CHAPTER SEVEN

ISAIAH 6:9-10 AND ITS RECENT INTERPRETERS

To this point I have assumed that the "original" text of Isaiah 6:9-10 would speak for itself against its later transmission and interpretation. Accepting language's *adequate* and not absolute ability to communicate, the Hebrew version of Isaiah 6:9-10 has done just that.[1] The exposure of differences and nuances among its earliest interpretations has illuminated the difficulty but not impossibility of preserving the meaning of this text. The NT, for example, displays a varied and "thick" reading of Isaiah 6:9-10. The study to this point yields a picture of greater interpretive coherence than Evans has offered. Can the same be said of our present interpretive context? Vanhoozer's ethic of interpretation will now be applied to present attempts to understand Isaiah 6:9-10.

The bibliography on recent works relating to Isaiah 6 is daunting[2] and so I will restrict myself to significant and relevant commentaries and articles contributed in the past 50 years. Space cannot be afforded to articulate a full exegetical model in addressing the modern interpretive contributions. For this reason discussions on broader context will be dealt with in a minimal manner.

---

[1] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 300.
[2] Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12* trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), 246-7; Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2001), 51.

The Genre of Isaiah 6

Vanhoozer defines genre as "nothing less than the 'controlling idea of the whole.'"[3] What idea, form, or context controls the reading of verses 9 and 10 in chapter 6 of Isaiah? Many scholars have located the hermeneutical key by relating chapter 6 to the Syro-Ephraimite crisis in 7:1-9:6. This view tends to read the meaning of chapter 6 in light of the events recorded in the following two chapters. Recognizing this relationship Marvin Sweeney states that "it provides a rationale for Isaiah's failure to convince Ahaz and the people to repent."[4] This reading must accept chapter 6 as a reflection on the past attempt made by the prophet. In this way the intention of the passage can no longer function as God's *plan* and *initiative* to harden but rather as Isaiah's theological reflection on his circumstances in light of his monotheistic faith. Within this isolated context chapter 6 can also be read as a specific commissioning, *not* reflecting his overall prophetic calling. Scholars establish this by relating the passage to the commissioning of Micaiah ben Imlah in Kgs 22:19-21.[5] Millard Lind also develops the notion that this "call narrative is a response to Israel's crisis occasioned by the threat of Near Eastern empires."[6] The message of chapter 6 can then be read as "Isaiah's political policy [which] is a rejection of all power politics for complete trust in Yahweh."[7] Even within the framework of the "Isaiah memoir" and the Syro- Ephraimite crisis the genre of Isaiah

---

[3] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 342.

[4] Marvin Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39 with Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 135. See also Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* trans. John Bowden 2d ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 122-3.

[5] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, 135.

[6] Millard Lind, "Political Implications of Isaiah 6," in *Reading and Writing the Isaiah Scroll*, ed. Craig Broyles and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 317.

[7] Ibid., 324.

6 is not easily established. However, is this generic framework even tenable under Vanhoozer's ethic of interpretation?

Christopher Sietz rejects these readings claiming that "if there was ever an original memoir, its first-person form has only erratically survived. If chapters 7-8 constitute an account of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, they have been substantially expanded to deal with the later Assyrian period assaults, if not also those relevant to the Babylonian period."[8] In this way Seitz takes a canonical reading of Isaiah (at least of the canonical *book* of Isaiah). The controlling idea of Isaiah 6 cannot be limited to the context of its immediate chapters. After surveying his contemporary literature John Oswalt also concludes that chapter 6 "was clearly fundamental to the entire course of Isaiah's ministry and to the shape of his book."[9]

Sweeney does not reject this approach. He *also* acknowledges that these are not the only contexts or genres in which chapter 6 can be read. Sweeney states that "when considered in relation to chs. 1-39 as a whole, or even chs. 1-66 in light of the later Babylonian destruction, ch. 6 becomes a paradigm for Isaiah's entire prophetic career."[10] Williamson agrees, working through the literary elements of chapter 6 he claims that his evidence drawn from the rest of Isaiah "seems irrefutably to point to the direct literary influence of this chapter on the Isaianic tradition as a whole and on Deutero-Isaiah in particular."[11] However, Williamson's study does not incorporate the final phrase "the stump is a holy seed." He argues that this phrase was secondary

---

[8] Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1993), 53.

