

## UNIT 2A: OLD TESTAMENT

### 37: Judah and Assyria

Although Israel in the North had the edge on the Southern Kingdom in terms of economic prosperity, Israel paid a terrible price of injustice and vulnerability to Syrian and Assyrian aggression from the East. Judah, although not without its own problems, was more stable under the Davidic dynasty. Its king Uzziah, who reigned at the same time as Jeroboam II in the North, presided generally wisely over a nation that was to consolidate its power, culture and vitality in the South. When Uzziah died in 742 B.C., Isaiah received his call to be a prophet and spoke out during more turbulent times. In this year, the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, moved into northern Syria, laying siege to Arpad. In 735 B.C. Israel and Syria invaded Judah to force the nation into a tripartite alliance to resist the Assyrian threat, but this proved futile with King Ahaz of Judah submitting to Assyria instead; so the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, pressed on into Israel laying waste to Gilead, Galilee and the Plain of Sharon. In 721 B.C. Samaria fell to Shalmaneser V with his successor Sargon II completing the task of crushing the local insurgency in 712 B.C. Finally, Isaiah witnessed a doomed attempt by Judah to conspire against Assyria leading to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. In the face of these external threats Isaiah consistently resisted all schemes of political alliance as "covenant(s) with death" (Isaiah 28:15-18). Few listened to his message of trust in God alone.

#### History and Providence: A Reflection

In the light of the complexity of events, of kings and prophets (in conflict and in agreement) every "student has to learn there are many more strands of history than one."<sup>1</sup> When records have been lost and individual writers of particular books of the Old Testament are stressing key themes for later ages, it is not easy to understand

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<sup>1</sup> E. J. Poole-Connor, *Evangelicalism in England* (London: 1951), p. 230. Although the comment was made in the context of understanding the role of evangelicalism in British history, the point is relevant to understanding any period of history.

why certain events have happened at certain times in certain places. However, each of us can recognize with the Christian historian Herbert Butterfield:

Either you must say that Chance is one of the greatest factors in history and that the whole of the story is in the last resort the product of blind chance, or you must say that the whole of it is in the hands of Providence—‘[For] in Him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28)—even the free will of men and even the operation of law in history, even these are within Providence itself and under it. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In considering the relationship between Judah and Assyria, as well as the complexity of both daily and national life in the Southern Kingdom, the prophets offer a sure-footed guide to the will of God.

### The Prophet Isaiah

As with most “books” in the Old Testament, Isaiah is a composite work containing a core of material from Isaiah himself (chapter 1 to 39). This material is then augmented by prophetic material from the school of his disciples writing some two centuries later during and after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and from then until the restoration under the benign policies of Cyrus, the King of Persia. In this period prior to the fall of Judah, therefore, we confine our analysis to the first 39 chapters, but even within these chapters there are oracles from Isaiah himself and later material interpolated into the collection, (namely chapters 13-23 plus chapter 12 which is a later “psalm.”). Strictly speaking then, (first) Isaiah of Jerusalem speaks in chapters 1 to 11 from the death of King Uzziah to the Syro-Israelite alliance in 732 B.C. (10 years). Then there is a jump to chapters 28 to 32 following the accession of King Hezekiah of Judah in 715 B.C. to the invasion of Sennacherib of Assyria in 701 B.C. (14 years).

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, “God in History,” in C. T. McIntire (ed.), *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 200.

Isaiah (whose name means “the salvation of God”) was a prophet par excellence of Jerusalem, deeply committed to the promise of the Davidic covenant, yet prophesying that only a faithful remnant would survive to enjoy its blessing. In his oracles of judgement and salvation he stretched forward the covenant of the Davidic dynasty to an idealized future King or Messiah, “an anointed one,” on whom holy oil has been poured as a sign that He would restore the fortunes of Israel. His call in Isaiah 6 is a classic expression of the Word of God coming to a prophet in worship, cleansing and inspiring the messenger to declare God’s coming judgement and final salvation. In the year of King Uzziah’s death, when Judah became vulnerable once more to invasion, it is significant that Isaiah’s vision in chapter 6 is of the Lord as King “sitting on a throne, high and lifted up” (v. 1). Furthermore, when Isaiah is confronted by the Lord with the question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go to this people?” the courage and resilience of the prophet is evident in his immediate reply, “Behold, here am I, send me” (v. 8). Everyone whom the Lord calls, whether in the Bible or in contemporary life, does not always respond with such alacrity. As Thomas Doulis has pointed out in *Toward the Authentic Church: Orthodox Christians Discuss Their Conversion: A Collection of Essays*, “there is something about life in a secular and rationalistic world that makes the religious orientation suspect. . . . Few of us change our ways or thoughts.”<sup>3</sup> Happily, from the opening verse of the book of Isaiah, the prophet demonstrates a confidence both in the capacity of the Lord to instruct His people and in their capacity to listen: “Hear, O heaven, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken.”

