

Isaiah 6:1-13, Hebrew Text with Translation and Footnotes

Isaiah's Visionary Call, With His Confession and Experience of Forgiveness, and Divine Commission to Fail¹

¹There are four end-notes to **chapter six**:

- (1) "Seeing God and Still Living";
- (2) "Sins Done Accidentally / Inadvertently, and Sins Committed with a "High Hand";
- (3) "**Zechariah 1:7-17; Job 1:6-12 and 1 Kings 22**"
- (4) "Passages in the **New Testament** Referring to Isaiah's Commission to Failure."

Slotki entitles **chapter 6** "Isaiah's Initiation and First Commission." He comments that **verses 1-4** give "a vision of the splendor, awe and majestic holiness that surround the throne of the Lord of hosts. The scene is the temple." (P. 28)

Ortlund entitles **Isaiah 6:1-12:6** "God Redefines the Future of His People; "Your Guilt Is Taken Away." He comments that "God's grace will preserve a remnant of His people to enjoy forever His Messianic kingdom and to fulfill the purpose for which He called them. That grace spreads from Isaiah (**6:1-13**) to the southern kingdom of Judah (**7:1-9:7**) to the northern kingdom of Israel (**9:8-11:16**), bringing God's people to the 'wells of salvation' (**12:1-6**).

He entitles **Isaiah 6:1-13** "Grace—through Judgment—for Isaiah," and states that "God's grace leads Isaiah from 'Woe is me!' (**verse 5**) to 'Here am I' (**verse 8**). This vision seems to recount Isaiah's commission as a prophet. His book conveys the lasting impression of the vision of God in His infinite holiness." (P. 1251)

Quite differently, Alexander states that "This chapter contains a vision and prophecy of awful import. At an early period of his ministry, the Prophet sees the Lord enthroned in the temple and adored by the Seraphim, at whose voice the house is shaken, and the Prophet, smitten with a sense of his own corruption and unworthiness to speak for God or praise Him, is relieved by the application of fire from the altar to his lips, and an assurance of forgiveness, after which, in answer to the voice of God inquiring for a messenger, he offers himself and is accepted, but with an assurance that his labors will tend only to aggravate the guilt and condemnation of the people who are threatened with judicial blindness, and as its necessary consequence, removal from the desolated country; and the prophecy closes with a promise and a threatening both in one, to wit, that the remnant which survives the threatened judgments shall experience a repetition of the stroke, but that a remnant after all shall continue to exist and to experience God's mercy.

"The chapter naturally falls into two parts, the vision, **verses 1-8**, and the message or prediction, **verses 9-13**...The question is, whether the vision is an introduction to the message, or the message an appendage to the vision. Those who take the former view suppose that in order to prepare the Prophet for a discouraging and painful revelation, he was favored with a new view of the Divine majesty and of his own unworthiness, relieved by an assurance of forgiveness, and encouraged by a special designation to the self-denying work which was before him. Those who
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assume the other ground proceed upon the supposition, that the chapter contains an account of the Prophet's original induction into office, and that the message at the close was added to prepare him for its disappointments, or perhaps to try his faith." (P. 144)

Oswalt states that "The literature on **chapter 6** is immense, a testimony to its continuing fascination and appeal. Comments upon its power, clarity, literary excellence, and importance as a religious document can be multiplied on every hand...

"Sinful, arrogant Israel is going to be the holy people of God to whom the nations will come to learn of God (compare **Isaiah 43:8-14; 49:5, 6; Ezekiel 36:22-38**). But how can this be? **Chapter 6** provides the solution. Sinful Israel can become servant Israel when the experience of Isaiah becomes the experience of the nation. When the nation has seen itself against the backdrop of God's holiness and glory, when the nation has received God's gracious provision for sin, then she can speak for God to a hungry world...

"Whatever the immediate future might be, if ever there should come a time when Isaiah's experience should be duplicated on a national scale,, then the promises of **1:16-19; 2:1-4** and **4:2-6** could be experienced. Without the lived-out truth which **chapter 6** presents, **chapters 1-5** present an irreconcilable contradiction. This could well be the reason, then, why an inaugural vision is laced six chapters into the book it inaugurates...For just as **chapter 6** is the conclusion to **chapters 1-5**, it is also the introduction to the **chapters 7-12**...

"In a real sense, **chapters 7-12** are a fulfillment and an explication of the word given to Isaiah in his call. Immediately in **chapter 7** is seen the hardening impact of the prophet's gracious invitation to trust. In a real sense the destruction which comes to Judah from Assyria's hand in the declining years of the eighth century B. C. Is caused by Ahaz's refusal of Isaiah's invitation (**8:6-8; 6:11, 12**). Thus the nation is cut down like a field of stumps (**10:33, 34; 6:13**). Yet, in one of those stumps life remains so that the nation might learn that God can be trusted (**11:1-12; 6:13**).

"So it is impossible to link **chapter 6** solely to **chapters 1-5** or solely to **chapters 7-12**. It functions with both sections, both showing the way of hope for the future (in **chapters 1-5**) and explaining the present situation (in **chapters 7-12**). In this sense it is a genuinely strategic chapter, shaping and defining the book as a whole.

"The vision which **6:1-8** reports was clearly fundamental to the entire course of Isaiah's ministry and to the shape of his **book**. The glory, the majesty, the holiness and the righteousness of God became the ruling concepts of his ministry. Furthermore, it is this experience which explains Isaiah's contempt for, and horror of, any kind of national or individual life which did not pay adequate attention to the one God." (Pp. 174-76)

Many pages have been written in commentaries on **Isaiah** speculating as to why **Isaiah 6**, with its description of Isaiah's call, is located where it is. Oswalt states that the most probable solution to the matter is that of P. R. Ackroyd, who proposes that "**Chapters 1-12** form an intentional arrangement of Isaiah's twin messages of certain doom and certain salvation...In this view **chapter** (continued...)

6:1 בְּשָׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֻזִּיָּה

וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי

יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנֹשֵׂא

וְנֹשְׂאֵי מַלְאִים אֶת־הַיְכָל:

In the year of King Uzziah's dying²

¹(...continued)

6 functions like a hinge, containing as it does words of utter doom and yet the example of the prophet's own cleansing and the concluding note of hope." (P. 173)

Oswalt states that "How he saw the Sovereign is insignificant. What matters is that he saw Him and saw Him in such a way as to change the shape of the rest of his life. Similarly, attempts to prove that the vision took place in either the earthly temple or a heavenly one are generally of no consequence...The reality of the experience for Isaiah and the truths which it conveyed to him are of fundamental significance. Precisely how or where the experience occurred has little to do with those questions." (P. 176)

Motyer, similarly to Ortlund, entitles **chapters 6:1-12:6** "The triumph of grace." He comments that Isaiah "takes as his starting point promises of personal spiritual renewal (**1:27; 4:3-4**) which he discovered through experience to be the foundation of the Lord's restorative action (**6:1-7**). As in **5:7**, however, he is concerned for the whole people of God and he sees Judah and Israel as alike caught up in Divine purposes of judgment and promise...

"The judgment will be as awful as he had already foreseen (e.g. the darkness of **5:30** and **8:22**). The promises are, however, equally real, resting upon a Divine work of salvation and enjoyed by a company of individual believers of whom Isaiah, in his personal experience, is the exemplar. **6:1-13** is not simply his justification for being a prophet but is more particularly the heart of his answer to the problems raised by his preface. It speaks of the triumph of grace." (Pp. 78-79)

Motyer entitles **6:1-13** "The prologue: reconciliation and commission." **6:1-8** is entitled "Isaiah's call."

²See **Isaiah 1:1**, which states that Isaiah's vision came in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Achaz, and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah. Uzziah (also known as "Ahaziah"--see **2 Kings 14:21; 2 Chronicles 26:1**) reigned from 791 / 790 to 740 / 39 B.C.E.; Jotham reigned from 740 / 39 to 732 / 31 B.C.E.; Achaz reigned from 732 / 31 to 716 / 15 B.C.E.; and Hezekiah reigned from 716 / 15 to 687 / 86 B.C.E., or in other words, in the general period from 790 to 686 B.C.E., which we can describe as the closing part of the 8th and early part of the 7th centuries B.C.E. That the vision came "in the year of King Uzziah's dying" does not tell us whether the vision came before or after Uzziah's death.

(continued...)

–and I saw my Lord,^{3, 1}

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The year in which King Uzziah died was, according to these figures, 740 / 39 B.C.E. We must note however, that such a date is very difficult to determine exactly, and Bright thinks of 742 B.C.E., while Donner thinks of 736 B.C.E. (see Watts, p. 73). Alexander gives the date as 758 B.C.E. (P. 145)

The last historical reference which can be dated in the **Book of Isaiah** is the attack of Sennacherib on Jerusalem, which is dated in 701 B.C.E.

Oswalt comments on Uzziah's death that "Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon. He had been an efficient administrator and an able military leader. Under his leadership Judah had grown in every way (**2 Chronicles 26:1-15**). He had been a true king. How easy it must have been to focus one's hopes and trust upon a king like that. What will happen, then, when such a king dies, and coupled with that death there comes the recognition that a resurgent Assyria is pushing nearer and nearer?...No earthly king could help Judah in that hour. In the context of such a crisis, God can more easily make Himself known to us than when times are good and we are self-confidently complacent. 'In the year of King Uzziah's death...my eyes have seen the King.'" (P. 177)

Motyer states that "According to **Isaiah 1:1** Isaiah entered on the prophetic office while Uzziah was still alive. Why then does he not date his call from 'the fifty-second year of Uzziah'?" He answers his question by saying that "Uzziah, as the darkness of death closed in on him, was symbolic of Isaiah's view of the nation, its plight and its problem...In this hour of death Isaiah discovered that the Lord still had a word of new life to speak (compare **verses 7-8**)." (Pp. 75-6)

Slotki states that "The prophet's vision...brings assurance to the people in their anxious forebodings of political unrest that might follow on the death of a powerful and successful king like Uzziah. The mortal ruler had vacated his throne, Isaiah seems to imply, but the eternal God continues on His throne of glory and ceaselessly watches over the destinies of His people." (P. 29)

Yes, but as this **sixth chapter** shows, He watches over them in great disappointment, knowing that their hardness of heart is leading to the destruction of the large majority of His people!

Wolf / Stek state that "Isaiah's commission probably preceded his preaching ministry; the account was postponed to serve as a climax to the opening series of oracles and to provide warrant for the shocking announcements of judgment they contain." (P. 1025)

³For this title for YHWH, יהוה, **Yadonay** in **Isaiah**, see in addition to here, **6:1, verses 8 and 11; 7:14, 20; 8:7; 9:7, 16; 10:12; 11:11; 21:6, 8, 16; 29:13; 30:20; 37:24; 38:14 and 16**. This same title for YHWH is not found in **Jeremiah**, only four times in **Ezekiel**, four times in **Amos**, once each in **Micah, Zechariah and Malachi**; but numerous times in the **Psalter and Lamentations**, once in **Daniel 1** and 8 times in **Daniel 9**. There are a number of Hebrew manuscripts which read **YHWH** here instead of **Yadonay**.

(continued...)

sitting upon a throne:⁴ high, and lifted up;⁵

³(...continued)

The claim that Isaiah “saw the Lord” is somewhat unique in the **Hebrew Bible**, which sometimes states that no one can see God and live--but then goes on to relate specific instances in which specially chosen individuals saw God and lived (“Theophanies”). See our end-note 1 for some of the passages involved.

It is this kind of paradoxical statement concerning not being able to see God, and the report of those who saw God, that led Samuel Terrien to entitle his major work **The Elusive Presence** (Harper and Row, 1978). Alexander comments that “It is therefore plain that the phrase ‘to see God’ is employed in different senses, and that although His essence is and must be invisible, He may be seen in the manifestation of His glory or in human form.” (P. 145)

Motyer states that “Isaiah says, *I saw the Lord*, and though it is true that ‘no-one has ever seen God’ (**John 1:18**), for in His essential being He is Spirit (**Isaiah 31:3; John 4:24**), yet He graciously condescends to clothe now this side of His nature and now that with visibility for the instruction and comfort of His people...Isaiah was thus allowed to see the Lord...” (P. 76)

Slotki comments that “The prophets, under the influence of Divine inspiration, behold mysterious and spiritual scenes which are invisible to ordinary men.” (P. 29)

Alexander states that “It seems needless to inquire whether the Prophet saw this sight with his bodily eyes, or in a dream, or in an ecstasy, since the effect upon his own mind must have been the same in either case. It is also a question of no moment whether he beheld the throne erected in the holy place, or in the Holy of Holies, or in heaven, or as Jarchi imagines, reaching from earth to heaven. The scene of the vision is evidently taken from the temple at Jerusalem, but not confined to its exact dimensions and arrangements.” (P. 145)

We wonder: were there any others present at the time of Isaiah’s vision? And if he was at the temple in Jerusalem, would the priests or other worshipers have seen what Isaiah saw? We think of Moses’ vision of the burning bush in an isolated area of the Wilderness Peninsula; the appearance of Jesus Christ to Saul / Paul as he traveled overland on horseback to Damascus, Syria; we think of John’s vision of the throne of God in **Revelation 4:1-8**, with its four six-winged creatures and with the cry of “Holy, holy, holy (undoubtedly rooted in this vision of Isaiah).

On a personal level, we think of our own experience of hearing the Divine voice speaking distinctly on a New Mexico desert in the darkest night, with no witnesses to confirm or testify to that experience. How can such experiences be proven? The only proof that can be offered is the transformed lives of the participants.

We know from experience, how easy it is for others to deny the reality of such experiences: It was only a dream; it was something he had eaten or drunk; it was the product of a guilty conscience; it was a haunting memory from his youth...What do you think? Where do you think the classical power of Isaiah’s preaching came from? Was it just something he dreamed up on his own? Or had YHWH in fact appeared to him, calling him into his life-long ministry?

⁴There was no “throne” in the temple in Jerusalem, unless the ark of the covenant, with the overshadowing winged-bull (or calf) figures be considered a sort of “Divine throne” (compare **Jeremiah 3:17**; **Ezekiel 10:1** [the ark of the covenant as the Divine throne]; **43:7** [the temple]. The Divine “throne” is nonetheless oftentimes mentioned in the **Bible**, sometimes referring to God’s “earthly throne” (as in **Jeremiah 49:38**), but most oftentimes speaking of a “heavenly throne”--see **1 Kings 22:19**; **2 Chronicles 18:18**; **Psalms 11:4**; **47:8**; **89:14**; **93:2**; **97:2**; **103:19**; **Isaiah 6:1** (**here**); **66:1**; **Lamentations 5:19**; **Ezekiel 1:26, 26**; and **Daniel 7:9**.

In the **New Testament** see **Matthew 5:34**; **19:28**; **23:22**; **25:31**; **Acts 7:49** (quoting **Isaiah 66:1**); **Hebrews 1:8** (?); **4:16**; **8:1**; **12:2**; and especially in **Revelation, 1:4**; **3:21, 21**; **4:2, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 6, 6, 9, 10, 10**; **5:1, 6, 7, 11, 13**; **6:16, 7:9, 10, 11, 11, 15, 15, 17**; **8:3**; **12:5**; **14:3**; **16:17**; **19:4, 5**; **20:11, 12**; **21:3, 5**; **22:1**, and **3**.

In the light of these passages, we are inclined to think that Isaiah had in mind the ark of the covenant, overshadowed by the wings of the cherubim, above which YHWH was envisioned as “sitting.” But in the light of the many other passages such as **Isaiah 66:1-2a**,

- 1 In this way YHWH spoke:
The heavens—My throne!
And the earth—footstool for My feet!
Where (is) this—a house which you people will build for Me?
And where—a place for My rest?
- 2a And all of these—
My hands made!

we wonder whether or not it is a universal, “heavenly throne” that appears to Isaiah in this vision. There is no way to be dogmatic concerning this—but we may be assured that even if Isaiah envisioned the throne as being within the temple itself, with YHWH enthroned above the ark of the covenant, the very theology of the temple would warn Isaiah against taking the vision literally--see **1 Kings 8:27**, where Solomon is depicted as saying:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth?
Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you,
much less this house that I have built!

1 Kings 8 expresses the “Theology of the Name of YHWH,” which emphasizes that it is only as pointing to the heavenly throne that the temple can be considered as the Divine dwelling-place or throne.

Watts comments that “הַהֵיכָל, **haheykal**, ‘the hall’ may refer to the temple in Jerusalem or the great heavenly hall. The word cannot settle the question, but the context favors a heavenly setting.” (P. 74)

Gray at one point insists that it is the temple in Jerusalem that is meant, and that “the very fact that he sees Yahweh holding court in Jerusalem...gives full point to his alarm; it is the actual presence (continued...)”

and his robes⁶ filling the temple / palace.⁷

⁴(...continued)

of the Holy One of Israel in the midst of Israel and not remote in heaven that spells doom to the unclean people.” (P. 104)

But then, much more in line with Alexander, Gray goes on to comment that Isaiah fell into an “ecstasy” during his worship, and in that condition, “...saw and heard more than he had been wont to see and hear--things that others who were present that day in the temple courts neither saw nor heard...This is the record of **fact**; but the fact is spiritual experience, which must be described, though inadequately, by means of material terms and pictures.” (P. 101)

⁵For this phrase, “high and lifted up,” compare **Isaiah 2:13** (cedars of Lebanon); **52:13** (YHWH’s servant); and **57:15** (YHWH). Just what is being described as “high and lifted up” is not made clear--it may refer to YHWH, or to the Divine throne. Either way, the meaning is unaffected.

