

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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Second Isaiah

I: Isaiah 6:1-9:21

The Prophetic Messenger and his Message

This early section of the Book of Isaiah opens with a spectacular vision describing the prophet's call to be God's messenger, an event which the text dates to approximately the year 738 B.C. (Isa. 6:1-13). In the vision Isaiah sees the Ark of the Covenant flanked by its guardian cherubim in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple, but in the vision the physical objects are transformed into the divine realities that they represent.

Such descriptions of the inner life of the prophet are not common in the Old Testament, and this one is even more unusual because it also describes a number of the important components of Isaiah's message, making it a convenient Table of Contents for the larger book. The message appears not only in the divine commission to the prophet (Isa. 6: 9-10), but also in the visual dimensions of the vision itself. Once the components of the message have been stated, they appear repeatedly throughout the rest of the Book of Isaiah. Later, these themes were reinterpreted in various ways by the prophet and the prophet's community over time, as new situations arose. Among the typical prophetic themes mentioned here are the following:

- (1) **God is powerful and exalted.** The heavenly Monarch is enthroned, and the earth-bound prophet is able to see only the fringe of the divine robe (v. 2). The attendant seraphs do not appear as deities in their own right but are God's servants and agents (vv.6-7). In this vision there is only one deity in the cosmos, and God's glory or aura fills the entire earth (v. 3). The seraphs praise God as supremely holy, with the three-fold repetition of the word "holy" emphasizing the highest degree of the holiness. The word "holy" indicates separateness or distance and stresses the contrast between God and the world of humans. The appearance of the Holy One (one of Isaiah's characteristic titles for God) threatens the stability of the earth itself, causing the temple to shake on its foundations (v. 4).
- (2) **The prophet is acutely aware of sin.** In contrast to the sovereignty and holiness of God, the human prophet is immediately conscious of his own

sin and the sins of his people and fears for Israel's life as prophet and people face the divine presence (v. 5).

- (3) **Divine agents are required.** Contact between God and humans requires the intervention of divine agents. The seraphs purify the prophet, and this purification allows Isaiah to hear God's voice for the first time in the vision (vv. 6-8). When God finally speaks, the deity asks for a volunteer to serve as an agent or messenger. Although the question "who will go for us?" may imply that others are present in the heavenly court, it is a human, the prophet, who volunteers to serve as the messenger to Israel (v. 8).
- (4) **God judges Israel's sin.** God's message to Israel is a message of judgment because of the people's past sins. In this case the message takes a strange form. The prophet is to tell the people to listen but not to understand, to look but not to see. The purpose of this instruction is to prevent the people from repenting and changing their behavior so that they might be saved. The judgment is inevitable and cannot be prevented by any human actions (vv. 9-10).
- (5) **There is still hope.** In spite of the divine decree of judgment, there is also a promise of hope and restoration. The whole land will become desolate, with its population exiled, but a remnant will survive, just as a stump of a tree remains after a forest has been cut and burned. Salvation appears only on the other side of judgment, but salvation will nevertheless occur (vv. 11-13).
- (6) **God's words is true.** No matter what humans try to do about God's intentions, the divine word delivered by the prophet will be fulfilled. Just as surely as God's word of judgment destroys the land, so also God's promise of a remnant will come to pass.

Isaiah's commissioning vision at the beginning of his prophetic activities lays out a model for God's continued dealings with Israel. The prophecy of the vision is not understood as a prophecy referring to a single time or situation in the future. Rather the prophecy is capable of multiple fulfillments during Israel's history as a nation and beyond. In this way the prophecies of Isaiah have an open-ended character that invites constant reinterpretation and reapplication to new situations.

For example, in the community of the Second Isaiah (500s BCE), struggling with the judgment that led to exile in Babylon, the community will focus on the ways in which the promise of restoration will be fulfilled. Earlier in Israel's life, however

(during the late 700s) the community focused in particular on two other historical crises. Along with demonstrating the flexibility and wide applicability of the prophet's words, these earlier applications illustrate the way in which judgment and promise intermingle in God's dealings with Israel.

