



First Isaiah

Isaiah 1-5: The Demand for Justice

The Book of Isaiah was compiled in many stages. While the call vision in chapter 6 may have originally introduced a memoir from the early years of the prophet, assorted oracles were placed before it in the book as we have it. Chapter One opens with a call to heaven and earth to bear witness. Compare Deut 32:1, where they are called to witness when the Lord accuses Israel of breach of covenant. The calling of witnesses suggest a *Ribh* or lawsuit, sometimes but not always based on the Mosaic covenant. In Isaiah 1, it is based rather on the order of nature. Even the ox and ass know their masters, but Israel does not know the Lord. Isa 1:2-9 seems to have been composed after the invasion of Sennacherib, when the country lay desolate, burned with fire. It would seem that Isaiah, or whoever composed this oracle, did not approve of Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria, which could only bring destruction on Judah. This passage is cited in the ruins of the Wilhelmskirche in Berlin, which stand as a monument to the disastrous course of action pursued by Germany in World War II.

Isa 1:10-20 turns to a critique of the cult, a favorite topic of the prophets in the eighth century BCE. (See especially Amos 5:18-27). The prophets typically dismiss the value of animal sacrifice: "what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? . . . I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs, or of goats (1:11). It is unlikely that the prophets wanted to dispense completely with the sacrificial cult. Such a move would be difficult to imagine in the ancient world. But the prophets were concerned with priorities, and saw the cult as hypocritical. People who offered sacrifices thought that they had thereby discharged their duty to God. Instead, Isaiah insisted, they should "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17). 1:27 states the principle directly: Zion will be redeemed by justice. Because Isaiah is so concerned with the promise to David, his preaching on social justice does not get as much attention as that of Amos or Jeremiah, who relate more directly to the Mosaic tradition. But he is just as insistent in his demand for justice. Ever since the dawn of history, kings were supposed to uphold justice and righteousness, and this was certainly part of the ideology professed by the Davidic kings. Isaiah demanded that the kings not just pay lip service to justice, but implement it in practice.

The most eloquent passage in Isaiah on the subject of justice is found in chapter 5: "ah you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land" (5:8). The basic social problem in ancient Israel was that the rich used their wealth to grind down the poor. People who could not pay their taxes had to

sell their land, and sometimes they had to sell their children, or even themselves, into slavery. Isaiah, like Amos, rails against the luxury of the rich, who rise in the morning in pursuit of strong drink and linger into the evening to be inflamed with wine, who enjoy feasts with music, but “do not regard the works of the Lord.” The works of the Lord, according to Isaiah, would lead to their punishment at the hand of Assyria, which he describes as “the rod of Yahweh’s anger” in chapter 10:5. In the view of Isaiah, as of Amos, the disasters that befell Israel and Judah were divine punishment for their internal inequity and injustice. From a modern perspective, the conquest of Israel and Judah by Assyria and Babylon were simply the result of power politics. Assyria and Babylon swallowed up small nations because they could, and because they were avaricious. But the prophets could validly argue that Israel and Judah deserved what happened to them because of their disregard for justice. They were not the last people who could be so accused. Moral issues have not changed greatly from antiquity to today.

In the last verses of Chapter 5, Isaiah complains of those who call evil good and good evil. We will see in chapters 28-32 that there was bitter rivalry between the prophet and the cynical “wise men” who offered pragmatic advice to the king, and derided the “plan” of the Lord, articulated by the prophet. Here again, things have not changed all that much between ancient and modern times.

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