

# The Manifestation of Yahweh and the Commission of Isaiah: Isaiah 6 Read against the Background of Isaiah 1

Willem A. M. Beuken

## I. Translation of Isaiah 6<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>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-hall.  
<sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance *about* him.  
Each had six wings:  
with two they covered their faces,  
and with two they covered their feet,  
and with two they flew.  
<sup>3</sup>And *one* called to *the other* and said:  
    "Holy—holy, holy is YHWH of hosts;  
    *filling all the earth is his glory.*"  
<sup>4</sup>The pivots of the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called,  
and the house filled with smoke.  
<sup>5</sup>And I said:  
    "Woe is me!  
    Truly, I am lost.  
    Truly, I am a man of unclean lips,  
    and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.  
    Yet my eyes have seen the King, YHWH of hosts!"  
<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me,  
holding in his hand a live coal  
that he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.  
<sup>7</sup>He touched my mouth with it,  
and said:  
    "Behold, this has touched your lips;  
    your *iniquity* has departed,  
    and your sin *is atoned.*"  
<sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying:  
    "Whom shall I send,  
    and who will go for us?"

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<sup>1</sup> The translation follows basically the NRSV; several modifications have been introduced.

And I said:

“Behold me!  
Send me.”

<sup>9</sup>Then he said:

“Go,  
and say to this people:  
‘Keep *hearing*, but do not comprehend;  
keep *seeing*, but do not understand.’

<sup>10</sup>Make the *heart* of this people dull,  
and stop their ears,  
and shut their eyes,  
so that they may not *see* with their eyes,  
and *hear* with their ears,  
and their *hearts* may not comprehend,  
and turn and be healed.”

<sup>11</sup>Then I said:

“How long, O my Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste without dwellers,  
and houses without population,  
*and the field lies waste and desolate,*  
<sup>12</sup>until YHWH *removes* the population far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.  
<sup>13</sup>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.  
Holy seed is its stump.”

## II. Introduction

The disproportionate theological attention paid to the hardening command in Isaiah 6:9-10 has often resulted in reduced interest in the coherence of the commission part of the chapter (6:8-13) with the vision part (6:1-7) and a lack of interest in the placement of chapter 6 in the founding collection of prophecies of the book (chs. 1-12). This is unfortunate because, on the one hand, the commission of the prophet presupposes some sort of encounter between YHWH and the prophet. On the other hand, it is clear that the people's unwillingness and incapacity to hear, to see, and to convert cannot be understood without the preceding series of accusations in chapters 1-5. Moreover, YHWH's assurance for Isaiah and his followers (8:11-15) and Isaiah's policy declaration vis-à-vis his rejection by Israel (8:16-18) are, if not necessary, at least in keeping with the purport of the perplexing command in 6:8-10 to indurate the people.

The limited scope of this article makes it impossible to present a complete discussion of the compositional place and function of chapter 6 in the context of chapters 1-12. For this reason, this article will limit itself to taking a fresh look at the chapter from the perspective of its compositional unity (sections III-

IV) and its compositional relationship to the introductory chapter, chapter 1 (sections V).

### III. Vision and Commission: One Manifestation of YHWH

By noting the semantic correspondences between the two parts of chapter 6, the vision in verses 1-7 and the commission in verses 8-13, in connection with the pattern of the acting persons, we obtain an insight in their indissoluble coherence. This coherence highlights the consistency of YHWH's action with regard to Israel. It shows, moreover, that the prophet's personal experience of God and his demeanor among the people form a coherent whole.

First, the two parts of chapter 6 are tuned to each other by their respective headings: "I saw the Lord sitting" in verse 1 and "I heard the voice of the Lord saying" in verse 8.<sup>2</sup> These two sensory perceptions open a real communication between the divine realm and Isaiah that results in the atonement of his iniquity (6:7) and in his being commissioned as a prophet (6:8-9). In this respect, Isaiah forms the counterpart of the people who are destined "to hear and to see" in a way that precludes their conversion and their being healed (6:10).

