THE INFINITE IN A FINITE ORGANICAL PERCEPTION (ISAIAH VI 1-5)

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“‘Isaiah answer’d. I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the infinite in every thing...’”, William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 12.

Driver’s Beginning

In 1971 G.R. Driver published a curious rebuttal of the conventional English translation of Isa. vi 1, of which the Authorized Version’s rendering is exemplary: “‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.’” According to Driver, “whatever the Hebrew noun [šāl] here used may mean, the Revised Version’s ‘train’ cannot stand; for, so far as Accadian sculptures and Egyptian paintings show, men never and women rarely, if ever, had trains to their robes. Indeed, a train, which is an elongated part of a robe or skirt trailing on the ground behind the wearer, must have been barely possible in the ancient world, where ground and floor can often have been unsuitable for such appendages.”

Fortunately, Driver soon abandons moot couturial speculation in favour of a philological study of the word in question. Expanding a suggestion by Abraham Geiger, Driver says, “the only possible rendering, then ... is ‘his lower limbs’ or ‘extremities filled the temple’” (pp. 89-90). But such blatant anthropomorphism is too crude for Driver’s sense of the august Isaiahic vision and he withdraws from it. “‘Let no one suppose, however, that the prophet will have

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imagined God’s extremities or lower limbs as exposed to view; the pictures suggest that he will have regarded Him as clothed in a long robe reaching to the ankles and leaving only the feet uncovered’ (p. 90). The rejected ‘kingly garment’ (so Ivan Engnell) returns, curiously, even though the šūl that Isaiah sees filling the temple is somehow a reference to God’s lower appendages. Clothing is one thing, what it covers another. The mortified reaction of the prophet, in any case, encourages a less tremulous exactitude about what the prophet saw if we want to understand why it so moved him.

In spite of Driver’s bland conclusions, his philological investigation points to some overlooked evidence that bears on this much read passage. After Driver, the conventional translation is untenable. It is surprising that the most recent translations, the *New Revised Standard Version*, for example, persist in ‘‘the hem of his robe filled the temple’’. Perhaps Driver’s ambivalence about the implications of his research on the word šūl allowed the editorial board of the *NRSV* to discount the force of his philological work. But unconnected research, since, on the world field in which šūl is found suggests that Driver’s research should be extended and pushed to a logical conclusion. Such an investigation leads to a new vision—perhaps one that Driver sensed and from which he shied—of what Isaiah saw and why it unnerved him.

*Philological Notes on šūl*

Driver identified six verses, relevant for understanding Isaiah’s vision, in which the word šūl occurs: Isa. vi 1, xlvi 2; Jer. xiii 22, 26; Nah. iii 5; and Lam. i 9. Aside from these passages he noted one other, Exod. xxviii 33-4, in which he said the correct under-

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3 Cf. Jonas Greenfield, “‘There can be no doubt that in this vision God ... is described as fulfilling his royal role by being seated on a high, elevated throne with his robe filling the Temple. There are no lacunae—no space left empty at the top of the lofty throne, and even more so, no telltale gap between throne and footstool, rather, an overflowing of the divine/royal gown’” (“Baʿal’s Throne and Isa. 6:1’’, in A. Caquot, S. Légasse and M. Tardiue [ed.], *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Mathias Delcor* [Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1985], p. 198). Even God’s legs, it seems, are too much for anyone; one wonders how Moses lived to tell of a look at the deity’s back side (... וְרָאָה בַּשָּׁם אֱלֹהִים, Exod. xxxiii 23).