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## Worship and Isaiah 6

Isaiah 6 opens with a reference to the end of the very long and prosperous reign of Uzziah at c. 740 - 739 B.C.<sup>1</sup> He had come to the throne as a young man of sixteen (2 Kings 15:2) and during his reign a long series of reforms have been instituted which brought the southern kingdom back to the virtual pitch of its former Davidic greatness. He had repaired the defences of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 26:9), refitted and reorganized the army (2 Chron. 26:11-15), imposed control upon Edom (ever the mark of a successful Judaean king), exercised hegemony over the Philistine cities and developed the economic and agricultural resources of his country (2 Chron. 26:10). Though late in his reign he was forced to relinquish power as a result of having been struck with leprosy by Yahweh for a cultic offence (2 Kings 15:5), he seems, under the regency of his son Jotham, to have remained the real ruler until his death, c. 740-739 B.C. The call of Isaiah occurred in the year of his death. Whether before or after his death, the date of the call is not a matter of precise importance, for the point which v.1 of the chapter is conveying is the uncertainty which had resulted from the political vacuum which arose with his passing. It is not sufficient to contend, as some have done that Is. 6:1 is a mere dating formula. Thus it is not merely the report of an event to which some political or contractual significance was to be attached. It is reported in full for reasons which will become clear as we proceed. Nor is the heading provoked as Wildberger<sup>2</sup> has suggested merely by the recognition by Isaiah that he was called at a critical epoch in Israel's history for which the details of his message would be particularly appropriate. The lack of reference to the precise regnal year of Uzziah (i.e. his fifty second), but the precise mention of the year as the year of Uzziah's death invests the heading as Knierim has noted with a flourish of importance. Clearly Isaiah is being called at what is the end of an epoch, as Knierim puts it, a 'caesura in history'.<sup>3</sup>

Politically seen, the reign of Uzziah had left the fortunes of the southern kingdom in excellent shape. Never had the nation been in better heart since the death of Solomon and never had it seemed to stand on the flood tide of fortune. Yet at the close of the chapter we are confronted with a description which involves a projection of the demolition of the state. All the legacy of prosperity with which we have begun this chapter has been thoroughly dissipated. Cities now lie waste, busy centres of commerce are uninhabited, houses are shadows within the cities without life or sound. The land lies absolutely desolated; God has engineered a traumatic and devastating decimation (vv. 11-13). All that is left of the grandeur with which we have begun the chapter is a tenth of the former

population of Judaea among whom the refining process continues. When this operation has been completed what then remains will bear the relationship to the once vital tree as a small shoot does to a truncated stump.<sup>4</sup>

In short, this chapter is concerned with a contrast of staggering proportions and it is to the reasons which had brought this about that the first verse with its implied contrast in kingships is doubtless referring. The spiritual lethargy Isaiah of Jerusalem confronted, the social oppression of which early chapters of the book are full, the sophisticated idolatry to which he refers, the false sense of security which the citizens of Jerusalem possessed all have their roots in the success story which Uzziah's reign had been. The key to Judah's problems had been a prosperity approximate to that of the north under Jeroboam II, earlier, when Amos had declaimed against similar abuses. The reference to Uzziah's death in Is. 6:1 might have normally turned the mind of the reader to a provision for the continuance of the prosperity which he had sponsored. But the question in the mind of Isaiah is provided by the vision to which immediate reference is made. In this year of Uzziah's death Isaiah sees the Lord, Yahweh himself. His mind is thus directed to the manner in which the politics which will ensure the security of the nation may be directed. At once the question is implicitly put before him as to who it will be, the Uzziahs of their day or Yahweh that will provide for the proper ordering of the future. In short this opening reference of the chapter introduces us to the major theme of the initial chapters of Isaiah 1-39, namely the clash between two imperium's: between the Davidic throne and its political manoeuvering, on the one hand, and the heavenly authority which backs it, on the other.

