

ISAIAH'S CALL AND ITS CONTEXT IN ISAIAH 1-6

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Commentators have offered a variety of opinions on Isaiah's call within its context in Isaiah 1-6. Part of this diversity stems from the call's placement. Unlike his fellow prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, whose call experiences open their books, Isaiah's initial command to preach seems to come in chapter 6. This difference has led to speculation on the authorship, date, compilation, setting, and purpose of the whole section. Though these issues cannot be solved beyond question, it is necessary to examine them to analyze Isaiah's call effectively. Therefore, this article will explore Isaiah's call in its context by noting the section's genre, historical setting, structure, biblical context, placement, contents, and theology. This discussion will conclude that Isaiah 6 functions as a linking passage between the book's presentation of the difficulty of the prophet's message in chapters 1-5 and the difficulty of the prophet's ministry in chapters 7-12. It will thereby demonstrate the strenuous nature of Isaiah's life and work.

Isaiah 1-6 and Prophetic Literature

Isaiah begins the latter prophets segment of the Hebrew canon. As the opening prophecy, it sets the tone for the rest of the books. Themes, images, and personae that appear here emerge again and again in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. The importance of this observation lies in its ability to help explain the logic of the placement of Isaiah 6.

The prophetic genre uses both narrative and poetry to proclaim its message.¹ Thus, what separates prophecy from the law and the

¹ Of course, scholars are currently debating the nature of Hebrew poetry and its existence. This article uses the terms in their traditional sense. However one defines Hebrew poetry, it is evident that Isaiah 1-5 and Isaiah 36-39 utilize different syntactical

writings is its content, not its mode of composition. B. D. Napier argues that five basic themes distinguish prophetic literature: (1) Word and symbol, (2) election and covenant, (3) rebellion and judgment, (4) compassion and redemption, and (5) consummation.²

R. Clements basically agrees with Napier. He thinks canonical (written) prophecy stresses the inspiration of the prophet's words and the destruction and restoration of Israel. Clements says "special emphasis was attached" to restoration, and that Israel's eventual renewal assumes a variety of forms in the prophets.³ Napier and Clements offer a balanced view of prophetic themes, in contrast to commentators who tend to over-emphasize the prophets' concern with sin and doom.⁴ Isaiah 1-6 constantly claims to present God's own words. Twice the passage says that Isaiah received these messages as "visions" from the Lord (1:1; 2:1). God is quoted repeatedly (1:2-3, 24-26; 5:1-2; etc.). Chapter 6 presents an episode where Isaiah speaks with God face to face. Claims for direct inspiration permeate these chapters and the whole prophecy as well.

Yahweh and the prophet denounce sin in great detail in chapters 1-6. These denunciations set the stage for later calls to repentance and offers of consolation. Often, the Lord announces the nation's wickedness (e.g., 1:2-3), and then Isaiah explains the implications of Yahweh's comments for Israel (e.g., 1:4-9).⁵ At other times, the prophet introduces God's condemnations (e.g., 3:13-15). Israel's wickedness becomes so evident by 6:5 that Isaiah admits, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

Because of this sin, God will punish Israel. The elect people do not recognize their master (1:2-3), so Yahweh will purge the rebel-

styles and that Isaiah 6 combines both styles. Cf. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (original 1753; reprinted Andover: Codman, 1829); James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 1981); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Mona West, "Looking for the Poem: Reflections on the Current and Future Status of Biblical Hebrew Poetry Analysis," *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. Paul R. House; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992).

² B. D. Napier, *Song of the Vineyard: A Guide Through the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 250.

³ Ronald Clements, "Patterns in the Prophetic Canon," *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 45.

⁴ Many early critical scholars tend to argue that the prophets preached judgment, and that any mention of hope must be an addition to the text. Cf. Ivan Engnell's survey and refutation of this tendency in *The Call of Isaiah: An Exegetical and Comparative Study* (Uppsala/Leipzig: A-B. Lundequistska/Otto Harrassowitz, 1949) 20-23.

⁵ Note John D. W. Watts' division of Isaiah 1-6 into speeches and counter-speeches in *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC 24; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 1-77.

lions nation of all His foes (1:24-26). This purging will occur on the day of Yahweh, a time of reckoning (2:12) that will humble the proud among Israel's leadership (3:1-12) and general populace (3:15-4:1). Exile will be the most obvious sign that the "day" has come (5:13). Only a remnant of righteous persons will remain in the land after the judgment ceases (6:9-13).

God punishes to effect redemption. After the devastation, all nations will worship Yahweh together in Jerusalem (2:1-4). The filth of Israel will disappear, and the "survivors in Israel" will enjoy God's protection in Zion (4:2-6). A remnant of people will survive even the harshest punishment (6:13). Though chapters 1-6 stress sin and judgment, they do not neglect restoration altogether. Renewal remains Yahweh's ultimate purpose.