The discrepancy between the prophet's and the people's seeing and hearing has important exegetical implications. Isaiah's seeing and hearing are two distinct events, the former being a perilous introduction to the latter. He calls himself "a lost man," not because he has heard the *trishagion* of the seraphs (6:3) but because he has seen YHWH (6:5). Only after the vision of YHWH has resulted in the purification of his lips (6:5-7) is he able to hear YHWH (6:8). It can rightly be asked: Why this emphasis on the lips?<sup>3</sup> The main reason seems to be that the uncleanness of the lips prevents the prophet from speaking in YHWH's presence. He feels obliged to join the seraphs in their proclamation of YHWH's holiness. However, his agreement with their exclamation can only follow after his purification. Significantly, his agreement takes the form of his positive response to YHWH's call (6:8): "Here I am; send me!"

The thwarted seeing and hearing of the people, on the contrary, forms one perception in which the "not hearing" dominates the "not seeing." This comes to the fore in two literary patterns: first, the sequence to hear—to see in verse

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<sup>2</sup> It remains an open question whether the single term יְהוָה means "my Lord" or simply "the Lord." The former interpretation is defended on the ground that in this chapter the title expresses both YHWH's exaltedness and Isaiah's special relationship to him (cf. Martin Rösel, *Adonaj-uarum Gott 'Herr' genannt wird*, FAT 29 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 91-93). Nowhere in the preceding text of chs. 1-5, however, has this special relationship, whether or not in connection with the same single title "Lord" (3:17, 18; 4:4), been an issue. It seems more appropriate to accept the meaning "my Lord" not for 6:1 and 6:8 but only for 6:11. Here, it is used in the vocative and after the commissioning of the prophet.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, "'Holy, Holy, Holy': Isaiah's Vision of God," in *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003), 128-29.

9; and, second, the concentric structure of heart-ears-eyes-eyes-ears-heart in verse 10. Moreover, the order that the prophet is given does not involve telling the people that he has seen YHWH; he should only transmit the words that YHWH has spoken with regard to the people.

Second, the two parts of chapter 6 are also enclosed by a semantic word pair: “death” (6:1) and “seed” (6:13). In the Hebrew and Semitic worldview, human transitoriness is compensated, to a certain degree, by the life force of the progeny. In connection with Isaiah 6, the following text is particularly illustrative, the more so because it links “seed” to “life” as opposed to “death” and “the desolation of the land” (terms also found in Isa. 6:11): “Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, and that the land may not be desolate” (Gen. 47:19).<sup>4</sup>

In Isaiah 6, the same semantic constellation applies to the contrast between the earthly king Uzziah who dies (6:1) and “the King, YHWH of hosts” (6:5), whose majesty defies decay. The contrast is not elaborated but might be hinted at by the unusual wording עֲזִיָּהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ (instead of the common עֲזִיָּהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ; cf. 2 Chron 26:18, 21), which corresponds to צְבֹאֵת הַמֶּלֶךְ.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the people of the earthly king are destined to ruin (6:11-12), the heavenly king, who governs the world by his holiness (6:3), has the ability to ensure the emergence of a holy seed that will live in harmony with him (6:13).

Next, the proclamation of the seraphs (6:3) and the woe cry of the prophet (6:5) deserve closer examination. First of all, the seraphs and the prophet do not praise YHWH in the second person because God does not need their homage (6:3, 5). While the seraphs combine the title “YHWH of hosts” with the ascription of holiness to God, the prophet combines this title with God’s kingship, no doubt in contrast to the king who had just died (6:1).<sup>6</sup> The seraphs point to the consequences of his glory for the earth; the prophet is concerned about how his reign will effect the uncleanness of himself and the people. Second, it is remarkable that the prophet, rather than the seraphs, calls YHWH “King.” In fact, the compound title “the King, YHWH of hosts” is unique in the Hebrew Bible.

