



“Whom shall I send...? ... Here, am I, send Me! (Isa 6:8)” *Ambiguity of the Call, Ambiguity of the Response:* A critical assessment of the Priestly Vocation in the context of the Call of Isaiah in today’s world

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ABSTRACT

The episode about the call of Isaiah (cf. Isa 6:1–3, 6–8) presents a crisis of ambiguity in the way the call was processed and lived. Ambiguity stems from the differing attitudes displayed by *the caller* and *the called*. Although the caller is divine and omniscient, yet the question regarding who to choose and send evokes a sense of uncertainty. Similarly, the response from *the called* seems equally confusing. The characters’ attitudes are obscure because *the caller* appears to be unsure about the right candidate for the task whereas the called thinks he is ready and he accepts to be sent without regard for the unknown. Meanwhile, his initial fear, insecurity and unworthiness rather cast doubts on his confidence and enthusiasm for the responsibility. This article uses a narrative analysis to study ambiguity in the call of Isaiah and draw implications for priestly vocation in today’s world. The paper argues that the priest’s vocation, like that of Isaiah, also portrays ambiguity of different behaviours and attitudes including knowing and not knowing, being holy and being unholy as well as feeling worthy and unworthy at the same time. Nevertheless, the candidate is assured amidst uncertainty that his vocation can be lived only through an absolute reliance upon the One who calls and who can embolden him with confidence and a sense of worthiness.

Keywords: Ambiguity, vocation, Isaiah, prophet, priest, priesthood.

INTRODUCTION

The scene in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3, 6–8) which is commonly known in Prophetic Literature as a call narrative describes Isaiah’s vision, experience and interactions with the Divine. In the narrative, God appears to need a suitable person who must be sent to undertake an important assignment on God’s behalf among His people. Isaiah recounts how he happens to be a witness to an assembly of God and His angels. He is shocked and surprised to have been privileged to partake in this awesome assembly. He is also terrified when he realizes that he is at a place he does not deserve to be, and prior to the calling, he declares his unclean state: his unworthiness as well as his incapacities (cf. Isa 6:5).

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The narrator seems to show an ambivalent attitude on the part of God. God probably does not know who exactly to call, name and send. The question: “Whom shall I send?” leans towards ambiguity because we are told in the narrative that Isaiah was present at the divine meeting, and God should have known Isaiah was there to be named, called and sent. Ambiguity, here, delineates a word or a statement that defies a single interpretation. It is a *perusal surprise*, i.e. an experience in a literary piece that deviates from what is normal and ordinary to the reader.¹ Responding in the words, “Here, am I, send Me!”, Isaiah also admits to the same degree of ambiguity. He knows that not only is he unworthy and unclean, but he is also not qualified with credentials and capabilities for the task.

However, he probably feels he must respond positively to the call with a conviction that he is poised to perform the task completely without concern for what may come along with it. The ambiguity that characterizes the call also somehow translates into the response it receives. The messenger plays his cards around ambiguous oscillations between fear and confidence, ignorance and knowledge, disqualification and readiness as well as weakness and seeming strength. Admittedly, the task is unambiguously sure; a pressing need that demands urgent execution. The ambiguity is both with the call and the response: Does Isaiah know he must respond as he did? Does the caller know him to be the one who must respond? It is not clear, at least from the narratological purview. It is shaped in ambiguity. Brooks holds that “ambiguity is inherent in a text.”² This notwithstanding, it is the person who heeds the calling invitation with an affirmative answer who is chosen and sent. The ambiguity which, hereafter, identifies with the behaviour of Isaiah as he carries out his mission as a prophet can be seen to parallel the priest living to fulfill his priestly vocation in the world today.

The present study employs a narrative critical analysis to examine the characteristics which the theme of vocational ambiguity in the story of Isaiah’s calling shares with the priestly vocation. In this sense, the author is guided by the diachronic and synchronic approaches with more reliance on the latter. He also leaves out issues and aspects of the pericope which other scholars may want to consider such as authorship, date, authorial intent, composite literary features, and similarities with extra-biblical texts just to name a few since these do not form the focus of the current work. As a narrative piece, the story on its own conveys meaning to the attentive listener, and this is a point of departure for analysis in this paper particularly on the synchronic plane.³

