

Rereading Isaiah's Vision (Isa 6) through the Lens of *Generational Imprinted Trauma* and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, the focus will be on the text of Isa 6:1-13 from the perspective of a generational imprinted trauma¹ and resilience. This interdisciplinary approach renders a new conversation on Isaiah's vision, not only giving scope to the ensuing traumatic events but also ascertaining hope and resilience that are embedded within the corpus of the chapter. These traumatic events and the possibility of hope expose the vulnerability² of the prophet and the people of Judah within the complexity of the text. The aim of the contribution is to give an understanding of trauma, collective trauma and the possibility of hope as experienced within the prophet's commission and vision as well as to investigate the impact that collective trauma has on the people. Thus, this article belongs in the domain of the literary and theological interpretation of the book of Isaiah and contributes towards the history of development of the book. The contribution will further aim to give an exegetical explanation of the structure of Isa 6 thereby giving a greater theological understanding of the text when using a lens of trauma and resilience.

Keywords: Isaiah, Trauma, Resilience, Collective trauma, Commission of Isaiah, Hardening, Despair, Hope, Remnant

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¹ In our view, this term implies that past, present and possible future trauma has an implicit impact on generations. Therefore, we would like to coin this new term in order to describe this process as *generational imprinted trauma*. For us, this implies, "grief within grief."

² We dedicate this contribution to our colleague, Gerrie Snyman, who retired from UNISA at the end of 2021. He published a number of articles on the hermeneutics of "vulnerability," albeit from the perspective of the privileged and victimhood. Cf. inter alia Gerrie Snyman, "A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability: Redeeming Cain?," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1/2 (2015):633–665, <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2015.v1n2.a30>; Gerrie Snyman, "Responding to the Decolonial Turn: Epistemic Vulnerability," *Missionalia* 43/3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.7832/43-3-77>, <http://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/77>.

A INTRODUCTION

During the eighth–sixth centuries BCE, Israel and Judah suffered several major traumatic experiences at the hands of various superpowers.³ For a century or more, the Assyrian Empire was a major threat to both Israel and Judah. At the time of the historical prophet Isaiah, both Samaria and Jerusalem were besieged by the Assyrian army, which caused their inhabitants to live in fear. Israel (Samaria) suffered destruction by the hand of the Assyrian Empire. Although a considerable part of the population was taken into exile, many of Samaria’s inhabitants fled to Judah and Jerusalem.⁴

The prophets in different historical epochs and contexts dealt with an often-traumatised nation, as it was expected of them to offer an assessment of current social, political and religious circumstances of their people. The grievous harm done by subsequent empires left their marks on the texts of the Hebrew prophets as these texts contain the residue of the times of terror as well as the “social formations and deformations that were deemed vital for survival.”⁵ The texts mirror the trauma and become the vehicle for post-trauma resilience.⁶

The book of Isaiah also contains the traces of woundedness and resilience as well as the literary creativity necessary for the process of survival and meaning making,⁷ which is necessary for trauma healing and resilience. Thus, this article belongs in the domain of the literary and theological interpretation of the book of Isaiah and contributes towards the history of development of the book as a vehicle of trauma reading and resilience. The text of Isaiah encompasses a plethora of literal, metaphorical and symbolic meanings, rendering the text open to more than one interpretation as it depends a lot on who is reading the text as well as what the original author(s) intended the audience to hear. Within these layers of textual development, traces of trauma suffered are encountered as well

³ Tiffany Houck-Loomis, *History through Trauma: History and Counter-History in the Hebrew Bible* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 1.

⁴ Wilhelm J. Wessels and Elizabeth Esterhuizen, “The Trauma of Nineveh’s Demise and Downfall: Nahum 2:2–11,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76/4 (2020):1; Houck-Loomis, *History through Trauma*, 1.

⁵ Carolyn J. Sharp, *The Prophetic Literature*, Core Biblical Studies (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 64.

⁶ For an outline on resilience, compare also Christopher G. Frechette, “The Power, People, Place, and Plan of YHWH: Isaiah as Resilience Narrative,” in *Resilienz narrative im Alten Testament* (ed. Judith Gärtner and Barbara Schmitz, Digitale Kopie; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 89–90; Michael Ungar, “Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture,” *Trauma Violence Abuse* 14/3 (2013):255–266.

⁷ Louis Stulman and Hyun C.P. Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 322.

as the remnants of hope that are embedded between these layers of the Isaianic text.

Isaiah 6:1-13 is one of the best-known passages in the book of Isaiah and the amount of literature on this chapter tells a story of "its continuing fascination and appeal."⁸ The scene as described in this chapter sets the stage for major developments, for not only the prophecy of Isaiah but also what is to follow in the textual development of the rest of the scroll of Isaiah. It is central for the understanding of the scroll of Isaiah, as it becomes a prism reflecting past, present and future imprinted trauma.⁹ For the sake of convenience, the chapter will be subdivided into three sections.¹⁰ The vivid description of the vision of the Lord sitting on his throne (6:1-4) is followed by the scene of the cleansing of the prophet Isaiah's lips (6:5-7) and his conversation and interactions with God (6:8-12), to which a final concluding comment (6:13) is added (i.e. 6:8-13). This chapter is clearly distinguishable from the surrounding texts.

Even though the chapter has a gloomier outlook, it also indicates that a small part of the people will survive the forthcoming purge, igniting a flame of hope. Therefore, for trauma victims, the memory of trauma may not only implicate group survival but also elevate the existential threat which brings about the construction of generational imprinted trauma within the fibre of the collective group. In the next section, we will give an overview of collective trauma and the role resilience plays in defining this new group identity.

B GENERATIONAL IMPRINTED TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE WITHIN THE COLLECTIVE

History creates a historical map that shapes communities' future. In the same sense, collective trauma creates a map of suffering that is instilled in the

⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 174.

⁹ Cf. also A Joseph Everson, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah: Hope in a War-Wearied World – a Commentary* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 28.

¹⁰ Gabriela I. Vlková, "The Strange Mission of Isaiah," in *Interactions in Interpretation: The Pilgrimage of Meaning through Biblical Texts and Contexts* (ed. Jan Roskovec and Vít Hušek; Bible Interpretation 185; Leiden: Brill, 2020), 67. According to Frederik Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah: A Study of Exile as a Literary Theme* (FAT 125; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 78-79, Isa 6 can be divided into two larger literary structures, namely vv. 1-7 (the vision) and vv. 8-13 (the mission). This would concur with our subdivision into three units (vv. 1-4, 5-7, 8-13), whereas we split vv. 1-7 into two parts. He continues to indicate that both parts are introduced by the key verbs "I saw" (וַיִּרְאֶה – v. 1) which introduces the vision scene and "I heard" (וַיִּשְׁמָע – v. 8) which introduces the mission scene, i.e. call and response. Poulsen further notes that, in v. 1, the prophet sees the Lord, and in v. 8 he hears the voice of the Lord. We can add that in v. 5 (part of our subdivision) the prophet's eyes have seen the Lord.

collective memory of a community. In order to understand trauma hermeneutics, the meaning of trauma must be understood. Thus:

[Trauma is the] experience of a fundamental discrepancy between a threatening situation and an individual's possibilities for overcoming it. This experience is accompanied by feelings of helplessness, defencelessness, and abandonment and can permanently disrupt the person's understanding of the self and the world.¹¹

Furthermore, trauma can be defined as "something alien break[ing] in you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defence. It invades you, takes you over."¹² Claassens¹³ emphasises that trauma can be either an isolated event or an ongoing experience of violence which causes wounds and emotional memory scars which cannot be erased from the mind and psyche of the survivor. Therefore, trauma in our understanding is never truly blind or dead and we concur with Claassens that trauma must be understood as affecting both the individual and the group.

