

The Living World of the Old Testament

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Before we turn to the message of Isaiah, we must first consider the book itself. The present book of Isaiah has sixty-six chapters. It is commonly agreed, however, that not all this material comes from the eighth-century prophet. A nucleus of this big book does come from Isaiah, but a great deal of the material comes from others who were disciples and interpreters of the prophet. Again we must remember that our conception of "authorship" did not prevail in the biblical period. In a day when it was impossible to "publish" books for general circulation and when copyrights were unheard of, the only way to preserve prophetic material was to deposit it within a circle of followers who faithfully remembered the words of their leader and recorded the tradition for posterity.

Isaiah gives us a picture of how his message was handed on. Early in his ministry, when his message to Judah had fallen on deaf ears, he withdrew from public life in order to "bind up the testimony" and to "seal the teaching among [his] disciples" (Isa. 8:16-18; cf. 30:8). If the present was a time of "the eclipse of God," when Yahweh was "hiding his face from the house of Jacob," as he put it (Isa. 8:17), then he would wait for Yahweh to come in glory and to speak with power. Apparently, then, Isaiah deposited his oracles for safekeeping within the faithful prophetic community. There they were treasured, revised in the light of Isaiah's later teaching, and, after his death, handed on by his disciples. Thus the tradition was kept alive. It included not only Isaiah's original words, but also other accumulated materials which, in the conviction of his followers, were in keeping with his teaching. We have already seen that this is what happened with the teachings of Moses. The Mosaic tradition, finally compiled in the Pentateuch, included not only the original traditions of the Mosaic period but also an accumulation of later traditions that had clustered around the great name of Moses.

In the Hebrew Bible the writings of the prophets are contained in four major scrolls: the book of Isaiah, the book of Jeremiah, the book of Ezekiel, and the book of the Twelve. Together, these scrolls make up the "Latter Prophets," as distinguished from the "Former Prophets" (see the table on p. 123). All four scrolls are approximately the same length. Apparently the size of a manageable scroll was one factor that controlled the amount of material to be included. The book of the Twelve, for instance, contains twelve small prophetic books—Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They are arranged in a single scroll, not on the basis of chronology or of relative importance, but because together the writings associated with the names of these prophets fill out a scroll. Like the book of the Twelve, the scrolls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are really prophetic collections, even though they are gathered under the name of a single prophet. One of the primary tasks of biblical criticism is to understand these "books" in the final form that they have been given. Usually, however, the final text is the end result of a dynamic history of traditions, during which an original nu-

clous of material was interpreted and contemporized as it was passed on from generation to generation. Our understanding of a particular "book," such as the scroll of Isaiah, is enriched by discerning that the final text contains various levels of tradition, each of which—like voices in a choir—contribute to the completed production.³

A Breakdown of the Material in Isaiah

Let us examine the kinds of material included in the Isaiah scroll. First of all, it is generally agreed that chapters 40-66 do not belong to the Isaiah who prophesied in Jerusalem in the eighth century. As we shall see in Chapter 14, these chapters reflect a historical situation that existed about two centuries later: when Judah had fallen, when the people were in exile, and when Babylonian—the superpower in the world—was about to fall before the rising empire of Persia. This scholarly nickname does not mean that the writer was actually named Isaiah, but merely that this anonymous prophet's writings are included in the same scroll with those of "First Isaiah"—that is, Isaiah of Jerusalem.

The genuine writings of Isaiah, then, are found in the first thirty-nine chapters of the book. A variety of material is contained even in these chapters, however. Chapters 36-39 have been lifted, with some modifications, from II Kings 18:13-20:19, which relate incidents that happened during the latter part of Isaiah's ministry. Chapters 34 and 35, the first a passage of doom and the second a passage of hope, are more like the poems of Second Isaiah than like the preceding material in the book of Isaiah. Scholars generally agree that these two chapters, which deal with the end-time, do not come from the eighth century Isaiah. Moving backward a bit further, chapters 24-27 (often called "the little apocalypse") seem to reflect a later stage in the Isaiah tradition. So, by a process of elimination, we are left with three sections of the book of Isaiah that contain the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem:

- A. Chapters 1-11—a series of prophetic oracles and prophetic narratives. A compiler added chapter 12, a hymn of praise (psalm), to round off this section.
- B. Chapters 13-23—a series of oracles against foreign nations. Many scholars believe that only a fraction of this material comes from Isaiah, however.
- C. Chapters 28-32—a series of prophetic oracles. Chapter 33, which completes this section, is a late prophetic liturgy.

