

## ***The Motif of Deafness and Blindness in Isaiah 6:9-10: A Contextual, Literary, and Theological Analysis***

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*Isa 6:9-10 is examined in its local (Isaiah 6) and broader (Isaiah 1-12) contexts, as well as in relation to the rest of the book and (briefly) extra-Isaianic passages of Scripture. Following a literary analysis in form, redactional, and rhetorical-critical terms, theological argumentation is developed consistent with the thesis of the paper. It is argued that the motif of deafness and blindness is a metaphor for a spiritual condition that (1) is brought on by the people themselves, (2) comprises a judgment from God, and (3) will ultimately be rectified by God himself "in that day" of salvation.*

*Key Words: blindness, deafness, judgment, sin, hardening*

The book of Isaiah is universally recognized as providing a major contribution to the OT prophetic corpus. Nevertheless, it has not been a book without controversial interpretive questions. The hermeneutical issues stem from its unusual literary structure and the contrasting message of its contents. In particular the sharp change in tone and prophetic perspective ( judgmental to salvific) between the first 39 chapters and the rest of the book has not gone unnoticed.

Prior to the modern historical-critical approach adopted by Isaianic scholarship today, Isaiah the son of Amos (1:1), an 8th-century BC prophet, was presumed to have been the author of the whole book. The prophet's perspective was understood to be both contemporary and future. And so, on the one hand we observe impending judgment upon a disobedient people and, on the other, a forward-looking hope to a great work of salvation **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא** ("in that day"), when Yahweh's presence would be radically experienced. Loosely, Isaiah 1-39

corresponded to the former; 40-66 to the latter. Few today would retain such an understanding of the book.<sup>1</sup>

As early as the mid-17th century some, for example the Dutch philosopher B. Spinoza (1632-77), were suggesting that chaps. 40ff. were derived from a 6th-century BC source. A century later, critical scholarship had developed to the point where Bernhard Duhm's famous commentary of 1892, attributing chaps. 1-39 to the preexilic prophet of Jerusalem, chaps. 40-55 to the era of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC, and chaps. 56-66 to a yet later period, was viewed as a reasonable explanation for the book's sources.<sup>2</sup> Essentially this First, Second, and Third Isaiah structure to the book is still retained today. However, the justification for viewing Third Isaiah as distinct from Second Isaiah has not been as strongly argued as the validity in maintaining the distinctive sources of First and Second Isaiah.

The rise of form criticism<sup>3</sup> provided another tool whereby literary units within a given part of Isaiah could be identified and its original historical, social, liturgical, or cultic setting allegedly determined. This procedure, of course, tended to fragment the book further as forms associated with a later period were found embedded in, say, First Isaiah.

Today, form criticism, while no means abandoned as a literary tool for Isaianic studies, is allocated a more modest exegetical role with the recognition that forms are more fluid than originally conceived and less subject to identification with some "ideal" form.

Most critical scholarship today would interpret the book of Isaiah within some redactional framework. Here, the challenge becomes that of attempting to understand the motives and literary and/or theological reasons the redactor(s) worked his existing sources into the final format we have today.<sup>4</sup>

Recently the question of redactional methodology with respect to the unity of the book of Isaiah has been raised. Two responses to this question may be discerned. Type A redactional approaches are "still concerned to keep separate the origin and development of tradition

1. Essentially, only the evangelical wing of Protestant scholarship; the majority of scholars today would hold with Clements that "only by doing violence to a reasoned and meaningful interpretation of many passages can such an assumption be defended" (R. E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Int* 36 [1982] 118).

2. Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HKAT 3/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892).

3. This critical tool has been commonly identified with Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) and his systematic study of "forms," for example, literary and oral units, often associated with different genres in the OT. See Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

4. John Barton, "Redaction Criticism," *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 45-60.

in 1-39 from that in 40-55, if not 40-66, even as the search for redactional unity proceeds."<sup>5</sup> In other words redactional reconstruction is sought only *within* the watertight framework of a First and Second (Third) Isaiah, with virtually no conscious connection considered to exist between the major parts of the book. These scholars "insist that the tradition-history of Second Isaiah be kept absolutely distinct from that of First Isaiah, until late in the post exilic period. Even then, the merger of First with Second Isaiah is externally imposed, and does not grow internally out of either tradition complex."<sup>6</sup>

When, in the past, the question of how Second Isaiah came to be linked to First Isaiah was raised, the answer was typically either patently unsatisfactory (for example, the need for a later editor to make full economic use of a single scroll of finite length) or highly speculative (for example, Mowinckel's theory that Second Isaiah was the product of a "school" or body of "disciples" of Isaiah the prophet that supposedly continued to exist for about two centuries<sup>7</sup>).

Most recent Isaianic scholarship has recognized a more conscious connection between First and Second (Third) Isaiah. "The distinguishing feature of this form of redactional approach (Type B) is the lack of emphasis on the strict independence of First from Second Isaiah in terms of editorial development or theoretical structural identity."<sup>8</sup> According to Seitz this understanding of the literary relationship between First and Second Isaiah is characterized by (1) minimal discussion of First Isaiah as a closed book, (2) the probability of redactional influence running in both directions (that is, from First to Second and vice versa), and (3) the probability that First Isaiah received early "redactional enrichment" intended to key these chapters (1-39) to Second Isaiah.<sup>9</sup> While each scholar may justify a redactionally oriented approach that links First and Second Isaiah in different ways, the distinguishing feature that unites proponents of this approach is their insistence on some kind of *literary relationship* between the two Isaiah traditions.

5. Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 24. Scholars such as O. Steck, O. Kaiser, H. Barth, J. Vermeylen, and H. Wildberger may be taken as recent proponents of this approach.

