

# **The Nature and Import of the Call Narrative in Isaiah 6 and its Lessons for Ministry Today**

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## **Abstract**

One of the major characteristics of Old Testament Prophets is the fact that they had to be called by God. The big problem today is that many prophets call themselves or at best just claim to be called. Though vocation to prophetic ministry is a recurrent subject of research, scholarship has not given enough attention to examining the real nature and true import of prophetic vocation especially at this time when many are playing down on the import of the divine prerogative and initiative to call. In response to the need to put vocation to ministry in right perspective, this work sets out to study the nature and significance of the Call Narrative in Isaiah 6 with the intention of discovering and identifying relevant lessons, as direction, for prophetic ministry today. Employing the historical critical method for the exegetical study of the passage, it is believed that the result of the study will expose relevant factors that will reshape today's attitude and practical orientation to vocation as a major factor in prophetic ministry. The result promises to add to scholarship and to be beneficial to general ministry and that of prophecy in particular.

**Key words:** Isaiah 6, ministry, prophecy, vocation

## **0. Introduction**

One of the major ministries cutting across the Bible to the Church is the prophetic ministry. In the Old Testament, it has its peculiar characteristic of being a consequence of a divine call. Today, this ministry has attained a rather unusual status where the supposed prophets of the day emerge as a result of self-acclamation. The divine initiative to call and the conventional ratification of prophetic role by God has been abandoned. What one sees is a legion of acclaimed prophets who are neither called by God nor do they reflect the prophetic vocational procedure. The loss of the import of vocation in today's prophetic ministry has posed a challenge for authentic prophecy. This work attempts to draw from the example of the Old Testament vocation to prophetic life and see how to confront the present-day usurpation of the divine initiative to call. Using the basic exegetical procedures for the analysis of the text, this work will also employ the analytical/directional approach. The aim is to examine, discover and apply the nature and import of the Old Testament prophetic ministry in radical service of the present-day ministry.

## **1. Analysis of Isaiah 6**

### *The Text in English*

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 The pivots<sup>1</sup> on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

7 The seraph<sup>1</sup> touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

9 And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'

10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate;

12 until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled."<sup>1</sup> The holy seed is its stump.

### *Exegesis of the Text*

This passage has to be understood against its historical background. The Book of Isaiah is better understood against the political background of 8<sup>th</sup> century Judah. But dealing with the call narrative is a peculiar pericope. Virtually every Israelite prophet has a call

narrative that highlights the divine credential of the ministry of that prophet. The call narrative of Isaiah comes in Chapter 6 and this is a pointer to something.

In chapters 1-5, Isaiah uses harsh words to speak of Judah's wickedness. He speaks of Judeans as rebellious children (1:2) and presents the picture that they have forsaken the Lord. Throughout Chapters 1-5, Isaiah is judgmental and condemnatory of Judah. It is controversial as per why the call of Isaiah is not recorded at the beginning but instead in Chapter 6. Scholars have sought to explain this. The most common explanation would be that chapters 1-5 are intended to be introductory, to set the stage so to speak, and that chapter 6 is the beginning of the "action" part of the book. Another possibility is that it could have been that a later redactor was at work. Scholars also believe the first five chapters of Isaiah form the theological background for the call narrative in Chapter 6

However, it is interesting to see how the experience of God changed Isaiah's judgment of Judah and that of himself. His experience of God's holiness changed his focus. He spoke about Judah in the previous Chapters but on experiencing the glory of God and His holiness, he changed direction and accused himself of sinfulness. That humbling experience prepared him for service

There is no major textual problem in this passage. Most manuscripts reflect a near confirmed appreciation of the text as we have it and do not constitute any serious controversy that would affect our analysis of the text as it is.<sup>1</sup> The proximate background of Isaiah chapter 6 is the general infidelity of Judah and the need to address it through the ministry of a prophet. This infidelity of Judah had already pitched the people in the disadvantage. On the other hand, the remote background presents a typical procedure of prophetic engagement.