METHODOLOGY

Narrative analysis revolves around the application of steps and techniques to ascertain meaning in a narrative piece. The present study follows Fokkelman’s model of narrative analysis to undertake a critical analysis of ambiguity regarding the call of Isaiah and relates it to the vocation to the priesthood in today’s world. A narrative is made up of two main components namely, a narrator’s discourse and character’s discourse.⁴ Narrative analysis depicts examining words and techniques employed to compose a story in order to interpret it. According to Fokkelman, meaning is embedded in texts but it can also be deciphered through a proper

¹ Michael C. Ndele, “Textual Ambiguity and Identity in Genesis 18–19: A Narrative Critical Reading” (PhD Dissertation; Leuven: KU Leuven Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, 2024), 14; For David Aaron, ambiguity is a common phenomenon in biblical texts but which is often overlooked. He regards ambiguity as stemming from the uncertainty about the meaning of particular statements usually metaphorical expressions, cf. David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1–2; see also Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3; Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

² David G. Brooks, “Ambiguity, the Literary and Close Reading” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12/4 (2010): 2.

³ Cf. Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, Trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Knox, 1999), 21; A pericope is simply a portion of scripture with a range of verses designated for a discourse about a particular subject, i.e. Isa 6:1–3, 6–8 is a pericope about the call of Isaiah. All scriptural passages are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated. A diachronic approach focuses on the historical development of the text while the synchronic deals with the text in its present form with which the reader may investigate meaning, cf. David Emanuel, *An Intertextual Commentary to the Psalter: Juxtaposition and Allusion in Book I* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022); Jan Christian Gertz, Angelika Berlejung, Konrad Schmid, and Markus Witte. *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Literature, Religion and History of the Old Testament* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 32–34, 39–41.

⁴ Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction* (Trans. Alexander Starrit; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 119; see also Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 5; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 67.

analysis of form and content.⁵ The approach involves performing certain operations on a text which include the division of a text into smaller segments for easy analysis.⁶ This helps to discover “relations” and “correspondences” among characters in a narrative. For instance, through a narrative analysis, one may understand certain relations that exist between words, symbols and gestures used by the characters in the call narrative of Isaiah.⁷ As a synchronic approach, a narrative critical analysis proposes that meaning is in the text but it is also generated through the story by the reader.⁸ For this reason, Fokkelman argues that biblical narrative texts are “products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence which have been crafted to speak for themselves provided there is a competent reader listening closely.”⁹ Thus, Isaiah’s call episode, in Isa 6:1–3, 6–8, provides a narratorial context for the pericope to be studied through a narrative analysis. The call of the prophet Isaiah appears unique in the sense that it is set after several chapters into the book.¹⁰ More so, Isaiah’s story about his calling and commissioning also shares literary resemblance to the events of the calling of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel.¹¹ It constitutes “a first-person narrative of the prophet receiving his call to task.”¹² Isaiah’s call narrative, in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3, 6–8), where he recounts his vision of the divine assembly can be viewed from the perspective of ambiguity. The prophet’s mode of appearing at the extraordinary council of the Divine and His cohorts is marked by ambiguity. Ambiguity is evident when one examines critically the ensuing conversation between Isaiah and his interlocutors regarding his calling and commissioning processes.¹³

Historical Background to Isaiah’s Call Narrative

The call of Isaiah is preceded and occasioned by the historical-political circumstances of his time. Prefaced in the pericope, the narrator points out the historical setting of the narrative: “In the year that King Uzziah died... (Isa 6:1)”. Thus, he situates Isaiah’s call and mission within the period of the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah.¹⁴ During these historical moments in the eighth century (ca. 740 BCE), the two kingdoms of Israel in the North and Judah in the South were faced with political tensions from the Assyrian empire.¹⁵ Assyria had become a superpower with its massive conquests of other nations surrounding the Mediterranean Sea in the ancient world. The nations that proved anti-Assyria faced the threat of Assyrian invasion and would subsequently be made to capitulate to an Assyrian rule. While some nations united to fight back against the Assyrian hegemony, Israel sought to remain aloof in order to maintain peace and security with Assyria.¹⁶

The Assyrian forces brought great upheavals against Judah and other nations which shook the socio-religious foundations of the people of Israel. The political turmoil master-minded by Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser, Sargon II and Sennacherib (ca. late 8th century and early 7th century, i.e. 705–681 BCE) among the regions in the west compelled the Judean King Hezekiah to ally with Assyria for survival.¹⁷ Such a move required the payment of huge tributes to the Assyrian King. This relationship compromised the worship of

⁵ Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 97.

⁶ Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 97; see also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 2011), 188.

