

# AUGUST TURAK

August Turak wrote this paper while studying theology at St. John's University. Lost in the assignment on a cold, dark, Minnesota night, he later worried that his professor would not like it. Not only did he like it, he asked him to publish it. Turak's transformational message applies to individuals and organizations as well as to religious and secular people. A transformation of being can be found in something as lofty as the Buddha's Enlightenment or as down to earth as Mr. Scrooge spreading Christmas cheer. Here Turak uses the Book of Isaiah and the poetry of T.S. Eliot to examine our universal longing to be transformed from selfish to selfless people from a Judaeo Christian perspective.

## Isaiah and The Darkness of God

'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices  
of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.  
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!' (Isa 6: 3-4)

Scholars consider Isaiah 1-39 a "difficult" text for study. Gowan starts his section on Isaiah with the comment "Isaiah is the most complex of the prophetic books..."<sup>1</sup>. Brueggemann, in his commentary Isaiah 1-39, often throws up his hands at the text and quotes Kaiser explicitly: "We would be grateful to him [Isaiah] for expressing himself less cryptically."<sup>2</sup>

Though many a theologian has struggled with Isaiah's words, I hope to illustrate through my own reading that Isaiah had no choice and/or no inclination to be less "cryptic". If this text is the inspired Word of God, then in some real sense we should not even *desire* Isaiah to be less cryptic. If we fail to abide in the ambiguity of the text, we trade our birthright of a genuinely mediated experience of God for the mess of pottage of an infinitely less rich, though more comfortable, intellectual sense that we have "grasped" the text. It is important to entertain and linger in the ambiguity engendered. For one of the most useful theological concepts is the idea that in some metaphorically ambiguous sense *it is in God's nature to be ambiguous*. Therefore, our all-too-human desire to be rid of mystery and ambiguity inevitably leads us to massive Tower of Babel efforts to "pin God down".

This is not to deride the intellect. It is only a reminder that at some point we must let go and *sense* God through the medium of poetry, and Isaiah is as just such an existential poet. He is not a philosopher or a theologian, and he is not even a poet. He is a *prophet*, with all the ambiguity with which that term is freighted. In some strange way, the poetry of Isaiah is nothing more than a dream or a mood put to words—a mood that makes one's hair stand on end because it is True. The book of Isaiah is God revealed to us as *terrible et fascinans*. In other words, if Isaiah were less cryptic he would be doing violence to the truth of what is revealed, and if he were more cryptic he would not have riveted so many human beings for the last 3,000 years.

As a result, the obscure way in which Isaiah speaks is a sign of just how close he is coming to the Truth about God and our relation to him. Isaiah is cryptic not only because he is speaking of God's cryptic nature, but also because the experience of chapter 6 has left Isaiah a mystery to himself, and as a result we can read the rest of the first 39 chapters as nothing more—and absolutely nothing less—than Isaiah urgently trying to unpack the experience of chapter 6.

Isaiah is urgent first because such an experience inevitably leads to an urgent need to process it, and second because the experience has such a direct bearing on his own beloved people, and third because he is under the heavy mandate of God himself to speak out. Here we have a man that is under the unbearable weight of trying to speak the ineffable in a moment of unbelievable personal and collective crisis, and all we wish is that he would be a bit easier on us by being clearer! Can we instead stay awake and pray with him awhile?

The call of Isaiah in chapter 6 is the key to understanding Isaiah 1-39. This call language is not merely some kind of stylized speech. It arises from an actual encounter with God. In fact, I would contend that this is about as close to meeting God face to face that a human can come, and as a result the wisdom of both the previous and ensuing chapters becomes the water both he and we draw out with joy from the wells of salvation. (Isa 12:3)

Isaiah's call in chapter 6 is an overture for the whole book, with the transformative theme of death, rebirth, and thanksgiving recapitulated in Isaiah himself. First is the particularity of God's crashing movement into space and time described as holiness: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isa 6:3)

Next is Isaiah's response to holiness with fear and trembling. In a truly apophatic sense, Isaiah first experiences the presence of God negatively, in terms of his own unworthiness, sin, and utterly contingent nature. This is the death experience of the Dark Night we read so much about. "Woe is me! I am lost..." (Isa 6:5)

However, what has been mistaken for death is in actual fact purification, expressed through the live coal touching his lips. "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." (Isa 6:7)

With the forgiveness of sin through grace comes rebirth, and the concomitant task not only to explain this unbelievable gift to others, but also to explain it to oneself. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' " (Isa 6:8)

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Finally, the inevitable reaction to a genuine encounter with God, no matter how dark and terrible in its initial stages, is one of absolute, profound gratitude. This gratitude defies common sense because one is grateful even for the darkness itself.... And while we must move forward to chapter 12 for its articulation, no violence is done to the sense of the text by calling it to mind here.

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me...Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

(Isa 12:1-2)

### THREE TRAJECTORIES

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Flowing out of Isaiah's call then are three trajectories. The first is Isaiah trying to process and articulate to *himself* what he *knows but cannot say*. Second is the way which he applies the particularity of his experience to Israel and its people. Third is the way in which he tries to speak about the transcendent aspects of what he experienced—its universal and eschatological significance.