### The Prophet Isaiah and Yahweh as King of Israel

For all the importance of Jerusalem and the promise to David, Isaiah and the Jerusalem cult itself retained the view of the ancient prophets of the confederacy that it was Yahweh who was the true King of Israel. This was embedded in the so-called enthronement psalms (46, 92, 95-98 LXX) when Yahweh was acclaimed as King in the autumn festival in the Temple. His enthronement invisibly in the Temple

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Doulis (ed.), *Toward the Authentic Church: Orthodox Christians Discuss Their Conversion: A Collection of Essays* (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life, 1996), pp. I, ii.

reflected the belief that here, in Jerusalem, the worship of earth connected with the worship in heaven. It is hugely significant then that Isaiah's call came in this setting. The liturgical reading of this passage in the Orthodox Church occurs in one instance at the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. What Isaiah prophesies, the aged Simeon receives. "The Holy Spirit is upon him;" and Simeon, like Isaiah, hears the Lord and responds immediately with faith (Luke 2:25-32).

Unlike Simeon, who departs from the presence of the Lord in peace without knowing how others will respond to Jesus Christ, Isaiah is told that having volunteered to live in the Lord's service, he will now speak to a people who are dull, insensitive and blind. This hardening of the hearts of a people lies still within God's purpose, for there will be a stump of the faithful that remain. In the previous chapters, Isaiah's message is elaborated in terms similar to that of Amos, a coming Day of the Lord which will be in judgement against the idolatry of those who place their confidence in human resources against the enemy, (2:6-21). The prophetic word in which the Lord invites the house of Israel to hear Amos, applies equally powerfully to Isaiah: "A lion will roar, and who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, and who will not prophesy?" (Amos 3:8). However, both prophets are ultimately rejected by the prosperous Israelites living in considerable wealth.

In the famous Song of the Vineyard (5:1-7) Isaiah compares Israel to an unproductive plot of land that has become a briar patch, setting the scene for Jesus Christ to present a parable that the vine-growers in His time were equally unproductive (Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-12). Yahweh has judged his people and found them wanting (1:4-6, 18-20, 3:13-15); yet he also desires to purge them of their sins to serve Him once more (1:24-26). Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the Syro-Israelite alliance against Assyria and its invasion of Judah in order to constrain Ahaz to join in the campaign. Ahaz, a weak king, vacillated and panicked. Isaiah, accompanied by his son, a little boy named Shear-yashub which means: "only a remnant shall return" sought out Ahaz and tried to dissuade him from political alliances and instead to trust in God the Defender of Israel. However, Ahaz goes back to seek further advice from his political advisers, so Isaiah returns and invites the king to

ask God for a sign, any sign. He refuses under the pretext of piety, namely that he will not tempt God. Exasperated, Isaiah says that God will give a sign anyway, a child named "Emmanuel" or "God-with-us." This child will lead the people through the coming darkness, a desert experience, into a promise of salvation. In this context, the prophecy refers to the Assyrian threat lying beyond the Syro-Israelite alliance. Isaiah looks forward to the intervention and reign of God (Isaiah 9:6). This then is the origin of those messianic prophecies which will much later be fulfilled in the birth of the Christ-Child, Jesus. Isaiah reaches out with God's Word to the immediate circumstance, yet in so doing he also prophesies to the whole world of the Saviour who is to come.