Hirschberger, an experimental social and political psychologist, studies collective threats in view of the relevance they have for group survival concerns. In his definition,

[Collective trauma is] a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning . . . The term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people.¹⁴

The tragic event does not pass at all but it becomes "suffering that remains" within the collective memory of the group; not only in the memory of the (first) generation who suffered the event but also in the memory of their descendants; in other words, what we would like to depict with the term *generational imprinted trauma*. The memory of this traumatic event, like all

¹¹ As quoted by Ruth Poser, "No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile," in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette; Semeia Studies 86; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 29.

¹² Kai Erickson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (ed. Cathy Caruth; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 183.

¹³ L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation* (vol. Trauma Bible of The Bible in the Modern World 74; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2020), 1–2.

¹⁴ Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Front. Psychol.* 9 (2018):1. Cf. also Alphonso Groenewald, "Trauma Is Suffering That Remains: The Contribution of Trauma Studies to Prophetic Studies," *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 26 (2018):90.

other forms of memory, is not only a reproduction of the event(s) but it becomes an intricate system of meaning making in order to redefine identity for the sake of the group's survival. Hirschberger explains that collective memory is different from individual memory, as it is remembered by the group members far beyond the traumatic events in time and space and thus continues even beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the trauma events. Such collective memory of a disaster, suffered in the past by the group's ancestors, cause a trauma dynamic in which the connection between trauma and emotional memory is intertwined.¹⁵

This connection of trauma and emotional memory is evident in the book of Isaiah, as the memory of the outcome of the disaster which had struck Samaria and the Northern Kingdom Israel found its way into the collective memory of those survivors who escaped to Judah, the Southern Kingdom. The text of Isaiah already shows the inheritance of the collective generational imprinted trauma. Although silent, sometimes undefined, it even lies dormant with nuances of passed lived communal trauma. It is heightened in the text of Isa 6 through possible future threat of hardening which leads to migration and exile.

Trauma survivors, however, need to find ways to voice what is "beyond words" and therefore these past¹⁶ trauma experiences need to be interpreted and reframed in order for the survivors to reconnect to their own emotions linked to the traumatic event. Therefore, we can say that, "trauma victims need trauma narratives in order to become trauma survivors."¹⁷

Whether trauma is suffered by the individual or the collective group, growth and resilience can be understood as processes and outcomes of the despair of trauma. Post-traumatic growth, according to Tedeschi and Calhoun,¹⁸ is the transformative change that can result from the struggle with highly challenging life crises. Resilience, as a concept of post-traumatic growth, necessitates stability in the context of trauma after a highly disruptive event, as

¹⁵ Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma," 1.

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 173 states that, "The mystery of the past is that it does not pass away. On the contrary, it accompanies us as our past it exists even when we no longer exist. William Faulkner rightly says: 'The past is not dead, it's not even past'... No one can relieve us of our past. Everything bad and ugly that has happened to us, and that we have done, remains as it is. It can no longer be altered... The mystery of the past is that it passes away only in time, but no in existence. What passes away in time remains in real existence."

¹⁷ Claassens, *Writing and Reading to Survive*, 2.

¹⁸ Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," *Psychol. Inq.* 15/1 (2004):1.

described by Bonanno.¹⁹ The severity and traumatic outcome of a collective traumatic occurrence are shared among members of a group and consequently, the threat will be dealt with collectively. Muldoon²⁰ rightly states that the “sharedness of traumatic experience is an important factor for mitigating the distress.” This shared experience enhances and contribute to resilience.

The text of Isa 6 provides a glimpse, not only of the penalties but also of the promises of restoration for the obedient, whether in a straightforward manner, or deeply embedded—even—in the unsaid.

C THE VISION OF ISAIAH IN CHAPTER 6

1 Introduction

The memory of Isaiah’s vision is one of the best-known passages in the scroll of Isaiah. Whereas the call-narratives in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea occur at the beginning of the respective books, this vision of Isaiah only occurs a few chapters later.²¹ Although it was common in Isaiah research to depict this narrative as the (so-called) call of Isaiah to his prophetic ministry, its position in the book makes it clear that this was not the perspective, at least, of the editors who arranged the material.²²

Beuken²³ argues that it is more appropriate to depict this vision as the “commission” of the prophet and not as a call-narrative and this text (“commission”) plays a very important role in the book’s final composition.²⁴

¹⁹ George A. Bonanno, “Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?,” *Psychol. Trauma Theory Res. Pract. Policy* S.1 (2008):102.

²⁰ Oria Muldoon, “Collective Trauma,” in *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19* (ed. J. Jetton et al.; London: SAGE, 2020), 87.

²¹ Willem A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12* (trans. Ulrich F. Berges; Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2003), 162; and Jenni Williams, *The Kingdom of Our God: A Theological Commentary on Isaiah* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 31.

²² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (1st ed. The Anchor Bible 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 223.

²³ Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, 162.

²⁴ Frederik Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah*, 76, 78, makes a very important observation in this regard: “In recent years, however, the growing attention to Isaiah as a unified composition has enlarged the proposed literary context for interpreting the scene in Isa 6. Within this broader context, the commissioning scene forms a structurally central element in the book’s composition ... the value ascribed to the scene by later editors emphasizes that it is appropriate to interpret Isa 6 as a program of the whole book.” Cf. also John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Rev ed.; WBC 24; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 104, who infers that, “This chapter is *not* a ‘call narrative’ ...

Blenkinsopp²⁵ infers that the vision's position at this compositional location, combined with the acknowledgement of failure, which is implicit in the conversation during the visionary experience, is an indication that the vision has a more limited historical function. He therefore suggests that it should mainly be understood as the prophet's commission for a specific political mission, namely in view of the risk of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion (in or about the year 734–732 BCE).²⁶ Williams concurs with this observation when she remarks that chapter 6 is seen as an introduction to the subsequent two chapters in order "to establish the theological underpinning of Isaiah's interactions with the political situation of his time."²⁷

Undoubtedly, the multiple introductions in the preceding chapters (1-5) prepare the reader for the vision by exposing the moral decay in Judah and Jerusalem (cf. especially chapter 5), as it highlights Isaiah's traumatic task to announce the downfall of the nation as a punishment for its stubbornness and disobedience (6:9-12).²⁸ Isaiah is called as a prophet to perform the announcement of the hardening of his audience.²⁹

This chapter belongs to the subsection which is regarded as the core of the book (6:1-9:6 [Eng. v. 7]) as well as the first major section of the book of Isaiah (chapters 1-12).³⁰ Since Karl Budde, scholars have referred to the Isaianic core as the Isaiah Memoir³¹ (German: *Denkschrift*) and they have regarded the

Its position in the book marks the *end* of Uzziah's reign, as the opening words clearly indicate. Its purpose is to show that the nature of God's actions toward Israel and Judah that had emerged in Uzziah's reign would remain the same until a complete destruction would come about (i.e., over Samaria in 721 B.C.E.). The time clause 'in the year of Uzziah's death' points backward, making this a closing scene. There is no indication that this is the prophet's first vision or first prophetic experience."

²⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 223.

²⁶ Cf. also Elizabeth Esterhuizen and Alphonso Groenewald, "Towards a Theology of Migration: A Survival Perspective from Isaiah 1-12," *Transilvania* 10 (2021):36.

²⁷ Williams, *The Kingdom of Our God*, 31.

²⁸ Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, 162. See also Willem A. Beuken, "The Manifestation of Yahweh and the Commission of Isaiah: Isaiah 6 Read against the Background of Isaiah 1," *Calvin Theol. J.* 39 (2004):73.

²⁹ Cf. Torsten Uhlig, *The Theme of Hardening in the Book of Isaiah: An Analysis of Communicative Action* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament. 2; Reihe 39; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 116–117.

³⁰ A. Joseph Everson, "A Bitter Memory: Isaiah's Commission in Isaiah 6:1-13," in *The Desert Will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah* (ed. Hyun C.P. Kim and A. Joseph Everson; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 4; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 58.

³¹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 223; and Patricia K. Tull, *Isaiah 1–39* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 137.

historical prophet as the author of these chapters.³² During most of the 20th century, this core (6:1-9:6 [Eng. v. 7]) has been interpreted as a separate and independent text which was inserted only much later between the woe and judgment oracles in chapters 5 (5:8-30) and 9. Therefore, these oracles only resume in chapter 9 after the memoir (in 9:7 – Eng. 9:8).³³

Recent interpreters, however, would argue that even if the core of this narrative could be dated to the historical prophet himself, these chapters were edited and reworked during the long and complex redactional and compositional history of the book of Isaiah.³⁴ In this regard, it is important to take note of the following statement by Reventlow:³⁵ “... the opinion of an Isaianic authorship of the whole complex seems to me to be untenable. And I am not alone in my unease with the established position ... As regards the other passages in the ‘Denkschrift’ complex, one can even say that the first-person style is no secure indication that we have the personal testimony of the prophet. For example, the

³² Cf. Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah*, 74–75, for a discussion of the whether this is autobiographical or a product of the later Isaianic tradition.

³³ Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 137. Compare also Elizabeth Esterhuizen and Alphonso Groenewald, “And It Shall Come to Pass on That Day, the Lord Will Whistle for the Fly Which Is at the End of the Water Channels of Egypt, and for the Bee Which Is in the Land of Assyria’ (Is 7:18): Traumatic Impact of the Covid-19 Virus as a Lens to Read Isaiah 7:18-25,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 77/3 (2021):3.

³⁴ Hugh G.M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 6-12* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 103; Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 137; and Stuart Weeks, “Whose Words? Qoheleth, Hosea and Attribution in Biblical Literature,” in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium: Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston* (ed. Peter J. Harland and Robert Hayward; Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 77; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 169. Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah*, 76, claims that, “Taking the final form of the passage and its placement in the present form of the book as the primary object of interpretation does not imply that its compositional history is irrelevant. Many of the scholars who are confident in finding the words of the historical prophet in this chapter nevertheless acknowledge that the present form is the result of editorial expansions.” Cf. also Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 32–33, who states in this regard that, “If this is correct, it means that the material will have reached us only through several phases of the composition as a whole. At a minimum we must presume an original narrative that was later incorporated in the earliest form of the book covering the 35 years or so of Isaiah’s prophetic activity. I find evidence below and elsewhere or some brief work by way of glosses rather than redaction in response to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of some of the population, and then for a substantial redaction, together with the inclusion of much new material, at the end of the exile and a new pair of headings in 2.1 and 13.1.”

³⁵ Henning G. Reventlow, “A Religious Alternative to a Political Response to a Severe Political Crisis: King Ahaz and the Prophet Isaiah,” in *Religious Responses to Political Crisis* (ed. Henning G. Reventlow and Yair Hoffman; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 444; New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 37–38.

first-person speeches of Job, which are universally accepted as fiction, provide clear evidence that the use of the stylistic device cannot be used to secure the authorship of a given passage." However, in spite of possible later additions, this chapter is presented in the Isaianic scroll as a unified composition.³⁶

Isaiah's vision and the description of his commission are usually connected to the prophet's mission to King Ahaz which is narrated in chapters 7-8.³⁷ Whereas chapter 6 is a first-person account of the prophet's encounter with God in the throne room, chapter 7 is told in the third-person narrative style describing the prophet's encounter with King Ahaz. Chapter 8 again takes up the first-person narrative style until verse 4, after which the style changes to a series of prophecies which are quite cryptic in format.³⁸

Isaiah is the sole recipient of God's command to give a message to the people of Judah. This vision in chapter 6 provides the prophet with fearful knowledge of impending disasters such as prospects of judgment, of looming war and narrow escapes. This knowledge must have created inner conflict and possible trauma responses in the prophet Isaiah. As Blenkinsopp³⁹ writes:

[T]he report has been put together as a carefully crafted dramatization of the claim that Isaiah has been admitted to the divine council, that he is therefore privy to the divine agenda, and that he has been charged to implement the agenda in the world of the Judean and international politics.

We can ask, how is this announcement possible? According to Oswalt,⁴⁰ chapter 6 itself provides the solution to the theological problem of this traumatic announcement: sinful Israel (as described in Isa 1–5) can only become servant Israel (e.g. 41:8; 44:1; 44:21; 49:3) when the experience Isaiah has described in chapter 6 also becomes the nation's experience. In this regard, Oswalt makes a very important theological remark:

To those who point out that ch. 6 speaks of cleansing for Isaiah but doom for the nation, it must be admitted that this is true, but it must also be pointed out that it is illogical to think that what is available to

³⁶ Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah*, 78; and Wolfgang Köhler, *Die Verstocktheit Israels im Jesajabuch: Studie eines theologischen Motivs* (Bibelstudien 25; Munster: Lit-Verlag, 2019), 86, who infers that, "*Jes 6, 1–13 is größtenteils ein einheitlicher Text. Jes 6, 13bß passt allerdings nicht zur Gerichtsaussage.*"

³⁷ Martin O'Kane, "Isaiah a Prophet in the Footsteps of Moses," *JSOT* 69 (1996):42. Cf. Tetsuo Yamaha, "Anti-Treaty Theology of the Chronicler and His View of History," in *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010* (ed. Martti Nissinen; Vetus Testamentum Supplements 148; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 289.

³⁸ Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 137.

³⁹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 224.

⁴⁰ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 174–175.

one member of the nation could never be available to the whole nation (note how carefully Isaiah’s identity with the nation is established – both are unclean), especially when strong promises of the nation’s eventual purging and utility have been made. No, whatever the immediate future might be, if ever there should come a time when Isaiah’s experience should be duplicated on a national scale, then the promises of 1:16-19; 2:1-4; and 4:2-6 could be experienced. Without the lived-out truth which ch. 6 presents, chs. 1-5 present an irreconcilable contradiction. This could well be the reason, then, why an inaugural vision is placed six chapters into the book it inaugurates.⁴¹

If we read chapter 6 in this manner, then, it describes not only the prophet Isaiah’s individual commission but also the nation’s collective commission—if not in a straightforward manner, then, in the unsaid and in the seams of the text.

