

## THE 'SERVANT SONGS' IN THE UNITY OF ISAIAH

ONE of the disservices rendered to the English Bible by the Septuagint is its tradition of an order of the books of the Old Testament, which allows most of what the Hebrew Canon classes as 'The Writings' to fall between the 'Former' and the 'Latter' Prophets, that is, between the 'Historical' books and the 'Prophetical' books. There is thus cultivated a distinction in study, for the English student, between the history and the prophecy, which was never intended. It has been the joyful experience of many — including the writer — to treasure as memorable and valuable the time when it suddenly dawned on a bewildered mind, that each of the prophets lived during some definite era of history, and that there is profit to be gained from putting the two together.

This method of studying the prophets is usually claimed as one of the permanent gains of the critical approach to the Old Testament. It has been well stated by Denney, when he writes: The Prophets 'have been put, by the labours of criticism, into their original setting; they have been read as the voice of God addressed to discoverable historical situations, and the voice of God has become audible in them again as it had not been audible for long.'<sup>1</sup> It is undeniable, of course, that this principle has been misinterpreted, and chiefly so by those who are credited with its discovery. Instead of being satisfied with insisting on the 'discoverable historical situation' as a starting point, they went on to demand it as the total area of relevance of the prophet's words, and consequently denied the fact of predictive prophecy. Denney himself fell into this pit: 'We need not believe that the prophets could write history beforehand'; and in the pit he found himself amid a very exalted and in some ways desirable company.<sup>2</sup>

However, the denial of predictive prophecy does not follow from the principle of seeking a valid historical starting point, and it is not now interpreted as doing so. John Marsh, for example, holds that, given the Exodus revelation of God, and a definite historical situation to which to apply it, the prophet could predict what God would do, and that, indeed, such prediction was his function. He insists that 'the Old Testament prophets were concerned to *foretell* as well as to *forthtell*'.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to take the critical principle and apply it to Isaiah, seeking to show in this way that Isaiah i-xxxix and xl-lv can be viewed as a theological and historical unity, and that within xl-lv the prophet's thought develops coherently and steadily round the person of the Servant.

According to the testimony of the book of Isaiah as we have it, the 'discoverable historical situation' of the prophecies from chapter xl onwards is given in chapter xxxix. Merodach-Baladan, a thorn in the side of the Assyrian Empire, occupied the throne of Babylon for two periods: 721-710, and 705-704 B.C. (Pfeiffer gives 703 as the second period). Isaiah xxxviii. 6, speaking of the Assyrian threat as an existing reality, suggests that Hezekiah's illness took place after 711 B.C. — the date of the fall of Ashdod to Sargon, and the presumptive beginning of the Assyrian attention to Judah. Hezekiah's illness would thus coincide with the second period of Merodach-Baladan's reign. We may presume that Merodach-Baladan was seeking to incorporate Hezekiah into the rebellion which he was fomenting in connection with the death of Sargon. Hezekiah, a very minor rebel by comparison, is excited by attention from such a quarter; and it would seem that it was because of his relationship with Merodach-Baladan that he came up for treatment in 701. The attitude

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Theology*, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 215. See also Allis, *Unity of Isaiah*, pp. 1-21.

<sup>3</sup> *The Fullness of Time*, p. 73. (Author's italics.)

of Isaiah is perfectly in accord with the situation. He finds that Hezekiah has not profited by past experience during his illness. He has not yet appreciated the goodness of Yahweh nor learned the security of casting oneself on Him. He is still filled with a desire for carnal acclaim and worldly strength. Isaiah has, however, already said that Yahweh will disperse the Assyrian threat. Seeing, therefore, in Hezekiah, that trust in the arm of flesh which he has always recognized as ruinous of states and their peoples, he looks, in prophetic inspiration, beyond the danger which he knows is transient, to the time when a carnal policy will reap its inevitable doom; and he finds the doom spelled out in the letters of the name 'Babylon'.

