

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE EARLIER IDEAS OF ISAIAH.

THOUGH the Book of Isaiah be not disposed throughout on a strict chronological principle, it is probable that chapters i.-vi. belong in the main to the earliest period of his prophetic history. It is extremely difficult no doubt to find a historical situation for all parts of chapter i. at an early period of his career; but on the other hand the tremendous power of the passage and the nature of several of the thoughts in it, such as Jehovah's appeal to heaven and earth (for to whom else could He appeal?) that He had nourished and brought up children and they had rebelled against Him, and the Lament over Jerusalem: "How is the city that was faithful become an harlot!" suggest a very early time. Such figures appear to express the first fresh consciousness in the prophet's mind of the real nature of the situation and the meaning of the people's condition. If supposed spoken in the time of Sennacherib, at the end of a ministry of forty years, they are very unnatural and lose very greatly in meaning.

From the place of the inaugural vision, chapter vi., in the collection it may be supposed that it was not published at the time it was revealed, or that it was republished in a new connexion. It is the opinion of some scholars that it bears marks of having been retouched by the author. This is quite possible, for the prophets were always practical teachers, and continually kept in view the great object of influencing men at the moment in any work which they undertook. The desire to reproduce any revelation exactly

as it was communicated was always subordinate to the desire to influence the people, and, if subsequent revelation had supplemented the former before it was committed to writing, there was no anxiety felt by the prophet to keep the two sedulously apart. It is thought that the picture of the desolation of the country and the idea of the hardening of the people's heart under the prophet's preaching were not likely to have been presented so broadly in the vision that determined him to assume the rôle of prophet. But there is one thing always to be remembered in such cases, and that is that the call to be a prophet was not the first step in the prophet's history (Jer. i. 5). The call was the second step; endowment with a certain cast of mind, a certain range both of thought and susceptibility, was the first. When we look at the work of men called of God, whether it be now or of old, the call appears to us to be rather a consecration than a communication, a fire from God that sets aglow the whole nature rather than anything added. This fire, it may be, purifies the nature and sets free all that is loftiest in its thoughts and feelings and also enables it to reach upwards to what it would never otherwise have attained to. Nevertheless we see how greatly the natural character of the prophet's mind reveals itself in the word which he speaks. This is to such an extent the case that it sometimes even disquiets us. We are almost led to say that the prophet's conception of God is just a reflexion of his own character, of the prevailing tone of his own mind, and we ask, Is there objective truth in it? Can we rely upon it as anything but a brilliant idealizing of that which the prophet himself was? It is certainly true that the idea of God set forth by each particular prophet does bear this relation to his own mind. Yet when we think that the prophetic call was not an accidental thing but the call of one formed in the womb to be called; that God's hand was upon them from their earliest being, and

that their nature was part of their prophetic endowment, our disquiet disappears. Each of these minds of men called to be prophets was a feeble counterpart of some side or some view of the mind of God, and just as the white light is made up of many separate colours so the perfect nature of God revealed in Scripture is formed by the colours reflected from the natures of various prophets, for it takes many human minds to make up the fulness of the Divine mind. Though the vision recorded in chapter vi. impressed Isaiah in such way as to lead him to take henceforth a public place among his people, the individual thoughts contained in it were probably not new to him. He had often thought of Jehovah as the Holy One before; the state of society about him had often occupied his mind; and he had certainly more than once forecast its issue. But now under an influence from on high all these things together presented themselves with a clearness and took possession of his mind with a force which compelled him to come forth and speak to men as the messenger of God. There is a curious fact which casts light upon the fixity of his ideas from the earliest moment of his prophetic career. He probably began to prophesy about the year 739, and three years later he has a child old enough to accompany him to the conduit of the upper pool (vii. 3), and this child bore the name of Shear Jashub, *a remnant shall turn*. From this it is clear that his great idea that only a remnant would be saved was one with which he started on his career, and this idea presupposes the desolation of the country, which again implies the people's persistence in unbelief—If ye will not believe, ye shall not be established (vii. 9).

