

ISA 6:9-13 IN THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH'S THEOLOGY

Craig A. Evans*

For several reasons Isaiah 6 has not been an easy passage for interpreters. The nature of the prophet's vision, the time when the vision took place in the prophet's career, various textual and literary uncertainties, and the meaning and extent of the fate-laden message itself encompass most of the difficulties. Recent studies have challenged critical orthodoxy's understanding of (First) Isaiah's eschatology and have made it possible to view Isa 6:9-13 in a new light. The present study, therefore, will attempt to clarify the theological context of the prophet's call and for the sake of discussion will limit itself to those oracles accepted as those of Isaiah (i.e., particularly chaps. 1-33) by critical orthodoxy.

I. THE PROBLEM OF ISAIAH'S ESCHATOLOGY

The first and (I believe) fundamental issue that must be addressed is that of Isaiah's eschatology. It is agreed by all that (First) Isaiah's oracles were chiefly words of doom, but what is debated is whether the prophet foresaw salvation. The problem has been examined most recently by J. Jensen.¹ He has argued against G. Fohrer's position that there is no future deliverance foreseen by Isaiah² since the early prophets understood Israel as always facing a decision either for or against God.³ Jensen summarizes Fohrer's interpretation of Isaiah (and the other early prophets) in terms of "alternatives (*Entweder-Oder*) which the prophet offers the people, never as successive stages (*Vorher-Nachher*)."⁴ This understanding of Isaiah's eschatology leads Fohrer to eliminate as inauthentic most passages that might be understood as proclaiming future deliverance after the judgment, a practice Jensen judges to be arbitrary.⁵ Nevertheless, among those passages that Fohrer is prepared to accept there are several that contain an element of hope in a coming restoration. As the best

*Craig Evans chairs the department of religious studies at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia.

¹J. Jensen, "Weal and Woe in Isaiah: Consistency and Continuity," *CBQ* 43 (1981) 167-187.

²G. Fohrer, "Die Struktur der alttestamentlichen Eschatologie," in *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie (1949-1965)* (BZAW 99; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967) 32-58; *Die Propheten des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh; Gerd Mohn, 1974-1976), 1. 16; 4. 10-12.

³Fohrer, "Prophetie und Geschichte," *TLZ* 89 (1964) cols. 481-500; Jensen, "Weal" 168.

⁴Jensen, "Weal" 168.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 170; cf. J. P. Hyatt, *Prophetic Religion* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1947) 97.

example Jensen cites 1:21–26, in which it would appear that Yahweh's judgment is designed to purify the city of Jerusalem. The following verses illustrate the point well:

- 21 How the faithful city has become a harlot,
She that was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.
- 25 I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross with lye
and remove all your alloy.
- 26 And I will restore your judges as at the first,
and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city.⁶

The idea of the passage is that the once-faithful city, now lacking justice, will some day again be faithful. The act of judgment is described metaphorically as removing the dross, or impurities, from the precious metal. After the cleansing Jerusalem will be a faithful city "as at the first."⁷

Jensen cites three other passages that give some indication of restoration following judgment: 14:24–26; 17:14; 28:29.⁸ The first passage predicts the removal of the Assyrian "yoke" from Judah. The second passage promises that God will "rebuke" the nations that have "despoiled" and "plundered" Judah. The final passage concludes with statements that grain is not "threshed" forever, thus implying that there will be a reprieve. Furthermore, the "cornerstone" text (28:16–17b), whatever its original context may have been, seems clearly to be an expression of hope in a new future.⁹ To these oracles J. Whedbee would add 9:1–7; 11:1–9.¹⁰ If these passages are indeed from the eighth-century prophet, then the idea of restoration was apparently linked to the hope of the coming of a wise ruler. In any case, it would seem that Jensen's argument is well taken and that among the oracles of Isaiah there is present the hope of future restoration. As we shall see, this conclusion receives further support in the subsequent section.

II. THE REMNANT IDEA IN ISAIAH

In a recent study G. F. Hasel has argued that the remnant idea is present not only in the oracles of Isaiah's later ministry (as conceded by Th. C.

⁶Jensen, "Weal" 173. In n. 23 Jensen notes that regarding this passage Fohrer admits to the presence of "eine gewisse Hoffnung" (*Das Buch Jesaja I* [2d ed.; Zürich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1966] 44–45) that sees the judgment as purificatory, but he (Fohrer) considers it "einmalig." Cf. O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 20–21.

