Isaiah's Song: Liturgical and Missiological Implications

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Abstract:

Isaiah is one of the most studied books of the Hebrew Bible (HB). However, despite the enormous amount of attention given to Isaiah, one area of research is curiously untouched. A careful reading of the book reveals that it has much to say about 'song' or 'singing'. This message is embedded in the use of three Hebrew root words: *ranan, shir*, and *zamar*. These words are used over 30 times in Isaiah and appear in both verbal and nominal forms.

An examination of the three words unveils an intriguing pattern. They are prevalent in chapters 1-35 and concentrated in chapters 40-55. They are not utilised in chapters 36-39 and only rarely in chapters 56-66. This pattern fits the generally recognised segments of the book and provides structural clues for the book.

However, the primary paradigm that emerges has more to do with the theology of the book. The prevalence of 'song' in chapters 1-35, despite this segment being the 'doom and gloom' portion of Isaiah, is highly instructive. The concentration of 'song' in chapters 40-55 is also expected because of the hope motif pervading these chapters. It is fair to conclude that 'song' (and 'singing') in Isaiah has two primary functions: (1) 'Song' is the most appropriate way of speaking to God (liturgical implication); and (2) 'Song' is the most appropriate way of speaking about God (missiological implication).

Isaiah's Song: Initial Thoughts

The book of Isaiah is one of the most studied and debated books of the Hebrew Bible (HB). It was prominent in the Qumran collection and inspired great art and music in the Christian era. The book continues to inspire the music of the Church today (for instance, Russ and Tori Taff's 'Eagle Song' [sung by the Gaither Vocal Band], Steve Bell's 'Wings of an Eagle', and Reuben Morgan's 'Eagle's Wings' [sung by Hillsong] are inspired by Isa 40:31) and scholarly research alike. Much of the current research has sidelined a significant aspect of the book of Isaiah, the prophet's use of 'song' and 'singing' as liturgical and missiological conceptualisation. While most commentators will briefly analyse the songs that actually appear in the book, this is done in a rather cursory manner. There is little comprehensive treatment of the subject in most commentaries and the focus of most research pertains to the historical, literary, and theological issues that impact Isaiah.

This study seeks to begin a process of addressing this lacuna. It examines the linguistic data concerning 'song' and 'singing' in Isaiah and explores the liturgical and missiological implications of this concept. The study is not so much intended to be comprehensive as exploratory. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to an analysis of certain terminology and selected 'songs' in as much as these impact the understanding of this phenomenon in Isaiah. This study is conducted with the aim of inspiring further research into this fascinating motif.

Isaiah's Symphonic Structure

In recent times a great deal of scholarly energy has been directed at the book of Isaiah. However, these studies have concentrated either on authorship issues or literary analysis and theological exploration of the book. Consequently, there are numerous suggestions on both the structure and theology of the book. These studies have also sought to marry literary and theological ideas with authorship considerations. The prevailing multiple authorship theories have greatly influenced the study of Isaiah, to the extent that there is little consensus on the structure of the book (Wann Fanwar, *Creation in Isaiah*, 79-85). This article posits that the 'Symphonic Structure' of the book offers a clearer view of the message of the prophet.

The use of the label 'Symphonic Structure' is an attempt to explicate the unique manner in which Isaiah organises his material. The label consists of three things (see Fanwar, 85, note 1 for a full description):

(1) Similar to a symphony, there are clear movements in the book of Isaiah, with each movement being distinctive yet collectively are organically bound by literary and conceptual strands; (2) Like a symphony, Isaiah exhibits frequent and sudden transitions with ideas that oscillate and recur; and (3) Themes in the book are introduced one by one, in a symphony-like manner, and these themes crescendo and are reiterated before the close of the book. Isaiah can be viewed as comprising three principal movements with one interlude, as follows: Chs 1-35 is the First or Introductory Movement, Chs 40-55 is the Second or Crescendo Movement, while Chs 56-66 is the Third or Finale Movement. Chs 36-39 serves as the Historical Interlude as well as a structural pivot (Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 30). While each movement may also be broken up into discrete segments, the entire work itself bears a 'symphonic' imprint.

