

The Realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa¹

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Abstract

The application of Isaiah 61 in Africa is considered by studying the original audience of Isaiah 61, exegeting the passage, studying Jesus' audience of Isaiah 61, including a brief exegesis of Luke 4:14–30, examining why Isaiah 61 was never fully realized in either audience and considering the applications to Africa. While the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 61 will be in the eschaton, and while there has already been a partial realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa; a greater realization of Isaiah 61 is contingent upon Africans meeting the conditions of this vision: acceptance of Christ, following God, fighting injustice and helping the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless.

Keywords

Isaiah 61; Luke 4:14-30; Africa; Fulfillment of prophecy; Fighting injustice

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¹ Interactions with Dr. Emmanuel Mbennah in the early stages of this work were key to the formation of this article.

² The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

Isaiah 61 represents God's vision for his people of hope, healing, freedom, comfort and salvation. It is a vision that has been preserved and passed down through the ages with Jesus himself quoting from this vision. It is a vision that has had a partial positive fulfillment on the continent of Africa;³ however, Africa—as a whole—with its conflicts,⁴ injustices,⁵ disproportion of diseases⁶ and spiritual tenuity⁷ should desire and seek a greater realization.⁸ However, there are a number of issues that demand careful prayer and reflection before attempting the implementation of Isaiah 61.⁹

The goal of this article is to highlight the major points of consideration.¹⁰ It is intentionally written with a very broad theological stance, so that emphasis can remain on prayer, contemplation and realization of the vision of Isaiah 61 in Africa with a spirit of unity rather than a resolution of all the details.¹¹ While there are many issues to consider, the key ones are:

1. The original audience of Isaiah 61 along with an exegesis of Isaiah 61:1–7
2. Jesus' audience of Isaiah 61 and a brief exegesis of Luke 4:14–30
3. Factors that prevented the realization of Isaiah 61 in the Bible
4. Factors to consider in the realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa

In looking at the exegesis and the original audience it will be shown that the original audience never fully attained the vision of Isaiah 61, rather the vision was mostly a vision of future hope. Likewise, a brief exegesis on Luke 4:14–30, along with a comparison of the reaction in Nazareth to other areas will show that the audience who heard Jesus read Isaiah 61 never saw the

9 This paper focuses on the realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa; one section of this article is very specific to Africa, although, the other sections are more universal and could potentially be applied to another region with prayer and careful reflection. To think that one can address all the critical issues before starting realization is ludicrous. There will always be new issues and problems discovered during the implementation of anything worthwhile. However, should one fail to pray and think critically before starting implementation, disaster is almost assured.

10 The application of Old Testament passages to a 21st-century audience raises critical theological questions that must be addressed. This article is written with the belief that Isaiah 61 has modern day application to 21st-century audience; the last footnote (drawing from the overall thesis of this work) defends this stance. Interpretation of prophetic genre, the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament and the authorship and the date of the book of Isaiah are difficult theological topics. This article attempts to address these topics only to the extent needed to defend its stance that Isaiah 61 speaks to the modern African continent. Detailed analysis of these topics is unequivocally beyond this work.

11 The details are important and their careful study is warranted. However, a broad theological stance will allow the arguments presented to have validity for a larger audience and provide a rallying point of unity in realization.

3 More will be said on this in the section Factors to Consider in the Realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa.

4 The 2018 World Health Organization report has the Africa region as the second highest region for direct deaths from major conflicts per capita.

5 This will be further delineated in the section Factors to Consider in the Realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa.

6 In the 2018 World Health Organization report, there are statistics for four infectious diseases across the various world regions. The Africa region has the highest per capita incidence for all four of these diseases. For two of these diseases, the occurrence in Africa is more than four times greater than the second highest region.

7 The well-respected African Bible Commentary notes: 'Christian leaders identified deficient knowledge of the Bible and faulty application of its teaching as the primary weakness of the church in Africa. They recognized that the church in Africa was a mile long in terms of quantity, but only an inch deep in terms of quality' (Adeyemo 2006:viii).

8 The author is aware of the call to change the African narrative from an exclusive focus on negative issues to also include positive aspects and the great potential of Africa (Thakkar 2015; UN Women 2018; UNESCO 2016). The discussion of an already realized fulfillment of Isaiah 61 (already pointed out in footnote 3, will be discussed more fully in a later section) is an attempt to have an accurate-looking both at the positive and negative—African narrative.

12 This statement could raise some objections. The sections Jesus' Audience of Isaiah 61 and Kingdom and Isaiah 61 provide a better-nuanced statement.

realization of the vision.¹² Given that neither of these audiences achieved the vision it is worthwhile discussing the factors that prevented the realization of Isaiah 61 in Bible times. This will lead to a discussion of present day factors that could prevent the realization of the same passage in Africa.

2. Original Audience

Anyone who has studied Isaiah knows that to speak of the authorship and audience is terrain riddled with theological peril, especially after chapter 39. While an attempt is being made to avoid the resolution of all the details and differences, a brief diversion into some details is necessary.

