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# God in the Book of Isaiah

JOHN T. WILLIS

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**T**he Bible's main character is God. Essentially "theology" is the study of God. To glean a "biblical" picture of God, one must begin with the picture of God in individual books of the Bible. The book of Isaiah is a veritable "gold mine" of affirmations about God. The intent of this article is to sketch a few of the major teachings about God in this marvelous prophetic work.

## **YAHWEH IS THE HIGH AND LOFTY ONE WHO INHABITS ETERNITY, WHOSE NAME IS HOLY (ISA 57:15A-B)**

The famous description of Yahweh's call of Isaiah begins: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty" (Isa 6:1a). Isa 57:15a portrays Yahweh as "the high and lofty one." The human inclination is to "exalt" many things above Yahweh. The book of Isaiah repeatedly denounces human "pride" or "arrogance." This oracle against Sennacherib, king of Assyria, is instructive: When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride. For he says:

"By the strength of my hand I have done it,  
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;  
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,  
and have plundered their treasures;  
like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones.  
My hand has found, like a nest,  
the wealth of the peoples;  
and as one gathered eggs that have been forsaken,  
so I have gathered all the earth;  
and there was none that moved a wing,  
or opened its mouth, or chirped."  
Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it,  
or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?  
As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up,  
or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood! (Isa 10:12-15).

Sennacherib boasted of devastating the 46 fortified cities of Judah and besieging Jerusalem. Isaiah declares that Yahweh was using Sennacherib and the Assyrians to punish his sinful people—as a lumberjack uses an ax to fell a tree, or a carpenter uses a saw to cut a board, or a parent uses a twig to spank a child. Tucker says,

Reading of the words and the fate of the king of Assyria might evoke reflection on the arrogance of the mighty and on the overweening ambitions of world powers generally ... When pride takes control—that is, when one arrogates to oneself total authority (and so becomes

“great”)—then power is corrupt ... One need not be a head of state ... to exercise power and be corrupted by it. Most readers of this text will recognize in themselves the temptation of the arrogance of power. Sooner or later, everyone wants to exercise his or her will over other people and things ... The problem addressed here is not power but the arrogance of power, which stems from the failure to acknowledge the limits and the source of all human power.<sup>1</sup>

In a day when foreign gods and allies and divination (Isa 30:1-7, 31:1-3), wealth, military strength (Isa 2:6-8), personal desire (Isa 26:7-15), and influential leaders (Isa 3:1-4.1, 28:1-8) seemed to dominate, the prophet announces:

The Lord of hosts has a day  
 against all that is proud and lofty,  
 against all that is lifted up and high;  
 against all the cedars of Lebanon,  
 lofty and lifted up;  
 and against all the oaks of Bashan;  
 against all the high mountains,  
 and against all the lofty hills;  
 against every high tower,  
 and against every fortified wall ...  
 The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,  
 and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;  
 and the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day.  
 (Isa 2:12-15, 17; see 2:9, 11; 5:15-16)

Yahweh stands in bold contrast to humanity as “eternal.” “He alone ... has immortality” (1 Tim 6:16). A psalmist says:

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
 or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
 from everlasting to everlasting you are God ...  
 The days of our life are 70 years,  
 and perhaps 80, if we are strong;  
 even then their span is only toil and trouble;  
 they are soon gone, and we fly away. (Ps 90:2, 10)

Humanity lacks resources to comprehend God’s eternity. God stops people short with such questions as:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
 Tell me, if you have understanding.  
 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
 Or who stretched the line upon it? (Job 38:4-5)

Yahweh is unique in being “holy.” When Yahweh appeared to Isaiah, one heavenly seraph called to another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory (Isa 6:3).”

Isaiah repeatedly designates Yahweh as “the Holy One of Israel (Jacob)” (26 times). Isaiah relates God’s “holiness” and “glory” (e.g., 40:5 and 4:25; 48:11 and 48:17; 60:1-2 and 6:9), i.e., splendor, magnificence, brilliance, radiance. As “holy,” God is entirely separate from anyone or anything he created (2 Cor 6:14-7:1). He is “incomparable.” The prophet asks:

To whom then will you liken God—  
 or what likeness compare with him?

