

THE PRACTICE OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY IN ISAIAH 29:9-14

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Abstract

Religious hypocrisy has been a problem for both the ancient Israelites and the Church. God's people practice religious hypocrisy because they are insincere in their faith and worship of God. The people become deceived in thinking that they can worship God without obeying him. Thus, they depend on their religious rituals and traditions without obedience to God's Word. In this article, the author examines the practice of religious hypocrisy by the ancient Israelites in the text of Isaiah 29:9-14. We analyze the text within its historical setting and literary context. The text is translated and its structural outline determined. A verse by verse explanation/interpretation of text is given according to the structural outline to determine its message. Finally, a summary of the text's message is given with some applications for the Church today. It concludes that God hates religious hypocrisy and he will punish those who practice it as he did to ancient Israelites.

Keywords: Religious hypocrisy, blind, sealed book, a spirit of deep sleep, lip service, heart, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Very few servants of the Lord go into the ministry today with the perspective failure which Isaiah faced. He was chosen by God to give his message to his people, most specifically the people of Judah, even though God knew that they as a nation would not listen (**Isa.6:9-10**). In **Isaiah 6**, we see Isaiah trembling in humility and despair at the tremendous vision of "the King," "the Lord of Hosts." But at the encouragement of an angel and the freeing experience of forgiveness, Isaiah boldly volunteers to represent the Lord before his contemporaries in Judah and Jerusalem. One might have expected a highly gifted prophet like Isaiah to enter the ministry with the optimism of our modern day church growth movements. Instead, the Lord commissioned Isaiah to preach a message which would condemn people to spiritual

blindness. He warns the people against religious hypocrisy that leads to some serious consequences.

Chapter 29 focuses on Judah and its leaders, and outlines in general terms the measures that the LORD will have to take in order to bring the nation and its leaders to their senses. In **verses 1-8**, Isaiah sarcastically invites the people to continue in their meaningless rituals and yearly festivals. Here we see a people so dependent on their religious traditions that they fail to comprehend the dreadful approach of the wrath of God. God's people during Isaiah's time thought and believed that their external religious observances can protect them from God's judgment. Jerusalem cannot be defeated or captured or destroyed in time of war, because it was the city of Zion.¹ After all,

¹See the claim by the Israelites in Jeremiah 15:1-6.

why should the sons of David, the people of Ariel, the recipients of all the divine promises expect anything less than for the Lord to take pleasure in their religiosity? Surely the Lord would not allow Jerusalem to fall into the hands of the Assyrian army.

The people at this time were so deceived by their false religion that for Isaiah to even suggest that the Assyrian army would defeat them struck at the very heart of Judah's religious hypocrisy and pride. But Isaiah takes his prophecy one step further by suggesting that Yahweh's judgment of Israel through the Assyrian army has no more substance to it than a bad dream. The message is clear: the heavy hand of God is like dust in the wind compared to his grace. But Judah would have to experience both, if they were to ever overcome their religious hypocrisy and pride, and exercise true dependence on Yahweh. It is exactly this juxtaposition of divine wrath and divine grace which stupefies modern scholars and escapes the grasp of Israel's spiritual sensitivity (Oswalt, 530). Such is the wisdom of God, a wisdom which sends people into bondage for the triumph of freedom, a wisdom which sends the Messiah to the cross for the triumph of the resurrected life. It must have crushed Isaiah to cast these pearls before a people destined for spiritual blindness.

SETTING OF ISAIAH 29:9-14

Isaiah 29:9-14 is located within the Oracles of woe or the book of woes (chaps.28-33). The material in these chapters is loosely connected by the word *woe* (28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). The critical issue in these **chapters 28-33** is whether the people of Judah and their leaders will depend on Egypt or on the LORD as they faced the growing threat coming from

Assyria. Chapters **30** and **31** make it explicit that the Judean nation had decided to rely on Egypt for military protection (30:1-5; 31:1-3). The Egyptians did support them and went to war against Sennacherib, but were defeated, leaving Judah alone to suffer the full wrath of Sennacherib (37:9). Much of Judah was devastated and only Jerusalem was spared miraculously (36:1; 37:36). In fact, King Hezekiah almost destroyed his nation by listening to foolish advice from some members at his court to rely on Egypt for military backing. It was in this context (before the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib) that Isaiah, through these oracles of chapters **28-33**, strongly and consistently opposed this foolish advice of dependence on Egypt, leading up to the invasion itself in 701BC (**Isa. 36 & 37**). The invasion was a punitive action taken by Sennacherib in response to a revolt led by Hezekiah. He had refused to pay any further tribute to Assyria and had annexed all the Philistine cities that were part of the Assyrian empire (cf. **2Kgs 18:7-8**). The leaders of Jerusalem were the real targets of Isaiah's message in the crisis which led up to Sennacherib's invasion.

