

## **MAKE THEIR EARS DULL** **Irony in Isaiah 6:9-10**

### **Abstract:**

In Isaiah 6:9-10, the prophet appears to be commissioned by God to make the ears of the people dull in order to prevent them from repenting. This article begins by proposing that these verses are better understood as rhetorical irony designed to persuade the people to (and not prevent them from) repentance. An alternative rhetorical interpretation and three literal interpretations are also discussed and rejected in favour of the view that assumes the use of irony.

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Isaiah 6:9-10 record the divine instructions that Isaiah receives at his commissioning.

(The LORD) said, “Go and tell this people:

‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’

Make the heart of this people calloused  
make their ears dull, and close their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Isaiah 6:9-10 (*NIV*)

These words have been the subject of considerable debate. There is no significant debate over the grammatical form of the biblical text<sup>1</sup>. The debate is over the theological nuance or significance of the commands. If the words are understood literally, then God instructs Isaiah with very strange commands. Isaiah must command his people to hear without understanding, to look without really seeing. He is to render the hearts of his people insensitive, to make their ears dull and their eyes dim. And why? “Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” It appears as if God instructs Isaiah to ensure that the people remain stubborn and unrepentant. How are we to understand this?

I shall begin with an explanation of the interpretation I favour before discussing other views.

Isaiah 6:9-10 should be understood as a command urging people to return to God and be saved. The form of the commands are not to be taken literally. Rather, we should see a rhetorical use of persuasive irony here.

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 9 uses strong Hebrew plural imperatives addressed to the people, and verse 10 uses singular imperatives addressed to Isaiah. The *NIV* accurately reproduces this.

Imagine a rebellious son who stubbornly refuses to listen to his father's advice to do his homework. Reverse psychology is sometimes used: "Alright, son. You don't have to study. Why bother? Just laze around and waste your life. Don't work hard, otherwise you might get accepted into Cambridge or Oxford and become a successful person admired by everyone, especially clever and pretty College girls. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Here a father uses the rhetoric of irony in the hope of persuading his son to do his work. The literal words may suggest that the father wants the son to laze around and do nothing. But a correct appreciation of the rhetorical irony indicates the opposite intention: the father wants the son to work harder. Could this kind of rhetorical irony be present in Isaiah 6:9-10? If so, then we should understand God's real intention as being the opposite of what the words literally suggest. Just as a father wants his son to work hard, so God wants his people to listen and to repent.

A word of clarification. I am not saying that the words of verses 9 and 10 can be equated to a polite invitation for people to repent. It is more than that. The heavy irony tells Isaiah that he will have to be confrontational when he challenges the people to repent. When a father resorts to sarcastic irony ("Go ahead and be as lazy as you want"), he is being confrontational.<sup>2</sup> Most fathers would prefer their sons to respond to gentle words and kindly reasoning. But sometimes the confrontational approach is needed. Isaiah here is told that he will need to resort to this approach, and there is ample evidence in the earlier chapters that illustrate this stance. It is natural for pastors in today's 21<sup>st</sup> century age of so-called tolerance to prefer a non-confrontational approach in their ministry. That is certainly my preference. Perhaps, though, the commission of Isaiah 6 should warn us that there may be times when God knows that we will have to resort to a clear confrontational stance that outlines the tragic consequences of a life lived in rebellion against God. God gave Isaiah a commission, and the evidence of his messages suggests that Isaiah was faithful and committed to it. May God help us to be faithful too.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Such confrontation includes the element of rebuke. Thus, the view I am describing here is not very different in effect from those that understand the divine message "commanding not that Isaiah should harden the people's hearts but that he should denounce them for being hardhearted" (so M. Kaplan, "Isaiah 6:1-11" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45 (1926) pp.252f, describing the interpretations of Jewish medieval commentators like Rashi). However, my approach emphasizes that the goal or intention of this confrontation is repentance, and not simply the announcement of judgement.