The inaugural vision of Isaiah contains in brief an outline of his prophetic teaching. The passage besides this has a singular psychological and religious interest of a kind personal to the prophet. It consists of a series of steps

each one of which naturally follows upon the other. There is first a vision of the Lord, the King, surprising and majestic, with a singular world of beings and activities around him (*vv.* 1-4). Then this vision of Jehovah reacts upon the mind of the prophet and makes him think of himself in relation to this great King, the Holy One, whom he had seen; and one thought succeeds another so that in a moment he lives a history (*vv.* 5-7). Then having passed through this history, the beginning of which was terror, but the end of it peace, an altogether new sensation filled his mind, as if the world, which was all disorder and confusion before, and filled with a conflict of tendencies and possibilities, had suddenly, in the light falling on it from the great King whom he had seen, become clear and the meaning of it plain, and also what was his own place in it; and this was accompanied with an irresistible impulse to take his place. This is expressed by saying that he heard the voice of the great Sovereign who had been revealed to him proclaiming that he had need of one to send—Who will go for us?—to which he replied that he would go,—Send me! And finally there comes the service which he has to perform, which is no other than just to take his place in the midst of that world the meaning of which his vision of the Sovereign Lord had made clear to him, and state this meaning to men, to hold the mirror up to his time and declare to it its condition and its tendencies, and what in the hand of the great King, God over all, its issue and the issue of all must be (*vv.* 8-13).

The vision which the prophet had was that of the King, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. All the great prophets had at the beginning such a vision of Jehovah, God of Israel. They were prophets of the Lord, their message was from Him, it was of Him that they spoke to the people, it was their vision of Him that made them speak. They did not find Him, He broke upon them in His majesty, and

they came forth from His presence with an awe upon them which never left them, and a force of conviction that never deserted them, and with the feeling of an imperative necessity lying on them to speak of him to men which they could not themselves resist.

It is not certain whether the vision was seen by Isaiah before the death of King Uzziah or after it—it was in the year that he died. If we could fancy it to have been seen after his death, some things in it might be more naturally accounted for. It was a vision that might well have been created by such a momentous death, the death of one once a king, and one so powerful, holding such a place among the forces of society, bridling them with so firm a hand—a hand now relaxed, leaving the unquiet humours of the land to assert themselves and draw the state on to its destruction. Perhaps only the thought of the death of such a king could have led the prophet's mind to draw that comprehensive sketch of the history and the destiny of his nation with which the chapter ends. But however we may suppose external events to have contributed to the operations of the prophet's mind, and certainly the opener and acuter we conceive the sensibilities of the prophets to circumstances around them to have been, the better shall we understand them, the great interest of the vision lies in the mental history which it exhibits. The "call" of the prophet, as we name it, was a crisis in his personal life, and his "office," as we speak, was nothing but the life task which the crisis made imperative. Nothing stood between Isaiah and being a prophet but the uncleanness of his lips; and nothing was needed to furnish him with his message from the King but just to *see Him*.

"I saw the Sovereign (Adonai) sitting on a throne; about him stood the Seraphim, and they cried one to another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." The general truth expressed by this scene, which is but a re-

flection of the service of Jehovah in His temple among men, is this: That there is a transcendental world within or behind this outer world, a world of spiritual powers, which are the forces that rule the destinies of this world in which we live. There is a Sovereign, majestic and lifted up, whose glory fills the earth. Around Him there are beings who know what He is, and who render Him the homage due; beings full of power and life, covering their faces with their wings lest the too great light of the Divine face should fall on theirs and blind them; covering their feet also, conscious, though perfect, of their imperfection before Him, and out of reverence concealing that in them which to His eyes might seem uncomely; ever in flight, swift to do His commandments; though conscious of their weakness, and awed before His majesty, yet not so abashed but that they can serve Him with a ready will; giving unending expression to that sense of what Jehovah is which fills their mind in the cry, Holy is the Lord of hosts! The cry of Holy! hardly ascribes any attribute to Jehovah such as moral purity; it rather expresses Godhead, transcendent majesty. At the same time "holy" already expresses, or at least connotes, moral purity, for the prophet immediately thinks of his own uncleanness, and fears death. Nor does he fear death merely from the physical nature of Deity reacting against the creature; he fears it from the moral nature of the Ruler. "Woe is me, I perish, for, being a man of unclean lips, mine eyes have seen the King." The smoke that filled the house is hardly to be regarded as a symbol of the dark side of the self-manifesting God coming into view and his anger against sin. Analogies for such an interpretation of the smoke in the house seem wanting. The cloud of smoke is rather the manifestation of Himself (iv. 5). The King, high and lifted up, is not immovable. He responds and gives a fuller token of Himself. On the spirits adoring what they knew there breaks a fuller know-

ledge and a more sensible nearness. If in the busy day the pillar seems cloud and smoke, in stiller hours it lightens into fire. And to the eastern seer God was a light more distinct and clearer far than to the dimmer vision of the western eye, when

On the glimmering limit far withdrawn
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn.