Slotki states that “This phrase qualifies the *throne*, not *the Lord*.” (P. 29) But Oswalt states, “The emphasis upon God’s exaltation is entirely in keeping with the themes of the [**Book of Isaiah**].” (P. 178)

⁶The Hebrew word is שׁוּלַיִם, **shulayw**, which is used elsewhere of a woman’s “skirts,” and of the high priest’s “robe.” We should probably think here of the Divine “train,” the part of the royal robes that trail behind, being drug along, or even, perhaps, the royal servants that accompany the Lord. The Greek translation leaves out this reference to the Divine “train,” and substitutes instead “the House was full of his glorious radiance.” This may be little more than the tendency of the Greek translators to get rid of “anthropomorphisms” in the Hebrew text.

Gray states that “The boldly anthropomorphic touch was euphemized away by the ancient translators” (P. 103), using “his glory,” or “the brilliance of his glory,” or some other phrase instead of the all too human “skirts”!

Oswalt notes that “There is no evidence that robes had trains in the ancient Near East. [The word] refers to the hem of the garment...or to the lower extremities covered by the skirt.” (P. 170)

What is striking is that **Isaiah 6** makes no effort to describe the form or likeness of YHWH Himself--describing only the accompanying phenomena (throne, skirts, temple / palace)--in contrast to the attempt in Ezekiel’s vision to describe the indescribable:

“High above on the throne
was a figure like that of a man.
I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up
he looked like glowing metal,
as if full of fire,
and that from there down
he looked like fire;
and brilliant light surrounded him.

(continued...)

6:2 שָׁרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ

שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפִים שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפִים לְאַחַד

בְּשֵׁתִים יָכֶסָה פָּנָיו

וּבְשֵׁתִים יָכֶסָה רַגְלָיו

⁶(...continued)

Like the appearance of a rainbow
in the clouds on a rainy day,
so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH...

Ezekiel 1:26b-28--see our end-note 1).

It is only "...by stressing the height of His throne and the enormous size of the hem of His garment, which is enough to fill the temple, [that] Isaiah paints an indirect picture of the powerful figure Who transcends all earthly dimensions." (Kaiser, p. 124)

Oswalt comments that "As in **Exodus 24:10**, where the pavement under God's feet is described, so here the description of God's appearance can rise no further than the hem of His robe ...There is a barrier beyond which the simply curious cannot penetrate. The experience is too personal, too awesome, too all-encompassing for mere reportage. Each one of us must aspire to our own experience of His presence." (P. 178)

Those who have not had such an experience can easily dismiss Isaiah's report, and the reports of others, including their contemporaries, who claim to have shared in such a life-changing experience. But there is no persuading Isaiah--or them--that there is nothing to their experience! The entire biblical teaching is rooted in just such experiences, which have called forth the transformed lives of such people as Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, etc. etc. Strikingly, none of those experiences are identical; rather, they vary greatly. But they all occur with transforming power and point to the reality of God.

What do you think? Are you dismissive of claims to such an experience? And if so, why? Do you think that if you have not had such an experience, it is not possible that anyone else has? And, are you open to such an experience?

⁷Oswalt observes that the "essential meaning" of the noun הַיְכָל "was 'palace,' but whether the palace of the human king or the Divine King depended strictly upon the context...So here the temple is God's palace. He is King, not Uzziah or Jotham or Ahaz." (P. 178)

We ask, "If the Divine 'train' or 'robe' filled the temple / palace, how could Isaiah see the Lord, or anything else?" And, "Where could Isaiah himself be located, if the temple / palace was 'filled' with the Divine presence?" These questions lead us to understand the vision in symbolical terms, as expressing the Divine mystery and fundamental "invisibility" of the "seen Lord."

וּבִשְׂתֵיִם יְעוֹפְרִים:

Flame-like creatures⁸ standing above him⁹

⁸Oswalt comments that “As Isaiah stands, or more likely, lies prostrate, at the door of the temple, his whole consciousness riveted upon the immense Being Whose presence dominates His house [/ temple], he becomes aware of other beings about the throne...Such mysterious, awesome beings would be quite appropriate in this sort of vision.” (Pp. 178-79)

The Hebrew plural noun שְׂרָפִים, **seraphiym**, which occurs here in **Isaiah 6:1** and **6**, is transiterated by **Rahlfs** (Σεραφίμ) and also by the Syriac and Latin Vulgate, as if it meant something in those languages! The Aramaic targum has “set-apart ministers.”

In Hebrew this plural noun evidently means “flame-like creatures,” majestic, mysterious beings with six wings, alongside human hands and voices. In other places in the **Hebrew Bible** it means “fiery serpents” --see **Numbers 21:6, 8; Deuteronomy 8:15; Isaiah 14:29** and **30:6**.

The usage of this noun here is similar to the noun **cherubiym**, which occurs 24 times in the singular (**cherub**), and 69 times in the plural, and which is also used to depict mysterious creatures that accompany the Divine presence, especially in connection with the Chest / Ark of the Covenant. It is the noun denoting the mysterious creatures accompanying Ezekiel’s theophany, and that play an important role in the symbolism of **Genesis 3:22-24**.

Watts comments that “Such throne room scenes regularly describe the heavenly ‘host’ but use different words. **Genesis 3:24** calls them ‘cherubs.’ They are often referred to as ‘messengers’--**2 Kings 22:21** calls them ‘spirits.’ **Job 1:6** calls them ‘sons of God’ and identifies one as **hassatan** [literally, ‘the satan’], ‘the adversary.’ **Ezekiel’s** vision (**1:5-21**) sees them integrated into God’s portable throne.” (P. 74)

For sculptures of figures similar to that which was seen by Isaiah, including a “satanic” figure, see James B. Pritchard’s **Ancient Near East in Pictures**, #'s 644-47, 649-52, 654-66, and 659 (pp. 212-15).

It is a peculiarity of both Jewish and Christian theology that sometimes biblical students have taken such words as this, and attempted to build descriptions of the mysterious heavenly beings, the “hierarchy of heaven” on their basis. But obviously, the words are too ambiguous to carry such a weight--they are, we believe, only a part of the “window-dressing” of the Divine vision, and it is a mistake to take them as literal descriptions of the heavenly creatures!

Compare the interpretation of the “living creatures” of **Revelation 4** and **5**. Origen of Alexandria held that the Seraphim should be understood as the Son and the Set-apart Spirit, and that their wings should be understood as covering not their own faces and feet, but rather, the face and feet of the Lord--indicating that while the Lord is revealed, the beginning and end is not revealed!

(continued...)

--six wings, six wings to [each] one.¹⁰

With two [wings] it covers its face;¹¹

and with two [wings] it covers its feet;¹²

⁸(...continued)

Rather than taking the language literally as an actual photographic portrayal of the inhabitants of the heavenly temple / palace, it is much better to understand it in terms of visionary symbolism; and to note that even the heavenly Seraphim consider themselves “unclean” in the presence of Divine majesty, having to cover themselves and their eyes, not being able to endure the direct vision of YHWH! Such symbolism emphasizes the thought of YHWH’s majesty and separateness from all that is impure.

⁹The Seraphim are depicted as “standing over the Lord,” not as forming the Divine throne on which the Lord sat, as is sometimes pictured in terms of the role of the **Cherubim** with their outstretched wings over the Chest / Ark of the Covenant.

The Greek translators changed the word “over” to “around.” Gray speculates that perhaps those Greek translators felt that “the majesty of Yahweh requires that He should, even when seated, tower above His attendants.” (P. 105)

Slotki’s translation has “above Him stood the seraphim,” but Slotki states, “Better, ‘seraphim were standing over Him,’ i.e. in attendance upon Him.” (P. 29)

¹⁰Ortlund comments that the possession of six wings “suggest remarkable powers.” (P. 1251)

¹¹Motyer takes the covering of their faces to mean their eyes, and states that “They covered their eyes, not their ears, for their task was to receive what the Lord would say, not to pry into what He is like.” (P. 76)

But we ask, How does Motyer know what the task of the seraphim was?

Slotki comments that “Even the ministering angels do not venture to gaze upon the Divine Presence.” (P. 29)

¹²It may well be that Isaiah means “genitals” instead of literal “feet,” as this is the normal Hebrew word for genitals (see **Exodus 4:25; Isaiah 7:20; Ruth 3:4, 7, 8**). The two wings covering the feet-genitals would be an expression of modesty in the Divine presence.

But Motyer states that “We can only conjecture why they *covered their feet*...The use of the euphemism of ‘feet’ for sexual parts (e.g. **7:20**) would involve an inappropriate attribution of sexuality to these heavenly beings [why so?]. The foot is, however, metaphorically the organ of activity and of life’s direction [we think this is hardly the case for creatures with multiple wings]. In covering their feet they disavowed any intention to choose their own path; their intent was to go only as the Lord commanded.” (P. 76)

(continued...)

and with two [wings] it flies.¹³

6:3 וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל-זֶה וַאֲמַר

קָדוֹשׁ | קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ

יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

מְלֵא כָל-הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

And this one cries out to that one, and says,¹⁴

Set-apart, set-apart, set-apart,¹⁵

¹²(...continued)

Such speculation concerning the various elements of Isaiah's vision, we think, is what is really "inappropriate."

Slotki comments that "In his modesty he does not expose all his body. A Midrashic interpretation refers to **Ezekiel 1:7**, and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: a calf recalls the sin of the golden calf, and the seraphim cover their feet so as not to recall that sin before God." (P. 29)

Ortlund states that "The references to *face* and *feet*, with their capacity for speech in **verses 3** and **7**, and 'his hand' in **verse 6**, imply composite creatures, such as are represented in ancient Near Eastern art." (P. 1251) See our footnote 8.

¹³Alexander recognizes that "The future [imperfect] form of the verbs denotes continued and habitual action." (P. 147)

¹⁴Motyer comments that "The seraphim *were calling to one another*; are we to picture them standing each side of the throne [no—they are depicted as flying] and responding to each other in antiphonal song? At any rate, the song is continuous and its theme is the holiness of the Lord and His presence in all His glory in every place." (P. 76)

¹⁵This unique threefold exclamation of worship, קָדוֹשׁ | קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ, **qadosh, qadosh, qadosh**, normally translated "holy, holy, holy," or "sacred, sacred, sacred," is an expression that emphatically honors the Lord YHWH of Armies as very special, absolutely unique. The threefold antiphonal phrase encourages all who hear to treat the Lord with great awe and wonder, refusing to let YHWH be considered common, or be compared to any other, or to assume that He is subject to and limited by human ideas or theologies.

The English word "holy" has been used so often in religion as to have largely lost its meaning or impact, and it seems wise in English to use some synonym (like our "set-apart," or perhaps "special," or "unique."). Students of the **Book of Isaiah** recognize the "holiness" or "set-apartness" (continued...)

¹⁵(...continued)

of YHWH as one of its major themes--see **1:4; 4:3; 5:16, 19, 24; 6:3, 3, 3; 10:17, 20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14, 15; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 7; 54:5; 55:5; 57:15, 15; 58:13; 60:9, 14.**

Protestant commentators from the time of John Calvin have held that the threefold statement applies to the three persons of the Trinity--but this seems very far-fetched and anachronistic (Oswalt notes that "There is nothing in the context to cause us to take this as a reference to the Trinity as the church fathers [and Calvin, and Alexander, and many others] did." (P. 181) We think it is another attempt to downplay the mysterious otherness of YHWH.

Compare similar repetitions at **Isaiah 51:9; Jeremiah 7:4; 22:29; Ezekiel 21:27** (threefold); **Psalms 99:3, 5, 9** (three times in the **Psalms qadosh** is used). In the first **Isaiah scroll** from Qumran (1QIs^a) there is only a twofold repetition of the word **qadosh**. The only other place in all of the **Bible** where this same phrase occurs, "holy, holy, holy" or "set-apart, set-apart, set-apart" (made so common in Christian liturgical worship) is in the **New Testament Book of Revelation 4:8**.

Instead of speculating concerning the Trinity, Gray states that "This holy, moral power which is revealed to Isaiah in his vision is Lord of the (heavenly) hosts, and the whole world reflects the luster of His righteousness. History, human life is under the government of a righteous power that rules the world, and is not devoted merely to satisfying the unethical desires of a petty nation or tolerating its sins." (P. 106-07)

Alexander, similarly, states that moral purity "is certainly the prominent idea" (p. 147).

But, we ask, Where in the three-fold phrase are "moral power" or "righteousness" to be found? In fact, they are not--but these are typical interpolated meanings read into the phrase by interpreters, seeking to resolve the mysterious otherness.

The three-fold phrase, as we understand it, acknowledges God as the "Wholly Other"--warning against human attempts to "put God in a box," to try and make God subject to our human conceptions (for example our human idea of what "moral power" or "righteousness" is). For far too many religious people, their God is "too small"--oftentimes a combination of Santa Claus and "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild," completely overlooking the terrifying aspects of created nature with its tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, plagues, murderous dictators, and the "law of the jungle," and not even thinking of the infinite universe beyond this tiny planet earth.

Many atheists, thinking they are rejecting the God of the **Bible**, have no idea of what the **Bible** really teaches concerning God--His "otherness," His claim to be the Author of evil as well as of good: **Isaiah 45:7**, where Isaiah describes YHWH as saying that He is:

One Who fashions light,
and Who creates darkness,
Who makes peace / prosperity,
and creates evil--

(continued...)

¹⁵(...continued)

I (am) YHWH,

One Who does all these (things)!

They fail to see that for the **Bible**, YHWH is the God of war as well as the God of peace, Who makes infinite demands for justice and love, etc. of His human creatures, but Who Himself is not subject to those demands. No one could ever “fear” or “stand in reverent awe” before the hypothetical, non-biblical God of the atheists!

What do you take to be the implications of this phrase, “Set-Apart, Set-Apart, Set-Apart is the Lord, YHWH of Armies”? Many an Israelite in the time of Isaiah believed that if God is truly God, He must conform to their nationalistic aspirations and goals, and any God other than that they simply would not believe in. But Isaiah proclaims a God Who is calling Israel into judgment, threatening the very existence of Israel because of its immorality and failure to reverence Him. The God Isaiah proclaims is not a limited, weak, national God, conforming to the ideals of His creatures, but the universal Creator and Lord, with infinite demands upon His human creatures, which serve to test them, and which they will disregard at their own peril.

What about you—do you believe in such a God?

Oswalt states that “What was distinct about this Deity was not so much His origin, His essence, or His numinous power. Rather, it was His attitude toward ethical behavior. Other nations had laws and they saw those laws as deriving from the Deity (compare the **Code of Hammurapi** and its forerunners, the **Codes of Eshnunna** and **Lipit-Ishtar**), yet none of them saw those laws as being an essential expression of what made God to be God...

“But this is exactly what the **Old Testament** says. The entire nation will be set-apart / holy to God (**Exodus 19:6**), and they will manifest that special relationship through a particular species of ethical behavior. This is the meaning of the so-called Holiness Code in **Leviticus**. ‘You shall be holy as I am holy’ (**Leviticus 19:1**) does not refer to ritual purity but rather to ethical behavior.

“Thus for the Hebrews holiness came to have a very particular ethical cast...To be holy was to behave ethically and to be unholy was, in an ultimate sense, not to be cultically impure, but to be ethically impure (**Ezekiel 36:22-32** [but does this text say anything about ‘cultically’ or ‘ethically’? We think not!])...

“So for Isaiah the announcement of God’s holiness meant that he was in the presence of One distinct from—other than—himself. But for Isaiah as a Hebrew, it also meant that the terrifying otherness was not merely in essence but in character. Here was One ethically pure, absolutely upright, utterly true.” (Pp. 180-81)

This sounds good, and we agree with much of what Oswalt says--but we insist that Oswalt runs the danger of depicting, instead of the hidden, mysterious God of the **Hebrew Bible**, a God made in the image of the prophetic and Christian ethical teaching, much like the three friends of Job attempted to do with wisdom teaching (the law of retribution) in their debates with Job.

(continued...)

¹⁵(...continued)

But for the **Hebrew Bible**, while YHWH of Israel gives the command “you shall not kill”—He Himself is depicted as killing a whole world in the ancient story of Noah, and as ordering the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites! He is depicted as commanding the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves, but also commanding Israel to commit perpetual genocide against their neighbors, the Amalekites—an act which can hardly be considered “ethically pure” (**Exodus 17:14-16**)!

