

4. The desire of some Greek proselytes to meet with Jesus provided the occasion for His final public statements to Israel. And those statements, appropriately, focused on His “hour” as the climactic fulfillment of the purpose for which He’d come into the world. He explained what that hour would entail and accomplish and He charged His hearers – and all Israel by implication – with their obligation in view of it: They were to walk in the light while the light remained. Jesus’ presence and ministration in Israel established the nation’s responsibility of authentic faith, but they met their obligation with unbelief. Thus John saw in this episode a kind of exclamation point: On the one hand, it brought Jesus’ self-presentation to Israel to its climactic close; on the other, it highlighted Israel’s response of unbelief. This is evident from the way he constructed his account of the episode, and especially from the commentary he appended to it (12:37-43).

And the central feature of John’s commentary is his conviction that Israel’s unbelief was a matter of prophetic fulfillment: *Though the nation was solely culpable for its rejection of its Messiah, this failure accorded with God’s design in the salvation history and derived its significance from Israel’s key role in that design.* This observation is critically important, for it disallows the common tendency to treat this passage outside of its salvation-historical framework as a doctrinal proof-text on human depravity and God’s sovereignty in personal salvation. This is not to say that the passage has nothing to do with human unbelief and its relation to God’s saving work; but John was addressing Israel’s unbelief as the Abrahamic people and the way that unbelief fit into Yahweh’s purposes for the covenant nation and, through it, for the world (cf. Romans 9-11). John and his counterparts understood the Christ event and its dynamics in terms of the salvation history which had Israel at its heart, and so must his readers.

- a. John chose to draw from Isaiah’s prophecy to establish the prophetic quality of Israel’s unbelief (12:37-40). He first cited from chapter 53 which introduces the messianic Servant as an enigma whom men would neither rightly discern nor embrace; though Yahweh promised and announced His coming, Israel for the most part didn’t heed that “report” and failed to perceive in Him the presence and power of their God (i.e., Yahweh returned to Zion to accomplish His promised triumph in judgment, deliverance, renewal and ingathering).

John’s first citation established the *fact* of Israel’s unbelief regarding the Messiah, while his second one *explained* it (Isaiah 6:10): *Israel’s refusal to embrace Jesus attested Yahweh’s long-standing judgment on the nation which was now reaching its climax in the fullness of the times.* From the time of its constitution as the Abrahamic household, Israel had failed to heed and obey its covenant Lord and Father. Yahweh’s “son” was intractably hardened with willfully closed eyes and ears so that seeing, he did not see and hearing, he did not hear. The self-inflicted nature of Israel’s condition is evident from the broader Isaianic context in which God exonerated Himself of all complicity and guilt respecting Israel’s plight and the horrific consequences coming upon it; in fact, He’d done everything to preclude this outcome (ref. 5:1-30; cf. Jeremiah 7:21ff). Yahweh sent His prophet to pronounce His sentence upon the unclean nation (6:1-9), but that sentence consisted in Him binding them to their corruption and error (cf. Romans 1:18-32).

*“There is a self-hardening in evil which renders a man thoroughly incorrigible, and which, regarded as the fruit of his moral behaviour, is no less a judicial punishment inflicted by God, than self-induced guilt on the part of man. The two are bound up in one another...”* (Delitzsch)

From its days in Egypt, Israel had refused to “see” and “hear” so that Yahweh eventually gave the nation over to itself. Israel had secured its own destruction, and this came about when God employed foreign powers to make Zion desolate, stripping her of her sons and sending them away into exile (ref. 2 Kings 18:9-12; 2 Chronicles 36:1-21). And going forward from there, Israel was to be sealed in its recalcitrance through centuries of exile, even up to the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:4-6; cf. Matthew 13:1ff; Acts 28:16ff). This truth is a key feature of Isaiah’s vision-prophecy in chapter six and is fundamental to John’s use of it here.

