



Injustice, bribery, and the commingling of the wealthy, influential, and powerful

Isaiah 5.²²⁻²⁴

²²What a tragic warning! There are those who are powerful, imbibing wine,
and are influential individuals, mixing alcoholic drinks,
²³who declare the guilty, "innocent," as a result of bribery
and subvert the vindication of the innocent.

²⁴Therefore as a lick of fire consumes straw
and a flaming fire devours dry grass
their root will turn to rot
and their bud will go up in dust
because they have rejected YHWH Šēbā'ōt's teachings,
and abhorred the word of Yisrā'ēl's Incomparable One (author's translation).

Isaiah 5 began with a love song (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God's love for His vineyard (Israel, 5.⁷) and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (social injustice, 5.⁷). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that will come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.³⁻⁶). Isaiah then interprets the song so that its application to the relationship between God and Israel is clear. In this interpretation, Isaiah makes clear that God's disappointment with Israel is centered on the social injustice that He finds in the nation (5.⁷).

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

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

With this, Isaiah launches into six blistering and tragic warnings. Each warning should be read in light of the injustice alluded to in verse 7. Each warning should also be read in light of the others, as building one upon another.

The first warning is directed at those who accumulated large, landed estates through predatory laws and practices (5.⁸⁻¹⁰). The second warning is directed at those same landowners and the

carefree and decadently luxurious lifestyle that they live on their fraudulently acquired estates (5.¹¹⁻¹⁷). The third warning, without any mention of consequences, is 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 (5.¹⁸⁻¹⁹). The fourth warning, again without any specific mention of consequences, is directed at these same landowners living in luxury who twist reality in such a way as to identify the evil they do—the business fraud and the decadent lifestyle—as good (5.²⁰). The fifth warning, also without mention of consequences, is once more directed at the wealthy and carefree landowners who claim that not only is the evil they do actually good but is a sign of their intelligence and skills (5.²¹).

In Isaiah’s second tragic warning, he condemned heavy drinking, finding in it a sign of the decadently luxurious lifestyle of the rich and famous. It was the decadent and luxurious lifestyle that Isaiah condemned, not some breach of a health code such as the LDS Word of Wisdom.

“What a tragic warning! There are those who rise early in the morning,
pursue drunkenness until nighttime,
wine inflaming them,
lyre and harp, tambourine and flute,
and yet more wine being part of their carousing.”¹

In today’s text, Isaiah returns to alcohol, speaking of “imbibing wine” and “mixing alcoholic drinks. What is Isaiah condemning here? The King James translation might lead us to conclude that Isaiah is condemning the drinking itself.

“Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine,
and men of strength to mingle strong drink...”

This translation is certainly possible. But, as we saw in verses 11-12, the heavy drinking was less about the drinking and more about the lavish lifestyle. After speaking of the “powerful” and “influential who imbibe wine and mix alcoholic drinks, Isaiah transitions immediately and easily

¹ Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹². All translations are the author’s unless noted otherwise.

to,

“who declare the guilty, ‘innocent,’ as a result of bribery
and subvert the vindication of the innocent.”

The imbibers and the mixers are the same people who decide cases based upon bribery. Under the influence of bribes, they call evil good and good evil (see verse 20), declaring the innocent “guilty” and subverting the case of the innocent. Obviously, Isaiah is condemning the system of bribery that perverts justice in the courts—and, undoubtedly, in the legislative process as well.

The prohibition against bribery and its perversion of justice is found in the Covenant Code of Exodus.

“You are not to pervert justice toward your impoverished in their lawsuits.

You are to keep your distance from false charges, and not put the guiltless and innocent to death. Certainly, I do not acquit the guilty.

You are not to accept a bribe because a bribe blinds the otherwise clear-eyed and subverts the claims of the innocent.”²

The Deuteronomistic code also possesses a prohibition against bribery.

“Cursed is one who takes a bribe to injure an innocent person. And all the people should say,
“So let it be.”³

Such prohibitions and statements are clear. Bribery is unacceptable. It is morally unsound and improper. It is harmful to individuals (especially the poor and powerless), families, communities, and societies. The Hebrew prophets condemn the violation of these inspired prohibitions and the injustice they produce. Earlier, Isaiah complained,

² Exodus 23.⁶⁻⁸

³ Deuteronomy 27.². This is some uncertainly whether the bribe spoken of here is offered to injure an innocent person, or to declare “not guilty” someone who has killed an innocent person. Either way, accepting bribery brings a curse—as does, presumably, offering a bribe.

“Your leaders are criminals,
collaborators with thieves.
All of them want bribes,
and, more, actively seek out kickbacks.
They do not stand up for the orphan,
or hear the widow’s complaint.”⁴

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, also criticized such behavior.

