

THE CHILD PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH.
ISAIAH VII: 1-IX: 7.

By PROFESSOR GEORGE W. DAVIS, PH.D.,
Macalester College, Minn.

The historical background of the Child Prophecies. The theories as to the fulfillment of the prophecies.—Details of the actual fulfillment, with the pith of Isaiah's prophetic messages of this period.—The occasion and utterance of the subsequent prophecies by Isaiah of the same import.

The historical background of the Child Prophecies of Isaiah is the Syro-Ephraimitish war. The origin of that war was as follows: It was the custom of the Assyrian kings, after ascending the throne and consolidating their domestic affairs, to make large foreign expeditions, generally westward. Tiglathpileser III.¹ (745-727) was now the reigning sovereign. After one or two campaigns in the east, he directed his operations against Arpad and Hamath in Syria, the former of which had been the center of a hostile coalition which included Uzziah, king of Judah. Syria and Israel lying in the line of these western expeditions were the first to suffer from invasion (2 Kings 15: 29). During the earlier period of the disruption the political relations between these two kingdoms were greatly strained, but now they sink all local animosities and join hands to resist a common danger. They had frequently made incursions into Judah by which it had become greatly weakened and demoralized (2 Kings 15: 37); and when Ahaz ascended the throne, Rezin and Pekah saw in his characteristic timidity a grand opportunity to force him to an alliance with them, against which combination of powers Assyria could not possibly succeed.²

¹For an account of his reign see Driver's "Isaiah," p. 7 *et seq.*; "Records of the Past," (New Series), Vol. V., p. 115. Since the discovery by Pinches ("Guide to the Nimroud Central Saloon") of a Tiglathpileser II., among those who preceded Assurnatsirpal, he is now known as Tiglathpileser III.

²From Isa. 7: 6, they clearly intended to put upon the throne one who would be entirely subservient to them. The name appears to indicate that he was a Syrian. For other incursions, especially by Rezin, see 2 Kgs. 16: 6; 2 Chron. 28: 17f.

Israel, also, probably knew that there was a strong Assyrian party in Jerusalem which favored an alliance with this great eastern power, and since this would mean inevitable defeat for the North, they strove to make Judah a vassal of themselves. Ahaz, although thinking to invite the assistance of Tiglathpileser long before this, at last determined to do so (2 Kings 16:7), thus "following the precedent set by Menahem." This step was successful for Judah for awhile,¹ but was only a step towards the great captivity at last. It also "cost Ahaz his independence." and a large amount of treasure. for he had to strip the temple of its sacred vessels, and give them to the Assyrian king (2 Kings 16:8). The confederacy, then, between Rezin and Pekah has been formed, and the final march against Judah begun. The alarm was so great in Jerusalem that the "king's heart shook, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the forest shake before the wind (Isa. 7:2). Isaiah, becoming aware that Ahaz had appealed to Assyria for help, went out, according to an express command. with his son Shear-Jashub, and meets Ahaz who is arranging for a supply of water in case of a siege at "the conduit of the upper pool."² This is the first time that the prophet is brought into personal contact with the king. Full of confidence, he says, "Ahaz, be quiet, don't fear; these two kings of the North are only the stumps of smoking firebrands, there is no fire in them, they cannot do you any harm. God has said that their purpose shall not stand nor come to pass; yet if *you* do not believe, *you* shall not be established."³ Ahaz hesitates. Jehovah replies through the prophet, "Ask a sign in the heights or in the depths, that what I have said is true." The king hypocritically answers, "I will not thus tempt the Lord." Isaiah, righteously indignant that this descendant of David's house and ruler over God's heritage should so madly invite destruction for Judah itself, cries out, "You count it of little importance

¹ Tiglathpileser attacked the confederate forces in the rear, thus diverting the attack on Judah.

² Isa. 7:3; cf. Hezekiah, on a similar occasion, 2 Chron. 32:3; also Isa. 22:9.

³ There is a forcible play on words in the Hebrew. Some one has compared an old North-of-England expression: "If ye have not faith, ye cannot have staith."

that you vex and weary me by your foolish policy, do you count it a small matter to weary my God? His purpose shall stand, and inasmuch as you have declined to ask a sign, he will himself give you one and this is it: A maiden¹ shall bear a son and call his name 'Immanu-el' [God (is) with us], and so reduced will his country be when he arrives at years of discretion that his only food will 'be curdled milk and honey.' Why? Because by this time the land (viz. Syro-Israel) of the two kings whom thou hatest shall be forsaken (vs. 16). But in addition to this, O Ahaz! the destroyer that is to effect their ruin, viz. Assyria, shall come against thee and thy people and thy father's house, and the days shall be unlike any since the disruption of the kingdom. You have hired a razor to shave Judah of its foes, but that same razor will by and by despoil you (vs. 20)."

