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### Genesis 3.<sup>1-5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>But the snake, being more ingeniously devious than any other animal YHWH <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים had made, said to the woman, “It really is the case after all, then, that <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים said, ‘You are not to eat from every garden tree!’”

<sup>2</sup>The woman answered the snake, “We may eat the fruit of all the garden trees. <sup>3</sup>However, concerning the fruit of the tree which in the middle of the garden, <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים has said, ‘You are not to eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’”

<sup>4</sup>The snake insinuated to the woman, “It isn’t because you will die, <sup>5</sup>but because <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים knows that, upon eating it, your eyes will be opened, and you, like <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים, will understand what is good and what is evil” (author’s translation).

### meditation

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The snake, we are informed, is enormously “subtle,” according to the KJV, or “ingeniously devious” according to the author’s translation. This notice is not for nothing, as my kids say. It is important to the story. It is important as one considers the snake’s very first words, traditionally understood as a question but one that I understand as a statement. Though these are the first words that the text reports as passing between the woman and the snake, the verse’s initial *ap* suggests that they represent a continuation of a conversation that has already been taking place. The previous conversation might be that which passed between the man and woman and God, or that which has been taking place between the woman and the snake. Either way, the snake’s trickiness is seen in the ambiguity of his statement.

“It really is the case after all, then, that <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים said, ‘You are not to eat from every garden tree!’”

What, exactly, is it that the snake is saying? Is he simply reaffirming the assertion that God has indeed spoken? Period. Or is he reaffirming that God did indeed say that not every tree’s fruit was to be eaten? The ambiguity of the snake’s gambit seems purposeful. It is designed to draw the woman into further conversation. His ambiguity will require the woman to continue her engagement with the snake. And continue she does.

“We may eat the fruit of all the garden trees. However, concerning the fruit of the tree which in the middle of the garden, <sup>ע</sup>לֹהִים has said, ‘You are not to eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’”

The woman’s reply is very revealing. In some ways, it may reveal more about her than it does about God, or the garden, or the trees, or any consequences of eating from the forbidden tree. The snake will take advantage of what he learns.

First, the woman places the tree “in the middle of the garden.” However, in reporting on the existence of the tree, the text had nowhere mentioned such a central placement. We might conclude that the author/ editors left out this detail earlier, leaving it to the woman to reveal it in this conversation. On the other hand, we might just as legitimately conclude that the centrality of the tree is in the woman’s mind. The woman has, perhaps, been circling the tree, observing the tree, thinking about the tree, obsessing on the tree. The woman has, perhaps, granted the tree a psychological centrality that has nothing to do with its actual location in the garden or with God’s intentions.

Second, the woman has expanded God’s earlier prohibition. In pointing out the tree, God warned the man and the woman, “thou shalt not eat.” Now, again, perhaps the woman’s additional “or even touch it” represents part of God’s original prohibition which the author/ editors decided to leave to the woman to reveal. On the other hand, perhaps the addition is purely the woman’s invention, akin to the Jewish practice of “building a wall around Torah.” Walls are meant to protect, to keep dangers out.

However, it seems built into human psychology that as soon as a wall is built to protect, it becomes an object that calls out to be scaled.

So, if we accept that both of the woman's additions to previously provided information were her own, we see a woman who has been thinking a good deal about that thing that is forbidden to her. We observe, then, a woman who is typically human, possessing the same psychology and behavior as nearly every other human being. First, like most of us, she wants what she is denied. The forbidden thing becomes an obsession. It becomes a central feature of her thoughts. She comes back to it over and over and over again. Second, sensing the danger of her obsession, she seeks to control her response by amplifying, magnifying, exaggerating the danger in hopes of strengthening her defenses against her desire. The evilly intelligent snake will not miss either of the woman's self-revelations and will use them to his advantage.

This story, then, is not simply a story about some singular individual in the distance past. It is a story about all of us. The woman is us—male and female alike. Therefore, as we continue to watch the back and forth between “the woman” and “the snake,” and observe how “the snake” approaches “the woman's” thoughts and feelings, we are really being taught something about the approach the snake takes toward all of us.

In the King James Translation, the snake seems to suggest that God is lying about the danger of death that eating the fruit of the tree represents. In this reading, the snake claims, “You will not really die if you eat the fruit.” My translation suggests something different. It suggests that the snake is insinuating that God is something far worse than a liar. “God doesn't care about you, but selfishly wants to keep the fruit from you, keeping it all for himself.”

The snake's insinuation is still that God is of bad character. But, rather than simply being a liar, or even selfish, God is actually an adversary. “You can't trust him,” the snake hisses. “God is not on your side.” “God feels no fidelity toward you.” Once the snake has whispered this ultimate lie into our ears, and then gotten us to consider it, give it airtime in our thoughts, the danger of God losing our hearts and minds grows until we act contrary to all that he has indicated as best for us.