With the storm clouds gathering Isaiah names his second son "Maher-shalal-hashbaz" or "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens." Then Isaiah formally publishes his prophecy that before the child will learn to say "mummy" or "daddy" Assyria will have laid waste to Israel and Syria. Ahaz ignores this warning and appeases Assyria even to the extent of complying with an order to raise an Assyrian altar in Jerusalem, (2 Kings [4 Kingdoms] 16:10-18). Now the vassal of Assyria, Ahaz is powerless and the country goes to rack and ruin, (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:16-27). Isaiah seals God's judgement on the whole affair by referring to "the waters of Shiloh" that flow softly ... a symbol for that quiet faith Judah ought to have against the Assyrian flood from the east. He then withdraws from public life upon God's command (8:11), recognizing that the Lord can later call people out of a situation into which they have earlier been called, because the prophetic word has been delivered and ignored—a pattern that remains possible today. At this point, Isaiah enters the prophetic circle of his disciples where with them he awaits in confidence for God's purpose to be worked out in history. He emerges briefly at the fall of Samaria to lament the "fading flower of Ephraim's glorious beauty" (28:1), but it is too late, the die is cast; God's hand is stretched out in anger and judgement.

## The Prophet Micah

From this period also we hear from Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Micah (whose name means "who is like the Lord?"), a country prophet, who prophesies from the fall of Samaria to the invasion of Judah by the Assyrians in 701 B.C. The reference, however, to exile in Babylon in Micah 4:8 over 130 years later shows that the original oracles have been combined with later prophetic material preserved by the school of his disciples much in the same manner as in the second part of Isaiah.

Unsurprisingly perhaps for a rural prophet, Micah attributes the apostasy of Israel and Judah to their respective cities, Samaria and Jerusalem (1:5). The dirge in 1:8-16 reflects the devastation of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. Unlike Isaiah who hoped for Jerusalem, Micah prophesied its destruction based on the conviction that it was "built on blood" (3:10-12). Great wickedness was there, so God's judgement must fall. This oracle was preserved and repeated a century later when Judah fell again to the Babylonians (cf. Jeremiah 26:18-19).

Micah's messianic theology is focussed for the future king not in Jerusalem as it is with Isaiah but in Bethlehem, the humble small clan of Judah "from which One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel"—a significant prophecy of where the Christ child would be born—a passage cited in the Vespers of the Orthodox Church for the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord. (5:2-6). In God's lament over his people in Chapter 6:1-8, it is to the Exodus that the prophecy yearns, not the Davidic covenant; and there is a strong insistence on justice, mercy and faith rather than mere cultic observance, (6:6-8).

The prophetic judgements of the remaining chapter end with a great message of hope that God's compassion and mercy will subdue and overwhelm Israel's sins for the sake of His faithful remnant, as all of Israel's sins "will be cast into the depths of the sea"—a phrase that many Church Fathers would later see as a foreshadowing of baptism (7:18-20).

## The Later Ministry of the Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah's later ministry is marked by his re-emergence from the prophetic circle during the reforms of Hezekiah who, unlike the weak Ahaz, was a wise, faithful and vigorous king—one whom the Deuteronomist likens even unto David, (2 Kings [4 Kingdoms] 18). Hezekiah tore down all the hill shrines, the syncretistic cult objects, the Assyrian altar undoubtedly, and also even the bronze serpent of Moses in the Temple. He purged Judah's worship and secured Jerusalem's water supply by the construction of the famous extant water tunnel. He also stiffened Judah's resolve in resistance to Assyria whilst that Empire was temporarily preoccupied with enemies to the North. As part of this policy though, he was tempted to cross a line and join an insurgency against Assyria promoted by the Egyptians in the Philistine city of Ashdod. Isaiah warned against this by going about Jerusalem in the loin cloth of a prisoner of war (Isaiah 20) thereby warning of the folly of such a venture. Hezekiah backed off and the Egyptians left the Philistines to their fate at the hands of the Assyrians. Judah remained safe however for only one more decade.

After the death of the King of Assyria, Sargon in 705 B.C., his rival, the king of Babylonia tried to stir up an international revolt against Assyria in Palestine and Egypt and Hezekiah is moved to join in. Isaiah warns him off again and most of the prophetic oracles in chapters 28 to 33 come from this period. The general prophecy concerning Assyria in the providence of God is to be found earlier in Isaiah 10:5-6. God's judgement and wrath is to be found active in the ascendancy of Assyria but God's final victory on Mount Zion (v. 12) will vindicate those who stand by their faith in God (vs. 20-23). Consistently, Isaiah warns against political opportunism, military self-confidence (31:1-3) and the "covenant with death" (28:18). He uncompromisingly insists that God will both judge and deliver. The people must keep their faith (30:15). This would be the foundation for a new and spiritual Zion, (28:16-17).

