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## Waiting and Waiters: Isaiah 30:18 in Light of the Motif of Human Waiting in Isaiah 8 and 25

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We are people who wait. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Paul even broadens the perspective to include that “All creation groans” (Rom 8:22). Pastors even spend much of their ministry with those who wait and struggle with the challenges of this world. We wait with those who struggle with grief and loss. Waiting factors significantly into the writings of Isaiah. We see a unique tension in Isaiah 30:18 when it states, “YHWH is waiting to show you grace. He will arise to show you compassion because YHWH is a God of justice. Blessed are those who wait for him.” This verse functions as a transition between the message of doom in Isaiah 30:1–17 and the message of restored Zion in 30:18–26. Waiting in this verse is merely mentioned without further elaboration. Waiting is simply stated in the beatitude without further elaboration before the text proceeds to its message of salvation. Rather, Isaiah 30:18 is the culmination of the theme of waiting anticipated earlier in Isaiah, namely in 8:17 and 25:9. The nature of the waiting in Isaiah 30:18 will be examined first and then these two other texts will be studied to demonstrate how they elaborate on the human waiting mentioned in Isaiah 30:18’s beatitude.

Isaiah 30 is a woe oracle directed against a proposed Egyptian alliance by Judah’s leadership against the Assyrian threat during the late eighth century BC. The issue of sin is a lack of trust. The people are described as stubborn sons, בְּנֵי סוֹרְרִים (Isa 30:1). This language is significant because it repeats the language of Deuteronomy 20:18–25 that prescribes capital punishment for the stubborn son. Doom is thus immanent for the people. Their rebellion is later described in Isaiah 30:9 with the adjective מְרִי that is much more common in the description of the wilderness.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 30:15 culminates the theme of the lack of trust by emphasizing the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> The exact adjective appears in Deut 31:27 where Moses uses it to describe the people in wilderness wanderings. Num 17:25 uses it at the conclusion of the Korahite rebellion when Aaron’s staff sprouted.

people in refusing salvation. This passage contains one of the clearest expressions of the prophet's message that is met with the tragic "but you refused" (Isa 30:15b).

Isaiah 30:19–26 moves on to describe the future hope of the people. This is a fairly complex collection of interwoven images. These include the attentive listening of Yahweh (Isa 30:19), the people's listening to a divinely given teacher (Isa 30:20–21), the ridding of idols as menstuous garments (Isa 30:22), agricultural abundance of restored Zion (Isa 30:23–24), and the transformation of the heavenly bodies (Isa 30:26). Thus, Isaiah 30:19–26 moves the reader into a description of the eschatological culmination at the end of the age with these motifs of extravagant abundance. The chapter concludes with the description of the fiery destruction of Assyria which functions as the paradigmatic archenemy.

Isaiah 30:18 acts as the transition between the age of the eighth century and the eschaton. It contains elements of both doom and hope. The chief challenge is that it is the only place in which Yahweh is the subject of the verb *קָבַח* as well as the function of *וּלְכֹן*. For example, Beuken argues that Isaiah 30:18 introduces salvation, claiming that it expresses Yahweh's eagerness to show grace rather than any sort of delay.<sup>2</sup> However, Seitz views Isaiah 30:18 as connected with the preceding verses. Yahweh's waiting is caused by the ongoing failures of each generation to heed (Isa 30:15). These failures of the people thus lead to the ongoing judgment of the people.<sup>3</sup> Watts captures a further tension well when he observes, "The phrase 'rises up to show you mercy' contains an inner tension. *יָרוּם* 'rise up', usually refers to YHWH's rousing himself for war on his enemies. Here it is paired with *לְרַחֵמְכֶם*, 'to show you mercy.' YHWH is forced to a violent course of action because Israel refused the quiet course that he had planned, for he is 'a God of justice.'"<sup>4</sup> Oswalt perhaps has the fairest assessment of these verses. He writes, "'Therefore'" (in Isa. 30:18) "introduces a statement which is admitted on all sides to be transitional. . . . All of these factors suggest that the case is at least as strong for

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<sup>2</sup> Willem A. M. Beuken, *Isaiah II*, trans. Brian Doyle, vol. 2 Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 136.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 219.

