

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MEANING OF TRUE FASTING AND WORSHIP FOR GOD'S PEOPLE IN ISAIAH 58:6-14

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I am pleased to contribute to this Festschrift in honor of Professor Danny McCain, who has spent 30 years of service as a missionary, teacher and scholar in Nigeria. Professor McCain has been a dear friend and colleague for many years. Preaching and worship are dear to his heart and he has contributed greatly in this area during his time in Nigeria. Thus, I desire to contribute on the subject of the true meaning of fasting and worship from a passage in Isaiah.

**Key words:** True fasting, worship, Sabbath, Yahweh, injustice, poverty

### **Introduction**

The Israelites in Isaiah's day were very religious people. They practiced fasting and carried out the sacrifice of animals according to the Mosaic Law for the sacrificial system. But, they missed the meaning of what fasting is all about and what it meant to truly worship and honor God. There were two areas in which this false worship was practiced: first, their attitude and manner in which they practiced fasting, and secondly, the lack of a proper observance of the Sabbath day. Fasting was being carried out by the Israelites without any serious repentance from sin and a resolve to stop their evil practices. For example, God's people practiced injustice and oppression of the poor. The Sabbath day was neglected and everyone was pursuing their heart desires and interests on this holy day, instead of honoring the Lord. Today, there is also a lot of talk and practice of prayer and fasting that go on in Christian churches.

Christians can learn some lessons from the Israelites to help us avoid repeating their mistakes. The ancient Israelites practiced false worship of God. But, God dislikes and hates false, hypocritical worship.

The situation has not changed in many Christian churches in which members love to practice false fasting and worship because they like to pretend. God will only receive a true, acceptable fasting and worship of him. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the text of Isaiah 58:6-14 that warns God's people about practicing false fasting and worship that does not honor God. We will examine the meaning of true fasting and worship for God's people.

In Isaiah chapters 56 and 57, we see that many of God's people choose to worship false gods. Now in chapters 58-59, Isaiah warns the Israelites concerning giving false worship to the true God. Legalistic religion can seem pious to us, but in fact, it can lead us away from God. It is actually self-centered, not God-centered. God tells Prophet Isaiah to shout and warn the people that there is no peace for the wicked. But God does show mercy to those who turn from their evil ways (cf. Isaiah 55:7; 57:21; Ezekiel 3:17-21). Since "there is no peace ... for the wicked" (Isaiah 57:21), the prophet of the Lord has the duty to warn the people (Isaiah 58:1).

### **Translation of Isaiah 58:6-14**

- 6 Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
- 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly spring up; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of Yahweh will be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you will call, and Yahweh will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here I am. If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking of evil;
- 10 and if you pour out yourself on behalf of the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your gloom will be like noonday.

- 11 Yahweh will guide you continually; he will satisfy your desire in scorched places, and make your bones strong. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.
- 12 Those from among you will build the ancient ruins, you will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to live in.
- 13 If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath, from doing your own pleasures on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of Yahweh honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, and not seeking your own pleasure or speaking idle words;
- 14 then you will take delight in Yahweh, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the inheritance of your father Jacob; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

### **The Literary Unit of Isaiah 58:1-14**

The literary unit is the whole of chapter 58:1-14, which includes Isaiah 58:6-14, the unit of thought for our study. Isaiah 58:1 marks the beginning of a new unit by its introductory imperatives and a strong note of proclamation, “cry aloud”, “lift up”, “declare” to point out to the people their sins. Vv.20-21 of Isaiah 57 concludes the preceding section by making it clear that those who remain wicked will have no peace: “there is no peace for the wicked, says my God” (v.21). Chapter 58 concludes with a promise of blessing for the inheritance of Jacob in a speech by Yahweh in v.14. 59:1 then begins a new unit, which is distinguished by its introductory exclamation: “Behold the hand of Yahweh is not too short to save”.

But, some critical scholars have suggested that vv.13 and 14 of Isaiah 58 are a later addition, and they limit the unit to only vv.1-12. They separate these last two verses from the rest of the chapter, because of the claim that vv.1-12 deal with fasting while vv.13-14 with Sabbath observance. J. Smart, for instance, argues that Sabbath observance is simply incompatible with the teaching of 58:1-12. Smart categorically asserts, “It makes nonsense of the prophet’s sermon to have him reject a

religious observance such as fasting because it has become a substitute for works of love and mercy, if only the members of the nation are scrupulous in the keeping of the Sabbath, God will reward them abundantly. The Sabbath [passage] was the enthusiasm of a later orthodox community, not of Second Isaiah.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this tendency to separate vv.13-14 from the rest of chapter 58, there are other scholars who have argued and maintained the integrity and unity of these verses within the whole passage. Some compelling evidence has been presented to show that vv.13-14 are an original part of the chapter, not merely an addition by another author at a later date. It is most likely that these verses form a complete unit with vv.1-12. We are of the view that Isaiah 58:1-14 is a unified composition that forms the literary unit. We observe that Isaiah 58:1-14 is framed by the inclusion of “Jacob” in vv.1b, 14b, and argue that the whole passage is a unity “held together by its contrasts.” We further note that other words and themes are repeated between its opening and closing verses. We can also see that vv.1-12 are integrally related to vv.13-14 by some significant linguistic links between vv.12 and 13: there is a close connection between the words for “rest” *lāšābet* in v.12 and “sabbath” *lāššabbāt* in v.13; the parallelism that occurs between the nouns for “path” *nētībôt* in v.12 and for “way” *derākeykā* in v.13. Thus, we agree that the relation of vv.13-14 to the passage of Isaiah 58, to its introduction, the literary form, and the thought, all support their originality. Without them the poem remains a fragmentary piece of work.

