

Theological Themes in Isaiah 6: A Positive Call to Judgment

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Introduction

Isaiah 6 has generally been viewed as the call of Isaiah the prophet. However, this chapter may well refer to another theological theme found throughout the book of Isaiah: the judgment scene. Scholars have noted the unusual location of Isaiah 6; why would the content of Isaiah 6 be included at this particular juncture in the book? What are the reasons for placing it in chapter 6 and not at the beginning of the book (in chapter 1) or after chapter 3, for example, where it would make more sense chronologically? Scholars observe that Isaiah 6 is placed in this location for a specific purpose. It is important to note that Isaiah does not always write chronologically; in fact, more often than not, he is writing instead for a theological purpose.¹ While the events in Isaiah 6 may have taken place before any of the other chapters in Isaiah, this chapter is strategically placed for theological reasons. One reason is that the primary message of the first five chapters is judgment or a covenant lawsuit; chapter 1 begins with a covenant lawsuit approach and the subsequent chapters follow the same theme. Isaiah 6 is a conclusion to the apex of the judgment being highlighted. Isaiah 6 also serves as an introduction to chapters 7 to 12, preparing the reader for the judgment theme in chapters 7-8 (with king Ahaz), while the hope theme in the last verse of Isaiah 6 reappears in chapters 7-8, 9, and 11 (under the Messianic theme). Thus, Isaiah 6 acts as the thematic and structural hinge: the conclusion for chapters 1-5 and the introduction for chapters 7-12. Hence, Isaiah 6 is essential for the theological purpose of all these chapters, keeping them all together through the theme of judgment.

Isaiah 6 and its Theological Theme

In Isaiah 6, Isaiah experiences a theophany, as other prophets had. Isaiah either receives a vision of the heavenly temple and sees what is happening in that temple, or the prophet is in the earthly temple in Jerusalem when he receives the vision, and he sees what is happening in the earthly temple. There is good evidence to conclude that the former is the case; verse 1 says the “Lord [was]

¹ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, 174.; Leon J. Liebreich, “The Compilation of the Book of Isaiah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 46, no. 3 (January 1956): 159–277; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, vol. 15A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007), 183.

seated on a high and lofty throne and His robe filled the temple" (v. 1). Furthermore, "His presence fills all the earth" (v. 3), showing something beyond the reality of this earth. Isaiah 6 addresses the theological theme of judgment for several reasons and in several ways. I will demonstrate these reasons below by analyzing keywords and concepts.

First, in verse 1, the Lord is seated on his throne, as opposed to the earthly king Uzziah, who has died. That the Lord is represented as a living king, and that He is seated, means that He is in a position for ruling or judging (cf. Psa 11:4). The term "to seat" in Hebrew also means "to dwell," suggesting that God not only sits on his throne but dwells there, administrating his kingdom and living there as well. Thus, we could draw a parallel to the White House, where the president of the United States does his administrating work while also living there with his household. The Lord's seat is situated at the throne. However, this throne is only significant because of who sits on the throne. This throne belongs to God, making the throne important through His presence (Isa 6:3; cf. 1 Kg 22:19; 1 Chr 29:23; Isa 66:1; Eze 43:7). There is nothing vital or symbolic about the throne itself except that God sits on it. His throne is an everlasting throne (cf. Lam 5:19). This is why the king of Babylon wanted the throne—to portray himself as God (see Isa 14:13).²

Second, the Lord is portrayed as a high priest as well as king. The final sentence in Isa 6:1 characterizes the majesty of God: "the hem of his robe fills the temple." A small part of God's robe, the seams, fills the temple. This description of His robe is not related to kings' apparel. In the Hebrew Bible, the term "seams" refers to the high priest's robe (Exod 28:33-35; 39:24-26). Therefore, God here is described as both a king and a high priestly being. Hence this combination of kingly and high priestly roles suggests the function of someone who is able to be a judge, both politically and spiritually. This is confirmed by the use of the word "temple" (*hēkol*), which can refer either to a palace (cf. 1 Kgs 21:1; 2 Kgs 20:18; 39:7; Psa 45:16; Dan 1:4) or to a temple (1 Sam 1:9; 3:3; 2 Kgs 18:16; 24:13; Jer 7:4; Eze 8:16; etc.). Thus, as with the hem of the robe, the temple is both a place for a king and a place for the high priest to minister. In Isaiah 6:1, then, God is acting as both the king and the high priest, and both of these offices hold the power of judgment. In Isa 6:2-3, the seraphs attend and worship God, demonstrating the importance of who He is and of His ministry as king and priest: "Holy, holy, holy! The LORD of the army/host."³ Similarly, the description in Isaiah 6 is paralleled by Dan 7:9-10, where the Ancient of Days is clothed in a "robe," seated on a throne flaming with "fire," with "heavenly beings" ministering to Him.⁴

² I do not have room here to develop the intertextual relationship between these two passages; however, very significant connections exist.

