

## The Theology of Isaiah.

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### PRELIMINARY.

A THEOLOGY of Isaiah or any of the prophets, or indeed of the Old Testament itself, can scarcely be spoken of. One may speak, however, of the religious beliefs of the prophets, of their assurances, and above all, of their religious presentiments or anticipations, though in regard to the last a distinction must be drawn between the strictly religious element in the presentiment and the external form in which it may appear to the prophet to be about to be realised. The religious idea is permanent, the form is variable, being usually constructed out of the circumstances and the condition of the world in the prophet's own day. Hence it varies not only in different prophets, but even at different periods of the same prophet's life.

Any change in the ruling religious conceptions of a prophet, or any correction by him of former conceptions at a later period of his career, is most improbable. But great historical events in providence and changes in the relations of the forces ruling the destinies of men, such as the rise or fall of nations, might conceivably alter the outlook into the future, and change his view as to the way in which his great religious conceptions would actually find fulfilment. In his early days Isaiah seems to threaten Jerusalem with destruction, while during the campaign of Sennacherib, the last and greatest danger that threatened the city during the prophet's life, he has the most positive assurance that it will survive unhurt. This might appear a change. But in regard to his early threats it is not easy to say how far they went. His contemporary Micah declared that Zion should be ploughed like a field and become heaps, but there is nothing so specific as this in Isaiah; and his doctrine of a "remnant" keeping up the continuity of the people of God, and blossoming out into a new nation, seems to imply that he conceived a part of the population still remaining in the country, in spite of his declaration that there shall be "a great forsaking in the midst of the land." And, on the other hand, in regard to his positive assurances that Sennacherib would fail in his attempt against Jerusalem, it is not easy to decide whether these assurances went beyond the

specific danger threatened and the specific occasion on which they were uttered. Many scholars indeed speak of Isaiah's "dogma" of the inviolability of Jerusalem, and it is possible that his predictions, combined with the city's marvellous preservation, may have created a belief in the minds of the people that no hand would ever be permitted to touch the place of Jehovah's abode, as they said in Jeremiah's days, The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these! But Jeremiah was of another opinion, and threatened Jerusalem with the fate of Shiloh, and in view of this fact Isaiah's words need careful consideration.

These are interesting questions. In order to answer them, if they can be answered at all, it is necessary that the prophecies of Isaiah should be disposed anew in their historical order. And this is a task of great difficulty. It is possible that the prophet himself may have given out at different times small collections of his own writings. Even such a supposition does not guarantee that the order he followed has been preserved by the final editors of his oracles. In the first thirty-nine chapters there are certainly many passages which do not belong to him, and even those chapters which are undoubtedly his are not disposed in strict chronological sequence. Ch. xxviii., part of which at least, if not the whole, must have been spoken before the fall of Samaria in 722, is now connected with the discourses of the time of Sennacherib, twenty years later; and ch. vi., though historically the earliest, now follows chs. ii.-v.

The call of Isaiah to be prophet, or the vision that inaugurated his prophetic career, belongs, as he tells us, to the year in which Uzziah died. This date is not absolutely certain, but may be put about 738 or 739. The prophet was alive still in 701, the date of Sennacherib's invasion. His prophetic activity extended over a period of forty years. This long period may be divided into several sections. First, from 738 to 735-4, the time anterior to the Syro-Ephraimitic war and the first appearance of the Assyrians. To this belong chs. vi., ii.-iv., v., and probably parts of ch. i.

Second, the period of the Syro-Ephraimitic coalition with the purpose of dethroning the house of David, and the appeal of Ahaz for the intervention of Assyria to protect him, 734-28. Here belong chs. vii. 1-ix. 6, possibly xi., and ch. xvii. Third, the middle Assyrian period down to the death of Sargon, 705. Here might be placed chs. xxviii., x., xx. (in 711), and some other pieces, perhaps. And fourth, the last Assyrian period, the attack of Sennacherib; perhaps chs. xxiii., xxix. *seq.*, and the passages in the historical section, chs. xxxvi.-xxxix. To this period may also belong chs. xviii., xix., and perhaps the reissue of chs. xv., xvi. In chs. i.-vi. the conceptions of the prophet hardly go beyond those of Amos and Hosea, though they have a complexion of their own, and are more powerfully expressed. But in the second period (chs. vii.-ix.) he enters a region which his predecessors had hardly approached. He is the creator of the eschatology of the Old Testament and of Christianity, and it comes from his hand in a form so perfect that his successors can hardly add a single touch to it. The ideal of the Messianic King and His reign of righteousness and peace, presented in chs. vii.-ix. and xi., is the ideal which men's eyes still follow with longing.

