

The Book of Isaiah: A Short Course on Biblical Theology

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One of the features of Isaiah studies in the last twenty years has been a return to an appreciation for the book as a unit.¹ While this has by no means signaled an abandonment of the long-held scholarly conviction concerning the multiple authorship of the book, it has recognized the historical fact that, for whatever reason, the materials have been transmitted to us on a single scroll. Beyond that fact, the materials in this book display a remarkable coherency. To be sure, that coherence is often elusive, prompting many scholarly disagreements, not to mention doctoral dissertations. Nevertheless, the coherence is certainly there, as many recent studies have shown.

I propose that one expression of that coherence is the inclusive character of the book's theology. I am not speaking of gender inclusivity here but of the breadth of the book's theological vision. Unlike some of the other large prophetic books, there seems to be in Isaiah a more extended theological reflection. Moreover, this reflection has a kind of multihued, multidimensional character. Theological themes are not merely presented. Rather, they are explored, and they are explored with sophistication and sensitivity. I do not believe that any other book of the Bible develops so many of the great themes of biblical theology in such depth and yet with so much nuancing. In fact, whatever one's position on the knotty question of authorship, I wonder if it is not this extended theological reflection that has prompted the shape of the book.

To illustrate my point, and before going on to look at some other examples, I want to consider the theme of righteousness at some length.² This theme in particular shows the kind of development and nuancing I am talking about. In chapters 1-39, righteousness is almost exclusively a human activity (or non-activity, as the case may be). The people of Israel are expected to live and relate

¹ An early published expression of this trend was the book *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), in which Seitz and the authors explored the various ways reading the book as a whole contributes to our understanding of what is being said in it.

² For a fuller discussion on this point, see my "Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56-66 in the Present structure of the Book," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. C. C. Broyles and C. A. Evans, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:177-92.

in right ways—ways that clearly reflect the stipulations of the Sinai covenant. A good example appears in 33:14-16:

The sinners in Zion are afraid;
 trembling has seized the godless:
 “Who among us can live with the devouring fire?
 Who among us can live with everlasting flames?”
 Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly,
 who despise the gain of oppression,
 who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it,
 who stop their ears from hearing bloodshed,
 and shut their eyes from looking on evil,
 they will live on the heights;
 their refuge will be the fortress of rocks;
 their food will be supplied;
 their water assured.

But alongside the repeated calls for righteous living is also the mounting evidence that the Israelites have little interest in such living. The point is made immediately in the opening chapter:

How the faithful city has become a whore!
 She that was full of justice,
 righteousness lodged in her—
 but now murderers! (1:21)

The Israelite people’s consistent failure to live righteously ultimately becomes a major issue, prompting repeated oracles of judgment against them along with threats of destruction and exile.

And I will make justice the line,
 and righteousness the plummet.
 Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
 and waters will overwhelm the shelter. (28:17)

In chapters 40-55, righteousness takes on a very different coloration. Here, the threatened exile is treated as a fact. Judgment for unrighteousness has fallen with terrible effects. Here also, with only a few exceptions, the righteousness discussed is God’s. It is an expression of his gracious deliverance. God would not be right if he left this sinful people to their fate in Babylon. Rather, his righteousness is displayed in his determination not to leave them in an exiled condition. Clearly, this is not a legalistic understanding. If one looked at the situation only in light of the solemn oath the people took upon themselves at the sealing of the Sinai covenant, it would seem that God could hardly be right and do anything else but leave them to that fate. They deserve it, and he is the just judge. Yahweh’s “right-ness,” however, extends far beyond mere legal correctness. What about his promises to Abraham? What about his promises to thousands who kept covenant love with him? It would never be right for this God of *chesed* to let mere legal justice proceed on its way. It is an expression of his righteousness to deliver graciously and to find a way of doing that which will satisfy his justice. Interestingly, one of the few places where righteousness occurs in chapter 40-55 with reference to human beings is in 53:11,

where we read, “The righteous one, my servant, will make many righteous, and he will bear their iniquities.”

What are we to conclude from the conjunction of chapters 1-39 and 40-55? Should we not conclude that human righteousness (or unrighteousness) is finally of no consequence, being swallowed up in the righteousness of God? That is what many have concluded on other grounds than merely a study of the book of Isaiah. To the suggestion that perhaps we should sin more so that God could be more gracious to us, this body of theological reflection called Isaiah anticipated by several hundred years Paul’s anguished, “God forbid!” (Rom. 6:1). That anticipation is found in chapters 56-66, which continue the discussion of righteousness in a most remarkable way. That further reflection is signaled in the very first verse of chapter 56, where the hearers are exhorted to “keep justice and do righteousness.” This exhortation is reminiscent of statements to be found in chapters 1-39, such as 5:7:

For the vineyard of the LORD of Hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
He expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!

Clearly the recipients of God’s gracious deliverance from exile are not merely to rest upon their status as the chosen servants of God and pay no attention to their covenant obligations. Yet, how are they to do that? The preexilic experience had shown that humans, for some reason, seem incapable of living out the righteousness of God. This fact, as if it could be forgotten, is fully developed again in chapters 57-59 and 63-65: Humans cannot produce righteous behavior. There are not many bleaker sentences in Scripture than those between 59:4 and 15a, concluding with:

Justice is turned back
and righteousness stands afar off;
for truth has fallen in the street,
and equity cannot enter.
So truth fails,
and the one who departs from evil
makes himself a prey.

