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“To Open Eyes that Are Blind...” [Isa 42:7]

Senses, Idolatry, and Unity in Isaiah

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5/7/2014

This thesis explores the theme of senselessness throughout Isaiah in connection with the sin of idolatry and prophetic expectation that Israel and Judah will one day be reunited. It explores Isaiah's use of a metaphorical trope to communicate the spiritual reality of Israel's insensibility and Isaiah's anticipation of YHWH's restorative action on their behalf. The restoration of Israel's senses portrays Israel's metaphorical features [eyes, ears, hearts] finally fulfilling their proper purpose before God [seeing, hearing, understanding], which are representative of the deeper spiritual reality that they at last will find their proper function as the people of God. Their senses must be restored so that they might finally see, hear, perceive, and respond to the voice of YHWH and the needs of the helpless among them. Israel's right sensory knowledge of God is prerequisite of their restoration and reunification.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a literary and theological exploration of Isaiah's prophetic voice relative to the expectation of the emergence of unity/righteousness when God establishes peace in Israel. One of the major consequences of idolatry in Israel's history is division, the clearest example being the division into two nations, Israel and Judah, due to the sins – specifically the *idolatry* – of king Solomon (1 Kings 11)¹. Sin has led to division, thus there is prophetic expectation that a significant component of Israel's restoration will be reunification (Isaiah 11:10-13). The other major consequence of idolatry this paper will explore is *sense-lessness*, that is, the inability to perceive, and thus to respond to, the voice and will of YHWH (Isaiah 6:9-10; 1:16-17). And so, another piece of Israel's restoration will include the healing of their senses. Israel will not be divided forever; neither will they remain blind and deaf to the voice of God.

My interest in the topics of idolatry and sense-lessness in Isaiah comes from the pervasive theme throughout the Old Testament that the Israelites are usually trying to provide for themselves. In Jeremiah, Israel is scolded for pursuing the waters (and therefore provision) of other nations (Jer 2-3). In Hosea Israel's desertion of YHWH is played out through the metaphor of a whore who can't seem to hold herself back and must go after lovers who provide food, water, and clothing (Hos 2:5). Idolatry is a classic example of the way Israel deserts YHWH in exchange for what they perceive to be political power like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8) or self-sustenance (Jer 2:13). The key for this paper is what they *lose* (their senses) by giving their worship to lifeless things rather than to YHWH.

The absurd practice of serving physical idols constructed to look real but lacking agency is also highlighted by other prophets in the Old Testament (Isa 44:9-20, Jer 2:4, Hab 2:18-19). Israel serves "gods" with eyes, ears, noses, hands, and feet, which are ultimately useless because they are made of wood and stone. While all of the prophets address idolatry, Isaiah does so distinctively by addressing this *sense-lessness* and inability to act or feel. Idols are not alive; Israel seems to become less alive as they direct their worship to lifeless things.

I explore the theme of *sense-lessness* that runs throughout canonical Isaiah by paying attention to the way in which Isaiah describes Israel's senses – specifically the failure of Israel's senses, as well as the senses of prophets, YHWH, The Servant, and the "Root of

¹ As it turns out, King Solomon was nothing a king *should* be (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) and brought upon Israel nearly every curse Samuel warned them of as they pleaded desperately for a king like the nations around them (1 Sam 8:11-18).

Jesse" (Isa 11:3-5). *Senselessness* means in this context not foolishness but a *lack* of sensory ability – to have features that lack proper function. This includes eyes that cannot or refuse to see, ears that cannot or refuse to hear, lips that cannot speak, and hearts that do not understand. To be sense-less is to have lost the ability to see, hear, perceive, and understand –and therefore to respond to the voice of YHWH. Isaiah is called to confuse Israel's senses so that they "hear and hear but do not perceive, see and see but do not understand" (6:9). The prophet is to "make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (6:11).

SEEING BUT NOT PERCEIVING

Isaiah is the only prophet specifically *called* to "make" Israel's eyes, ears, and hearts blind, deaf, and dumb. He is to fatten (*shaman*), dull (*kabad*), and shut (*sha'a*) lest they turn back for healing. Throughout the book, however, it becomes clear that YHWH does, in fact, desire Israel's healing so that they turn their stiff necks around to face Him once more (Isa 19:22, 43:4). It seems Israel was already very confused, thus Clements calls Isaiah's prophetic call "heavily ironic" despite the difficulty of what he has been asked to do, because of Israel's blatant sin². Isaiah 1 establishes that YHWH is displeased with Israel's sacrifices and festivals – they are *already* blind and YHWH is *already* choosing not to hear them (1:11-15).

As a prophet, Isaiah is called to serve God and the people of Israel in a particular way. The prophet is the conduit of YHWH to his people. He serves as a bridge, having been given sight into the mind of the LORD, between the people and YHWH. "All too often," says Clements, "prophecy has been cited as a proof that belief in absolute divine sovereignty implies a form of historical determinism... Far from prophecy declaring a future that is fixed and unalterable, the book of Isaiah... is first and foremost a call to repentance and a summons to return to the path of obedience... the message of prophecy becomes a call to energize and activate [Israel]"³. Prophetic proclamations are not death sentences, but serve as water to remold hardened clay and bring new life.

Central to this thesis is the theme of the *healing* of Israel's perception problem. The issue is that they have all the senses they need with which to apprehend YHWH, but refuse to apprehend to the point that they become unable to do so. The theme of Israel's lack of senses throughout Isaiah is particularly intriguing in light of Isaiah's call in 6:9-13 to

² Clements, "Healing the Blind and the Lame," 193.

³ Clements, "Who is Blind but My Servant?" 156.

make Israel blind and deaf through his prophecy. There is a pattern in the prophetic canon of YHWH healing the *sense-lessness* of his people, Israel⁴.

IDOLATRY

Idols are referred to sometimes as “no-gods” (Deut 32:17, Jer 2:11, Isa 44:9-10) and mocked for having no agency (Isa 40:18-20; 44:9-20; 46:1; 57:13; Jer 10:5). If idols are nothings, then idolatry is participating in nothing-worship, non-being, non-knowing. It is chaos because it is undoing, unmaking, rather than substantial participation in and acceptance of the provision of God. This is why idolatry is absurd: it is worshipping *nothing*, as opposed to the Living God of the universe who alone has provided, does still, and will continue to provide for the covenant people of Israel (Ex 3:7-9; Deut 6:21-23; Isa 11:10-16; Jer 2:13). Idols cannot even *receive*, participate in, or partake of the worship directed to them. They were created as and remain as inanimate objects; they are created with mouths and cannot taste or speak, ears and cannot hear, eyes and cannot see. Partaking of worship signals some kind of sacramental participation, of which inanimate objects are incapable. No reciprocal relationship or exchange can exist between Israel and her idols. Worship of idols, then, has nothing to do with some twisted form of righteousness or even an exchange of goods. Israel levels their praises at dumb idols and it doesn’t just fall on *deaf* ears, it falls on *inanimate* ears that will never be able to hear. Israel’s idolatry inevitably leads to a nation with *real* mouths, ears, eyes, and hearts no longer capable of utilizing their senses.

