

NYACK UNIVERSITY

OLD TESTAMENT EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY OF ISAIAH

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BY

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INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH

1 **Historical Background**

According to chapter 1 of Isaiah, he ministered during the reigns of four Judean kings Uzziah (792-740 B.C.), Jotham (750-732 B.C.), Ahaz (735-715 B.C.), and Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.). His name in Hebrew means “Jehovah has saved”. Isaiah began his ministry in the year that King Uzziah died (Isa. 6:10). Judah enjoyed peace during Uzziah’s reign. However, Assyria began to expand its territory and take its place as a world empire. “The invasion of Israel by the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III serves as a backdrop to chapters 7-12. The response of Ahaz, king of Judah, was to summon Assyria to police the region, an invitation that the king of Assyria gladly accepted. However, several years later (721), Israel’s rebelled and was totally assimilated by the Assyrian Empire. The invasion of Judah by the Assyrian king Sennacherib brought destruction to many of the fortified cities of Judah. However, Hezekiah trusted the Lord for deliverance, and the Assyrian army was destroyed.”¹

2 **Purpose and Message**

The primary purpose of Isaiah was to remind Israel of their covenant relationship with Jehovah. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy God through Moses had promised Israel if they walked in obedience through God’s covenant contract they would be blessed (Deut. 28:1-14). But if they would not obey then they would experience curses instead of blessings (Deut. 28:15-680 and they would be exiled from the land. So, Isaiah was calling the people back to a covenantal relationship with God. Isaiah’s message was directed to two groups. Those of his generation, who had disobeyed God’s covenantal obligations given them in the Law of Moses

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H Walton, “A Survey of the Old Testament”, (Grand Rapids, Mi Zondervan 2009) p.523

and those of a future generation who would be taken captive by the Babylonians. This book is also a contrast between the two kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Ahaz did not trust Jehovah, and this resulted in them being taken away by the Assyrians. On the other hand, even though Hezekiah initially counted on the Egyptian's help he depended on Jehovah and was delivered miraculously (II Kings. 19:35). "The oracles of the first part of Isaiah (1-39) are largely oracles of indictment and judgment whereas chapters 40-60 are more concerned with God's forgiveness, deliverance, and restoration of Israel."²

3 **Organization and Structure**

Let's lay out the structure of Isaiah but the focus and emphasis will be on Chapter 6. The book of Isaiah is one of the prophetic books. The word prophesy means forth-telling and foretelling. There were schools of the prophets, but little is known of them (I Sam. 19:19) There were also true and false prophets (Jer. 28:1)³ The prophets did foretell some future events but most of their prophecy was forth-telling. They declared what God had already given to them in the Mosaic Law. Chapters 1-39 emphasize judgment whether it was Israel or the nations. According to Gerhard Rad: "Chapters 40-66 point to two separate writers: Isaiah and "Deutero-Isaiah." With further study, a theory of three writers ("Trito-Isaiah") emerged because of the differences between chapters 40—55 and 56—66."⁴ "The themes of chapters 40-55 include the coming deliverance of the exiles, the worthlessness of idols, the coming judgment on

² Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton p. 524

³ Zondervan Compact Bible dictionary, (Grand Rapids, Mi 1993) p. 476

⁴ Gerhard Von. Rad, "Old Testament Theology", (London, SCM) p. 2:295

the nations, and God's use of a particular Servant as an instrument to carry out his plan. Finally, in chapters 56-66, it projects further in the future to those who have returned from exile."⁵

Jehovah wants his people to know that He is holy (Separate from all other gods) sovereign, (His totally in control) and, faithful (He will bring the covenant to past).

4 Main Characters

4.1 Isaiah

Little is known about the prophet Isaiah except what his own words reveal. He prophesied in four reigns from Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). His name means "Jehovah has saved". "His most important events are the Syro-Ephraimitic war in the days of Ahaz (7:1-9). Assyria is the great enemy with which much of chapters 7-39 deals; and beyond it looms an even mightier foe, Babylon whose downfall is foretold in chapters 13-14 and is the great theme of 40-48. Over against these terrible instruments of divine judgment, Isaiah pictures the messianic hope, first in counseling unbelieving Ahaz, and repeatedly thereafter." "Isaiah was married to a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). He also had two sons whose names had prophetic meanings. They were Shear-Jashub (Isaiah 7:3, meaning "a remnant shall return") and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isaiah 8:1-4, meaning "speed the spoil, hasten the booty."⁶

4.2 Ahaz, Hezekiah, Nation of Israel

Ahaz king of Judah (735-715 B.C) rejects Isaiah's message to trust in God rather than

⁵ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton p. 527

⁶ James Hastings, "Dictionary of the Bible" (Hendrickson Publishers, New York 2001) p. 387-391

trust his ultimate enemy Assyria to deliver him from the troubles with Israel and Syria (7-12).

