A BITTER MEMORY: ISAIAH'S COMMISSION IN ISAIAH 6: 1-13

SBL Formation of the Book of Isaiah Group

A. JOSEPH EVERSON

everson@clunet.edu

California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

The Isaiah scroll presents us with a richly woven fabric of themes, images and motifs that appear and then reappear in later texts. Among them are the images relating to deafness and hearing, blindness and sight, fatness of heart (insensitivity) and compassion. Probably no text in the scroll of Isaiah has presented a more puzzling dilemma for the interpreter than the images set before us in the text of Isaiah 6:1-13 and in particular, vv. 9-10:

> *Go and tell this people: hear but do not understand!*
>
> *see but do not perceive!*
>
> *Make the heart of this people fat!*
>
> *Make their ears heavy!*
>
> *Shut their eyes!*
>
> *lest seeing with their eyes and hearing with their ears and understanding with their heart, they return and be healed!* (Isa 6:9-10)

We want to ask: did Isaiah really have such a frightening commission? Can we trust our own abilities to hear, see or understand his message? Brevard Childs has written concerning this text: "Needless to say, the subject of divine hardening is one of the

most difficult topics in the Bible. It appears to run in the face of God's very nature. Does not the God of Israel will only good for his people? Was not the purpose of divine election to bestow life, not death?"[1]

In this essay, I contend that the text is most properly understood from the perspective of the post exilic era, possibly from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, at a time when the scroll was approaching its present canonical form. Isaiah 6: 1-13 preserves a memory of the faithful witness of the prophet Isaiah for whom this scroll is named. The text is part of a larger portrait that is preserved throughout the entire Isaiah scroll and the language found here needs to be understood in conjunction with other texts throughout the scroll.[2] Isaiah 6: 1-13 is one in a collection of "bitter memories" concerning Judah and Jerusalem gathered in chapters 1-12, followed by "bitter memories" about Judah among the nations preserved in chapters 13-35.[3] Each of these sections, ch. 2-12 and ch. 13-35, has been edited and shaped in light of the

[1] Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 2001) 56.

[2]Barry A. Jones, "Canon of the Old Testament," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) *215-217;* Brevard S. Childs*, Introduction to the Old Testament as* Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

[3] When I speak of "bitter memories", I am thinking specifically of the imagery of באשׁים "wild or bitter grapes" in Isa 5:4 and the use of מר "bitter" in Isa 5:20.

destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and in light of the fall of Babylon following the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BCE. Those were events that changed the world for people in Judah. In the post-exilic era, a new generation of people could discern that Isaiah's words in these opening sections of the scroll had come to pass.[4] Jerusalem and Judah had been reduced to rubble. Babylon and other nations had also known the horrors of war.[5] In a very real sense, therefore, the two opening sections of the scroll (ch. 2-12 and 13-35) constitute theological commentary on past events in Judah and the surrounding world. It is against the backdrop of earlier history that dramatic contrasts are set forth in the central message of the scroll set forth in chapters 40-66. The text in Isaiah 6:1-13 preserves a bitter memory. In light of that text, later texts will speak of the importance of hearing (שמע), seeing (ראה) or knowing (ידע) in texts such as Isa 29:18, 35:5, 40:1-11, 42: 18-25 and 43: 8-13.

---

[4] The classic test of the "true prophet" is set forth in Deut 18:20-22: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken"(v.22).

[5] Chris Hedges, *War is a Force That Gives Us* Meaning (N.Y.: Random House, 2002) is a compelling contemporary study of the horrors of war in every age.

I. Approaches to Isaiah 6: 1-13

It was in 1927 that Theodore H. Robinson summarized the development of prophetic literature in terms of three stages: First, there were small independent oracles that were collected and preserved by disciples of a prophet. Later, disciples gathered the individual oracles into collections, adding new material and arranging the oracles into new thematic arrangements. Still later, these collections were reorganized and expanded into what today is the final form of the text. Drawing heavily from the work of Robinson, together with perspectives from the form-critical analysis of Hugo Gressmann and the concerns for genre analysis of Hermann Gunkel, an entire generation of 20th century scholars has focused primarily on Robinson's first stage, attempting to discover the actual words of the original prophet. This approach inevitably involves critical judgments about what is "authentic" and what is "later redaction" in a text.[6] But more and more, scholars are recognizing that the discernment of earlier stages in the formation of the scroll is a highly subjective task.

---

[6]See essays in Roy Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney (eds.), *New Visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) and Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, Editors, *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* SVT 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39.* FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) combines both synchronic and diachronic analysis and uses a fourfold redactional approach, working back from the completed scroll in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, to a 6th century redaction at the end of the Exile, to a collection dating from the time of Josiah, and to a collection dating from the end of Isaiah's lifetime.

