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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

## Prophetic Vocation: A Comparison.

BY THE REVEREND R. C. GILLIE, M.A., D.C.L., BATH.

THE three great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, overtop all others by the volume of their recorded words. Quantity as well as quality of output is an element in our estimate of greatness. And these three mountain-peak men are as remarkable for the length of their prophetic activity as for their wide range of thought. Ezekiel's ministry lasted twenty-two years, Jeremiah's forty, and Isaiah's at least as long. They all began their ministry as young men.

This largeness of labour is manifest to the casual reader, but it is easy to miss another feature, common to all three, which distinguishes them from their fellow-prophets. Each began his ministry by an ecstatic experience of marked originality. There was a creative moment in the life of each which not only endowed them with the messages they were to deliver in season and out of season, but also achieved a transformation of personality. Without this inward transformation their ministry, however enlightened, would have lacked force. An explosive energy launched them on their prophetic career. All three lay strong emphasis on this fact.

This is the more noteworthy when we compare them with the other prophets of Israel and Judah, especially the author-prophets. Moses and Samuel began their prophetic careers by similar experiences of intimate and immediate contact with God, but of none of the others is any vocation-vision recorded. Elijah bursts suddenly from the uplands of Gilead upon recreant Israel. Elisha is called decisively, but by the hand of Elijah rather than of God. Amos can say, 'The Lord took me from the flock,' but records nothing at the beginning of his prophetic career beyond the commanding word, 'Go and prophesy to my people Israel.' Hosea suffered from a tragical breakdown in his home life which made it possible for him to enter into the wounded love of Israel's God, but other men were betrayed in the same fashion. For the rest, with the exclusion of Jonah, they break suddenly into some moving or terrific utterance without a hint of what prepared or empowered them for it. Micah, for instance, calls at once for a world-wide audience, 'Attend, all nations; listen, O earth, and all on earth'; Haggai is immediately a herald, 'A message from the Lord of hosts'; Habakkuk is as abrupt, 'Look, faith-

less creatures, gaze, and be aghast.' But they all leave us in ignorance whether their intense conviction sprang from a creative moment of vision, or from a course of deep meditation issuing in an irresistible conviction. Their experience was apparently slow crystallization; that of the three was explosive.

### I.

Our interest is thus quickened when we realize the uniqueness of the fact that the three greatest prophets began their lengthy ministries with a remarkable vision as well as a decisive communication from God. All the more when we observe how contrasted the three initial experiences are in form. There is little relation between them. Suspicion of imitation, whether conscious or unconscious, is impossible. The sublimity of Isaiah's vision makes Jeremiah's fascinated interest in the boiling over of a great stew-pot almost ludicrous. The simplicity of Isaiah's vision, sublime as it was, differs violently from the elaboration of detail of Ezekiel's, which is none the less impressive.

Studying the three creative moments more closely, we penetrate to the most decisive contrast. The need of each of the three prophets is markedly different from that of the other two. All alike were crippled by a feeling of unfitness, but the sources of the unfitness in each case are not to be confounded.

Isaiah is bitterly conscious of personal and national sin, paralysing him. He has no temperamental fear of becoming a public character, or of the call to rebuke evil in men and nations.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, has no sense of acquiescence in evil. From childhood he had lived a life isolated from wrongdoers, dedicated to communion with his God. He is curiously destitute of any sense of personal taint. It is his temperament which causes him to tremble at the prospect of publicity. His is a shrinking nature. He is in a panic at the thought of boldly attacking the evils of his time, in which he has had no share.

Ezekiel differs from both Isaiah and Jeremiah. He was not crippled by condemnation of conscience or disability of temperament. His difficulty is of another kind. He has to break away from his environment and become an individual over against both God and his nation. He has 'to

stand upon his feet' before God's message can be delivered, to find himself and take resolute hold upon himself. Like Jeremiah, he is warned against cowardice—'Be not rebellious like this rebellious folk,' but the risk of cowardice was not because of his temperament but because of his situation.

If this analysis be correct, a double contrast confronts us. On the one hand, the big three are isolated from other spokesmen of God by a sudden and overwhelming experience at the beginning of their labours. On the other hand, they are isolated from each other by the difference of their need and of God's answer to their need. In these three individuals we see God dealing with the three great hindrances to Christian service—a sense of moral failure, a defect of temperament, an entanglement of personality.

## II.

Isaiah was an aristocrat and familiar with the royal palace, a devout citizen and familiar with the Temple at Jerusalem. God's self-disclosure to him takes form and colour from his ordinary haunts.