When Sennacherib finally mobilized the Assyrian horde against Palestine, his victories were swift and conclusive. Jerusalem was shut up in his words "like a caged

bird.” Sennacherib’s chief deputy and chief of propaganda tried to undermine the city’s morale. Hezekiah fell into despair but Isaiah encouraged him to trust in God whose promise to David and his line could not fail. Isaiah was no appeaser even if he did believe that the Assyrians were the instruments of God’s wrath. In the end Isaiah’s prophecy that Assyria would not prevail proved true. The angel of the Lord mysteriously decimated the Assyrians overnight; and Sennacherib retreated only later to be assassinated by one of his sons (2 Kings [4 Kingdoms] 19:35-37). A faithful remnant was saved in Jerusalem, and that promise later informed the Church’s self-understanding as she gathered around the Messiah when Jerusalem finally fell many centuries later to the Romans.

After the death of Hezekiah, Manasseh took to the throne and promptly started to undo all Hezekiah’s good work by reopening country pagan hill shrines, merging Yahwism with Baalism, introducing the Mesopotamian astral cult of star worship (astrology on steroids) and even promoting necromancy, occult divination, sacred prostitution, child sacrifice and other abominations in Jerusalem. 2 Kings (4 Kingdoms) rightly compares the apostate Manasseh to Ahab and Jezebel in the North. Isaiah according to tradition was martyred during his reign. The Assyrians left the capital unscathed, but only because Manasseh accepted his position of compliant vassal. The Empire was safe for now, but Egypt threw off the Assyrian yoke in 664 B.C. and hostile incursions weakened it.

In Jerusalem prophecy was persecuted mercilessly, so the prophecies and oracles were preserved in the Isaianic schools together with those of the north, duly adapted to Judah’s present situation. These were indeed dark days for Judah, but, spiritually speaking, all was not lost. People began once more to look to the past to Israel’s historic faith and the confidence of prophets and reformers grew. These reforming voices were strengthened by the rise of nationalism following Assyria’s fatal weakening after the death in 627 of its last king Ashurbanipal. Manasseh was succeeded by his son Amon who continued his father’s foreign policy, but he only ruled for two years and was assassinated in a patriotic revolt. He was succeeded by

the boy king Josiah who by the time Ashurbanipal died was in his teens and ready to reign.

The Assyrian Empire fell apart not long afterwards when in 612 B.C. the capital, Nineveh, fell under the combined assault of the newly ascendant Babylonians, with the Medes and Scythians. We shall return to this history later when we consider the fateful end of Josiah's reign.

### The Prophet Zephaniah

King Josiah's legacy was his reform of Judah's religious life in the implementation of the Deuteronomic Code and a purging of Manasseh's idolatry. The preparation and groundwork for this reform was laid by a surge in prophecy immediately beforehand and notably from the prophets Zephaniah and Jeremiah. Zephaniah will be considered briefly now, but Jeremiah will be examined later in this lecture and in the next lecture, his ministry extending further than Zephaniah to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Zephaniah (whose name is sometimes taken to mean "God has hidden") was a prophet of judgement against apostasy in the old Northern styles of Hosea and Amos (1:15-16). He may have been related to Hezekiah; and he certainly shared his perspective. Zephaniah prophesied the collapse of Assyria but did not specify the new aggressor. Some have speculated that this might have been the Scythians, but the Greek account in Herodotus of their incursions in the Middle East are not universally accepted.

In any event, Zephaniah is clear: "the great day of the Lord is near. It is near and quick. The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter and harsh" (1:14). Like Isaiah before him, Zephaniah held out hope for a remnant who would find shelter from God's wrath in that great day. His warning to Israel to repent could be applied to many nations: "Gather together, and bind yourselves together, you uneducated nation, before you become like a transient flower, before there comes upon you the Lord's anger before there comes upon you the day of the Lord's wrath. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth; work judgement and seek justice . . . that you might be

sheltered on the day of the Lord's wrath" (2:1-3). This beautiful exhortation to "seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth" is primarily a call to the nation of Israel, but each Israelite is also called to make a personal decision for or against the reign of Yahweh, because each person like each nation can easily become "a transient flower" who withers in the midst of idolatry, whether the source of that idolatry is Baal, atheism, narcissism or addiction to some other evil.