Thus, this short story, so often considered unique and solitary, is anything but. It is commonplace. It is utterly human. It happens every day. We obsess on potential spiritual dangers, believing that keeping a wary eye on them will increase our chances of resisting them, only to discover over the long haul that all this obsessing and amping up of defenses often makes it more, not less likely that the forbidden thing will be partaken of. We discover that in putting potential spiritual dangers on a pedestal and placing them in a spotlight we have only succeeded in creating what amounts to an idolatrous God. We are not admonished to “come unto sin,” after all, but to “come unto Christ.”

We also learn that we are encouraged to distrust God in a million ways. We can easily think of him as an enemy. This is particularly true when, as we will see as this story continues, we partake of the forbidden fruit. At this point, already suspicious of God's commitment to us, we imagine that we have lost God as a loyal and committed partner. Our hiding from God then grows more pervasive and characteristic. It is impossible to calculate the number of ways in which we underestimate God's fidelity; his unflagging commitment to us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Genesis 4.<sup>9</sup>

And the LORD said unto Cain, “Where is Abel thy brother?”  
And he said, “I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?”

### Meditation

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Genesis 4.<sup>9</sup> reports a portion of the conversation conducted between Yahweh and Cain immediately after Cain's murder of his brother Abel—a murder inspired by envy and a desire to possess what another rightly possessed. The passage contains the first *recorded* words uttered by a mortal being after the expulsion from Eden. One can think of any number of probable and earlier mortal utterances that might have been more positive and uplifting. But, in portraying and advancing their thesis concerning the brutal nature of mortality, the writers and editors of Genesis reported these words first.

Though Cain's response to Yahweh's question concerning the location of Abel takes the form of a question, it is, in fact, anything but an honest query. Rather, it is Cain's arrogant and dismissive denial of his responsibility to or for anyone other than himself.

“Am I my brother's keeper?”

Sadly, this attitude is alive and well today. It is evidenced in both private and individual acts of selfishness and in the choices that society makes concerning public policy—policies that proudly and loudly proclaim that no American need be his brother's keeper. The America version of Cain's selfish and murderous belligerence can be seen in a myriad of private and public acts and policies, but the recent anti-masker and anti-vaxxer movements with their tens of millions of members is as good and as concrete an example as any. Unlike Cain, these modern-day American Cainites are responsible not for one death but for many—tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens.

This is tragic enough but is made even more tragic when so many millions of American Cainites call themselves “Christian”—this with the Bible's anti-Cainite position staring them in the face. And it isn't like Genesis' authors and editors were the only and last to rebuke the Cainite doctrine of vile and violent sacrifice of others out of selfish self-service. As but one example, we offer up the admonition of the apostle Paul—a man so many “Christians” claim to admire, love, and follow.

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2.<sup>3-4</sup>).

This counsel is not only ignored almost entirely by American “Christians,” it is proudly rejected as some kind of socialistic plot against decency. But, it is American “Christianity's” rejection of the “brotherly” principle and its willful adoption of the murderous Cainite attitude that is indecent.

It is not enough to personally resist in our individual lives this Satanic delusion that we are not our brother's keeper. The times call for true evangelists and activist that push back against American Cainite delusions with equal and opposite force. Without this, the modern American Cainites gain ground inch by inch. Those worthy of the name, “Christian” must join forces with all decent people to publicly renounce Cain's age-old Satanic lie and to actively agitate for private attitudes and behaviors and public policy that recognize and act upon the truth that God has called us to be our brother's keeper; that we are all truly connected, interrelated, indeed, related. Without this, we can only expect deeper belligerence and more murder on grander and grander scales until the nation and then the whole earth is wasted.

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

## genesis 6.<sup>5-6, 11-13</sup>

<sup>5</sup>And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

<sup>11</sup>The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. <sup>12</sup>And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. <sup>13</sup>And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

## meditation

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In their desire to portray the gross nature of wickedness found in the pre-flood generation, Genesis' author and editors bring an impressive array of "superlative" language to bear in their sixth chapter: "every," "only," and "continually." Does it get any greater than "every"? Can it be any more exclusive than "only." Can it be any more frequent than "continually"? And we must not pass over the notice that "the earth was *filled* with violence," or that "*all* flesh had corrupted his way."

Little wonder that God was "grieved" to the core of his being. This passage does not speak so much to the depths of Yahweh's anger as it does to the utter brokenness of God's heart. Moses reminds us of this divine brokenness by recording Enoch's vision of a God who weeps over the devastation brought on by human violence.

The text's notice that "the earth was filled with violence" reminds us that one of humankind's most consistence vocations is the production of violence. But we must not think of this violence only in terms of the vilest physical harm that, if carried to its extreme ends in physical death. The wall street broker engaged in illegal and immoral trading commits an act of violence against other members of society. His "briefcase" is every bit an instrument of violence as the pistol of a convenience store thief. A municipal, state, or national government that perpetrates injustice against any individual or class of individuals is engaged in violence. "Violence" takes any form that "violates" the dignity and value of another.

