



Meditation— isaiah 5

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Meditation 1— Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷

a song about the dashed hopes of love

**¹Let me, if you please, sing about my beloved;
a song about my beloved's vineyard.**

“My beloved owned a vineyard
on a hill he knew was fertile.

²He dug holes, removed stones,
and planted red grape vines.

He built a tower in it,
and even went so far as to hew out a wine press.

He then eagerly waited for it to yield juicy grapes,
but it yielded only horrible ones.

Yahweh's response to his dashed hopes

³And now, you inhabitants of Y^erûšālayim, and you people of Y^ehûdâ;
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.

⁴What more is there to do for my vineyard
that I have not already done?

Why have I expectantly waited for it to produce juicy grapes
only to have it produce foul ones?

⁵So now, let me tell you, if you please,
what I am going to do to my vineyard.

I am going to remove its hedge and it will be burnt.

And I am going to tear down its walls and it will be trampled.

⁶I will make it desolate.

It will not be pruned or hoed.

Thorny weeds and scrub will come up.

I will direct the storm clouds

not to rain a drop of rain upon it.

Interpretation

⁷In like manner, Yahweh Šebā' ôt's vineyard is the nation of Yⁱšrā' ēl,
and Y^ehûdâ's people, plantings in which he delighted.

He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!

He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress! (author's translation).

Isaiah 5 begins with a song. More specifically, a love song. It seems likely that Isaiah presented/sang verses 1 and 2, if not more, to the tune of a love song well known in his day. With this in mind, it seems like a good time to remind the reader of what Nephi calls “the manner of prophesying among the Jews.”¹ The Jewish manner of prophesy, like most prophesy of the ancient Near East, often involved musical performance. The lyrics to sung musical numbers are translated, or should be translated in modern translations in the form of poetry with all the features of poetry—metaphor, simile, allegory, etc. We see evidence of the musical and performative nature of Hebrew oracles in many passages.

For example, in 2 Kings 3, Israel's King Jehoram and Judah's King Jehoshaphat were preparing to unite

¹ 2 Nephi 25.¹

their armies and go to war against their mutual enemy, Moab. In preparation to do so, Jehoshaphat wished to have a prophet summoned to prophecy concerning the advisability and prospects of success for such an enterprise. Reluctantly, King Jehoram summoned the prophet, Elisha, to deliver an oracle. Before prophesying, Elisha requested, “Bring me a minstrel.” We are then informed that “when the minstrel played...the hand of the Lord came upon him. And he said, ‘Thus saith the Lord...’”² Accompanied by the minstrel’s musical instrument, Elisha then uttered his oracle.

In another example, after anointing a reluctant Saul as king, the prophet Samuel offered Saul three signs as evidence that the Lord had chosen him as Israel’s king. The third sign was that as Saul approached “the hill of God... thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy.” Samuel then prophesied “the Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them.”³ All signs, including this third occurred as Samuel foretold.

These two passages demonstrate the use and importance of music in prophecy. The use of music to speak the words of Divinity probably resulted from both practical and esoteric considerations. First, we all know the emotional impact music has on the hearer. From the immediate perspective, prophets used music not only to alter their mood and move themselves to utterance, but with the hopes that through music they might alter the mood of their audiences and move them emotionally. Music, it was hoped and thought, altered mood and made reception of a message more effective.

But music has an effect beyond the immediate and the emotional. It can have long term intellectual effects. Music can actually serve to improve memory and thought. We have all had the experience of hearing a song from decades earlier in our lives and having the words come immediately and easily to our mind. So, by prophesying with the accompaniment of music, the prophets could hope to have their messages stay in the minds of their audience longer. In addition, music is an effective mnemonic device that allows the speaker/performer to remember long and complex texts more accurately and for longer periods of time. We also know that the more senses that are used in learning, the more effective the learning.⁴

Whether they could verbalize it or not, ancient prophets understood that singing their message allowed them to speak to both the emotional and the intellectual part of the individual to enhance reception and memory of the message. This latter observation is consistent with what we are told about revelation and the perception of truth. True revelation and the ability to perceive truth do not come through solely emotional experiences. Neither do they come through solely intellectual means. True revelation encompasses both emotion and intellect—heart and mind working together in unison.

In describing how He would communicate truth to Oliver Cowdery, the Lord announced, “I will tell you in your *mind* and in your *heart*.... Behold, this is the spirit of revelation.”⁵ The Lord reminded this same Oliver Cowdery that in revealing truths to him in the past, He had “enlighten[ed] thy *mind*” and had spoken “*peace* to your mind.”⁶ So, there is both an emotional and intellectual element to revelation and truth perception. In describing how one seeks to know truth, the Lord commands that “you must study it

² See 2 Kings. 3.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

³ See 1 Samuel 10

⁴ One is impressed that a Catholic mass, for example, engages the attendee’s hearing (sermon, readings, song, prayers), sight (art, crucifix, altar, pageantry), smell (incense), taste (wine and bread, emblems of communion), and even touch (greeting those near through handshake); all in hopes of increasing the understanding, learning, and effectiveness of the purposes and lessons of the mass.

⁵ DC 8.²⁻³

⁶ DC 6.^{15, 21}

out in your *mind*” and “you shall *feel* that it is right.” In addition, one might have “a stupor of *thought*” if something is not true.”⁷ Here, again, is the combination of mind/thought and heart/feelings—emotional and intellectual faculties working in tandem to perceive truth and receive revelation.

There may have been another reason for uniting music with the words of the message. God’s word is truly something above and apart from any human speech. Divine speech is powerful far above that of human speech. Thus, when speaking the words of God, the messenger may feel the desire and need to elevate their language above the common. Combining the word with music elevates the word, giving it uncommon weight and power.

We cannot be certain, but it seems likely that the Hebrew prophets, including Isaiah, delivered many, possibly most of their oracles publicly and performatively.⁸ Music was key to their performative delivery. Isaiah’s decision to deliver his sad message of Israel’s rejection of God’s love accompanied by a familiar tune that lamented unrequited love was likely his own genius as he sought to move his audience to action and a return to God. Through music, he could hope to move them emotionally and intellectually, thus offering them a true and lasting revelatory experience.

May we all learn to engage our whole person in seeking and obtaining revelation and perceiving truth from error. Using only the emotions or only the intellect in seeking revelation and understanding truth is likely to produce false results, and lead us away from the divine help and direction that we so earnestly seek.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁷ See DC 9.⁸⁻⁹

⁸ See, for example, Isaiah 20.²⁻⁴, Jeremiah 13.¹⁻¹⁰, Jeremiah 27.¹⁻² and Jeremiah 28, Ezekiel 5.^{1-4, 11-12}.

Meditation 2— Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷

a song about the dashed hopes of love

¹Let me, if you please, sing about my beloved;
a song about my beloved's vineyard.

**“My beloved owned a vineyard
on a hill he knew was fertile.**

**²He dug holes, removed stones,
and planted red grape vines.**

**He built a tower in it,
and even went so far as to hew out a wine press.**

**He then eagerly waited for it to yield juicy grapes,
but it yielded only horrible ones.**

Yahweh's response to his dashed hopes

³And now, you inhabitants of Y^erûšālayim, and you people of Y^ehûdâ;
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.

⁴What more is there to do for my vineyard
that I have not already done?

Why have I expectantly waited for it to produce juicy grapes
only to have it produce foul ones?

⁵So now, let me tell you, if you please,
what I am going to do to my vineyard.

I am going to remove its hedge and it will be burnt.

And I am going to tear down its walls and it will be trampled.

⁶I will make it desolate.

It will not be pruned or hoed.

Thorny weeds and scrub will come up.

I will direct the storm clouds

not to rain a drop of rain upon it.

Interpretation

⁷In like manner, Yahweh Šebā' ôṭ's vineyard is the nation of Yisrā' ēl,
and Y^ehûdâ's people, plantings in which he delighted.

He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!

He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress! (author's translation).

God had tremendous hopes for Israel, and went to great lengths for the nation. Isaiah began his book with a metaphor of parent/child. God was the parent. Israel was the child. God lovingly cared for and raised the child. But against all God's hopes, the child rebelled in the most extreme ways.¹ No one reading the metaphor could avoid being heartbroken over the child's rebelliousness. Certainly, God was heartbroken.

Now, in Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷, the prophet utilizes another metaphor. And, as before, both reader and God are left once more with a feeling of heartbrokenness. The prophet begins with a love song, more specifically, a song of unrequited love. It is possible that Isaiah utilized a familiar secular tune about unrequited love to deliver his spiritual message. In this song, the prophet sings of a valued and valuable fertile hill that God

¹ See Isaiah 1.¹⁻⁴

possesses. God plants a vineyard on the hill in anticipation of sweet and juicy grapes with which he can produce tasty wine. He labors diligently in the vineyard. He toils to remove stones. He laboriously digs holes for the newly purchased vines. He surrounds the vineyard with protective walls. We can almost see the sweat dripping off God's bow and down his face as He performs His hopeful labors. We can feel His optimistic anticipation, His positive expectations.

“He then eagerly waited for it to yield juicy grapes.”

The tragic words that follow are devastating.

“But it yielded only horrible grapes.”

God is devastated. He can hardly understand how things came to be as they are, or how they might be improved.