2 Exposition of Isa 6:1-4

Isaiah 6 describes a vision in which Isaiah sees the Lord in His majesty, sitting on a throne, surrounded by seraphs⁴² who proclaim His holiness.⁴³ In this vision, the prophet Isaiah finds himself in the overwhelming presence of God.⁴⁴ He

⁴¹ Ibid. Cf. also John N. Oswalt, *The Holy One of Israel: Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 7: “Thus chapter 6 is in its present place in the book to answer the question raised by the shocking oscillations of chapters 1-5. As the reader careens back and forth between grimmest judgment and highest hope, he or she must ask, ‘But how can this Israel, proud, rebellious, corrupt, become that Israel, clean, holy, displaying the truth for which all hunger?’ Chapter 6 provides the answer. When the nation of unclean lips has shared the experience of the man of unclean lips, they can declare to the world the glory he has declared to them. Thus, chapter 6 is not merely the call of the prophet; it is the call of the nation.”

⁴² Friedhelm Hartenstein, *Die Unzugänglichkeit Gottes im Heiligtum: Jesaja 6 und der Wohnort JHWHs in der Jerusalemer Kultradtion* (WMANT 75; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 195, states: “Aus dem dargelegten Befund zum vorkommen von רָפָאִים geht eindeutig hervor, daß es sich in den alttestamentlichen Texten bei »Seraph« und »Seraphim« um gefährliche Schlangenwesen der Wüste und des Ödlands handelt, denen dämonische Qualitäten zugeschrieben werden ...” He therefore draws the following conclusions regarding the appearance of the Seraphim in this text: “Indem der Prophet den JHWH-Thron von den gefährlichen dämonischen Wesen des Ödlands flankiert sieht, hat die Gotteserscheinung sofort eine unheilvolle Komponente ... Die geflügelten Schlangen erscheinen daher im Rahmen des Visionsbericht von Jes 6,1-4 wohl auch als Verkörperung des göttlichen Gerichtszorns, der kurz davor ist, zu »entbrennen«.”

⁴³ Jules Gleicher, *Political Themes in the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 213.

⁴⁴ Cf. Everson, “A Bitter Memory,” 57.

receives a frightening message in the year King Uzziah died (6:1),⁴⁵ which is also the year Ahaz, Uzziah's grandson, ascends to the throne.⁴⁶ This specification of time is very important, as it builds a bridge to the superscription in 1:1, which tells us that Isaiah's visions started during the reign of King Uzziah. It is important for the interpretation of this text to take cognisance of the death of Uzziah as well as Ahaz's ascension to the throne, as both dates coincide with the traumatic event⁴⁷ of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis which started in 734 BCE (cf. 7:1).⁴⁸

The locus of Isaiah's vision is the sanctuary—the temple (הַהֵיכָל) in Jerusalem (6:1).⁴⁹ The theatrical dramatic scene creates a visual scenery which encapsulates the fearful presence of God. The images associated with this vision are a reminder of the דְּבִיר (dēbîr, "inner sanctuary" or "Holy of Holies"), which housed the ark (e.g., 1 Kgs 6:16, 19). According to biblical tradition, the ark

⁴⁵ According to Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis* (SBL Dissertation Series 123; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 73–74, Uzziah became king in the year 785, abdicated in 760/759, perhaps because of his sickness (2 Kgs 15:5) and died in September/October 734. Cf. also Hyun C.P. Kim, *Reading Isaiah. A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Reading the Old Testament; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2016), 53.

⁴⁶ According to Ulrich F. Berges, *Isaiah: The Prophet and His Book* (trans. P. Sumpter; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 31, the explicit chronological reference could be an indication that Isaiah's vision of the heavenly court could have occurred in the interim period in which YHWH alone was regarded as the king in Jerusalem. Isaiah 6:5, which explicitly refers to the "King (הַמֶּלֶךְ), YHWH Zebaoth" (cf. 24:23; 33:22; 41:21; 52:7) as well as the reference of his dwelling upon a high and lofty throne (6:1), likely supports this interpretation. To Berges, *Isaiah*, 31–32 "[T]he kingdom of Yhwh here functions to critique human rule rather than legitimate it. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the messianic heir to the throne (Isaiah 7; 9; 11) is never called a 'King' (melek)!"

⁴⁷ Esterhuizen and Groenewald, "Towards a Theology of Migration," 34, note that, "[t]hese associations of migration such as displacement, death, war and suffering, become the underlying trauma markers layered within the text."

⁴⁸ Berges, *Isaiah*, 31. It is interesting that the reign of Jotham, the father of Ahaz, is not mentioned here at all (cf. 2 Kgs 15:32–38). Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 138, argues that it may be that, "according to some recent reconstructions of the chronologies of the kings, Uzziah may have actually outlived his son and died during the reign of his grandson Ahaz, shortly before the crisis depicted in the following chapter. If this was so, it may explain the absence of any reference to Jotham's reign outside of the book's superscription."

⁴⁹ Jimmy J.M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 92; Martin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 139; Hugh G.M. Williamson, *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; London: T & T Clark, 2007), 124–126.

functioned as God’s footstool (Ps 132:7-8) and it portrays God as the One who is enthroned on the cherubim (כְּרוּבִים; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Kgs 19:15). Smoke and cloud are often the symbols of God’s presence in the “Holy of Holies” (1 Kgs 8:9-13; cf. also Exod 40:34-38; Lev 16:2).⁵⁰

According to Berges, this chapter denotes critique by the Isaianic scribes of both royal as well as priestly power.⁵¹ In the vision, Isaiah enters the inner sanctuary where he sees the Lord and King (YHWH Zebaoth, יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת) with his own eyes (6:1.5). As has already been stated, the images used in this vision are related to the דְּבִיר (“Holy of Holies”), which could only be entered by the High Priest (הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל) once a year on Yom Kippur (Day of the Atonement). Yom Kippur is the day YHWH atones the people off all their sins (cf. Lev 16:21ff.) and it is also the only day on which YHWH appears in the דְּבִיר in the cloud upon the mercy seat (Lev 16:2, 14, 30-34).⁵²

Although Isaiah does not belong to priestly circles, his vision transfers him to a scenery only reserved for the priestly class. He has an overwhelming encounter with God in this vision and the tension created through the involuntary scene causes internal trauma for the prophet Isaiah as he is terrified.⁵³ As a non-priest, not only he was allowed inside the temple but he was also able to “see” God (6:1.5) and he surely knew that whoever sees God, must die and the fear caused by the mere thought of death caused immense inner tension (Gen 32:31; Exod 19:21; 33:20). The fact that Isaiah “sees” God connects him to Moses who was the only person who knew God face-to-face (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10).⁵⁴

What then does it mean when the Isaianic text says that the prophet saw the Lord (וַיַּרְאָה אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי; Isa 6:1)⁵⁵ and how should we interpret this phrase “to

⁵⁰ Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 139.

⁵¹ Berges, *Isaiah*, 81; Ulrich F. Berges, “Kingship and Servanthood in the Book of Isaiah,” in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew: Essays Honoring Joseph Blenkinsopp and His Contribution to the Study of Isaiah* (ed. R.J. Bautch and J.T. Hibbard; Festschrift J. Blenkinsopp; Grand Rapids.: Eerdmans, 2014), 162.