The structure of the passage can be discerned from different points of view. The entire structure is generally pitched between a focus on the messenger (verse 1-8) and a focus on the message (verses 9-13). The thirteen verses offer a great insight into the nature and import of prophetic ministry. It can be seen in three broad sections.

Verses 1-4: This forms the locale and the setting for the call to take place. Verses 5-8: Isaiah receives his vocation

Verses 9-13: Isaiah confirms the nature of his prophetic ministry (The message)

The above picture can further be broken down as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 35.

Verses 1-4: Isaiah experiences the Glory of God

Verses 5: Isaiah's fear/declaration of unworthiness

Verses 6-7: Cleansing/Divine assurance of pardon

Verses 8: Divine Call and commissioning

Verses 9-12: Communication of the difficult mandate to Isaiah

Verse 13: The Hope of a Remnant

The main part that records the vocation of Isaiah is between verses 5 and 8 of chapter 6 and it would be important to look more closely at this:

*Isaiah 6: 1-4: The setting for the call...*

These first four verses form the setting for the vocation of Isaiah in verses 5-8. The incident is dated to the year of Uzziah's death "In the year that King Uzziah died" (v. 1a). Uzziah (known as Azariah in 2 Kgs 15) was one of the most treasured kings of Judah. He also achieved a lot to the extent that his administration became a reference point after his death because his successors could not measure up to his standard. To mention him in this Isaian passage is an allusion to the fact that Isaiah's vision came at a time of great need. It came after Judah lost a very important administration in the land and needed God's intervention for a 'rebirth.'

The vision in the Temple is very significant. Isaiah saw the glory and experienced the holiness of God. The awe that he experienced was very profound and fearful against the background that one was to die if he saw God. Seraph (seraphim in plural) is a transliterated Hebrew word. Most scholars believe that the word, seraphim, means “fiery serpents.” Scott explains that it means “burning ones” and that the idea of serpents is derived illogically from Numbers 21:6, 8.<sup>2</sup>

The antiphon by the seraphim choir was to emphasise the holiness of God as manifested in the Temple. The whole verses 1 to 4 depict the setting and nature of the experience that Isaiah had. It was in the Temple and the awe-inspiring feeling was consequent upon his experience of the glory and holiness of God.

### *Isaiah 6:5: Isaiah's fear and Declaration of Unworthiness*

In this verse Isaiah speaks, confessing his guilt. He now realizes that it was not only other people who were sinful as he mentioned in Chapters 1-5. His experience has opened his eyes to know that he himself was a sinner. His lips

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<sup>2</sup> R.B.Y. Scott, “Introduction and Exegesis of Isaiah 1-39”; Kilpatrick, G.G.D., “Exposition of Isaiah 1-39”, *The Interpreter's Bible: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 208.



were also unclean and not only those of the people

Isaiah's unclean lips give expression to his unclean heart, just as the unclean lips of the people of Judah (on whom Isaiah has been pronouncing judgment) give expression to their unclean hearts. It is only when Isaiah finds himself in the presence of Yahweh's holiness that he recognises his own uncleanness.<sup>3</sup>

At a point, he thought he would die especially for two reasons. First of all he realized he was a sinner and secondly he realized he had seen God and these two points pushed him to devastation in verse 5 "for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Armies!" (v. 5b). To see "the King, Yahweh of Armies," is to die.

### *Isaiah 6: 6-7 Cleansing and Declaration of Pardon*

Isaiah must think that he was about to be incinerated on the spot. But there came another experience that was liberating. While there is no mention of that fact that this other seraph was commanded by God to this, it still follows that this cleansing came from God. It was when the seraph touched his lips with the life coal that he became fit to stand in the presence of God

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<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Interpretation Commentary: Isaiah 40-66*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 23.