As a direct result, the challenge of interpreting a particular text from the perspective of an earlier stage is also problematic.

In contrast, the approach of canonical criticism provides an opportunity to look at Biblical texts in a more comprehensive manner. Rather than searching for "authentic words" from an original author, the focus is on the portrait presented in the completed scroll, while still acknowledging that there are earlier written and oral sources behind the present text. In a consideration of Isaiah 6: 1-13, these questions of perspective are critical. Against what historical background will we hear this text? How is the text related to other passages within the scroll? Because the themes in Isaiah 6 return in the later poetry, it seems most appropriate that this text should be interpreted from the post-exilic perspective. The text is one part of a larger narrative commentary. Attempts to hear and interpret Isaiah 6 as an isolated text from a specific earlier historical setting run the risk of distorting both the literary and the kerygmatic intentions of those who set forth the full portrait in the Isaiah scroll.

II. The Poetic Imagery in Isaiah 6

Isaiah 6:1-13 can be analyzed in three parts: the vision account (vv. 1-4), the account of cleansing and forgiveness (vv. 5-8) and the actual commission (vv. 9-13).

A. The Appearance before the Divine Council (vv. 1-4)

In the first section (vv. 1-4), we hear the report of Isaiah's appearance before the heavenly court[7]. In first person singular form, the prophet shares the report:

> *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.*
> *Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:*
> *"Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts;*
> *the whole earth is full of his glory."*
> *The pivots on the threshholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.* (6: 1-4)

The vision report conveys the sense of holiness, awe and reverence that the prophet felt at the experience of being in the presence of God. What we do not know is whether this report is an account of an inaugural call experience that resulted in Isaiah becoming a prophet, or whether it is a later commissioning experience for a

[7] See H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh" *The Journal of Theological Studies* XLV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944) 151-157. On call narratives, see also N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (Berlin: Verlag von Alfred Topelmann, 1965) 297-323.

particular task.[8] There are certainly parallels with other reported call visions: Moses in Exodus 3:1-17, Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22: 19-22, Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1: 4-10, and Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1-3.[9] In each of those texts, the common theme is the response of the prophet: awe, humility, feelings of inadequacy at the experience of standing in the presence of God.

B. Divine Purification, Cleansing and Forgiveness (vv. 5-8)

Regardless of how Isaiah's vision is understood, either as an initial call vision or as a later commissioning experience, the second section (vv. 5-8) clarifies that after being purified and cleansed, the prophet volunteered for a very difficult assignment.[10] In

---

[8] For a summary of the debate, see Childs, *Isaiah*, 51-53.

[9] See further, Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39" *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 200l) VI:101-105.

[10] Moses does not volunteer; he is given a command at Horeb in the "burning bush" narrative and he is a very reluctant volunteer; see Exodus, ch. 3-4); Micaiah's vision report is similar to the report in Isa 6 but it is a spirit that volunteers in response to the divine request "Who will entice Ahab"; Micaiah simply reports what he has heard in the heavenly court (I Kings 22: 19-23). Jeremiah also does not volunteer but is commissioned "to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1: 10); Ezekiel is literally overpowered by his call vision that concludes with the words: "let those who will hear, hear; and let those who refuse to hear, refuse; for they are a rebellious house (Ezekiel 3: 27).

this section of the text, the striking contrasts between the divine and the human realms are emphasized:

> *And I said:*
>
> *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,*
>
> *and I live among a people of unclean lips;*
>
> *yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*
>
> *Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had*
>
> *been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched*
>
> *my mouth with it and said:*
>
> *"Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed*
>
> *and your sin is blotted out."*
>
> *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,*
>
> *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"*
>
> *And I said,*
>
> *"Here am I; send me!"* (6:5-8)

Isaiah is painfully aware that he is a human being of "unclean lips living among people of unclean lips" (6:5). It is only after he declares his unworthiness that one of the seraphim touches his mouth with a live coal and declares to him that his guilt has departed and that his sin has been blotted out (6:7).