### **Relationship of Isa 58:6-14 to its Immediate Context**

Even though Isa 58:1-14 is defined as the literary unit, for our study we are concentrating on vv.6-14. Isa 58 is clearly related to the preceding text of chap 57 and the succeeding text of chap 59. There are the repetitions of words, images, and themes that links or connects these chapters: “my people” of 58:1 recalls that of 57:14; “their transgression/rebellion” appears in 58:1 and as “transgression” in 57:4. The verb “to guide” (*nḥh*) appears in both 58:11 and 57:18, in which its

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<sup>1</sup> J. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 252.

uses in these verses are similar in their contexts, and represent a link between the literary units: the Lord will always guide his people (58:11), and he will lead his people (“I will guide him”) (57:18). The word “way(s)” appears as “my ways” (58:2), “your ways” (58:13), “your ways” (57:10), “the way” (57:14), “in the way of” (57:17) and “his ways” (57:18).

There is a reference to “on high” in 58:4, and “the high and holy place” in 57:15. The noun “your healing” occurs in 58:8, while its verb forms occur in 57:18-19: “I will heal him” (57:18) and “and I will heal him” (57:19). The verb “to see” occurs as “you do not see” (58:3), and as “I have seen” (57:18). In 58:7, we have “not to hide yourself”, while in 57:17 the Lord hid his face from his people (“I hid my face”). The word “righteousness” occurs in 58:2, while “your righteousness” in 57:12. In 57:1 there is the mention of the righteous, while 58:7 has the description of what the righteous do. The verb *kzb* appears in 58:11 as “do not fail” and in 57:11 as “you lied,” with different senses. Also, the verb “to take delight in” in 58:14 and “to make sport of” or “to mock” in 57:4 is used with different senses in the two verses.

There are injustices mentioned in both 58:3b-4 and 57:1-2, 4, in which the people of God are to practice justice: they should let the oppressed go free; they should help the hungry, homeless, poor and the naked (58:6-7). They are not to be greedy, who seek gain through injustice and violence (57:17). The “pointing of the finger” and “speaking wickedness” in 58:9 seems to correspond to the mockery mentioned in 57:4. The phrase “with a wicked fist” in 58:4 is linked to the “the wicked” in 57:21. The noun “inheritance” occurs in 58:14, while its verb form, “he will inherit” is in 57:13. In 57:21 the word “peace” is related to healing in the sense of “wholeness and well-being”. Thus, Isaiah 57 leads well into chapter 58, where to those who will practice the Lord’s appointed fast properly, it is promised that their healing will appear quickly (58:8).

The relationship between Isa 58 and 59 is also characterized by the use of repeated vocabulary and similar motifs. There is “their sins” in 58:1, “your sins” in 59:2 and “our sins” in 59:12. “Their transgression/rebellion” in 58:1 is repeated as “our transgressions” in 59:12 and “transgression” in 59:20. The word pair of “justice/righteousness” appears in 58:2 and 59:9, 14. The word

“righteousness” occurs as: “your righteousness” in 58:8, “in righteousness” in 59:4, “his righteousness” and “righteousness” in 59:16, 17. The righteous person described in 58:6-7 contrasts with the wicked described in 59:3-7, 12-15. We have acts of violence described in both 58:4 and 59:6-7.

The verb “shall break forth” occurs in 58:8, while in 59:5 it occurs as “is hatched” and “they hatch”. We have the images of light and darkness in both 58:8, 10 and 59:9, 10. The word “way(s)” appears in similar contexts as “my ways” (58:2), “your ways” (58:13), and “the way of peace” (59:8). The verb “to see” occurs as: “you do not see” (58:3) and “he saw” (59:15, 16). The “pointing of the finger” in 58:9 is linked with “your fingers with iniquity” in 59:3. The “streets” or “paths” in 58:12 connects with “their paths” in 59:8. There is the construct noun “to know” in 58:2 and its verb forms “they do not know”, and “he does not know” in 59:8. The people’s ignorance of God’s ways is displayed in 58:1-5. This lack of knowledge of the kind of fast that God chooses in 58:6 corresponds to the lack of knowledge of the way of peace in 59:8.

The word *mšpṭ* “justice” occurs in 58:2 and 59:8,9,11, in contexts where justice is lacking throughout the land in both texts. The people of God do not practice justice and righteousness in 58:2-4 and 59:6-9,14. They fasted but without succeeding in attracting divine attention or obtaining a hearing (58:3-4). This is connected to the fact that their problem is with sin, which has raised a barrier between them and their God (59:1-2). Thus, the accusation of God’s people in 58:1-4 corresponds to that of 59:1-4. The fault is in rebellion and sin. But, this barrier which prevents contact with God in 59:2 can be removed in 58:8-9. The root *šm* ‘ “to hear” appears in both 58:4 and 59:1-2 as: “to be heard” (58:4) and “to hear” (59:1,2). In both 58:4 and 59:1-2, Yahweh has not closed his ears to his people, but their sins prevented him from hearing them.

### **Literary Analysis and Structure of Isa 58:6-14**

The whole of Isaiah 58 is filled with the repetition of words, images, particles and themes.<sup>2</sup> The whole passage forms an inclusion with the

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<sup>2</sup> Repetition is a unifying principle, which shows the unity of this text and its integrity.

occurrences of “Jacob” in vv.1 and 14. There is a contrast between these two verses: the prophet is to declare to the house of Jacob their transgression and sins (v.1), but to give a promise of blessing for the inheritance of their father Jacob (v.14). There are four words that recur in vv.2 and 13: “a day”, “a way”, “to do or act”, and our attention is especially drawn to the repetition of “to delight or take pleasure”: “they delight to know my ways” (v.2a), “they delight to draw near to God” (v.2d), and “from doing your pleasure” (v.13).<sup>3</sup>

The word *yôm* “day” occurs seven times in vv.2 (twice), 3, 4, 5 (twice), and 13. Also, the word *šôm* “fast” appears seven times as: “we have fasted” (v.3a), “your fast” (v.3b), “your fast” (v.4twice), “a fast” (v.5twice), and “the fast” (v.6). The sevenfold repetitions of these words indicate their emphasis, that they are keywords. Both “day” and “fast” in vv.2-5 anticipate the coming verses and look forward to the right kind of fast God chooses (v.6) and proper practice of observing the Sabbath, the holy day (v.13). Both words also function together to indicate that fasting is a practice that is to be done at a time when one is ready to humble himself.