So, the question intrudes: How are we to fulfill the renewed command of 56:1? The answer to the question is revealed in the second half of 56:1 and is couched in the terms of chapters 40-55, and especially 49-55. We are to keep justice and do righteousness “*because* my salvation is about to come and my righteousness [NRSV “deliverance”] is about to be revealed.” That is, God’s demand that his people live lives like his has not changed, but the enabling cause of such behavior is not to be human effort. Rather, it is to be that same gracious enablement of God that would make the return from exile possible.

If there were any question about this interpretation, it seems to me that the unique literary structure of chapters 56-66 settles it. That structure is a five-step chiasm with 61:1-3 as the center point.³

- A. Righteous foreigners (56:1-8)
- B. God's people unable to do right (56:9-59:15a)
- C. The Divine Warrior (59:15b-21)
 - D. God's righteousness dawns in his people (60:1-22)
 - E. Anointed to preach the Good News (61:1-3)
- D¹ God's righteousness dawns in his people (61:4-62:12)
- C¹ The Divine Warrior (63:1-6)
- B¹ God's people unable to do right (63:7-66:17)
- A¹ Righteous foreigners (66:18-24)

The opening and closing, or *A*, segments are 56:1-8 and 66:18-24. They tell us of righteous foreigners who keep God's covenant. It would be difficult to put God's point that mere election as the people of God accomplishes nothing apart from genuinely righteous living more forcefully than does this way of opening and closing this division of the book. The fact that God delivered his chosen servants because of his grace alone and not because of any righteousness on their parts is no justification for those servants' continuing in sin.

The second, or *B*, segments are 56:9-59:15a and 63:7-66:17. These segments deal in considerable detail with the failure, and indeed, the inability of the chosen servants to live righteous lives. However, the two segments end in different ways. The first one ends in 59:1-15a with total despair, as already mentioned. The *B¹* section draws to its close with a note of hope expressed in two different ways, the hope of a new heaven and earth (65:17-25) and the hope of Mother Zion's blessing her children (66:6-13). The reason for the difference, I believe, is what is contained in the center segments, the *C*, *D*, and *E* segments.

The *C* segments are 59:15b-21 and 63:1-6, and they are a revelation of the Divine Warrior, who is the arm of the LORD (59:16).⁴ No longer is the arm of the LORD a spindly shoot struggling to survive in dry ground (53:1-2). Now he is the invincible warrior who comes striding off the battlefield spattered with the blood of his fallen enemies (63:1-2). What is it he has come to defeat? Do not the *B* segments make that very clear? He has come to defeat the persistent sinning that makes it impossible for the chosen servants to be a light to the nations. In 53:7, he took the judgment for their sin as a silent lamb going to its own slaughter, but he comes to defeat sin in them as a fire-breathing conqueror (cf. 11:5).

³ For a fuller discussion of this structure see John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461-65. See also J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 461-62, for the same idea with variations.

⁴ One evidence that the author or editor intended for these two passages to be seen as parallel to each other is the repetition of 59:16 in 63:5.

He intends to realize the promises of purity and holiness in 4:2-6 in order that the predictions of a mission to the world in 2:1-4 may become a reality.

The victory of the Warrior explains the *D* segments, 60:1-22 and 62:4-63:12. When the Warrior has done his work, the light to the nations will dawn on the hill of Zion, and the nations will either come to worship, or they will come to be the slaves of those they once oppressed. What is that light that dawns? It is the righteousness of God *in* his people. Look at what is said here:

Your people will all be righteous;
 they will possess the land forever.
 They are the shoot that I planted,
 the work of my hand so that I might be glorified. (60:21)⁵

For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
 he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,⁶
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up;
 so the LORD God will cause righteousness and praise
 to spring up before all the nations.
 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
 and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
 until her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
 and her salvation like a burning torch.
 The nations will see your righteousness,
 and all the kings your glory. (61:10b-62:2)

If there still remained any question as to how the change from the despairing bondage to evil behavior in the *B* segments (56:9-59:15a; 63:7-66:17) was going to be changed into the light and joy of the *D* segments (60:1-22; 61:4-61:12), the center, or *E*, segment in the structure should answer the question conclusively. It will be because of the Spirit-anointed Messiah. He has been anointed to preach the good news of deliverance. This is not deliverance from Babylon. The people being addressed here would have already experienced that deliverance. The mourning (61:2, 3) they would be engaging in would not be over physical bondage. Rather, it would be over their inability to live the kind of righteous life their covenant called for. The Messiah's ministry, however, would make them "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD to display his glory" (63:3).

The mention of the Spirit of God in 61:1 is significant not only because of the mention of him in connection with the Messiah in 11:1-3 but also because of his significance already in chapters 1-39 (and 40-55) as the one who will make righteousness possible. In 32:15, in a passage connected with the messianic kingdom the text reads:

⁵ Note the repetition of the theme of planting from 5:7.

⁶ Note that NRSV translates *sdaqah* here and in v. 11 as "righteousness" (correctly, I think), but then translates it with "vindication" in the next two verses. There is no justification in the context for the change.

Until the Spirit⁷ is poured out upon us from on high,
 and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
 and the fruitful field is counted as a forest.
 Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
 and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
 The effect of righteousness will be peace,
 and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.⁸

Neither is the idea entirely new that it is God who will enable his people to do righteousness and keep justice. In 51:4-8, it was said:

Listen to me, my people;
 and give ear to me, O my nation:
 For instruction [*torah*] will proceed from me,
 and I will make my justice rest as a light of the peoples.
 My righteousness is near,
 my salvation has gone forth,
 and my arms will judge the peoples;
 the coastlands will wait upon me,
 and on my arm they will trust....
 Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
 you people in whose heart is my instruction (*torah*):
 Do not fear the reproach of men,
 nor be afraid of their insults.
 For the moth will eat them up like a garment,
 and the worm will eat them like wool;
 But my righteousness will be forever,
 and my salvation from generation to generation.