7. Sigmund Mowinckel, *Jesaja-disiplene: Profetien fra Jesaja til Jeremia* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1925). Clement's observations are noteworthy: the school's "existence over a period of at least two centuries is postulated without any clear identification of where or how such a group maintained itself. The argument in fact rapidly becomes completely circular in that the existence of such a group is attested from the book, the structure of which is assumed to be illuminated by the identification of such disciples" (Clements, "Unity of the Book of Isaiah," 119

8. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*, 26.

9. *Ibid.* The following OT scholars would hold to a Type B redactional approach: P. R. Ackroyd, J. Becker, W. Brueggemann, R. E. Clements, and R. Rendtorff.

## THE PLACE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ISAIAH 1-12

In conformity with the two basic redactional approaches noted above, Isaiah 1-12 tends to be viewed in the one instance as only legitimately contextualized within chaps. 1-39 (Type A) and in the other instance as displaying evidence of connections beyond 1-39 and into 40-66 (Type B).

O. Kaiser is typical of the Type A approach: "1-12 contain primarily words against the nation itself, 13-23 words against foreign peoples, 24-35 prophecies of salvation."<sup>10</sup> While willing to speak of First Isaiah as an "eschatological proclamation" because of the intrusion of apocalyptic themes, Kaiser still insists on viewing 1-39 as an essentially independent 8th-century work, in which "the more untidy dimensions of Isaiah's growth (into the Maccabean period) are factored in."<sup>11</sup> Vermeylen<sup>12</sup> also insists on the independence of First Isaiah from Second Isaiah. First Isaiah, established in its final form by about 480 BC is considered to reflect a theology of history, "After the time of misfortune for Judah and Jerusalem (1-12) comes that of judgment on the nations (13-27), as a prelude to the triumph of the people of Yahweh and Zion (28-35)."<sup>13</sup> Chapters 36-39 are borrowed with modifications from 2 Kings 18-20. Chapters 56-66 were added to the two independent First and Second Isaiah traditions later, in Nehemiah's time. The final redactor is also considered to be responsible for further "relecture" (Seitz's "redactional enrichment") throughout 1-66.

In summary then, the position of 1-12 in relation to the rest of the book adopted by Type A redaction is one in which (1) 1-12 is considered only within the scope of 1-39, and (2) First, Second, and Third Isaiah comprised independent works in their original form but now betray evidence of later redactional enrichment.

By way of contrast, and not surprisingly, the Type B redactional approach permits a more flexible and fluid relationship to exist between 1-12 and 1-39, and indeed in 1-66.

Two representatives of this approach will be briefly reviewed in order to show how differently the role and literary function of 1-12 is perceived with this approach relative to the Type A approach.

Starting with the assumption that 40-55 originated in the 6th century BC, within a Babylonian historical context, Clements asks,

10. O. Kaiser, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1984) 232.

11. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*, 20.

12. Jacques Vermeylen, "L'unité du livre d'Isaïe," in *The Book of Isaiah* (ed. J. Vermeylen; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989) 11-53.

13. *Ibid.*, 34.

"... what have these chapters to do with the earlier prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem preserved in 1-39 of the book?"<sup>14</sup> He lists three options: (1) the author of 40-55 had nothing to do with the original Isaiah and neither did his prophecies (Type A), (2) 40-55 formed a sequel to the earlier prophecies of Isaiah, (3) 40-55 "was intended to develop and enlarge upon prophetic sayings from Isaiah of Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup>

Clements prefers the third option and justifies this redactional relationship by noting two themes that appear in First Isaiah and that, Clements argues, appear to be consciously developed in Second Isaiah—namely, the motif of blindness and deafness and the divine election of Israel. Thus, while 1-12 finds its primary context in 1-39 since it forms a part of the original prophetic corpus of Isaiah of Jerusalem (8th century BC), the rest of the book (40-66) is not to be viewed as an exclusive construction apart from material found in 1-12.

In sharp contrast to Clements, but still within a Type B redactional approach, Ackroyd sees 1-39 receiving redactional enrichment prior to the time of its final formulation. This enrichment is designed to key readers into themes present in 40-55. Thus 1-12 have been deliberately shaped to function in the final form of the entire book.<sup>16</sup> He also recognizes important links between chaps. 6 and 40 that serve to bridge First and Second Isaiah. Chapters 36-39 serve a transitional function. Redactional fluidity is maintained even to the extent that Ackroyd sees no adequate basis for the supposition that 40-55 were added to an already-completed book of (First) Isaiah.

Naturally, with the widely divergent approaches to the redactional reconstructions believed to be present within the whole book of Isaiah, questions of chronology and authenticity cannot be answered by the critics with certainty. Chapters 1-12, to the extent that they are believed to be a legitimate part of First Isaiah, would be considered to be a part of the authentic oracles of the 8th-century prophet of Jerusalem. Those parts within 1-12 that are perceived to reflect later redactional activity (relecture, redactional enrichment; for example, 4:2-6<sup>17</sup>) are, of course, not attributed to the prophet himself and assigned a much later dating.

14. R. E. Clements, "Beyond Tradition History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of Isaiah's Themes," *JSOT* 31 (1985) 95-113, esp. 100.

15. *Ibid.*, 101.

16. Peter R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah I–XII: Presentation of a Prophet," *VT* 29 (1978) 19-21.

17. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 165: "The question of authenticity . . . continues to be a matter of dispute . . . we will have to let it go with a general statement that it was 'post-exilic.'"

Most critics see no special significance in the term "Zion" in 1-12, viewing it as essentially synonymous with Jerusalem,<sup>18</sup> and even Seitz focuses his attention on a Zion theology in chaps. 40ff., particularly the Servant passages, and makes virtually no reference to Zion in 1-12.<sup>19</sup> This essentially indifferent stance to Zion and its theological significance is somewhat surprising since a case could be made that Zion theology provides one of the keys to understanding the whole book.<sup>20</sup>

Having briefly examined the place and significance of Isaiah 1–12 in broad redactional terms, I now want to go on and consider the literary, contextual, and rhetorical features of Isa 6:9-10, the text that forms the focus of this study.