To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One. (Isa 40:18, 25)

Yet, mysteriously, inscrutably, God “dwells” *both* “in the high and holy place” *and* “with those who are contrite and humble in spirit” (Isa 57:15) to “make” them “holy” as he is holy (Lev 1:2; Eph 4:17-24; 1 Pet 1:13-16).

### **YAHWEH SITS ENTHRONED ABOVE THE CHERUBIM (ISA 37:16A)**

The account of Isaiah’s call begins: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne” (Isa 6:1a). King Hezekiah begins his prayer that Yahweh deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrians: “O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim.” The ark of the covenant in the Jerusalem temple underneath the outspread wings of the cherubim symbolized Yahweh’s presence among his people as king (1 Sam 4:3-4; 1 Kgs 8:4-21; Pss 80:1, 99:1, 132:1-8, 13-14). Yahweh is not a “harsh dictator” like the kings of the nations, but a “gentle shepherd” who “carries” his people when they are weary or troubled or hurt (Isa 40:11, 46:3-4), and who “leads” his people on safe paths to abundant pasture and gentle streams (Isa 35:8-10, 42:14-16, 49:8-10).

Yahweh’s reign is all-comprehensive. He is king of the individual. When he appeared to Isaiah, the prophet declared: “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa 6:5). Yahweh is king of his chosen people Israel and her king. Isa 24:23 announces, “The Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.”

Isa 33:22 states: “For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; he will save us.” (See also 41:21, 43:15, 44:6).

Yahweh is king of all nations and their kings. He uses kings of various nations and their armies to carry out his purposes, including punishing his sinful people for their rebellion against him (Isa 7:17, 20; 10:5-19; 47:5-9), and delivering his penitent people from oppression and exile (Isa 44:24-45:7; 45:13). Accordingly, Cyrus, king of Persia, is Yahweh’s “shepherd” (Isa 44:28) and “anointed one” (Hebrew *mashiah* = messiah) (Isa 45:1). Yahweh is king of all creation, including the angelic hosts invisible to humanity. Isa 24:21 announces:

On that day the Lord will punish  
the host of heaven in heaven,  
and on earth the kings of the earth.

Isa 6:2-3, 14:3-23, and 40:1-11 speak of Yahweh’s rule over realms far beyond earthly spheres.

The recurring reference to Yahweh as “Lord of hosts” confirms this. “Hosts” means “armies.” “Hosts” in “Lord of hosts” sometimes means “angelic hosts” and “heavenly hosts” (sun, moon, and stars) (Isa 6:3, 5; 13:13; 40:1-11, 25-26; 45:12; 51:15-16); sometimes, the armies of Israel (Isa 10:24-27; 48:1-2; cf. 1 Sam 17:46); sometimes, the armies of nations other than Israel (Isa 19:18-25 [Egypt and Assyria]; 39:5-7 [Babylon]; 13:4-5, 17-19; 14:22-23; 45:13 [Medo-Persia]).

As king, Yahweh discharges the two major functions for which kings were responsible in the ancient Near East (see especially Psalm 72).

1. He protects his people from enemies (Isa 1:9, 31:4-5, 37:14-20, 52:7-12).
2. He promotes and maintains justice and righteousness among human beings (Isa 1:21-28, 3:13-15, 5:1-7, 28:15-22).

**YAHWEH OUR MAKER IS OUR HUSBAND (ISA 54:5A)**

Isaiah extols Yahweh as “creator” of the universe. He asks:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.” (Isa 40:28a-c)

Isa 42:5 describes Yahweh in this way:

Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it.”

He uses the vocabulary of the creation account in Genesis 1-2—“create, make, form”—to sketch Yahweh’s creation of the universe in Isa 45:18:

For thus says the Lord,  
who created the heavens (he is God!),  
who formed the earth and made it  
(he established it;  
he did not create it a chaos,  
he formed it to be inhabited!)  
I am the Lord, and there is no other.

At the same time, Yahweh is “creator” of his people. The prophet encourages the Judean exiles in Babylon to embrace the future with enthusiastic hope as he speaks in Isa 43:1, 6-7:

But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.  
I have called you by name, you are mine ...  
I will say to the north, “Give them up,”  
and to the south, “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”

It is natural, then, for Isaiah to refer to Yahweh as Israel’s “maker” (17:7; 29:16; 45:9, 11; 51:13), i.e., shaper, potter. It is nothing short of a miracle for God to gather a group of individuals into a cooperating, loving, vibrant faith community. Creation language is quite appropriate to describe such a unified people. Paul uses the word “create” to explain how God in Jesus Christ fashioned the church composed of Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:15).

