

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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**Introduction to the Volume**

*STR Editor* 115-116

**The Continuation of 'A New Exchange':  
Theological Interpretation of Scripture in  
Retrospect and Prospect**

*Grant D. Taylor* 117-136

**Replacement or Fulfillment? Re-applying  
Old Testament Designations of Israel to  
the Church**

*Robin Routledge* 137-154

**Undoing 'this people', becoming 'my  
servant': Purpose and Commission in  
*Isaiah 6***

*Caroline Batchelder* 155-178

**Time for a New Diet? Allusions to Genesis  
1-3 as Rhetorical Device in Leviticus 11**

*G. Geoffrey Harper* 179-195

**Overlooked Herder, and the Performative  
Nature of שיר השירים as Biblical Wisdom  
Literature**

*Calvin Scerveld* 197-222

Book Reviews 223-251

## **Southeastern Theological Review**

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## CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

- Introduction to the Volume..... 115  
*STR Editor*
- The Continuation of ‘A New Exchange’: Theological Interpretation of  
Scripture in Retrospect and Prospect ..... 117  
*Grant D. Taylor*
- Replacement or Fulfillment? Re-applying Old Testament Designations  
of Israel to the Church..... 137  
*Robin Routledge*
- Undoing ‘this people’, becoming ‘my servant’: Purpose and Commission  
in *Isaiah 6* ..... 155  
*Caroline Batchelder*
- Time for a New Diet? Allusions to Genesis 1–3 as Rhetorical Device  
in Leviticus 11\*..... 179  
*G. Geoffrey Harper*
- Overlooked Herder, and the Performative Nature of שיר השירים as  
Biblical Wisdom Literature..... 197  
*Calvin Seerveld*
- Book Reviews ..... 223

### BOOK REVIEWS

- Peter Enns. *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't  
Say about Human Origins* ..... 223  
*Gene C. Fant, Jr.*
- Sang-Il Lee. *Jesus and Gospel Traditions in Bilingual Context: A Study  
in the Interdirectionality of Language*..... 224  
*Chris Keith*
- B. Dwain Waldrep and Scott Billingsley. (eds) *Recovering The Margins  
of American Religious History: The Legacy of David Edwin Harrell Jr.*..... 226  
*Henry O. Robertson*
- Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles.  
*The Lion and the Lamb: New Testament Essentials from The Cradle, the Cross,  
and the Crown*..... 227  
*Ed Gravelly*
- J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. *Living God's Word: Discovering Our Place  
in the Great Story of Scripture* ..... 229  
*Matthew Y. Emerson*

Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott. <i>The Theology of Jonathan Edwards</i> .....	231
<i>Nathan A. Finn</i>	
Kelly M. Kopic and Bruce L. McCormack, eds. <i>Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction</i> .....	234
<i>Randall L. McKinion</i>	
Miles V. Van Pelt. <i>Biblical Hebrew: A Compact Guide</i> .....	236
<i>Humphrey H. Hardy II</i>	
Mark Dever. <i>The Church: The Gospel Made Visible</i> .....	238
<i>James Wells</i>	
Mark A. Noll. <i>Turning Points</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> Edition.....	240
<i>Stephen Brett Escher</i>	
Hugh J. McCann. <i>Creation and the Sovereignty of God</i> .....	242
<i>Allen Gebring</i>	
Marion Ann Taylor, editor. Agnes Choi, associate editor. <i>Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters</i> .....	244
<i>Amy Peeler</i>	
Andy Chambers. <i>Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts</i> .....	245
<i>Matthew Y. Emerson</i>	
Stewart E. Kelly. <i>Truth Considered &amp; Applied</i> .....	247
<i>James K. Dew, Jr.</i>	
Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd. <i>Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction</i> .....	248
<i>Brian P. Gault</i>	
John Painter and David A. deSilva. <i>James and Jude</i> .....	250
<i>Thomas W. Hudgins</i>	

## Undoing ‘this people’, becoming ‘my servant’: Purpose and Commission in *Isaiah* 6

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“This is the end—for me the beginning of life”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The significance of chapter 6 within the book of *Isaiah* has been fiercely debated.<sup>2</sup> If it is a ‘call narrative’, why is it not located in *Isaiah*’s opening chapters, as are the call narratives of *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*? And how can a ‘sending’ which so overturns the usual concept of Yahweh’s soteriological purpose—that the word of Yahweh is sent to bring people to repentance—rightly belong to a prophetic call? The resolution of these two questions seems, to me, to be the mark of a viable canonical reading, not only of chapter 6, but of the whole of *Isaiah*. This essay will explore a resolution to these questions based on the form of the text of chapter 6 within *Isaiah*. I hope to demonstrate that the text itself acts as a guide into a particular way of reading. This way of reading, in turn, will ground my thesis that the book of *Isaiah* presents the figure of the Servant (developed in chapters 40–55) as the human who fulfils the relation to Yahweh for which humanity was created.

*Isaiah* 6 is the account of a remarkable enlargement of perspective for the one who is ‘I’ in the text,<sup>3</sup> and secondarily, but very importantly, for the reader, who (as I will show) becomes ‘I’ through the text. The vision of chapter 6 is recounted as a shift in perception made by one who is ‘undone’ by confrontation with an overwhelming reality (6:4), and tracks for the reader the process of change *from* ordinary human perspective *to* the perspective that marks the whole prophecy of *Isaiah*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These were the last words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to fellow prisoners, as he was taken away to be hanged at Flossenbürg on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1953). 181.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical references will be to *Isaiah*, unless otherwise noted. I use ‘Isaiah’ to refer to the prophet, and ‘*Isaiah*’ to refer to the book.

<sup>3</sup> That this is the prophet Isaiah is rarely questioned, though see J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33* ed. B.M. Metzger, et al., Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985). 71., and P. D. Miscall, *Isaiah*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993). 34.

<sup>4</sup> 1:2–4 to 2:2–4.

Chapter 6 comes at the end of a litany of disregarded prophetic appeals to Judah to ‘turn’.<sup>5</sup> It is a last-ditch effort, not for repentance, because that is now too late, but to plant a seed for a future beyond the end; the seed of a new kind of person in relation to Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> It acts to confront its readers with the same vision which confronts the see-er, inviting them also to shift perspective, to become ‘see-ers’ and ‘hearers’ of Yahweh, and so be sent. So, *Isaiah* 6 has two simultaneous engagements: one in relation to the see-er and through him to Judah, as reported by the text, and the other in relation to the reader, by means of the text.

The shift in perspective recounted in *Isaiah* 6 is a shift from focus on a particular geographic location (the Hebrew temple) to the whole earth, and from a particular historical event (the death of the Hebrew king) to an everlasting kingship. It moves from the particular to the universal, from the historical to the eschatological, displacing the ethno-centric, hiero-centric world of Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Then, significantly, it refocuses on the particular—on Judah and their relation to Yahweh—in the light of all that has been seen.<sup>7</sup> The scene’s initial outward movement prefigures the radical displacement and enforcedly expanded perspective of Judah, who are to be thrust out amongst the nations in the coming exile.<sup>8</sup> What is seen and heard in *Isaiah* 6, and pictured there as a revelation that ‘shakes the foundations’ of temple and earth, is critical to the movement of the whole book of *Isaiah*.

### The Mission of Hardening

I propose that the prophet’s ‘commission to harden’ (6:8–10) is a vital ‘symptom’ for the interpretation of the passage (and indeed for understanding the nature of the prophetic task in *Isaiah*), and that it is intended to provoke an unsettling re-evaluation of prophetic purpose.<sup>9</sup> This symptom effec-

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<sup>5</sup> שׁוּב, usually translated ‘repent’ (see the participle in 1:27). Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, “The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,” ed. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm (Leiden: Brill, 1994), Vol 4, p1427. See also the appeals in 1:5, 1:16–20, and 2:5.

<sup>6</sup> See Seitz’ suggestion that chapter 5 is ‘a period of warning and exhortation.’ Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, ed. J.L.Mays, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1993). 12, also 47–49. With Judah’s failure to ‘turn’, this period has now ended.

<sup>7</sup> 6:9–13.

<sup>8</sup> Because the book of *Isaiah* is framed as a word to heaven and earth (see 1:2), the use of pronominal suffixes to refer to particular locations on the earth (1:7; 2:7, 8) and the preceding contrasting image of the threat of chaos to the earth (5:26, 30), I read *kol-hā’res* in 6:3 as indicating ‘all the earth’ rather than the ‘land’ of Judah.

