



The Expected of Nations (Fra Angelico)

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST IN PROPHECY

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WHEN the fulness of the time was come," says St. Paul, "God sent His Son." Divine Providence had prepared the nations for the coming of the Messias. The Messianic prophecies pictured the coming Deliverer in no mistakable colors. When the moment of the nativity of the God-Man was at hand, that moment so important in time and eternity, that moment when the Omnipotent Word, the Son of the Eternal Father and the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, was about to be born as man, all the nations of the world ought to have turned their eyes to Bethlehem to welcome their Redeemer. At first the prophecies concerning the advent of the Saviour were obscure. God gradually revealed the future events and circumstances relating to the Messias. All the prophets announced the coming of the Prince of Peace. They described His origin, birth, life, passion, death and glory. It is beyond our present purpose to treat in detail all the Messianic prophecies. Within the contents of this article we will endeavor to consider some of the prophetic utterances, as expressed in the Old Testament, that concern the conception and nativity of the Expected of Nations and then examine the record of their fulfillment as given in the gospel narrative. In so doing we hope to show that, under the providential guidance of God, the nations of the world ought to have been ready to receive the Babe of Bethlehem as a divine person sent to redeem fallen man.

Prophets sent by God prepared the Israelites for the coming of Christ. The chosen people in turn directly helped in the preparation of the pagan world. The progress of the Messianic idea in the prophecies of the Old Testament may be conveniently traced through three successive periods of patriarchs, kings and prophets. The nearer these enlightened heralds approached the time of the birth of the Saviour, the more fully were they instructed in the matters pertaining to His coming. During the patriarchal period, we find the prophecies limited to the announcement of the Redeemer as coming from the seed of Abra-

ham, Isaac and Jacob. "And the Lord said to Abraham . . . I will make of thee a great nation . . . and in thee shall all the kindred of the earth be blessed."¹ This prophetic promise is repeated to Isaac and Jacob. In the prophetic blessings uttered by Jacob to his sons we read, "The sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till he come that is to be sent, and he shall be the expected of nations."²

The verses of the Old Testament during the period of the kings are replete with references to the Messias. They describe Him as a priest, a king and the Son of God. For our purpose it suffices to quote from certain prophetic psalms. King David, from whose seed the Deliverer was to be born, thus sings of the promised Prince, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness. Thou hast loved justice, and hated iniquity: therefore God, thy God, hath annointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows."³ Again, "The Lord hath said to me: Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the Gentiles for thy inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession."⁴ In these verses the Royal Psalmist clearly announces the divinity of the expected Saviour.

The period of the prophets is marked by a more detailed narration of the future events regarding the Messias. His family descent, the time and place of His birth, His mother and precursor are foretold. The Messias will be of the seed of David, the son of Jesse, "And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise out of his root."⁵ In Jeremias we read, "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, and I will raise up to David a just branch: and a king shall reign, and shall be wise: and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth."⁶ Bethlehem is predicted as the place of the birth of the Prince of the Kingdom of God, "And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel: and his going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity."⁷ Daniel announces the time of the advent of the

¹ Genesis, XII, 1-3.

² Genesis, XLIX, 10.

³ Psalm XLIV, 7-8.

⁴ Psalm II, 7-8.

⁵ Isaias, XI, 1.

⁶ Jeremias, XXIII, 5.

⁷ Micheas, V, 2.

Saviour, "Seventy weeks are shortened upon thy people, and upon thy holy city, that transgression may be finished, and sin may have an end, and iniquity may be abolished; and everlasting justice may be brought; and vision and prophecy may be fulfilled; and the saint of saints may be anointed."⁸ The mother of the Promised One will be a virgin, "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel."⁹ The name Emmanuel just quoted foretells the divinity of the son of the virgin, for as St. Matthew tells us, Emmanuel signifies, God with us. In another place Isaiah also brings out the fact that the Messiah is to be God, "For a child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace."¹⁰ Malachias, the last of the prophets, makes known that a precursor shall prepare the way of the Lord, "Behold I send my angel, and he shall prepare the way before my face. And presently the Lord, whom you seek, and the angel of the testament, whom you desire, shall come to his temple. Behold he cometh, saith the Lord of hosts."¹¹ From the prophecies quoted, one can readily see that God prepared His chosen people for the advent of their Redeemer.