Keeping this macro view in mind, the presence (or sometimes absence) of 'song' or 'singing' either at the close of or within each significant segment of the book is frequently observed. Isa 1-12 exhibits an oscillating motion between doom and gloom passages and texts offering a glimmer of hope. The segment contains an early song, the 'Song of the Vineyard' (5:1-7), and climaxes with a 'Song of Praise' in Ch 12. While there are no songs in the segment which provides oracles against the nations (Chs 13-23), there are two songs (25:1-5 and 26:1-21) in Chs 24-27, Isaiah's eschatological unit. Chs 28-35 is the final segment of Isaiah's Introductory Movement and culminates with a 'Song of the Redeemed' (Ch 35). As expected, there are no songs in the Historical Interlude.

Isaiah's Crescendo Movement appears to be a seamless tapestry of sublime poetry. However, embedded within this tapestry are the four so-called 'Servant Songs' (it should be noted that the song words under examination in this article do not occur in the Servant Songs), a 'Song of Praise' (42:10-20), a 'Song of Victory' (54:1-17), and another 'Song of the Redeemed' (55:1-13). The Finale of Isaiah (Chs 56-66) does not contain any specific song but the climactic passage (65:17ff.) about 'the new heavens and the new earth' clearly echoes 'song' sentiments.

Isaiah's Poetic Paradigm

When studying the book of Isaiah, it is crucial to recognise that the bulk of the book is written in poetry. While there are prose sections in the book, the poetic nature of the book is visible even to the most casual reader. Chs 1-35 consists of both poetry and prose sections with poetry being the dominant form of writing. The most extended prose segment of the book is in Chs 36-39. Yet, even in this portion, certain pericopes may arguably contain poetic material. This is particularly true of Hezekiah's 'poem' (38:10-20) which he wrote after his recovery from illness.

There are different views concerning this poem of Hezekiah. It has been called a 'hymn of thanksgiving' (Herbert M. Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah*, 179), a psalm (Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 644; J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 292), and a 'prayer of thanksgiving' (Trent C. Butler, *Isaiah*, 205). The disparity in labelling this passages lies in the textual description of 38:9 where the 'poem' is called a '*miktav*' (meaning 'writing') in Hebrew but a 'prayer' in LXX (Septuagint). Subsequently, BHS has suggested that the text should be emended to read '*miktam*' ('a psalm') due to the similarity of this 'poem' with other '*miktam*' in the Psalms (see John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 55). Perhaps it is preferable to simply call it a 'poem'.

The Second Movement of Isaiah (Chs 40-55) is sustained poetry which moves seamlessly from start to finish. The only detectable break in this magnificent work of art is the use of the formula *koh 'amar YHWH* ('this is what Yahweh says') coupled with participial or nominal appositional phrases. In some cases (like 41:14), the phrase *n'um YHWH* ('Yahweh's declaration') parallels *koh 'amar YHWH*. 'This is what the Lord says' is frequently coupled with appositional phrases like 'creator of the heavens' (42:5) and 'your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel' (43:14). These constructions are the only structural markers in Isaiah's Second Movement. This formula provides 'breathing' space within a movement comprised of sustained and virtually unbroken poetry. The use of the formula provides structural clues for partitioning Chs 40-55 into smaller pericopes even though the outcome is somewhat irregular in terms of unit length.

The Final Movement of the book reverts to the mix genre of the First Movement. It is a combination of poetry (mostly) and a limited amount of prose. Therefore, as far as literary styling is concerned, the book ends more or less the same way as it begins.

Having said this, it is somewhat superfluous to speak of 'songs' in a book that contains so much poetry. The parameters set in this article for considering any passage (Servant Songs excluded) as 'song' is determined exclusively by the use of the three principal 'song' words that Isaiah employs. It should be

noted that these 'song' words are also the most frequent in the Psalms. Therefore, delimiting Isaiah's 'songs' to these terms is deemed appropriate. These 'song' words, reviewed below, present a clear portrait of 'song' and 'singing' in Isaiah.

Isaiah's Song Terms

Here, we examine the three principal Hebrew 'song' terms utilised by Isaiah, *ranan, shir*, and *zamar*. These words, in their verbal and nominal forms, occur throughout the book with the exception of Chs 36-39. Altogether, there are 36 occurrences of these words with *ranan* occurring 21 times, *shir* 10 times, and *zamar* 5 times. The words also occur in all three principal movements of the book with a slight concentration in the Crescendo Movement. This particular pattern is observed with most terminological and thematic data in Isaiah, strengthening the 'Symphonic Structure' view of the book. Further, the words appear in imperatival form 8 times and once as cohortative (a Hebrew command in the 1st person). Evidently, the command to 'sing' is important to the book (see Appendix A for a complete breakdown of the 'song' words).