#### LITERARY-CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF ISAIAH 6:9-10

6:9 And he said, "Go, and say to this people,	וַיֹּאמֶר לְדַ וַאֲמַרְתָּ לְעַם הַזֶּה
'Hear and hear, but do not understand;	שְׁמַעוּ שְׁמַעוּ וְאַל תִּבְיִנוּ
See and see, but do not perceive.'	וּרְאוּ רְאוּ וְאַל תִּדְעוּ:
6:10 Make the heart of this people fat	הַשְׁמֵן לִבֵּיהֶם הַזֶּה
and their ears heavy	וְאָזְנוֹי הַכִּבֵּד
And their eyes blind	וְעֵינֵי הַשֵּׁע
Lest they see with their eyes,	פֶּן יִרְאוּ בְעֵינֵי
And hear with their ears,	וּבְאָזְנוֹי וְשָׁמַע
And understand with their hearts,	וְלִבָּבּוֹ יִבִּין
And return and be healed."	וְשָׁב וְרִפָּא לוֹ:

As Craig Evans has remarked, "There are no significant variants in the Masoretic Text," and the translation given above seeks to retain the full force of the *qal* imperatives in v. 9 ("hear" שְׁמַעוּ; "see" רְאוּ) and the *hiphil* imperatives in v. 10 ("make fat" הַשְׁמֵן; "heavy" הַכִּבֵּד; "blind" הַשֵּׁע).<sup>21</sup>

18. For example, *ibid.*, 30: "Isaiah uses Zion and Jerusalem without distinguishing them in any way."

19. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*, 202-5. He views Zion as the innocent Servant depicted in 52:13-53:12, "a controversial and unusual interpretation . . ." (p. 204).

20. Jon D. Levenson (*Sinai and Zion* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985]) provides an exception to this general trend, though he does not restrict himself to the book of Isaiah.

21. Craig A. Evans, "The Text of Isaiah 6:9,10," *ZAW* 94 (1982) 415-18. In this interesting study Evans has shown how later text traditions "observed a marked tendency to move away from the harsh, telic understanding of the Hebrew text," where Yahweh himself makes the people's hearts hardened, to "efforts aimed at mitigating the severity of the Hebrew" and where "the responsibility is shifted from Yahweh . . . to the people themselves" (p. 418).

The traditional approach to these verses views them as fitting naturally within the immediate context of Isaiah's call conveyed to him in a vision.<sup>22</sup> A form-critical approach would likewise see these verses fitting within one of two generally accepted types of prophetic call and commissioning—namely, one which involves a vision (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19).<sup>23</sup>

Often the form is understood in terms of a divine throne room scene where the prophet is allowed to be present through a visionary experience. Thus Wildberger confidently asserts that

the narrative call of Isaiah is constructed on the basis of a vision of the heavenly council, used to send a messenger out on a very specific task. The form, constructed in this way because it follows an established pattern, is replete with elements which describe an actual inaugural vision.<sup>24</sup>

Of course Wildberger, like all Type A critics, views Isaiah's commission within those portions of chaps. 1-39 that would be attributed to the prophet of Jerusalem—generally those oracles of judgment and narratives depicting an 8th-century historical context. Such a context would fit well with the content of the message of 6:9-10.

Interestingly, a proponent of a Type B redactional approach such as Seitz also sees the divine council that forms the context for Isaiah's visionary call in chap. 6 as deliberately being utilized in 40:1-8 (the introduction to Second Isaiah). "The purpose of the utilization of an older scene of prophetic commissioning at the opening of Second Isaiah was to ground this new form of prophetic discourse in the same divine council responsible for Isaiah's proclamation, thereby maintaining a degree of continuity" between First and Second Isaiah.<sup>25</sup>

As noted previously, each of the literary-critical approaches (form, redactional Types A and B) suffers from a high degree of speculative reconstruction. This may be demonstrated both by the plethora of theories designed to account for the content and structure of the book and by the more recent trend towards a holistic view of the book and its message.

The perspective to the book adopted here in effect extends the Type B approach to suggest that the elements of continuity observed

22. For example, E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965-72). Also J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): "Each element (of the vision) leads to the next . ." (p. 186).

23. W Zimmerli (*Ezekiel: A Commentary* [trans. R. E. Clements; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979]) has drawn attention to these two forms—the vision call/commission, and the call where an initial reluctance and excuses must be overcome (pp. 97-100).

24. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 272.

25. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*, 197.

throughout the book attest to the work of a single redactor who is also its author, both being the 8th-century prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem.

In the light of these introductory remarks, the thesis I propose may now be stated. The motif of blindness and deafness is a metaphor for a spiritual condition that (1) is brought on by the people themselves, (2) comprises a judgment from God, and (3) will ultimately be rectified by God himself "in that day" of salvation.

This thesis will be developed by carefully examining 6:9-10, both rhetorically and in its immediate and extended contexts, and by noting other passages in the book where the same motif is employed, noting any rhetorical features in those passages that may serve to highlight Isaiah's meaning. Finally, I will briefly examine extra-Isaianic passages (especially the Psalms) that likewise may help to elucidate the significance of this motif.

### CONTEXTUAL AND RHETORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Within the context of chap. 6, vv. 9-10 form a part of Isaiah's commission associated with the prophet-Yahweh exchange in vv. 8-13. The commission itself follows directly from Isaiah's willingness to serve as God's messenger (v. 8). God's somber message to his people would consist of a warning of impending judgment via prophetic word (vv. 9-10), which in turn would lead to physical judgment via destruction (v. 11) and ultimately exile (v. 12). For a faithful remnant, God's message includes a word of hope (v. 13).