As we've already treated the first trajectory, we'll begin with the implications for Israel and the world. It is significant that Isaiah's call takes place in the temple. The temple is the nexus point that joins God in his immanent nature with God in his transcendent nature. When Isaiah leaves the temple to take up God's call, he seems to be aware of the fact that he has something to say both about God in history and God at the end of time. When God reveals himself, he is saying something about history and something about a time when there will be no history. It cannot be otherwise. But since Isaiah experiences God immanent and God transcendent in one experience, it is not surprising that he mixes and mingles the historical and eternal in his descriptions of the darkness to come and the ultimate victory and restoration through the Davidic Covenant.

At times he seems to be referring to the current historical plight of Judah; how it will be "cut down" and how it will be restored, and at other times he is referring to an eschatological Zion where: "The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox." (Isa 11:7)

The way Isaiah effortlessly moves between the poles of history and eschatology are jarring: One second we think he is talking of a future Israel in time, and at the very next we feel he is speaking eternally. It is at these times we might echo Kaiser and wish he could be clearer. But I don't. Whether or not Isaiah had it completely worked out for *himself*, it is clear that God is calling us to strain our human faculties to the utmost in the hope of a better intuition of the way all things actually are in God.

The key point to remember is that whether Isaiah is speaking of his own experience, the case of Israel, or when he is speaking about the end of the world, the coming of God is always presaged by dread and Kierkegaard's "fear and trembling and the sickness unto death." In some ambiguous way, it is in the nature of God to come in darkness and to be revealed in light. We can't have the one without the other, and neither can Israel and neither can the world/universe. This is why we don't find in Isaiah the words and works of the reformer. Instead we see the work of a true prophet revealing to us the way things *must be*. As T.S. Eliot puts it in his Four Quartets: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God...."<sup>3</sup>

We must not excuse here the obvious ways in which Isaiah has made us complicit in the fact that God *must* come in darkness and terror. We are only recognizing that at this point it is the only way, and this explains—through a glass darkly—God's admonishment to the people to: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; Keep looking but do not understand." (Isa 6:9)

It is also this necessary interpenetration of light and dark in Isaiah 1-39 that makes me at once thrill with unbelievable joy, and at the same time psychologically fall on my knees in abject terror, when the Lord summons his host in Isaiah 13:

I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones, to execute my anger...Listen, a tumult on the mountains as of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The Lord of hosts is mustering an army for battle. Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! (Isa 13:3-4,6)

It is so horrible, so terrifying, so *awful*, and yet I find something deep inside me shouting, "Yes Lord, YES!"

To the extent that Isaiah attempts to explain this paradox of light and darkness, he uses the idea of purification. The same purification he went through himself when the coal touched his lips. "Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning." (Isa 4:3-4)

This intermingling of horror and promise and the paradoxical necessity of purification as part of God's plan are echoed neatly by Eliot:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.  
Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.<sup>4</sup>

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So whether in his own case, the case of Israel, or of the nations, or in our own spiritual seeking, when God comes he will come as Love but will be experienced as darkness and purification. Only then can the immense promise to us all from the “root of Jesse” come to fruition.

At heart, and again like Eliot, Isaiah is wrestling with the paradox of an eternal God in a world of time. To think that Isaiah is only talking about his own spiritual experience or even our own is to miss the point. To see Isaiah as only a commentator on his own time is to miss the point. To see him only as a prophet of the future, of a particular Zion of history, is to miss the point, and to see him only speaking of what lies beyond time is to miss the point. For he is not only speaking of them all, but is trying to convey to us that they are all intertwined and going on all at once. Yes, he is teaching individuals how to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, and yes, he is objectively treating historical Judah and its future. But Isaiah is also *sensing*, and thus God is telling us, that all of this is necessary, has already taken place outside of time, and yet must be articulated and brought to reality through and by time. In this sense Isaiah is at long last revealing (yet at the same time jealously guarding) the mystery, wonder, and glory that is God.

Richard Gaillardetz, in his book on the teaching authority of the church, “updates” Isaiah’s call to holiness in the spirit of more recent scholarship. Moving away from just propositionally “doing the right things” he defines holiness in the context of God’s love—a love that creates in us a transformation. But this transformation is not something we learn—it is something we *become*: “This loving response entails nothing less than a radical conversion, what Lonergan calls ‘a transformation of horizons’...Morality then is concerned with the *transformation* of human motivations and human intentionality.”<sup>5</sup>

So in effect what Isaiah is calling for is just such a transformation, a transformation that is analogous to the one he experienced. And nothing short of this radical transformation can assure us of this right relationship, a relationship of wisdom, a wisdom born and nurtured in humility and gratitude. Eliot says it succinctly:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.<sup>6</sup>

So individually, collectively, and eternally, the path of Isaiah is one of humility and trust. We labor on in faith, humility and trust in the full confidence that:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

- 1 Donald Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 59
- 2 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39 Books* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 169
- 3 T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*, in *The Four Quartets*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943) pt. 3
- 4 T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, in *The Four Quartets*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943) pt. 4
- 5 Richard Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 111, 112
- 6 T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*, in *The Four Quartets*. (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943) pt. 2
- 7 T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, in *The Four Quartets*. (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943) pt. 5 5