³ The call to go beyond past biblical criticism and consider the book of Isaiah as a canonical unity was issued by Brevard Childs, *Introduction* [37], pp. 325-38. See further R. E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Interpretation*, 36 (1982), 117-129, and "Beyond Tradition History: Deutero-Isaiaic Development of First Isaiah's Themes," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 31 (1985), 95-113; also Walter Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 29 (1984), 89-107. On "canonical criticism," see Definition, Chapter 18, p. 639.

So the study of Isaiah is not so big a job as it would seem on first opening the book of Isaiah! At the most, we must tackle twenty-nine chapters, and, since for our purposes the section on the foreign nations (B) can be set aside temporarily, only eighteen chapters are left.

By narrowing our attention to these two sections—chapters 1-11 (A) and chapters 28-32 (C)—our study of the long career of Isaiah is greatly simplified, for each of these sections comes from a fairly well-defined period in the prophet's ministry. In general, chapters 1-11 reflect the early period of Isaiah, from the death of Uzziah to the time of the Syro-Israelite alliance—or about ten years (c. 742-732 B.C.E.). And chapters 28-32 reflect the later period of the prophet's career, from the accession of king Hezekiah of Judah to the great crisis brought on by Sennacherib's invasion of Judah—or about fourteen years (c. 715-701). These two major sections provide a convenient approach to the study of Isaiah. Let us look first at section A of our outline, beginning with the prophetic memoirs found in Isaiah 6:1-8:18, and then move on to the oracles of Isaiah's early career.

Isaiah's Early Ministry

Not very much is known about Isaiah's background. He was obviously a man of the city, which accounts for the great number of urban metaphors he used, and he may have grown up in the privileged circles of Jerusalem. Above all, the city of Jerusalem had a deep place in his affection. For Jerusalem was the place of Yahweh's Temple, the seat of David's throne, and the city hallowed with many sacred memories. Oddly enough, Israel's wilderness tradition, which loomed so large in the message of prophets like Amos and Hosea, seems to have had no great influence on Isaiah's prophecy. On the Exodus and the other great themes of Israel's sacred history he is virtually silent, even though he was obviously aware of these traditions.⁴ Isaiah seems to have been nurtured in circles that stressed the special relationship between Yahweh and the Davidic dynasty (see II Sam. 7). In view of his absorbing interest in Davidic theology, it is not surprising that he is regarded as the chief exponent of the hope for a coming Messiah (literally: "Anointed One") of David's lineage. (See Definition, p. 233).

The Kingship of Yahweh

The account of Isaiah's call to be a prophet is one of the classic passages in prophetic literature (Isa. 6). In a few verses of prose that verge on poetic sub-

⁴ The Exodus is referred to explicitly in Isa. 10:24-26 and 11:16—passages which, in the judgment of some scholars, come from later Isaianic tradition. On the affinities between Isaiah's message and the Mosaic covenant tradition, see Walther Eichrodt, "Prophet and Covenant: Observations on the Exegesis of Isaiah," in *Proclamation and Presence* [158], 167-88. Jon D. Levenson maintains that the "Sinai" and "Zion" traditions, though separate in origin, actually supplement one another [140], pp. 187-219.

limity we are ushered into the worship experience which provided both the motive and the content for his preaching. The account in its present form, of course, is written in retrospect. Although it points back to a time when he was a very young man, it carries the overtones of his later experiences, especially his bewilderment over the people's dullness and blindness. This, in part, is why the prophetic commission is described in such bleak and unpromising terms (Isa. 6:9-13; see 29:9-12, an oracle from his later ministry). As a whole, however, the passage is a vivid portrayal of the great moment of decision in Isaiah's life, an experience that was to persist at the center of his message.

