind with bright prospects of hope concerning the future destinies of our fellow men and the world which we inhabit. It has pleased the Divine Being not only to give us a never-failing confirmation of our faith in the prophecies already accomplished, and an adequate view of our duty in the moral precepts, but to reveal in oracles reaching to the end of time the ultimate triumph of truth and holiness, the destruction of the wicked, and the final blessedness of this earth; and in the partial fulfilment which we behold, we have an earnest of their future and complete accomplishment.

Thus St. Peter argued from the glory manifested at the transfiguration to the certainty of a full manifestation at the second advent. 'We have not followed cunningly devised fables,' said he, (2 Ep. i. 16,) 'when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount; and have the word of prophecy more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.' And what the transfiguration was to St. Peter, the past and present fulfilment of prophecy is to us. It assures us that we are not following cunningly devised fables, and makes the word of prophecy concerning the future more sure. It enables us, amidst the cares and troubles of time, and the clouds which occasionally spread a gloom over the Church of God, to look forward to a brighter day, and to interpret with more certainty that which is said concerning it.

There is one lesson, however, suggested by the entire inquiry in which we have been engaged, which must not be overlooked, and that is, the great danger of ignorance of the prophecies. In

explaining particular prophecies, and showing their fulfilment, the unbelief of the Jewish nation has been frequently noticed; but whence did this unbelief arise, and how has it been continued? No doubt, the depravity of the human heart, the love of the world, the force of prejudice, have all had their share in its formation, but it cannot be denied that the main cause was and is, ignorance of those prophecies which related to the humiliation and suffering of the Messiah. 'They were slow to believe all that the prophets had spoken. They knew not the time of their visitation.' They could not discern the signs of the times, and therefore recognised not the Holy One and the Just when he appeared in the midst of them. They did not understand the prophecies respecting the call of the Gentiles, and therefore by opposing it filled up the measure of their iniquity, as St. Paul says, (1 Thess. ii. 15,) 'Who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved, to fill up the measure of their wrath always.' From these evils, a knowledge of the prophecies would have delivered them.

How carefully, then, ought we to study all that God has vouchsafed to reveal respecting the future destinies of the Jew and the Gentile, and the Church of God. A common prejudice prevailed largely in the Church, that to study unfulfilled prophecy is no part of a Christian's duty--that to compare what has been fulfilled with its accomplishment is the very utmost that can be required in reference to the prophetic Scriptures; but that the devotional, the historical, and the preceptive portions of the Bible should be the objects of our exclusive attention.

This prejudice has been common, but warranted by no declaration of the Almighty. St. Paul declares, generally, that 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the Scripture, might have hope.' St. Peter says particularly, 'That we do well to take heed to the word of prophecy as unto a light that shineth in a dark place.' And concerning that which is considered most obscure of all the prophecies, the book of the Revelation to St. John, the Lord himself says--'Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are written therein for the time is at hand.'

How, then, is it possible for any one believing these declarations to consider himself exempted from the study of any portion of the prophetic writings--to think that he can walk safely without giving heed to that light that shineth in darkness, or that he can please God whilst wantonly rejecting that special blessing pronounced upon the study of prophecy? How can a Church be secure if such neglect were common, or faith in the divine promise generally regarded as fanaticism? Judging by the analogy of the Jews, a more certain presage of approaching destruction can hardly be imagined, in individual or church, than a wilful neglect or an infidel contempt of the voice of prophecy. It argues either a latent unbelief, or an unusual degree of spiritual pride, when men denounce as unprofitable that which God has revealed for their benefit; and who can be astonished, if by a just retribution they are visited with that judicial blindness which at last makes 'the vision of all as a sealed book.'

It is true that injudicious men have, by vainly attempting to calculate times and determine the dates of particular events, excited an unjust prejudice against prophetic study; but will the folly of some excuse the deliberate disobedience of others? He who does nothing in vain must, in making known the destinies of men to the end of time, have had some wise purpose to fulfil, and that purpose could certainly not have been to have them passed by in neglect.

One great use of prophecy is that for which we have just employed it, to confirm our faith by considering its accomplishment; but this is far from being the only or the primary object for which it was given. St. Paul, we see, includes it in all Scripture given for consolation and hope; and St. Peter calls it a light. In the hour of the Church's trial it affords a distinct hope of deliverance, and in the days of her prosperity gives notice of the approaching sorrows, and warns her to prepare for the conflict. Nothing can be more false than the common maxim, that prophecy was not given to make us prophets--*i.e.*, to enable us to foreknow future events. On the contrary, for this purpose, principally, to exercise our faith and guide our practice, it has been intended in every age. To comfort the pious Jews in the hour of danger, Isaiah was sent to declare the birth of Immanuel, and Jeremiah to announce the seventy years' limit to the captivity. To enable his disciples to escape, Christ foretold the signs of Jerusalem's approaching desolation; and to arouse all men to constant watchfulness and earnest prayer, he has made known the signs preceding his second advent.