There are two major possibilities for the author of the original vision of Isaiah 61. The first one being that Isaiah, the son of Amoz, in the eighth century BC, had this vision which was received by an eighth-century audience with the probable intent for a postexilic audience (Grogan 1990; Lessing 2014). The second possibility is that an anonymous author, Deutero-Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah,¹³ either during or after the exile had the vision for an exilic or postexilic audience (Goldingay 2014; Watts 2002a). Hence, from a very broad perspective, Isaiah 61 was written either by Isaiah (eighth century BC) or by Deutero/Trito-Isaiah. Keeping the same broad perspective there are three possible audiences, an eighth-century BC audience, an exilic audience and/or a postexilic audience.

Since the goal is the realization of Isaiah 61, in the consideration of the original audience, it will be presumed that this is a prophetic vision of God delivered to his people.¹⁴ The issue of who received and communicated the vision, for the purpose of this argument, is not the critical factor. Whether it was Isaiah (eighth century BC) or Deutero/Trito-Isaiah, the crucial point is that God communicated the blessings he desired to bestow upon his people. Hope for healing and restitution were imparted to the audience and the intent of God to give freedom and restoration was clearly received.

As mentioned above, there are three possible audiences: an eighth-century BC audience, an exilic audience and/or a postexilic audience. Exegesis of Isaiah 61 followed by a review of the vision of Isaiah 61 in relation to each audience is warranted.

13 The term Deutero-Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah can also refer to the later chapters of Isaiah. These terms can be a flashpoint for debate see Coggins (1998).

14 This statement does narrow the theological stance of this argument. However, prophetic visions from God to his people are vital to the Christian faith, without prophetic vision there can be no hope of an eschanton.

3. Exegesis of Isaiah 61:1-7

Isaiah 61 consists of four parts: verses 1–3 speak of the tasks for which God has anointed and sent the prophet. Verses 4–7 tell of God’s restoration of and blessing to his people. In verses 8–9 God reaffirms his covenant with his people. Verses 10–11 close the chapter with rejoicing and exultation for what God has done. This article focuses on verses 1–7, thus these are the only verses exegeted.

3.1 The Tasks for Which God has Anointed and Sent the Prophet (Verses 1-3)

Verse 1. ‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD¹⁵ is upon me’¹⁶ (or more literally translated ‘the Spirit of *my* Lord GOD is upon me’ רִיחַ אֲדֹנָי (יהוה עָלַי) opens this chapter with the prophet describing who—the Lord GOD—is acting upon him.¹⁷ ‘Because the LORD has anointed me,’ details that the LORD has acted on the prophet to anoint him (qal verb מָשַׁח). There is an important connection between the Hebrew verb מָשַׁח (to anoint) and Hebrew noun מְשִׁיחַ (anointed or messiah), which is often translated with the Greek word *χριστός* (anointed) in the Septuagint.¹⁸ Normally anointing in the Old Testament is reserved for kings and priests; hence it is atypical that a prophet is anointed.

To anoint is followed by a string of infinitives: to bring good news (1b), to bind up (1b), to proclaim (1b), to proclaim (2a), to comfort (2b), to grant (3a) and to give (3a).¹⁹ These infinitives explain the purpose of the prophet’s anointing.

The first purpose in the prophet’s anointing is ‘to bring good news to the poor’.²⁰ The Hebrew word for ‘poor’ (עָנִי) is difficult to translate in this context and could also be translated as oppressed (NASB/NRSV) or meek (KJV). The poor/oppressed/meek will hear God’s message of hope through his prophet.

There is another verb in the string of infinitive constructs, ‘he has sent’ (qal verb שָׁלַח). In addition to anointing the prophet, the LORD is also sending the prophet to ‘to bind up the brokenhearted’. The LORD has also purposed that his prophet will bring comfort to those who are hurting.

The prophet is also ‘to proclaim liberty to the captives’. This has a reference to the Year of Jubilee by using the same words as Leviticus 25:10 ‘and proclaim liberty’.²¹ Following the LORD’s purpose the prophet is announcing freedom to the prisoners. The next line provides a synonymously parallel thought ‘and the opening of the prison to those who are bound’. Both Leviticus 25

15 GOD (capital ‘G’ small caps ‘OD’) or LORD (capital ‘L’ small caps ‘ORD’) indicates יהוה.

16 Unless otherwise noted, English quotations are from the ESV.

17 Some view this opening as a Trinitarian formula with רִיחַ (Spirit) referring to the Holy Spirit, רִיחַ אֲדֹנָי יהוה (my Lord GOD) referring to the Father and the pronominal suffix יָ (me) with the preposition עָלַי as a referent to Christ—given that Christ quoted this passage in reference to himself in Luke 4:18 (Martin 1983:1115).

18 In the New Testament *χριστός* takes on the meaning of messiah or a personal name ascribed to Jesus. For further reference see Kidner (1994:667), Koehler and Baumgartner (2001:s.v. ‘חֲשַׁח’ and ‘מְשִׁיחַ’), Liddell, Scott and Jones (1996:s.v. ‘χριστός’) and Martin (1983:1116).