### *Isaiah 6:8: Divine call and commissioning*

It is interesting to note that God was not addressing Isaiah particularly. After Isaiah confessed his guilt and was cleansed by the seraph, God spoke as if to address the heavenly court. Isaiah just happened to be available at the time and the passage suggests that Isaiah volunteered an answer and disposition to serve. He must have been caught up in the excitement of the experience:

- The privilege to be in the Temple
- The opportunity to experience the holiness and glory of God
- The excitement of the moment of trance
- The benefit of seeing God and not dying
- The opportunity to be cleansed

With the above, he volunteered for a job he did not even have details of what was expected. Isaiah writes Yahweh a blank check, offering to go wherever and to do whatever. This is unusual in the call stories of the Old Testament, where people often object to their call (Exodus 3:11; 4:10; Judges 6:15; Jeremiah 1:6).<sup>4</sup>

### *Isaiah 6:9-10: Communication of the Difficult Mandate*

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<sup>4</sup> Virtually all other major prophets with a call narrative hesitated when they were called. Cf. Jeremiah etc

The remaining verses of Isaiah 6 are very revealing as far as vocation is concerned. Verses 9-13 can be misleading. Is it that God has made up His mind to condemn? Why then does He still need to send a prophet? The entire chapter has a structure along the focus. The initial part focuses on the messenger and the later part focuses on the message.

However, the two sections of this passage go together. Verses 1-8 tell of the messenger, while verses 9-13 tell of the message. The message is dismal, but it has a turnaround, a hopeful twist, at the end. At the end, even after everything is condemned to destruction twice, there will still be a remnant. For the sake of the remnant, Isaiah's ministry had a ray of hope. A remnant will survive to carry on Yahweh's plan.

The idea of a remnant is a Biblical recurrence. It is found throughout the Old Testament and also implied in the New Testament. Typically, God judges sinful people, allowing many to die—sometimes quickly as in the great flood (Gen 7), and at other times slowly, as on the journey to the Promised Land. In each instance, God chooses a faithful remnant to survive and carry on his work. In this book, Isaiah often raises the hope of a remnant (10:19-22; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:4, 31; 46:3). The idea of a remnant continues in the New Testament (Mat 7:14; Rom 9:27-29; 11:2-5, 7; Rev 12:17). “He said, ‘Go, and tell this people’” (v. 9a). The phrase “this people,”

distances Yahweh from the people of Judah, rather like a father saying “this kid” instead of “my son” or “my daughter.” In better times Yahweh said, “my people” (Exodus 3:7; 6:7).

It is note-worthy that God refers to the people as “This people” and NOT the usual ‘My People.’ There is something wrong here. There are two things here. The people of Judah are a known group as far as this is concerned. But what are they known for? God has in the past tried to bring them back to fidelity and they have been obstinate. Besides, by their action, they had fallen out of favour with God. By their action Isaiah is to speak the truth while knowing in advance that the people will refuse to respond.

*Isaiah 6:11-13: The Hope of a Remnant*

Now it becomes clear to Isaiah that he is into a challenge. He exclaims: How long? **“Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’”** (v. 11a). “Lord, how long,” is more a lament than a question. It expresses despair rather than seeking precise information. It appears in the book of Psalms as a plaintive cry (Psalm 13:1; 35:7; 79:5; 89:46). When God says, “How long,” it is usually a cry of frustration at Israel’s recalcitrance (Exodus 10:3; 16:28; 14:11, 27), but here it is a cry of grief.

Isaiah’s response makes it clear that he is surprised and dismayed at the task that the Lord has given him. He finds no pleasure in the

prospect of Judah's demise or in being a party to it. This is not what he anticipated when he raised his hand to volunteer. One can only imagine what impression Isaiah got from the answer of the Lord. Even the remnant will be consumed. The only ray of hope is that it is possible the message is not directly for the death of the people but for the exile of the people. It is hoped that even though some would die in exile, some others may survive the exile. Most scholars treat verses 11b-13a as Yahweh's response to Isaiah's "How long?" question. Yahweh answers that the destruction will continue until it is complete. This could imply that there *is* a limit on this judgment. Isaiah will not have to preach doom forever. There will be an end to this end.<sup>5</sup>

The mention of terebinth here is important. The terebinth is also known as the turpentine tree because it produces resins from which turpentine can be derived. When we hear: "so the holy seed is its stock" (v. 13b), it offers the desired ray of hope. These few words are the glimmer of hope that emerges from verses 9-13. They represent well the reality that they portray. The good news of this half-verse is that Yahweh will not abandon his people forever. He will continue to honour the covenant made so long ago with

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<sup>5</sup> Brent A. Strawn, in Van Harn, Roger (ed.), *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Text. The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 309.