The feeling of Jehovah's universal kingship leads to the next step in the vision: "Then said I, Woe is me, I perish. Then flew one of the Seraphim with a live coal and touched my lips, saying, Thine iniquity is taken away." The sight of the King reacted on the prophet, and made him think of himself. In such a presence the consciousness of himself rose like a blush to his face or a pallor of terror. Perhaps men universally carry with them a sense of their relation to God. We cannot think of Him out of relation to ourselves. Our thought of Him includes thought of ourselves. The prophet's thought of Him as the King immediately awakened terror in his mind. This may not be the way in which we need think of God still. Many things have happened since this prophet lived. God has commended his love to us. It was certainly not unnatural that, being suddenly brought face to face with the King, the prophet should be seized with terror because of his uncleanness. He thought of the uncleanness of his lips, though it did not lie there alone; but a man's words are the expression of his heart, and his lips are the organ of this expression, as it is said: Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen, because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord to provoke the eyes of His glory (iii. 8). Perhaps he thought of his lips from hearing the praises of the Seraphim, in which he was unfit to join (Zeph. iii. 9). There he practically felt his uncleanness, and that he was a stranger to that holy circle that surrounded the great

King. But what is of interest is that the prophet's feeling of fear was succeeded by another. Though the first, it was not the last condition of his mind. In a brief space he lived a history, and thought succeeded thought of his relation to God. A seraph seemed to fly to him with a live coal from the altar and touch his lips, saying, Thy sin is purified. The two things are embraced in the full effect of the vision of God. First it may be fear, but then the stilling of the fear. First the sense of sin, but following it the sense of sin purged away by a fire from the Lord's presence. Just as on seeing the great King he felt that, though on earth, he was not without, but far within the sweep of the King's holy rule, so the laying of this coal to his lips made him feel that he was equally within the sweep of the purifying fire from God. The symbolism is very simple. The altar is no doubt that of burnt-offering, for, apart from all questions about the altar of incense, a hot coal or stone would scarcely be found there. Nothing appears to depend on the altar, except that it furnished a hot coal from God's presence. The uncleanness of men must be purified with fire—with a fire from God.

The purification of Isaiah's lips led to the third step in the vision: "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Who will go for us? And I said, Send me"! The psychological consecutiveness of the steps is singular. The removal of the prophet's sin lifted him up out of the sphere in which he felt himself before, dwelling among a people of unclean lips, and made him belong to that heavenly sphere which had been revealed to him. He was now one in sympathy with this, and immediately there followed the impulse to enter upon the service of the great King. The sight of the Ruler which he had received enabled him to take his place in the world, and see what it became him to do. It is not of course any mere abstract conception of God that will enable or compel men to do this. It is a sight of God the

Ruler, of one who holds the world together, in whom the universe, society, and human life consist. And it is a sight of Him amidst the circumstances of our life, throwing light upon them, classifying them, bringing them into order, showing us their meaning, and their needs, and the issue of them. It was in the year that King Uzziah died that the prophet had this vision. Uzziah was a strong king. He held the reins tight. The resources of the nation were enlarged by him, and the forces of revolution kept under. His death is the turning-point in the history of Judah. From now downwards it begins to decline. The forces of dissolution were working long ere this time, but the firm hand of the king repressed them. The great characteristic of the age was religious insensibility. That which the prophet had been enabled to see, a Divine world within this outer world, was the thing which the nation could not be made to perceive. Men could not be impressed with the idea of a living God, a Sovereign high and lifted up ruling the destinies of the world. "They said to the seers, See not, and to the prophets, Prophecy to us smooth things. Get ye out of the way, turn you out of the path, have done with the 'Holy One of Israel' in our hearing" (xxx. 10). A Sovereign ruling over the world and life and men's consciences they would have none of. The heart of the people was fat, their ears were heavy, and their eyes closed. And this insensibility led to formalism, to distrust of Jehovah, and when danger threatened to compromising alliances with the great foreign empires, in the collision of which with one another the little state must inevitably be crushed to pieces. Perhaps the death of Uzziah might have suggested some of this to the prophet, and brought it suddenly before his mind. But it was the vision of Jehovah that cast the real light upon the world, the revelation of a great Ruler behind all things, the real power in the world, a fire in contact with the evil and impurity of mankind, which must