⁷Jensen ("Weal" 174) notes that most commentators have taken the phrases "as at first" and "as in the beginning" as referring to the time of David, a period of time that came to be idealized. With approval he cites Fohrer, *Das Buch 44*.

⁸Jensen, "Weal" 174.

⁹B. S. Childs (*Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* [SBT 3, 2d series; London: SCM, 1967] 65) regards vv 16–17a as unquestionably authentic and originally an oracle of promise.

¹⁰J. W. Whedbee, *Isaiah and Wisdom* (New York: Abingdon, 1971) 141 n. 69.

Vriezen¹¹) but also may be traced to the very beginning of the prophet's ministry.¹² Hasel divides Isaiah's oracles into three broad categories: early oracles, oracles and narratives during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, and oracles during the Assyrian crisis.

To the first category Hasel assigns Isaiah 6, the account of the prophet's vision and inaugural call. It is likely that the account was written several years after the experience, probably during or shortly after the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (hence its close association with chaps. 7—8, which describe the prophet's activities during this period).¹³ Hasel finds the idea of remnant implied by Isaiah's personal purification, which set him apart from the people of "unclean lips" (6:5-7).¹⁴ But the idea is made explicit in the prophet's commission to harden the heart of the people "until cities lie waste without inhabitant . . . and the Lord removes men far away . . . and . . . a tenth remain." Hasel finds this reference to the remnant as essentially negative (and hence he sees no reason why vv 12-13 cannot be authentic).¹⁵ Since he also accepts the last three words of v 13 he finds yet further reference to the remnant, but in this case the reference is positive.¹⁶ The remnant, by virtue of its purge through Yahweh's judgment on the nation, will constitute a "holy seed." As another example of the remnant idea in Isaiah's early ministry Hasel cites 1:24-26.¹⁷ The metaphor employed by the prophet implies the emergence of a remnant: "The removal of the alloy indicates the preservation of the purest residue."¹⁸ Finally Hasel finds the remnant idea expressed in 4:1-3.¹⁹ In v 1 the image of seven women taking

¹¹Th. C. Vriezen, "Essentials of the Theology of Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (ed. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson; New York: Harper 1962) 128-146. Vriezen (p. 133) states: "In his preaching, the judgment remains the point at issue. This is the paramount fact for Isaiah. At the beginning of his ministry there is, in my estimation, no possibility of restoration either of the nation as a whole or of a remnant thereof." Childs also has stated (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979] 327): "Historically First Isaiah spoke mainly of judgment to pre-exilic Israel."

¹²G. F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1972) 217 ff.

¹³Kaiser, *Isaiah* 73.

¹⁴Hasel, *Remnant* 243, states: "Isaiah's cleansing experience 'symbolizes Yahweh's cleansing and forgiveness of Israel'" (citing W. Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament* [New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963] 232).

¹⁵Hasel, *Remnant* 238-240. He states (pp. 239-240): "The remnant motif is here used in a negative sense to illustrate the magnitude of the disaster which will come over 'this people.'"

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 236-243.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 150-157; cf. Kaiser, *Isaiah* 19.

¹⁸Hasel, *Remnant* 253. Kaiser states (*Isaiah* 20): "Here again, it is clear that according to biblical belief, God's judgment is not simply a punishment. It is a division between the devout and the godless. The destruction of the godless is followed by the renewal of the congregation." It was noted above that Jensen cites this passage as one that points to the hope of restoration (see n. 6).

¹⁹Hasel, *Remnant* 257-270. As to the question of authenticity see *ibid.*, pp. 258-260 nn. 156-159.

hold of one man implies the remnant, and of course the remnant idea is made explicit in vv 2–3.

