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A STUDY OF THE FIRST LESSON FOR CHRISTMAS DAY[1].

Isaiah ix 1–7.

1. . . . As for the former *king*, he despised the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but the later *king* honours it, *both* towards the Sea *and* beyond Jordan[2], *he honours* 'Galilee of the Nations[3].'

2. The people that walked in darkness
   See a great light!
   They that sat in a land of the shadow of death,
   Light shines upon them!
3. Thou increasest the 'Nation[4],'
   To it thou givest great joy,
   They joy before thee[5] as with joy of harvest,
   As men rejoice when they divide spoil.
4. For the yoke that is their[6] burden,
   And the staff *that smites* their[6] shoulder,
   The rod of their[6] taskmaster,
   Thou dost shatter as in the day of Midian!
5. For every boot of the earth-shaking host[7],
   And *every* garment rolled in blood,
   Shall be for burning, fuel for fire.
6. For to us is born a child,
   To us is given a son,
   And the government falls upon his shoulder,

[1] Revised from a paper read before the Rhondda Valley branch of the C. S. S. S., May 27, 1902.
[2] i. e. both westward (towards the Mediterranean) and eastward.
[3] A depreciatory designation.
[4] A reference back to ver. 1.
[5] Deut. xii 18 *al.*
[6] *Heb.* his.
[7] A paraphrastic translation of a phrase which cannot be literally translated.

And his name is called:
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God;
Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace.

7. Great is his government, and peace hath no end upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom; *he cometh*[1] to establish it and to uphold it in judgement and in righteousness from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of JEHOVAH SABAOTH shall perform this.

(1) *The state of the Text.* There is almost certainly some corruption in the text of ch. ix 1 (viii 23, Heb.). In particular the words 'In the former time' (בעת הראשון) seem to be faulty. 'Time' (עת) is feminine ('seldom, mostly late, masculine,' *Oxf. Heb. Lex.* s. v.), whereas the epithets 'the former' (הראשון) and 'the latter[2]' (האחרון) are masculine. If therefore we disjoin בעת from what follows, we are left with a contrast not between *times*, but between *persons*, such a contrast indeed as is implied in Isa. xliv 6, 'I am the first (ראשון), and I am the last (אחרון)'; cp. also Job xix 25, 'And one-who-comes-after (אחרון) shall rise up over my dust.' Symmachus gives ὁ πρῶτος . . . ὁ ἔσχατος. (I begin my translation at the point at which the text ceases to be doubtful.)

The 'not' of ver. 3 (ver. 2, Heb.) is a very ancient mistake. The LXX and the other Greek versions have it, and though the printed editions of the Peshitta (*Lee* and *Urmi*) with the Ambrosian MS (*wĕlēh*) and the Buchanan Bible (*dhĕlēh*) follow the Hebrew *Kĕrī*, yet the negative survives in Camb. Univ. Add. 1965 (Cent. xv, Nestorian), while in Brit. Mus. Add. 14,432 (Cent. vi) the reading is blurred as though the doubt between *lā* and *lēh* had not been resolved.

(2) *The form of the Passage.* We commonly call this passage a *Messianic prophecy*, and perhaps we commonly mean by the phrase a *prediction about the Messiah.* Substantially (I believe) this description is correct, but in form it is faulty, and especially open to the objections of those who refuse to see any close connexion between the Old and New Testaments. It is not in

[1] I supply a necessary verb here.
[2] 'Time' is not repeated in the Hebrew, as in the English Version.

form a prediction; the prophet does not say that certain events will come to pass in the future; indeed there are in the passage only two verb forms which correspond with an English future (*viz.* ver. 5 'shall be for burning, fuel of fire'; ver. 7 'shall perform this').

The tenses in the Hebrew are *perfects*, although it is clear that they do not refer to the past. We can only conclude that the prophet describes certain events and their consequences, which are fully present to his own mind, as though he had already had experience of them, and was recalling them by memory. It is in short a *vision* that Isaiah shows us. Out of the darkness of the present he sees a child, a son, born; to him the government comes; and his destiny is to exercise such a rule as the world did not know before. The Prophet tells us step by step what he sees, and accordingly we translate the Hebrew Perfects by English Presents.