<sup>9</sup> Avoiding such a re-thinking, the Septuagint writers in an early interpretive move (probably during the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) ‘translated’ the imperatives of the Hebrew in 6:10 as indicatives. Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, ed. C.G.Bartholomew, et al., Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010). 175–176.

tively diagnoses the meaning of the passage: that Judah's framework for understanding the relation of Yahweh and earth is 'sick unto death' and has no future in Yahweh's earth.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, *Isaiah* 6, as I will show, acts to bring the reader into the perspective of the book of *Isaiah*, in order to work the future envisioned by *Isaiah* in the reader, and through the reader in the earth; indeed to fulfil the destiny of the earth which it proclaims. This essay will explore this perspective, and show how Yahweh's future for the earth is directly connected with the mission of hardening.

### Earth and Yahweh

As Webb notes, the 'headings' of chapters one and two<sup>11</sup> alert the reader to 'the twin poles of the days of Uzziah and *the last days*',<sup>12</sup> that is, to concurrent 'present' and eschatological perspectives. These poles represent a relation of the everyday to eschatological realities, which is innate to the design of *Isaiah*. They are the poles of 'human, earthly perspective' and 'Yahweh's eschatological perspective', which I will refer to as the poles of 'earth and Yahweh'.<sup>13</sup> The dislocation of these poles through Israel and Judah's rejection of Yahweh is given in the opening chapters as the cause of the tensions within *Isaiah*.<sup>14</sup> The book of *Isaiah* 'relocates' and resolves these tensions through the person of the Servant, envisaged in chapter 6 and developed in chapters 40–55.

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase 'sick unto death' [חֲלָהּ ... לְמוֹת] comes from the story of Hezekiah, portrayed in *Isaiah* as a kind of representative of his people (e.g. 38:6). Given the death sentence by the prophet in 38:1, Hezekiah is reprieved and lives 15 more years, testimony to Yahweh's faithfulness (38:18, 19). Despite this, his 'final' word reported in 39:8 (placed to set the scene for chapters 40–55) gives a chillingly self-centered view of the world and its relation to Yahweh, one that clearly does *not* partake in the shift in perspective recounted in *Isaiah* 6, and which seems completely at odds with the self-giving intercession that Yahweh will work through Yahweh's Servant for the earth in *Isaiah* 40–55. I argue that this is by editorial design [Christopher Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). 204.], and that Hezekiah and his kingdom are represented in *Isaiah* 39 as 'sick unto death'. For an alternative reading of Hezekiah's final words, Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*: 156–160.

<sup>11</sup> 1:1 and 2:1 (*sic*); also 2:2.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*, ed. A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1996). 45. Author's emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Strictly speaking, these are the poles of 'the heavens and the earth' and 'Yahweh'. See the discussion of *Isaiah*'s cosmology in B. N. Peterson, "Cosmology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 91–94.

<sup>14</sup> 1:4b.

The opening words of Isaiah, son of Amoz, display these poles as he invokes heaven and earth as witnesses to the word of Yahweh.

Hear, heavens and use the ear, earth,  
for Yahweh speaks ...<sup>15</sup>

The act of prophecy itself, i.e. the conviction that these words are concurrently the words of Yahweh *and* the words of the prophet, fittingly embodies the same duality. The prophet, himself part of earth in its dislocation from Yahweh, brings Yahweh's word of 're-location' to the earth. Thus he holds the dislocated poles of earth and Yahweh together in his words. When Judah fails to respond to these words,<sup>16</sup> the prophet alone is left as the one who sees, hears, and so can be sent. By his obedient response to Yahweh, he will hold the dislocated poles of earth and Yahweh together in his person.<sup>17</sup>

I propose that this is the true nature of the prophetic task according to *Isaiah* 6, and that the people of Israel in their remaking as a prophetic people after exile, must be fashioned accordingly.<sup>18</sup> They must model 'in their person' the just alignment of earth with Yahweh, amongst the nations and for the nations.<sup>19</sup> This 'just alignment' will emerge as the basis of what is called '*mišpāt*' in *Isaiah*. The entire book of *Isaiah* can be understood to unfold between the two poles of earth and Yahweh; the heavens and earth misaligned from Yahweh in chapter 1, and realigned with Yahweh in chapters 65–66. The fate of the exceptions to this realignment (chillingly described in the coda at 66:24), 'prove' the final alignment of the poles by the book of *Isaiah*. The fullness of all the earth *will be* Yahweh's glory. Harsh as the mission of hardening appears, I will show that—given the extent and persistence of Judah's sin and their consequent dislocation from Yahweh—it is necessary in order to plant the seed of hope for the future.<sup>20</sup>

In *Isaiah* 6, the see-er's vision is expanded to include what lies behind the world of the everyday. He sees Yahweh in Yahweh's true relation to earth; the destined alignment of earth and Yahweh towards which all history leads, and for which end Judah has been covenantally set apart. Simultaneously he

<sup>15</sup> 1:2.

<sup>16</sup> See chapters 1–5, 6:9–13.

<sup>17</sup> 6:8.

<sup>18</sup> Childs notes that *Isaiah* 8:18 refers to Isaiah himself as 'paradigmatic', a 'sign and portent'. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, ed. J.L.Mays, et al., The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2001). 53.

<sup>19</sup> Although not stated explicitly, the concept of the alignment of Yahweh and earth lies behind Fretheim's ideas in T.E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005). xvi. See his comments on the 'divine-world relationship' on page 18, also 22, 23 and 26. The logic of the chapters on Yahweh's partners also reflect this idea, in W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament; Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), esp. 554–6.

<sup>20</sup> 6:13.

realises the utter failure of his people in this calling, and their inevitable demise.

### **The king is dead. Long live the King!**

6:1, In the year-of-the-death of the king, Uzziah,  
and I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,  
and his skirts filling the temple.

Earth and Yahweh are immediately contrasted in the first verse of chapter 6. The ‘year-of-the-death’ is hyphenated in Hebrew, and almost certainly identifies much more than the date of Uzziah’s death, again bringing the earthly into comparison and contrast with the eschatological.<sup>21</sup> Uzziah, the earthly ‘lord’, has died at the end of a remarkably prosperous and optimistic reign, and it is in his ‘death-year’, the end of an era, that the unnamed see-er sees a much greater Lord who continues, seated, to reign above the whole earth. For the see-er there is a ‘fusion of horizons’,<sup>22</sup> where a significant historical event has awoken him to the eschatological horizon beyond it.<sup>23</sup>

There is some discussion as to whether this ‘seeing’ took place within the temple, but the phrase ‘and his skirts filling the temple’ portrays the enthroned Lord above and far greater than the temple.<sup>24</sup> The ordinary horizon of Judahite perspective is thrown wide, relativising the temple as centre and dwelling-place of God. This great temple, ‘navel’ of the earth, and not only the earth’s centre but its microcosm,<sup>25</sup> is filled with the mere ‘outskirts’ of Yahweh, God of all the earth, whose glory is the whole earth’s fullness (6:3). Matthews describes ‘the transference to the temple of the symbols of YHWH’s presence’ during settlement of Israel’s land and the institution of

<sup>21</sup> Pace R. W. L. Moberly, “‘Holy, Holy, Holy’: Isaiah’s Vision of God,” in *Holiness: Past and Present*, ed. S.C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 124–125.

<sup>22</sup> H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1975). 305.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, there was a concurrent kingship in Uzziah’s day, briefly described in 2 *Kings* 15:5 (more extensively in 2 *Chronicles* 26). Yahweh struck Uzziah with leprosy because his heart became ‘lifted up’, and he lived apart while his son Jotham ‘reigned’ in his stead, though Uzziah ‘seems to have remained the real ruler.’ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, fourth edition ed. (London: Westminster John Knox 2000). 258. It seems likely that this image of a dual kingship—a true reigning king, represented by a regent—lies behind the imagery of dual kingship in this passage. Behind Jotham was Uzziah, true king of Israel; behind Uzziah is Yahweh, true king over all the earth.

<sup>24</sup> See 40:22, where Yahweh ‘sits above the circle of the earth’.

<sup>25</sup> Jon D. Levenson, “The Temple and the World,” *Journal of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1984): 284.

the monarchy.<sup>26</sup> The vision of *Isaiah* 6 radically reverses that transference. Zion will be lost, and the see-er sees the symbols of Yahweh's presence moved outward again, into (and indeed filling) 'all the earth'.