Notice the time and the place. It was a critical time, heavy with urgency and foreboding. That is the meaning of the reference to Uzziah's death. Uzziah had been a strong king, and even while his son Jotham was acting as regent Uzziah remained a pillar of strength for the people. Since kingship is more or less alien to our experience, it is difficult for us to appreciate the significance of the king in ancient society. "Just as the house is centered in the father," writes an eminent authority on ancient Israelite life, "so the soul of the people is centered in the king."⁵ From the king's person blessing and strength went out through the whole nation, like life-giving sap through the branches of a tree. Hence Uzziah's death was an event that touched the life of the people, especially in view of the weakness of his son Jotham and the menacing shadow of Assyria. In such an hour, says the prophet, "I saw the king." His testimony implies that his people were ultimately dependent, not upon the Davidic king enthroned in Jerusalem, but upon the cosmic King, Yahweh of hosts (i.e. of heavenly armies; cf. Judg. 5:20).

The place of Isaiah's vision was the Temple of Solomon. Here, in a priestly setting of worship with which the prophet had grown familiar through the years,⁶ he beheld a vision of Yahweh sitting on a heavenly throne, high and lifted up, while the chamber rang with the "holy, holy, holy" which is heard in anthems of worship even today. This theme of Yahweh's enthronement as King over the earth and the whole universe was especially at home in the Jerusalem cult. The exclamation, "Yahweh is king!" sounded forth on the New Year's Day of the Autumn Festival, when worshippers sang hymns which portray Yahweh as robed in majesty, exalted in "the beauty of holiness," and enthroned over the whole creation as Judge and Arbiter of the destinies of the peoples.⁷

⁵ Johannes Pedersen, *Israel* [117], I-II, 275.

⁶ It has been suggested that Isaiah himself was a priest or a temple prophet (see R. B. Y. Scott, *Interpreter's Bible*, V, 207-208). Since ordinary worshippers did not enter the Temple but stood outside before the high altar of sacrifice, this is possible; but it is sufficient to say that Isaiah, like other great prophets—Samuel (at Shiloh), Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—was influenced by the priestly tradition.

⁷ The so-called Enthronement Psalms (Pss. 47, 93, 96-99) will be discussed in Chapter 16. An excellent discussion of Zion theology is given by Bennie Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King* [352].

The Prophet in the Heavenly Council

In this setting, the elements of the temple service—the antiphonal singing, the altar with its red-hot stones, the incense smoke that filled the sanctuary, the mysterious depths of the Holy of Holies—are transfigured. Even the temple itself was suffused with celestial glory, for Isaiah's vision presupposes the ancient view that the Jerusalem temple was a microcosm of the macrocosm—that is, an earthly replica of the heavenly Temple. This view enabled people to believe that Yahweh is truly present in Mount Zion and at the same time is the transcendent God, enthroned on high.⁸ (See the reconstruction of the temple, p. 238.)

In the prophet's vision, the earthly temple suddenly enlarges and he finds himself standing in a spacious heavenly temple. He sees Yahweh seated upon a great throne, clothed in a majestic robe whose skirt fills the temple. A thrice-holy anthem resounds in the temple, and the visible radiance ("glory") of the King fills the whole earth. Yahweh is not only Israel's King, but the King *par excellence*, upon whose sovereignty the destinies of all peoples depend. With appropriate poetic reserve, Isaiah makes no attempt to describe Yahweh's appearance; but the imagery communicates the overpowering and awesome effect of divine sovereignty. Surrounding the throne are unearthly *seraphim*, like the strange figures—half-human and half-animal—which ancient people portrayed as attendants of the deity's sanctuary. Their three pairs of wings express symbolically the appropriate responses to Yahweh's presence: with one pair they shield their faces from the King's blinding glory, with the second pair they hide their nakedness from God's holy purity, and with the third pair they fly to do their appointed tasks.