“I beg you to listen to this, you leaders of Ya‘aqōb,
and you rulers of Yiśrā’ēl
who show abhorrence for justice
and pervert all that is right;
shaping Šîyôn through violence,
and Y^erûšalāyim through injustice.
Its leaders make decisions based on bribery,
its priests offer direction for a fee,
and its prophets offer predictions for money.”⁵

“Those of integrity have vanished from the land.
There isn’t an upright individual among them.
All of them are involved in violent intrigues.
Each of them hunts down his fellow citizen with a snare.
Their hands are outstretched to corruption.
For a favorable decision, the government administrator demands,
along with government official, bribes.
So, the power elite reveals what he secretly wants,
and they grant it.

⁴ Isaiah 1.²³

⁵ Micah 3.⁹⁻¹²

The best of them is like a prickly bush.

The most upright like a thorn hedge...”⁶

Obviously, bribery is unjust and is a cause of both prophetic critique and divine retribution. But we should note and consider the significance of Isaiah’s linking heavy drinking with bribery. We must ask, What is the connection? What do drinking and the perversion of justice through bribery have to do with each other? One possible answer may be found in the writings of an older contemporary of Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet, Amos. He complained,

“Upon garments given as collateral
they recline next to their alter,
while they drink wine, payment of those fined,
in the house of their gods.”⁷

Here, Amos suggests that much of the ease that the wealthy experienced came at the expense of others who were treated unjustly. Perhaps, Isaiah wants us to understand the same when he mentions heavy drinking and the subversion of justice in the same breath. Those whom Isaiah criticizes for their drinking, indicative of their easy lifestyle, could drink and live as they did because of the ill-gotten gains they acquired through injustices, among them, bribery.

However, we should consider another connection between the easy life of drink and bribery. We quoted the following passage earlier as an example of the prophetic complaint against bribery. But now, we must quote it once more, this time in relation to the connection between the easy life of drinking and bribery.

“Your leaders are criminals,
collaborators with thieves.
All of them want bribes,
and, more, actively seek out kickbacks.

⁶ Micah 7.²⁻⁵

⁷ Amos 2.⁸

They do not stand up for the orphan,
or hear the widow's complaint."⁸

Those in a position to legislate law (legislators) and interpret the application of law (the judiciary) “collaborate” with those with money and possess their own monied interests. But such collaboration is not limited to some kind of secret backroom exchange. The official accepting the bribe does not take the bribe and walk away, never to hear from the briber again. The collaborators have a relationship that extends outside the moment that the bribe is exchanged. The word we translate to indicate collaboration can also reflect “companionship,” “alliance,” and “association.” The one offering the bribe and the one accepting the bribe are companionable. They hang out together so that their association is more than what takes place in the dark.

It seems to me that we must consider the possibility that Isaiah is condemning the easy mingling of wealthy and influential individuals with members of the judiciary (and the legislature) under the influence of alcohol with its loosening of inhibitions. Those with money and power hobnob with those who make and administer law. Those of the legislator and those of the judiciary often associate with the wealthy, enjoying the luxuries the wealthy have to offer. These luxuries include the finest wines, bourbons, whiskies, etc.

Then, members of the judiciary and legislature find themselves considering laws and cases that involve the very same people with whom they have been regularly hobnobbing. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that the laws will be written, and the cases decided in favor of drinking buddies whose money and wealth made the drinking and partying possible.

Such mingling of the rich and influential with members of the judiciary and legislature has become a bedrock feature of America's legislature and judiciary. One only need recall the many... many... examples of Supreme Court Justices—Clarence Thomas foremost among them—accepting trips, vacations, luxury resort excursions, cruises on yachts, flights on jets, etc. from and often in company with the wealthy and influential. There is no doubt that just as in Isaiah's day, such mingling involves large doses of the finest wines, bourbons, whiskeys, etc.

⁸ Isaiah 1.²³

Neither can there be any doubt that interests close to the heart of the wealthy and influential with whom judges and legislators party are discussed during their drinking and then come before those same judges and legislators. It beggars all credulity to believe that those same legislators and judges who are beneficiaries of the largesse do not decide in favor of their drinking buddies. In fact, one comes to believe that the real decision making takes place during these parties under the influence of drink rather than during the deliberations that take place in the deep chambers of the legislature or the arguments that are presented in the paneled court rooms of the judiciary.

Only a fool could believe that members of the legislature and judiciary are invited to parties that the wealthy and influential throw because of their bubbly and personable personalities. Only a fool could believe that wealthy and influential individuals are invited to parties thrown by members of the legislature and judiciary because of the bubbly and personableness of those invitees. Many of those members of the legislature and judiciary along with the wealthy and influential lack personality or have personalities that are far from personable—one can't imagine, for example Elon Musk being a great dinner guest. No, invitations are based upon positions and influence. The parties of the rich and famous are like cattle auctions where wealthy, powerful, and influential people are bought and sold and the common people are sold out.

As is so often the case, the world in which Isaiah lived and against which he preached bears an uncanny resemblance to the world in which we now live. Perhaps the world has always been such no matter the time or location. But one wishes that modern religious leaders—prophets, priests, and pastors alike—possessed the same inspired insights into their world and the same courage to stand against it that the great Hebrew prophets, Isaiah being one of the greatest among them, exhibited

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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