Obviously, the proclamation of the seraphs (6:3) and the woe cry of the prophet (6:5) are complementary. By his exclamation in response to the vision, Isaiah presents himself as a true interpreter of it, just as the seraphs are in their quality of heavenly servants. In his exclamation, he gives evidence of a wise

<sup>4</sup> The fact that “seed” refers here to sowing-seed does not detract from the evidential value of the semantic field (cf. Lev. 20:2.4; Deut. 30:19).

<sup>5</sup> Moberly, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” 124-25.

<sup>6</sup> One would expect here the title “the Lord, YHWH of hosts” (יְהוָה צְבֹאֵת), which is unique for First Isaiah (1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33; 19:4). Its absence may have redaction-historical reasons, but on the level of the final text form it corroborates the complementarity of the two statements.

comprehension (as opposed to the people in 6:9-10) of the glaring contrast between YHWH's majesty and the uncleanness of himself and the people. In a certain sense, his exclamation is cry for help. Consequently, in reply to this confession, one of the seraphs arranges for his purification.

Finally, the locations that play a role in the vision and commission sections also call for our attention. In the vision (6:1-7), two places are mentioned: the temple (6:1-4) and the earth (6:3). They are somehow opposed to each other. While the throne room is too small to encompass YHWH's presence—the mere hem of YHWH's robe fills the hall (6:1), and the smoke, the accompanying phenomenon of his appearance, fills the edifice (6:4)—it is the whole earth that his glory is able to fill (6:3). By the way, this clause in the proclamation of the seraphs should not be interpreted as bearing on the testimony of the earth. Rather, it announces that YHWH's sovereignty, which manifests itself as holiness, extends over all the earth.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, in the vision part (6:1-7) there is no mention of "the land" that plays such an important role in the commission part (6:8-13). To the extent that YHWH resides in the temple, the land is comprised in it, but to the extent that the land is inhabited by "a people of unclean lips" (6:5), it is nonexistent because "the field / the land" will not survive (cf. 6:11-12). The omission of the land is ominous. Just two places seem to have a right to exist: the temple where YHWH's holiness manifests itself to the applause of the seraphs and the earth where his glory reigns.

This proclamation of YHWH's dominion over the whole earth is important for the unity of the chapter. It designates in advance the desolation of the land, which follows from the obduracy of the people (6:11-13), as inconsistent with God's universal rule. From this angle, the "emptiness of the land" cannot endure forever (6:12-13). Some day this territory, too, should be filled with the glory of YHWH, i.e., come under his authority. A reversal of the judgment is necessary. Therefore, the question of the prophet: "How long, O YHWH?" (6:11) and the announcement that some day, "holy seed" will sprout, are not contrary to the judgement (6:13b). These elements conform with YHWH's reign over the world. Whether or not verses 11-13, or parts of them, have been added to the original version of chapter 6, their claim is in no way a strange element that conflicts with the whole.

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<sup>7</sup> Moberly, "Holy, Holy, Holy," 126. The syntactical sequence of the statement "the fulness of the earth is his glory" is predicate-subject, as is the case in the preceding line, "Holy—holy, holy is YHWH" (cf. Otto Kaiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jesaja, Kapitel 1-12*,<sup>3</sup> ATD 17 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981], 128-29; idem, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary*,<sup>2</sup> OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983], 126-27; Hubert Irsigler, "Gott als König in Berufung und Verkündigung Jesajas," in *Ein Gott, eine Offenbarung: Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese, Theologie und Spiritualität, Festschrift für Nother Füglistner zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Friedrich Vincent Reiterer [Würzburg: Echter, 1991], 134; Jörg Barthel, *Prophetenwort und Geschichte: Die Jesajaüberlieferung in Jes 6-8 und 28-31*, FAT 19 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997], 67 and 99-101).

## IV. The Prophet: A Failed Messenger?

The space occupied by the prophet undergoes a change of status and location. In the beginning, he dwells<sup>8</sup> in the midst of an unclean people (6:5), but his purification sets him apart from that environment. The seraph who flies over to him and cleanses him also transforms his domain: “iniquity has departed” from him (6:6-7), and, from this new situation, he has “to go to this people” (6:8-9). The new accommodation of the prophet is not a splendid isolation; rather, it is the beginning of something bewildering with regard to the people and their land.