<sup>4</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33 (Revised)*, vol. 24, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 466.

the verse to be read in the light of the foregoing as of the following.”<sup>5</sup> Within this transition between doom and hope, we find the beatitude of people waiting.

The beatitude functions in conjunction with Yahweh waiting. The force of the beatitude is to provide comfort to those experiencing the delay. After observing that *יְשׁוּעָה* functions to introduce a beatitude, Sweeney sees a beatitude as functioning to describe, “one who is fortunate by reason of upright behavior or blessings already derived from God.”<sup>6</sup> Blenkinsopp further comments on the force of the beatitude. He writes, “Waiting for God is therefore waiting with God, the justification for which is not subject to verification but can only take the form of a blessing on the one who waits even while not free of doubt.”<sup>7</sup>

As the flow of Isaiah 30 is examined, one observes how Isaiah 30:18 transitions between doom and hope and describes the dynamic waiting of both Yahweh and the people. Yahweh waits because of the faithlessness of the people. After a time, however, Yahweh will act to restore the inhabitants to Zion. The prophet draws upon a rich collage of images to describe this salvation and cast it in undefined future terms. The experience of human waiting is not described. If attention is turned backwards to Isaiah 8, there an explicit description of the experience of waiting is encountered.

In fact, Isaiah 8 anticipates many of the themes in Isaiah 30. Isaiah 8 appears both chronologically and sequentially earlier than Isaiah 30 by interacting with the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. The political issues during this period are congruent with the political issues addressed in Isaiah 30, namely the intersection between political and theological allegiance. By the repetition of *חָכָה*, Isaiah 8 connects us to the beatitude in Isaiah 30:18 that uses the same word. While Isaiah 30:18 describes the waiting with a plural participle, Isaiah 8 describes the experience of waiting from the prophet’s perspective. Childs observes, “However, he does not retreat in despair or self-introspection. Rather, continues to hope in God with full confidence and chooses to wait until God no longer ‘hides his face’ from Israel in anger. Moreover, Isaiah has been given signs of the promise of a new

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<sup>5</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 557.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 515

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, vol. 19, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 420.

age.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, in this brief statement of the prophet, an image is presented of the quiet confidence of Isaiah who waits even while God is hiding his face. The prophet does not portray himself as upset, but rather withdraws as part of divine judgment. This gives us a personal picture of what it means to wait from the perspective of the prophet living in an irretrievably corrupt age. The experience of waiting is heightened because Yahweh is hiding his face from the people. The image of God hiding his face is a familiar one from the Psalms where it is used often in the context of laments to express the people’s despair that God is not acting graciously to them (e.g. Ps 13:2; 27:9; 44:25; 69:18; 88:15; 89:47; 102:3; 104:29; 143:7).

Isaiah 8 does place a limit on the delay of salvation. Here it differs from Isaiah 30:18 because rather than looking to the far future, it is more focused in the events of the eighth century BC. This is seen in Isaiah 8:1–4 where the salvation of *נְהַרְשֵׁלֵל הַיְהוָה בְּזוֹ* will happen before the child will be able to say *אָמֵי* and *אָבִי*. Isaiah 8 shows, therefore, both a delay of salvation and also the end of the delay. The end of the Syro-Emphraimite crisis, however, is not the final word of salvation. Within Isaiah 2–12, there is testimony to the breakdown of the human Davidic line that leads to the expectation of a decisive divine intervention that will accomplish what the human leader could not (cf. Isa 9 and 11). The chapters that elaborate on the salvation terms in Isaiah 8 again move to the eschatological horizon. Vindication in Isaiah 8 is ultimately incomplete and anticipates Isaiah 9.

Isaiah 8 provides us with the tension of waiting that happens when the people are not ready for salvation. The passage emphasizes the contrast between the prophet and the people. Isaiah depicts himself through this fairly infrequent example of first-person narrative in the book as the one who remains faithful along with his children. He and his children function as signs contrasted with the people around them. This is a fairly strong distinction that results in God hiding his face and the prophet being forced to wait. This anticipates the dynamic within Isaiah 30:18 of both Yahweh and the people waiting. Isaiah 8 shows the tension that exists while the people remain not ready. Yahweh approaches them with grace and compassion, but they refuse. Isaiah 8 shows the tension of the prophet who must remain waiting.