Oswalt’s statement is an attempt to paint a picture of God as the Great Ethicist, which eliminates a great deal of the mysterious nature of God. But the God of the **Bible**, YHWH of Armies, simply will not fit such a depiction. While He commands His human creatures to keep the “holiness code,” He Himself is not subject to that code, nor is the universe He created. And it is not His keeping of such laws that “makes Him God” (what an irreverent phrase!). The Gods of Hammurabi, Eshnunna and Lipt-Ishtar (primarily Marduk) are like play-dolls when compared with the Wholly Other YHWH of Armies of **Isaiah**, Whose origin is never discussed in the **Bible**, and Who can only be worshiped and served by those who fall in awe before His mysterious and inexplicable otherness, by those who are willing to answer His call to service, not attempting to force Him into our human categories, or imagining that He Himself is subject to the laws He has given His human creatures.

What do you think? When Paul finishes his theological section of the **Book of Romans**, in **11:33-36**, he concludes:

- 33 O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God!
How unsearchable the judgments of His,
and incomprehensible the ways of His!
- 34 For, Who knew (the) Lord’s mind?
Or who became ‘counselor’ of Him?
- 35 Or who gave before to Him,
and He will repay him?
- 36 Because out of Him,
and through Him,
and for Him—(are) all the things!

Paul has done his best to explain the judgments and ways of God—but ends by confessing that His judgment are “unsearchable,” and His ways are “incomprehensible”! Should we not make that same confession?

¹⁶This Divine name is first found In **1 Samuel 1:3**--it is **יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת**, **YHWH Tseba)oth**, "YHWH of Armies" (a Divine name that we will find used more than 250 times in the **Hebrew Bible**--largely in **Samuel-Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah**, the **Twelve (Minor Prophets)**, and in the **Psalter** (never in the **Five Books of Moses**, or in **Joshua-Judges**, nor in the **Writings** other than **Psalms**).

(continued...)

Fulness of all the land / earth,
His glorious radiance!¹⁷

¹⁶(...continued)

This name identifies YHWH as the Divine Warrior, who acts with great, unlimited power in human history, using the armies of heaven, and human armies as well, for the fulfillment of His purposes. It is an important element in the "Divine Warrior" motif of the **Hebrew Bible**, which is continued in the **New Testament** as Jesus is depicted as embodiment of the "Divine Warrior" in such passages as **Revelation 19:11-16**.

¹⁷Literally, the Hebrew reads, "Fullness, all the earth, His glorious radiance!" (with no verb). The opening word מִלֵּא, **melo**) has been spelled by the Masoretes as a noun meaning "fulness," or "that which fills." But it can also be spelled as an imperative verb, "Fill all the earth!," or as a perfect verb, "Has filled all the earth." This means that the sentence can be translated in different ways:

"His glorious radiance has filled all the earth!," or

"Fill all the earth [with] his glorious radiance!"

Alexander translates in this second way, and comments as follows: "...The fulness of the whole earth, that which fills the whole earth, is His glory!" (P. 147)

Watts likewise translates, "The fulness of all the earth (is) His glory!"

Tanakh has "His presence fills all the earth!"

Rahlfs has πλήρης πάσα ἡ γῆ τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ,
literally, "full—all the earth—of His glory!"

However this problem of the initial word in the sentence is resolved, the meaning of the rest of the sentence is very clear--it is a universal claim concerning this God, YHWH, Isaiah's Lord, the Divine Warrior. Not just the temple, or the heavenly throne--but "all the land / earth" (we will learn in reading the remainder of **Isaiah** that this involves the nations surrounding Israel--not just Israel) is the location of His glorious radiance! It is not an affirmation that "His righteousness fills all the land / earth"--but rather, His glorious radiance--which is seen in the savage crocodile and stalking lion, and the hippopotamus (in **Job 38-41**), but not His obedience to any law of righteousness.

Ortlund comments that the phrase כְּבוֹדוֹ "His glory" "is a technical term for God's manifest presence with His covenant people [but note: here it is applied to 'all the land / earth'!]. It was seen in the cloud in the wilderness (**Exodus 16:7, 10**); it moved in to 'fill' the tabernacle (**Exodus 40:34-35**) and then the temple (**1 Kings 8:11**), where the worshipers could 'see' it (**Exodus 29:43; Psalm 26:8; 63:2**). Several passages look forward to the day when the Lord's glory would fill the earth, i.e. the whole world will become a sanctuary (compare **Isaiah 11:9** [the last two lines are: 'for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea'])." (P. 1251)

(continued...)

¹⁷(...continued)

This God, YHWH of Armies, praised by the mysterious flame-like creatures, is the universal God, Who is not isolated to, or confined by, any sacred place, or any geographical location. His glorious radiance fills all the earth! Compare related statements in:

Numbers 14:21, where the following statement is attributed to YHWH Himself:

And indeed, (as) I live--
YHWH's glory will fill all the land / earth!

Jeremiah 23:23-24, where YHWH asks:

- 23 (Am) I a God Who is near--
a saying of YHWH--
and not a God Who is far off?
- 24 Or will a man be hidden in the mysterious places,
and I, I will not see him?
—a saying of YHWH--
Do I not fill the heavens and the land / earth? (Here, “earth” is obviously best.)
—a saying of YHWH.

Psalms 72:19, where the last prayer of David closes with these words:

And blessed (be) His glorious name to long-lasting time!
And may His glory fill all the land / earth! (Again, “earth” is best.)
Amen! And amen! / Truly! And truly!

Kaiser comments that “If the first half of the heavenly song of praise celebrates God’s innermost, hidden being, which nevertheless stands powerfully above all creation, the second half looks towards His presence in [כָּל־הָאָרֶץ] all the land / earth...” (P. 127)

Watts comments that “The praise would be fitting at any time, but the dating of the passage suggests a timely meaning here as does the shaking of the threshold and the smoke of incense. It suggests approval of God’s decision to destroy Israel and to purge Jerusalem that was reached in **chapters 1-5.**” (P. 74)

And if this is so, as we think it is, the praise means that even in the midst of the death of beloved national leaders, and the destruction of beloved homelands and temples, YHWH God is present, fulfilling His purposes in human history, even in ways that seem to deny ethical standards!

Oswalt states that “It cannot be mere coincidence that in the year of King Uzziah’s death Isaiah saw the King [YHWH of Armies]. The prophet has recognized that the fate of any nation, as well as his own fate, does not finally rest in the hand of any human king, however competent and faithful that king may be. Rather, it is in the hands of the only One Who is true Monarch of creation...Alt suggests

(continued...)

וַיִּנְעוּ אֲמוֹת הַסְּפִיּוֹת 6:4¹⁸

מִקּוֹל הַקּוֹרָא

וְהַבַּיִת יִמְלֵא עָשָׁן:

And they shook--the foundations of the thresholds--¹⁹

¹⁷(...continued)

that it may be because of this experience that Isaiah is ever after reluctant to accord the title of king to anyone but God.” (P. 183)

¹⁸Alexander comments that in **verse 4** “The effect of this doxology, and of the whole supernatural appearance, is described.” (P. 148)

¹⁹Oswalt notes that the meaning of the Hebrew phrase אֲמוֹת הַסְּפִיּוֹת “is uncertain. The second term is relatively frequent as ‘threshold, sill,’ but the first is unknown except as ‘cubit’ or ‘mother city (**2 Samuel 8:1**)’. The common suggestion of ‘foundation’ rests upon a supposed derivation from ‘mother,’ אִמָּ, while ‘doorposts’ assumes an emendation [adding the letter nun, נ]...

“[Rahlf’s translation] apparently combines the two terms with its ‘lintels’ [τὸ ὑπέρθυρον, ‘the lintel’ of a door or gate].” (P. 170)

Alexander states that the explanation that the phrase means “the *lintel*, or upper part of the door-frame by the [Greek translation, τὸ ὑπέρθυρον, literally ‘that which is above a door’]...is now commonly admitted to mean thresholds, and the other word foundations.” (P. 148)

Our English translations have “the posts of the door,” the doorposts,” “the pivots of the thresholds” and “the doorposts and thresholds.”

Oswalt comments that “As the seraphim fly back and forth about the throne singing to one another of God’s incomparable glory, the sound of their voices causes the doorways to shake. Why the doorways should be singled out is unclear...At any rate, the hymn was thunderous, rocking the great building to its foundations. All the while the sanctuary was filling with *smoke*...adding to the immediacy and mystery of the experience. The holy God is not to be surveyed casually with unveiled eyes.” (P. 182)

Motyer states that “Shaking is the customary reaction of earth to the Divine presence (compare **Exodus 19:18**; [20:18]; **Habakkuk 3:3-10**). Concentrated on doorposts and thresholds it specifically prohibits Isaiah’s entry to the Divine presence, just as smoke forbids him to see God, The Divine nature as such is an active force of total exclusion.” (P. 77)

But is this the case? Isaiah says he saw the Lord, in spite of the smoke filling the temple. And to say that the Divine nature is one of total exclusion goes against the depiction of YHWH’s invitation (continued...)

from the voice of the one crying out;²⁰
and the house / temple is filling [with] smoke.²¹

¹⁹(...continued)

to human beings in **Isaiah 1:16-18** to enter into open and honest dialogue with Himself, and with the invitation of YHWH to all people and nations to come to Himself in **Isaiah 55:1-7**. Those who respond to that Divine invitation will certainly shake with awe, but they will not be excluded!

What do you think?

²⁰Watts translates "...from the sound of the calling," but we think that it is much more likely that **הַקּוֹרֵא**, **haqore**) means "the one calling."

Gray translates "...the voice of them that called," but the Hebrew text is clearly singular, not plural. Gray defends his translation, stating that the singular participle is used here in a collective sense (see p. 107).

Paul Tillich, the great (and infamous for his sexual immorality) German Theologian who fled from Nazi Germany to America to become one of the greatest theologians \ teachers of the twentieth century, is well remembered for his famous sermon and book entitled "The Shaking of the Foundations." Tillich used this phrase in many ways to express the experience that occurs when "world-views" collapse, when our basic paradigms for understanding reality are called into question, and we have to re-group, seeking new answers, new ways of explaining reality.

Something like this is what was happening to Isaiah in this temple-vision. Everything around him was shaking--the old assumptions could no longer be held, his former life-style and hopes and dreams were being called into radical doubt. He had to envision a new world, with YHWH and His demanding word at its center, with Isaiah himself as its servant, at the very time that his surrounding world with the security of its long-time King Uzziah was falling into ruins, at least in terms of the Divine Message which Isaiah was receiving.

²¹Watts translates "...As the hall began to be filled with smoke," as does Slotki (p. 30), understanding the imperfect verb in Hebrew to be used in this sense. (P. 67).

Alexander comments that the statement is "intended to produce a solemn awe in the beholder." (P. 148)

We have asked concerning the location of "the temple / palace, as to whether the literal temple in Jerusalem is meant, or the "heavenly throne" of YHWH that includes the whole universe. Our answer is that most probably Isaiah is speaking about the literal temple in Jerusalem, but viewing it as pointing to, symbolic of that heavenly throne. Here, the language seems to demand that it is "the house" in Jerusalem--a very common designation for the literal temple in such writings as **Kings and Chronicles**.

"Smoke" is oftentimes used in a very literal sense in the **Hebrew Bible** to describe the smoke arising from literal fires, including the smoke that came from the altars of burnt offering and incense
(continued...)

6:5²² וְאָמַר

אֲוִי־לִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי

כִּי אִישׁ טַמְא־שִׁפְתַיִם אָנֹכִי

וּבִתְוֹךְ עַם־טַמְא־שִׁפְתַיִם

אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב

כִּי אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

רָאוּ עֵינָי:

²¹(...continued)

inside the temple in Jerusalem. But “smoke” is also used in a more symbolical sense, of the clouds that arise from dust-storms, or of the hot breath that comes out of the mouth of a crocodile. In an even more symbolical, “spiritual” sense, “smoke” is also used as part of the terminology for describing Theophanies, in which the Divine “coming” or “presence” is pictured as being surrounded by clouds, smoke, and thick darkness. See such passages as **Genesis 15:17; Exodus 14:19; 19:18; 40:34; 2 Samuel 22:9 = Psalm 18:8; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Isaiah 4:5** and **Joel 2:30**.

There should be little doubt that here in **Isaiah 6:3**, the meaning of “the house / temple filling with smoke” is that the Divine presence is manifesting itself--it is indeed, a “Theophany,” an appearance of the Divine majesty to Isaiah--YHWH is mysteriously, hiddenly present, even though the Divine message is one of destruction, of the overthrow of Israel and Judah, Isaiah’s beloved homeland! But still, the vision of YHWH is obscured by the presence of the clouds--YHWH remains mysterious and “Other.”

Kaiser comments that “The poet stresses the infinite distance which separates man not only from God but even from the heavenly beings, who for their part may not even look upon His countenance. At the same time the hall of the temple is filled with smoke, which conceals God from human eyes so that the prophet will not be destroyed, but put in a position to experience what is to come.” (P. 128)

Oswalt notes that the Aramaic Targum “has ‘thick darkness,’ which seems to be in keeping with the tendency of that paraphrase here to remove some of the immediacy of the experience. So, ‘I saw the glory of the Lord’ (**verse 1**); ‘holy ministers,’ ‘ministered’ rather than ‘flew’ (**verse 2**); ‘glory of the shekinah’ (**verse 5**); ‘in His mouth was a speech’ for ‘in His hand was a coal’ (**verse 6**).” (P. 170)

²²Alexander comments that in **verse 5** “The Prophet now describes himself as filled with awe, not only by the presence of [YHWH], but also by a deep impression of his own sinfulness, especially considered as unfitting him to praise God, or to be His messenger, and therefore represented as residing in the organs of speech.” (P. 148)

And I said,²³

Woe to me,²⁴ for I was destroyed / silenced;²⁵

²³Ortlund comments that “For the first time in the **book**, Isaiah [is quoted as speaking], and his word is a prophetic woe against himself.” (P. 1251)

²⁴This phrase, “Woe to me!” is an expression of the worshiper’s response to the Divine vision--it expresses the inadequacy, the guilt, the feeling of unworthiness that comes spontaneously in the presence of ultimate power, purity, goodness, mystery, and especially in the face of the Divine sentence of destruction against Isaiah’s beloved Israel!

Alexander calls the phrase an expression of both lamentation and alarm. (P.148)

Kaiser comments that “This cry betrays anxiety at the approach of an inexorable disaster.” (P. 128) Compare

Exodus 33:20, where YHWH is depicted as saying to Moses,

You (singular) cannot see My face,
for man / humanity shall not see Me and live!

Judges 13:22, where Samson’s father, Manoah, tells his wife,

We shall surely die,
for we have seen God!

Slotki translates by “undone,” and states that “Isaiah feels that his own spiritual shortcomings, as well as those of the people among whom he dwells, create an insurmountable barrier between him and the Divine call.” (P. 30)

Rudolph Otto taught twentieth century students to recognize in this something found throughout world religions--the unique “experience of the holy,” the “tremendous mystery” which engenders the combined feelings of dread, and awe, and fascination, all at the same time. Isaiah didn’t get up and run away--he felt irresistibly drawn to the Divine vision--but he also felt stripped and naked, guilty, in great need of Divine forgiveness and cleansing. “Woe is me!” This passage, **Isaiah 6:5**, is the only place in the **Hebrew Bible** where the phrase is uttered by a worshiper in the temple, expressing his personal feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Oswalt comments that “At this point, the prophet becomes aware of himself. He has been aware of the desperate need implicit in the political situation. He has been made aware of the awesome holiness of God with all that means of His transcendence and yet His immanence, and now he is suddenly and brutally aware of himself. He who had been pronouncing woe upon others...now must pronounce woe upon himself..

“Such confrontation cannot help but produce despair. For the finite, the mortal, the incomplete, and the fallible to encounter the Infinite, the Eternal, the Self-consistent, and the Infallible
(continued...)

²⁴(...continued)

is to know the futility and the hopelessness of one's existence. Modern existential angst is a species of such despair, for confronted with the apparent meaninglessness of our existence in this universe we wonder why we should go on living...

“But it is not the recognition of his finitude which crushes Isaiah; it is his uncleanness. The primary element about God's holiness that distinguishes Him from human beings is not His essence but His character...Isaiah recognizes with sickening force that his character is not, any more than is his people's, in keeping with God's character...In some way, sin and iniquity must be removed if Isaiah (and his people) are ever to serve God with clean lips.” (Pp. 182-83)

Do you agree with Oswald's attempt at psychoanalysis of Isaiah? We do, but think the recognition of finitude and uncleanness can be combined, that is, “both / and,” not “either / or.”

²⁵The verb used here, נִדְמֵיתִי, **nidmeythi** means “I am caused to cease,” “I am cut off,” “I am destroyed.” It is used to describe the ruin of a city at **Isaiah 15:1, 1; Jeremiah 47:5**; the ruin of a people at **Hosea 4:6; Zephaniah 1:11; Obadiah 5**; the ruin of kings at **Hosea 10:7, 15, 15**; compare **Ezekiel 32:2**; the ruin of beasts at **Psalms 49:13, 21**.