19 The infinitive constructs are: לְשׂוֹם, לְנַחַם, לְקַרְא, לְקַרְא, לְחַבֵּשׁ, לְבַשֵּׁר and לְתַתּוֹת.

20 שָׂרָא to bring good news’ is translated with *εὐαγγελίζω* in the Septuagint. *εὐαγγελίζω*, is also used in the New Testament referring the bringing of the good news of Jesus Christ. *εὐαγγελίζω* a verb, is a cognate of *εὐαγγέλιον*, which is the noun used for ‘gospel’ in the New Testament. As seen in this footnote and the previous footnotes, there is a strong lexical and thematic connection between the prophet in Isaiah and Jesus.

21 לְקַרְא לְשׂוֹבִימִים דְרוֹר in Isaiah 61:1 and וּקְרַאתֶם דְרוֹר in Leviticus 25:10.

and Isaiah 61 stress ‘amnesty for the impoverished and downtrodden’ (Friesen 2009:387).

Verses 2-3. ‘To proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour’ is another reference to the Year of Jubilee along with the antithetically parallel statement ‘and the day of vengeance of our God’. Justice requires both God’s restoration and favour to the oppressed along with God’s retribution and vengeance on the oppressor. Along with announcing God’s favour and judgment, the prophet also has the purpose ‘to comfort all who mourn’. Comfort here has two parts. It is both an announcement that lifts people’s spirits and a concrete action, which provides a basis for positive change (Goldingay 2012:347).

The following lines in verse 3 reiterate the theme of restoration and comfort started in verse 2. Verse 3a has two consecutive infinitives ‘to grant’ and ‘to give’. The first indicates purpose and the second designates attendant circumstance or manner (Smith 2009:636). The LORD’s purpose toward ‘those who mourn in Zion’ is to provide (NIV and NRSV)—or ‘to grant’—for them by giving. Three powerful metaphors follow, ashes is a metaphor for sorrow that is being replaced by the metaphors of a headdress, oil and garment, which imply preparing for a jubilant festival. The last metaphor ‘oaks of righteousness’ points to a well-established, strong and fruitful people that the LORD himself has planted for his glory.

3.2 God’s Restoration and Blessing (Verses 4-7)

Verse 4. The theme changes—and continues through verse 9—from the purposes and the means of the LORD’s anointed to the restoration and blessings of the LORD. The destroyed cities and their ruins are to be raised up and rebuilt.

Verse 5. There is a change of voice to the second person. The works that God is bringing about will change the nature of the workforce. Before God’s people were working the land and tending the herds to pay tributes and taxes to foreign powers. Now strangers and foreigners will be working the land of God’s people. There is no suggestion of forced labour or reprisal being imposed on the strangers and foreigners. It seems ‘that this service will be done out of gratitude, thankfulness, and cooperation’ (Smith 2009:637).

Verse 6. God’s people now take up their rightful role of serving God and ministering to the nations. In response, the wealth of the nations will be given to God’s people in gratitude for their service.²²

²² There is a difficulty with the final phrase of verse 6, וּבְכֹבוֹדָם תִּתְיַמְרוּ ‘in their glory you shall boast’. תִּתְיַמְרוּ can be either the hithpael imperfect of יָמַר (to exchange) or the hithpael imperfect from root II of אָמַר (to boast). A variant reading from 1Q Isaiah would support the last option.

Verse 7. The double portion is representative of God's abundant blessing, which leads to rejoicing, rather than shame and dishonour. Along with this is a double portion of land with resultant joy.

4. Relation of Isaiah 61 to Possible Audiences

The vision of Isaiah 61 could not have been realized in an eighth-century BC community. Isaiah 61:5 and 6 call for aliens and foreigners to serve God's people. However, during this time period the Northern kingdom, Israel, will be taken into captivity by Assyria and the Southern kingdom of Judah will be defeated by the Arameans and attacked by Assyria. In addition, the gross idolatry of Israel and the idolatry present during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham and Ahaz would be in contradiction to the promises of righteousness and priestly ministers found in Isaiah 61:3 and 6. Hence the vision of Isaiah 61, for an eighth-century BC community, would have been a vision of future hope and restoration to God's people that was not realized in their generation. One could possibly argue for a partial fulfilment during the reign of Hezekiah.

There is no doubt that Isaiah 61 could not have been fulfilled during the exilic period. Jerusalem was in ruins and God's people were in captivity in Babylon. The vision of Isaiah 61 would have been nothing but a distant dream of hope.

Isaiah 61 has a partial fulfilment during the post-exilic period. God's people have returned from captivity to Jerusalem, the temple is rebuilt and the wall around Jerusalem restored.²³ Undoubtedly captives and prisoners were freed (Isaiah 61:1), gladness filled the hearts of God's people (Isaiah 61:3) and cities were restored (Isaiah 61:4). However, a complete fulfilment of Isaiah 61 was never realized during the post-exilic period. Nations never served nor contributed to God's people as envisioned in Isaiah 61:4 and 5. From the admonishments of the postexilic prophets, it is clear that the righteousness and priestly ministry of Isaiah 61:3 and 6 were never realized. To the post-exilic community Isaiah 61 was both a vision partly fulfilled and a hope for what God would accomplish in the future.

