

Isaiah 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 6. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings, with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?

Then I said, Here I am, send me. And he said, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. Then I said, How long, O Lord?

And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste. And the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth, or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

In Isaiah chapter 6, we find something that many have identified as a prophetic call narrative, related to accounts that we find in places like Jeremiah chapter 1, and Ezekiel chapters 1 to 3.

In Jeremiah chapter 1, verses 4 to 10, we read of Jeremiah's installation as a prophet for the nation of Judah. Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

[2 : 2 4] Then I said, Our Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth. But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

In that chapter, the Lord proceeds to assure Jeremiah of the effectiveness that the words that he has placed upon Jeremiah's lips will have. He declares the judgment that is about to come upon the nation of Judah from the north, the way that Jeremiah will be empowered for his mission, and how his message will be received and responded to. Verses 17 to 19. But you, dress yourself for work. Arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. As in Isaiah, Jeremiah's mouth and lips are prepared for speech.

In Ezekiel's call, like Isaiah, he witnesses a theophanic vision, and he has given a scroll to eat. Moses also has a theophanic vision and a prophetic commission in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. However, while the passages describing Jeremiah and Ezekiel's prophetic cause open their respective books, Isaiah's is found six chapters in. And this puzzles many commentators, as chapter 6 verse 1 to 8 has many of the expected features of an inaugural commission. The prophet's lips are prepared, and he has given an outline of his mission and the results that it would have. Commentators have, in many cases, sought an explanation for this in speculative reconstructions of the redaction history of the text, in the different historical layers of its composition. It is hypothesised by some, for instance, that the call narrative, along with chapters 7 to 8, was part of a single document, and so was kept with them, even though it might better have been situated at the beginning of the book.

John Oswald remarks upon the fact that many of those advancing this theory are the same as those who argue that this supposedly inserted section has broken up material in the chapters that bracket it.

Far better, Oswald suggests, to place far less emphasis upon doubtful reconstructions, and to focus instead upon the final canonical form of the text, and the call narrative in its actual situation. Another important consideration here is that, despite similarities with inaugural call narratives, there are also similarities with the vision of the divine council given by the prophet Micaiah in 1 Kings chapter 22 verses 19 to 22. And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord.

[5 : 35] I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?

And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so. Rather than reading Isaiah chapter 6 as the account of Isaiah's initial call, it might be better understood as the account of a special commissioning, in which he receives a more extensive and prominent task, although he is already a prophet at the beginning of it. The vision is dated to the year of King Uzziah's death, and it is a glorious vision of the Lord, exalted and enthroned in his temple. We ought to remember that the temple, literally the palace, and especially the Holy of Holies, was the symbolic throne room of the Lord.

The Lord was enthroned upon the cherubim, with the Ark of the Covenant being like his footstool. The date of King Uzziah's death is uncertain, and determining depends heavily upon larger schemes of chronology that we follow. Some suggest 742 BC, others a date several years later.

There seems to be more than a narrow concern for dating present here, though. The death of King Uzziah, after a 52-year largely prosperous and militarily successful reign, represented a key point of transition to a time of national insecurity and threat.

As the old king dies, however, the Lord, the word here is not Yahweh, but Lord, Master or Sovereign, is seen exalted upon his throne. Human kings will fall, but the throne of the Lord endures.

- [7 : 27] Judah's sovereignty is about to collapse, but God's is unrivaled and over all. In the inaugural vision of Ezekiel, he also saw the Lord enthroned on the divine throne chariot. Ezekiel's description of the Lord focused upon the lower and upper body of the enthroned figure, shrouded in glory and also in metaphor. In Exodus chapter 24, it is the pavement beneath the throne that is most in view.

In Isaiah's vision, it is the train of the Lord's robe, at the level of his feet, that is especially focused upon. Along with the enthroned Lord, Isaiah saw seraphim above him.

The seraphim, literally the burning ones, are described as having six wings, two covering their faces, two covering their feet, and two with which they flew. The feet here might possibly be a euphemistic reference to genitals.

Whatever it is, they shield themselves from the glory of the Lord and cover their modesty. They seem to have some human-like features, faces, hands and feet, but the more specific character of the seraphim is difficult to ascertain.

- [8 : 30] We don't have them described anywhere else in scripture. Elsewhere in scripture, the term is used in relation to the fiery serpents in Numbers chapter 21, and the bronze serpent that Moses erects in response to that plague.

In contrast to those, however, we are not told that the burning ones here in Isaiah chapter 6 are serpents. However, in Isaiah chapter 14 verse 29, we encounter the same terminology.

They are clearly used in relation to a serpent. It is likely that we should imagine the seraphim here as flying serpentine figures, with some human limbs and features.

Several scholars relate them to Egyptian images of winged Uraei, serpent-like creatures associated with gods and pharaohs. As flying fiery serpents, they are also akin to living lightning bolts.

The seraphim called antiphonally, declaring the holiness of the Lord. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. The Lord is the thrice-holy God, enthroned above all other powers, whose majesty pervades his creation.

- [9 : 45] The seraphim pronounced the utter incomparability of the Lord, his set-apartness, and his consuming presence. And the temple in Isaiah's vision responds. The foundations of the threshold shake, and the building fills with smoke.