<sup>3</sup> I am not implying that confrontation should always be the preachers' approach. The book of Isaiah itself envisages a more favourable climate in which "the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will hearken" (Isaiah 32:3). There are a number of passages in subsequent portions of the book called Isaiah which are influenced by the verses here in Isaiah 6:9-10 (cf. R.E. Clements "Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah's Themes" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (1985) pp.101-104; J.L. McLaughlin, "Their Hearts Were Hardened: The Use of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Book of Isaiah", *Biblica* 75 (1994) pp.9-17), and indeed by Isaiah 6 as a whole (cf. H.G.M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's role in composition and redaction* (OUP: Oxford, 1994) pp.46-51). Of particular interest is the prophetic commission found in Isaiah 40. There the approach conveyed is one that offered comforting assurance rather than severe warning.

The irony may be even more cutting than I have presented it. Beale<sup>4</sup> suggests that an association with idols is present in verses 9 and 10. Both Psalm 115:5-7 and Psalm 135:16-17 describe idols as things which “have mouths, but do not speak. They have eyes but they do not see; and ears, but they do not hear.” This is strikingly similar to what Isaiah is told to say: “Listen, but do not understand; look, but do not comprehend.” Is the similarity deliberate? Is God effectively saying, “Become like the idols who have eyes but cannot see, who have ears but do not hear”? Isaiah 44:18 also rebukes idol-makers as people whose eyes cannot see and whose hearts cannot understand. One should not dismiss the idea as over-imaginative without reading Beale’s sustained arguments. He does not, however, clarify whether he thinks the command should be understood ironically as an urgent plea for repentance, or simply as a sarcastic announcement of a judgement now unavoidable. If the association with idols is correct, then I think it should be understood as an ironical taunt to the people designed to urge them to stop behaving like senseless idols. Although Beale presents his argument well, I do not think that there is enough evidence to regard the suggestion as likely.<sup>5</sup> Even without that idol association, however, the irony of the picture in these verses is sufficiently cutting. We use the word “zombie” for something that apparently has eyes but does not see. It wanders around without any real evidence of purpose or thought. Isaiah says, with considerable irony, “Carry on - God wants you to be a zombie all your life.”

### *Three objections to rhetorical irony in Isaiah 6:9-10*

The first objection is a technical one. Verse 10, in the Hebrew text, records words spoken by the LORD, not addressed directly to the people, but directly to Isaiah. Whilst one might imagine an ironical tone used in addressing the stubborn people (in verse 9b), it is improbable that irony would be used by the LORD when speaking to the willing prophet Isaiah (in verse 10).

Although this is a legitimate objection, its force is considerably reduced if one interprets verse 10 together with verse 9 as part of the (ironical) message that Isaiah is commissioned to preach to the people. Thus, verses 9-10 might be paraphrased as follows:

“This is what the LORD told me to tell you. ‘Hear God’s warnings, but don’t bother to listen or understand. Open your eyes, but don’t bother to see.’ God told me, “Isaiah,

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<sup>4</sup> G.K. Beale, “Isaiah vi 9-13: A retributive taunt against idolatry” in *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991) pp. 258-60.

<sup>5</sup> Beale’s argument would be more persuasive if he could demonstrate that the descriptions of idols in Psalms 115 and 135 were in circulation before the writing of Isaiah 6:9-10. H.J. Kraus (*Psalms 60-150: a commentary* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1989; E.tr. by H.C. Oswald from *Psalmen 60-150*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978; 1<sup>st</sup> edn. published in 1961) pp. 380f, 494) assumes that the two psalms have drawn their imagery from the book of Isaiah, and not *vice versa*. Even if there are idolatrous overtones in Isaiah 6:13, based on the assumption that Isaiah 1:29-31 should influence the reader’s understanding of 6:13, it is not obvious why the imagery of 6:13 should be transported to 6:9-10 which *precedes* it. Incidentally, Williamson has argued that 6:13 preceded 1:29-31 chronologically (H.G.M. Williamson, “Isaiah 6,13 and 1,29-31” in J. Van Ruiten and M. Vervenne (eds.) *Studies in the Book of Isaiah: Festschrift Willem A.M. Beuken* (Leuven Univ. Press: Leuven, 1997), pp.123-27.

harden the people's hearts; make them deaf. Don't let them hear and see, or they might begin to repent and be saved! We wouldn't want that, would we?"

A second objection is that such appeals to irony lack any objective controls on the meaning of the text. By appealing to rhetoric, one can suggest almost any meaning for anything.