So the narrative suggests that the prophet, entering through the vestibule of Solomon's Temple, stands in Yahweh's celestial throne room, where the heavenly host surround the King. One of the recurrent themes in the Old Testament is the picture of the Heavenly Council presided over by Yahweh—as in Micah's vision, for example: "I saw Yahweh sitting upon his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left" (1 Kings 22:19; see pp. 268-271).⁹ Yahweh's speech employs the plural "us" (Isa. 6:8), a pronoun that includes the surrounding Council, the "heavenly host," to whom and for whom Yahweh speaks. Isaiah, then, is drawn into Yahweh's Heavenly Council where the divine decrees are announced and where messengers are sent

⁸ See R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* [437], chap. 5.

⁹ See the prologue to the book of Job, and also various Psalms where the angelic hosts are summoned to praise Yahweh as "a great king above all gods" (Ps. 82:5-7, 95:3, 103:19-22, 148:2). A good discussion of the Heavenly Council is found in G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* [289], pp. 30-41. See also H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," in *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLV (1944), 151-57.

forth to execute them.¹⁰ In a visionary moment he is permitted to behold what is veiled to the sight of mortals, (see Exod. 33:20), for he exclaims that with his own eyes he has seen the celestial King.

Called to Be the King's Messenger

His first response—already symbolized in the attitude of the seraphim in the King's presence—is to cry out that he is an "unclean" person and a member of an "unclean" people (verse 5). This response is evoked by an overwhelming sense of the holiness of Yahweh, a fundamental aspect of Israel's experience of the presence of God in the world, portrayed classically in the story of the Sinai revelation (Exod. 19). Yahweh's holiness means, first of all, that Yahweh is "God and not a human being" (Hos. 11:9)—the God who completely transcends the human world and is therefore beyond all human analogies or categories. Although active within the human world, Yahweh cannot be domesticated within it or manipulated and controlled according to human purposes (remember the story of the Golden Calf, Exod. 32). Yahweh is the One who is God absolutely, before whom all beings stand in judgment and upon whom everything that exists is dependent. Moreover, in Isaiah's message holiness is not limited to the sublimity of God as contrasted with human creatureliness; it also means the awful contrast between God's purity and human sinfulness. As "the Holy One of Israel"—a favorite expression of the prophet—Yahweh is exalted in righteousness (Isa. 5:16). In Yahweh's presence, nothing unclean, nothing unrighteous, nothing idolatrous can survive. So, in the moment when the threshold of the Temple shakes at the sound of the seraphim's anthem, Isaiah confesses that he is a member of a community in which there is no health (see Isa. 1:4-9), and he links himself with his people in a woeful cry of dereliction: "Woe is me! For I am lost!"

In his vision one of the heavenly "priests" (a seraph) takes from the altar a glowing stone and purges his unclean lips:

Behold, this has touched your lips;
your guilt is taken away,
and your sin forgiven.
—ISAIAH 6:7 (RSV)

Here a new note is introduced into prophecy: the prophet himself needs purification before he can be God's messenger. Amos had prayed that Yahweh would forgive the people (Amos 7:1-6), but Isaiah begins his prophetic career as a person who has been forgiven. And no sooner is he "consecrated"—that

¹⁰ The prophet understands himself to be God's messenger (see pp. 248-249), sent to deliver a message to the people. The prophet's source of authority, according to some passages, was located in Yahweh's Heavenly Council (Jer. 23:18, 22). On this point see James F. Ross, "The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger" [cited under 324], 102-6.

is, made holy or cleansed for God's service—than Yahweh, speaking in a manner which includes the whole Heavenly Council, says: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah volunteers, only to receive a commission so unbearable that he cries out, asking how long it must go on. The answer is that he is to proclaim Yahweh's word to a people whose heart¹¹ is fat (insensitive), whose ears are heavy (dull), and whose eyes are blind (verses 9-10).

This is a very puzzling command. As we have said, Isaiah's memory of his call seems to be colored by his later experiences of failure. And yet more is expressed in this language than the mood of later discouragement. Isaiah, like other prophets, believed that all events came from the hand of God. Although we would regard the developments of Isaiah's career as stemming from human sources, for which a cause-and-effect explanation could be found in the social situation, the prophet insisted that these experiences happened within the divine purpose; God was not taken by surprise, as it were. It was known in advance that the prophetic word would have the effect that it did among a rebellious people (see Isa. 1:2-3). For as excessive light can blind the eyes, or excessive sound can be deafening, so the words and signs of the prophet would increase the people's blindness to Yahweh's acts and their deafness to Yahweh's words, although, strictly speaking, that was not the intention of the prophet's activity. Yet, if we are correct in interpreting the severe passage of doom (verses 11-13), the darkness is illumined by a ray of light, for it is said that after the fire of divine judgment has swept through the land a "stump" will remain. And just as a new branch sprouts from a stump that stands in a burned forest, so new life will begin in a remnant of the people.

