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Isaiah 63:7-66:24

It is quite unfortunate that no chapter division has been made in our Bible between Isaiah 63:6 and 63:7. This is an important dividing point. Putting what precedes and what follows together in one chapter means that the last paragraph of the division of the book which begins at 56:9 and the first paragraph of the one that runs to the end of the book are combined into one chapter. As a result this chapter fails to have any unity. Actually the material in the latter part of this chapter and the whole of Chapter 64 are so closely bound together that a chapter division between them is out of place.

This section of the book is made up of three parts. The first, Isaiah 63:7-64:12 may be entitled, "Israel prays for help." The next consists of Isaiah 65, "a Rebuke to sinful Israel with a sketch of God's plan for the world." Chapter 66 describes "God's intention for Israel itself."

Isaiah 63:7 to 64:12 forms a unit. Nowhere in it is God the actual speaker, as in the sections preceding and following, though in Verse 12 something which God had said at a much earlier time is quoted. The speaker is recalling God's goodness to Israel in the past and praying Him to help His people in the midst of a desperate situation. The greater part of his discourse consists of a plea to God to deliver His people from dire catastrophe.

Immediately, of course, one asks, who is the speaker? Is the prophet speaking on behalf of the righteous remnant of the people? Is he presenting the rightful petitions of the nation as a whole? Or is he, perhaps, presenting a false attitude which is characteristic of a large portion of the nation, in order to show God's answer to such an attitude?

This third suggestion is not as improbable as it appears at first sight. Frequently in the Bible false statements are quoted in order to describe a situation or to show God's answer. As early as Genesis 3 a lying statement of Satan is recorded in order to show its effects upon Eve and its results in God's curse upon the serpent and upon the entire creation. In Isaiah 7 the hypocritical evasions of Ahaz were quoted, in order to show God's response to them. Isaiah 36:14-20 quotes at length the blasphemous words of the Assyrian king whom God later defeated without utilizing human effort. When such statements are quoted all that is intended is to give a true picture of the attitude of the speaker. All the Scripture is true but some of it is a true picture of the thoughts and attitudes of human beings rather than a presentation of the mind of God. Is it possible that this beautiful passage should be included in such a category? Normally such statements are labeled but this is not always the case. Sometimes the true situation has to be decided from observation of the context. In such a case it is very vital, of course, that we be extremely careful to avoid mistakes and not to read into the context something that is not there.

An instance where an entire book is a presentation of a human attitude rather than a direct revelation of divine ideas is the book of Ecclesiastes, which shows us the vanity of purely human effort "under the sun."

THE CLUE TO THE PASSAGE

In the case before us the clue to the interpretation of 63:7 to 64:12 is found in what follows. It is strange that the true interpretation has escaped many interpreters. Interestingly enough we find Professor Franz Delitzsch in his commentary (1)

(1) Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah, translated from the author's fourth and last edition, Volume 2, Edinburgh, 1910, p. 437.