First, the twofold elaboration of the woe cry implies that a twofold reaction to the *trishagion* of the seraphs should follow: one by the prophet and one by the people. The cleansing of Isaiah represents the heavenly domain’s response to the first part of his woe cry: “I am a man of unclean lips.” The second part of that cry: “I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” awaits another initiative from the heavenly domain (6:5). Therefore, Isaiah’s vision of YHWH develops into a divine commission to the people. This is possible through the atoning power of the altar that embodies the space between the sacred and the profane (cf. Ex. 30:10).<sup>9</sup> The purification of the prophet is intended to be the act that connects these two spheres.

Does the (com)mission of the prophet indeed contribute to the cleansing of the people? In the first instance it does not. Isaiah is commanded to work on his audience in such a way that they will not find “healing” (6:10: רפא). The term *healing* is used for procedures to expel uncleanness (cf. Lev. 13-14; Isa. 30:22-26; 2 Chron. 30:17-20). In the wake of the hardening of the people, not healing but devastation and abandonment to a degree that defies all understanding will follow (6:11-12). According to the covenant between YHWH and his people, a tenth of Israel’s welfare is to be offered to the temple and the poor (Num. 18:25-32; Deut. 14:22-29; 26:12-15). However, the judgment announced by Isaiah will turn things upside down: Even the mere tenth part of the land that escapes destruction will again fall prey to burning down (6:13).

The term בער means both “to burn” and “to pillage.” Under the conditions of a military campaign, of course, these two hostile actions often coincide. The meaning “to burn” is contrasted with the live coal that has been employed to purify the prophet.<sup>10</sup> That coal, which the seraph could only take up with tongs, did not scorch the prophet’s lips but enabled him to express his readiness to serve YHWH (6:7-8). In sharp contrast, the disobedient nation will see its land burned down by YHWH’s judgment (6:11-13a).

<sup>8</sup> The same verb, ישב, is used for YHWH’s “sitting” on the throne in 6:1 and for Isaiah’s “dwelling” under his people in 6:5.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alfred Marx, “Sacrifice pour les péchés ou rite de passage? Quelques réflexions sur la fonction de HATTA’T,” *RB* 96 (1989): 27-48, esp. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Moberly, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” 130-32.

Second, it is only when by human standards all life in the land has ceased to exist that the unclean people will be succeeded by their opposite: “Holy seed is its stump” (6:13b)<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, some scholars attribute the lower status of a gloss to the very last sentence of the chapter (6:13) or do not fully perceive that a seed that is really holy endorses the proclamation of the seraphs: “Holy—holy, holy is YHWH of hosts; filling all the earth is his glory” (6:3). This exclamation may seem irreconcilable with the bewildering command to harden the people down to annihilation, but, in fact, this problem is only indissoluble if we do not take the very last sentence of the chapter absolutely seriously: “Holy seed is its stump” (6:13b).

We should keep in mind that the vision does not expect either the prophet or the people to join the proclamation of the heavenly beings. They certainly ought to properly greet this announcement with approval, but they cannot join it. The seraphs belong to the realm of the divine. The prophet is not lifted up to this domain nor is he ushered into the assembly of the seraphs. Instead, one of the seraphs comes over from there in order to cleanse him. With regard to the unclean people, the gap between them and the place where the seraphs stand at YHWH’s service is even deeper: The prophet is sent to bridge the distance. Consequently, the assent of the prophet and the people will not occur by means of their joining the proclamation the seraphs.

