

DID ISAIAH SEE JESUS AS GOD IN HEAVEN?

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“In the year of King Uzziah’s death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up ...” (Isaiah 6:1).

“These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him” (John 12:41 NASB).

“Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory, and spoke about him” (John 12:41 NIV)

As you can see, the New International Version exchanges the personal pronoun “his” [*autou*] into the proper personal name “Jesus”. The NIV wants you to believe that around 750 BC Isaiah had a vision of Jesus in heaven *as God* in his pre-incarnation glory. Is there any justification for this not-so-subtle-alteration of the text by the NIV? Did Isaiah see “the Lord [Jesus] sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple” (Isaiah 6: 1)? The NIV wants you to believe Jesus is the eternal Lord God. Are the NIV translators just being careless with the precious text, or have they deliberately set out to bat for a cause --- trinitarianism?

Now, in support of the NIV, it must be said that many “orthodox” commentators connect John 12:41 with Isaiah 6:1. One of Australia’s leading Anglican authorities is typical;

“John sees in the words of the prophet primarily a reference to the glory of Christ. Isaiah spoke these things ‘because he saw his glory’. The words of Isaiah 6:3 refer to the glory of Yahweh, but John puts no hard and fast distinction between the two. To him it is plain that Isaiah had in mind the glory revealed in Christ.”¹

Another commenting on John 12:41 boldly asserts,

“A striking testimony is this to the absolute Deity of Christ. The prediction quoted in the previous verse is found in Isa. 6. At the beginning of the chapter the prophet sees ‘Jehovah sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.’ ... And here the Holy Spirit tells us in John 12, ‘These things said Isaiah, when he saw *his* glory, and spake of him’ --- the context makes it unmistakably plain that the reference is to the Lord Jesus. One of the sublimest descriptions of the manifested Deity found in all the Old Testament is here applied to Christ. That One born in Bethlehem’s manger was none other than the Throne-Sitter before whom the seraphim worship.”²

And how about this for confidence that Isaiah really saw Jesus as God in heaven,

“Isaiah had seen the Lord of glory, who is none other than Jesus himself --- Jesus is God, yet he is also a distinct part of the mysterious Trinity, and he is also Jesus the Son.”³

I hope to demonstrate that the NIV and ‘orthodox’ commentary represents a serious mis-reading of this “proof text” for the doctrine of the Deity of Christ. Our aim always is to proceed carefully and prayerfully, not just assuming things without a proper investigation of the facts. I am sure we all want to see “the glory of God” and of His Son, no less than Isaiah or John. That at least is my aim.

DOES JOHN 12:41 REFER DIRECTLY BACK TO ISAIAH 6:1-3?

First thing. Did you notice that the esteemed commentators are sure that John 12:41 directly references Isaiah 6:1-3? John Morris says, “the words of Isaiah 6:3 refer to the glory of Yahweh”, and that John plainly means to say that Isaiah had the glory of Christ in mind in Isaiah chapter 6. Arthur Pink also says, “the prediction” [that John says is fulfilled in Christ] “is found in isaiah 6”. The third commentator shouts his hearty “Amen” in support.

¹ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According To John: The New International commentary on the New Testament*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1973, p605

² Pink, Arthur. W. *Exposition of the Gospel of John*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975, pp 282 (Italics original).

³ *Life Application Bible Commentary*, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003, p 263

Of course, I can understand how a believer in a Jesus who is God would assume that John 12:41 positively is referencing Isaiah 6: 1. After all, the words “saw” and “glory” are found in both John 12:41 and Isaiah 6:1-3. Isaiah “saw” the LORD and His “glory” filling heaven and the whole earth. And John says that Isaiah “saw his glory” when he “spoke of him”. So, yes, if John is saying that Isaiah saw “the glory of Jesus” in heaven and “spoke of him” in Isaiah 6, then it is a slam dunk: Jesus is God who is sitting “high and lifted up” on the Throne --- Jesus is being personally worshipped by the Seraphim as God, meaning Jesus *is* God. This would make Isaiah’s vision one of Jesus personally preexisting his own birth as a human being by 750 years.