Clearly there is a series of contrasts in this passage: the dead, earthly lord of national Israel contrasts with the normally unseen, divine lord, whom the see-er sees to be true king over all the earth. This contrast is demonstrated by the see-er's exclamation of woe in 6:5, a series of almost disjunct locutions which, significantly, reflect the *order* of how he sees: 'For the king—Yahweh of Hosts—they have seen—my eyes!' Firstly he sees 'the king!', then that this king is neither Uzziah nor his successor, but 'Yahweh of hosts!', and only then—with horror—he realises his own culpability as a result of what he has seen. The glory of thrice-holy Yahweh 'seated' or 'dwelling' [*yōšēb*] on the throne is contrasted with the despair of the man of unclean lips 'seated' or 'dwelling' [*yōšēb*] amongst the people of unclean lips. Underlying these multiple contrasts, as I will show, is the single determinative contrast between the earth and Yahweh.

### Boundaries Thrown Back

Notably, the language used to present the *Isaiah* 6 vision is not distinctive visionary language, as is used elsewhere in *Isaiah*.<sup>27</sup> This underlines the nature of the events as within the possibilities of seeing and hearing that are open to all readers. While it is clearly a prophetic event peculiar to the see-er, the lack of specialist language keeps it within the range of the reader's potential experience, and plays upon the broad concepts of seeing and hearing. The opening 'I saw...' (6:1) and the following 'I heard' (6:8) seem to be used in deliberate opposition to the *end* of seeing and hearing for Judah that the passage records,<sup>28</sup> prefiguring the contrasts that become so significant later in *Isaiah*.<sup>29</sup>

I claim that the text consciously develops the see-er as a model of faithfulness in contrast to Judah—i.e. a model of one who sees, hears and consequently goes—that the Servant of Yahweh will later be shown to take up. This can be understood as the genesis of the much-debated contrast in *Isaiah* 40–55 between the faithful 'Servant' of the Servant Songs, and faithless servant Israel described outside the Songs.<sup>30</sup> In *Isaiah* 6, the 'see-er' sees and hears

<sup>26</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Theophanies Cultic and Cosmic: Prepare to meet thy God," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, ed. R.K.Harrison; A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1998), 312.

<sup>27</sup> While the whole book of *Isaiah* is described in 1:1 as a 'vision' [וִיזוֹן], chapter six is not. The writer simply uses the phrase 'and I saw...' [וַיֵּרְאֵהוּ] (6:1).

<sup>28</sup> W. A. M. Beuken, "The manifestation of Yahweh and the Commission of Isaiah: Isaiah 6 read against the background of Isaiah 1," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (2004): 74 and 78.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. 42:6, 7, 18–20, 49:6, 7; 50:4, 5; 52:13; 53:11.

<sup>30</sup> This is one of the most commented-upon features in discussions about the identity and function of the Servant in *Isaiah* 40–55. The verbs for seeing and hearing

Yahweh and is 'sent'.<sup>31</sup> Judah refuses to see and hear Yahweh and will be 'sent far away' (into exile).<sup>32</sup>

From 6:2 the account is rendered by a series of exclamations, as if reporting live on an unfolding event.<sup>33</sup> Suddenly the see-er (and his readers with him) are 'over-seeing' and 'overhearing' a reality more true, more real than the everyday, and—critically—one that is concurrent with the everyday. As Buber writes, 'It is not in the future that the *kabbod* is to fill the earth...'<sup>34</sup> The usual boundaries of what is seen are thrown back, and the see-er is shown Yahweh in Yahweh's relation to earth as he has never seen them before.

6:2. Seraphim! Standing from above him! Six wings! Six wings to each! With two he covers his face, and with two he covers his feet, and with two he flies! 3. And he calls—this one to this one—and he says,

'Holy, Holy, Holy, Yahweh of hosts!

The fullness of all the earth [is] his glory!<sup>35</sup>

4. And the foundations of the thresholds shook from the voice of the one calling, and the house was filled with smoke. 5. And I said 'Woe to me! For I am undone! For a man unclean of lips I [am], and amidst a people unclean of lips I dwell. For the king—Yahweh of Hosts—they have seen—my eyes!

### 'Undone'

Why does this vision cause the see-er such woe? Because as he sees he *knows* that he is lost. Unclean of lips, he belongs to a people unclean of lips.<sup>36</sup> Until now he has proclaimed the truth about Yahweh,<sup>37</sup> but in the vision of chapter 6 he sees with excruciating clarity the relation between Yahweh and earth that undergirds all history, and himself in relation to it, and he knows

that are negated in chapter 6 are recapitulated, and their function restored, in the Servant Songs.

<sup>31</sup> שָׁלַח, 6:8.

<sup>32</sup> רָחַק, 6:12.

<sup>33</sup> This 'immediate' quality seems to be one of the carefully composed literary features of the text. I have translated 6:2 in the present tense to express the immediacy of the participles, which are followed by imperfect verbs. I have translated the *waw* consecutive perfect verbs in 6:3 similarly; potentially they are governed by the imperfects in 6:2.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949). 128.

<sup>35</sup> 'Fullness' [מְלֵא] in 6:3 is a noun, rather than the verb of the usual English translation, 'all the earth *is filled* with his glory'. For a discussion of this translation see Levenson, "Temple and World," 289–290.

<sup>36</sup> As I will show, 'lips' represent not only the speaker, but what the speaker's lips are able to declare about Yahweh and earth.

<sup>37</sup> *Isaiah* 1–5.

that he does not—and because of his uncleanness that he cannot—belong to that true, real world in which ‘the king is Yahweh’ over all the earth. All that he thought he was is ‘undone’;<sup>38</sup> all that his people are is undone. He looks now into eschatological reality, where the poles of ‘earth and Yahweh’ are held together, and where the earth fulfils its creation purpose as the location for the display of Yahweh’s glory, and he knows that he and his people—the ‘elect’ of Yahweh—have missed the reality of earth’s relation to Yahweh, and consequently are outside the fullness and the glory. Those who were called to hold together these two realities of earth and Yahweh in their national life belong rather to the world of uncleanness.<sup>39</sup> They are doomed to destruction as the false must give way to the real. The see-er expects an end, and indeed, his life as he knows it will end.

The see-er’s exclamation of woe echoes the ‘6-fold woe refrain’ of chapter 5.<sup>40</sup> Israel’s offences against Yahweh increase in seriousness in this series (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21 and 22), culminating in the reversal of good and evil.<sup>41</sup> There is a dramatic shift in standpoint in chapter 6, after the see-er ‘sees the Lord’, where his past indictment against others—‘Woe to those who...’—is turned upon himself: ‘Woe to me for I...’ Dismayed by his own uncleanness in the presence of Yahweh of hosts, the seer knows himself to be included in his own pronouncement of woe. He ‘tastes’ the utter lostness of his people for the first time.

The basis of the see-er’s woe, I propose, is earth dislocated from Yahweh, and himself, together with Judah, wholly failed in their calling of ‘re-location’, i.e. in their calling to live out before the nations the just location of humanity in relation to Yahweh, and to become a centre of re-location for the na-

<sup>38</sup> 6:5, or ‘destroyed’, נִמְחָתִי.

<sup>39</sup> Uzziah the king, whose death is noted in 6:1, was unclean and forced to live apart, a leper as a result of his attempt to offer sacrifice in the temple (2 *Chronicles* 26:16–21). This incident stood as a warning to the people and priests of Yahweh about Yahweh’s unqualified holiness, and seems likely to be the background to the use of ‘uncleanness’ in *Isaiah* 6. King Uzziah had taken upon himself divine authority which he did not possess, and became unclean as a result. I suggest that the see-er, in a moment of clarity and horror, sees that he and his people have been masquerading a divine authority which *they do not possess*, and are thus guilty of the same sin as Uzziah. Notably, the subject of falsely offered sacrifice is prominent in *Isaiah* 1–5 (especially 1:10–15). Thus it might be the prospect of leprosy that causes the see-er such dismay in 6:5. (This is not the same as the theory that the Servant of *Isaiah* 53 was Uzziah, and thus had leprosy, [discussed in C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study*, second ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). 41.], or as the theory that the Servant was struck with leprosy and died. [See Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*, Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoe & Ruprecht, 1922). 396–397.].)

<sup>40</sup> Seitz, *Isaiah* 1–39.: 27.

