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Chapter 8

**TOTAL OTHERNESS, AWE-DRIVEN SELF-
CONDEMNATION AND ATONEMENT FOR GUILT: THE
PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND
GUILT IN ISAIAH 6**

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ABSTRACT

Oriented in the integrated area of psychology and biblical studies, this chapter examines the interrelatedness between the psychological impact of religious experience and the evoking of guilt. A first-person biblical text is chosen—Isaiah 6, demonstrating the dynamics of one’s engagement in exotic visionary experience leading to the inducing of shame, guilt and its atonement. The cognitive aspect (according to the Hebrew mind) and the emotional state of guilt; the individual and collective dimensions of guilt (or corporate personality in the Hebrew mentality); and the difference between the Isaian emotive experience of shame and guilt will be explored. Employing a psychological lens along with literary critical tools, the psychological profile of Isaiah will be analyzed—providing a “window” into the personality’s inner reflection of his emotive state of shame and guilt. To Isaiah, the atonement for guilt should serve as an amendment and restoration towards the divine-human relationship. However, this study will further look into the extent to which the atonement for guilt is sufficient to bring about its amendment. Theories on reading as an “event” and the text’s emotive impact upon its readers (the notion of the emotive transference of guilt) will be discussed. In keeping with this line of investigation, the reader’s repertoire (gender-culture-context-situatedness) will become an integral part shaping the whole discussion (i.e. the “empirics” of reading). It is my high hope that through this study, the intricacy of perceiving the psychology of guilt as both a “science” and as an “art” will surface. Perhaps, this emerging concept should call for some methodological re-orientation and extension in this area of research.

INTRODUCTION

In this undertaking, I begin with a definition of guilt that is commonly accepted by many in the field, in that guilt is both a cognitive and an emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes that he or she has violated a moral standard and is responsible for that violation (<http://www.enotes.com/gale-psychology-encyclopedia>). While there are recognized distinctions between shame and guilt (Martinez-Pilkington, 2007; Schmader & Lickel, 2006); healthy and unhealthy guilt (Murray & Ciarrocchi, 2007); as well as individual and collective guilt (Daeg de Mott, 2001), the role of religious experience and its impact on the individuals in invoking guilt and shame have never received any serious attention in the field. For this reason, Isaiah 6 is intentionally chosen as a demonstrated example—the prophet Isaiah’s visionary experience with the Hebrew God, retold in his first-person “I”-voice.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

One’s methodological location shapes one’s orientation and approach toward the development and expansion of the psychology of guilt. As a biblical scholar operating within the integrated area of psychology and biblical studies, I perceive that there are three missing dimensions in the past research on the psychology of guilt: *First*, while empirical studies conducted through surveys and interviews with flesh and blood subjects (e.g., the intricate difference between guilt and shame, cf. Martinez-Pilkington, 2007; Leeming & Boyle, 2004) have been considered as normative paths, the employment of a psychological lens in reading first-person narratives in which the characters’ experience of guilt and shame is expressed through the authentic “I”-voice should carry the same weight in our exploration (cf. Silfver, 2007).

Second, as a well-established reading theory, the act of reading is considered as an “event” in that the emotive impact of the text upon its readers should always be placed in the forefront of discussion (Brown, 1998). In terms of the “empirics” of reading, engaged readers would potentially experience the same feeling of guilt and shame of the characters through the transference of emotion. This transferred emotive experience of guilt upon the readers would in turn shape their perception of what guilt is. In Isaiah 6¹, the “I”-voice of the character invites all readers to look into his interior life, his psyche. In other words, the readers of the biblical narratives experience the same emotion of guilt as experienced by the biblical characters through the event of reading. The whole aspect of the transference of emotion from the text to its readers should be an integral part in identifying, articulating, and defining the fluidic concept of shame and guilt and their peripheral realm of feeling/emotion (e.g., frustration, unworthiness) (Brown, 1998).

Third, the extent to which one’s gender, culture, context/situatedness may affect one’s perception on shame and guilt should be placed at the core of discussion (Thomas & Parker, 2004).² Reading as a Chinese-Canadian woman reader, I seek to gain an experiential

¹ Cf. Leung Lai, B. M. Total otherness, self-condemnation, and ‘mission impossible’: A three-world approach to Isaiah 6. Paper presented to the Pathways for interpretation seminar, Tyndale Seminary, February 27, 2008.

² Note the discussion on whether shame or guilt is the dominant “cultural” emotion in the west (Thomas & Parker, 2004, p. 177).

understanding of the psychology of guilt as I emerge myself in the same visionary experience of Isaiah—i.e. from the culture-specific perspective yet situated in the west.