We should probably connect this to the cloud of the Lord's presence, described in places like Exodus chapter 40, but also to a glorious cloud of incense. As the building shakes, so does the prophet, Isaiah recognizing all too clearly his own sinfulness, and his membership of a sinful people, exposed by the dazzling glory and holiness of the Lord's fiery presence, despairs, suddenly seeing who he is in relation to the holiness of the Lord, and thinking himself to be a dead man.

As Oswald underlines, It is not the greatness of the Lord's might, so much as the consuming holiness of his presence, that impresses itself upon the prophet. As for his own sinful character, and the sinful character of the people among whom he ministered, Isaiah feels the primary locus of that uncleanness, to be in their lips and their speech.

We might perhaps relate this to the teaching of the book of Proverbs and elsewhere, where the tongue is the chief organ revealing the character of a person. We might think about the false worship of Judah also, as described in chapter 1, as a particularly egregious example of their unclean lips.

James speaks of unclean lips in his epistle, in chapter 3 verses 10 to 12. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

[11 : 17] Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

One of the burning ones, the seraphim, takes a burning coal from the altar and touches the lips of Isaiah with it, cleansing his mouth for service. We should also recognize that this is a sort of igniting of his tongue.

On the day of Pentecost, for instance, the ascended Christ sends his spirit upon his disciples, in the form of tongues of fire alighting upon them. The tongues of fire become flaming tongues of speech, by which they bear a spirit-empowered witness to Christ.

Something similar is happening here. The burning one is making Isaiah another sort of burning one, a prophet who can speak with fiery words. The fiery presence of the Lord that had earlier terrified Isaiah does not destroy, but cleanses him, purging him of his guilt and atoning for his sin.

Having had his unclean lips cleansed, Isaiah is now prepared for service. The next thing that we hear is the Lord's voice, presumably addressing the assembly of the divine council.

[12 : 26] Whom shall I send? Presumably refers to the Lord himself. And who will go for us? To the divine council that surrounds him. The seraphim and any of the other heavenly hosts who are present.

As in 1 Kings chapter 22, The prophet primarily seems to be a witness to these proceedings and is not directly summoned nor commanded. However, Isaiah speaks up, volunteering himself for the mission.

We should think here also of the mission of the prophet. A priest is someone who acts as a household servant for the Lord in his temple and also maintaining the household of his people. The king is the vice-guerrant of the Lord, one who rules under him as his son.

The prophet, however, is a direct participant in the heavenly council. He participates in the deliberations of the divine council around the Lord in situations like this. He is one of the messengers of the Lord and the divine council to the people, but also represents the people to the council.

Oswald helpfully articulates the progressive development of this scene. The sequential relationship of the elements ought not to be overlooked. Each element leads to the next.

[13 : 32] The king's death prepares the way for the vision of God. The vision of God leads to self-despair. Self-despair opens the door to cleansing. Cleansing makes it possible to recognize the possibility of service.

The total experience then leads to an offering of oneself. The Lord's commission to Isaiah is a strange one. The commission is to tell the people what the effect of his message will be.

The people would be rendered insensible, much as Pharaoh's heart was hardened at the time of the Exodus. It is important, as John Goldingay notes, to recognize that Isaiah's commission was designed to be heard by Judah itself.

In 1 Kings chapter 22, Ahab was informed that there was a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets, yet he heeded them nonetheless. It is not as if Judah is left without warning.

Rather, the very warning message will compound and accelerate their judgment. Paradoxically, the warning message will itself be a means by which that of which it warns will be affected.

[14 : 31] The people's senses would still physically function, but they would be robbed of spiritual perception in judgment for their sin. Sin gradually renders people unresponsive and insensible, hearts hardened, necks stiffened, ears dulled, and eyes darkened.

The response of the prophet is to ask a familiar question from the Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture. How long? This is a common question in lament. We see it in places like Psalm 13, verses 1 to 2.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Psalm 74, verse 10. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

Psalm 89, verse 46. How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? The judgment, however, the Lord declares, will continue until the land was laid waste by it, desolated by the Lord's judgment.

[15 : 36] As we saw in the preceding chapters, it will only be through the purgation of judgment and the cutting off of all the sinful and wicked of the land that the people will finally experience the promise that we see at the beginning of chapter 2, for instance.

This would involve both desolation, the cities laid waste without inhabitant, and also deportation, the Lord removing people far away. We could perhaps connect this to three different waves of judgment.

The wave of judgment in the Syro-Ephraimite war in the next few years. The wave of judgment in the attack of the Assyrians that would lead to the near destruction of Jerusalem in 701 BC, and then later in the destruction of Judah by Babylon in 586 BC.

One might see the stump here as Jerusalem, which barely survived the attack of the Assyrians in 701 BC. One could also imagine it applying to Judah after the return from exile in Babylon in the 530s BC.

As Joseph Blenkinsop notes, holy seed only elsewhere is mentioned in Ezra chapter 9 verse 2, in reference to the population of the returnees, some of whom had been intermarrying with surrounding pagan peoples.

[16 : 46] There is a hint of promise at the end. After all of the judgment has fallen upon the people, they will not be destroyed, but purged. A small remnant will remain, but yet they will be a holy remnant.

Through them there is the hope of the people finally flourishing. A question to consider, how does the commission of Isaiah in this chapter provide a fundamental framework for understanding Jesus and the church's mission in the New Testament?