The divine name “Yahweh” also occurs seven times in vv.5, 8, 9, 11, 13, and twice in 14, in the literary contexts mainly with the message of hope such as: it is Yahweh who protects (v.8b) and guides his people (v.11a); he answers their call (v.9a), and in him they should find their true delight (v.14a). “God” another divine name appears twice in v.2 in the context of the reasons given for the accusation against God’s people. The verbal root *qr*’ “call” or “cry out” appears five times throughout the passage in vv.1,5,9, 12, and 13. The word *nēpeš* (“soul, self, desire”) occurs five times as: “ourselves” (v.3), “himself” (v.5), “yourself” (v.10), “the desire of the oppressed” (v.10), and “your desire” (v.11). The root *nh* (“to humble”) recurs three times as: “we have humbled” (v.3), “to humble” (v.5), and “the oppressed” (v.10).<sup>4</sup> In v.5 *annôt* (“to afflict or humble”) echoes the motif of humility earlier employed as the people ask why they humble themselves, and why God does not notice it

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<sup>3</sup> But, these words repeated in the opening and closing of the text are used differently. In v.2 God explains what the house of Jacob is doing, while in v.13 God gives directives for what the people *should* do.

<sup>4</sup> This is a *Niphal* participle that refers to an individual who is already humbled and being oppressed.

in v.3. In v.10 the focus shifts to the concern for the one who is already humbled. All these repetitions point to the overall unity of Isaiah 58. And the relationship between the opening and closing verses shows that vv.13-14 play a role as part of structural components distinguishing the unit's beginning and end, arguing against those who excise them.

We now examine specifically the literary structure of Isaiah 58:6-14, which is the text of our focus. Vv.1-5 contain the accusation or charges that Yahweh brings against his people ("my people") for their lack of practicing justice and righteousness and their wicked actions which accompany their fasting. These verses basically point out and emphasize the rebellion and sins of God's people. Vv.1-4 discuss the wrong kind of fast that goes with the wicked deeds and the formal acts of fasting that God rejects. It is observed that v.5 stands as a transition verse between vv.1-4 and vv.6-14, in which it is connected to vv.1-4.<sup>5</sup> V.5 also links vv.1-4 of the hypocritical fast to vv.6-14 of the right kind of fast that involves the true worship of God. The questions asked in v.5 are specifically concerning this wrong and hypocritical type of fasting, in which they anticipate the response beginning in v.6 employing the same verb, "I choose". They call for reflection on whether this kind of fast just described in vv.1-4 is really acceptable to God. After the questions of v.5, a new set of questions are asked in vv.6ff. to explain the kind of fast with the spiritual life that is pleasing acceptable to God.

There is a rhetorical shift from accusation in vv.1-5 to an alternation between three protases at vv.6-7, vv.9b-10a and v.13 with their respective apodoses at vv.8-9a, vv.10b-12 and v.14. The relation of these protases to their apodoses is the stylistic characteristic in 58:6-14, which deserves to be emphasized and considered for its literary structure.<sup>6</sup> The general movement of this text from some condition to some result or consequence is based on the particle indicators of *hālô* ("is it not?"), *'im* ("if"), and *'āz* ("then"). Both vv.6 and 7 begins with the negative question, "is it not?" which tie the two verses together. From these

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<sup>5</sup> Some people suggest that v.5 goes with vv.6-7, using the interrogative *he-* that occurs in these three verses.

<sup>6</sup> The statements made in vv.6-14 in terms of an "if-then" proposition is reminiscent of the blessings and curses of the covenant in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Cf. Jeremiah 22:15-16, which shows the movement from a particular action to a blessing.



questions there is a movement to “then” in vv.8, 9a. This combination of *hālô’* with *’āz* shows that the questions/instruction in vv.6-7 has a conditional character, since it is only when God’s people practice justice and social compassion that they receive the benefits mentioned in vv.8-9a.<sup>7</sup>

V.6 is an explanation of the kind of fast, which involves practicing social justice (i.e., the liberation of the oppressed). V.7 picks up the interrogative of v.6 and stresses other areas that require social compassion for the needy. The infinitive absolute *pattēah* (“to loose”) is used as a direct object, and it is also in apposition to *zeh* (“this”), in which it serves as the subject to a verbal clause(v.6a). The particle *kî* (“when”) in v.7b concludes the conditions/actions of the true fast and points forward to the promises in v.8.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars emend the word for “the house” in v.7a to read “your house” with the possessive pronoun.<sup>9</sup> They intend to make it parallel to the corresponding word “your bread”, by adding the pronominal suffix. But, the Masoretic Text by not having the possessive pronoun seems to be referring to housing or shelter in general for those who are homeless, not limiting it to an individual’s specific house.<sup>10</sup>

The emphatic adverb “then” begins both vv.8a and 9a. This particle introduces the promises or benefits of healing, guidance, divine presence and answer to prayer in vv.8-9a. The reception of these benefits is contingent upon living the life that pleases God as described in vv.6-7. He offers them to those who practice the true fast that involves liberation

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<sup>7</sup> But, this does not necessarily mean that v.6 must originally have begun “if you loose the bonds of wickedness”, as a conditional statement. Both an instructional and a conditional character mark the message about the right kind of fast in vv.6-7.

<sup>8</sup> The particle *kî* (v.7b) together with *’āz* (v.8a), emphasizes the *’āz* as the point toward which the passage is moving. Thus in v.7b, the particle *kî* moves the text forward and indicates that a change is about to take place.

<sup>9</sup> This is based on the readings from the LXX, Syriac, Targum and Vulgate versions that have the possessive pronoun. To the word “house” the LXX adds the possessive pronoun: “into your house”. They think the MT should be read as “your house”.