Abram (Gen 12:1-3). Abraham's descendants will suffer, but a remnant will survive to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.<sup>6</sup> In all these, God is central and prominent. By nature, the prophetic ministry is God-centred and God-determined. From the address to the messenger and the address of the message, it is possible to determine the nature and import of vocation from the call narrative of Isaiah.

## **2. The Nature of Isaiah's Call to Prophecy**

Going by the analysis above, the call of Isaiah, by nature, is by God and for His work. It is God who calls. It is God who purifies, and it is God who commissions. The import of the verb "to call" entails the fact of being called by another other than the self. It is the same thing in verse 8 where the verb "to speak" is used. This, by the context does not only portray mere utterance of a sentence but a conscious invitation eliciting a response. It was a call for response and a response is given to the person who asks about a particular point of interest. Here God did not just 'say,' He 'called.' In this case it can only be God. This prominence of the divine role in prophetic ministry gives it an identity.

Isaiah's call came after an experience. He first experienced God, considered his suitability for

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<sup>6</sup> This, most likely was a reference to the exile and the eventual return of a remnant from that exile.

ministry, and realised he was not qualified.<sup>7</sup> He professed his unworthiness even though he appeared to have had the interest. It was only after all such feeling that God decided to prepare him for the ministry. Again, it was only after such preparation that God called, and Isaiah was able to respond. There is some important aspect of vocation here: If there is no call, there can be no meaningful response. Ministering must be commissioned by the owner of the ministry. God sent Isaiah to minister to “This people” of his. He was the owner of the ministry, and he alone could prepare, call and commission the minister.

### **3. The Significance of Isaiah’s Call to Prophecy**

Isaiah’s call to prophecy has revealed a few things about vocation. There are two things involved here. The message and the messenger. In Ministry and especially in prophetic ministry as seen in the call of Isaiah, God determines a lot in the message and the messenger. It is also possible to see the basic step by step discernment

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<sup>7</sup>For more, see Gene M. Tucker, in Craddock, Fred B.; Hayes, John H.; Holliday, Carl R.; and Tucker, Gene M., *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, C (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 11; Gene M. Tucker, *The New Interpreters Bible: Isaiah*, Vol.VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 77; John D. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1985), 55-72.

of the vocation in general and prophetic ministry in particular.

Someone experiences God

Someone considers service to God

Someone declares his unworthiness

God prepares whomever he believes disposed

God calls generally

Someone responds personally

God commissions

God mandates with a specific mission

God's message/mission may not be exactly what may be desired by the human person

God's message/mission, no matter how difficult, ends in 'salvation'

A true prophet must reflect the above facts in some way.<sup>8</sup> The call of Isaiah becomes a relevant 'checklist' for prophetic ministry. Vocation entails the feeling, an expression of the feeling, and the commissioning of the agent who had the feeling. One may have the feeling and may not express it. One may express and not be commissioned. If the three do not go together,

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<sup>8</sup> William Holladay, *Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 2002), 76.



then, proper situation into the ministry would be lacking. This beam light from the call of Isaiah constitutes the import of this work.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. The Problem of Vocation to Prophetic Ministry Today**

Today we have people who can be considered Prophets either in the loose sense or in the strict sense. Seen generally as a messenger of God or as someone who plays the role of intermediary minister between God and man, the prophet in today's setting may have gotten it wrong in any other way but the most disturbing is the fact that they call themselves but are not called; and if ever called, not by God.

While the prophetic ministry must have the primary background of the experience of God, many self-acclaimed prophets today either have no such background or have a wrong background of the experience of God. The experience of the glory and holiness of God is important in prophetic ministry, but this is lacking today. Since most of today's prophets do not experience the holiness of God, they lack the humbling effect of realizing their unworthiness and asking for God's cleansing. The pride and arrogance

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<sup>9</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 104.

characterizing today's prophetic ministry needs to be addressed. Vocation to prophetic ministry today would need to be squared against the nature and import of prophecy as seen in the call narrative of Isaiah.