Before determining whether John really is saying Isaiah saw Jesus as God in heaven, let’s look at the all-important context in which John is writing. As has been well said, a [proof] text without a context is just a pretext (for one’s own private theory). Let’s take in the breadth of John chapter 12 before zeroing in on verse 41.

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF JOHN 12 IS THE GLORY OF JESUS THROUGH SUFFERING

Even a cursory reading of the whole of John chapter 12 shows his subject concerns Jesus’ sufferings and glory via crucifixion. To state the matter negatively, John 12 is not talking about “ontology”, which is to say, he is not writing about God’s “being” or God’s “nature”. Let’s prove this.

Scene 1:- The chapter opens just “six days before the Passover”. It’s the last week of Jesus’ life. The whole climax of his ministry is upon him. Jesus is soon to be the sacrificial Passover “Lamb of God” (John 1: 29). But for the moment, Jesus is enjoying a “supper” with his friends, including Lazarus whom he has just raised from the dead.

During supper Mary took a pound weight of “very costly, genuine spikenard ointment, and anointed the feet of Jesus” and wept over him. Jesus himself describes this act of devotion as a faith-portrayal “for the day of My burial” (v. 3,7). The shadow of the cross hangs thick over the air. Or, perhaps I should say, the spectre of the cross fills the air like the sweet perfume of Mary’s love-gesture. However, through the perfume, Jesus smells his impending death. There is a sinister chill in the air, for “the chief priests took counsel” how they might not only kill Jesus but also Lazarus (v.10). The suffering of the cross and Israel’s rejection of her Messiah is writ large as we begin John chapter 12.

Scene 2:- The next scene is one we are familiar with and concerns the so-called “Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem” (v. 12-13). The crowds who have gathered for the Passover Feast escort Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem. They wave their palm branches and cry out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord, even the King of Israel”. But on his way into the city we know Jesus wept over Jerusalem because she did not recognize her king. John’s comment is that “His disciples did not understand at the first, “but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things to him” (v.16). John quotes the prophet Zechariah (9:9) and the Psalmist (118:25f) when he recalls that “these things were written of him”. Not until Jesus “was glorified” after his death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven, did the disciples see Jesus’ Messianic glory.

Scene 3:- John next introduces us to “certain Greeks” who want “to see Jesus” (v.21). Jesus cryptically answers that if they want to see him they must understand that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v. 23). Jesus tells them a little parable about the need for a grain of wheat to fall into the ground and die before it can bring forth much fruit (v. 24). Jesus clearly explains that the path to glory and salvation for his followers will also be by way of sacrifice and denial (v. 25-26). Yes, they will “see” Jesus, but not as they anticipated.

This prospect of suffering and dying appears to trouble Jesus himself deeply. Will he ask the Father to spare him from such a cruel fate (v. 27)? No, he prays, “Father, glorify Thy name” (v. 28). A voice from heaven answers that God will be glorified through Jesus’ death. Jesus then says to his listeners that it will be in the process of his being “lifted up from the earth” --- referring to his humiliating death by crucifixion --- that God’s plans for the world will be secured (v.28, 32-33). Though he dies alone, glory is assured.

For us, with the benefit of hindsight, this is readily understood. But for those first-audience listeners this is all too dark and cryptic. “What’s all this talk about dying? And who is the Son of Man?” they ask (v. 34). After these exchanges Jesus “departed and hid himself from them” (v. 36). Thus, the careful reader will note the whole

context leading up to our “proof text” in verse 41 concerns how Jesus’ is not yet glorified, but that his glory will come via his rejection and suffering and public execution.