<sup>10</sup> Since, the MT makes sense as it is in this context, there is no need for this emendation.

for the oppressed (v.6), and provides for the needs of others (v.7). V.8a is framed by two verbs at the beginning and end *y<sup>e</sup>bāqa* (“shall break forth”) and *tišmāḥ* (“shall spring forth”) in a chiasmic order. Two verbs *w<sup>e</sup>hālak* (“shall go”) and *ya’aspekā* (“will be your rear guard”) similarly frame v.8b also in a chiasmic order.<sup>11</sup> The word *’ārukāt<sup>e</sup>kā* (v.8) means “healing of a wound, restoring properly the new flesh that grows at the wounded spot”.<sup>12</sup> The word *tiqrā* (“you will call”) in v.9a is used as a synonym for prayer or beseeching the Lord, and *môṭâ* means “a yoke.”<sup>13</sup> The *yoke* is a symbol of oppression generally. The idea of “oppression” fits this context.

In v.9b, there is a change from what precedes it with the opening words “if you remove”, which gives a conditional statement about ending oppressive practices. V.10a is connected to v.9b by the *waw* of the verb *w<sup>e</sup>tāpēq* (“and if you pour out”), which continues with the conditional statement. Both verses further develop the two themes of liberation and service from vv.6-7 with concrete examples of the yokes to be removed and the giving of oneself to the service of others. The original demands in vv.6-7 are expanded upon and intensified here. The words *môṭâ* (“yoke”) and *š<sup>e</sup>lah* (“pointing”) in v.9b are repeated from v.6, in which they recall the theme of liberation and oppression. They specify in a concrete manner what v.6 speaks of in a general fashion. V.10a demonstrates the kind of activity that will serve and satisfy the needs of others as it repeats this theme from v.7.

The conditional particle “if” in v.9b moves to the opening word of v.10b *w<sup>e</sup>zārah* (“then shall rise”), which is a substitute for the particle *’āz* (“then”). Thus, the conditional statements of vv.9b-10a progress toward the promises in vv.10b-12. The change occurs in v.10b to the benefits/results for fulfilling the conditions listed prior to it, in which the initial verb *zārah* governs both lines A and B of v.10b. The imagery of light in v.10b is repeated from v.8a with an intense progression from darkness to light, from gloom to midday. The word *napšekā* can be translated “your soul” or “yourself” in v.10. The parallel words *napšekā/nepeš* would expand on what is already said in v.7a. That is,

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<sup>11</sup> When words are placed chiasmically, the semantic bond between the words tends to be tighter than when chiasmus is not employed.

<sup>12</sup> *BDB*, 74. Cf. Jer. 8:22; 30:17.

<sup>13</sup> *BDB*, 557.

more than the call to give bread to the hungry is to give oneself, which is more demanding. It expands and expresses in a stronger way the manner in which one should serve others. MT continues the call for greater self-involvement in giving from v.7b; and it has the more difficult reading and thus it should be retained. V.11 continues with more promises/benefits that come to those who do away with the yokes of wickedness and practice the true fast. The verb *w<sup>e</sup>hisbīa* (“will satisfy”) takes an object complement with preposition *b<sup>e</sup>* in v.11: “And will satisfy your desire in scorched places”.<sup>14</sup>

V.12 is the additional promise for the city's future well-being, in which the descendants of the addressees will rebuild its ruins. It has the blessings of restoration and continuance. *Mimm<sup>e</sup>kā* (“those from among you”) is the subject of the verb *ûbānû* (“will build”), which refers to the future descendants of those who will go into exile and return.<sup>15</sup> In this literary context, it seems there is a contrasting parallel usage of *n<sup>e</sup>tîbôt* (“paths or streets”) in v.12 with *d<sup>e</sup>rākeykā* (“your ways”) in v.13. The use of *n<sup>e</sup>tîbôt* in v.12b can refer to a way of life, which is God's path (or way) for his people to walk in.<sup>16</sup> God's people are confronted with the charge of going their own ways in v.13, rather than being “the restorer of paths” (i.e., God's paths) in v.12. This interpretation of *n<sup>e</sup>tîbôt* as a “path or street” of life to walk in and conform to, fits the context of this passage with its emphasis on the lifestyle of God's people.<sup>17</sup>

The conditional particle “if” begins v.13 and returns to a conditional statement on the observance of the Sabbath (i.e., the day of holiness and honor) that pleases God. One of the conditions for sharing in the blessings is the acknowledgment of the Sabbath as a delight: “if you call the Sabbath a delight”. We still retain the MT *‘āsôt* because the *min* preposition in the first clause of line A serves to govern that of line B (v.13). Although the preposition *min* is written but once, it serves to

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<sup>14</sup> The word *ṣaḥṣāḥôt* is a *hapax legomenon*, that refers to “scorched regions” (*BDB*, 850).

<sup>15</sup> *mimm<sup>e</sup>kā* (“those from you”) refers to “those yet to be born.”

<sup>16</sup> In all the prophetic writings both *derek* (“way”) and *n<sup>e</sup>tîbâ* (“path”) are always used in parallelism with each other (cf. Isa 59:8 and Job 24:13, where both words are used to express a way of life that the people have chosen).

<sup>17</sup> The text of v.12 can refer to both physical and spiritual restoration of the city; thus *n<sup>e</sup>tîbôt* can refer to physical streets as well.

govern two coordinate clauses. Then the conditional particle “if” moves to the adverb “then” in v.14.<sup>18</sup> *’āz* again is emphatic here and it introduces the blessings that follow the fulfillment of the conditions in v.13. In v.14, the first verb *tit’annag* (“you will take delight”) a *Hithpael* Imperf. 2nd per. masc. sing., is followed by two *Hiphil* perf. 1st per. sing verbs *w<sup>e</sup>hirkabtīkā* “and I will make you ride”, and *w<sup>e</sup>ha’ākaltīkā* (“and I will feed you with”).

