

Isaiah 6: A Window into Biblical Worship

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Worship in the presence of the living Lord forms the general background for much of the biblical literature. The predominant theological concern of Scripture is the covenant between the Lord and his people. Since the celebration of the covenant is primarily an act of worship, it is reasonable to assume that a considerable portion of the biblical revelation has taken place against a background of worship, or was given for use in worship.

Although many illustrations of this principle could be mentioned, we focus here on an example from the prophetic literature: Isaiah's description of his call to be a spokesman for the Lord of hosts, as narrated in Isaiah 6. The prophets of Israel and Judah functioned within a context of corporate worship, and in this chapter we find perhaps the clearest example of a prophet responding to the experience of the Lord's presence in worship.

The narrative takes the form of a vision of the glory of the Lord in the temple in Jerusalem. Although we may allow for the possibility of an "ecstatic" vision as the source for this material, it seems more likely that we are dealing with a "literary" vision. That is, the prophet is using visionary imagery to convey the truth that has been revealed to him by the Spirit of the Lord, through his participation in the temple liturgy. Though transcending them in form and impact, Isaiah's imagery is drawn from the actual worship of the temple and its furnishings and architecture. This chapter is a record of Isaiah's individual response to the revelation of the glory of the Lord as conveyed through the visual and auditory aspects of the service of worship.

Theophany in Israel's Worship

The high moment of Israelite festal worship was not the moment of sacrifice. It seems rather to have been the "theophany" or manifestation of the glory of the Lord, that point in the ceremony when the Lord was said to "come" to his people (Deut. 33:2; Pss. 50:3, 80:2), to "appear" (Psa. 102:16), to "shine forth" (Deut. 33:2; Psa. 50:2) or to "make his face to shine" (Pss. 31:16; 67:1; 80:3, 7, 19). Exactly how this took place we do not know. Possibly Yahweh (Jehovah) was understood to "appear" and speak to his people in the ceremonial recitation of the Decalogue, the "Ten Words" or Ten Commandments. Hints of this are found in the language of Psalm 50:7, 16 and Psalm 81:10. At such a moment the worshiper sensed himself in the presence of the glory of the Lord — the radiant envelope hiding the mass of the divine Being (the Hebrew word *kavod* means both "glory, honor" and "mass, weight"). When Isaiah says that the Lord's "train filled the temple" (Isa. 6:1), the underlying concept is that of the radiance and glory of his presence.



Visual aspects of temple worship also contributed to the awareness of the glory of the Lord. One such aspect was the presence of the ark of the covenant, with its guardian cherubim. These *keruvim* were winged, lion-like creatures with a human face, which in ancient times were symbols of royal or divine authority.¹ The Lord is said to be "enthroned upon the cherubim" (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Kgs. 19:15; Isa. 37:16; Pss. 80:1, 99:1), and Psalm 18:8 depicts him in theophany "riding upon a cherub."

Ordinarily the ark rested in the inner sanctuary, the "holy of holies" or *debir* ("oracle") into which the high priest would enter on the day of atonement (Lev. 16). However, it is possible that Israelite festal worship incorporated a ceremonial procession of the ark, when it was removed from the temple and brought back as a symbol of Yahweh's enthronement. Such a practice would explain the language of several of the psalms. In Psalm 24:7, for example, the cry goes forth, "Be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!" (24:10).² The expression "Lord of hosts" (*Yahveh tseva'ot*, "Yahweh of armies") was apparently the

“ark name” of the Lord, associated with his leadership in battle against his enemies (Num. 10:33-36, 1 Sam. 4:3-4). When Isaiah says, “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5), this may indicate the visible presence of the ark of the covenant.³

Further, imagery of earthquake, fire and smoke is associated with divine theophany in the Bible. This imagery is found in the Sinai theophany (Ex. 19:18) and is elaborated elsewhere (as in Psa. 18:7-15). Psalm 97:2-3 declares that “clouds and thick darkness surround him . . . fire goes before him.” God is compared to a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). These images occur in Isaiah’s vision as well. He says that “the foundations of the thresholds trembled” and that the house of the Lord was filled with smoke (Isa. 6:4). Here he seems to visualize the smoke of incense within the temple proper.⁴ He also refers to the burning coals of the altar of sacrifice (6:6), which was located in front of the building.

The imagery of fire is also conveyed in Isaiah’s depiction of the seraphim. We can only speculate concerning the nature of these enigmatic beings. The term *serafim* could mean “burning ones,” from the Hebrew root *s-r-f*, “to burn.” The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are ministering to the Lord, and we are reminded that the Lord makes “his ministers a flame of fire” (Psa. 104:4; Heb. 1:7). However, the background for this imagery is perhaps more than the fires of the altar. The same word is used for the “fiery serpents” which the Lord sends upon Israel in Numbers 21:6, so that *serafim* seems to refer to fiery, serpent-like creatures. To ward off the death brought by these “fiery serpents,” Moses made the bronze serpent, and in 2 Kings 18:4 we learn that the reforming King Hezekiah (715-687 BC) had it destroyed because the people were burning incense to it. At the time of Isaiah’s vision (the year of King Uzziah’s death, ca. 740 BC), the bronze serpent may have been in the temple and may have served as the visual background for Isaiah’s portrayal of the seraphim.