In looking at the original audience it has been shown that Isaiah 61 was never completely fulfilled to the original audience(s). The vision of Isaiah 61 was not realized in the eighth-century BC community or during the exile and only partially attained during the post-exilic period.²⁴

23 There were 71 years between the completion of the temple and the rebuilding of the wall.

24 The theologically curious and courageous could ask what would have been the implications had Isaiah 61 been completely fulfilled in the Old Testament? It must be noted that an Old Testament fulfilment of a prophecy does not negate a New Testament interpretation and/or fulfilment of the same prophecy. A well-known example of this is Isaiah 7:14 where there is a complete Old Testament fulfilment and a New Testament fulfilment/interpretation. For further information and a good discussion of the varying views see Comfort (2005 42-45).

5. Jesus' Audience of Isaiah 61

Luke 4:14–30 is a striking account of Jesus reading from Isaiah 61 and the reaction of the people of Nazareth. In considering the fulfilment, or lack thereof, of Isaiah 61 in the New Testament an examination of this passage and related material is required. This examination contains a brief exegesis of Luke 4:14–30 and a comparison of the reaction in Nazareth to other areas.

5.1 A Brief Exegesis of Luke 4:14-30

Luke uses Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 61:1–2 and subsequent proclamation that he is the Messiah who will usher in God's kingdom as the initiation of Jesus' ministry. This quotation and proclamation is made in the Nazareth synagogue and those listening reject Jesus' word and attempt to kill him. Matthew (13:53–58) and Mark (6:1–6) record Jesus' rejection at Nazareth later in their narratives. It is likely that Luke has moved this event from its historical position to the initiation of Jesus' ministry, as it provides an excellent introductory synopsis of Jesus' message (Marshall 1994:988).

Verses 14–15. An initial summary of Jesus' ministry is given by Luke declaring that Jesus operated in 'the power of the Spirit' in the region of Galilee. Jesus taught in the synagogues and was 'glorified by all'.

Verses 16–21. Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth, the scroll from the prophet Isaiah is given to him and he reads from Isaiah 61:1–2. Luke's quotation of Isaiah is from the Septuagint, which has some variances in comparison to the Hebrew text. This explains some of the differences between the quotation in Luke 4:18–19 and Isaiah 61:1–2. The line 'to bind up the brokenhearted' (which is in the Septuagint) from Isaiah 61:1 is omitted by Luke. The phrase 'the opening of the prison to those who are bound' in Isaiah 61:1 is from the Hebrew text and is not contained in Luke's account nor in the Septuagint text. The phrase 'recovering of sight to the blind' is in the Septuagint text of Isaiah 61:1 but not the Hebrew text. 'To set at liberty those who are oppressed' is a phrase added from Isaiah 58:6 with the likely intention of emphasizing the year of Jubilee (Nolland 2002:197). It is probable that the reading of Isaiah 61:2 stops before the line 'the day of vengeance of our God' as a means of emphasizing the present possibility of salvation for those listening (Stein 1992:157).

After reading this passage, Jesus rolls up the scroll, returns it to the attendant and everyone is looking at him. Luke then records an incredible assertion: 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in

your hearing.’ It is reasonable to see this assertion as a summary of the sermon Jesus preached at Nazareth (Nolland 2002:198).

Verses 22–30. The responses of those in the Nazareth synagogue can be taken in either a positive or negative way (Liefeld 1990:48855/61616).²⁵ Most commentators and translators take the first two phrases (‘all spoke well of him’ and ‘ marvelled at the gracious words’) in a positive way and the question (‘is not this Joseph’s son’) in a negative way.

Jesus’ response with the famous proverb ‘physician heal yourself’ and his often quoted statement ‘no prophet is acceptable in his hometown’ clearly indicates that some part of the response from those at the Nazareth synagogue was negative. This is combined with Jesus knowing that they wanted proof of ‘what we have heard you did at Capernaum’. The statement ‘what we have heard’ indicates they did not believe Jesus had performed the miracles.

Jesus then tells of how Elijah was sent to Zarephath, a gentile, in the land of Sidon rather than to a widow in Israel and about Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian instead of a leper in Israel. Jesus’ messages that Nazareth cannot exclusively claim him nor must he do miracles for them and that he is free to minister to others in the two accounts is clear (Stein 1992:159).²⁶

Jesus’ response invokes the wrath of those in the synagogue. They rise up, take Jesus out of town with the intention of throwing him over the edge of a cliff. However, he passes through them and goes on his way leaving Nazareth.

5.2 Comparison of the Reaction in Nazareth to Other Areas

In thinking about Jesus’ audience of Isaiah 61, it will be beneficial to compare the reaction of those in Nazareth to other regions. The negative reaction, recorded in Luke 4:22–30, of those who heard Jesus read Isaiah 61:1–2 and his sermon on this passage are detailed above. In addition, Matthew 13:53–58 and Mark 6:1–6 provide parallel accounts that detail Jesus ‘did not do many mighty works’ (Matthew 13:58) in Nazareth and that Jesus himself marvelled at the unbelief of those in Nazareth.