The analysis of Isaiah 58:6-14 shows the numerous repetitions of thoughts or ideas in this literary unit that suggests a literary structure with an alternating pattern of A B A’B’A”B”, where the A A’A” are the conditional statements and the B B’B” are the results, promises or blessings of fulfilling the conditions. Thus, the outline with the title is as follows:

### **The Meaning of True Fasting and Worship for God’s People in Isaiah 58:6-14**

#### **A Practice the fast that pleases God (vv.6-7)**

- 1.By removing injustice and oppression (v.6)
- 2.By providing food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless (v.7a)
- 3.By clothing the naked and not hiding from anyone in need (v.7b)

#### **B Results of practicing the fast that pleases God (vv.8-9a)**

- 1.Light will break forth like the dawn and healing will come (v.8a)
- 2.God will provide care and protection (v.8b)
- 3.Prayers will be answered and God’s presence will be restored (v.9a)

#### **A’ Remove the yoke of oppression and practice social compassion (vv.9b-10a)**

- 1.Remove the pointing of the finger and speaking of evil (v.9b)
- 2.Give oneself to the service of others (v.10a)

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<sup>18</sup> Some examples of texts that show this pattern of a movement from an *’im* (“if”) condition to an *’āz* (“then”) consequence, while also using an imperfect verb are: 1 Samuel 6:3; Job 9:30-31; 11:13-15; Proverb 2:4-5.

**B' Blessings that come from serving others (vv.10b-12)**

- 1.Darkness and gloom will turn into radiant light (v.10b)
- 2.The Lord will constantly guide, satisfy needs and give strength (v.11a)
- 3.The constant availability of fresh resources for living (v.11b)
- 4.Promise of spiritual and physical restoration and a new name (v.12)

**A" Worship God on the Sabbath in accordance with His ways (v.13)**

- 1.Worship the Lord in truth and stop pursuing personal interests on the Sabbath
- 2.Consider the Sabbath a delight to serve other people
- 3.Honor the Sabbath by doing what is right

**B" Promise of blessing for observing the Sabbath properly (v.14)**

- 1.You will find true delight in the Lord himself
- 2.The Lord will give you victory and fullness of life

**Explanation of the Text Isaiah 58:6-14**

The prophet uses rhetorical questions in both vv.6-7, introduced by “is it not?” to specify the kind of actions which should accompany the practice of fasting.<sup>19</sup> The prophet confronts the audience with their current actions that are not consistent with what pleases God. For earlier in vv.1-5 (esp.v.5), the prophet attacked the standard practices in fasting and the people’s lack of commitment to God with biting sarcasm. Now employing these questions, he is contrasting the practices in vv.1-5 with a different kind of fast that consists in one’s right behavior towards his fellowman. The demonstrative pronoun “this” also functions to alert the audience to something new while focusing their attention on the present state of things. It is used here to specify the kind of fast that God desires: “Is this not the fast that I choose?” (v.6a). A series of infinitives are used to describe the right actions that God desires. These infinitives

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<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 58 is not rejecting fasting but emphasizing that unless accompanied by actions of love of neighbor it is an empty ritual. The prophet’s intention is not to assert that fasting as such is illegitimate but rather to emphasize the importance of doing social justice. Remember, Jesus said the same thing to the Pharisees in Matthew 6.

emphasize the mode of action or way of life that needs to be put into practice by God's people: "to loose the chains of wickedness"; "to undo the thongs of the yoke"; "to let the oppressed go free"; "and break every yoke" (v.6b).

The repetition of the word "wickedness" in v.6 from v.4a calls them to reflect upon its prior use and their own wicked deeds. In v.4a the people strike each other with "a wicked fist", but in v.6 metaphors are employed to call upon the people to end all oppressive practices on others.

The infinitives describe the actions to be taken, while the verb *tʿnattēqû* ("to break", a *Piel* imperf. 2<sup>nd</sup> pers.masc.pl.) orders the shattering of every yoke. The repetition of "yoke" should impress upon the reader the importance of liberation from bondage, which culminates all that has been said in v.6 with the emphasis on breaking "every yoke".<sup>20</sup> V.7 continues from v.6 on what God requires of his people by stating that genuine fast calls upon them to share with others. The concern for others should also lead the people to share food, shelter, clothing, and other resources with the disadvantaged in the society (Cf. Ezek. 18:7, 16; Job 31:17-19; Matt. 25:34-40). The change in the verbs from the infinitives to the imperfect forms indicates a change in style for the admonition of the people. From the first phrase, "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry?" to the last phrase, "and not to hide yourself from your own flesh", there is a progression that develops from what are known as the basic necessities of life (i.e., food, shelter, and clothing) to a climax of the challenge to make oneself available to help others.<sup>21</sup> The importance of giving oneself to serve others is emphasized as well as an all-encompassing concern for the hungry, the homeless, and the naked. The particle *kî* ("if" or "when") in v.7b draws attention to itself and concludes the conditions of what the true fast consists of.

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<sup>20</sup> Other uses of *môṭâ* ("yoke") in which it carries with it the idea of bondage are in Jeremiah 27:2; 28:10,12-13; Ezek. 30:18; Nah. 1:13. The people of Israel could easily have recollected their liberation from bondage in Egypt (cf. Deut. 15:15; 16:12).

<sup>21</sup> The phrase "from your own flesh" in the literary context of v.7 suggests an openness to provide help to anyone who needs it. The instruction expands beyond the realms of blood ties or legal bonds to establish a relationship which exists among human beings.