The Most High is revealed as a monarch with a retinue of seraphim, the lightning-angels, distinguished from the cherubim, who may be described as the cloud-angels. Immediately the note of awe is struck. They have six wings, but only two are for flight; four are for reverence, hiding face and feet. Before the overwhelming Majesty they seek to efface themselves. Voices of adoration like thunder shake the doorposts, and proclaim God's holiness and universal rule. Smoke begins to fill the Temple palace, symbol of mystery. It is not incense smoke, symbol of prayer. What are the great impressions made by the vision? Two.

1. Earlier prophets had known that Jehovah's power was not confined to Israel. They had escaped from the thought of a localized God, but they had tended to delimit His frontiers. The conviction seizes Isaiah that there are no frontiers. God is governor of the whole world. Assyria is His rod, as Judah is His child. The Seraphim heighten the impression of supremacy. God works through agents, does nothing save through these flaming servitors of His. He Himself is 'high and lifted up.'

2. But though so high, He is not remote; though universal, there is neither defect nor oversight in His government. 'Holy, holy, holy'—these are the affrighting words. The terror which seizes the prophet has a moral origin. He feels that he

is steeped in uncleanness, personal and national, and is powerless to cleanse himself or his people. This is the noblest contribution of the Jewish faith. The contrast felt is not, in the first place, between might and weakness, or between wisdom and folly, or between wealth and poverty, but between moral perfection and moral imperfection.

Why the emphasis upon 'unclean lips'? Because there is continual worship of Jehovah in Jerusalem, the elaborate ritual is maintained unceasingly. The prophet is dismayed at the effrontery of it as he beholds unveiled holiness and realizes the moral squalor of the worshippers. Their pollution seems to him to lie upon their lips.

It is equally remarkable that the cleansing achieved in Isaiah is neither by his own invitation, nor by his own act, and involves pain. The burning coal from off the altar, symbol of Divine holiness, alone can cleanse, and fire hurts. But the pain is unnoted and unmentioned in the joyful sense of release of personality. Cleansing brought with it an immediate sense of personal freedom and personal capacity. The authentic experience of Divine grace brought with it assurance of emancipation and equipment. As soon as the challenge to service sounds forth, even though it be by the voice of the Eternal Himself, 'Here am I, send me,' leaps to the lips of the cleansed man.

There is no explicit message of Divine forgiveness in Isaiah's experience. But the essential facts concerning forgiveness as concerning cleansing are here. Not by evasion of the Divine holiness, but by contact with it, is either pardon or purgation accomplished. Both are from God, neither self-induced nor self-created. And the process is marked by pain. 'Forgiveness is always a costly and tragical transaction.'

In Isaiah's experience, what may be called conversion and the unmistakable sense of vocation coincide. Sometimes vocation precedes conversion, oftenest vocation follows conversion; here they are simultaneous.

## III.

There could scarcely be a greater contrast than that between Isaiah and Jeremiah, both in their circumstances and in their vocation experience.

Jeremiah was a country priest, much more familiar with rustic scenes than with the life of the city, though it was not far off. He was interested in the trees and changing seasons. He had often watched the cooking and washing operations at the

cottage doors, where they take place in a warm climate. He had apparently lived an isolated life, in the nation but not of it, chiefly acquainted with himself and with God. He had noted the growing alienation of his people from right ways and true religion, but it had not entered his mind that he had a responsibility in the matter. He was without ambition, and conscious of his own inadequacy.

There is an extraordinary naturalness in his epoch-making interview with God. There is nothing strange to him in the impression of God's intimate nearness. That had often happened before. The strangeness is in what is said to him. From childhood he had talked with God. Communion with the Unseen One had been his habit. That had helped to isolate him from others. Now, in a flash, he is made to know the meaning of it. He had not only been isolated, he had been set apart from birth for a purpose, and the purpose was nothing less than to be a 'prophet to the nations.' That disconcerted him, though the nearness of God did not. Inadequacy, not impurity, is his disability—'Ah but, O Lord Eternal, I cannot speak, I am too young.' Immaturity is his plea, but there is a deeper difficulty. He thinks really that he never will be old enough. God speaks to his unspoken fear: 'Be not afraid at the sight of them, for I am with you to succour you.'

The intimacy of the conversation is heightened by the Divine gesture which accompanies it. Jeremiah, like Isaiah, gains a sense of new endowment, just where he is most conscious of need, on his lips. But it is not a seraph, with a glowing coal in the altar-tongs, who touches his lips; not a servitor of the Most High, but the Most High Himself. 'And then the Lord put out his hand to touch my mouth; the Lord said to me, "There I have put my words into your mouth: here and now I give you authority over nations and kingdoms, to tear up, to break down, to shatter, to pull down, to build up and to plant."' Was ever a wider and more authoritative commission given to a prophet? Was ever such a tremendous charge bestowed in simpler fashion? Was ever timidity at the moment of vocation counter-balanced by a more lavish promise of Heaven-sent enabling energy?