The 'Symphonic Structure' of Isaiah is underscored by the distribution of these 'song' words. The words appear mostly in the Introductory Movement (Chs 1-35) and Crescendo Movement (Chs 40-55) of the book. They do not appear in the Interlude and only once (65:14) in the Finale. This pattern also applies to other themes of Isaiah. Creation motif, salvation thought, and eschatological consideration all present a similar pattern of distribution where they are concentrated in the First and Second Movements of Isaiah. In every instance, the Second Movement invariably contains a slightly higher concentration of words and ideas (see Fanwar, 79-85 and 180-187).

Furthermore, these song words appear most frequently in contexts dealing with God's salvific work. There are 'songs' connected with the judgement work of God. The book even mentions 'songs' that others sing (for instance, in 25:5 the 'song of the ruthless ones'). However, the majority of the 'songs' belong to the faith community, those who have experienced the redemptive work of God and will continue to do so.

The use of 'song' words in the context of salvation is highly instructive. 'Song' and 'singing' are often portrayed as appropriate responses to the salvation that God provides. What is even more intriguing is the command (e.g., 12:6; 42:10; 44:23; 54:1; etc.), reminiscent of the Psalms (see Pss 96:1; 98:1; 147:7; etc.), to sing songs, even new songs, to God. Clearly singing has something to do with worship as well. The role that 'song' and 'singing' have in the life of the faith community will be explored shortly.

The Table below highlights the most significant 'songs' in Isaiah (Servant Songs excluded); providing data on the identity of the singers and the reason for and content of each song.

Song	Who sings?	Why sing?	Content of the Song
Isa 5:1-7 'Song of the Vineyard'	The prophet?	To remind Israel of its sinful intransigence	God loves his people but must put a brake on their sin
Isa 12:1-6 'Song of Praise'	Judah (God's people)	To declare God's salvific work	Praise and adoration to the greatness and grace of God
Isa 25:1-5 'Song of Praise	The prophet?	To declare God's salvific and judgement work	Singing about God will quiet the songs of those who defy God
Isa 26:1-21 'Song of Victory'	Judah (God's people)	To celebrate what God has done and continues to do	Affirmation of faith in God
Isa 35:1-10 'Song of the Redeemed'	God's redeemed	To describe the redemption of God	The joy of redemption
Isa 42:10-20 'Song of Praise'	God's people	To express the idea that God's judgement favours his people	The salvific nature of divine judgement

| Isa 54:1-17 'Song of Victory' | God's people | To affirm hope in God's work | The salvific work of God provides hope for present struggles and future victory |
| Isa 55:1-13 'Song of the Redeemed' | Prophet? | To invite people to avail themselves of the redemption that God offers freely | The joy of redemption |

This analysis demonstrates that inevitably God's people are the ones who do the singing. The singing of the faith community is often a declaration of their faith in the salvific and even judgement work of God. They sing because they have experienced the joy of redemption. They also sing because they wish to affirm their faith in God. 'Song' is an expression of their praise and adoration for the greatness of God.

The 'song' words of Isaiah provide a portrait of the experience of God's people. On the one hand, God's people are commanded to 'sing' to the Lord; on the other hand, they 'sing' to express themselves to and on behalf of the Lord their God. It is evident that 'song' and 'singing' become the instruments of both the worship and mission. To further strengthen this idea, certain songs of Isaiah are explored at length.

Isaiah's Songs: Selected Samples

The thesis in this study is that the 'songs' in Isaiah have liturgical and missiological ramifications. While the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah are not the focus of this study, the 'songs of Praise' and 'songs of the Redeemed' are. A sampling from each type of song is examined below so as to demonstrate the foundational nature of 'song' and 'singing' to the life of God's people.

Songs of Praise: Isa 12:1-6 and 26:1-21

As discussed earlier, Isa 12 is the climax of the first major segment of Isaiah (Chs 1-12). It is also one of the shorter chapters of the book. The Song contains two of the three 'song' terms used in Isaiah, *zamar* (twice) and *ranan* (once). In 12:2 the noun *zimrat* is used, while the Pi'el imperative *zimmru* is employed in 12:5 and the Qal imperative *ronni* occurs in 12:6. The command to 'sing' to the Lord is clearly a significant aspect of the 'Song', especially when the use of the Pi'el imperative, with its intensity mode, in 12:5 is taken into consideration. In a manner that reflects several psalms (e.g., Pss 96; 98; 100; etc.), 'singing' is not merely a natural response to God but an expected one.