It is interesting that the themes of divine cleansing and forgiveness have in some ways become the focal points for understanding this text, especially within Christian

worship traditions. In an essay in 1991, Donald Gowen contrasted the New Testament usage of Isaiah 6 with the ways in which this text appears in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Revised Common Lectionary.[11] In the New Testament, Isaiah 6 is cited five times (Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; and Acts 28:26-27). In the four gospel texts, Isaiah 6 is remembered primarily in conjunction with the inability of people to perceive, understand or embrace the proclamation of the Christian gospel. Typical is the passage in Mark 4; there the evangelist reports Jesus' telling of the parable of the sower and the seed and concludes with the words, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" In the narrative that follows, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 as he explains to the disciples:

> *To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,*
> *but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that*
> *"they may indeed look, but not perceive,*
> *and may indeed listen, but not understand;*
> *so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."*
> (Mark 4: 11-12)

In a similar way in the text from Acts, Paul uses Isaiah 6 to explain the inability of people to hear his message. He is remembered as saying:

> *The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors*
> *through the prophet Isaiah,*

---

[11] Donald Gowen, "Isaiah 6: 1-8" *Interpretation* 45:2 (April, 1991) 172-176.

"Go to this people and say,

You will indeed listen, but never understand,

you will indeed look, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull,

and their ears are hard of hearing,

and they shut their eyes;

so that they might look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and understand with their heart and turn—

and I would heal them."

(Acts 28:26-27)

While the New Testament texts focus on the inability of people to hear, the contemporary Roman Catholic and protestant Revised Common Lectionary appears to use Isaiah 6 primarily to focus on discipleship and God's divine forgiveness. As the lesson for Holy Trinity Sunday, the First Sunday after Pentecost in Series B, Isaiah 6: 1-8 is set together with Romans 8:12-17; Psalm 29, and John 3:1-17 (the encounter with Nicodemus). As the appointed lesson for the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany in Series C, Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13) is to be read together with Psalm 138; I Cor. 15: 1-11; and Luke 5: 1-11 (the calling of Peter, James and John). In Series B, only vv. 1-8 are listed as the text; in Series C, vv. 9-13 are bracketed as optional reading. It is also interesting to note the focus of the epistle and gospel texts selected

for each of those Sundays. In those texts, primary attention is focused on God's holiness, calling and forgiveness for all people.

Isaiah 6: 1-8 is also a text frequently used at ordination services for those entering professional Christian ministry but one wonders how often verses 9-13 are included in such services. While Isaiah 6 is in many ways very appropriate for an ordination service, there is something troubling about the use of this text when the decision is made to stop at verse 8 with the words:

Then I head the voice of the Lord saying,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And I said,

"Here am I; send me!"

In some contexts, the text can then convey a heroic or even a romantic message. When that happens, the scandal of this text is lost. And that is the point of this excursus into present day usage. The historical meaning of this text as a "bitter memory" is too often simply "softened" or lost. The scandal of Isaiah 6:1-13 is that the text speaks of a time and situation in which there was no forgiveness!

C. Isaiah's Painful Commission (vv. 9-13)

The words are unambiguous. Isaiah is told by God to do a strange work. People are to listen and not comprehend; they are to look but not understand; the prophet is to

make their minds dull, to stop their ears and shut their eyes so that they will not see, hear or comprehend!

And he said, Go and say to this people:

"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;

keep looking, but do not understand.

(שמעו שמוע ואל־תבינו וראו ראו ואל־תדעו:)

Make the mind of this people dull,

(השמן לב־העם הזה)

and stop their ears, and shut their eyes,

(זניו הכבד ועניו השע)

so that they may not look with they eyes (פן־יראה בעיניו)

and listen with their ears (ובאזניו ישמע) *and comprehend with their minds*

(ולבבו יבין)

and turn and be healed." (ושב ורפא לו[Isa 6: 9-10])

In the rhetoric of the Isaiah scroll, the verbs clustered in verses 9 and 10 contribute in important ways to the larger canonical portrait: שמע "to hear", בין "to understand", ראה "to see", ידה to know", שמן "to make fat", כבד "to make heavy", שעע "to shut", שוב "to return, to repent", and רפא "to be healed". Then, Isaiah's commission is made even stronger as the prophet is remembered asking the lament question,

How long, O Lord?

And the answer comes:

Until cities lie waste without inhabitant

and houses without people,

and the land is utterly desolate (שממה) *;*

until the Lord sends everyone far away,

and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

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! (Isa 6:9-13) [12]

Only the final line holds out the possibility of some hope. Otherwise, the text declares that there is no hope and that the end will be destruction. By his words, the prophet is to actively prevent repentance.

III. Isaiah's Commission in the Context of Prophetic Theology

---

[12] The final half line is missing in LXX. Based on the reference to "holy seed" in Ezra 9:2, some scholars have argued that the final line is a "late addition." Such suggestions relegate the final line as being of lesser importance. I suggest rather that the reference provides helpful insight for understanding the entire message of the Isaiah scroll in the era of Ezra. See a summary of the debate in Childs, *Isaiah*, 58.