With that brief *tour de force* in mind, we now come to the immediate part of John’s commentary, verses 38-41:-

“But though he had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in him; so that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, ‘LORD, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?’ For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ‘He has blinded their eyes, and He hardened their heart; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them.’ These things Isaiah said, because he saw his glory, and he spoke of him”.

When John writes that Isaiah said “these things” when “he saw his glory”, is he referring to when Isaiah saw Yahweh’s glory in Isaiah 6, or is he saying Isaiah saw the future glory when Messiah would be exalted through suffering and death? Context is always king, and any fair reading of John 12 proves the subject overwhelming concerns glory via suffering for Jesus. “These things” are not matters of ontology, which is to say, the question of God’s “Being” is not under discussion. For Jesus it is glory in prospect, not because he is God, but because he is faithful unto death.

We have already met the phrase “these things” once before in this very same chapter. John 12:16 explains that after Jesus’ suffering, resurrection and ascension to glory, the disciples “remembered that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things to him.” “These things” John notes were written in the Psalms and in Zechariah. “These things” concern Jesus’ humiliation and rejection by Israel which were his assigned pathway to glory.

Furthermore, in the immediate context of John 12:41, John has *two quotes* from the book of Isaiah when he says Isaiah said “these things”. The first quote in John 12: 38 comes from Isaiah chapter 53 --- not from Isaiah 6:1 --- the great Suffering Servant prophecy where it is predicted the Messiah would be “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” and would be “despised” and “afflicted” etc. Thus, John is saying Isaiah “saw” the coming ministry of suffering and subsequent glory of the Messiah.

The second quote in John 12: 40 concerning Israel’s blindness and hardness is taken from Isaiah 6 during Isaiah’s marvellous vision of Yahweh in heaven. After God has cleansed and commissioned Isaiah for his prophetic ministry, Yahweh explains the rejection Isaiah himself would soon experience when he preaches to Israel (Is.6:10). The people will not listen to Isaiah because of their hardness and unbelief. It was the very same kind of rejection that Jesus was now finding in John 12. Though Jesus had performed many “signs” the people “were not believing in him” as their long-promised Messiah (Jn 12:37). These are “the things” John says Isaiah “saw” when he prophesied Messiah’s “glory”.

The whole point of John 12:37-41 (sitting as it does within the imminent setting of Jesus’ sufferings of John 12) is to show that just as Isaiah saw Yahweh’s glory in heaven, but was rejected when he preached in Israel --- so too Jesus who saw the glory of God the Father in ways far beyond what Isaiah saw --- was rejected in a worse way because he was the promised Messiah that Isaiah spoke about. It is “these things” that Isaiah saw and wrote about.

CONFIRMATION

Now just in case you think I am barking up the wrong exegetical tree, I wish to point out that not only does Jesus himself in John’s passage connect his Messianic sufferings as the means of bringing “glory”, but this is how the other apostles also understood the case. Remember, Jesus has already indicated that by his being “lifted up” in a death of ignominy, His Father will be glorified and will also reward him with a glorious salvation harvest (John 12: 27f). Remember also that the disciples did not get this connection between Messiah’s sufferings and his glory (John 12: 16). But after Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven to God the Father’s Right Hand, the disciples finally ‘got’ it;

“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Peter 1:10-11).

Certainly Isaiah was one of the prophets mentioned by Peter who centuries before had seen “the sufferings of Messiah” and “the glories” that would follow. In harmony with Peter his fellow apostle, John agrees that the prophets Zechariah, the Psalmist and Isaiah saw the sufferings of Messiah and the glory that would follow (John 12: 12-16; 37-41). We must connect the dots and see that in John chapter 12 the apostle is writing with the knowledge that Isaiah had foreseen Jesus the Messiah’s sufferings on his way to subsequent glory.

