

CHAPTER TWO
THE “ORIGINAL” TEXT OF ISAIAH 6:9-10

The sixth chapter of Isaiah constitutes a distinct literary unit.¹ It begins with a unique introductory formula “In the year of death . . .” Its conclusion, despite severe text-critical issues, reads “with a short but very meaningful glimpse into a time of salvation which is yet to come.”² This does not mean that this chapter is thematically or theologically distinct or divergent from the rest of the book. A strong case can be made for Isaiah 6 as a literary key in understanding the whole of Isaiah.³ Broad agreement as to the unity and distinction of this chapter allows us to explore what can be known of its original form.

What Constitutes an Original?

Preserving something textually requires decision making. One decides to write one thing instead of another. The Bible was of course conceived long prior to the printing press and its textual formation spans centuries. In light of these

¹ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), 252.

² *Ibid.*

³ For an important contribution to this discussion see chapter 3, “Isaiah Chapter 6” in H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah’s Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30-56.

circumstances we have not received a completely uniform textual tradition.⁴ Rather there remain closely related traditions which likely stem back to an original autograph.⁵ The task becomes establishing the earliest form of each distinct tradition. We have no record which concretely traces the phases in which the Bible took its final form. The Bible itself records the reality of literary progression as certain books record the possession of other books (i.e. Ezra reading in the Law in the book of Nehemiah). In the case of Isaiah 6, Isaiah appears to have received something aurally/visually which he later offers in his written form.⁶ It is important in these circumstances to have a functional and relevant use for the term “original.”⁷ Emmanuel Tov’s definition is worthy of adoption. He understands the original text to be that which stands “at the end of the composition process [at which time it] was considered authoritative . . . [and] at the beginning of a process of copying and textual transmission.”⁸ We may not be able to *prove* that we have attained the text that perfectly fits this description. However, the definition offers sound guidelines in the decision-making that must take place in textual criticism.

It should be noted that this position does not preclude any discussion on the history prior to the “original” only that none of these constructed texts should be central for the reader who wishes to attend to the canonical Bible. In fact, chapter 5

⁴ For the basic issues in Old and New Testament textual formation see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001); Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁵ A consensus on the reality of original autographs has not been reached. Jeremiah provides an excellent example of the difficulty in reaching an understanding of the original autograph; see Duane L. Christensen, “In Quest of the Autograph of the Book of Jeremiah: A Study of Jeremiah 25 in Relation to Jeremiah 46-51,” *JETS* 33 (1990): 145-54.

⁶ The hand of post-exilic redactors may also be present in this chapter; see Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001), 58.

⁷ Though I maintain the term here in a qualified sense it may be beneficial in the future to employ another designation, perhaps “primary” text.

⁸ Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 177.

demonstrates how understanding the possible history of Isaiah 6 illuminates the interpretive approach of the targumist.

The Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Original of Isaiah 6

I accept the consensus view regarding the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible that “the readings of [the MT] are, on a whole, preferable to those found in other texts.”⁹ Having only late extant copies of MT does not devalue its placement in relation to the original. Tov has argued that in the case of Isaiah the Qumran scribal practices of 1QIsa^a are “further removed from the *Urtext* of Isaiah than a Masoretic manuscript written in the tenth century CE.”¹⁰ This does not mean that all of the content preserved in the various Masoretic manuscripts represents the Hebrew original. However, it remains that to the MT all variants must be judged. The variations within the extant texts of the manuscripts of the Masoretic period¹¹ (dating no earlier than 800 CE) add little in recovering the original text of Isaiah 6. Their value, according to the editors of *HUBIsa*, is “practically nil” in the reconstruction of the *Urtext*.¹² Following is a lay out of Isaiah as presented in the *BHS*, with corresponding translation. A few potentially important variations found in the Masoretic manuscripts are foot-noted.

⁹ Ibid., 299.

¹⁰ Ibid., 301.

¹¹ Attested in *HUBIsa*.