The second category consists of the narratives and oracles of Isaiah 7–8. In these chapters Hasel finds ample evidence of the remnant idea.²⁰ He begins with an analysis of the meaning of Isaiah's son's name, Shear-Jashub ("a remnant will return" or "repent"), and concludes that the name was meant to convey to Ahaz both threat (in that Judah will be reduced to a remnant) and promise (in that at least a remnant will be spared).²¹ But what sort of people will make up this remnant? The context points to the disciples of Isaiah, who will not "walk in the way of this people" (8:11) but fear and sanctify Yahweh (8:13). Isaiah's disciples stand in sharp contrast to Ahaz and his counselors, who prefer to place their trust in Assyria rather than in God. To the latter Isaiah gives this warning: "If you will not believe [*ta'āmīnū*], surely you shall not be established [*tē'āmēnū*]" (7:9b).²² In Isaiah the need for faith is thematic and recurs in oracles concerned with the later Assyrian crisis (e.g. 28:16b: "He who believes will not be in haste"; cf. 30:15).²³

There are other indications in the narratives and oracles of Isaiah from the period of the Syro-Ephraimite war that suggest that the prophet anticipated the survival of a remnant. One indication is the name of the child Immanuel ("God with us"; cf. 8:8). Whoever Immanuel was supposed to have been the name certainly seems to suggest some kind of future hope for the faithful.²⁴ Finally, the binding and sealing up of Isaiah's "testimony" for his disciples anticipates, it would appear, the survival of a remnant who would later appreciate the prophet's teaching.²⁵

Hasel also points to several passages derived from Isaiah's later career that seem to imply the survival of a remnant. The first passage is 28:5–6, but not all scholars accept the oracle as having come from Isaiah.²⁶ Hasel believes that it does in fact come from the eighth-century prophet and may reflect the time when Hezekiah decided to join in the revolt against Sargon II in 705 B.C.²⁷ As such, the oracle would be understood as a warning as well as a reason for hope.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 270–301.

²¹Hasel, "Linguistic Considerations Regarding the Translation of Isaiah's 'Shear-jashub,'" *AUSS* 9 (1971) 36–46; *Remnant* 274–280.

²²Note the wordplay; cf. 2 Sam 7:16.

²³Hasel (*Remnant* 287) states: "Faith alone will be the *criterium distinctionis* between the surviving remnant and the perishing masses"; see also W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965) 74.

²⁴See Hasel's discussion (*Remnant* 288–298). Hasel notes that A. E. Skemp ("'Immanuel' and 'Suffering Servant of Yahweh,' a Suggestion," *EvT* 44 [1932] 44–45) had suggested that "Immanuel" was not an individual but a cipher for the remnant itself.

²⁵Hasel, *Remnant* 298–301.

²⁶See *ibid.*, p. 301 nn. 321 and 322.

²⁷Ibid., p. 304 n. 332.

Isa 30:15-17 is another oracle, reflecting the same period, that warns against foreign alliances and military activity. The people will be saved through quietness and trust (v 15), but in choosing the political option (v 16) their numbers will be decimated (v 17). Hasel notes that v 17 contains a hint that at least a small number will be left "like a flag-pole on the top of a mountain."²⁸ Another oracle that describes the remnant is 1:4-9, which Hasel believes reflects 701 B.C. when most of Judah had been overrun by Sennacherib (cf. vv 8-9).²⁹ Hasel also includes the controversial passage 10:20-23 as deriving from this period, though acknowledging the fact that many scholars regard the oracle as post-exilic.³⁰ He also cites 37:30-32 as a "prose oracle" from Sennacherib's second invasion of Judah (690/689 B.C.).³¹ As his last example Hasel cites 11:10-16, with special attention given to vv 11, 16.³² Hasel admits that many scholars deny its Isaianic authorship, but he agrees with other scholars "who have seen no decisive reason to deny the authenticity of this oracle."³³ Verses 11, 16 proclaim a second "exodus" in which God will gather his people from Assyria and other nations as he had gathered them originally from Egypt. Hasel notes that the idea in the oracle that Judahites would have to be gathered from various nations probably reflects the Assyrian practice of deportation,³⁴ though it may only reflect a general diaspora.

It would seem that Hasel has presented a convincing argument for seeing the remnant motif as running throughout Isaiah's ministry even if one does not accept every oracle and passage that he has cited as having originated with the eighth-century prophet. His research supports Jensen's contention that weal and woe are juxtaposed themes in Isaiah.³⁵ Judgment is, as Jensen argues, purificatory. And one of the results of this purifying process is, as Hasel has shown, the creation of a remnant that puts its trust in Yahweh and not in foreign alliances and deities. This understanding of judgment in Isaiah is exceedingly important for our understanding of 6:9-13, a passage that seems to

²⁸Ibid., pp. 311-312.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 313-314.