Thus, while the idea of gracious, divine empowerment for righteous living is brought to its climax in chapters 56-66, it is not an intrusion into the overall thought of the book. These chapters synthesize the teachings of chapters 1-39 and 40-55 in a powerful way. However, as we have seen, the ideas are not developed in some neat dialectical fashion. The development is much more complex and nuanced than that, with elements appearing and disappearing, only to reappear again in fuller form until the final climax is achieved. It is not accidental that the book has more than once been compared to the musical form of the symphony.

One of the ways in which the book develops its theological concepts is through a phenomenon we may call bipolarity.⁹ That is, the prophet puts

⁷ The NRSV translates "a spirit." However, *marom*, "on high" is unquestionably a reference to God in this book (see 24:18; 33:5; 57:15), and the definite article is regularly omitted in Hebrew poetry. It is hard to imagine that any other spirit than the Spirit of God is intended. This is not to say that Isaiah had some fully developed concept of the Trinity, but it is to say that it is not conceivable that the prophet is merely thinking of any of a host of indeterminate spirit beings as accomplishing these tasks.

⁸ See also 44:1-5 where the result of the Spirit's being poured out is a renewed attachment of the people to God and a willingness to be known as his people.

⁹ For further development of some of these bipolarities, see John N. Oswalt, "Key Themes in the Book of Isaiah: Their Relevance for Christian Theology," in *The Newell Lecture*, vol. 3, ed. T. Dwyer (Anderson: Warner Press, 1996), 1-90, 202-11.

together concepts that at first glance seem to be composed of contrasting opposites. Before he has finished exploring them, though, we see that the points are complementary rather than contradictory. Perhaps the most important of these bipolarities is the concept of judgment and hope. The concept's importance is signaled in the prominence given it in the first five chapters, which many commentators consider to be introductory.¹⁰ In these opening chapters, one of the striking features is the interleaving of judgment and hope with no transitions between them. When we encounter the words that are now Micah 4:1-4 in the Micah context, we are somewhat prepared for them. When we encounter those same words in what is now Isaiah 2:1-4, we are almost completely unprepared for them. The idea that the Zion described in much of chapter 1—rebellious, stupid, hypocritical, and unclean—might be the Zion to which all the nations will flow to learn the ways of Torah seems completely impossible.

Likewise, we are unprepared for Isaiah 4:2-6. The previous materials (2:6-4:1) have described an Israel whose idolatrous worship of human glory has plunged it into the holes of the earth with the unclean bats and moles (2:20-21). That segment concludes with a picture of haughty Zion humiliated, stripped of her beautiful clothing, sitting on the ground in stench and shame among the ruins (3:16-4:1). Chapter 4, verse 1 concludes that picture of disgrace with the opening phrase, "In that day." Chapter 4, verse 2 begins with the very same phrase, but uses it to introduce a picture that is very different. Here beautiful Zion ("the daughters of Zion," 4:4, see also 3:16) is cleansed, made holy, and sheltered. How are we to explain this complete contrast, whose intentionality seems clear with the repetition of the words, *in that day*?

Then, just as abruptly, the picture changes back to one of imminent judgment in chapter 5. There, the vineyard that only produces bitter grapes of greed (5:8-10), self-indulgence (5:11-17), and refusal to accept God's instruction about right and wrong (5:18-24) is about to be decimated by the wild animals that the Owner of the vineyard is calling in from the ends of the earth.

What is this abrupt oscillation from judgment to hope and back again telling us? Before we attempt to answer this question, we should note the same oscillation in the larger structure of the book. Chapters 7-39, while they do include some announcements of hope, are still largely oracles of judgment, and they close with an icily calm Isaiah telling a blustering Hezekiah that all the wealth and armaments he has paraded before the Babylonian envoys will one day

¹⁰ See, e.g., Motyer, *Isaiah*, 40; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1985), 9. I agree that the section sets the stage for the rest of the book, but I am not sure that it was consciously designed as an introduction. It is hard to imagine that someone with 40-66 before him would not specifically include the concept of servant in some way. To be sure, I believe that the idea of servanthood is implied from the outset, but this is only because of the theological concepts involved rather than because of conscious design. See John N. Oswalt, "The Kerygmatic Structure of the Book of Isaiah," in *Go To the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, ed. J. E. Coleson and V. H. Matthews (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 143-57.

belong to those same Babylonians, as will his own descendants. As a result, we are completely unprepared for the opening words of chapter 40, “Comfort, comfort my people, speak to the heart of Jerusalem. Announce to her that all her suffering is past.” Although words of judgment are hardly over, the dominant tone of chapters 40-55 is one of repeated hope. The repetition of the injunction “fear not” that characterizes this segment underlines this point. It does not matter about the past, Israel is God’s chosen servant. Far from being cast off, they will be his prime exhibit in his case of proving that the so-called gods of Babylon have no right even to be called by such a name.