¹² Ibid., xlii.

Text¹³ and Translation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the MT

v.1

In the year of King Uzziah's death
I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne
high and exalted
with his robe filling the Temple.

בשנת־מות המֶלֶךְ עֻזִּיָּהוּ
וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי¹⁴ יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא
רָם וְנֹשֵׂא
וְשׁוּלְיוֹ מִלְּאִים אֶת־הַהֵיכָל:

v.2

Seraphim were standing over him.
Six wings! Six wings for each of them.
With two they covered their face,
with two they covered their feet,
and with two they were flying.

שֶׁרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ
שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפִים שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפִים לְאֶחָד
וּבְשָׁתַיִם יָכְסָה פָּנָיו
בְּשָׁתַיִם יָכְסָה¹⁵ רַגְלָיו
וּבְשָׁתַיִם יְעוֹפֵף:

v.3

They called out, this one to that, and said,
“Holy, holy, holy LORD of Hosts
his glory fills all the earth.”

וַקְרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וַאֲמַר
קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
מְלֵא כָל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

v.4

The foundations of the entrance shook
from the sound of the shouting
and the place was filled with smoke.

וַיִּנְעוּ אַמּוֹת הַסָּפִים מִקוֹל הַקּוֹרֵא
וַהֲבִית יִמְלֵא עָשָׁן:

v.5

I said, “Woe is me! I am void.”
Because I am a man of unclean lips
and I dwell among a people of unclean
lips.
Because my eyes have seen the king, the
LORD of Hosts.

וַאֲמַר אוֹי¹⁶-לִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי
כִּי אִישׁ טְמֵא־שִׁפְתַיִם אָנֹכִי
וּבְחַוֹךְ עִם¹⁷-טְמֵא שִׁפְתַיִם אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב
כִּי אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ¹⁸ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת רָאוּ עֵינָי:

v.6

Then one of the Seraphim flew to me.
In his hand was a coal which he took with
tongs from upon the alter.

וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד¹⁹ מִן־הַשֶּׁרָפִים
וּבְיָדוֹ רֹצֵפָה בְּמִלְקָחִים לָקַח מֵעַל
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

v.7

It touched my mouth
And he said, “See, this has now touched
your lips.
Your guilt is shed and your sin has been
removed.”

וַיִּגַע עַל־פִּי
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה²⁰ נִגַּע זֶה עַל־שִׁפְתֶיךָ
וְסָר עֲוֹנֶךָ וְחַטָּאתֶךָ תִּכָּפֵר:

¹³ For the full critical apparatus of all variants and reference to manuscript sigla see *HUBIsa*.

¹⁴ *pm* read Tetragrammaton.

¹⁵ Omitted in one manuscript of K.

¹⁶ 11-ל and 20-ל reads לו.

¹⁷ Omitted in one manuscript of K.

¹⁸ Omitted in one manuscript of K.

¹⁹ Omitted in one manuscript of K.

²⁰ Omitted in 93.

v.8

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
 “Who shall I send?
 Who will go for us?”
 I said, “Here I am, send me!”

וְאִשְׁמַע אֶת־קוֹל אֲדֹנָי²¹ אָמַר
 אֶת־מִי אֲשַׁלַּח
 וּמִי יֵלֶךְ־לָנוּ
 וְאָמַר הִנְנִי שְׁלַח־נִי:

v.9

And God said, “Go and say to this
 people,
 ‘Listen carefully, but do not understand.
 Look closely, but do not comprehend.’”

וַיֹּאמֶר לְךָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לְעַם הַזֶּה
 שְׁמַעוּ שְׁמוּעָה וְאַל־תִּבְיִנוּ
 וּרְאוּ²² רְאוּ וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ:

v.10

“Fatten the heart of this people.
 Plug up their ears.
 Smear their eyes shut.
 Lest
 they see with their eyes,
 hear with their ears,
 understand with their heart,
 then turn and be healed.”