<sup>41</sup> This is demonstrated specifically by the practice of injustice (5:23), the mark of Judah’s estrangement from Yahweh, which I have called the ‘dislocation’ of the present and eschatological poles. See 1:17, 21–23.

tions.<sup>42</sup> *Isaiah 6* records the see-er's acutely personal encounter with the message of 1:1–7; one that also has far-reaching consequences for the earth. Yahweh's sons are estranged from Yahweh, and as a result are mortally sick and their own 'earth' lies desolate.<sup>43</sup> While 'earth' in 1:7 refers most immediately to the land of 'Judah and Jerusalem', the dislocation of Judah in relation to Yahweh is clearly critical for the whole earth if the future is to be the one envisioned in 2:1–4 where the word of Yahweh goes out from Mt Zion and 'all the nations shall flow to it.' Judah has failed in their calling in relation to Yahweh, and Judah as Judah was must end. The see-er has seen Yahweh and earth, and their relation of glory. Here is life, and Judah is found to be outside that life.

### The Bitter End and the Seed of Holiness

This death-knell demonstrates the reason for the see-er's lack of explicit identification in chapter 6. While almost universally taken to be the prophet Isaiah, the unnamed 'I' has another function critical to this scene: to broaden the scope of the see-er's identity to include the reader as 'I'. The first person pronoun works to involve the reader in the text,<sup>44</sup> and has the effect of opening up eschatological reality to readers through the see-er's eyes, allowing them to see their own uncleanness and culpability in its light, significantly whilst retaining their status as spectators of the scene. In this way, the scriptural report of the vision *works against* the see-er's commission to blind and deafen. By allowing the audience to 'stand outside' and see Judah's entrenched blindness, deafness and ultimate demise (the result of their dislocation from the intended relation of Yahweh and earth), while simultaneously being drawn into the drama as the 'I' who sees, the text acts to open eyes, ears and understanding at the very time that the prophet is commissioned to close them. It allows the reader-as-spectator to stand at the brink of the chasm over which unseeing Judah must plunge; to see their inevitable end but to avoid, if not the plunge itself, the end beyond it. The text here can be understood to be working towards its own fulfilment.<sup>45</sup> I suggest that the 'seed

<sup>42</sup> 2:2–4.

<sup>43</sup> אֶרְצְכֶם, 'your earth' (1:7).

<sup>44</sup> I.e. it is 'self-involving'. On the narrowing of the distance between author and reader because of 'I-narration' see A.L.H.M. Van Wieringen, *The Implied Reader in Isaiah 6–12*, ed. R.A. Culpepper and R. Rendtorff, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden: Brill, 1998). 32, 41. See Wenham's comment that '[s]elf-involvement is particularly evident in first-person utterances'. Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*, ed. J.B.Green and C.R.Seitz C.G.Bartholomew, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012). 70.

<sup>45</sup> The 'ironic' interpretation of *Isaiah 6* 'serves to encourage the readers / hearers of Isaiah to listen, hear and believe so that what is presented ironically in Isaiah's call does not happen to them.' Torsten Uhlig, "Too Hard to Understand? The Motif of Hardening in Isaiah," in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, ed. D. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson (Nottingham: Apollos 2009), 81. While this has similarities to my

of holiness' (6:13)—the only hope for the future—is planted by this text. The seed is the reader who has seen 'through the see-er's eyes', and for whom the 'foundations' are shaken by the knowledge of how Yahweh truly relates to earth.<sup>46</sup>

So the prophetic word stands as an unambiguous word of hardening, sealing the fate of the elect kingdom of Judah that has severed its life-giving connection to their true King. But *at the same time*, in its form as a report to an audience beyond 'this people', and in its position within the text of *Isaiah*, the prophetic word looks and works towards a hope that lies beyond that bitter end, and which is related to the present 'people' as a seed relates to its parent tree, dead, burned, and burned again.<sup>47</sup> This, I suggest, is the background to understanding the hardening passage in 6:10.<sup>48</sup> Judah as Judah is must be 'undone'. The prophet as the prophet is must be undone. The reader as reader must be undone. But Judah's death will plant a seed of holiness which will spring up with new vigour, as I will demonstrate, in the life of the Servant of Yahweh.

The movement that the see-er demonstrates—from the external knowledge of Yahweh's judgement of injustice to acute personal awareness of guilt, and of the inclusion of himself *in* Yahweh's judgement—is the movement that must be made by the reader who will take the path of renewal 'beyond the end' that is offered by the text.<sup>49</sup> This personal inward movement is part of the movement into 'all the earth' previously described, and part of the enlargement of perspective charted by the chapter. The prophet, as representative of Yahweh to earth, has spoken the word to the people; the prophet, as representative of earth to Yahweh, must also receive the word as a model for the people, prefiguring the role of the Servant in chapters 40–55.

reading, it does not develop the idea that the 'seed of holiness' *is thus planted*. See also Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*: 180., and Moberly, "Isaiah's Vision," 133. I read chapter 6 without irony (beyond the inevitable 'irony' occasioned by the incongruity between the action and its result), as the trajectory of a 'former thing' coming to its inevitable end at the same time as the seed of a 'new thing' is planted.

<sup>46</sup> Contrary to H.G.M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). 35–36., among others, for whom the final words of 6:13 are 'a late gloss' and thus discounted, or who conclude that 6:12–13 has been 'added secondarily', I work with the canonical form of the chapter. Other writers take the chapter's structure as evidence of the integrity of the final verse. See Childs, *Isaiah*: 58.

<sup>47</sup> See Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah*, ed. W.Brueggemann, et al., *Overtures in Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). 110–113., 'it appears that the book is designed to present Isaiah as a paradigm for the ... survivors [of the exile].'

<sup>48</sup> This claim is in relation to *Isaiah* 6, and not for other passages that use similar language; *Jeremiah* 5:21 and 7:16, *Ezekiel* 3:7 and 12:2, and *Zechariah* 7:11.

<sup>49</sup> The words reported in 5:19, 'Let [it] hasten ... let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come in, and we will know' clearly demonstrate that the speakers had no idea of their own culpability.

## The Word that Shakes the World

6:1–5 seems to have been composed as a kind of loose chiasm, indicating meaning, and highlighting the centrality of the seraphim’s words in 6:3b.

6:1a, death, the king, Uzziah, I saw

6:1b, ‘my Lord’, *yōšēb*

6:2, *šērāpîm*, ‘and he calls ... holy’

6:3b, ‘The fullness of all the earth [is Yahweh’s] glory’

6:5a, ‘and I said ... woe’, *šēpātayim*

6:5b, ‘I’, *yōšēb*

6:5, ‘I am destroyed’, the king, Yahweh of hosts, my eyes saw.

The chiasm shows that the contrast between the earthly and divine kings that is drawn in the first verse is also built into the structure of the section, and that the verb ‘to see’ encloses the whole.<sup>50</sup>

6:1–5, by its position in *Isaiah* as well as by its form, is presented as ‘true seeing’. It is a reversal of those who do not (or will not) see Yahweh’s work in 5:12b, and of those who have a completely false (and self-centred) idea of what it means to see Yahweh’s work in 5:19.<sup>51</sup> The chiasm instructs the reader how to see, showing that at the heart of seeing is the earth in its relation of fullness and glory to Yahweh (6:3b). True seeing **is** seeing Yahweh’s glory in relation to earth, and everything else in its location and order within that relation of glory. Seeing this central reality will enable *hā’ādām* (from and upon *hā’ādāmā*) to live justly in relation to Yahweh.<sup>52</sup>

Now, the noticeable but slightly odd repetition of *yōšēb* makes sense, again drawing Yahweh and earth into chiasmic parallel. The phonic parallel of *šērāpîm* with *šēpātayim* marks the chiasm and supplies part of the reason for

<sup>50</sup> The most common analysis of *Isaiah* 6 parallels ‘and I saw ...’ (6:1) with ‘and I heard ...’ (6:5), which is apparent in most English translations; e.g. Beuken, “Manifestation and Commission,” 74. But see Cole’s comment that the vision of *‘ādōnay*’s glory is ‘nicely envelope[d]’ by ‘the twofold use of רָאָה’; Robert L. Cole, “Isaiah 6 in its Context,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 2, no. 2 (2011): 178., and Williamson’s mention of the *inclusio* marked by 6:1 and 5. H.G.M. Williamson, “Temple and Worship in Isaiah 6,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 127. I have tried to give the reason for the ‘envelope’ and *inclusio*.

<sup>51</sup> Notably, both these references to seeing Yahweh’s work are paired with ‘knowing’ in the following verse (5:12 and 13, 5:19 and 20). I claim that this self-centred, ‘upside down’ understanding represents Judah’s delusion about the relation of Yahweh and earth; their false concept of *mišpāt*, which the Servant will reverse. This is epitomised in Hezekiah’s final words before the long silence of exile, ‘Good is the word of Yahweh which you have spoken ... for there will be peace and truth in *my day*’ (39:8).