Oswalt states: “Whether Ahaz admits it or not, God is with Israel, and that is not good news if Israel rejects him. So, in 7:16-8:22, the prophet talks about the tragic consequences of trusting your worst enemy while trying to leave the transcendent God out of the equation of your life.”⁷

God’s call to Ahaz is to trust him no matter how desperate the circumstances may appear. He

reminds Ahaz that Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Samaria will be smoldering but pose no

threat. King Hezekiah of Judah (715-686 B.C.) initially counted on Egypt to help her against the

king of Assyria (II Kings 18:21). “Yet he trusted Yahweh and was delivered in a mighty way.

Hezekiah became a convincing example of how God in his sovereignty can bring deliverance.

This was an important lesson for the Israelites in exile, who were thereby encouraged to respond

to their crisis with trust.”⁸ But God was not only holding the kings responsible but the nation as a

whole. God commanded the people to keep the covenant and his promise was that they would be

a peculiar treasure above all people and that they would be a kingdom of priests, and a holy

nation. The people responded to God by saying, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do”

(Exodus 19:5-8).

5 **Argument**

God is Holy which means He is other than this world and is not bound by space or time.

Without seeing God for who he is no one can be called (saved) or serve him biblically.

⁷ John S. Oswalt, “Isiah-The NIV Application Commentary”, (Grand Rapids Mi, 2003) p.136

⁸ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton p. 524

6 **Key verses: Isaiah 6:5-8**

5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. 6 Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, [which] he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: 7 And he laid [it] upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. 8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

7 **Major Themes**

The Holy One of Israel
 Judgment on Israel
 Judgment of the Nations
 The Servant
 God's faithfulness
 God's hope for the future
 Redeemer
 Eschatology

INTERPRETATION AND EXPOSITION

1 **Isaiah experiences the glory of God 1-4**

The first question one would ask is why Isaiah mentions Uzziah's death. Why date this passage? Scripture does not tell us why but Thomas Constable states: "Probably he did so because King Uzziah had been the best king of Judah since Solomon."⁹ Oswalt believes "it is because it is Uzziah's death that Judah's truly hopeless situation emerges. Assyrian emperor

⁹ Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Isaiah" (Tyndale Seminary Press 2023), 59.

Tiglath-Pilser has clearly established himself as a military power to be feared. So, when Uzziah was removed from the scene, the danger could no longer be ignored.”¹⁰ Scripture doesn’t tell us the reason but Hezekiah’s life had a positive impact on the nation (II Kings 18-19). But what happens next is life-altering. Part of the prophetic language of the prophet is poetry. The response of God is not only cognitive but emotive. Oswalt notes, “the images and language used to describe God emphasized majesty (seated on a throne), transcendence (high and exalted) as the train of his rode filled the temple (the temple filled with smoke) and holiness (Holy, holy, holy). The seraphim or ‘burning ones’ were majestic beings with six wings which might indicate they could move at a moment’s notice. God’s presence entered the temple. Andrew Bartelt states; the place in space and time where God had promised to be present on Earth was in the holy temple. Worship is central to the identity; indeed, it is the very heart and life of God’s people, focused on the temple. Yahweh’s glory did not only to fill the temple but indeed the whole earth.”¹¹

2 **Isaiah’s Response to God’s Glory 5-7**

What happens when a person experiences the glory of God? Scripture tells us that no man can see God and live (ex. 33:20). So, we’re not talking about Isaiah seeing God we’re talking about him seeing God’s brilliance and wonder. When God appeared to the nation of Israel on Mt Sinai after they came out of Egypt the bible says God descended upon the mount in smoke,

¹⁰ Oswalt p. 126

¹¹ Bartelt, Andrew H, Concordia Journal, 47 no 1 Winter 2021, p 29-47.

