

I Isaiah: The Year that King Uzziah Died

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Isaiah 6

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Ever since King Jehu died (814 BCE) the country has been in a mess.

Several kings have tried to rule and none have succeeded. Israel has been on the verge of civil war for fifteen years. And down south in Judah things have begun to deteriorate as well. The aristocracy has asserted itself and applied pressure on the monarchy to rule in their favor. The working class has begun to grumble with dissatisfaction.

Then in 792 BCE the two countries try to hide or cover up their problems by going to war against each other. The two co-regents of Israel, Joash and Jeroboam II, capture the king of Judah, Amaziah, and imprison him. In Israel, the sixteen year old son of Amaziah, a young reformer named Uzziah, steps into the vacuum and declares himself king with the support of the army. Immediately, he rebuilds the walls of the city which has been battered down in the war and begins to make reforms, pushing back the power of the aristocracy and making laws to favor the poor and the working class as well as restoring Yahwism, the predecessor of Judaism, as the sole religion of Judah.

Ten years later, in 782 BCE, Joash dies leaving Jeroboam II the sole king of Israel and he frees the imprisoned Amaziah who returns to Judah, pushes his now 26 year old son off the throne and declares himself king with the support of the Judaic aristocracy.

He rules for about fifteen years when, in 767 BCE, a revolt breaks out, led by certain elements in the army who are still loyal to Uzziah who is now about 40 years old. Amaziah flees to the town of Lachish where he is discovered and killed by the conspirators who place Uzziah back on the throne.

CAMELOT IN JUDAH

Uzziah, whose reign would cover nearly 40 years, would become known as one of the great kings of Israel. The prophets who would preach during his reign would include Amos, Isaiah and Hosea but never once would they utter a word of criticism against the king, himself. Their problem would always be with the excesses of the aristocracy.

Here is just a brief digest of the things Uzziah accomplished:

He established a peaceful relationship with king Jeroboam II of Israel and worked with that country to establish and fortify borders, especially against the Assyrians to the north.

He also extended the borders of Judah into the Philistine territories, capturing the cities of Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod and taxing them heavily to pay for the needs of the kingdom. He defeated the Ammonites, east of the Jordan River and levied taxes against them as well.

He rebuilt the wall surrounding Jerusalem and was the first to utilize angles in the design of the wall that would place any assailant in a crossfire. He invented and installed devices on the wall that would hurl multiple rocks and arrows.

He built forts and army barracks along the main highways to keep the peace and enforce the laws.

He reorganized the army into cadres of full time, professional officers and instructors under a single general and armed them with professionally made, uniform chain mail, shields, helmets, swords, bows and slings. No longer did soldiers have to provide their own weapons and armor.

He developed agriculture by creating farming settlements and setting army barracks near them to protect them. He had catch ponds, called cisterns, dug so water could be harvested and saved for livestock and irrigation.

He developed Israel's first navy and reopened King Solomon's copper mines that had been closed for some unknown reason.

His rule was universally lauded as fair and evenhanded. He tended to lean toward the working people and he enforced the Judaic codes that required fair treatment of workers, slaves, indentured servants, orphans, widows and the handicapped.

He was, one might say, the JFK of his generation.

He may not have been universally loved but he was loved by many and most. And even those who did not agree with him tended to admire and like him.

One of those people who liked, admired, and believed in Uzziah was a young intellectual, a child of the aristocratic class, raised in wealth, educated by the rabbis, literate and articulate in his own right, an idealistic, pious young follower of YHWH, whose name was **Isaiah**.

Isaiah believed that King Uzziah was not just a good king. Isaiah, and probably many others like him, believed that Uzziah was a great king, maybe even the one whose coming was foretold, the long awaited messiah.

Then, in 750 BCE, the wheels fell off.

It was announced from the palace that King Uzziah had been stricken with leprosy. He would not be leaving the palace again. His son, the crown prince, Jotham, would rule with him as co-regent and would be his voice from now on. Leprosy.

How was it possible? What sin had he committed? What wrong had he done that could bring such a horrible punishment down upon him?

It was the modern equivalent of AIDS. It wasn't just a disease, it was a judgment, a stigma, a brand, and a curse.

Uzziah was never seen outside the palace again. He reigned for ten more years with his son gradually assuming control of the country until, in 740 BCE, Uzziah died.

The funeral would have been a weird and disjointed affair. On the one hand, it was the funeral of a king and certain protocols must be observed. But, on the other hand, this king was a leper and certain laws and traditions must be obeyed.

He would be afforded the traditional royal funeral, which probably lasted about 30 days. The royal orchestra would play and the choir would sing and sacrifices would be made in the temple every day on his behalf, but he would not be buried with the other kings. As a leper, he would be buried separately.¹

AT THE FUNERAL

One day during the funeral, young Isaiah went to the temple where he sat and prayed and grieved for his beloved king. His heart was heavy, his stomach was empty from fasting, his hope was dashed, his mind was a blank. He did not know which way to turn.

It is at such times that God often speaks the loudest and clearest to those whom he chooses and this was just such a time for Isaiah. The orchestra was playing, probably loudly. The choir of all male voices was singing. The incense was burning and smoking. The pyre upon which the sacrifices were offered was burning and smoking.

And it was in this situation that Isaiah had a vision.

“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.”

In his vision, he sees God, something that was not allowed even to Moses, and the experience of which, if it happened in real life was supposed to be so overwhelming that it would kill a man. Perhaps he does not see the Lord face to face, however, because he says that God was sitting on a throne “high and lofty,” maybe near the ceiling of the huge temple. It may be the case that he simply sees God and that is enough to ignite what will follow.

The only description of God that Isaiah gives is that the hem of God’s robe flows down from the throne and fills the temple; could this have been the smoke from the incense and the sacrificial pyre?