And Isaiah's predictions came true, for, about thirty years afterwards, Sargon met Hanno of Gaza and Sabako of Egypt at Raphia on the very borders of Judah "and the land itself was terribly devastated by the wild Assyrian soldiery."²

But in spite of these dangers which threaten Judah, Isaiah is still full of hope. He expressed it first in the sign "Immanuel," he now does it in a second more popular sign. Jehovah instructs him to take a large tablet of wood covered with soft wax and write upon it in bold characters, "For Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (spoil speedeth, prey hasteth), a two-fold prophecy of the rapid success of the Assyrians against the confederacy. To prepare against any disputes in the future, he has two men, Uriah and Zechariah, witness the act. About a year afterwards, his second son is born whom he is commanded to call by the above name, "for before the boy shall know how to cry, my father, and my mother, the riches of Damascus, and the spoil of Samaria shall be carried away before the king of Assyria." (Isa. 8:1-4; cf. also 7:16).

The pith of both prophetic messages thus far is, the North

¹ It is generally agreed that *ālmā* signifies a young woman of marriageable age.

² Driver's "Isaiah," pp. 34, 44. "Sabako" is called "So" in Herodotus (ii. 137), and the Bible (2 Kings 17:4). See Schrader's "Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament, under this passage.

shall not succeed in their campaign, for God is with us; both children are signs, the first of God's presence according to the ancient covenant; the second of the speedy overthrow of the northern confederation by Tiglathpileser.

But in this overthrow Judah, also, was to suffer. That terrible stream, about to envelop Rezin and Pekah, was to sweep over Judah itself, stretching out its wings over "thy land, O Immanu-el," but should reach only to the neck, for its "invisible Lord" (Immanu-el) would protect it from entire destruction (vss. 5-8). This last thought fills the prophet with new courage who calls upon the nations outside to do their worst, yet they shall not prosper, for, Immanu-el. (vs. 10)!

But the powerful Assyrian is still moving onward, and amid the deepening darkness Isaiah offers a prayer (1) that his teaching may be permanently preserved, and (2) that it may accomplish its purpose, for he and his children are for signs (vss. 16-18). This prayer is followed by a warning not to resort to necromancy, but to the religious instructions of the prophets, otherwise, when it is too late, they will look to the earth, but only darkness; to the heavens, but only deep darkness; Zebulon and Naphtali and the region beyond Jordan, says the prophet, though now dishonored by being taken into captivity by Tiglathpileser (734) shall be glorified, however, in the latter time; instead of the present "darkness," a "great light"; instead of the present sorrow, the "joy of harvest"; instead of the present captivity, freedom from the "yoke"; instead of war and bloodshed, all implements of war destroyed; instead of Tiglathpileser, a child who is yet to be born, and whose names shall be "Wonder of a Counsellor" (T. was a counsellor, but this child is to be a "wonder of a counsellor"), "Hero of a God" (T. was a hero, but this one is to be a "Divine hero"), "Father of Eternity"¹ (in sharp contrast with the mortal life of the Assyrian), "Prince of Peace" (T. was rather a prince of strife). This child is further to be of

¹ Others (Hitzig, Knobel, Kuenen) "Father (*i. e.*, giver) of Booty," but, as Cheyne observes, this "is against the parallelism and out of harmony with the religious character of the passage." Orelli translates, "Eternally Father," on the ground that "Father of Eternity" "gives too metaphysical a turn." So Gesenius, Delitzsch, Dillmann (Der Prophet Jesaja).

David's line, and to sit on David's throne; his empire is to be peaceful and growing, and to stand upon the eternal foundation of righteousness; and so important is this work in the divine economy that in spite of any obstacles, human or satanic, the undying energy of the Divine Nature will surely bring it to pass.

Such, briefly, is the historical situation of the Syro-Ephraimite war, and the child-prophecies of Isaiah which grew out of them. But how were these child-prophecies fulfilled? These discourses certainly had an application then and there, they were intended for the times in which they were delivered. Let the Bible and the monuments tell their story.