[9] John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 176.

[10] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, 136.

[11] H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 55. In criticism of Williamson see Jospeh Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 226.

to the core of the passage and should therefore be omitted in the reading of Isaiah 6's

role in the larger Isaianic corpus. Brevard Childs accepts Williamson's conclusion

but he rejects his application stating that "the addition is not an attempt to soften the

message of destruction, but rather to pursue and to interpret the full dimensions of the

biblical text. . . . The force of the narrative of chapter 6, particularly in the larger

context of chapters 1-12, strove for an exposition of the meaning of v.13. The tree

had been felled, but its stump is the holy seed waiting to sprout in God's time."[12] Not

denying the expanded nature of the chapter Wildberger recognizes chapter 6 as "a

kerygmatic unity."[13]

Lind also does not reject these readings but adds even more reading

possibilities when he states that "from the perspective of form criticism and tradition

criticism, the genre of Isaiah 6 is the prophetic call narrative . . . from the perspective

of the Hebrew canon, [the chapter] takes a strategic place in the Torah . . . from the

perspective of Israel's history, each call narrative is a response to Israel's crisis

occasioned by the threat of Near Eastern empires."[14] Certainly from this position

perspectives can be added *ad nauseam* (i.e. NT, early church, rabbinic, evangelical,

etc.). This type of reading appears to side well with Fish's notion of interpretive

communities as the base for meaning as well as Derrida who celebrates the endless

play of signs.

Roy Melugin accepts an explicitly Fishian approach to Isaiah. He says that,

---

[12] Childs, *Isaiah*, 58. For a similar reading which notes the expansion of the texts but acknowledges its interpretive value see John Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985), 73.
[13] Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 252.
[14] Lind, "Political Implications," 317. See also Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "Le motif de l'endurcissement (Is 6,9-10) et la lecture d''Isaie'," *Bib* 73 (1992): 208-39. Sonnet also read Isaiah from the perspective of the "memorial" as well as in its canonical shape.

> One might be tempted to ask which vision [or in this case read perspective] is more correct, but framing the question this way largely misses the mark. Such an approach assumes –erroneously- that there is meaning "in" or "behind" the text. . . . Such an assumption, I contend, misunderstands what actually takes place in the activity of interpreting texts. What happens, as Stanley Fish has taught us, is that meaning is something which interpreters construct in the process of reading.[15]

Melugin offers several scholars' readings of Isaiah and for each one declares that it was their initial perspective and questions which led to their final conclusions. In many respects Melugin and Vanhoozer would not disagree. Vanhoozer notes the historical critics who "treat each stage in the history of a text's composition as a quasi-text to be interpreted."[16] He also concedes that "the fact of a plurality of ways of reading is incontestable."[17] However, his burden remains "to claim that not all interpretive interests are equal."[18] This leads Vanhoozer to reject the basic idea of interpretive pluralism embraced by Fish and adopted by Melugin and others. In its place Vanhoozer advocates for a "Pentecostal Plurality." This approach, based in a trinitarian "plural unity," rejects "any plurality that assumes the meaning of a text changes at the behest of the reader, at the influence of an interpretive community."[19] However he affirms a "Pentecostal plurality, which maintains that the one true interpretation is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods and contexts of reading. The Word remains the interpretive norm, but no one culture or interpretive scheme is sufficient to exhaust its meaning."[20] The question remains,

---

[15] Roy Melugin, "The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning," in *Writing and Reading the Isaiah Scroll*, ed. Craig Broyles and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 39. For an expanded work in which this basic premise is demonstrated see Roy Melugin and Marvin Sweeney eds., *New Visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

[16] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 417.

[17] Ibid., 418.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 419.

[20] Ibid.

does Vanhoozer's model accept all the above mentioned contexts in which to read Isaiah 6? I argue that it does not.

