

WHY DOES JESUS TEACH IN PARABLES and PAUL QUOTE ISAIAH 6 IN ACTS 28?

In this essay we will be like gold prospectors looking for nuggets or outcrops across a very interesting piece of country. The country in question is the combination of the OT and the NT, the outcrops will be those places where Isaiah 6 appears on the surface of the NT text, and the nuggets will be the insights and bits of information we can pick up about the integration of the two Testaments by tracing the use of just one OT text. I found this search fascinating and exciting and I hope you do too.

Isaiah 6 (which I am going to place around 700 BC) crops up again in key places in each of the four Gospels and in Acts 28, which suggests a fairly important impact on NT thinking. We have seen elsewhere that every NT verse without exception has some kind of general OT background which we must always be aware of, but here we find specific quotes from Isa 6 or very strong references to it so we will be looking at the impact this OT chapter has on the NT.

Isaiah is an uncompromising prophet who gives us strong contrasts and stark choices and this is shown in his rapid changes from black to white, just like on a chessboard. There are no shades of grey with Isaiah – you are either with God for blessing or against him for cursing – there are no compromises. This sort of chessboard arrangement, which is more or less followed throughout Isaiah suggests, of course, that it was carefully edited, and there is no clash between saying this book is the Word of God and saying it has been carefully edited, although we will never know whether this editing was done by Isaiah himself, or by his sons, or by later generations.

Stop here! – At this point it is important that you read Isa 6 for yourself to see what you can make of it before you read on. How is it divided up? How would you use it in a Bible study? How is it often used and applied today? What parts of it would you expect to see used in the NT?

Having read Isa 6 you will have noticed that there are two main sections, Part A which ends with v. 8 and Part B from v. 9 to v.13. Now here is the curious thing: Part A has always been a favourite section of the Bible for modern Christians, certainly since the great expansion of modern overseas mission work after about 1800 AD. We have had literally millions of sermons on Part A because preaching on Part A is easy and comfortable and familiar to most of us and often greatly loved. In stark contrast Part B has been ignored. We have no sermons on Part B. We find it is just too much – too confronting, too uncomfortable, too unwelcome, too difficult, too irrelevant to modern western Christianity. But what do the NT writers do? They go the opposite way to us – they largely ignore Part A, the part which pleases us so much, but make very serious use of Part B, the part which we choose to ignore. Why

– is something wrong here? We need to look a little deeper.

Part A can be further subdivided and verses 1 to 4 tell us how Isaiah sees the Lord God, high and mighty and seated on a throne, with seraphim calling out God's praises. Isa 1:1 clearly tells us that this prophet only sees a single vision, but it is a long one that covers some 40 years and is then cut up and distributed across 66 chapters, so what he sees here in the temple in Isa 6 is part of a gigantic whole. As he sees and hears this wonder in the temple he becomes intensely aware of the filth of his own lips and those of his own people and the reality of judgement before the God of holiness. He has a one-to-one encounter with the Lord, but then comes the gracious and unexpected and undeserved act of mercy from the Lord who deals with the Prophet's personal sin: 'Your sin is taken away and your guilt atoned for.'

Thus far the modern Evangelical Christian is on safe and comfortable ground. All our preaching and evangelism is aimed at bringing as many people as possible to just this point – the greatness of God, followed by the reality of sin, followed by the reality of judgement, followed by the reality of God's wonderful act of salvation. Isaiah's story is our story in a sort of way, but then he starts to leave most of us behind when the Lord asks him in v. 8: 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' Many missionary organisations have used this passage, and this verse, to challenge gospel-minded people to GO – 'For my sake and the gospel go,' and go they have, into all corners of the world. But the use of this chapter has usually stopped at v. 8 – we just ignore the next bit, but the NT writers didn't, so what were they so interested in?

Isaiah the man has left himself wide open. He has just had the most unbelievable experience in his encounter with the Lord, and has been dealt with in such a wonderful personal way, that he could well be thinking:

If this mercy has been shown to me and I am being sent with a message to the rest of the Lord's people, unclean sinners just like myself, then surely they too will be given the gift of repentance and forgiveness which I have just been given.