First, as regards *Syria*. It was predicted, "Behold, Damascus (the capital) is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap."¹ The fulfillment reads, "And the king of Assyria went up against Damascus and took it, and carried (the people of) it captive to Kir and slew Rezin."² The Assyrian accounts which we possess of the fall of Damascus and the death of Rezin are very meagre. There is a mutilated inscription in the British Museum from which we learn that Tiglathpileser entered Syria at the head of an army, and fell upon Rezin, who was defeated and fled to Damascus, where the Assyrian king besieged him for two years, at the end of which time he was taken and slain.³

Secondly, as regards *Ephraim*. As we have seen, the prophet foretold, in several ways, its overthrow. The narrative reads, 2 Kings 15:29,30, "In the days of Pekah, king of Israel, came Tiglathpileser, of Assyria, and took . . . , Gilead and Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali (all situated in the N. and N. E. of Israel), and carried them captive to Assyria." In his annals the king says, "The land of the House of Omri⁴ the distant,

¹ Isa. 17:1; cf. also Amos 1:3.

² 2 Kings 16:19.

³ Rawlinson's "Ancient Monarchies," Vol. ii., pp. 131, 132; Schrader, in 2 Kings 15:37, where the passage from the inscription is given; also, his "Sammlung," Band ii., p. 31 (foot-note). Tiglathpileser says, "bit abiou sa Rasuni màt Gar-Imêrisuæ . . . alvî aksud=the house of the father of Rezin of the country of Gar-Imêrisua (=Damascus-Syria) . . . I besieged, I took. The date is 732 B. C.

⁴ "mât Bit Humrû," the Assyrian title for Northern Israel.

the whole of its inhabitants, together with their possessions, to Assyria I deported. *Pekah*, their king, I slew." Though Israel lost this large territory and population in 734, yet Samaria, its capital, did not fall until captured by Sargon, 722, twelve years later.

Judah, though seriously weakened for the assistance she received, was left unmolested for the present, "and the danger which Isaiah feared passed, for a time, away (Driver)."

But who was this child Immanuel that so filled the prophet's imagination and inspired him with such continuous hope? And here I can do no more than mention the various theories, without entering into the arguments *pro* and *con*.¹

1. The old orthodox Jewish opinion² was that it referred to Hezekiah, soon to be born, or already born, to Ahaz, and employed by the prophet as a sign of Jehovah's presence. It is regarded by the opponents of this view as a sufficient answer to it that Hezekiah was, according to any chronological scheme, already eight or nine years old.

2. Others³ hold that Immanuel refers to a son soon to be born to the prophet himself, viz., Mahershalalhashbaz, and Isa. 8:3 et seq. is quoted in proof. It is important to remember, however, *a*) that while the child's mother is called a "maiden," the prophet's wife is called a "prophetess"; *b*) that Isaiah does not speak of the birth of his second son with that peculiar solemnity with which he, on every occasion, refers to Immanuel.

3. That Isaiah *supposed* this case to indicate a mere "note of time"; but this does not comport with the emphasis which the prophet puts upon the *child* as a real personage.

4. The *ideal* view, held by Eichhorn, Driver, and practically, Cheyne. Canon Driver says (p. 41), "The language of Isaiah forces upon us the conviction that the figure of Immanuel is an *ideal one*, projected by him upon the shifting future—upon the

¹ See a good summary in Smith's Bible Dictionary, art. "Immanuel."

² Specially the earlier Rabbins. See also "Journal of Biblical Literature," Vol. IX., 1890, Part I, where Professor C. R. Brown argues strongly for this view.

³ Such as the later Rabbins, Kimchi, and Abarbanel; also, Gesenius, Hitzig, and Knobel.

nearer future in chap. 7, upon the remoter future in chap. 9, but grasped by the prophet as a living and real personality, the guardian of his country now, its deliverer and governor hereafter." "It is the Messianic king, whose portrait is here for the first time in the Old Testament sketched distinctly."

5. That of the great body of Christian interpreters who regard it as a direct and exclusive prophecy of our Saviour. This opinion, it will be seen, leaves out of view entirely the fact that the child was to be a "sign" then and there to Ahaz of deliverance from the threatened danger.

It is difficult to tell, of course, whether the child existed ideally or not in the prophet's mind; but it seems to involve less difficulties to hold that Isaiah had in view a particular maiden and child who thus became *types* of the virgin Mary and the Child Jesus. Though fulfilled partially at the time, yet the prophecy only received its fullest and grandest accomplishment in the Incarnation.