³⁰Ibid., p. 320 n. 394, cites Wolff, Eichrodt, Kaiser and Fohrer, among others, who have concluded that 10:20-23 is postexilic.

³¹Ibid., pp. 331-334. Although the "two-invasion" theory is not without its supporters (e.g. Bright, Wright, Gray, Harrelson), recently it has received serious criticism from Childs, *Isaiah*, and R. E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (JSOTSUP 13; Sheffield: Sheffield University, 1980). Childs believes that there is inadequate evidence for hypothesizing a second invasion, and Clements believes that 2 Kgs 18:17-19:37 (the "second invasion") represents later reflection on Isa 10:5-10 (perhaps during the Josian era). Nevertheless most scholars accept the oracle as coming shortly after the time of the Assyrian invasion of Judah.

³²Hasel, *Remnant* 339-340.

³³Ibid., p. 339.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 345-347.

³⁵It is unfortunate that Jensen apparently has not seen Hasel's work.

declare that God intends to harden the heart of his people in order to prevent their repentance and healing.

III. THE INTERPRETATION OF ISA 6:9–13 IN CONTEXT

Although there are variations found in all of the various primitive versions it is likely that the MT represents the original form of Isa 6:9–10.³⁶ The prophet has been commanded by God to speak the word of judgment: “Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive” (6:9 *RSV*). R. Knierim has noted that the prophet’s word is to bring about the very condition described in the next verse: “Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (6:10 *RSV*).³⁷ The prophet is told that he is so to preach until total destruction and exile have taken place (6:11–13). Indicating the severity of the disaster is the description of a remnant as a “tenth” (6:13a).

Most scholars have concluded that the original account consisted of the first eleven verses with vv 12–13 added at a later time.³⁸ Kaiser, however, believes that these verses should “be regarded rather as a fragment of a genuine saying of Isaiah than as a corroborative addition by a disciple, or by an even later hand.”³⁹ But what of the final line of v 13? Here scholars are divided.⁴⁰ Despite its absence from the LXX, text-critical analysis favors the authenticity of the clause.⁴¹ Kaiser would be representative of most of those scholars who doubt the clause’s authenticity on theological grounds: “But the conclusion of v. 13 is also secondary, because it gives a positive sense to the comparison between the survivors and the growth that springs up after the felling of the tree . . . while its original sense was negative.”⁴² The sentiment expressed here is quite

³⁶For a survey of the readings of the various primitive versions and the rationale for viewing the reading of the MT as original see C. A. Evans, “The Text of Isaiah 6:9–10,” *ZAW* 94 (1982) 415–418.

³⁷R. Knierim, “The Vocation of Isaiah,” *VT* 18 (1968) 47–68, esp. 59; cf. also Kaiser (*Isaiah* 82–83), who states: “Verse 9 sums up not the content of Isaiah’s public preaching, but the effect intended from it by God. The word of God is not merely withdrawn from the sinful people. It continues to be uttered through the prophet, but only in order to speed the coming judgment.” See also A. F. Key, “The Magical Background of Isaiah 6:9–13,” *JBL* 86 (1967) 198–204.

³⁸Kaiser, *Isaiah* 84.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰For an exhaustive and recent survey of the scholarship concerned with the authenticity and meaning of Isa 6:13c see J. A. Emerton, “The Translation and Interpretation of Isaiah vi. 13,” in *Interpreting the Bible: Essays in Honour of E. I. J. Rosenthal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982) 85–118.

⁴¹See K. Budde, “Über die Schranken, die Jesajas prophetischer Botschaft zu setzen sind,” *ZAW* 41 (1923) 154–203, esp. 166 ff.; P. Ruben, “A Proposed New Method of Textual Criticism,” *AJSL* 51 (1934) 30–54, esp. 40–42; I. L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 1948) 63–64; I. Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah* (Uppsala/Leipzig: Lundequistska, 1949) 13–15; G. W. Ahlström, “Isaiah VI. 13,” *JSS* 19 (1974) 169–172.