If this is what he hoped for then what he got was the exact opposite – in the most stinging, challenging and disturbing words ever given to any OT prophet he is promised almost total failure! Even worse than that, he is told that his own words, his own ministry, his own exertions, his own life both public and domestic, will serve only to make an already bad situation much worse for his audience.

The message which he is to give to Israel is almost completely negative, full of judgement and rejection and hopelessness, as we see in v 10:

You people will be ever hearing but never understanding
Ever seeing but never perceiving. (My ministry is designed to)
Make the heart of this people hard
Make their ears deaf
And their eyes blind
LEST they see with their eyes

Hear with their ears
Understand with their hearts
And turn and be healed.

The hardest word to accept in this very harsh verse is undoubtedly the word **LEST** because it seems to be saying that the Lord God who is sending Isaiah with this message to Israel is actually closing the door on them – he is not just making it difficult for them to go through the door but is actively keeping them out, actually deafening their ears, blinding their eyes and hardening their hearts – the very things he himself constantly holds against them! Isaiah himself is appalled at this message and the nature of this task he has just been given and he cries out in agony of soul 'How long, Oh Lord – how long will this last?' In modern times translators of his words have shared his reaction to the word *lest* and often try to soften it, and the NIV for instance uses *otherwise they might see* instead of *lest they should see*, but even this sort of move does not remove the difficulty we feel – a discomfort which comes about because we all have a god we carry around in our minds – a god who “wouldn't do that!” The list of things someone somewhere thinks God would **not** do is very long indeed. As we will see later, both Jesus Christ and Paul his Apostle take it that in this verse God did indeed do “that” very thing we object to – he did indeed place Israel under some kind of ban which Jesus and Paul take very seriously – a ban of a duration and degree which is about to be revealed in the final section of the Lord's reply to Isaiah's question in Isa 6.

When faced with this shattering message Isaiah bursts out with the most natural question: 'How long Oh Lord?' He could either challenge the Lord's sovereignty and right to do what He is doing, or seek to have the time shortened, and the prophet wisely chooses to explore the latter. He wants a glimmer of hope for the nation and for himself, a cut-off date, some reason to keep going on this worse than fruitless task he has been set, and he is indeed given the glimmer of hope but is not given the date. He is told this bad relationship between the Lord and Israel will last until the cities are ruined, the houses left deserted, the fields ravaged, the people taken far away, the land emptied and burned over twice. These are dark pictures which the book of Isaiah will use over and over again but the time frame is deliberately left unclear – and then comes the all-important message of hope which ends this powerful short chapter.

Verse 13 says that the first burning will destroy 90% of the land and the second burning will destroy so completely that there seems to be no possibility of any future for this people – there is nothing left but a single stump somewhere, a twice-burnt single stump – all else has gone and the Lord's destruction has been complete. But NO! Against all the odds a green shoot emerges and it must be the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes! The verse promises that the *holy seed* will be the stump in the land. Whether you are trying to grow new crops or flocks or new people, new life always comes from seed and here the Lord promises the seed will be holy – unlike the parental stock which has been destroyed. What we see emerging here is the concept of the faithful remnant, the believing few who will represent God properly

and survive and prevail. This concept of the faithful few among the faithless majority has already been very strongly expressed in the first chapter where Jerusalem the city is seen standing forlorn and alone like a watchman's hut in a harvested and trashed field – all the other cities of Israel and Judah have been taken and burnt and the people of Jerusalem can only say: 'If the Lord had not left us some survivors we would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah' (1:6). The memory of those two sinful cities was still strong among these people and the Lord does not hesitate to call Jerusalem Sodom or Gomorrah, but even in chapter one the blackness of judgement suddenly turns into the brightness of promised salvation, as in 1:26-27 'Afterwards you will be called the faithful city, the city of righteousness and Zion will be redeemed with justice and her penitent ones with righteousness.' In Isaiah the Lord's black is always answered by the Lord's white.