²Seraphs 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.

God is presented, in this vision, as a king so, naturally, a king would have a bodyguard close by. These are the seraphs, the soldier angels with the bodies of men and the heads of animals – lions, tigers, bears, eagles, even dragons. Each has six wings, like dragonflies, and they hover above and around the throne of God. Their wings make a horrible, loud droning sound. With their other four wings they cover their faces and their private parts because it is only proper to do so in the presence of God. They are hideous and fearsome creatures who almost always begin their messages with the phrase, “be not afraid,” because the natural human inclination when confronted with such beings is to be very afraid, indeed.

Not only do they hover over and protect God – who needs no protection – they do what human armies did in those days; they sing songs of how mighty and powerful their king is.

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

It says that they said these things to each other but, in fact, this was a well-known hymn of the time and it was sung antiphonally with the choir divided in half, each half facing each other, singing back and forth in a call and response format.

And, let me tell you, this is some loud singing -- as loud, perhaps, as the royal choir and orchestra playing and singing together in the confined space of the temple. So loud is it, in fact, that ...

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

Anyone who has lived in an earthquake zone knows that the strongest place in the house is above the threshold of the doorways. The headers and arches above the doors make those spaces the strongest places in the wall and the safest place to stand. Isaiah says that the music was so loud that the thresholds shook all the way down to the pivots.

The word “pivot” is the best guess translation of an ancient Hebrew word, the exact meaning of which has been lost to us. Other translators use the word “foundation” which, given the context, makes more sense. Isaiah tells us that the music was so loud that the very foundations of the building shook even under the thresholds, the strongest places.

The experience overwhelms him. It’s too much. He is undone by it and he says as much.

¹ Uzziah’s body would lie in a different burial site for nearly 740 years, until the year 1CE when King Herod the Great would have his bones move to the cemetery of the kings. Still afraid that leprosy might survive the grave, the following warning was placed on the limestone cover: “Hither were brought the bones of Uzziah, king of Judah. Do not open.”

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!’**

Confronted with the greatness and the perfection of God, Isaiah is struck by his own smallness and imperfection. Perhaps that is why YHWH doesn't let us see his face. It's not that the greatness of God overwhelms us. What overwhelms us is the poor, weak, sniveling smallness of our own lives and our own selves when contrasted to the powerful holiness and the blinding glory of God.

Placed in contrast to the God who comes to us in Scripture we are struck with the stark reality of who we are and what we have done. The great theologian, Paul Tillich, describes it this way: Suddenly, we are confronted with the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life... we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged... our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure... become intolerable to us,” and we must accept the inescapable fact that year after year, the longed-for perfection of life has not appeared and the old compulsions still reign within us as they have for decades.²

And not only is this true of us, it is true of everyone we know. “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” I am a sinner and so is everyone I know – rich, poor, weak, powerful, young, old, male, female -- we are all hopeless sinners.

Is it any wonder that Isaiah sums up this situation as he does? Woe is me! I am lost!
Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called it despair – the “sickness unto death.”

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 touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’

God, however, in his infinite mercy, does not allow us to languish in self-flagellation and despair for even the briefest of moments.

God's response to our hopelessness, guilt and despair is always the same. Those who believe that grace was invented by Christianity, look closely again at these two verses.

In Isaiah's vision one of the terrible angels flies to the altar and removes a burning coal from it with a pair of tongs. Then he flies to Isaiah and touches the coal to the young man's unclean lips. Note how, in Isaiah's vision, there is no pain associated with this rite, only the cleansing, purifying heat of the fire is present.

Martin Luther once described God's grace as “a white hot furnace of love.” It is a fire so hot that nothing, no sin, no act, no thought, no intention, nothing we can do, think up or even imagine doing can escape its cleansing, sterilizing power.

Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out. That's how the New Revised Standard Bible puts it. Listen to some others. King James: thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. The New Century Version: Your guilt is taken away. Your sin is taken away. Today's English Version: Your guilt is gone and your sins are forgiven. The Contemporary English Version: Your sins are taken away and you are no longer guilty. In Eugene Peterson's wonderful modern language paraphrase, The Message. The angel speaks like an Old Testament Yoda: “Gone your guilt, your sins wiped out.”

No matter how you play it, the tune comes out the same: God's grace undoes, wipes out, erases, blots out, removes and cleanses human sin. Yours, mine, Isaiah's.

“You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*”³

⁸ **Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’**

Isaiah languishes for a small time, as we all do, in that moment of absolute grace, that moment of total acceptance and love and forgiveness. He does not ask, attempt, seek or perform anything. He simply accepts the fact that he is accepted.

He does do one thing, however. He listens. And as he listens, he hears the voice of God.

In Isaiah's vision God has appeared as a king so he speaks in the language of royalty, referring to himself in both the first person singular and the first person plural.

The question which God asks is the one he is still asking. It is the question of the ages that lies before the people of God, that hangs there in the midst of history, in times of war and peace, in times of scarcity and plenty, in times of weal and woe. In times of ease and of challenge throughout the history of the people of God the question never changes. It is and always has been the same:

² “You Are Accepted,” sermon by Paul Tillich in *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Can be found at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=378&C=84>.

³ *Ibid.*

Who will go for God?

Who will speak for God? Who will act on God's behalf? Who will speak God's will? Who will announce God's presence? Who will stand before the people and dare to say, "Thus saith the Lord..."

And Isaiah, filled with the grace of God and overflowing with a sense of God's presence in his life, rises, his hand thrust into the air, his face flushed with excitement, his heart racing with a surge of adrenaline, his head swimming with hope, his eyes brimming with tears of joy and with his mind reeling with endless possibilities of the question, he shouts aloud in the sanctuary of the great temple...

Here am I! Send me!

Here am I. Send me.

AMEN