consume them or cleanse it; it was this that made the prophet perceive the true meaning of the circumstances of his time, and compelled him, now conscious of his own right relation to this Ruler, to assume his place in regard to the world of his day, and speak to it that which he had learned. His teaching is just the counterpart of what had happened to himself—Woe is me, I am undone! Lo this hath touched thy lips, and thy sin is purged! The fire from God's altar purged his sin, and the blood of Jerusalem shall be purged from the midst of her by a blast of burning (iv. 4). The cities shall be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man. Yet it shall be as a teil tree, or as an oak, whose stock remains when they are cut down; the holy seed is the stock thereof, and out of it springs a new life.

It is singular how in a moment the whole outline of God's purpose and of his own prophetic work stood out before the prophet's eyes. All his life long he has little else to say than he says here of Jehovah the King, and of the people in that figure of the tree cut down to the roots. The thought of his life and his prophecies is this thought of the Sovereign, the Holy One of Israel, and this thought he throws into the history of his people, on which it acts like a fire or a hewer in the forest, withering or cutting even with the ground every growth of the people's life and even the people itself, yet leaving an indestructible stock out of which a new people shall arise. In a moment all this stood out before the prophet's eyes, his conception of what Jehovah was and was doing, or must do, and that of the nature and scope of his own prophetic work. We see something like this sometimes in ourselves. There is a distant resemblance to it at times in our intellectual life. In some moment of higher mental power than we usually possess, we may fling out the outline of all that we shall ever think or do. All our after life is but busied in filling in with

colour and shade what in one moment of our early life we had drawn in sketch and outline. And sometimes, in after years, when some thought occurs to us which we think fresh or new, we are surprised perhaps to find the rough cast of it in something which we did long ago. It is in our early days when the mind is fresh and creative that the impression made on it by the world and life is deepest, and its response most vigorous. And this response is the contribution which we make to the life or the thought of mankind, and it is not unusual to find that we make it in a moment, and that after years do little but amplify or expand it. And there is an analogy from another side of the mind's experience even closer than this from our intellectual history.

The prophet's thoughts at this period are few if great. They are in the main these three: (1) His thought of the Lord, the King. (2) His thought of the people in their insensibility to the majesty and rule of the King. And (3) these two thoughts when brought together inevitably create the third—that of the annihilation of the people down to a remnant, that the Lord may be exalted on that day. At this period these appear to be purely abstract religious conceptions in the mind of the prophet. He has not, as yet, in view any instrument to be used in the destruction of the people. It is a moral necessity.

It is evident that the prophet's conception of Jehovah is the source of his other conceptions, though this may be said of all the prophets. His conception is singularly lofty and pure. The vision is but the service in the temple transfigured. One might almost fancy that the prophet had fallen into a trance while beholding the service in the sanctuary and musing on its real meaning. Suddenly the house and the service and the altar and the ministers became transfigured, the walls went apart and the roof lifted itself up till it seemed the high dome of God's temple on high under which he stood, and the Lord the King sat upon his

throne receiving the adoration of all holy minds. The question whether the temple or palace was the earthly or heavenly temple is an idle one. And equally irrelevant are such questions as, Where did the prophet feel himself standing? Such questions are hardly to be asked, and consistency in regard to locality is not to be sought in such ideal scenes.

Again corresponding to the prophet's conception of Jehovah as the King whose majesty fills the whole earth is his conception of the sin of men. This also is a purely spiritual thing: it is insensibility to the majesty of the King. On the one hand this may be mere pride of self, which fails to recognise the Ruler above. Or it may go further, and be distrust and want of faith in His power and rule. Or, once more, it may be disregard of His will and Himself and active opposition in deeds which provoke the eyes of His Majesty. The essence of sin is everywhere the same. The prophet's idea appears in his singular analysis of the working of the mind of the king of Assyria (chap. x. 7 *seq.*), and his threat that the Lord "will punish the fruit of the proud heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks." So it is the "pride of heart" of the inhabitants of Samaria that brings the chastisement of "adversaries" upon them. And even the sin of the women of Jerusalem is the same: "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched out necks, walking and mincing as they go," therefore the crown of their head shall be smitten with a scab (chap. iii. 16).¹ The passage chapter v. 11 *seq.* is to the same effect. It is to prostitute the prophetic writings to drag them down into the arena of modern party strife on social questions and the "drink