The commission itself is found in the context of the vision that "King" Yahweh granted to Isaiah in the year that "King" Uzziah died (740 BC, 6:1). The contrast between Isaiah's personal experience and the experience of those to whom he was sent is clear: Isaiah "saw the Lord" (v. 1), heard the voice of the Seraphim (v. 3), heard the voice of him who called out (v. 4), *saw* the King with his own *eyes* (v. 5b), and *heard* the voice of the Lord (v. 8a). The purification process of v. 7, which entails cleansed lips and results in forgiven sin, is paradigmatic of the needs of the people, as well as functioning as a necessary prelude to Isaiah's speaking on behalf of Yahweh.<sup>26</sup>

The rhetorical unit chosen for investigation is a rather small one and has been provided (Hebrew and translation) at the beginning of the previous section. Even though the motif of deafness and blindness in Isaiah 6 is encompassed within only these two verses (9-10),

26. Contra Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah: 1-39*, 185), who suggests that "the alienated condition [of the prophet] and the cleansing from it are primary and the hearing of the message is secondary."

there are several noteworthy rhetorical features that help convey the burden of the prophet's message.

The first consists of *repetition*. The prophet skillfully uses several levels of repetition to achieve, via this powerful rhetorical device, his intended effect. To begin with, we may note the repetition of *words, sounds, and verb forms*.

1. words:	שְׁמוֹעַ . . . וְרָאוּ . . . רָאוּ	(9)
	יְרָאֵה . . . יִשְׁמַע	(10)
2. sounds:	שְׁמָעוּ . . . תְּבִינּוּ . . . רָאוּ . . . תִּדְעוּ	(9b)
	הִשְׁמִין . . . הִכְבֵּד . . . הִשַׁע	(10a)
3. verb forms:	juss . . . impv . . . juss . . . impv	(9b, Qal)
	impv . . . impv . . . impv	(10b, Hiphil)

To an orally dominant society, repetitive use of words, sounds (in this case the 2mp endings and characteristic *hiphil* preformative), and verb forms as noted above would combine to produce a powerful rhetorical effect, which would serve to reinforce and complement the content of the message itself. A kind of cumulative, compounding effect is produced that "drives home" the message in a format designed to aid memory retention.

In addition to the reinforcing effect, the repetition of words and especially "the utilization of the infinitive absolutes (שְׁמוֹעַ . . . רָאוּ) intensifies the idea of the verb and expresses as well the long continuance of an action."<sup>27</sup>

We also note the repetition of *phrases*. These function as a *contrasting* device: "but do not understand" (וְאַל־תְּבִינּוּ), "but do not perceive" (וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ). The certainty of the action, though with negative overtones that immediately come into effect, is underscored.<sup>28</sup>

A somewhat negative tone, very appropriate to the judgment implicit in the commission itself, is also established by the aloof description God uses twice to describe the people of Israel—namely, עַם הַזֶּה ("this people," 9a and 10a)—in sharp contrast to the more endearing term עַמִּי "my people."

The *structure* of v. 10 also manifests *repetition*.

Make . . . heart/fat, ears/heavy, eyes/blind (10a)

Lest . . . see/eyes, hear/ears, understand/hearts (10b)

27. Yehoshua Gitay, *Isaiah and His Audience: The Structure and Meaning of Isaiah 1-12* (Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991) 124. This enduring quality is reflected in several of the translations: "Keep on hearing" (G. K. Beale), "Be ever hearing" (Niv), "Hear continually" (H. Wildberger), and so on.

28. According to J. Weingreen (*A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959]), the לֹא functions as an "immediate prohibition" (as opposed to the permanent prohibition expressed by לֹא־, p. 77).

Here again, repetition of couplings serves to aid in lodging the content vividly in the mind.

The second major rhetorical device employed by the writer is that of chiasm. Verse 10 is organized in a parallel chiastic manner that emphasizes the role of the physical organs and their associated status (used metaphorically, of course).

Chiasm—of organs heart

	ears	(10a)
	eyes	
		⌋
	eyes	
	ears	(10b)
	hearts	
—of status	fat	
	heavy	(10a, malfunction)
	blind	
		⌋
	see	
	hear	(10b, way of restoration)
	understand	

The repetition of structure in v. 10 and the chiasm both serve, via physical analogy, to underscore (1) the finality of the condition, namely, spiritual impotence and irresponsiveness; and (2) the comprehensiveness of the condition. Every organ of potential divine-human communication is malfunctioning. Note also how the chiasm of v. 10 pivots around the word ⌋ ("lest"), which serves thereby to draw attention to the first half of the chiasm consisting of divine judgment via prophetic activity in contrast to the second half, the way of salvation spurned by the people of Israel.<sup>29</sup>

Isaiah's commission was both clear and unusual, and not without irony (another rhetorical feature!).<sup>30</sup> He was charged with the task of assuring the people of Israel (and Judah) that despite their "listening" and "looking" they would not perceive spiritual realities (v. 9) because of their sins (as the larger context of the book clearly demonstrates). As a consequence, God will also confirm their choice, as a divine judgment, through the prophet's ministry (10a). Ironically (and perversely), the more the prophet communicates God's word of warning and hope, the more the people will harden their hearts. In the

29. The conjunction ⌋ occurs five other times in Isaiah (27:3; 28:22; 36:18; 48:5, 7), and no special characteristic is discernible in the way Isaiah employs the term. The usual meaning "in case that . . ." is maintained throughout, as here in 6:10.

30. See Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 1.255 for an expansion of this feature.

process they will become incapable of turning to the One who alone can reverse this suicidal course (10b).