⁷ Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 118.

⁸ A narrative analysis as a method falls under the broad synchronic approach which suggests that the text can be analyzed in its present form through the study of “the intrinsic connection between form, content and intention, insisting that these cannot be isolated from one another,” Gertz *et al.*, *T&T Clark Handbook of the Old Testament*, 41.

⁹ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 21.

¹⁰ Unlike the books of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel which detail the accounts of their calling at the beginning, Isaiah’s call narrative occurs in chapter six of the book of Isaiah.

¹¹ Cf. Isa 6:11–3; Jer 1:41–9 and Ezek 1:13–15.

¹² Ronald L. Troxel, *Prophetic Literature: From Oracles to Books* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1731–74.

¹³ Cf. Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity*, 51: For her, ambiguity stems from a text since she states that “the text in its physical form leaves the reader at the crossroads of multiple interpretations”; see also Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 117.

¹⁴ Cf. Gordon McConville, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Prophetic Books: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2023), 34.

¹⁵ Cf. Victor Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 229.

¹⁶ Cf. John Hayes, *Amos the Eighth Prophet: His times and His Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988), 16–21.

¹⁷ Cf. Carly L. Crouch and Christopher B. Hays, *Isaiah: A Paradigmatic Prophet and His Interpreters: An Introduction and study Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 35.

YHWH with syncretic lifestyle among the people of Israel.¹⁸ New trade contacts and relationships with foreigners and other cultures weakened the traditional ties with the homeland as well as the adherence to the covenant among Judeans in the diaspora.

Coupled with the political advantage and economic prosperity that accrued to Judah from the Assyrian empire, the society became stratified into upper and lower classes where the upper elites exploited the lower majority for their own selfish-interests. Local agricultural production that made subsistence possible for all was expanded into a large-scale production to facilitate tribute payment at the expense of the needs of the masses. The few elites in positions of political power took advantage of the economically marginalized to perpetuate injustice and enrich themselves. Thus, the leaders lost focus and disregarded the covenant stipulations to ensure economic equity for all people.

Just like his earlier contemporary eighth-century prophets such as Amos and Micah, Isaiah lived in the Southern kingdom of Judah where moral decadence, religious apathy and disobedience to the covenant were rampant.¹⁹ Isaiah's mission would lead him to speak to the powerful, the Kings and rulers of Judah, the elites as well as the ordinary people who had abandoned the ways of YHWH. Isaiah acknowledged his impure state and disqualification for the task during his encounter with the Divine, but he now finds himself in a position that contradicts his personal credibility for his mission as a prophet. He is aware that he is unclean like his audience and yet his ministerial concern will be focused on holiness, justice, righteousness, and obedience to the worship of YHWH.²⁰ How is Isaiah able to deal with his own states of life as well as those of his people? This spells out the uncertainty of his mission since he is still Isaiah who looks and smells the same as his people.

Conversely, the priest like Isaiah is the same in all things as his people, but he seems, at the same time, to carry a message that contradicts the lifestyle he shares with them. In both Isaiah's days and in the priest's world today, corruption, injustice and disobedience towards God's ways exist among people. Nevertheless, it is human beings who must speak to counteract and correct these perverse behaviours with divine authority. Hence, the call of Isaiah to the prophetic mission and that of the priest to the priesthood seemingly resonate with each other in ambiguity.

Ambiguous Call versus Ambiguous Response²¹

Ambiguity also connotes contradictions with regard to meaning and understanding.²² It may reflect a process of reaching the full content of a reality rather than an attainment of it.²³ In other words, that which is ambiguous is in a confused state and lacks complete and total understanding though it is comprehensible. The ambiguous phenomenon is a state of confusion in a process of attaining clarity. The call of Isaiah is as ambiguous as its response because "Whom shall I send" denotes perhaps 'I do not know who to send, and I am not sure whether there is anyone capable and competent'. Such a call tends to leave its hopes at the mercy of the prospective respondent. It is open and bereft of any restrictions that may influence and limit response. The response, "Here, am I, send Me!" is imperative and suggests readiness, but it is also short of the full knowledge and understanding of the meaning of the task connected with the call. This is because the

¹⁸ Cf. Crouch and Hays, *Isaiah*, 17–26.

¹⁹ Cf. Crouch and Hays, *Isaiah*, 30; see also Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets*, ... He argues that it was for such reasons that Isaiah was warned in his vision that "people will neither hear nor understand for they had disobeyed earlier ones, Is 6:9–10; Zech 7:11–12; Amos 2:12; Hos 6:5."