So I ask again, what is the point of this bipolarity? I believe it is this. The Israelites, like the rest of us, tended to believe that hope only lay in the escape from judgment. They saw the oncoming juggernaut of Assyria. They could not avoid seeing it, and it so filled their vision that they really could see nothing else. Everything revolved around the hope of escaping destruction at the hands of the Mesopotamian colossus. If they could not escape that destruction in some way, either by a treaty with the enemy, or failing that, by a treaty with the toothless old dragon Egypt, then all hope was surely lost. It is either destruction or hope.

To that idea, Isaiah says a resounding no. He says in the opening chapters that it is not a case of judgment *or* hope but rather judgment *and* hope. Their problem is that they think it is an out-of-control Assyria that they must face. Isaiah says, undoubtedly arising out of his own experience, that it is the all-holy covenant LORD who is their problem. In his introduction, the prophet shows us, especially in the culminating parable in chapter 5, that judgment is inescapable. What else can the Owner of the vineyard do with it but destroy it? However, 2:1-5 and 4:2-6 tell us that if destruction is an inescapable reality, so is hope. In fact, as 4:4 suggests, the *only* hope is *through* judgment: “when the LORD has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.”

I believe this bipolarity explains the placement and content of chapter 6. I am convinced that the chapter is where it is in the book because of what it says in regard to chapters 1-5. Those chapters pose what looks like an insoluble problem: How can the Israel described in most of chapter 1, in 2:6-4:1, and in chapter 5 ever become the Israel of 2:1-5 and 4:2-6? How can filthy Zion become holy Zion? How can an Israel that is stupider in respect to its Master than any ox or ass is ever be the place to which the world will come to learn the Torah of God? Isaiah’s answer is very straightforward. It can happen when the nation of unclean lips has the same experience the man of unclean lips had; when the fire of God has been poured out on the nation to the extent of reducing it to a field of burned out stumps. The nation becomes the vessel out of which the light of God can shine on the nations. From Isaiah’s perspective, that is the only hope, because until judgment comes, the condition of the people is such that the word of God can only harden, deafen, and blind them (6:9-10; cf. 8:16-18). Apart from judgment, there was no hope that *this* Israel of the present could ever become *that* Israel of

the future. Without the fire of judgment, they would continue down the road of idolizing human glory until they came at last to dissolution.

If through the fires of judgment Israel could get a vision of a God who wields mighty Assyria as a mere axe in his hand, who tells Babylon to get off its throne and sit in the dust, who is the only being in the universe who is holy in himself, then there might be hope. If they could come to realize that Yahweh is so great that he can use the most terrible disasters imaginable to accomplish the greater good in us, there would indeed be hope. If through judgment they could see that God, far from intending to destroy them, intended to refine them, and if they could embrace that refining fire with Isaiah's "Here am I," then the blind, deaf, fat-hearted servant (6:10; 42:18) could become a servant like the one described in 50:4—sensitive, perceptive and obedient. In the end, however, the only way that good goal could be achieved would be through the suffering of judgment.

This bipolarity continues into chapters 56-66, and with a similar kind of synthesizing to what we saw above with righteousness. Here, the concept that hope comes through judgment is brought to its final development. Very clearly the prophet sees where the unconditional grace, the hope, that God would show in the return from exile might lead. It could very well lead to a sense that the elect of God are exempt from judgment. Thirty years ago, Professor Paul Hanson posited that the issue in these chapters was the struggle between the elite establishment who wanted to build Ezekiel's temple and the marginalized visionaries who dreamed of Second Isaiah's more spiritual kingdom.¹¹ I thought then, as I still do, that that conceptuality had more to do with the 1970s A.D. than it did with 520 B.C. I believe that the text as it stands, without the almost complete reconstruction Hanson undertook to prove his point, points to a different kind of contrast. It does refer to an elite and to a marginalized underclass, but the elite are those who view themselves as above judgment because of their elect status, while the marginalized are those who are crushed by their persistent sinning, who wish to please God with their lives, and who realize that God will hold them accountable for the appropriation of his grace that will make those pleasing lives possible. Thus, this marginal group, whom God particularly calls his servants in chapter 65, realizes that grace is not for escaping judgment. Rather, it is the means by which the good God turns judgment into hope.

Another of these bipolarities is found in the book's theology of the Messiah, and that bipolarity is interwoven with still another. This third one is that of height and depth or exaltation and humiliation. Let me speak briefly about it before turning back and seeing how it is woven into the theme of the Messiah.¹² Obviously, one of the great issues in the book is that of the nations. They appear

¹¹ Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

¹² The same connections between the idea of Messiah and servant are explored in Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, *Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

throughout the book from beginning to end. They are antagonists, allies, oppressors, saviors, fellow-worshippers, and slaves. The central question in all of this is: What is the appropriate relationship of Israel to them? From as early as 2:1-5 and culminating in 60-62, it is clear that if Israel does not have a mission to them, *per se*, it does have at the very least an important function in regard to them. That function is to be the vehicle through which the light of God's Torah reaches the farthest nation of the earth. If it is true that Yahweh is the sole Creator of the universe, then his ways alone are those that lead to life and fulfillment, and Israel is charged with being the means through whom that reality can become known among the nations (2:1-5; 12:4-6; 25:6-8; 42:1; 51:4-5; 60:1-3). It is Yahweh's glory that fills the earth (6:3), and Israel's place in God's economy is to make that fact known to the ends of the earth.