## SIN, JUDGMENT, AND REVERSAL IN OTHER ISAIANIC PASSAGES

I will now examine other portions of Isaiah's prophecy that utilize the deafness and blindness motif to support the thesis that this theme contains primarily three elements: its root cause in the sins of the people, God's response of judgment, and a future reversal of this spiritual malaise.

### *I. The Spiritual Condition of the Nation: Deaf and Blind*

Already in the opening verses of the first chapter of the book, the fundamental condition of the people is established, with the use of words very reminiscent of 6:9-10. The creation is called to listen (שָׁמַעוּ) and give ear (הִשְׁמַעוּ) to the fact that Yahweh's own people have rebelled (1:2), acted corruptly, abandoned, despised, and turned away from God (1:4). In consequence, the rulers and people are urged to repent and to שָׁמַעוּ דְּבַר יְהוָה, and הִשְׁמַעוּ תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ (1:10). In ironic contrast to mere animals who still know (יָדַע) their owner, Israel's condition is לֹא יָדַע and לֹא הִתְבּוֹנֵן (1:3)—precisely the verbs used in 6:9. In its development, 1:2-9 clearly parallels 6:9-10. In both passages each of the following conditions hold:

1. Israel has a failure of understanding and knowing (1:3; cf. 6:9).
2. Israel has turned away from Yahweh (1:4; cf. 6:10).
3. Israel is sick from the head to feet and, by implication, in need of healing (1:5; cf. 6:10).
4. Yet Israel continues to rebel and refuses to turn and be healed (1:5; cf. 6:10).
5. Destruction follows (1:7-8; cf. 6:11), but a remnant remains (1:9; cf. 6:13).

Though 6:9-10 focuses on the fact *that* the people suffer deafness and blindness, it is helpful to enquire what it is the people actually fail to see, hear, and understand.

According to 5:12, "they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they see (רָאוּ) the work of his hands." In their sinful blindness they even challenged God to "hasten his work, that we may see (נִרְאֶה) it" and his purpose to come to pass "that we may know (נִדְעֶה) it" (5:19)! And yet, in reality of course, God was continually working in their midst.

Had not God assured, and subsequent events ensured, deliverance for Ahaz, king of Judah, from the Syro-Ephraimitic threat (Isaiah 7-8, 732 BC)?<sup>31</sup> Had not God inclined his ear and heard, opened his eyes and seen (37:17) in miraculous response to Hezekiah's prayer for deliverance from Sennacherib? Had not God spoken, both through his הוֹרָה which he had graciously provided (42:21) and through his uttered word, the דְּבַר יְהוָה, communicated through his messenger the prophet (6:8)? The people of Judah and Jerusalem failed to see God's hand of judgment in the Assyrian invasion and dispersion of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, and in the destruction already experienced in Judah (1:7-8).<sup>32</sup> In other words, "This is the height of blindness: not to recognize that Yahweh is God in judgment as in deliverance, and that nothing happens to them that is not his will."<sup>33</sup>

Isa 29:9-24 is another important rhetorical unit for our study in that all three aspects of the motif of deafness and blindness are clearly interwoven in this pericope—that is, willful sin, divine judgment, future reversal. I shall concentrate here only on the sin of the people that is represented by the metaphor of deafness, though this is not the major strand in the passage.

In a context of woes pronounced upon both Israel (28:1) and Judah (29:1) for their sins of pride, rebellion, and hypocrisy, the prophet exclaims, "Blind *yourselves* and be blind . . ." (29:9a). Further, a part of the indictment brought by the Lord against his people is religious hypocrisy, where "*they* remove their hearts far from me" (29:13b). Their hearts have become fat and calloused (cf. 6:10a), and their hearts suffer from a failure to understand (cf. 6:10b) that God is not impressed with a people who "draw near with their words" and provide lip-service honor but at the same time "remove their hearts from me" (29:13).

In a massive failure to understand the holiness and omniscience of God, the political rulers scheme and plot "in a dark place" (29:15).<sup>34</sup> In a remarkable reversal that betrays their own blindness and lack of understanding, they ask rhetorically, וַיִּיָּדַעַנּוּ מִי רֵאָנָנִי

31. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1972) 271-75.

32. John D. W. Watts (*Isaiah 1-33* [WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985]) notes that while vv. 4-7 "evades dating and historical identification," probably the Northern Kingdom is in mind because of the "distinction drawn between it (Israel) and Zion in v. 8" (p. 18). Wildberger (*Isaiah 1-12*, 28) holds v. 8 to apply to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC.

33. J. L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB 20; New York: Doubleday, 1968) 47.

34. Again, the historical circumstances are unclear; in the light of 30:1-2 where plans and alliances made with respect to Egypt are mentioned, Oswalt (*Isaiah 1-39*, 536) may be right in seeing 29:15 as referring to Hezekiah's "decision to break the vassal covenant with Assyria and to rely on help from Egypt" (2 Kgs 18:7b, 21). The latter point, however, is itself not without difficulties (see Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny*, 72ff.).