Though ch. vi. does not occupy the first place in the book, it is, no doubt, historically first. The vision may not have been written down when seen, or, though written, its author may have thought it a fitting introduction to ch. vii. *seq.* Some scholars have considered that it bears traces of having been retouched, and that there shines through it a certain painful experience of insensibility on the part of his countrymen to his exhortations. The arguments for this view are little cogent; they resolve themselves very much into the idea that the prophet could not at the beginning have foreseen that his preaching would only harden the minds of his people. But this assumes that the prophet entered on his work unprepared, and that his call and the vision through which it was given was something altogether above nature and out of all connexion with previous movements in his own mind. This has no probability. Ch. vi. is the record of a vision—*i.e.* an intuition or a series of intuitions in a condition of mind more or less ecstatic. The vision was not something objective shown either to his outward or inward eye. It was the creation of his own mind. Whatever higher influence bore on him it operated on his mind,

and his mind projected the vision. But in such visions there is usually no element new or unfamiliar to the mind. What is new is the disposing of the elements. The mind operates on old materials, and gives them a new form and a connected unity. Certainly the idea of the Holy One of Israel, the King, was not one unfamiliar to Isaiah. Nor could he have been blind to the temper of the nation among whom he dwelt, and their insensibility to the operations of God in the world. This insensibility was not a new thing, it was inveterate. To Isaiah, indeed, this insensibility to God is just the sin of mankind; the root of all other sins. The frivolous levity of men and their excesses would not be if there lay on them the sense of the Lord the King: The harp and the lute, the tabret and the pipe, and wine are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither do they consider the operation of His hands (ch. v. 12). Others in the present day may argue well that excess blunts the mind to all feeling of God; but Isaiah's view and statement is that insensibility to God is the mother of excess. And probably the prophet touches the primary evil with most precision, and perhaps also he suggests to those who occupy offices that have some correspondence to his what is the true point towards which to direct their efforts. This slumber of the consciousness of God in men's minds seems to Isaiah so deep that nothing will break it but a self-manifestation of God to the world (chs. ii., iii.): God will appear in His majesty; He will arise to shake terribly the earth, and every eye shall see Him.

Now these are the main conceptions of ch. vi., and there is no reason to doubt that the prophet entered upon his career with a mind possessed by them. There is indeed positive evidence to that effect. If he began his prophetic work in 738, between three and four years after this he has a child old enough to accompany him to meet the king, who bears the name of Shear-jashub, *a remnant shall turn*. In this name all the prophet's conceptions of the coming history of the people are condensed, their insensibility to the rule of God in the world, the decimating judgments that must ensue to awaken them, and the result that a few shall turn unto the Lord. And these conceptions had such possession of the prophet's mind that he made his child a living expression of them.

The inaugural vision in ch. vi. contains in brief

an outline of the prophet's teaching. The passage has, besides this, 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, vers. 1-4, a vision of God, with a singular world of beings and activities around Him. The epithets used express the prophet's conception of God. "I saw the Lord," or, as we might say, the Sovereign. He sat upon a throne, and was "high and lifted up." The cry of holy which the seraphim raised without ceasing does not express any moral quality so much as the idea of absolute Godhead—God! God! God! the whole earth is full of His glory! Again, the prophet calls Him the King, Jehovah of hosts (ver. 5). This conception of God as Sovereign is the ruling one in Isaiah.

Second, this vision of Jehovah reacts upon the prophet, and makes him think of himself in relation to this transcendent Ruler, the Holy One, whom he had seen; and one thought succeeds another, so that in a moment he lives a history, vers. 5-7. First, there is terror. Woe is me! I perish; for being a man of unclean lips mine eyes have seen the King. Then the stilling of his terror: There flew one of the seraphim with a coal from the altar, saying, Lo, this has touched thy lips, and thine iniquity shall depart and thy sin be forgiven. The two poles of holy majesty and forgiving grace!

Third, the next step follows with singular truthness to the history of the mind. The purification of the prophet's lips and the taking away of his sin lifted him out of that sphere to which he

had belonged as one of a people of unclean lips, and gave him a place in that transcendental world which had just been revealed to him. He was now in harmony with this, and immediately there followed the impulse to enter also upon the service of the great King. He seemed to hear the Lord saying that He had need of some one to send, and he answered, "Here am I; send me."

Nothing could show the moral basis of prophecy, and that it is not a thing of "office" but of personal life, so clearly as this vision. Nothing stood between Isaiah and being a prophet but the uncleanness of his lips, and nothing was needed to give him his prophetic word from the Lord the King but just to see Him. It is not, of course, any mere abstract view of God, if such a thing could be, that will suffice. It is a sight of one who is the Ruler, of one who is the only power in the world, in whom the universe and human life consist; and it is a sight of Him, amidst the circumstances of our life, throwing light upon them, classifying them, showing us their meaning and the issue of them.

To the prophet the coming history of his people is but the counterpart of his own history. It follows from his conception of Jehovah, the Holy King, who is a fire in contact with men and their sin which must consume them or cleanse it. The fire of God burnt up the uncleanness of his own lips, and the blood of Jerusalem must be purged away by a blast of judgment and a blast of burning (ch. iv. 4). The details, however, of the prophet's conceptions in the earliest period of his career must be drawn from chs. ii.-iv., v., and ch. i.

## The Books of the Month.

### PART I.

THE PHILOCALIA OF ORIGEN. By J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON. (Cambridge: *At the University Press*. Crown 8vo, pp. lii, 278.) "*The Philocalia of Origen* is a compilation of selected passages from Origen's works, made by SS. Gregory and Basil. The wholesale destruction of his writings which followed upon the warfare waged against his opinions shortly after his death has caused a special value to attach to the *Philocalia*, as preserving to us in the original much of Origen's

work which would otherwise have been entirely lost, or would have survived only in the translation by Rufinus. Moreover, even his great and comparatively popular work, *Against Celsus*, depends for its text solely on a manuscript of the thirteenth century, so that we have great cause for gratitude in the preservation of a large part of it in the *Philocalia*. But apart from its textual importance, this collection deserves attention as forming an excellent introduction to the study of Origen.