So how are we to understand this memory? It is important to remember that the words of Isaiah were never heard in isolation. They were heard together with Torah memories, psalms of lament and praise, wisdom sayings and other priestly writings. The prophetic traditions seem to be centrally anchored in the memories of Moses. They take written shape with the stories of Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah ben Imlah and other early prophets and then expand with the writings attributed to the so-called classical prophets. Like other prophets, Isaiah is remembered for his strong words concerning righteousness and justice. He is remembered speaking both words of judgment and words of hope. And the themes of hope are not just found in later parts of the scroll; they are also heard in a number of places within chapters 1-12. Already in the first chapter of Isaiah, a dominant theme in prophetic thought is sounded:

> *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean**;** remove the*
> *evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,*
> *learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed,*
> *defend the orphan, plead for the widow.* (1:16-17)

In 2:1-5, the vision of future peace for Zion is set forth as a promise both for people of Jerusalem and for all peoples. The conclusion of that text may be the central invitation of the entire scroll: "*O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"* (2:5). In 4: 2-6, in what may be an inclusio with 2:1-5, a word of hope is set forth concerning a day when Jerusalem will once again *"be a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain!"* (4:6). In chapter 7, Isaiah

addresses Ahaz, apparently with the hope that he can still change his already stubborn mind:[13]

> *Take heed , be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.* (7:3-4)

[13] Sweeney attempts to discern the "original intent" of the commission in ch. 6 against an 8th century setting and he acknowledges a dilemma. Does the commission to "make blind, deaf and harden hearts" represent the prophet's actual purpose? Is the text "his self-understanding at the time of his commission ...or is it a reflection on his task after failing to persuade Ahaz to avoid reliance on the Assyrian empire during the Syro-Ephraimite War? If the commission represents his actual self-understanding, then how do we understand his warning to Ahaz or his warnings to the people as though he was attempting to help them avoid punishment. On the other hand, if the commission declaration comes at a time after a time when the prophet experienced utter failure and lack of response from the people, then the veracity of Isaiah's commission is undermined." (Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39,* 140). Ultimately I suggest that the canonical text of Isaiah does not allow us to know what the "historical Isaiah" actually thought. What we have is the memory; a narrator tells us that at a certain point in his life, Isaiah concluded that God must have decided to "harden the hearts" of particular people. In the Exodus narrative, the "hardness of heart" motifs declare the power of Yahweh over all created humans, including the Pharaoh. But it is interesting to note how the poetic rhetoric alternates: "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3, l4, 22; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, and 17) and on occasion: "Pharaoh hardened his (own) heart" (Ex. 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7; 9:34, 35). In William Stringfellow, *A Public and Private Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), "hardness of heart" is discussed as a disease peculiar to humans that involves "paralyzed conscience."

This passage seems to presuppose that Ahaz had the freedom and the possibility of taking actions other than calling for Assyrian intervention.[14] In Isaiah 9:1-7, people are invited to take hope in the birth of a child who may be a future ideal king. Likewise, in Isaiah 11:1-9, people are invited to find a basis for hope by envisioning the wisdom and ideal leadership qualities of a future king. Finally, Isaiah 12: 1-6 concludes the opening section with a doxology, words of praise and thanksgiving. In each of these texts, the reader is offered encouragement even as the "bitter memories" of past judgment are recalled. Isaiah's words, whether spoken as announcements of judgment or reassurances of hope, were intended to call the reader or the hearer to a new commitment to justice and righteousness in faithfulness to Torah traditions.[15]

---

[14] The text of II Kings 16:1-20 sugggests that Assyrian intervention was a concern of Isaiah; we may sympathize with Ahaz as he sought all possible military assistance to secure his country against invasion from northern Israel and Syria. In broader terms, the critique in Isaiah focused on Ahaz' syncretistic practices, such as Baal worship and child sacrifice (one child according to II Kings 16:3; two or more according to II Chronicles 28: 3).

[15] Isaiah's life as a social critic is further confirmed by his walking naked in Jerusalem as a warning of impending doom (20:1-6) and his pleading with people to change in passages such as 28:12 and 30:15.

IV. Isaiah 6:1-13 within the Rhetoric of the Isaiah Scroll

Within the canonical portrait, it seems appropriate to look at Isaiah 6: 1-13 in four particular ways, first within ch. 6-11, then from the perspective of 1, and 2-12, next in conjunction with ch. 13-35 and finally as one text within the full 66 chapter canonical portrait.