After perusing the Messianic prophecies, we can easily discover the mission of the Israelites. In virtue of the covenant made by God with Abraham, which was confirmed in Isaac and Jacob, the Jews were to be the bearers of the high commission to preserve among the nations of the earth the knowledge of the One, True and only God and faith in the Redeemer to come. True it is, that these people were not always faithful to their mission, but, when chastised by God, as during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, they listened to the warnings and predictions of the prophets and returned to the God of their fathers. In this manner the Hebrew nation received a positive and direct preparation for the recognition and reception of their Saviour. The Jews never doubted that the prophecies would be accomplished. As a whole, their belief in the promised Messiah was never shaken amidst an environment that was wholly idolatrous.

⁸ Daniel, IX, 24.

⁹ Isaiah, VII, 14.

¹⁰ Isaiah, IX, 6.

¹¹ Malachias, III, 1.

The preparation of the pagan nations was negative and less direct. The correct idea of paganism is expressed by St. Paul in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. At one time the pagans enjoyed a primitive revelation, a partial knowledge of the truth. This knowledge, though perverted, was never entirely lost, for some obscure notion of a Supreme Being, a consciousness of guilt and the hope of a redeemer can be traced in the legends and traditions of antiquity even down to the time of Christ. As the pagans gradually were estranged from God they lost the correct idea of man's nature and destiny and became more and more corrupt and immoral. They began to worship the created things of nature thus falling into absolute idolatry. This prevailing materialistic polytheism could not satisfy the pagan mind or heart. As a result, their souls were filled with a spirit of unrest and dissatisfaction. They longed for something better. They yearned for a redeemer. Divine Providence allowed paganism to pursue its own course to make it conscious of the necessity of redemption. To be assured that a universal expectation of a redeemer did really exist among the nations of antiquity, one has but to acquaint himself with the classical literature of such tribes and nations as the Persians, Indians, Arabians, Greeks, Romans and the Germanic and Celtic races. The constant intercourse of the pagans with the Jews, who were dispersed throughout the world and who carried with them the belief in the promised Messias, or at least the spread of the Jewish prophetic literature, helped to fan the sparks of hope among the pagans to a glow of expectancy. So we may conclude that the history of the ancient world cannot be viewed adequately except in so far as it points out the guiding hand of Providence preparing the nations for the coming of Christ.

"When the fulness of the time was come," when the preparatives, which in the designs and forecasts of God were to precede the birth of the Messias, were accomplished, the Expected of Nations was born. The gospel account of the Nativity proves the perfect accord between the prophecies and their fulfillment. The time foretold by Daniel, the fifty-two weeks of years that were to elapse before the birth of Christ, was about to draw to a close. The angel Gabriel was sent to announce the precursor of the Lord. Gabriel appeared to Zachary, as he offered incense in the temple while the multitude of people was praying without, and said to him, "Fear not Zachary, for thy prayer is heard (the common opinion of the Fathers is that he

had been praying for the speedy coming of the Messiah); and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear a son, and thou shalt call his name John . . . And he shall convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias; that he may turn the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the incredulous to the wisdom of the just, to prepare unto the Lord a perfect people.”¹² Certainly these words refer to the forerunner predicted by Malachias.

Six months after the conception of John, we find the angel Gabriel again summoned by God to bear another message to earth. This time he appears to the Virgin Mary, whom Isaias had foretold would be the Mother of the Saviour, “And in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary . . . And the angel said to her: Fear not Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father; and he shall reign in the house of Jacob forever.”¹³ Who can doubt that this passage fulfills the prophecy of Isaias uttered seven-hundred years before?