²⁰ Cf. Crouch and Hays, *Isaiah*, 29–30.

²¹ This along with the other topics of outline in this paper has been intentionally selected given the scope of the present work to deal with the posture of ambiguity in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3; 6–8) and its relation to the vocation to the priesthood by drawing upon the method of a narrative critical analysis. The aim is to highlight the evidence of the phenomenon of ambiguity (as defined and explained in this paper, see pp. 1,3,5) regarding Isaiah's call narrative rather than the theology thereof even though this has also been occasionally tackled and can be glimpsed in relevant analyses.

²² It is "the doubled or duplicitous character of signification as exemplified in the way a sign represents one thing or meaning, and another (and another), the way bare/bear is ambiguous as sound as well as grammar, or the way character means the outward letter and the inner spirit," Timothy Bahti, "Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture," *Comparative Literature* 38/3 (1986), 211.

²³ For Brooks, "ambiguity is or is something that occurs to—is an obstacle that presents itself before—an unstable state of knowledge or understanding that is seeking to become a stable one," Brooks, "Ambiguity, the Literary and Close Reading," 3–4.

respondent had already dismissed himself as a possible candidate when he declared himself as unclean and unfit for the task (cf. Isa 6:5).

As the call is couched in confusion, the response is also framed in ambiguity. Both the call and the response share similar features as a means rather than an end in themselves. They signify a process; a journey's beginning but not the attainment or the destination. For *the called*, the response may indicate a process of learning to know something never known about the mission, experience what has not been realized, and acquire strength and skills he does not have. On the part of *the caller*, however, an ambiguous call implies widening the scope of the invitation, a process of extending the call beyond the boundaries of territories, time, persons, appearances, merits and qualifications.

In essence, the ambiguous response to the ambiguous call allows the mission bearer to be viewed as someone who may not possess a full understanding of what he carries to communicate to others to fulfill his mission. This means the prophet does not necessarily have to bear resemblance to a perceived image of prophets, come from a town or home of prophets, walk and behave like prophets, but he is someone impelled by a sense of necessity and urgency to bear witness to what he has been given to accomplish a prophetic task. Therefore, he cannot and may not be understood because he is responding ambiguously to an ambiguous calling on his life.

Isaiah's Calling: A Paradigm for Understanding the Vocation to the Priesthood

From its ambiguous outlook in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3, 6–8), the call of Isaiah may be observed to provide a plausible framework to examine the priestly vocation in detailed dimensions. Isaiah's call aligns with the call to the priesthood in such aspects as the mode of the call, the candidacy, setting, and nature and scope of mission.

First and foremost, the act of calling is the initiative of the One who calls.²⁴ The caller addresses the call to people in their own conditions of life. He calls when He calls not because of a need but because it is part of the divine-human relationship.²⁵ It is a free call that can be heard by people anywhere and in their various circumstances of life. The particular style of Isaiah's call explicates the point. The moment of his calling experience is described as a vision in which he encounters the caller by seeing, hearing and responding to his call. People can hear the call to the priesthood in a similar way but in various other ways as well. For some people, it is revealed to them through conversation with others who have told them their life seems to be moving in this direction. The call may reach people by inspiration from a priest attending to his priestly duties in the parish or in society. A person who constantly participates in the Church's life in the presence of the priest and the congregation can be drawn nearer to hear the call to the priesthood. For people who receive their calling under this mode, they can be compared with Isaiah.²⁶ There are also persons who may not have connections with the Church and priests but receive the call by means of the force of an intuition they experience to follow this path. Both Isaiah's call to the prophetic mission and the call to the priesthood converge at a point where there is a sense of urgency that produces a response—an affirmative answer—a conviction for readiness in the person who hears the call.

Secondly, there are no parameters to judge the candidacy of Isaiah for the prophetic role. Isaiah is chosen to be a prophet because he saw, heard and responded to the call. This means he was available and ready for the mission. He was an ordinary person who only showed willingness and readiness to undertake the bidding of a higher power. There was no record of his credentials except for his availability. In like

²⁴ Cf. Mt 9:37–38; Lk 10:2: Jesus makes evident the primacy of the caller's initiative in a vocational journey when He says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest"; see also Pope John Paul II, "I Will Give You Shepherds: On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day," *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 1992), p. 94, no.36, "It is God who takes the initiative in the call."