Idolatry and Identity

YHWH formed Israel into a people beginning with Abraham, establishing covenants along the way between this people and “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Ex 3:6, 4:5; Deut 9:5, 30:20). Without YHWH, Israel has no identity (Gen 12:2, 46:3), no land (Gen 12:7; Deut 9:1), and no way to provide for themselves (Deut 8:3; Jer 2:13, 37). Israel’s *sense-lessness*, then, may even be considered a symbol of their loss of *identity* markers, having forsaken the provision and power of YHWH. Worship directed at idols causes Israel’s senses to become dulled and unusable because idols themselves lack life and senses. On the other hand, worshipping YHWH is a fulfillment of purpose, the very reason for the creation of the people of Israel in the first place. Idolatry *goes against Israel’s calling*, against what –or Whom— Israel was designed as a community to serve.

⁴ See Clements’ chapter, “Patterns in the Prophetic Canon: Healing the Blind and the Lame” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation*.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the *Shema*, Israel is likewise entreated by Moses to hear: “Hear O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD...” (6:3). Later in Deuteronomy 6, Israel is reminded to remember the provision of YHWH: “cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant...” (Deut 6:10-11). They are then commanded to remember their deliverance from Egypt: “You shall hear the LORD your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name. You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the peoples who are round about you...” (Deut 6:12-14). They are to recount to their children how the LORD delivered them as a people from Egypt, where they were slaves, so their fear of the LORD will be considered righteousness (Deut 6:20-25). In losing their senses to their idols, Israel has given up some fundamental identity markers of their purpose as a nation including serving and knowing YHWH.

Idolatry, along with the sense-lessness that results, is an identity issue, not simply a moral predicament, particularly for this nation whose very identity is having been made “holy” – literally, set apart – by God (e.g. Deut 26:19, 33:3). Idolatry is not simply an issue with Israel’s legality and breaking the law but with their religious identity. By forsaking the LORD, Israel is not only bargaining with political allies, serving the gods of other nations, or committing spiritual adultery per se, but compromising the stability of their entire national and spiritual identity. A desire to run back to Egypt for provision, their minds blurred and confused about what actually took place there, is the ultimate example of Israel’s betrayal of YHWH. Not simply idolatry, this is *adultery*, like Israel returning to an abusive ex-lover. Abraham Heschel says that “The history of Israel began in two acts of rejection: the rejection of Mesopotamia in the days of Abraham and the rejection of Egypt in the days of Moses. In both cases it was a rejection of political and spiritual sovereignty”⁵. They were slaves in Egypt, yet they remember vegetables (Num 11:10); they walked across the Reed Sea on dry land, yet they think they need horses from Egypt on which to flee from their enemies (Ex 14:21-22; Isa 30:16; 31:1). Provision and might from Egypt symbolize the temptation to political idolatry and self-sufficiency. While rejecting Mesopotamian sovereignty is not necessarily emphasized in the text, Israel’s temptation towards Egypt is clearly shown to be problematic through YHWH’s rejection of Israel’s pursuit of this other source of provision (Isaiah 30:1-3, 12; Jer 2:13, 18).

⁵ Heschel, *TP*, 71.

Political Idolatry

Likewise, political alliances align with the spiritual reality of idolatry; serving another nation's king means adopting their gods as well. Thus a part of Israel's loss of sensory faculty is political idolatry, or the desire to be provided for in ways not designed by YHWH and/or to be like the nations around them (a classic sin in Israel's history, e.g. 1 Samuel 8:5 when the elders of Israel demand that Samuel appoint them a king "to govern [them] like all the nations"). Heschel, likewise, notes that a primary concern of Isaiah is political alliances that each Israelite king makes with the nations around them rather than relying on the provision of YHWH⁶.

In Isaiah 36:8, Sennach'erib, the king of Assyria (via Rab'shakeh, 36:2, 4), entices Hezekiah (via Eli'akim, Shebna, and Jo'ah, 36:3) to "Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders upon them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?" The militiaman of Assyria mocks Israel for relying on Egypt yet offers the same provision – horses and military might. Solomon – whose idolatry led to the original division of Israel and Judah – was according to 1 Samuel 8 and Deuteronomy 17 many things a king of Israel should *not* be and almost nothing a king *should* be. One of these marks of Solomon's illegitimate kingship in Kings is his penchant for Egyptian horses (1 Kings 4:26; 10:28; 1 Sam 8:11; Deut 17:16).

Sennach'erib continues, trying to convince the Israelites to follow him instead of Hezekiah: "Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat of his own vine, and every one of his own fig tree, and every one of you will drink the water of his own cistern..." (36:16). The temptation of self-provision is a strong one – one Israel has fallen for before. Israel, rebellious people that they are, proclaim to the seers, "See not!" and to the prophets, "speak to us smooth things... let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 30:10-11). This iniquity, named in 30:1-3 as the desire to return to Egypt and thus to forsake the LORD and abundant provision, will be like a high wall shattered so fully that not a piece could be used to scoop water from a well (30:14). But they prefer quick horses from Egypt (30:16).

Hearing the temptation of Assyria, Hezekiah prays, "Incline thy *ear*, O LORD, and *hear*; *open* thy *eyes*, O LORD, and *see*; and *hear* all the words of Sennach'erib, which he has sent to mock the living God" (37:17). Hezekiah entreats the LORD to see and hear Israel in their distress and to respond – because he has *not* given into Sennach'erib's

⁶ Heschel, *TP*, 64-66.

temptation and recognizes it as evil. Then, in 37:29 YHWH speaks to Hezekiah) of Sennach'erib: "I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came." God effectively tells Sennach'erib, "I will make you *my* horse, because I control you, not the other way around." YHWH continues to assert His control over political power and human attempts at control, which serve as examples of Israel's idolatry.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF IDOLATRY: SENSE-LESSNESS

Sense-lessness and Israel

Israel laments their state of *sense-lessness* in this way as they walk in darkness and groan for salvation: "We grope for the wall like the blind, we grope like those who have no eyes, we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men" because "our transgressions are multiplied before [God] and our sins testify against us" (59:10-12). Israel loses their sense of sight as they worship idols that not only lack senses, but have never had the ability to see, hear, touch, taste, or smell because they are lifeless objects of stone, wood, and metal (Deut 4:28, 28:64; Isa 37:19; Eze 20:32; Hab 2:18-19).

The inability to see, hear, and therefore perceive YHWH's voice is troubling because it affects Israel's ability to *know* (*yada*) the LORD (Isa 1:3; 6:9; 40:21; 44:18). Often the word *yada* is translated "perceive" or "know": Israel *sees* but they do not *perceive* (know). Elsewhere, fat hearts are implicated in carelessness to the cause of the vulnerable whom God has called Israel to care for (Deut 32:15; Jer 5:28⁷). What becomes clear is that the sense-lessness of Israel has led to a deafness to God's voice and numbness to God's work in the world, which is a reversal of how things are meant to be. Eyes should be able to see and ears should be able to hear; having the organ but not the function is unnatural, disorderly: "You turn things upside down!" YHWH levels at Israel in regard to their servitude to things their own hands have made (Isa 29:16).

Along with Isaiah's prophetic scolding of Israel for their spiritual blindness, they are also *commanded* to see and hear, suggesting that they should be capable of such abilities. In Isa 32:29 Israel is commanded to "hear" (*aziyn*) and "give ear" (*qashib*) and "listen" (*sh'ma*) to the voice of the LORD (28:23, 42:23, 51:4). "Who among you will *give ear* to this, will *attend* and *listen* for the time to come?," YHWH asks (42:23). And also, "Listen

⁷ Jeremiah 5:28 "they have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy".

to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation... Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath..." (51:4, 6).