Following the conditions in vv.6-7, vv.8 and 9a both begin with the emphatic adverb *'āz* (“then”) and introduce the promises and benefits that will come to those who practice the right kind of fast that pleases God. The double repetition of “then” draws our attention to these promises as it also stresses their importance to them. The first benefit is that the people’s light will shine as a result of their good deeds in serving others in v.8a: “Then your light will break forth like the dawn” (cf. Matt. 5:16). The people used to walk in darkness because of their sin, but now the prophet announces the dawning of light for those who will change to please God. If they will obey and work to serve other people, then they will experience a new beginning to life.<sup>22</sup> Their lives will shine forth to others who see their good deeds in contrast to the evil of oppressing and mistreating people. God also promises to restore their health: “and your healing will quickly spring up”. Sin brings a lot of sickness and death. *'ārukāt'kā* (“your healing”) is used here as a prophetic metaphor referring to both spiritual and physical healing. “Spiritual healing” is thought to go hand in hand with “physical healing.”<sup>23</sup> The quality of righteousness and the glory of Yahweh will give his people protection and security: “then your righteousness will go before you”, “and the glory of Yahweh will be your rear guard” (v.8b). This is a beautiful picture of protection in which their righteousness is leading them as an advance guard with glory of God behind as a rear guard (Cf. Isa 52:12). The reference to the protection before and behind seems to be an allusion to the cloud and pillar of fire at the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 14:19-20).

In their pilgrimage in the new life, God assures them of his protection. And finally, they will have access to God himself through their prayers in v.9a: “Then you will call, and Yahweh will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here I am”.<sup>24</sup> God’s presence will be

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<sup>22</sup> The expression *'ōrekā* “your light” designates that this “light” is the people’s own which comes from their new way of life.

<sup>23</sup> There is no reason to see the healing in this text as only “spiritual”. Spiritual healing might be the precursor of physical healing, but it certainly did not stand alone. Godly living and the fear of the Lord were expected to produce tangible results.

<sup>24</sup> This promise looks back to the unanswered prayers of vv.2-3. The context of vv.1-5 portrays a situation where God’s presence has departed from

restored and Yahweh will emphatically declare his presence to them: *hinnēni* (“here I am”). He will be very present in responding to those who cry out for help (cf. Isa 30:19; 65:24).

With the use of *'im* (“if”) in vv.9b-10a, Isaiah returns to the conditions of vv.6-7 to further develop the themes of doing away with oppression and practicing social compassion. In v.9b, the repetitions of *mōtâ* (“yoke”) and *š'lah* (“pointing”) remind the reader of the fact that God is concerned with oppression and slander of people. The opening verb *tāsîr* (“you remove”) governs this verse and the infinitive constructs distinguish the yokes that are to be abolished. Thus, the reader is again challenged to end any form of oppression within their community: “If you remove the yoke from your midst”. They are specifically to stop those actions that may impose burdens on others: “the pointing of the finger, and speaking of evil”. The reproaching finger and the evil word only tighten yokes instead of shattering them. They only increase the weight of the oppression. The tongue with evil words can be used as weapons to destroy people.<sup>25</sup> The people are again admonished to give themselves to the service of others in need in v.10a. The two groups of those in need mention here are the hungry and the oppressed that are repeated from the demands of v.7. This stresses to the reader the need for him/her to commit himself/herself to help these groups of people. The two verbs “pour out” and “satisfy” are in a chiasmic order in which they frame v.10a. They emphasize service to others in two ways: first, by the giving of oneself to those in need- “and if you pour out yourself on behalf of the hungry”; and then satisfying their needs- “and satisfy the desire of the afflicted”. The same root word referring to oneself (*napšekā*) and the desire of another person (*nepes*) is used in order to impress this idea of service in the reader’s mind.

If the audience will fulfill the demands in vv.9b-10a, then they are promised a second set of benefits and blessings in vv.10b-12. In v.10b, their darkness and gloom which seems to refer to their evil deeds and guilt situation will be removed so that their light will rise and shine

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the people, and they have no access to him. But here, there is a change of things in which God will be present and he will hear their prayers.

<sup>25</sup> The “pointing of the finger” and the “speaking of evil” seems to refer to gestures of condemnation, making false accusations, malediction, and malicious talk (cf. Prov. 6:13; Ps 12:2-3; Zech. 10:2; Amos 5:7; Col 3:5-10).



brightly: “then your light will rise in the darkness, and your gloom will be like noonday”. The imagery of light here is an intensification of the one in v.8a, in which the breaking forth of the dawn gives way to the contrasts between darkness and light, gloom and noonday in v.10b.<sup>26</sup> The natural shining of light in darkness of line A is intensified to a supernatural event when the people’s very gloom is to shine like noonday in line B (cf. Isa. 42:16; Lam. 3:2; Job 11:17; Ps 37:6). The simile helps the reader to visualize “gloom” rising and giving way “like the noonday”.

There is also the promise of God’s guidance for those who do his will in v.11a: “Yahweh will guide you continually”. The Lord will constantly guide them and they will never again be lost, without a leader (cf. Isa 57:18). With the repetition of the words *napšekā* (“your desire or soul”) and *hišbīa’* (“satisfy”) from v.10a the reader should see that if a person satisfies the need of an afflicted individual (v.10a), then the Lord will satisfy his needs (v.11a): “and satisfy your desire in scorched places”.<sup>27</sup> God promises to give strength as well: “and make your bones strong”. Their bones or frame will be strengthened.

By means of a beautiful simile, the prophet also tells us that godly people will be like a well-watered garden or a fountain that never dries up: “you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail” (v.11b). Here there is a change to a second per. masc. sing. verb *w<sup>h</sup>āyītā* (“you will be”) that tells the reader about the constant availability of fresh resources for those who live in accordance with God’s will (cf. Isa. 41:18; 43:19-20; 44:3; Jer. 2:13; 31:12; John 4:14; 7:38). With the promise of abundant resources for living, comes the spiritual restoration (that might include physical rebuilding) of the community as well in v.12a.<sup>28</sup> V.12a commences with the verb “will

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<sup>26</sup> The image of light in v.8a begins with the first signs of light breaking forth and moves to its peak display of radiance at midday in v.10b. Alter says: “Intensification can also be achieved by the introduction of a simile or metaphor in the second verset that brings out the full force of meaning of an image occurring in the first verset” (*Art of Biblical Poetry*, 21).