The apostle Paul connected the dots too. Paul knew “these things” were written in the prophets, for he noted how the suffering Servant of Yahweh would “bear our iniquities” by “pouring out himself unto death”.⁴ But Paul also knew Isaiah had seen Messiah’s glorious reward and how Yahweh God would “see” the “anguish of his soul and be satisfied” (Is. 53:10f). After he had “emptied himself” out unto death, “even death of a cross” God,

“Therefore also highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord Messiah, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2: 9-11).

Paul, Peter and John all knew “the predicted sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.” Therefore, John 12:41 teaches that Isaiah “saw” the “glory” of Christ’s rejection and suffering and death for us. The Servant Song from Isaiah chapters 52 and 53 provides a rich source of “the predicted sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.” God’s glory is revealed in the Messiah’s pathway of humility. And through his sufferings, Jesus knew His Father would also be glorified. The crowds in Israel in John 12 did not see this.

This teaching has already been met earlier in John’s Gospel. For instance, predicting his sufferings and death Jesus says that in spite of how Israel is going to kill him, nevertheless His Father is the One Who “glorifies me” (John 8: 54). But they refuse to believe Jesus’ messianic credentials. They refuse to believe that Jesus’ teaching has the power to keep one from “eternal death” [Lit. “death into the age”] (John 8:51). Jesus retorts, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Did you get that? Abraham “saw” the future day of Messiah’s glory. This is what Isaiah and all the prophets also saw, Messiah’s future “day” of glory.

MORE NIV TAMPERING WITH THE TEXT

Now, you may raise an interesting point here. If you are reading along in your NIV Bible you will object and say, “But Greg, why don’t you just read on into the next chapter of John? During the Last Supper we read that , “Jesus, knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God ...” (John 13:3 NIV). So, if Jesus was returning to God, surely this proves Jesus had been in heaven before he came to earth? Surely this indicates Isaiah saw Jesus as God in heaven in Isaiah 6?” Nice question.

Remember how in the introduction to this article we asked whether the NIV translators were just careless or being deliberately manipulative with the text by changing the personal pronoun “his” into the proper personal name “Jesus”? Well, on this particular occasion the translators are up to their old tricks again. For John did **not** write that Jesus was “returning to God”! The NT Greek language had a perfectly good word for “return” but it’s not the word John uses here. What John actually wrote is this: “Jesus knew that he was going to God.”⁵ No, John does not say Jesus was “returning to God or “going back” to Heaven. It simply reads that Jesus knew he was going to God his Father in heaven ... but note again, between him and that glorious reward stood the horror of the cross.

⁴ Note carefully Paul does not say Jesus “emptied himself of the glory of His Deity” as trinitarians like to say. No, Jesus “emptied himself” by “pouring out his soul unto death”!

⁵ The NASB unfortunately reads, “Jesus knowing he was going back to God”, which again is an unwarranted nuance inserted into the text. The Greeks knew how to say somebody was “going back” but this is not what John penned here.

Our preliminary finding then, is that John 12:41 does not teach that Isaiah saw Jesus as God in heaven 750 years before he became a human being! The context is sufferings and glory to follow for Christ. But wait, there's more.

ISAIAH SAW YAHWEH IN HEAVEN.

It cannot be too strongly stated: In his sixth chapter, Isaiah says he saw a vision of Yahweh and His glory. There is not one scrap of textual evidence that Isaiah says he saw "Jesus' glory" in heaven, as the NIV would have us believe. Nor does Isaiah say anything of a God who is a Trinity in Isaiah 6.⁶

In the Hebrew Bible (commonly called the Old Testament) there are roughly 6,800 occurrences of the Divine Name Yahweh (written in Hebrew with four consonants YHWH). That's six and a half times the personal name of God appears on every page of your Old Testament, so it must be important to understand who the God of the Bible is! And in all of those 6,800 occurrences of God's Personal Name the accompanying verbs and personal pronouns are in the *singular*. Language has no surer way of communicating that Yahweh is One Person and not two or even three persons.⁷