“What more is there to do for my vineyard
that I have not already done?”

Isaiah will provide his own interpretation to this tragic song. But, even without the interpretation, Isaiah has introduced us to a God very different than the one we so often think of. When we think of God, we think of Him as all powerful. We think of Him as all knowing. As perfect. God dwells in glory. He is always in control, always has His way. He dwells, we imagine, in a sort of carefree and unimaginable felicity. But Isaiah knows a different God, or, at least, of a different side of Him. He knows a God who can be sad and troubled. A God who can be hurt. A God whom others can impact negatively. Indeed, God is saddened and troubled precisely because of His commitment to engage with inferior and troubled beings. Us. You. And me.

It's remarkable, really. Why would He who is always in control willingly subject Himself to pain? I am not the first to ask this question. In the fall and winter of 1830, Joseph Smith produced what is today the Pearl of Great Price's Moses 7. There, Enoch is recorded as having witnessed God weeping. He was flabbergasted. He could not believe his eyes. He was so shocked that he had to question three times what his eyes beheld.

“The God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: *‘How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?’*”

And Enoch said unto the Lord: *‘How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever; and thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep?’*²

This is not how we imagine God—and for those formerly known as Mormon, it is certainly not the life they imagine when they contemplate being gods, themselves. But the fact is, the Being we call God is subject to sadness and pain and grief and hurt. We should not be surprised at this. Jesus, the truest revelation of the kind of Being God is, was all too familiar with sorrow and pain. Indeed, he could be described as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”³ At one point in his life, his sorrow was so

² Moses 7.²⁸⁻³¹

³ See Isaiah 53.³

intense and so very heavy that he thought it might be “unto death.”⁴ An angel informed King Benjamin that Jesus suffered “even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death.”⁵

We might view Jesus’ sorrows and suffering as the consequence of his mortality. We might imagine that when he is immortal, he knows no such sorrow or suffering. But this would be wrong. Jesus wasn’t a different being in mortality than he was before or is now after his mortal life. Jesus was in mortality exactly who he had always been and who he always will be. Jesus was in mortality exactly like His Eternal and Heavenly Father was, is, and will be. A Being subject to sadness, pain, and sorrow.

It is not fun and games, pleasures for ever more to be a God. Father and Son are beings that know sorrow and pain and grief and hurt. And they know these things because of their willing involvement with human beings. Isaiah clearly lays out this aspect of Divinity in his tragic song about God’s unrequited love.

There’s no telling how many times I’ve saddened and hurt Him. I have contributed my share of poison to Jesus’ bitter cup. I am saddened and hurt to have to confess this painful truth.

“My heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins.”⁶

Nephi didn’t end there, though. And neither do I.

“Nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.”

That is one huge “nevertheless.” And so,

“O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.”⁷

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

⁴ See Matthew 26.³⁷⁻³⁸

⁵ Mosiah 3.⁷

⁶ 2 Nephi 4.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

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Meditation 3— Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷

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Interpretation

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In Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷, the prophet utilizes song, a love song about unrequited love, to portray God's relationship and experiences with Israel. In the song, Israel is likened to a vineyard. God is the owner of the vineyard. God planted the vineyard on a fertile plot of land. He labored night and day in the vineyard in hopes of a bountiful crop of sweet and juicy grapes with which He could produce tasty wine. He protected it from the encroachment of the surrounding wilderness and hostile intruders. But, tragically, the vineyard did not produce according to His hopes. It produced only bad grapes. God is disappointed and heartbroken over the failure. He cannot imagine what more He could have done. He cannot imagine what more He might yet do.

In today's meditation, we look at the consequences of the bad yield. These consequences are presented as direct Divine action. God will cease his labors in the vineyard. God, Himself, will tear down the vineyard's protections and allow it to be burnt and trampled. God will bring draught, causing the vineyard

to dry up, shrivel, die, and blow away in the wind.

All of this did happen to Israel. The Assyrians devastated the nation's self-defense systems. Cities and agricultural resources were trampled and ruined by marching infantrymen, galloping horses, and wheeling chariots.

The question becomes, "Who is the agent of these devastating consequences." To be sure, Isaiah portrays God as the agent. Of course, this is how those of the ancient world explained the world around them. God or gods were the agents of everything that happened.¹ Perhaps nowhere do we see just how totally engaged the gods were thought to be in human affairs than in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—two books on the short list of books that I have read multiple times. In the *Iliad*, one god or another controls, aims, and alters every arrow shot, every sword thrust, and every spear thrown or thrust. No one was wounded or killed but by a direct divine act. It almost becomes comical, and humans little more than pawns on a chess set.²

We do not believe God to be this personally manipulative today. Or, at least, most of us don't. Nor should we believe it. As I have noted in the past through passages such as Helaman 13.⁸, the Book of Mormon unwittingly reveals to the discerning reader the absurdity of such a belief system. There, for example, we read,

"Therefore, thus saith the Lord: 'Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, except they repent I will take away my word from them, and I will withdraw my Spirit from them, and I will suffer them no longer, and *I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them*'".

Their "brethren" are obviously the Lamanites—who, as any word search will demonstrate, were so called with great frequency in the Book of Mormon. The Lamanites were, literally, the sworn enemy of the Nephites. Animosity between the two groups was generational and many centuries long. Lamanites did not require an act of God to have their hearts turned against the Nephites any more than Egypt's Pharaoh needed God to harden his heart against Israelites and Israelite independence from Egyptian oppression and control.

At the same time, the turning of Lamanite hearts "against them," certainly is meant to suggest Lamanite military aggression against the Nephites. The assertion of Helaman 13.⁸, then, would make God instigator of both emotional and military contention between the two nations.

But the idea of God being somehow active in creating animosity and aggression on the part of the Lamanites flies in the face of Jesus' own statements about himself, his intentions toward humankind, and his expectation of it.

"For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away."³

¹ One might argue, I suppose, that such language was merely rhetorical—we are dealing with poetry, after all—but it seems that this belief that everything that happened was God's doing was in fact at the center of the ancient belief systems and theologies about God.

² We chose an example from the *Iliad*, but could easily choose any one of many from the Bible. See, for example, the hanging of Saul's descendants in 2 Samuel 21—it is ridiculous to accept that this was perpetrated at God's demand.

³ 3 Nephi 11.²⁹⁻³⁰

Jesus, Himself, of course, is a far, far stronger argument against any idea that God is responsible for human animosity and aggression than any analysis of a scripture passage or passages. The first and foremost purpose in his ministry, including his suffering and death, was to introduce an unknown, misunderstood, and falsely portrayed God. Jesus was a perfect representation of God and His character. To believe that Jesus, and thus God, would actively work to create human animosity and aggression is preposterous beyond measure.

Still, as we have mentioned, the consequences of Israelite sin occurred just as Isaiah predicted. Isaiah was right about the consequences, even if he was not right about the agent. So, who is responsible for the devastation that Isaiah predicted and that occurred? The Assyrians, that's who. It was a matter of the wicked "punishing" the wicked.

"But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed."⁴

It was God's "judgments"—His incredible "perceptiveness," "intelligence," "wisdom," and "understanding" of humans and human affairs—that He shared with Isaiah to allow Isaiah to understand the consequences for Israelite rejection of God and the principles He had given Israel for security and endurance. Knowing human character, God had provided the principles that brought security and enduring private and national existence. Neither private individuals nor the national character, culture, or institutions had abided by these divine principles, but had rejected them. In general terms, Isaiah will characterize the nature of Israel's rebellion against godly principles in verse 7. He will be more specific in verses 8-24.

Because Israel would not live by divine principles, Isaiah understood through God's instruction that he could expect human principles to kick in—chief among them being that when one human nation observes a weakness in another human nation, the observant nation will take advantage of the weakness. Animosity and aggression will follow as surely as the thunderclap follows the lightning bolt. God does not control or manipulate human animosity or aggression any more than he controls every bolt of lightning and clap of thunder.

The world would go a long way toward overcoming its animosities and aggressions if it would jettison its common beliefs in a God who encourages, manipulates, and participates in human animosity and aggression. But, alas, we love the hateful and avenging God, or, at least, the God who hates and wreaks vengeance on those we hate and against whom we seek vengeance. It's a tragic and pathetic state of affairs.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

⁴ Mormon 4.⁵

Meditation 4— Isaiah 5.¹⁻⁷

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Interpretation

**⁷In like manner, Yahweh Šebā'ôt's vineyard is the nation of Yiśrā'ēl,
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He eagerly looked for justice. But, look! Violence!
He eagerly looked for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!** (author's translation).

Isaiah 5.⁷ serves as pivot between what has gone before in verses 1-6—both love song and declaration of consequences in metaphor—and what follows in the series of tragic warnings found in verses 8-24 with their respective consequences. The verse represents the interpretation of the preceding song and metaphor. At the same time, it represents the interpretative key to understanding the tragic warnings that follow. It is in verse 7 that we learn that the vineyard is a representation of Israel and Judah. It is in verse 7 that we come to understand the nature of God's hopes for the two nations—the good grapes of the song—and the meaning of the horrid grapes. It is verse 7 that sets the stage for Isaiah list of offenses by which Israel shattered God's hopes for the nation.