Clearly, Isaiah 1-6 introduces the basic themes of the prophetic genre. Isaiah will participate in the main traditions of prophetic preaching. Since condemnation and calls for repentance are so prominent, his audience may not appreciate his message. His ministry may not prove easy or popular.

Historical Setting of Isaiah 1-6

Some scholars attempt to date chapters 1-5 fairly specifically. For instance, Hayes and Irvine note that Isaiah 7's setting is ca. 733, since it describes the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. At this time Syria and Samaria invade Judah (7:1-2), which causes Ahaz to ask Assyria for help (2 Kgs 16:7-9). Since chapter 6 is dated about seven years earlier, Hayes and Irvine suggest that most, if not all, of chapters 1-6 is preached 745-740, or, in other words, a few years before Uzziah's death.⁶ In their scheme, Isaiah 1-6 comes from Isaiah's early ministry, when Judah's wickedness has yet to place them in political danger. Chapters 7-12, then, are sermons delivered during and after the 733 crisis that inaugurates a new, politically conscious phase of Isaiah's ministry.⁷

Other commentators are more cautious. For instance, J. Oswalt thinks chapters 1-5 are broad introductory messages that have no "more direct relationship with chaps. 7-12 than they do with any other segment of the book."⁸ Thus, they can only be dated sometime during Isaiah's career. R. Clements says that chapter 1 is an introductory collection of texts from various periods of Isaiah's ministry. Most

⁶ John H. Hayes and Stuart Irvine, *Isaiah the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) 52-53.

⁷ Ibid. Note, too, their discussion of chaps. 7-12 (113-220).

⁸ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 173.

of chapters 2-6 originates during 733-725, since these passages are similar in content to Isaiah 7-9, though messages of hope like 2:1-5, 4:2-6, and 6:12-13 are post-exilic additions.⁹ E. J. Young essentially agrees with Oswalt's assessment of the section, and though they date more oracles after 587 than Clements, Kaiser and Gray also think much of chapters 1-6 comes from eighth-century Isaiah.¹⁰ Other authors could be cited, but the point has been made. These writers conclude that Isaiah 1-5 arises from a variety of eighth-century settings and introduces the book in some way. All agree that Isaiah 6 occurs by 740.

The prophecy itself offers no exact life setting for chapters 1-5. Two inscriptions appear, but they merely state that Isaiah delivers these messages sometime "during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah" (1:1) and that they consist of comments "concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (2:1). Chapter 6 originates "in the year of King Uzziah's death" (6:1), but this reference reveals little. It sets a date for the call experience without divulging how Uzziah's death affects Isaiah. The book's internal evidence can be interpreted in a number of ways, as the survey of scholarly opinions noted above indicates. Therefore, chapters 1-5 can only be dated sometime during the reigns of the kings listed in 1:1, or between 783-687.¹¹ Again, chapter 6 takes place near 740. Isaiah's ministry spans from at least 740, and concludes no sooner than 701, when Sennacherib invades Judah (cf. Isaiah 36-37).

Because chapter 6 mentions Uzziah's death, it is possible to suggest a general historical situation for Isaiah 1-6. Uzziah rules effectively from ca. 783-742.¹² He helps Judah attain economic and military success at a time when Jeroboam II (ca. 786-746) enjoys an even greater reign in Samaria.¹³ Despite these prosperous times, Yahweh is not pleased with the people. Hosea and Amos, who minister during the earlier decades of Uzziah and Jeroboam's era, charge the people and their rulers with a variety of individual and societal sins. By the time Uzziah dies, the people are ripe for judgment. Assyria

⁹ Ronald Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 2-8.

¹⁰ Cf. E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Vol. 1, chapters 1-18* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 233; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 1-7; 23, 53, 73; G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 1-27* (ICC; Edinburgh: or and or Clark, 1912) l-li. It is unnecessary to argue the merits of these authors' opinion on specific texts at this point in the article. What matters is their agreement about the general date and purpose of chaps. 1-6.

¹¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 288-308.

¹² *Ibid.*, 254-55.

¹³ *Ibid.*

will soon threaten the region and will eventually destroy Samaria. As a new prophet, Isaiah should have even less hope for Israel's immediate future than his predecessors.

Structure of Isaiah 1-6

A passage's structure unites its various themes, images, ideas, characters, plots, points of view, and time sequences. It is the glue that holds artistic pieces together. E. V. Roberts states:

Structure is a matter of the relationship among parts that are usually described in terms of cause and effect, position in time, association, symmetry, and balance and proportion. . . . Literary artists universally aim at a unified impression in their works, and because literature is a time art. . . , the study of structure attempts to demonstrate that the idea and the resulting arrangements of parts produces a total impression.¹⁴

Because of its ambiguous historical background, this section's structure is particularly important to grasp. If the chapters are introductory in nature, then their progression of thought becomes extremely vital.