A Translation of the Text of Isaiah 29:9-14

9 Delay and be amazed,
delight yourselves and be blinded.
They are drunk but not with wine,
they stagger but not with liquor.
10 For Yahweh has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep.
He has blinded your eyes--the prophets,
he has covered your heads--the seers.
11 For this whole vision has become to you
like the words of a sealed book,
which when they give it to one who can read
saying, "Read this please," he will say,
"I cannot for it is sealed."

12 Or if they give the book to someone
who cannot read saying, "Read this please,"
he will say, "I cannot read."

13 Then the Lord said,
"Because this people draw near me with their
mouth
and honor me with their lip service,
but they remove their heart from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment of
men,
learned by rote;
14 Therefore, see me again deal wonderfully
with this people in doing wonderfully even a
wonder.
And the wisdom of the wise will perish,
and the discernment of the discerning one
will be hidden."

Literary Unit of Isaiah 29:9-14 Within its Immediate Context

Isaiah 29 can be divided into three literary units: **vv.1-8**, **vv.9-14**, and **vv.15-24**. **Verses 1-8** focus on Jerusalem, which is called here Ariel, the city where David settled (**v.1**), and as *Mount Zion* (**v. 8**). We have an announcement of judgment on Jerusalem (**vv.1-4**); and afterward the prediction of the destruction of the enemies that will attack Jerusalem (**vv.5-8**). God will first attack Jerusalem in his judgment of her, and then later deliver her from her enemies. Thus, in **verses 1-8**, the prophet presents Jerusalem with a sweeping glimpse of future destruction followed by deliverance. In **verse 9**, the focus shifts from the city to the people and their hardening due to their rejection of God's will. Their hypocritical worship of God is condemned, and he will bring their wisdom and knowledge to nothing (**vv.13-14**). The Woe of **verse 15** marks off another unit that ends in **verse 24**.

Literary Analysis and Structure of Isaiah 29:9-14

Verse 9 – Isaiah's predictions in 29:1-8 are received by a people who are insensate to God's word. And so in frustration, Isaiah cries out: "Delay, and be amazed. Delight yourselves² and be blinded (BDB, 554). The fact is that the more Judah lingers in their rituals the more their humiliation will amaze them. The more they continue to satisfy spiritual need through their festal traditions, the more they will be blinded by God. Thus, Isaiah describes them as a people intoxicated and staggering on the alcohol of their religious pride. Religious hypocrisy is the worst kind of pride because it disrespects and dishonors God, since one cannot deceive him.

Verse 10 – That Judah's blindness in v. 9 is a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9-10 is clear. "For Yahweh has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep." *tardēmâ* here is used figuratively for "spirit of insensibility" (BDB, 922).

Were Judah to repent certainly she would receive a "spirit of understanding." But in her drunkenness the very Word of God judicially condemns her to blindness. Thus Isaiah continues: "He has blinded your eyes—the prophets. He covered your heads—the seers." *hann'hî'im* and *hahōzîm* are probably glosses. There is no textual evidence for this but the flow into verses 11-12 supports this interpretation (Oswalt, 530). The very persons in the society who were supposed to give a word of wise counsel or revelation at a time of national crisis were themselves blinded and their heads blocked from knowledge. The

²The hithpael imperative *hišta'as'u* means "delight yourselves". BHS footnote 9a has *hittamm'hu* (cf. *ōzîmm*, 1:5).

ability or capacity of the prophetic leadership in Judah to hear the divine word is gone, and this tragedy is inherited by the people. The people are pictured as blind, drunk, and stunned, both as a result of their own choice and God's judgment on them.