The Day of Yahweh

Before going on to the prophetic memoirs in chapters 7 and 8, it is appropriate to look back from chapter 6 to the preceding chapters, which, for the most part, reflect Isaiah's early ministry.¹² In these chapters the themes of Isaiah's vision are elaborated. In various ways and situations the prophet reaffirmed that Yahweh is enthroned, high and lifted up, above all the tumult of history and the feverish strivings of the nations. As with Amos, the Day of Yahweh will not be light, but darkness—a day of judgment against all symbols of human pride and self-sufficiency: against silver and gold, horses and chariots, fortified cities, and stately ships that sail to faraway places (2:6-21). These cultural treasures are not bad in themselves; but when they are "lifted up" like the proud cedars of Lebanon, people begin to place their trust in them, and they become objects of

¹¹ "Heart" refers to the inward center of the person, not to mere feelings or emotions. In Hebrew a person thinks in the heart, and loves with the heart.
¹² Not all of chapter 1 comes from this period, for verses 7-9 refer to the isolation of Jerusalem during the siege of Sennacherib. Indeed, some scholars maintain that the whole chapter is a later editorial introduction, designed to introduce the themes that are announced in the entire Isaiah tradition, Isa. 1-66; see Brevard Childs, *Introduction* [37], p. 331 (referring to the view of G. Fohrer).

idolatry—for idolatry is trusting in anything less than God. The time will come, says the prophet, when people will cast their idols to the moles and the bats. The oracles of doom are punctuated with this refrain:

Human haughtiness will be humbled,
human pride will be abased,
And Yahweh alone will be exalted in that day.

—ISAIAH 2:17

That Yahweh comes to judge the people is the theme of Isaiah's famous Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7). The prophet begins by singing a vineyard song, like the popular ballads that were sung at the autumn vintage festivals. It is possible that Isaiah posed as a singer in order to catch the attention of the crowds on their way to the Temple to celebrate the gathering of the harvest. He tells about his disappointment. He had done everything possible to insure a good harvest, only to find that his vineyard yielded wild grapes. He asks his hearers what had gone wrong; after all, what more could he have done? Then he announces what he is going to do: he will tear down the vines and let the vineyard become a briar patch. Suddenly, the unexpected point of the song is plunged into the people's heart, for it turns out that Yahweh is the speaker and that the song is about Yahweh's chosen people: "the vineyard of Yahweh of hosts." With a play on words, the prophet announces Yahweh's indignant dis-appointment:

He looked for justice [*mishpat*],
and beheld, bloodshed [*mispah*];
for righteousness [*zedakah*],
but beheld, distress [*ze'aqah*].

It is impossible to reproduce the force of the Hebrew assonance in English, but word-pairs like justice/distress and right/riot give a rough idea. The following oracles (5:8-24) elaborate further the woes of a people guilty of the most flagrant injustice and exploitation.

Isaiah's earliest message, then, was one of doom, in keeping with the commission given to him in chapter 6. Yahweh announces a covenant lawsuit¹³ against the people Israel, summoning them to stand trial before the prophet had 1:18-20; 3:13-15). Arraigned before Yahweh's holy presence, the prophet had to say on their behalf that they were "unclean"—indeed, that there was no health in them (1:4-6). And yet, Yahweh's purpose was not just destructive: it was to restore Israel to health, to make Israel a holy people fit to serve the King. Just as Isaiah was cleansed by forgiveness, so—according to the prophet's interpretation—Yahweh was seeking to purify the people as by fire. Through the terrible sufferings of the time, Yahweh was purging away the dross and alloy

¹³ See pp. 339-340 where the structure of the covenant lawsuit (*rib*) is given.