Certain "seams" exist in these chapters. First, both chapters 1 and 2 have inscriptions which separate them into two distinct segments. Second, chapters 2-4 form a unit, since 2:1-4 describes Israel's glorious future, 2:5-4:1 warns of coming judgment, and 4:2-6 returns to the restoration theme. Third, 5:1-7 is a song about Israel's rebellion against God. Fourth, 5:8-30 consists of woes against Israel. Fifth, 6:1 is a dated, narrative account. Sixth, 7:1 presents a totally different setting from chapter 6. Except for 5:1-7 and 5:8-30, each seam also marks a thematic transition.

Linguistic parallels help link these sections. L. Liebreich notes that variations on שָׁמַע (*sm'*) ("hear") and קָדַשׁ (*qds*) ("holy") occur throughout the chapters. Israel is told to "hear" or "obey" in both 1:2 and 1:10.¹⁵ The Torah is the object of the "hearing" in 1:10, and 5:24 blames rejection of the Torah for Israel's certain punishment.¹⁶ Further, 1:4 and 5:24 charge that Israel has "rejected the holy one of Israel," 5:16, 19, and 24 mention Yahweh's holiness, and chapter 6 presents Yahweh as the thrice-holy one.¹⁷

¹⁴ Edgar V. Roberts, *Writing Themes About Literature* (3d ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 119.

¹⁵ Leon J. Liebreich, "The Position of Chapter Six in the Book of Isaiah," *HUCA* 25 (1954) 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

Thematic progression is evident as well. Chapter 1 utilizes several common prophetic rhetorical devices, each intended to shame the people into repentance.¹⁸ Yahweh exposes Israel's rebelliousness by comparing them unfavorably to an ox and an ass (1:2-3). Next, God asks the people why they are determined to perish (1:4-9). The land has been devastated, so why do they remain stubborn? Why not "wash" themselves of this sin (1:10-17)? After all, repentance will bring blessings (1:18-20). As a last resort, Isaiah calls Israel a harlot (1:21-26) and once again demands repentance (1:27-31).

Chapter 2 uses a new inscription to break from chapter 1, but it continues the sin, punishment, and restoration sequence. P. R. Ackroyd places 2:1-5 with chapter 1, thus creating two segments that begin with condemnation and conclude with hope (1:2-2:5 and 2:6-4:6).¹⁹ Though this ordering is possible, it fails to accept the separate inscriptions as clear divisions and does not recognize another viable structural option. If 1:1-31, 2:1-4:6, and 5:1-30 are distinct units, then 1:1-31 and 5:1-30 begin and end with oracles of doom. Conversely, 2:1-4:6 begins and ends with words of hope. This rhetorical strategy allows Israel to receive the prophet's message however they wish, either as a message of doom or hope. Unfortunately, they reject threats and promises equally. No wonder Isaiah despairs over the nation's uncleanness in 6:5.

God gives Israel a vision of what the people can be (2:1-5). This vision rejected, Yahweh declares Israel a hopelessly proud and idolatrous people (2:6-11). God will therefore set a "day of reckoning" (2:12) to remove idols (2:12-22), proud officials (3:1-15), and rich and haughty citizens (3:16-4:1). Apparently the people choose to inherit the glory described in 2:1-4 by suffering the devastation promised in 2:12-4:1 (cf. 4:2-6). Chapter 5 begins with a parable (5:1-7), moves to a series of woes (5:8-23), and ends with predictions of exile (5:24-30). The parable, or "song" (5:1), denounces the way Israel has destroyed itself through oppression and murder (5:7). Since Israel rejects God, only "woe" can result. "Woe" awaits all who rape the land (5:8), live for wine (5:9), pervert God's word (5:20), and take bribes (5:23). The people refuse blessing (2:1-5; 4:2-6; 5:1-2), so a purging disaster has become inevitable (5:24-30).

The first five chapters have done more than introduce the book's contents²⁰ or simply stress the message over the messenger.²¹ After

¹⁸ Douglas R. Jones, "Exposition of Isaiah Chapter One Verses One to Nine," *SJT* 17 (1964) 468.

¹⁹ P. R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 1-12: Presentation of a Prophet," *VT Sup* 29 (1978) 43.

²⁰ Cf. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 173.