The fear is valid and the potential danger real. However, it is a danger that cannot be avoided unless one assumes that every verse in the Bible must be understood literally. There is, however, no objective ground for such an assumption, and there is ample evidence to suggest that this assumption cannot be maintained. The real question then is how one is to decide *which* passages should be understood literally, and which not. I suspect that many readers will be comfortable with a principle that states that every passage should be interpreted literally unless common sense and context indicates otherwise. Unfortunately, common sense differs amongst individuals. I am attracted to the rhetorical approach in Isaiah 6:9-10 because common sense suggests that a father does not want his son to be lazy, Jesus does not want his disciples to pull out their eyes (Matthew 5:29f), and God does not want his people to remain stubborn and unrepentant. As for context, I believe that this favours a non-literal interpretation. The reasons may be summarised as follows:

- a) The context within Isaiah 6 itself favours an interpretation that is consistent with a God who desires to forgive (cf. Isaiah 6:1-7).
- b) The immediately following context in Isaiah 7 also favours this understanding. In Isaiah 7, the prophet is not portrayed as trying to produce insensitivity to God's word as a literal understanding of Isaiah 6:9-10 would imply. Instead, he is seen urging belief in God's word (7:4-9). He does not ask Ahaz to close his ears or harden his heart. He warns Ahaz of the consequences of unbelief. This description of Isaiah's ministry, together with Ahaz's disappointing response, favours the rhetorical interpretation of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6 that I have suggested.
- c) The wider context of the book portrays a God who is looking for true repentance in his people (cf. 1:16-20; 2:5; 9:13; 10:20; 30:15; 31:6; 55:6). It does not portray a God who wants to prevent repentance, which a literal interpretation of Isaiah 6:10 would imply.<sup>6</sup> Scholars also believe that Isaiah 1 has been shaped as an introduction to the whole book of Isaiah in order "to encourage its audience to repent."<sup>7</sup>
- d) There are examples elsewhere in Isaiah of the use of irony to convey the divine message (e.g. the ironical commands in 29:9 and 50:11).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> One may, of course, point to Isa. 44:18 and 63:17 as support for the idea of a God who hardens the hearts of people. However, the other verses I have referred to are more numerous, and more importantly, many portray the prophet as himself urging repentance towards God. This suggests that the prophet does not understand the commission of 6:9-10 as a literal command.

<sup>7</sup> D. Carr, "Reading Isaiah from beginning (Isaiah 1) to end (Isaiah 65-66): Multiple modern possibilities" in R.F.Melugin & M.A.Sweeney (eds.) *New visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1996) p.198.

<sup>8</sup> cf. E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1965) pp.115-167, for irony in Isaiah generally, and B. Hollenbach ("Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven: Irony" in *Bible Translator* 34 (1983) pp.312-21 for irony in Isaiah 6:9f specifically.

- e) Finally, although I do not discuss it here, the rhetorical view fits easily with the way various New Testament writers employ Isaiah 6:9-10<sup>9</sup>.

A third objection might assume that this non-literal rhetorical interpretation is motivated by a fear of facing up to the harsh realities taught in these verses. God alone knows the true motivations and impulses within each interpreter. However, it should be clarified that the approach I have presented does not deny the harsh reality of God's judgement. Whether understood literally or ironically, these verses clearly affirm the theological conviction that divine judgement is not an idle threat. Neither is there any attempt to deny that, in practice, there may come a time in the life of a nation or an individual at which it may be too late for repentance to avert judgement. This is, in fact, the theological thrust of the warning in Isaiah 6:9-13. My non-literal ironical interpretation does not deny this. It avoids only the theological affirmation that God here chooses to prevent the occurrence of repentance in the heart of someone when it is still not too late to avert divine judgement ('lest they turn and be healed'). I have based this contention, not on personal theological persuasion or philosophy, but on a consideration of the present shape of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah's commission was to urge repentance, not prevent it.

#### *A second rhetorical interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10*

I have proposed a rhetorical (as opposed to a literal) interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10 that envisages the use of irony. There is another rhetorical, non-literal interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10 that does not, however, envisage the use of irony. This common view interprets Isaiah 6:9-10 as God's way of telling Isaiah the expected response to his prophetic ministry rather than the content and purpose of his ministry.<sup>10</sup>

Consider the command of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you" (Matt. 5:29). Most of us believe (I think correctly) that these words were not intended by Jesus to be taken literally. It is an example of Jesus' use of forceful rhetoric to emphasise the seriousness that we should apply in our battle against sin in our personal lives.