Within the book of Isaiah itself, therefore, there is good reason to see the possibility of a prophecy of the Babylonian captivity, and that on the critics' own principles. It is in the highest degree unscientific to allow, as they do, the historical credibility of the visit of the Babylonian ambassadors, and yet to deny the Babylonian prophecy, merely because their *hypothesis* of the nature of Isaiah demands that 'Isaiah the son of Amoz did not prophesy about Babylon'! The evidence of chapter xxxix is that he did, and that he had every reason for doing so. We may follow up this clue, and seek to 'imagine' our way into the prophet's situation.

Isaiah has now uttered the final threat. 'Nothing shall be left' (xxxix. 6). In doing so he has fulfilled the divine forecast of his message as stated in vi. 11-13a. But also by the very comprehensiveness of the judgment he foresees, he has raised some theological problems for himself. Having prophesied on the basis of a real historical situation, he now finds himself compelled to continue prophesying on the basis of a real theological dilemma. How does the prophecy of complete captivity, now spoken with force and detail, accord with the perceptions of Israel's God declared with equal force and detail in the previous years of his prophetic office? If God is such as Isaiah has declared Him to be, can even this complete captivity be the last word? Let us be more explicit:

- (a) If Yahweh is Lord of history (chapter x), using the nations as a craftsman uses his tools, and not suffering them to overstep the bounds He has allotted, can the captivity be final? Can Yahweh both be Lord of history and also allow His age-long purpose to be rendered void by historical causes?
- (b) If Yahweh is supreme over idols (chapter ii), can Israel remain captive to the idols of Babylon? Can He be supreme over idols and yet allow idols to have the final appearance of being supreme over Him?
- (c) If Yahweh has been in earnest when He promised the preservation of a remnant (vi. 13) — and this seemed to be a real part of the inaugural vision — then where is His promise if there is no remnant and the captivity is the end?
- (d) If Yahweh spoke a valid word about Himself when He taught Isaiah that there is a way whereby a sinner can be made fit for the divine Presence and service, then is it possible that there is a sin (for which the captivity is the punishment) beyond the scope of a divine atonement?
- (e) If Isaiah was undeceived in his vision of Jerusalem as the centre of a world religion (ii. 2-4) — Jerusalem, purged by judgment, the dwelling-place of God Himself (iv. 2-6) — then can Jerusalem remain finally desolate without inhabitant?
- (f) If there is to be such a person as Prince Immanuel, the fulfilment of the promise to David, over what will He rule if there is no city, no inhabitant, nothing but an empty land?

This is Isaiah's theological dilemma. If a prophet can be inspired to declare God's truth in the context of history and to meet the problems of history, it is no great demand that he should also be inspired to find the solutions to the theological problems raised by those revelations of God granted to him. Isaiah could not stop at chapter xxxix, so to speak. In his retirement, during the days of the wicked Manasseh, either alone, or in company with some disciples, he meditated on the lessons he had learned from God, and gradually there took shape before his vision the book of comfort, and the mighty things God would yet do for His people.

In order to complete the first part of our task, it remains to show how chapters xl-lv provide the answers to the theological problems raised by chapters i-xxxix. If we may treat the foregoing six points as covering the main theological truths of the first period of Isaiah's prophesying, then we may proceed as follows: (a), (b), and (c). Chapters xl-xlvi are almost en-

tirely taken up with variations on these themes. It is sometimes asserted that the doctrine of the remnant disappears in chapters xl-lv. This is a statement only possible because of the superficial literalism of much criticism. The word 'remnant' is not found, but the truth is. The doctrine of redemption in these chapters is the theological equivalent of the remnant teaching in the earlier chapters. What is stated in fact there, is seen in action here. Space forbids anything more than a single illustration of the weaving together of the themes.<sup>4</sup> In chapter xli all three themes are found. In verses 8-20 we are shown Yahweh's saving purpose for His people; this is, as we have suggested, the equivalent of the 'remnant' teaching. But Yahweh's purposed redemption is seen in the context of His power to save: (i) by His Lordship over history (verses 1-5, 25-27); (ii) by His supremacy over idols (verses 21-24, 28-29).