<sup>52</sup> 6:11–12.

the see-er's much-debated reference to unclean 'lips'.<sup>53</sup> It draws the divine speech of the 'burning ones'<sup>54</sup> into parallel with the inability of unclean, earthly, as-yet-unburned lips to speak similarly.

The chiasmic parallel 'and he calls ...' / 'and I said ...'<sup>55</sup> parallels the declaration 'holy' with the declaration 'woe'. Outside of Yahweh's holiness, which is proclaimed over 'the fullness of all the earth', there is only woe. The contrast that is usually recognised here, between 'holy' and 'unclean' (6:3 and 6:5), has generated much discussion. For example, Briggs writes that this contrast (rather than a contrast with something like 'unholy' or 'profane' which the reader might expect) represents 'a transcending of the prophet's own perspective ... a conversion of status and perspective'.<sup>56</sup> However, the contrast between 'holy' and 'woe', which the chiasm marks, goes a step beyond this argument, and represents the distinctive ontology of *Isaiah* that I have tried to demonstrate: the 'two poles' of earth and Yahweh, here shown in absolute dislocation. 'Holy' and 'unclean' mark the extremities of ordered human existence within which movement and change is possible. The 'woe' of the seer and his people is beyond these extremities, an expression of their utter remove from the holiness of Yahweh's realm, and their lostness outside of any possible relation to Yahweh; a lostness that would be final and irredeemable were it not for the present awareness of it breaking in in the vision. 'Holy' is declared by the *šērāpîm* over the reality and future of 'all the earth' in relation to Yahweh, and 'woe' declares that there will finally be no corresponding opposite to 'holy' that can be cleansed or atoned for.<sup>57</sup>

After this seventh declaration of 'woe' there will be no turning back. The 'woe' of 10:1 makes it clear that on 'the day of calamity and devastation' there will be no one for the people to go to for help, and—significantly—nowhere

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Moberly, "Isaiah's Vision," 128–129., who asks 'Why this reference to the lips?' and outlines the possible answers. This is not to say that those reasons are incorrect, but to assert that *Isaiah's* recounting of the vision is also shaped in significant ways by other concerns, including structure, sound and wordplay, and that these are a guide to the meaning of the passage.

<sup>54</sup> The literal translation of *šērāpîm*.

<sup>55</sup> This is obvious in Hebrew, but normally obscured in an English translation. See 6:3, 5. The contrast of the subject (he / I) emphasises the separation between divine and human realms, and what their representatives are able to declare.

<sup>56</sup> Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*: 173–174. See Phillip Jenson, "Holiness in the Priestly Writings of the Old Testament," in *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 105–107., and the chart in Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*: 174. Within this scheme, the see-er of *Isaiah* 6 knows himself to be unclean, at the furthest remove from Yahweh's holiness. I argue that the proclamation of 'woe' in 6:5 refers to a final remove beyond the 'scheme' that situates holy, profane, clean and unclean. The proclamation of 'woe' is at an absolute remove from the proclamation of holy.

<sup>57</sup> See 66:24 for a final picture of woe, now irrevocably outside Yahweh's realm. Wendell Berry, "How to be a Poet (to remind myself)," *Poetry* (January 2001)., writes, 'there are no unsacred places;/ there are only sacred places/ and desecrated places.'

to leave their *kābôd*.<sup>58</sup> There is no place for *kābôd* other than Yahweh's in an earth whose fullness is Yahweh's *kābôd*. 'Holy' is the single word which will finally describe the whole earth and all it contains in its relation to the lord Yahweh. 'Woe' is the single word that will finally describe everything of which 'holy' cannot be said. Again, the 'I' in 6:5 ('and I said ...') is self-involving by identification with the see-er, opening the readers' eyes to their complicity in the dislocation of earth in relation to Yahweh, indeed to their complicity in 'woe'.

This reading bears out the implications of 6:3b, which holds together the poles of Yahweh and earth, and which I identify as the 'theological crux' of the passage: "The fullness of all the earth is [Yahweh's] glory."<sup>59</sup> I will argue that the rest of the chapter (and indeed the book of *Isaiah*), can be best understood in the light of this declaration.

In another detail of the chiasmic pattern, the 'eschatological' community (in which 'he' calls 'holy') is described before verse 3, and after verse 3 the 'earthly' community (where the representative 'I' says 'woe') is described.<sup>60</sup> The central cry of the *šērāpîm* (6:3b) fuses the two communities in their destined interrelation to each other. These two poles that currently repel are declared by the seraphim to be held together for the fullness of Yahweh's glory. But before the joining between earth and Yahweh can be brought about,<sup>61</sup> the dislocated relation of Yahweh and Judah must be undone. In 6:9–10 the communities become 'disjunct',<sup>62</sup> as sensory perception between earth and Yahweh is cut off. There can be no overlap of Judah (for the earth) and Yahweh, until the relation between them is re-made. I will show that it is re-made in the Servant.

In this complex and evocative passage there are concurrent and overlapping patterns, including a triple repetition pattern.<sup>63</sup> The prominent repetition of 'holy' is echoed by three kinds of 'fullness': Yahweh's skirts 'filling' the temple, the fullness of all the earth that is Yahweh's glory, and 'the house ... filled with smoke'. The central 'fullness' (of all the earth) is marked by this chiasmic arrangement, and the repetition of fullness contrasts with the triple

<sup>58</sup> 10:3.

<sup>59</sup> Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*: 175. puts the crux at 6:9–10, and Uhlig, "Too Hard?," 64. claims that the hardening of the people is 'the goal of the whole passage'.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Landy, "Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 1 (1999): 67, 68.

<sup>61</sup> This joining has been intended to be particularised and modelled in the joining between Judah and Yahweh.

<sup>62</sup> Landy, "Strategies," 68.

<sup>63</sup> While many comment on this, see especially Jonathan Magonet, "The structure of Isaiah 6," in *Proc, 9th World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Aug 1985* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 92–94.

emphasis on emptiness in the final verses of the chapter.<sup>64</sup> The reasons for the declaration of ‘woe’ (discussed above) are given by three ‘for ...’ clauses.<sup>65</sup>

Briggs observes that three ‘fundamental units of ... thought’ are introduced by ‘*waw* consecutive verbs of perception’ (1, 8, 11), each marked by the triple use of ‘*ādōnāy*, which contrasts with the triple use of *Yhwh* (3, 5, 12).<sup>66</sup> The triple-repetition pattern may also account for the use of *sipîm* (‘thresholds’) in 6:4, because of paronomasia with *šérāpîm* and *šépātayîm*. The burning seraphs, the burned mouth, and the burning of the stump, which occur in each of the three sections of the chapter (1–5, 6–8, 9–13), are another expression of the pattern, tying together the see-ing, the sending, and the ‘undoing’ of Judah.

I have argued that the crux of this scene’s first ‘act’ (6:1–5) comes with the seraphim’s call in 6:3b, which is not only indicated by the text’s structure but is given by the text as a ‘world-shaking’ word. Levenson has made a convincing case for the temple as a microcosm of earth in Hebrew thought, using *Isaiah* 6 as an example.<sup>67</sup> Just as Isaiah sees smoke filling the temple, he writes, ‘so the seraphim proclaim that the *kābôd* fills the world.’ In an extension of Levenson’s logic, just as the ‘foundations of the thresholds’ of the temple (6:4) shake at the voice of the one speaking, so the foundations of the earth must shake at the same word.

The significance of the seraphim’s call is highlighted by its form as ‘an inset of formal verse ... a common convention in biblical narrative for direct speech that has some significantly summarizing or ceremonial function.’<sup>68</sup>

Holy! holy! holy! Yahweh of hosts!

The fullness of all the earth is his glory.

This formal couplet holds together the poles of Yahweh and earth (dislocated since 1:2) in the resolution into which the book of *Isaiah* will finally bring them.<sup>69</sup> In this it foreshadows the whole action of *Isaiah*, showing those who read what lies behind (and ahead of) history, so that this seeing and hearing (in marked contrast to the people’s inability to see and hear) becomes the seed of regeneration of a people who will be formed in the relation to Yahweh over whose glory the seraphim exclaim; a people who hold the poles of history and eschatology together ‘in their person’. Even as Judah is being hardened *beyond* hope, hope in the form of one who sees, hears and goes is being brought to birth in the see-er. The old era is ending, even as the seed of a new era forms in the see-er, and in those who will ‘see’ through his eyes.