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<sup>9</sup> I have deliberately avoided comment on the numerous New Testament references to Isaiah 6:9-10. The use which each New Testament writer makes of the verse itself requires a careful study which lies beyond the scope of this essay. I believe that the interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10 which I favour can be easily reconciled with New Testament usage of the verse. For an examination of New Testament and early Jewish and Christian usage of Isaiah 6:9-10, cf. C.A. Evans (*To See And Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (JSOT Press: Sheffield, 1989) pp. 81-135) and B. Hollenbach ("Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven: Irony" in *Bible Translator* 34 (1983) pp. 316-21). Note also J.F.A. Sawyer's more negative evaluation of the New Testament writers use of the verse in Jewish-Christian relations (*The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (CUP: Cambridge, 1996) pp.35-38; 121-25). Even if one holds a more charitable view of the New Testament and early Church writers, Sawyer's warnings against using Isaiah 6:9-10 to justify or promote anti-Semitic sentiment should be taken to heart. It is arbitrary and inconsistent for Christians to own the comforting words of Isaiah 40:1 for themselves whilst directing the harsh words of Isaiah 6:9f to others, Jews or otherwise.

<sup>10</sup> Although it is not always expressed in these terms, nor argued in the way I shall present it, this interpretation of Isa. 6:9-10 is the approach adopted by most commentators today.

If “tear it out and throw it from you” does not mean “cut out your eye”, perhaps “make the heart of this people hard, and make their ears dull” does not mean, in Isaiah 6:9-10, what it might appear to mean.

Thus, although the plain and literal reading of the words in verses 9 and 10 appear to command Isaiah to make the heart of the people stubborn, and to make their ears deaf, we should understand this as an example of forceful rhetoric. God was not telling Isaiah that this was the *goal* of his preaching. Rather, he was warning Isaiah that this would be the heart-rending *result* of it.<sup>11</sup> Though he should preach for repentance, the people would remain unresponsive and unrepentant.

This understanding removes the problem: God did not ask Isaiah to make the people unrepentant. He warned only that they would remain so. There is thus no need to explain why we have records of Isaiah preaching for faith and repentance: the divine commission was never understood as a command to do otherwise.

In support of this view, one might note that the translators who produced the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation usually abbreviated as *LXX*) render the verses in this way. The Greek translation reads as follows:

And he said, ‘Go and say to this people: “You shall hear but you do not understand, you shall see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn for me to heal them.’

The difference the Greek translation makes can be compared to the difference between these two sentences:

1. “Hurt yourself when you use that hammer; be reckless when you use tools.”
2. “You will be hurt when you use that hammer because you are so reckless with tools.”

The first sentence uses imperatives that express intention and purpose. The second uses statements to express a possible and even probable result of using the hammer based on past or existing behavioural patterns.

In a similar way, the Hebrew uses a series of commands (“Hear, but do not understand; see, but do not perceive; make the heart of this people stubborn”) whilst the Greek translation uses statements (“You will hear, but you do not understand; you will see, but never perceive. This is because this people’s heart is stubborn”). It is suggested here that the Hebrew text, though cast in the form of sentence 1 (a command expressing purpose), is a rhetorical way of conveying the sense found in sentence 2 and the Greek translation (a statement of probable result). Isaiah is not to be the instrument that causes stubborn hearts. The hearts of the people are already stubborn, and this is why they will hear

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<sup>11</sup> Compare this with Jesus’ words in Matt.10:34 “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Is this another example of Jewish rhetoric that describes the heart-rending result, and not the goal, of Jesus’ ministry?

without understanding. This is the reason why Isaiah's ministry will not find many repentant hearts: the people are already set against God and do not want to repent. This is the intended meaning of the Hebrew rhetoric used in Isaiah 6:9-10, and the Greek translation (followed in Matthew 13:14-15) clarifies this.<sup>12</sup>

I am sympathetic to this common rhetorical interpretation that views Isaiah 6:9-10 as expressing, not God's intention to keep the people from repenting, but the response to Isaiah's preaching which God knew would occur because of the existing and persistent stubbornness of the people. However, since the form in Isaiah 6:9 appears to be that of a commissioning, it is more natural to expect here a description of the task that is entrusted to the prophet, rather than a description of results. I therefore prefer to understand the rhetoric in terms of irony, and understand the verses as instructing Isaiah to confront the people with the demand for repentance.