That we are introduced by this initial reference to a critique of historical kingship is confirmed by the structure of Isaiah 1-12. It has been convincingly demonstrated<sup>5</sup> that Is. 1-12 betrays the schema of alternating prophecies of judgement and hope. Interruptive of the sequence of judgement oracles begun with 5:1 and continued at 9:8 is the so-called 'Denkschrift' of Isaiah,<sup>6</sup> 6:1-9:7. Since the hope content of this section, Is. 9:1-7 is the entirely idealistic picture of messianic kingship which that section presents, it is at least plausible to suppose that the prior material from 6:1-8:22 has been concerned with judgement to come upon Judah's ruling house. Thus Is. 6 begins its depiction of Judaean kingship under threat with this remarkable vision which requires the reader at once to recognize where lies the true font of all political authority. Isaiah ominously 'sees the Lord'. In itself this is an indication that Yahweh is probably about to intervene since the messenger role of the prophet will demand the communication of the substance of this vision. We are at once aware that it has been the neglect of the authority of the divine king and the substitution of policies of political expediency, of foreign involvement, of economic soundness etc., which has brought Judah, unknowingly to her knees.

This contrast in kingships is now reinforced by the striking series of images to which the visionary report now turns. There is first the concentration, as is fitting, upon the figure of Yahweh himself, exalted in his heavenly palace, invested with his robes of state. The location of the vision may have been the earthly temple since the word *bēt* is used in

v. 4. That matters little, however, since the earthly temple was the spatial representative of the heavenly *hēkāl*. More probably, the ambiguity in the terminology of location may have been intended to produce a visionary scene in which heaven and earth are fused. The atmosphere of transcendence is heightened by the intimation that the distance of dignity ('high and lifted up') separates Yahweh from the royal court by which he is surrounded. The mention of Yahweh's throne, the remarkable similarity in character of what is seen to the parallel vision of 1 Kings 22:19 speaks ominously of impending judgement.<sup>7</sup> This notion of Yahweh in council, however, in deliberation with angels, sons of God etc. is a frequent one in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> But this is no ordinary royal session here for the prophet is here surprisingly an acknowledged auditor and the sentence is to be pronounced upon Judah, it would seem, before his very eyes.

Singled out for special mention are the seraphim. A mention is made of them in five of the thirteen verses of the chapter (vv. 3-5, 6-7). This is the only biblical reference in which they appear as heavenly beings. The question of the nature of the seraphim is not readily able to be answered, since this is the only occasion in the Old Testament when they appear as divine beings. In Numb. 21:6 the seraphim there clearly seem to have serpent features about them and we may refer to Is. 14:29 where some sort of flying serpent appears to be on view. Varying suggestions as to their nature, however, have been proposed. Suggestions that they were serpent-like rays of lightning which kept everything that was profane or unclean from the divine presence, or that their place in the vision was modelled upon the supposed role which the brazen serpent, the Nehustan played in the Jerusalem cult are hardly to be entertained. Engnell saw some connection between them and the cherubim who flanked the ark<sup>9</sup> in the *dēbir* of the temple. More fancifully as Schoors<sup>10</sup> notices, some have further suggested that the sun shining on the golden plating of the sanctuary cherubim, presented them somewhat more spectacularly, accounting thus for their appearance in this visionary setting under another name.

Is. 14:29, however, is perhaps illuminating for what may be in view in Is. 6. For we may note that in the iconography of Egypt and Mesopotamia winged animals are very common. In Egypt the cobra or the uraeus was the symbol of kingship. In Egyptian iconography the uraeus is frequently presented with appendages such as wings or other limbs or with a human head and hands. Scarabs found in Palestinian sites indicate that this typology of composite mythological-type beings would have been well known in Isaiah's time.<sup>11</sup> The kingship associations would thus make the appearance of the seraphim consistent with the general scene here in which Yahweh is depicted as a king clad with his robes of state, enthroned in his heavenly palace (cf. Ps. 104:1-2, 29:1-2). But the visionary nature of the scene forbids us to depict it with any greater clarity. The whole presentation is as impressive as it is allusive. Its clear function is to underscore the dignity and worth of the king on view and that his power is co-extensive with the created universe (cf. v. 3).