Luke 4:14–15 makes a comparison of Nazareth to another area by reporting that in the region of Galilee Jesus’ teaching in the synagogues resulted in him being glorified. This provides a stark contrast to the following verses (16–30) where those in Nazareth reject and try to kill Jesus.

The very next pericope in Luke (4:31–37), providing another contrast to the Nazareth reaction, records Jesus teaching and

25 πάντες ἐμαρτύρουν αὐτῷ ‘all spoke well of him’ can be literally translated as ‘all bore witness to him’ or ‘all bore witness against him’. The translation of the phrase hinges on whether αὐτῷ should be translated as a dative of advantage or disadvantage. μαρτυρέω can be used in both a positive sense (John 15:27) and a negative sense (Matthew 23:31). Likewise θαυμάζω ‘marvelled’ can refer to a favourable response (Matthew 8:10) or an unfavorable response (Mark 6:6). Lastly, the question ‘is not this Joseph’s son’ can be asked incredulously or admiringly.

26 In Luke’s gospel these examples also serve as demonstrating the extension of God’s grace to the gentiles.

casting out a demon in the Capernaum synagogue with the result of (positive) amazement and reports about him going into the surrounding region. The Sea of Galilee is recorded as an area where Jesus is positively received by large crowds with many healings (Matthew 15:29–31 and John 6:1–2). Large crowds followed Jesus and he healed them in Perea (Matthew 19:1–2 and Mark 10:1).

Like Nazareth, there were other locations where Jesus did not receive a warm welcome. In the country of the Gerasenes (Matthew 8:28–34, Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–39) after Jesus cast out demons from the demoniacs, the demons entered a herd of swine, which consequently drown in the sea. When the people of the city learned what had happened they asked Jesus to leave. Jerusalem gave a mixed reception to Jesus, on one trip the people attempted to stone Jesus (John 8:48–59). There was a triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1–11, Mark 11:1–11, Luke 19:29–44 and John 12:12–19) which is contrasted to those crying for Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:22–23, Mark 15:12–14, Luke 23:21–23 and John 19:15) and his subsequent death.

Other locations could be mentioned; however, what is clear is that some regions and people accepted and welcomed Christ. In these regions there are healings, miracles and the positive reception of Jesus and his message. Other areas and people rejected Christ, in the case of Nazareth—especially compared to the area where Jesus is accepted—this resulted in fewer healings and limited teaching by Jesus.

This section exegeted Luke 4:14–30 and compared the reaction of Nazareth to other areas. From this, it is clear that the audience who heard the very Son of God read from Isaiah 61 and give the declaration that the vision was fulfilled in their hearing never realized—in any significant manner, especially in comparison to the town of Capernaum and the region of the Sea of Galilee—the promises contained in Isaiah 61. Nazareth missed the realization of the vision in Isaiah 61.

6. Kingdom and Isaiah 61

Isaiah 61 and Jesus' quotation of it in Luke 4 clearly invokes kingdom language, warranting a discussion of the relationship between Isaiah 61 and the kingdom of God. In the Old Testament, the kingdom of God is clearly affiliated with the Davidic covenant in 1 Chronicles 17:11–14 where God promises David—through his offspring—an everlasting kingdom. There was the expectation (Psalm 72) that the earthly kings of Israel (and subsequently

Judah) would mediate the kingdom of heaven, and its ensuring righteousness and justice, on earth (Seal 2016:s.v. 'kingdom of God'). After the fall of Judah, this expectation became a future vision and hope, with the prophets expecting a messiah to re-establish the kingdom.

There are a number of factors that indicate the connection Isaiah 61 has to the Old Testament theme of kingdom. They are the connection between the Hebrew verb *מָשַׁח* (to anoint) and Hebrew noun *מָשִׁיחַ* (anointed or messiah), liberty/year of Jubilee language, the sense of restoration and retribution, transformation of Zion from mourning to jubilant festival, restoration of destroyed cities, strangers and foreigners working the land of God's people, the wealth of the nations being given to God's people and a double portion of land.

In the New Testament, the kingdom of God is a key teaching of Jesus. On one hand Jesus indicates that the kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 3:2 and Mark 9:1). On the other hand Jesus speaks of the kingdom as a future event (Matthew 25:1–13, Luke 12:35–48 and 19:11–27). Paul's writings also view the kingdom as something present (1 Corinthians 4:20 and Colossians 1:13) and also as something happening in the future (1 Corinthians 15:23–24). Revelation announces the final victory of God's kingdom (Revelation 11:15).

Within Christianity, there is much debate as to how much of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated during his earthly ministry, how much of the kingdom exists now and when the final kingdom will arrive.²⁷ It is safe to say, that Jesus, to some extent, inaugurated the kingdom during his earthly ministry. Likewise, it can be said with confidence, that there is a coming kingdom where all things are made right.

Matthew records a partial realization of Isaiah 61 and at least a partial arrival of the kingdom. In Matthew 11:2–5, John the Baptist is in prison and wants to know if Jesus is the messiah or if they should look for someone else. Using a phrase from Isaiah 61:1, Jesus assures John the Baptist that he is the messiah by having it reported to John that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor.