There is a rival to Yahweh's glory, and that is the glory of the nations, the glory of humanity. That, then, becomes Israel's trap. Will they be seduced by the glory of the nations into forgetting the glory of the LORD and thus be destroyed by the very nations they have bowed down to? Or, will they instead recognize that God alone is high and lifted up, commit themselves to declaring his glory to the nations, and thus become the means for the saving of the nations? That note is sounded immediately in 2:6. Isaiah has pled with his people to come and "walk in the light of the LORD" because that is what all the nations, would one day do (2:1-5). Instead, Israel is "full" (2:6-8) of the riches, the armaments, and the religion of the nations. What will be the result of that exaltation of humanity? It will be utter humiliation. This love affair with all the great things of earth (2:12-16) instead of with the only Great One, can only result in the loss of all those things. They are not ultimate and have no ultimate reality in them. Only Yahweh, says Isaiah, is truly high and lifted up, and to put anything else in his place, especially the "lofty looks of man" (2:11) is to court inevitable disaster. By contrast, the prophet says much later, the Holy One sits in the high and lofty place *and* with the humble and contrite (57:15). Any attempt to take his seat for ourselves is to destroy ourselves, as the mocking lament for the king of Babylon in chapter 14 makes so clear. To surrender those foolish attempts and take the place of the servant at his feet is to find that the Holy One has come down to sit beside us, and the dust has become a throne. A similar point is made in chapters 47 and 50. Babylon, who had said of herself what only God can say, "I am and there is no other" (47:8, 10; cf. 45:6; 46:9), is cast down into the dust by her own hubris, whereas Zion, thrown into the dirt by Babylon, and abject in her failure and shame, is lifted up into the seat of honor by her gracious LORD (52:1-2).

The same theme appears in the final division of the book, and we have noted it in passing already. It is not those who are proud of their own religious attainments or those who are secure in their status as the elect of God whom God calls his servants. In fact, in tones all too reminiscent of those used by Jesus in his castigation of the Pharisees hundreds of years later, Isaiah bitterly suggests that the religion of such persons is no better than the rankest paganism (66:3-4). Who

are those who earn his commendation? It is the foreigner, someone from one of those outcast pagan nations (56:3, 6-8), or the eunuch who can never bear elect children to continue the line of Israel (56:4-5). These are the lowest of the low, and yet the prophet commends them. Why? Because they are contrite and humbly keep his covenant, treating one another in righteous ways through the power of his grace.

This same contrast between exaltation and humility characterizes Isaiah's theology of the Messiah. There is of course almost no agreement among interpreters of the book as to what passages actually qualify as messianic. Perhaps the only one that all agree is messianic is 11:1-16. This would be, according to language that is in vogue in other areas of biblical studies today, the "minimalist" position. The "maximalist" position, where I find myself, adds to chapter 11 the Immanuel passages in chapters 7 and 8, and the Child passage in chapter 9. In addition to these, in chapters 1-39 there would also be 16:5, 32:1-5, and 33:17-24.¹³ What about chapters 40-66? Of course, the burning question is the identity of the so-called suffering servant in 42:1-9; 49:1-12; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12, as well as that of the person in 61:1-3.

With regard to the suffering servant, I take very seriously the evidence of Acts 8:26-35 that the earliest Christians saw the ultimate suffering servant passage, Isaiah 52:13-12, as predictive of Jesus the Messiah.¹⁴ Beyond that is what is to me very clear evidence that (1) the nation of Israel is not being talked of in these four passages, and (2) the mission given to this person shows that no ordinary person is being talked about.¹⁵ Briefly, note that this person, called "Israel" in 49:3, is repeatedly said to be obedient, submissive, and unusually sensitive to the teaching and guidance of the LORD. That is not the nation of Israel, which is continually described as deaf, blind, and rebellious throughout chapters 40-55. Furthermore, it is specifically said that the mission of this person called Israel is "to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be restored to him" (49:5). This is not the nation of Israel but someone who will be what Israel never succeeded in being in itself in order to restore Israel to its LORD.

Could this person not be the prophet himself, or perhaps some other prophetic figure, as the Ethiopian eunuch wondered? The answer to that question is found in a further examination of the mission of the servant; 42:1, 3, and

¹³ Some would also add to the messianic passages 4:2 with its reference to "the branch of the LORD" (Heb. *semah*) on the basis of the phrase's appearance in undoubtedly messianic settings in Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8, and 6:12. So Motyer, *Isaiah*, 65. However, despite that compelling evidence, the parallel "fruit of the land" in 4:2 seems to mitigate against that connection.

¹⁴ Brevard S. Childs' argument that we cannot say what the early church's position was because the text merely says Philip preached Christ to the eunuch, beginning at this Scripture, seems to me to be very weak (*Isaiah*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 423). How can there be any doubt in view of the specific quotation of Isa. 53:7-8 and in view of the eunuch's question as to who the prophet was speaking of in the passage?

¹⁵ See Childs, *Isaiah*, 383-85, most recently for substantial agreement on these points.

4 state that “he will bring forth justice to the nations . . .”; “he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands [the ends of the earth] wait for his teaching.”

I submit that that is not the work of any human prophet. These are the same kinds of things that are said of the Messiah in chapters 11 and 32. He will establish justice and righteousness on the earth (11:4-10; 32:1; so also 16:5). Likewise, it is the Messiah who will deliver his people from the oppression of the nations (11:11-16; so also 33:17-24). So, if the servant is not the nation but an individual who is in some sense the ideal Israel, and, if the mission of this ideal Israel is the mission elsewhere ascribed to the Messiah, the servant is the Messiah.