הַשֶּׁמֶן לִב־הַעַם הַזֶּה
 וְאִזְנוֹ הַכֹּבֵד
 וְעֵינָיו הִשָּׁע
 פֶּן־
 יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו
 וּבְאִזְנוֹ יִשְׁמַע
 וּלְבָבוֹ²³ יִבִּין
 וְשָׁב וְרָפָא לוֹ:

v.11

Then I asked, “For how long Lord?”
 God replied, “Until cities lie ruined
 without inhabitants,
 and the houses are without people
 and the land wasted,
 a desolation.”

וְאָמַר עַד־מַתִּי אֲדֹנָי²⁴
 וַיֹּאמֶר עַד²⁶ אֲשֶׁר אִם־²⁵־שָׂאוּ עָרִים
 מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב
 וּבָתִּים מֵאֵין אָדָם
 וְהָאֲדָמָה הִשָּׂאָה²⁷
 שְׁמָמָה:

v.12

Until the LORD sends the people away
 and devastation is great in the midst of
 the land.

וְרַחַק יִהְיֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם²⁸
 וְרַבָּה הָעֲזוּבָה בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ:

v.13

There will still be a tenth
 and it will also return and be consumed as
 terebinth and as oak which leaves a stump
 after being felled.
 In this stump is a holy seed.

וְעוֹד בָּהּ עֵשְׂרִיָּה
 וְשֹׁבָה וְהִיחָה לְבַעַר כְּאֵלֶּה וְכָאֵלוֹן
 אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁלְכָתָּ²⁹ מִצֵּבֶת
 בָּם³⁰ זֵרַע קֹדֶשׁ מִצֵּבֶתָהּ:

²¹ *pm* read Tetragrammaton.

²² 93 and *pm* of K read רִאָה.

²³ 93, 96, 150, and *pm* in KRG read וּלְבָבִין פ. וּלְבָבִין.

²⁴ *pm* read Tetragrammaton.

²⁵ Omitted in 96 and a single manuscript of K.

²⁶ 30 reads על.

²⁷ 18-ל reads תִּשָּׂא. A single manuscript of K reads תִּשָּׂאם.

²⁸⁻²⁸ Omitted in 30.

²⁹⁻²⁸ Omitted in 30.

Interpretive Issues in the MT of Isaiah 6:9-10

It has long been accepted among scholars that when examining an early translation of a biblical text much can be learned about that community's theology and interpretation of the Bible.³¹ Vanhoozer agrees, stating that in our attempts to get translation right "interpretation is always biased. . . . Readers can never wholly recover the selfsame meaning of the original."³² I am under no illusion that my translation provides any less an influenced translation or transmission as that of the LXX, DSS, Targums, or NT.

Vanhoozer, in his claim for *adequate* literary knowledge, offers the corrective of "creative fidelity" to address the reality of imperfect literary knowledge.³³ This process keeps a number of elements in place. First, it respects and maintains the *two horizons*, namely the contribution of the text's original meaning and its reception into another context (i.e. language, worldview, etc.). Second, more important than maintaining the formal equivalence of words (which places the burden of meaning at the level of words and not sentences) Vanhoozer advocates an equivalence which aims at carrying the trajectory of the original. It is impossible to transfer the meaning of a text with the belief and practice of directly transferring each word into its exact equivalent receptor language correspondent. Rather, the translator must understand

³⁰ ַד; 96, 150; and *pm* of KRG read ַדבּ.

³¹ The level interpretative influence varies among traditions. However, scholars in all fields being examined note the influence of the community handling the text; Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 22; Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 6; Joseph Rosenbloom, *The Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll: A Literary Analysis and Comparison of the Qumran Scroll with the Masoretic Text of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 81.

³² Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning?*, 392.