However, because of the close relationship of this verb with another verb meaning “make silent,” some have translated here “I am struck silent.”

Watts, for example, translates “...that I was silent,” and understands this phrase to be Isaiah's confession of having failed to speak during the reign of Uzziah. “The prophet is constrained to join the praise, but dares not. His own nature (‘unclean lips’) as well as that of his people does not allow him to speak in the assembly. It is astonishing enough that he has been allowed to see the King, YHWH of Armies, and still be alive.” (Pp. 67, 74-5).

Alexander states that “According to an old interpretation, נִדְמֵיתִי is a statement of the reason why he was alarmed, to wit, because he had kept silence...This sense is also given to the verb by Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, the [Syriac translation], and in some copies of the [Greek translation]...It is possible...that an allusion was intended to the meaning of the verb in its ground-form, in order to suggest that his guilty silence or unfitness to speak was the cause of the destruction...The lips are mentioned as the seat of his depravity, because its particular effect, then present to his mind, was in capacity to speak for God or in His praise...The preterite [‘past’] form of the verb implies that the deed was already done and the effect already certain.” (P. 149)

Oswald notes that this verb “expresses more strongly than something like ‘I will die’ the prophet's conviction that he cannot continue to exist having seen what he has.” (P. 171)

Slotki likewise states that this is “A second reason why he is undone” (p. 30)—compare **Exodus 33:20** (see it quoted in footnote 24).

Motyer says that the verb is used here “of the silence following disaster or death. ‘Silenced’ would be telling in this context, i.e., excluded from the heavenly choir, forbidden even to join from
(continued...)

for a man of unclean lips am I,
and in the middle of a people with unclean lips,
I am living!²⁶
For the King,²⁷ YHWH of Armies²⁸

²⁵(...continued)

afar in adoration, but the silence of death must be included too.” (P. 77)

²⁶Isaiah uses the Hebrew adjective טָמֵא, **tame**), “unclean”--and we immediately think in terms of the Jewish traditional laws of ritual impurity--for example, those concerning persons who have become unclean from contact with a corpse, or of certain classes of animals that are considered unclean. Sometimes things in general are described as unclean--certain kinds of food, or houses, and especially persons with sicknesses such as leprosy / severe skin disease, who have to go about crying “unclean.”

However, we think that Isaiah’s usage here is different--it is not about “ritual defilement,” but rather about personal, moral impurity that comes from the wrong kind of speech--his own, and his nation’s. It is the mouth, or lips, that have become unclean.

Kaiser comments that “Unclean lips stand for the uncleanness of the whole person, whose condition and disposition they express (**Matthew 15:10-20 / Mark 7:14-22**). If a person or people comes to stand in their impurity before the holy God who is set apart by an infinite distance from the angels and even more from all mortal creatures, it becomes evident that they have spoiled their lives.” (P. 129)

We agree with this comment, and insist that this kind of understanding is reflected in the teaching of Jesus, Who shows little concern for ritual defilement, but deep and lasting concern for the kind of personal impurity that proceeds from “unclean lips,” perhaps meaning lips that have attempted to speak of Divine reality, but which now realize how inadequate that speech has been in the light of YHWH’s “holiness / separateness.”

²⁷Isaiah gives the personal name “YHWH of Armies” to the Lord, and describes YHWH as “King.” The earthly King Uzziah may be dead; but the heavenly King YHWH of Armies, the Lord, lives--and Isaiah’s eyes have been privileged to see the King!

This is the vision that can enable the servants of God to endure any hardship, any holocaust, any experience of destruction!

For this description of YHWH as “King” see **Deuteronomy 33:5; 1 Samuel 12:12; Psalms 5:2; 10:16; 24:7, 8, 9, 10, 10; 29:10; 44:4; 47:2, 7-8; 48:2; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; [93:1-2]; 95:3; [96:10; 97:1-2]; 98:6; [99:1]; 145:1; 149:2; Isaiah 41:21; 43:15; 44:6; Jeremiah 10:7, 10; 46:18; 51:57; Zephaniah 3:15; Zechariah 14:9, 16, 17 and Malachi 1:14.**

There can no doubt that the **Hebrew Bible** teaches unreservedly that YHWH God is the eternal King of the Universe--planet earth, and the starry heavens, with their endless number of
(continued...)

my eyes saw!²⁹

6:6³⁰ וַיַּעַף אֱלֹהֵי אֶחָד מִן־הַשְּׂרָפִים

²⁷(...continued)

galaxies above, now being seen through the Hubble telescope—as well as seeing YHWH as the King of Israel.

It has been a very short-sighted theology among Christians to have sometimes claimed that the “Kingdom of God” began with the preaching of John the Baptist, or with the coming of Jesus, or on the Day of Pentecost following the coming of the Set-apart Spirit, or even worse, to hold that the Kingdom of God is only an eschatological, future reality that has not yet been realized!

When Isaiah “saw the King,” he was not seeing a Divine reality of the coming future--but rather, a very present reality in his own time! The Kingship of YHWH, and his Kingdom, as depicted in the **Psalter**, are not something only to be realized in the distant future, but rather, a present, eternal reality! The universe is the Divine Kingdom of YHWH, not only in our human world, but also in the world of fierce animals, and unknown sea creatures, and far beyond, in the exploding stars and dark holes of outer space!

What do you think? How big is your vision of God?

²⁸See footnote 16 for the Divine name YHWH of Armies.

²⁹See footnote 3 along with end-note 1.

Watts comments that “Whether the account is spoken by the historical prophet [i.e., Isaiah of the 8th century B.C.E.] or by (on behalf of) the literary prophet [i.e., the final author of the **Book of Isaiah**, in the 5th century B.C.E.], its purpose is clear. It is a claim for Divine authority in the task at hand. It claims to place this work with other reports from those who ‘stood before the Lord,’ who saw God and lived.” (P. 74)

This comment is important--as it points to the ultimate meaning of this **sixth chapter of Isaiah**, regardless of arguments concerning authorship and time of composition. The chapter is claiming Divine authority for the message of Isaiah; even if that message is totally rejected (as the vision assures Isaiah it will be), still, it is the truth of YHWH, and reveals the truth of history!

³⁰Alexander comments on **verse 6** that Isaiah “now proceeds to describe the way in which he was relieved from this distress by a symbolical assurance of forgiveness...All that is necessary to the understanding of the vision is, that the scene presented was a temple, and included an altar. The precise position of the altar or of the Prophet is not only unimportant, but forms no part of the picture as here set before us.” (P. 149)

Oswalt comments on **verse 6** that it “speaks of the depths of God’s grace. Isaiah does not plead for mercy, nor does he make great vows if God will but deliver him. All of the evidence makes it appear that he considers his case hopeless. Yet out of the smoke comes a seraph with a purifying coal. God does not reveal Himself to destroy us, but rather to redeem us (so with Jacob in **Genesis 32**, and with the Israelites in **Exodus 19-24**).” We would add, and so with the prostitute cities of
(continued...)

וּבִירוֹ רֹצֵפָה

בְּמִלְקָתָיו לָקַח מֵעַל הַמְּזִבְחִים:

And one of the flame-like creatures flew to me;³¹
and in its hand [was] a burning coal—³²

³⁰(...continued)

Jerusalem, Samaria and Sodom in **Ezekiel 16!** And we would also add, even if the Divine Theophany condemns us, it is intended to turn us around from our sinfulness, to seek Divine forgiveness and grace in the midst of YHWH's fiery judgment.

³¹Motyer comments that “The initiative has been heaven’s all along; revealing (**verses 2-3**), excluding and condemning (**verses 4-5**) and now sending the seraph to the one He has chosen to save [**verse 6**].” (P. 77)

Again we say, even if the Theophany excludes and condemns, it is not for the sake of final exclusion and condemnation, but rather in the hope of a response of humility and repentance, leading to inclusion and salvation. What do you think?

³²Where our Hebrew text has רֹצֵפָה, “glowing stone / or coal,” **Rahlfs** has ἄνθρακκα, “a coal.”

Watts translates “a smooth stone,” and holds that this word was used either for paving or for cooking purposes (p. 69). He states that if “burning coal” were meant, the Hebrew גַּחְלֵת אֵשׁ, **gacheleth esh** would have been used--compare **Leviticus 16:12**.

For another occurrence of the noun רֹצֵפָה, see **1 Kings 19:6**, where the phrase עֲגַת רֹצֵפִים, “a round, flat loaf of glowing coals” occurs, apparently meaning a loaf of bread baked on “hot coals.”

Oswalt notes that “There is no indication of removable stones in the descriptions of the altars in **Exodus, 1 Kings** or **2 Chronicles**.” (P. 171)

He adds on p. 184 that “The fiery coal from the hand of the fiery one touches the prophet’s mouth. God had a provision for sin and iniquity whereby their effect is mitigated and their power is broken.” (P. 184)

Motyer insists that the *live coal from the altar* “holds together the ideas of atonement, propitiation and satisfaction required by God and of the forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation needed by His people. All this is achieved through substitutionary sacrifice and brought to Isaiah, encapsulated in the single symbol of the live coal.” (P. 78)

(continued...)

with tongs³³ he had taken [it] from off the altar.³⁴

³²(...continued)

Wolf / Stek likewise explain that in **Leviticus 16:12** it is shown that “coals of fire were taken inside the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, when sacrifice was made to atone for sin.” (P. 1026)

But both of these comments are reading far too much, we think, into this one phrase, which may only symbolize the Divine forgiveness which Isaiah experienced in his vision.

To insist that YHWH Himself could not forgive Isaiah without an animal sacrifice on the literal temple’s altar, is to put God into the box of Judaism with its ritual restraints—and the six-winged creatures are not being represented as Levitical priests!

As the example of David’s forgiveness demonstrates (**2 Samuel 12**), YHWH can forgive whenever and whomever He desires, without the benefits of the temple and its Levitical procedures of atonement, propitiation and satisfaction—and we think it is totally unnecessary to bring these theological terms into the explanation of this verse, as Motyer does.

There is no real indication of animal sacrifice or Levitical procedures in this text—but there is full, Divine forgiveness!

As we have insisted in our comments on **Isaiah 1:16-18**, Christian theologians need to come to terms with this teaching that permeates the **Hebrew Bible**—YHWH God’s grace and full forgiveness of human sinfulness—it is not something that suddenly came into being with the coming of John the Immerser and Jesus, or that was not possible until the death of Jesus on the cross. God has always forgiven His penitent people by His grace—He did not suddenly become forgiving at the death of Jesus! What do you think? How do you explain this?

³³Alexander comments that “The word translated ‘tongs’ [מְלָקָחִים] is elsewhere used to signify the ‘snuffers’ of the golden candlestick, and tongs are not named among the furniture of the altars; but such an implement seems to be indispensable, and the Hebrew word may be applied to anything in the nature of a forceps [a pair of pincers or tweezers used in surgery or in a laboratory—here, in connection with a sacrifice].” (Pp. 149-50)

Oswalt notes that the root of this word, לַקַּח, “means ‘to take,’ so ‘tongs’ [an instrument with two movable arms that are joined at one end, used for picking up and holding things] seems most appropriate.” (P. 171)

³⁴Commentators have argued over which altar in the Jewish temple is meant--the altar of burnt offerings, or the altar of incense nearer to the most sacred place in that temple.

Alexander comments that “Both these interpretations take for granted the necessity of adhering to the precise situation and dimensions of the earthly temple, whereas this seems merely to have furnished the scenery of the majestic vision...All that is necessary to the understanding of the vision is, that the scene presented was a temple, and included an altar. The precise position of the
(continued...)

6:7 וַיִּגַע עַל-פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר

הִנֵּה נִגַּע זֶה עַל-שִׁפְתַיךָ

וּסֵר עֲוֹנֶיךָ

וַתִּטְאֲתֶךָ תְּכַפֵּר:

And it touched [it] upon my mouth. And it said,

Look--this has touched your lips,

and your iniquity will depart,

and your missing-of-the-mark will be covered over!^{35, 2}

³⁴(...continued)

altar or of the prophet is not only unimportant, but forms no part of the picture as here set before us.” (P. 149)

Slotki comments that “The fire on the altar was heavenly and holy, and as such burned away, so to speak, the impurities of sin.” (P. 30)

But see Motyer’s comment in the next footnote, where he attempts to describe the altar in terms of a literal, Levitical altar with animal sacrifice as the basis for Isaiah’s purification.

³⁵What Isaiah is describing in symbolical, visionary language is his experience of Divine forgiveness and cleansing, making him fit for the work of being YHWH’s messenger.

Gray comments that “...Isaiah does not find himself driven forth on account of his sinfulness: on the other hand, the same vision which had intensified his consciousness of sin is, before it vanishes, to assure him of the removal of his sin.” (P. 108)

Watts translates “Your guilt has departed! Your sin has been atoned!” But both of the verbs translated as perfects are preceded by the “waw-conversive,” which normally means a future tense, as we have translated. We understand the verbs to be the promise, not only of present forgiveness, but of future cleansing and forgiveness. In fact, the Hebrew uses a past tense verb [“caused to touch”] along with the two future verbs in this statement to Isaiah. We take them to mean that Isaiah has been forgiven by this act, and that the effects of this act will continue to be effective in his future life, turning him away from iniquity, and covering over any future missing-of-the-mark.

Motyer takes the use of the last verb in this verse, **תִּכַּפֵּר**, “it will be covered,” as the basis for his view that the Levitical system of atonement is being implied: “A comprehensive work of dealing with sin takes place...All of this arises from the payment of the price. The verb *atoned for* (**כִּפֵּר**) means ‘to effect a **כֹּפֶר**’ or payment of the price...the price which justice requires...As we speak of
(continued...)

³⁵(...continued)

a sum of money as sufficient to cover a debt, so כָּפַר, כִּפָּר [‘to cover,’ ‘covering’] is the payment of whatever Divine justice sees as sufficient to cover the sinner’s debt, the death of the substitute sacrifice on the altar.” (P. 78)

Ortlund likewise states that “Through the sacrifice on the altar, according to the Levitical ordinances (e.g., **Leviticus 1:4**)” his sin was atoned for. (P. 1251)

But a majority of the sacrifices in **Leviticus** are intended only to cover accidental sins, or sins done “inadvertently,” not intentionally, and the sins that Isaiah and Judah are plagued with are much more in the nature of sins committed with a “high hand.” See our end-note 2 for discussion of sins done accidentally, or inadvertently, in contrast to sins done “with a high hand.”

In contrast to Motyer and Ortlund, we think it is extremely doubtful that Isaiah is depicting the heavenly King YHWH as being subject to or dependent upon the procedures of Levitical sacrifices, and that it is much more likely that Isaiah is using this language symbolically.

Kaiser comments that “...What the priest does at each sin-offering and the high priest does for himself, his house and Israel on the great Day of Atonement (compare **Leviticus 4:26, 35; 16:17**) is accomplished by the heavenly being with his extraordinary act of atonement.” (P. 130)

However, the kind of forgiveness spoken of here is quite different from, and far superior to, either of these actions of the ordinary priest and high priest, even on the Day of Atonement--since it brings both unqualified forgiveness in the present, and is described as effective for the future as well, whereas the Day of Atonement sacrifice had to be repeated yearly.

We agree with Kaiser’s further comment, “Thus Isaiah is removed from the complex of guilt in which his people is involved, so that he can dare to speak in the heavenly council, and show how God can use him as His instrument.” (**ibid.**)

Ancient Hebrew interpreters thought that the meaning of the touching of Isaiah’s lips with the burning coal from the altar was that the Divine “Word” was being placed in his mouth, inspiring him, enabling him to speak for YHWH (compare **Jeremiah 1:9** and **Daniel 10:16**).

Alexander, however, holds that “...the mention of the altar and the assurance of forgiveness ...makes it far more natural to take the application of fire as a symbol of expiation by sacrifice...The fire is applied to the lips for a twofold reason: first, to show that the particular impediment of which the Prophet had complained was done away; and secondly, to show that the gift of inspiration is included, though it does not constitute the sole or chief meaning of the symbol.” (P. 150)

We think Alexander is reading too much into this depiction—holding that it implies sacrifice, and that it includes the gift of inspiration. There is no mention of these things in the text, and the symbolism is that of forgiveness and cleansing, without any sacrifice on Isaiah’s part, and without any mention of Isaiah’s “inspiration.” What do you think?

(continued...)

6:8 וְאַשְׁמַע אֶת-קוֹל אֲדֹנָי אִמֹּר

אֶת-מִי אֶשְׁלַח

וּמִי יֵלֶךְ-לְנוֹ

וְאִמֹּר הֲנִנִי שְׁלַחְנִי:

And I heard my Lord's voice,³⁶ saying,

Whom shall I send;³⁷

³⁵(...continued)

We do think that the symbolism implies that Isaiah will be able to speak for YHWH—but it seems too much to read a doctrine of “inspiration” into this. What do you think?

Ortlund states that following the Divine forgiveness, “Now Isaiah is qualified to proclaim the only hope of the world—the overruling grace of God.” (P. 1251) Yes, but Isaiah’s message proclaims Divine judgment and condemnation as well as Divine grace.