Vanhoozer's model of ethical interpretation can essentially only accept those readings which take seriously the canonical form and place of the book of Isaiah. He does not deny that *meaning* cannot be found in other readings only that the author's intention is not attended to in those readings which excise texts from their literary context. In this way Vanhoozer is following the lead of Childs who argues that "the literal sense of the Bible is a function neither of its historical nor its storied context, but rather of its canonical context."[21] Vanhoozer adds that "in the context of Scripture, each of the literary genres of the Bible has an additional illocutionary force."[22]

Sweeney and Lind, when reading from the sole framework of the "Isaiah memoir," are in fact reading a *text* not a *meaning* of their own creation.[23] We have no received text called the "Isaiah memoir," not to say that it could not have existed, only that we do not have it. This text exists as the creation of the reader.[24] Williamson comes close to offering an improper reading context as he marginalizes verse 13 at the end of chapter 6.

The reader can also certainly apply infinite ideological readings to a text, as Lind appears to imply. I have no doubt that my present work could be deconstructed in manner which exposes my prejudices and social conditioning. This sort of reading

---

[21] Ibid., 309; See also Childs concise summary on the matter in "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *Ex Auditu* 16 (2000): 121-29.

[22] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 349.

[23] R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 71, also sets the primary reading context of chapter 6 in the Isaiah memoir.

[24] In this way Melugin may need to give more credit to the "untrained person" who questions whether all are reading the same book; Melugin and Sweeney, ed., *New Visions of Isaiah*, 13.

may yield useful information. However, this would not result in recovering the

meaning of the text. In fact Vanhoozer argues that it insulates readers from this

meaning. "To assign priority to the reader's context and interest is to immunize one's

interpretive community from the very possibility of criticism *by the text*."[25]

According to Vanhoozer the readings of Childs and Seitz provide an ethical

framework in which the proper reading of Isaiah 6 can occur.[26] This reading

recognizes chapter 6 as a whole (primarily as a paradigmatic call), its place within

canonical Isaiah, as well as, the broader canon itself. The other reading contexts are

rejected, not because of inadequate interpretive techniques, but because they are

simply not interpreting the same text. In rejecting some of the text there is a danger

in creating a new text. I am not rejecting the value of understanding smaller historical

sections of the Bible, only that this understanding must be subjected to the canonical

context if the goal is to interpret the biblical book of Isaiah. However, even the

acceptance of reading chapter 6 canonically does not mean that a unity of

interpretation for verses 9-10 will emerge.

The Interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10

Several approaches have been adopted in the attempt to understand verses 9-

10 in Isaiah 6. Kaiser asks us to "give up the notion . . . that in this chapter we can

hear directly the voice of the prophet Isaiah."[27] In this reading verses 9-10 become a

---

[25] Ibid., 182.

[26] For similar reading contexts see J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1993); Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001).

[27] Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 121.

theological reflection that intends to make sense of the events of the exile. However, unlike Lind who maintains a particular political reading Kaiser still places his interpretation in a canonical context. For the post-exilic community he claims that the writer "makes God lead the people to disaster through the prophet in order to redeem God's power and freedom for his people in the present."[28] In the face of this mystery Kaiser takes the context into the NT and states that "instead of going on asking questions here, point to the cross, from which the call for God's help, and question why such a terrible thing can happen, receives an answer in the Easter message."[29] In this way Kaiser unnecessarily accepts a view that Isaiah does not speak in *any* part of chapter 6 but he does accept the canonical framework in which it should be interpreted.

Scholars who accept the essential presence of the prophet Isaiah's voice in interpreting verses 9-10 still find variation in their readings. A common thread of interpretation deals with the judgment/hardening as a mixture between Israel's actions and God's sovereignty. Citing Isaiah 9:7ff Wildberger recognizes "the polarity between Yahweh as the cause of hardening and Israel's own role in the hardening."[30] This results in Isaiah's message culminating in the reality "that the way of salvation is demonstrated over and over again to be an unreal possibility."[31] John McLaughlin adds that if the people are not allowed to repent the implication follows that "they have actually done something of which to repent."[32]

---

[28] Ibid., 132.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Wildberger, *Isaiah*, 273.
[31] Ibid.
[32] John McLaughlin, "Their Hearts *Were* Hardened: The Use of Isaiah 6,9-10 in the Book of Isaiah," *Bib* 75 (1994): 6.