Now, having said all that, what is the picture of the Messiah in the book of Isaiah? It is one of startling contrasts. It is a particularization of the contrast between height and depth, exaltation and humiliation that we have just considered. On the one hand, the anointed one is an unquestionably royal figure who pronounces judgment upon the earth and who rescues his subjects from the hands of any nation that dares to hold them against his will. As kings across the ancient Near East claimed to have established justice throughout their realms, this king is said to do it throughout the earth. The earth trembles at his edicts, but it also eagerly anticipates his instruction (42:4; cf. 51:4-5). In his realm, fools and knaves are no longer treated as noblemen and philanthropists. Now it is the truly noble and generous who are honored (32:1-8). It is no longer those who prey on the poor who are given high positions in the kingdom; now such positions are given to those who protect the poor. His righteous power is absolutely incontestable. Those who persist in opposing him are relentlessly destroyed (63:1-6). His throne is exalted above any other throne anywhere. This is the Messiah that the Jewish people of the first century A.D. eagerly anticipated.

Still, that picture gives us only one side of Isaiah’s messianic coin. The other side is equally striking, and perhaps even more so, because it is so utterly unexpected. The Israelite people faced two terrible colossi: the rampaging Mesopotamian powers, and the implacable sin that they could not shake off. Finally, it was the Messiah to whom they looked for deliverance from both of these enemies. So how would he bring about this deliverance? Ahaz and his court “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (7:2) before the oppressors from Samaria and Damascus, and a yet greater oppressor, Assyria, waited in the background. How would God defeat these mighty enemies? Surely, he would send One who would be more aggressive than the aggressors, who would be more oppressive than the oppressors, but what is Isaiah’s vision, his sign? “A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and she will name him ‘God is with us.’” God’s answer is a child—an unborn child? Yes, and if there were any question, the prominence of children throughout chapters 7-11 should lay it to rest. Besides Immanuel, there is Shear-jashub, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Chapter 9:1-7 seals the point. It is a child who is born, on whose shoulders the weight of government rests, who is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of peace.” Finally, who leads in the messianic kingdom of chapter 11? It is a little child (11:6).

What is all this saying? It is saying that the divine answer to arrogance is not more arrogance. Aggression is not the answer to aggression, nor oppression to oppression. In the words of the apostle Paul, the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of humans, and the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of humans (1 Cor. 1:25). The greatest power of all, says Isaiah, is the power to take evil into oneself and give back love. It is no power to be able to hate in a greater way than ones haters do. That is simply to be in their power. God, by causing his prophet to depict his Messiah in the garb of a child, shows that his divine power is not in thrall to his enemies, a mere reaction to their overbearing self-interest. His response is one of entire disinterest in his own rights and prerogatives. If he punishes and destroys his enemies—and he does—it is not because of their infringement on his self-interest—he has none. It is because they have lived and acted in ways that are in defiance of the way in which they were made. It is the difference between an abusive father who knocks his child down because the child dares to frustrate the father’s arbitrary will, and the father who, with tears in his eyes, spans the child because he knows that to allow the child’s wrong action to go unpunished is to create an adult monstrosity who believes that the world should function to please him. Unless we understand the King of chapters 11, 16:5, 32:1-8, and 33:17-24 in terms of the children of chapters 7-11, we will inevitably misunderstand him and his kingdom.

This understanding should make it much easier for us to see how the suffering servant is a messianic figure, and to accept that to read the passages in that way is not a Christian imposition. What these passages say about a king who is self-denying and submissive, who lays down his life for his subjects, is entirely consistent with what was said about Immanuel in the first part of the book. In fact, I will go so far as to say that a view of messiahship that did not incorporate such an understanding would be a deficient one in the context of the Bible. To be sure, we might not have recognized that fact in the Old Testament if it were not for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The fact that we do not recognize something until someone else points it out to us does not mean that what we now recognize was not there all along. Additionally, we may well turn the point on its head. Would we have recognized the substitutionary nature of Jesus’ suffering if it were not for Isaiah 52:13-12? I suspect not, and Paul might never have said those wonderful words, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19), and Peter might never have said, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

This submissiveness and self-denial is in no way a sign of weakness. That is what reading the suffering servant passages of 40-55 together with the divine warrior passages of 56-66 helps us to see. In our human fallenness, we are largely unable to see the truth of Jesus’ words that the way to gain life is to lose it, or

that the way to victory is through surrender, or that the way to rise is to fall. We give lip service to such bizarre ideas, but too often our lives say that we do not believe them. Thus, we are a little embarrassed by the apparent weakness of the servant whose back is lacerated and whose beard is pulled out, whose work seems so futile and fruitless, and who dies like a mute sheep. Or, if we embrace that view, we all too unconsciously acquiesce in the Victorian picture of the limp-wristed, soft-featured Jesus who spends a great deal of time swooning over flowers. That Jesus is not much good to us when we are in trouble and distress. Then we want a Jesus who has a lot more in common with Arnold Schwarzenegger. The trouble is that we rarely succeed in putting the two visions together. Most of our attempts at synthesizing the divine warrior and the suffering servant end up doing damage to one or the other. Why have Isaiah or his editors not made the attempt to create that synthesis for us. Somewhere G. K. Chesterton makes the point that the Bible is not a book of pastels. It is, he says, a book of pure colors, pure red and pure white, for instance, so that each age can create the blend that will speak most effectively to its needs and crises. I think he is exactly correct. So it is here. Is Isaiah's Messiah the suffering servant or the divine warrior? The answer to both alternatives is yes. He is the self-denying sufferer, taking the sins of the world upon himself to destroy them utterly and without mercy. He is the terrible warrior, but the blood that spatters his garments is his own. The greatest power in the universe is the power to absorb all the evil and hatred in the world and to destroy it utterly by turning it into self-denying love. That is not weakness but unconquerable strength.

