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A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

ISAIAH 6 1-11

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ALL commentators both ancient and modern, without a dissenting voice, interpret the sixth chapter of Isaiah as a description of Isaiah's call to prophesy. That chapter is, accordingly, taken to be an autobiographical account of an experience which constituted Isaiah's inauguration as prophet. Despite such unanimity, however, I venture to suggest that, instead of being a description of Isaiah's call to prophesy, that chapter merely pictures the sense of despair which came over Isaiah in the course of his career.

Kimhi suggests that the basis for regarding this vision as inaugural is verse 8, which reads: "And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said: 'Here am I; send me.'" On the assumption that 'to be sent' means to be appointed as prophet, the Tannaitic interpreters concluded that the sixth chapter was an account of Isaiah's call, and should therefore have been placed at the opening of the book (cf. *Mekilta*, Exod. 15 9). This is one of the many instances, they say, which prove that there is no chronological order in the arrangement of Scriptures. However true that principle is in the abstract, we cannot always follow the rabbinic exegetes in their application of it. For example, they maintain that the book of Leviticus should have opened with chapter 9, and that the book of Deuteronomy should have opened with chapter 29. Hence, we cannot accept any particular application of the principle as to the absence of chronological

arrangement without carefully examining the contents of the chapter in question. If we were to follow the suggestion of the Rabbis, we ought to treat Isaiah 50 4-7 as part of the 'call' to Isaiah to assume the task of prophecy (cf. *Wayyikra Rabba* 10).

The fact is that the passage which deals with the 'sending' of the prophet is in this instance not to be taken as having the significance of a 'call.' If it had that significance, the circumstances of the vision would have been altogether different. Isaiah would have been told directly by YHWH to go and prophesy. What we find is that YHWH calls for someone to volunteer, and that Isaiah says "Here am I, send me." That is hardly compatible with the conception of prophecy. Moses had to be urged to accept his mission. From the nature of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's inaugural visions we gather that they too had to be urged to be prophets against their will. It seems that the prophet is usually conceived as undertaking his mission because God has chosen him and has commanded him to carry out a certain task, not because of his having undertaken that task of his own free will.

But the main reason for our finding the accepted interpretation of the sixth chapter untenable is that it does not read like a consecration oracle. From the inaugural visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel we can tell what a consecration oracle should be like. Both of them are represented as being sent by God to warn Israel concerning the impending doom in the hope that some would repent, while others would, no doubt, continue in their rebellion against God. The former were to be encouraged, the latter to be fearlessly denounced. But no such message is given to Isaiah. Instead of a warning, he is commanded to go and harden the hearts of the people. That fact has given no small amount of trouble to the commentators. They have tried to overcome it in one of two ways: (1) Some of the medieval commentators interpret the message as commanding not that Isaiah should harden the people's hearts but that he should denounce them for being hardhearted. The verbs in vs. 9 and 10 which have

the form of an imperative are rendered as though they were in the imperfect tense, and thus made to have an indicative instead of a hortatory significance (*Targ. Jonath.*, Rashi and partly *Kimhi*). (2) On the other hand, the modern commentators take the imperative force of those verbs literally. Hence, the meaning according to them is not merely that the people are deaf and hardhearted, but that the prophet should make them deaf and hardhearted. The prophet, realizing that YHWH, by issuing that command to him, makes of him an instrument of Israel's complete destruction, cries out: "How long, O Lord?" And the only answer which he receives is to the effect that he will have to keep on doing that until his people will be completely exterminated. In my opinion, such unqualified and irredeemable destruction could not have constituted the burden of an inaugural message.

The entire vision will assume an intelligible meaning if we will treat it as one that was experienced by Isaiah after he had been active as a prophet for some time. We can understand how, as a result of the failure of the people to heed the repeated call to repentance, the prophet would become convinced that they were doomed. Thus we find that Amos, in the course of his career, experienced a vision very similar to that recorded in Isaiah 6 1-11. "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar; and He said 'Smite the capitals, that the posts may shake; and break them in pieces on the head of all of them: and I will slay the residue of them with the sword . . . And I will set Mine eyes upon them for evil, and not for good' (Amos 9 1-4). The concluding phrase indicates the irrevocable character of the divine determination to destroy Israel.