So the remnant of Israel will be preserved through their faith, but here in chapter 6 the vast majority are placed under a ban which prevents their believing. It is a tough doctrine but Isaiah is not alone in stating it. Moses, centuries earlier, had said to next-generation Israel as they were about to cross the Jordan: 'The Lord has not yet given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see or ears to hear,' (Deut 29:4) but he too was able to add the promise: 'the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you may love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live' (Deut 30:6). Writing during the Exile in Babylon Ezekiel agrees: 'Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, and have ears to hear but hear not' (Ezek 12:2), but had things improved by the time of Jesus Christ – had the ban spoken of in Isa 6 been lifted?

Isaiah 6 in Matthew Mark and Luke

Matthew 13, a major chapter about the use of parables, says 'All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world,"' which comes from Psalm 78:2. There seems to be a clear difference between the Psalmist and Jesus however, because the Psalmist was trying to make things as clear as possible, while Jesus taught the crowds in parables which few if any could understand. Why did he do so? Many reasons have been suggested and most of them have something to add to our understanding of the way he taught, but I want to turn the spotlight on his use of Isaiah 6 in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8.

The Lord Jesus often spoke in parables to the crowds but gave them no explanations, but he did explain many things to the twelve in private, and both these actions are explained by using Isa 6, which as we have seen sets before us an unbelieving majority and a believing remnant within Israel. In Matt 13:10 – 17 for example the disciples came and said to him: 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' And he answered them

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to

them it has not been given. For to him who has more will be given and he will have abundance, but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. That is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says:

'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive; For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I say to you, many prophets and just men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

In this passage the Lord says the people have closed their own eyes, but otherwise he takes the same line as the original passage found in Isa 6. He is preaching to the Israel of his own day and his preaching is very deliberate on two counts; firstly it recognises the opposition of the many and the faith of the remnant to whom he is speaking in private, so essentially nothing has changed since former times. Secondly he recognises the continuing authority of the scripture, an area we will look at more closely.

God had spoken through all the Scriptures (those we call the OT today) and Jesus' use of them and masterful interpretation of them is very interesting. To what extent was he subject to them (that is to those words and texts) and to what extent were they subject to him? Sometimes we see him asserting his authority over them and saying 'The Scriptures mean what I say they mean' which is his perfect right as the Son of God, but at other times we see him meekly submit to their authority in the same way we would. His own nature is unique, being both divine and human, and this is also shown in his reaction to the Scriptures. He bravely endures all that the Scriptures say about him as an individual, and as far as his preaching is concerned he follows the lead given by many OT passages, especially Isa 6. Clearly, for Jesus in the three Synoptic gospels, Israel does not yet enjoy the promised new heart of Deut 29:4, and his answer to his own disciples is: 'The reason I preach to Israel in parables is because the Scriptures tell me to, and the Scriptures also assure me that under the hand of God the good seed will find its way to the good soil and bear its good fruit in due season!'

Isaiah 6 in John's Gospel

John is, as usual, quite brilliant and challenging on this topic, and also very different from the other three. After a slow build-up over the previous few chapters, in John 12 the public ministry of Jesus comes to a quite swift, dismal and emotion-filled end. His final days begin on what seems to be a high note, with happy crowds welcoming him on his entry to Jerusalem, caused partly by his very recent raising of Lazarus, but in the background the Pharisees are saying among themselves: 'See how we can't do

anything now because everybody wants to follow him' (12:19). A show-down is inevitable. Jesus himself is looking for some sort of sign from heaven, and when some Greeks appear and ask to see him, Jesus seizes upon it this incident and begins his last and fateful great public speech: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen amen I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.' He calls on his followers to follow him even unto death, so that his Father will bear witness to them.

From 12:27-31 we see the famous passage with the 'three Nows' which bring all human history to a great crescendo: '**Now** is my soul troubled, and how should I respond to my Father? **Now** is the judgement of this present world; **Now** is the ruler of this present world thrown out!' But this action of the throwing out of one ruler will be matched by the raising up of another and in words which seem to reverse the action of the seed falling onto the earth Jesus says in v 24: 'And I, if I am lifted up above the earth, will draw all men to myself,' a process which, of course, was even then beginning with these Greeks who are drawn to him as the first-fruits of the harvest.