A. Chapter 6 within Isaiah 6:1-11:16

First of all, the vision in Isaiah 6 seems particularly related to the chapters that directly follow it. Together, they seem to reflect the frustrations that Isaiah experienced during the reign of king Ahaz of Judah (735-715 BCE).[16] The poetic units in the following chapters (7:1-9, 10-17, 18-19, 20, 21, 23-25; 8:1-4, 5-8, 9-10, and 11-22) all seem to relate to the difficulties experienced by the prophet at a time

---

[16] Sweeney is certainly correct when he writes: "Insofar as ch. 6 is related to the time of the death of King Uzziah (742) and insofar as 7:1-25 relates to the Syro-Ephraimite war some ten years later (735-732), it is clear that ch. 6 was not composed in relation to ch. 7, but was associated with it only some time after the initial composition. This means that the original intent of ch. 6 must be defined apart from its relationship to ch. 7 and the "memoir" as a whole" (*Isaiah 1-39, 141).* It seems clear that narratives and poetic units have been collected and arranged in a particular way within chapters 2-12; Sweeney suggests that 6:1-11 originally was an expression of condemnation for northern Israel and that vv. 12-13 paved the way for introducing the narratives in chapter 7-8, which illustrate the punishment for the remaining "tenth" part (v..13), namely, Judah. This is an intriguing suggestion but it directly contradicts the stated focus that this material is all part of the "word which Isaiah saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (2:1).

when his words were not heeded. The only response we hear from Ahaz are his pious words: "*I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test"* (7:12).

Chapters 7 and 8 culminate with the declarations of 8:11-15, which echo the frustrations heard in Isaiah's call vision:

> *For the Lord spoke thus to me while his hand was strong upon me,*
> *and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying:*
> *"Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy,*
> *and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread.*
> *But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread . . . .*
> *Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face* (המסתר פנו) *from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.* (8:11 –14, 16)

God is "hiding his face"; the poetic rhetoric complements the "hardening" rhetoric in Isaiah 6. There is a gulf separating the worlds of thought of Ahaz and of Isaiah. Isaiah declares that Ahaz is so alienated from faith that his heart is hardened beyond redemption. Isaiah's task was thus to announce to him the verdict of the divine court: "*If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all."* (7:9b)

B. Chapter 6 within Isaiah 1, 2 -12

In a larger sense, Isaiah 6: 1-13 is remembered as a central text among other "bitter memories" that are preserved in both chapter 1 and throughout chapters 2-12.[17] The opening words of the scroll set the dominant theme:

> *Hear* (שמעו)*, O heavens, and listen* (והאזיני) *, O earth;*
>
> *for the Lord has spoken.*
>
> *I reared children and brought them up,*
>
> *but they have rebelled against me.*
>
> *The ox knows* (ידע) *its master, and the donkey its master's crib;*
>
> *but Israel does not know* (לא ידע)*,*
>
> *my people do not understand* (לא התבונן [1: 2-3])

Similar bitter memories that appear throughout chapters 2-12 are gathered under the superscription in 2:1: *"The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem."* In the lengthy "day of the Lord" poem in 2: 6-22, Isaiah's primary message announcing judgment is sounded. The prophet boldly declares that arrogant and haughty conduct will bring its own inevitable consequences:

---

[17]There is widespread agreement that chapter 1 is an introduction to the entire scroll. Chapters 2-12 incorporate both words of hope and words of judgment. It is significant that hopeful words both open and close the section: Isa 2:1-5 sets out a 'vision of peace for Zion" and 12:1-6 concludes the section with words of praise and thanksgiving.

The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. (1:17).

In 3:13-15, the charge against the leaders is bluntly stated:

It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.' What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor'? says the Lord God of hosts. (3:14-15)

With even greater clarity, the judgment theme is spelled out in the parable of the vineyard poem in 5:1-7.[18] Pre-exilic Judah is remembered as a field of grapevines bearing only bitter grapes. Despite every possible effort by their creator, Judah had become like useless vines and bitter fruit so that the reader must understand that the logical action is to uproot and destroy:

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?
And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns;

---

[18] Childs contends that Isaiah 5-6 mark a turning point in God's history with Israel (*Isaiah,* 56-57; I suggest rather that in the literary portrait set forth in Isaiah, the turning point comes with the destruction of Jerusalem, the fall of Babylon and the rise of Cyrus.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. (5:4b-5)

In ch.10:5-19 and again in 10:27b-34, Assyria is identified as the instrument of Yahweh by which the vineyard will be destroyed. The fact that Assyria understands the world in quite a different way has no bearing. The prophet declares that Yahweh is using Assyria to carry out an act of punishment for Judah.