The truth is that this is probably the clearest foreshadowing of the Incarnation to be found in the Old Testament. God to Jeremiah in that hour was very like in word and act to what Jesus of Nazareth was to His disciples. All the sublimity of the momentous visions granted to Isaiah and Ezekiel at the opening of their careers is less than

the singular intimacy of contact granted to Jeremiah. Let it be repeated that this great boon was bestowed to counteract a defect of temperament, his natural timidity.

The two accompanying visions of assurance are of the same stark simplicity. 'Homely' is the only adjective to apply to them. Amazing though it appears to us, the first is based upon what we can scarcely avoid calling a pun. Jeremiah sees the shoot of an almond tree, called the *wakeful* tree because of its early blossoming. He is told that God will be *wakeful* over His word to perform it. God on the alert! That is the message for a man of shrinking temperament.

The second vision of a cauldron, belching forth steam and boiling fluid southwards, represents both the devastation and the source of the destroying forces which are to overwhelm Judah. The bareness of the vision makes its message all the more grim.

Finally, the tremendous promise is given that this trembling spokesman will be made like a city with walls of bronze—adamantine, impregnable, inviolate. There is no sentence in the Scriptures more like metal. No inhibition springing from habitual self-depreciation can stand against this word of the Lord, 'I—I fortify you.'

This discovery of vocation has nothing to do with conversion. Jeremiah knew no conversion. It sprang from long-sustained communion with God, habitual from opening consciousness. But it was a discovery of the availableness of God to outweigh every inbred deficiency of a man's original being. It was new creation.

#### IV.

The vision of Ezekiel comes before the charge to labour and is entirely without any word of God or angel. It is a little incoherent, imperfectly harmonized, in places almost abnormal. The prophet saw more than he can tell. 'In the middle of the Creatures there was *Something* moving to and fro like glowing coals, like torches afire that gleamed and flashed out lightning.' 'Such was the appearance of what resembled the splendour of the Eternal.'

This vision is also distinguished from the others by a vivid sense of colour. 'The colour of amber,' 'the colour of a topaz,' 'blue like a sapphire,' 'a bright halo like the rainbow,' reveal the artist temperament. There is a curious interest in machinery too. The wheels with their special arrangement which baffles our understanding

form an extraordinary feature. Science and art combine here with religion. It is strangely modern.

The details, full of suggestion, are so numerous that it is easy to miss the forest by looking at the trees. What is the main impression made by the vision? That is the important thing.

It is an impression of Divine Energy, perfectly controlled but indescribably active. There is perfect symmetry, for the four creatures are four-sided, and the celestial chariot they support and convey is four-sided. There is also perfect rhythm of movement—'each moves straightforward,' 'whenever the creatures moved, the wheels moved with them.' Especially notable, the whole apparatus is penetrated with intelligence. At the risk of grotesqueness this is emphasized—the wheels 'were full of eyes all around,' 'a living spirit was in the wheels.'

No doubt the vision derived some of its features from the amazing accompaniments of a highly wrought civilization into which Ezekiel and his fellow-exiles had been suddenly transported. The buildings of Babylonia were adorned by strange paintings of creatures, half-man and half-beast, many of them with wings. The rumble and rattle of wheeled traffic were continually in his ears. But the format of the vision must not blind us to its substance. It was a revelation of Divine Energy continually at work, by its swiftness omnipresent, fully available at every point. The everywhere-ness of the Energy is emphasized, but the supreme fact is Itself, its manifoldness and inclusiveness and intelligence. Everything imaginable is called in—wings and wheels, the faces of man and bull and eagle and lion, the colours of the sky and of jewels, lightning and rainbow—to heighten the impressiveness of Power. Language cracks and almost collapses under the strain. Personality is just saved. 'On the thronelike appearance there was the semblance of a human form.'

No doubt the message implicit in this vision was partly for the compatriots of Ezekiel. It was addressed to their situation. They were inclined still to think of Jerusalem as the throne of God, for a Jewish king, though a vassal, still ruled there. They are reminded that the Energy of God can flash from Jerusalem to Babylon in a moment. They fed their courage by the hope that things would remain as they were, that Jerusalem would abide unconquered and undestroyed. Here was the message of a Vitality that could form the future as easily as it maintained the past.

But the chief impact of the message was for Ezekiel himself. He was one of a group of exiles in an alien land. Their circumstances tended to make them cling together, to lose their individuality in their sense of racial and national unity, to forbid any kind of criticism of the community, past or present. Under such circumstances it was easy to lose one's sense of private responsibility in a stupor of patriotism. That was Ezekiel's danger. His environment was drugging his manhood.