The crowds do not miss his meaning; they know this 'lifting up' refers to crucifixion and they get really angry and even quote Scripture to him. They have expected him to be the Christ who delivers them and they respond: 'We have heard in the law that the Christ endures forever so how can you be saying that it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' What they are saying is that their Christ must conform to their expectations and their Christ conquers all and cannot die, so if Jesus keeps talking about dying he cannot be the Christ (and they will kill him as an imposter). There are these dreadful ironies throughout the whole increasingly bitter exchange between the crowd and Jesus, and his last words to Israel are full of sadness: 'You have got the light here just for a little while. Walk in it while you have it so that the darkness does not envelop you.' Then he turned away and hid himself from them. It was all over – he never spoke publicly to Israel again.

John the writer has brought us the readers to this point but he is not content to leave it there and in a stunning passage he takes us inside his own thinking about this tragic outcome: 'He had done such wonderful signs among them and they ended up not believing in him – but why?' The answer John gives is that the word of Isaiah had to be fulfilled which says: 'Lord, who has believed our report and to whom has the saving arm of the Lord been revealed?' (John 12:38 and Isa 53:1). And the reason they were not able to believe is again given from Isaiah: 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts in order that they might not see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts nor turn so that I may heal them.' But even here John is not finished because he adds his own further observations, not about Jesus this time but about Isaiah himself. In a curious and notable comment John asks: 'Why did Isaiah talk in the manner I have just quoted? John's answer is that Isaiah spoke like this because he saw his glory and talked about him' (12:41).

I find this conclusion extraordinary – John has quoted from Isa 53 where the *Suffering Servant* is 'high and lifted up' in suffering for others, but also from Isa 6 where it is *the Lord* who is 'high and lifted up,' and John is telling us that Isaiah has seen that these two things are really the same thing happening to the same person – the Suffering Servant of Isa 53 is the Lord of glory in Isa 6 – both the cross and the throne are like two sides of the one coin and both are revelations of his glory. John is given to long-term reflection on spiritual things and it seems that he has come to see that just as he himself stood at the foot of the cross looking up at Jesus, so Isaiah had stood at the foot of the same cross looking up at the suffering servant. They were both there together, John and Isaiah, except Isaiah was there 700 years earlier – but then John knows that that is the sort of thing prophets do!

John has already shown us how interested he is in the way the glory of God can be contained in ordinary human flesh when he says the amazing words of John 1:14 'The Word became flesh and inhabited the *tent* of his human body among us, which allowed us to gaze upon his glory.' The background story here is the Tabernacle or *tent* which Moses made in the wilderness, where the glory of the Lord appeared but also where the Israelites could not bear to gaze upon the glory shining from the face of Moses after he had met with God (Ex 34:29-35), and Paul explores the same subject in much more detail but with equal passion in 2 Corinthians 3 – a very difficult chapter in a very difficult book.

Overall then John 12 is seen to confirm the ban placed on most of Israel by Isaiah 6. The next chapters of John, from 13 to 17, show Jesus alone at night with his Apostles, who represent the future, the believing remnant of Isa 6, but He himself never says another word to apostate Israel – their time is over.

I recommend that you find and compare the end of the public ministry of the Lord in each of the four Gospels – among many interesting things you will see how each of them ends negatively, in anger and frustration. They will, after all, soon kill him.

Isaiah 6 in Acts 28

Did the events from the trial of Jesus through to Pentecost and beyond show that the ban imposed in Isa 6 had been lifted? Certainly we do see encouraging early signs with many thousands of Jews, including many from overseas, believing in Jesus as the Christ. But since three million or more could be found in Jerusalem at any Pentecost, and since the official opposition to this new 'Way' remained very strong, it seems the old ban from Isa 6, while shaken and dented, was not removed. The Kingdom was not returned to Israel nor Israel to the Kingdom (see Acts 1:6).