RESEARCH AGENDA

I shall begin with the established maxims on the different aspects of the psychology of guilt. Using these proven truths as parameters, I shall proceed with a textual analysis focusing on the cognitive and emotive dimensions of the Isaian experience of shame and guilt and the atonement, as expressed in the first-person vision report—listening to Isaiah in his own “I”-voice and take him on his own terms. The dynamics of the textual development from the exotic vision to the three Isaian emotive responses (i.e. from seeing-hearing-perceiving; or from God’s vision-call-commissioning) is the focal point of my reading. In short, the trajectory of my reading moves from: a) established truths to the textual depiction of guilt and shame; b) from the experience of guilt and shame as expressed in the Isaian “I”-voice to the reader’s experiential understanding.³ My goal is to demonstrate that investigation of the psychology of guilt should go beyond theories, objective and empirical research methods into the terrain of experiential understanding. Exploration into the psychology of guilt and shame is therefore, neither a “science” nor an “art”. It is “both” a science and an art.

TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF GUILT

(1) On Guilt and Shame: Maxims

I begin with the following 6 statements which serve as parameters of my textual analysis:

- (a) Guilt is both a cognitive and emotive experience (<http://www.enotes.com/gale-psychology-encyclopedia>).
- (b) When a person engages in religious practices like confession and exotic vision, the feeling guilt and shame is often induced through the experience (Martinez-Pilkington, 2007; Merkur, 2004).
- (c) In some culture-specific communities (like the Ancient Hebrew or Chinese community/mentality), there is a certain interdependence between the individual and corporate guilt (Di Vito, 1999; Hsu, 1985; Leung Lai, 2008).⁴

³ In my case, I am reading as an overseas born Chinese Canadian woman, with a reading location from the west.

⁴ The concept of corporate personality is deeply rooted in the Hebrew mentality. As R. A. Di Vito (1999) has stated, the individual Israelite is always embedded in the patriarchal family and in the ever-widening circle of relationship defined by kinship (pp. 217-218). On the one hand, then individual and the community are inseparable and each finds its existential significance in close relationship to the other. This aspect resembles the traditional Chinese ideology of the harmony and interconnectedness of the individual (the “small-self”) in relation to nation/country (the “big-self”). Hsu (1985) has further stated that the autonomy of the self is not recognized in traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese “self” can be described as both interdependent and sociocentric (or situation-centered).

- (c) The interrelatedness between the sense of responsibility and the sense of guilt is recognized. With no sense of personal responsibility, there can be no sense of guilt (Daeg de Mott, 2001).
- (d) Unresolved guilt will lead to a state of unworthiness and shame. The fundamental difference between shame and guilt is that in the former, a person does not feel he could have avoided the action; in guilt, s/he feels responsible (Murray & Ciarrochi, 2007; Thomas & Parker, 2004; Schmader & Lickel, 2006)
- (e) The experience of unworthiness and shame is similar to a state of unhealthy guilt. It is a pervasive sense of responsibility for others' pain that is not resolved, despite efforts to atone. Whereas healthy guilt is an appropriate response to harming another which is resolved through atonement, such as making amends, apologizing, or accepting punishment. The importance of transforming this unhealthy guilt to healthy is that, healthy guilt inspires a person to behave in his/her best interests and others and make amends when any wrong is done. On the contrary, unresolved unhealthy guilt stifles a person's natural expression of self, creates a sense of defective identity, and also prohibits intimacy with others. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0004/ai_2699000485)
- (f) Atonement for guilt can transform unhealthy guilt to healthy guilt which can bring about the outcome of restored relationship.

(2) Guilt as Experienced and Expressed in the First-Person Narrative: Textual Analysis

- (a) Genre: First-person "vision report"
Isaiah 6, a first-person "vision report" is chosen on four grounds: *First*, the character Isaiah engages in a unique religious experience (exotic vision of God) and from which the feeling of guilt and shame are induced. *Second*, the personality shares his experience of guilt and awe in his authentic "I"-voice, as a "first-person" vision report. *Third*, the narrative is embedded with some of the pivotal elements for the study of the psychology of guilt (e.g., the individual and corporate guilt; the co-existence of shame/unworthiness and guilt; the atonement of guilt and its outcome); and it relates also to the psychology of religious experience. *Fourth*, the emotive realm of the narrative as retold in the self-referential "I"-voice of the personality is rather explosive. Correspondingly, readers' emotive experiencing could also be intense—moving beyond the service level of the text to that of felt, experiential emotion.
- (b) Reading strategy: A vision-drama (Isa 6)
The emotive setting of the narrative provides a distinct angle of perception as to the interrelatedness between guilt and the psychology of religious experience. "Meaning through genre" is a sound interpretive principle for biblical interpretation. I concur with J. Watts (1985) that a "vision-drama" reading is an appropriate port of entry for Isaiah 6. Unique to this chapter is its highly descriptive and dramatic character, with scenic renderings of situations and events (including the character Isaiah's inner speech/thoughts). In other words, the dramatic nature of this vision report invites an