### **Some theological and pastoral implications**

Of the two rhetorical views of Isaiah 6:9-10 outlined above, I have expressed a slight preference for the first viz. the view that assumes the tone of irony in Isaiah's message to the people. The difference between these two rhetorical views, however, is minimal for the pastoral expositor. In the latter (and more common) view, the emphasis falls on a divine commission which warns Isaiah to expect disappointing results in his ministry: the people will largely remain unresponsive and unrepentant. Nevertheless, he is to remain faithful to the task with which he is entrusted. The greatness and graciousness of God which he experienced firsthand in his vision (Isa. 6:1-7) remain true despite the lack of response from the people. A resistant audience does not imply that God's greatness and graciousness is inadequate or false. Nor is the integrity of a prophet measured by the quality of response evoked in the audience.

What was the message of Isaiah's ministry to be? In the latter view, this is not explicitly stated. However, if the result of the ministry would be a disappointing lack of responsiveness to God, it is evident that the nature of Isaiah's ministry was one which would call for a positive response towards God. This understanding of Isaiah's mission which is only implicit in the second view is explicit in the first. Here verses 9-10 are understood as commanding Isaiah to use strong warning and irony in order to persuade the people to turn to God and be saved. He is to urge them to repent by warning them in no uncertain terms of the horror and reality of God's judgement. However, the fact that Isaiah must resort to strong, ironical, language would surely suggest that Isaiah must expect to find an audience which will not be easily persuaded. They will not be rushing to embrace his message of repentance. He should not be surprised to find resistance and rejection.

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<sup>12</sup> Many scholars think that the Greek translators were not clarifying, but altering the sense of the Hebrew. They were offended by the meaning of the Hebrew text and they changed it. There is no objective way of knowing what was in the mind of the translators. I think it is just as likely that they altered the literal words of the Hebrew text in order to guard against any misunderstanding of the rhetorical intention of the verses which they understood correctly (cf. similarly, B. Hollenbach, "Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven: Irony" in *Bible Translator* 34 (1983) p. 316).

The difference between the two views is therefore one of emphasis. Both envisage a call for repentance and a warning of resistance. That which is emphasized in the first view is implicit in the other, and vice versa. Both emphases are of relevance in our time. We live in an age which is deaf to the call for repentance because it denies the problem of sin against God. And we live in an age which measures spiritual success by results and popular acceptance. Perhaps the commission in Isaiah 6:9-10 is one that remains relevant for us today.

### **Non-rhetorical explanations of Isaiah 6:9-10**

Both views described above assume that the words of Isaiah 6:9-10 should not be understood at face value. The reader must appreciate the rhetorical nature of the words to grasp correctly the intention of the verses. I have indicated my support of this approach. I shall, however, conclude this extended discussion by describing three other explanations of Isaiah 6:9-10. These 3 views are united in taking the words of Isaiah 6:9-10 at face value. The verses speak of God's intention to ensure that the people remain unrepentant and fully deserving of judgement. The views differ only in their defence against the moral problem raised by this picture of a God who seeks to prevent repentance.

#### *Literal explanation 1 - God's Sovereignty*

The first explanation stresses the sovereignty of God. His ways and his thoughts differ from ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). His actions and purposes may sometimes be strange and incomprehensible to us (Isaiah 28:21). God is the potter, we are the clay, and the pot being moulded cannot question the divine Moulder (Romans 9:20). Although it may seem unfair to us, we must be humble enough to acknowledge that we do not understand everything clearly. Our proper response should be to trust that God is wise and just.

