

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH THE PROPHET

IN 1908 the Biblical Commission, which represents the Holy See at Rome in matters biblical, took occasion of some answers which it was issuing with regard to Isaiah to lay down principles concerning prophecy in general. The answers are all in the negative in the official Latin text, consisting in all cases of simply one word, *negative* : it is the questions which are carefully framed in order to make this simple answer possible.

The first question is whether it may be taught that there are no true prophecies in Isaiah, or in Scripture generally. To the Catholic it will seem obvious enough that the answer can only be, no. But in reality the point is of fundamental importance, because outside the Church the majority of biblical students are not really prepared simply to follow the evidence, but have resort to one or other of the two evasions mentioned by the Commission, contending either that the so-called prophecy was composed after the event, or that it was just a good guess. If I may take an example (with all reverence) from our Lord's own words, in the course of His ministry an intelligent man might have felt fairly certain that before long the Romans would attack and take Jerusalem ; and so it would be unwise to take our Lord's own words to that effect as a proof of His power of prophecy, though of course we know that He had absolute knowledge of all future events. But His prophecy of His own resurrection is amply testified and admits of no reasonable doubt. The chief prophecies in Isaiah concern the Virgin Birth of our Lord and His redeeming death.

The second question is whether the view may be held that Isaiah and the other prophets foretold only events that were to happen soon, and whether such a view can be reconciled with the messianic and eschatological prophecies that were to be fulfilled only after a long time, as was held generally by the Fathers of the Church. By a 'messianic' prophecy is meant one whereby our Lord is indicated as the Messiah, as in the two prophecies in Isaiah already mentioned. An 'eschatological' prophecy is one dealing with the end of the world, as in Isaiah xxiv-xxvii, or the last three verses of Malachy.

The third question asks whether it can be admitted that the prophets must always have addressed, not future hearers, but only their own contemporaries, so as to be understood easily by them : and that therefore the second part of Isaiah (chaps xl-lxvi), in which the prophet addresses and consoles, as though living among them, not the Jews who were Isaiah's contemporaries, but the Jews mourning in their Babylonian exile (about 587-538 B.C.), cannot have had as its author Isaiah, who was long dead, but must be assigned to some unknown prophet living among the exiles. The answer once more is in the negative : it is not definitely

asserted that the second part of Isaiah *did* have the prophet for author, but the opinion is rejected that it *cannot* have had him for author. The point may be illustrated from St John Chrysostom's exposition of Psalm 44 (Vulgate 43 : *Deus auribus nostris*). 'This psalm', he writes, 'the prophet (i.e., David) speaks, not in his own person, but in the person of the Maccabees, relating and foretelling things that were to happen at that time, For such are the prophets : they run over all times, past, present and future' (Migne, *Patres Graeci*, Vol. LV, column 167 : this passage is included in the breviary lessons for the fourth Sunday of October). Still, of course, normally speaking, the presumption is that a prophet is living among those whom he is addressing and consoling. Père Calès, s.J., in his edition of the Psalms (Paris, Beauchesne, 1936 : Vol. I, p. 465), remarks that nothing in the psalm suggests such a miracle of foresight, but suggests that perhaps the best solution is to suppose that the psalm underwent some slight adaptation at the time of the Maccabees. Patrizi (he mentions) simply admitted the Maccabean interpretation and date. The Biblical Commission (1910) does not object to any definite psalm being called Maccabean, but only to 'not a few of them' being so dated. I have brought up this psalm by way of supplying some background to this question of a 'miracle of foresight'. But of course all true prophecy involves to some extent such a miracle.

The fourth question asks whether the philological argument, from language and style, is such as to compel a serious man, an expert in the critical art and in the Hebrew language, to admit in the Book of Isaiah a plurality of authors. In using such a strong word as compel (*cogat*) the Biblical Commission shows itself cautious. It would have been easy to prescribe simply that the simple authorship of Isaiah alone was to be defended as absolutely certain. This, however, is not said, but only that the *denial* of such a single authorship is not absolutely certain, a very different proposition, which does not forbid that a plurality of authors should be absolutely excluded. It seems reasonable to conclude that it may be admitted as possible.

Before treating of the matter further it seems wiser to pass on to the fifth and last question : whether there be solid arguments, even taken cumulatively, to prove that the book of Isaiah is not to be attributed to Isaiah himself alone, but to two, or even to more authors. This question too is met with a denial : but it is denial only that a plurality of authors can be proved. Once more it may be remarked that the answer is a cautious one, for it is not asserted that it is proved that the Book of Isaiah has a single author, but only that it is not proved that it has more than one. It may still be held, therefore, that the plurality of authors is a possible view, or even, so far as words go, that it is the more likely view, though such an opinion is hardly to be encouraged.

