

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

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

*THE CONCEPT OF SIN AND HOLINESS IN
THE BOOK OF EMMANUEL (Is. 1-12)*

The two notions of sin and holiness are essentially correlative, since sin for Israel (and ultimately for all men), is the negative opposite of Yahweh's holiness, and some notion of that holiness must precede a concept of sin.

For Isaiah, 'holiness' is the essential quality proper to Yahweh himself. It is commonly said that he realised this in his inaugural prophetic vision related in chapter six of his book: this does not seem to be entirely adequate. Such a vision undoubtedly gave him a clearer, more impressive realisation of this quality of Yahweh, but had he not already had some notion of holiness, derived, in common with all Israelites, from his covenant relationship with the God of his people, his own reactions to this vision would be inexplicable, and in fact the whole of his book echoes the language not so much of Deuteronomy, as of Exodus, and to some extent Leviticus; compare for example, Isaiah 2:10 with Exodus 33:21.

Isaiah tries to evoke this essential quality of Yahweh by utilising various other familiar notions, the chief of which is that of 'power'. Yahweh is the Lord of Creation who can treat all natural phenomena just as he wishes: 'The Lord of hosts has a day . . . against all the high mountains . . . when he rises to terrify the earth' (2:12-19). 'The Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt; and will wave his hand over the River with his scorching wind, and smite it into seven channels that men may cross dry-shod' (11:15). He is the Lord of all men and can control them as he wishes: 'The Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee which is in the land of Assyria' (7:18). Similarly, 'Therefore the Lord, the Lord of Hosts will send a wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled like the burning of a fire' (10:16). Especially can he do as he wishes with his own chosen people, Israel: 'Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and smote them, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets' (5:25).

This notion of 'power' is made more concrete by two inter-related images; Yahweh is the 'Lord of Hosts', the leader of numberless armies of celestial beings: 'and his train filled the temple' (6:1), whose name 'Seraphim' when it is used, seems to mean a flaming or a burning creature, and the effect of Yahweh's power itself is often compared with that of fire: 'Therefore as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame' (5:24) or 'And

the strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together with none to quench them' (1:31).

The fact that fire is purifying also, and not merely destructive opens the way for other associated notions of Yahweh's own purity and his purifying action on men; 'The Light of Israel will become a fire and his Holy One a flame . . .' (10:17) a flame which will 'smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy' (1:25) leaving behind the purified remnant which is one of Isaiah's characteristic themes: 'If the Lord had not left us a few survivors we should have been like Sodom' (1:9); so also, 'Tell the righteous it shall go well with them for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds' (3:10).

The notion of power and its effect on man which is thus built up (not logically but evocatively, in a manner apt in Hebrew poetry), demonstrates clearly the gulf which separates man from God, a fact which in itself hardly needed dwelling on for the Israelite, though it is now and again emphasised by Isaiah: 'and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day' (2:11). The more important aspect of this gulf of separation for Isaiah is the fact that it has in a sense been bridged, as far as Israel is concerned, by the Covenant. Israel has been brought into close relationship with her transcendent God, and in some sense enabled to participate in his holiness: 'Sons I have reared and brought up' (1:2), 'The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the House of Israel' (5:7) and 'for great, in your midst, is the Holy One of Israel' (12:6). The existence of this covenant-relationship needed little emphasis in the time of Isaiah—in fact the people were prone to rely rather too much on it, but the real implications of it were what he sought to clarify, and he made clear that neglect of these implications amounted to rejection of the covenant: 'Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged' (1:4) so too: 'How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice' (1:21). There is some indication too, of the culpability of this implicit rejection, in the comparison suggested by: 'The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know and my people does not understand' (1:3) and in the question: 'What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done for it?' (5:4), and in the warning to those 'Who say "Let him make haste, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and let it come that we may know it"' (5:19).

This rejection of the implications of the covenant, which is Israel's primal sin, expresses itself in three chief ways; the most overt is the

worship of false gods and idols: 'their land is filled with idols; they bow down before the work of their hands' (2:8)—a sin which Isaiah castigates in suitably strong terms; the same fault however underlies their concentration on worldly wealth and power: 'Their land is filled with silver and gold' (2:7), and their reliance on human prudence, wisdom and strength, whether their own: 'Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes' (5:21), or worse still, that of others, in the shape of foreign military alliances, the chief sin of King Ahaz (7-8:5). This whole attitude ignores the fact that the very existence of Israel as a nation derives from, and depends upon the covenant, which should therefore be the only basis of all national and private policy: 'If you will not believe, surely you will not be established' (7:9) but 'If you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land' (1:19).