The picture is thus of Yahweh surrounded by heavenly ministrants, perhaps temple guardian figures somewhat analogous to the biblical cherubim, composite beings whose presence and action emphasize the

other worldly notes which the vision is conveying. But it is the response of the seraphim to which our attention is now directed. This response takes the form of a superlative in which through this trisagion words are stretched out to convey meaning beyond their meaning. In heaven they betray an awe which acknowledges the gap set between them and Yahweh by the divine nature. What is being said is that the holiness of Yahweh, the character of his inner essence, what he is in himself, cannot be adequately conveyed. It may be encountered in our universe, which the praise report of the seraphim notes, is full of his glory. Glory elicits praise, even on earth (cf. Is. 42:8, Is. 48:11).<sup>12</sup> Again this reference to glory is an allusion to mystery, a reference to the note of unapproachability by which the divine presence is surrounded. What is happening here in the heavenly palace serves simply to remind us that the very universe itself is a vast temple dedicated to divine use. This is underscored again by what follows in v. 4, that the presence of God in his world is co-extensive with creation itself. The cry of the seraphim seems to be a witness to the reflex of what is happening in the earthly temple in which Isaiah is positioned. As a result of this theophany, the foundations of the 'house' (Heb. *bayit*), tied into creation itself (cf. Ps. 78:69) and thus the visible representation of total stability in our world, are shaken. The glory cloud now conceals the prophet from the divine gaze so that the experience of the vision is an indirect report.

Knierim, to whom we have referred, has drawn our attention to the place of this doxology of the seraphim as a response to divine holiness manifested in judgement and has presented the parallel Old Testament evidence which convincingly points in that direction.<sup>13</sup> What is now highly significant is the confession of sin from the prophet which follows and the form in which it is couched. v. 5 in fact forms the key to the passage. The prophet, overcome with what has been experienced cries out that there is no hope for him or for his people. He is a man of unclean lips. Had he stopped at that point and not associated the Judaean and Jerusalem population with him, we might have taken this response of Isaiah as a typical prophetic rejoinder, a confession of personal unworthiness and thus the component of the normal prophetic all and nothing more than that. But it has become clear by now that we are not dealing with a typical prophetic call. The theophany, with its attendant effects (cf. Exod. 19:18, Judg. 5:4, Ps. 68:9), the clarity of the vision, the lack of prophetic hesitance as he is later summoned, all serve to make it clear that though as prophet he will convey the message, the judgement which is pronounced is one from which he cannot separate even himself. He is as involved as all Judah, more obviously, is. So he proceeds to identify himself with his people, who are also a people of unclean lips. Thus his response is initially as their representative, not as Yahweh's potential emissary to them. Their problem is his problem and whatever they are and have been bound up in he also has been part of that problem. Whatever is to be the nature of their judgement is to be his as well. He is involved in the divine decision to judge of which he has been a spectator, admitted as he has been to the proceedings of the heavenly council where final decision which concerns Jerusalem particularly seems to have been taken. He is a man of unclean lips, convinced by what he has seen and heard for he notes 'my eyes have seen even the King, the Lord of Hosts'.

It is this latter confession which takes us back to the tenor of the chapter and in particular, by the mention of the identity of Yahweh as 'Lord of Hosts' to the confession of the seraphim in v. 5. We need not at this stage take up the question of the nuances bound up in the phrase 'Lord of Hosts' except to note that in its first biblical occurrences it is bound up with the ark (1 Sam. 4:4) and thus in some sense with Yahweh as enthroned. It is clear that this second occurrence of *melek* in this chapter (cf. *King Uzziah* v. 1) puts as we have noted, Davidic kingship into its proper perspective. Were there any doubt as to the nature of the comparison that Isaiah is drawing in v. 1 the details of v. 5 have removed it. This vision has caused him to put the range of Davidic kingship and particularly Uzziah's kingship into its proper framework. He has now seen the measure by which all earthly rule must be judged and the yardstick to which it must be related. It is this vision which has caused him to abase himself and to identify himself with the nation in the way in which he has done. But we may still ask the meaning of the explicit reference to lips, his and his peoples, in v. 5. The note is clearly important because it is the lips which are then cleansed as the seraphim move towards the prophet in v. 7. The effect of the purging by fire is undergone by him in v. 7 is the removal of his personal sin and guilt and presumably the equipping of him to move in an analogous way to purge nation and city, with whose sins he has previously identified himself.