Come to think of it, then, one suspects that the inspired authors and editors that are chronicling today's American society will have recorded much the same observations as did the ancient authors and editors. Poor God. Will his heart ever experience anything but hurt and sorrow from the children in and for whom he had such high hopes?

Certainly, we must examine our own hearts, our own minds, our own souls in search of any feelings, attitudes, or actions that violate other's dignity. But we must go further. We must demand that public institutions prioritize human dignity over the acquisition of wealth or power or prestige. We must expose and renounce violence at every level, private and public.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Genesis 13.<sup>1, 5-12</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south....

<sup>5</sup>And Lot also, which went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. <sup>6</sup>And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. <sup>7</sup>And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle: and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land.

<sup>8</sup>And Abram said unto Lot, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. <sup>9</sup>Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left."

<sup>10</sup>And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. <sup>11</sup>Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. <sup>12</sup>Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.

## meditation

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My series of *Just Scripture* readings and meditations examines principles, attitudes, and behaviors related to social justice—just principles, attitudes, and behaviors to be adopted and unjust principles, attitudes, and behaviors to be avoided by both individuals and societies. The principles, attitudes, and behaviors that are to be adopted and are found in many of the *Just Scripture* passages are often at odds with those adopted by modern societies, including that of the United States. Today's passage is a good example of just and godly economic attitudes and behaviors that are at odds with common American economic values and behavior.

In this reading, Abraham became acutely aware of and troubled by the strong economic competition that had developed between himself and his nephew, Lot—a competition that threatened to turn aggressive and violent. Both men were wealthy. Both men possessed large flocks and herds. Both men required large swaths of land to feed their flocks and herds. If they remained in competition, it seemed, one of them must increase at the expense of the other. But Abraham, rejecting and refusing to live by the rules of a zero-sum economic game, made an extraordinary offer. He allowed Lot, his economic competitor, first choice of economic resources. Of course, Lot chose the very best pasturage for himself. Abraham willingly yielded to Lot's decision and then utilized the inferior economic resources that his economic competitor left him.

One can easily imagine the response of an American businessperson such as a Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk or Warren Buffet to this scenario. They would think Abraham preposterous. Indeed, we have recently witnessed Buffet's attitudes and behaviors toward economic "competitors" in how he and his fellow administrators treated their railroad employees. The attitude and behavior of the Bezos and Musk toward employees, i.e., competitors for resources, are legendary and diametrically opposed to those of Abraham. One can also anticipate the response of the modern economist: "Abraham's economic decision in this instance was and is impractical, irresponsible, and ignorant. A recipe for ruin and loss."

While the specifics of Abraham's economic *circumstances* differ from those of modern times, we should have no difficulty finding *principles* that can apply to today's economic circumstances. First, Abraham demonstrates how the just and godly man can and should reject the zero-sum lie of modern economic theory. It is not inevitable that the success of one necessarily limits or diminishes the



success of another. Abraham seems to have understood and accepted God's stipulation that "the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare."<sup>1</sup> Greed, of course, rejects this stipulation, never able to possess enough.

Second, Abraham demonstrates that profits and profit margins are less important than human beings and human relationships. Indeed, profits and profit margins are immaterial to God; "for what," He asks, "is property unto me?"<sup>2</sup> Consistent with Paul's admonition, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others,"<sup>3</sup> the just and godly accept and act upon the belief that other's right to succeed are as legitimate and to be as valued and prioritized as that of one's own.

Third, profits and profit margins never justify economically aggressive or violent behavior. One must always choose peace with others and stability for society over personal gain and profit.

Finally, Abraham teaches us that God can be trusted; that He honors those who prioritize respecting other's rights, preserving other's dignity, granting the legitimacy of other's financial needs, and maintaining peace with others above personal gain, profits, and profit margins.

There can be no doubt that the world would be a better place with more individuals like Abraham. The people of God, often spoken of as the seed of Abraham, are to follow his example, understanding that Abraham followed the example of his God who, upon coming to earth, would put the good of all others above his own. He did so during that brief span of time because it is who He always had been and ever will be.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> DC 104.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> DC 117.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2.<sup>4</sup>

## **Genesis 29.**<sup>15-30</sup>

<sup>15</sup>And Laban said unto Jacob, “Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? Tell me, what shall thy wages be?”

<sup>16</sup>And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup>Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured. <sup>18</sup>And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, “I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.”

<sup>19</sup>And Laban said, “It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.”

<sup>20</sup>And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.

<sup>21</sup>And Jacob said unto Laban, “Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.”

<sup>22</sup>And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>And\* in the evening, he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. <sup>24</sup>And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid. <sup>25</sup>And\* in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, “What is this thou hast done unto me? Did not I serve with thee for Rachel? Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?”

<sup>26</sup>And Laban said, “It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup>Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.”

<sup>28</sup>And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. <sup>29</sup>And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid. <sup>30</sup>And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

## **m**editation

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### *prolegomena*

In this series of meditations on Genesis 29.<sup>15-30</sup>,<sup>24</sup>, we are going to have an intimate peek into the family that gave its name to one of the best known and most closely studied nations in western civilization: Israel, aka, Jacob. To fully understand and appreciate the dynamics of Jacob’s family, we need first to go back for a quick overview of the man, Jacob, and his life to this point.

