

Overview

As often, Isaiah begins with a figurative statement, to which he then gives the interpretation.

5:1-7, The Parable: Israel as the Lord's Vineyard

Isaiah has hinted at this metaphor previously, in 1:8 and 3:14. Now he develops it more fully. First we'll study his parable, then look at it in the broader context of the image of the nation as a vine.

The parable has three stages, marked by a shift in the speaker: the prophet in vv. 1-2, the owner of the vineyard in vv. 3-6, then the prophet again, giving the interpretation of the metaphor, in v. 7.

Like Nathan's parable to David (2 Sam 12), this one does not immediately point to the people's sin, but starts as a curious story to which anyone might want to pay attention, and seduces the people into proclaiming judgment on their own sin. An important key to this strategy is the threefold repetition of the Hebrew particle **נא**, which marks a statement or request as polite or respectful. It indicates that the speaker respects the higher status of the one who is addressed. The particle appears at v. 1 “now,” v. 3 “I pray you,” and v. 5 “now, go to.” This deferential attitude captures the people's attention, and makes the impact of the accusation, when finally it falls in v. 7, even more striking.

1-2, The Prophet's Song

1 Now—This word translates the Hebrew particle of polite request. We might more aptly translate, “Please let me sing...”

will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard.--Everybody loves a love story. Isaiah begins by describing some unnamed person as his “wellbeloved” **ידיד** and “beloved” **דוד**. The latter term is the one used in Canticles for the man in the relationship, and Canticles offers by far the greatest density of references to vineyards of any book in the Bible. By starting the song in this way, Isaiah entices his hearers to listen. They are expecting a ballad of pastoral romance, two lovers romping through the garden together.

My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill:--To one attractive theme (love), he adds another (prosperity). The situation is excellent: a “fruitful hill,” with rich soil exposed to the sun.

But a vineyard requires more than just a good field. He goes on to describe the care that the beloved bestows on the vineyard. Each element heightens our sense of the expectation that the beloved has concerning his vineyard.

2 And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof,--The soil is naturally rocky, but he gathered together the rocks and piled them along the edges to make a border. This rock wall would have been enhanced by piling briars on it to discourage intruders. This is hard, hot work, but the farmer is anticipating the wonderful grapes that he will grow in this fertile ground.

and planted it with the choicest vine,--He did not skimp on the quality. He got the best stock that money could buy. “Choicest vine” is literally *soreq*, a vine from the valley of Soreq, the home of

Samson's Delilah.

and built a tower in the midst of it,--A place to rest from the midday sun, and also a place from which to guard the crop as it matured and harvest drew near. He anticipates that the wonderful crop he will produce may tempt others to steal it, so he makes provision to guard it. In addition, this structure makes the vineyard more attractive as a romantic venue.

and also made a winepress therein:--The winepress is a basin hewn from the limestone bedrock in which the grapes are trampled to extract the juice. So confident is he in the harvest that he expects to be able to make his own wine, rather than simply selling his grapes to others. At Gibeon, the winepress is close to the storage caves for the wine. The amorous couple now has a lovely country garden, with the seclusion of a tower, and promise of plenty of wine. The listeners are by now fully engaged.

and he looked that it should bring forth grapes,--The anticipation that is latent in the owner's labor now is made explicit. He expects good fruit. The preparation is all in place for the lovers to enjoy this beautiful setting. The next thing the hearers expect is a description of their romance, as in Canticles, but they will be disappointed.

and it brought forth wild grapes.--Instead, all he gets are sour, worthless berries. In two words in Hebrew, **וַיַּעַשׂ בְּאֵשִׁים**, he brings the entire romantic picture crashing down.

3-6, The Lord's Resolve

Suddenly, Isaiah's role changes. In the first two verses he was speaking about his beloved. Now he takes up the voice of the beloved, the farmer, who describes the disaster from his own perspective.

3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah,--He addresses himself to the people of the Southern kingdom. If any of them has a hint that a tale of judgment is about to replace the love story, they will naturally anticipate that it is the northern kingdom that is in trouble. And as we will see when we review the history of the vine metaphor in the Bible, the original reference (Gen 49:22) is specifically to Joseph, the progenitor of Ephraim and Manasseh, the heart of the Northern Kingdom.

judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard.-- "I pray you" is the polite particle that introduced v. 1. He continues to represent the hearers as a respected party. He appeals to their sense of propriety with two questions.