On the positive side, in the song, God, the owner of the vineyard, "eagerly waited [Hebrew, *qāwā*] for it to yield juicy grapes." In the interpretation found in verse 7, God "eagerly looked [Hebrew, *qāwā*] for justice [*mišpāṭ*]" and "the rule of law [*šēdāqā*]."

The “juicy grapes” that God hoped and labored for were a representation of “justice” and the “rule of law.”

On the negative side, in the song the vineyard had produced only “horrid grapes.” In the interpretation, Israel produced “violence” [*mišpah*] and “shouts of distress” [*s^e‘aqah*]. The “horrid grapes” that the vineyard produced were a representation of the “violence” and “shouts of distress” that pervaded Israelite society.

This much is rather straightforward. However, there is more to be gleaned from the verse. First, we note Isaiah’s use of alliteration. In the third line of verse 7, God wanted *mišpāt* but got, instead, *mišpah*. As the reader can perhaps see and hear, the two words, though opposites look and sound a good bit alike. The same is true of the second pair found in the fourth line of verse 7. God wanted *š^edāqâ* but got its opposite, *s^e‘aqah*.

Now we could simply chalk this prophetic use of alliteration up to personal style and poetic panache. But we might want to consider that there is more to it than that. The alliteration may reflect a prophetic observation concerning the fallen nation’s perspectives and values. To Israel of Isaiah’s day, what was in very fact “violence” looked like and was claimed to be “just.”

In the verse that immediately follows verse 7, Isaiah criticizes the accumulation of large, landed estates. There can be little doubt that the owners of such estates did so “legally” through the corruption of good governance and laws. Many who witnessed these landowners incredible financial “success” and “achievements,” likely viewed these landowners as “titans of industry.” No doubt the landowners themselves heartily agreed. They were “self-made” and successful men—and they would have, every one of them, been men—achieving what they achieved through personal intelligence and “hard work.”

But Isaiah would have none of it. These accumulators and their loyal fanbase who lauded their accomplishments were simply some of 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.”¹

As a modern-day example of such perversion, I think of the atrocious “three strikes and your out” laws from America’s 1990 legislation and jurisprudence. We were told with the utmost seriousness and conviction that such laws were “just” and produced a safer and more just society. But this was little more than turning reality on its head and calling “violence,” “justice.” I think, too, of the extreme economic inequality that modern America condones and propagates—an inequality made possible through unjust laws; an inequality that is but a form of violence, an inequality that is a principal cause for the Lord’s truthful condemnation that “the world lieth in sin.”²

Just as Israel had twisted and perverted “justice,” subsuming policies and behaviors that violated others under the rubric of “justice,” the nation abandoned the rule of law producing distress in large segments of the population. But, when those who passed and enforced corrupt government laws and policies witnessed

¹ Isaiah 5.²⁰

² See DC 49.²⁰

the distress the laws and policies created, they blamed the distressed rather than the laws and their applications! Nowhere do we see this blaming of the victim more than we do in America's past and present bigoted and stress inducing actions against native Americans, past and present contempt for the poor and disadvantaged, past and present institutional racism against African Americans, or past and present hateful attitudes and policies toward the LBGQT community.

Speaking to the modern world, particularly, it seems, modern America, Moroni claims that "Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing."³ In speaking of those "doings," he charges,

"I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted."⁴

I doubt that Isaiah would make the same claim of looking into the future and seeing modern day America. But he clearly saw and described the violence that powerful, wealthy, and influential Israelites perpetrated against the powerless, the poor, and disadvantaged. He saw and described the pride of the advantaged and the distress that it brought upon the disadvantaged. In seeing and describing such things among the Israelites, he did, in a sense, see us, for we are them, repeating all the same errors, abandoning the same justice and rule of law, instigating the same types of violence and causing unpardonable distress to millions of the world's vulnerable.

In describing the consequences that would come upon a rebellious Israel, we should seriously consider the possibility that we face similar consequences. We should perhaps fear that whatever protective care God's principles have given America is fast approaching its end, leaving it vulnerable to the hate and aggression of its enemies, both foreign and domestic.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

³ Mormon 8.³⁵

⁴ Mormon 8.³⁶⁻³⁷

Meditation 5— Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.

⁹Into my ears, YHWH Š^ebā' ô^t speaks:

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

¹⁰such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons
and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel” (author's translation).

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.¹⁻⁴). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.⁵⁻⁶). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard's owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.⁷). With this, Isaiah launches into six blistering warnings. This meditation examines the first of these warnings. We should perhaps first note that this warning immediately follows Isaiah's depiction of God's shattered hopes for His nation.

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

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

God had gone to great efforts to show His devotion for Israel. In return, the nation gave Him the exact opposite. The nation's citizenry showed no devotion to Him and no devotion to one another. Citizens committed all manner of injustices against each other. These injustices created all manner of distress, worry, insecurity, and suffering.

Among these injustices was this one about which Isaiah lifts a warning voice.

“What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.

It is generally believed that according to Israelite land tenure law and policy, all land was owned by God. He granted stewardship not ownership of land. Land was to remain with those to whom God had given stewardship. Therefore, land could not be bought and sold. If, for any reason, a family lost land to debt, the land was to be returned to the family, essentially, once a generation. Many of those who read Isaiah's warning see his criticism in light of the law of stewardship and the prohibition on buying and selling land. They see the problem Isaiah describes and decries as one of lawlessness and disobedience.

While it is undoubtedly this, one must not become so focused on the breaking of the law, that they lose sight of the law and its purposes to begin with. Laws that sought to secure land for individual Israelites were not simply about land use and real estate policies. They were about real, flesh and blood people, about maintaining their happiness, security, and dignity. Many of the ancient Near Eastern cultures believed that society had an obligation to so structure itself as to secure basic life necessities, especially

for landowners.¹ While this belief and practice was often utilitarian and practical—the accumulation of great wealth, and thus power, in the hands of an aristocracy, for example, was a danger to a monarch’s power (and, indeed, that of any form of government, as America is witnessing today).

No doubt there were utilitarian benefits to the land stipulations found in Israel’s “charter” as inspired by God. But God called for justice and fidelity between Israelite’s. He called for Israelite law to be so ordered as to encourage and institutionalize justice and fidelity between citizens; not so much for the benefit of the institution as for the individual.

One can see this emphasis in Isaiah’s perspective on land policies. In his discussion of the predatory behavior of land grabbers, there is no reference to the fact that the law was being broken. Rather, it came immediately on the heels of his complaint about violence and cries of distress. The unjust land policies being practiced in his day were violent acts that brought distress into the lives of the dispossessed. This is Isaiah’s focus.

Unfortunately, it is highly likely that the unjust and predatory land practices of Isaiah’s day were made “legal” through legislative shenanigans on the part of the government. Isaiah complains elsewhere, in another warning,

“What a tragic warning! There are those who issue oppressive statutes
and continuously write laws that afflict;
that put redress out of the reach of the underprivileged
and rob the poor among my people of justice,
making prey of widows
and plundering orphans.”²

It is highly likely, too, that those who were greedily buying up land claimed that they were acting justly because, they could point to (corrupted) legislative acts that made unethical behavior “legal.”

If this all sounds eerily familiar, it should. We are watching a similar phenomenon take place in our society today. Investors are buying up properties at a rate never before seen in American history. More and more people are being priced out of home ownership. Just as many are being reduced to something near indentured servitude as rent payments take up an increasing high percentage of wages. We are increasingly hearing cries of distress. The predatory practices of the investors that cause this distress has all been declared legal through the passage of oppressive statutes. Government seems to think more of protecting the “property rights” of the wealthy than the security, health, dignity, and even life of those less well off.

Now, as we have so often said, we do not advocate for the adoption of Biblical law in American society—as if we were a fundamentalist Muslim imposing Sharia law. Our economic, governing, legal, and cultural systems are different than those of ancient Israel. Nevertheless, I believe we can find *principles* in the Bible that can be applied to modern society. Notwithstanding our differing systems, what is happening with housing in America today is wrong for the same reason that the monopolization of land was wrong in Isaiah’s ancient Israel. It does harm to real people. It robs them of the happiness, security, and dignity that God intended them to have. American laws that regulate economic practices can be written in such a way as to maintain the security of all citizens by, at the very least, seeing that its more vulnerable citizens are not denied basic necessities and therefore their god given dignity.

¹ See Michael Hudson’s “And Forgive them their Debts,” for one discussion of this perspective.

² Isaiah 10.¹⁻², author’s translation

And we will not even bring up the fact that God actually expects individuals and societies to do *more* than simply maintain one another's *basic* necessities and personal dignity.

“It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin.”³

Oh, well, I guess we did bring it up. In the end, we would maintain that this much neglected divine value—neglected and even rejected even among those who claim the book from which it comes to be scripture—is something akin to this divine value that produced ancient Israel's original land policies. Breach of these policies and, more, the violence and injustice such breaches perpetuate and the cries of distress they induce lead nowhere good. Those perpetuating such violence and injustice may, in the short term, seem to do well, as the Psalmist's discouragingly observed.

“Even in death, they experience no suffering,
but die with stomachs full.
They do not experience the hardships of common people,
nor are they struck as others are struck.
So, they adorn themselves with self-conceit;
cloak themselves in a garment of cruelty.
Their eyes bulge out on account of their corpulence;
their physique goes beyond imagination.
They are disdainful and promote wanton oppression.
Their rhetoric is ever so soaring.
They claim divine license;
their assertions are found the world over.”⁴

But in the end, it produces ruin for them and, eventually, for the whole of society, as Isaiah observes.