²¹ Cf. Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, 234 and Geoffrey W. Grogan (EBC 6; ed. F. Gaebelain; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 54.

all, some major Isaianic themes, such as the coming Messiah and the fall of the nations, receive very little treatment, and 1:1 and 2:1 make Isaiah quite visible to readers. Rather, chapters 1-5 reveal the callousness of the people and, thus, the difficulty of the prophet's ministry. Regardless of his rhetorical skill, he will be rejected. Neither threat nor promise will change the people. Yahweh will have no choice except to destroy his vineyard. With this desperate situation in place, Isaiah 6 presents the prophet's call. The reader now knows the obstacles Isaiah faces.

Isaiah 6 has its own structure, since it narrates a single event, yet continues the main emphases of chapters 1-5. N. Habel suggests that this episode unfolds like other OT call stories²² and therefore divides Isaiah 6 as follows: (1) divine confrontation (6:1-2); (2) introductory word (6:3-7); (3) commission (6:8-10); (4) objection (6:11a); (5) reassurance (6:11b-13).²³ Habel notes that God offers Isaiah no sign like those given Moses and Gideon.²⁴

There are several difficulties with this arrangement. First, it is not logical to divide 6:1-2 from 6:3-4, because both texts narrate connecting parts of the same vision. The scene is broken by Isaiah's speech in 6:5. Second, Isaiah's startled "how long?" (6:11) is hardly "as bold as" the objections "of Jeremiah or Moses"²⁵ as Habel asserts. Jeremiah gives a reason for not prophesying and has significant later confrontations with Yahweh.²⁶ Moses makes repeated excuses for not leading Israel (cf. Exod 3:11- 4:17). Isaiah simply asks a question. He has already volunteered to go do God's work (6:8). It is best, then, to leave 6:11-13 as one section, since these verses all describe the difficulty of Isaiah's ministry to a soon-to-be-judged nation. Third, Habel's labelling of 6:11b-13 as "reassurance" is questionable. Certainly Isaiah learns that judgment will not last forever and that punishment will help forge a new, purified people (6:13). Still, Isaiah receives no special promise of God's presence as did Moses (Exod 3:12), or promise of survival as did Jeremiah (Jer 1:17-19). Again, these verses focus on immediate struggle and long-term hope. The volunteer is learning his task. Isaiah 6 is a call story, but it does not match Habel's divisions exactly.

Hayes and Irvine suggest a better division. They state that all of 6:1-4 describes Isaiah's vision of God, that 6:5-7 presents Isaiah's

²² Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 298.

²³ *Ibid.*, 310-12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Note Jeremiah's "confessions" found in 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; and 20:7-18.

"sense of unworthiness; and that 6:8-13 details Isaiah's commission.²⁷ Clements claims that 6:12-13 is a sixth-century addition to the text and therefore separates 6:8-11 and 6:12-13.²⁸ Otherwise, he agrees with Hayes and Irvine's description of the contents of 6:4-13. Young simply divides the chapter into vision (6:1-7) and commission (6:8-13), while Gray separates the passage into vision (6:1-4), effect on Isaiah (6:5-8), and message for Israel (6:9-13).²⁹

Given the chapter's generic and thematic characteristics, it is best to adopt the following combination of the suggestions made by Hayes and Irvine, Clements, and Gray.

1. Isaiah's Vision of God (6:1-4);
2. Isaiah's Sin and its Cleansing (6:5-7);
3. Isaiah's Commission (6:8-10);
4. Isaiah's Difficult Ministry and Israel's Difficult Future (6:11-13).

This ordering reflects the main ideas in chapters 1-5. God reveals himself to a disobedient people bound for punishment (1:1-31). Unlike these people, Isaiah repents, and receives the dubious honor of preaching to a rebellious nation. As 2:1-5 and 4:2-6 state, however, Israel does have a future, but one forged from the fires of a punishing day of Yahweh (2:6-4:1). Thus, the structural progression in Isaiah 1-6 is fairly clear:

1. God's Complaint against Israel (1:1-31);
2. Israel's Rejection of Forgiveness and the Resulting Day of Yahweh (2:1-4:6);
3. "Woes" Connected with Israel's Judgment (5:1-30);
4. Isaiah's Call to Minister to the Rebellious Nation (6:1-13).

The Placement of Isaiah 6

As has been noted above, Isaiah 6's placement in the book has caused much discussion. Some of the debate stems from curiosity about a call story so late in a prophecy, while concern about chronology fuels other discussions. Scholars normally accept variations on two basic solutions. Either this chapter discusses Isaiah's initial call, and the function of chapters 1-5 must be considered as an introductory word of some kind, or chapter 6 begins a second phase of the prophet's work.

Most commentators adopt the first solution. E. J. Young and G. Grogan simply believe Isaiah stresses his message more than himself.³⁰ This theory does not explain why Isaiah would ever insert him-

²⁷ Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 110-12.

²⁸ Clements, *Isaiah* 1-39, 72.

²⁹ Young, *Isaiah* 1-18, 231, 253; Gray, *Isaiah* 1-27; 102-9.