⁴²Kaiser, *Isaiah* 84.

in keeping with Fohrer's antipathy for "before/after" eschatology. But if hope for restoration and a remnant is allowed to be part of Isaiah's eschatology, then theologically-based objections to the authenticity of v 13c melt away and it becomes quite possible to view the clause as a pre-exilic word of the prophet later attached very easily, by virtue of similar metaphors, to its present context.⁴³

Isa 6:9-10 notwithstanding, it is going too far to say that Isaiah did not preach repentance. There are indications throughout Isaiah's preaching that the prophet expected the people to repent. Such expectation would imply a hope for a remnant and, perhaps, for restoration. The following examples may be noted. Despite the blows delivered against them (as described, for example, in 9:8-12) "the people did not turn to him who smote them, nor seek the Lord of hosts" (9:13 [Hebrew 9:12]). In 30:15 opportunity for repentance and salvation are offered: "In returning [i.e., repenting] and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." Perhaps the best example is found in 31:6: "Turn to him from whom you have deeply revolted, O people of Israel."

We are confronted with something of a paradox in that we find in Isaiah's message certain judgment on the one hand and the offer of repentance on the other. I believe that the studies of Jensen and Hasel resolve the paradox. Whereas Isaiah's commission in chap. 6 not only predicts but actually assists in bringing about national destruction, there very well could be the anticipation of the survival of a remnant from which there will emerge a "holy" and "righteous" people. When Isaiah confronted Ahaz it was for the dual purpose of assuring him that Yahweh was able to defend Judah as well as warning him that their God was just as able to destroy his people. The requirement that Isaiah laid before Ahaz consisted of faith and not presumption that Yahweh was somehow obligated to give the king victory.

Herein lay the essential difference between Isaiah and the false prophets. Isaiah's hermeneutic was that of the true prophet in that he understood and proclaimed Yahweh's freedom to destroy Jerusalem and lead Israel into captivity.⁴⁴ A major ingredient in official theology (what so often became, in the wrong context, "false" prophecy) was the Davidic covenant in which it was understood that God would maintain a descendant of David upon the throne in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 7:14 ff.). Isaiah appeals to these traditions (cf. 9:1-7; 11:1-16; 32:1; 33:17; 37:35) but does not find in them a guarantee of Jerusalem's inviolability. Isaiah seems to have two major ideas regarding royal theology. First, the prophet views Yahweh himself as "King" (cf. 6:1; 33:22). Ultimately it is God himself who is King of Israel. Therefore an end to Davidic succession did not mean that Israel had no king. Second, Isaiah apparently anticipated the eventual establishment of a just and righteous king who would sit upon the throne of David and inaugurate an eternal kingdom (9:1-7). In view of

⁴³Reference is often made to the "holy seed" mentioned in Ezra 9:2, as if Isa 6:13c is dependent on the former. But why cannot Ezra be dependent on Isaiah?

⁴⁴See J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 88; "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy," in *Canon and Authority* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 22-41; C. A. Evans, "On Isaiah's Use of Israel's Sacred Tradition," *BZ* 30 (1986) 92-99.

these two ideas it is possible to understand how Isaiah could prophesy certain doom and yet at the same time anticipate a future restoration. Isaiah's vision of the future was simply the outworking of his own faith.

Although Isaiah has appealed to the Davidic/Jerusalem traditions he has applied the same hermeneutic as that applied by the other canonical prophets to the Mosaic traditions—that is, if God could lead the people out of slavery he could return them to slavery and then deliver them again. Similarly Isaiah has prophesied that the same God who established the throne of David in the first place, and who himself is Israel's true King, can destroy and later restore it (cf. 11:1). Out of the purge of destruction comes redemption. Out of death comes salvation.

It could be, then, that the prophet Isaiah came to view his judgmental commission in terms of a purificatory purge. Whereas the prophet understood fully well that his word would bring about further spiritual insensitivity and so guarantee divine wrath, he was able—or at least so it seems—to foresee the survival of a remnant through which would come restoration and a better day. In light of this reassessment of Isaiah's theology, denial of the authenticity of v 13c on theological grounds would appear unwarranted if not arbitrary and only contributes to a distorted view of the prophet's theology. No doubt it was because of Isaiah's great foresight and vision that his oracles were preserved, edited and expanded. Whereas it is true that the oracles of (First) Isaiah are for the most part negative and those of (Second) Isaiah positive, the latter should be viewed as an expansion and, in some sense, a fulfillment of the former.