The Song consists of two stanzas, 12:1-3 and 12:4-6. The introduction to the Song, 'on that day', points to the future when the Song will be sung as response to the salvation God brings (Smith, 282). The underlying theme of salvation is encapsulated in the phrases 'God is my salvation' (12:2), 'Yahweh has become my salvation' (12:2), and 'from the wells of salvation' (12:3). These expressions are allusions to Isaiah's own name which means 'Yahweh is salvation'. They are also reminders of the Exodus experience because of the 'linguistic connections to the song the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea in Exodus 15' (Smith, 280). Coming so soon after the hope of a 'new exodus' presented in Isa 11, the Song serves a similar liturgical purpose as did the song of Exod 15.

The first stanza begins in the first person to reflect a personal response of the prophet towards the salvation God provides (Butler, 92). This stanza describes the joyful celebration of those whom God has redeemed and offers two reasons for this celebration. First, there is the experience of God's compassion despite his anger and the salvific consequence of such compassion (12:1). Second, God is not merely the source of salvation but salvation itself and trust in him inevitably results in redemption (12:2-3; refer to the discussion in Smith, 282-283).

The second stanza employs the imperatival structure that is common to other praise songs in HB and reiterates the 'on that day' concept. However, the Song moves past the personal tone of the first stanza and extends the call to praise God internationally. More significantly, these verses couple together the call to praise and worship God with the command to declare God to the other nations. The parallelism in 12:4 unveils this dual concept:

> On that day you will say:
> *Give thanks* to Yahweh
> *Call* upon his name
> *Make known* his deeds among the nations
> *Proclaim* that his name is exalted

The verse couples praise and worship with mission. These are the twin ideas of the Song. This juxtaposition of liturgical and missiological motifs underpins the entire Song. It may be argued that 'praise and thanks are essential to robust spiritual life' (John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, 292) and that 'the secret relationship of thanksgiving and worship must venture into the open to *make known*' God's deeds to the people (Motyer, 130). Isaiah's Song of Praise clearly expresses liturgical and missiological implications. Worship and mission go hand in hand as responses to God. Whereas worship is the proper manner in which to talk to God, mission is the appropriate way of talking about God.

These sentiments are also conveyed in Isa 26:1-21. This Song also begins with the phrase 'on that day' and proceeds to describe the judgement and salvific work of God which is the motivation for the Song. This Song uses two of the three song words, *shir* in 26:1 and *ranan* in 26:19. The verb in 26:19 is a Pi'el imperative, implying the intensity of the command. Not only is praise commanded, mission is also spelt out. The Song declares, 'Our desire is for Your name and renown' (26:8 HCSB). This Song also posits worship alongside mission; the two are inseparable twins. The missiological impact of 'song' and 'singing' in Isaiah is further enhanced in Isa 42:10-17, another Song of Praise that couples worship with mission. This Song begins with 'Sing (*shiru*) a new song (*shir*) to Yahweh' (42:10) but quickly follows this imperative with 'Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare His praise in the islands' (42:12). Again, worship and mission go hand in hand.

A Song of the Redeemed: Isa 35:1-10

This is the first Song of the Redeemed and it is also the climax of the First Movement of Isaiah. In this Song only the word *ranan* is used but it is used three times in 35:2, 6, and 10. In these instances the word describes the joyful celebration of liberation by nature and humans alike and ultimately by the redeemed. The song comprises three stanzas that describe the transformation of nature (35:1-2), the transformation of disabled humanity (35:4-6a), and the experience of the redeemed who are transformed by God's salvific act (35:6b-10; see Smith, 578). This seems the most plausible division of the song but there is no consensus on the matter. Whereas Butler (191) divides the Song into three units comprising of verses 1-2, 4-7, and 8-10, Oswalt (621-622) contends that the Song comprises three stanzas consisting of verses 1-4, 5-7, and 8-10 respectively. Motyer (272-275), based on a perceived concentric pattern, finds six stanzas in the Song. However, his view seems rather contrived and overstretched. Nevertheless, he correctly observes that the Song contains an inclusio (35:1 and 35:10) which uses the word 'glad' and 'gladness' (*sus*) respectively. Also, the term *ranan* appears at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Song.