The *trishagion* has to find an equivalent expression on the part of the prophet and the people *in the place where they dwell*, i.e., the land. The prophet complies with the purport of the seraphs’ song by his readiness to be sent (6:8). The people do not show any readiness to comply with the content of the proclamation although they could and should do so by accepting the message of the prophet sent on YHWH’s authority (6:10). It is only after the long learning process of a devastation to the second power (6:11-13a) that “a holy seed” can make up for the earlier people’s failing consent with the proclamation of YHWH’s holiness (6:13b). The chapter leaves open the way in which this response takes shape. Will the new offspring finally do what their ancestors have failed to do? Will they finally hear and see, understand and repent? Or can it only happen by means of a special intervention of YHWH himself—one that we simply cannot imagine? It is clear that chapter 6 asks for a continuation.

## V. The Prophet: A New Commencement

The preceding exegesis of chapter 6, taken by itself, needs to be completed by an investigation of how chapters 1-5 prepare the road to the chapter under consideration. This is not a matter of a noncommittal introduction that could be skipped without practical effect. On the contrary, chapters 1-5 provide the readers with information that is absolutely necessary for the understanding of chapter 6.

One way of entering upon this subject matter would be to study the thematic lines that tie the various passages of chapters 1-6 together: YHWH’s care for

<sup>11</sup> For “unclean” (טמא) and “holy” (קדוש) as an antithetic word pair, see Lev. 10:10; 11:44; 20:3; 22:4, 6; Isa. 35:8; 52:1; Ezek. 22:26; 43:7-8; 44:23; Ps. 79:1; 2 Chron 36:14.

Israel and Israel's rejection of YHWH, idolatry, the lack of social justice, and so forth. Another way would be to compare the various literary genres employed in these chapters. For example, we have noticed before that the very reason why Isaiah is to harden the people is not indicated within the boundaries of chapter 6. The accusations that form the ground for this bewildering command could be studied from the perspective of how they extend over chapters 1-5 and culminate in the conclusion of 5:34-35.

Initially, we find that a more accurate and fruitful investigation takes stock of semantic concentrations in a book: which passages share a considerable number of important terms? This method brings to light the realization that thematic affinity does not always match semantic affinity.

One could, for example, choose to compare the thematic connections between Isaiah's vision of YHWH's house on the mountain (2:1-5) with his vision of YHWH's appearance in the temple (ch. 6), but a semantic analysis yields—apart from the word *house* (בֵּית) for the temple (2:2-3; 6:4)—just one parallel: In the same way as the mountain is “raised above the hills” (2:2) is YHWH's throne “high and lofty” (נֹשָׂא). Other semantic analogies fail.

Sometimes, however, a semantic inquiry reveals unexpected connections between certain passages. This happens to be the case especially with chapters 1 and 6. The list of important words or cognate terms that the former chapter shares with the latter demonstrates strong affinity between them (cf. the appendix). In addition to these semantic analogies, it catches our eye that the house of YHWH plays an important role in chapter 1 as well as in chapter 6. In chapter 6, it is represented by the terms *temple-hall* (6:1: הֵיכָל) and *house* (6:4: בֵּית); in chapter 1 by *my courts* (1:12: הֶצֵּרִי).

This raises the question of what chapter 1 contributes to the understanding of chapter 6. I will broach this subject matter in the concluding section of this article.

Second, the data above suggest that verses 10-20 of chapter 1 anticipate Isaiah's vision of YHWH and his subsequent reaction by means of a counterpart: the attitude of Jerusalem's inhabitants when they make their appearance before YHWH in the temple (1:12). The fact that they are addressed as “rulers of Sodom / people of Gomorrah” in verse 10 tags their behavior from the very start as utterly godless. They serve as the antitype of the righteous who enter into YHWH's presence (cf. Pss. 15; 24). This allows for a comparison with Isaiah's conduct in the presence of YHWH. On the verbal level, the differences between 1:12 and 6:1 are remarkable:



Isaiah 1:12

When you come to appear before me  
who asked this from your hand?

כִּי תֵבֹאוּ לִרְאוֹת פָּנַי<sup>12</sup>  
מִי־בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם

Isaiah 6:1

In the year that King Uzziah died  
I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty.

בְּשָׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֻזִּיָּהוּ  
וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנֹשָׂא

While the first text blames the audience for taking the initiative of entering into YHWH's presence and denies their supposition that YHWH has asked for this step, the second text describes Isaiah's vision of YHWH as something that simply overcomes him. The surprise character of this event is apparent from the fact that any introductory formula, such as are found in the visions of other prophets, is lacking (cf. Jer. 1:11: "The word of YHWH came to me, saying: 'Jeremiah, what do you see?'; Ezek. 1:1: "as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God"; Amos 7:1, 4, 7; 8:1: "This is what the Lord YHWH showed me"). This agrees with the fact that the vision is neither granted to the prophet as a recompense for sacrifices (cf. 1:11-12), nor at the occasion of a religious holiday (1:13-14), nor in response to prayer (1:15). The one slight hint of an occasion is the mention of King Uzziah's death (6:1), which may serve, as we have seen, as a reminder that earthly kings die whereas the King whom Isaiah is allowed to contemplate rules forever. In other words, the initiative of Isaiah's vision lies wholly with YHWH.

Third, we infer from Isaiah's deferential reception of the vision that he has not prepared himself for a vision from God by fulfilling a prerequisite ritual. His first reaction is not a prayer addressed to YHWH. On the contrary, his first reaction is one of awe and fear because of his unworthiness and the distance between YHWH and himself. Now that his uncleanness has come face to face with God's holiness, his very existence is imperiled (6:5). The prophet does not point to specific facts that make him deserve the qualification "unclean." The fact that he applies this precise characteristic both to himself and to the people demonstrates that he envisions himself as a member of sinful Israel. Before YHWH there is no distinction between more and less unworthy. In this regard, he differs from the rulers and the judges in Jerusalem. Although YHWH has designed Jerusalem as a city in which only righteousness should rule, they have transformed it into a city of two social classes: those who profit from the distribution of justice and those who succumb to it (1:15-17, 21-23).

<sup>12</sup> The absence of a preposition before the noun *my face* leads one to suspect that the original reading ran: "to see my face" (לִרְאוֹת qal). The Massorettes have chosen for the reading "to appear before my face" (לִרְאוֹת niphal), because they avoided using, certainly in this context, the idiom of "seeing YHWH" (Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancient Testament*, vol. 2, *Isaïe, Jérémie, Lamentations*, OBO 50/2 [Fribourg / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986], 3-5).

Fourth, the comparison with the godless cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in 1:10 embeds the introductory chapter with the question of whether here and now YHWH will also “send someone out of the overthrow,” as he did with Lot (Gen. 19:29). Certainly, the judgment on Israel cannot be underestimated. The people and the land of Judah have been struck by an equally terrible ordeal as the cities of the Plain. This is clear from the graphic description in 1:7:

Your country is desolate,  
your cities are burnt with fire . . .  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.<sup>13</sup>

According to Isaiah 1:16-17, however, the way to repentance remains still open:

Wash yourselves;  
make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil doings from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed  
defend the orphan  
and plead the widow.

The postexilic redaction of the book of Isaiah has elaborated the analogy of a rescue out of the overthrow of the godless cities in the concluding verse of 1:4-9:

If YHWH of hosts had not left us a few survivors,  
we would have been like Sodom,  
and become like Gomorrah (1:9).

This concluding verse calls for further elaboration. To begin with, Lot and his family did not belong to the sinful inhabitants of Sodom, as is apparent from the motivating clause of the angels’ command in Genesis 19:15: “lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.” Next, according to Isaiah 1:9, Zion is to be rescued from the downfall, but not because she would have no share in the iniquity of all Israel. This is evident from 1:21: “How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice” (1:21). Instead, 1:9 explains why Zion’s fate diverges from that of Sodom. Zion has a totally different past: a past of solidarity with YHWH. The whole chapter deals with the harrowing contrast between how YHWH has produced Israel and into what they have developed:

I reared children and brought them up,  
but they have rebelled against me.  
The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master’s crib;  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand (1:2-3).<sup>14</sup>

For this element, there is no analogy in the Sodom story. YHWH has had no special relation with the cities of the Plain. Jerusalem and Sodom concur insofar as they have to meet YHWH’s unrelenting demand of righteousness. They differ in that YHWH has elected Jerusalem. This fundamental contrast

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gen. 19:24-29.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 1:21-23.

accounts for the fact that YHWH is going to intervene in Zion. He is determined to restore the city to its original purity:

I will turn my hand against you;  
I will smelt away your dross as with lye  
and remove all your alloy.  
And I will restore your judges as at the first,  
and your counselors as at the beginning (1:25-26).