³⁶The implication of this ability of Isaiah to hear YHWH’s “conversation” with His surrounding servants is that Isaiah has been given access to the “Heavenly Council” such as is described in **1 Kings 22:19-22; Amos 3:7; Jeremiah 23:18, 22; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; 15:7-10; 29:4** and **Psalms 89:7**.

Oswalt comments that “Now, for the first time, God speaks. It is as if Isaiah was not ready to hear before this moment, as if the possibility of service could not be appreciated until this time. But for whatever reason, God makes it plain that while spiritual experience is never merely a means to an end, neither is it an end in itself. Unless that experience issues in some form of lived-out praise to God, it will turn upon itself and putrefy...”

“That Isaiah is neither directly addressed nor coerced is suggestive. Perhaps it is so because Isaiah does not need coercion, but rather needs an opportunity to volunteer...Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God’s service?” (Pp. 185-86)

He adds that “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 a offering of oneself.” (P. 186)

We say, Isaiah’s experience was his “call to ministry”! Do you agree? See footnote 38, where Watts denies that this is so.

³⁷The Hebrew verb for “send,” שָׁלַח, **shalach**, is the root word for the later **sheliach**, used in Mishnaic Hebrew for “authoritative messenger,” “envoy,” or “ambassador.” The Greek translation (continued...)

and who will go for us?³⁸

And I said, Look--it is I--³⁹

³⁷(...continued)

uses the verb ἀποστέλλω, **apostello**, “I send,” from which came the noun **apostolos**, “authoritative messenger,” “envoy,” or “ambassador,” so well known from Christian history as it was transliterated into other languages simply as “apostle.”

Here is an “apostle” in the **Hebrew Bible**—none other than Isaiah himself!

³⁸Watts insists that **Isaiah 6** is not about the “call” of Isaiah, and is not a “call narrative” (see p. 70). He comments that “...Interpreters wonder why it does not come at the beginning of the **book** as in **Ezekiel 1** [we add, **Jeremiah 1**]. The chapter is **not** a ‘call narrative’...Its position in the **book**...marks the **end** of the Uzziah section as the opening words clearly indicate. Its purpose is to show that the nature of God’s actions toward Israel and Judah which had emerged in Uzziah’s reign would remain the same until a complete destruction would come (i.e., over Samaria in 721 B.C.E.). The time clause ‘in the year of Uzziah’s death’ points backward, making this a closing scene. There is no indication that this is the prophet’s first vision or first prophetic experience.” (P. 70)

Watts is correct in this--the temple vision of the Lord comes at the end of Uzziah’s life, and is certainly not Isaiah’s first or inaugural vision (Pp. 71-2). But nonetheless, it certainly is a “call narrative,” for it involves Isaiah’s confronting the Divine request for a spokesperson, to which Isaiah, having experienced the Divine cleansing, answers “Yes!”, and offers his services.

What honest prophet or preacher cannot confess that it was not simply at the beginning of his preaching that he saw something of the Divine vision, and heard the Divine call to speak for God--but that it was only later in their ministry, as experience had mounted on experience, when the Divine call came through in their mind and heart with great power and conviction?

Throughout the history of interpretation of **Isaiah**, much has been made of the use of the plural pronoun here, “Who will go for **us**?” It has been explained as “the plural of majesty” (so Slotki), or as picturing YHWH speaking on behalf of the entire “heavenly council,” or as evidence in the **Hebrew Bible** for the later Christian doctrine of “the Trinity” (Jerome, Calvin, Motyer).

We think this last view is anachronistic, and seeks to interpret an ancient document in terms of developments that occurred centuries later--and is therefore unjustified as comment on the meaning of the text in the time of Isaiah. It is much better to think in terms of the heavenly council, to which Isaiah has been granted access.

Compare a similar use of the plural pronoun in **Genesis 1:26; 11:7** and **1 Kings 22:19-23** (this last passage, with Micaiah’s vision of YHWH on the heavenly throne, is especially relevant to **Isaiah 6**).

³⁹The Hebrew word is הִנְנִי, **hinneni**, the common way to respond to a call by name, implying a readiness to listen to the one speaking, and to do what is being asked. That is why, in this present instance, it is immediately followed by the words, “Send me!”

(continued...)

send me!^{40, 3}

³⁹(...continued)

Alexander comments that “A beautiful commentary upon this effect of pardoned sin is afforded in David’s penitential prayer, **Psalm 51:12-15**^{Heb} / **10-13**^{Eng}.”

- 12^{Heb} / 10^{Eng} A clean heart,
 create for me, O God!
And an upright spirit,
 renew within me!
- 13^{Heb} / 11^{Eng} Do not cast me away from Your presence!
 And Your Set-apart Spirit,
do not take away from me!
- 14^{Heb} / 12^{Eng} Return to me (the) rejoicing (in) Your salvation!
 And uphold me (with) a generous spirit!
- 15^{Heb} / 13^{Eng} I will teach transgressors Your ways,
 and those missing-the-mark will return to You!

⁴⁰Isaiah’s response is terse, not wordy--and we may remark that it is the mark of wisdom to be very brief in our speech when standing in the presence of God!

Compare **Ecclesiastes 5:1-3**^{Heb} / **2-4**^{Eng},

- 1/2 You shall not hurry, upon / with your mouth;
 you shall not hurry to bring forth a word before the God.
Because the God--in the heavens,
 and you--upon the earth.
Therefore, let your words be few.
- 2/3 Because the dream came with a multitude of business;
 and a voice of a foolish person, with abundance of words!
- 3/4 Whenever you may vow a vow to God,
 Because there is no delight in the foolish people.
 Whatever you may vow, fulfill!

Slotki describes Isaiah’s response as “ready and spontaneous acceptance of the Divine mission even before its nature was revealed to him.” (P. 30)

Here Isaiah uses the same verb, שָׁלַחְנִי; only here it is in the imperative, “Send me!” Again the Greek translation uses the verb ἀπόστειλόν, **aposteilon**. Watts (in agreement with Kaiser) comments that “Here the prophet volunteers to go at God’s command. This is unique to call narratives, but is normal in heavenly-throne room descriptions.” (P. 75)

See the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in **1 Kings 22**, who says Yes to the Divine command. On this basis some scholars have contended that **Isaiah 6** is not the story of a “call” at all--but rather, must be described as the “bestowing of an extraordinary commission in the heavenly council,” such as those found in **Zechariah 1:7ff.**; **Job 1:6ff.** and **1 Kings 22**. See our end-note 3.

(continued...)

⁴⁰(...continued)

This is probably a “distinction without a difference”—since the “bestowing of an extraordinary commission” is in fact a “call”! The only real distinction, we think, would be that between an initial call, and a later call to a particular work, and the story of Isaiah’s cleansing and enabling for the mission does have the marks of an initial call. See Kaiser, pp. 122-23.

Kaiser observes that “When the poet makes his prophet take the initiative in intervening in the heavenly council and without hesitation declaring himself ready to take on the task which has been announced, it sounds as though we have a step beyond the theme of refusal rooted in the call narratives [he is thinking of Moses and Jeremiah]. Thus Isaiah appears as the man who, instructed by means of the Theophany about the true power-relationships in this world...resolutely takes God’s side without enquiring into the consequences which will follow for his own person.” (P. 130)

⁴¹Oswalt entitles **verses 9-13** “The Commission,” and comments that “Almost all sermons on **Isaiah 6** conclude with **verse 8**, probably because of the frankly disturbing character of the remainder of the chapter. It is especially disturbing to Christians whose whole upbringing has conditioned them toward an emphasis upon God’s forgiving grace and will to deliver. Yet these verses depict God as preventing repentance so that total destruction may occur...

“The only glimmer of hope appears in the enigmatic final phrase, and the authenticity of that phrase is open to question since it does not appear in the [Greek translation]...

“So difficult is it to believe that this could be the content of an inaugural vision that it has become rather common to assert that they are Isaiah’s reflections upon his call after some years of preaching to a progressively more recalcitrant people...However, such a view fails to take seriously enough the concept of the prophetic word as a causal factor. The proclamation in some sense produces the effect it predicts [so, Gerhard von Rad]. Thus there is no reason to doubt that from the outset Isaiah expected his preaching to have the effect it did. Indeed, as Fohrer and Lindblom have pointed out, the element of unavoidable doom was inherent in Isaiah’s earliest preaching. This is not to say, however, that these words sum up the content of Isaiah’s preaching—he could still preach eventual healing and hope—but that the effect of his preaching would be hardening and destruction.” (Pp. 187-88)

Motyer entitles **6:9-13** “The future revealed in principle.” He states that “**verses 9-10** describe the spiritual expectations Isaiah may have had regarding his ministry; **verses 11-13a**, his historico-political expectations; and **verse 13b**, his Messianic expectations.”

Motyer states that in **verses 9-10** “Isaiah’s message (**verse 9**) and his task (**verse 10**) constitute, at first sight, the oddest commission ever given to a prophet: to tell people not to understand and to effect heart-hardening and spiritual blindness!” He notes that the Greek translation “evaded the rigor of the Hebrew text by softening the imperatives to indicatives: ‘For the heart of this people is made fat...’ There is, however, no way to evade the plan meaning of these verses.” (P. 78)

Motyer adds that “The use of these verses in the **New Testament** [see our end-note 3, for the statements concerning Jesus’ parables—seemingly so clear and easy to understand—had the purpose
(continued...)

⁴¹(...continued)

of hardening hearts] is an additional reason to be concerned to interpret them correctly and a simple approach lies to hand: How did Isaiah obey them? According to the criticism leveled at him in **28:9-10**, Isaiah taught with such simplicity and clarity that the sophisticates of his day scorned him as fit only to conduct a kindergarten. The Isaianic literature as it has come down to us bears all the marks of a plain, systematic, reasoned approach. It is clear that Isaiah did not understand his commission as one to blind people by obscurity of expression or complexity of message. He, in fact, faced the preacher's dilemma: if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart [that is, the bearer of the Divine message becomes the instrument of Divine judgment]...

“It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery. The human eye cannot see this point in advance; it comes and goes unnoticed. But the all-sovereign God both knows it and appoints it as He presides in perfect justice over the psychological processes He created (compare **Exodus 4:21** [where YHWH tells Moses to go on performing miracles before Pharaoh, but informs Moses that He is hardening Pharaoh's heart, so that he will not accept Moses' message]. It was just such a point that Isaiah was called to [his prophetic] office. His task was to bring the Lord's word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity, but in their response people would reach the point of no return. The imperatives of these verses must, therefore, be seen as expressing an inevitable outcome of Isaiah's ministry...And, of course, so it turned out to be, as is made clear in **chapters 7-11**. These were the days in which the decisive word was spoken and refused. ‘Opportunity in human life is as often judgment as it is salvation’ [quoting G. A. Smith].” (P. 79)

Do you agree with Motyer? We are prone to agree—but acknowledge that this is a very difficult matter to deal with. We want to proclaim a message of love and hope—but the message is lop-sided without honest confrontation with our human predicament of sin.

Alexander comments on **verse 9** that “The Prophet now receive his commission, together with a solemn declaration that his labors will be fruitless. This prediction is clothed in the form of an exhortation or command addressed to the people themselves, for the purpose bringing it more palpably before them, and of aggravating their insanity and wickedness in ruining themselves after such a warning...

“Where the blindness and infatuation of the people are foretold, they are allowed an abundant opportunity of hindering its fulfilment if they will. Not only is their insensibility described in the strongest terms, implying extreme folly as well as extreme guilt, but, as if to provoke them to an opposite course, they are exhorted, with a sort of solemn irony, to do the very thing which would inevitably ruin them, but with an explicit intimation of that issue in the verse ensuing...

“A similar expression is employed by Christ Himself when He says to the Jews (**Matthew 23:32**), *Fill up then the measure of your fathers.*” (P. 151)

Do you agree? Have you ever sought to compare Jesus to Isaiah, and the message of Jesus to that of Isaiah?

שְׁמַעוּ שְׁמוֹעַ

וְאֶל-תְּבִינוּ

וְרֵאוּ רְאוּ

וְאֶל-תִּדְעוּ:

And He said,

Go!⁴² And you shall say to this people:⁴³

Listen, you people, listening--⁴⁴

and you will not understand;⁴⁵

⁴²With a simple one word command, “Go!” (**lekh**), Isaiah receives the Divine commission. This is the command given to Abram (**Genesis 12:1**); to Moses (**Exodus 3:16; 4:12, 19; 7:15; 19:10, 24; 32:7, 34; 33:1; Deuteronomy 10:11**); Gideon (**Judges 6:14**); Saul (**1 Samuel 15:3, 18**); David (**1 Samuel 23:2; 2 Samuel 24:1**); Nathan (**2 Samuel 7:5**); Elijah (**1 Kings 17:3, 9; 18:1; 19:15**); Isaiah (**Isaiah 6:9, here; 20:2; 21:6; 22:15**); Ezekiel (**Ezekiel 3:4**); Hosea (**Hosea 1:2; 3:1**); Amos (**Amos 7:15**) and Jonah (**Jonah 1:2; 3:2**).

This command reminds us of the command of Jesus to his disciples, commissioning them to go to all the nations, proclaiming the Good News (see **Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47** and **Acts 1:8**).

⁴³We learn from study of the entire **Book of Isaiah**, that Isaiah’s message was directed to more than simply the Kingdom of Judah. He sometimes included northern Israel in his message, and there are many places in the **Book of Isaiah** in which the Divine message is directed not to the Jewish people at all, but to Babylon, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Tyre, and others such as Cyrus, the Ruler of Persia. But here, in the story of Isaiah’s commissioning, it is only “this people”-- i.e., Judah, the Jewish people, to whom Isaiah is sent.

Watts comments that “*This people* picks up the references in **1:3** [my people]; **2:6** [Your people]; **3:12** [my people...my people], **15** [My people]; **5:13** [my people], **25** [His people]. It will be continued exactly in **8:6** [this people] and **11** [this people]. The references appear without exception to refer to Israel.” (P. 75)

⁴⁴It is a peculiarity of the Hebrew language that the finite verb is repeated in its infinitival form, thereby strengthening and emphasizing the action of the verb--“listen, listening” means “be very careful to listen!” “See, seeing” means “be very careful to see what I am showing you!” Watts translates “Listen constantly!” and “Look regularly!” (P. 67)

⁴⁵Isaiah is to command the people to listen carefully--but he is fore-warned that in spite of his insistence, the people will not understand. His Divine Message will meet with misunderstanding on the part of Judah, and his mission will not be successful.

(continued...)

and see, you people, seeing--⁴⁶

and you will not know!⁴⁷

6:10⁴⁸ הַשְׁמִינׁ לְבַהֲעֵם הַזֶּה

⁴⁵(...continued)

Gray comments that “The doom of the people is inevitably fixed: there is to be no further healing of their sick state (compare **1:5-6**); let them now persist in their insensitivity (compare **1:3**) to the voice and will of God: even the prophet’s preaching is but to render them blinder, deafer, and more insensitive. The gradual hardening and ultimately fatal effect on character of continued disobedience to the voice of God is here stated in the bold, direct, dramatic speech of prophecy.” (p. 109)

Truly, we can say, Isaiah was called to be faithful, and obedient to the Divine vision--but he was not called to be “successful,” that is, in terms of number of converts! Indeed, he was warned this early in his ministry that he would be anything but successful. His message would meet with radical rejection, and only serve to further harden the hearts of those to whom he went! In fact, we think, Isaiah was being called to be the instrument of YHWH’s work of hardening Israel’s heart.

Slotki appears to want minimize this, stating that “This inevitable result is viewed by the prophet, perhaps ironically, as if that had been its purpose.” (P. 31) But we disagree, and hold that this is exactly the purpose of Isaiah’s ministry in response to the Divine call. What do you think?

I have observed many ministers preaching on Jesus’ parables in **Mark 4**, **Matthew 13** and **Luke 8**, rarely mentioning the statements attributed to him that they were given for the purpose of hardening the hearts of those who heard them (**Mark 4:11-12**; **Matthew 13:10-15**; **Luke 8:9-10**, omitting the quotation from **Isaiah 6**). Evidently we are like Slotki, not believing that this could have been their purpose. What do you think?

⁴⁶Compare footnote 44.

⁴⁷Isaiah is to command the people to carefully see--but again he is forewarned that in spite of his insistence that they do so, the people will not see--i.e., they won’t know what Isaiah is talking about. Isaiah need have no illusions about the success of his mission--if “success” means he will be met with understanding and knowledge!

Watts comments that “The words [hearing-seeing-under-standing-knowing] are part of a motif that runs through the length of the [**Book of Isaiah**] from **1:3** through **42:16-20**.” (P. 75)

⁴⁸Alexander comments on **verse 10** that “As the foregoing verse contains a prediction of the people’s insensibility, but under the form of a command or exhortation to themselves, so this predicts the same event, as the result of Isaiah’s labors, under the form of a command to him. *Make fat*, gross, callous, *the heart of this people*, i.e. their affections or their minds in general, *and its ears make heavy*, dull or hard of hearing, *and its eyes smear*, close or blind, *lest it see with its eyes*, and *with its ears hear*, and *its heart understand*, perceive or feel, *and it turn to Me*, i.e. repent and be converted, *and be healed*, or literally *and one heal it*, the indefinite construction being equivalent in meaning to a passive...