“audience perspective in readers.” To grasp the full impact of its depiction, the chapter is best imagined, even viewed. I invite each reader to fully immerse himself or herself in the visionary experience of Isaiah—both emotionally and experientially—as it is described by the author’s “I”-voice. To demonstrate the “empirics” of engaging text, we readers need to become the audience of its performance.

- (c) The inducing of guilt and shame: Humanity encounters with the Divine (vv.1-5)
 After giving a brief referential introduction (v. 1a), Isaiah now retreats to the background. The Lord is now at the centre of the scene. Interestingly, even though the drama begins with the Isaian “I”-voice—“I saw the Lord”—the description here has nothing to do with the face of God. It centers on the majesty, splendour, holiness and glory—very abstract matters to human perception. From an audience perspective, with Isaiah I witness God sitting on a throne, wearing a robe so large that its train occupies the whole space of the temple. I perceive what it means to be “high” and “exalted”—the Lord’s majesty. The actions and voice of the 6-wing seraphim bring to life a more in-depth depiction of the Lord. They are flying and calling to one another: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; and the whole earth is full of his glory” (v.3). Their voices are so loud that the doorposts and thresholds are shaking, and the temple is filled with smoke (v.4). The unusual appearance of the seraphim, their loud voices, the shaking of the doorposts of the temple, and the smoke in it all contribute to my comprehension of the holiness and glory of God (vv. 2-4). To the reader/audience, these would have been very abstract matters without the audio-visual aids. It is an awesome depiction, an awful feeling, a frightening experience. The audio-visual scene depicted in verses 2-4 assists in bringing what seem to be abstract perceptions more concretely to the foreground in a comprehensive way. This forms the background for the inducing of unworthiness and guilt in the three subsequent Isaian emotive responses.
- (d) The three Isaian emotive responses (vv. 5, 8, 11)
 The flow in the development of this vision-drama is marked by the same 3 pathos-filled responses which begin with: “Then I said” in verses 5, 8, 11. The motif of seeing-hearing-perceiving frames the whole background for the Isaian “I”-voice and his emotive responses. He “sees” with his own “eyes” the majesty of the sovereign Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted. He “hears” with his own “ears” the resounding voice of the 6-wing seraphim shouting to each other with a triple “Holy” (v.3) which shakes the doorposts of the temple. His lips feel the burning sensation of cleansing coal taken from the altar. To Isaiah, this is an all-senses experience that requires the engagement of his whole being—witnessing to the fullest extent what it means to experience the holy and sovereign God as the “Total Other.” As to the Isaian interiority, it is also to be noted that the rhetoric of the chapter indicates a movement from “intense engaging” to “suppressed responding.”
 Isaiah responded in verse 5, “Woe to me!” I said. “I am silent! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” This is a vivid articulation of the spontaneous feeling of guilt and unworthiness—both on the individual and corporate level (me and my

people are people of unclean lips). Considering Isaiah as the sole object of this vision, the impact on him would even be greater, as is evident in this first “I”-response in the form of an “interior monologue” (v. 5). Overwhelmed with awe and in a state of shock, Isaiah breaks out with a desperate cry: “Woe to me! For, I am silent/finished.” With “woe” indicating an impassioned expression of grief and despair, the fact that here it is directed to himself is quite remarkable.⁵ The second part of the “woe” provides further qualification: “I am silent.” The Isaian “self-lamented woe” and “I am silent” complement each other in this self-representation of his emotive state. As a general expression of dismay, “woe to me” carries the notion of a self-lamenting cry over one’s situation.⁶ The force of this lament is further strengthened by using “I am silent” together which points to a fatal, hopeless situation, as if Isaiah’s very existence is at the verge of being wiped out. The whole expression here (v. 5a) echoes a funeral setting as if a life is gone forever, and there is absolutely no hope for survival—only mourning remains. These intense expressions depict vividly what the feeling of guilt, shame, and unworthiness is about. It is more than feeling sorry about his wrongdoings or offenses (against God). The self-lamenting woe (“woe to me”) signifies a strong self-referential feeling of doom, shame, and worthlessness, the whole self-identity is at stake here. As Martinez-Pilkington (2007) has argued, shame differs from guilt in that shame is essentially “self-referential.” Simply put, Isaiah is saying: “I am fundamentally a ‘doom’/deserve to be wiped out.” On the one hand, both the individual and corporate dimensions of guilt and their interdependence according to the Hebrew mind are exhibited in this Isaian “lamenting cry,” yet on the other hand, this lamenting woe is essentially directed to himself alone—as an individual beholding and experiencing the holiness and majesty of God. The corporate dimension of guilt fades away and the individual sense of shame and unworthiness looms large.