Today's ministry of prophecy is no longer God's ministry. It has become the ministry of the individual self-made prophets. Even after the commencement of 'their ministry,' they make more effort to distance themselves from God by their actions. This disassociation from God robs them of a major character in the ministry. They lack the foundation of Ministry and consequently, believe they are not only the beginning and end of their ministry but also that they are independent of God.

Today, whether they are worthy of the name or not, many supposed prophets and prophetesses have sprung up as their own bosses only to deceive people and lead them astray because they have no experience of the holiness and glory of God. They present the ministry as a platform gained by right for their personal gains and enrichment. There are other prophets today who may have had the initial calling and commissioning but who have grown through the years to lose focus. These are not ready to wait for the 'remnant' to emerge. There is what they are looking for and if those things are not seen, they tend to be disappointed and make mistakes of seeking and taking up the wrong mandate. In

some prophetic ministry today, God is absent. Since there is no call from God, those people are not sent by God and cannot, therefore be commissioned by Him. The greatest problem of the prophetic ministry today is centred around this aspect of Vocation. Most of today's prophets have no vocation especially because there was no experience of God that would have shaped their orientation of the ministry.

## **5. The way forward: drawing relevant lessons from Isaiah 6**

In response to the vocation crisis experienced in ministry today, there is need to draw relevant lessons from the call narrative in Isaiah for the appreciation of the nature and import of vocation to prophetic ministry today. The main way forward is to heal today's ministry from the root by appreciating the fact that one cannot be a prophet if he or she is not called by God. The 'God-factor' must be re-addressed and re-appreciated before one can talk of prophetic ministry. If the glory and holiness of God is not felt from the onset, it becomes difficult to appreciate the nature and import of vocation. The call has to be made by the one who alone can justify, commission and mandate. Today, this is done through the instrumentality of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Brent A. Strawn, in Van Harn, Roger (ed.), *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for*

It may be difficult to ‘repair’ the ones that are already off the track. But the Church should put more effort in catechesis and in active enforcement that things are put in place for genuine discernment of vocation. A meaningful experience of God defines the nature of the prophetic ministry at the end. Every ‘candidate’ for the prophetic ministry must therefore be mandated as a certifying ‘agency’ (The Church) of the genuineness of vocation in order to forestall the harm already done by fame-seeking self-acclaimed prophets who have no genuine vocation. Vocation has to be allowed to be a call from God.

## **6. Conclusion**

A Prophet, in this context should be a minister who speaks in the name of God. But where and when the prophet is not known to God nor called by God, it becomes a big problem and can only succeed in fermenting more problems. The analysis of the call narrative in Isaiah has revealed that vocation is a necessary qualification for ministry. Without the experience of, justification/qualification/call by God, there would be no basis for the commissioning by God and without commissioning by God, there is no

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Sunday’s Text. The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 106

basis to see oneself as a prophet of God. Vocation encapsulates the 'God-factor' in ministry and must be appreciated and enforced as such. Vocation should only be appreciated as a fruit of genuine experience of God's glory and holiness. Believers must not recognize these self-acclaimed prophets with no background of community religious experience. Authentic prophetic ministry should be domiciled in a Church to avoid abuses. A prophet must be a humble messenger communicating only what God wants to communicate. The necessity of genuine vocation in Prophetic Ministry should be extended to other ministries in the Church today

The research on Ministers and Ministries in the Bible has revealed many things which need to be given attention in the overall need to redeem Ministers and Ministries in Church today. As has been considered in this work with regard to prophetic ministry, the nature and import of vocation in the call narrative of Isaiah demand that, unlike what is happening in many quarters today, the 'God-factor' remain basic and characteristic of prophetic ministry. A prophet must be called by God to have the status of a true prophet. It is in being called by God that justification, commissioning and mandating can follow genuinely. Both the message and the messenger must be determined by God because He owns the ministry. It is the hope of this work that, in addition to the attitudinal re-orientation about prophetic ministries, the findings and

recommendations will reshape the understanding and consequent actions about ministries and ministers in the Church today especially in the area of prophecy.