Isa 35:5-6 presents some hope for the healing of Israel, and textually part of this redemption includes the healing of their senses. Clements juxtaposes this passage with Isaiah's call narrative, bracketing Isaiah's harsher passages dealing with judgment (e.g. Isa 13; 22; 24; 28, etc.) within the bookends of Isaiah's call to confuse Israel's (presumably already confused) senses and God's promise to heal their sensory sin in the future⁸.

The inclination of YHWH to punish the people of Israel as a tired parent at the end of his or her rope might punish their immature, rebellious child has the end goal in mind of obedience not for *YHWH's* sake but for *Israel's*. The healing of Israel's senses makes them able to worship God rightly again, placing Israel back in the position of receiving the abundance of the LORD. Then,

"Though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it'... Then you will defile your silver covered graven images and your gold plated molten images. You will scatter them as unclean things..." (30:20-22a).

Isaiah's claim above is that Israel's *sight* of their Teachers and right *hearing* of the voice of YHWH causes them to throw their idols aside, despite the experience of adversity and affliction. Without jumping into what Brueggemann calls "the public practice of pain which touches both guilt and grief," or what Clements refers to as, "the gulf between judgment and promise where guilt and grief have their powerful say" – a direct result of their personal and communal sin and thus the judgment of YHWH – Israel will never find restoration, or perhaps *could* find only a superficial and insubstantial peace⁹.

Sense-lessness and YHWH

God is not lacking in sensory ability in the same sense as Israel or lacking in power and agency, but God's senses are turned away from His people because of their sins. God is dissatisfied with the current state of Israel's worship: "Your new moons and your

⁸ Clements, "Healing the Blind and the Lame". Pages 192-193.

⁹ Brueggemann, *Unity and Dynamic*, page 95; Clements, *Healing the Blind and the Lame*, page 96.

appointed feasts my soul hates" (1:14). God tells Israel, "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" to which the solution is to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" since rebels "do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them" (1:15-17, 23). Israel's spiritual blindness translates to real-world consequences for the helpless who should be cared for by the people of God.

Throughout Isaiah, as well, it is clear that ignoring God is equal to ignoring the helpless; when Israel fails to perceive and respond to the needs of the widow, orphan, fatherless, and powerless, they sin against God. In chapter 1, YHWH threatens to hide his eyes and ignore their prayers until they "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (1:15-17). Leaders who have caused them to stray are rebels who "do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them" (1:23). Further, "Woe" is proclaimed for those who "decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!" (10:1-2). Israel's senselessness has serious consequences, including not only idolatrous Israel's unheard prayers but a lack of provision and justice for the oppressed.

YHWH also distinguishes His being with the non-being of idols by contrasting order and chaos. YHWH says to Israel, "I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in chaos.' I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right" (45:19). "Chaos" is *tohu*, the same word used to describe the emptiness and worthlessness of idols in Isaiah 41:29 and the world before creation in Genesis 1:2. God, on the other hand, speaks truth/righteousness, *tsedeq*, and evenness/uprightness, *mashar* (45:19). The righteous person who "stops [their] ears and eyes from participating in evil is also described as speaking with this same "sincerity" and uprightness (*mashar*) (Isa 33:15). The order, righteousness (*tsedeq*), sincerity/evenness (*mashar*) of God is set in stark opposition to the formless/vanity/emptiness of idols (*tohu*). The LORD who created the heavens and formed the world "established it; he did not create it a chaos" (45:18). YHWH created *out of tohu*, chaos/formlessness, and brought order and light (Gen 1:2). It seems Israel's idolatry has caused them to descend back into the void of non-being and chaos, rather than to live in the light and order of YHWH.

To emphasize the inability and non-agency of idols, the book of Isaiah laments that they must be carried, whereas YHWH has carried Israel. Idols of Bel and Nebo must be carried on "weary beasts" (46:1) but Israel has been "carried from the womb" (46:3) and

“even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you,” says the LORD, “I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” (46:4). God has distinguished Himself from idols, which are *carried*, and identifies Himself as the one who *carries* Israel. God also identifies Himself like a mother and a woman carrying a child (42:14, 49:15). God also carried and called His Servant: “The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name... ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’” (49:1, 3). Idols are so helpless that their craftsmen even become weary while crafting and must take a break to slake their thirst (44:12). The whole process is man-made.

God makes his own case, though. God distinguishes God’s work from the non-work of idols, which cannot accomplish anything with their limbs of stone: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” the LORD asks of Israel (40:21, 28). God specifically distinguishes God’s work from the non-work of idols, which can’t even stand upright without help (40:20). Only YHWH is the true Creator of the world: “Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles’?... I made the earth, and created man upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host...” (45:9, 12). Idols cannot see or speak, let alone create a world and sustain it. The irony that Israel is serving something their own hands have crafted instead of the God who created them is obvious.

Obviously, God is not the one with the problem, Israel is. God is not sense-less, but Israel’s sins have caused God to hide His face from Israel: “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear” (59:1-2). Just as God called Isaiah to make Israel’s senses confused, God does some numbing of God’s own. The very beginning of Isaiah sees YHWH already displeased with Israel’s sin and inability to worship rightly: “what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats... who requires of you this trampling in my courts?” (1:11-12). And again, “Look! The LORD does not lack the power to save, nor are his ears too dull to hear, but your misdeeds have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you so that you aren’t heard” (59:1-2). God’s senses are metaphorically numbed against Israel whose sin has caused their own sense-lessness. God has control over the matter; Israel is helpless to heal her own senses. YHWH chooses *sense-lessness* as a judgment against *sense-less* Israel.

And yet, God promises restoration and cannot seem to bring Himself to destroying Israel: "Can a mother forget her suckling child?" God asks, unable for His *own sake* as well as Israel's to bring destruction upon them¹⁰.

In the end, YHWH expects that even the blind and deaf will be able to testify to His greatness: "Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble... and let them hear and say, It is true. 'You are my witnesses,' says the LORD, 'And my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He...'" (43:8-10). Israel's infirmity is spiritual rather than physical. YHWH will eventually end their spiritual insensitivity that they may finally hear and see God.

Isaiah seems to make clear that these are *metaphorical* rather than physical infirmities. Clements believes that Israel's loss was indeed physical, but Isaiah seems to make it clear that this is spiritual sickness rather than physical ailment through statements such as in Isaiah's calling in which Israel will become "seeing but not perceiving," able to use their eyes, apparently, yet not perceive the truth of what their eyes see (Isa 6:9). While Clements states that the promises of healing for the deaf, the blind, and the lame are "quite clearly intended literally," I believe the metaphorical weight of the matter is primary because of Isaiah's common reference to Israel's collective physical senses as signals of their righteousness or unrighteousness¹¹.

The worthlessness of idols will also be proven. YHWH looks around and finds no equal worthy of Israel's praise. God demands that a case be made: "[B]ring your proofs," He says, "that we may know that you are gods" (41:21, 23). Yet they can do no good or evil, because they are "[N]othing, and [their] work is nought" (41:24). And yet, God's challenge is met with silence: "But when I look there is no one; among these there is no counselor who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their molten images are empty wind" (41:29). God contrasts His real work with the non-work of the idols: empty wind, nothingness, formlessness (*tohu*).