Jesus quoting Isaiah 61 in Luke 4 is an inaugural statement of his kingdom, and those in the synagogue at Nazareth heard this inauguration. Hence it can be said that Nazareth in some sense took part in the kingdom inauguration. However, as shown above, they did not receive the benefits or realization of Isaiah 61.²⁸

27 Due to this debate, this article (other than this section) tries to limit the use of the word 'kingdom'. As mentioned in the introduction, this is in keeping with the purposeful broad theological stance to have validity for a larger audience and provide a rallying point of unity in realization.

28 From a broader perspective, first-century AD Israel as a whole missed the realization of Isaiah 61. While Israel was granted a degree of religious freedom, Rome was the clear power in opposition to a possible realization of Isaiah 61:4 and 5. Jesus' harshest words of rebuke were directed to the Jewish religious leaders in contrast to the vision of Isaiah 61:3 and 6. Israel of the first century AD rejected and killed the Messiah and then proceeded to persecute and kill those who would follow him.

7. Factors that prevented the realization of Isaiah 61 in the Bible

The previous sections have demonstrated that in the Old Testament and New Testament the vision of Isaiah 61 was never fully realized.²⁹ This raises a critical question of why the vision was never fulfilled? What factors prevented the realization of the vision? After addressing these two questions it is critical to address the question: Could these same factors prevent Isaiah 61 from becoming a reality in Africa?

In Nazareth, Jesus himself was present to fulfil the vision. Yet the people of Nazareth did not even receive a partial fulfilment of Isaiah 61. The people of Nazareth rejected the Saviour. They could not believe that one of their own was the Messiah and had come to fulfil prophecy. Their unbelief and rejection of Christ prevented the realization of Isaiah 61 in their midst.

In the Old Testament a closer look at the vision of Isaiah 61 is needed to reveal the factors why God's people missed or only partially received the blessings promised. Isaiah 61 must be put into the proper context. Isaiah 61 is only part of the vision of the author. The vision of the author also includes (at minimum) chapters 58 through 60.³⁰ Chapter 58 sets out the conditions for the fulfilment of the prophecy. Chapter 59 is a testimony against the iniquities of God's people and a promise of both vengeance and a coming Redeemer. Chapter 60 continues the theme of redemption started at the end of chapter 59, providing hope for restoration and prosperity. Chapter 61 is a continuation of this theme of hope.

When looking at prophecy one must always look for the conditionality, both implicit and explicit, of the prophecy (Chisholm 2010). The vision contained in Isaiah 58 through 61 is no different. If there is not a fulfilment of Isaiah 61 then the required conditions were never met.

Chapter 58 details some very specific conditions required for the fulfilment of chapters 60 and 61. The first part of chapter 58 deals with the hypocrisy of God's people; they were fasting, supposedly for God, while they were quarrelling and doing whatever they wished. The rest of the chapter explicitly gives the required conditions for God's blessings. The conditions include: loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing food with the hungry, providing shelter to the poor wanderer, clothing the naked, not turning away from own flesh and blood, satisfying the needs of the oppressed and keeping the Sabbath.³¹ In Isaiah 61:8 the LORD reminds his people of his requirements: love justice, hate

29 Unrealized prophecy raises questions of human responsibility and choice along with God's intentions and sovereignty. There is a great debate around this topic. For further discussion on this topic relating to unfulfilled prophecy see Chisholm (2010).

30 There is much debate about how to divide the book of Isaiah; however, there is strong agreement that chapters 58 through 61 are part of one vision from the author; whether this vision starts at chapter 56 or 58 is debated.

31 The Old Testament concept of Sabbath rest is transformed in the New Testament, both by Jesus' teaching and by the epistles. Care must be taken in defining Sabbath rest in the light of the New Testament. The commandment to keep the Sabbath is the only one of the ten commandments that is not repeated in the New Testament.

robbery and injustice. These expectations in Isaiah 61 have direct reference to the conditions from chapter 58.

Chapter 59 details some factors that will not only prevent the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 but will incur the judgment and wrath of God. Some of these factors are: murder, lies, injustice, rebellion against God and turning away from God. So in addition to the explicit conditions set out in chapter 58, chapter 59 adds some implicit requirements.

As pointed out in the section on original audience, the eighth-century BC community did not meet the required conditions. The Northern kingdom of Israel was blatantly worshipping idols, and idolatry was present in the Southern kingdom of Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham and Ahaz.

During the exile there was a reappropriation and 'rediscovery of their deepest identity as members of the covenant' (Skiba, 1984:48). In chapter 9 of Daniel we see a prayer of repentance by Daniel. Given the above and the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem it would seem the exilic community met enough of the conditions for the previously mentioned partial fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in the postexilic community.³²

There is no doubt that the postexilic community did a better job at meeting the conditions and requirements of Isaiah 58 and 59 than the other communities that have been discussed. However, the warnings and exhortations of the postexilic prophets give evidence that the community was not completely fulfilling the conditions and requirements.

In review, the major factors that prevented the full fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in the Bible can be summarized as follows: rejection of Christ, turning away from God, inactivity against injustice and failure to help the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless.