²⁵ Cf. Geoffrey Chapman, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 7, no.1, par.1: The catechism makes it clear that God calls out of sheer goodness of creating man to share in his blessed life. Thus, "For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength."

²⁶ Matthews argues that the description of the heavenly beings in the vision of Isaiah suggests that he was probably "within the inner precincts of the Jerusalem temple," Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World*, 230.

manner, people from anywhere and from various backgrounds can be chosen for the priestly ministry. It is only those who avail themselves of the call to the priesthood who are trained and formed to become priests in the present time. It is not based on merits and sophisticated credentials. It is a gift freely dispensed to those who accept it. The synodal exhortation expounds on this in the following: “The history of every priestly vocation, as indeed of every Christian vocation, is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him.”²⁷

Furthermore, since the call is ambiguous and knows no bounds, its setting cannot be limited to a specific geographical location. The setting for Isaiah’s call is probably a sacred space in the temple (cf. Isa 6:1). This does not limit all settings for future respondents of the call to it. The mission inherent in the call revolves around the person who answers it more than about the place. The setting, i.e. the particular location, of the moment where one listens to the call can be anywhere including a holy ground, at the workplace, in the field, on the farm, at home, in the street, alone or in a group travelling by any means of transport, for example, by bus, boat, car, plane, train, bicycle, motorbike, ship or canoe. The call is directed to reach any place. Its response can come from people from anywhere including unfamiliar territories. It does not submit to human expectations.²⁸ This aspect of the call and its response lend credence to ambiguity because ambiguity causes us to be surprised. Therefore, the call to the prophetic mission no less than the priestly vocation may be experienced in places we do not think about while its response may come from people we will not endorse and choose.

Finally, it is the caller who determines the nature and scope of the mission he calls Isaiah to embrace. He alone knows the weight of the load for which he makes a call that demands a corresponding answer from a person. The specific assignment of the call is known to the One who calls but may not be known to the one who answers it. The caller, i.e. God, the Lord, the Divine, knows the task may be huge and heavy and so He leads, guides and accompanies the candidate concerning its execution. Isaiah who by his ambiguous response mirrors the candidate to the priesthood at this moment seems to lack understanding of the full extent of the mission. However, he also appears to trust in the One who calls him and he is probably confident he can carry it out. It is not for nothing that the call, as ambiguous as it is, can reach all but only a few may hear and answer it.²⁹ By this token, the words, “Whom shall I send?” in Isaiah’s vision signify a vocational encounter which suggests that the priestly vocation is open to all and anyone can respond to it. Similarly, persons who affirm ‘yes’ to the call do so because they also, like Isaiah, probably trust in the caller and His mission with a confidence that makes them ready.

All in all, Isaiah’s call episode offers a plausible framework to understand the vocation to the priesthood. His vocational encounter—a moment in which he sees, hears and speaks—seals his being called by a higher power. It is a time of divine-human encounter that produces a dialogue through the actions of seeing, hearing and speaking. The human being sees something mysterious (the divine), listens to a voice and speaks to affirm an answer to the voice. On the narrative front, a vocational encounter is enacted through the agency of three verbal actions of seeing, hearing and saying something. These actions give force and meaning to the encounter. The following illustrates the three verbal actions of Isaiah’s vocational encounter in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3, 6–8)

Action One: Isa 6:1:	וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי	Then, I saw the Lord
Action Two: Isa 6:8a:	וַאֲשָׁמַע אֶת־קוֹל אֲדֹנָי	And I heard the voice of the Lord
Action Three: Isa 6:8d:	וַאֲמַר הֲנִי שְׁלֵחֲנִי	Then, I said , Here am I, send me

²⁷ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, p. 94, no. 36.

²⁸ See how the selection of the following individuals to partake in the divine mission defies the logic of human expectations: David’s selection among his siblings to be anointed king of Israel (1 Sam 16:1–13), Amos’ calling as a prophet (Amos 7:10–15) as well as Paul’s calling as an apostle to the gentiles (Acts 9:1–16).

²⁹ Ambiguity, in this sense, spans openness, flexibility and freedom, cf. Ndele, “Textual Ambiguity and Identity in Genesis 18–19,” 194.