⁵² According to Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 140, “[o]nly the high priest is allowed to appear before YHWH in the Holy of Holies with the appropriate offerings, but he does so on behalf of the people who are gathered at the temple for the holiday. Although there is no indication that Isaiah filled a priestly role, his presence at the temple during the Yom Kippur ceremonies appears to be the most likely setting for his vision. In this regard, Hurowitz’s observations concerning the role of mouth purification in Mesopotamian ritual contexts supports a cultic setting for the activities portrayed in this text.” Cf. Victor Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,” *HUCA* 60 (1989):39–89.

⁵³ Cf. Poulsen, *The Black Hole in Isaiah*, 74.

⁵⁴ Berges, *Isaiah*, 32.

⁵⁵ Cf. also v. 5, which states that Isaiah saw “the King, the Lord (YHWH) of hosts” (אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת רֹאֵי עֵינַי).

see God"? Knierim⁵⁶ outlines that there are two different streams in the biblical tradition. One stream claim that it is totally impossible "to see God," as it could even have deadly consequences for the person, should this happen. The book of Exodus clearly echoes this specific tradition, when God tells Moses the following: "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Exod 33:20).⁵⁷

On the other hand, there is also another tradition in the Hebrew Bible and the scribes of the book of Isaiah probably relied on this tradition.⁵⁸ A number of references are based on this tradition such as 1 Kgs 22:19, where Micaiah ben Imlah⁵⁹ states: "I saw the Lord (YHWH) sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and the left of him" (רָאִיתִי אֶת־יְהוָה יֹשֵׁב (עַל־כִּסֵּאוֹ וְכָל־צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם עִמָּד עָלָיו מִיְמִינוֹ וּמִשְׂמָאלוֹ). Some other texts were probably also influenced by the Micaiah ben Imlah-tradition, for example, when Jacob states: "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen 32:30; MT 32:31). Gideon exclaims that he has seen the "angel of the Lord" (Judg 6:22-23; מַלְאָכֵי יְהוָה)⁶⁰ and Manoah, who sees the "angel of the Lord" tells his wife that they have seen God (Judg 13:22: כִּי אֵלֹהִים רָאִינוּ) and surely will die, to which the wife replies: "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have

⁵⁶ Rolf Knierim, "The Vocation of Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968):50.

⁵⁷ According to Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 19-40* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 349, the kernel of the problem here is that the act of *seeing* God is impossible. The connection of seeing God and death occurs a number of times in the Hebrew Bible, as in Gen 32:31; Exod 19:21; Num 4:20; Judg 6:22f.; 3:22. Dohmen formulates it as follows: "*Die Allgemeingültigkeit des Begründungssatzes liegt in der Differenz zwischen Gott und Mensch. Als lebender Mensch, d.h. so wie der Mensch existiert, ist er von Gott derart verschieden, dass seine Unmittelbarkeit, die die Erkenntnis des Wesens Gottes in seiner Ganzheit (genau das impliziert die Vorstellung vom »Angesicht«) beinhaltet, unmöglich ist. Das Besondere der vorliegenden Stelle liegt darin, dass diese Differenz ausdrücklich auf Mose hin formuliert undbetont wird. In Bezug auf das Vorausgegangene – und das Nachfolgende – betont V 20, dass Mose Mensch ist und Mensch bleibt.*" Cf. also Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 263–264.

⁵⁸ Alphonso Groenewald, "Isaiah 1:2–3 and Isaiah 6: Isaiah 'a Prophet like Moses' (Dt 18:18)," *HTS Theologese Studies* 68/1 (2012):5.

⁵⁹ Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (trans. M.C. Lind; Hebrew Bible Monographs 46; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 80; Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Z. für die Alttestamentliche Wiss.* 77/3 (1965):317; O'Kane, "Isaiah a Prophet," 42; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 134–135; Thomas Wagner, *Gottes Herrschaft: Eine Analyse der Denkschrift (Jes 6,1–9,6)* (VTS 108; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 36–37, 115–116; Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 104; Hugh G.M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 38.

⁶⁰ "and Gideon said, 'Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.' But the Lord said to him, 'Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.'"

accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these." Knierim⁶¹ infers that the Isaianic scribal tradition relies on the tradition that a small number of people in Israel had the privilege to "see the Lord" and Isaiah surely belonged to this exclusive circle of people who claim that they remain alive after having "seen" the Lord.

This visual imagery in Isa 6:1-4 shows strong similarities to the theophany that Moses had on Mount Sinai.⁶² In this Isaianic text, the author describes the seraphim and the temple in which Isaiah's vision took place, stating that the doorposts were shaking upon hearing the sound of the one who called; subsequently the house filled with smoke (Isa 6:4).⁶³ This revelation echoes the scene in Exod 19:18: "Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently."⁶⁴ Whereas on the one hand, the event on Mount Sinai causes great fear, it simultaneously exercises an eerie appeal.⁶⁵ What we have here in the Isaiah text is that the Sinaitic experience is re-enacted in the Temple at Jerusalem.⁶⁶ The text in Isa 6 likewise creates a paradoxical experience of fear and wonder as we read about the prophet who experiences God's presence and who, subsequently, was ushered into a wholly different dimension of reality.

3 Isaiah 6:5-7

The experience of God's presence only increases Isaiah's feelings of fear and wonder. He is terrified because he regards himself as sinful and he sees himself as the one who has to carry the burden of the nation's impurity.⁶⁷ This description reminds the reader of the text of Exod 4:10 where for the first time God reveals himself to Moses and commands him to undertake a mission of liberation.⁶⁸ Moses laments that he has never been a man of many words and protests that he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue" (literally: "heavy of mouth and heavy of

⁶¹ Knierim, "The Vocation of Isaiah," 50.

⁶² See also Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, 139; Gleicher, *Political Themes*, 213.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 214. See also, in this regard, Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1974), 369; Dohmen, *Exodus 19-40*, 69; Hartenstein, *Die Unzugänglichkeit Gottes im Heiligtum*, 137.

⁶⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Chicago: Winston, 1985), 15.

⁶⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 122-24; Cf. also Soo J. Kim, "Eschatology in Isaiah," in *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah* (ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 365.

⁶⁷ See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 55.

⁶⁸ Gleicher, *Political Themes*, 214.

tongue"). In other words, in his opinion, he is not capable of speaking and of fulfilling the heavy task God expects of him. Moses' statements emphasise the predicament any human being encounters who engages in prophetic activity (cf. Jer. 1). The emphasis of the use of the (spoken) "word" is an important theme in prophecy, as a prophet needs to deal with intimate knowledge of God and God's intentions.⁶⁹ Divine instruction prepared both Moses and Isaiah to receive their respective commission. Moses was ordered to take off his shoes as he was standing on a holy place (Exod 3:5) and Isaiah's lips were cleansed before the Holy One in order to purify him for his commission.⁷⁰ With regard to the prophet's purification and sanctification (6:6-7), Berges explains that YHWH is the One who brings this about, which indeed is a significant observation, given that "in the post-exilic period the priestly service became increasingly significant due to an increased focus on the act of atonement. The effect of this portrayal, however, is that such service is at least relativized."⁷¹

The prophet is left in anticipation, according to Isa 6:5-7. Isaiah is clearly unsettled, even traumatised, as we can see from the description in verse 5. The prophet is acutely aware of, not only his own impurity but also the uncleanness of the people, which he shares.⁷² The fact that Isaiah regards his lips as "unclean" leaves him vulnerable and traumatised.⁷³ The people are also perceived as impure and unclean, leaving them vulnerable and exposed. The collective trauma encompasses not only the prophet and his embodiment but also the body of the people.