Isaiah 7:1—8:4 narrates a threat to Jerusalem's existence that arose in the period between 735 and 732 B.C. During this time, the northern kingdom of Ephraim, which had split off from the southern kingdom of Judah after the reign of Solomon, decided to enter into a league with Syria in order to recapture Judah and Jerusalem and to replace Ahaz, the Davidic ruler in Jerusalem, with a puppet king. According to the narrative, Ahaz was worried enough about this possibility to try to improve the defenses of Jerusalem, his capital city.

To the prophet Isaiah, this action of political alliance indicated that Ahaz lacked faith. God had earlier promised the permanent election of the house of David as the rulers of Judah and Jerusalem. God had also promised to dwell forever in the Jerusalem temple (2 Samuel 7). Had Ahaz forgotten God's promises? Did he not believe them? Isaiah therefore confronted the king, and urged the king not to fear, promising that God would fulfill the earlier oracle of protection for the city and the dynasty (Isa. 7:1-9).

In order to authenticate this new promise oracle, Isaiah invited the king to name a divine sign, the occurrence of which would guarantee the truth of the divine word. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, an action which Isaiah took to be an act of unbelief, an act which would deserve judgment as God's response. Isaiah therefore supplied a sign, the famous sign of the birth of a child, who would not grow to adulthood before the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that the Ephraimite coalition would not be successful (Isa. 7:14). However, the salvation of the city will be followed by judgment against Judah and Jerusalem because of the king's and the people's unbelief. This judgment will take the form of an invasion by the king of Assyria, an event which finally took place in 701 B.C., when Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem.

In Isaiah 7:15-8:4 judgment and promise alternate in a complicated series of oracles, and time seems to dissolve, so that the subject of the oracles becomes highly ambiguous. It is not always clear whether the prophet is talking about Ahaz's threat from the Ephraimite coalition or the much later Assyrian threat to Jerusalem, or both at the same time. At work in these verses are the efforts of Isaiah and his disciples to understand how the divine word given during the time of Ahaz is still applicable during the Assyrian crisis of 701. The two events are seen as two examples of the fulfillment of the revelation originally given to the prophet in Isaiah 6.

Isaiah 9:1-7 the prophet looks forward to the birth of a king, who in the “latter time” will be the opposite of the unfaithful king Ahaz. God will restore the Davidic line, thus fulfilling the promise originally made to David. Though Jerusalem and its monarchy may be punished, it will not be destroyed. In the present context, this passage may look forward to the enthronement of Hezekiah in 716 or 715, who will be presented in Isaiah 36—39 as a faithful Davidic ruler. However, the ambiguous nature of the passage (the future king is never named, just as the promised child of Isa. 7:14 is never named) may already indicate that the unit is the work of Second Isaiah, in whose time the Davidic line was disrupted by the Babylonian exile and who interprets the promise as referring to a future messianic king.

Questions for Discussion

1. In Isa. 7:15-25, does the prophet lay out a clear sequence of events, or does the passage simply present a series of images that illustrate the way in which Israel’s life with God is a never-ending alternation between judgment and promise? For example, is the name given to the child, Immanuel, “God is with us,” a sign of God’s blessing or God’s judgment” [Isa. 7:14; 8:9; 8:10]; how does Matthew understand the name [Matt. 1:23; cf. also Matt. 2:13-18]. Are the oracles that begin “on that day” in Isa. 7:18-24 positive or negative?

2. Is the incident described in Isaiah 8:1-4 related at all to the promise of the child in 7:14?

3. In Isa. 9:2, who are “the people who walked in darkness”? Are they related to the ones who see but don't understand in Isa. 6:9-10?
4. Is the royal child born in Isa. 9:6 related to the child mentioned in Isa. 7:14 or 8:1-4? Is there any way to know at what time in the future the birth will take place?
5. Does Isaiah's concept of the multiple fulfillment of prophecy allow for the possibility that such fulfillments might take place beyond the biblical period and even extend down to our own time?

6. Do you experience the events of your own life as an alternation of God's judgment and God's promise? How would that worldview help? What are its dangers?

For Further Study

- Peter R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 1—12: Presentation of a Prophet," in *Congress Volume, Göttingen, 1977* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 29; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 16-48; reprinted in Peter R. Ackroyd, *Studies in the Religious Tradition of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 79-104.
- Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 60-81.