³ "The LORD of the army/host" is used as an epithet of God.

⁴ In Isaiah 6 "seraphim" means the "fiery ones" or "burning ones" whereas Dan 7 uses the word "fire." Both Isa 6 and Dan 7 use "robe" as a description of what God is wearing. Isa 6 refers to "seraphim" who minister to God and praise Him, while in Dan 7 a number is used to refer to the ones who minister to God: "thousands of thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him."

Both descriptions confirm the presence of God as king and high priest, sitting in judgment.

Third, the judgment theme continues in the altar and smoke imagery in Isaiah 6. Smoke is often seen in conjunction with theophany; for example, when God appears at Mount Sinai, there is smoke (Exod 19:18). Isaiah has already referred to the fact that God would meet on “Mount Zion by a cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night” (Isa 4:5), as when He led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Smoke surrounds God to cover and protect the priest and high priest when they go into His presence (cf. 2 Sam 22:9; Psa 18:8); it is a veiling mechanism (cf. Exod 13:21-22; 14:19-24). On the Day of Atonement when Aaron went into the Most Holy Place (MHP), he first took a censer with him, using coals of fire from the altar and sweet incense to make a cloud of incense⁵ that would cover the mercy seat, lest he die (Lev 16:12-13).⁶ In Isaiah 6:6, the seraph takes a coal from the altar; scholars debate whether this is the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense, which makes a significant difference for the judgment theme. One argument in favor of the altar of incense is that the angel is in the LORD’s presence, as in verse 2, and one of them comes to Isaiah from within the temple or from the seat of God (cf. Lk 1:11, 19). Perhaps the clearest argument for the altar of incense is that the temple is filled with “smoke” (Isa 6:4), as it would be during the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:12-13; cf. Rev 8:3). The altar of incense is placed just before the veil that separates the HP and the MHP, fulfilling two functions: one in the HP with the daily sacrifice (Exod 30:6; 40:5; Lev 16:18), and the other in the MHP on the Day of Atonement (Exod 30:7-10; Lev 16:18, cf. Num 16:46-48).⁷ The smoke that continues to fill the house of God also protects sinners like Isaiah, more particularly on the Day of Judgment. If Isaiah is perceived as a priest, in Isaiah 6 the prophet may be acting as a high priest who is intervening between God and the people Isaiah represents (cf. Lev 4).

There is also another motivation for Isaiah to exclaim in verse 5, “Woe is me; I am lost,” he may have said so primarily because he saw God, but there may be another reason: the imperfection of Isaiah and his realization of being a sinner while seeing God. The unholy cannot be found with the holy (a Levitical concept). Isaiah was aware of his own condition and that of his people. He also knew that when sin is found with people during the day of judgment, the result is

⁵ This “cloud of incense” is literal and the word “smoke” is not used; however, this “cloud” is understood to be a cloud of smoke from the incense (cf. Isa 30:27).

⁶ See Baruch A. Levine, JPS Torah Commentary Series, Leviticus, ed. Nahum M. Sarna, (The Jewish Publication Society: New York, 1989), 104. Note of interest: this “cloud” is seen as a theme throughout the Bible. While this cloud is found in Exodus regarding the exit from Egypt as well as in the temple, we find this concept also related to eschatology when Jesus will return with a cloud (Matt 26:64; Mk 13:26; Rev 1:7; 14:14-16). The Psalmist has already alluded to this eschatology of “cloud” in Psa 97:2. Ezekiel alludes to the “day of the Lord” with the “cloud” or literally the “day of cloud” (Eze 30:3).