To regard the passage as the description of a Vision helps us to understand a second peculiarity in the form of the prophecy, *viz.* the transition from prose to poetry and back again to prose. Vers. 2–6 are arranged according to poetical parallelism (as I have tried to show in my translation), and a rhythmic beat (a rudimentary form of poetical measure) is to be found here just as in other Hebrew poems. Vers. 1 and 7 on the contrary are in prose. The prophet begins in prose as one who has a simple message to deliver; the exaltation of his vision lifts him to poetry; he returns to prose to press home the assurance that his vision is no mere dream, *The zeal of* JEHOVAH SABAOTH *shall perform this.*

(3) *The Context of the Passage.* It has been suggested by some writers (*e.g.* by Hackmann *apud* Cheyne, *Introduction to Isaiah*, pp. 44–46; Cheyne, *Jewish Religious Life*, pp. 98–101; Marti, *Hand-Commentar*) that this prophecy has no real context. Isa. ix 2–7 (1–6, Heb.) is said to be an appendix added by an unknown writer in the age which followed the Return from the Babylonian Captivity (± 500 B.C., Marti), the object of this writer being, we are told, to relieve the dark picture given in ch. viii. The function of Isaiah, it seems, was to threaten; to give comfort was a task reserved for exilic and post-exilic pro-

phets[1]. (Even Duhm, *Jesaia*, 2te Auflage, while allowing Isaianic authorship assigns the passage to the reign of Hezekiah. Cf. Nowack, *Theologische Abhandlungen*, Festschrift für H. J. Holtzmann, p. 49.)

Now it seems to me that there is very little support for such views as these, but in the present instance I believe we can give not only this negative rejoinder, but also a positive one. We may indeed say that there is little reason for holding Isa. ix 1–7 to be a late appendix to ch. viii, but we may also say that we have solid grounds for treating this passage as Isaiah's own continuation of his prophecy against Ahaz. We must *not* separate it from its present context, for it can be best understood in connexion with the verses which precede and those that follow.

(4) This may be readily seen when we come to the consideration of what I should like to call the *immediate occasion* of the prophecy. The passage which precedes (chs. vii, viii) and the passage which follows (ch. ix 8–21) both deal with the Syro-Ephraimite war. Accordingly I shall endeavour to interpret our prophecy on the assumption that it has for its historical background the reign of Ahaz in general and this miserable civil war of Israel and Judah in particular.

Now it is necessary for us to know something about this war, if we are to understand Isaiah in his true greatness as a Man of God who from first to last brought religion to bear on statesmanship. With a later event of Isaiah's lifetime—the invasion of Sennacherib—we are sufficiently familiar. We are familiar with the thought of the Assyrians as the enemies and oppressors of Judah in the reign of Hezekiah, but in order to form a complete view of the meaning of the career of Isaiah, we must accustom ourselves to a very different condition of things, i.e. to the Assyrians as the friends and patrons of Judah. When we see the prophet under the most perplexingly different circumstances giving the very same advice we realize that we are not contemplating a mere human reed shaken by all political winds, but a Man of God speaking from God and for God. Pekah of

[1] According to Marti Isaiah did *not* even promise deliverance for Jerusalem in 701 B.C.

Samaria comes down from the north upon Jerusalem terrifying the supporters of the House of David and flattering the hopes of the disloyal, and Isaiah with unshaken courage says to Ahaz, 'Take heed and be quiet.' The rab-shakeh comes up years afterwards with a great host from the south-west, and the prophet with just a slight variation of his former words tells his people, 'In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.'

Had Isaiah's advice been taken on the first of these two occasions, there would be little to chronicle about the Syro-Ephraimite war. It would have proved only a passing storm. But Ahaz went his own way, and the whole story must be told.

Assyria, a great inland empire like Russia, sought expansion like Russia towards the Mediterranean Sea. One of the conquests of which she was most proud was the conquest of the port of Arpad in the Levant; 'Where is the king of Arpad?' triumphantly asks Sennacherib once and again of Hezekiah. Arpad was captured in 740 B. C. by Tiglath-pileser, after a three years' siege, and became an Assyrian possession [1]. This event was a terrible blow to Northern Syria; it meant that Assyrian fetters would be rivetted on the cities which hitherto had escaped with a nominal submission and a moderate tribute. Native kings would be removed and Assyrian governors would be put in their place. Accordingly Rezin king of Damascus took steps to form a coalition against the Assyrian. Pekah king of Israel joined him. Probably resistance was hopeless from the beginning, but for any hope of success it was necessary that every state of Syria which could put a few thousand men in the field should be represented. Certainly Judah could not be spared. An invitation (it is commonly believed) was sent to Ahaz and rejected by him. There was nothing to be done but to depose the Jewish king and to compel Judah by force to join the coalition. This task no doubt seemed comparatively easy, since a party—perhaps a strong party—in Jerusalem itself was favourably inclined towards the two kings (Isa. viii 6).