The tripartite actions expressed in the first-person singular forms signify Isaiah's active and total participation in this new path. The verbs stated in active rather than passive voice are indicative of personal responsibility,³⁰ i.e. it is Isaiah who out of his own free will, decides to act in relation to this new experience of his life. Herein lies a formula for the vocational journey: a vocation is founded, first, upon an experience between a person and something mysterious (the Divine, God), which is followed, secondly, by a listening to a voice from a higher source. The third stage is a response that culminates in an ongoing relationship between the candidate and the higher source of the call. Therefore, the phrases 'then, I saw,' (ואראה-*wa'er'eh*), 'and I heard,' (ואשמע-*wa'eshma*) and 'Then, I said' (ואמר-*wa'ōmar*) interpret the vocational encounter to be total and complete because an experience is validated, a voice is listened to and a response has launched a new chapter of divine-human relationship in the life of a person.

Isaiah as a Model of Vocational Ambiguity in the Priesthood

Every vocation begins with a call and a response. Isaiah's vocation grew out of a political-religious confusion. A situation that probably caused him disappointment and resentment against the prevailing patterns of behaviour among people towards the covenant of YHWH. His vocation apparently emerges from the darkness and indifference of people concerning God and righteous living. He testifies to the moral depravity to judge his own suitability for the mission he is being called to pursue. He feels he does not qualify hence declaring: "woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of host!" (Isa 6:5). Isaiah and his people are indistinguishable when it comes to evil and he seems to bemoan this state of life he finds himself in with his people. However, a live coal carried with tongs is used symbolically to touch his lips to purify him from his uncleanness. The cleansing probably allayed his fears to enable him to have active participation in the divine assembly. It served as a preparation and introduction to the vocational encounter.

The narrative proceeds with the vocational question: "Whom shall I send and who will go for us? (Isa 6:8). This drifts the experience towards ambiguity since the 'I' changes to 'us' in the second part of the question. With the shift from the first-person singular pronoun to the first-person plural pronoun, the sequence raises eyebrows because one is skeptical about whether it is the voice of one or more than one.³¹ Isaiah's response is a reaction to the voice of one or multiple entities who seem to be doing the sending simultaneously. Ambiguity engulfs the call to which Isaiah responds and it filters into the corresponding mission. Thus, in vv. 9–10, "And he said, 'Go and say to this people: Keep listening but do not comprehend, Keep looking but do not understand.'" The imperatives contained in these verses require Isaiah to cause the people to exhibit a behaviour contrary to general expectation. Verse 9 reflects probably the existing state of affairs with the people which Isaiah is commanded to activate with his words. The people are already hardened in heart and blind so Isaiah is reminded to expect it.

In v. 10, the commissioning rather commands Isaiah to intensify this hardening of the people's faculties to hear and see, i.e. "Make the mind of this people dull, or stop their ears, and shut their eyes so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." This is ambiguous and can be seen to put Isaiah's commissioning into question.³² Though these portions go beyond the pericope under study, they help us to show Isaiah as a symbol of ambiguity with his commissioning as a prophet. He will do what will not be understood. His actions will portray him as a man of contradiction so that his preaching produces the opposite of its intended effect. He will be opposed as he opposes.³³

³⁰ Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 80.

³¹ Some suggest that the plural refers to God and the heavenly beings present, cf. Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 25.

³² Chisholm Jr argues that vv. 9–10 contain irony and sarcasm. He adds that Isaiah's call reflects god's act of hardening this people, cf. Chisholm Jr, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 26.

³³ Ambiguity also signifies opposition in a narrow sense, i.e. two ideas that exclude each other, cf. Martin Vöhler, "Modern and Ancient Concepts of Ambiguity," in *Strategies of Ambiguity in Ancient Literature* (edited by Therese Fuhrer and Stavros Frangoulidis, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 7.

The opposition may be seen on three levels: between him and the mission (tensions between his own struggling effort and the demands of the mission), between him, the people and the mission (opposition due to his status as a prophet, the people's view of him and the new behavioural requirements from his mission) and lastly, between the people and the mission (a mismatch between the people's ways and the dictates of the prophetic mission). The mission is contained in him but he is not the mission. Isaiah is also confronted by the mission in the same way that people are faced with its urgent demands. His own behaviour cannot affect the efficacy of the message, but it can be shaped positively by it. He is commissioned and sent to perform a task for God. It is up to people to listen to his message or refuse it. He is only a necessary divine conduit for God to act out His ways with people. His life may contradict the message he carries, but it cannot discredit its authenticity. Although this ambiguity relating to his vocation may pose a challenge for others, it is also an element that reflects the validity of his vocation. The vocation-bearer is never above the vocation. He is rather a servant of it.

