

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

A THOROUGH REDEMPTION: AN EXPOSITION OF ISAIAH 63:1-6

AN EXPOSITION PAPER
SUBMITTED TO DR. ...
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR
THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS COURSE
ISAIAH (OBST 633)

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SPRING 2008

Synthesis and Outline of Isaiah 63:1-6

Summary: Yahweh returns from Edom with blood-stained garments having single-handedly slaughtered the nations for the sake of redeeming his people.

Outline:

I. The watchman sees a triumphant warrior arrayed for battle approaching the city and asks for his identity. Yahweh responds by identifying himself as the redeemer of his people. (63:1)

- A. The watchman's question: The watchmen suspiciously question the identity of a valiant warrior approaching the city. (63:1a)
- B. Yahweh's response: Yahweh identifies himself as the victorious conqueror over the enemies of his people. He has come to announce a salvation accomplished. (63:1b)

II. Yahweh answers the watchman's question about his bloody garments by calling attention to the fact that he has just completely pulverized his enemies (the nations) by himself. (63:2-3)

- A. The watchman's question: The watchmen ask this valiant warrior why his garments are dripping with blood. (63:2)
- B. Yahweh's response: Yahweh's garments are covered with blood to such an extent because he took on the nations by himself. (63:3)

III. Yahweh, demonstrating his sovereign power, elaborates on why his garments are stained with blood by stating that since he could find no one to help; he redeemed his people by thoroughly destroying Israel's enemies by himself. (63:4-6)

- A. Yahweh's appointed time for securing redemption by way of destroying his enemies had come. (63:4)
- B. Yahweh looked, but found no one who would help in the task of destroying his enemies, for the sake of securing redemption. So he, in his wrath, won redemption for his people by himself. (63:5)
 - 1. No one among the peoples of the earth were righteous to help Yahweh bring about redemption. (63:5a)
 - 2. Yahweh takes matters into his own hands and accomplishes redemption in his own power. (63:5b)
- C. The enemies of God (the nations) are utterly defeated by Yahweh. (63:6)
 - 1. Yahweh destroys the nations by trampling them in his anger. (63:6a)
 - 2. Yahweh destroys the nations by filling them with their own blood in his rage. (63:6b)

3. Yahweh destroys the nations by covering the ground with their blood. (63:6c)

Exposition of the Text

Introduction

Isaiah 63:1-6 finds itself couched in the middle of a subsection within the context of the entire book. In this section, Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites of a future generation: those living at the end of the exile in Babylon. Isaiah's purpose in writing this section of the book was to both encourage them in the salvation that God was going to accomplish, and to remind them of the necessity of living up to the righteousness demanded in the covenant that Yahweh had made with them.¹ Some scholars have argued that Isaiah 56-66 is comprised of one large chiasmic construction. At the very heart of this construction sits chapters 60-62 with its emphasis on the final salvation which Israel will enjoy. Isaiah 63:1-6 (the passage in view) and 59:15b-21 serve as book ends to 60-62.²

Many scholars have been struck with confusion as to why 63:1-6—a section dealing with the bloody, gruesome destruction of the nations—is found at the tail end of two chapters fleshing out the glories of Yahweh's salvation for his people. Brevard Child's has correctly suggested that Isaiah has put it here in order to “emphasize in the strongest manner possible that the divine judgment against the evil and injustice of those in rebellion against God's rule must precede the entrance of God's promised kingship in the transformation of Zion.”³ Thus, the destruction of the nations is a necessity if the promises of 60-62 are to be realized. Claire Matthews suggests that the destruction of the

¹ Frederic Wm. Bush, David Allen Hubbard, and William Sanford Lasor, *Old Testament Survey* 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 299.

² Claire R. Matthews, *Defending Zion*, (New York: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 1995), 83. Matthews has arranged this construction in a visually helpful way.

nations and the redemption of Israel should be seen as two sides of the same event.⁴ With this in mind, this section is only encouraging to those who are faithful to Yahweh's covenant.

