

ISAIAH'S WIFE

THIS is less a thesis than a query, answerable perhaps with easy certainty by those who can cite adequate parallels in other languages. The query is: Does the statement in Isaiah viii 3 **ואקרב אל־הנביאה** imply that the unnamed woman whom the young Isaiah had married was a prophetess?

Dr Gray's answer was in the negative: 'אֵשֶׁת נְבִיאָה here means the wife of a prophet as מַלְכָה means the wife of a king.' No one will dispute that a man holding the office and title of 'king' refers to his wife as 'the queen'. Dr Skinner's note is: 'Isaiah's wife is so called, not because she herself possessed the prophetic gift, but because the husband's designation is transferred by courtesy to the wife'. Strictly this comment would apply to a narrative in the third person, and a narrative of later, probably posthumous, date. It is possible that the biographical material was once in the third person, like the *προσηλθεν* of א Q here, and the **אֶל־יִשְׁעָהּ** of M.T. at vii. 3. Actually, however, we are considering a statement in the first person: 'I went unto the prophetess'. This reads as an assertion that the woman was a prophetess, whereas Dr Moffatt's version, 'Then I the prophet went to my wife', is tantamount to an assertion that she was not. A greater degree of certainty must be attained before the text is altered to make it agree with the commentators.

The Targum simply repeats the statement made in the text.

Gesenius apparently cited as parallel the Latin usage of *episcopa* and *presbytera*. But, even if these can be quoted from speech by the husband, they are no better than the analogy of 'king', since the husband was an office-holder in a way in which the prophet was not.

Or, if the prophetic office is to be regarded in that way, we are back at the possibility of the holder being a woman. We have only to think of Victoria, queen and empress, or of the *ἱέρεια*, priestess, in the Greek classics. True, in this case Isaiah, the husband, was a prophet. But we are dealing with his own statement. If a poet said, 'I need my wife's help there. I can do nothing without the poetess', we should hardly be justified in flatly contradicting his implied assertion and declaring that his wife possessed no poetic faculty whatever. That, in effect, is what most of Isaiah's commentators have done.

The designation, even though one of courtesy, must be in some degree merited. It would not be considered right for allusion to be made by Hosea to Gomer as 'the prophetess'. And, as for Ezekiel,

we have his recital in the fullness of its pathetic simplicity: 'The Lord said, "I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes" . . . and at even my wife died'—'my wife', not 'the prophetess'.

Yet we find Dr Briggs (BDB, p. 612) adopting the usual hypothesis. The usage of נָאִיָּבִי is allotted three divisions:

- 1 a ancient type, Miriam, Ex. xv 20; and Deborah, Ju. iv 4.
- h later type, Huldah, 2 Kings xxii 14 = 2 Chron. xxxiv 22.
- 2 false prophetess, Noadiah, Ne. vi 14.
- 3 wife of Isaiah, Is. viii 3.

The Greek equivalent being *προφήτις*, we can add two more examples, Anna, Lk. ii 36, to be classed under 1 b; and the Jezebel of the church in Thyatira, Apoc. ii 20, to be classed under 2.

Thus, in Canonical Scripture, the number of women to whom this term is applied is raised to seven: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Noadiah and her Thyatira imitator, and Isaiah's wife: six to whom the term is applied with a normal significance, but the seventh, we are asked to believe, did not really merit the title! This is a remarkable theory. Would it ever have gained acceptance but for the prestige attaching to Isaiah's name as author of the entire book, first of the Major Prophets, and a 'statesman' entitled to his place in the peerage?

On the one occasion when Isaiah is recorded as using the title, was his own position so firmly established? Have we any right to assume that the great prophetic movement of the eighth century caught him before it caught the woman who became his bride? Or that the name of their first-born, Shear-Yashub, 'A Remnant Shall Return', was not of her choosing at least as much as his?

Chronological conclusions advocated in Cripps's *Commentary on Amos* allow us to date Isaiah's birth 762-60 and the great earthquake 740-39. The stirring voice of Amos may have been heard only a very few years before Isaiah's call. Until his inaugural vision described in ch. vi this young 'man of unclean lips' had no sense of his vocation; but he may already have begun to be infected by the enthusiasm of her whom he calls 'the prophetess'. We deduce that Shear-Yashub was born very near the time of the earthquake and of his father's call, for he must have been a boy between four and seven years of age when he accompanied his father to the interview with young King Ahaz in the year 735-4 (ch. vii v. 3).

Isaiah's own statement, even in regard to the conception of his second son, may be interpreted as uttered on a note of deference, 'I went unto the prophetess'. Before the birth of the first, the true parallel might well be, not a king honouring his queen, but a commoner being

honoured with the favour of a princess. Even if the time was after Isaiah's call, it was so soon after, that he could not then allude to his bride by his own prophetic title. Is it likely that he would a very few years later? The reply to this may be that the autobiographical detail belongs to a narrative compiled near the close of his life when his reputation had been long established. ('Isaiah did not repudiate the title "prophet"—Gray.) That, however, is a defensive argument rather than a natural interpretation of the words as they stand.

If Isaiah's wife was a prophetess, it is easier to understand how such names were bestowed on her children; for the mother had some say in the matter. And, while Isaiah claims to have been guided by God to take Shear-Yashub to Ahaz, there is nothing to preclude reception of that guidance partly through his wife, who had at least had her share in the responsibility of labelling the boy with a name which was a warning or a prayer. If he was a 'child of the earthquake', a devout mother might well plan for the child, Hannah-like, a special consecration. She may have known little of the problems in statecraft that confronted the king, and yet have longed to win him to a renunciation of worldly policies: to membership in that inner circle of the spiritually-minded who rely only upon God.

Sound exegesis cannot ignore x 20-23, discarded from the version of Dr Moffatt. In the Hebrew as printed by Kittel the two words that comprise the name of Isaiah's firstborn stand there challengingly prominent at the opening of both verse 21 and verse 22 b. If Dr Gray was justified in suggesting that these verses 'are due to some disciple of Isaiah' trying to fit on a conclusion to the oracle preceding, then there appears to be room for a conjecture that the placing of verses 20-23 was due solely to a collector who found, as he thought, a link in the presence of the word רִשָׁיָה 'remnant' in verse 19; while the composition goes back, not to a disciple, but to the wife of Isaiah. The proper context for this fragment is now lacking; but the original memoirs will have told of the birth and naming of the firstborn in greater fullness than we find in viii 3 for the second son.

Both names, Shear-Yashub, 'A Remnant Shall Return', and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, 'Spoil-Soon-Prey-Quick',¹ may at first, as Dr Kennett pointed out in his Schweich Lectures, have borne only their obvious and primary significance. Warnings against war comprised one topic of the oracles evolving from this prophetic partnership. In any case the Day of Doom loomed menacing for those of scandalous behaviour. Is it reasonable to deny that the voice of the prophetess may be heard in the denunciation of Jerusalem's society-women, if not in iii 16 to iv 1,

¹ Or 'Hasten-spoil-hurry-plunder' (Humbert in *Z.A.W.* 1 90-92).

then perhaps in xxxii 9-14? It would be invidious to assign her no more than the curious inventory of feminine finery in iii 18-23. But, without attributing to her any of the Isaianic oracles that survive, or exaggerating the scope of her influence, we may still find ourselves able to concede the probability that Isaiah's wife was a prophetess in her own right.

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