fire and a loud trumpet sound and the people were afraid (Ex. 19:16-25). When Isaiah experienced the presence of God he cried out Woe is me! The word Woe is used twenty-three times in Isaiah. It is the Hebrew word (וָיָאֵן) and it means a passionate cry of grief or despair. One wonders why this chapter was not first in the book of Isaiah. Before God called Paul to preach the gospel the Damascus experience initiated his call. Isaiah saw himself in the presence of God for who he really is, and he calls out “Woe is me! For I am undone.” This is part of the problem that we face in Christendom today. Do we realize who we are and what we have done to offend a Holy God? Or do we see ourselves as not really that bad? Paul says “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23). But Isaiah is not the only one in trouble it’s the whole nation (I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips). So, why is the focus on lips? This is where I would try to make the “contemporary significance” as Oswalt does in his text. What comes out of our mouths is a result of what’s in our hearts. Jesus says it like this; “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man” (Mat. 15:18). Because God is righteous and loving he doesn’t allow us to remain in a sinful state. So, these Seraphim (s) who have live coal which they get from the altar, fly to Isaiah and lay it upon his mouth. As a result, his iniquity is taken away. From the time man had sinned in the Garden God had already prepared for his redemption (Gen. 3:15). The Old Testament Law was not given to Israel to save them but it was to reveal how bad off they were. Paul says the Law was only a

schoolmaster and was never meant to save us (Gal. 3:24-25). Just like the coal cleansed Isaiah so the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses a sinner once and for all (Heb. 10:10).

3 **Isaiah's Call 8-10**

Again, as I referenced earlier why is Isaiah's call placed here in chapter 6 rather than in the first chapter of his book, like the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel? There's no real answer so, all one can do is speculate. But we can analyze his call. Once Isaiah is cleansed now, he can hear God's call. Because Israel would continue to rebel against God's forgiveness it would not come as it did for Isaiah. Even for believers today God cannot bless our lives and order our steps if we do not confess known sin in our lives (I John 1:5-10). The Psalmist also says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). This call is also different because God allows Isaiah to volunteer rather than saying, "This is what I command you to do". The call also references "us" (who will go for us). Paul House states: "Calvin believes "for us" refers to the Trinity, and Grogan says the phrase suggests God's majesty or "fullness of being. Oswalt thinks, in light of 1 Kg. 22:19-21, that "for us" probably refers to the heavenly council, which is probably the best interpretation."¹² Once Isaiah responds to the call then he learns the specifics. He will be preaching to people with heavy ears, shut eyes, and callous hearts. Again Paul House states: "It appears that Isaiah must intend to harden the people."¹³

4 **Isaiah's Difficult Ministry and Israel's' Difficult Future 11-13**

¹² House, Paul R. Source: Criswell Theological Review, 6 Spr 1993, p 207-222. Publication Type: Article p. 220

¹³ Paul R. House p. 220

Even though God has promised to be with us the journey will not always be easy. There will always be challenges and difficulties. Isaiah will find out in the next three verses how difficult the task will be. Isaiah asks, Lord how long shall I do this? God's response is until the cities be wasted, the inhabitants have no houses, and the land is utterly desolate. Wow! His call to Israel seems to be dire. Oswalt states: "The only hope of healing for these people is in near total destruction. Their religion is already half pagan, and if they continue, all the revelations that God has given will be for nothing"¹⁴ But verse 13 reminds us that God always has a remnant and judgment is not the last word. God says a tenth shall return. Scripture says, "For whom the LORD loves He chastens" (Heb. 12:6). God made a promise to Abraham and his "seed" that he would bless them and give them the land (Gen. 12:2, 15:18).

APPLICATION

Just like the Laodicean church in Revelation, we're neither hot nor cold so therefore God will spit us out of his mouth. Like that church, we are in need of nothing. The church today is rich monetarily. We have padded pews, state-of-the-art technology, paid staff, multi-million-dollar buildings, publishing houses, and worship centers on every corner. We don't have to pray to God for anything because we have everything we need. What changed Isaiah, so that he cried out "Woe is me for I' am undone"? Maybe because Uzziah died that he knew the nation was in peril. Maybe he was looking to the Kings of Judah rather than looking to Jehovah? Whatever the

¹⁴ Oswalt p. 128

reason, he experienced God's presence and it brought terror! It's one thing to know God exists but it's another thing to experience God personally. Job said, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee" (Job:42;5). Can a person be saved without acknowledging that they are a sinner, lost, or acknowledge that Jesus is Lord? The thief on the cross didn't say the ABCs of salvation, but he did acknowledge Jesus as Lord (Luke 23:42). Finally, God's call on our lives will be filled with challenges. Sometimes it can be downright confusing and even cost us our lives. I like how Oswalt phrases it; "Where are the Christians today who will leave their worship services and their luxury automobiles and their stock options to take up the cross of Christ even in sacrificial giving to the cause of Christ?"¹⁵ The disciples in the early church realized the call to evangelize could mean life or death. But the apostle Paul reminds us if we suffer for Christ, we would also one day reign with him (II Tim. 2:12).

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¹⁵ Oswalt p. 132

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