C. Chapter 6 and Isaiah 13-35

Isaiah 6: 1-13 also has echoes within the poetry preserved in Isaiah 13-35. In this second major section (ch. 13-35), Judah is remembered among the nations of her world. The new section is marked by the superscription in 13:1, the first in a series of oracles that focus both on Judah and on surrounding nations: "*The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah ben Amoz saw."*[19] In this chapter and in the oracles that follow, it is interesting to note the themes that relate to "hearing" or "not

---

[19] I no longer feel that it is helpful or appropriate to use the traditional distinctions concerning "first Isaiah", 'second Isaiah" or "third Isaiah." As much as they may have helped us to a better understanding of the historical development of the canonical work, they also can keep us from hearing the text. In a similar way, I no longer think it is valid to speak of Isa 13-23 as "oracles addressed to the nations." Isaiah 22 is clearly addressed to a community in Judah that has survived a disastrous military attack but has failed to learn or discern anything from that experience; it seems much more accurate to see chapters 13-35 as poetry addressed to "Judah among the nations." See further, A. Joseph Everson "Isaiah," *Eerdmams Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 648-652.

hearing", "seeing' and "not seeing".[20] People from the era before the fall of Jerusalem and Babylon are remembered as those who brought disaster on themselves by their reckless and selfish conduct.[21] And yet, certain texts declare that people in a future era will have the capacity to hear, to see and to understand as a remnant community. The audience understands! Two poignant texts in chapters 13-35 illustrate the contrasts set out between the past and the envisoned future. In 29:18, the prophet envisions a future time when changes will occur:

On that day the deaf shall hear (ושמעו) *the words of the scroll,*

and out of their gloom and darkenss

the eyes of the blind shall see. (תראינה)

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,

and the neediest people shall exalt in the Holy One of Israel. (29:18)

And in ch. 35, the poet again dreams of a future era as he declares:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened (תפקחנה עיני עורים)

and the ear of the deaf unstopped (ואזני חרשים תפתחנה)

and the lame shall leap like a deer

and the tongue of the speechless sings for joy! (35:5)

---

[20] See Robert Carroll, "Blindness and the Vision Thing: Blindness and Insight in the Book of Isaiah" in Broyles and Evans, *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* (N.Y.: Brill, 1997) I: 79-93.

[21] One striking example in Is. 22:15-19 is Shebna, an official in the era of Hezekiah. We may also think of later kings, Manasseh, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.

The judgments announced for various nations and for Judah in ch. 13-23 and the mythic reflections in chapters 24-27 all speak to the horrors of war. War has a way of devastating both lands and people. Through the tumult of war, empires and small countries alike learn painfully that they are not gods!

D. Chapter 6 within the Canonical Text of Isaiah 1-66

This essay has argued that Isaiah 6: 1-13 needs to be understood as one scene in the larger portrait that is preserved throughout the scroll. The account of Isaiah's commission provides a backdrop for the words of hope and encouragement that are so prevalent in chapters 40-66.[22] The prophet is remembered as a courageous

---

[22] I am indebted to Rolf Rendtorff, "Isaiah 6 in the Framework of the Composition of the Book" *Canon and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 170-180 for his helpful study of the rhetoric of Isaiah 6 as it appears in later texts. Regarding Isa 6 and Isa 40, he writes: ". . . the two texts mark two corresponding fundamental aspects of the book of Isaiah: the climax of the announcement of judgment, whose inescapability is expressed in the statements about the hardening of the people's hearts in Is. 6:8ff., and the beginning of the announcement of salvation, in which it is explicitly stated that now sin has been canceled (40:2). The two aspects are therefore related. It is obvious that without the preceding judgment the announcement of salvation has no function." (179). I differ from Rendtorff only when he discusses ch. 6 as a text that "points forward", where "the gaze travels into the future... to the time after the judgment has been executed, in which the salvation that is imminent is announced and with it the end of the time when God hides his face" (174). I no longer think that we can stand with Isaiah in the 8th century; we can only stand with the late exilic or post-exilic community that incorporates these texts as memories from a "bitter" past era.