¹⁰ Brueggemann mentions in a footnote in his article "Unity and Dynamic in Isaiah" that he is indebted to a few female students for pointing out the "radical character" of the metaphor of a suckling child: the child needs to eat, yes, but the mother experiences pain if she goes too long without feeding her baby. "One can hardly imagine a more freighted metaphor to articulate YHWH's share in the pain of alienation with Israel in exile," says Brueggemann, "That is, the mother cannot forget, even if she wants to and wills to" (105).

¹¹ Clements, *HBL*, page 192

Sense-lessness and the Servant

Isaiah is called to make Israel blind and deaf; The Servant is called to open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears (Isa 6:9-10). While the particular identity of “the Servant” in Isaiah is still a matter of scholarly debate, the Servant’s calling to *restore* Israel’s senses is of interest in light of Isaiah’s calling to prophesy to a nation who cannot see or hear him. “My Servant” sometimes appears to refer to Israel (also Cf. 41:8; 42:1; 44:1, 21; 49:3), but other uses throughout the book are less clear (37:35; 42:21; 52:13) or refer to Isaiah himself (20:3). The title “Servant of the LORD,” or “*ebed YHWH*,” is used in Isa 42:19, a distinguished title in the Old Testament given also to Moses (Deut 34:5; Jos 1:1, 13, 15ff), Joshua (Jos 24:29, Jdg 2:8) and David (Psalm 18:1, 36:1). While the Servant in Isaiah is interpreted in various ways, including as Israel, as a Messianic figure, and as a separate character altogether, there are a few clear places where God refers specifically to Israel as “my Servant,” and this is one instance where such is the case.

In connection with idolatry and senses, Isaiah 41 juxtaposes the Servant’s role with the non-ability of idols. As for idols, “Behold, they are a delusion; their works are nothing...” (41:29). For the Servant, however: “Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights,” a statement which directly follows the description of idols at the end of chapter 41 (42:1). Behold the delusion of idols, says God, in contrast to the faithfulness of the Servant. Regardless of the Servant’s identity, His role accomplishes the will of YHWH by restoring the senses of Israel despite the Servant’s own blindness (42:19). Ironically, the blind Servant is called to restore the sight of Israel.

This servant is called, unlike Isaiah in 6:9-10, to *restore* Israel’s lost senses, “To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42:7). In a command to use the senses, YHWH demands, “Hear, you deaf; and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear” (42:18-20). In Hebrew, the command is more personal: *You* see many things but not keeping/watching for/retaining (*tish’or*) them; *your* ears are open, but not hearing (*sh’ma*).

Sense-lessness and the Root of Jesse

In Isaiah 11, a new figure is introduced: “A shoot from the stump of Jesse” (11:1) who has “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (11:2). This man will “not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth..." (11:3-5). This figure stands out in Isaiah's narrative as having a hand in Israel's eventual salvation; Jesse's Root is a messianic figure. Scholars are still at odds about the interpretations of Isaiah's "root of Jesse," referred to in 11:10 (also branch from Jesse's stem; shoot from his roots, 11:1). The traditional interpretation is that this root of Jesse refers to a coming king in the Davidic line rather than a personified representation for the postexilic Judaic community¹². Patristic interpreters also understood the Root of Jesse as a Messianic figure¹³.

The "Righteous Branch of Jesse" in Isaiah 11 also illustrates something for us about sense-lessness; rather, in this case, it is that Jesse's branch has no *need* for physical senses. In 11:3, this messianic figure's "delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor..." Righteousness is apparently the only "sense" needed by Jesse's heir with which to judge. Curiously, the word translated here "delight," (*ri'ach*), means in every lexical context "to smell, perceive odour"¹⁴. The word was translated thus only by the 1611 KJV translators¹⁵. Jewish commentator David Kimhi states that the root of Jesse has "smell *instead of sight or hearing*," regarding 11:3¹⁶. Duhm also pointed out the peculiarity that "it does not make sense for God or the 'fear of God' to smell"¹⁷. Though the translation has not lasted in English, the Hebrew further emphasizes that the Branch of Jesse's *senses* are righteousness and the fear of the LORD. As Israel's senses were so profoundly compromised, the lack of necessity of senses distinguishes the Root of Jesse from sinful Israel and sets him above the material experience and need for ordinary human senses.

The Righteous Branch of Jesse's distinctive *lack* of sensory need in order to judge Israel appears to be a connection to the sense-lessness of Israel. It is as if this messianic figure has *opted out* of the sensory experience in order to judge transparently and justly. It may even be suggested that the lack of need for senses with which to judge is a higher sort of spiritual evolutionary step, as righteousness apparently serves the same function. As

¹² Stromberg, Jacob. "The 'Root of Jesse' in Isaiah 11:10: postexilic Judah, or postexilic Davidic King?" JBL 127 no. 4 (2008): 655-669.

¹³ "The most important theme in Patristic interpretation of Isaiah is messianic announcement" according to Steve McKinion's introduction to the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Isaiah 1-39*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), xx.

¹⁴ Ritchie, Ian D. "The Nose Knows: Bodily Knowing in Isaiah 11.3," JSOT vol. 25 no. 87, 59-73 (2000): 65.

¹⁵ Ritchie goes on to describe a sixth-century passage in which rabbis test "the false messiah Bar Kokhba (meaning 'Son of a star')" with this passage from Isa 11. They put him to death after deciding that "he could not smell a man and judge" (66). He further clarifies that the LXX reads "the spirit of the fear of God shall fill him," though I believe this lines up with the sensory/intuitive nature of righteousness and the fear of the LORD in the root of Jesse.

¹⁶ Ibid. 68.

¹⁷ Ibid. 69.

Jesse's root judges with righteousness, wolves and lambs will dwell together, as will leopards and kids; calves, lions, and fatlings will get along, as well. Cows and bears will feed and nap together and lions will eat straw like oxen; children will play with spiders and snakes and not be harmed (11:6-8). This is creation at peace with itself because it is at peace with God since "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (11:9). The righteous judgment of the Root of Jesse leads also to the reunification of Ephraim and Judah at which point enmity between them will cease and they will escape Assyria together as "when they came up from the land of Egypt" (11:16).

Senselessness and Prophets

False prophets have their sight *removed* from them as a punishment, or else they refuse to see rightly and thus prophecy falsely. YHWH keeps these prophets from perceiving "For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; *he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers.* The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, 'Read this,' they say, 'We cannot, for it is sealed.' And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, 'Read this,' they say, 'We cannot read'" (29:10-12, emphasis added). The vision they are blinded from seeing is the LORD powerfully defending His people against threatening nations (29:6-8).

Here, "the normal prophetic efficacy of vision and teaching is described as obscured, and the people become like drunkards and the blind, unable to perceive and hear what God is telling them or might tell them. Yet it is God himself who authors this darkness, and so the Spirit's power is made to reveal itself in its own inefficacy"¹⁸. God's authored darkness is manifested in one way in the prophets' inability to perceive the Spirit faithfully.

The people of Israel also do not want the prophets to see rightly and speak truth; they would rather live comfortably without being bothered by God. This further reinforces the idea that Israel was already sense-less when Isaiah is called to prophesy so that they might remain confused. The prophet is told to go write his prophecies in a book since Israel "are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the LORD; who say to the seers, 'See now'; and to the prophets, 'Prophecy not to us what is right...Let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel'" (30:9-11). Aside from God, idolatrous *Israel* is commanding the prophets not to see.

¹⁸ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 38.