Yahweh Makes Himself Known (63:1)

This section begins with what many have considered to be something of a watchman manning his post.⁵ Furthering this idea, Paul Allen Smith suggests a strong tie between 62:1 and 63:1.⁶ In 62:1-6 Yahweh declares his determination to vindicate Israel. He states that he will set up "watchmen" on their walls who will not rest until Israel realizes the redemption promised by Yahweh. "Thus," Allen says, "63:1-6 could be understood as a fulfillment, in visionary terms, of 62:1-2."⁷

As the watchman stands on his post looking out, he sees a valiant warrior approaching the city. He asks the warrior to identify himself. This is the first of two questions asked in 63:1-6. Jan Leunis Koole suggests that these questions are asked to "make the reader/listener alert and curious."⁸ The watchman notices that Yahweh is coming from Edom and Bozrah. Bozrah is the main city in Edom.⁹

The identity of Edom and Bozrah is hotly debated among scholars. There are basically four positions: (1) some hold to a literal interpretation and suggest that Yahweh destroyed the literal people of Bozrah and Edom;¹⁰ (2) others postulate that Edom and

³ Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 519.

⁴ Matthews, *Defending Zion*, 81.

⁵ Joseph Blankinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 247.

⁶ Paul Allen Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito Isaiah*, (Brill Academic Pub, 1984): 43.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jan Leunis Koole, *Isaiah III* (Belgium: Peters Publishers, 2002), 331.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Julian Morgenstern, "Further light from the book of Isaiah upon the catastrophe of 485 B.C.," in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 15-17. Morgenstern identifies the destruction mentioned in 63:1 as referring to the destruction of Edom by the Nabataeans in the 6th Century BC.

Bozrah refer to the direction from which the Lord came, the south;¹¹ (3) still other scholars interpret Edom and Bozrah to be Israel's foremost enemy; and thus they conclude that Edom and Bozrah symbolize all the enemies of Yahweh;¹² (4) lastly, other scholars hold that Edom and Bozrah are utilized here for sole purpose of the author's use of winepress imagery.¹³ All of these positions have strengths and weaknesses. Also, it is not impossible to hold more than one view simultaneously without contradiction.

In light of the context of this passage, there is no doubt that the author is marshalling all of the winepress imagery he possibly can. With this in mind, the fourth position holds weight, and especially considering the fact that there is relationship between "Edom" and "red," and between "Bozrah" and "grape harvest."¹⁴ Blenkinsopp also points out that "Edom, like its northern neighbor Moab, was well known as a center of viniculture (cf Isa 16:8-10)."¹⁵

One of the strengths of the second view is that Yahweh is not said to have destroyed Edom, but to merely have come from Edom. The third view holds weight because of Israel's long and somewhat dysfunctional distant-relative relationship with Edom. Edom had become something of a Babylon to Yahweh and his people—a stereotypical archrival enemy.¹⁶

Although the possibility of this oracle referring to the destruction of Edom by the Nabataeans in the 6th Century BC is a possibility, it is not likely. The thrust of the context

¹¹ See John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah: Chapters 33 to 66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 196. Sawyer points to Deut 33:2; Judges 5:4-5; and Hab 3:3 as examples of Yahweh coming from the south (Edom).

¹² See John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 838. MacArthur says, "Edom represents a God-hating world."

¹³ See John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 353. Goldingay suggests that "Edom and Bozrah's names suggest pools of grape juice that turn out to be pools of blood."

¹⁴ *Ibid.* In order to prove these connections Goldingay offers an abundance of Scripture.

¹⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 250.

of this passage suggests that God's vengeance is against the nations. In fact, both B. Dicou and the Net Study Bible suggest that the plural suffixes on the verbs "stomped" and "trample" in 63:3 suggest that the object of the action was upon the nations symbolized by the nation of Edom.¹⁷ Also, in 63:6, Yahweh further explains his redemptive action against "Edom": "I trampled *nations* in my anger" (emphasis mine).

Yahweh answers the watchman by declaring himself to be the redeemer/vindicator. J. W. Olley states that "speaking" (or "announcing") is always closely associated with "doing." Thus, he says Yahweh (in 63:1) was "speaking (acting) with a saving, just purpose, with a concern to bring about what is right."¹⁸ Yahweh's response to the watchmen is evidence that the thrust of 63:1-6 communicates that the primary function of God's acts of judgment are ultimately for the redemption and vindication of his people. Thus, although 63:1-6 graphically depicts an angry God destroying his enemies, it is imperative that the purpose of their destruction is not missed. Smith states that "63:1-6 draws out the implications" of God's redemptive actions on behalf of his people "for other nations."¹⁹

Yahweh Explains His Blood-Stained Attire (63:2-3)

This section of 63:1-6 begins with another question from the watchmen to Yahweh: "Why are your clothes red?" This question is only reasonable. After all, would not the watchmen want to know why this valiant warrior dripping with blood was covered so?! The watchmen would have had a situation on their hands if the warrior

¹⁶ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 327-331.