He, therefore, who neglects the study of prophecy must not flatter himself that he is merely escaping from a matter of little practical concernment, or doubtful interpretation, which may be studied or neglected with impunity: he is treating a large portion of divine revelation with contempt, depriving himself of the consolation and hope which it was designed to impart, shutting his ears against its warnings, making it impossible for him to perform its duties, losing a blessing, and drawing down upon himself that punishment which is sure to follow neglected duty.

How has the whole Christian Church suffered and sinned already from the neglect of that one class of prophecies relating to the destinies of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. Had they been borne in mind, could Rome have ever attained her usurped supremacy, or intoxicated the nations with the wine of her fornication? The prophecies would have enabled men to see that the restored Jerusalem is the appointed mistress and mother of all Churches, and the only metropolis of the Church universal recognised in Scripture. Yea, had this portion of God's revelation been diligently studied, could our own Church have been guilty of that dereliction of duty now chargeable upon her in leaving the Jewish people to this hour uncared for, to perish in their unbelief?

It is a melancholy and painful truth, but one which no faithful friend of the Church dare pass in silence, that whatever efforts have been made to bring the perishing Jews to the knowledge of salvation, have been made by individuals or private societies. The great body of the Church has altogether ignored those efforts, or looked on in silence. But let me not be mistaken: allow me to correct a common error and justify the Church we love. That Church itself has done much more than any or all the Churches of Christendom. By appointing her daily and Sunday lessons from the unfulfilled prophecies, by devoting the Sundays of advent almost exclusively to the consideration of this subject, and by commanding prayer for the conversion of Israel to be offered up in the most solemn of all her services, she has left without excuse all those of her children, who, unlike the good Samaritan, look upon the wounded man, and pass by on the other side in apathetic silence.

The Church is altogether guiltless. She has set before us the Scriptures treating the subject. She has enjoined the duty of intercession. Her chief pastors, also, in times past, as well as now, have, by their expositions, testified their interest in the welfare of Israel, and the lectures now concluded are themselves a proof of the earnestness with which it is regarded. The Church's children only are to be blamed, who have been hearers of the word, and not doers; hypocritical supplicants for an event which they have never heartily endeavoured to accomplish.

God grant that this state of neglect and disobedience may soon terminate, and that the judgments which it involves may be speedily averted. Be assured that it is no common measure of guilt and danger, which their continuance would accumulate upon us. Hear how the Lord reproaches the Chaldeans for similar conduct. 'I was wroth with my people; I have polluted mine inheritance, and given them into thine hand: thou didst show them no mercy.' (Isaiah xlvii. 6.) Hear how (Zech. i. 15) he threatens the heathen of old, saying--'I am sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.' And think you that he will overlook the heartless neglect of the Jewish people practised by those who have received a command to preach the gospel to every creature? If he punished the ignorant and idolatrous heathen, he will surely not suffer us to escape with impunity.

If, therefore, we desire to avert God's wrath from ourselves, our Church, or our nation, let us faithfully fulfil our duty towards the Jewish people. It may soon be too late; our day of grace may soon be past; and our Church, the only Church whose reformers, by commanding the public reading of the prophets, has commended the subject scripturally to the attention of her children--whose prelates and divines, almost exclusively, have maintained the true interpretation of prophecy--may lose the blessing.

The roll of Israel's destiny is now rapidly unfolding; the tide of political interest already rolls back upon the shores of Judea; the Jewish people itself awakes from the torpor of centuries, and stretches forth its hands after the inheritance of its fathers; the Rabbinist shakes off the adamantine fetters; the Gentile nations look wistfully at the hastening consummation of the word of prophecy. Even the eye of the worldly statesman begins to recognise the work and hand of the Almighty, and to desire to co-operate. And shall the Church of England alone be blind to the signs of the times, and deaf to the voice of prophecy? Shall she alone refuse to lift up her voice with strength, to say to the cities of Judah, Behold thy God? We trust not. Some of her sons have already gone to seek the lost sheep of Israel in the lands of their dispersion. Her liturgy already exists in the sacred language of the Hebrews, the voice of her prayer and praise already ascends from the hill of Zion, and soon we hope that the whole Church, her prelates, her pastors, and her people, will all unite in the glorious work of bearing good tidings to Jerusalem.

Yea, brethren, let this be the practical inference, this our constant and earnest prayer--that the Spirit of God may enable us individuals, as a Church and nation, to know the day of our visitation, to understand the voice of prophecy, and to fulfil our duty.

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