The point that is being made in this exchange between Isaiah and the seraphim is that which stems from the liturgical confession of the seraphim in v. 3. From sanctified lips, from the heavenly choir of the holy ones, he has witnessed a confession of Yahweh's kingship and universal majesty, the acknowledgement of his total power and universal significance. What the seraphs have just done is to have confessed Yahweh's lordship over heaven and earth, before which kingships such as Uzziah's must recede. Since what we are dealing with in Is. 6:1-9:7 is kingship under judgement followed by ideal kingship, the sin of Isaiah which must be cleansed and with which Judah and Jerusalem are associated is simply that national lips have failed to respond appropriately to the central core of Israel's covenant faith. Israel and Judah as a priestly royalty and a holy nation was set under Yahweh's kingship. The course of Davidic kingship to that historical point in time had moved in the direction which Uzziah's kingship had struck. It had endorsed political aims, it had solved its external problems by the construction of foreign alliances. These in their turn had brought the inroad of foreign cults into Jerusalem and perhaps even into the temple itself. In short, politics and diplomacy had undercut the reliance upon divine guidance in the matter of the conduct of Judah's matters of state. Particularly it had been long and prosperous kingships such as Uzziah's in the south, or Jeroboam II's in the north which had caused them to ignore the reality now displayed in this vision which lay behind this earthly kingship. No kingship of that character could hold the key to the future, even though the future would seem presently assured as it did to Judah after fifty-two years of Uzziah's kingship. It would not do for the nation to come to Yahweh's temple/palace with a perfunctory acknowledgement through the cult of Yahweh's place in the life of the nation. What is demanded from Jerusalem at this time, in whose temple

this vision is seen is the remembrance that she was after all the city of the great King. For, in short, attitudes of any contrary character meant a virtual unilateral abrogation by Judah or Israel of the covenant.

This is precisely the point which Isaiah is making in Is. 1 and it is the important note on which the prophecy begins. That chapter seems to be a summary of the theology which controls most of the presentation of the book of Isaiah, namely that from Jerusalem under judgement there will emerge finally a community of faith. But the particularities of abuse to which we have generally referred in Is. 6 are in Is. 1 totally exposed. We shall need to examine the tenor of that chapter before we return to Is. 6. Probably as some have argued the total chapter is to take the form of a covenant law-suit. In which case vv. 1-3 will be accusation, continued and with the verdict given in vv. 21-31. Verse 1 is generally recognised to be an introduction to the book as a whole. Vv. 2-3 then take up the details of the quarrel, vv. 4-9 point to the nation's refusal to be the people of God, while the significant address against the perverted cult comes in vv. 10-20. As S. Niditch<sup>14</sup> has argued the continuation of the law-suit of vv. 2-3 seems to come in v. 21ff. The indictment of vv. 21-23 becomes a more ominous threat in vv. 24-26 while in vv. 27-31 the operation of the divine punishment issues into a resulting situation of blessing and curse.

Two groups emerge within the city, a repentant righteous, for whom there will be salvation (v. 27) but also a reference to the wicked for whom there is prepared destruction (v. 28). It is thus clear, as we have already noted in Is. 6, that we are moving from the narrowly national plane on which a redeemed city will correspond to a redeemed community. Vv. 29-31 represent a final image of destruction in which idolators will receive payment in kind. Grove and oak, the objects of veneration and syncretism in v. 29 will become in v. 30 a picture of abject desolation, namely an unwatered garden. Both idolator and idol will (v. 31) be swept away. In short Is. 1 operates as a powerful and embracive review of Jerusalem's position where the ills which will descend upon her are seen to have stemmed from her neglect of the cultic response which must have been expected from her bound by covenant as she was.

We may now return to Is. 6. For it is now clear how the tirade of Is. 1 which centred around cultic abuse is directly to be related to the vision of Is. 6. Is. 6 has made it plain that right worship is the proper acknowledgement of divine headship over nation and over the world. The temple, the symbol in the national life of divine kingship and thus the locus of final political authority for the people of God, must operate within the life of the people as a reality. Thus we are not merely dealing, as we have already pointed out with mere prophetic identification with his people in Is. 6:5. It is a confession which has given point to the implied contrast in kingships with which the chapter has begun. We may surmise from all this that Isaiah's own attitude to the Davidic dynasty had been too unreflective. Perhaps even as a prophet, he had been prepared to accept the stability of the Davidic dynasty, the long reign of Uzziah, as the mark of special divine favour. It is to be noted moreover that we have had no mention in the biblical materials to this point of prophetic attitudes in the south, which were critical of the royal court or

of the politieal situation as it had developed in the south since Solomon's time. Perhaps there has been such an acquiescence in the force and the significance of the Davidic covenant that prophecy in the south had been silenced virtually to this point. Isaiah may thus, at this time freely acknowledge that even his own attitudes stood in need of correction.