(d) The doctrine of atonement. It makes an interesting study in Isaiah to examine the way in which his inaugural vision provided the groundwork of his whole message. The centre-piece of the vision is the truth of atonement: the 'live coal' speaking not of purification by fire, but symbolizing the 'power of the altar' — the message of a sacrifice which avails to take away sin. Everything else in the vision is developed elsewhere in Isaiah's teaching; but if we deny to him the prophecy of the Servant of Yahweh, we leave him without a doctrine of atonement to correspond to the greatest element in the vision.

(e) Chapters xl-lv deal with this topic under its two ideas, and leave the association of them to implication. Isaiah speaks of the restored Jerusalem and its glory; and he speaks of the world-wide religion. That we are intended to see these as two aspects of the same thing is made clear, for example, when we observe that the world-wide call of lv. i follows on the vision of the restored Zion in liv.<sup>5</sup>

(f) lv. 3, 4 implicitly identifies the Servant with the promised prince of David's line. On the basis of the Servant's atoning work (iii), Zion is restored, and in the Servant many are made righteous and inherit His title and functions (*cf.* liv. 17 with liii. 11). The call goes out to all to partake of what is now spoken of as the covenant with David.

Pfeiffer remarks: 'Whatever conclusion may be reached as to the authorship and date of Isaiah 40-66, the differences in style, historical background, and theological thought between 1-39 and 40-66 are so marked that it is preferable to treat them as separate books.' Differences in style and historical background are, of course, what the traditional theory would expect; but, as we have shown, it is simply not true that there are such differences in theological thought.

We now turn briefly to the second part of our task. Having seen that chapters xl-lv grow naturally out of the theological dilemma created for Isaiah by his prophecy of captivity, we now seek to trace the logical growth of his thought, which, as the title of this article suggests, is to be found in his increasing perception of the person of the Servant of Yahweh.

Chapters xl-lv fall easily into two sections. In xl-xlvi the main theme is the deliverance of captive Israel from Babylon. This explains the concern with Yahweh's Lordship over history, his call of Cyrus, his supremacy over idols: all which topics disappear after chapter xlvi. The question of redemption from sin is only hinted at and touched in passing. In chapters xlix-lv, however, the foreground of the prophet's thought is taken up with the topic of redemption from sin, and the historical redemption from Babylon is only introduced by way of illustration of the greater divine action in the spiritual realm. When Isaiah first introduces the Servant (xlii. 1-4) the context makes it clear that he is speaking of Israel. This is true of chapters xl-xlvi, where there is constant identification of the Servant with Israel. The first Song, however, is not concerned with the Servant's person, but with his task: he is to be the means of bringing the genuine revelation ('judgment') of Yahweh

<sup>4</sup> (a) xl. 9-11; xli. 8-20; xliii. 1-7, 14-17; xlv. 1-8, 24-28; xlvi. 8-13.

(b) xl. 21-25; xli. 1-4, 25-27; xlii. 24-25; xlv. 24-xlv. 7; xlvi. 8-13; xlvi. 1-15.

(c) xl. 18-20; xli. 21-24; xlii. 17; xlv. 9-20; xlvi. 1-7, 8-13.

<sup>5</sup> (e) Restoration of Zion: xl. 9; xli. 27; xlv. 26, 28; xlvi. 13; xlix. 17-26; li. 11; lii. 1-2, 7-9; liv. World-religion: xl. 5; xlii. 1-4, 6; xlv. 14, 22-24; xlvi. 13 (RV mg); xlix. 6-7; li. 5-6; lii. 10; lv. 1ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 416.

to the Gentiles, and establishing that revelation in the earth. It would be correct to suppose that at this point Isaiah was answering some such question as: What does Yahweh require of Israel redeemed and restored? No sooner does he ask the question, however, and answer it in the Song (the truth of which is reinforced in verses 5-17), than, apparently, another question arises: Can Israel — even Israel who has passed through the experience of exile and restoration — be the Servant of Yahweh in this great task? The answer to this question is given immediately in xlii. 18ff. Isaiah there sees Israel as deaf (19), blind (19), and unresponsive (20, 24-25). How can one who is deaf to Yahweh's voice, blind to His truth, and unresponsive to His grace be the mediator of His revelation to the Gentiles? How, indeed? And this is just the beginning of Isaiah's perception of the sinful state of Israel, Yahweh's intended servant. The catalogue of sin grows: Israel's lack of response is again stated in xliii. 20-24; her rebellion against His appointed way of salvation in xlv. 9-13; that she is rebellious, stubborn, far from righteousness in xlvi. 8, 12; that she is insincere, obstinate, deeply idolatrous, spiritually deaf, treacherous and rebellious in xlviii. 1-8.