prophetic figure from an earlier era of history. Sadly, his words of warning were not heeded; divine judgment came. Judah and Jerusalem were brought low! Isaiah's word was to continue *"until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land"* (6:11-12). Those who heard this prophetic word in the late exilic and post-exilic eras could not escape understanding that Isaiah's announcement had come to pass with the destruction of Jerusalem and the experiences of exile that followed. In the same way, people who heard the concluding declaration of this text: *"The holy seed is its stump"* must have pondered what it might mean to be that "holy seed." Heard from this perspective, the text of Isaiah 6 was and still is an admonition concerning faith and obedience to Torah. With Isaiah 40-66, a new era is described! Isaiah 6 was located specifically "in the year that Uzziah died" (6:1); now the new era of history is marked with references to Cyrus of Persia (44:28; 45:1; 45:l3). Assyria had been viewed as an instrument of judgment; now Cyrus and Persia are understood to be an instrument for salvation, a power that will bring liberation from bondage. In contrast with Isaiah 6, a voice in Isaiah 40:1-5 declares: "*Comfort, O comfort my people!"* concluding with the claim: "*the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together"* (וראו כל־בשר יחדו). [23]

Throughout chapter 40, the themes of sight and insight are expanded: "*See (or 'behold'), the Lord comes with might.. . ."*(הנה אדני יהוה בחזק יבו [40:10]) , *"see (or 'behold'), the nations are like a drop from a bucket"* (הן גוים כמד מדלי [40:l5a]) , *"see (or 'behold'), he takes up the isles like fine dust"* (הן איים כדק יטול[40:l5b]) and *"Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these"*.

(שאו־מרום עיניכם וראו מי־ברא אלה [40:26]). In 40:12-31, Yahweh is affirmed as the mysterious source of all life, a source that cannot be controlled or manipulated, the one who gives power to the faint and strength to the powerless (40:29-30). In 41:17-20, the new era for Judah is heralded as God transforms the desert into fruitful lands precisely "so that all may see and know."(למען יראו וידע) In direct contrast with Isaiah 6, Isaiah 42: 18-21 declares:

> *Listen, you that are deaf* (החרשים שמעו)
>
> *and you that are blind, look up and see* (והעורים הביטו לראות)
>
> *Who is blind but my servant,*
>
> *or deaf like my messenger whom I send?*
>
> *Who is blind like my dedicated one,*
>
> *or blind like the servant of the Lord?*
>
> *He sees many things, but does not observe them.*

---

[23] Of particular interest is the dramatic contrast between 1:4 and 40:2. In 1:4, we hear of a sinful people (גוי חטא) and a people "laden with iniquity" (כבד עון) ; in 40:2, we hear of Jerusalem "that her "sins" (חטאתיה) are forgiven and her iniquity is pardoned" (כי נרצה עונה).

(ראית רבות ולא תשמע)

his ears are open, but he does not hear. (פקוח אזנים ולא תשמע)

The Lord was pleased for the sake of his righteousness,

to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.(42:18-21)

The striking aspect of this text is that the servant, identified as Israel/Jacob in 41:5, is still portrayed as being blind and deaf. Yahweh "gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers" because they refused to obey the Torah and to walk in an upright way (42: 24). But now the servant is no longer to be bound by the "former things". The servant is to see and hear the "new things" that are now being declared (Isa 42:9).

At the beginning of the scroll, Isaiah declared that even "the ox knows his owner" (ידע שור קנהו) but Israel "does not know" (לא ידע) . The theme of "not knowing" was also present in 6:9 when people are told to "see but do not comprehend or perceive" (וראו ראו ואל־תדעו) . But throughout Is. 40-66, the word is now set forth that people are to comprehend and understand. Rhetorical questions are posed in 40: 21 and repeated in 40:28 in second person plural forms: "Have you not known?" (הלוא תדעו). "Have you not heard?" (הלוא תשמעו) .[24] In the poetry of 43:8-l3, the reversal is dramatically presented:

---

[24] See further on "knowing", Isa 41:20, 22,23,26; 42:16; 43:10,19; 44:9,28;45:3,4,6,8; 49:23,26; 51:7,52:6, 59:12 and 60:16.

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,

(הוציא עם־עור ועינים יש)

who are deaf, yet have ears!

(וחרשים ואזנים למו)

Let all the nations gather together,

and let the peoples assemble.

Who among them declared this,

and foretold to us the former things" (Isa 43: 8-9)

The author is claiming that the events of history should now allow people to hear, see and understand. It is in this context that the declaration concerning "knowing" is made in 43:10:

You are my witnesses, says the Lord,

and my servant whom I have chosen,

so that you may know and believe me (למען תדעו ואסינו לי)

and understand that I am he. (ותבינו כי אני הוא)

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

In 43: 18, those who constitute the servant community are told again:

Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive (know) it? (תדעות הלוא)

I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

Commands to see and to hear continue for the servant: "*But now hear, O Jacob my servant. . . " (*44:1); *"Hear this, O house of Jacob. . ."* (48:1) and *"Listen to me, O Jacob. . . "* (48:12); "Listen, your sentinels lift up their voices. . ." (52:8); and "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." (52:10).[25]