I share the conviction that God is Sovereign and the assertion that mankind must acknowledge her relative ignorance and remain in humble submission to God. These are, I believe, wise biblical convictions and attitudes which we would do well to embrace. If such humble attitudes enable readers to cope with this "difficult" text here in Isaiah 6, then this is not something to be discouraged. Nevertheless, even if we are humble enough to own such attitudes, we should be sensitive enough to recognise that there are people in this multi-religious world who are seeking sincerely to understand the nature of the God revealed in the Bible. Here is a verse that seems to portray the biblical God as One who chooses to prevent certain people from turning to Him. Is this a fair portrayal of His character? This is, in fact, the real question confronting us here in Isaiah 6:9-10. The response which exhorts the need for a humble attitude is good and sufficient for answering the more general question, "Isn't God unfair here?" The humble approach replies, "No. God may seem unfair to us. But we do not understand. We do not see things clearly. God is fair and just. We must trust him humbly." But what is our response to the more specific question of whether it is correct to describe God here as desiring to prevent people from turning back towards him for healing?

There are devout Christians who believe that the answer demanded by Isaiah 6:9-10 and the rest of the Bible in general is “Yes.”<sup>13</sup> If this answer is correct, then we may humbly accept and teach it.<sup>14</sup> My response here is limited to Isaiah, and not biblical theology in general. Is it reasonable to assume this interpretation of Isaiah 6 in the context of the book itself? There is at least one obvious objection: if God wanted Isaiah to keep the people unrepentant, we would expect Isaiah to obey. But the evidence suggests that Isaiah did otherwise. In chapter 7, Isaiah does not encourage Ahaz to close his ears or harden his heart. Instead, he urges Ahaz to believe. Isaiah 30:15 indicates that Isaiah’s ministry involved a call to repentance.<sup>15</sup> Was Isaiah being disobedient to the literal terms of his commission? Furthermore, I have argued above that the book of Isaiah contains many calls for repentance.

#### *Literal explanation 2 - God’s foreknowledge*

Another explanation speaks of God’s foreknowledge. God knew that the people, if given a free choice, would have chosen to remain disobedient and unrepentant. Therefore when God asked Isaiah to ensure that they remain stubborn and unyielding, he was helping them become only what he already knew they wanted to become.

This argument aims to defend God against any charge of unfairness. God does not impose upon the people something contrary to their will. He merely gives them strength to do what they themselves wanted to do.

In objection, one should ask why verse 10 says, “lest they repent and be healed”? These words, taken at face value, imply that there was a possibility of a true repentance that would result in healing. One cannot reply that it is only a false repentance that is being guarded against here. For if the repentance was only a sham, God would not be moved to heal them. Isaiah elsewhere speaks against the hypocrisy of false marks of devotion (cf. 1:11-15; 29:13). If the words are taken at face value, then a true repentance is envisaged. The argument from God’s foreknowledge is therefore double-edged. One might argue that God’s foreknowledge enabled him to see that if the people heard a true call for repentance, they would respond and be healed. He therefore commanded his prophet to guard against this eventuality. If this portrayal of God was intended here,<sup>16</sup> then we have essentially returned to the explanation invoking God’s sovereignty. The same objection there also applies: why do so many passages in the Book called Isaiah portray God as desiring repentance from his people (e.g. 1:19-20; 9:13; 22:12; 55:6)?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Some readers will recall the theological debate over double predestination and free will.

<sup>14</sup> One might, for example, regard Isaiah 44:18; 63:17 as giving support to this characteristic of God.

<sup>15</sup> Some scholars think that Isaiah 30:15 does not speak of repentance at all. But see G.C.I. Wong, “Faith and works in Isaiah xxx 15” in *Vetus Testamentum* 47 (1997) pp.236-45 for a defence of the traditional translation against such views.

<sup>16</sup> Some literary philosophies argue that it is a fallacy to think of a text having an original intention, whether the intention is that of the author or anyone else. Without attempting here to defend my approach, I state simply that I believe the pastoral expositor of the Bible must seek to identify the probable meaning and viewpoints that God intended the reader to grasp.

<sup>17</sup> It is sometimes said that those who try to tone down the harshness of Isaiah 6:9-10 are not taking the text seriously enough. Not “seriously enough” here often means not “literally enough”. Unless such criticisms

### *Literal explanation 3 - Isaiah's two-phased ministry*

The third explanation responds to the above objection by proposing two phases in the ministry of the historical Isaiah. The passages that speak of repentance must be dated to a period preceding the commission of chapter 6. The people proved themselves to be stubborn and unrepentant. Only then did God give Isaiah the commission in Isaiah 6 to pronounce unavoidable judgement on the people. They had exhausted their opportunities of repentance. Now God would keep them in their chosen and proven rebellion until the time for his judgement.