This, then, is the course of thought in chapters xl-xlviii. Isaiah starts with a perception of what Yahweh requires in His Servant. This is what He purposed for national Israel, but the nation is far from the divine blue-print. Chapter xlviii ends with the joint recognition of two thoughts: verses 20-21, national Israel will be delivered from Babylon; verse 22, sin raises an issue between man and God which demands a solution; it cannot be overlooked.

When Isaiah turns, immediately, to investigate Yahweh's plan for deliverance from sin, he still finds the Servant to be the answer. Consequently the new section opens with the second Song (xlix. 1-6), but with this significant alteration. Isaiah, having become increasingly aware of Israel's sinful state, sees Israel's restoration as the Servant's primary task, and the salvation of the Gentiles as the next stage of the revelation. The Servant is still called Israel, but is seen as exercising a ministry first to Israel. It is now clear, that Israel is not a self-explaining term, but one which needs definition. In pursuit of this definition, Isaiah takes up the question of the nation's failure to respond to Yahweh. xlix. 14 shows the defeated spirit of Zion. Yahweh replies with some emotion that neither in terms of love (verses 15, 16) nor in terms of power (verses 22-26) has He forsaken her. But yet, though His love and power are still extended towards her, there is no response. Consequently, chapter I opens with a double question: Can you produce proof that you are cut off from My love ('certificate of divorce') or proof that you have passed out of My power ('to which of my creditors')? But yet, though proof is not forthcoming, neither is response. There is 'no man'. At this point, however, another voice is heard — the Servant! Though the nation fail to respond, yet there is One who can speak for Yahweh because He has listened daily to Yahweh; One who has learned discipleship in personal tuition, and who is prepared to put His discipleship to the test of suffering for the sake of obedience. The Servant thus emerges in emphatic personal distinction from the nation, a Sufferer because of His obedience. Now the prophet is warming to the task. He takes up the question of salvation. The sequence of thought is: li. 1-16, the announcement of salvation; li. 17-1ii. 12, the nature of salvation; and lii. 13-1ii. 12, the basis of salvation. The last two sections must be examined briefly. li. 17-23 and lii. 1, 2 are parallel: they declare that Zion, humiliated in judgment by divine action, will also be raised in glory by divine action. This is the nature of salvation: a judgment on sin and a resurrection to new life. lii. 3-10 indicates that the salvation emphatically springs from personal divine intervention; it is the work of the 'arm of Yahweh' — Yahweh Himself intervening in saving action. But how? How can the people humiliated in divine judgment be raised? How will the arm of the Lord be seen? The answer is — the Servant. He is the basis of salvation. We see Him, then, first of all, in summary: His exaltation (lii. 13), which has followed on from His humiliation (lii. 14), which has resulted (lii. 15) in His purification of many nations. It is needless to expound further the rest of the Song. The Servant is declared to be the arm of Yahweh. He is seen in His life (verses 1-3) and death (verses 7-9), and the spiritual significance of His work is declared (verses 4-6, 10-12). He is seen alive after death to dispense the fruits of His sacrifice in making many righteous. The reality of what He has accomplished is declared in chapter liv where 'the

servants of Yahweh' who are given His righteousness are seen. They inherit His name and office, and the call to the world goes out to seek Yahweh, for in the atoning work of the Servant He is come near.

Thus, the theological dilemmas of Isaiah of Jerusalem, under the inspiration of God, became a vantage point from whence the prophet saw, not merely across two hundred years to the captivity and restoration, but across seven hundred years to 'his exodus which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.'

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