Such prophecies of gloom could only have been uttered after repeated calls to repentance. The older conception of the prophet's function as that of urging the people to repent and obey the law of YHWH is undoubtedly correct. Though the recorded prophecies of Amos deal almost entirely with two themes, the sins of Israel and the impending doom, we cannot but surmise that Amos must have done much more

pleading in a constructive vein than is contained in the few verses in chapter 5. He certainly must have exhorted his contemporaries to repentance again and again as is evident from the refrain in Amos 4: "Yet ye have not returned unto Me, saith the Lord." There can be no question that the mission of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel was essentially to move Israel to repentance. This is borne out by their reiterated call to "return." That a prophet like Amos should be obsessed with the idea that Israel is beyond all possibility of redemption can be explained in one of two ways. Either all his efforts to get his people to repent proved to be futile, or he hated his people so intensely that the wish was father to the thought. The latter possibility is certainly out of the question. For we know that Amos loved his people with every fibre of his being. More than once does he cry out: "How shall Jacob stand! For he is small." Hence we must fall back upon the alternative that the futility of his reproofs was the cause of his obsession that Israel was doomed.

Isaiah's experience is analogous. He must have repeatedly called upon Israel to give up its evil ways. Appeals of the kind we read in chapter 1 no doubt preceded the vision recorded in chapter 6. Certainly such pleas as: "Wash you, wash you, make you clean, put away your evil doings from before mine eyes, etc.", or, "Come, now, let us reason together, saith the Lord. Tho your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow", are incompatible with the command that he prevent Israel from returning and being healed. Only to an occasional commentator does it occur that there is a violent incongruity between an inaugural mission of the kind we find in chapter 6 and the numerous calls to repentance. To explain away that incongruity, those commentators resort to a most ingenious but very far-fetched suggestion, namely, that Isaiah wrote down the contents of the sixth chapter many years after he became prophet. He accordingly put into his inaugural vision not what he had originally been told, but what he had come to experience as a result of his disappointment over Israel's callousness. But why all these *ad hoc* explanations to bolster up an untenable theory? All

difficulties disappear as soon as we learn to take the chapter in question not as an account of an inaugural vision, but of a heartbreaking experience that could have come only after many years of seemingly hopeless effort.

I venture to suggest that the phrase "In the year that king Uzziah died" is an editor's superscription for the purpose of giving to the entire chapter the significance of an inaugural vision. He too was, probably, misled by the eighth verse.

Fortunately, there is a vision recorded in another part of Scripture which is parallel in many essential respects to the one described in the sixth chapter of Isaiah, and which proves the interpretation we have suggested to be the correct one. That parallel is found in 1 K. 22. Let us study carefully that passage. At the suggestion of Jehoshaphat, Ahab consulted the prophets of YHWH to know the outcome of the battle of Ramoth Gilead. He gathered four hundred of the prophets and put the question to them. They replied: "Go up; for the Lord will deliver it unto the hand of the king." Jehoshaphat was not satisfied with that stereotyped reply. He wanted that the prophet to be consulted might be not one of the professional hirelings. He had heard of Micaiah, the son of Imlah, and he recommended him to Ahab. "But I hate him," added Ahab, "for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil." At Jehoshaphat's suggestion, Micaiah is called. At first Micaiah, to escape annoyance, takes up the conventional tune of "success to the expedition." Ahab, wishing to prove to Jehoshaphat that he had been right, succeeds in drawing out from Micaiah an evil prophecy. When Ahab exclaims: "Did I not tell thee that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil", Micaiah recounts a vision which presents so many points in common with the vision of Isaiah that there can be no question that both visions belong to the same type of prophetic thinking.

Thus, like Isaiah, Micaiah sees YHWH sitting on a throne. He also beholds YHWH surrounded by the host of heaven who stand near the throne after the manner of

courtiers of an earthly king. A second point of resemblance is that YHWH calls for someone to volunteer to carry out a work of destruction. There the one to be destroyed is Ahab. A third point of resemblance is the fact that the destruction is to be encompassed by putting a misleading idea into the mind of the guilty one. Ahab has to be led astray in order that he may meet the fate which YHWH has marked out for him.

The main point of difference is that in the vision of Micaiah one of the spirits undertakes to deceive Ahab by acting as a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets, whereas, in the case of Isaiah, Isaiah himself volunteers to carry out the task that YHWH may set before him. When Isaiah volunteers, he does not know the nature of the task with which he is to be entrusted. He is overwhelmed when he learns what he has to do, and he cries out: "How long?" He no doubt would have preferred to withdraw his promise to do the bidding of YHWH, but it is too late.