(continued...)

וּאֲזַנְיָו הִכְבֵּד
וְעֵינָיו הִשְׁעַ
פֶּן־יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו
וּבְאֲזַנְיָו יִשְׁמַע
וְלִבָּבוּ יִבֵּן
וְשָׁב וּרְפָא לוֹ:

Make fat this people's heart;⁴⁹

⁴⁸(...continued)

“The thing predicted is judicial blindness, as the natural result and righteous retribution of the national depravity. This end would be promoted by the very preaching of the truth, and therefore a command to preach was in effect a command to blind and harden them. The act required of the Prophet is here joined with its ultimate effect, while the intervening circumstances, namely, the people's sin and the withholding of God's grace, are passed by in silence...

“The essential idea is their insensibility, considered as the fruit of their own depravity, as the execution of God's righteous judgment, and as the only visible result of Isaiah's labors...

“Make them insensible, not by an immediate act of power, nor by any direct influence whatever, but by doing your duty, which their wickedness and God's righteous judgments will allow to have no other effect. In this sense the prophet might be said to preach them callous.” (P. 152)

⁴⁹Watts translates “Dull the heart of this people!” (P. 68)

A heart that is “fattened” (or “dulled”) is a heart that is filled with cholesterol, which cannot accomplish its work of pumping life-giving blood to the body, and that is close to death. Isaiah's work is to be primarily a work of Divine judgment on a disobedient, rebellious Judah. His Divinely-given message, instead of entering into Judah's heart, and breaking up its clotted arteries, will only serve to make Judah's condition worse, bringing about their destruction!

As Watts has pointed out, this matter of hardening the heart of Israel finds parallels in the Divine hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the stories of the plagues in **Exodus** (see **8:11, 28; 9:7, 34**). “The message remains the same: There is no turning back. The decision has been made and will be carried out. The commission addresses the question of prophetic success or effectiveness. As evangelists to bring the nations to repentance, the eighth-century prophets, indeed the great seventh-century prophets, were remarkably unsuccessful. This commission insists that this was not their task.” (P. 75)

and make heavy its ears;⁵⁰
and its eyes, smear [over]--⁵¹
for fear that⁵² it should see with its eyes,

⁵⁰To make ears “heavy” apparently means to make them unresponsive, or “dull,” or “deaf.” Isaiah’s Divinely-given message, instead of working in such a way as to bring about penitence and renewal, will only serve to make Judah dull, and unresponsive--it will be met with the response, “Boring!” Judah will refuse to hear the very message that could save her!

⁵¹To “smear” (or “plaster”) over the eyes” means to cause blindness, to stop people from being able to see clearly (so, Watts paraphrases, “shut its eyes,” p. 68). The Divinely-given message, which could impart light and guidance to Judah, will only serve to blind Judah, and make her no longer able to see her way clearly! That is Isaiah’s commission!

Kaiser comments that “If anyone hardens his heart, God will complete the hardening. Anyone whose heart is hardened has his condition made even worse by the call to repent. By this truth the poet is clearly interpreting the fate of his people; he makes God lead the people to disaster through the prophet in order to redeem God’s power and freedom for His people in the present.” (P. 132)

We wonder what Kaiser means in this last sentence. He dates much of the Isaianic material as post-exilic, written as late as the fifth century B.C.E., and so we assume he means the **Book of Isaiah** is written to enable fifth-century readers to experience God’s power and freedom, by understanding what their ancestors who heard the historical Isaiah preach went through--and why they didn’t respond to the prophetic message--in hopes that the present fifth-century generation will respond to that message.

The Greek translation changes the imperative verbs “make fat,” “make heavy,” and “smear over” to “became fat,” “they heard with disgust,” and “they closed,” so that instead of Isaiah being given the commandments to cause these things to happen, the responsibility is shifted to the people themselves--thereby avoiding the theological problem raised by the Hebrew text.

But the Hebrew text shows that the prophet Isaiah’s task is to play an integral role in the Divine judgment that comes upon Judah--as his message becomes the instrument of judgment, not of salvation!

Watts points to the parallels to this found in **1 Kings 22:20-23** (a heavenly spirit volunteers to be a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets, to bring disaster on Ahab), as well as in the story of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in **Exodus 8 and 9**. (P. 75).

⁵²The Hebrew word is , **pen**, a conjunction which constitutes a sort of warning, “lest,” or “for fear that.” Here, the warning means that if Judah should truly listen, and see, and open its heart to the Divine message, she would receive true understanding, and vision, and find healing!

We take the conjunction here to be spoken by YHWH in an ironic manner--as if YHWH were saying, “We wouldn’t want that to happen, would we--so we are taking steps to prevent it from
(continued...)

and with its ears should hear,
and its heart / mind⁵³ should understand--
and it will turn around / repent--⁵⁴
and He will heal it!^{55, 4}

⁵²(...continued)
happening!"

⁵³Where our Hebrew text reads וְלִבָּבּוֹ, “and its heart / mind,” the Qumran manuscript 1QIs^a reads וּבְלִבָּבוֹ, “and in its heart / mind,” along with many other Hebrew manuscripts, the Syriac translation and other ancient versions. **Rahlfs** has καὶ τῆ καρδία, “and in the heart / mind.”

⁵⁴The verb is שׁוּב, **shubh**, “to turn around,” “to repent.” It is in the third person masculine singular, and most probably refers as do the other pronouns in this verse to “this people.” This is the same verb that we will find so prominently used in **Jeremiah** (and its Greek equivalent in the preaching of John the Baptist and in the beginning message of Jesus, according to **Mark 1:4, 14**, where the Greek noun μετάνοια, “repentance,” and the imperative verb μετανοείτε, “repent!” are used, synonyms of the verb ἐπιστρέψωσιν, “they might return / repent” used here in the Greek translation of **Isaiah 6:10**).

⁵⁵Translations of **verse 10** vary slightly, especially in the Greek:

King James, “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.”

Tanakh, “Dull that people's mind, Stop its ears, And seal its eyes -- Lest, seeing with its eyes And hearing with its ears, It also grasp with its mind, And repent and save itself.”

New Revised Standard, “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”

New International, “Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

New Jerusalem, “Make this people's heart coarse, make their ears dull, shut their eyes tight, or they will use their eyes to see, use their ears to hear, use their heart to understand, and change their ways and be healed.”

Rahlfs, ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν αὐτῶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῆ καρδία συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς, “For the heart of this people became dull / fat; and with their ears they heard with difficulty; and their eyes they closed—lest / so that they would not see with the eyes, and might hear with the ears, and in the heart might understand—and they might turn / return, and I will heal them!”

(continued...)

⁵⁵(...continued)

Watts translates the last line by “and will have healing” (p. 68), but this does not seem to be what the Hebrew text actually says. He goes on to comment that “The closing line in a backhanded way provides a lucid description of revelation’s normal purpose: Seeing and hearing (the vision and word of God) should lead to understanding (of their perverted and evil ways) which should cause rational beings to change and be healed.” (P. 75)

But in spite of this, such is not to be the case with Isaiah’s Divinely-given message! This passage, with all of its problematic nature, is quoted by Jesus in **Mark 4:12; Matthew 13:14-15; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27**; compare also **Romans 11:7-10, 25**. See our end-note 4.

Anyone at all acquainted with the nature of YHWH knows that this God, the great “Healer,” longs for his people to hear, and see, and turn around, and receive His healing. All of this awaits Judah--if they will only truly hear, and understand; if they will only truly see, and know; if they will only turn around in their hearts, to love YHWH (and their neighbors as themselves)--YHWH can and will heal them!

Yet the ironic way in which Isaiah’s commission is given to him lets Isaiah know that even though this is what YHWH desires for his people, Isaiah need not expect to be successful in his mission. He must be prepared to face rejection, and misunderstanding, and to see his message fall on deaf ears, unseeing eyes, and unheeding hearts! He himself must in fact become an instrument of judgment by proclaiming the message that his hearers will refuse to hear and obey.

Kaiser (p. 121) sees this entire chapter as the work of narrators in the post-exilic period, who were attempting to explain what had happened to the people of God in the Babylonian captivity--looking at their own past as in a mirror--and seeking to enable their readers to interpret Israel’s history in terms of the working of YHWH of Armies, Whose will was being fulfilled even in Israel’s disobedience and in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

However we may respond to this view--in acceptance or rejection--it is certainly the case that whether the chapter comes from the historical Isaiah himself, or from his later students following the exile, the basic theology of the chapter is that even in the midst of catastrophe and destruction, faith can discern the work of YHWH of Armies--the Divine Warrior, who brings to pass His purposes even in the midst of human blindness and hardness of heart!

Oswalt states that here in **verse 10** “is the heart of the difficult statement. Isaiah’s preaching will not make it easier for the people to believe and repent. It will make it more difficult. The faculties of perception and response (eyes, ears, and heart) will be dulled and apathetic. But why should God desire to harden people’s hearts? Why should He wish them not to be healed?...

“The text itself gives no reason, but we may offer some general deductions. It is evident that something is more important than healing. What could that be? Surely it is a pure revelation of the character of God and of the human condition. As it happened, such a revelation could only harden Isaiah’s generation in its rebellion (**3:8, 9; 5:18, 19**). For Isaiah to declare faithfully what he knew to be so would not result in an admission of guilt and a turning to God. Rather, it would bring about a more adamant refusal to recognize need...

(continued...)

⁵⁵(...continued)

“What was the alternative? Perhaps if the prophet would alter the truth in certain ways the people might be more responsive and, after a fashion, be healed. Yet such a healing would be a mockery. For what can heal except God’s truth? It is as though Isaiah should tell them that they did not need to see God as he did nor be cleansed as he was to be a servant of God as he was. The ultimate result would be deadly. It would confirm that generation in its syncretism and pervert the truth for all generations to come. It would sell the future for the apparent sake of the present. But if the truth could not save the present generation, if it would, in fact, destroy that generation, it could, faithfully recorded, save future generations...

“This, then, was Isaiah’s commission, as it is of all servants of God, not to be successful in a merely human sense but to be faithful.” (Pp. 189-90)

Do you agree with Oswalt?

In footnotes, Oswalt quotes Gerhard von Rad as making the point that “since destruction is considered to be God’s act then it is a part of a salvation-history whose ultimate end is not destructive but salvific (**Old Testament Theology II**, p. 155). Oswalt adds, “Note also the careful delineation of Isaiah as a part of a people. Whenever the people will respond as Isaiah did, they may experience cleansing as he did. God’s ultimate purpose of reconciliation with all people remains the same.

Oswalt also quotes E. Jenni as suggesting that “this prediction of short-term failure was given precisely in order to preserve the prophet and his followers from the consequence of that failure.” (P. 190)

Again we ask, Do you agree with Oswalt, von Rad, and Jenni? What do you think a prophet should do, faced with the situation that confronted Isaiah?

⁵⁶Slotki comments on **verses 11-13** that “Only desolation, destruction and exile of the sinful majority will bring to an end the deplorable condition.” He adds that the cry “Lord, how long?” is “a heart-rending cry of the prophet. How long, he asks, will this insensibility and blind obduracy persist?” (P. 31)

Motyer comments on **verses 11-13a** that Isaiah’s question “For how long...?” “is shorthand for ‘How will things go on, and what will be the end?’ The Lord predicts cities and land devastated and emptied (**verse 11**), deportation (**verse 12**), and, even then, a further process of wasting (**verse 13a**). Isaiah is left with no illusions about Jerusalem or any notion of its sacrosanctity [being extremely sacred or inviolable, not to be treated with disrespect]...

“Here, at the outset of his ministry, he already knows the end: a colossal tragedy proceeding from a single cause—they heard and refused the word of the Lord. Isaiah is alerted to the fact but not to its timing. Assyria introduced the policy of deporting subject peoples (compare **2 Kings 17**) and this was continued by the Babylonians (**2 Kings 24-25**). The prediction was at home in its own times.” (P. 79)

(continued...)

עַד־מַתִּי אֲדַנִּי
 וַיֹּאמֶר
 עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־שָׂאוּ עָרִים מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב
 וּבָתִּים מֵאֵין אָדָם
 וְהָאֲדָמָה תִּשָּׂאָה שְׂמָמָה:

And I said,

Until when / how long,⁵⁷ my Lord?

⁵⁶(...continued)

What do you think? If you felt Divinely called into the ministry, and then were assured that such hardening and rejection would be the outcome of your ministry, would you go on in it? All the more reason to admire Isaiah in his preaching ministry—he knew his ministry would fail, and still he went!

⁵⁷The Hebrew phrase, עַד־מַתִּי, **adh-mathay**, means literally “until when?”, and came to mean “how long?” Compare **Exodus 10:7; 1 Samuel 1:14; 16:1; 2 Samuel 2:26; Hosea 8:5; Isaiah 6:11** (here); **Jeremiah 4:14, 21; Habakkuk 2:6; Zechariah 1:12; Psalm 6:3; 74:10; 82:2; 90:13; 94:3** and **Proverbs 1:22**.

On the lips / pen of Isaiah, it is a heart-wrenching question--“How long, O YHWH, must I endure this non-productive, fruitless ministry?”

Watts comments that “The inevitable question is whether this is temporary or permanent. Is it a chastisement which is intended to eventually bring about the turning and ‘healing’? Or does this exclude Israel forever?” (P. 76)

Oswalt comments that “It is difficult to know the exact interpretation of this phrase...At the most, [Isaiah] is expressing a sense of sorrow and an implied request for mercy upon God’s people (**2 Samuel 2:26; Psalms 6:4^{Heb} / 3^{Eng}; 94:3; Zechariah 1:12**)...

“Fohrer believes that the prophet is asking when he can cease preaching judgment and turn to the preaching of salvation...But surely whatever else may be said, this is a cry of dismay. This is not the sort of message the prophet wished to bear, nor does he wish to see his people destroyed. Yet it is not a refusal, nor an insistence that God justify Himself. He is determined to obey, but he does so with a heavy heart.” (P. 190)

We say, the Divine message is not by any means an “easy” or “comforting message.” It is a tough, demanding message, which requires intensive listening and life-changing response on the part
(continued...)

And He said,

Until the time when⁵⁸ cities (are) crashed to ruins from there not being inhabitants,⁵⁹
and houses from there not being a human-being,⁶⁰
and the ground shall be laid waste,⁶¹ a devastation.⁶²

⁵⁷(...continued)

of the hearers. It is not a “sugar-pill” that tastes sweet, but accomplishes nothing. If Israel is willing to honestly open their heart and eyes and ears, they can hear the message, understand it, and be healed. But it will not happen automatically, or without their determined response.

⁵⁸Commentators such as Delitzsch and Kaiser have held that this statement, “until that time when...” implies that the destruction will reach an end, and opens the way to a time of renewal and of hope. “God’s answer envisages the end of the hardening and the possibility given with it of a new beginning to history. Both are to be expected only beyond the utter collapse...For the community to which this story is told, that means that if it trusts in the almighty and holy Yahweh Sebaoth, it can hope in the change in salvation that He has brought about.” (Kaiser, pp. 132-33)

⁵⁹That is, abandoned cities, with no inhabitants--not a person to repair roofs, or repair damage from wind and rain--where everything continues steadily into ever more devastation.

Watts comments that “The answer is equivocal. It speaks of a total destruction of cities, houses, and fields. This may be understood to include social and political institutions that leave the land of Israel vacant and abandoned. But it does not answer the question about the people or about the possible future rehabilitation of the land. These are relevant questions to post-exilic readers or hearers.” (P. 76)

⁶⁰It is easy to suppose that if no one lives in a house, it will continue on in its present condition, without falling into worse condition. That would perhaps be true, if it were not for termites, rodents, wind-storms with blowing dust, hail, rain, etc. But the fact is that natural forces in and of themselves will sooner or later bring destruction to the house that has no inhabitant!

Oswalt comments that “The answer to Isaiah’s cry is not comforting. There will be no reprieve for Judah [we add, so long as Judah continues to fail to respond to Isaiah’s / YHWH’s message]. God’s justice will be carried out to its full extent until the land is empty. So the prophecies of **Deuteronomy** would come to their fulfillment (**Deuteronomy 28:21, 63; 29:28**)...

“So long as they remained in God’s favor, by living lives in keeping with His character, then the land was theirs to develop and to enjoy. But if they ceased to live in obedience to God, the land would vomit them out as it had the Canaanites before them (**Leviticus 18:25-27**)...All this would be done by the Lord.” (P. 190)

⁶¹Where our Hebrew text reads תִּשָּׂא, “shall be ruined / laid waste,” Rahlfs has καταλειφθήσεται, “shall be left,” translating a Hebrew text with תִּשָּׂא. For this last line of **verse** (continued...)