Verses 11-12- These verses further illustrate the judicial act of Yahweh to blind Judah. The revelation of God's plan and purposes that has been given to the people has become "like the words of a sealed book" to them. Isaiah compares the declaration of his vision in 29:1-8 to handing a literate³ person a sealed scroll. Though he is perfectly capable of reading the scroll, he cannot because he lacks the authority to break the seal and the spiritual insight to understand it. How hopeless it is then for those who cannot even read. Though the vision itself is given and written with intelligible words, it comes with a seal, concealing Yahweh's plans from the heart understanding of the prophets and seers. They cannot understand it because of God's judgment on them. The illustration is clear. If the prophets and seers of Judah do not have the spiritual insight to understand Isaiah's vision⁴ how hopeless it is then for the people

³*hassēper* means "the book" or "the Scripture" as in Daniel 1:4,17. Thus more than just the "literate" might be implied here. This verse 11 can be translated: "one who knows the Scripture", a specific reference to the prophetic leadership and seers, who would be familiar with the Scriptures. However, BHS editors, in their footnote, suggest that the definite article was added and the translation is: "one who knows how to read."

⁴Compare with **Rev. 5:1-10** where no one is found worthy to open the seal and read the scroll except the Lord Jesus Christ. Intellectual ability is not enough to comprehend Scripture, I believe one needs spiritual insight or illumination from the

who depend on them as their eyes and their heads. They cannot teach the people what they do not understand. God has hidden the understanding of the truth of his Word from them.

Verses 13-14- The Lord⁵ himself analyses the situation and characterizes his people. V.13 is a protasis summarizing Judah's problem and v.14 is an apodosis revealing Yahweh's solution. Because the people have chosen to worship God in a hypocritical manner (**v.13**), God then responds to this kind of hypocritical worship (**v.14**). In his response, Yahweh is distancing himself (*hzh h'm* "this people") from a people who draw near to him with their words only, but removing their hearts from Him.⁶ The people of Judah were essentially religious. Their sin is not the drunkenness of Ephraim (**Isa. 28:1-3**) or open idolatry.⁷ Yet, the equally intolerable drunkenness of religious hypocrisy was their

Holy Spirit (cf. **1Cor 2:13-14**). Also, receiving Scripture as truth is sealed to all persons except for those who love and honor the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is only revealed by Jesus to those who are properly related to him (**Matt 11:25; Matt 13:10-13,34-36; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:10; John 12:16**). E.g., people like Benedict De Spinoza & Dan Brown with the **DeVinci Code** never understood the Bible.

⁵BHS uses '*dny*' for "Lord," but many Manuscripts (MSS) have 'Yahweh'.

⁶*niggaš* "draw near" and *riḥaq* "remove" are antithetical. The contrast suggests that *pîw* "his mouth" is connected with *niggaš* and not with *kibbdûnî* "honor me". Hence, the problem is not that the people are drawing near to Yahweh, but rather they are drawing near to him with mere lip service.

⁷Note Hezekiah's reforms in **2Kings 18:4**.

sin. The Old Testament prophets attack religious hypocrisy practiced by the people over and over again. It is foolish to think that you can please God by just observing the external religious rituals without any change in your character. How deluded these people are to think they could please Yahweh with religious forms or rituals while their hearts, the real seat of their personality and affections (TWOT, 466-467), are striving to get away.⁸ From this superficial drawing near to Yahweh develops a superficial fear of Yahweh. The result is a nation of people whose systematic worship has become *mišwat 'ānāšim m'elummādā* “a commandment of men, learned by rote.”⁹

The people had trained themselves to perform their various sacrifices and observe their yearly festivals and feasts without their hearts being changed to obey God's laws and word. They might even see this as a means of earning God's approval so that they will not face judgment. The tendency of man to invalidate God's Word through human plans and religious traditions is a theme throughout Scripture. The only response/solution is for God to act in such a way that man's wisdom will perish (v.14b). And so Yahweh bids us to behold him as he performs the wonderful works (v.14a),¹⁰ which shatters the wisdom of

the wise and cause human intelligence to disappear into hiding (v.14c)¹¹ (Watts, 385). In the immediate context the wonder of the Assyrian invasion will thwart the plans of the people of Judah to enter into alliance with Egypt. The practice of their religious traditions could not prevent the invasion from taking place. Ultimately, however, it is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ that destroys forever the wisdom of man to depend on himself (1 Corinthians 1:18-19).

From our analysis, we come up with the following structural outline for the text of **Isaiah 29:9-14:**

The Practice of Religious Hypocrisy in Isaiah 29:9-14

I. Religious hypocrisy leaves people Spiritually blind (vv.9-12)

A. Religious people blind themselves (v.9)

1. When we decide to content ourselves with our religious traditions and practices and continue in our pride. “Delight yourselves.”
2. When we try to live the Christian life through our own efforts, we make

and *wāpele*'. The infinitive absolute is adverbial, modifying the infinitive construct and the accusative noun. The idea is “to do wonderfully in doing wonderfully even a wonder” (see Lange Commentary, 321). The wonder is something extra-ordinary and hard to understand. It is a work which only God can do (see BDB, 810).