Isaiah hears the seraphim calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!” This sounds like the description of an antiphonal, or responsive, hymn of praise. Perhaps it is reminiscent of the chanting of the temple musicians, in which groups of singers would respond to each other. Our knowledge of the music of the temple is fragmentary, but several passages of Scripture do suggest such antiphonal singing as part of Israelite worship.⁵

The Response of the Worshiper

Having described in detail the possible background of Isaiah’s vision in the actual worship of the house of God, with its sights and sounds and the rich imagery of its architectural setting, we must now remind ourselves that what Isaiah sets before us is not an actual description of the temple and its order of worship. It is, rather, a narrative of the prophet’s personal response, as the Spirit of the Lord moved upon him during the act of worship. This narrative does not give us a pattern by which we are to reconstruct our worship today according to biblical models. Rather, it suggests to us the inner movement and mood of worship as they may be experienced by worshiping Christians. The external setting of worship is important, and we do well to pay close attention to the architecture and to the visual and auditory aspects of our places of worship. But biblical worship is “worship in Spirit and in truth,” whatever the external setting, and Isaiah has much to teach us in this respect.

Worship begins, for Isaiah, in a vision of the majesty of the Lord, exalted upon his throne, the Subject of adoration and praise. The seraphic hymn celebrates his holiness, and the universal sweep of his glory. The initial motivation for worship must come from such a conception of divine grandeur; “great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised!” (Psa. 48:1).

But worship may not stop with the celebration of the greatness of God. For, confronted by the awesome majesty of the Creator and living Lord, we are confronted also by our unworthiness to behold him. Thus Isaiah cries out, “Woe is me, ... for I am a man of unclean lips” (6:5). He recognizes not only his own sin as a worshiper, but that of the people to which he belongs. It is not a light thing to come before the Lord in praise and adoration. It must be done in fear and trembling before “him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 12:21). It must be done confessing not only our personal unworthiness, but the sin and corruption of the whole fabric of our culture — that society whose misplaced values

and false perceptions have permeated our very lives and rendered our lips “unclean,” unable to express the truth of God (Rom. 1:18).

But “there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared!” (Psa. 130:4). Cleansing comes for Isaiah at the touch of the burning coal from the altar of sacrifice — a picture of the forgiveness and cleansing mediated to the believer through the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John. 1:29). The Lord’s minister speaks: “Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (Isa. 6:7). Worship brings absolution, the renewal of life through the mercy of a loving God. In his presence our sinful self, once confessed and offered upon the altar, begins to fall away, removing the barrier to his further dealing with us.

With Isaiah, we may then hear the summons of the Lord: “Whom shall I send?” (6:8). Worship conveys a commission, a call to serve the King and allow him to work out his purposes in and through us. Worship allows us to respond in commitment: “Here am I.” It is a commitment made in trust that the Holy One, to whom we belong, will not misuse us; only worship allows us to see this. Responding, we discover that “God is at work in us” (Phil. 2:13).

The work we are given to do may not be pleasant. Isaiah was commissioned to declare the word of the Lord to an insensitive, unresponsive people, that the judgment of God might be visited upon them (Isa. 6:9-11). Yet even this judgment is part of the plan of God for the eventual restoration of his kingdom, even from a “tenth portion” or a “stump” (6:13). Because the vision of the glory of the living God is ever renewed through worship in his presence, we have confidence that our labor “is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Worship is not static. It lives, it has movement. Isaiah’s vision takes us through a series of moods or movements in the encounter with God: confrontation, confession, cleansing, commission, commitment, confidence. It is not the order of worship nor the physical setting which determines the effectiveness of worship. These are useful aids to worship. But the real difference is made by the extent to which we allow the Spirit of God to take us through the movements of worship, until he has us in the place where he wants us.

¹ Examples of guardian figures similar to the biblical *keruvim* have been found in ancient Carchemish, a Syro-Hittite capital, and in the palace of the Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal II (884-859 BC) at Nimrud.

² Note also Psa. 132:6-9, especially verse 8: “Arise, O Lord to Thy resting place, Thou and the ark of Thy strength.” Psalm 68 begins with the same words used to describe the movement of the ark in the wilderness (Num. 10:35), and then goes on to describe a festal procession into the sanctuary (68:24-27).

³ In any case, representations of the *keruvim* appeared elsewhere in the temple. Gigantic olive-wood sculptures plated with gold stood in the *debir* or holy place (1 Kgs. 6:29-35). *Keruvim* were woven into the veil of the holy place (2 Chr. 3:14) and carved into the decorative woodwork of the temple (1 Kgs. 6:29-35).

⁴ We are not told that Isaiah ben Amoz was a member of a priestly family. If not, he would not have entered the temple proper on a ceremonial occasion. He was, however, a prominent citizen, counselor to kings (Isa. 7:3-16, 37:1-7, 38:1-8, etc.) and no doubt in closer contact with the operation of the house of the Lord than was the ordinary Judean.

⁵ The “curse liturgy” in Deuteronomy 27 portrays two groups of tribes arranged on opposite mountains to give the blessings and the curses, with the Levites answering in turn. Psalm 24, celebrating the entrance of the Lord of hosts, is arranged for two groups of speakers or singers — one in procession and the other guarding the doors. Psalm 136 contains a refrain or chorus spoken after each verse. Psalm 124 begins with a solo singer inviting Israel, the worshiping assembly, to respond with the words of the psalm.

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