For my final illustration of Isaiah as a source book for biblical theology, I want to turn to the central topic of theology: Theos. I agree with the late Gerhard Hasel when he said that the center of Old Testament theology, and indeed, of biblical theology, is God.¹⁶ If the Bible is in any sense the self-revelation of the Creator of the universe, then that is as it should be. As Yahweh demonstrated in Egypt, before the Israelites needed to know deliverance, they needed to know the Deliverer. Thus, throughout the Bible, the cause of deliverance is the self-revelation of God. This is certainly true in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah's call in chapter 6 and the reissuing of the call in chapter 40 both center on one fact: a revelation of the LORD. What the man of unclean lips needed is what the people of unclean lips needed: a vision of God as he is—the Holy One. It is no accident that of the thirty occurrences in the Bible of the phrase *The Holy One of Israel*, fully twenty-five of those are in Isaiah, and one of the other five is in the parallel passage in 2 Kings 19. This means there are only four occurrences of the phrase outside of this book, two in the Psalms (78:41; 89:18), and two in Jeremiah (50:29; 51:5). When the one occurrence of *The Holy One of Jacob* (Isa. 29:23) is added, the proportions are twenty-six out of a

¹⁶ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 168-71.

total of thirty-one occurrences.¹⁷ As I said, this phenomenon is hardly accidental. It is apparent that Isaiah's vision of the LORD narrated in chapter 6 made such an impact upon him that he never escaped it, nor did he wish to.

What exactly does a vision of God's holiness entail in this book? In the Bible as well as in the Ancient Near East in general, the basic idea of holiness is that which separates the divine from the merely human. In a word, it is transcendence. Clearly, Isaiah had a vision of the overwhelming transcendence of Yahweh. He is absolutely other than this world and anything in it, not only in his essence but also in his character. It is striking that the thing about Yahweh's holiness that was most crushing to Isaiah was his moral purity. I say moral purity precisely because of the strange phrase Isaiah uses to describe himself: "a man with unclean lips." He is not talking about ritual impurity as he might have been if he had merely said, "I am unclean." No, he is talking about what the King James Version calls "his conversation," that is, the conduct of his life.¹⁸ What is particularly striking about this is that it could not be said of the holiness of any other deity in the ancient world. The one thing you knew about holiness is that it has no moral quality whatsoever. If El was holy, so was Reshef, the god of pestilence. Baal was no less holy when he was having a sexual liaison with a cow than when he was sitting on his throne receiving worshipers. Yet, what drove Isaiah to despair was not Yahweh's infinity, nor his power, nor even his eternity. It was the way Yahweh behaved. In comparison, Isaiah's behavior, and that of the people, destroyed them in God's presence. There is no reason to think that this realization was born for the first time in this experience. Rather, it suggests strongly that this unique understanding of the fundamentally ethical aspect of holiness was already in Isaiah's thinking before this experience. That is entirely consistent with the content of the Torah, for while the Torah showed that being holy as Yahweh is holy certainly did involve ritual behaviors that emphasized Yahweh's radical separation from the common and ordinary, it showed with considerably greater force that the elemental evidence of being the exclusive property of Yahweh was to treat other persons in ethical ways—with honor and respect and with refusal to seek advantage over them for one's own benefit. This holy way of living was enjoined upon them "because I am Yahweh." The inference is obvious: this character is required of Yahweh's devotees because this is Yahweh's character.

¹⁷ It is interesting that of these 26 occurrences, 13 are in chapters 1-39, and 13 are in chapters 40-66. When the phrase is reduced to *the Holy One*, either by itself or with the genitive phrase added, the dramatic imbalance is maintained. Twenty-seven occurrences are in Isaiah, while 9 are found in the rest of the Bible: the five already mentioned plus Job 6:10; Ezek. 39:7; Hos. 11:9; and Hab. 3:3.

¹⁸ Another interpretation of unclean lips is that the writer is thinking already of the prophetic call and has the prospective prophet seeing his mouth as unfit for the divine message (cf. Ex. 6:12, 30). Even if this were the correct understanding, it seems that a real offense of behavior as opposed to a ritual offense was what disqualified Isaiah in his own mind. However, I do not believe this is a correct interpretation because Isaiah saw himself destroyed because of the condition and not merely unable to bear a message.

It is this understanding that shapes the conflict with the gods that runs throughout the book and comes to its most intense expression in chapters 40-48. The problem with the gods is that they are not holy. They are not truly other than the creation; they are simply the psycho-socio-physical forces of the cosmos wearing humanly constructed masks. Is half of a log holy? Is a gold-plated piece of wood that has to be nailed down to keep it from toppling over holy? Is a god that has to be carried by its worshipers holy? Of course not! How can something that is thoroughly continuous with the earth be other than the earth?