¹¹In v.14c, the word *tistattār* “will be hidden” gives the idea that is not simply to be proven wrong. God is acting in such a way that the wisdom of man will perish, and man's discernment will disappear forever. *tistattār* is denominative from *str* “the secret place,” which refers to Sheol in Isaiah 28:18; 45:19; Psalm 139:15.

⁸*riḥaq* is taken here causatively as an intensive Piel verb, which then means “to make removal with zeal to strive to get away” (see Lange Commentary, vol. II, 321).

⁹cf. Hos. 10:11; 1Chron. 25:7; Song of Songs 3:8 where *m'elummādā* has the idea of training and external discipline. Also see 1Timothy 4:8.

¹⁰In v.14a, *l'hapli*' is a hiphil infinitive construct intensified by *haplē*' the hiphil infinitive absolute

ourselves drunk with insensate to God's Word.

B. Religious people are then blinded by God (vv.10-12)

1. God pours a "spirit of deep sleep" on religious people. It begins with the pastors and elders and filters down to the congregation.
2. When pastors and preachers don't preach the Word then those who depend on them for guidance are led astray.
3. The deeper problem is not simply preaching the Word; the problem begins with the decision to trade in a real heart for God for a heart for just maintaining the church/religious community.
4. And that is why Isaiah writes: "The entire vision shall be to you like the words of a sealed book."
5. How sad is the condition of our churches when the word of God accomplishes the purpose of blinding our leaders and the congregation because we refuse to abandon our religious hypocrisy and pride.

II. Religious hypocrisy does not fool the Lord (v.13)

A. We may think we are fooling the Lord (v.13a)

1. "These people draw near me with their words, and honor me with their lip service."
2. In our Christian culture it is far too easy to say the right words and to pray the right prayers.

B. But the Lord is not fooled at all (v.13b-c)

1. "But they have removed their hearts from me, their fear of me consists of commandments of men, learned by rote."

2. We cannot draw near with our words and at the same time remove our hearts. (We cannot deceive God).
3. The key is to ask yourself the question: How do I really fear the Lord?
 - a. Through following a list of do's and don'ts.
 - b. Or by loving God with all your heart.
4. Jesus quotes Isaiah's words in **Matthew 15**. He sums up the sin of the religious person: "You invalidate the word of God for the sake of your tradition."
5. Do not content yourself with simple conformity to human standards.

III. Religious hypocrisy and tradition will ultimately be broken by God (v.14).

A. The Lord's answer to our religious attitudes is to do something wonderful.

1. The Assyrian invasion, followed by their downfall.
Our religious traditions and practices will not continue perpetually.
2. The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - a. The ultimate picture of man's attempt to manage God is to literally put God in a tomb.
 - b. And so Yahweh says: "Look to me, and I will act so as to destroy your wisdom forever."

B. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key to destroying our tendencies to depend on ourselves. It gets us back where we belong, for we cannot please or satisfy God by our efforts.

1. It is the wonderful act of God which transcends all of time and is as real for

us today as it was for the first century religious people.

2. Here lays our golden opportunity to escape the spiritually blinding institutions of our life and to experience a true relationship with God.
3. Our stupidity and religious pride put Christ on the cross.
4. We tried to manage God; to make him fit into our religious system.
We should worship God in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24)

Summary of Message of Isaiah 29:9-14 with Some Applications

Isaiah prophesized to the ancient religious people of Judah: “Woe to you Jerusalem. Keep on observing your religious feasts and following your church calendar. Keep up your religious traditions. But the Lord is going to shake this city with the armies of your enemy Assyria. They will take you over and humble you. And then after you are humbled, the Lord will destroy Assyria and the whole thing will seem like a bad dream.” (A summary and paraphrase of **29:1-8**). But, the people of Judah were proud of their religious practices and they felt secure. The last thing they expected to hear was some ridiculous tale about how God would judge and humiliate them using their enemy, only to turn around and destroy the enemy. And so they decided to continue in their religious pride.

Thus, Isaiah says to the people of Judah: “Delay, and be amaze. Delight yourselves and be blinded. You, who are drunk, but not with wine. You who stagger but not from strong drink.”