8. Factors to consider in the realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa

It must first be clearly understood that the complete and full realization of Isaiah 61 for all Christians will be the eschaton. Ultimately Isaiah 61 is an eschatological hope for the Christian that will be fulfilled at the second advent of Christ. As factors for the realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa are discussed, it must be remembered that the final and comprehensive realization of Isaiah 61 will be when Christians see their LORD face to face. Hence the

32 There is also the promise of return from Babylon after 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). For more discussion on conditionality, sovereignty and prophecy reference the article by Chisholm (2010) already mentioned.

33 Holter (2014) discusses the relation between the biblical book Isaiah and Africa.

34 This is not a claim that missionary service and kindness between Africans has been perfect. No doubt there have been plenty of mistakes. But compassion, kindness and love has been demonstrated to many in Africa in the name of Christ.

35 With over one trillion US dollars of given to Africa over the last 50 years (Moyo 2009), some could argue that Africa has fed on the wealth of nations (Isaiah 61:6). However, the sense in Isaiah 61 is one of a powerful region receiving because of its power rather than a needy region receiving charity.

36 Manus (2009) addresses this need along with importance of caring for the poor via detailed exegesis of Luke 4:7-19 for a Nigerian context.

rest of the discussion deals with how to achieve a greater partial fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in Africa.³³

Before asking what factors need to be considered in the partial realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa, it is worthwhile considering the limited realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa that has already taken place. The good news has been preached to the poor (Isaiah 61:1). 40.8 percent of the world's Protestants are African, which is more than double the percentage of the second largest region of Protestants, Asia with 17.7 percent (Johnson et al. 2017:43). Further, Africa is the fastest growing region for Protestant Christianity with a 2.88 percent annual rate change from 2000 through 2017 (ibid:50). The brokenhearted have been bound up and those who mourned have been comforted (Isaiah 61:1 through 2). To deny this is to deny the effectiveness and kindness of missionary service to Africa over the last century and the compassion that Africans have shown to each other.³⁴ Given the above, it is clear that there has already been a partial fulfilment of Isaiah 61.³⁵

The question is what factors need to be considered for a greater fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in Africa? The factors that prevented the complete fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in the Bible will be the same factors that will prevent a greater fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in Africa. A closer look at the major factors identified in the previous section is warranted.

Acceptance of Christ is the greatest factor in the realization of Isaiah 61. He is the good news to the poor. He is the one who binds the broken-hearted. He is the one who comforts those who mourn. To reject Christ is to miss not only the vision of Isaiah 61 on earth but also the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for abundance of life; not to mention missing the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah 61 in the eschaton.

Acceptance of Christ is a tremendous start in the fuller realization of Isaiah 61. However, after acceptance has to come following God. It is not enough just to accept Christ, but one must follow after him to receive the vision of Isaiah 61. Obedience to the commands of God is not optional if Isaiah 61 is to be realized.

The greater realization of Isaiah 61 also requires a fight against injustice. It is not enough to accept Christ and follow God. Injustice must be fought. Corruption must be fought. It is God's expectation that his children will actively combat systems of evil. God's children are not meant to passively accept wrongdoing in any circumstance.³⁶ Please note that God's children do not wage war in the same way as the rest of the world. God's children wage

war against evil with love, kindness and compassion. The truth is spoken in love. The other cheek is turned. The extra mile is walked. Enemies are fed.

Lastly the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless must be helped in order for a greater fulfilment of Isaiah 61 to be realized. The command of God to his children has always been to show compassion to those in need.³⁷

At this point the astute observer is asking: is Isaiah 58 through 61 a self-fulfilling prophecy? The conditions that God has set out for fulfilment are activity against injustice and helping the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless. He then promises that these very same things will be fulfilled. Like many things with God, there are some paradoxical qualities to the vision. You have to lose your life to find it. Give, and it will be given to you. As God's people start to obey his commands there is an empowering of his Spirit that supernaturally provides such a greater fulfilment it cannot be called self-fulfilling. If this supernatural fulfilment is not present, it should be questioned whether God is truly involved in the endeavour or whether it is simply a work of the flesh.

It also should be noted that the realization comes to the very ones who are meeting the conditions: acceptance of Christ, following God, activity against injustice and helping the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless. In thinking about Africa, there has been an acceptance of Christ and a following of God, 40.8 percent of the world's Protestants are in Africa (Johnson et al. 2017).³⁸ However, Africans have not actively fought against injustice, nor taken seriously the business of helping others.

Human trafficking—especially of women and children (Okyere-Manu 2015), abuse of women (Kretzschmar 2009), violence (Bouju & de Bruijn 2014), corruption at all levels of government and fraud (Carnes 2005; Ojo 2011)³⁹ are all commonplace in Africa. If Africa wants a greater realization of Isaiah 61 Africans must actively fight these injustices. It is not the job of aid agencies, the UN or outside mission organizations. It is a battle for Africans. There will be those who go to jail because they refuse to pay a bribe. It will take courage for honest government officials to stand up to their colleagues and demand they stop embezzling money. Ordinary Africans will have to get involved if they suspect human trafficking, abuse of a woman or other violence. There is no doubt that this will be a difficult war, especially since God's weapons of war are love and compassion, but a greater realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa hinges on Africans fighting injustice.

