ISAIAH VI 9-13: A RETRIBUTIVE TAUNT AGAINST IDOLATRY

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The message which the prophet Isaiah was commissioned to deliver to Israel, recorded in Isa. vi 9-13, has generated much literature partly because of its difficult theology, especially with respect to the problem of theodicy. On the surface, God appears to be using the prophet’s preaching as the instrument through which he causes Israel’s unbelief. What is the basis for Yahweh’s righteousness and justice in hardening Israel through Isaiah’s message? Although much discussion has arisen in connection with this question, a possible perspective apparently unexplored so far is that Isa. vi 9-13 could form a specific part of a literary tirade against Israel’s idolatry. While this text has been understood as a pronouncement of judgement because of covenant disloyalty in general, there has been no suggestion that it may be a punishment tied specifically to the nation’s sin of idolatry.

The thesis of this article is to explore the possibility that Isa. vi 9-13 functions as a pronouncement of judgement on Israel’s idolatry, which possibly serves as a synecdoche or metonymy representing the whole of the nation’s covenantal disobedience.

1 I am grateful to my colleagues at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and at Tyndale House, Cambridge, for comments on an earlier draft of this article.
2 In addition to the relevant OT and NT commentaries, the following represents a sampling of the literature which includes some significant discussion of this problem in Isa. vi 9-13: C. Lattey, “Did God Harden the Heart of Israel (Isaiah 6:10)?”, Sitz 3 (1948), pp. 48-50; F. Hesse, Das Verstockungsproblem im Alten Testament, BZAW 74 (Berlin, 1955); J. M. Schmidt, “Gedanken zum Verstockungs auftrag Jesajas (Is. vi)”, VT 21 (1971), pp. 68-90; H. Räisänen, The Idea of Divine Hardening (Helsinki, 1972); B. Hollenbach, “Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven: Irony”, Bib Tr 34 (1983), pp. 50-66; A. Schenker, “Gerichtsverkündigung und Verblendung bei den vorexilischen Propheten”, RB 93 (1986), pp. 563-75, who also cites recent literature on this topic which should be consulted.
The following lines of evidence point to the plausibility of this thesis.

(1) The first observation comes from outside Isaiah but merits initial mention because of its unusual verbal resemblance. There is a striking verbal parallel between Isa. vi 9-10 and Ps. cxxxv 16-17 (and Ps. cxv 5-6):

*Isa. vi 9b-10a*  
*Ps. cxxxv 15-17a (and Ps. cxv 5b-6a)*

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*Keep on hearing but do not understand; and keep on seeing but do not know. Render the hearts of this people fat, and their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears... and repent...*

The verbal parallel between Isa. vi and Ps. cxxxv (and Ps. cxv) merely may be formal, but this conclusion cannot be reached until the broader argument of Isaiah is studied and the contextual function of the language describing sensory organ malfunction is determined.

(2) A second line of evidence pointing to the present proposal is found in the immediate context of Isa. i-vi and must be understood in connection with the above discussion. When the broader message of Isa. vi 9-10 is surveyed, there appears to be not only a verbal likeness with Ps. cxxxv (and Ps. cxv) but also a comparable contextual function of phraseology. The idolatry pericope of Ps. cxxxv 15-18 (cf. Ps. cxv 4-8) concludes with the climactic thought that those nations who make and worship idols will become like those very idols: “Those who make them will be like them, everyone who trusts in them” (Ps. cxxxv 18; cf. cxv 8). Hence, the reader of the Psalm is to deduce that worshippers of idols will be judged by being made to resemble the idols portrayed in vv. 15-17, i.e. through “having eyes but not seeing”, etc. The statement of

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3 Cf. Ps. cxv 5-6 (= cxxxv 16-17): ḫenayim lāhem wĕlō? yir’ā, ḫoznayim lāhem wĕlō? yīshā’ā [ya’ezīnā]. Isa. vi 10 reads: hašmen lēb-hā’ām hazzeh wĕoznayw hakbēd wĕēnayw hâsā’ pēn-yir’ēh b’ēnayw (see almost identically Isa. vi 9). Even if a literary relationship could be established between these two texts, priority or dependence cannot be determined since neither Ps. cxxxv nor Ps. cxv can be dated with any certainty.