³⁰ Cf. Young, *Isaiah* 1-18, 234, and Grogan, 54.

self into the story, or why more of the major elements of Isaiah's message are not included in chapters 1-5. Gray, Kaiser, and Clements follow K. Budde's contention that 6:1-8:18 forms "a memoir written by the prophet himself, and relating to prophecies at the time of the Syro-Ephraimite war."³¹ These authors therefore argue that redactional concerns account for the call story coming after other material. Chapters 1-5 and 6:1-8:18 may have existed as separate collections before being joined by a final editor. Though this redactional reconstruction deserves extensive discussion, it is impossible to do so here. It is only possible to note the function of chapters 1-5 and chapter 6 in this viewpoint. Clements states that the main "theme of this memoir is how Ahaz came to refuse the message which Isaiah gave to him" and how this refusal brought punishment on king and people.³² Similarly, Kaiser concludes that the call account reveals "that God's judgment was already decreed when he called him to a task that went beyond all normal feeling and understanding."³³ Both Kaiser and Clements highlight refusal and judgment. To them, chapters 1-5 announce these themes, chapter 6 calls Isaiah to proclaim them, and chapters 7-12 show the prophet experiencing them.

P. Ackroyd, L. Liebreich, and J. Oswalt believe that chapter 6 serves as both "a suitable conclusion to the chapters before it, and an equally suitable introduction to the chapters which follow."³⁴ Liebreich thinks Isaiah 6 draws together the early chapters' emphases on God's holiness and Israel's rebellion.³⁵ He also states that chapter 6's portrayal of Yahweh as king contrasts the activity of Israel's earthly kings in chapters 7-12.³⁶ Ackroyd says that Isaiah 1-12 introduces Isaiah's role as preacher of doom and hope. Given this purpose for the whole section, chapter 6 draws together both Israel's "prospect of the future" and its present "recognition of failure and doom."³⁷ Thus, the chapter does balance this major section of the book.

Oswalt agrees that the "recognition of the double function of chapter 6 is fundamental to an understanding of its position in the book."³⁸ He decides, however, that chapters 1-5 are very broad and introductory. Therefore, chapter 6 does conclude chapters 1-5, but does more as well. The text also introduces chapters 7-39 by offering

³¹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 70. Cf. Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, 99, and Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 73.

³² Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 71.

³³ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 73.

³⁴ Liebreich, "The Position of Chapter Six," 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-39. See also this article's discussion of the structure of Isaiah 1-6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷ Ackroyd, *Isaiah 1-12*, 45.

³⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 173.

Israel two choices. The people can repent like Isaiah and be forgiven, or they can rebel and face the devastation outlined in 6:11-13.³ Like Ackroyd, then, Oswalt claims that Isaiah's call sets him apart as a preacher of hope that emerges from doom. He also uses Isaiah as a paradigm of Israel's relationship with God.

Some authors adopt the position that Isaiah 6 announces a new phase of Isaiah's ministry. J. Calvin argues that chapters 1-6 are chronologically correct. Isaiah receives a prophetic call "after that he had for some time discharged the office of a teacher."⁴⁰ Calvin assumes a chronological ordering of the book, but such an ordering was unnecessary for the original audience, since 1:1 divulges the book's setting. His emphasis on Isaiah's work as teacher may also reflect Calvin's belief that teachers "have an ordinary office in the church."⁴¹ At any rate, Calvin's position has no textual evidence other than the position of chapter 6.

Hayes and Irvine conclude that the rhetorical styles of chapters 1-5 and chapters 6-12 reflect different settings. The early chapters are addressed to a general audience, and admonish "the population about particular actions, ethical stances, and faith postures."⁴² Later chapters deal with problems among "the Davidic court and its supporters in Jerusalem."⁴³ Hayes and Irvine also claim that chapters 1-5 are Isaiah's attempt to change Israel after a great earthquake.⁴⁴ Though the rhetorical styles vary somewhat in chapters 1-5 and 6-12, there are also several similarities. Too, 3:12-15 condemns the nation's rulers, and Isaiah never mentions the earthquake noted in Amos 1-2 and Zech 14:5. Thus, Hayes and Irvine lack the textual evidence they need to sustain their argument.

Isaiah 6 does act as a linking text. Chapters 1-5 detail the sins of Israel and how those sins postpone God's blessings for the nation. Clearly the nation ought to repent, yet refuses to do so. Chapter 6 admits this national sin and announces its long-term cure. Chapters 7-12 explain how Isaiah announces the cure to the rebellious people but has little success in changing them. Thus, the reader learns Israel is a difficult audience, Isaiah has a difficult task, and Isaiah will experience a difficult ministry.