6:12 וַרְחֵק יְהוָה אֶת־הָאָדָם

וְרַבָּה הָעֲזוּבָה בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ:

And YHWH sends the human-being(s) far away,⁶³

and many are the forsaken (places) in the land's midst!⁶⁴

⁶¹(...continued)

11, New International has “and the fields ruined and ravaged”; **New Jerusalem** has “and a great desolation reigns in the land.”

⁶²The same thing that has been observed in the two preceding footnotes will happen to the land itself that is not occupied, and cared for. In the place of carefully tilled land, and crops, will come weeds, erosion, and a “return to nature.” In just a few short years without farmers and field hands, what was once profitable, productive land, will become a desolation, subject to weeds, wild animals and the devastating forces of wind and rain!

Alexander think that Isaiah’s question is “how long the blindness of the people shall continue,” and the answer given is “until it ruins them and drives them from their country.” (P. 154)

⁶³There can be little doubt that these words envision the results of an enemy invasion, with the population largely killed in battle, or carried far away from their homes and farms into enemy captivity, such as happened under the invasions of first the Assyrians (722/21 B.C.E.), and then the Babylonians (587/86 B.C.E.). By the time we come to the end of **chapters 1-39** of the **Book of Isaiah**, we will know well the terrifying reality of the threat of these two invasions!

⁶⁴The Greek translation of **verse 12** is καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα μακρυνεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ οἱ καταλειφθέντες πληθυνθήσονται ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, “And after these things God will prolong the human beings, and those remaining will be multiplied upon the earth!” Thereby the devastating word of judgment has been transformed into a message of hope!

Alexander comments on **verse 12** that “This verse continues the answer to the Prophet’s question in the verse preceding. *And (until) [YHWH] shall have put far off (removed to a distance) the men (or people of the country), and great (much or abundant) shall be that which is left (of unoccupied forsaken ground) in the midst of the land...*

“This is little more than a repetition, in other words, of the declaration in the verse preceding. The [Greek translation] and the [Latin] Vulgate make the last clause not a threatening but a promise that those left in the land shall be multiplied...The terms of this verse may be applied to all the successive desolations of the country, not excepting that most extreme and remarkable of all which exists at the present moment [that is, in 1847 / 1875, in the nineteenth century, before the 20th century return of the Jews to Palestine].” (P. 154)

6:13⁶⁵ וְעוֹד בְּהַ' עֲשֵׂרִיָּה

וְשָׁבָה וְהִיְתָה לְבָעֵר

כַּאֲלֵה וְכַאֲלוֹן

⁶⁵Alexander comments on **verse 13** that “The chapter closes with a repetition and extension of the threatening, but in such a form as to involve a promise of the highest import. While it is threatened that the stroke shall be repeated on the remnant that survives its first infliction, it is promised that there shall be such a remnant after every repetition to the last...

“*And yet—even after the entire desolation which had first been mentioned—in it—the desolated land—(there shall remain) a tenth or tithe—here put indefinitely for a small proportion—and (even this tenth) shall return and be for a consuming—i.e., shall again be consumed—but still not utterly, for—like the terebinth and like the oak—the two most common forest trees of Palestine—which in falling—in their fallen state, or when felled— have substance or vitality in them—so a holy seed shall be, or is the substance—vital principle—of it—the tenth or remnant which appeared to be destroyed...*

“However frequently the people may seem to be destroyed, there shall still be a surviving remnant, and however frequently that very remnant may appear to perish, there shall still be a remnant of the remnant left, and this indestructible residuum shall be the holy seed, the true Church, the *λείμμα κατ’ ἐκλογὴν χάριτος* [‘remnant according to the choice / selection of grace’] (**Romans 11:5**)...

“This prediction was fulfilled, not once for all, but again and again; not only in the vine-dressers and husbandmen left by Nebuchadnezzar and afterwards destroyed in Egypt; not only in the remnant that survived the destruction of the city by the Romans, and increased until again destroyed by Adrian; but in the present existence of the Jews as a peculiar people [in the nineteenth century], notwithstanding the temptation to amalgamate with others, notwithstanding persecutions and apparent extirpations; a fact which can only be explained by the prediction that ‘all Israel shall be saved’ (**Romans 11:26**). As in many former instances, throughout the history of the chosen people, under both dispensations, ‘even so, at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.’” (Pp. 154-55)

Alexander turns to Paul, in the **New Testament**, for light upon this prediction—which continued to be fulfilled in the twentieth century (with Hitler’s holocaust of the Jews—and their return to Palestine).

The question is constantly raised, Is there in fact genuine predictive prophecy in **Isaiah** (and in the **Bible**)? Some so-called “predictive prophecies” are highly questionable. But this is not the case with this prediction in **Isaiah 6:12**—which indeed has continued to be fulfilled throughout some 2700 years since Isaiah first spoke / wrote these words!

What do you think? Is this in fact a genuine predictive prophecy? And if we have to confess that it is, doesn’t that open the door to the possibility of other predictive prophecies in the **Book of Isaiah**, of which there are numerous examples? See end-note 6 on chapter two.

אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁלְכָתָּ מִצֵּבֶת בָּם

זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ מִצֵּבֶתָּהּ:

And still [there is] in it a tenth--⁶⁶

and it too will turn [away], and will be for burning.⁶⁷

Like the terebinth, and like the oak [tree],⁶⁸

which when being cut down,⁶⁹ a stump [is] in them--⁷⁰

⁶⁶Kaiser suggests that “This tenth, which is perhaps proverbial in Hebrew...is compared to the stump of a great tree that has been felled, perhaps an oak or a terebinth, and begins to send out fresh shoots or branches (compare **Job 14:7ff.**). These are then eaten by sheep, or, more particularly, by goats and thus destroyed (compare **5:5.**)” (P. 133)

Slotki holds that the “tenth” means Judah: “The Kingdom of Judah remained after the ten tribes that formed the Northern Kingdom had gone into captivity.” (P. 32)

⁶⁷We have become well acquainted with Isaiah’s doctrine of the “remnant”--the faithful people, the “set-apart seed” that remains following Divine judgment, from which springs forth hope for the future. But this statement warns that even if a tenth-part of the people remains following the Divine judgment, they too will be for burning! The text warns the reader, “Don’t jump to hope too quickly!” (Nonetheless, see the closing words of this verse.)

Gray comments that “Yahweh will not Himself be destroyed, as the people supposed, in the destruction of His people; He is Himself the cause of it. Israel will vanish; Yahweh will remain. The land of Israel will become a desolation, but the whole earth (**verse 3**) will still reflect Yahweh’s righteousness; the very desolation of Yahweh’s country will speak of His righteous anger, which will not tolerate the sins of those whom He had chosen to be peculiarly His own...” (P. 111)

⁶⁸Watts combines the Hebrew word for oak-tree with the next word in Hebrew אֲשֶׁר,)asher, changing it to אֲשֶׁרָה,)asherah, and translating “like the oak of an asherah.” (P. 68) He states that the text in the normal Hebrew is an “obscure passage,” but this change in reading does not make it any less obscure!

⁶⁹Where our Hebrew text reads בְּשִׁלְכָתָּ, “when being felled / cut down,” 1QIs^a reads מִשְׁלַכְתָּ, a hophal participle, “having been felled / cut down.” Watts translates “cast down” (P. 68).

⁷⁰The phrase in Hebrew, בָּם זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ מִצֵּבֶתָּהּ, literally “a pillar among them, a set-apart seed / descendant,” is omitted by **Rahlfs**. 1QIs^a, instead of reading בָּם “in them,” reads בְּמִהָ, “by what?”

(continued...)

a set-apart seed [is] its stump!⁷¹

⁷⁰(...continued)

Watts changes the text to read “(becomes) a monument of a high-place.” (P. 68) The first **Isaiah scroll** from Qumran reads “high-place,” and there are a number of Hebrew manuscripts which read “in her” instead of the Hebrew text’s “in them.” It is true that the Hebrew noun **matstsebeth** means “a pillar,” or “a monument,” a stone set up for some type of memorial of a religious experience or for a grave “monument.” It is oftentimes used for sacred stones or pillars, which are condemned by the Deuteronomic code and mentioned oftentimes in a negative way by the author of **Kings**.

Many English translations translate “stock,” or “stump,” but this is the only place in the **Hebrew Bible** where such a meaning can be found--and is therefore unlikely here. Slotki translates by “stock,” and comments that it means “the vital and indestructible element from which the tree springs into life again.” (P. 32)

Translations of **verse 13** vary:

King James, “But yet in it *shall be* a tenth, and *it* shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil [lime or linden] tree, and as an oak, whose substance *is* in them, when they cast *their leaves*: so the holy seed *shall be* the substance thereof.”

Tanakh, “But while a tenth part yet remains in it, it shall repent. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which stumps are left even when they are felled: its stump shall be a holy seed.”

New Revised Standard, “Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

New International, “And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

New Jerusalem, “And suppose one-tenth of them are left in it, that will be stripped again, like the terebinth, like the oak, cut back to the stock; their stock is a holy seed.”

Rahfs, καὶ ἔτι ἐπ’ αὐτῆς ἔστιν τὸ ἐπιδέκατον καὶ πάλιν ἔσται εἰς προνομὴν ὡς τερέβινθος καὶ ὡς βάλανος ὅταν ἐκπέση ἀπὸ τῆς θήκης αὐτῆς “and still upon it is the tenth, and again it is for foraging, like a turpentine tree, and like an acorn when it falls out of its husk.”

⁷¹Watts understands the last two lines of the Hebrew text as having a “gruesome” meaning--the only thing that will be left after the Divine visitation of desolation upon the people will be a lonely memorial of Judah’s idolatrous past, but no future! “...The concluding *its monument* suggests for them a role they would not enjoy. They would be a continuing reminder of the nation that was now dead and of the reason why it was destroyed. The final verse of the [Isaianic] Vision (**66:24**) suggests the same gruesome role.” (P. 76)

We do not agree with Watts’ conclusion. **Isaiah 66:22-24** is not by any means a “gruesome” conclusion for the faithful people of YHWH--but rather, speaks of the new heavens and the new earth which YHWH will make, and which will remain before YHWH, as universal worship goes up to YHWH. True, the future for those who have rejected YHWH is one of unrelieved darkness and suffering according to Isaiah’s vision--but not so for the “set-apart seed” which will endure!

(continued...)

⁷¹(...continued)

We agree with Kaiser's evaluation, "...The stump which grows again is not gnawed completely away. It forms the holy seed of the new Israel, and replaces the old seed of the evildoers who have perished in the Divine judgment (1:4). And because it is itself holy (compare 4:3), and hallows the name of the Holy One of Israel (compare 29:23), it will remain and grow into a new tree." (P. 133)

Slotki likewise states that the "holy seed" means "the escaped remnant."

We agree with Kaiser, thinking it much more probable that the text means that in spite of all the devastation and destruction, there is a "set-apart seed" which will continue as a living memorial to Israel of old, and which will receive the wonderful promises of YHWH to his people!

Compare **Isaiah 8:17**, which states, "I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him..." along with **Isaiah 11:1**, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots..." In spite of all the Divine message of doom and destruction that we hear throughout the **Book of Isaiah**, there is simply no denying the presence of this living hope that throbs throughout its pages because of Isaiah's faith in YHWH! See our end-note 4 at the close of our study of **chapter 2**.

Oswalt comments that as **verse 13** "now stands in the Masoretic Text, it offers a faint, but sure, ray of hope. Yes, the desolation will be complete. Not even a tenth part will remain. The nation will be like a forest whose stumps are burned after the trees are cut down. Yet even from such blasted stumps a shoot can burst forth. So it will be for Judah (compare **Isaiah 10:33; 11:1**). Utter desolation is sure, but that desolation is not the end. There will be offspring holy to the Lord, for the Lord is not finished with Israel. God's promise to Abraham to bless the nations through His offspring is not to be forgotten (compare **Isaiah 49:19, 22**).

"In this sense, the chapter is much like the **Book of Amos**, which, while filled with judgment, nonetheless ends on a hopeful note...In God's overall purposes judgment is never His last word. This is consistent with the present structure of **chapters 7-12** as well as with the **book** as a whole." (Pp. 190-91)

Motyer asks, "Do the preceding verses, then, represent the final fall of the curtain on the Lord's valiant efforts to save a people for Himself? Ask another question: Was Isaiah's deadly sin the end for him? The 'burning one' [seraph] approached with fire, but when the fire touched the voice said, 'Forgiven.' So here too. The tree is felled but the voice says, 'The holy seed.' Typically of **Isaiah**, hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom...Within the stump there is life!...Already here the reference is to the shoot out of the stem of Jesse (**11:1**); the promise of the Messiah is the guarantee of a future people over whom he will reign." (P. 79)

1. **Seeing God and Still Living**

Genesis 16:9-13,

- 9 And YHWH's messenger said to her (Hagar),
Return to your mistress / female master,
and humble yourself beneath her hand!
- 10 And YHWH's messenger said to her,
I will certainly multiply your descendant(s),
and it / they will not be counted because of their multitude!
- 11 And YHWH's messenger said to her,
Look—(you have) conceived, and you will give birth to a son,
and your will call his name Ishmael,
because YHWH heard your (cry of) affliction!
- 12 And he will be a wild donkey human-being,
his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he will settle against (the) face of all his brothers.
- 13 And she called YHWH's name, the One speaking to her,
You (are) a God Seeing Me / God of my seeing.
Because she said, Have I not also to this place seen
after One Seeing Me?

Genesis 28:13-15,

- 13 And look—YHWH standing above it (the ladder to heaven), and He said,
I (am) YHWH God of Abraham your father, and God of Isaac;
the land upon which you are lying,
to you I will give it, and to your descendant(s).
- 14 and your descendant(s) will be like the dust of the earth,
and you will break through to the west and to the east and to the north and to the north
and to the south;
and in you will be blessed all clans of the ground, and in your descendant(s).
- 15 And look—I (will be) with you, and I will protect you
wherever you will go;
and I will return you to this land,
because I will not forsake you,
until I have don that which I spoke to you.

Genesis 32.31^{Heb} / 30^{Eng},

And Jacob called the place's name "Face of God,"
because (he said,) I saw God, face to face,
and my innermost being was delivered.

Exodus 3:6,

And He said, I, God of your father,

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.
And Moses hid his face,
for he was afraid to look at the God.

Exodus 19:21,

And YHWH said to Moses,
Go down, and warn the people,
so that they will not tear down (boundaries) to YHWH to see,
and a multitude of them will fall (dead).

Exodus 20:18-20,

- 18 And all the people were seeing the voices / thunders and the torches / lightnings,
and (the) voice / sound of the trumpet and the smoking mountain;
and the people were afraid and they trembled,
and they stood afar off.
- 19 And they said to Moses, You speak to us, and we will listen;
and God shall not speak with us, so that we will die!
- 20 And Moses said to the people,
You shall not be afraid;
because in order to test you the God came,
and in order for fear / reverent awe of Him to be upon you faces,
so that you will not miss-the-mark!

Exodus 24:9-11,

- 9 And Moses and Aaron went up,
Nadab and Abihu,
and seventy from Israel's officials / elders.
- 10 And they saw Israel's God,
and beneath His feet,
like tile-work, the (blue-)sapphire kind;
and like the heaven itself for purity.
- 11 And to Israel's children's chiefs,
He did not send forth His hand!
And they observed the God;
and they ate and they drank.

Exodus 33:11,

And YHWH would speak to Moses,
Face to face,
just like a man would speak to his neighbor.
And he would return to the camp,
and his attendant, Joshua, son of Nun, a youth,
would not move from the tent's midst.

Exodus 33:19-20,

- 19 And He said, I, I will cause to pass by all My goodness before your face;
and I will cry out in YHWH's name before you;
and I will have mercy on whoever I will have mercy;
and I will show compassion to whomever I will show compassion.
- 20 And He said, You will not be able to see My face;
because the human being will not see Me and live!

Exodus 34:5-10,

- 5 And YHWH came down in the cloud,
and He took His stand with him (Moses) there;
and He called out / proclaimed in YHWH's name.
- 6 And YHWH passed by before his face,
and He cried out / proclaimed,
YHWH, YHWH,
a God compassionate and merciful / gracious,
long of noses / slow to anger,
and great in steadfast-love and true faithfulness;
- 7 guarding steadfast-love for the thousands,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and missing-of-the-mark;
visiting (with punishment) iniquity of father upon children,
and upon children of children,
upon thirds / third generations and upon fourths / fourth generations!
- 8 And Moses hurried,
and he bowed down to (the) earth,
and he worshiped.
- 9 And he said, If now I found favor in Your eyes, my Lord,
let my Lord go now in our midst;
because it (Israel is) a stiff-necked people,
and You will forgive our iniquities and our missings-of-the-mark,
and You will inherit us!
- 10 And He said, Look—I am cutting a covenant before all your people:
I will do wonders which were not created in all the earth, and in all the nations;
and all the people who in its midst you (are) will see YHWH's work,
because it is fearsome, what I am doing with you.