³³ *Ibid.*, 386-92.

the illocutionary force of a text and attempt to produce the same trajectory in the given language. “A faithful interpretation must reflect the same matter, force, and direction that characterized the original communicative action.”³⁴

The English translation which I have provided should not be considered definitive. However, it stands as an attempt to faithfully produce the matter, force, and direction as received in the Hebrew text. The usefulness of this translation comes in serving as a paradigm for the work done on the DSS, LXX, Targums, and NT. These four later traditions will also be accompanied with an English translation. My English translation will remain constant in those sentences which seem to appropriately preserve the original Hebrew’s (i.e. the author’s) intended meaning. This is not to say that these antiquated translations have achieved what we cannot, namely a perfect translation. Rather, this practice will serve as a starting point in the discussion on the variants found in the four traditions.

The syntax of verses 9 and 10 are quite straightforward. I have translated the imperative – infinitive absolute verb combinations as denoting an element of intensification. This is in departure from Gesenius who indicates this combination as denoting only continuance (*GKC* § 113 r). Gesenius need not exclude the element of intensification in light of the attested use of this verb combination, especially with the verb שמע, “to hear” (Job 13:17; 21:2; 37:2).

The verb sequence in verse 10a is exceedingly difficult to translate. In isolated contexts the verbs are simple enough to comprehend. However, in sequence and in the context of the chapter a difficulty emerges. I have attempted to maintain the rhythm and metaphor in verse 10a. The metaphor revolves around the action

³⁴ Ibid., 391.

performed upon a component of the body. The result of these actions renders these components of the body unable to function as they should. Verse 10b spells out the result of their improper functioning. The difficulty in translation comes from the poetic nature of the passage. Landy has captured this element by demonstrating how each verb carries with it a second ironic connotation. The “fattening” (השמין) of the heart is contrasted to the same word which reads as an image of Israel’s prosperity and healing (Isa 1:6; 17:4). The “plugging” (הכבד) of the ear is contrasted to God’s כבוד, “glory” in verse 3. The verb “smearing” (השע) can be read either as שעה, “to smear” or השע, “to gaze.” With this in mind Landy concludes that “the culmination of ambiguities and the richness of implication in each verb focus attention on the consciousness of the listeners and negate it. Glory/weight is empty, the prosperity or obesity of the heart/mind makes it non-functional, the gaze is delusive.”³⁵ I have found no adequate English translation which can account for this poetic element. The element of the incapacitating of these physical faculties which could lead the people to healing retains primary importance in translation.

The first person singular suffixes are rendered as third plural in light of the context. The explicit reference, “this people,” could allow for the maintaining of the first singular. However, the third plural rendering is chosen for English style.

From the text and variants provided above it can be observed that the Masoretic tradition maintains a relatively stable account of Isaiah 6. The variants recorded within this tradition exert little pressure on the text critic to make crucial decisions. The attestation of the Tetragrammaton in numerous manuscripts argues for

³⁵ Francis Landy, “Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6,” *BibInt* 7 (1999), 71-72.

adopting these variants as the original. Moving from *Yahweh* to *Adonai* more likely represents the text's transmission, as the proclivity to write the Tetragrammaton decreased with time.³⁶ However, the presence of both names for God indicates that it was not a crucial point of contention and in this passage their meanings appear to be interchangeable.

The variant reading of *רָאָה* for *רָאוּ* in verse 9 can be explained as the use of another acceptable form of Qal imperative for *רָאָה* (Isa 37:17; 63:15). The addition of the *bet* to *וּלְבַבּוֹ* in verse 10 could be argued as original and will be addressed in later sections, especially in relation to 1QIsa^a.

Conclusion

The MT of Isaiah 6:9-10 reflects a stable textual tradition. The translation provided will allow a starting point in the discussion on the early transmission of this passage. The basic syntax of the passage is straightforward. However, its poetic nature and difficult content already point to its difficulty in translation. These aspects will be kept in mind for each respective tradition. Also any potential emendation to the MT as “original” will be made in subsequent discussion.

³⁶ Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 216-7.