Prophetic unfaithfulness is representative of Israel's hardened state: "The sense that opposing the Spirit of God carries as one of its effective aspects a divine hardening, or a positive dislocation of expected pneumatic assistance, is a common feature of these kinds of texts"¹⁹. Isaiah in particular is Radner's example of prophetic material in which is included Israel's cycle of idolatry, divine judgment, lament, and restoration. "Pneumatic absence" typifies God's hardened state against *Israel*, not simply Israel's stubbornness against God²⁰.

A SECOND CONSEQUENCE OF IDOLATRY: DIVISION

A Narrative History from 1 Kings

1 Kings provides the context for the original division of Israel and Judah. At the end of Solomon's reign, God finally decides Solomon's kingship was so illegitimate²¹ and his leadership so led Israel astray that the nation would have to suffer the consequences.

Jeroboam is originally found "able" by King Solomon and given authority over the labor force of Israel (1 Kings 11:28). The prophet Ahi'jah finds him on the road out of Jerusalem and tears a garment into twelve pieces (1 Kings 11:30), announcing to Jeroboam that God will "tear the kingdom from Solomon's hands and give ten tribes to you" (1 Kings 11:31). God hands over ten tribes of Israel to Jeroboam, vowing to punish the people for Solomon's wrongdoing (1 Kings 11:39).

This division is *specifically* due to Solomon's idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-11). YHWH brought about the original division of the nation into two parts, symbolized by the torn garment (11:29-38). The division was a consequence of the sins of Solomon, and thus Israel, since the whole community appears to be accountable for the sins of their leader. However, it is key that the division was never supposed to last forever: "I will humble David's descendants by means of all this, *though not forever*," proclaims the LORD (11:39, emphasis added). God puts the mantle of authority on Jeroboam (1 Ki 11:31), and Rehoboam inherits kingship from his father, Solomon (1 Ki 11:43). Neither Jeroboam's nor Rehoboam's leadership goes well.

Rehoboam loses control of his part of the kingdom because he listens to the young advisors and threatens to make the people's workload even harsher than did his father. Rehoboam flees (12:18). Jeroboam is crowned the sole king "over all Israel" (12:20).

¹⁹ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 38.

²⁰ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 38.

²¹ Cf. 1 Kings 1-9, describing Solomon's kingship as everything a King should *not* be and nothing an Israelite King *should* be according to 2 Samuel 8 and Deuteronomy 17.

Then Jeroboam sees that “if these people continue to sacrifice at the LORD’s temple in Jerusalem, they will again become loyal to their master Rehoboam, Judah’s king, and they will kill me so they can return to Judah’s king Rehoboam” (12:27). He makes two golden calves and tells the people, “Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out from the land of Egypt,” which is the same proclamation Aaron makes to Israel in Exodus 32 after he has fashioned the golden calf in Moses’ absence (12:28, Exodus 32:4). He argues that it is so far to go all the way to Jerusalem as if it is a matter of convenience that Israel should worship the two golden calves rather than YHWH. Moses, Aaron, and Israel were commanded back in Exodus, following the original golden calf debacle, “You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Ashe’rim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land... You shall make for yourselves no molten gods.” (Exodus 34:13-15, 17). That Jeroboam makes *golden calves*, of all things, signifies that he has repeated this famous incident.

As if to emphasize the illegitimacy of Jeroboam’s new cult, the text of 1 Kings says he appointed priests “but none of them were Levites,” (12:31) who were the genuine priests in Israel and during the incident with the golden calf were the only ones to present themselves when Moses asks for those “who are on the LORD’s side” (Ex 32: 26). Jeroboam then decided on a date of celebration “—in the month he had devised of his own heart” (12:33), which was “just like the celebration in Judah,” (12:32) and also similar to Israel’s feast for the golden calf in Exodus (Ex 32:5-6). Then he “appointed a festival for the people of Israel, and he went up to the altar to offer incense” (12:33). It seems Jeroboam superficially filled the seat of YHWH with his golden calves, and he expected everyone to worship them with him whenever he so decided (12:33). He shifted ritual worship from untamable, holy YHWH to his hand-crafted calves. The sheer childishness of his lust for power and attempts to reduce worship to such controllable means in order to remain king is absurd.

Division in Isaiah

Division is not looked at positively in Isaiah, but mourned. Isaiah expects that in the age to come when YHWH puts everything back in its place, reunification of Ephraim (at this point, a remnant, considering the political undoing) and Judah will take place as part of the promise of restoration (11:13-16). Since division is a major consequence of Israel’s idolatry, a significant piece of their restoration must include unification.

Part of the problem of sorting through Isaiah’s use of the divided nations, of course, is that *Israel* can mean either Israel only or Israel *and* Judah, and *House of Israel* or *Jacob* can also mean one or both nations. There are various semantic usages of Israel, Jacob-Israel,

and Israel and Judah throughout the book of Isaiah. For example, God is called “the Mighty One of Israel” in 1:24, then “the Mighty one of Jacob” in 49:26. The people are referred to as “the house of Jacob” throughout chapter 2 and chapters 58-65. Isaiah says in chapter 31 that God will protect “Jerusalem” and demands, “Turn to him from whom you have deeply revolted, O people of Israel” (31:5-6).

While chapter 7 is the first context within Isaiah in which it is necessary to distinguish between the political/geographical cohorts of Israel and Judah, the North and South, Kratz references Rost, who theorized that Isaiah termed the North “Israel” until the Syro-Ephraimite war only afterwards including Judah in the larger term “Israel.” Hogenhaven took Rost’s hypothesis further to clarify that the “semantic innovation” did not take place at the war text, but in 722BC at the downfall of the nation of Israel²². According to Kratz, these observations all line up with his belief that regardless of which term Isaiah uses in a given context to refer to the entire nation of Israel (be that Israel/Judah, or Judah/remnant), Isaiah “interprets the fate of both kingdoms as the history of one and the same people of God”²³. He claims further that the geographical and political distinction between Israel and Judah can be traced through each textual unit of Isaiah. My thesis is that Isaiah is fundamentally concerned with the national unity of Israel and Judah, and I believe that Isaiah’s ambiguous usage of terms for the nation of Israel/Judah/House of David does help to illustrate that Isaiah is interested not in a sharp distinction between the nations of Israel and Judah but in their eventual restoration.

Isaiah also ties the nations together with a common history and a common future, trailing out his prophetic expectation that there will again be unity. Chapter 7 (the war) is a blip in the history of the [one] nation – not the undoing of the collective history of the people of God. Hence the text moves along in such a way that Isaiah’s return to pre-division definitive moments in Israel’s collective history serve as the right contrivance of the nation’s future. Chapter 11 calls particular attention to Israel’s past by promising a similar deliverance as from out of Egypt (11:16). Remembering the old story makes space for Israel to imagine the new story that YHWH is making in their midst²⁴.

Isaiah’s main portion about division is chapter 7, the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. “The fact of Jerusalem’s desolation in 587 casts its shadow across the entire book of Isaiah as truly and as unmistakably as the shadow of the cross stretches across the three Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament”²⁵. Though Israel is not condemned in Isaiah for *causing*

²² Ibid. 123.

²³ Ibid. 123.

²⁴ Brueggemann, “Unity and Dynamic in Israel”.