Accordingly an allied army of Syrians and Israelites appeared before Jerusalem and blockaded it. There is nothing to show that an assault was attempted; on the contrary it is probable that the besiegers hoped that the city would be betrayed to them by

[1] Schrader, *Keilinschriften und das A. T.* (3te Aufl.), S. 53.

their partisans within the walls. The alarm of Ahaz and his supporters was extreme.

Two obvious courses now lay open to the Jewish king. He might yield to the pressure of Syria and Israel, and trust that, if he joined the coalition even at the eleventh hour, the allies would not insist on deposing him. He might on the contrary defy them to the uttermost by allying himself to the foe whom they both feared. To take either of these courses was indeed to lean on the arm of flesh, and to drag little Judah from her retirement among her mountains into the whirlpool of the great politics of Western Asia. There remained, however, to the eye of faith and patience a third course; Ahaz might listen to Isaiah; he might 'take heed and be quiet,' confine himself to a passive defence of Jerusalem, and wait in faith for God to work.

But the Jewish king was too weak a man to carry out a policy of 'masterly inactivity,' and too irreligious a man to put faith in an unseen Power into practice in his hour of trial. He might at least save his crown, even if Judah lost her independence, by submission to the Assyrian king, and accordingly he took the temple treasures which were kept for times of emergency, added to them the treasures preserved in the royal palace, and sent the sum as tribute to the Assyrian king. With this tribute he sent a message of complete submission: 'I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me' (2 Kings xvi 7).

Now it must have been obvious to Ahaz that there was only one way in which the king of Assyria would respond to such an appeal, if he responded at all. Tiglath-pileser would not march straight to Jerusalem, while there was territory belonging to Damascus and to Northern Israel immediately in his path to overrun and to plunder. Ahaz was in fact asking—nay, even bribing—the Assyrian king to invade the north and east of Israel. In any case this was the form in which the Assyrian answered the invitation. 'In the days of Pekah king of Israel,' writes the author of the book of Kings, 'came Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abel-beth-maacah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria.' It is true

indeed that the population of the districts named was of somewhat mixed descent (Judges i 30–33), and to this fact the general title 'Galilee of the Nations' is doubtless due. But that a population in the main Israelite should be carried into captivity and scattered at the instigation of a king of Judah must have been hateful to the best spirits of the southern kingdom, and especially to the best of the best, Isaiah himself. 'The brotherhood between Judah and Ephraim' (Zech. xi 14; *cf.* Hos. i 11) was a very old watchword; it was one of Isaiah's own; in another passage the prophet looks forward to the Messianic Age (for one reason) because 'Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim' (xi 13[1]). This sympathy was not merely a sympathy of kinship; it was also a religious bond. In a psalm which belongs, I believe, to the later days of the Jewish monarchy we have this feeling strongly brought out. 'The north and the south thou hast created them: Tabor and Hermon rejoice in thy name' (lxxxix 12). Here 'the north and the south' is a phrase describing the land of Israel in its full extent; while Tabor is mentioned as the characteristic mountain of the land of Zebulun, and Hermon as the range which towers over the land of Naphtali. The Psalmist standing on Mount Zion in the south pictures the mountains of the north joining in the chorus of praise which rises to the God of Israel.

But in the visions and aspirations of prophet and psalmist Ahaz had no share at all. He desired only to save his tottering throne. It was the sight (I believe) of this degeneracy in the House of David which was the external starting-point of Isaiah's vision of a new king and of a new era.

(5) *The substance of the Prophecy.* Isaiah begins where Ahaz leaves off. Ahaz has nothing to do with the vision of future glories. The prophet's eye of compassion and sympathy is fixed on the devastated lands of northern Israel. The true author of this devastation is dismissed in one short sentence, and passes out of sight: 'The former *king* despised the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.' The word 'despised' is full of significance; it suggests an offence against the sacred bonds of kinship (2 Sam.