Fifth, the newness of YHWH's *démarche* in Zion's case becomes clearer if we compare it with the purpose of his visit to Sodom and Gomorrah as he revealed to Abraham before their punishment: "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very great their sin! I must go down and see whether, according to the outcry about it that has come to me, they have made a full end; and if not, I will take heed" (Gen. 18:20-21).<sup>15</sup> This visit looks like an inspection tour by judges who want to verify the truth of a complaint. Moreover, YHWH leaves the final responsibility for a "full end" with the inhabitants of the perverted cities. He does not announce that he will bring about a change in their unrighteous behavior.

Finally, if we take into account that the comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah in 1:10 is accompanied by a strong point of divergence, i.e., the announcement that YHWH will intervene in order to restore Zion's state of righteousness, then we must raise the question as to where in the book of Isaiah this intervention takes place. It is possible, of course, that this happens in more than one passage.

I postulate that the first major intervention is recorded in chapter 6. The obdurate disobedience of the people of Jerusalem resembles the utter perversion of Sodom's inhabitants. Their appearance before YHWH in the temple has been fully rejected (1:12-15). Nevertheless, in chapter 6, YHWH initiates a new encounter with his people in the temple, be it for the moment only with Isaiah. The prophet himself provides absolutely no basis for such a manifestation, but his recognition of the uncleanness of himself and the people forms the required response that has so poignantly been missed on the side of the people. In this way, the restoration of Zion, announced in chapter 1, starts with YHWH's manifestation of himself to Isaiah in the temple.

## VI. Conclusion

It remains an arduous task to grasp the two perspectives of Isaiah 6: on the one hand, the dominion of YHWH's holiness over the whole earth, which does not allow for any territory to be excluded (6:3); on the other hand, the irreversible judgment on Israel's stubbornness, which does not allow for a compromise (6:9-13). Disregard for either aspect leads to a distortion of the whole chapter. The multiple semantic connections between chapters 1 and 6 help to

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Willem A. M. Beuken, "Gen. 18:21: An Overview of the Problems of Interpretation and an Attempt at a Translation," *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 32 (1991-1992): 141-49.

draw the full background against which we must interpret the indissoluble unity of YHWH's self-manifestation and his commission of Isaiah.

Time constraints will not allow us to demonstrate in detail how this works in the active reading process.<sup>16</sup> From our discussion so far, however, it should be clear that the vision report in Isaiah 6 is not an introduction to the judgment alone. It also involves the cleansing of the prophet, which requires as a parallel, if not the return and healing of Israel, at least a new beginning for it. According to chapter 6 itself and in the perspective of chapter 1, YHWH neither can, nor will, resign himself to the obduration of "this people" (6:10), formerly "my people" (1:3). The accusation in 1:4 that they are "an offspring [seed] of evildoers" may be true, but their hardening in 6:10 is the prelude to their transformation, as is evident from the tree simile in 6:13: "like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. Holy seed is its stump."