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.
Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant
such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons
and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel.”

Or, as the Psalmist observes about the wealthy, successful, and powerful,

“In their mind, their houses are enduring;
their abodes, passing from one generation to another.
They even name lands after themselves!
But even the most prestigious don't last long;
exactly like senseless animals.
This is their way of life, madness owns them,
and those who follow them accept what comes from their mouth!
Like sheep, they are destined for Še'ôl.
Death shepherds them,
and leads them down daily into flat plains.
Še'ôl consumes their body;
consumes what dignity they possess.”⁵

³ DC 49.²⁰

⁴ Psalm 73.⁴⁻⁹

⁵ Psalm 49.¹²⁻¹⁵

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22,, 2024)

Meditation 5— Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.

⁹Into my ears, YHWH Š^ebā' ô^t speaks:

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Isaiah's fifth chapter begins with a love song. It laments God's unrequited love for Israel. Its message is summed up in these two interpretive lines that Isaiah adds to the song.

“He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!
He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!”

Isaiah then launches into a series of warnings, six in number, that reflect on the nature of the violence and distress that God finds so lamentable. In the first, Isaiah warns of the predatory practices of land grabbers.

“What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.”

What made such predatory practices wrong then is the same thing that makes them wrong in all ages, now as well as then. They harm people. People's needs and wellbeing always take precedence over the profit margins of the wealthy and influential class—and, no, we do not believe that people should or can live on a “trickle,” as one of the great blasphemies of human history called “trickledown economics” falsely declares.

Now, simple common sense should be enough to make it apparent that those who engaged in the predatory behavior that Isaiah decried did so out of a desire for increased gain and profit margins. But, Isaiah, wisely it seems, does not leave it up to common sense. He spells it out. Isaiah spells out the nature of the wickedness as scripture so often does, not by naming it directly, but by revealing the nature of the consequences. You see, consequence is always in relation to the act. If one puts their hand in the fire, they do not walk away with frostbite. If one is pulled over for running a red light, they are not given a ticket for speeding in a school zone. “Punishment fits the crime,” as we say.

Here, then, are the consequences of the predatory behavior of ancient Israelite land grabbers—we call them “venture capitalists” today.

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.
Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant
such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons
and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel.”

Now, you tell me if I think I am wrong, but I don't think that's the outcome the predators were looking for. It seems that God is not the only one who had his hopes dashed.

The consequences are appropriate to the crime so that, here, Isaiah's depiction of the consequences, justify the conclusion that the predatory practices of ancient Israelite land grabbers were motivated by lust: lust for profit and increasing profit margins. Thus, the consequence was an absence of profit. Appropriately, the hoped for profits did not materialize. Quite the opposite. Profit margins collapsed. Losses mounted.

Isaiah's poetry allows us to use our imagination to appreciate just how deep the predators' failure was and how very far they came to realizing their desires for profits. Isaiah's imagery allows us to close our eyes and imagine, for example, long rows of previously luxurious grape vines. Then to imagine those same rows turned to dried, brittle leaves, broken trunks, and bare wilted branches. Or, we can close our eyes and imagine the field previously covered with golden heads of wheat now trampled down and invaded by weeds and scrub growing in dry pockmarked dirt. Then again, he invites us to get a bushel basket and fill it three times with seed. He then invites us to place a fourth bushel basket by the others and fill it one-quarter full with edible wheat. The latter is the pitiful yield of the former. He invites us to imagine a vineyard roughly the size of 10 American football fields, and then look at the six measly gallons of wine it produced.

"So, how's business?" Isaiah might have asked. How did your predatory behavior work out for you?"

We might also hear him say something like, "When profit margins become god, god dies."

Some one hundred years later, things had not changed much. So, another prophetic "woke liberal" issued warnings similar to that of Isaiah.

"They have sown wheat,
but shall reap thorns:
they have put themselves to pain,
but shall not profit:
and they shall be ashamed of your revenues
because of the fierce anger of the LORD."¹

"...Surely our fathers have inherited lies,
vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.
Shall a man make gods unto himself,
and they are no gods?"²

"Hath a nation changed their gods,
which are yet no gods?
but my people have changed their glory
for that which doth not profit.
Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this,
and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate,
saith the LORD.

¹ Jeremiah 12.¹³

² Jeremiah 16.¹⁹⁻²⁰

For my people have committed two evils;
they have forsaken me
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed them out cisterns,
broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”³

Make no mistake about it, anything that puts profit above the necessities and dignity of people is a god. An idol. The profit of the god named, “profit margins,” is an illusion. No profits flow from the god, “profit.” Such gods and their devotees can only product violence and distress: the only yield, wasteland and death.

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.
Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?
Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit;
but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.
A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,
neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.
Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down,
and cast into the fire.
Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”⁴

Jesus, being far more radical than Isaiah (or, for that matter, than those who claim him as their Savior will acknowledge), goes a further than Isaiah. It is not only the agricultural fields of those whose lust for increased profit margins drove them to predation of others that are profitless. They, the lustful predators, themselves, are profitless.

“He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.”⁵

They are of no profit to themselves. They bring profit to no one else. They do not profit society.

Oh, how human predators who prey on their own kind, running madly for higher profits, choke the society that they cannibalize. And, oh how they dash the hopes of God!

“And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood.”⁶

Sad. Tragic. Fruitless. Wasteful. Ruinous.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

³ Jeremiah 2.¹¹⁻¹³

⁴ Matthew 7.¹⁶⁻²⁰

⁵ Matthew 13.²²

⁶ Moses 7.³³

Meditation 6— Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.

⁹Into my ears, YHWH Š^əbā'ôt speaks:

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

¹⁰such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons
and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel” (author's translation).

After describing the unjust and predatory nature of ancient Israelite land grabbers, Isaiah describes the consequences of the predation. Isaiah has already described the consequence for the victims: distress. But now, he describes the consequences for the perpetrators themselves.

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons

and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel.”

As we suggested in the previous meditation, in revealing these consequences, Isaiah reveals, as scripture often does, the fundamental nature of the wickedness that brought about the consequences. He does this, not by explicitly naming the exact nature of the wickedness, but by depicting the nature of the consequences. The nature of the wickedness is revealed in the nature of the consequence. In this case, the loss of revenue and destruction of the purchased lands that the predators experienced informs us that the wickedness was not simply to be located in the accumulation of land but in the lust for profits and increased profit margins that drove the predatory and unethical behavior.

Things did not turn out for the predators as planned, however. In fact, not only did they not profit from their predation, they suffered, and appropriately so, massive, catastrophic losses.

In this meditation, we will further examine scripture's penchant to use the nature of consequence to reveal the nature of wickedness. We have written extensively on this elsewhere, but would like to hit the highlights here.¹

We are familiar with the heroic, master of dodging stones and arrows, Samuel the Lamanite. Helaman devotes 4 chapters to his exploits. While he is best known for his intuition concerning the future coming of the Savior, he also knows a great deal about the present condition of his audience, the Nephites. He characterizes Nephite society as one of “wickedness,” “hardness of heart, and “wickedness and abominations.” Because of this national character, “the sword of justice” hangs over them. “Heavy destruction,” “utter destruction,” and “desolation” awaits them. This will come at the hands of their enemies. It will come through “sword,” “famine,” and pestilence.”²

Nowhere in these seventeen verses—you are welcome to check me on this—does the prophet specify the

¹ See, our homily entitled, “The Slippery Slope of Materialism,” based on Helaman 13.

² See, Helaman 13.¹⁻¹⁷

exact nature or manifestations that all this national “wickedness,” “hardness of heart, and “wickedness and abominations” takes. He speaks of the nation’s spiritual malaise only in the most general of terms. We are left to wait for his warning of the approaching consequences before we begin to understand the character of Nephite “wickedness,” “hardness of heart, and “wickedness and abominations.”

He begins his discussion of the consequences in the transitional verse 17. Here, he speaks for the first time of a “curse” that “shall come upon the land.” He refers to the “curse” twelve more times in the chapter—talk about the unlucky ’13’! The object of the curse is Nephite “treasures/ riches”—mentioned, between them, nineteen times in the chapter. The “curse” will cause the “treasures/ riches” to become “slippery” (3 times). They will be “lost,” “gone” (twice), and “taken.” Their owners will be unable to “hold” onto or “retain” them. All this loss will come as a result of the people’s having “set their hearts” upon their treasures/ riches. At the same time, while they “do always remember [their] riches,” they “do not remember the Lord [their] God.”

Given the extreme form of materialism that Samuel depicts, there can be no doubt whatsoever that these “treasures/ riches” were acquired through any means necessary, however dubious, unethical, or harmful to others. Nor can we doubt their unwillingness to let go bits of their “treasures/ riches” for the benefit of others less fortunate than themselves.

In other words, the Nephites of Samuel’s time were guilty of the same mischief as Israel in Isaiah’s time—and of Sodom and Gomorrah before that. Greediness. Lust for wealth and profit. Materialism. And, as a natural corollary to these, unjust and hurtful treatment of others that brought despair and insecurity. In both cases, the key to understanding the full nature of their wickedness is to be found in the threatened consequences.