³⁹ Ibid., 174-76.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapters 1-32* (trans. William Pringle; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 199.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Ford L. Battles; reprinted, John T McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1056.

⁴² Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 52.

⁴³ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 69-78.

Contents of Isaiah 6

N. Habel correctly identifies Isaiah 6 as a call story.⁴⁵ Though there are problems with his division of the text, as has been noted, Habel does reveal that Isaiah 6 parallels call stories like those of Gideon, Moses, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Each account includes an appearance of, or statement from, Yahweh, a commission, and a comment about the difficulty of each person's ministry. These elements, along with Isaiah's sense of sinfulness, provide the four main thematic divisions of this chapter.

Isaiah 6:1-4: Isaiah's Vision of God

6:1. Isaiah says his call occurs "in the year of king Uzziah's death," which is a difficult date to determine. Hayes and Irvine observe that the dates scholars assign the kings of Isaiah's era "may vary as much as a decade or more."⁴⁶ Uzziah's reign is particularly hard to fix, since he is co-regent with his son Jotham in the last years of his life (2 Chronicles 26-21). Bright's 742 date for Uzziah's death, though, leaves enough time for the events of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah's reigns.⁴⁷

Many scholars argue that Uzziah's death greatly affected Isaiah. For example, G. A. Smith thinks this king, who had led Israel so effectively, was probably the young prophet's hero.⁴⁸ Oswalt notes that Uzziah was the only king Isaiah had known. Thus, his death, and the mounting Assyrian threat brought on by Tiglath-Pileser III's ascendancy, helped Isaiah realize that Israel was at a crossroads.⁴⁹ Ultimate spiritual and political decisions would soon be made. Smith's theory is intriguing, but has no support in the text. Oswalt's comments are probably accurate. Early readers of Isaiah would definitely recognize the transitional nature of this time.⁵⁰

Isaiah sees "Adonai sitting on a throne, high and lifted up." This phrase refers to God's kingship and sovereignty, images that appear throughout the book (e.g., chaps. 13-23; 37:23-24; 40:18-22). Uzziah may be dead, but the Lord remains sovereign. A second image reinforces this picture of greatness. The edges of Adonai's robes are "filling the temple." God is too magnificent for the temple to contain.

⁴⁵ Habel, "The Form and Significance."

⁴⁶ Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 34.

⁴⁷ Bright, *History*, 254.

⁴⁸ G A Smith, *The Book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper, 1927). 58.

⁴⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 177.

⁵⁰ Of course the call could have come before Uzziah's death. Cf. Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, 102. Still, readers would note the changing political scene.

6:2. "Seraphim," or "burning ones," stand before the Lord. This term is used several ways in the Old Testament, including to describe a burning serpent (Num 21:6) or flying serpent (Isa 14:29; 30:6).⁵¹ Here the word applies to six-winged creatures who fly before the Lord, praising him as they go (6:3). The mighty God has unusual courtiers.

6:3. These "burning ones" increase the distance between the Lord and human beings. Isa 5:16, 19, and 24 have already established God's holiness.⁵² Now the "seraphim" declare קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה זָבָאוֹת (*qados qados qados YHWH sebaot* "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts"). Some writers have been tempted to find the trinity in this formula, but Young rightly concludes, "The number three seems to be employed primarily for the sake of emphasis."⁵³ God is totally different in nature, character, and worth from the human race or the seraphim.

Engnell observes that the second half of 6:3 also carries "emphatic import."⁵⁴ Not only is Yahweh holy, he also fills the earth with "his glory." The phrase מְלֵא כָּל-הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ (*melo' kol-ha'ares kebodo*) parallels וְשִׁלְיוֹ מְלֵאִים אֶת-הַהֵיכָל (*wesulayw mele'im 'et-hahekal*) from 6:1. God's glory fills the earth, just as it fills the throneroom of the Lord. The ruler of the earth governs by inherent holiness. This verse sounds wonderful until one realizes that "where God's glory is manifested, there is judgment for sin, for the two cannot exist side by side. . . ." ⁵⁵ Yahweh's ethical perfection ("holy") makes his presence ("glory") eliminate sin.

6:4. The initial vision of God ends with the building's foundations shaking at the voices of the seraphim, and the area filling with smoke. The reference to smoke re-emphasizes Yahweh's presence. Engnell notes that smoke accompanies appearances of God in Exod 40:34 and 1 Kgs 8:10ff. as well.⁵⁶ Smoke covers God in Leviticus 16, so perhaps smoke protects Isaiah from viewing the Lord, which could cause Isaiah's death. Regardless of the smoke's exact purpose, Isaiah has now seen evidence of Yahweh's greatness, heard the seraphim's comments on God's holiness, and felt the shaking of the building. His senses have been assaulted by Yahweh's power.

⁵¹ BDB, 977.