¹ The "wanton" eyes of A. V., or the "ogling" eyes of others, introduces an idea foreign to the connexion. There seems no reference to immorality. It is the pride of beauty and attire, which has no mind for the Ruler above, which is punished with all that makes loathsome.

traffic," a thing unknown in those days. The prophet may reprobate excess in wine, but it is less this than another thing which he reprobates: it is the heathenish merriment, the ungodly levity of life, which has no thought nor eyes for the Divine in the world's history: "The harp and the viol and the tabret and the pipe and wine are in their feasts, but they regard not the work of the Lord, nor consider the operation of His hands." Therefore shall this light of life and its joy and its music be swallowed up in the darkness of Sheòl (chap. v. 13, 14).

To the prophet this seemed inevitable. Men's insensibility to the sovereign Ruler must be broken in upon. The Lord will reveal Himself in His majesty. And realizing His manifestation as actually breaking on the world, the prophet exclaims to men, "Enter into the rock and hide thee in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of His majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be brought low, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and Jehovah alone shall be exalted on that day" (chap. ii. 10). And connecting his conception of Jehovah with the old idea of the day of the Lord (Amos. v. 18) he proceeds: "For the Lord of hosts shall have a day upon all that is proud and haughty, and it shall be brought low . . . the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and Jehovah alone shall be exalted on that day." It is possible that the "day" of the Lord originally meant a battle-day, but if so this special allusion had been long lost. No foe or other instrument of Jehovah's wrath appears alluded to in these early chapters (the passage in the end of chapter v. is hardly to be connected immediately with that chapter). It is the revelation of Jehovah's majesty that brings Him to the knowledge of men; a revelation before which nature quakes and men hide themselves in the earth. So powerful is the prophet's conception of the majesty of Jehovah and the recognition due to it from men that their insensibility awakens

a certain animosity in his mind, and he represents the Lord interposing among men, and, with a kind of indiscriminate fury, reducing society to a chaos by removing every one whom men called great and on whom they relied—"the Lord of hosts shall remove the stay and staff; the mighty man, and the man of war; the judge, and the prophet, and the diviner, and the elder; the captain of fifty, and the honourable man, and the counsellor." Every head that rose above the mass shall be smitten down. Cease ye from man, for wherein is he to be accounted of!

Naturally, if the essence of men's sin be this insensibility to the majesty of the King, the essence of true religion is the opposite condition of mind, faith in the sovereign Ruler. In the earlier prophecies this comes less to expression, though it is suggested in the passage quoted from chapter v. 11 (cf. v. 19, 21, 24), but it is abundantly visible in the second stage of the prophet's ministry. To Ahaz his words were, "If ye will not believe, ye shall not be established" (vii. 9); and of himself he says, "I will trust in Jehovah who hideth His face from the house of Israel, and will wait for him" (viii. 17). And the same note is heard through all the subsequent prophecies: "They that are escaped of the house of Jacob shall stay upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel in truth" (x. 20). "In that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall be toward the Holy One of Israel" (xvii. 7, cf. xxx. 15, xxxi. 1-3, etc.). The principle of religion is the same in the Old Testament as in the New.

The immediate consequence of the revelation of the King in His majesty, the destruction of the sinful kingdom and the exaltation of the Lord of hosts in judgment (v. 16) is chiefly dwelt upon in the earlier prophecies; the more remote consequence, the restitution of the kingdom, is less alluded to. Indeed the authenticity of almost all the passages where it appears has been contested by one scholar or another, *e.g.* ch. ii. 2-4, iv. and vi. 13 last clause. It was natural that when

danger threatened, the indestructibility of the kingdom of the Lord should be insisted on, and accordingly it is in the second and subsequent stages of the prophet's career that the idea is most prominent. It would be strange, however, if the idea were wholly absent from the prophecies of the earliest period. Because the idea, like all the prophet's other ideas, is but a consequence of his great conception of the Lord the King. The kingdom is His, and like Himself it is eternal—"What shall one answer to the messengers of the nations? That the Lord hath founded Zion, and in her shall the poor of His people find refuge?" (xiv. 32). Whether chapter i be a unity belonging all to one period or not, the Dirge over Jerusalem must surely be very early, and in it the restitution is clearly stated: "I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy councillors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called the righteous city, the faithful city" (chapter i. 26). And though difficulties beset chapter iv., they are outweighed by the probabilities in favour of the prophet's authorship.

A. B. DAVIDSON.