Isaiah bids them to do what they are already doing: “Go ahead delay: Keep on with your

rituals. You are going to be amazed. Keep on delighting yourselves with your religious pride. You will be blinded. You are intoxicated on the alcohol of your traditions.” The philosopher Karl Marx once said: “Religion is the opiate of the masses.” In other words, religions are like a drug which gives people a false sense of reality. It gives them a hope that isn’t based on truth. Now, Marx was an atheist, but he probably never knew how close he came to the words of Isaiah.

The application of this prophecy extends beyond Isaiah’s immediate audience. Christ himself speaking to the Pharisees of his day refers to them saying: “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you...” The Pharisees have questioned the unwillingness of Christ’s disciples to obey the traditions of the elders. Jesus provides us with the best commentary of all on Isaiah’s prophecy: “You invalidate the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (**Matt. 15:1-9**). The Pharisees traveled across land and sea for just one convert. They were the respected teachers of their time. They prayed and fasted. But Jesus said to them: “Woe is you.” Because, they did not love God nor love people. Simple conformity to human standards will never satisfy a man; unless he truly fears God by obeying him. The Jews were very religious people who used their religious traditions and practices to worship God, but they did not obey his commandments. When we are content with ritualistic traditions rather than a deep love of God and relationship with Jesus Christ, then this will lead to religious hypocrisy in our worship of God.

Outward religious acts of worship without heart commitment and surrender to the Lord are detestable to God. Hypocritical worship is

totally rejected by God. Using religious rituals as a means of trying to manipulate or control God will not work. "If I do this ritual then God will be obligated to grant me that favor." God says no! This kind of worship is useless and displeasing to him. He is disgusted by the exercise of religious rituals without a repentant heart toward sin. Outward religious acts cannot heal your broken relationship with God. We are cautioned against studying God's Word for mere intellectual knowledge rather than seeking to know, love, trust and obey God who gave it for that purpose. We are also to apply the teachings of Scripture to our lives.

Today, there are churches that haven't preached the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ in years. Church services/activities are conducted without God's presence which are all in vain. They have good organization, they sing songs, they take communion, they have beautiful liturgy and yet when it comes to preaching and teaching the word of God or proclaiming the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, they are utterly blind. In some of these churches, when the pastor sits down to read God's Word and prepare a sermon, rather than being blessed with a 'spirit of understanding' the Word itself becomes a 'sealed book' accompanied by a 'spirit of stupidity.' This is why when you listen to their messages you ask yourself, what Bible are they using and preaching from? Even if they wanted to preach God's Word, they couldn't because their hearts are not with the Lord. They are with the church clubs they've developed. Avoid the tendency to make Christianity manageable through your own efforts. Can you weigh and measure yourself and figure

out how you are doing? If so, you have become like the Pharisees who regulated righteousness into a long involved list of steps and procedures, cumbersome indeed, but possible to fulfill.

God will not allow himself to be molded into an image of our religious traditions and practices. We need to ask ourselves some deep questions. Are we satisfied with things the way they are? Do we really think the Lord is pleased with all of our rituals and performances in the pulpit? Are we able to write sermons or counsel only in the strength of our education and seminary skills without ever really praying or meeting with the Lord?

Still, I suspect that far too often we act as if the Gentiles have done a better job at handling grace than the Jews did. What makes things any different? People today are very religious without any spiritual life in them, yet they claim to know God and have a relationship with him. Things have not changed. Let's look to Jesus and find the solution. Jesus, in one of his teachings on sinners, says: "Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish" (**Luke 13:3**). And on useless, worthless worship, he says: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (**Matt. 15:8**; cf. **Isa. 29:13**). Repent (i.e., turning away from evil and toward good) and seek God's forgiveness.

God will not accept the worship of hypocritical worshippers. He is looking for a proper heart attitude toward him and proper actions toward other people in the life of the worshipper. God wants us to manifest this proper heart attitude in our daily life. Religious individuals have always been susceptible to an insidious disease known as hypocrisy. Our vertical relationship to God

must involve our hearts and active obedience. Jesus reminded the Pharisees of this (**Matt. 23:23**). Those who attempt to worship God in religious hypocrisy like ancient Israel are self-deceived and destined for severe judgment. Many people today go to church to worship God with a lot of pretensions and disguises. We have the practice of hypocritical, false worship still going on today just as in ancient times.

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