4 What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?--The first question is whether he has been defective in his attention to the vineyard. Did he leave anything undone?

wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?--The second question is that if he has not been remiss, where does the fault lie for the failure?

5 And now go to;--The third time, he uses the particle of polite entreaty. "Please let me tell you what I will do." He continues to represent his hearers as impartial, respected observers of the dispute between himself and the vineyard, and invites their agreement. "Here's what I'm thinking of doing. What do you think? Isn't this exactly what you would do if you were in my sandals?"

I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard:--He describes four things that he will do to the vineyard. The first three are straightforward, but the fourth will surprise the hearers.

I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up;--The hedge consists of the briars that he piles on top of the stone wall, to keep small animals from eating the grapes.

and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down:--The wall is the stone foundation that would keep larger animals out.

6 And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns:--Not only does he remove its protection from animals, but he refrains from cultivating it, allowing it to return to its wild state.

So far, the actions are what one would expect from a human farmer. But the fourth action finally reveals who this husbandman is.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.--No human farmer can command the clouds. At the very end of the parable, Isaiah reveals that the farmer in question is not just any farmer, but the Lord. Therefore the vineyard cannot be just any ordinary vineyard.

7, Interpretation

7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,--Now he provides the interpretation. "The house of Israel" is the entire nation, but the term is also used to refer to the northern tribes (Israel as opposed to Judah). The men of Judah at this point might pride themselves that Isaiah means to criticize the northern kingdom, but their comfort is short lived:

and the men of Judah his pleasant plant:--Judah is explicitly included in the condemnation.

and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression;--This pair and the next are puns. In Hebrew, this one puns **וַיִּקְוֶה לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהָיָה מִשְׁפָּח**. He wanted the leaders to provide judgment for the oppressed, but instead they became the oppressors. He has highlighted this problem earlier in the book:

1:23 Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them.

3:14 The LORD will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.

for righteousness, but behold a cry.--Another pun: **לְצַדִּיקָה וְהָיָה צַעֲקָה**. Instead of righteous behavior on the part of all, he hears the wailing of the oppressed.

v.7 interprets the vineyard and the bad fruit. The interpretation of the final aspect of the story, the destruction of the vineyard, comes in vv. 8-30. First, though, let's pause to set this metaphor in its broader biblical context. This is the sixth of the Bible study principles I outlined in the handout some weeks ago, "Find the Bible's comments on itself."

The Metaphor of Israel as a Vine

This is neither the first nor the last instance in Scripture where Israel is compared to a vine, and the Lord to the farmer. Let's set the metaphor in the context of some other references.

Gen 49:22

When Jacob blesses his sons, he begins the blessing on Joseph, his favorite, with the words,

Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall:

The vine is one of the treasures of the middle east. Recall from Num 13:23, 24, that in response to Moses' charge to "bring of the fruit of the land," the spies

came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs. 24 The place was called the brook Eshcol, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence.

Jacob anticipates that Joseph will grow and flourish as a vine planted by a well, where it can get plenty of water. Recall the imagery of Ps 1, where the righteous man who meditates in God's word is described as a tree planted by the rivers of water, nourished and flourishing.

This imagery may have predisposed Isaiah's hearers to associate the parable with the Northern tribes, in which the descendants of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) were prominent.

Psa 80:8-16

The next parallel in historical order is Psa 80:8-16, which according to the title is "a psalm of Asaph." Asaph was a Levite responsible for music under David (2 Chr 35:15), and by the time of Hezekiah, a contemporary of Isaiah, had come to be recognized as a seer (2 Chr 29:30). As we saw in studying his psalms, he often describes events in the future. In particular, in Ps 74, he sees all the way to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70.

Asaph's treatment of the vine metaphor extends it beyond Joseph to the entire nation. The vine is not just a passing theme, but the main subject of his Psalm, which he intends to be sung upon the tune "Gittith" (Ps 81:1), probably a corruption of גתות "winepresses" (see Thirtle for full discussion).

The handout compares Isaiah's poem with Ps 80. The similarities strongly suggest that Isaiah has Asaph's poem in mind as he writes. In both cases, the farmer

- prepares the ground by getting rid of obstacles (Gentiles, stones)
- imports a special vine
- then later removes the protecting wall,
- opening the vineyard to devastation by marauding beasts
- and it is ultimately burned with fire (not in Isa 5:1-7, but emerging in v.24).

