

## THE "SUFFICIENT REASON" FOR ISAIAH XL-LXVI.

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*Analysts' view overlooks facts and conditions.—Fate of Northern Israel: Impending fate of Judah.—Necessity of encouragement for the faithful.—Such encouragement in accord with the prophetic method.—Isaiah the one naturally to be looked to for encouragement at such a time.—Mention of Cyrus by name no objection.—Uselessness of such encouragement if coming at end of the exile.—Influence of such an early prophecy on Cyrus.*

Those who refer the last part of Isaiah to an author or authors different from Isaiah, do so, in the main, from the fact that the standpoint taken is that of the captivity as actually existing, and that consolation is offered the people in the promise of deliverance. They claim that there is an utter incongruity in presenting consolation under a calamity which has not yet occurred, and almost an absurdity in threatening a punishment for sin and in the next breath comforting those who are to suffer it.

If this is a complete and fair statement of the matter from the historical point of view, it cannot be denied that the argument is with its advocates.

But we maintain that this representation of the case overlooks facts and conditions which are vital in their importance, and are quite sufficient to reverse our judgment. If it can be shown that there was a "sufficient reason" for Isaiah's having written all that has been traditionally attributed to him, this logical principle debars all reasoning *a priori* such as that to which I have referred.

What then were the conditions which were potent enough to call forth in the time of the prophet the last twenty-seven chapters of the book of Isaiah?

In the first place, the prophet had distinctly declared that conquest by Babylon and captivity were surely to be visited upon the nation. The effect of this announcement upon the God-

fearing in Jerusalem, who could not doubt the authority and the word of the prophet, can hardly be exaggerated. Exile had often been conditionally threatened against the people, but now for the first time was a definite sentence pronounced. They now know that their children's children were to be torn from their homes, and made prisoners of war to the hated and idolatrous monarch of the East. Every personal, patriotic, and religious feeling or aspiration must have combined to depress their hearts, and fill them with the direst forebodings. What had become of the promise of God himself, uttered even by Isaiah, that the throne of David should never lack one to sit upon it? What had become of the promise of God to Abraham that in him should all nations be blessed? Where now could their hopes of a Messiah rest?

To add to the poignancy and alarm of their grief, there was the fate of Israel ever before their eyes. Nearly a generation before "the Lord had been very wroth with Israel, and had begun to remove them out of his sight."

The heathen had been transplanted into the land of promise, and the ten tribes had entered upon an exile in the East so "lost" that the world has not yet ceased to wonder after them. With the prospect, therefore, that the two tribes were to follow the ten, all pious hearts must have sunk, and God must have seemed to them to have left himself without witness of his faithfulness. This must have been the feeling as the fated days drew on. And when the captivity actually occurred, and the people found themselves in hopeless bondage, what was to hold them together and to their God? What could their patriotic impulses feed upon if left only under the curse and calamity? By this time, their brethren of Israel had become inseparably mingled with the heathen, and no other expectation could have been theirs if we suppose them left without divine promise and support.

The lamentations of Jeremiah are the scripture evidence of what the imagination easily paints for us. "How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and hath cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel." . . .

"Thou hast utterly rejected us, thou art very wroth against us." "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people." "Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow."

But it was not the purpose of the Lord to cast away Judah as Israel had been cast away. The nation was not to perish, the blessing of Abraham was not to fail. The Messiah was not to be cut off from saving his people, and being a light to the Gentiles. What now shall bear up the hearts and the hopes of the godly among the people? What keep their eyes fixed upon a more distant and glorious future? What hold them in patriotic unity and separateness? What make them resolved to trust in Jehovah that they may yet be the vehicle of salvation to the world? What but a prophetic word as clear and positive as that under which they had experienced judgment and affliction?

And there was what we may call a prophetic law for such a word. From Moses and Solomon to the last seer before the captivity, no prophet uttered threatening of such an event without at some time offering hope of mercy and return, either absolutely or conditioned upon repentance and prayer. Notably was this true of Jeremiah and Amos. The former even was authorized to announce the term of seventy years as limiting the exile. Therefore, if Isaiah had not offered such consolation and ground of hope, he would have been an exception and a violator of the divine method.