<sup>64</sup> ‘lack ... desolation ... abandonment ...’; 6:11–13. Landy, “Strategies,” 82.

<sup>65</sup> [...יָהוָה], Rolf P. Knierim, “Vocation of Isaiah,” *Vetus testamentum* 18, no. 1 (1968): 56.

<sup>66</sup> Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*. 173. See also Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 127.

<sup>67</sup> Levenson, “Temple and World,” 282–291.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011). 31–32.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. 65:19–25; 66:1, 22–3.

### What kind of Call?

As noted, there is much debate over this passage's status as a 'call narrative'. I think that it is a call, but of a particular kind. It is focussed by the central cry of the seraphim that sees the whole earth in its just relation to Yahweh, and it seems that anyone who 'sees' and 'hears'—that is, whose senses are alive to Yahweh—can respond to Yahweh's question (6:8). The call to 'go and be sent' and the future of Judah (if it exists at all) partake in the chapter's movement from the particular to the universal, and are set within *Isaiah's* vision of earth and its glorious destiny of alignment with Yahweh. The one who answers will be the one who holds these two poles together for the fullness of the earth. *Isaiah* 6 is not only a call to those who might see and hear within the setting of the chapter, but—by its canonical presentation in the book of *Isaiah*—draws those who read it to become see-ers and hearers, who are then able to offer themselves in answer to Yahweh's question, to become executors of *mišpāt*, the just alignment of earth and Yahweh.

In *Isaiah* 6 the see-er takes a step beyond his existing calling, into both full identification with the earthly community of his people (6:5), and into his commissioning as part of the holy community (6:8, 'for us'), thus drawing together the poles of earth and Yahweh. It is this dual calling—the synthesis of the 'twin poles'—that lays the foundation for the figure of the Servant in *Isaiah* 40–55 to be envisaged and explored.

### Separation and Presence

The seraphim call to one another that Yahweh is triply holy. Judah knows well the separation required by this absolute holiness, as their long and meticulous traditions of purification and atonement attest.<sup>70</sup> Holiness involves Yahweh's separation from the earth and its peoples.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, the parallel poetic line declares that the 'fullness of all the earth'—its purpose, its future, when it is most completely 'itself' as it was created to be—is Yahweh's glory, Yahweh's presence *in* the earth.<sup>72</sup> Earth is thus both separated from Yahweh because of Yahweh's holiness, and earth's 'fullness' is Yahweh's own

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<sup>70</sup> See Brueggemann, *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*: 288.

<sup>71</sup> Brueggemann writes, 'It is probable that holiness, understood phenomenologically, remains completely a category of separation'. Brueggemann, *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*: 288. For a discussion of Brueggemann's ideas see Jenson, "Holiness in Priestly Writings," 98, 113–115.

<sup>72</sup> This proclamation should be heard against the background of *Isaiah's* use of 'fullness' and its cognates in chapters 1–5. In 1:15, Yahweh will not listen to prayers because the hands spread out to him are 'full of blood'. In 1:21, murderers live in the harlot-city which was once faithful and 'full of justice'. 2:6–8 details increasingly negative kinds of 'fullness', culminating in people bowing down to the work of their own hands. The seraphim's cry asserts that the earth, in contrast, is made to be filled with Yahweh's glory.

glory.<sup>73</sup> That this is the meaning of the words is shown by the see-er's anguished response that he and his people are 'undone'. They are outside the fullness and glory of the earth.

Related to this concept of 'fullness' in *Isaiah* are the *Genesis* commands to 'fill the earth', given firstly to humankind, and then to Noah and his sons.<sup>74</sup> Both these commands are connected closely with assertions that humanity is made in God's image and likeness.<sup>75</sup> If humankind, created in God's likeness, is repeatedly commanded to 'fill the earth', what then *is* 'the fullness of all the earth' that is envisioned by God? It makes sense that it is the filling of earth with and by those who relate to God in such a way that can be described as 'likeness'.<sup>76</sup> Holiness and glory are held together with earth *in* (and by) those who are 'like' Yahweh. But the see-er has seen himself and his people to be utterly 'unlike'; unclean, and separated from Yahweh.

The Hebrew of the couplet at 6:3 is marked by a repeated long *ō* sound (also *ō* and *o*) that is present in every word apart from *hā 'āreš*, thus highlighting it, and indicating that, although this couplet magnifies Yahweh and Yahweh's glory, it is significantly also about the earth.<sup>77</sup> Even the phonics of the poetry both contrasts and holds together Yahweh's holiness and glory with the earth.

The two poles of Yahweh's otherness and Yahweh's presence, Yahweh's transcendence and Yahweh's immanence, eschatology and history *held together* are the word that shakes the foundations of the temple and the world.<sup>78</sup> Not surprisingly, these are the same poles whose dislocation generates the literary tension from the beginning of *Isaiah*. The earth's very existence and future are bound up with Yahweh's glory. In rejecting Yahweh and Yahweh's glory,<sup>79</sup> Judah has rejected their own identity as Yahweh's people, to be 'like' Yahweh amongst the nations of the earth. They have chosen their own undoing.

<sup>73</sup> See the similar comments in Magonet, "Structure," 92.

<sup>74</sup> *Genesis* 1:28 and 9:1.

<sup>75</sup> *Genesis* 1:27 and 9:6.

<sup>76</sup> This would include not only populating, but creative endeavours and 'ordering'.

It is clear from the treatment of 'fullness' and its cognates in early *Isaiah* that, in a kind of parallel with Noah's time, Judah is guilty of 'filling the earth' in a distorted parody of God's charge. See footnote 72 above, and *Genesis* 6:11 and 13. See also Paul's claims in *Romans* 8:18–23.

<sup>77</sup>

קְדוֹשׁ | קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת  
מְלֵא כָּל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

<sup>78</sup> See the observations about 'bipolarity' in John N. Oswalt, "The Book of Isaiah: A Short Course in Biblical Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39(2004): 59–66, 70.

<sup>79</sup> See 3:8.

## Death and Likeness

It seems possible that the unusual word for ‘undone / destroyed’ is a wordplay on the more common meaning ‘to be like’.<sup>80</sup> Thus the see-er’s cry—a result of having seen earth’s true calling in relation to Yahweh—would signify ‘woe to me, for I am like (‘to Yahweh’, the one just seen), *yet* I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips ...’ He sees with stark clarity the dissonance between earth and Yahweh displayed by himself and his people in relation to Yahweh. Called to be ‘like’ Yahweh, they are instead ‘unclean’. If they were ‘like’ Yahweh, their ‘fullness’ would be the display of Yahweh’s glory (as part of ‘all the earth’, 6:3), but it is not. This wordplay underlines the basis of the see-er’s horror: the utter failure of himself and his people who are called to be ‘like’ Yahweh in the earth. If this is so, the final line of the chiasm in 6:1–5 (parallel with the death in the first line of the king who was to be ‘like’ Yahweh for the people),<sup>81</sup> while it forms a conclusion of destruction through the failure of Judah to display Yahweh’s likeness in the earth, is compatible with the thrust of the whole passage, that the only possible remaining future for Judah involves a relation of ‘likeness’ to Yahweh. Though destruction is inevitable, ‘likeness’ still seems possible. How will the reader read? What possibilities for the future will they see and hear in the prophecy?

In support of this wordplay, the chiasm in 6:1–5 mimics the ‘likeness’ between Yahweh and earth in its poetic structure. On either side of the central declaration of Yahweh’s relation to earth are parallels between holiness and woe, the lord dwelling and the see-er dwelling, and the human and divine kings. The poetry holds together the ‘unlike’ on either side of the reciprocal ‘indwelling’ relation of identification (‘likeness’) into which Yahweh and earth will finally be brought. This is both a demonstration of their contrasts and tensions *and* a declaration of the coming fusion of the poles of Yahweh and earth.

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<sup>80</sup> [דמה], (6:5), Koehler and Baumgartner, “HALOT,” Vol 1, 225, I. Wildberger and others have used an alternative definition, ‘to be silent’, meaning that the see-er is unable to participate in the seraphim’s cry. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 249. I have found only Williamson to mention the possibility of the meaning ‘to be like’ (he notes its occurrence in the *nip’al* [as here] 2<sup>nd</sup> masculine singular in *Ezekiel* 32:2, ‘you are like’), but he does not consider it a serious possibility here. Williamson, “Temple and Worship,” 138, footnote 129. It is interesting that this possibility has not been explored in the literature. My analysis of the relation of Israel / Judah to Yahweh, and the development of the figure of the Servant in chapters 40–55 as the one who is ‘like’ Yahweh suggests it clearly. It may be a wordplay that emerges only retrospectively, upon re-reading of this significant chapter.