Most scholars do not view Isaiah as trying to deceive the people but rather as being called to bring God's truth "with fresh, even unparalleled clarity."[33] Oswalt agrees that Isaiah could have altered the message in order to find acceptance but that "something is more important than healing."[34] In this reading God knew the effect his word would have on the people, indeed he could speak nothing other than his word, and told Isaiah of its consequences ahead of time.

Andrew Key asks further that "if, indeed, the prophet is to utter his proclamation in such a way that the people will not understand, then *why bother with the prophecy in the first place?*"[35] To which he answers that "the oracle itself is the means through which God's plan is to be carried out . . . the deliverance of the oracle causes the events to happen."[36] The message was necessary because it was God's *means* of judgment.

Childs clarifies that the issue of repentance is moot. In chapter 6 Isaiah learns "that the divine sentence has already been decreed. Chapter 5 marks the transition. The vineyard will be destroyed. [In this way] the punishment is not pedagogical, but final."[37] With the respect to the prophetic ministry as a whole Watts states that "this commission insists that [success] was not their task."[38]

Goldingay offers a minority view stating that "the words in verses 9 and 10 may be ironic . . . [They are] designed to bring people to their senses, to repentance, and to forgiveness, even though it does not explicitly urge them to repentance and

---

[33] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 79.
[34] Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 189.
[35] Andrew Key, "The Magical Background of Isaiah 6:9-13," *JBL* 86 (1967): 199.
[36] Ibid., 203.
[37] Childs, *Isaiah*, 57.
[38] Watts, *Isaiah*, 75.

indicate a way out."[39] Even here we may see the hopes of Luke's view found in Goldingay. Seitz's reading comes in direct opposition to Goldingay. Seitz believes that these verses are a message to prepare Isaiah for the people's rejection. However, in his actual ministry he will continue to cry out "keep looking, keep listening."[40] The message *is* of repentance but *will* be rejected.

G. K. Beale[41] agrees that God is commissioning Isaiah to speak judgment against a people who have violated their covenant. He attempts to clarify that verses 9-13 offer insight into the specific charge laid against the people. He traces the content of these verses throughout Isaiah and in the Hebrew Bible noting the similarity with which the idea of "looking, but not seeing" has with idolatry and idols, "that have eyes, but they do not see" (Ps 135:16b). In this way Beale cites 2 Kgs 17:15 as demonstrating the state of the people in Isaiah. This passage reads that Israel "followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." This theme ties into verse 13 which he reads as the destruction of cultic high places. Beale makes an overall illuminating contribution tying together texts thematically and linguistically. His only fault may come in an over reliance on the cultic reading of v.13a which has not found wide scholarly consensus.[42] In all fairness to Beale, most interpreters are quick to point out the difficulty in translating this verse.

Francis Landy offers an interesting perspective on the content of Isaiah's message. He argues that the poetic nature of the verses 9-10 create a paradox. Verse 9 offers a message which is self-contradictory. "If the audience obeys and does not

---

[39] Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 61.
[40] Seitz, *Isaiah*, 57.
[41] G. K. Beale, "Isaiah VI 9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry," *VT* 61 (1991): 257-78.
[42] Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 251; Childs, *Isaiah*, 57-58; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 187. In support of Beale see Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 68-70.

understand, they have understood, and vice versa . . . the commandment not to

understand is linked to an equally exigent injunction to attempt to understand

diligently, 'hearing, hear . . . seeing, see.'"[43] Verse 10 also employs an obscuring

technique with the ambiguous terms השמן, "make fat," הכבד, "make heavy," השע,

"blind." Landy displays how each of these terms can be understood with a positive

meaning. "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."[44] Ultimately "the prophetic message is fulfilled in its non-

communication."[45] The meaning then comes not in the form of a propositional re-

statement, but rather in its effect on the reader/listener. Even here Landy acts

carefully not presuppose precisely what that effect should be. Landy concludes with

the suggestion that these verses may offer a paradigm for poetry/prophecy in general

and therefore "a model of reading and understanding."[46] The message then found in

these verses "is that all reading is incomplete . . . [and that] between speaker and

reception, commentary grows, and poetry."[47]