Many interpreters accuse Isaiah of creating a straw man at this point. They argue that he has engaged in reductionism of the worst sort, refusing to admit that no pagan ever thought his or her god was restricted to an idol. In pagan thought, the idol partook of the holiness of the being who was spiritually continuous with the idol but yet transcended it. The accusers say that Isaiah understood this quite well but conveniently chose to overlook it because it was much easier to attack the practice of idolatry.¹⁹ Isaiah, however, is not disregarding that issue at all, as is clear from his case against the Babylonian gods in 40-48. He challenges their worshipers to produce evidence that any of the gods had ever explained “the former things” or, failing that, “the latter things.” That is, could the gods explain how the world began or how it would develop in the future? Of course they could not because they are a part of the world’s cycles, and, just as the thunderstorm does not know how it arose or where it will go, neither do the gods. A further question is even more pointed: which of the gods ever once specifically foretold the future? The answer is never. Of course there were plenty of cases of prediction, but like those of modern astrologers, they were so cloaked in ambiguity that they would always be “right” no matter what happened.²⁰

Yahweh, on the other hand, did make specific predictions in case after case, particularly those of the exile and the return. He can do that, the prophet says, because he “sits above the circle of the earth” (40:22). He is not a part of the stars, “the host of heaven,” but is the one who calls them forth by name (40:26). In short, Isaiah boldly asserts that Yahweh is not a part of earth’s cycles. He is not a personification of any of its forces. He is beyond it and directs it. Therefore, he alone can specifically predict the future. Furthermore, he alone can do “new things.” The gods can only do what they have always done. They cannot transcend the past because they are part of the past. Neither can they alter the future because they are whatever that future unfolds to be. This is a far more sophisticated argument than merely an attack on idol making. To be sure, the prophet includes idol making in his polemic because that is at the heart of the issue. To

¹⁹ Yehezkel Kaufmann claimed that Israel was so far from the pagan worldview of continuity between this world and deity that they really did not understand how paganism imagined itself to operate (*The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginning to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. M. Greenberg [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960]).

²⁰ On this point, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, trans. D. Stalker, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 90-91.

make your god into an idol is a fundamental expression of the conviction that the gods are continuous with the cosmos and fundamentally at one with it. The Bible's profound iconoclasm is aimed precisely at this point.

If Isaiah was struck in his call experience with Yahweh's absolute transcendence, both in essence and in character, there was something else that struck him in the experience with equal force. Although Yahweh is utterly other than the earth and all that is in it, it is his glory and his alone that fills the earth (6:3; cf. 40:5). Transcendence is often faulted by its detractors as making creation completely inaccessible to God and making God completely inaccessible to the creation. This was certainly the concern of the neo-Platonists, who sought to overcome what they saw as this inevitable outcome of the doctrine. Isaiah (and the rest of the Bible) is blithely unconcerned about philosophical conundrums. Although God is not the creation and has no essential continuity with the creation, he is everywhere present in his earth. He can intersect it at any and every point.²¹ Thus, its glory is his glory, and it has no other. This is the wonder of the biblical doctrine of revelation. Truth does not emerge from within the cosmos because the cosmos is not self-explanatory. To attempt to make it explain itself is to deify it and that is the way of endless horror, as both Romans 1 and modern film culture amply demonstrate.

Instead, truth and glory have broken in upon us from beyond ourselves. More than that, God has broken in with his truth and glory for the express purpose of sharing that truth and glory with us. Thus, we have the astonishing phrase *The Holy One of Israel*.²² He is the only Holy One in the universe, and yet he has chosen to become immanent in Israel. He has chosen to be owned, as it were, by this broken, fallible people. He is pleased to become localized in them.

These two aspects of transcendence and immanence (another bipolarity) find particular expression in the way the phrase, *The Holy One of Israel*, is used in the book. In the twelve occurrences of the phrase (or thirteen if we count the *Holy One of Jacob*) between 1:4 and 37:23, the primary emphasis is upon the absolute Lordship that extends from Yahweh's transcendence. Thus, it is a crime of the highest order, and the worst sort of folly, to despise his word (5:19, 24; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1), or to exalt oneself against him (1:4; 37:23). The emphasis on Yahweh's transcendence in connection with this phrase is not entirely negative in this first part of the book. The promise is that one day Israel will recognize that it makes sense to depend on the Holy One of Israel instead of their oppressors (10:20) or their idols (17:7). His transcendent power will be exercised on their behalf so that the lowly will rejoice in him (29:19), and they will proclaim to the world how holy (29:23) and how great (12:6) is the name of the Holy One of Israel who dwells among them.

²¹ Finally, it is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that explains how it is that God can be transcendent and immanent at the same time. The Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son, yet they are one with the Spirit.

The change in emphasis in the use of the phrase in the thirteen places where it occurs in chapters 40-66 is quite apparent and seems to me, at least, to be only explicable as a conscious development from the earlier chapters. Here, the most striking thing is the number of occurrences where the Holy One is said to be the Redeemer (41:14; 43:3, 14; 48:17; 54:5). The Holy One can intervene in history to deliver his own from every enemy, within and without. The reason he can intervene is that he is the sole Creator, the Maker of the world and of Israel (41:20; 45:11). He is also the LORD of history who can bring down Babylon (43:14) and give Egypt and Sheba to Cyrus in exchange for restoring Israel (43:3). All of this is in aid of one thing, that the glory of the Holy One could be shared with his people for the sake of the world (55:5; 60:9). In this regard, it is impossible to forget the climax of Jesus' teaching ministry on earth, when he said in the Last Supper discourse:

I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. . . . All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. . . . The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. . . . Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:4-5, 10, 22, 24)

Isaiah's (and John's) vision is that the only Holy One, the One who is beyond time and space, but who because he made time and space finds them completely permeable, has broken in upon us. His breaking in fills us with terror because we know ourselves to be rebels from his cause. He does not come to terrorize us; he speaks his unchanging word to us in order to restore us. What does that restoration entail? It is to take away from us the shadow world we have made for ourselves and to infuse us again with the incredible significance and reality that is his glory. He does it all so that we might be called "The City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (60:14).