### **The Renewal of the Covenant and the Reforms of King Josiah**

With the accession of Josiah, reforms were implemented that placed the Mosaic traditions of Israel right back in the centre of Judah's common life (2 Kings [4 Kingdoms] 23). These were stimulated by the finding of a Torah document in the archives of the Temple in 621 B.C. (2 Kings [4 Kingdoms] 22). Upon confirmation of its authenticity by Huldah the prophetess, Josiah then implemented reforms that purged Israel of pagan religion, instituted a covenant renewal and restored the long neglected observance of the Passover. The recovered document is almost certainly now embedded in the book of Deuteronomy in chapters 12 to 26, (the so called Deuteronomic Code), and was the basis for Josiah's reformation. It was Saints Athanasius, Chrysostom and Jerome who first suggested this documentary hypothesis, (which should remind some Orthodox that Biblical criticism is not a modern, primarily Protestant invention!).

The Code itself mirrors almost exactly the reforms elsewhere listed in 2 Kings (4 Kingdoms) 22 to 23. All the high places are to be abolished and worship of Yahweh must be confined to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem to which people must make pilgrimage to celebrate the great religious festivals. It is likely that an earlier legal tradition lies behind the Code since Josiah "filled in" Jerusalem as the central shrine. This older tradition may have come from the North with roots in Shechem and the old tribal confederacy. Interestingly, Jeremiah's own familial lineage suggests this connection back to Shiloh. The Deuteronomic reforms, however, had certain fatal flaws and although Jeremiah initially supported them (Jeremiah 11:1-13), it soon became clear that they were predicated on a superficial nationalism

rather than an inward change of heart (Jeremiah 8:8); and this in turn was made possible by a theology that oversimplified the blessings and curses that were held to follow from obedience or disobedience to the Torah. This perspective bred a certain kind of “prosperity theology” that would easily be undermined by adverse political or economic circumstances.

The prophet Nahum’s celebration of the divine justice of the Assyrian collapse seems rather shallow in this context (Nahum 3:18-19). When Babylon took the place of Assyria on the world stage at the beginning of the 7th century, it was the prophet Habakkuk who exposed the weaknesses of this way of thinking and believing. He offered no solution for the mystery of iniquity but raised Israel’s vision as it were onto the watchtower of faith, waiting expectantly for God’s redemption, notwithstanding the ambiguities of the ebb and flow of human history, because it was still possible that “the just shall live by My faith” (2:4).

The end of Josiah’s reign and his death in battle was marked by a fateful defence of Babylonia against an Egyptian-inspired defence of crumbling Assyria. A temporary period of suzerainty to Egypt followed before the Babylonians reacted and defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish under Nebuchadnezzar II in 605 B.C. Storm clouds from Babylon now hung over Judah and a barely reformed Judah for all Josiah’s valiant efforts, as Jeremiah prophesied.

### **Conclusion: Prophets, Kings and Governance**

The previous lecture concluded with the reflection: “Not only in the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, but with all nations at all times, the prophetic tradition is a substantive part of God’s wish to empower His people to live with justice and mercy. However, whatever the nation or the time period, there need to be potential prophets waiting to hear the Word of the Lord for their lives and the life of their nations, with those prophets having the courage not only to hear the Lord, but also to confront those responsible for the governance of the nations with the Word of the Lord.”

In the light of how so many people and kings in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms failed to respond to the many prophets who were sent to them with the Word of the Lord, it should now be added that when prophets do hear and proclaim the Word of the Lord it is necessary for those in governance and their people to listen and to act. Isaiah set out the challenge: consistently, the Lord ensures for each king and society there is “a voice of one crying out in the wilderness ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God’” (Isaiah 40:3; cf. Luke 3:4). Whether or not that voice is heard has consequences, as will become evident in the next lecture with the expulsion of both people and kings to Babylon.

