The Motif of Deafness and Blindness in Isaiah 6:9-10: A Contextual, Literary, and Theological Analysis

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Isa 6:9-10 is examined in its local (Isaiah 6) and broader (Isaiah 1-12) contexts, as well as in relation to the rest of the book and (briefly) extra-Isaianic passages of Scripture. Following a literary analysis in form, redactional, and rhetorical-critical terms, theological argumentation is developed consistent with the thesis of the paper. It is argued that the motif of deafness and blindness is a metaphor for a spiritual condition that (1) is brought on by the people themselves, (2) comprises a judgment from God, and (3) will ultimately be rectified by God himself "in that day" of salvation.

Key Words: blindness, deafness, judgment, sin, hardening

The book of Isaiah is universally recognized as providing a major contribution to the OT prophetic corpus. Nevertheless, it has not been a book without controversial interpretive questions. The hermeneutical issues stem from its unusual literary structure and the contrasting message of its contents. In particular the sharp change in tone and prophetic perspective (judgmental to salvific) between the first 39 chapters and the rest of the book has not gone unnoticed.

Prior to the modern historical-critical approach adopted by Isaianic scholarship today, Isaiah the son of Amos (1:1), an 8th-century bc prophet, was presumed to have been the author of the whole book. The prophet's perspective was understood to be both contemporary and future. And so, on the one hand we observe impending judgment upon a disobedient people and, on the other, a forward-looking hope to a great work of salvation ("in that day"), when Yahweh's presence would be radically experienced. Loosely, Isaiah 1-39 corresponded to the former; 40-66 to the latter. Few today would retain such an understanding of the book. ¶

As early as the mid-17th century some, for example the Dutch philosopher B. Spinoza (1632-77), were suggesting that chaps. 40ff. were derived from a 6th-century bc source. A century later, critical scholarship had developed to the point where Bernhard Duhm's famous commentary of 1892, attributing chaps. 1-39 to the preexilic prophet of Jerusalem, chaps. 40-55 to the era of the Ba...