[1] I am unable to accept Duhm's view (*in loco*) that these words are a late gloss inserted into a second-century prophecy.

xix 44 [43]; Ezek. xxii 7); Ahaz is condemned as having committed the capital sin of unbrotherliness, and is excluded from the coming glories.

In his place another ('the later *king*') is introduced. Of him the prophet says that he 'honours' the land which his predecessor has despised and disowned. He owns his kinship with its people throughout the whole land from west to east; it may be 'Galilee of the Nations' or 'Galilee of the Heathen' in name, but to him it is part of the land of Israel, part of the old kingdom of David, the prosperity of which must be dear to the successor of David. The word 'honours' in this connexion is significant (cf. Exod. xx 12) in the opposite sense to the word 'despised' in the previous clause. To 'honour' means to fulfil those duties arising from kinship which Ahaz had despised.

Thus understood we may see a certain fulfilment of the words in Isaiah's own day. The prophecy bore fruit in the prophet's lifetime. Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, sometime after the kingdom of Israel had fallen, celebrated a solemn passover in Jerusalem. It was used as an occasion for asserting the unity of the whole Israelite people in a striking manner. Hezekiah 'honoured' the ties of kinship even in those who were far removed from the narrow limits of his kingdom. All Israel was summoned in an open letter to attend this passover. 'So the posts passed,' says the chronicler, 'from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them[1]. Nevertheless divers of Asher and Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem' (2 Chron. xxx 10, 11). This action of Hezekiah was really large-minded, for there was more than a trace of heathenism in these northern Israelites. 'For a multitude,' writes the chronicler again, 'had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it is written. For Hezekiah had prayed for them, saying, The good LORD pardon every one that setteth his heart to seek God, . . . though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary' (2 Chron. xxx 18, 19).

We can be sure from such an incident as this that Hezekiah's views and aspirations were wholly different from his father's.

[1] No wonder, seeing what Ahaz had done!

Ahaz might see with satisfaction the ravages committed by the Assyrians on Israel, but the younger king's heart would be given to the ideal which Isaiah paints in vers. 2–5. It is a true altruist's picture. The prophet looking forth from Jerusalem sends his full sympathy to his kinsmen in the north involved as they are in the ruin of war. He sees with exultation the light of joy rising upon their night of sorrow, he sees the sadly diminished people multiplied once more, he sees the heavy yoke of the Assyrian broken, he sees the very traces of war obliterated in great cleansing fires. Isaiah's vision in short is of the restoration of that which Ahaz had destroyed, and of the deliverance of those whom a narrow spirit in Judah had despised as a 'Nation,' *i.e.* as Gentiles, Heathen, Foreigners.

When was this deliverance to come? Not at once. It was to be the work of One whose birth is part of the great vision; the deliverance is to be (no doubt) the work of his full manhood, when the government comes upon his shoulder. But even while Isaiah speaks of a king who is born and grows up to receive his kingdom, the prophet's vision extends beyond time and earth. The king who is to undo the work of Ahaz and to heal not only the material but also the spiritual wounds which he had inflicted on the chosen people of God, could not be merely the heir and successor of the apostate king. When it comes to naming him only superhuman epithets suffice; He is the *Wonderful Counsellor* ('doing things past finding out'), the *Mighty God* ('strong in divine power to conquer evil'), the *Father of Eternity* ('a guardian who never fails'), the *Prince of Peace* ('one who can command the very waves of war to be still')[1]. The king thus

[1] Justice cannot be done to the language of ver. 6, unless the allusion to a superhuman personality be acknowledged. To state the fact briefly, the four names of the king when considered, as they should be, together, point decisively to a sphere of mystical Hebrew thought which is well represented in the Old Testament, though absent from, or only latent in, post-Biblical orthodox Jewish writers, I mean the sphere in which the Divine and the human meet. Thus the root from which *pēlē* ('wonderful') comes (though not restricted to the description of Divine action) is characteristically used of the working of God, or of the 'Angel of the LORD'; Judges xiii 18, 19 ('wonderful . . . wondrously'); Ps. cxviii 23 ('marvellous'); cxxxix 14 ('wonderfully made'). Again, *gibbōr* ('mighty') is most commonly applied to men, but it appears in a striking context as one of the epithets of God; Deut. x 17 *al* ('the great, the *mighty*, the terrible God'); and in Psalm xlv the mysterious ruler who is addressed with the words, 'O mighty one' (*gibbōr*) in ver. 3 [4], is addressed in ver. 6 [7] as 'God' (*ĕlōhīm*). The exact phrase *ēl gibbōr*