⁵² Cf. Liebreich, "The Position of Chapter Six," 38-40.

⁵³ Young, *Isaiah 1-18*, 244.

⁵⁴ Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*; 37.

⁵⁵ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 181.

⁵⁶ Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*, 37.

Other scenes of a divine throne room appear in the OT. For instance Job 1-2 portrays the Lord and Satan in conversation in God's "control room." The text that parallels 6:1-4 the most, however, is 1 Kgs 22:19ff. Here God sits on a throne, has heavenly messengers, and reveals a message to a prophet. The texts differ, though, since one of the heavenly beings carries the Lord's message, not a human prophet, and there is no prophetic commissioning in 1 Kings 22. Apparently Isaiah shares a common OT vision. Certainly the whole OT attempts to explain in understandable terms how Yahweh rules the universe.⁵⁷

Isaiah 6:5-7: Isaiah's Sin and its Cleansing

6:5. Given his experience in 6:1-4, it is no wonder Isaiah cries, "Woe is me, for I am ruined." This "woe" (וֹי [oy]) parallels Israel's "woe" (וֵי [hoy]) in 5:8-23, except that Isaiah is wise enough to sense his own "woe," unlike Israel, which forces Yahweh to pronounce "woe" on it. Why does Isaiah feel so unworthy? Because he knows he is "a man of unclean lips" (כִּי אִישׁ טִמְאָה שֶׁפִּתְיָיִם [ki teme' sepatayim]) who lives in a nation filled with unclean lips.

"Unclean" often refers to ceremonial uncleanness in the OT,⁵⁸ so perhaps Isaiah feels unworthy to remain in God's temple. F. Delitzsch suggests that Isaiah mentions his lips because he could not match the praise of the seraphim.⁵⁹ Clements offers a better solution. He claims Isaiah realizes his unfitness to act as God's spokesman.⁶⁰ Thus, Isaiah's unclean lips make it an unlikely prophet, just as Israel's unclean lips make it a poor elect nation. Both Isaiah and the nation should expect "woe" for their "uncleanness." Isaiah fears for another reason. Not only is he a sinner, but he has also seen God. Jacob has a similar fear, as does Yahweh for Moses (Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20). Clearly, Isaiah has good reason to feel "ruined."

6:6-7. The Seraphim immediately come to Isaiah's aid. They purify his lips with a coal from the divine altar. God's desire to cleanse and forgive is evident. Isaiah can now speak for God. Besides Yahweh's kindness, this cleansing emphasizes the stupidity of Israel's

⁵⁷ Note Habel's contention that the similarities between Isaiah 6 and 1 Kgs 2:19-21 strengthen the argument that Isaiah 6 is indeed a typical call story. Habel, "The Form and Significance," 310.

⁵⁸ BDB, 379-80.

⁵⁹ Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 196.

⁶⁰ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 75.

continued rebellion. Forgiveness would come just as quickly for Israel as for Isaiah if the nation would change.

Isaiah 6:8-10: Isaiah's Commission

6:8. Gratitude leads to service. Isaiah hears God ask "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Yahweh allows Isaiah to volunteer. Calvin believes "for us" (לָנוּ [lanu]) refers to the trinity, and Grogan says the phrase suggests God's majesty or "fullness of being."⁶¹ Oswalt thinks, in light of 1 Kgs 22:19-21, that "for us" probably refers to the heavenly council, which is probably the best interpretation.⁶²

Regardless of the identity of "us," Isaiah feels compelled to answer the question. His הִנְנִי שְׁלַחְכִּי (hinni selaheni, "Here I am, send me!") echoes other obedient cries of הִנְנִי, such as Abraham's in Gen 22:1 and 22:11. It also contrasts excuses such as those made by Moses and Jeremiah.⁶³ Isaiah responds unreservedly to the all-powerful and all-merciful Lord.

6:9-10. Now Isaiah learns the specifics of his task. The MT reads that he must tell the people, "Listen and listen, but do not understand. Look and look, but never perceive" (6:9). Then 6:10 uses three hiphil imperatives--"make fat" (הַשְׂמִין [hasmen]), "make heavy" (הַכְּבִד [hakhbed]), and "shut" (הַשֵּׁעַ [hasa'])--to describe Isaiah's effect on the people's heart, ears, and eyes. Since the hiphil carries causative force, it appears that Isaiah must intend to harden the people.