It is this point of difference that probably prevented the commentators from noting the fundamental resemblances between the two visions. In the light of those resemblances, the difference is merely one of situation. The essential character of the vision remains the same in both. The underlying motif in both visions is the despair of the prophet. This refusal to heed the prophet's words leads the prophet in both instances to one conclusion, namely, that YHWH Himself must have so hardened the hearts of those they appealed to that it is hopeless to try to get them to listen and take warning. This conclusion takes the form of a vision, in which YHWH actually asks some one to undertake the task of bringing about the ruin of those who had so long disregarded His words that they deserved no better fate. In the story of Ahab it is one of the spirits in the heavenly courts. In the account of Isaiah, it is Isaiah himself who is employed as an instrument of destruction. Far from being an inaugural vision, this oracle implies that Isaiah had long been active as a prophet. But in the course of his career he must have been overcome by a sense of futility of all his

efforts to wean Israel away from idolatry, entangling alliances, unrighteousness and impurity. It appeared to him as tho his very efforts only provoked Israel into sinning still more (cf. 1 s). What could be the meaning of this failure of Israel to respond to his pleadings? Can it be that YHWH would permit Israel to go on defying Him and flouting His will? No. There was but one explanation. YHWH Himself, seeing how irredeemably corrupt Israel had become, must have determined to destroy them and he, Isaiah, by being appointed as prophet, was in reality being employed by YHWH to provoke them into still more determined rebellion.

The suggested interpretation puts out of court the usual question, whether Isaiah really beheld such a scene as is described in the sixth chapter, or whether he really heard angels singing the "trisagion." Factually, the matter is to be conceived as follows: Whenever the prophet became possessed of an overpowering sentiment or belief with regard to Israel, he naturally ascribed that sentiment or belief to an external source, namely, God. Afflatus as merely a subjective or psychological condition was inconceivable to the ancient mind. Any striking idea, whether it dealt with some immediate personal concern or with some social problem, was always regarded by the ancients as inspired by some deity. Throughout the Bible, we find that the skill of the artisan and the wisdom of the sage were treated as emanating directly from God. It is to be expected, therefore, that any idea dealing with God's relation to Israel would naturally be assumed as emanating from God. Hence, when in a highly sensitized mind like that of Isaiah's, pessimism takes the form of a vision in which YHWH tells him to render his people even more callous, incorrigible, than they are, there was no doubt in either the prophet's mind or in the mind of any of his hearers that this was a divine communication.

That explanation is borne out even more fully by the case of Micaiah. Why did not Micaiah narrate his vision as soon as the question with regard to the fate of Ramoth Gilead was put to him by Ahab? The fact probably is that Micaiah, having anticipated Ahab's repudiation, brooded long

and intensely upon the obduracy of Ahab. It is of the nature of the imaginative mind to think in images. The activity of the false prophets took on, in his mind, the character of a divinely purposed means to Ahab's downfall. That notion became embodied in the concrete form of one of the spirits offering itself to delude the prophets. Accordingly, when Micaiah came before Ahab, he at first adopted the conventional attitude of wishing the king well. But when he was pressed for a genuine expression of what he considered to be the will of YHWH, he recalled his vision of despair. Thus the very fact of Micaiah having withheld the account of his vision until he was pressed to speak the truth proves its subjective and psychological character. It is inconceivable that he would have withheld it at first, had the vision had for him the same reality as any ordinarily objective experience. It is noteworthy that when Isaiah alludes to the false prophets he depicts them in terms which correspond with the general tenor of the command that he is given in the vision recorded in the sixth chapter. "Stupefy yourself, and be stupid! Blind yourselves and be blind! Ye that are drunken but not with wine, that stagger but not with strong drink. For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes, the prophets, and your heads, the seers, hath He covered" (Isaiah 29 9, 10).

The representation of YHWH both in Micaiah's and in Isaiah's vision as intentionally misleading and corrupting his victims is built upon a theological conception that antedated both prophets, and that may have functioned in their day more as a literary survival than as living belief. According to that theological conception, whenever a human being persists for some time in defying YHWH's will, YHWH purposely maneuvers that human being into a position where he must be destroyed. That is the theological conception underlying the account in Exodus of the way YHWH continually kept on "hardening the heart of Pharaoh", i. e., rendering him ever more stubborn. Similarly, we are told that YHWH made the sons of Eli refuse to heed their father's reproof, „because YHWH wished to slay them" (1 Sam. 2 25; cf. also

Ps. 18 27 b.) It is not likely that Isaiah accepted literally such a conception of YHWH. His sense of justice may even have rebelled against it. Yet in the heat of anger and disappointment, he would naturally fall into what was still the conventional mode of thought. Augmented by a powerful imagination, that conventional mode of thought was transformed into a vivid metaphor, so vivid as to become a genuine psychological experience.