Isaiah's vocational ambiguity provides an avenue to examine the ambiguity of different behaviours that can be observed in the life of a priest and his vocation. Like Isaiah, he also expresses his life within the context of vocational ambiguity when his personal character traits measure in opposition to the demands of his vocation. A priest's life may be swung in diverse directions by the pendulum of sin. Nonetheless, the core of his vocation always remains untouched. It is not his faults, mistakes and personal sins that are at issue in the exercise of his vocation, but what it is about. He cannot be immune to human frailties and moral shortcomings because he is a man selected from among his fellow human beings to represent them in the things about God (cf. Heb 5:1), who holds "this treasure in clay jars so that this extraordinary power belongs to God" (2 Cor 4:7). Isaiah, called from among his people, is commissioned to go back to them where he will oppose and be opposed in different ways. The priest exhibits similar contradictions through living his vocation with people.

In addition, both Isaiah and the priest manifest in their lives some lifestyle contradictions against their vocational life and message. While Isaiah and the priest together with the people must grapple with the challenges their mission throws at them, the vocation is always at the center stage in all circumstances. Vocational ambiguity in a priest, then, is a function of the difference between his own sins and the missionary demands on his life as well as the lives of other people. The priest not only conveys the message to others; he shares it with them. What his message asks his audience to do is equally required of him. The ambiguity he displays lies in the fact that he carries the message that brings about righteousness when he still sins and he is not righteous himself.

A Critical Appraisal of the Crisis of Vocational Ambiguity among Priests in Today's World

Vocational ambiguity designates the priest as a man of contradiction in terms of his character and attitude in the face of his vocation. He can exhibit behaviours contrary to the core demands of his vocation. He is called to do God's work. He is not commissioned to do his own work since he acts at God's commands and instructions as a prophet. He is also trained and formed to live according to certain standards of life. His vocation does not aim to change him from his humanity, but to engage it fully in God's work of salvation among people. His humanity along with its character traits is not opposed to the efficacy of the vocational mandate. However, he needs to hold on to his affirmative answer to God's calling on his life.

In today's world, the priestly vocation, because it spells out a programme of formation, tends to prescribe standards and regulations to which the priest must conform his life. In this vein, the Decree of the Second Vatican Council declares that "Their very ministry makes a special claim on them not to conform themselves to this world; still it requires at the same time that they should live among men in this world and that as good Shepherds they should know their sheep and should also seek to lead back those who do not belong to this fold, so they too may hear the voice of Christ and there may be one fold and one Shepherd."³⁴ Thus, it is incumbent upon the priest to live and behave not like other people in the world while at the same

³⁴ "The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests: *Presbyterorum Ordinis*," no. 3 in Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1975), 2030.

time he must live among them for the purpose of teaching, guiding and leading them to the Church. When the priest behaves otherwise, his lifestyle may constitute ambiguity regarding his vocation. He deviates from some set rules and standards even though he may not contradict his true humanity in such situations. Vocational ambiguity whereby a priest's attitude mismatches his vocational mission can be seen as strange and odd to people. This spans the beauty of ambiguity because it is the blend of normal and abnormal, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, as well as similarity and difference. The priest's life may manifest such ambiguity as struggles of human nature may co-exist with divine omnipotence, i.e. sin with grace, weakness with strength, ignorance with knowledge and blindness with vision.³⁵

Contrariwise, ambiguity may be confusing, but it is not meaningless. There is new meaning offered in any situation of ambiguity and when applied to the priest, it must not be discarded but embraced, for in it may be the path paved for the fulfilment of the Divine will. It underscores the fact, in relation to a priest's conduct, ambiguity also implies that "doubt and plenty are intimately joined in the act of interpretation."³⁶ This means although ambiguity may bring about surprises, shocks, doubts, scandals, confusion and awkwardness about the vocational life of the priest, it has the potential to produce more and fresh insights into the priestly vocation.

Many of today's priests are entangled in the crisis of vocational ambiguity because they probably lack a proper understanding of the relationship between their humanness, with its tendencies to be genuinely involved in certain behaviours, and the mission of their vocation. Vocational ambiguity can erode self-confidence and self-worth in an immature vocation-bearer and affect the effectiveness of their vocational life. It can also bring about a positive influence in a priest's life. This may happen when he accepts his humanity with all its 'flaws' to eschew the postures of pretense and hypocrisy. Vocational ambiguity as a concept as well as a lived experience is a double-edged sword for both positive and negative effects on people, but also for the advantage of the vocation-bearer. It is his leverage to add to the effectiveness of his calling and mission by bringing his whole humanness to bear on his missionary activities without the feeling of guilt or shame. It allows for the authentic expression of himself without hiding behind rules to fulfill God's purpose in his life for the benefit of all people.