<sup>27</sup> There is a relationship established between the protasis “if” in v.10a and this promise in the apodosis “then” in v.11a.

<sup>28</sup> Isaiah has not only Judah’s physical restoration in mind. But he has spiritual life above all; he proclaims here the promise of Yahweh to restore

build” which describes the action of the people. Again, if they liberate the oppressed, feed the hungry and clothed the naked, then the ruins (*hār<sup>e</sup>bôt ‘ōlām*) in their community will be rebuilt. And with this restoration, the well-being of their community will be established again.

Yahweh will also give a new name to those who obey him in v.12b: “you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to live in”). The expression “you will be called” is used to indicate the blessing endowed by God on them.<sup>29</sup> The new names are in active participles that indicate to the reader the mission or charge to those given the names: “Repairer (*gōdēr*) of the breach; Restorer (*m<sup>e</sup>šōbēb*) of streets to live in”. Those given the new names are the ones who show others the way to salvation by the manner of life they lead.

The concern with true worship of God (especially with regard to the true fast in vv.6-12) is now climaxed by the reference to the keeping of the Sabbath in vv.13-14.<sup>30</sup> The prophet returns to the final set of conditions introduced by “if” in v.13 with its results in v.14. In v.13 there is the repetition of the verbal root *‘šh* in the infinitive construct *‘āšōt* with the word *hāpāšeykā* (“your pleasures”) from vv.2-3. The phrase in v.13c “not seeking your pleasure” brings to the mind of the reader one who delights to know God’s ways from v.2a, while in fact what he does is to follow his own ways. Seeking one’s pleasure is not a way to draw near to God (cf.v.3). The repetitions of *hāpāšeykā* (“your pleasures”) and *d<sup>e</sup>rākeykā* (“your ways”), emphasize that it is wrong for one to seek

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abundant life to his people. Some scholars seem to see Isa 58:12 as referring only to the rebuilding of the city after the Exile. But we believe in this context, it refers to spiritual restoration and regeneration as well (cf. Isa. 44:26; 61:4; Amos 9:11ff.).

<sup>29</sup> The use of this expression is important in the book of Isaiah in which the verb *qōrā* is used with the inseparable preposition *l<sup>e</sup>* (cf. Isa. 60:14; 61:3; 62:2, 4,12). Most scholars see the giving of a new name as symbolizing a change in the people and the entry into the new situation/age or era of salvation.

<sup>30</sup> We can compare the climaxing role of the Sabbath here with the one which it occupies in the creation account in Genesis 2:1-3. The Sabbath is a very important day in which God’s people are to give themselves to worship him (cf. Exod. 16:23; 31:14-15; Deut. 5:14-15; Isa. 56:2; Amos 8:4-5; Hos. 2:11; Jer. 17:19-27; Neh. 13:15-22).

his own pleasure or to follow his own ways in v.13. The reader is admonished to give himself/herself to the true worship of the Lord on the Sabbath. The genuine observance of the Sabbath is to refrain from carrying out one's own pleasure on this day, a holy day set apart for worship. The Lord's holy day is not a time to seek one's own pleasures. Instead the reader is to have a positive attitude towards Sabbath observance in v.13b: "if you call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of Yahweh honorable". We are to consider the Sabbath both a delight and the Lord's holy day that is to be honored. We can cause the Sabbath to be honored or dishonored.

Again, v.13c opens with the verb *w<sup>e</sup>kibbadtô* ("and you honor it") in which the reader is called upon to honor the Sabbath by doing what is right and not pursuing his own personal interests: "if you honor it, not going your own ways, and not seeking your own pleasure or speaking idle words". We are not to follow our own ways, not to indulge in our own pleasure or making idle talk that is displeasing to God on the Sabbath (cf. Hos. 10:4). The Lord's Day, being a special day, is to be given its proper respect and abused of it by self-indulgence, hypocrisy and the exploitation of the poor is forbidden. If fasting is to be an opportunity to show love to our neighbor, then the Sabbath should express first of all our love of God that must overflow to our fellowman. As VanGemerén states: "The Sabbath day is most appropriate as a day in which to do works of mercy in order to give an experience of light and joy to those who are oppressed and distressed."<sup>31</sup> The climax is reached with the blessings in v.14 that will belong to those who properly observe the Sabbath in v.13. It begins with the emphatic "then" which introduces the blessings. There is a movement from the 2nd per. masc. sing. speech, "you will take delight" to the 1st per. sing. "and I will make you ride"/ "and I will feed you with", which throws attention on Yahweh as the speaker. With the recurrence of the root *'ng* in v.14a, we see that taking the Sabbath as a delight leads to taking delight in the Lord himself. The connection is that if you call it a delight (v.13b), "then you will take delight in Yahweh" (v.14a; cf. Job 22:26). The proper observance of the Sabbath brings great joy in Yahweh, which should persuade the reader to

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<sup>31</sup> Willem A. VanGemerén, "Isaiah," *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Walter A. Elwell ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1989), 510.

truly worship Yahweh. Then with Yahweh as the speaker, he emphatically makes the promise in v.14b: “and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the inheritance of your father Jacob”.<sup>32</sup> Yahweh will lead his people to greater delight and joy as he also brings them to the heights of the land and feeds them with inheritance of Jacob, i.e., to inherit the earth (cf. Isa. 57:13; Gen. 28:13-14; Deut. 32:13; 33:29).

We could share in the full enjoyment of the covenant blessings and triumphant conquerors with Yahweh as well, if we would follow and obey him and not go our own ways. The promise is also sealed by Yahweh using the divine self-affirmation: “For the mouth of Yahweh has spoken”. This concludes the message of Isa 58:6-14 in a solemn manner. It guarantees that the promise will be fulfilled and should persuade us to take Yahweh’s ways and word seriously.