### *genesis 25.*<sup>19-34</sup>

Jacob was one of two twins—the other being Esau—born to Isaac, son of Abraham, and Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel and sister of Laban. While in the womb, the twins’ movement was so violent that Rebekah came to understand they were wrestling in the womb for dominance and that this competition would be a defining feature of their relationship.

Even as Rebekah delivered the twins, the wrestling for dominance continued. Esau emerged first, but Jacob grasped onto Esau’s heel—the proverbial weak spot, as typified by the famous Achilles—as if trying to hold him back and pull him back into the womb so that he, Jacob, rather than Esau could be firstborn and have dominance over his brother. This presumptuous act at birth earned Jacob his name: “heel grabber,” “supplanter,” “replacer,” “he who finds others’ weakness and takes advantage of their weakness for his own gain.”

Though Jacob’s effort to be the dominant firstborn failed, it did not end Jacob’s striving to “supplant,” and “replace” his brother. As a lad, Jacob continued to stir the pot, convincing Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup—a presumptuous act in itself since Esau had no right or authority to sell what did not belong to him, but to their father.

*genesis 27*

As the boys grew, Rebekah showed favoritism for Jacob while Esau was Isaac's favorite son. Finally, in one of the Hebrew Bible's most tragic comedies, Jacob, with his mother as accomplice—took advantage of his father's weakness— blindness—to supplant Esau by literally substituting himself for and masquerading as Esau. As a result of this deceptive and tricky mimicry, Esau concluded that the only way to check his brother's constant power grabs was to murder him. Thus, in order to save his own life, Jacob was forced to go into exile in Syria, where he became a hired hand in his uncle, Laban's, family enterprise.

*more of the same*

We now come, finally, to today's text. We have taken the time to recall the backstory because it is central to understanding Jacob's experiences in Syria. It is especially important for understanding the dynamics of Jacob's growing family in Syria. In the narrative covering Jacob's time in Syria, attempts to supplant are repeated over and over again. The attempt to supplant by substitution, masquerade, mimicry, and trickery repeats itself. The idea of competition and the desire for dominance, natural enough between siblings, is once more exacerbated through favoritism.

So far, Jacob's life has been one in which he and everyone around him are at odds. Jacob and Esau have been at odds since the womb. Rebecca and Isaac, each favoring a different twin, have been at odds about which son is to have preeminence in the family hierarchy. There can be little doubt that the parents' displays of favoritism have created tension between Esau and Rebekah and between Jacob and Isaac. As we will see, this family dysfunction will travel with Jacob to Syria and permeate nearly every relationship in Jacob's marriage and growing family. It is almost as if Jacob carries in himself an infection. Wherever Jacob is and wherever he goes, conflict seems to arise.

We already wonder—and our wonder will only grow—at God's choice of this dysfunctional family to serve as His ambassador and servant to the nations of the world. Can't God find a less dysfunctional family to represent him to the world? Perhaps not. Perhaps all the world knows is dysfunction. Dysfunctional individuals. Dysfunctional families. All living on a dysfunctional planet.

This wonder might set us to thinking about our own call, coming, as it does, in spite of our own dysfunctional. We are reminded that our call leaves no room for arrogance or self-righteousness. For we find in our lives and in our own families the same truth we find in Jacob's. Indeed, the same truth that we find in every individual and every family God calls to the work.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are...”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, he must choose the weak, not only because that's all he has to work with, but because we too often believe those who boast that they are part of a “great and noble” minority that roams the planet. And believing their propaganda, we glory in them. But God calls the weak so that

“No flesh should glory in his presence... that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him a glory in the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1.<sup>26-29</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1.<sup>29, 31</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Genesis 31.<sup>43-55</sup>

<sup>43</sup>And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, “These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine: and what can I do this day unto these my daughters, or unto their children which they have born? <sup>44</sup>Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee.”

<sup>45</sup>And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. <sup>46</sup>And Jacob said unto his brethren, “Gather stones.”

And they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there upon the heap. <sup>47</sup>And Laban called it ‘Jegar-sahadutha:’ but Jacob called it ‘Galeed.’ <sup>48</sup>And Laban said, “This heap is a witness between me and thee this day.”

Therefore was the name of it called ‘Galeed;’ <sup>49</sup>and ‘Mizpah;’ for he said, “The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. <sup>50</sup>If thou shalt afflict my daughters, or if thou shalt take other wives beside my daughters, no man is with us; see, God is witness betwixt me and thee.” <sup>51</sup>And Laban said to Jacob,

“Behold this heap, and behold this pillar,  
which I have cast betwixt me and thee;  
<sup>52</sup>this heap be witness, and this pillar be witness,  
that I will not pass over this heap to thee,  
and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me, for harm.  
<sup>53</sup>The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father,  
judge betwixt us.”