⁷ Harold S. Camacho, “The Altar of Incense in Hebrew 9:3-4,” Andrews University Seminary Studies, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 5-12.

catastrophic; as a matter of fact, those people are cut off.⁸ If Isaiah 6 represents a judgment theme, Isaiah's reaction and fear of being cut off is valid, and this scenario resonates with the judgement day in the book of Leviticus. It is important to note that the idea of "cut off" is communicated using a different word in Isa 6:5 than the one used in Lev 23:29 regarding the Day of Atonement. However, the idea suggested by the word in Isa 6:5 prompts the reader to wonder if this scenario is potentially related to the judgment day in the book of Leviticus. In Lev 23:29 the Day of Atonement represents the cleansing of sins from those who have already been forgiven and are loyal to God (cf. Lev 16:29-31), but those who are disloyal and are not already forgiven are condemned (cf. Dan 8:14; Rev 21:7-8).⁹

We find forgiveness for Isaiah in verse (v. 7), which continues from the previous verse the idea of what happens to sin. Isaiah proclaimed in the previous chapters that Judah was self-sufficient. While Isaiah may have relied on God, Isaiah's nature is like any other human being who tends to rely upon themselves and sees no need of God. Thus, Isaiah, like the people of Judah, was in need of being purged. Isaiah's lips were touched with the coal, the lips being the part of the body recognized as the place of pollution (cf. Num 16:46-47). The coal (fire) is a means of purifying and judging, a continuation of the same theme earlier in the book (see Isa 1:25; 4:4). What is being taken away and purged? Verse 7 gives two components: "Your iniquity is taken away" and "your sin is atoned/covered for." Both terms "iniquity and sin"¹⁰ are used in relation to the sanctum and its sacrifices. The term "iniquity" describes Cain's punishment for killing his brother (Gen 4:13), and his outcry against God is also against the judgment he receives for his deeds. In contrast, Isaiah's iniquity is taken away, removed from the presence of God. "Sin" is a prominent term in the OT, often related to the temple offerings. "Your sin is atoned for" could refer to the purification offerings, which removed sins forgiven by God from the offerors, or offered purification from physical ritual impurities.¹¹ However, Isaiah 6 raises the possibility of atonement through cleansing the sanctuary due to moral purification of sins already forgiven. Chapter 6 overall thus reveals a judgment scene, and verse 7 indicates the removal of iniquity and sin from the sanctuary. There is no fear in the judgment since there is protection in the mercy of God. The subsequent chapters in Isaiah (chaps. 7-8) appear to also support the fact that there is a judgment of Ahaz and his kingdom.¹² Even the context of the

⁸ The term "lost" (dāmāh) in many versions can also be translated in Hebrew as "cut off" or "destroyed." This verb in Nif'al, although some scholars have questioned its stem, would definitely suggest being "cut off, destroyed, and ruined."

⁹ See Roy Gane, Leviticus, Numbers, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 2004), 406-8.

¹⁰ The terms "iniquity and sin" are removed from the offerors by purification offerings during the year (Lev 4:26; 5:6, 10) and followed by the purging from the sanctuary and camp on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:16, 21).

¹¹ See for more information Gane, Leviticus, Numbers, 277-84.

¹² Chapter 6 as the hinge between Isaiah 1-5 and 7-12, and between two periods of time, reinforces the idea of judgment being delivered to Ahaz as a realization.

immediate chapter also reveals a judgment scene; therefore, verse 7 would indicate the removal of iniquity and sin from the sanctuary. The blessed hope of this passage is that judgment is not something to be afraid of when we understand that God desires redemption for human beings, not destruction.

Finally, in Isa 6:9-13 Isaiah is sent with a message to the people. The message resembles one of the priests sounding the trumpet before the Day of Atonement, calling people to prepare for that special day (see Lev 23:23-32). Isaiah may have even understood this message to refer to the judgment, since he asked in verse 11, “How long, my Lord?,” similar to Daniel 8:13 and Revelation 6:10.

Conclusion

Isaiah 6 is more than a passage about Isaiah’s call; it reveals to us that God is doing the work of cleansing by removing sin from the lives of people. Isaiah can testify by his life how God made and changed him, and in turn, God calls us to testify to what He has done in our lives. The judgment demonstrates God’s faithfulness and justice. He is not content to leave anyone where they are in life. Since God is concerned about our redemption and restoration, he wants to change us in preparation for His imminent return. Will we allow God to cleanse us?

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