The refusal to make the holiness of Yahweh, expressed and explained in the simplest possible terms in the wearisome details of legislation later collected in the Book of Leviticus, the basic and absolute standard rule in all departments of life, is exemplified in the moral corruption and injustice which has resulted from concentration on worldly wealth; this is seen in the most elementary sins which Isaiah rebukes—oppression of the poor (1:17, 1:23); drunkenness and luxury (5:22); cheating and fraud (5:20, 10:1); and such moral corruption is joined to hypocrisy when it is accompanied by meticulous ceremonial worship, supposedly the formal expression of the covenant relationship, in fact a disgusting lie on which Isaiah expends some of his strongest language in his opening chapter.

Not only does Isaiah point out that Israel is a people committing sins, but he also indicates the resulting condition of sinfulness, or estrangement from Yahweh: 'They are utterly estranged' (1:4). Idolatry is not merely a specific refusal to acknowledge dependence on Yahweh, but a fantastic inversion of the real order of things, since man now makes gods in his own image and likeness: 'idols of gold which they made for themselves to worship' (2:20); the harlotry which this is considered to be is a denial of Israel's very character, and even almost, of her existence as a nation—her disruption by invaders is no more than a logical result of her own destruction of the basis of her corporate entity: 'your silver has become as dross' that is, it has changed its very nature (1:22); inevitably such perversions result in the degradation of man's own natural dignity: 'so man is humbled and men are brought low' (2:9). The destruction of the nation is the inevitable revelation of the true nature of Yahweh, which Israel has failed to manifest to the world around her; but because her relationship with Yahweh was a corporate, national one, her destruction will

occur precisely through national and political events, and not through cosmic forces like that of Sodom.

Holiness for man therefore means cleaving to Yehweh with absolute trust in him, earnest observance of his law, and sincere worship which is a genuine expression of this attitude. That this will be a safeguard for those who observe it is also emphasised by Isaiah: 'Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them' (3:10), or 'Be broken ye peoples, and be dismayed; give ear all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed. Take counsel together but it will come to nought; speak a word but it will not stand, for God is with us' (8:9-10); He has absolute control even over his destructive agents: 'And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant which is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt' (11:16). Yahweh's purging with fire will take away, forcibly, anything else on which they could rely except himself: 'For behold the Lord, the Lord of Hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Juda stay and staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water; the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counsellor and the skilful magician and the expert in charms' (3:1-3). So too, 'In that day the Lord will shave with a razor which is hired behind the River, with the Kings of Assyria, the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also' (7:20) 'In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the House of Jacob will no more lean upon him that smote them, but will lean upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth' (10:20).

If the first twelve chapters of Isaiah's work, the so-called Book of Emmanuel, be considered as a self-contained entity, the central placing of Isaiah's inaugural vision in chapter six may not be fortuitous and is certainly very apt, since it presents a microcosm of all the other themes developed in this part of the prophet's teaching. The holiness of Yahweh is epitomised in the Trisagion (v. 3); his power is evoked by the title 'Lord of Hosts' (v. 3); his lordship of creation is stated in the assertion that the whole earth is full of his glory (v. 3); his lordship of men is fully recognised in Isaiah's own reactions; both the terrifying and the purging aspect of fire are represented, by the smoke that filled the house (v. 4) and the seraphim's burning coal which cleansed Isaiah's lips (v. 6), while the prediction that even the 'tenth' that remains shall be burned again (v. 13) brings in the notion of the purified remnant; the distance separating God from his creatures—seraphim as well as man—is evoked by the high, exalted throne and the seraphim's

veiled faces (vv. 1, 2); perhaps even a faint reflection of the covenant idea could be derived from the act of purifying and forgiving Isaiah (v. 7) and the fact that his mission is voluntarily accepted (v. 8). The current neglect and rejection of the covenant are clearly indicated in the command to tell the people to 'Hear and hear but do not understand' (v. 9); the general sinfulness of the people is summed up by Isaiah himself (v. 5), while the refusal to rely on Yahweh is implied in the refusal to 'turn and be healed' (v. 10), and the inevitable result of national destruction is clearly stated (v. 11). Even the safety of the righteous remnant is symbolised in that of Isaiah himself, as is also the awful and terrifying character of Yahweh's cleansing action—the coal which cleansed Isaiah's lips of flesh is represented as being held by the Seraphim in a pair of tongs! Isaiah too, like Hosea and Ezekiel lives his message before he delivers it.

SR MARY CECILY, O.P.

Dominican Convent, Stoke-on-Trent.