The main question is, whether we are to suppose one or two Isaiahs : whether besides the main prophecy (chaps i-xxxix) there is a

second part of different authorship. As a matter of fact, besides a second Isaiah ('Deutero-Isaiah') a third Isaiah ('Trito-Isaiah', chaps lvi-lxvi) has been proposed, with some later fragments even in this portion. The sacred books, in fact, are nowadays subjected to a vivisection such as does not seem to find any real parallel on anything like the same scale in secular literature. It does not seem worth while to discuss all these comparatively minute points, but we may confine our attention, as has been said, to 'Deutero-Isaiah'. (*Deuteros* in Greek means 'second', and *Tritos* means 'third'.) Henceforth I shall speak of chaps i-xxxix as 'Part I' and chaps xl-lxvi as 'Part II'.

Part II has more unity about it, though for the sake of brevity one must make the unity appear rather greater than it really is. It may be divided into (1) Jehovah's glory in the deliverance of His people, by the defeat of Babylon and its idols: chaps xl-xlvi; (2) the Servant of Jehovah: the expiation of Israel's sin: Israel's deliverance: chaps xlix-lv; (3) the glory of the New Jerusalem. The people are pictured as if in the Babylonian exile (xlvi, 5-6), Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins (xlv, 26-28): but the exiles are to return (xlvi, 20-21: li, 11: lii, 1-2), Jerusalem is to be restored (lii, 1-2, 8-9), whereas Babylon is to be destroyed (xlvi, 1-5: xlvii, 14). The deliverer is to be Cyrus (xlv, 28: xlv, 1-7), who reigned 538-529 B.C., but whom one might suppose from these texts to be already known to readers living under Hezekiah (725-697 B.C.), to whose reign belong chaps xxxvi-xxxix. In such a periodical as the present I feel that I ought not to hide such reasons as this, which make students outside the Church practically unanimous in relegating Deutero-Isaiah to the time of the Babylonian exile; but on the other hand the Biblical Commission, which acts in these matters with the authority of the Holy See, must have our obedience and sympathy in declining to throw overboard, once for all, the strong tradition of centuries, and in insisting that in a case like this one the question cannot and must not be regarded as finally closed in favour of the late date. Nor must it be thought that the Holy See is demanding a perfectly blind obedience in such matters of biblical criticism. The Blessed Pope Pius X, one of whose chief merits was to crush the danger of Modernism within the Church, could still write an appreciative letter to the Bishop of La Rochelle (Le Camus) in 1906, printed in Denzinger's well-known *Euchiridion* (in a footnote to no. 1946), in which, while he blames the excessive freedom of those who pay more heed to novelties than to the authority of the Church, he also lays it down that the proceedings of those are not to be approved, who never dare to break away in any respect from the biblical exegesis which up to yesterday was in vogue, even when, with the integrity of the faith safeguarded, the same progress of studies invites them to do so courageously.'

But to return to Deutero-Isaiah: Within this part comes 'the Passion-chapter of Isaiah', chap. liii, to which must be attached lii, 13-15, which evidently is closely bound up with it. Here is depicted one who is to suffer a terrible death, yet not on account of any sins of his own, but for the sake of mankind:

There was no form or majesty in him that we should look upon him,

Nor beauty that we should desire him . . .

Verily he hath borne our infirmities,

And hath carried our pains :

And we accounted him stricken,

And smitten of God and afflicted.

Nevertheless he was pierced because of our transgressions,

Crushed because of our iniquities :

The chastisement that hath brought peace to us was upon him,

And by his blows we have been healed.

All we like sheep had gone astray,

We had turned everyone to his own way ;

And Jehovah made to light upon him

The guilt of us all . . .

He poured out his soul unto death,

And was numbered with the transgressors,

Whereas he bore the sin of many,

And interceded for the transgressors.

I have kept the past tenses as is usually done, but it may be well to remark that the only two true Hebrew tenses are really indifferent to time—an example of the astonishing deficiencies of the Hebrew language, above which it still emerges triumphant—and the tenses essentially indicate only completed or incompleted action, so that they can be applied to past, present or future, according to certain recognized conventions, and yet to some extent at the translator's risk.

This and three other passages are called the 'Servant Songs', because they concern one called a 'Servant'—evidently in this chapter our Lord. The other passages are xlii, 1-4 ('Behold my servant'): xlix, 1-6 (or even to the end of the chapter: the *Nunc Dimittis* in Luke ii, 32 quotes 'light to the gentiles' from Isaiah xlix, 6): and l, 4-9, which last to some extent prepares the way for the Passion chapter. It may be noted that in Isaiah xlix, 3 it is widely admitted that there is a good case for omitting 'Israel': an individual is speaking, the servant who is 'to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel' (6): it makes no sense if the servant himself is to *be* Israel. In any case there does not seem sufficient warrant for extracting these four passages and making them into a separate 'source'; they fit in well enough where they come, for even 'Deutero-Isaiah' does not write according to a preconceived

logical scheme, though there is more of this in the second part than in the first.