### **Conclusion: Summary of Message of Isaiah 58:6-14 and Application**

Isaiah 58 as a whole is an admonition in which Yahweh points out the wrongdoing of his people and contrasts that with specific examples of the behavior which he expects of them. If we are to truly worship and serve him we must devote ourselves totally to him, because relying only on our outward acts of religion such as fasting or observing the Sabbath is hypocritical. For then as worshippers, we are professing to be something we are not.

This is the emphasis of Isaiah 58:1-5 where God’s people are relying on their formal acts of religion and thinking that they are worshipping and serving God, without realizing that they are basically just hypocrites. Formal worship, no matter how correctly performed, is of no avail if it is accompanied by wrong conduct. Obedience to God’s law or Word in one’s religious practice is essential. God desires his people not the mere formalities of worship but full obedience from the heart. It is not enough for people to *conform* to some areas of God’s

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<sup>32</sup> We see in this promise the motif of victory in battle in which the imagery in verse 14 is military. In battle, to capture the high ground is synonymous with being victorious; victory means recovering the land that is rightfully yours and enjoying the fruits of the heritage of your fathers (cf. Ps 18:33; Hab. 3:19).

Law, but they continue to sin against it in one or more ways. Prophet Isaiah emphasizes true religion and the rewards of true godliness.

The people asked, "Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" in verse 3. What seems to be their motive for fasting? Their motive was to be seen and noticed (this reminds us of the Pharisees). In contrast to their self-righteous attitude, God gives them his evaluation of their fasting (Isa. 58:3b). They care more about pleasing themselves. God then shows them that their fasting was only external showmanship, and didn't come from their hearts (vv.3-4): they exploit their workers; they fight and quarrel; they physically strike each other.

God had commanded one fast for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), even though the people practiced other fasts voluntarily as the need arose. Whereas God had mandated one fast, he had also mandated fair treatment of others hundreds of times. One cannot claim to be fasting to God and yet he is being wicked to his fellow human beings. How you treat others will show whether you have a genuine relationship with God or not.

The passage of Isaiah 58:6-14 makes us aware of how we should fast in order to please God. Isaiah employs the alternating pattern of the "if-then" propositions in this text to give us an understanding of the need to obey and follow Yahweh's ways in worshipping and serving him.

True fasting must be accompanied by the kind of conduct that pleases him. We are challenged to be sensitive to the sufferings of other people. The mistreatment of fellow human beings should stop. Basically, we are instructed to practice justice and righteousness as a way of life. We should have concern for the value, worth and freedom of other people. We are to treat other people fairly and uphold their dignity and rights. We are to give ourselves to serve others such as the hungry, the homeless, and the naked. We are to seek and care for these groups of people, if our fast and worship of God is to be true. We have the supreme example of Jesus who emptied himself for us (Philippians 2:6-8). We are to empty ourselves for God and others (Isaiah 58:10; Matthew 7:12). The importance of giving oneself to serve others is emphasized. To provide for them and to meet their needs pleases the Lord.

God does want to bless us his people! It is not religious manipulation which will bring his blessings, but a genuine relationship with him which results in obedience to his commands (Deut. 5:29,32-6:7). Fasting is more than just denying oneself food and drink. The kind of fasting God is looking for is a fast from sin and injustice. That is what a true fast does. One must have hatred for sin because he desires to live a righteous life. Practicing a religious ritual, such as fasting, without a righteous, radical change in your life does not impress God (Isa. 58:4b-5; Matt. 6:1,5,16-18). Those who perform religious rituals, even biblically mandated ones, but do so without change in their behavior cannot expect answers to their prayers (v.4). One of the sins Jesus hated most was hypocrisy which he often confronted in the legalistic, religious Pharisees. When we are caught up in just ritual practices and worship, we can be deceived into thinking that we are pleasing God. God, however, is not deceived or mocked.

In our culture, we are more concerned with outward appearances or image than our inside or inner man. We should take time to examine and evaluate ourselves. Are you more concerned with practicing religious rituals than with showing mercy to others? Many people are modeling a religion of works rather than one of love for God and others. God desires that his people should fast and worship him in spirit and truth. He hates hypocritical fasting and worship.

Also, our attitude towards the Lord's Day called Sabbath or Sunday is addressed. Proper observance of the Sabbath is to set it apart for the worship of God and as a holy day of rest. The Sabbath was given to God's people by God to be a blessing, not a burden. According to Isaiah 58:13, the Sabbath was to be a day of delight as one worshiped his/her Creator and was refreshed spiritually as well as physically. How can you make the Lord's Day a delight—a day that pleases God? (Isa. 58:13-14). The term "Lord's day" only occurs in Revelation 1:10. Its meaning is variously interpreted as the "eschatological day of the Lord", Easter Sunday, or as most of us understand it, the first day of the week which we call Sunday. Instead of Sabbath, Sunday became the Christian day of worship, setting the pattern for what most of us observe today in honor of our Lord.

"Sabbath keeping" was commanded of Israel as part of the Mosaic covenant or Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15) and it

had its beginning in Genesis 2:1-3 when God rested from his work of creation. We are to worship God on the Sabbath or Sunday by setting aside work for personal gain in order to honor God. But it does not mean that we do nothing on this day. Jesus was doing things on the Sabbath, such as healing the sick (John 5:16-19). Setting aside this day to worship God shows one's trust and faithfulness to him. People would trust God to meet their needs if they took a day off of work to worship him, even during the critical harvest time. They honor God enough to obey him even when it was against farming or harvest time. No other nation had a similar day of rest.

It used to be that businesses and shops were closed on Sundays in order to worship and honor God. But, it's unfortunate that today it is a different story. Many people open their shops and trade on Sundays including Christians just like any other day. Also, many people including Christians prefer to go for some entertainment, such as sporting events than to worship God on Sundays. They miss out on the blessings of God promised to those who faithfully worship him in spirit and truth.

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