37 Hofheinz (2017) develops this argument from Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 for a North American audience.

38 This does not imply that the work is finished but rather is an affirmation of the tremendous progress that has been made in the last century.

39 Ojo (2011:61) asks the penetrating questions: 'Why are there frequently and deep-rooted moral failures and corruption among Christians who hold political power and are in leadership positions? Why do contemporary African Christians not strive to lead good and exemplary lives in the belief that they are in the end time and that they are preparing for the final events of this age and Christ's return?'

40 A Google search on Africa dependence on aid will yield thousands of interesting and varying opinions. Fr Kimaroyo (1997) has written on this topic from a Catholic perspective. Much of what he says would have direct application to the evangelical church.

41 Note there are slight differences between figures in this paper and the article. In this paper, missionaries per million Christians equals 'Missionaries sent per million Christians'. It should also be noted that comparing the number of missionaries that Africa sends to the number of missionaries North America or Europe sends is not a fair comparison because of the vast differences in economic capacity to support missionaries. However, comparisons to other regions of the world are reasonable.

Africans have not taken seriously the business of helping others. This is seen in the current debate amongst aid agencies and mission agencies about aid dependence in Africa.⁴⁰ Although, the clearest place to see this is in the number of missionaries from Africa versus the number of Christians in Africa and comparing this to other parts of the world. In 2010 Africa had 494 million Christians and 20,700 missionaries. This means that Africa had 42 missionaries per million Christians (pmC.). What is indicting is that Latin American had 106 missionaries pmC, Asia had 134 missionaries pmC, Oceania had 215 missionaries pmC, Europe had 226 missionaries pmC and North America had 477 missionaries pmC (Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2010).⁴¹ Africa had the lowest number of missionaries pmC of any region in the world. It is not just the lowest number, but the closest region (Latin America) had more than double the number of missionaries pmC than Africa. Further, in the last 100 years Latin America, Asia, North America, Europe and Oceania have increased their missionaries to pmC ratio by multipliers of 21, 11, 2.7, 2.4 and 2.4 respectively. While in the last 100 years Africa has only increased its missionaries to pmC by a multiplier of 1.5 (ibid.).

If Africa wants a greater realization of Isaiah 61, Africans must start helping the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless. African churches must get involved in the affairs of missions. Not only is this something that has to be organized by African churches and organizations, but it also needs to start happening every day on the street between Africans of differing ethnic origins.

At this point, a word of caution is in order. Isaiah 61 can be used as a springboard simply for social reform (Hanson 1985). Jesus' claim that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 puts him at the centre of a greater realization. This realization 'is not spiritualized into forgiveness of sins, but neither can it be resolved into a program of social reform. It encompasses spiritual restoration, moral transformation, rescue from demonic oppression, and release from illness and disability' (Nolland, 2002:202).

9. Conclusion

A biblical framework for the application of Isaiah 61 to the context of Africa was set by a study of the original audience, an exegesis of the passage, examining Jesus' audience of Isaiah 61, a brief exegesis of Luke 4:14–30 and asking why Isaiah 61 was never fully realized in either audience. It was shown that the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah 61 will be in the eschaton; however, there has already been a partial realization of Isaiah 61 in Africa. If Africa

wants a greater realization of Isaiah 61 then it must meet the conditions placed upon this vision, which are in summary form: acceptance of Christ, following God, fighting injustice and helping the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless. For a greater realization it must be Africans, empowered by the Holy Spirit, who meet these conditions.⁴²

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42 The application of Old Testament passages to a 21st-century audience raises critical theological questions that must be addressed. The questions required will depend on one's theological position, especially one's view of the relation between national Israel and the church. However, no matter one's theological disposition, two questions are key: 1) how is the passage used in the New Testament? 2) do the conclusions from the use of the Old Testament passage agree with the New Testament? If the New Testament gives an Old Testament passage validity to a modern audience and the conclusions drawn are consistent with the New Testament, then most other questions and concerns become secondary for most theological positions.

The New Testament use of Isaiah 61 provides a very strong case that the passage can be applied to a 21st-century audience. In Luke 4:21 Jesus claims Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in the hearing of his audience; in addition, there are also allusions to its fulfilment in Matthew 11:15. Jesus' claim clearly makes Isaiah 61 a messianic passage with at least a partial fulfilment found in Christ's first advent.

The overall conclusion of this paper, which is derived from Isaiah 61, could be summarized as: accept Christ, follow God, fight injustice and help the oppressed, hungry, naked and homeless. This summary is clearly affirmed in many other places in the New Testament.

There are three major factors that guarantee Isaiah 61 has an application to a 21st-century audience: 1) Jesus quotes the passage with an intended application to his audience, 2) the New Testament affirms there is at least a partial fulfilment of Isaiah 61 found in Christ's first advent, and, 3) the overall conclusion of this article agrees with the New Testament.

Mason (2012) provides a different argument that focuses on seeing Isaiah 61 as a discrete Old Testament voice for 'holistic' Christian mission (although Mason will argue that adding 'holistic' is redundant as by definition Christian [or biblical] mission is holistic).

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