This view appears to offer a reasonable defence of God's command here (the people had disobeyed God for a prolonged period already) and also to account for Isaiah's (earlier) ministry of preaching repentance. Unfortunately, on closer examination, it does neither adequately.

That Isaiah 30:15 comes after Isaiah 6 is not a weighty objection. Isaiah 30:15 describes Isaiah's message of repentance as something that had occurred in the past, and therefore could refer to the proposed earlier phase of his ministry. Of more weight, however, is the objection that Isaiah 7:1-9 is clearly dated to the reign of King Ahaz i.e. a period *later* than that envisaged in Isaiah 6 (the year King Uzziah died cf. 6:1). But in this later period, Isaiah urges Ahaz to trust in God, promising him deliverance from the threat of the enemy (7:4-9). This message invites faith, not stubbornness, and it comes after the proposed earlier phase of ministry.<sup>18</sup> Again, it should be noted that the commission of Isaiah 6:1 is dated to the year of King Uzziah's death. Since Isaiah (see 1:1) is reported as ministering right up till the reign of Hezekiah, the reference to Uzziah makes it probable that the experience of chapter 6 came, if not at the very beginning, then at least very early in his ministry. This would leave little or no room for a proposed earlier phase of his ministry. One would, at the very least, have to concede that this proposed earlier phase was a very short one. In other words, the view that Isaiah's ministry can be divided into two historical phases divided by the experience of chapter 6, and differentiated by the content of the message, faces historical problems. Furthermore, from the perspective of the present shape of the book, such an argument is without merit. There is no sharp differentiation between what precedes and what follows Isaiah 6. The refrain of 5:25 is repeated in 9:17, and this suggests similarity, rather than differentiation. In short, Isaiah preached for repentance and faith *after* the commission in 6:9-10. This commission, if understood literally, appears to instruct him to do the opposite of what he is recorded as actually doing.<sup>19</sup>

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are accompanied by a reasoned explanation for the many other passages in Isaiah which portray God as desiring repentance, it may be asked whether the critics take these other passages "seriously enough".

<sup>18</sup> Some believe the commission of chapter 6 was specific to the historical crisis posed by the Syro-Ephraimite threat described in chapters 7 and 8 (cf. O.H. Steck, "Bemerkungen zu Jesaja 6", *Biblische Zeitschrift* N.F. 16 (1972), pp. 198-206). But even if this historical context is accepted, it is still a problem for the literalist that Isaiah does not obey the commission literally here in Isaiah 7.

<sup>19</sup> Some scholars think that the passages calling for repentance did not originate from Isaiah the *man*. This, however, does not remove the problem before us: how does one reconcile the picture in Isaiah 6:9-10

The view does not even answer fully the charge that God's command to Isaiah appears unreasonable. Even if there were two distinct phases in Isaiah's ministry, the second half of verse 10, if understood literally, would imply that God was concerned to guard against the possible outcome that the people would truly repent. Did the God of the Bible really guard against such a seemingly good outcome occurring? It is important to appreciate that the heart of the problem is not simply that these verses, taken literally, imply that God has decided that the time has come when it is too late to repent and avert a deserved judgement. The real problem is that these verses, taken literally, imply that God has decided to prevent a repentance that *could* avert their deserved punishment ("lest they repent and be healed").<sup>20</sup> This two-phase view of Isaiah's ministry does not address this problem.

The three variations in the approach just described all assume that the words of God's command to Isaiah should be understood literally. I believe that the context of the book of Isaiah speaks against this. It is better to understand the use of rhetorical irony in Isaiah 6:9-10.

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within a *book* which elsewhere portrays God as desiring his people's repentance (e.g. 1:19-10; 2:22; 9:13; 22:12-13; 30:15; 55:6-7)?

<sup>20</sup> The suggestion that this last line is a later addition (so K. Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOT Press: Sheffield, 1989; E.tr. from *For et træ er der håb: Om træet som metafor I Jes 1-39* (G.E.C. Gads Forlag: København, 1985) p.145) does not remove the problem for readers who regard the final form of the text as their Scriptures. In any case, all the ancient versions include this line, as does Mark 4:12.