But the “maker” or “creator” of all is at the same time the “husband” of Israel, his bride or wife. The message in which this affirmation appears is touching and compelling:

For your Maker is your husband;  
the Lord of hosts is his name,  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,

the God of the whole earth he is called.  
 For the Lord has called you  
 like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
 like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,  
 says your God.  
 For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
 but with great compassion I will gather you.  
 In overflowing wrath for a moment  
 I hid my face from you,  
 but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
 says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Isa 54:5-8).

Yahweh is creator and sustainer of all that is, and thus he is sovereign. Yet, because of his deep love for humankind, he seeks a strong, intimate, daily, personal relationship with human beings, similar to the relationship found in marriage. Several biblical passages present Yahweh's relationship with Israel as the story of a husband and wife.

The story begins when Yahweh courts and marries Israel in the exodus from Egypt and giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Here Israel is "the wife of Yahweh's youth" (Isa 54:6). Apparently this concept is based on Hos 2:14-15, where Yahweh says:

Therefore, I will now allure her [Israel],  
 and bring her into the wilderness,  
 and speak tenderly to [woo] her.  
 There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,  
 as in the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Jer 2:2 uses similar language. When Israel settled in the land of Canaan, it was not long until she "forsook" (left) Yahweh. The prophet declares:

Ah, sinful nation,  
 people laden with iniquity,  
 offspring who do evil,  
 children who deal corruptly,  
 who have forsaken the Lord,  
 who have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
 who are utterly estranged. (1:4; cf 65:11)

Upon leaving Yahweh, Israel went after other lovers: the Baals, foreign nations, other objects of trust including military strength, wealth, earthly wisdom, and self. Isa 2:6-8 succinctly summarizes the objects of Israel's trust. In 1:21, Isaiah exclaims bluntly: "How the faithful city (Jerusalem) has become a whore."

Yahweh used several means to bring his adulterous wife Israel back to him, but everything failed. So, in desperation, as a final extreme effort, he divorced his wife, i.e., he sent the Babylonians to defeat Judah and carry the Judeans into exile. The prophet declares:

Thus says the Lord (to the Judean exiles—Zion's "children"),  
 Where is your mother's bill of divorce  
 with which I put her away?  
 Or which of my creditors is it  
 to whom I have sold you?  
 No, because of your sins you were sold  
 and for your transgressions your mother was put away. (Isa 50:1)

Yahweh is referring to this divorce when he says in Isa 54:7, 8, “I abandoned you” and “I hid my face from you.” However, Yahweh’s action here is ironic because the reason he divorced his wife is that he loved her and wanted to jolt her to her senses and bring her back to him. Yahweh declares he loves Israel with “everlasting love” (Isa 54:8; c.f. Jer 31:3), and affirms that he will take her back because of his great love for her, even though this is a violation of God’s law (Deut 24:1-4). “The text touches on the problem of remarriage with the previous husband. Deut 24:1-4 specifically excludes this possibility. That a remarriage is possible is a miracle of God’s free grace and an outcome of his Love.”<sup>2</sup> To symbolize Yahweh’s remarriage to Israel, Yahweh gives Zion—Jerusalem—“a new name”: *Hephzi-bah*, “My Delight Is in Her,” in place of *Azubah*, “Forsaken”; and *Beulah*, “Married,” in place of *Shemamah*, “Desolate” (Isa 62:1-5).

The book of Isaiah uses many metaphors to depict Yahweh and his work in the world. Yahweh is high and lifted up, glorious, holy, incomparable, king, creator, husband. He is simultaneously far above his creation and deeply involved in his creation. The proper human response to him is awe and humility, gratitude, and service. The book of Isaiah maintains this tension in God and humanity throughout.

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#### END NOTES

- 1 Gene M. Tucker, “The Book of Isaiah 1-39,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible VI*, ed. L. E. Keck, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 134.
- 2 Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah. A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55* (Hermeneia), ed. Peter Machinist, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 444

