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UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

THE PROBLEM OF ISAIAH

For some years I have been occupied with the problem of the significance of Isaiah the son of Amos in the development of the religion of Israel. Probably more attention has been paid to Isaiah, especially by English-speaking scholars, than to any other prophet in the Old Testament, yet I cannot find any adequate attempt at a methodical investigation of the complex problems presented by the oracles attributed to this prophet. The reason for this is possibly the fact that the most of Isaiah study as, indeed, the most of the study of the prophets generally, is even yet conducted in the commentary form, chapter by chapter and verse by verse. But commentaries give only a piecemeal view of a prophet's significance. The time is rapidly approaching when the conventional commentary must give place to the monograph in which the raw material of the commentary can be worked up into a living picture of the prophet and his work. Almost thirty years ago Hackmann wrote such a monograph (*Zukunftserwartung des Jesaia*, 1893) and it still remains the most instructive study of Isaiah's religious significance. But it is time for Hackmann's work to be brought down to date.

What are some of the problems which such a monograph should discuss?

1. There are two very divergent schools of criticism in the interpretation of Isaiah. One of these, earlier championed by Wellhausen and Robertson Smith and later by Stade and Marti, to mention the more outstanding names, would emphasize the historical and ethical features in Isaiah's life and work. The rival school charges this interpretation with being an attempt to modernize Isaiah; he is not to be regarded as a modern preacher but is still an ancient *nabi*. His significance does not lie so much in his high ethical conceptions; these he shares with his predecessors. His significance lies rather in the fact that he is the founder of eschatology. He is himself an "exstatiker." Duhm is the great protagonist of this view of Isaiah, though he is supported to a certain extent by the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* as represented by Gunkel, Gressmann, and Hans Schmidt. Which of these interpretations is the more accurate? Isaiah study at this point is

strikingly parallel to the study of the Gospels. The *Quest of the historical Jesus* has its Old Testament counterpart in the *Quest of the historical Isaiah*.

2. Again it is the fashion among scholars, or rather it is a critical dogma, for it is more fixed than a fashion, to hold that Isaiah was absolutely opposed to the ceremonial and would do away with the entire system. Superficially there is strong evidence for this. Nothing could be expressed more absolutely than the repudiation of the ritual in 1:10-17. Yet the same scholars who advocate this view insist with equal emphasis upon the nationalist character of Isaiah's religion. That is, he is supposed to be thinking rather of the citizen than of the individual soul, of the obligations of the Israelite rather than of the man. Religion with Isaiah is therefore still quite objective. It is in reality a religion of the state. But if this is so, how can such a religion be expressed otherwise than in some sort of a ceremonial system, especially in ancient times? Furthermore it is a curious fact to which too little attention has been paid that when Isaiah describes the most important experience of his life he does it in terms of the cult. His inaugural vision is a temple vision and his consecration is a purification. If he so despised the ritual as is commonly supposed, would he have pictured his own call under the symbolism of the ceremonial system? Have we, then, in Isaiah an extreme radical with respect to organized religion and the forms in which organized religion has always been embodied, or must we qualify the inferences usually drawn from his attack upon the ritual.

3. Closely connected with this problem is the problem of his conception of the Remnant. It is true that we are on difficult ground here. The evidence is scanty and perplexing. Yet the subject is so important that it deserves a far more careful discussion than is usually given to it. For example, even in the third edition of Duhm's great commentary (1914) and in his *Israel's Propheten* (1916) one misses any clear analysis of the idea of the Remnant. Is it more nearly related to the state conception of religion or to the individualistic conception of religion? Is the Remnant the germ of the idea of a supernatural messianic state, or is it the germ of the idea of a church historically developing and distinct from the state? The Wellhausen-Smith interpretation connected the Remnant with the band of Isaiah's disciples (chap. 8) and thus arrived at the conception of a historical Remnant ethically prepared for the future and gradually differentiating themselves from the state. This is in keeping with their historical and ethical interpretation of Isaiah, but is this identification justifiable? If it is, we have at this point a doctrine closely related to individualism in religion and the conception of Isaiah's

religion as a purely state religion would have to be qualified and Isaiah would become the precursor of that development which led to Jeremiah's profound views of the inwardness of religion.

4. The same question again emerges in connection with Isaiah's doctrine of faith. Is Isaiah's conception of faith a simple adhesion to Jahweh's voice through the prophet and to signs and wonders which guarantee that word, as it would seem to be in chapter 7, or is it that experience of inward peace and trust in God which we associate with the idea of faith, as it would seem to be in 8:16-18? In the latter case the nationalistic theory of Isaiah's religion would again have to be modified by a more individualistic theory.

5. Closely related to the same problems is the question of Isaiah's quietism as seen in his constant warning against all foreign alliances, and compare 30:15. Was this quietism founded on his belief in the supernatural, in a deliverance through miraculous intervention, or is it more related to a profounder view of faith and a more spiritual view of the Remnant?

6. What inferences does Isaiah draw from the localizing conception of religion apparently expressed in 8:16-18? Does he think, because Jahweh dwells in Mount Zion, therefore it is sacrosanct, inviolate? Have we, then, already in Isaiah the deuteronomic doctrine of the centralization of the cultus and the inviolability of Zion? In that case how is the attitude of Isaiah in the anti-Assyrian prophecies, for example, to be differentiated from the attitude of Jeremiah's opponents in Jer. 7? Is Isaiah to be made responsible, even "unconsciously" responsible (compare Duhm), for a dogma which gave Jeremiah so much trouble?

7. Finally, is the conception of a Davidic Messiah an original creation of Isaiah as Duhm would still have us believe, or is it an inheritance of Isaiah that came to him out of the popular mythology as Gressmann maintains, or is it a product of later ages incorporated into a collection of Isaiah's oracles as Stade and Marti insist? These questions remain unsettled. No general consensus upon them has as yet been obtained. Yet until this is done the outline of Israel's religious development must remain uncertain at some of the most important points and the final appraisal of the life-work of this remarkable man, who has exercised so great an influence upon Jewish and Christian thought, must be deferred.

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