("who sees us, and who knows?")! Their perversion reaches an ironic climax in their own assessment of Yahweh their Maker as one with לֹא יָדְבִיר ("no understanding").<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in an eschatologically oriented chapter (42), Yahweh expresses his frustration with his people who, because of their stubborn insistence on remaining deaf and blind, failed to be Yahweh's true servant or faithful messenger to the nations:

Hear you deaf! And look you blind, that you may see. Who is blind . . . or so deaf . . . who is so blind . . . or so blind as the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; your ears are open, but none hears. (42:18-20)

Rhetorically the prophet asks, "Who among you will give ear (יִשְׁמָעוּ) to this? Who will give heed and listen (יִשְׁמְעוּ) hereafter?" (42:23). The reality and extent of the people's sin, their hardness of heart, and their blindness to the work of God in their midst, all point to the fact that "the Israelites had not yet perceived the reality of God, and so they were messengers who cannot hear the message nor see where they are going."<sup>36</sup>

## II. *God's Judgment upon Israel: Deafness and Blindness*

It is this aspect, judgment, that is being emphasized in 6:9-10. In the end, God is not mocked; if the people persist in their willful blindness, then God confirms them in their chosen state. It is important to maintain this balance if the mistaken notion that "the nation was forbidden to understand" or that Isaiah was "to preach so that men cannot do what they have been commanded [by God] to do" is to be avoided.<sup>37</sup>

Wildberger is correct in noting that "it would be wrong . . . not to recognize the polarity between Yahweh as the cause for hardening and Israel's own role in the hardening."<sup>38</sup> And, as Clements notes, the element of forewarning contained in 6:9-10, "with its implication that God knew in advance that the people would not respond to his message, provides an essential basis for the understanding of it."<sup>39</sup>

35. Oswalt (*Isaiah 1-39*, 536) observes that "since Adam and Eve human beings have been trying to hide from God, our own blindness deluding us into believing he is more blind."

36. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 48. Interestingly, a few other passages use the motif of blindness and deafness in a non-condemning way to represent those who are oppressed and desperate, and in a salvific context (for example, 35:5; 42:7, 16).

37. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 1.256-58.

38. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 273.

39. R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 77.

That deafness and blindness represent a divine response of judgment to the people's choice to be deaf and blind to the presence and claims of God can also be seen in the following passages.

Isa 1:10-15 comprises a unit in which the prophet clearly uses several rhetorical devices with the intent of underscoring the divine response to the people's sin of religious hypocrisy. The basic structure is skillfully constructed in terms of an *inclusio*, which also manifests linear development.

1. The rulers and people are exhorted to hear and give ear to the word and commands of God. (1:10)
2. A cascading sequence of activities relating to cultic worship follows, which includes "*multiplied sacrifices*," "the *blood of bulls*" (1:11), and "*appearing before me*" (literally, "to see [רָאֵתָהּ] my face"). (1:12)
3. God's response to their *multiplied* prayers in his *presence* with hands covered with *blood* will be to hide his eyes (יְיָ) and to not listen (שָׁמַעַתְּ). (1:15)

As the people demonstrate their deafness and blindness in failing to respond to God's call for sincerity in worship, so God will turn a deaf ear and blind eye towards them in judgment.

Yahweh's judgment upon his people is seen also in 29:9-24, where the Lord "has shut your eyes, the prophets" (29:10)—a specific grouping within those in 6:10 whose eyes God would make blind. The result, the outworking of divine judgment, is that the "entire vision" (29:11a) that Isaiah has seen and sought to communicate as God's messenger is effectively like a sealed book, inaccessible to both the "literate" and illiterate. Furthermore, those who "blind themselves"<sup>40</sup> will "become blind" (29:9), and "the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed" (29:14b).

Here, the influence of wisdom literature is prominent, where "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" (Ps 111:10) and where the way of the fool is right in his own eyes (Prov 12:15). In a similar vein, the woe (הָרָה) pronounced at the beginning of 29:15 represents God's judgment upon fools who devise plans with no reference to God and who ask, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"

A final passage to be considered where blindness and divine judgment coincide is found within the rhetorical unit 44:6-28, specifically 44:18.

They do not *know* (לֹא יָדְעוּ)

Nor do they *understand* (וְלֹא יָבִינֻהוּ)

40. הַשְׁתַּעֲשִׂעוּ, *hithpael*, imv. mp. from שָׁעַע "be blinded"; BDB 1044a.

For (ִׁ) he has smeared over (ִׁ) their *eyes* so that they cannot *see*, and their *hearts* so that they cannot *comprehend*.<sup>41</sup>

The people engaged in idol construction and idol worship have now become like their idols who cannot see, know, or understand! This is not merely an impersonal (and potentially arbitrary) consequence of idolatry; it is, rather, a specific judgment upon the people from God, fitting well with the prophet's mission to "make the heart of this people fat . . . and their eyes blind," 6:10a.<sup>42</sup>

### III. *A Future Reversal of Deafness and Blindness*

I begin with the unit 43:8-13, since this passage in some ways represents a transition between judicial blindness and total restoration of sight. The former is associated primarily with preexilic times; the latter in some future eschatological time.

43:8 Bring out the people who are blind,  
even though they have eyes,  
and the deaf, even though they have ears.

The language of 6:9-10 is unmistakable. But now "the very people that 6:9, 10 condemned to continued blindness are to be released. The period of cursed judgment (6:11-13) is past (cf. 40:2)."<sup>43</sup> In what appears to be a "trial speech," Israel is called to know, believe, and understand the sovereignty and uniqueness of Yahweh, and to act as a faithful witness to God's works. This, of course, implies the ability to "see" the works of God. Furthermore, Israel is called to be a worthy servant of Yahweh, and this implies the ability to "hear" the Master, 43:10.

The unit 29:17-21 refers to a time period described as "a little while" (NASB), "a very short time" (NIV), "very soon now" (Watts, V.I,

41. The verb ִׁ, a *qal* pf. 3ms., is either a hapax legomenon from ִִׁׁ ("be besmeared," BDB 377c) or is from ִִׁׁ meaning "to overlay or besmear" (BDB 376b). In either case the subject may be "he" or "it," with the context determining the most appropriate. Some attribute the blinding action to the idol itself (for example, Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 138: "it has closed their eyes"); others ignore the agent of action altogether (for example, NIV, "their eyes are plastered over"). The former attribute too much to an impotent idol; the latter seem to ignore the force of the causative ִׁ ("for . . ."). For these reasons, and the fact that other contexts clearly assign the blinding action to God himself, it is best to translate as above (with NASB). Contra Claus Westermann (*Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 151), who believes "this verse (44:18) is out of place both in style and content," the verse fits very well the context of 44:6-28 and connects well especially with v. 19 ("no understanding").