The fragility of the prophet is tangible, as formulated by Landy⁷⁴:

⁶⁹ Meyers, *Exodus*, 61; and Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 78.

⁷⁰ Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," 311.

⁷¹ Berges, *Isaiah*, 81–82.

⁷² Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 56. Alexander V. Prokhorov, *The Isaianic Denkschrift and a Socio-Cultural Crisis in Yehud: A Rereading of Isaiah 6:1-9:6[7]* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 261; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 71, states: "therefore the reference to his impure lips is quickly balanced with the statement of the community's "impure mouth", so that the pre-eminence of his figure in relation to the image of *hā'ām hazze*^h ("this people") may be maintained."

⁷³ Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 63, notes that, "Isaiah's immediate response is to give expression to his sense of complete unworthiness and to realize that in this he is not alone. Recognition of one's true state is an essential element of repentance ... The first is quite general, *for I am undone*. The verb, *המך*, bespeaks a sense of being totally ruined and coming to an end; it induces terror at the prospect of destruction."

⁷⁴ Francis Landy, "Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6," *Biblical Interpretation* 7/1 (1999):65.

[T]he self becomes self-aware only at the point of extinction. The fragile self, asserting and grieving over itself against its disintegration, opposes the vision of God that radiates outwards. In the world full of glory and the voices that celebrate it, one thing is excluded. The self that falls back on itself in the midst of silence, despair and fragmentation is nonetheless representative of the human community, as becomes evident in the sequel.

What is clear from the text is that the prophet's trauma is inseparable from the collective trauma of the people. The prophet not only becomes the symbol of both his and the nation's nothingness and the emptiness of the land but also personifies the possibility of resilience of the individual as well as of the collective.

The following section expands the textual development to include also other bodily parts which emphasise the overwhelming traumatic experiences which are to follow. The collective trauma that awaits the people can be understood as God's punishment for their impurity, demonstrated through their disobedience to God because they are unable to "hear" and "see."⁷⁵ Subsequently, the traumatic ball is set in motion and collective trauma escalates. Isaiah 6:5-7 sets off the traumatic build-up that continues in the following verses where the trauma and peril reach its crescendo.

4 Isaiah 6:8-13

The narrative which begins on a positive note ends with despair; verse 13 though, with its ambiguous repetitive hope, tones down the overwhelming air of gloom. The text has no real ending; it commences with the experience of revelation and only looks forward to the endless rubble and experiences of chaos.⁷⁶ The body of the people is exposed to traumatising scenes of hardening, blindness and deafness.

So far, Isaiah has only heard the seraphs speaking but for the first time in the narrative, he hears the voice of the Lord (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ), speaking and asking who is available to be sent to fulfil the task which will be given by the Lord.⁷⁷ Isaiah answers in the affirmative and states his availability to fulfil this tremendous task, which is however extremely confusing and shocking. The Lord commands Isaiah to go and convey the message to the people of Judah that they will not be

⁷⁵ Cf. Matthijs J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 117; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 55–56.

⁷⁶ Landy, "Strategies of Concentration," 60.

⁷⁷ Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 144. See also Elizabeth Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope in Isaiah 7 and 8 from a Perspective of Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth" (UNISA, 2016), 59.

able to comprehend in spite of hearing Isaiah's message and will not be able to perceive what they are seeing (v. 9). In the following verse, the Lord gives an even more puzzling message to Isaiah, namely that he should cause the mind (lit. heart) of the people to slow down (lit. make fat), make their ears dull and cause their eyes to dim so that their eyes will not see, their ears will not hear and their minds will not understand. Had it been the opposite, their minds would have understood and this would have caused them to turn around and be healed or be saved (v. 10). It could be that the verb רפא ("to heal") is a reference to Isa 1:4ff., which states that the nation got beaten from the sole of the foot even to the head, resulting in bruises, sores and bleeding wounds. The healing is only possible if the nation shows some insight into their own condition, which however is not the case.⁷⁸ According to Esterhuizen "[t]he encumbrance of this commission is laden with cognitive trauma elements, visual elements of the event, loss of memory and concentration abilities, which are all markers on traumatic experiences."⁷⁹

The dreadful implications of his commission cause Isaiah to call out to the Lord and ask, "How long, O Lord?" Roberts⁸⁰ raises the important point that it may seem very odd for modern readers to hear the question "How long?" (עַד־מַתַּי), being asked in these circumstances, as one would have expected "why?" to be a more appropriate question. The reader is left with the perplexing question of why the seraphs could purify the prophet (vv. 6-7) but not the heart of the people.⁸¹ Did God not want the people to turn around and to be saved from ruin and destruction? The text's obvious internal contradiction leaves the reader troubled with more questions than answers.

"How long?" (עַד־מַתַּי) indeed may seem to be an unusual question for modern readers. However, in the time of Isaiah, it was not strange, as we encounter the same question in for example a number of Psalms (e.g. 6:4; 74:10; 80:5; 82:2; 90:13 and 94:3 [twice]). The psalmist(s) would lament God's anger and punishment and would call out to God and ask God how long the enemies would still triumph over the life of the psalmist(s).⁸² The question "how long?" expresses the supplicant's hope that God will act in the midst of the trouble being

⁷⁸ Zoltán Kustár, "Durch seine Wunden sind wir Geheilt": Eine Untersuchung zur Metaphorik von Israels Krankheit und Heilung im Jesajabuch (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 8. Folge, Heft 14=Heft 154; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 62.

⁷⁹ Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 59.

⁸⁰ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 100.

⁸¹ Beuken, *Jesaja 1-12*, 163.

⁸² Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 100.

experienced; it is an impatient hope calling on God to act promptly and to redress the seemingly hopeless situation.⁸³ In this regard, Roberts remarks:

When an ancient Israelite or Mesopotamian consulted a deity because sickness or some other disaster had overtaken him, he or she wanted to know three things – why did the disaster befall him, would he survive, and how long would it be before he recovered. This is not fundamentally different from what a modern individual wants to know from his physician – what is the name of the illness, will I recover, and how long before I feel better.⁸⁴

The prophets though were also concerned about a particular point in time, as these time limits confirmed and legitimised the prophetic oracles, as we can see in the book of Isaiah (e.g. 7:8-9.14-16; 8:3-4; 37:30-31). In Isa 6, the question "how long?" is being asked by Isaiah, as he is concerned to know how long the nation will experience divine judgment and for how long their punishment will last.⁸⁵

Wildberger⁸⁶ rightfully indicates that the exclamatory question "How long, O Lord?" belongs to the Gattung of the lament and that we often find this question in communal laments. Williamson⁸⁷ concurs that the words convey dismay and loss of hope as judgment becomes prevalent. The response, "how long?" in verse 11, encapsulates the historical trauma through the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Esterhuizen⁸⁸ infers that one could agree with Stulman and Kim⁸⁹ in their interpretation that "*seeing* and *hearing*" are central themes in this passage as well as in the book of Isaiah as a whole, just as the two related themes, "*understanding* and *knowing*," in this passage and the book as a whole. Esterhuizen⁹⁰ emphasises that "*despair* and *hope*" should certainly be added as two very important themes in the book of Isaiah.