And Jacob sware by the fear of his father Isaac. <sup>54</sup>Then Jacob offered sacrifice upon the mount, and called his brethren to eat bread: and they did eat bread, and tarried all night in the mount.

<sup>55</sup>And early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his sons and his daughters, and blessed them: and Laban departed, and returned unto his place.

## meditation

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When we talk about an infinite God, we are necessarily limited by our finite human experience and language. We are reduced to searching for finite human experiences that we can utilize as analogies for the things of God. We resort, for example, to words and images such as “redemption”—a word taken from the marketplace in reference to the buying back of captives—or “justification”—a word taken from the courtroom in reference to decisions of guilt or innocence.

When referencing the relationship and degree of cooperation between ourselves and God, one of the words we use is “covenant” (or treaty)—a word taken from intergroup and international relations such as we find in this reading. In that realm, a covenant establishes peace between two groups or nations who were, often, previously at enmity with each other. With the covenant, there are commitments for the avoidance of hostilities, an assumption of common values and goals, and agreement of cooperation in accomplishing those goals.

While God could never feel hostility toward us, we sometimes believe He does. So, He chose the language of covenant to assure us that He is at peace with us and works for our welfare and betterment. At the same time, the covenant encourages us to loyally adopt His values and to work cooperatively with Him in advancing His interests. A covenant people, then, is a people who know firsthand of God’s peaceful disposition and intentions toward them and respond in kind to Him and to all those with who He feels attachment. Such a people join Him in working toward His goal of expanding peaceful and cooperative relations with as many people and nations as possible. The word

covenant speaks—imperfectly and finitely, it is true—to this grand divine disposition for eternal and cosmic peace and cooperation—a disposition we might be excused for referring to as at-one-ment.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Exodus 13.<sup>3-10</sup>

<sup>3</sup>“And Moses said unto the people, “Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place: there shall no leavened bread be eaten. <sup>4</sup>This day came ye out in the month Abib.

<sup>5</sup>“And it shall be when the Lord shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service in this month. <sup>6</sup>Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, and in the seventh day shall be a feast to the Lord. <sup>7</sup>Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days; and there shall no leavened bread be seen with thee, neither shall there be leaven seen with thee in all thy quarters.

<sup>8</sup>“And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the Lord’s law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt. <sup>10</sup>Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year.”

## Meditation— 1

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This meditation is an introduction to Exodus 13.<sup>3-10</sup> as well as to this series of meditations entitled, “The Righteousness of Being Woke: Resisting the Un-biblical Anti-woke Heresy.”

These days, it is fashionable on America’s political and cultural right to complain about and rage against what it calls “wokeness,” or “woke culture” —as if sleeping and slumbering are somehow preferable to being awake! It is bizarre. And this is really saying something about a political and cultural movement that is increasing drunken with and in the thralls of the most bizarre and easily refuted conspiracy theories in America’s long history of infatuation with conspiracy theories. Tragically, there are those like Florida’s DeSantis who, for personal and political gain, cynically seek to further enflame and manipulate the frenzied anti-woke mind—often making appeal to the more rational mind by dressing up the hateful anti-woke heresy in the language of “parental rights.”

One of the many tenets of this anti-woke heresy involves America’s history with slavery and racism. There is an attempt on the part of the slumbering right to deny this history; to deny the oppression African Americans have and do endure; and to deny that much of America’s economic “greatness” was built on the back of free and forced labor. The movement wishes to remove such truths from school curriculums. It wishes to keep our children asleep. Ignorant. Forgetful. All of this, we suspect, it does in order to maintain the ungodly white supremacy that has dominated America from its inception.

All of this must be challenged, resisted, and defeated. In this series of meditations, we resist the aspect of the anti-woke heresy that challenges the remembrance of America’s historical and systemic oppression of African Americans. We resist the anti-woke heresy with the Bible—a Book that so many anti-woke warriors claim to know and love. It is yet one more of many sad commentaries on American Christianity that so many who claim the title, “Christian” have adopted the hateful anti-woke heresy that is so incompatible with the Bible.

Make no mistake about it. The anti-woke heresy that seeks to forget America’s past oppression and ignore America’s present oppression of African Americans is decidedly unbiblical. It is, in fact, about as unbiblical as one can get. To forget and ignore social injustice is antithetical to every Biblical and Christian principle. It is utterly un-Christian. If it is un-American to remember our own or any oppressive past or ignore our own or any oppressive present, then large swaths of America’s

population is unbiblical and un-Christian.

We will begin this series of meditations and our resistance of the anti-woke movement's slumbering denial and forgetfulness of America's oppressive history toward African Americans with a story that is familiar to all of us: the story of Israel's exodus from Egyptian bondage. The story is a staple of western culture. It is the central story of the Hebrew Bible. The story's point is central to not only the Hebrew Bible, but the Christian Bible as well. It is the central point of Christian doctrine.