## A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, Bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:<sup>1</sup>

### Isaiah 6:1-13

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
<b>Exegetical</b>	<b>Historical / Contextual</b>  <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	<p>In <i>The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective</i>, Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos selects one passage from the OT (Isaiah 6:1-8) and one from the NT (Galatians 1:13-17) to stress that: “At the exegetical level, one can ascertain the fact that Scripture, as well as tradition, includes direct eye-witness accounts of immediate experiences of God” (p. 222).</p>	<p>Isaiah’s call is set firmly in a liturgical context in which he sees “the Lord sitting on a throne” (v.1). Each of us can also be called by the Lord to do specific work, as we worship in the Divine Liturgy, drawing closer to Christ.</p>
	<b>Allegorical / Typological</b>  <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	<p>In his <i>Six Homilies on Isaiah 6</i>, St. John Chrysostom calls out to both his own congregation and future Christians with these words: “It is the kingdom of heaven we are entering, after all; we are going to places where lightning flashes. Inside, it is all silence and mysteries beyond telling. Pay precise attention, however: the reading out of the Scriptures is the opening of the heavens. It is a theology of the Word with implications, of course, also for our age’s liturgies: public reading of the lectionary is the congregation’s key to heaven.” (cited by Father Eugen J. Pentiuc, <i>The Old Testament in Eastern Orthodox Tradition</i>, p. 199).</p>	<p>Considering St. John Chrysostom’s Teaching on Inspiration in Six Homilies on Isaiah 6, Robert Hill notes the saint is “conspicuously faithful to the principles of interpretation favoured at Antioch.” At the same time, the saint’s exegesis is literal and practical: “Do you want to learn how Isaiah saw God? Become a prophet yourself” (p. 32) (at <a href="http://www.jstor.org">www.jstor.org</a> with free registration).</p>
<b>Interpretative</b>	<b>Spiritual / Ethical</b>	<p>In <i>The Face of Christ in the Old Testament</i> (SVSP), the Orthodox theologian Georges A. Barois explains that: “Christian Tradition is unanimous on proclaiming Isaiah the ‘Prophet of the Incarnation.’ Our liturgical readings draw heavily on the canonical Book of</p>	<p>Barois also comments that with the Spirit of God resting on the coming Messiah in 11:4, “We have now left the contingencies and mediocrities of the</p>

		<p>Isaiah, which [is] the paradigm of prophetic literature since, more than any other book in the Old Testament, it points to the birth and mission of Immanuel, to the passion and triumph of the Messiah, and to the Christ of the Latter days” (p. 105).</p>	<p>Hebrew dynasties, and of all dynasties and governments for that matter” (p. 111). The challenge of idolatry faced by Isaiah still faces many cultures today.</p>
	<p><b>Personal / Social</b></p>	<p>St. John Chrysostom notes the angel has been sent to Isaiah “to free him of his fear and to fill him with confidence, and in order that—[un]like Moses, who pleaded slowness of speech (cf. Exodus 4:10) and Jeremiah, who said he was too young (Jeremiah 1:6)—he would have no pretext that his lips were unclean and he could therefore not render the service to be demanded of him, the seraph proceeded to purify his sins not by his own power, for that belongs only to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but on order and by the application of the coal.”</p> <hr/> <p>For further reflections, both modern and traditional, see Johanna Manley (ed.), <i>Isaiah through the Ages</i> (Menlo Park CA: Monastery Books, 1995) [1,072 pages].</p>	<p>St. Paul paraphrases Isaiah 6.9 to the Jews of Rome in Acts 28:26 (“Go to this people and say, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand’”). The same challenge to accept Christ confronts each of us today. St. John Chrysostom reminds us: “If you ask why was the mouth of the prophet not burned? It is that the object of the vision was not material fire; for the rest, when God does something, do not meddle; do not be too curious.”</p>
<p><b>Transformative</b></p>	<p><b>The Call to Holiness</b></p>	<p>Barois notes: “The Orthodox priest, wiping his mouth with the veil after partaking of the precious blood, repeats the very same words which were spoken to Isaiah [6:7]: ‘This has touched my lips, and shall take away my iniquities and cleanse me from my sin” (p.105, <i>The Face of Christ in the OT</i>). St. John Chrysostom notes that the hymn, “Holy, holy, holy” is “not only a praise but also a prophecy proclaiming the benefits that are going to pour on the earth.” Here are the roots of the Trisagion Prayer with its focus on the holiness of God. St. Theodoret of Cyrus insisted: “Let no one think . . . that the glory of the God</p>	<p>As each Orthodox Christian receives the Eucharist, taken from the altar, they share the experience of Isaiah 6:7 [<i>O. Study Bible</i> note on Isaiah 6:7.]  St. John of Damascus urges: “Let us apply our eyes and lips and brows and partake of the divine coal, in order that the fire of longing that is in us, with the additional heat derived from the coal may utterly</p>