42. G. K. Beale, "Isaiah 6:9-13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry," *VT* 41 (1991) 257-78. In this provocative article, Beale develops this identification extensively.

43. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 133.

p. 387); also reference is made to בְּיָמֵם־הַהֵוא (29:18). Obviously, there is a distinct eschatological orientation to the passage: it will be a day of reversal when the afflicted and needy shall rejoice in the Lord, and the ruthless will come to an end (29:19-20). Significantly, it will be a day of rejoicing when "the deaf shall hear" (שָׁמְעוּ) and "the eyes of the blind shall see" (עֵינֵי עִוְרִים תִּרְאֶינָה) 29:18.

In sharp contrast to the willful blind and those made blind by Yahweh who cannot read the sealed book (29:8-12), these deaf shall indeed hear the words of a book (29:18). Who are *these* former deaf and blind who now hear and see? They are identified with the "afflicted" (or humble) and "needy"—those who were oppressed by the "ruthless," the "scorner," and those "intent on doing evil." These latter will come to an end, be finished, and be cut off (29:20).

This eschatological perspective is brought into yet sharper relief in chap. 35. The precise meaning of this chapter, especially in terms of the time periods associated with its progressive fulfillment, is difficult to establish. Oswalt's cautionary note is well taken: since we are dealing with poetry, "it is improper to attempt to make poetry fit into a wholly cognitive mode. Poetry speaks to the affective side of the personality . . . any attempt to reduce the imagery to simple literary statements is an inappropriate method of interpretation."<sup>44</sup>

On that eschatological day, a day of vengeance and recompense upon evildoers but a day of salvation for those "anxious of heart" (35:4),

the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. (35:5)

On that glorious day, there will be permitted no blindness, deafness, or any other infirmity—spiritual or physical. Only the redeemed will be permitted to walk "the Highway of Holiness" to Zion; the unclean and fools will not travel that road (35:8-9). Zion, the focal point of Yahweh's presence and activity, the place where God is represented as ruling, caring, and protecting the true people of God, will be seen in all its glory and majesty by those whose eyes are opened to its reality. By contrast, the blind and deaf who insist on ignoring the divine presence and activity in their midst shall only experience the retributive justice of the God who reigns in Zion.

And so we see that, in the end, Isaiah's message to his people (6:9-10), while a somber one for those who persist in their blindness

44. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 621. Cf. Watts (*Isaiah 34-66*, 14ff.), who treats the entire chapter rather restrictively in terms of pilgrims on their way to Zion following Edom's fall. While this may be one legitimate historical fulfillment, the language of chap. 35 appears grander and more glorious, and probably finds its ultimate referent in the day of the new heavens and new earth (65:17ff.).

and who refuse to turn to Yahweh and find healing, also provides (implicitly) the message of hope laid out in the eschatological era of contrasts and reversal. There are some whose eyes will be opened, who will hear, who will find healing and joy—everlasting joy (35:10)—as they march steadfastly towards Zion, the city of God.<sup>45</sup>

#### THE MOTIF OF DEAFNESS AND BLINDNESS IN EXTRA-ISAIANIC PASSAGES

It is instructive to see the extent to which other OT passages harmonize with the theology of Isa 6:9-10 presented above. I shall consider briefly Psalms 135 and 58.

The theology of Ps 135:8-18 reflects precisely the judgmental aspects of deafness and blindness. With respect to the idols of "the nations" (135:15), the Psalmist observes that "they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear" (135:16-17). The point of describing these characteristics is to contrast very vividly the utter impotence and inability of the idols to impact historical reality to any degree whatsoever—they are all merely "the works of man's hands" (135:15b).

Significantly, this reference follows immediately after the list of the ways Yahweh *has* impacted historical reality (135:8-12).<sup>46</sup> The connection between the idol's characteristics and Israel's own inability to comprehend Yahweh's activity is seen in the structure of Ps 135:8-18.

1. Yahweh has acted mightily in Israel's history. (8-12)
2. Yahweh will judge his people. (14)
3. The idols of the nations "have eyes but do not see." (16-17)
4. All who make or trust idols "will be like them." (18)

The rhetorical effect of this structure is clear: just as dumb idols cannot see, hear, or comprehend Yahweh's activities in history, neither can those who commit themselves to the false gods represented by the idols. They too will become blind, deaf, and incapable of discerning Yahweh's mighty acts in history and of responding to his word.

45. While it has not been my intent to prove single Isaianic authorship, the passages reviewed here regarding sin, judgment, and reversal, do tend to substantiate the claim made earlier concerning a common redactor and author (p. 10). This assumption gains plausibility in the remarkably common theological perspective vis-à-vis the fact and consequences of willful blindness and deafness. As recounted above, the motif of spiritual blindness finds expression in chaps. 1, 5, 6, 29, and 42. The consequent judgment of Yahweh to this specific pathological condition is seen in chaps. 1, 6, 29, 44. Eschatological hope of reversal of blindness is expressed in chaps. 29, 35, 42, 43. In short, all these themes are remarkably well harmonized between so-called First and Second Isaiah.