God is a Savior, a Redeemer, a Rescuer, a Liberator, an Emancipator. This reality is more than central to the Biblical witness, it is central to the Divine Character. But, for every Savior, Redeemer, Rescuer, Liberator, and Emancipator needed, there is an enslaver, an oppressor that must be humbled, resisted, defeated, halted and, where necessary due to the hardness of heart, an annihilation. The two messages—Liberator and oppressor—go together, hand in glove. One cannot remember one without remembering the other. Nor should one.

The battle over wakefulness or slumber in matters related to social justice has a very long history, indeed, pre-dating, even, America's existence. America's re-branded dalliance with forgetfulness and ignorance is not new. Forgetfulness and ignorance are exactly what one would expect of the every oppressor. But Americans, like ancient Egypt is called away from injustice. Americans, like Israelites are called to remember. They are called to wokeness. They are called away from forgetfulness. This series of meditations lends but one more voice to that call. This call to woke remembrance is not simply a matter of righting past wrongs. It is a matter of imagining and carrying out a more just future.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **m**editation— 2

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In our first introductory meditation on this series entitled, “The Righteousness of Being Woke: Resisting the Un-biblical Anti-woke Heresy,” we strongly asserted that the American Right's anti-woke heresy is un-biblical and contrary to biblical and Christian principles and virtues. This is so when it comes to the Right's rejection of America's past and present oppressive policies—especially its institutional racist past and present and its demand that this past and present racism be suppressed in our national shared memory and in the education of our nation's citizenry, especially our future citizenry.

In this second meditation of the series, we have a look at a biblical example of extreme and unrelenting wokeness about oppression.

The first thing we note in today's passage is that the woke remembrance of Israel's oppression at the hands of the Egyptian superpower and of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from that oppression is one that Yahweh commands. Woke remembrance of oppression and emancipation is envisioned as a righteous and essential element of Biblical worship and morality. It is of God. It is godly. As we will see, this necessity for woke remembrance is less about the historical past and more about a moral and ethical future freed from the past's errors.

The second thing we note is that the command for woke remembrance of Israel's oppression at the hands of the Egyptian superpower and of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from that oppression is



issued even before Israel experienced emancipation from the oppression. Surely, this is indicative of the priority God placed on woke remembrance of Israel's oppression and Yahweh's deliverance.

Third, we note that woke remembrance of oppression and emancipation is incumbent upon Israel long after the events. Even when things are going well and Israel is happily dwelling in and enjoying "a land flowing with milk and honey," the nation is to engage in woke remembrance of past oppression and emancipation. Israel, in fact, is to engage in woke remembrance as an "ordinance," and this "ordinance" is to be observed "from year to year." The stipulation is repeated elsewhere.

"Observe the month of Abib, and keep the passover unto the Lord thy God: for in the month of Abib the Lord thy God brought thee forth out of Egypt by night... seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread therewith, even the bread of affliction; for thou camest forth out of the land of Egypt in haste: that thou mayest remember the day when thou camest forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of thy life."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the inspired record stipulates that this woke remembrance, observed "from year to year" and "all the days of thy life," is to extend to perpetuity.

"And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; *ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever.*"<sup>2</sup>

But what, we wonder, is to be remembered? Some might want to claim that the remembrance is of Yahweh's emancipation, not the oppression from which Israel was emancipated. But this is pure sophistry. *Prima facie* nonsensical.

"Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, *out of the house of bondage*; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place."

One cannot rip the emancipation from its context of oppression. And so, along with the woke remembrance of Yahweh's "strength of hand," Israel remembers "the house of bondage" itself. Indeed, the sacred texts keep Israel's experiences in "the house of bondage" alive in its national memory.

"Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we: come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply,<sup>3</sup> and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land.'

Therefore *they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens*. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses<sup>4</sup>... And *the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage*, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein *they made them serve, was with rigour.*"<sup>5</sup>

"From year to year" and "all the days of thy life" Israel has kept the memory of their oppression alive,

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 16.<sup>1,3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Here we hear the Egyptian version of "replacement theory," and see the word of God reveal it as evil; justification for evil perpetrated against "foreign" influences.

<sup>4</sup> Here we see the use of free and forced labor and the increased profits they are meant to achieve.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 1.<sup>8-11, 13-14</sup>

nowhere more so than during Passover. During this “ordinance” the people remember their oppression and God’s response to it.

“And the Lord said, *‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows... Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.’*<sup>6</sup>

“And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and *the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.’*<sup>7</sup>

This is some major, radical, concentrated, and unrelenting wokeness. America’s woke remembrance of African American oppression seems almost pathetic by comparison. We can have little doubt that Egyptians, like America’s anti-woke heretics, complained about this “unholy wokeness”: “Oh come on! It’s been three thousand years already. Give it up! Stop talking about it. Forget the past. Live in the present.”

But, we maintain, a God woke to oppression, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, demands of His people woke remembrance of oppression. So it was. So it has been. So it will always be.