In this connection, it is important to note that the parallel use of oak imagery in chapters 1 and 6 is not coincidental. An in-depth analysis of 6:13 has clarified two important exegetical matters:

- (1) "V. 13b is an original unity, a complete image, whose function is to give a positive corrective to vv. 12-13a's negative statement."<sup>17</sup>
- (2) "The chosen image of oak and terebinth connotes in the culture of the time 'the holy tree,' and awakens among the hearers a series of associations that support Isaiah's reasoning that destruction will not impede new life."<sup>18</sup>

Once we perceive the cultic background of the oak imagery (Isa. 44:14), it follows that the end of chapter 6 bears on the end of chapter 1: "For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water" (6:29-30). From a diachronic point of view, these verses are more likely an anticipatory application of 6:13 than that the direction of dependence would be the reverse.<sup>19</sup> The redactors of the book of Isaiah have taken up the baffling end of Isaiah's perplexing commission story in more clear terms as a warning for contemporaneous devotees of deviant cults.<sup>20</sup> The wor-

<sup>16</sup> For example, with regard to sickness and healing in 1:5-6 and 6:10; see: Zoltán Kustár, *Durch seine Wunden und Heilung im Jesajabuch*, BWANT 154 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 54-65.

<sup>17</sup> Kirsten Nielsen, *There Is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah*, JSOT Supplement Series 65 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>18</sup> Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 158.

<sup>19</sup> It remains an interesting question why the final redaction of the book of Isaiah has added the garden motif in 1:29-30 or why they have made no effort to let the garden motif of 1:29-30 return in 6:13. Otherwise, the problems with regard to the explanation of v. 31 are left outside of account here. For these issues see: Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 204-10.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, "Isaiah 6:13 and 1:29-31," in *Studies in the Book of Isaiah: Festschrift Willem A. M. Beuken*, eds. Jacques van Ruiten and Marc Vervenne, BETL 132 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 122-25.

shippers of oaks pay no attention to YHWH's words. Instead, they ally themselves with their idols in order to obtain a share of the sacred vitality of these would-be gods. As a result, they will meet the fate that waits all trees. Nevertheless, YHWH's holiness is able to make oaks produce holy seed, even after the judgment has reduced them to stumps (6:13).

This long awaited revival, however, commences with the faithful reaction of the prophet Isaiah to the manifestation of YHWH. Here lies the challenge to all of us when we endeavor to preach on this chapter. That cannot just be a matter of neutrally transferring a spectre of doom with a faint glow of new life while we ourselves remain out of range. It is, first of all, a respectful acceptance of the proclamation of YHWH's holiness as dominating the whole world—not by joining the *trishagion* of the seraphs but by joining the prophet in his confession of impurity. In this way, we, too, throw in our lot with that of the people accused and condemned. At the same time, we must proclaim that in the end the stubbornness of the chosen people cannot but taste defeat against YHWH's holiness. The Lord will create a new seed that will live in obedience to him. This expectation does not stem from psychic optimism. It is based on YHWH's holiness, i.e., his power to triumph over all resistance.

Appendix: List of Words that Isaiah 6 Shares with Isaiah 1  
(in alphabetic order; cognate terms in *italics*)

אדמה	field	1:7; 6:11
אלה	terebinth	1:30; 6:13
אדני/האדון	(my) . Lord	1:24; 6:1, 8, 11
ארץ	(land / earth	1:2, 7, 19; 6:3, 12
בין	to comprehend	1:3; 6:9, 10
בער	to burn	1:7, 31; 6:13
ידע	seed	1:4; 6:3
חטאת	sin	1:4, 18, 28; 6:7
טמא	unclean	1:15-18; 6:5
ידע	to understand	1:3; 6:9
יהוה צבאות	YHWH of hosts	1:9, 24; 6:3, 5
כבוד	heavy /glory	1:4; 6:3
כפר	to atone	1:18; 6:7
לבב	heart	1:5; 6:10
סור	to depart	1:5, 16, 25; 6:7
עון	iniquity	1:4; 6:7
עיר	city	1:7, 8, 26; 6:11
עם	people	1:3, 4, 10; 6:5, 9, 10
קדוש	holy	1:4; 6:3, 13
ראה	to see	1:12; 6:1, 5, 9, 10
רפא	to heal	1:5-6; 6:10
שוב	to turn	1:25-27; 6:10, 13
שמומה	desolation	1:7; 6:11
שמע	to hear	1:2, 10, 15, 19; 6:8-10

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