²⁵ Clements, “Who is Blind but my Servant?” 153.

division through their idolatry, the connection between the original split into two nations from 1 Kings (due to Solomon's *idolatry*) and the undoing of the Northern Kingdom of Israel must be taken into account. The "shadow" of Israel's downfall, as Clements refers to it above, affects the way Isaiah should be read on the subject of division. Judah and Israel's practice of idolatry throughout the Former Prophets is punished by exile (see 2 Kings 25). The shadow of exile hangs over the Latter Prophets as Israel and Judah are whittled down (Isa 6:11-13).

SENSE-LESSNESS AND DIVISION

Idol worship is specifically forbidden to Israel in the first two of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me," and "you shall not make for yourselves a graven image" (Ex 20:3-4). Isaiah refers to "graven images" as well, not just "idol" or "image" (44:15, 48:5). The First Commandment is also clearly referenced: "I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images" (Isa 42:8). The prophets, and Isaiah in particular, make the claim that a "firm connection exists between the condition of division and the experience of pneumatic deprivation"²⁶. Which is to say their disunity and their senselessness are inherently connected and symptomatic of each other.

A discussion of idolatry in connection with Israel's worship is necessary and inevitable. G.K. Beale prefaces his work on worshippers becoming like that which they worship by explaining that, "Isaiah 6:9-13 was about idolatry, particularly a judgment on Israelite idol worshippers in contrast with Isaiah's faithfulness," thus the main thesis of his book is, "*what you revere you resemble, either for ruin or for restoration*"²⁷. Either people become more like the idols they serve or more like the true God they worship²⁸, and worship has consequences on well-being, depending on Whom or what is being worshipped.

Connecting this point to the crux of my own thesis, people become *dulled* and *sense-less* like the idols they serve or become more *whole* and *righteous/true* like God. Beale argues that "the purpose of the identical description" of humans to the idols they worship, "is to indicate mockingly that the worshipper, rather than experiencing an expected life-giving blessing, has received a curse by becoming as spiritually inanimate, empty, rebellious, or shameful as the idol is depicted to be"²⁹. He uses the specific example, as I have, of people described as having eyes that cannot see or ears that cannot hear just

²⁶ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 38.

²⁷ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 11.

²⁸ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 21.

like the idols³⁰. Beale specifically names idolatry as the sin that precipitated Isaiah's call to confuse Israel's senses. Presumably, then, when Israel returns to the LORD and finally forsakes their no-gods/idols, their senses will also be restored. The time of Israel's restoration, says Ephraim Radner, ""is precisely the time when God will choose to overturn the present shape of the people, to restore to the nation a single and coherent worship"³¹. The restoration of Israel's senses plays a major part in the processes of Israel's reunification and reeducation in worshipping YHWH.

REUNIFICATION AND WORSHIP

Returning to the LORD means finally learning to worship YHWH righteously, since worship is the right response to God's work among them (Cf. Isa 12; Isa 65:17-25). Isaiah expects Israel's reunification along with their return to YHWH, which includes rejoicing in the work of God on their behalf. First, however, Israel will experience anguish in exile, which will also play a part in leading them to restoration. The expectation that God would heal them was a central value of Israelite identity. They relied on *The Living God* to provide for them³².

The role of exile in future reunification

Isaiah expects Israel to be restored, but first, they must deal with the pain of exile. Israel must experience judgment before they realize the depth of their idolatry and return to YHWH. Walter Brueggemann claims the prophet Isaiah's social criticism also functions as prophetic judgment, having made a "cold intellectual assessment" of the social and spiritual norms Israel has contrived for herself³³. Thus the prophet serves not so much as a harbinger of the judgment of YHWH but a dissenting voice who points out the social judgment *already present* within the community due to their falsely contrived constructs. Israel reacts against reality when the community collectively rebels against God.

Brueggemann holds that Israel's sin which brought upon them the judgment of YHWH early on in Isaiah is only allayed by walking *through* the valley of grief and suffering into the new hope promised in the middle of the book, which is supplemented and taken further into a new social order even later on³⁴. The middle of Isaiah is a theological response of hopeful promise to the problem of Israel's sin and their

³⁰ Ibid. 21.

³¹ Radner, Ephraim, *The End of the Church*, 38.

³² Ibid. 199.

³³ Brueggemann, "UDI," 93.

³⁴ Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic in Israel"

impending judgment, while the optimistic end of Isaiah subverts³⁵ the current [false] social order. The time lapse between chapters 39 and 40 serves as the placeholder for Israel's deepest pain: the silence of YHWH, and the grief of exile³⁶.

The contrived false reality Israel set up for themselves, that is, the participation in idolatry, must be done away with for true reality to make its way into their collective experience. Brueggemann argues that Israel must learn to own their sufferings, but I believe it must be taken a step further: pain became the only sensation they were still capable of feeling, thus suffering is the only option for awakening them from their idolatrous stupor. Only in their pain does Israel finally cry out, "Where is the LORD?"³⁷.

Israel's judgment and the wrath of God must be put in context with God's lament. Pain seems to be the only message loud enough to reach Israel's lame, sense-less bodies; pain is the only sensation they are still capable of feeling, having lost their sight, hearing, taste, and smell to the idols they have given themselves over to instead of YHWH. God's lament over Israel's unfaithfulness is allegorized as marital unfaithfulness (Isa 1:21; Hosea 2). Further, Heschel identifies God's *weariness* as "an important theological category" in Isaiah's prophecy because the prophet himself participates in God's pathos *and* feels Israel's suffering: "The wrath of God is a lamentation. All prophecy is one great exclamation; God is not indifferent to evil!"³⁸. In this way the prophet binds YHWH and Israel – he has the words and, in some sense, the knowledge of God yet he remains part of the community longing for the end of grief and suffering.

We know from Israel's history that YHWH *hears* Israel in their distress and works for their salvation. The book of Judges, for example, shows the cycle of Israel's sin, God's judgment, Israel's cries of suffering, and God's response³⁹. When God *hears* and remembers, God is poised to act on someone's behalf. The refusal of YHWH to even *hear* Israel is indicative of God's refusal to relent. The only remedy for Israel's pain over which they have any measure of control is who (or what) they worship. There will be a worshipping remnant not in the sense that a piece has been broken off of Israel and God's favor has followed it, but that the whole community has been whittled down (Isa 6:13) to something essential and concentrated. Once the chaff has been cleaned out, perhaps essential Israel can finally fulfill her call as the people of YHWH to bless the

³⁵ Ibid. 102.

³⁶ Ibid. 95.

³⁷ Isa 63:11 "Where is he who brought them up out of the sea...?"; Jer 2:6,8 "They did not say 'Where is the LORD who brought us up out of Egypt...?'"

³⁸ Heschel, *TP*, 284.

³⁹ Spina. "The Story of Israel." Nienhuis, David and Wall, Robert W., eds. *The Compact Guide to the Christian Scriptures*. Forthcoming from Baker Academic, 2014.

whole earth by being YHWH's representatives. This is holiness: to be set apart, called aside, remade and renamed for a particular purpose. Israel was set apart by God to be *His* people only and to serve as evidence of God's work among humanity (e.g. Gen 12:3).