Numbers 12:6-8,

- 6 And He said, Listen now (to) My words:
If your (plural) spokesperson / prophet (is / speaks for) YHWH,
in the vision, I will make Myself known to him,
in the dream I will speak with him.
- 7 (It is) not this way (for) My servant, Moses;
in all My house, he was confirmed / faithful.
- 8 Mouth to mouth I will speak with him,

and (in) a vision, and not in riddles;
and YHWH's likeness he will see.
And for what reason were you (plural) not afraid
to speak against My servant, against Moses?

Deuteronomy 5:23-26

- 23 And it happened, as you people heard the voice
from (the) midst of the darkness,
and the mountain burning with the fire—
and you drew near to me,
all (the) heads of your tribes and your officials / elders.
And you people said, Look—YHWH our God caused us to see
His glorious radiance, and His greatness,
and we heard His voice from the fire's midst;
this very day we saw that God will speak with the human,
and he will live!
- 25 And now, for what reason shall we die?
Because this great fire will devour us,
if we are continuing to hear
YHWH our God's voice any more,
and we will die!
- 26 Because, who (of) all flesh heard (the) living God's voice,
speaking from (the) midst of the fire like we did,
and lived?

Deuteronomy 18:16, YHWH promises Israel that He will do:

According to all that you asked from YHWH your God,
in Horeb, on (the) day of the assembly, saying:
I will not continue listening to YHWH my God's voice,
and this great fire I will not see again,
and I will not die!

Judges 6:11-24,

- 11 And YHWH's messenger came, and it sat beneath the oak tree,
which (is) in Ophrah, which belongs to Yoash Abiezer.
And Gideon, his son, was beating out wheat in the wine-press,
to hide it from before Midian / the Midianites.
- 12 And YHWH's messenger appeared to him, and said to him,
YHWH (is) with you, mighty soldier / man of the war!
- 13 And Gideon said to him,
Please, my Lord; and (if) YHWH is being with us--
and for what reason did all this find us / happen to us?
And where (are) all His wonders which our ancestors told us about,
saying, Did YHWH not bring us up from Egypt?
And now, YHWH forsook us,

and He gave / placed us in Midian's hand / power!
 14 And YHWH turned to him and he said,
 Go in this strength of yours,
 and save / deliver Israel from Midian's hand / power!
 Have I not sent you forth?
 15 And he said to him, Please, my Lord;
 by what (means) shall I save / deliver Israel?
 Look—my clan is the weak(est) in Manasseh,
 and I (am) the least in my father's household!
 16 And YHWH said to him,
 Because I will be with you,
 and you will strike Midian like one man!
 17 And he said to Him, If now I found favor in Your eyes--
 and You shall do for me a sign
 that (it is) You speaking with me.
 18 Do not, please, move from this (place) until I come to You
 and I will send forth my gift / offering,
 and cause it to rest before You.
 And He said, I will stay, until your return.
 19 And Gideon came, and he prepared / made a kid-goat,
 and an ephah of flour—unleavened cakes;
 the flesh he placed in the basket,
 and the broth he placed in the pot.
 And he brought (it) forth to Him,
 to beneath the oak tree,
 and He drew near.
 20 And YHWH's messenger said to him
 Take the flesh and the cakes,
 and cause (them) to rest on this rock;
 and the broth, pour out.
 And he did so.
 21 And YHWH's messenger sent forth the end of the staff which was in his hand,
 and he touched the flesh and the broth;
 and the fire went up from the rock,
 and it devoured the flesh and the broth.
 And YHWH's messenger went from before him / his eyes.
 22 And Gideon saw that it / he (was) YHWH's messenger
 and Gideon said, Alas, my Lord YHWH!
 Because in this way I saw YHWH's messenger,
 faces to faces!
 23 And YHWH said to him,
 Peace to you--
 you shall not be afraid;
 you shall not die!
 24 And Gideon built there an altar for the YHWH,
 and he called to it / named it YHWH's Peace / YHWH (Is) Peace.
 To this very day it is still in Ophrah, Abiezer.

Judges 13:22

And Manoach (Samsons' father) said to his wife
We shall surely die,
because we saw God!

Ezekiel 1:26-28,

- 26 And above the expanse which was over their head,
like a vision / appearance of a sapphire stone
a likeness of a throne,
and above a likeness of the throne,
a likeness like a vision of a human / man,
over it, from above.
- 27 And I saw like a spring of amber / shining substance,
like a vision / appearance of fire;
it has a house around it,
and from a vision / appearance of His mid-section, and downwards,
I saw like a vision / appearance of fire,
and it had a brightness, (all) around--
- 28 like a vision / appearance of the (rain-) bow
which will be in the cloud on a day of the rain-shower
in this way-- vision / appearance of the brightness (all) around;
it (was) a vision / appearance of a likeness of YHWH's glory.
And I saw, and I fell upon my face,
and I heard a voice speaking.

Ezekiel 8:2, Ezekiel feels the hand of God falling upon him:

And I saw, and look--a likeness like a vision / appearance of fire;
from (the) vision / appearance of His mid-section and downwards, fire;
and from His mid-section and upwards, like a vision / appearance of brightness,
like a spring of the amber / shining substance.

In the New Testament:

John 1:18,

No one has ever seen God.
God the unique Son,
Who is close to the Father's heart,
that One described (Him).

(This statement goes against many of the statements made in the **Hebrew Bible**, that on various occasions human have seen God.)

Compare also:

Matthew 5:8

Blessed (are those) pure / clean in the heart,
because they will see the God!

John 6:46

Not that anyone has seen the Father,
except the One being beside / from the God,
this one has seen the Father!
(Again, this goes against many of the **Hebrew Bible's** statements.)

1 Timothy 6:16, where it is apparently said concerning Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords, although English translations change it to a statement concerning God the Father):

The Only One having immortality,
dwelling (in) unapproachable light,
Whom no one of (the) people saw,
neither is able to see--
to Whom (belong) honor and long-lasting strength. Amen!
(But we wonder, how can it be said that no one saw Him if it is speaking about Jesus Christ?
English translations change from Jesus Christ to God in **verse 15**, making Him the subject of
verse 16.)

1 John 4:12,

No one ever has seen God.
If we should love one another,
the God remains in us,
and His love is perfected in us!
(Again, this statement goes against the statement in the **Hebrew Bible** that on rare occasions,
human beings have seen God.)

2. Sins Done Accidentally / Inadvertently, and Sins Committed with a “High Hand”

Exodus 5:1-6:6 gives a description of “missing-of-the-mark offerings”-those committed “unintentionally”-by priests, the whole community, leaders, and members of the community, along with a detailed description of lesser gifts to be made by poorer people. The text continues to speak of sins committed בְּשִׁגְגָה, **bishgagah**, “in inadvertence,” or “accidentally,” implying a difference between them and those committed בְּיַד רָמָה, **beyadh ramah**, “with a high hand,” that is, “deliberately, intentionally.”

In both the **Hebrew Bible** and the **Greek New Testament**, the words חַטָּא, **chata**) in Hebrew, and the nouns and verbs related to ἁμαρτία, **hamartia** in Greek all have the basic meaning of “missing-the-mark,” that is, living in such a way as to “miss” the Divine intention for human life, to “miss” the intended course in life, a much broader matter than our narrow definitions of “sin.”

This distinction between “inadvertent” missings-of-the-mark and intentional, “high-handed” missings-of-the-mark is most important for our understanding of **Leviticus** and its sacrificial system. As Levi states, “Substitution [i.e., the animal’s blood substituting for the human making the offering] was allowed only in cases of inadvertence. Where the offense against God had been intentional [בְּיַד רָמָה, **beyadh ramah**, ‘with a high hand’] ritual expiation did not apply.” (P. 115) Compare **Numbers 15:30-31**.

This leaves the student of **Leviticus** with a probing question: “How then could Israel avoid a constant string of executions, that would rapidly destroy the population of Israel, if every intentional violation of the torah mentioned in their law as deserving of capital punishment was carried out?”

And, “How then was King David forgiven after his adultery, lying, and murder?”

The answer to this question points to the inability of animal sacrifices to deal with the missings-of-the-mark deserving capital punishment, and points to a Divine grace and forgiveness that is much deeper and greater than the system of Levitical sacrifices.

King David was forgiven by the gracious mercy of YHWH, to Whom he went in heart-felt penitence (compare the dynamic theological statement of **Psalms 51**, with its admission of the inability of animal sacrifices to deal with such a situation). See **2 Samuel 12**.

Indeed, this same truth applied to the Nation of Israel as a whole, as is taught so emphatically in **Exodus 32-34**, where the point is made that the only way that the building and worship of the golden-calf by apostate Israel can walk out into the future, is on the basis of YHWH’s nature as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and missing-of-the-mark...”

The law-code in **Leviticus** thus points away from itself to that personal relationship with a forgiving God, to whom the guilty individual can come in penitence, and thereby receive forgiveness.

We think this is the kind of forgiveness that is promised by YHWH to those who are willing to enter into honest dialogue with Him in **Isaiah 1:18**, the kind of forgiveness granted to Isaiah by

YHWH in **Isaiah 6**—a forgiveness based on YHWH’s grace, and His willingness to forgive the sinner. Certainly if Isaiah’s forgiveness is a signal to Judah of what can happen to her, it is a matter of Divine forgiveness of “high-handed sins,” not minor infractions, sins of inadvertence!

3. **Zechariah 1:7-17; Job 1:6-12 and 1 Kings 22**

Zechariah 1:7-17,

- 7 On day twenty-four of (the) eleventh month,
it (is) Shebat month, in the second year for Darius,
YHWH's word was / came to Zechariah,
son of Berechiah, son of Iddo the spokesperson / prophet, saying:
- 8 I saw (in) the night,
and look—a man riding upon a red horse;
and it / he was standing between the myrtle trees which were in the basin / hollow (?);
and behind him / it—red horses, sorrel / ruddy ones and white ones.
- 9 And I said, What (are) these, my Lord?
And the messenger, the one speaking with me, said to me,
I will show you what these, they (are).
- 10 And the man, the one standing between the myrtle trees, answered and said,
These are those that YHWH sent forth to walk back and forth in the land / earth.
- 11 And they answered YHWH's messenger, the one standing between the myrtle trees,
and they said, We walked back and forth in the land / earth,
and look—call the land / earth is dwelling and is being quiet.
- 12 And YHWH's messenger answered and said,
YHWH of Armies, how long will You not show compassion to Jerusalem,
and to Judah's cities,
with which You were angry these seventy year(s)?
- 13 And YHWH answered the messenger, the one speaking with me,
good words--
words of compassion / comfort.
- 14 And the messenger, the one speaking with me said to me,
Cry out / Proclaim, saying, In this way YHWH of Armies spoke:
I was jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion,
(with) a great jealousy!
- 15 And (with) great wrath, I am wrathful,
against the nations, the ones at ease--
because I, I was wrathful a little bit,
and they helped for evil / furthered the disaster.
- 16 Therefore, in this way YHWH spoke:
I returned to Jerusalem with compassions;
My house / temple will be build in it—a
a saying of YHWH of Armies--
and a measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem!
- 17 Again cry out / proclaim,
In this way YHWH of Armies spoke:
Again cities will overflow with good things;
and YHWH will again show compassion to Zion;
and He will choose Jerusalem again!

Job 1:6-12,

- 6 And the day came;
and the Elohim's children came to stand before YHWH,
and the adversary / satan also in their midst., ,
- 7 And YHWH said to the adversary / satan,
from where are you coming?
And the adversary / satan answered YHWH,
and he said,
From going about in the earth,
and from walking here and there in it.
- 8 And YHWH said to the adversary / satan,
have you placed your heart to / upon My servant Job?
Because there is no one like him in the earth—
a man complete / wholesome and upright,
a fearer / reverer of Elohim—
and he turns away from evil.
- 9 And the adversary / satan answered YHWH, and he said,
Is it for nothing Job is fearing / revering Elohim?
- 10 Did You not erect a (protective) fence on his behalf,
and on behalf of his house,
and on behalf of all that he has, all around?
You blessed the work of his hands;
and his cattle increased in the land.
- 11 And indeed, send forth Your hand now,
and touch / strike all that he has—
(see) if he will not curse You to Your face!
- 12 And YHWH said to the adversary / satan,
Look—all that he has (is) in your hand;
only against him you shall not send forth your hand!
And the adversary / satan went forth from (being) with YHWH's presence.

1 Kings 22:19-23,

- 19 And he (Micaiah) said, Therefore hear YHWH's word:
I saw YHWH sitting upon His throne,
and every army of the heavens standing beside Him,
on His right and on His left.
- 20 And YHWH said, Who will seduce / entice Ahab,
and he will go out and he will fall in Ramoth-Gilead?
And this one spoke in this way,
and this one in this way.
- 21 And the Spirit went forth, and it stood before YHWH,
and It said, I, I will seduce / entice him.
And YHWH said to him, By what means?
- 22 And he / it said, I will go forth,
and I will be a spirit of falsehood in (the) mouth of all his spokespersons / prophets.
And He said, You will seduce / entice!
And also, you will be able.

Go forth, and do this way!

And now look—

YHWH placed a spirit of falsehood in (the) mouth of all these spokespersons / prophets;
and YHWH spoke evil against you!

4. Passages in the New Testament Referring to Isaiah's Commission to Failure

Mark 4:11-12,

- 11 And He said to them (the twelve),
to you the mystery of the kingdom of the God has been given;
but then to those outside,
everything happens in parables / comparisons,
12 in order that seeing they might see and not see (synonym),
and hearing they might hear and not understand,
lest / so that they should not turn
and it be forgiven to them.

That is, Jesus explains that He teaches those outside the circle of discipleship through parables / comparisons, as a means of preventing them from understanding and turning and being forgiven—exactly in line with the Divine commission to Isaiah!

Matthew 13:14-15,

- 13 For this reason I am speaking to them in parables / comparisons,
because seeing, they do not see;
and hearing, they do not hear nor understand;
14 and the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in them, the one saying
In hearing you will hear, and you will not understand;
and seeing you will see, and will not see (synonym).
15 For the heart of this people became dull,
and with ears they barely heard;
and they closed their eyes, so that they might not see with the eyes,
and hear with the ears,
and with the heart might understand,
and might turn and I will heal them!

Luke 8:9-10,

- 9 So then His disciples were asking Him
what this parable / comparison might be.
10 So then He said,
To you has been given to know the mysteries and the kingdom of the God;
but then to the rest in parables / comparisons (it is given),
so that seeing they might not see,
and hearing they might not understand.

John 12:37-43,

- 37 But then having done so many signs of His before them,
they were not believing in Him,
38 so that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he said,
Lord, who believed in our report?

And the arm of (the) Lord, to whom was it uncovered?
39 For this reason they were not being able to believe,
because again Isaiah spoke,
40 He has blinded their eyes,
and He hardened their heart,
so that they might not see with the eyes,
and might understand with the heart,
and might turn, and I will heal them.
41 These things Isaiah said,
because he saw His glory,
and he spoke concerning Him.
42 Nevertheless, however, even many from the rulers believed in Him,
but rather, because of the Pharisees they were not confessing,
in order that they might not be expelled from the synagogue.
43 For they loved the glory (that comes from) the people,
more than the glory of the God.

Here the reference is to **Isaiah 53:1**, as well as to **Isaiah 6**, and the meaning is much the same.

Acts 28:23-28,

23 Then, having set a day with him (Paul, in Rome),
many (of the Jews in Rome) came to him to the guest-room.
He was explaining to them,
giving solemn testimony to the kingdom of God,
and persuading them concerning Jesus,
both from the Teaching of Moses and the Prophets,
from early morning until evening.
24 And indeed, some were being persuaded by the things being said,
while others did not believe.
25 Then being at variance with one another,
they were departing,
as Paul was speaking one word, that
Well did the Set-apart Spirit speak through Isaiah the Prophet to your fathers,
26 saying, Go to this people, and say,
with hearing, you shall hear,
and you will not understand;
and seeing, you will see,
and you will not see (synonym);
27 For the heart of this people has been made fat,
and with their ears they heard with difficulty,
and they closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
and with their ears they might hear,
and with their hearts they might understand,
and they might turn around,
and I will heal them!

28 Let it be known to you people, therefore,
that this salvation from God has been authoritatively sent to the non-Jewish nations—
and they will listen!

Just as Jesus quoted **Isaiah 6** with reference to His mission, so Paul quotes **Isaiah 6** in a similar manner, referring to the failure of the Jewish people to hear and understand his message.

Compare also **Romans 11:7-10, 25**,

7 What therefore?
That which Israel is seeking for,
this it did not attain;
but then the chosen one(s) did attain (it).
But then the remaining ones were hardened,
8 just as it has been written,
The God gave to them a spirit of stupor—
eyes to not see,
and ears to not hear,
until this very day.
9 And David says,
Let the table of theirs become a snare and a trap,
and a cause of offense, and a retribution to them.
10 Let the eyes of theirs be darkened,
to not see,
and the back of theirs forever to bend.

25 For I do not wish you to be ignorant, brothers, of this mystery--
in order that you should not be wise [by] your own estimation.
Because a hardening in part has happened to the Israel,
until (the time) when the fulness of the nations may enter in.