Paul, like the other Apostles, may have held great hopes for the conversion and salvation of the nation which he loved – just like Moses and Isaiah (all the OT prophets were 'weeping prophets') and indeed Jesus who wept over Jerusalem – but the reality had turned out to be different from his dreams. Although designated the

sole 'Apostle to the Gentiles' Paul nevertheless preached continually to Jews whenever and wherever he could find them – in Damascus, in Jerusalem and on his missionary journeys. His strategy was to go first to the Jewish synagogue in any new town he came to, partly because he knew he would be made welcome, partly because there could be some Greek-speaking Gentile converts there, but also because of his theological conviction that salvation and its many privileges was of the Jews first and must be offered to the Jews first. Sometimes he wore out his welcome very quickly as can be seen in Acts 13 which records Paul's great sermon in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, a sermon which represents all his sermons to Jews and also shows us the typical reaction from the Gentiles who were present and the punitive reaction of the Jews.

Jewish opposition to the Gospel made Paul's heart ache, as we see in the anguished cry in Romans 9:1 'I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my own conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that there is great grief and unremitting pain in my heart, and I could wish myself to be totally separated from Christ if that would save my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites ...' and it was this spirit which kept him preaching to them in the hope that he might save some. In Second Corinthians chapter 3, Paul argued that the veil which Moses had to put over his face when he preached God's word to Israel had somehow remained in place over the hearts of the unbelievers among the Israelites and was still in place 'to this day' (2 Cor 3:15), and then some years later we get to Rome and Acts 28 and the end of the road. We can follow the story from 28:17 onwards:

Three days after arriving in Rome as a prisoner Paul called together the leaders of the Jews to explain why he had been brought there and to plead his innocence and to establish his credentials as an observant Jew: '(I am not here because I am a criminal, but I am just like you all and) It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.' Their reply is full of interest for us: 'We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brethren coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you personally, but we would like to hear from you what you believe because we know that this sect is widely rejected and criticised.' So they agreed on a day and came to him (since he could not go to them) and it is important to note they came 'in great numbers.' Paul spent all day testifying to the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced while others disbelieved and so they argued among themselves as they departed. There is nothing really remarkable here, nothing unexpected so far, but then Luke chooses to record that Paul makes one last statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet' and then follows the full text of the ban from Isaiah 6, and that I think really is unexpected and worthy of notice.

Here in Rome Paul was speaking very much in an evangelistic setting and it is stunning that he should choose to quote Isa 6, one which we today would say is a

most inappropriate text for evangelism, especially among Jews – one likely to do more harm than good and best avoided. We must note however that in his letters to the Roman and Galatian churches, letters which are theologically reflective rather than evangelistic, Paul wrestles with the same question of the present state of the Jewish people and why they are as they are. It involves very ancient questions about God's choice and his freedom to choose whom he wishes and how he wishes. Any further discussion would take this essay well beyond our reasonable limits but we should note that in Romans Paul redefines the remnant of Isaiah in two ways:

(A) The 'Remnant' are now understood to be 'elected' to faith, set apart and marked off before the beginning of time to be the ones who would have faith and to obtain what they sought, while the rest of Israel were 'hardened' as in Isa 29:10 where 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day,' (Rom 11:8).

(B) Gentiles are now included in the Gospel, and in Rom 9:25 Paul quotes Hosea: 'Those who were not my people I will call my people.' This opening of the door to the Gentiles, which is so important in Romans 9-11, is meant to provoke Israel to 'jealousy' as in Deuteronomy 32:21 and Romans 11:11 – 14, and is also seen in Acts 28:28 as the logical outcome of Jewish hardness: 'Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.'

The importance of this gathering of Jews in Acts 28 is that it is able to stand for and represent Israel as a whole, Israel the nation, Israel at the very centre of the Roman Empire, and Israel brought together and listening to the Gospel for the very last time in the NT. Thus it is an event of great historical and theological importance, and in it Paul answers the question about any lifting of the ban on Israel – he uses the full text and weight of Isaiah 6 to say 'NO – it is still in force.'

I believe nothing has changed since then.

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