Remembering Israel's Unified Past

Isaiah uses a present evocation of the past as a prophetic event: "Do as you have done, LORD," the people ask – renew your work for us now⁴⁰. Throughout Isaiah there are key moments Isaiah mentions from Israel's history that emphasize their past – even before they were made into a people. Reimagining the old story of God's work among God's people creates space for Israel to imagine their future. These moments are definitive past moments, and Israel is promised that the future will *be like* the past when they had the abundant provision of God. Brueggemann says "the old story was re-embraced" once Israel realized the inadequacy of their contrived story (idolatry) as Isaiah "uses the old memory to re-read the present and discern power for new life"⁴¹. Throughout Isaiah, events of Israel's unified past are remembered as God reminds them of His work on their behalf and also as Israel entreats God to come and save them:

4:5-6 promises provision for Israel like the cloud by day and fire by night during Israel's years in the desert.

11:16 promises a highway through Assyria as there was through Egypt when Israel was delivered by God from slavery and sent into the desert.

51:1-2 reminds Israel that Abraham was the rock from whom Israel was hewn, who "was one but [YHWH] made him many."

51:3 says that the wilderness will become lush like the Garden of Eden

54:9 remembers the days of Noah when God promised not to remain angry and punishing forever.

63:11-14 God remembers Moses and the Exodus; God's remembrance means God is poised to act⁴².

63:15-19 God is entreated to remember Israel's past and provide again

66:20-21 all the people will worship together "*just as the Israelites* bring their cereal offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD." It is even promised that God "will take for priests and for Levites" some who are outsiders.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hab 3:1; Isa 63.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, "UDI," 97.

⁴² For example, when God "remembers" Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:19 and gives her a son.

In Isa 63:11-14 the people of Israel ask, "Where is he who brought them up from the sea along with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in their midst his holy spirit, who made his glorious arm march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make himself a name for all time, who led them through the deeps so that they did not stumble... as a horse in a desert, like a beast descending the plain? The spirit of the LORD gave them rest; thus did you shepherd your people to win for yourself a glorious name..." Israel finally asked the right question. Indicted by Jeremiah in 2:6 and 2:8 for *not* asking "Where is the LORD...?" at last they come to their senses and wonder what YHWH has been up to, recalling his action on their behalf in the past and entreating his help in their present, for the sake of their future.

The unity of Israel and Judah can be drawn back to the Exodus: the definitive moment of Israel's history. The shared history of Israel and Judah binds them together and makes space for imagining a shared future, as well.

Rather than remaining divided by their enemies and turning on each other (ch 9), Judah and Israel unite against these enemies and plunder them together. They are delivered as one, "just as... on the day they went up from the land of Egypt" (11:15). The fact that unity and an end to enmity and strife is/are part of the promise for the future has implications about the fractured state of Israel and Judah: it is not good for Judah to be alone. A piece of the restoration to come includes, according to Isaiah, the gathering of the remnants of Israel and Judah together into one unified people of God once more.

Isaiah's Expectation of Reunification

Isaiah understands both Israel and Judah as God's people, not only Judah:

*"In that day my LORD will apply his hand again to **redeeming the other part of His people** from Assyria –as also from Egypt, Pathros, Nubia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and the coastlands. He will hold up a signal to the nations and assemble **the banished of Israel**, and gather **the dispersed of Judah** from the four corners of the earth. Then **Ephraim's** envy shall cease and **Judah's** harassment shall end; **Ephraim** shall not envy **Judah**, and **Judah** shall not harass **Ephraim**. They shall pounce on the back of Philistia to the west, and together plunder the peoples of the east; Edom and Moab shall be subject to them and the children of Ammon shall obey them."*

Isaiah 11 is a passage about reunification. It promises the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (11:1) who will gather the dispersed of God's people from the corners of the earth and reunite them (11:12), cause envy and rivalry to cease (11:13), and create an escape highway out of the land of Assyria where they have been exiled, just as out of the land

of Egypt at the Exodus (11:16). The latter is especially poignant, considering the Exodus is *the* defining moment in the history of collective Israel. It was the definitive act of YHWH on their behalf, and became part of the name by which they called God⁴³: “The LORD who brought us up out from the land of Egypt, from the land of slavery...”⁴⁴. With the exception of references to bringing Israel up out of the *North* just as it was at the *Exodus*, this designation for YHWH, in which God is defined by acts on behalf of Israel, is notably missing from Isaiah. In the original context of division in 1 Kings, Jeroboam even mocks the title of YHWH as the king, fearful that he will no longer be a king if Israel and Judah begin to worship YHWH again together in Jerusalem, makes his two golden calves and proclaims, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” just as Aaron proclaimed to the Israelites in Exodus (1 Ki 12:28; Ex 32:8).

Isaiah 11 also details Israel’s future deliverance from exile: God will make a highway out from that place as from Egypt, delivering them in a similar fashion and thus redefining Israel’s historic national moment. Jeremiah similarly redefines Israel’s definitive moment. No longer the Exodus from Egypt but their deliverance from the hands of their Northern enemies will serve as the principle act of YHWH on behalf of Israel. Jeremiah redefines, in a sense, God’s *name*, from “God who brought us up out from Egypt” to “As the LORD lives who brought us and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them” (Jeremiah 23:8). Further, in Isaiah 19, Assyria, Egypt, and Israel are said to be at peace (19:16-24).

God identifies Himself to Israel based on acts He has done on their behalf. Serving idols rather than the LORD also means to forget everything God has done Isa 65:11; Deut 6:12, 8:11, 8:14, 19). Remembering the work of God among them and worshipping God accordingly is part of the remedy for Israel’s forgetfulness and sin. Directly following the future promises of deliverance and reunification from chapter 11, the entirety of chapter 12 is a song of praise thanking God for comfort and salvation. Isaiah points out the right response to salvation: worship giving credit where credit is due.

⁴³ Before the Exodus, God was known as “the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans...” (Gen 15:7). After the Exodus, God identifies Himself to Israel as “The LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God” (Lev 11:45). Israel is entreated by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:12 not to “forget the LORD who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”.

⁴⁴ Ex 13:3,14, Deut 8:14, Jdg 6:8

Reunification means learning to worship rightly

Since idolatry is *wrong* worship, Israel must learn *right* worship. In chapter 12, we see the correct response to the salvation and unity of the end of chapter 11. “Behold, God is my salvation,” Israel will proclaim, “I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” (12:2). Also, “Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitants of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (12:6). God is known as *The Holy One of Israel*, not just as God or YHWH. God has bound Godself to Israel. Idolatry is an identity issue because Israel *ceases to be Israel* when they are not worshipping the God who formed, upheld, delivered, and continues to provide for them.

On the other hand, “Woe to those who hide deep from the LORD their counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’ (29:15-16a). Israel’s idols are foreign to them – “gods neither you nor your fathers have known” (Deut 13:6, 28:36, 64; Jer 16:13). Yet, the LORD knows, sees, hears, and understands Israel. While YHWH’s ears are stopped and eyes are shut to Israel’s idolatrous and falsely pious prayers (1:15-17), Israel will be restored “If [they] are willing and obedient” (1:19) and they will become “the city of righteousness, the faithful city” (1:26). When all is said and done, “From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship” the LORD (66:23). Isaiah is bookended by these promises for Israel’s blessing in an obedient and worshipful future. Even all Israel’s former troubles will be hid from the eyes of God (65:16).