⁸³ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 78; Cf. also Philip S. Johnston, "The Psalms and Distress," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 74.

⁸⁴ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 100.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 100–101; Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 59.

⁸⁶ Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja: Kapitel 1-12* (2nd ed.; vol. 1 of *BKAT X*; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), 257.

⁸⁷ Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 84.

⁸⁸ Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 60.

⁸⁹ Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 33.

⁹⁰ Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 60.

The text further calls to mind visual imagery of past, present and possible future trauma. The narrative of Isa 6:11-13, creates a possible collective traumatic event within an imaginable historical outcome, which Janzen⁹¹ refers to as a "failure of narrative" because the implied audience of the day and the prophet are imperilled to hear and visualise the traumatic repercussions without actually experiencing the traumatic event.⁹²

Collective generational imprinted trauma means that the hardening is not only a time-specific warning directed at the present people the text indicates but also heeds a warning for future readers of the book of Isaiah. This traumatic observation and warning imminent in the text are based on the collective experiences of successive past generations which might become repetitive in collective generational imprinted future trauma. Williamson⁹³ postulates that his understanding of hardening entails a process rather than an understanding or an implied content. The hardening within this visualised collective suffering, evokes past narratives and experiences of trauma as a means to conceive reality of future demise for those in a predisposed realm of looming threat.

The calling of the prophet is burdened with collective traumatic elements and according to Esterhuizen,⁹⁴ "cognitive trauma elements, visual elements of the event ... and concentration abilities" are not only trauma markers but also aspects of traumatic experiences evident in verse 11. It is as if the verse holds the generational trauma within the historical suffering. At some stage, this continual generational trauma—either experienced or told—will achieve *Gestalt* where healing, hope, redemption and resilience for future generations are implied.

Although blindness and deafness are important themes in the book of Isaiah⁹⁵ and in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, the text most comparable to Isa

⁹¹ David Janzen, *Trauma and the Failure of History: Kings, Lamentations, and the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Semeia Studies 94; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 71.

⁹² Janzen, *Trauma and the Failure of History*, 79, argues that, "Trauma is not history; it is the intrusion of the unknowable event into the victim's present, so trauma literature cannot point to meaning, only 'to an understanding of what it means that meaning is absent'." Though Janzen emphasises "the failure of narrative," postulate that within the possible future trauma, the possibility exists for transformation and growth after the traumatic event, in other words post-traumatic growth leading to resilience.

⁹³ Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 6-12*, 76.

⁹⁴ Esterhuizen, "A Study of the Tension between Despair and Hope," 59.

⁹⁵ R.E. Clements, "Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah's Themes," *Journal Study Old Testament* 10/31 (1985):95-113, indicates that the imagery of blindness and deafness which are introduced in chapter 6 (vv. 9-10), play an important role in the book of Isaiah and are further developed in 29:18; 35:5; 42:16, 18-19, 21-25; 43:8. Clements indicates that: "The theme of Israel's blindness and deafness, understood in a metaphorical and spiritual sense, is clearly of central

6:9-10 is Deut 29:1-4⁹⁶ (MT 28:69-29:3), where Moses begins his covenantal speech as follows:

These are the words of the covenant that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb. Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, ‘You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.’

YHWH is portrayed as being responsible for the trauma the people will experience, as he is keeping the people from being able to see, hear, know and understand, which will be the precondition to thwart the disaster that will strike them.⁹⁷ In Deuteronomy, God speaks through Moses and in the book of Isaiah God speaks through Isaiah. According to Deut 29:4 (MT 29:3), the people did not have the ability to interpret and understand the significance of YHWH’s deeds performed in Egypt and in the wilderness (vv. 2, 5 [MT vv. 1, 4]). Exile (Isa 6:11-12), being one of the most traumatic experiences the nation could experience, will be the consequence of the fact that the people are not able to hear and see and that their minds are not able to comprehend Isaiah’s message. According to O’Kane,⁹⁸ there are similarities in YHWH’s words to Moses and in the instructions given to Isaiah—the first-mentioned being given in the solemn context of the covenant speech (Deut 29)⁹⁹ and the second in the equally serious

importance to Isa. 40-55. Not only so, but it makes its point in a way which assumes that this deafness and blindness is already known to be the case. Nor do I think that we can properly doubt its source of origin, since it derives from the call narrative of Isaiah and the terms by which he was commissioned with a divinely given task towards Israel” (102-103). He continues: “First Isaiah’s call-account used the imagery of Israel’s blindness and deafness to signify the refusal of the people to listen and respond to the prophet’s message” (104).

⁹⁶ O’Kane, “Isaiah a Prophet,” 43; Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, 146.

⁹⁷ O’Kane, “Isaiah a Prophet,” 44.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 259, notes that this chapter dramatically focuses on “brokenness” and presents the covenant between God and the nation as broken: “This text begins the third address of Moses, which culminates in the great poem of 32:1–43 with a prose addendum in 32:44–47. The structure of this corpus is the dramatic movement of broken covenant (chap. 29), repentance (30:1–10), and summons to new covenant (30:11–31:13) that opens the way to a future in the land (31:13–39) ... Chapter 29 is presented as a speech of Moses, a preferred vehicle for theological instruction in the tradition of Deuteronomy ... Israel has failed to respond, and so has failed as of now to be YHWH’s holy people. The

context of the prophet's mission. Brueggemann¹⁰⁰ emphasises that this narrative account justifies the authority of Isaiah, as Moses had authority, which is necessary in order to give legitimacy to the prophetic book. The book therefore claims a continuing prophetic authority for the prophetic person. The authority of both the prophet but also "his" book is confirmed, therefore, making this book authoritative for the faithful of the present as well as forthcoming generations.

The last verse of Isa 6, namely verse 13, is in itself a conundrum.¹⁰¹ It leaves the reader perplexed and almost at a loss for words. The content of the verse occupies an odd space but also an exciting space for interpretation, especially when considering that the notion of a remnant is the predominant theme of the last verse. The following chapter, namely chapter 7, further elaborates on the remnant theme as a central part of the prophet Isaiah's prophetic voice. The concept of the remnant (or as referred to in verse 13, the holy "seed"; זרע) becomes after all the main premise of Isaiah's message as a prophet throughout the book of Isaiah.

Although only a few would remain, this motif is an important contributing factor to the literary plotline of the whole of the book of Isaiah and "[t]he initial image regarding the remnant¹⁰² motif is that of a tenth of a people who survive divine judgment, and they serve as the 'holy seed' who will repopulate the land (Is 6:13)."¹⁰³ The historical drama of Isa 7–8 presents the reader with three children with significant names. The first to appear in this narrative is *Shear-jashub* (שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב "A-Remnant-Turns-Back" or "A-Remnant-Will-Return" – Isa 7:3)—the prophet's son. The child is present to embody the message and functions as a sign to both King Ahaz and his father. The message is namely that King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel will return to their countries as the "fire stumps" that are still smouldering (7:4) and what is clear from the narrative is that the enemies of the north will not survive but they will be cut down. In this context, the name *Shear-jashub* embodies hope and comfort. The dualism in the name not only implies that there is hope but despair is also a breath away.¹⁰⁴

speech of Moses thus voices a harbinger of the judgment that is to come later in this chapter" (259–261).