C. A. Evans notes that the Dead Sea Scrolls change the negative particle אַל ('al) in 6:9 to עַל ('al), which would mean Isaiah must preach to effect understanding and knowledge. Further, the first hiphil imperative (הַשְׂמִין) has no nun, which changes the word's meaning to "make appalled." In this reading Israel's appalled heart saves them from horrible sights and sounds.⁶⁴ Evans also observes that the LXX makes the verses descriptive, not imperatival.⁶⁵ Thus, both the Qumran and Greek texts shift the blame for Israel's sin "from Yahweh and his prophet to the people themselves."⁶⁶

Four factors argue in favor of the MT's reading of Isaiah's task. First, changing the first hiphil imperative does not totally blunt the next two. Why would an appalled heart cause heavy ears and closed eyes? Second, the latter half of 6:10 begins with a strong averting con-

⁶¹ Calvin, *Isaiah 1-32*, 213; Grogan, *EBC*, 57.

⁶² Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 185.

⁶³ Cf. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 82.

⁶⁴ C. A. Evans, "The Text of Isaiah 6:9-10," *ZAW* 94 (1982) 416.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 418.

junction "lest" (פֶּן [pen]).⁶⁷ The second half of the verse explains what the first half seeks to avoid, and adding a vav ("and") to פֶּן, as Evans suggests,⁶⁸ does not erase this syntactical intention. Third, chaps. 1-5 have already established Israel's callous nature. Further preaching will make them even more callous. Fourth, Isaiah's startled reaction in 6:11 implies the extreme difficulty of the preaching, not just disappointment at a lack of response. Therefore, Isaiah must live with the fact that he will preach repentance, but that this preaching will harden his hearers.

Isaiah 6:11-13: Isaiah's Difficult Ministry and Israel's Difficult Future

6:11. A startled Isaiah inquires "how long" he must pursue this mission. Engnell states "that the Hebrew עַד־מָתַי ('ad-matay) is a technical term from the phraseological fund of the lamentation psalms. . . ."⁶⁹ Often the question is asked in frustration, or during a time of perceived injustice (cf. Pss 74:10; 82:2; 94:3).⁷⁰ This phrase is not a response to a normal instructional assignment. God's answer is not typical either. Isaiah must preach until the cities have no inhabitants and the land lies "utterly desolate; or until the threats made in 2:6-4:1 come true.

6:12-13. Several scholars, including Clements and Kaiser,⁷¹ think these verses are an addition to the text, since they speak of deportation, desolation, and a remnant. In this view, 6:12-13 was inserted in post-exilic times to explain the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions and to offer the exiles hope. Isaiah's predictions of doom were thereby vindicated and his predictions of hope kept alive.⁷²

Linguistic and thematic details argue against this position. Engnell asserts that the verses' stylistic unity is evident, since the devastation images build to the announcement of a "holy seed" (זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ [zera' qodes]), a remnant, for the holy God.⁷³ Verse 11 ends with a play on words that continues in v 12. The houses will have no "man" (אָדָם ['adam]), the "ground" (וְהָאָדָמָה [we'ha'adama]) will be desolate, and Yahweh will "remove men (הָאָדָם [ha'adam]) far away." Also, the metaphors of desolation in 6:11b and 6:12b are similar. It is logical to

⁶⁷ BDB, 814.

⁶⁸ Evans, "The Text," 416.

⁶⁹ Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*, 44-45.

⁷⁰ BDB, 607.

⁷¹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 84; Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 78.

⁷² Cf. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 1-12," 46.

⁷³ Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah*, 47.

conclude that a hard, impenitent nation under God's judgment will lose the land. Israel knew this truth long before the many Assyrian threats.

Despite the horrors described in 6:9-12, all is not lost. There will still be a "tenth" (עֶשְׂרֵי יָדָא [ʿasiriya]) in the land.⁷⁴ This remnant may be burned, it may be like a felled tree, but it will survive. Restoration, like that outlined in 4:2-6, will emerge at some future point. Israel will never lack a "holy seed." Isaiah learns that he will get to announce restoration, not just sin and punishment.

Conclusion

Isaiah 6 draws together the main thematic emphases of chaps. 1-5. The God who delivered Israel and planted the nation in the land (5:1-7) remains a powerful, holy Lord (6:1-4). Israel is determined to sin and must face the day of Yahweh (cf. 2:6-4:1 and 6:9-12). Renewal will overtake the nation's wickedness only when punishment has done its work (4:26; 6:13).

Isaiah 6 also instills great respect in readers for Isaiah the prophet. No part of his mission is easy, as chaps. 7-12 reveal. Thus, he embodies Israel's present difficulties, yet at the same time leads the way to the nation's future blessings. Like Moses, who must deal with Pharaoh's hardened heart, and Jeremiah, who can expect total opposition, Isaiah's commission is extremely difficult. He can expect few positive results. He can expect restoration to come at a high national cost. Still, he can depend on the power, holiness, and mercy of God. The holy God must destroy sin, yet will do so to create a holy people.

⁷⁴ Verse 13 is notorious for its textual problems, and these difficulties cannot be explored here. Still, the restoration theme emerges in any reconstruction of the text.

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