For Isaiah, the atonement for sin is felt both physically as well as emotionally. “Then one of seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, See, this has touched your lips: your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for” (vv. 6-7). The anticipated result of this atonement is a restored relationship between an unworthy/unclean individual and the Holy God. In the case of Isaiah, guilt is perceived and experienced as uncleanness and ascribed to his lips in both the individual and corporate dimensions—“for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (v. 5). This may have to do with the prophetic tradition in Ancient Israel in that the prophetic role is perceived as essentially the “mouth-piece” of God.

As stated in verses 6-7, one way of looking at the outcome of the atonement is a restored relationship between an unclean individual and the Holy God. Reading with the grain will be: With this renewed relationship, there comes God’s call and commissioning for Isaiah to undertake a “mission impossible” (vv. 8-12) and occasion the second (v. 8b) and third Isaian emotive responses (v. 11).

⁵ As “woe” is usually used with the dative, with 2nd and 3rd person often imply a denunciation of doom and judgment.

⁶ Cf. Isa 24:16; Jer 10:19; 15:10 in similar context.

After the cleansing of his lips and the proclamation that his iniquity is removed, there comes the voice of the Lord: "Whom shall I send and who will go for us" (v. 8a)? At this juncture of the Lord's calling and Isaiah's completed cleansing, there comes the second Isaian response: "Then I said, here I am, send me" (v. 8)! To most commentators, "then I said" indicates the immediacy of a spontaneous response. This, in turn, signifies the willingness and readiness of the one who responds. Perhaps a close reading of the text points in another direction. The immediacy of the response becomes the core of my inquiry. Should the atonement through cleansing and announcement of forgiveness be taken as a relief for Isaiah? (Note that the cleansing of the people of unclean lips is yet to be carried out). The text itself leaves gaps for the reader/audience to fill in. From the audience perspective, Isaiah is still in a state of shock after his vision of God. He then witnesses a seraph taking a live coal from the burning altar, flying to him and touching his lips. He has experienced an awful experience, a burning sensation! The announcement of the forgiveness of sins comes at the highest point of this intense sensation—rather than a more relieved, settled mental state. The emotive building up at this junction is at its climax. Reading the text with a psychological lens and against the grain, this Isaian response is that of awe and in a state of shock. It is, therefore, an awe-driven, spontaneous response. Therefore, should the renewal of God-prophet relationship be the outcome of the atonement for guilt?

Next, there comes the commission of God to Isaiah, the content of which is highly paradoxical. He is instructed to go and say to the people, "Hear indeed, but do not understand, and see indeed, but do not perceive" (v. 9). By way of explanation, Isaiah is told his prophetic task is to make people's heart calloused, their ears dull, and to coat their eyes. The whole purpose of this is to make the people deaf, blind and ignorant so that they might not repent and be healed (v. 10). As A. Evans has concluded (1989, pp. 48-50), the causative aspect of the command in verse 10 states explicitly that it is God's purpose to harden his people in order to prevent repentance, and to render judgment certain. Reading in this light, verses 9-10 serve to explain Isaiah's lack of success as a fundamental part of God's divine plan for him, and it is central to his mission. To a perceptive and skillful (keen in "seeing," "hearing," and "perceiving") prophet like Isaiah, he is fully aware of what it means to dull the faculties of the people so that they become incapable of "hearing," "seeing," and "perceiving." It is an awful task—one that seems very unreasonable for God to commission. "To make certain God's complete destruction of the land and its people" is a complete reversal of what a prophet's mission should be! In order to fulfill his task, he will have to put aside his perceptive skills, deny the very capabilities which give him the true identity as a prophet. From the perspective of the prophetic pathos, it is truly a "mission impossible"!

Against this perplexed feeling, Isaiah says, "For how long, O Lord" (v. 11)? This is not simply a request to know how long the situation will last. It is rather a deep-rooted plea that arises out of intense and complex emotions—frustration, confusion, and being restrained by God. Before the Lord Almighty, there is no room for him to argue or demand an explanation. In this sense, the expression here is a lamenting petition as often used in the Psalms of Lament, pleading with God to put present

suffering to an end. It expresses a sigh of sadness, a lament of grief—"For how long, O Lord?" It is succinct, yet deep emotion is embedded here.