The understanding of past history here is that Yahweh had previously attempted to speak to a stubborn people through various tribulations and finally, through the language of the war. Judah should have heard Yahweh's voice in the destruction that came for Samaria, the northern kingdom. Already in Isaiah 9:8-12, Isaiah had declared "*the Lord sent a word against Jacob and it fell on Israel and all the people knew it."* So also people in Judah should have learned from a close call with tragedy such as the invasion of Sennacherib in "the fourteenth year of Hezekiah" (Isa 36:1, probably 701 B.C.E.). Isaiah 22:1-14 appears to have been written in the aftermath of such a near tragedy; the real disaster is that people failed to hear or learn from their close call with disaster, as is expressed in the final line of the poem:[26]

---

[25] Rendtorff points to a number of other contrasts, including the pardoning of sin (see 6:7, 33:24, 44:22-23 and 53:5) and the rebuilding and repopulating of Jerusalem in ch. 49ff. as the reversal of the devastation ((שממה of 6:11.

[26] The "valley of vision" poem in 22:1-14 clearly is a reflection on a past event; all four strophes describe past action; therefore, the reference to *yom adonai* in 22:5 should also be translated in a preterite sense: "For the Lord God of hosts has had a day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision". The near catastrophe of 70l is remembered in 2 Kings 18:13-27 and in Isa

T*he Lord of hosts has revealed himself in my ears;*

surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die,

says the Lord of hosts. (22:14)

In Isaiah 30:30, the prophet speaks of the horrors of war as the most frightening voice of God in the world. Amid the devastating sounds of battle, a people (in this text, Assyria) should hear the sound of God's divine judgment:

And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and tempest and hailstones. The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the Lord, when he strikes with his rod. (30:30)

V. Concluding Observations

36:1 as "the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah; from the post-exilic era, the fall of Judah in 587 BCE would certainly be remembered as well in relationship with 22: 1-14." I believe that Isaiah 22: 1-14 provides insight for understanding a number of current events involving war. In the film "The Fog of War", former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara reflects on the U.S.-Vietnam war and says that the problem was that we simply did not see, hear or understand correctly. The driving issue for the North Vietnamese was nationalism, not communism.

In Isaiah 63:17, we hear a further reference to "hardness of heart" as a perennial danger for human people:

Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways?

and harden our hearts (תקשיח לבנו)

so that we do not fear you?

What seems apparent from this passage is that the motif of the Lord "hardening" hearts was quite synonymous with "straying from the way" and "not fearing the Lord." The text is a reminder that "hardness of the heart" is a constant danger for people in any age. The Isaiah scroll provides a wealth of rhetoric, seeking to affirm the sovereignty of God over all of life. Sovereignty is affirmed in retrospect both in terms of God's intentions and the actions of human individuals. People are called to remember that humility, compassion and justice are appropriate activities for the human family. Isaiah 6: 1-13 describes a past era when people refused that path with the resulting outcomes of blindness, deafness and lack of discernment. In Israel's prophetic tradition, as well as in the broader world of Hebrew thought, it was possible simply to declare that this is what God must have done. This mode of interpretation was one option available for explaining divine activity in the world.[27]

[27] There is an interesting parallel in the rhetoric of Isaiah 6 with the interpretation of history offered by the author of the Joseph saga in Genesis 37-50. We hear of the evils committed by the brothers as they sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. The brothers are clearly portrayed as being responsible for their actions. But at the end of the saga, we hear the interpretation given in the words of Joseph: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh,

We may choose to interpret divine activity in other ways. But when do, we must guard against "softening" the message of a Biblical text. In Isaiah 30:9-10, there is a warning about those who would soften or to simply disregard the frightening message of a text such as Isaiah's commission. The prophet is remembered giving this instruction:

> *Go now, write it before them on a tablet,*
> *and inscribe it in a book,*
> *so that it may be for the time to come*
> *as a witness forever.*
> *For they are a rebellious people, faithless children,*
> *children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord;*
> *who say to the seers, "Do not see";*
> *and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right;*
> *speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions,*
> *leave the way, turn aside from the path,*
> *let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."*
> (Isa 30: 9-10)

---

and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt." (45: 7-8); and later, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today!" (Gen 50: 20). It was in retrospect that people discerned God's presence in all things.

The text of Isaiah 6:1-13 is not a "smooth thing." But it provides a profound perspective and a sense of urgency about the words of invitation: *"Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"* (2:4) and *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.* (55:3). Isaiah 6 is a reminder that the human abilities to see, to hear and to respond to life with compassion and mercy are precious gifts.