¹⁰⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (1st ed.; WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 58. Cf. also Groenewald, "Isaiah 1," 6.

¹⁰¹ Landy, "Strategies of Concentration," 77, says, "v. 13 refuses closure, and is discontinuous with the previous verses."

¹⁰² Righteous remnants: (שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב / שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב). In Isa 1–12 (singular noun), see Isa 10:20, 21(2x), 22; 11:11, 16. In the rest of the book, see Isa 14:22; 16:14; 28:5; 37:31, 32.

¹⁰³ David M. Morgan, "Remnant," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 660.

¹⁰⁴ Morgan, "Remnant," 660.

Hyun Kim¹⁰⁵ indicates that in the whole of the HB, this phrase, the “holy seed” (זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ) only occurs here in the book of Isaiah and in the book of Ezra (9:2). With regard to the connection between these two books, he infers that:

Regardless of the compositional influence of these books, if there were any phraseological correlation, it is worthwhile to ponder the pertinent meaning and theology. On the one hand, ‘the holy seed’ in all these texts may denote the same socio-ethnic identity, i.e., the in-group of true Israel, commonly defined as the *golah* (exile)-returnees from the Babylonian captivity of Ezra and Nehemiah. The holy seed of Isaiah, then, would likewise refer to the Judean survivors from the exile. On the other hand, however, the holy seed of Isaiah may allude to a group counter to that of Ezra-Nehemiah. In this sense, the Isaianic holy seed may connote the out-group of Ezra-Nehemiah’s true Israel.¹⁰⁶

Given the theology of the book of Isaiah, as we have seen from its first chapter onwards,¹⁰⁷ we could assume that the last mentioned would be the more plausible option.

The last verse uses vivid imagery from the sphere of nature to depict the total vastness, emptiness and nothingness from the destruction which the country is about to suffer. The country will be utterly desolate and will become like a burnt-down terebinth or an oak and only the stump, which looks dead and unappealing, will remain. However, as we notice in nature, many species of trees show resilience and this (burnt-down) stump has the capacity to put out new shoots and subsequently new growth emerges. Although it takes a long time to regrow, the new sprouts and shoots develop into new branches and eventually it becomes a (new) fully-grown tree again. The text states that out of the stump a seed will grow miraculously (cf. also 11:1) and YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, is the one capable of preserving and restoring this “holy seed.” It is conspicuous that this chapter commences and ends with the two semantic word pairs “death” (v. 1) and “seed” (v. 13), as it links “seed” to “life” which stands in contrast to “death” and the “devastation, desolation” (שָׁמָמָה) of the land. The combination of these word pairs possibly indicates an underlying idea in the narrative that although the early king and his descendants will die, the heavenly King (הַמֶּלֶךְ הַשָּׁמַיִם) will be the one who will redeem this small group called the “holy seed.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Hyun Kim, *Reading Isaiah*, 57; Köhler, *Die Verstocktheit Israels*, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Hyun Kim, *Reading Isaiah*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Isa 1:9: לֹדְלֵי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הוֹתִיר לָנוּ שְׂרִיד כְּמַעֲט (“If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors”).

¹⁰⁸ Beuken, “The Manifestation of Yahweh,” 75; Cf. also Hyun Kim, *Reading Isaiah*, 58.

Isaiah 6 embodies the intricate traumatic experiences felt by the individual as well as the collective group. The text builds up from the harsh language of hardening, metaphorical deafness and blindness to collective guilt with disastrous consequences. A traumatic picture of pain and tragedy is painted where not only the senses of sight and hearing will be affected but also the heart of the people will be hardened. Verses 11-13 reverberate fearful messages that things will even get worse for the collective group before it will get better. The looming judgement and possible punishment build up to a crescendo of trauma. Bartelt¹⁰⁹ points out that "this is not the end of the story ... there is a sense of hope in the 'holy seed,' small though it may seem ..." The promise of a remnant in verse 13 becomes the hope and resilience to overcome the trauma.

Generational imprinted trauma, as we understand and define it, is a relived trauma experience which is etched into the generational encounter as it is passed on from generation to generation. In this sense, the imprinted trauma holds the fear, pain and suffering within the fibre of the lineage. Generational imprinted trauma creates a space where the narrative provides a collective platform for understanding, resilience and meaning-making through each generation's relived experiences. This perspective links to Mucci,¹¹⁰ who explains that generational trauma creates a dissociation between history and memory that leads to a painful narrative.¹¹¹

In our understanding, generational imprinted trauma holds the emotional memories of suffering without the actual experiences that are part and parcel of the past traumatic event. However, the retelling of the trauma conjures a space of re-experience and re-living for present and future generations. The imprinted trauma, therefore, becomes specific and re-imagined through the integration of sensory, visual and auditory senses so that the re-living and re-imagining become a real specific trauma marker with a plethora of historical stereotypes and trauma outcomes. It is our summation that the text of Isa 6 not only forebodes future trauma, as the different textual layers warns of the imminent threats of loss, war, despair and hope that loom but this text also reflects on past experiences of trauma, whether in a straightforward manner or in the unsaid and in the seams of the text.

¹⁰⁹ Andrew H. Bartelt, "A Hard Saying, with Purpose. Isaiah 6:9-10 and the Gospel of Mark," in *The Press of the Text: Biblical Studies in Honor of James W. Voelz* (ed. Andrew H. Bartelt, Jeffrey Kloha, and Paul R. Raabe; Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), 23–24.

¹¹⁰ Clara Mucci, *Beyond Individual and Collective Trauma: Intergenerational Transmission, Psychoanalytic Treatment, and the Dynamics of Forgiveness* (London: Karnac, 2013), 131–143.

¹¹¹ Esterhuizen and Groenewald, "Towards a Theology of Migration," 35.

D CONCLUSION

Isaiah scholars will attest that when writing a conclusion on any academic analysis of this book, such a conclusion is never conclusive. This is even more applicable to the commission of Isaiah in Isa 6. In a way, trauma studies and the use of trauma as a lens render a fresh perspective on an already complex and fascinating text. This chapter addressed the aspect of trauma, evident in the text through the narrative of individual and collective trauma, as it is presented in the fibre of the prophet's commission. The text displays trauma markers which leave the prophet and subsequently the people of Judah troubled, fearful and traumatised. The text of Isa 6 also offers a fascinating paradox; within the chapter, there are not only harrowing imageries of suffering and looming fear but there are also moments of awe and wonder with hopeful snippets of resilience, of salvation. A theme that bridges the gap between despair and hope becomes part and parcel of the lives of the prophet Isaiah and the people of Judah.

It can be concluded somehow that Isa 6 leaves not only the reader and the historical role players of the time breathless and at a loss for words. As the text builds up tension with the traumatised language of hardening, metaphorical threats of loss of hearing and blindness, it also depicts crippling moments of guilt with grave consequences. The text paints a vivid scene of disability that not only affects the physical body of the individual and of the collective but also the heart and emotional centre when it is threatened with hardening. This visible threat and possible harsh judgement build up to a pinnacle of unbearable trauma and fear. A turning point comes to the fore when a sense of hope is presented in a metaphorical "seed," even if it is minuscule in appearance. This glimmer of survival embodies the promise of resilience and future hope that would overcome the trauma awaiting a prophet and a nation.

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