46. Cf. Ps 115:3, "He (Yahweh) does whatever he pleases."

Furthermore, the element of judgment is present. As Beale notes, "the reader of the Psalm is to deduce that worshipers of idols will be judged by being made to resemble the idols portrayed in vv. 15-17."<sup>47</sup>

The willful deafness of Israel, its subsequent and inevitable judgment, and the ultimate vindication of God's faithful remnant is also seen in Psalm 58. Here, the wicked are likened to "a *deaf* cobra that stops up its ear, so that it does not *hear* the voice of charmers" (58:4-5). The analogy is clear: wicked Israel chooses not to hear the appeals of Yahweh to repent—to turn and be healed (Isa 6:10). The imprecatory psalm expresses the call for justice to prevail and for such willful blindness and deafness to be judged (58:6-9). Finally, in contrast to the deaf wicked, the righteous will rejoice when they see the vengeance of God. And the desire of the righteous, who indeed "see" Yahweh in history and "hear" his word and who understand Yahweh's presence in both righteousness and judgment, will be finally fulfilled when "men will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous, and surely there is a God who judges on earth'" (58:10-11).

#### WILLFUL DEAFNESS AND BLINDNESS: SOME THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

Theologically, our text (Isa 6:9-10) expresses the propensity of the human heart to reject God and his ways for a way that seems right to the individual but that in fact leads to death (Prov 14:12). This tendency began in the Garden of Eden and continued in the days of Noah and at Babel.

Even in the wilderness, at the birth of the nation, Israel struggled to remain faithful to God—to understand the significance of the Exodus, to see God in the pillar of fire and cloud, and to hear the voice of God through the voice of his spokesman Moses. The period of the Judges is a low point in this respect, where the characteristic refrain is "everyone did what was right *in his own eyes*" (Judg 17:6; 21:25).

The period of the monarchy continued this failure of faith with some notable exceptions (David, Solomon, Hezekiah). The lure of the gods of the nations, the temptation to seek help from the nations and not from Yahweh all betray the same fundamental malfunction of spiritual seeing, hearing, and understanding.

Both the mode of expression (as absolute certainty--almost of divine determinism) and the note of irony in Isaiah's message to the people merely reflect the repetitive and stubborn nature of Israel's sinning and the inevitable, inexorable judgment such refusal to give heed to God's presence and demands must incur. The persistent re-

47. Beale, "Isaiah 6:9-13," 258.

fusal of God's people to be holy as their Redeemer God was holy (Lev 20:7) must call down his holy wrath, as both Israel (722 BC) and Judah (587 BC) learned by bitter experience.

Since Isa 6:9-10 makes reference to a fundamental phenomenon regarding divine activity and the failure of appropriate human response, it is a motif that is widely used in the NT, where this passage is quoted six times.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, its use in the NT is found in those books where confrontation between the light of the gospel and the stubborn refusal to believe is found, namely the Gospels and Acts.

The explanation Jesus gave for speaking to the crowds in parables—and the need for the hearers to exercise faith—is clearly indicated in Matthew 13. In response to the disciples' question as to why he taught in parables, Jesus explained the divine principle associated with Isa 6:9-10, namely that where faith is present, clearer sight "is given," but that where faith is lacking, "even what he has shall be taken away from him" (Matt 13:12). What was it the crowd was in danger of "seeing yet not seeing" (13:13)? The answer is precisely the same as in Isaiah's day, that is, the presence and activity of God in their midst. To the disciples Jesus says, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear—for truly many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see . . . and hear what you hear" (Matt 13:16-17).

Wherever unbelief blinds men to the divine presence this principle of Isa 6:9-10 is operative. Even the disciples are not excluded from this danger. Regarding the incident of the teaching on leaven in the boat, where the disciples cannot penetrate beyond physical bread, Jesus is forced to ask, "Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear?" (Mark 8:17-18).

Again when Jesus encounters unbelief in his Temple ministry, he quotes Isa 6:9-10, and John comments, "But though he had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in him, so that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled" (John 12:37, 39-40).

In his confrontation with the unbelieving Pharisees, Jesus declared, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" (John 9:39).<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Paul quotes Isa 6:9-10 in its entirety and applies it to those who came to visit him while under house arrest in Rome and who "would not believe." Their judicial rejection by God in this case

48. Matt 13:15; Mark 4:12; 8:18; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:27.

49. As before, note the presence of two groups who do not see: the oppressed and the proud, respectively.

is reinforced by God's revealing himself to the Gentiles: "This salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they also will listen" (Acts 28:28).

Hermeneutically, the danger of interpreting Isa 6:9-10 in strongly deterministic terms in an attempt to justify an absolute view of divine sovereignty should be avoided. Thus, while there is a legitimate sense in which God does indeed cause the blindness, hardness, and so forth, this ought not to be understood in decretal terms, whereby God establishes this condition in his people as part of a preordained purpose. The primary theological context in which divinely imposed blindness and deafness occurs is reactive judgment upon human sin, not demonstration of decretal sovereignty.<sup>50</sup>

Rather, these verses must be understood in the light of God's nature as both loving and holy and in the light of God's actual dealings with his people in patience and with much warning to repent. Additional interpretive contexts include the divine response to human stubbornness and willful blindness, the way in which other texts apply this passage (especially the Gospels), and the irony inherent in the message. Only when all these factors are carefully considered can the full meaning be ascertained. And somber indeed are the implications of the meaning for those who persist in closing their eyes, stopping their ears, and refusing to understand and receive healing.

50. The undue concern to maintain the theological maxim of an absolute sovereignty upon the interpretation of Isa 6:9-10 would seem to be reflected in Craig A. Evans (*To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989] 16): "I am interested in the text of Isa 6.9-10 because in a certain sense it epitomizes the struggle to monotheize, that is, to explain all of existence in terms of God and his sovereign will." While the element of divine sovereignty is undoubtedly present (Israel too, like the surrounding nations, is not exempt from divine judgment), it is surely going too far to say with Evans, "Isa 6.9-10 explicitly states that God hardens his people *in order* to prevent repentance, *and so* render judgment certain" (p. 52, emphasis mine).