Yet there are differences as well.

- Asaph continues the theme of fruitfulness (vv. 9-11) inspired by Gen 49:22, says nothing about the sour grapes, and pleads for God to restore the vineyard.
- Isaiah emphasizes the fruit that the Farmer desires from the vineyard by describing in detail the preparation of the watchtower and the winepress, and motivates the destruction of the vineyard by describing the poor fruit that it produced. In contrast to the first four chapters, he says

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nothing about restoration, but will later (11:1, “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots”). This may be an extension of Ps 80:17.

Other Prophets

Other OT prophets pick up the metaphor, though none with Isaiah's thoroughness.

Hosea, a contemporary of Isaiah in the Northern Kingdom, describes Israel's sin under the image of bad fruit. Is he echoing the much fuller development of the theme in Isaiah?

Hosea 10:1 Israel *is* an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself: according to the multitude of his fruit he hath increased the altars; according to the goodness of his land they have made goodly images.

Jeremiah, prophesying more than a century after Isaiah and Hosea, picks up the metaphor, and in particular Isaiah's concept that the choice vine has turned bad. His word for “noble vine” is שורק, the same term that Isaiah uses for “choicest vine” in 5:2.

Jer 2:21 Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, picks up the penalty that God will visit on the worthless vineyard.

Ezek 15:6 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

The paradox that Isaiah notes, and that Jeremiah and Hosea continue, is that even if a vine comes from good stock and is given a perfect environment, it may itself turn bad. There is an important lesson here: you cannot inherit righteousness from your parents. We saw this all through Genesis. Dave's meditations on Jacob's experience on Wednesday evenings remind us that in spite of the piety of Abraham, Jacob had to come to know the Lord himself.

John 15:1-8

The culmination of the vine metaphor is when our Lord teaches that he is the “true vine.” “True” stands in contrast to “symbolical.” He is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies of the vine. But he is also true as opposed to false, for only he brings forth good fruit, fulfilling the Farmer's intention. As we will see in the later chapters of Isaiah, the Messiah is the true Israelite, the one who succeeds where the nation failed. He is the only vine that can bring forth the good fruit that the Father desired.

If we try to grow as independent vines, even in the vineyard that God has so carefully prepared, we will produce only sour grapes. We must become branches of the true vine, grafted into him, or (to use another metaphor, from 1 Cor 12:13) baptized into his body. Physical birth, even from godly parents, is not sufficient. A Christian home is a good example of the well-prepared vineyard. But we will prosper only if we partake, not only of the vineyard, but also of the true Vine.

In confirmation of this, compare Isa 4:2, where we understood “branch of the Lord” as the Messiah. Only in him can good fruit be produced.

8-30, Woes and Consequences

Verse 7 interpreted the identity of the vineyard and of the farmer, and explained what the sour grapes were, but did not unfold the literal nature of the destruction of the vineyard. Now Isaiah expands further on the nature of the people's sin, and describes the coming judgment.

This section has two parallel panels. Each panel has three parts:

- woes detailing individual offenses (further information on the sour grapes)
- “therefore” statements describing the judgment to follow, in each case with links to other sections of the prophecy (backwards in the first panel, forwards in the second) (explanation of the destruction of the vineyard)
- the coming threat of foreign invasion.

The first panel focuses on sins that abuse other people (the Second Table of the law), while the second focuses on sins that directly reject the Lord (the First Table).

Woes (2x “therefore”)	8-12: Two woes, focusing on sins against the Second Table (covetousness, debauchery)	18-23, Four woes, focusing on sins against the First Table (direct offenses to the Lord)
First marked with “because”	13	24
Second linked to another oracle	14-16 (cf. 2:9, 11, 17)	25 (cf. 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4)
Prediction of foreign invader	17	26-30

8-17, First “Woe ... Therefore” Panel

These offenses focus on the second table of the law, dealing with covetousness and self-gratification.

8-12, Two Woes

8-10, Lust of the Eyes

The first woe deals with the lust of the eyes, seeking to gain possession of as much wealth as possible.