The Song is the culmination of the preceding prophetic chapters before the historical narrative of Chs 36-39 (Butler, 191) and also forms a theological bridge to Isaiah's Second and Third Movements (Chs 40-66; see Oswalt, 620). As such, it is the gateway between the doom and gloom of the First Movement and the bright lights of salvation and hope of the Second Movement. The prominence of 'song' and 'singing' at this stage is crucial to the discussion here.

The singing of nature, the disabled, and the redeemed underscores the primacy of 'song' to worship and mission. If anything, the missiological aspect is heightened in the Song of the Redeemed. The most complete way of talking about God is to 'sing' of what he has done. Worship must inevitably lead to mission; the two are inseparable twins in the life of the redeemed. Because of salvation, God's people are able to worship him in joyful celebration and declare his works to all at hand with energy. Truly, 'the redeemed of the Lord will come to Zion with singing' (35:10).

Isaiah's Song: Final Reflections

In examining the 'song' terms of Isaiah and selected 'songs' within the book, this study has highlighted the twin concept that liturgy and mission are inseparable ideas. Wherever God's people are found, two

things are expected of them: to worship him and to make him known to others. Clearly, Isaiah's use of 'song' and 'singing' carries unmistakable liturgical and missiological implications. 'Song' appears to be the primary mode of communication available to the redeemed. Whereas worship is the way by which God is addressed directly, mission is the manner by which God is communicated to those who do not yet know him.

The tragic testimony of Christian history has been that much energy has been spent debating music while paying scant attention to the foundational nature of 'song'. Even the theological world has been remiss in not paying sufficient attention to this significant motif. Although Isaiah's creation thought, salvation theology, and eschatological musings are truly notable ideas that must be constantly studied, his 'song' motif is an equally significant path of research in as much as it explains the manner by which God's people communicate to and about him. In short, 'song' and 'singing' are the most appropriate way of talking to God and about him. Isaiah's use of 'song' and 'singing' has two primary functions: (1) it presents the most proper channel for addressing God, and (2) it offers the most appropriate avenue for talking about God.

Were Isaiah alive today, he would most likely urge the Church to 'sing' to the Lord and about his wonderful deeds. Isaiah is more than just a prophet; he is a liturgist and a missiologist. His 'song' motif encapsulates both the worship and mission of the Church.

Appendix A
Isaiah's Primary 'Song' Words

Hebrew Root	Passage	Morphology	Context
ranan/rinnah	12:6	verb	God's salvific work
	14:7	noun	God's salvific work
	16:10	verb	*God's judgement work*
	24:14	verb	*God's judgement work*
	26:19	verb	God's salvific work
	35:2	*verb*	God's salvific work
	35:6	*verb*	God's salvific work
	35:10	*noun*	God's salvific work
	42:11	verb	God's salvific work
	44:23	**verb**	God's salvific work
	44:23	**noun**	God's salvific work
	48:20	noun	God's salvific work
	49:13	**verb**	God's salvific work
	49:13	**noun**	God's salvific work
	51:11	noun	God's salvific work
	52:8	*verb*	God's salvific work
	52:9	*verb*	God's salvific work
	54:1	**verb**	God's salvific work
	54:1	**noun**	God's salvific work
	55:12	noun	God's salvific work
	65:14	verb	*God's judgement work*
	21x	**V 13x; N 8x**	
shir/shirah	**5:1**	**verb**	Blessing and *judgement* of God
	5:1	**noun**	Blessing and *judgement* of God
	23:15	noun	[Song of prostitute]
	23:16	noun	[Song of prostitute]
	24:9	noun	*God's judgement work*
	26:1	**verb**	God's salvific work
	26:1	**noun**	God's salvific work
	30:29	noun	God's slavific work
	42:10	**verb**	God's salvific work
	42:10	**noun**	God's salvific work
	10x	**V 3x; N 7x**	
zamar/zimor	**12:2**	**noun**	God's salvific work
	12:5	**verb**	God's salvific work
	24:16	noun	*God's judgement work*
	25:5	noun	[Song of ruthless]
	51:3	noun	God's salvific work
	5x	**V 1x; N 4x**	

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