Besides, as it had fallen to him to pass beyond general and conditional warnings, and announce a definite and surely approaching calamity, to him certainly did the pious in Judah look to know if any hope and salvation remained. To him "the remnant" must have turned.

If the two tribes were not after all to be "lost" as the ten were, by whose mouth should the glad word of comfort come, if not by Isaiah's? And the need of support which this remnant felt, even beyond the darkness of the future, can be understood by the behavior of the proud and rebellious later in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The party, which put their trust in political combinations and the fortunes of war, must have been largely in the ascendant, and their boasting and their scoffs were an

additional affliction to those who revered the word of Jehovah. If ever a crisis in the history of God's people called for the intervention of merciful and assuring promises, this one did. And, as we suppose, God did then and there direct his prophet Isaiah, himself, to utter the abundant consolations of these latest chapters. They were addressed to hearts which were at once patriotic and God-fearing. Though Israel were hopelessly lost, Judah was not so to be. The nations of the earth were yet to be blessed, as declared to Abraham, the Messianic hopes of all true souls were not to be mocked and rendered vain. Hence the largely Messianic character of these chapters.

Now, if all this had been deferred till late in the exile, it had probably been too late. Despair would have done its work. What more than a century of captivity had already done for Israel would have been the index finger pointing to the doom of Judah. Unsupported by a divine word disintegration and assimilation to those about them would have done their work upon the captives from Jerusalem. The return never could have been achieved.

In speaking "Comfort" by Isaiah, God simply used means adapted to his ends.

But the mention of Cyrus by name, say our critics, makes history and not prophecy of these chapters. But did that mention require any more provision than the announcement of seventy years by Jeremiah as the term of the exile? Or, any more than in the case of Amos, when he declared that the house of Jacob should not be utterly destroyed, but that the tabernacle of David which had fallen, should be raised up? Or, any more than the foretelling the doom of cities and nations again and again by the prophets of Judah and Israel?

Jehovah makes it a part of his glory, according to Isaiah himself (42: 8, 9) to declare new things and tell his people of them "before they spring forth." Of this glory the critics are ready to rob him, if it consists in calling the name of a monarch yet unborn.

But there are other things to be said regarding this calling Cyrus by name. Why should such emphasis be laid on the fact

of calling his name, if it were by a contemporary? Surely, there could have been nothing particularly noteworthy in naming an existing monarch well known in the time of the writer. But if it were a prophetic feature, the emphasis is accounted for.

Again, the act of Cyrus in permitting the return of the Jews was a very remarkable historical event, perhaps entirely without parallel in the history of the world. As historical students, how shall we account for it? In his decree, Cyrus attributes his action to Jehovah, the God of the despised captives. This knowledge of Jehovah must have come, it would seem, through the Jewish sacred writings brought to court by Daniel, or some fellow among the Hebrews, who have always known how to make themselves felt at the seats of power as Ezra and Nehemiah at the court of Artaxerxes. But which would be most likely to gain the attention of the monarch, the contemporary utterance of his name by his suffering subjects, or by being shown that the God of his captives, or rather the God of the captives of his old enemy, the Babylonian king, had pointed him out as the deliverer of his people long before. The re-establishment of the Jews would thus be made to appear as a part of Cyrus' victory and righteous vengeance over Babylon.

Yes, it was the part of Isaiah to do for the days of trembling and discouragement preceding the exile what Ezekiel did during its actual period. And their methods were not unlike. Both mingled terrible warnings against the proud doers of iniquity with sweet promises for the Godly remnant. And both conclude their missions with a glorious picture of Jehovah, returning to dwell among his people and going forth from Zion to bless and save mankind.

We must say, therefore, that there was not only a sufficient fitness in Isaiah being the author of these chapters, but a discernible necessity in the divine plan to bind the faithful so firmly together and to the worship of the true God, that all the luxury and allurements and all the idolatry of Babylon could not corrupt them and bring to naught the work of God in and through them.