8 Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they [Hebrew “you”] may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!--The land was allocated to the twelve tribes, and the law of the Jubilee (Lev 25:10) ensured that though one family might sell their property to another, after fifty years at the most it would return to the original family. The one exception had to do with houses in a walled city, which could be sold permanently (Lev 25:30). But people had worked out ways to evade these provisions, and some families aggregated great holdings to themselves, while others were left without land.¹

¹ Dave Nelson has suggested that those who aggregated property exploited the exception of Lev 25:30 and found a way to treat fields as part of the walled city. In response, the Lord breaks down the wall of the city, removing all excuse.

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We see this in our day on a commercial scale, as large corporations gobble up small ones and push little entrepreneurs out of business. WalMart and Meijer have driven the local merchants out of business; Builder's Square, Home Depot, and Loeb's are crushing private hardware stores and lumber yards. Family grocers disappeared long ago. Even in agriculture, it is increasingly difficult for family farmers to compete with huge agro-conglomerates. As consumers, we like the lower costs and convenience of the big box stores. But what are the implications for the ability of individuals to start a business and support their families?

9 In mine ears said the LORD of hosts,--This is a side comment, whispered to the prophet by the Lord. As a description of the penalty, it ought to come with the "therefore," but the Lord is so indignant that he must tell Isaiah about it right away. They accumulate houses and fields, so the Lord will judge both.

Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant.--"Desolate" שמה describes the result of some disaster, usually divine judgment. "Devastated" might capture the sense better. They "join house to house," but they will not remain to enjoy them. The houses will be left empty. They put others out of their homes, and they themselves will suffer the same fate.

10 Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah.--We don't know what the expected yield of a vineyard was, but we do know that a homer is equal to 10 ephahs (Ezek 45:11), so they would reap only a tenth of what they sowed. A bath is about six gallons, and apparently this is considered a very poor yield for ten acres (lit. "ten yoke," the area that ten yoke of oxen could plow in a day). They "lay field to field," but the added acreage will do them no good.

11-12, Lust of the Flesh

The second woe deals with the lust of the flesh. They devote much effort to trying to make their bodies feel good.

11 Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!--Their main purpose in life is to party. They get up as early as they can, and stay awake as long as they can. Compare Ps 127:2, which describes how other people arise early and sit up late in a vain search for wealth:

It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

12 And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts:--Along with intoxicants they have lots of music: strings, tambourine, and flute.

The next bicolon explains why they feel the need for this stimulation.

but they regard not the work פועל of the LORD, neither consider the operation מעשה of his hands.--The phrase "work of the Lord" emphasizes primarily his work in judgment. Compare Ps 46:9,

Come, behold the **works of the LORD**, what desolations he hath made in the earth.

Isaiah is here drawing from David's Ps 28:4-5. The colors show the alignment of the vocabulary:

4 Give them according to their **deeds**, and according to the wickedness of their endeavours:

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give them after the **work of their hands**; render to them their desert. 5 Because they regard not the **works of the LORD**, nor the **operation of his hands**, he shall destroy them, and not build them up.

These expressions focus on the Lord's works of judgment. Bad things have already happened to the nation.

- In a few verses (5:25), Isaiah will refer to a notable earthquake that took place during Uzziah's reign.
- In ch. 7, under Ahaz, Jerusalem faces a siege by the northern kingdom, allied with Syria.
- Ultimately, under Hezekiah, the southern kingdom will see the north led into captivity.

They ought to have recognized in these disasters the Lord's hand in judgment. Secular misfortune ought to have led them to repent of their sin. Instead, they break out the alcohol, strike up the band, and party from morning until night, hardening their senses to what is going on around them.

We see the same contrast in Eccl 7:2, 4

It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. ... 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

God brings mourning to remind us of our sin and his fearful power. We should give careful attention to misfortune, and the lessons it teaches, for it is God's way of awakening us from our stupor and calling our attention to himself:

Isa 26:8-9 Yea, **in the way of thy judgments, O LORD, have we waited for thee**; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. 9 With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for **when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.**

Yet most people would rather go into “the house of feasting,” to help them forget the very tragedies that they should be heeding.

This principle is directly applicable to our nation's current situation. God's word warns against coveting possessions and against borrowing. Our current economic crisis can be traced to these sins. How can we not see in it the judgment of the Lord upon our disobedience to him? Modern Americans are swift to blame *other* people for problems such as recession or environmental degradation, but reluctant to see these problems as God's judgment for their *own* sin.

13-16, Two Therefore

The judgments deal with the two “woe”s together, rather than separately.