The drama ends with God's answer which comes in verses 11-13. To Isaiah's plea, God replies that it will not come about until a complete destruction which brings the people and the land to a final end. In other words, Isaiah's plea is not granted at the end yet there is a remote notion of hope for the survival of the holy seed (v. 13). From the audience perspective, I see Isaiah on the stage with intense emotions of frustration, fear and grief—a picture of one who is under divine constraint. The portrait itself is very remarkable in terms of its "intense" but "silent" emotive responses. The issue is: To what extent are these Isaian emotions associated with the experience of shame, guilt and unworthiness?

The above outlining of the Isaian emotions as expressed in his three responses points to one intriguing observation. The anticipated result of the atonement for guilt in the Isaian case (v. 8a) is, at best, partial. From the two sustained emotive responses to the call and commissioning of God (vv. 8b, 11), the whole emotive realm points to the fact that Isaiah is still a defective identity/self in front of the holy God. His self-perceived status provides no room for him to argue or reason with God—the one who calls and commissions him to the "mission impossible." In short, a restored, intimate relationship with God has not been realized.

(3) **Guilt as understood experientially through the act of reading**

Reading is an event that occurs in the integrated area between text and reader. Shaped by my own gender-culture-context-situatedness, and as I engage in the meaning-making process of Isaiah 6, I ask three readerly questions of the text. *First*, what is the overarching message of the chapter, a first-person "call report," a "commissioning report," a "vision report," or something else? *Second*, is "Here I am, Send me" an indication of readiness/willingness (as a result of the atonement) or an awe-driven, spontaneous response? Moreover, is the last Isaian reply "For how long, O Lord" a "quest for information" or a sustained, silent lamenting cry—a "plea for mercy"? *Third*, and an important one for the objective of this chapter, is the Isaian guilt atoned for through the cleansing with burning coal performed by the seraph? In addition to that, what is the nature of guilt, shame and unworthiness induced through humanity's encounter with God (like vision and confessional prayer)? Alternatively, what is the interplay between the psychology of religious experience and the psychology of guilt?

The answers to these questions are interdependent. The above textual analysis does provide directives in reply to these questions. My reading supports the idea that Isaiah 6 is essentially a dramatic "vision report" in that the holiness of God (as the total "Otherness") is the core subject of depiction. It is cast in a stage setting of a Heavenly Council, with a self-conscious, unclean individual standing in front of a majestic holy God, climaxing in the emotive realm of *mysterium tremendum*. The overarching message of the chapter is therefore, the sheer reality of the sharp contrast existing between the holiness of God and the sinful nature of humanity. The essence of the 3 Isaian responses is that of "awe" and "silence." Reading in this light, the response in v. 8 is an awe-driven, spontaneous response rather than an affirmation of

the result of the atonement for guilt. The quest expressed in verse 11 is thus, a “plea for mercy.”

The most striking feature in this first-person vision-report is the paradox created in God’s announcement of the atonement of guilt and the yet-to-realize outcome of that atonement as indicated in the three Isaian emotive responses. When cast in the setting of humanity’s encounter with the “total otherness”—God, the nature of the emotion of shame, guilt, uncleanness and perhaps unworthiness experienced by the prophet Isaiah appears to be of a self-referential, inner-reflective, and self-perceived identity. Through the Isaian “I”-voice, readers are able to hear him saying: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty”—the utter reality of my existence before God.

CONCLUSION: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GUILT AND BEYOND

The psychology of guilt explored through engaged reading of this first-person vision-report is both enlightening and dissatisfying. Reading with the informed parameters entails a constant reminder of the discipline and theories established in the past. At the same time, the call for stepping beyond the terrain of the psychology of guilt and the psychology of religious experience into that of reader’s emotive experiencing is evident—for psychologists, religious practitioners (Murry and Ciarrocchi, 2007), and biblical scholars.

In the case of Isaiah 6, when both the psychology of guilt and of religious experience are taken into consideration, our study demonstrates that guilt, shame (and the long-debated distinction between the two, cf. Murray & Ciarrocchi, 2007; Thomas & Parker, 2004; Schmader & Lickel, 2006) and unworthiness are essentially different ways of articulating the same emotive realm—a naturally evoked feeling when humanity enters into an intimate encounter with God—one that is of a “total other” nature. Perhaps, a multi-faceted, more holistic “psychology of guilt” may emerge through multi-disciplinary and collaborative efforts among scholars and researchers of diverse disciplines and methodological locations.

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