<sup>81</sup> On earthly and divine kingship, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, ed. John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 68.

### Holy One of Israel / Yahweh of hosts

I propose that Yahweh's title in the formal verse of the seraphim's call, 'Yahweh of Hosts' (6:3), works polemically *against* the distinctive Isaian title 'Holy One of Israel', particularly considering the placement of chapter 6 within *Isaiah*. References to the 'Holy One of Israel' in chapters 1–5 evoke the title's covenantal significance, and address the failure of Israel and Judah to honour Yahweh.<sup>82</sup> They work *with* the Holy One's chosen identity, 'of Israel' to call errant Israel back to faithfulness to Yahweh's covenant, and to holiness, as Yahweh is holy. I propose that this is because Israel / Judah in these opening chapters is not yet past the point-of-no-return and can still be called back into their covenantal identity-in-relation to Yahweh.<sup>83</sup> Conversely, the references to 'the Holy One of Israel' immediately following chapter 6,<sup>84</sup> look forward to 'that day' in which Yahweh's covenantal longings will be fulfilled in Israel, when the Holy One's identity will again truly be 'of Israel'. I suggest that this is because Israel / Judah, as the see-er has seen in chapter 6, is 'destroyed'—dislocated, disbanded, disabled as an entity, cut loose from Yahweh, a dead 'oak' or 'terebinth', of which only the 'holy seed' will remain (6:13). Significantly, the holy seed is separated—'made holy'—by this very occasion, and its telling in *Isaiah* 6.

The 'seeing' in chapter 6 wrenches the see-er's eyes from the temple to Yahweh enthroned over all the earth; from unclean, mortal, earthly kingship to Yahweh, holy, 'high and lifted up', the King beyond all kings. In 6:3, Yahweh's identity is *not* given as 'the Holy One of Israel' (as might be expected in the context of the triple exclamation of Yahweh's holiness)<sup>85</sup> but as 'Yahweh of the hosts' ('of the masses', 'of the armies'), of all the earth.<sup>86</sup> As I have noted, the temple is relativised. Israel is marginalised. The Holy One's self-limiting genitive 'of Israel' is exploded outwards, and Yahweh's holiness and glory is shown to be 'of all the earth'.

I claim that the meaning of the relativisation of temple and people goes beyond enlargement to become a profound reversal of perspective. Rather than the glory of Yahweh being 'at home' in the temple,<sup>87</sup> the temple is shown as a place of Yahweh's glory *only* in its relation to all the earth as the

<sup>82</sup> 1:4, 5:19, 5:24.

<sup>83</sup> Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*: 12, 25, 52–55.

<sup>84</sup> 10:20, 12:6, 17:7.

<sup>85</sup> A number of writers concur that the title 'Holy One of Israel' effectively sums up this vision, but is notably *not* used here, so the vision is thought to predate or even to be the origin of its use. E.g. John Goldingay, "The Theology of Isaiah," in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, ed. D.G. Firth and H.G.M. Williamson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 171. My argument is another explanation of the same observation.

<sup>86</sup> *Isaiah* demonstrates that Yahweh will use the armies of all the earth as Yahweh sees fit (see 5:26).

<sup>87</sup> This the implication of **יְשֻׁב** in 6:1 and 5.

place of Yahweh's glory. This radically re-contextualises the calling of Judah in relation to Yahweh and the earth. Israel / Judah and temple as microcosms are shown to have failed the Holy One in their creation purpose of displaying Yahweh's glory, and as a prototype of the relation of earth to Yahweh.<sup>88</sup> Israel's reversal of Yahweh's just order (Yahweh's *mišpāt*), which emerges as their particular failing in chapters 40–55, is deeply connected with Israel / Judah's 'reversal' of Yahweh's glory in chapters 1–5. The task of the prototype, I argue, will become the task of the Servant in *Isaiah* 40–55.

## Act Two

6. And he flew to him—one from the seraphim,  
and in his hand a live coal!  
With tongs he took [it] from upon the altar,  
7. and he touched upon my mouth and he said,  
'Look! This has touched upon your lips,  
and your iniquity is turned aside,  
and your sin has been atoned for.'  
8. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying,  
'Whom will I send, and who will go for us?'  
And I said, 'I am ready!<sup>89</sup> Send me!'

The two parts of Yahweh's question in the oft-preached verse 8 hold together the same underlying tension between Yahweh and earth that I have observed throughout this essay. Here the Lord sends; the human agent goes. Divine sovereignty and human will are held together by the poetry of the lord's question, each intact, without comment.

Whom will I send, and who will go...?'

Its form as a general question is again self-involving, inviting the reader to 'overhear' in the same way as the see-er, and to similarly align themselves with Yahweh's purpose. Earth is to be aligned with Yahweh *in* the see-er / hearer, both within the text and by means of the text. Atoned for, the see-er can now be sent as an agent of the true world, where the King is Yahweh of hosts, and where the fullness of Yahweh's creation *is* Yahweh's glory. When Yahweh sends, and the human goes, when the verbs of earth and Yahweh, of history and eschatology coincide, this, I propose, is the 'fullness' of the destiny of earth, and the way in which earth will become, as Yahweh intends, the place of Yahweh's glory. Again, we can see in the text that one world is ending—the world where disobedient Judah is severed from Yahweh—while the seed of the new world is already being planted. This is why Israel is re-

<sup>88</sup> See 5:7: 'For the vineyard of Yahweh of Hosts is the house of Israel...'

<sup>89</sup> See this translation of *hinēni* in Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (London: Yale University Press, 1993). 126.

envisioned as ‘servant’ after the national destruction of exile. The person of the Servant of Yahweh is the human point at which divine and human verbs—and thus energies—coincide; the joint, covenantally-formed life which begins in seeming insignificance, in simple acts of alignment with Yahweh (perhaps better known as ‘obedience’) of one faithful human person or nation. This is the germ or ‘holy seed’ (6:13) that will become, when developed, the prototype of realigned humanity, firstly for Israel, then for the nations, and finally for ‘all the earth’, of which Yahweh’s glory is purposed to be the fullness. Chapter 6 is framed by this movement from the ‘lord’ to the one who is sent, the seed of the servant.

### The Effective Word

9. And he said ‘Go! And you will say to this people,  
“Really hear! ... but you will not understand.

And really see! ... but you will not know”

10. Make fat the heart of this people!

And their ears make heavy and their eyes make blind,  
lest they see with their eyes and with their ears they hear,  
and their heart understands and they turn and they are healed.’

11. And I said, ‘How long, Lord?’

And he said, ‘Until the cities lie waste from lack of an inhabitant  
[*yôšēb*],

and the houses from lack of a human (*ādām*),

and the ground (*hā’ādāmā*) is laid waste to desolation,

12. and Yahweh sends the human (*hā’ādām*) far away,  
and great the abandonment in the midst of the earth.

13. And yet a tenth in it,

and it will turn and it will be for burning,  
like a mighty tree and like an oak,  
which in felling [become] a pillar to them,  
a seed of holiness, its pillar.

I understand the ‘mission of hardening’ as a two-stage process.<sup>90</sup> Firstly, the see-er must command ‘this people’ to really hear, but they will not understand; to really see, but they will not know (6:9).<sup>91</sup> At this stage the people are

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<sup>90</sup> See the scheme in K.T. Aitken, “Hearing and Seeing: Metamorphoses of a Motif in Isaiah 1–39,” in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings*, ed. P.R. Davies and D.J.A. Clines, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 144* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 12, 18–19.

<sup>91</sup> The imperative followed by an infinitive absolute has the function of strengthening the main verbal idea; the ‘exact nuance ... must be determined from context’. Allen P. Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 167–168.

able to hear and see as commanded, but as a continuation of the trajectory of their wilful refusal to ‘turn’ in *Isaiah* 1–5 they ‘will not’ understand and know. This can be read in the sense of refusal, rather than a future tense. The prophet is to declare to them what they are already doing,<sup>92</sup> and even now the prophet’s word might alert them to the precipice.