		<p>of all the universe is confined to the Temple: the Master of the universe fills the whole world.”</p> <p>=====</p> <p>The beautiful painting by Marc Chagall (1887-1985) of the angel wiping Isaiah’s lips is free on the web, by searching for “Chagall paintings Isaiah angels.”</p>	<p>consume our sins and illumine our hearts that we may be inflamed and deified by the participation in the divine fire. Isaiah saw the coal. . . .”</p> <p>And so can each of us as Orthodox Christians.</p>
	<p><b>The Call to Witness</b></p>	<p>St. Basil the Great reflects in <i>On the Spirit</i> XVI, 39 that “in the order of the intellectual world it is impossible for the high life of the law to abide without the [Holy] Spirit. . . How could the seraphim cry, ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ were they not taught by the [Holy] Spirit how often true religion requires them to lift their voice in this ascription of glory?” Do ‘all His angels’ and ‘all His hosts’ praise God? (cf. Psalm 148:2). It is through the cooperation of the [Holy] Spirit.”</p>	<p>“Isaiah’s vision has strongly influenced the development of Orthodox Christian worship. For the Church, like heaven, has an altar, a throne, smoke from the incense and believers singing ‘Holy, holy, holy, the Thrice-Holy Hymn.”</p> <p>[<i>O. Study Bible</i>, note on Isaiah 6:1-6].</p>

<sup>1</sup> In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,*” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality. . .” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages. In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.

**6** In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

<sup>2</sup>Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

<sup>3</sup>And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

<sup>4</sup>And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

<sup>5</sup>Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.

<sup>6</sup>Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar:

<sup>7</sup>And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.

<sup>8</sup>Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

<sup>9</sup>And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.

<sup>10</sup>Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

<sup>11</sup>Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate,

<sup>12</sup>And the LORD have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land.

<sup>13</sup>But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.

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**King James Version (KJV)**

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## Isaiah 6:1-13 LXX Septuagint (Brenton)

<sup>1</sup>And it came to pass in the year in which king Ozias died, *that* I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, and the house was full of his glory. <sup>2</sup>And seraphs stood round about him: each one had six wings: and with two they covered *their* face, and with two they covered *their* feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one cried to the other, and they said, Holy, holy, holy *is the* Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. <sup>4</sup>And the lintel <sup>\*</sup>shook at the voice they uttered, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said, Woe is me, for I am pricked to the heart; for being a man, and having unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people having unclean lips; and I have seen with mine eyes the King, the Lord of hosts. <sup>6</sup>And there was sent to me one of the seraphs, and he had in his hand a coal, which he had taken off the altar with the tongs: <sup>7</sup>and he touched my mouth, and said, Behold, this has touched thy lips, and will take away thine iniquities, and will purge off thy sins. <sup>8</sup>And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom <sup>†</sup>shall I send, and who will go to this people? And I said, behold, I am *here*, send me. And he said, Go, and say to this people, <sup>9</sup>Ye shall hear indeed, but ye shall not understand; and ye shall see indeed, but ye shall not perceive. <sup>10</sup> <sup>\*</sup>For the heart of this people has become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. <sup>11</sup>And I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities be deserted <sup>‡</sup>by reason of their not being inhabited, and the houses by reason of there being no men, and the land shall be left desolate. <sup>12</sup>And after this God shall remove the men far off, and they that are left upon the land shall be multiplied. <sup>13</sup>And yet there <sup>§</sup>shall be a tenth upon it, and again it shall be for a spoil, as a turpentine tree, and as an acorn when it falls out of its husk.