- The penalty for these offenses is captivity (in the first “therefore”) and death (in the second). These mechanisms explain how it is that the houses amassed by the greedy landowners are left desolate (v. 9).
- Other phrases in these judgments recall the carnal excesses of the second “therefore.”

13, Captivity and Want

13 Therefore my people are gone into captivity,--Captivity is the first mechanism for emptying their ill-gotten houses (v. 9). Isaiah speaks of this as already active.

- We do not know the order in which his oracles were given, and this may have been written after the fall of Samaria in 722.
- Or the verb form may be used prophetically (cf. ch. 53).
- Most likely, the reference is to some earlier partial captivity as a result of enemy invasions. One possible example is 2 Chr 21:16, 17, the Philistines and Arabians in the time of Jehoram (about 850 BC, some 60 years before Uzziah took the throne). This may be the captivity referenced in Obadiah 11.

because they have no knowledge:--As in the second panel (v.24), the first of the two “therefore”s has a “because.” Here the reason is negligence; in the second round, it will be deliberate disobedience.

The negligence here recalls the second half of v. 12. They ignore the signs of judgment that have already come upon the nation, so even worse judgment will come.

and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst.--This is not part of the “because,” but continues the first clause. They devoted themselves to riotous partying in their ill-gotten houses. Now, in captivity, they will suffer hunger and thirst.

14-16, Death

14 Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure:--“Hell” here is not the opposite of heaven, the residence of the damned, but Sheol, the place where all of the dead reside in the OT. This time death is the means of emptying the houses.

and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.--Again, he brings in the second woe. “Glory,” “pomp,” and “rejoiceth” recall their wonderful parties, but in the end they must go down to the grave.

The concluding contrast in vv. 15-16 is largely quoted from ch. 2, the prophecy of the coming Day of the Lord.

15 And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled:--The first two clauses are from 2:9, and the third from 2:11. All categories of people, from the poorest to the most lofty, will be reduced to nothing.

16 But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment,--This expression comes from 2:11, 17. By the act of judging them, the Lord will exalt himself. Yet Isaiah hastens to add that this is not an unjust action. The landowners had exalted themselves in abasing others, but the Lord exalts himself by rendering righteous judgment:

and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.--His action is set apart, distinguished from theirs, by his righteousness.

17, Foreign Invasion

17 Then shall the lambs feed after their manner--The picture of flocks grazing over the ruins of a city is a common picture of judgment:

Isa 17:2 The cities of Aroer are **forsaken**: they shall be for **flocks**, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid.

Isa 32:13-14 Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briars; yea, upon all the houses of joy in the joyous city: 14 Because the palaces shall be **forsaken**; the multitude of the city shall be left; the forts and towers shall be for dens for ever, a joy of wild asses, **a pasture of flocks**;

Zeph 2:13-14 And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a **desolation**, and dry like a wilderness. 14 And **flocks shall lie down** in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the cormorant and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; their voice shall sing in the windows; **desolation** shall be in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work.

and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat--An anticipation of the foreign invaders in 26-30. Here they are pictured, not as destroying the people, but as enjoying the land after the people have been removed.

18-30, Second "Woe ... Therefore" Panel

These offenses focus on the first table of the law, offenses against God himself as the lawgiver.

18-23, Four Woes

These two woes describe different facets of the self-deception by which people reject God's word. The first and the last consist of a figurative statement clarified by a literal one, while the central two are more straightforward.

18-19, Tempting God: The Outcome of the Deception

18 Woe unto them that draw iniquity--"Draw" here means "pull, drag." Isaiah pictures people deliberately pulling a load of guilt behind them. In terms of Num 15:27-31, they are sinning presumptuously, not out of ignorance.

He describes the bonds that tie them to their guilt in two ways.

with cords of vanity--"Vanity" here has the sense of "deception." Calvin probably has the right explanation: God has given each person a conscience, a "law written in their hearts" (Rom 2:15), which naturally restrains them from sin. Those who have been exposed to God's law have the additional restraint of that revelation. They can only overcome these restraints by deceptive arguments, which Isaiah here describes under the figure of cords that bind them to their guilt.

and sin as it were with a cart rope--A cart rope is a very strong cable, able to pull a great weight. Once they are linked to their sin, it is very difficult for them to disengage from it.

19 That say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it:--Now he moves from the figure to the literal reality. Here are the ropes with which they tie their sin to themselves: a deliberate denial of God's warnings of judgment.