¹⁷ Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito Isaiah*, 40. And *NET Bible*, (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Isaiah 63:3.

¹⁸ J.W. Olley, "Notes on Isaiah 32:1, 45:19,23 and 63:1," in *Vetus testamentum* 33 (1983): 452.

replied, “I have just returned from shedding the blood of the innocent!” He would have had to call the ranks to action. However, this was not the answer he received from the great warrior, Yahweh.

The language used by the watchmen conveys the absolute slaughter accomplished by Yahweh. He states that Yahweh looked like a man who just got done stomping on grapes in a winepress. Without a doubt, Isaiah is utilizing winepress imagery to communicate the nature and extent of God’s redemptive actions against the enemies of His people. Victor H. Matthews has helpfully described the process of the (somewhat) ancient process of treading grapes in a winepress:

The extraction of the juice took on various forms, from treading the grapes under foot to crushing them in wicker baskets above a catchment basin. Egyptian tomb paintings, especially those from the tomb of Ptahhotep, provide graphic depictions of this process... In these scenes the harvested grapes were first placed in a "treading trough" made of mud brick and sealed with a plaster surface. A group of men, holding on to a pole hung horizontally over the trough, then worked the grapes into a mash with their feet... A further pressing process then occurs when the crushed grapes are placed into a sack or closed wicker basket that is stretched over wide-mouth jars and twisted by a team of three or more men.²⁰

According to this imagery, Yahweh is the one symbolized by the winetreader, while the nations are symbolized by the crushed grapes. In the same way that a vintner’s clothing becomes stained by the juice within the grapes he is crushing, Yahweh’s clothing becomes stained by the blood within the people he is crushing.²¹

In response to the watchmen Yahweh appeals to the fact that he had to destroy the nations alone. Koole correctly explains that the reason why Yahweh’s garments are so

¹⁹ Smith, *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito Isaiah*, 42. Thus, Koole is most likely mistaken in making the assertion that the main emphasis in 63:1-6 is theocentric rather than soteriological. Koole, *Isaiah III*, 342.

²⁰ Victor H. Matthews, “Treading the Winepress” in *Semeia* 86 (1999): 20.

²¹ There is a great deal of debate concerning the word “stain” (63:3). The word in the original conveys the idea of defilement. Although this is the case, very few today have issues with translating it as “stain,” because “guilty” simply does not fit into the context of this passage. See Koole, *Isaiah III*, 217-18.

stained is because he took on the nations alone.²² In other words, all the blood of all the nations fell upon him and no one else.

Many scholars have seen a connection between 63:3 and Revelation 19:13 and 15. In Revelation 19:13 Christ is said to be “clothed with a robe dipped in blood;” and in 19:15 Christ is pictured as treading the “winepress of the fierce wrath of God.” The imagery is strikingly similar to that of Isaiah here in 63:3. Carroll D. Qsburn says, “Revelation 19:11-16 has attributed to Christ what the Isaiah text attributed to God.”²³

It is vital that one does not mistakenly equate the imagery of 63:3 with the crucifixion of Christ, for in both Isaiah 63 and Revelation 19 the blood which splattered on the garments of the warrior was not the blood of the warrior, but rather the blood of the warrior’s enemies.²⁴ It is not as if the only blood which stains the garments of Christ will be his own—Revelation 19:13 and 15 make this abundantly clear.

Yahweh Elaborates on His Redemptive Acts of Judgment (63:4-6)

After having just answered the watchmen’s questions regarding his identity and blood-stained apparel, Yahweh then attempts to explain the answer he gave in 63:3 in more detail.²⁵ Yahweh begins his explanation by making reference to the “day of vengeance,” and the “year of redemption.” The “day of vengeance” is clearly connected to 61:2. In the context of 61:2, Yahweh speaks of a day in which Israel will be rebuilt,

²²Ibid., 338. Koole suggests that Isaiah uses “garments” (plural) to indicate the extent of blood that covered him.

²³Carroll D. Qsburn, “Alexander Campbell and the text of Revelation 19:13,” in *Resoration Quarterly* 25 (1982): 134.