described cannot, I believe, be (as the great Jewish commentator Abraham ben Ezra maintains) the Hezekiah whom we know from Bible history. Other great Jewish authorities, though differing among themselves, agree that the first three epithets cannot be given to a merely human king. In particular they hesitate to allow the title 'Mighty God' to a 'Son' *born* and *given*. The best alternative put forward by them is to take the four epithets as a sentence, translating thus, 'And his name is called, *The Mighty God, the Father of Eternity, the Prince of Peace, counsels wondrously*[1].' We know that the English Puritans, who were filled with the spirit of the Old Testament, did take names which consisted of words strung together to form a sentence, such names, I mean, as *Fight-against-sin*, *Hew-Agag-in-pieces-before-the-Lord*. But the nearest parallels in the Old Testament (including the 'JEHOVAH is our righteousness' of Jer. xxiii 6) belong to a later period than this prophecy; they consist chiefly of names found in Chronicles which seem to have come into use not before the close of the Babylonian captivity, and even among these we find nothing so elaborately framed as the one suggested by Jewish commentators here (Isa. ix 6). We get for example nothing more than *Jushab-hesed* ('Mercy is restored') or *Hodaviah* ('Thank ye JEHOVAH'). On the whole I think we have no choice but to acknowledge that four separate names or epithets are applied to the 'child' or 'son' mentioned at the beginning of the verse. And, if I dare not go so far as to say that Isaiah shows by the use of these four names

('Mighty God') appears again in ch. x 21, where it corresponds with the 'JEHOVAH, the Holy One of Israel' of the preceding verse. 'Father of Eternity' (אבי עד) finds its closest parallel in the epithet 'One that inhabiteth Eternity' (ch. lvii 15 שכן עד), which is applied to JEHOVAH, but on the other hand the cognate expression 'for ever' (לעד) is used sometimes to express a continuance other than Divine; cf. Ps. xxii 27; xxxvii 29. Finally, 'Prince of Peace,' though in itself a title suitable for a human ruler, has yet, when applied to a king of Israel, a touch of unexpectedness sufficient to confirm the impression of the superhuman nature of the expected king, which is gathered from the other epithets when they are studied in conjunction. Eastern kings are not 'princes of peace' (i. e. 'givers of peace'); 'peace' is a supernatural gift, Ps. xxix 11; compare too the Pauline title (also found in the Epistle to the Hebrews) 'the God of peace' (Rom. xv 33 *al*). Solomon himself was no more than a 'man of rest' (1 Chron. xxii 8), a ruler untouched by such mighty convulsions as those through which his father first rose to power, and afterwards more than once almost fell from it altogether.

[1] Luzzatto *apud* Delitzsch, *Jesaia* (3te Aufl.), *in loco*.

that he saw in vision the Incarnation, I do venture to say that the names prove that the prophet realized to himself a Person upon whom the Spirit of God rested to a degree and in a manner unknown before. This later king is in his person and in his achievements a fresh revelation of the God of Israel.

One point more. The 'Son' is given, the prophet says, to *us*, to us Jews, not directly to the suffering 'nation' to which he was destined to bring deliverance. The spiritual parallel between the prophet's vision and the Gospel history is very striking in this respect. The son is given to the house of David and to the Jews, but his work of salvation is manifested in half-Gentile Galilee. Isaiah's vision no less than the life of the Lord illustrates the truth—the Salvation is of the Jews, ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων.

(6) *Conclusion.* At the outset I said that I preferred to call this passage a *vision* and not a *prediction.* A *prediction*, if a prediction be taken to be a foretelling of future certain events, is most likely to be a barren, fruitless thing, until the events predicted have come to pass, and even then its chief result may be merely to establish the credit of the person by whom or through whom the prediction is given. But a vision deals not so much with mere events as with great principles active in the present and full of promise for the future. A vision appeals to the men of the present to work towards the future. Understood as a vision this passage of Isaiah had its meaning both for its own day and for the apostolic age; it bears a message ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.

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[NOTE.—I make no apology for the use made of 2 Chron. xxx on page 24. In the introduction to *Chronicles* in the Cambridge Bible I have given reasons for dissenting from the exaggerated depreciation of the book as a history which is popular at present. Moreover the particular narrative referred to seems to me to bear the impress of truth.—W. E. B.]