They have persuaded themselves that there will be no judgment for their rebellion. This request is offered in a mocking tone, just like that of 2 Pet 3:3, 4,

there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, 4 And saying, Where is the promise of his coming?

“Isaiah,” they say, “you warn of judgment. If he's really going to judge us, bring it on!”

and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!--They are not asking to know the word of God, but, as in the previous half of the verse, for him to carry out his plan of judgment if it really is true. Note their use of Isaiah's distinctive name for God, “the Holy One of Israel” (which he uses 25 times out of its 31 occurrences). They are mocking his message.

Their sin is not just in allowing themselves to be lured into a burden of sin, but in their mocking attitude toward God and his promised judgments.

20, Denying Truth: The Fact of the Deception

20 Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!--This denial of the revealed warnings of judgment is just one example of “vanity,” the deception by which people overcome the restraints of conscience and Scripture and enter into sin. In fact, they reverse every aspect of God's revelation. By clever reasoning they argue that things are just the opposite of what they really are.

This kind of sophistry is common in academic analyses of Scripture, and is particularly common in writings of the so-called “Christian feminist” and “Christian gay” movements. It is a refusal to believe that Scripture means what it clearly says. Ultimately, it leads to the modern deconstructionist movement, which argues that language has no meaning. (In the process, of course, it invalidates all use of language, including itself.)

Remember the principles of Deut 29:29. There are secret things that we cannot know, but what is revealed is just that—revealed, and not just for us, but for our children as well. “When the plain sense of scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”

21, The Pride of Life: Deception's Alternative Authority

21 Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!--To be “wise in one's own eyes” is to have a high esteem of one's own wisdom. It's the attitude we capture with our expression, “You think you're so smart.” Having rejected the plain sense of God's revelation, they think of themselves as the source of true understanding.

In using this phrase, Isaiah shows his knowledge of Proverbs. The expression “wise in one's own eyes” **בְּעֵינָיו חָכָם** appears five times in Proverbs (3:7; 26:5, 12, 16; 28:11), and only there.

Prov 3:7 shows exactly the contrast that Isaiah notes:

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Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.

Being wise in one's own eyes, and fearing the Lord, are opposites of one another. If we fear the Lord, we will pay attention to what he says, and will not overvalue our own wisdom, but if we are wise in our own eyes, we will not regard the Lord's words.

Note also the ethical impact in Prov 3:7. Only by fearing the Lord can we depart from evil. Our own wisdom is corrupt and liable to lead us into sin.

Proverbs teaches that this attitude is characteristic of three kinds of people:

- “Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him” (26:12, cf. v. 5). The fool **cannot recognize** the difference between truth and false.
- “The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason” (26:16), The sluggard knows there is a difference but is **too lazy** to search it out.
- “The rich man is wise in his own conceit; but the poor that hath understanding searcheth him out” (28:1). The rich can impose his view of the world on others by economic pressure and so **doesn't feel the need** to pay heed to any alternative interpretation.

Isaiah's focus is on the third category, the rich who abuse the poor.

22-23, Abusing Responsibility: Invalidating that Authority

The replacement of God's revelation by self-authority, seen in their denial of the coming judgment, leads to abandoning their responsibility in society.

22 Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: 23 Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!--Ironically, while esteeming themselves rather than the Word of God as the ultimate source of wisdom, they engage in activities that blunt their ability to think!

The point here is not their debauchery (which was covered in 11-12), but how they have forsaken their civic responsibilities. The “mighty” and “men of strength” correspond to “the mighty man” and “the man of war” in 3:2; “justify” and “take away righteousness” are failings of the “judge” in the same verse.

Proverbs warns strongly against the use of intoxicants by those responsible for making important decisions:

Prov 31:4-7 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: 5 Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. 6 Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. 7 Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.

Compare also the prohibition against the use of wine by on-duty priests:

Lev 10:9-11 Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations: 10 And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean

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and clean; 11 And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses.

Following hard on the heels of the death of Nadab and Abihu, this admonition may suggest that their error was due to intoxication.

Ezek 44:21 Neither shall any priest drink wine, when they enter into the inner court.

By using such substances, the leaders in the society have made themselves incapable of discharging their responsibilities.