How fortunate are we! We know the consequences of rampant materialism and the injustices that produce them and flow with them without having someone tell us. Its written right there, in black and white. How much more deserving will we be of the devastating consequences if we do not heed history’s warning found in the prophetic voices of Isaiah and Samuel!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

Meditation 7— Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.

⁹Into my ears, YHWH Š^ebā'ôt speaks:

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

¹⁰such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons

and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel” (author's translation).

Israel, charged Isaiah, committed injustices of all sorts. Israel's behavior not only broke God's heart and shattered his hopes for the nation. It also produced suffering, insecurity, and distress in those against whom injustices were perpetrated. One of the injustices committed, almost certainly with the blessing of corrupted laws, was the predatory buying up of real estate.

“What a tragic warning! There are those who merge homestead after homestead,
combine property after property
until there's nothing left
and you dwell by yourself in the heart of the property.”

The motivation for this predatory buying is to be found in the consequences about which the prophet warned.

“Into my ears, YHWH Š^ebā'ôt speaks:

“It is certain that many an estate will become wasteland.

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

such that a ten-acre vineyard will yield but six gallons

and three bushels of seed will yield a quarter bushel”

We often speak of prophets as “See-ers.” Most likely, they are, like Isaiah, more “hear-ers” than “see-ers.” What Isaiah heard and revealed was that the motivation for the predatory buying of the wealthy was profit and profit margins. Unfortunately for them, the consequences of their predation, driven by desire for profits and increased profit margins, would be commensurate to the crime. Profits would collapse. Losses would mount until nothing was left but wasteland and mansions left without inhabitant.

Isaiah does not, here, identify the agent of the consequences. Drought could explain the collapse in crop yields. But, it seems more likely that something, or, better, someone else is responsible.

Isaiah began his work with a horrific metaphor. God had a child. The child rebelled. To discipline the child, God struck the child. The child remained belligerent. Over a period of time, God beat the child senseless. The child remained belligerent.¹

¹ See Isaiah 1.²⁻⁶. You can see our homily, “A Devoted Parent, a Rebellious Child, and a Brutal Beating: Metaphor for a Nation's Rebellion,” based on Isaiah 1.²⁻⁶

God then left metaphor and spoke plainly of its meaning.

Your country is desolate,
your cities are burned with fire:
your land, strangers devour it in your presence,
and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers.
And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard,
as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers,
as a besieged city.
Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant,
we should have been as Sodom,
and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.”²

It seems most likely that the collapse in crop yields and, thus, in profit margins was a consequence of war. Invading and defensive forces marched back and forth, fighting across the land, trampling crops. Invading forces consume crops for their own needs. Those they do not eat they burn. This is common fare, warfare, as you can see today in places such as Ukraine.

Now, we might conclude that all this devastation and loss—whether through climactic factors, military incursions, or a combination of both—came as the result of direct action on the part of God. He drew his desk chair up to his cosmic punishment console, pushed a few buttons... draught... pestilence... war... and, voila, destruction, waste, and ruin came crashing down on the head of the guilty.

Isaiah’s rhetoric seems to suggest so. He says, for example,

“The LORD shall bring upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon thy father’s house, days that have not come, from the day that Ephraim departed from Judah; even the king of Assyria. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the desolate valleys, and in the holes of the rocks, and upon all thorns, and upon all bushes. In the same day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired, namely, by them beyond the river, by the king of Assyria, the head, and the hair of the feet: and it shall also consume the beard.”³

It was, Isaiah seems to suggest, God, Himself, who called the attacking forces and brought unparalleled devastation upon Israel. In our last meditation, we appealed to Samuel the Lamanite and his insights into the relationship between cause and effect. In the course his discourse, Samuel offered this threat and ascribed it to God, “I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them.”⁴

But, really, now. It's hard to believe that the Lamanites or any other enemy ever needed any divine encouragement to attack their enemy—and how, exactly, would God accomplish this? Through the whisperings of the Holy Spirit whose ministry they were not “worthy” of? If we have not already learned that individuals and nations do not need any divine encouragement to attack others and go out “conquering and to conquer,” then, well, we may not be as much more intelligent than our monkey cousins as we imagine.

Perhaps both men believed exactly what they said. I don’t know. Perhaps they heard the warning that their enemies would attack and assumed that it was the result of God pushing the “sick their enemies on

² Isaiah 1.⁷⁻⁹

³ Isaiah 7.¹⁷⁻²⁰

⁴ See Helaman 13.⁸

them” button on his cosmic punishment console. Or, perhaps, such language should simply be chalked up to rhetorical flare. Maybe exaggeration to grab one’s attention? God is known to embroider, exaggerate to get one’s attention.⁵ Perhaps His prophets do too?

However, one works such a notion out, the idea of God stirring up hostility and warfare is, we just have to say, preposterous. Satan, may. Oh, yes, Satan does for sure. But not God. What makes me so confident? You ask. Because none other than “God, Himself” informed us that he simply does not operate in such ways.

“Behold, this is *not* my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this *is* my doctrine, that such things should be done away.”⁶

I really don’t know how he could be clearer. Here, we might mention Mormon who, though not as authoritative as God, taught quite similarly.

“But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed.”⁷

So, no, unless God is going to “turn the hearts of their brethren against them” and then the armies attack without enmity and anger, God has nothing to do with the coming onslaught. Imagine that, will you, divinely inspired human warfare conducted by wicked men devoid of anger and enmity! I have a bridge to sell.

But this idea of God as instigator of “punishment,” even if said punishment is not viewed as vindictive, is a persistent one. Hard to let go of. So, you might say, “Then what did Mormon mean when he said, ‘the *judgments of God* will overtake the wicked’? Does not this suggest direct action and involvement on the part of God?”

No.

Words can have more than one meaning. That word, “judgement/s” is funny that way—Mormon makes the word plural because it is God, who knows everything, he is talking about. Judgement/s can refer to the judgement/s of a court judge who pronounces the punishment of prison time for a convicted criminal. This is analogous to how we usually think of the “judgement/s of God.”

At the same time, you and I can show good “judgement/s” in the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the friends we keep, etc. In this way, what we mean by “judgement/s” is insightfulness and discernment, the ability to analyze and predict what the future might hold if certain actions and decisions are made.

In light of this other meaning for “judgement/s,” what, does Mormon mean by “the judgments of God” that “will overtake the wicked”? God knows the consequences of every act. They are as natural and predictable as gravity. Maybe, like gravity, there’s even a mathematical formula to predict the consequences of every deed—good and evil (Isaac Asimov played with this notion in his Robot and Foundation series).

God reveals his judgment/s. It is His “judgement” for instance, that when nations begin to weaken from internal disharmonies—and how can the behavior of Israel’s predatory land grabbers or that of the

⁵ See DC 19.⁷

⁶ 3 Nephi 11.³⁰

⁷ Mormon 4.⁵

Nephites who set their hearts first on riches/ treasures... how can they not create internal disharmony?— that nation's enemies, like sharks that smell blood in the water, come sniffing around. The tiniest opening will convince them to attack, go for the jugular.

So, God warns about behaviors that cause disharmony. He tells us about the negative consequences that those behaviors and their accompanying disharmony bring. This is His judgement/s. His insightfulness. His ability to tell us before something happens what will happen based on his knowledge of the causes.

So, yes, Israel's predatory landgrabbers suffered the consequences of their lust and greed. Their vineyards and crops were ruined, ruining their desires for increased profits. The agent of these consequences was not God. The agents of these consequences were less likely drought or plague and more likely the Assyrian army. It was Assyrian wrath, not divine wrath that brought an end to the success story of Israel's predatory landgrabbers. The Assyrians did not need God's permission or encouragement. But it was God's judgement, his insight that if certain conditions existed in Israel/Judah, the Assyrians would most certainly come calling. And they would come calling exactly according to his judgement, his ability to know and discern.

So it was that Israel's predatory realtors found out that what goes around comes around. Naturally. Without anyone pushing cosmic buttons on the divine cosmic consequences dashboard. We should heed the warning. The law of restoration is still very much alive and well.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

Meditation 8—Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹⁷

¹¹ What a tragic warning! There are those who rise early in the morning,
pursue drunkenness until nighttime,
wine inflaming them,

¹²lyre and harp, tambourine and flute,
and yet more wine being part of their carousing.

But they will not consider what YHWH does
and won't acknowledge what his power has accomplished.

¹³So then, my people are exiled
because of the lack of understanding.

Also, the nation's reputable die of hunger;
its boisterous parched with thirst.

¹⁴So then, Še'ôl increases its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit
so the nation's honored and boisterous descend,
as well as its raucous and festive, into it.

¹⁵People will be brought low.
and individuals humiliated,
and the confident bearing brought down.

¹⁶But YHWH Šebā'ôt is exalted because of His justice
and the incomparable God is seen to be preeminent because of His rectitude.

¹⁷Lambs will graze as if in their pastures,
and foreigners consume the ruins of the well-fed (author's translation).

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.¹⁻⁴). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.⁵⁻⁶). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard's owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.⁷). The song's message is summed up in these two interpretive lines that Isaiah adds to the song.