But, again, this is not a matter of historical antiquarianism. Rather, it is about the present and the future, as we will see in upcoming meditations. A present and future devoid of oppression requires the woke memories of past oppression so that they not be repeated. Without the woke memory, oppression continues, often, unrecognized, and unimpeded. Such ignorance and immorality can only lead to the same tragic consequences that the ancient superpower, Egypt, experienced. Let America take heed. Let the anti-woke heretics repent.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 3.<sup>7,9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 2.<sup>23-24</sup>

## Levitiuss 19.<sup>33-34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. <sup>34</sup>But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

### **m**editation

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Israel was expected—nay, commanded—to never forget Yahweh and the power he exerted in delivering them from slavery in Egypt. They were, however, also commanded to never forget their experience of oppression and slavery itself. This eternal remembrance was not only about remaining grateful and loyal to Yahweh. It was also about remaining un-Egyptian-like in the way they treated others. They were never to treat others as they had been treated.

Many of the laws that Yahweh gave Israel came with the reminder that they had been “strangers in the land of Egypt.” For example, the commandment to keep the Sabbath Day holy was, surprising to some, founded upon the fact that they had been enslaved in Egypt, never given rest. Thus, a day of rest gave those weary with labor, especially “menservants and maidservants” a day of rest and kept the nation from becoming Egyptian in relation to its work force.

In like manner, Israel was to treat foreigners in Israel very differently than they had been treated as foreigners in Egypt. There were to treat them as they did natural born citizens. They were, consistent with Jesus’ “Golden Rule” to “love him as thyself.”

America has much to learn from such divine expectations made of ancient Israel. It has much to repent of too. It has repeatedly been in violation of this divine decree. Some make the argument about “illegality.” Others complain of resources being siphoned off from “actual citizens.” Let there be no doubt, Egyptians made both these arguments to justify Israelite oppression. God rejected the argument and made Egypt pay for such mean-spirited propaganda and the ugly treatment of others that resulted. Inasmuch as America continues to follow ancient Egypt’s example of oppression, it will follow its example of comeuppance.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## 2 Samuel 21.<sup>1-14</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites."

<sup>2</sup>And the king called the Gibeonites, and said unto them; (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them: and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah.) <sup>3</sup>Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord?"

<sup>4</sup>And the Gibeonites said unto him, "We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel." And he said, "What ye shall say, that will I do for you."

<sup>5</sup>And they answered the king, "The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, <sup>6</sup>let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose."

And the king said, "I will give them."

<sup>7</sup>But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. <sup>8</sup>But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bare unto Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite: <sup>9</sup>and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the Lord: and they fell all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.

<sup>10</sup>And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night. <sup>11</sup>And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done.

<sup>12</sup>And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabesh-gilead, which had stolen them from the street of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa: <sup>13</sup>and he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged.

<sup>14</sup>And after that God was entreated for the land.

### **m**editation 1

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It is common to hear people testify that "the scriptures are true." While scripture has held no end of fascination for me since I began studying them seriously at around the age of 16, and while I occasionally find these words escaping my own mouth, I generally avoid saying them. In part, this stems from the fact that these words mean something different to everyone. It also stems from the fact that these words probably mean something different to me than what others think that they mean to me.

Today's text is a good example. Is it "true?" If so, what is it that is true about it? Some might ask, "Did David really exist?" or "Was there really a three-year famine?" But, I am far more interested in assertions that are made in the reading. For example, there is no question but what ancient peoples often felt and claimed that cataclysmic events, such as the famine found in today's reading, were acts of God. And not just passive acts of God, but direct and active ones. So, I wonder, is the assertion that this drought-induced famine was the result of a conscious and punishing act of God "true?" And

again, was God pleased and appeased by the hanging of Saul's seven descendants such that He pushed his cosmic "end drought button?"

In the end, I am very skeptical about these two truth claims. Yet, I believe in the value of this text and that it is "true." How can I maintain both skepticism and belief regarding this text? I believe that the author/editors accurately or "truly" reported the reality that people held such beliefs. From a theological perspective, they accurately reported that a people truly believed in the kind of god who acted out of revenge—and it was a grossly delayed revenge, to which we will return in a separate meditation—and the kind of god who was pleased and appeased when bloated corpses hung from the end of ropes in desperate hope of ending divine punishment.

No, I do not believe in such a god. If the author/editors were promoting such a god in this narrative, I ain't buying what they are selling. But if they were simply reporting, "This is what David really thought, this is how he really spoke to god, this is what he really thought he heard god reply, this is what god really demanded to end the famine, etc. without necessarily condoning and propagating it, then, yes, I can buy that. Such ignorance and violence against God, after all, hasn't even been completely stamped out in my own good ole 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **m**editation 2

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This reading, I have maintained (meditation 1), is "true" in the sense that it accurately or "truly" reports the beliefs of David and others of his time about God and the actions that flowed from those beliefs. This may seem like faint praise, but we can learn much from the past, even when the past is less than inspiring. However, the fact that I do believe the text is true in describing David's beliefs about God, does not mean that I accept David's beliefs about God to be "true" or that the actions that flowed from his false theology were in harmony with the character of God or the demands He makes of His followers.