When the Lord commissioned Isaiah to go to Israel and pronounce His sentence of enduring dullness and hardness of heart, the prophet inquired how long this condition was to continue (6:11a). The divine response had two dimensions: *First*, this hardened condition would follow the nation into desolation and captivity (6:11b-12). Conquest and exile were coming to both houses of Israel (Isaiah’s prophetic ministry began around 750 B.C. immediately preceding the captivity of the northern kingdom) and dim eyes, dull ears and intractable hearts would accompany them even as invading powers devastated their respective kingdoms and drove them into exile (cf. Isaiah 28:9-13; Ezekiel 12:1-11, 24:1-24). But *secondly*, this condition would endure even after the return of the Judean remnant (6:13). Jerusalem and its temple were eventually restored, but not the hearts of the people. Israel’s recalcitrance remained intact, so that the remnant of Israel – the “tenth portion” which continued in the land – was itself going to be “subject to burning.” In general, there are three ways this prophecy is understood, hinging upon the meaning of the phrase, “the holy seed”:

- The first view treats this phrase in a positive sense as designating the faithful remnant among the body of Israelites (the “tenth portion”) coming out of the desolating judgment of 6:11. The prophecy is then said to reveal that, when the surviving “tenth portion” undergoes its own judgment of “burning,” the “holy seed” within it was going to survive just as a living stump remains when a tree is felled.
- The second view is a development of the prior one. It also treats the phrase, “holy seed,” in a positive fashion, but regards it as referring, not to faithful second-temple Israelites in general, but to those Jews who, in the fullness of the times, would embrace Yahweh’s Messiah. Thus the prophet was indicating that the judgment which was going to fall upon the restored Israelite nation (the “tenth portion” continuing in the land) because of its unbelief would preserve a believing “stump” (“holy seed”). A variation of this view regards the “holy seed” as synonymous with Christ’s *Church*, so that it includes believing Gentiles as well as Jews.

- Another less common interpretation is held by scholars such as Greg Beale. In this view the phrase, “holy seed,” has a derisive, condemning function. That is, while it designated Israel according to its unique election and covenant relationship with Yahweh, Isaiah employed it here to indict the covenant household as *unholy* and thereby highlight its distinct worthiness to suffer the judgment of destruction (“burning”). And so, rather than describing a *faithful remnant* within the hardened nation which came out of captivity, it identified the *whole nation* as guilty of violating its identity and calling. Beale’s own summary is helpful: “*‘Holy seed’ still has a strictly positive connotation, but only in the formal sense that God had chosen the nation to be ‘his seed’ to be set apart from the idolatrous nations, though despite this holy calling, they had become just like the nations. Although the book of Isaiah later admits of a future, restored Israel subsequent to the coming judgment, this Israel is constituted on a different basis and in a different form from what was previously conceived. Therefore, Isaiah uses the remnant idea in both 6:13a and 13b not positively but negatively in order to emphasize the magnitude and absoluteness of Israel’s judgment.*” (We Become What We Worship)

Beale’s interpretation is based on a whole series of textual and exegetical considerations beyond the scope of this treatment, but what is important to note here is that it fits well with John’s design in employing this particular citation. For John didn’t reference this prophecy in order to highlight either a faithful Jewish remnant in Jesus’ generation or the believing community that would arise after His resurrection. Rather, he employed it to explain the unexpected, even shocking fact of Israel’s unbelief and opposition to her long-awaited Messiah (ref. 12:37, 39; cf. also 1:11, 10:22-27, 15:18-25, etc.). Even noting that John here spoke of rulers believing in Jesus (12:42-43), his point seems to have been to emphasize again the dynamic of believing unbelief (the Greek expression rendered “nevertheless” by many English versions is perhaps better captured by the phrase, “even indeed”): These rulers “believed” just as their forefathers had – with hardened, self-concerned hearts. Their faith was set within their self-interest; seeing, they didn’t *perceive*, and hearing they didn’t *discern*. So Westcott: “*This complete intellectual faith (so to speak) is really the climax of unbelief. The conviction found no expression in life.*”

- b. A final thing to note is John’s commentary on Isaiah’s vision (12:41). Many have interpreted John as indicating that Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh (6:1-4) was actually his glimpse of the pre-incarnate Christ. John *was* connecting this vision with Jesus, but in a more subtle and profound way: He was asserting that, in encountering Yahweh’s glory in His word and will concerning Israel – Israel His elect instrument of redemption and renewal, Isaiah was encountering – and discerning – the glory that was to find its tangible expression in Messiah (cf. 1:14). Isaiah was able to see, and thus proclaimed, what Israel could not, namely that Yahweh’s glory was bound up in and was to be fully revealed in His Messiah.