²⁴John Calvin acutely attacked this common misuse of 63:1-6: “This chapter has been violently distorted by Christians, as if what is said here related to Christ, whereas the Prophet speaks simply of God himself; and they have imagined that here Christ is red, because he was wet with his own blood which he shed on the cross. But the Prophet meant nothing of that sort.” John Calvin, *Isaiah* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000). Calvin is correct in rejecting the idea that this passage refers to the death of Christ, but goes too far by not qualifying that it does refer to Christ when he tramples upon his enemies in the *eschaton*.

safe from attack, and served by the nations. Thus, as said earlier, the destruction of the nations and redemption of Israel are two sides of the same coin. It is no wonder why 63:4 contains both ideas side by side.²⁶ Koole, in speaking of “the day of vengeance,” helpfully suggests that “there is no question here of a sudden fit of anger but of a plan which God had formed long ago.”²⁷ This day is the day in which He has planned to make his promises of redeeming his people a reality.

Barry G. Webb suggests that 63:4b should be translated “*year of his ‘redeemed’ (his people).*”²⁸ However, such a rendering of this passage misses the point of the passage. The context puts the emphasis on Yahweh as both the avenger and redeemer of his people, Israel. The word translated “redemption” (*go’el*) refers to the idea of a kinsman redeemer. The NET Study Bible says this about the usage of the function of a *go’el*: “He was also responsible for avenging the shed blood of a family member (see Num 35:19–27; Deut 19:6–12).”²⁹

The time for Yahweh to redeem his people (by destroying their enemies) had come, but he could find no one to come along side as a helper. Similar language is used in Isaiah 59:16b. This passage communicates the great difference between God’s actions in exilic and post exilic times. During the exile God worked through Cryus, the king of Persia, to cut his people free from the bondage of the Babylonians in 538 BC. With great contrast, both in 59:16 and 63:5 Isaiah states that Yahweh took matters into His own hands. Blenkinsopp says, “The statement therefore marks a turning away from the

²⁵ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66*, 250.

²⁶ In regard to Isaiah speaking of the “*day of vengeance*” and the “*year of redemption*.” It is a possibility that Isaiah, wanting to communicate the long lasting effects of his redemption, distinguishes vengeance and redemption with the words “day” and “year.” This is not to say that he wanted to downplay God’s justice, but rather that he wanted to build up the redemptive work of Yahweh.

²⁷ Koole, *Isaiah III*, 341.

²⁸ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 240.

historical arena and international affairs in the search for intimations of a change in fortune for Israel and therefore comes a step closer to embracing an apocalyptic world view.”³⁰

Some scholars have tried to speculate as to why Yahweh destroyed the nations. Goldingay answers; “Yahweh’s explicit dissatisfaction is with having to act alone rather than with the necessity of bloodshed.”³¹ There simply is not enough textual, historical, or grammatical support for this position. Webb, on the other hand, states that God destroyed the nations because of their ill treatment of his people.³² Although this postulation is easier to defend than Goldingay’s, Walter Bruggemann correctly suggests that the text does not specifically state Yahweh’s specific motivation for taking such action; he suggests that the motive must be “inferred.”³³

Isaiah, in 63:6, further describes the extent of destruction inflicted upon the enemies of Yahweh and his people. Koole states that Isaiah stopped using winepress imagery in v. 3: he suggests that “trodden down” refers to Yahweh treading his enemies into the mud;³⁴ he also understands that the word “drunk” refers to the way in which the people were “trodden down” (in humiliation);³⁵ he suggests that “poured out their lifeblood” refers to God humbling the arrogant—he makes them “sit on the ground” (Isa 47:1; Eze 26:16).³⁶

²⁹ *The NET Bible*, Isaiah 63:4.

³⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66*, 250.

³¹ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 354.

³² Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 240.

³³ Walter Bruggemann, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 227.

³⁴ Koole, *Isaiah 56-66*, 342. He identifies this as potter language.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 342-43. Here Koole states that drunkenness “denotes the stupid conceit and impudence and at the same time the defenselessness in which the drunkard displays paltriness and merely makes himself an object of ridicule.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 343. He suggests that it has nothing to do with the literal destruction of the nations, but rather with the humiliation of the arrogant.

