



the injustice of turning evil into good, lies into truth

Isaiah 5.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup>What a tragic warning! There are those who speak of evil as good  
and of good as evil;  
who present darkness as light  
and light as darkness;  
who present bitterness as sweetness  
and sweetness as bitterness (author's translation).

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song (5.<sup>1-2</sup>) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.<sup>3-4</sup>). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.<sup>5-6</sup>). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard's owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor quality yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.<sup>7</sup>).

"He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!

He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!"

After singing and interpreting this song, the prophet leaves metaphor behind and describes the nature of the nation's social injustices through six blistering warnings. Each warning should not only be read in light of the injustice lamented in 5.<sup>7</sup>, but each warning should also be read in light of the others, each related to and building on the others.

Isaiah directs his first warning against those who accumulated large, landed estates through predatory laws and actions (5.<sup>8-10</sup>). We understand his second warning to be directed at those same landowners and the carefree and decadently luxurious lifestyle they live on their fraudulently acquired estates (5.<sup>11-17</sup>). Similarly, we understand the third warning to be directed at these same landowners, who are now portrayed as skeptically challenging God to act, as Isaiah

claims He will do, against the injustices he alleges against them (5.<sup>18-19</sup>).

It will come as no surprise, then, that I understand this fourth warning in terms of the previous warnings. It is directed against those who have acquired large, landed estates and lived a luxurious life of ease. They call the evil that they have done and do “good.” Just as today, those who wrote laws allowing the predatory and societally destructive accumulation of large estates and those who took advantage of such corrupt laws and thus lived in ease and luxury will have claimed at the least that the resulting inequality was inevitable. If they could convince individuals and society of the truth of this propaganda, it would have been but a short step to convincing them the inequality is proper and good and that the luxurious lifestyle of those made rich and famous by it was to be celebrated.

As I think on this, I recall an interview I recently saw with U.S. Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen—a supposed liberal (pejoratively, “socialist”)—herself worth a paltry 20 million dollars, in which the same warping of reality as Isaiah describes was evident. In the interview, she was challenged to justify the increase in housing insecurity that 10s of millions of Americans face due to rising rent costs that result from the predatory real estate practices of investment firms. She was challenged to defend the fact that those with money can afford health care and extend their lives, while the disadvantaged cannot afford health care and so suffer and die as their wealthier citizens do not. She was challenged to justify the fact that 10s of millions of Americans are made to rely on government, and thus the tax payer, for such things as food and housing subsidies because their wages for honest work are insufficient... this while those same employers/ corporations rake in billions in profits—a form of corporate welfare and government subsidized shareholder profits.

Her response? “Well, that’s capitalism.” Because capitalism is an ultimate and unalterable good (or an idolatrous god) the economic insecurity, anxiety, poorer health or abbreviated life-spans that flow from it cannot be counted as evil. Blame the poor victims, not the wealthy criminals for the insecurity, anxiety, poor health and abbreviated lifespans of the vulnerable.

In a much-maligned passage, Paul asserts that “the love of money [and who does not love

money?!] is the root of all evil.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, those who cannot discern the nature and evil of economic injustice are likely to find it increasingly difficult to discern the nature of any evil or any evil.

So, while Isaiah’s fourth warning should be understood, first, in the context of Isaiah’s previous three warnings and the economic injustices perpetrated, advanced, and directed there, it is undoubtedly true that individuals and societies who cannot discern economic injustice will find it increasingly difficult to discern the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and injustice in relation to other matters. Afflicted by such a lack of discernment, individuals and society will increasingly come to possess ever more seriously warped views of reality until every good is labeled evil and every evil is labeled good. Therefore, Isaiah’s warning about the warping of reality can apply to all warping of reality.

America of 2023 is living in a time of reality warping at pandemic scale. Insane fantasies and conspiracy theories take the place of rational thought, truth, and reality. Maybe, just maybe, it all started with the unjust economic system that we chose, we advanced, we directed, and we called “good.” Maybe, just maybe, the trend can only be reversed by naming the economic injustices that are rampant in American society what they are: “evil,” “dark,” and “bitter.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: april 22, 2024)*

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6.<sup>10</sup>