In agreement with all the prophets, Isaiah makes a clear distinction between Yahweh and His Messiah. For Isaiah, Yahweh is One Single Person and is never confused as two Gods or two Persons who are God. For Isaiah, Yahweh is the God who will "form" His Messianic Servant in his mother's womb (Isaiah 49: 5). For Isaiah, Messiah is referred to as "the branch of Yahweh", the one on whom Yahweh's Spirit would "rest", the one who would "delight in the fear of the Yahweh", the one "chosen by Yahweh", the one in whom Yahweh "delights", the one who would be Yahweh's wise "servant", the one who would grow up before Yahweh as "a young plant", and the one on whom Yahweh would lay "the iniquity of us all" (Is 4:2; 11:2-3; 42:1; 52:13; 53:2,6,10; 61:1). Thus, *throughout the entire book of Isaiah, the prophet never confuses the coming Messiah as Yahweh God.* For Isaiah, Messiah is not Yahweh.

Furthermore, to say that Jesus *is* Yahweh is to break the inviolate trinitarian rule that the Persons of the Godhead must not be confused. Remember, Yahweh is a Personal Name. To say that God the Father is Yahweh and at the same time to say that Jesus is Yahweh is to confuse the "First Person" of the Trinity --- God the Father --- with the "Second Person" of the Trinity --- "God the Son". Indeed, if we say John is equating Jesus *as* Yahweh in John 12:41, then we are making a case not for Trinitarianism, but Modalism. Modalism is the concept that Jesus is God the Father expressing Himself in a different 'mode' or expression (it is proposed today by such groups as the Oneness Pentecostals). Thus, to say Jesus is Yahweh, creates a world of confusion and hurt for our trinitarian friends, even though they seem not to know it! It destroys the Bible's strict unitary monotheism.

Jesus never identified himself as the Father God, a concept even trinitarians do not accept. Isaiah claimed he saw Yahweh in Isaiah 6, not Jesus the Messiah. But what Isaiah did see and speak about is the prophetic vision of the rejection and subsequent glory that Messiah would achieve 750 years *in the future*. "These things" Isaiah saw. It is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of Messiah's sufferings and following glory that John writes about as being fulfilled in his day.

We conclude therefore, that John does not say that in Isaiah 6 Isaiah literally saw Jesus as God in heaven. To say that is to ignore the overall context of John chapter 12, to disregard the immediate context of John 12:37-41, both of which speak of the sufferings of Jesus being the necessary prelude to his messianic glory. Furthermore, to say that Isaiah literally saw Jesus as God in heaven is to ignore the consistent distinction in the entire book of Isaiah, and indeed of all the OT prophets, that Yahweh is One Person, and that the promised Messiah is never

⁶ Though some want to read into the threefold "Holy, Holy, Holy" a Triune 'Godhead', we know the rest of the angelic worship is to the unitary monotheistic God, for they say, "Holy, Holy Holy, is Yahweh of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Is.6: 3). Which is to say, we know Yahweh is a Single Person Deity because of the accompanying singular verbs and singular personal pronoun: The angels do not say, "Holy, holy holy *are* Yahweh of hosts and the whole earth is full of *their* glory"!

⁷ This distinction is followed in the New Testament where God is always the God and Father of Jesus. Indeed, 1,325 times in the New Testament "the God" (*ho Theos*) refers to the Father alone. There is not one verse in the entire Scriptural corpus that says God is Three in One. Not one! This agrees with Jesus' definition of the Father being "the only true God" with himself as "the Messiah" whom "Thou (note the singular personal pronoun Jesus uses of God!) hast sent" (John 17:3). Thus it may truly be stated that the entire Bible from beginning to end, testifies to a unitary monotheistic faith as opposed to the oxymoron of a so-called monotheistic trinitarian belief.

Yahweh God. It's been rightly said that translation is the subtlest form of commentary, and in this case I hope I have proved the NIV is giving you commentary, rather than translation!