The voice of the Lord which follows upon his cleansing in vv. 6-7 makes the direction of his ministry now totally clear. He is set before his situation and he must give prime place to the denunciation of false worship from which all the evils of the nation had stemmed. Here one might momentarily reflect upon the attitude of the prophets to the cult. This was not a matter with which they were peripherally concerned, nor were they functionaries within it who had gradually come to terms with the abuses to which it was being put. They stood above it as divine emissaries but they recognized that the heart-beat of the nation was bound up with the correlation between public performance at the sanctuaries and national practice. It is clear that Is. 6:9-10 are no subsequent reflection as has been commonly suggested upon the course of his ministry. For as O. Kaiser<sup>15</sup> points out if Is. 6 is a subsequent reflection upon the whole course of his ministry would Isaiah in the light of such an overpowering inaugural vision have reflected upon the failure of his ministry? What is being announced through them is the end of the Judaean nation. That is their function. The point of no return has been reached and the role of the prophet from this time forward as Isaiah conceives it is to operate with a restricted notion of the community. The judgement has been pronounced and all his message will do is to reinforce it. It will be so contrary to public expectation that its rejection is assured.

Yet the chapter is not without its message of hope. Purified he is emboldened to look beyond the judgement for the hope that we must be part of Jerusalem's future. There must be an end, even to this judgement, whether the 'how long' of v. 10 refers to the duration of the punishment, or the hardening of the national heart which results in punishment, since the fact of the elect people of God is at stake. This fate is inextricably bound up with the symbol which is Jerusalem. There must therefore be a terminus even to this judgement. Thus the durative extent of the 'until' of v. 11 makes this perfectly clear as the detail of Isaiah 1 has made the corresponding relay of the message in that context clear. There will still be a future for the people of God, for it is the qualitative effect of refining judgement that v. 13 finally refers us to. After the death of the nation, there comes in that verse the faint hope of the emergence of a small community of faith. At the end of this chapter when the nation is in tatters, when the political institutions over which Uzziah had presided, intact at the beginning of the chapter had long since disappeared there is still hope. True, all that is left of the once glorious Jerusalem the vaunted city of God, indeed of the national expression of that people of God is only a remnant, only a holy seed, holy because God himself had brought this about. Only a remnant, and yet nevertheless a sign of potential from which further life could spring. The stump on the one hand which is there in v. 13 is the nation reduced. It is a clear sign of the reduction of the nation. Yet the shoot which springs up from the charred stump reminds us that the word of judgement is not the final divine word. There is yet a

word of hope to come. By this word of consolation, Jerusalem, disgraced and exiled, will be restored, refurbished, renewed, and will be in the mysterious purposes of God the symbol of the new creation (Is. 65:16-17) by the time the book of Isaiah will conclude. Nations will in the end come, as Is. 2:2-4, in the midst of this agony of destruction about to take place, foreshadows, to this world centre, recognizing as they come, not the centrality of world systems and political rule, but the kingship of God by which alone this disordered world shall find her peace (cf. Is. 66:19-20).

W. J. DUMBRELL

### Notes to Isaiah 6

1. The dating accepted is that advanced by H. Wildberger *Jesaja*, BKAT x/1, (Neukirchen, 1972, p. 241.
2. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p. 242.
3. R. Knierim, "The Vocation of Isaiah", *VT* 18 (1968), p. 49.
4. On the question of the text of v. 13 and the remnant theology bound up with it cf. G. Hasel, *The Remnant* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1974), pp. 394ff.
5. By P. R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah I-XII", *STV* XXIX (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 16-48.
6. For the question of the limits and the material contained in this 'Denkschrift' cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, p.234.
7. Cf. Knierim, *VT* 18, p. 55.
8. Note the review article of Max E. Polley, "Hebrew Prophecy within the Council of Yahweh Examined in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting" in *Scripture in Context* ed. C. D. Evans et al., (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1980), pp. 141-156.
9. I. Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah: An Exegetical and Comparative Study* (Uppsala: University, 1949), pp.33-35.
10. In "Isaiah, The Minister of Royal Anointment?" *OTS* 20 (1977), pp. 96.
11. Schoors, *OTS* 20, p. 97.
12. As O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (London: SCM, 1983), p. 127 notes.
13. Knierim, *VT* 18, pp. 54-56.
14. Susan Niditch, "The Composition of Isaiah I" *Biblica* 61 (1981), pp. 509-529 so argues.
15. O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 119.



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