About nine months after the conception of the Messiah in the chaste womb of His Mother, Divine Providence leads Mary and Joseph to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, that the prophecy concerning the birthplace of the Redeemer might to be accomplished. “And it came to pass that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled . . . And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem: because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child. And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for him in the inn.”¹⁴

¹² Luke, I, 13-17.

¹³ Luke, I, 26-32.

¹⁴ Luke, II, 1-7.

Bethlehem goes down in history as the birthplace of Christ and thus is fulfilled the prophecy of Michaeas.

It is important that we examine the geneology of the Christ of the manger as recorded in St. Luke in order to assure ourselves that the predicted origin of the Messias was verified. St. Luke traces the pedigree of Christ back to Adam, the father of the human race.¹⁵ In this account of the human ancestry of Mary's Son, we see that He is indeed of the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of the family of David. The angel that appeared to the shepherds leaves no doubt in our minds regarding the fact that the Child of the manger is the divine Messias. Attend to the angelic message, "And the angel said to them: Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people; For, this day, is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger."¹⁶ The texts quoted are sufficient to prove that the Messianic prophecies foretelling the conception and nativity of the Christ were fulfilled.

Thus far, we have seen that the prophets foretold that a redeemer was to come. These enlightened heralds further predicted that the Expected One would be a man, born of a woman, the son of Mary, the Virgin, and at the same time God. We have noted that these prophecies prepared the nations for the advent of the Messias. It has been shown that the prophetic statements of the Old Testament are real prophecies. They forecasted future events. They were fulfilled. Now, do the prophecies prove that the Infant of Bethlehem was divine, that in Him there was a union of two natures, human and divine, in one person, the Son of God. No—for the Incarnation is a mystery. They do prove that it is reasonable to *believe* that the Child lying on the straw of the manger that first Christmas morn was a God-Man. God is the highest and first truth. He is Truth. He infallibly knows all things, even future events. He cannot testify to what is false. By means of the Messianic prophecies, He testified to the divinity of the Messias. God revealed to His prophets the knowledge of the promised Redeemer. To prove this we have but to listen to the testimony of the prophets. Jeremias, who foretold the origin of the

¹⁵ Luke, III, 23-38.

¹⁶ Luke, II, 10-12.

Messias, tells us that he speaks as a messenger sent from God, "For in truth the Lord sent me to you, to speak all these things in your hearing."¹⁷ Isaías, who predicted the family, the Virgin Mother and divinity of Christ, states that he speaks as one illumined by God, ". . . that which I have heard of the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, I have declared unto you."¹⁸ Therefore, the Messianic prophecies are worthy of belief. The Jews knew that their prophets were the mouthpieces of God. In their intercourse with the pagans they spread this knowledge. And so, we may conclude that God prepared the nations to receive and recognize His Son as a divine Saviour. After the Christ-Child had grown to manhood and had proved by His miracles and Resurrection that belief in His divinity was reasonable, and still found Himself rejected by His people, He had recourse to the argument from the prophecies to show all generations that they ought to believe in Him. Jesus on the way to Emmaus speaks thus to His two disciples "O foolish and slow of heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken . . . And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the scriptures, the things that were concerning Him."¹⁹ Notice, Christ does not say, "O slow of mind to *comprehend*" but "slow of heart to *believe*." Our Saviour uses this argument not only to confound His enemies, but also to confirm our faith in Him, to manifest that it is reasonable to believe that Bethlehem's Babe was a God-Man. The magnificent structure of our holy faith rests on the fact that the Child born to us on the first Christmas morn was divine. So, let us with Mary, Joseph and the humble shepherds kneel and adore the Christ-Child of the manger.

¹⁷ Jeremias, XXVI, 15.

¹⁸ Isaías, XXI, 10.

¹⁹ Luke, XXIV, 25.

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