Although Koole's suggestions are not completely lacking, it is always best to follow the suit of the context unless there is overwhelming evidence to not do so. Surely, these terms ("trodden down," "drunk," and "poured out their lifeblood") may mean many different things in other contexts. However, since these terms can convey winepress imagery, and since Isaiah has heavily leaned upon winepress imagery in the immediate context, there is no reason why these terms should not be interpreted on the basis of their relationship to winepress imagery.³⁷

John Oswalt says, "The theme of judgment is brought to a powerful climax in this verse, both through the development of the "wine vat" theme and also through the introduction of the related image of the wine cup full of God's wrath."³⁸ The reference to Yahweh making the nations drunk could very well mean that they will be drunk on their own blood. The idea here is that the wine vat of God's wrath will be so full of blood that the nations therein will drown in it.³⁹

Isaiah 63:6c literally reads, "and I brought down to the ground their juice."⁴⁰ "Juice" is a clear usage of such winepress imagery and carries the symbolic meaning of blood. The meaning conveyed is that of death—their lifeblood will have been spilled on the ground.

³⁷ The term "trodden down" is rare, but the intended meaning is clear considering the context of the passage.

³⁸ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 603.

³⁹ *Ibid.* This same imagery can be found in 49:26; Rev 14:10; 16:19.

⁴⁰ *The NET Bible*, Isaiah 63:6.

Theological Significance

The Wrath and Love of God

Isaiah 63:1-6 is one of the most gruesome passages in the entire Bible. This passage portrays the radical character of God in a way that causes a weak stomach to churn. Here God is seen as the one who crushes real people under his weight in the same way that a vintner crushes grapes under his weight. Yahweh is a God covered with blood—the blood of his enemies. This in no way calls into question the love of God. In fact, God’s purpose for dealing with his enemies in such a drastic way is for the sake of redeeming his own people. Although this passage is more of a precursor of the “day of judgment” than it is of the cross, it is important to know that God sent his only Son to die in the place of his enemies. Thus, Christ was thrown in the wine vat and trampled on by the Father in order to propitiate the sins of the world. Make no mistake about it: because of the love with which God loved us, his garments were dripping with the blood of his own Son at Golgotha. Surely, he crushed his one and only Son, but it was for the redemption of the world.

The Independence and Sovereignty of God:

Yahweh is not the sort of God who is in need of those who follow Him. Yahweh is completely independent and “does whatever He pleases” (Psalm 115:3). When he found no one to help defeat the nations of the world, he took it upon himself and successfully brought about salvation by his own strong right arm. God is not in need of human brilliance, strength, ingenuity, or discipline.

Application

Celebrating Deliverance

Often times Christians have such a difficult time with passages like 63:1-6 that they end up neglecting them altogether. The problem with this is that they are missing out on one of the most uplifting and encouraging passages in all of the Bible. John Oswalt brilliantly illustrates this passage by likening Yahweh to a World War II “blood-spattered, smoke-begrimed GI” who breaks into a concentration camp to set the prisoners free. He asks, “Does he look distasteful to those prisoners?”⁴¹ The obvious answer is, “Absolutely not!” Although we, like God, ought not delight in the destruction of the wicked, we ought to rejoice in the deliverance accomplished by Yahweh. What would heaven be like if God did not demand payment for sin? What would heaven be like if murders, rapists, child molesters, and robbers were allowed through her gates? It is interesting that Jesus specifically mentions this aspect of the eternal Kingdom of Glory in Revelation 22:18. Celebrate your deliverance—it secures your safety and is the basis for your ultimate hope of eternal bliss. Your redemption was fully secured by the shedding of the blood of Christ, but Jesus will then consummate your redemption by shedding the blood of the enemies of God and his people on the ‘great and awesome Day of the Lord’ (Malachi 4:1-3).

Seriousness of Rejecting Yahweh

Too often in our culture today God is communicated as if he were a hippy in the sky flipping the world a peace sign, calling the whole world to gather around for a big group hug. Because of this popular approach, very few people today have a true fear of the Lord. Isaiah 63:1-6 is a beckon call to those who fearlessly and carelessly live in unrepentant sin. As seen in the pages above, this is not just a picture of Yahweh: Isaiah 63:1-6 finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ destroying his enemies in the *eschaton*. How

much more seriously would we take sin if we understood God's relation to it? God is not some sort of a heartless, blood-thirsty villain. The picture painted here in Isaiah 63 appears this way only to those who do not understand the glory of God, the vileness of sin, and the fierceness of the enemies of God.

⁴¹ John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 661-62.

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