The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, in fact, may be divided into six main sections, without much connection between them. They may be headed here conveniently A B C D E F : the headings must not be pressed too strictly.

A : chaps i-xii : prophecies about Judah. There is strong invective in these early chapters, and promise of chastisement, but with promise of a glorious remnant, especially in iv, 3-6 : cf. Rom. xi, 1-7. The remnant appears also in Isaiah vi, 13. In vi is the vision and call of Isaiah, with which may be compared those of Jeremiah (Jeremiah i) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel i-iii) ; it takes place 'in the year that King Uzziah died, 747 (vi, 1). The general background of vii-xii is that Syria ('Aram', with Damascus for capital) and Israel (the northern kingdom) combine against Judah, but are to be overwhelmed by Assyria (vii, 1-2, 16-17 : viii, 4 : x, 5-27). Against this background we have much Messianic prophecy, in which the first part of Isaiah abounds as much as the second : vii, 14-16 : viii, 3-4 : ix, 1-7 : xi, 1-9.

I have written at some length about the Emmanuel Prophecy (vii, 14), which chiefly comes into question here, in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (published from Washington by the Catholic Biblical Association of America) for 1946, and 1947,¹ and can only summarize very briefly here what I have already written. The doctrine of compenetration, indeed, I have expounded more than once, and I think that both the principle and the name have found considerable acceptance. The doctrine comes ultimately from St Jerome's commentary on Daniel xi, 21 ff., whence St Thomas, in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, takes it without mention of St Jerome, but enunciates it with more precision, as follows :

'Prophecies are sometimes uttered about things which existed at the time in question, but are not uttered primarily with reference to them, but in so far as they are a figure of things to come ; and therefore the Holy Ghost has provided that when such prophecies are uttered, some details should be inserted which go beyond the actual thing done, in order that the mind may be raised to the thing signified.'

In Isaiah vii, 14, the word translated 'virgin' in the Latin Vulgate and in the Revised Version, and also in the Septuagint (=the Greek Old Testament), cannot be taken in quite such a narrow sense in the Hebrew, which has another word (*bethulah*) for a virgin as such. The Hebrew word here (*almah*) is more accurately translated 'girl'. Normally the 'girl' would be understood to be a virgin, but need not always be so.

¹ Vol. III, No. 4 : *The Emmanuel Prophecy* ; Vol. IX, No. 1 : *The Term 'Almah in Isaiah vii, 14* ; Vol. IX, No. 2 : *Various Interpretations of Isaiah vii, 14*. In this last number see also *Second Isaias : the Literary Problem* by R. T. Murphy, O.P., S.S.L.

In the titles of some of the psalms the word is used to indicate sopranos. But the crucial passage, which I feel bound to mention here, is Prov. xxx, 19-20. The chapter contains a series of comparisons: three examples of some quality are cited, leading up to a fourth, in which is the real point and purpose of the others. The passing of an eagle through the air, or of a serpent over a rock, or of a ship through the sea leaves no trace; nor yet does the dealing of a man with one who (only at the outset) is called a 'girl' ('*almah*'), and in the next verse is said to wipe her mouth (i.e., removing all trace of the transaction) and to say she has done nothing wrong (also, quite a modern touch).

But the word, as I have said, would normally be understood to imply a virgin, and so has a certain fitness here, for there is a compenetration between the child to be born immediately and Christ Himself, as Cardinal Billot, for example, pointed out in a series of articles in the *Etudes*, the organ of the French Jesuit Fathers, the first of which appeared in June 1917. Before the child comes to the use of reason, Syria and Israel (the northern kingdom), whose attack is so feared by King Ahaz at Jerusalem, will be devastated by Assyria (Isaiah vii, 16). But there is a greater deliverance showing through, as it were, for the child to be born immediately cannot satisfy all the glorious description of deliverance which we find, for example, in chaps xi-xii. The subject is too large to be dealt with adequately here.

In chaps xiii-xxiii (=B) we have prophecies and denunciations against the nations, of a recognized pattern, found also (e.g.) in Jeremiah xlvi-xlix, followed by the tremendous attack on Babylon in Jeremiah l-li. In xxiv-xxvi (=C) there is a picture of universal judgment, and of the restoration of Israel. In xxviii-xxxiii (=D) we have woes pronounced on Hebrews and Gentiles, but with hope offered to the latter, as again in xxxiv-xxxv (=E). The first part concludes with a prose section, xxxvi-xxxix (=F), which is chiefly concerned with the good king Hezekiah. Space forbids that I should enlarge on these sections; I have tried to dilate only on the more important sections, leaving of course much unsaid in what is only a very general treatment.

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