“He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!
He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!” (vs. 7)

With this, Isaiah launches into six blistering warnings (5.⁸⁻²⁵). These warnings should be understood in terms of the nation's violence and social injustice lamented in the chapter's opening song. Isaiah's first warning—the subject of four meditations—is an example of Israelite violence and injustice that brought distress to so many. It is directed at those who illegally gathered large estates in order to increase profit margins from agricultural holdings (5.⁸⁻¹⁰).

The present meditation on Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹⁸ examines the second of these six warnings. Before, jumping right into this second warning, we should comment on our approach to all the warnings. Some read each warning as if there is a gigantic pause between one and the next, each warning hopscotching from one issue, misunderstanding, or group to another as if they were unconnected. I do not so read them. In my reading, each is read in light of verse 7, quoted above. Each warning is then connected to the others, building on those that have gone before. Hopefully, in this series of meditations I can demonstrate the interconnectedness of the six warnings and the usefulness of reading them in a connected manner.

As I understand the second warning found in Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹⁸, then, the evils described are, like those of the first warning, associated with the violence and social injustice lamented in verse 7. The audience is the same as in the first warning. The activities described in the second warning take place in the villas that are situated on the large tracts of land acquired through fraudulent means as described in the first warning.

One other preliminary comment is in order. Because my audience is, presumably, predominantly LDS, I must issue my own warning that I would not need to issue to a non-LDS audience. The behavior that Isaiah condemns in this second warning has nothing to do with the LDS health code known as the Word of Wisdom or breach of that word. Rather, it represents a warning about the appetite for sumptuous living, especially that which is achieved through lust, fraud, and the complete disregard for others and their needs as found in the first warning and as portrayed in the second warning.

Indeed, if this second warning has a parallel in the Doctrine and Covenants, it is a much-ignored word of wisdom such as the following rather than the warning associated with the traditional and ubiquitous “Word of Wisdom.”

“Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.”¹

The wealthy individuals to whom this second warning is directed have absconded with an abundance and use it for their own comfort, leisure, and entertainment at the detriment of the poor and needy. As the lustful individual in the Doctrine and Covenants, the individuals to whom Isaiah issues his warning have also subjected themselves to the whims of hell—or, in Isaiah’s language, Še’ôl. The consumers will be consumed. Such does the law of restoration dictate for the willfully unrepentant sinner and practitioner of social injustices.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 23, 2024)

¹ DC 104.¹⁸

Meditation 9— Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹⁷

¹¹ What a tragic warning! There are those who rise early in the morning,
pursue drunkenness until nighttime,
wine inflaming them,

¹²lyre and harp, tambourine and flute,
and yet more wine being part of their carousing.

But they will not consider what YHWH does
and won't acknowledge what his power has accomplished.

¹³So then, my people are exiled
because of the lack of understanding.

Also, the nation's reputable die of hunger;
its boisterous parched with thirst.

¹⁴So then, Še'ôl increases its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit
so the nation's honored and boisterous descend,
as well as its raucous and festive, into it.

¹⁵People will be brought low.
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¹⁶But YHWH Šebā'ôt is exalted because of His justice
and the incomparable God is seen to be preeminent because of His rectitude.

¹⁷Lambs will graze as if in their pastures,
and foreigners consume the ruins of the well-fed (author's translation).

Isaiah's fifth chapter began with a tragic metaphor/ love song in which the prophet portrays God's disappointment at seeing violence and social injustice running amok in Israel (5.¹⁻⁷). Isaiah summed it up with these interpretive lines,

“He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!
He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!” (vs. 7)

With this, Isaiah launched into a series of six warnings (5.⁸⁻²⁵). Each warning is related to the others and should be understood in terms of the nation's violence and social injustice lamented in the chapter's opening song. The first warning was directed at those who covetously gathered large estates in order to increase profit margins from agricultural holdings (5.⁸⁻¹⁰).¹ As I understand it, the second warning found in today's passage is, like the first, associated with the violence and social injustice lamented in verse 7. The audience is the same as in the first warning. The activities described in the second warning take place in the villas that are situated on the large tracts of stolen land.

As we have suggested, the behavior that the prophet criticizes in this second warning has little to do with drunkenness, as a mind raised on the LDS Word of Wisdom might surmise. Rather, the behavior criticized is more akin to that which Ezekiel describes when contemplating the perverted behavior of Sodom.

“As I live, saith the Lord God, Sodom thy sister hath not done, she nor her daughters, as thou hast

¹ See my four meditations on these verses.

done, thou and thy daughters. Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me: therefore I took them away as I saw good.”²

Israel’s corrupt real estate tycoons have indeed become rich, as the unscrupulous so often do. Their large tracts of land produce lots of wine—note the connection between wine here and wine in the chapter’s opening song. The landed have plenty of leisure time. They can party all day and on into the night. They are serenaded with live music—certainly a prerogative only of the wealthy. Amos, an older contemporary of Isaiah, criticized the same lavish lifestyle.

“You are they who deny the era’s maliciousness,
while you cozy up to a violent throne.
You are they who lie upon ivory divans,
sprawl out on your settees,
eat lambs from flocks,
and specially fed calves,
pluck on the harp
as Dāwīd, invent for themselves musical instruments,
drink wine by the bowl full,
apply the best of perfumes,
while remaining unaffected by the nation’s collapse.”³

While the world of ancient finance and real estate is the domain of the male, the wives become insatiable as they enjoy and come to feel entitled to the luxuries injustice has to offer.

“Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan
that are in the mountain of Samaria,
which oppress the poor,
which crush the needy,
which say to their masters,
“Bring, and let us drink.”⁴

The wealthy engage in this behavior even in the face of all that God has done for the nation.

“But they will not consider what YHWH does
and won’t acknowledge what his power has accomplished.”

The Psalmist laments this willful ignorance and rebellion.

“The wicked, consistent with his stubborn arrogance, is unreflective.
All his plans are made with no thought of ’ēlōhîm.
The wicked are distressed by God’s ways.
The loftiness of God’s judgements confront him.
Anything that would restraint him he blows off.

² Ezekiel 16.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰

³ Amos 6.³⁻⁶, author’s translation

⁴ Amos 4.¹

He says to himself, "I cannot be toppled.
My future holds no misfortune."
This, while his mouth is full of injurious lies;
while misery and abuse flow from his tongue."⁵

Of course, one of God's greatest and most benevolent acts is found in His merciful giving of His law, as the opening hymn of the Book of Psalms reminds us.

"How truly fulfilled is one who...
Choose[s] YHWH's direction
and consult[s] his Tôrâ at all times."⁶

Among other things, God's word and law serve, as the Psalmist bears witness, to "warn"⁷ against the prevalent evils of this world, among them those described in this warning and to describe the sort of just society He envisions. But the wealthy find God and his wise direction an inconvenience. They ignore the Lord's merciful act of law giving, choosing instead willful ignorance, disobedience, and injustice over enlightened discernment, obedience, and justice.

Having critiqued the wealthy landowners' luxurious lifestyle built on fraud, Isaiah turns his attention to the consequences of their unjust and uncaring behavior. This will be the subject of our next meditation in this series. As we have noted in many places, including in our meditations on Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰, descriptions of consequences aid greatly in expanding our understanding of the exact nature and motivations of the condemned attitudes and behaviors.

As always, our exploration of Isaiah's warnings goes far beyond any antiquarian interests. Isaiah's critique of the lifestyles of the rich and famous of his day seems applicable to our times. Certainly, the wealthier one is the more luxurious one's lifestyle can be. The wealthy of the 21st century A.D. with their multi-million-dollar yachts and private jets, their multiple multi-million-dollar residences dotted about the globe, their exorbitantly priced suits and shirts and ties and gowns and jewelry and shoes, etc., live in luxuriousness unparalleled in human history. They and, indeed, all of us, pay for their callous injustice.

But, unlike ancient Israel, our society has a large middle class that has delusions of grandeur and often seeks to imitate the worst behavior that the wealthiest exemplify. Many of us who are not part of the infamous 1% or think of ourselves as rich nevertheless experience comforts unparalleled in human history. We too fall prey to what Jesus calls "the deceitfulness of riches."⁸ And, all too often, our search and acquisition of wealth and luxury comes at the expense of vulnerable people the world over, including many in our own back yard. Like the uber-rich, most of us living in the west are in danger of the torments of hell as the Doctrine and Covenants describes.

"Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment."⁹

May God in His mercy protect us from our worldly appetites. May our hearts be turned to the miracle of God's word which warns against the evils of this world and inspires us to look to a world enriched by

⁵ Psalm 10.⁴⁻⁷, author's translation

⁶ Psalm 1.¹⁻²

⁷ Ps. 19.¹¹

⁸ Matthew 13.²²

⁹ DC 104.¹⁸

better things.

“Moreover by them is thy servant warned:
and in keeping of them there is great reward.”¹⁰

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 23, 2024)

¹⁰ Psalm 19.¹¹

Meditation 10— Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹⁷

¹¹ What a tragic warning! There are those who rise early in the morning,
pursue drunkenness until nighttime,
wine inflaming them,

¹²lyre and harp, tambourine and flute,
and yet more wine being part of their carousing.

But they will not consider what YHWH does
and won't acknowledge what his power has accomplished.

¹³So then, my people are exiled
because of the lack of understanding.
Also, the nation's reputable die of hunger;
its boisterous parched with thirst.