CONCLUSION

Israel’s sense-lessness is a judgment in itself. It is the consequence of their sin, and it is a sin that they have so stubbornly refused to hear God’s voice and to care for the vulnerable among them (1:21-23). Their refusal has become inability; their idolatry has made them like their idols (Isa 6:9-10; Daniel 5:23; Hab 2:18-19). The redemption of Israel’s senses in Isaiah is portrayed as Israel’s metaphorical features (eyes, ears, hearts) finally fulfilling their proper purpose before God (seeing, hearing, understanding), which are representative of the deeper spiritual reality that they at last will find their proper function as the people of God by acknowledging God rightly and caring for the needs of the world. Their senses must be restored so that they might finally see, hear, perceive, and respond to the voice of YHWH and care for the helpless among them. Israel’s right knowledge of God is prerequisite for their sensory restoration.

Righteousness and unity are also the proper functions of a community that has been formed, provided for, and set aside by YHWH. Israel's restored senses as a sign in Isaiah of their proper posture before their God. Without righteousness, Israel cannot see, hear, or understand the work of God in their midst and in the world.

The senselessness theme is a trope through which the prophet communicates about Israel's sin and YHWH's response, which includes both judgment and restoration to their destined role as an embodied example of God's fierce and perfect love. Isaiah's call narrative in chapter 6 includes his fearful question, "how long, O Lord?" (6:11) And God's answer ends with Israel being burned down to a holy stump – a seed of righteousness (6:13). Perhaps the Root of Jesse can grow the wild vine of Israel (5:2) back into a choice vine that yields good fruit from the "vineyard of the LORD," the house of Israel (5:7).

In That Day...

"In that day, " Israel will be healed and restored. In ninety-two total uses of the phrase in the NASB, forty are from Isaiah: 2:11, 17, 20; 3:18; 4:1, 2; 5:30; 7:18, 20, 21, 23; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 12:4; 17:4, 7, 9; 19:16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24; 20:6, 22:8, 12, 20, 25; 23:15; 24:21; 25:9; 26:1; 27:1, 2, 12, 13; 28:5; 31:7; 52:6.

In that day, Israel will be restored, specifically their senses. When Israel is healed, "Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will hear. The mind of the rash will have good judgment, and the tongue of the stammerers will speak readily and distinctly" (32:3) but the ungodly choose "To leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink" (32:6). The nation will regain senses, thawing out from their numbness to God's voice and becoming the nation they are meant to be. At last, idolatry will cease: "Turn to him from whom you have deeply revolted, O people of Israel. For in that day every one shall cast away his idols of silver and his idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you" (31:7).

Also, "In that day [people] will *regard* their Maker, and their *eyes* will *look* to the Holy One of Israel; they will not have *regard* for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not *look* to what their own fingers have made..." unlike in 2:8 when they "bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made" (17:7-8a). God will provide abundant produce and lush greenery in the desert, "that [people] may *see* and *know*, may *consider* and *understand* together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it" (41:19-20). Their faculties restored, Israel can finally enjoy the abundant provision of YHWH.

There will be a day of vengeance (34:8) against the nations and their “no-kingdoms” (34:12) shall be overgrown and overrun by animals (34:13-35:2). This will lead to the salvation of the people of God, when “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (35:3-6). Also in that day, “The deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see” (29:18).

YHWH says He will “lead the blind in a way that they know not, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground...” (42:16). And yet, for those who continue in their idolatry, “They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in graven images, who say to molten images, ‘You are our gods’” (42:17). For those who choose the LORD, abundance and healing awaits; for those who still cannot help themselves and cling to their idols, judgment.

We might liken the state of the Church, divided as it is, to the state of idolatrous Israel, who became spiritually blinded, deafened, and deadened to the voice of YHWH. Just as Israel became sense-less, divided, and lost when they chose to serve idols their own hands had made, worshipping sense-less, worthless, man-made idols renders us sense-less, worthless, and tragically much less than we were made by God to be. The Church feels similar consequences as Israel: rampant division and blindness/deafness to the voice and activity of God.

Israel’s sense-lessness is a symptom of deeper problems, including, as I have shown, idolatry and disunity. Ephraim Radner claims texts such as Isaiah “are in general set within larger discussions that treat Israel’s punishment and restoration. Thus, the themes of pneumatic antagonisms or abandonment and communal blindness to God’s Word are explicitly tied, through contrast, to the specific elements of Israel’s sinful condition”⁴⁵. That is to say, Israel’s blindness is a symptom of the larger, communal sins of division and idolatry, and the loss of the guidance of the Spirit is further evidence that Israel has gone astray.

Ephraim Radner deals with the state of the Church and ties it inseparably to the experience of Israel, particularly to God’s judgment upon Israel of what Radner calls “pneumatic deprivation,” or the lack of guidance from the Holy Spirit. He uses Isaiah specifically as his example of this Spirit-deprival. “To the degree that pneumatic deprivation in the midst of division forms a very part of the Spirit’s ordering toward life, that Israel’s abandonment is providential even within the scope of salvation, the

⁴⁵ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 38.

dullness of impenitence is stamped as an act of God..." as in Isaiah's call in chapter 6⁴⁶. This claim is essentially that Israel's dullness is both a function of their own sin *and* an act of God for their very salvation. Isaiah anticipates Israel's salvation as a *restoration* of their senses and therefore pneumatic activity among them.

Alluding to both Isaiah and Jeremiah, Radner identifies the dullness of the church with the insensibility of Israel: "Indeed the most manifest mark of the divided church appears to be its own insensibility to the symptoms of its condition. No stench reaches its nostrils; no shame cracks its heart. 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, "peace, peace," when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush"⁴⁷. Radner also points out that Israel's penitence for deep division and sinfulness "will require the recognition of [their senses'] stunted usefulness"⁴⁸. Israel's stunted senses must be healed for true restoration to take place.

Worth quoting at length, a piece from Radner's conclusion to *The End of the Church* looks at the importance of how Israel's restored sensory faculties aimed at really feeling, seeing, hearing, and understanding demonstrate a re-creation by YHWH. God does this restorative action on Israel's behalf. Radner directly connects the experience of Israel to the current state of the Church:

"Bodies, especially bodies laid out with the pallor of insensibility, bodies of the dead, await not medical specialists, but Creators. Their quieted subjugation within the realm of benumbed feeling receives the facets of their history as a temporally unmeasured openness to the Coming of God. Hearing awaits the forming and the offer of its primordial noise. So too, one would imagine, must rest the complement of corporeal receptors that engage the Church's form in its enforced divesture of apprehension⁴⁹.

Israel's restored sensory experience will enable them, according to Radner, to be remade as a whole and restored people. This unity will not be achieved by chopping off pieces of the community into new denominations, each "convicted" of their own moral

⁴⁶ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 283.

⁴⁷ Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 277. Also Jeremiah 6:14ff.

⁴⁸ Radner, *The End of The Church*, 56.

⁴⁹ Radner, *The End of the Church*, 56.

and biblical standards, but by healing such brokenness and coming to the realization that the *whole* church is the community of God⁵⁰.

Perhaps in *this* day, the Church might learn to work together. In *this* day, may we not repeat the sins of Israel and bear the burden and pain of judgment for having forgotten the LORD and served worthlessness instead. God has given God's people, "As a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isa 42:6-7a). May we stay attuned to the voice of God and the needs of the helpless among us: prisoners, orphans, widows, and strangers as well as those who are lonely, hurting, broken, and burned out, as so many seem to be. In this day, may our eyes be opened, our ears unstopped, and our hearts made to understand God and the world around us.

⁵⁰ Or, as Dr. David Nienhuis has said, the differences are for bar fights, not exactly Church Council material: "You're *supposed* to argue that stuff over pints, not separate over them."

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