In addition, even his human weaknesses in certain situations can provide necessary ingredients for the effective performance of his vocational mandate.³⁷ Every person who is called to the prophetic or priestly function must understand that ambiguity is inevitable if he is to be real and authentic. Vocational ambiguity defines the priest as a complete human being who has been chosen to do a particular assignment for God with people on earth. Therefore, the affirmative response to the call is an absolute act of courage and confidence on the part of the candidate. It is his daring attitude to embrace his vocation no matter what may come along with it. It must be observed that the priest's person and humanity are not replaced by his vocation, but are harmonized with it for the fulfilment of the mission and God's purpose.

In the end, it is such well-mannered and balanced individuals who are dynamic and always unique during the crisis of vocational ambiguity that the Church requires to hold and exercise the priestly vocational mandate among people in today's world. Quoting the letter to the Hebrews chapter five verse one, the Synod Fathers in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* conclude that "so we see that the human formation of the priest shows its special importance when related to the receivers of the mission; in order that the ministry may be humanly as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important that the priest should mould his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of man."³⁸ Thus, the ultimate executor of the vocational mandate is *the caller*, i.e. God. *The called*

³⁵ The evidence of cases of certain ambiguous attitudes by the clergy including sex abuse, corruption and tactics aimed at covering up evil behaviours of priests tends to verify the point, cf. Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Abuse and Cover-Up: Refounding the Church in Trauma* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), xxi, xxv, 1-14; Roy Hattersley, *The Church and Its People in Britain and Ireland, from Reformation to the Present Day* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2017), 542; see also other research works in Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser, *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995).

³⁶ Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity*, 2.

³⁷ Cf. Hebrews 5:2-3.

³⁸ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 43, 166-117.

(the candidate), i.e. the prophet or priest only fulfils his part by being available and ready as a channel for God's saving activity.

CONCLUSION

The call of Isaiah as a prophet in the book of Isaiah in the pericope (Isa 6:1–3, 6–8) is paradigmatic for understanding the vocation to the priesthood. Both his call to the prophetic ministry and the call of the priest to the priesthood have been observed to share similar elements of ambiguity in relation to their individual callings and responses. The confusion that surrounds the call in its initial stage in the vocational encounter also shapes its response. God and the candidate who responds to His call begin a relationship for the purpose of carrying out a divine activity with humanity.

Just as Isaiah's socio-religious atmosphere was steeped in unrighteousness and disobedience towards the covenant of YHWH so is the priest's world today also marked by corruption, injustice and indifference towards God's ways. Their vocation arises out of these moral conditions in which they live and to which at the same time they are commissioned to go and speak with divine authority among people. In discharging his ministry, the priest, invariably, exhibits attitudes which may be judged to be awkward and probably abnormal. This is vocational ambiguity, whereby the priest shows disparity between his personal life and his vocational life, as well as people's expectations. As a human being engaged in God's work of salvation among people, he may be characterized by sin and sinful behaviours, but this does not eliminate the truth of his vocation.

Vocational ambiguity is a crisis which the priest must grapple with in order to live as authentically as possible in today's world. It calls for a deeper understanding of himself as a person and his vocation as a priest. When he is involved in behaviours familiar with human beings including scandalous behaviours, vocational ambiguity can take a toll on him and his vocational life if he lacks maturity in growth and development as a person. Vocational ambiguity is rampant among priests in today's world which grips many with fear, low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, and self-pity. It does not aim to detract from the efficacy of one's vocational life but to complement it when the behaviour reflects who one truly is before God and man. It bars the attitude of pretense where a person hides away from reality in the name of following the rules to fulfill the demands of ministry.

In summary, the priestly vocation flourishes best in the genuine expression of one's self as a person, mature and balanced, amidst the issue of vocational ambiguity. Ambiguity in respect of the priestly vocation is inevitable. Every priest experiences vocational ambiguity one way or another because he still must live his life endeavouring to process an ambiguous calling and ambiguous response. Therefore, he can live his vocation to the fullest only with an absolute dependence on *the caller* who is supreme and whose power turns a crisis of vocational ambiguity into His good purpose.

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