Many of these contributions can surely find a place in what Vanhoozer calls a

"thick" reading. A general consensus can be read from much of what has been

recently contributed. The message forms a part, if not the means, by which God

judges the people. While irony may be present (as Landy aptly demonstrates) a literal

reading of the passage does not indicate the irony which Goldingay offers. His

---

[43] Francis Landy, "Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6," *BibInt* 7 (1999), 70.
[44] Ibid., 72.
[45] Ibid., 69.
[46] Ibid., 81.
[47] Ibid., 82.

reading can be justifiably questioned on the grounds that, according to Vanhoozer, the text (illocution) itself must be able to support any reading offered. While Isaiah's message may have actually been for repentance (cf. Seitz) the text reads as though the die has been cast and judgment is final (cf. Childs). Another consensus view rejects God's judgment as arbitrary. McLaughlin's article demonstrates this in no uncertain terms and that the people's guilt was somehow tied to idolatry is clear (Is 1:29-31) whether or not we accept all of Beale's contribution.

These readings offered above displays that no interpreter offers *the* final reading of Isaiah 6:9-10. The section on genre offers the most disparity in terms of readings. Many of the genre perspectives rejected above can certainly offer legitimate readings. However, this occurs because no meta-genre exists in the discussion of Isaiah 6. Scholars have the freedom to *create* texts as they see fit. However, the consequence of this freedom comes in the reality that many scholars are no longer reading the book of Isaiah as found in the Christian canon. I would never deny scholars the right to engage with this activity, however, they should not necessarily claim their interpretations to be valid for the canonical Isaiah as situated in the Bible. To do so would be unethical under the framework offered by Vanhoozer.

With respect to the interpretations of Isaiah 6:9-10 there are surprisingly few readings that should be rejected outright if at all. Perhaps Landy's contribution offers the best reason for the ability of this text to absorb so many readings. Isaiah 6 provides a paradigm which may be conveyed in language but rejects domination.[48] The message of Isaiah 6 demands that we stand-under it in order to receive its

---

[48] Ibid., 82.

meaning. Vanhoozer advocates this posture as necessary for faithful reading.[49] The

scandal of Isaiah 6 runs from its message both for judgment and salvation.

Vanhoozer's citation form the work of T. F. Torrance is appropriate here. "Torrance

observes that it is at the point where we most feel ourselves under attack from

Scripture (where our reason is most offended) that genuine interpretation can take

place. For it is here 'that we can let ourselves be told something which we cannot tell

ourselves, and really learn something new which we cannot think up for

ourselves.'"[50]

Those who take seriously the canonical book of Isaiah have largely wrestled

with Isaiah 6 in a manner that does not attempt to control its voice. However, has the

voice of Isaiah 6 really been heard? Are scholars reading this text so as to allow its

perlocutionary effect? Several scholars recognize and accept the text's relationship to

the ministry of Jesus.[51] However, few have ventured a reading which suggests a

current significance which this text acts upon its readers. One of the few exceptions

comes from Walter Brueggemann who writes that "these words sound ominous in a

society like ours, deeply narcoticized not only by chemical dependence, but by a host

of numbing dependencies: poverty and wealth in the extreme, brutality, militarism,

self-indulgence – the same list of which the ancient poets spoke so relentlessly. *Not

noticing* leads to *termination*."[52] The terror in applying this text comes from its

resistance in clarifying at what point God's judgment stands. Brueggemann's reading

is bold but, in accordance with Vanhoozer, necessary if we desire to hear the meaning

---

[49] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 401ff.
[50] Ibid., 407.
[51] Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, 132; Childs, *Isaiah*, 53; Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 63.
[52] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 63.

of the text. Vanhoozer's standing challenge for scholars to wrestle with significance

must continue in order to best benefit from their toil in the text.