Secondly (and it is important to see the two stages), the see-er is commanded to *prevent* the people from seeing and hearing, lest they understand, turn and are healed (6:10).<sup>93</sup> I argue that the very command to ‘really see’ and ‘really hear’ (6:9) when met with the people’s wilful and persistent refusal to make sense of what they see and hear in the relation to Yahweh into which they are called, results in the fat heart, heavy ears and blinded eyes of 6:10. The organs of seeing, hearing and understanding, when not used for their intended purpose, will cease to function. The word refused thus effects the hardening. Similarly, the privileges which the people enjoy—of land, temple, king and cult—are the by-product of a particular relation to Yahweh, of a call to serve that they have refused, and even now are refusing, and are the means for a purpose from which they are now drawing back. Those who ‘will not’ understand and know as a result of their seeing and hearing, will finally attain the endpoint of their trajectory of refusal: the inability to understand and know. All this is brought about by one on an opposite trajectory, who has seen, heard and understood, and answers *hinēni* to the call to go, and who himself, as noted, is the seed of a different kind of future, and a living testimony that the future might have been otherwise for Israel and Judah.<sup>94</sup> The trajectory of life intersects with the trajectory of death *in* the mission of hardening.

Francis Landy has noted the clarity and order of the passage,<sup>95</sup> as it proclaims its message of coming disorder, using the language of uncreation. The meticulous design of the poetic structures reflects the sovereignty of the Lord ‘high and lifted up’, including the Lord’s meticulous design in the coming ‘disordered’ future. What is seen in verses 1–5 is critical for understanding 9–13 as an outworking of Yahweh’s sovereignty in the earth, and the outworking of the seraphim’s declaration of the true nature of earth in its relation to Yahweh. The uncreation of Judah’s ‘known world’ (11–13) is *in order that* ‘the

<sup>92</sup> Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*: 271. This might be the reason for the ‘mild’ negative לֹא (rather than the absolute negative אֵין). לֹא with the jussive expresses ‘a negative wish or dissuasion’, Page H. Kelley, 1992, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans). 173. See also Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Unabridged), (1996). 39.

<sup>93</sup> See Uhlig’s differentiation between ‘literal imperatives’ (what Isaiah is actually to do) in v9, and ‘figurative imperatives’ (which will result from his words) in v. 10a. Uhlig, “Too Hard?” 68.

<sup>94</sup> I suggest that this is also what Hezekiah’s healing was supposed to be (see *Isaiah* 38), and its failure as a prototype of Judah’s future is a demonstration of the failure of human kingship.

<sup>95</sup> Landy, “Strategies,” 70.

fullness of the earth [will be] (finally) Yahweh's glory'. Only when the see-er has seen the Lord 'high and lifted up', in the Lord's true relation to earth, is he able to see the coming destruction as an aspect of that sovereignty. Indeed his question in 6:11, 'How long, Lord?' frames the coming destruction within the purpose of God.<sup>96</sup> It is a question only able to be voiced by someone whose identity is formed by the knowledge of Yahweh's covenantal commitment to Yahweh's people.<sup>97</sup>

The sense of the passage is a kind of 'if ... then ...' construction. *If* really hearing, the people will not understand, and if really seeing, they will not know, *then* (and this is the second stage) the effect of the prophetic word is to 'make fat ... make heavy ... make blind'. This construction picks up the conditionality of judgement that is mentioned repeatedly in chapters 1–5<sup>98</sup> and makes it final by Judah's own choice. These people have not only severed their life-giving connection to their true King, but have parodied it,<sup>99</sup> effectively inoculating themselves against understanding, and the prophet now proclaims their inevitable fate. Such ongoing wilful resistance to Yahweh is the antithesis of the 'I' who really sees and hears, and who—rather than refusing the difficult wisdom arising out of his hearing and seeing—says 'send me'. Such a one can best be described as 'servant' of Yahweh. Thus a servant reverses the 'mission of hardening'.

Indeed, the mission of hardening may be best understood through the theme of reversal. As has emerged during 6:1–5, Israel and Judah's conception of the 'good order' of the earth in relation to Yahweh—the temple at the centre with the glory going out from it—has been reversed. In light of the seraphim's declaration, any glory of the temple is due solely to the glory of Yahweh that is the fullness of all the earth. If the people (and the prophet in his identification with them) are guilty of falsely offered sacrifice,<sup>100</sup> of the reversal of good and evil,<sup>101</sup> of the persistent practice of injustice,<sup>102</sup> and of seeing the world from the perspective of their covenant privilege with Yahweh,<sup>103</sup> rather than seeing the honour of their covenant call to demonstrate that Yahweh's glory is the earth's fullness, then they have reversed the word of Yahweh. They have manufactured and lived in a world of the reversed word, a world 'spoken' by unclean lips. In this way, the very word of Yahweh which was to have brought turning and healing will now bring inability to turn, and destruction.

<sup>96</sup> Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*: 57–59.

<sup>97</sup> As Childs comments this is the 'language of the Psalter', Childs, *Isaiah*: 57.

<sup>98</sup> E.g. 1:5, 16–20; 2:5 and chapter 5.

<sup>99</sup> 1:11–15.

<sup>100</sup> See footnote 39.

<sup>101</sup> 5:20.

<sup>102</sup> 1:16–31.

<sup>103</sup> 5:19.

## Conclusion

Miscall has astutely described chapter 6 as a *mise-en-abîme* of *Isaiah*.<sup>104</sup> It is a vision within a vision, a prophetic encounter within a prophecy, which as I have shown, distils and reveals the central concerns of the book of *Isaiah*, and which instructs the reader in how to read. The crux of its ‘first act’ (6:3b within 6:1–5) shows the twin poles of Yahweh and earth held together as designed. Israel and Judah, as Yahweh’s elect, have not only failed but refused to hold these poles together in their national life, thus locating themselves inevitably outside the glory of Yahweh.

I have argued that just as the ‘I’ of chapter 6 is complicit in the ‘realm’ of Judah (for the earth), and thus in Judah’s sin and lostness, so by his obedience he becomes complicit in the divine realm, relocating in his person, through costly obedience, the dislocated poles of Yahweh and earth. The narrative of the rebellion, hardening and demise of Judah, unfolding from *Isaiah* 1, peaks with the mission of hardening in chapter 6, where the text works simultaneously in the opposite direction on the canonical level, to bring about in its readers the distant future that it sees: the survival of the holy seed. The position of *Isaiah* 6 after chapters 1–5 is critical to its purpose of alerting the reader to Judah’s trajectory of destruction, and to the coming point-of-no-return, after which their intransigence will be fixed in an act of anticipatory judgement. The poetry works to draw readers into the identity of the ‘I’, so that out of uncleanness, ‘woe’ and death, will be sown the seed of a new humanity, a renewed ‘likeness’, who sees and understands, who hears and who answers ‘send me!’ Thus the solution to the final failure of Israel and Judah is pictured (though not yet named) as a ‘servant’.<sup>105</sup> I propose that this is the pattern for the Servant of Yahweh, the exemplar of a new kind of humanity, one who holds the poles of earth and Yahweh together in his person, which is taken up and explored in the servant poetry of *Isaiah* 40–55, and which will become the basis of Israel’s return, firstly to Yahweh, lord of all the earth, then to the land.

Chapter 6 not only reveals the proper relation of Yahweh and earth,<sup>106</sup> marking it as the centre of true seeing, but clarifies and separates readers in their response to it. It induces them to embrace either one future or the other: to remain part of the ‘sinning nation’ of chapters 1–5 whose end is woe,<sup>107</sup> or to identify with the ‘I’ of chapter 6; to become one who is ‘like’ by obedient relation to Yahweh, and so part of the holy fullness of the earth which is

<sup>104</sup> Miscall, *Isaiah*: 34. A *mise-en-abîme* (a term used in heraldry) is ‘an image within an image’; ‘the containment of an entity within another identical entity’ “*Mise-en-abyme*,” in *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2013).

<sup>105</sup> The threefold use of ‘*ādōnāy*’ in 6:1, 8 and 11, the ‘lord’ of the servant, supports this claim.

<sup>106</sup> As noted, the good order between Yahweh and earth is what is meant by *mišpāṭ* in chapters 40–55.

<sup>107</sup> Note the rhyme that links ‘woe’ to the nation in 1:4, *hōy* | *gōy*.

Yahweh's glory. Thus, through and beyond undoing and death, Yahweh is still creating Yahweh's people in Yahweh's likeness. Yahweh is still Yahweh *of hosts*, the Holy One *of Israel*, the God whose word is sent to bring its hearers to repentance and to bring about the future of which it speaks, through the one called to be 'servant'.