¹⁴So then, Še'ôl increases its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit
so the nation's honored and boisterous descend,
as well as its raucous and festive, into it.

¹⁵People will be brought low.
and individuals humiliated,
and the confident bearing brought down.

¹⁶But YHWH Šebā'ôt is exalted because of His justice
and the incomparable God is seen to be preeminent because of His rectitude.

¹⁷Lambs will graze as if in their pastures,
and foreigners consume the ruins of the well-fed (author's translation).

Isaiah's fifth chapter began with a tragic metaphor/ love song in which the prophet portrayed God's disappointment at seeing violence and social injustice running amok in Israel (5.¹⁻⁷). Isaiah summed it up with these interpretive lines,

“He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!
He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!”¹¹

With this, Isaiah launched into a series of six warnings (5.⁸⁻²⁵). Each warning is related to the others and should be understood in terms of the nation's violence and social injustice lamented in the chapter's opening song. The first warning was directed at those who covetously and fraudulently gathered large estates in order to increase profit margins from agricultural holdings (5.⁸⁻¹⁰).¹²

As I understand it, the second warning found in today's passage is, like the first, associated with the violence and social injustice lamented in verse 7. I understand those warned in the second warning to be the same as those warned in the first. The activities described in the second warning take place in the palaces and villas that are situated on the large tracts of stolen land mentioned in the first warning. The nature of the sin found in the second warning is lust, unchecked appetites, and the abundant and luxurious life-style described in verses 11-12 and discussed in the two previous meditations.

Like the first warning, the description of the condemned behavior is followed with a description of the

¹¹ Isaiah 5.⁷

¹² See my four meditations on these verses.

consequences. As we have noted in many places, including in our meditations on Isaiah 5.⁸⁻¹⁰, descriptions of consequences aid greatly in expanding our understanding of the exact nature and motivations of the repugnant attitudes and behaviors that God condemns. This is true of the consequences associated with the sins found in this second warning. We will look first at the consequences and then consider what additional insights they provide into the luxuriant lifestyle described in verses 11-12.

“So then, my people are exiled
because of the lack of understanding.”

The nation will go into exile. This happened twice, once when Assyria took the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity in 721 B.C., and again when Babylon took the southern kingdom of Judah into captivity in 586 B.C. Amos, an older contemporary of Isaiah, anticipated the same consequence of an unrestrained lifestyle of luxury and ease.

“Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive,
and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed.
with all that is therein.
The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself,
saith the LORD the God of hosts,
I abhor the excellency of Jacob,
and hate his palaces:
therefore will I deliver up the city.”¹³

We should note that the callous and luxurious lifestyle of the rich and famous brings destruction on the entire nation. The powerful and wealthy often have an outsized influence and impact on society and its future. Unfortunately, their influence and impact is often negative and destructive. We can't help but think of Amulek's prescient complaint and warning.

“O ye wicked and perverse generation, ye lawyers and hypocrites, for ye are laying the foundations of the devil; for ye are laying traps and snares to catch the holy ones of God. Ye are laying plans to pervert the ways of the righteous, and to bring down the wrath of God upon your heads, even to the utter destruction of this people.”¹⁴

But, Isaiah warns, before exile, there will be trauma.

“Also, the nation's reputable die of hungry;
its boisterous parched with thirst.”

As the invaders enter the land, rural populations head for the urban centers, the wilderness, or the highlands to evade the army. The urban centers take in the fleeing refugees, close their gates, and prepare for the inevitable siege. The rampaging army consumes crops and livestock, and destroys what crops and livestock it does not consume. Soon hunger and thirst accompanies the invaders as urban centers run out of food and those hiding in the wilderness and highlands simply cannot find enough to eat. However, Isaiah focuses on the hunger and thirst of those who were formerly accustomed to stuffing their face with platefuls of food.

But the invaders bring more than physical and economic hardship and devastation. They deliver a psychic shock.

¹³ Amos 6.⁷⁻⁸

¹⁴ Alma 10.¹⁷⁻¹⁸

“People will be brought low,
and individuals humiliated,
and the confident bearing brought down.

The wealthy whom Isaiah addresses in this reading have lived a charmed life. They have enjoyed everything that this world’s wisdom tells them is necessary for happiness and security. They carry themselves with confident bravado. But now, for the first time in their lives, the comfortable and self-assured find themselves vulnerable to an irresistible force. The enemy shatters their carefree world. They worry. They fear for the future.

And, as if starvation and twenty-four-seven anxiety are not enough, death comes a callin’.

“So then, Še’ôl increases its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit
so the nation’s honored and boisterous descend,
as well as its raucous and festive, into it.”

Še’ôl is often portrayed as having a huge mouth, expansive stomach, and an insatiable appetite. It cannot get enough of the dead, but shovels them into its maw one corpse after another. The wealthy, accustomed to shoveling fistfuls of food and imbibing goblets of wine into their face, now find themselves the desired food of one whose appetite exceeds even theirs.

Finally, there is this consequence.

“Lambs will graze as if in their pastures,
and foreigners consume the ruins of the well-fed.

With this consequence, the prophet brings the land thieves of the first warning together with the wealthy and carefree revelers of the second warning. Those who have purchased large tracks of land, built impressive palaces and villas, and surrounded themselves with gardens and vineyards will watch helplessly as the invaders ruin all that they have so painstakingly and fraudulently built. Cherished possessions will become spoils of war. Palaces will be burnt to the ground—their stone walls dislodged and pulled down. Soon, sheep roam through the ruins munching on weeds and native grasses that have invaded these previously cherished halls and courts along with the surrounding vineyards and agricultural fields.

All these painful consequences are just and proper.

“But YHWH Šebā’ôt is exalted because of His justice
and the incomparable God is seen to be preeminent because of His rectitude.”

And all these painful consequences fit the crime. All these painful consequences shed light on the nature of the crime.

One notices, first, the focus on eating, consuming, and appetites. The revelers go hungry and thirsty. With its insatiable appetite, Še’ôl hungrily feeds on the revelers. Foreigners consume the revelers and all that they cherished. Lambs feed among the revelers’ ruins. By this, we understand better the revelers’ sin. Their sin is far more than yielding to unwholesome and unchecked private appetites and dietary extremism.

In yielding to their unchecked and insatiable private appetites and living a carefree life of luxury, they are guilty of committing social injustices against their fellow citizens. In warning the revelers that they will suffer the consequences of hunger, thirst, anxiety, humiliation, ruin, and death, the Lord reveals that they themselves are the cause of others' hunger, thirst, anxiety, humiliation, ruin, and death. While they were feeding their faces with delicacies, they were really feeding on their fellow citizens, who were defenseless against their violence. Indeed, in discussing the injustices committed by the powerful and wealthy, another of Isaiah's contemporaries, Micah, used just this cannibalistic imagery.

“Is it not for you to know judgment?
Who hate the good, and love the evil;
who pluck off their skin from off them,
and their flesh from off their bones;
Who also eat the flesh of my people,
and flay their skin from off them;
and they break their bones,
and chop them in pieces, as for the pot,
and as flesh within the caldron.”¹⁵

Because the wealthy have fed on others, finding no worth to others but whatever benefit others brought to them, foreigners invaders feed on the wealthy, finding no value in them but whatever benefits the wealthy bring to them. The wealthy are as helpless before this onslaught as their vulnerable fellow citizens had been before the wealthy's voracious appetite for more and more and more. Worse yet, hell feeds on the wealthy. Indeed, the insatiable and unrestrained appetite of the powerful and wealthy was undoubtedly inspired by hell. But after doing hell's bidding, the wealthy need expect no mercy at the hands of hell. It will treat them as they have treated others.

Jesus admonishes his disciples to treat others as they would like to be treated, in part, because he knew that, like it or not, for better or for worse, we are treated the way we treat others. The consequences with which the idle rich are threatened are commensurate with the social injustices they perpetrated against their fellow citizens. What goes around comes around. This is one lesson, anyway, of Isaiah's second warning.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

¹⁵ Micah 3.²⁻³

Meditation 11—Isaiah 5.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

¹⁸ What a tragic warning! There are those who drag along injustice with ropes of deceit,
and wrongdoing with the lead rope of a wagon;

¹⁹ those who say, “He should act now.

He should quickly do what He’s going to do
so that we can observe it.

The decision of Israel’s Holy One should arrive and happen
that we believe it” (author’s translation).

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God’s love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.¹⁻⁴). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.⁵⁻⁶). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard’s owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.⁷). With this, Isaiah launches into six blistering warnings. Each warning should not only be read in light of the injustice lamented in 5.⁷

“He hoped for justice. But, look! Violence!
He hoped for the rule of law. But, look! Shouts of distress!”

Each warning should not only be read in light of the injustice lamented in 5.⁷, but each warning should also be read in light of the others, each related to and building on the others.

The first warning is found in 5.⁸⁻¹⁰. Here, Isaiah condemns the predatory practices of those who fraudulently buy up land and form large estates to increase profit margins. The second warning is found in 5.¹¹⁻¹⁷. Here Isaiah condemns the luxurious lifestyle of the wealthy landowners who live on the same estates described in the first warning.¹ With this, we come to the third warning. It is addressed to

“Those who drag along injustice with ropes of deceit,
and wrongdoing with the lead rope of a wagon...”