The other text that assists in understanding Isaiah 30:18 is found in the thoroughly eschatological vision of Isaiah 25 in which the people are again in a waiting mode. This vision is important because of the similarity of

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<sup>8</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 76.

vocabulary that is congruent with Isaiah 8 and 30, but shifts the emphasis to the distant eschatological horizon. Isaiah 25:9 anticipates the waiting of Isaiah 30:18. Set within Isaiah 24–27, this passage shares an emphasis on eschatological culmination of the divine plan that is congruent with the imagery of Isaiah 30:19–26. It provides a perspective that differs from Isaiah 8 in that it is placed in the eschatological future. Like Isaiah 30:19–26, Isaiah 25 consists of a vision of restored Zion here described in terms of the eschatological banquet on the mountain. Isaiah 25:9 uses the more common verb for waiting *קָוָה* rather than *יָחַבַּה*. These words are synonyms and appear elsewhere in parallel (e.g. Isaiah 8:17). Isaiah 25:9–10a is a victory song in response to Yahweh's establishment of his reign on Zion.

The preceding verses, Isaiah 25:6–8, depict salvation in decisive terms. This text describes a coronation banquet in which the great enemy death is destroyed. The banquet is unique to Yahweh and set in the future.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis upon the dominion of Yahweh culminating in the end of the age is a helpful counterpoint to the problems of the eighth century that plague the prophet and the people. Isaiah 8 and 30 both represent a breakdown of the human monarchy that results in looking towards a future divine intervention. Furthermore, the destruction of death in Isaiah 25 anticipates the language of healing that is present in Isaiah 30:26.

The waiting described in Isaiah 25:9 is that of triumph after a victory. It does not contain tension of not-yet-fulfilled expectations like Isaiah 8. The joy that is experienced is the result of God's action. Childs captures this joy well in his exposition. He notes that waiting is a typical Old Testament expression for worship, especially in the Psalter. He then writes, "The joy expressed in 25:9 is that period of waiting is finally over as God's salvation is experienced. The divine blessing on those who have waited has been indeed realized."<sup>10</sup> This joy fills out what waiting means for those experiencing the restoration in Isaiah 30:19–26. Thus it gives voice to the final hope implied in Isaiah 30:18 and actualized in Isaiah 30:19–26.

Set in the eschatological future, Isaiah 25:9 anticipates the beatitude of waiting that one encounters in Isaiah 30:18. To be sure, Isaiah 25:6–8 contains language that in some ways is more vivid than the language of restoration, but both it and Isaiah 30:19–26 describes salvation in terms of restoration and healing in cosmic terms. It gives a fallen voice to waiting

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<sup>9</sup> For helpful discussion consider "Il engloutit la mort à jamais": remarques sur Esaïe, 25, 8 a α." *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M Mathias Delcor* (1985): 283–296.

<sup>10</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 185.

after the transition in Isaiah 30:18 has happened and helps the hearer of this text to better appreciate waiting in light of the rest of Isaiah 30.

This study of these three pericopes has demonstrated the interlocking images within the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 8 described the faithlessness of the people facing of the Syro-Emphraimite coalition. This faithlessness and rejection of stillness anticipates much of the description of sin in Isaiah 30:1–17. In the midst of this threat, Yahweh promised through the sign of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz that deliverance would come within the child's lifetime. The people, however, were described as recalcitrant. The result was that the prophet leaves it as a written record and withdraws as part of the divine instruction of judgment. Isaiah thus waits for a God who hides his face until such a time in which his face is again revealed. Isaiah 25 gives a picture of waiting realized that anticipates the eschatological imagery of Isaiah 30:19–26. These two pericopes lead to Isaiah 30 where the tension is seen that exists as Yahweh both judges and promises salvation, but delays the salvation until the people are ready. Waiting in Isaiah 30:18 involves both God and people. Waiting permeates much of the Christian life as we live after God's climatic coming in salvation through Jesus Christ but before Christ's return to bring all things to their consummation. This foray into Isaiah shows how the prophet captures different facets of the waiting experience that encompass our lives.