24-25, Two Therefores

24, *Future Fire*

24 Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff,--The simile draws on the final clean-up after grain harvest. The goal of raising grain is the edible kernel, which is wrapped in an inedible sheath and grows on top of an inedible stem. When the plant is mature, two processes are needed to retrieve the kernels. Both generate waste.

First, the heads are cut off from the stem with a scythe. The stalks that remain in the ground are called "stubble."

Then the heads are crushed under a sledge to separate the husks from the kernel. On a windy hillside, the material is tossed into the air. The heavier kernels fall to the ground, and the husks blow off to the side. What blows away is called "chaff."

After the kernels are safely stored, the chaff is burned to get rid of it. Cf. Matt. 3:12, "he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Sometimes the fields are burned as well, to prepare them for replanting.

Both the chaff and the stubble are very dry, so this fire burns very quickly. Thus the simile refers to the deliberate, rapid destruction of useless portions of the crop by fire.

so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust:--Now he turns from external judgment to internal dissolution. When a plant's root rots, it cannot survive. The point of the comparison with the fire is in the rapidity with which this judgment comes.

because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.--Contrast the "because" in v. 13. There, it was negligence. Here, the combination of casuistry to justify their sin, reinforced by self-wisdom and mind-numbing use of alcohol, constitute a deliberate rejection of God's law.

25, *The Lord's Past Anger*

25 Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people,--Up to this point in 8-30, the Lord has foretold bad things that would happen (abandoned houses in v. 9, captivity in v. 13, death in v. 14, rapid destruction in v. 24). Now, for the first time, the Lord is explicitly the agent of the judgment. Finally the picture of the farmer destroying his own vineyard in vv. 5-6 comes into full focus.

and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them:--This is described as already having happened.

and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn [or, “as refuse”] in the midst of the streets.--The reference is probably to the earthquake that took place during the reign of Uzziah:

Amos 1:1 The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

Zech 14:5 ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah:

Isaiah is not ashamed to interpret such natural calamities as the hand of God in judgment.

This “therefore” answers the taunting request of v. 19. They asked, “Where is his promised judgment?” Isaiah responds, “You saw a part of it already, in the earthquake.”

There is a pattern here for our testimony. As we discussed under v. 12, people are reluctant to see “the work of the Lord” in global misfortunes, but we must awaken them to this reality.

For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.--The earthquake is the harbinger of worse things to come. Note the chiasm in the verse. The anger and stretched-out hand seen in the earthquake will continue to have their effect.

As the first two “therefore”s looked back to the prophecies of ch. 2, these two look forward to those of ch. 9, 10, where this phrase appears repeatedly: 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4.

26-30, Foreign Invasion

In the first panel, the predicted invasion (v. 17) took the form of a single word: strangers would eat the waste places of the fat ones. Now it is expanded into an entire paragraph. The imagery of the description mostly speaks for itself.

26 And he will lift up an ensign [a signal flag] to the nations from far, and will hiss [whistle] unto them from the end of the earth:--Behind all the intrigues of international politics, the Lord commands the nations to accomplish his will. Here he summons them to come in judgment upon rebellious Israel.

and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly:--Unlike Israel, which has repeatedly ignored the word of the Lord, these Gentiles will hasten to do his bidding. The ungodly are impatient for judgment (v. 19), but when it comes it will be swift.

27 None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken:--Nothing will go wrong with their attack. They won't stumble, fall asleep on duty, trip on their long robes, or have their shoes fall off.

28 Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent,--They are “locked and loaded.” The arrows are sharpened, and the bowstrings have been placed on the bows to make them ready for action. (A bow is stored unstrung, so that it will not lose its tension.)

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their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint,--A split hoof renders a horse lame. Their hooves are so hard that they will not break during their charge.

and their wheels like a whirlwind:--Their chariots move so rapidly that their wheels are a blur.

29 Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions:--These two instances of “roar” refer to the loud roar of the lion, echoing through the forest, as he sets out on his hunt.

yea, they shall roar,--A different Hebrew word, more like “growl,” describing the lion's subdued voice as he seizes his prey.

and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it.--Once the lion has seized his prey, no one can take it away from him. So far from defending them, the Lord has summoned the adversary. No one else can deliver them.

30 And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea:--Now the roaring of the lion turns into the roaring of the sea, another power that Israel feared greatly.

and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow,--But even turning toward the land, there is no hope.

and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.--Even the heavens are dark. Everywhere one looks, there is no hope.