Translations and interpretation of these two lines vary greatly, so one must not be dogmatic about either. But it is clear that the warning is addressed to those who drag or draw forward injustice and wrongdoing. Some suggest that the dragging of injustice and wrongdoing is meant to suggest the burden that they represent. Injustice and wrongdoing burden the victims and, eventually, they will burden the perpetrators, as they are made to suffer the consequences of their injustice and wrongdoing mentioned in the first two warnings. This reading is not without merit.

Then again, the idea of drawing injustice and wrongdoing with a rope as one might do with a wagon, sheep, or other animal suggests the idea of momentum and direction. Pulling an object with a rope gives it momentum and dictates the direction that the momentum takes. Thus, we might understand Isaiah to be warning those who give momentum and direction to injustice and wrongdoing—the inventors and instigators of the injustice and wrongdoing mentioned in the first two warnings.

Whatever interpretation one gives to the metaphor, we understand that the warning is directed toward those who are perpetrating the injustice and wrongdoing described in the first two warnings. This is consistent with our previous observation that each warning is related to the others.

¹ See my meditations on these two warnings for additional details.

We understand, then, that it is those who fraudulently bought up large tracts of land, built expansive estates, and lived leisurely and luxurious lives—all at the expense of others—as described in the first two warnings, who utter the challenge of the following lines.

“He [God] should act now.
He should quickly do what He’s going to do
so that we can observe it.
The decision of Israel’s Holy One should arrive and happen
that we believe it.”

These lines represent a challenge to Isaiah’s prophetic claim to divine insight. Worse yet, these lines represent a challenge to God, Himself. But, what divine decisions and actions is it that the speakers challenge God to do quickly, immediately? We understand them to be the consequences announced in the first two warnings. Isaiah and his God should, the unjust reply to Isaiah’s threatened consequences, either put up or shut up.

“O.K., Isaiah. If our deeds are really unjust and wrong, let the consequences with which you threaten us come to pass. Now. Immediately.”

As a reminder, here are the threatened consequences. Landowners will experience diminished profits, business losses, ruin and loss of estates, depopulation (5.⁹⁻¹⁰), starvation, thirst, humiliation, exile, and death (5.¹³⁻¹⁷).

How delusionally certain must those be who fraudulently grab up lands, establish estates, and live luxuriously be believe that they have done nothing wrong and will not suffer any negative consequences for their actions? How stupid and foolhardy must one be to issue such a challenge and invite the threatened negative consequences?

As we consider their delusional foolhardiness, we think of the infamous Korihor from the Book of Mormon. He believed, as those who fraudulently acquired large, landed estates and lived a life of luxury and ease almost certainly did, that “every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength.”² Financial and worldly successes justified one’s actions, however depraved they might be. “Whatsoever a man did was no crime” as long as he was a successful through his life management skills.

And Korihor, like the unjust of Isaiah’s day, willfully refused to believe anything that he could not see; anything that was not present—whether it happened in the past or would happen in the future. So he, like those addressed in Isaiah’s third warning, demanded proof. “Except ye show me a sign, I will not believe,” Korihor spat, like his counterparts in Isaiah’s time.³

Korihor would get the sign he so foolheartedly demanded.

“Now Alma said unto him: ‘This will I give unto thee for a sign, that thou shalt be struck dumb, according to my words; and I say, that in the name of God, ye shall be struck dumb, that ye shall no more have utterance.’ Korihor was struck dumb, that he could not have utterance, according to the

² Alma 30.¹⁷

³ Alma 30.⁴⁸

words of Alma.”⁴

As for those to whom Isaiah issued his warning, history demonstrates just how stupid, foolhardy, and delusional they were, for they did indeed pay for their willful intransigence and suffered the threatened consequences at the hands of Assyria and then Babylon.

Unlike the first two warnings, Isaiah’s third warning possesses no threat of consequence. This is because it is the consequences threatened in the first two warnings that are the subject of the challenge issued by the unjust and wrongdoers of the first two warnings. The fraudulent landgrabbers who lived a life of ease and luxury on their landed estates, did not believe they were doing anything wrong—rather like modern day elite “capitalist” who believe their successes are due to their superior life management skills and justify the economic inequality that provides them a life of luxury while billions suffer across the globe. Thus, they did not believe they deserved or would experienced the threatened consequences. So delusional were they about their own innocence and God’s inaction that the invited God to bring it on.

We are certainly justified in thinking them fools for their false sense of security. They have had lots of company over the centuries. They have lots of company today.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 22, 2024)

⁴ Alma 30.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰

Meditation 12—Isaiah 5.²⁰

²⁰What 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 (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.³⁻⁴). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.⁵⁻⁶). 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 (5.⁷).

“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 5.⁷, 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 (5.⁸⁻¹⁰). 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 (5.¹¹⁻¹⁷). 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 (5.¹⁸⁻¹⁹).

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.”¹ 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)

¹ 1 Timothy 6.¹⁰

Meditation 13— Isaiah 5.²¹

²¹What a tragic warning! There are those who are wise in their own opinion,
and view themselves as perceptive.

Isaiah 5 begins with a love song (5.¹⁻²) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.³⁻⁴). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.⁵⁻⁶). 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 (5.⁷).

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With the fifth warning found in today's reading, Isaiah continues to address 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. Now, we might think that Isaiah is simply accusing them of thinking that they are smarter than they actually are, thus suggesting that they are not, in fact, wise or perceptive. While this may be part of his thought, there is more to it. The fact is, those who have accumulated large tracts of land and lived luxuriously on their large estates are actually quite wise and perceptive. Perhaps I should explain.

First, as to their perceptiveness or discernment. The Book of Moses contains a retelling of the story of Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. It is slightly different than that found in Genesis. In an “Aha” moment of sudden insight, Cain discovers a “great secret.” The secret is “that I may murder and get gain.” Cain becomes a “master of this great secret... and... glorified in his wickedness” (5.³¹). Cain, then, perceives the tragic truth that in this fallen world the path to temporal success and economic accumulation is often found through violence against others. Violence, or the violation of others, Cain discovers, works. The Hebrew prophets were aware of this reality of our fallen world, as Jeremiah lamented.

“For there can be found among my people ungodly individuals.
They keep watch, like bird catchers watching a trap.
They place traps, they capture human beings.
Just as a bird cage is full of birds,
their houses are filled with deceit.
This is how they have become powerful and wealthy.

They have grown fat and plump,
having gone beyond, even, the wicked words they speak.
They will not hear a legal case—
such as that of an orphan—and yet they enjoy success.
Nor will they bring the cases of the impoverished to trial.
Should I not level a charge against these?—
an oracle of YHWH—
Should I not take vengeance on a nation such as this?¹

The Psalmist, too, laments this reality.

“Even in death, they [the ungodly] experience no suffering,
but die with stomachs full.
They do not experience the hardships of common people,
nor are they struck as others are struck.
So, they adorn themselves with self-conceit;
cloak themselves in a garment of cruelty.
Their eyes bulge out on account of their corpulence;
their physique goes beyond imagination.
They are disdainful and promote wanton oppression.
Their rhetoric is ever so soaring.
They claim divine license;
their assertions are found the world over.
This is why peoples keep turning to them;
why, as overflowing water, they flow to them.
They say, “How could God know?
How could ‘Elyôn possess any awareness?”
In summary: these are the impious;
ever secure, always increasing in wealth.”²

Yes, the wealthy landowners who lived a life of luxury acquired and luxuriated because they perceived and acted “wisely” upon the great secret discovered in the earliest dawn of human history: wealth and power and influence come most often through the violation of others. If we consider further the “wisdom” of those who own large tracts of land and live in luxury, we find ourselves in 1 Nephi observing the great and spacious building, the wisdom of which so many have found impossible to ignore or reject.³

“And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: “Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world...”⁴

The building is described as a representation of both the world’s “wisdom” and its “pride.” In what, one must ask, does “the world” take pride? It takes pride in wealth, in power, and in influence. And of what

¹ Jeremiah 5.²⁶⁻²⁹, author’s translation

² Psalm 73.⁴⁻¹², Author’s translation

³ See my homily on 1Nephi 8.^{26-27, 33} and my meditations on 1 Nephi 11.³⁴⁻³⁶ for extended discussions of this building with its meaning within the context of Nephi’s visions and its meaning in human culture and society.

⁴ 1 Nephi 11.³⁵⁻³⁶

does its “wisdom” consist? The world is wise and skilled in acquiring those things in which it takes pride: wealth, power, and influence. Those to whom Isaiah speaks in the six warnings found in his fifth chapter are gifted. They are skilled at using the great secret to acquire that in which the world takes pride. They are rich. They are powerful. They are influential.

Isaiah delivers his warnings because the wisdom and skills and acquisitions of the nation’s wealthy, powerful, and influential are all of dubious character and value. The wisdom that the nation’s wealthy have adopted is, in fact, not wisdom. It is foolishness. Wealth, power, and influence are illusionary gods. They are not the source of true happiness. They serve as a distraction against emotional and spiritual pain. But, the wealthy reject both God’s warnings and God’s wisdom, exchanging God’s life affirming wisdom for a wisdom that will ultimately lead to their consumption in life and in death.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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