If, however, within and without this situation of his people and himself, there sped hither and thither the intense and intelligent Energy of God Himself, the situation was transformed. If he could in any degree receive this energy, he was immediately re-endowed with personality. Its intention was not to stun, but to stab him broad awake. Abject prostration before the splendour of the Eternal was not asked from him. The supreme demand was to accept his individual responsibility and act upon it. The first words which break from the overwhelming majesty are these, 'Son of man, *stand up*, and I will speak to you.'

Here is a demand for something which lies behind either conversion or vocation. A man must be himself and realize himself before he can either receive or serve, receive the highest gift or serve on the most sacred mission. It is impossible to take a grip of God before one has taken a grip of life, and man cannot take a grip of life before he has taken a grip of himself. The Master of mankind said of the prodigal son, 'he came to himself,' before 'he came to his father.'

## V.

Hesitatingly I offer a few suggestions arising from this study.

1. With too facile tongue and pen it is asserted to-day that we preachers are as truly prophets for our generation as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were for theirs, that all inspiration differs not in kind but in degree, that we are as essentially equipped to be spokesmen of God as these ancients were. Is that true? Without them, and apart from them, have we a like experience of the immediacy of Divine communicativeness? Even with them to help us, with their announcements of God's character and power to guide us, have we any vision of God as concrete and as authoritative as theirs? Are we not wiser if we are more humble, recognizing that we serve the same God, with

larger knowledge and immensely enriched stores of revelation, but with less dramatic and less authoritative direct disclosures of the Divine will and mind? We have to think more. That is not our disgrace, if it does not prevent us believing more abundantly, more intensely. But to claim a like directness of communication, stamped with the unmistakable seal of Divine authority? That, I for one will not claim. Without the revelation of God in the Bible and in our Lord Jesus Christ I am undone, without a chart if not without a compass.

2. We are reminded of the manifoldness of the Divine activity. He takes His chief workers from every type of personality and from every type of experience. He still needs and finds the statesman-prophet and the artist-prophet, the messenger of hope and the messenger of doom, the recluse and the man of affairs, endowing them with the gifts which make them fit for apparently impossible tasks. We easily limit His range and doubt His availability for our kind of requirement. He still controls the births of great personalities, He still invades every kind of life with His thunderous or whispered challenge.

3. We are reminded equally of the Divine re-

sources. 'There is no kind of difficulty within us or without us with which He cannot deal.' Smear and stain of sin, defect and disability of temperament, entanglement and imprisonment of environment—the Divine Energy can liberate and endow and renew according to our and His need. All the modern elucidations of how things affect the soul of man are useful, if we remember the inestimable powers of recovery and revitalization which are in God alone. Forget that, and we are without hope. Recollect that, make it a part of our working faith, and we belong to the conquerors.

4. Finally, the greatest servants of God begin with a creative experience in their own life. It may not be conversion—we need a bigger name—but it is transformation. If that dies out of our message we defraud our fellows of the good news they need most tragically in this hour. Nay, we do a worse thing, we come near to baffling God when He seeks to redeem our time by personalities newly empowered because newly endowed with what only God can give. On His power to penetrate human personality and to transform it, we must insist if we are to continue to believe in the God revealed in the Old and the New Testaments.

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## In the Study.

### *Virginibus Puerisque.*

An Easter Sermon.

BY THE REVEREND STUART ROBERTSON, M.A.,  
GLASGOW.

'The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live.'—Jn 5<sup>26</sup> (R.V.).

EASTER is the time when all the face of Nature is preaching in white and gold and purple the message of Resurrection. For long months the world has been silent: the fields bare, the trees gaunt and leafless, the birds' voices unheard. It has seemed as if all the beauty of the world was buried and lost.

But although buried it was not dead. Nature was a Sleeping Beauty with a spell upon her. She lay helpless and silent until the sun, that Fairy Prince, stooped and kissed her and she woke to new life.

That is the wonder of Easter. It is as if the sun, that great light of the world, was saying what Jesus, who is 'the Light of the world,' said once

—'the hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live.' So the world hears a voice and lives. There is a green on the bare brown fields, a bursting of buds on the trees that shall clothe their nakedness in fair, new garments, and a great and glad singing of birds. This is God preaching from the book of Nature what He preaches in His other Book, the Bible—life from the dead—Resurrection.

I want to tell you how I once saw it.

It was in a garden. The front was just a bare, dull sweep of gravel; but in the midst of it, like a point of flame, was a crocus. There had been a flower-bed there, but to save work it had been dug up, its flowers taken away, the earth smoothed and beaten down and covered with gravel. It seemed the finish of the flower-bed, but deep down was one crocus bulb overlooked and left. Under cart-loads of gravel that little vital streak of life lay sleeping. Then the Easter sun shone out and called to it—'Awake, thou that sleepest, and I will