This text is a good example why Jesus' mortal example as found in the New Testament Gospels is so important. The Gospel witness is that Jesus and his Father are one in character and purpose; that Jesus is a manifestation of the fulness of God. It is simply impossible to imagine Jesus having anything to do with the theology or the behaviors that flow from the theology found in this reading. It is, therefore, impossible to imagine God doing as this text claims.

Having said all of that, there is much to learn from this text. Above all else, to quote the Psalmist, "By thy word is thy servant warned" (Ps. 19.<sup>11</sup>). Through the ugliness of the acts reported in this reading—acts that I do not believe pleased, please, or ever will please God—I am warned away from creating a God that incites such violent and ugly atrocities. The world is alive, including among "Christians" who should know better, with such gods and the atrocities that their followers believe please him. Texts such as this one, they believe, justify their violent theology and the violence that they then perpetrate upon others. But, I wonder if those who do so have not only missed the Gospels' witness but have, in addition missed the wizard behind the screen of this narrative. More on that in Meditation 3.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### **m**editation 3

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I will grant that it is highly likely that the author/editors of this text believed as David is reported to have believed, worshipped the same sort of god that David worshipped, and deemed David's actions as accomplice to the killing of seven men in order to appease an offended God as appropriate, justified, and even "godly." However, it is also a fact that the authors/editors never come right out and straight up either condone or condemn the thoughts and actions of David and others.

It is true that after the executions the text reports "water drop[ping] upon them out of heaven," and that "God was entreated for the land." But even here, the text does not tightly connect the rain with the killing itself—besides, a few drops of rain does not the end of a draught make. In fact, if one is determined to connect human behavior with climate events, the alleged end of the drought might just as easily be connected to the compassion that Rizpah showed for the seven dead men as she sought to protect their corpses from being picked apart by birds and wild animals (Or, to the kindness of David's respectful reinterment of Saul's and Jonathan's remains). Could this be a way for the author/editor's to subtly and safely condemn the execution of the seven men?

But, if so, why do it so subtle—so subtle as to create future confusion? Was it always safe to condemn the actions of a king, especially one that the tradition respected as this one did David? Perhaps the author/editors hoped against hope that the very ridiculousness of the claims and the perversity and ugliness of the actions would be enough to warn away any true servant from believing and adopting such a belief system and acting with such callous disregard towards those whom God loves and values so much? If so, it seems that they underestimated the human love for a violent god and the violence that such a god allows humans to perpetrate and justify, no matter the era in which they live. For it is surely the case that nothing has caused more human blood to be spilt than religious dogmas that respect only the god who is the superior killer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### **m**editation 4

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This text reports, seemingly without judgement for or against, the execution of seven men for a crime committed a generation earlier; a crime that offended god and required "blood atonement." I have already made known my acceptance that something like this likely really happened during David's reign—and, sadly, many other times and in many other places. I have also made known my skepticism that, though He is presented as the initiator of it, the One and True God had anything to do with it—who doesn't claim god as justification for evil and for the legitimization of power?

I would, however, like to have a closer look at one small point. Whoever wrote/edited this narrative placed it chronologically toward the end of David's reign—of course, it is impossible to know for sure how accurate this chronology is. Nevertheless, whenever it took place, the author/editor did not find it to be inconsistent with the latter times of David's reign. Nor did they consider the timing of god's retribution out of the ordinary. It is this timing that bears closer scrutiny.

According to generally accepted Biblical chronology, Saul reigned from around 1050 to 1010 BC. David reigned from around 1010 to 970 BC. So, based on the fact that the final redactor of the book located the events of this narrative toward the end of David's reign, we can say that some 25 to 35 years—if not more—lapsed between Saul's sinful massacre of Gibeonites and the famine that served

as god's response to it. However long the Lord's delay was between the massacre and the demand that Saul's descendants be executed for it, the individuals and generation responsible for the atrocity were long gone—nowhere does the text even hint that the executed men were present at or participated in the massacre.

Even if we like a vengeful god who demands blood atonement—and I do not—we may question why he waited so long to initiate the punishment that the drought represented and why he demanded the blood of those who had nothing to do with the spilt blood of massacre. At least as far as the text goes, their only crime was to have the same blood coursing through their veins that had coursed through their dead ancestor, Saul. As for myself, I have asked the questions and concluded, as I have said, that, though the events might have occurred, God was not responsible for punishing the crime with a drought that could be explained in any number of naturalistic ways, or for demanding the death of innocent victims so that his blazing temper could be doused with blood.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **Isaiah 1.**<sup>21-23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>How is the faithful city  
become an harlot!

it was full of judgment;  
righteousness lodged in it;  
but now murderers.

<sup>22</sup>Thy silver is become dross,  
thy wine mixed with water:

<sup>23</sup>Thy princes are rebellious,  
and companions of thieves:  
every one loveth gifts,  
and followeth after rewards:

they judge not the fatherless,  
neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them (author's translation).

## **m**editation

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Nearly all of the Hebrew prophets utilize the imagery of marriage when contemplating and discussing the relationship between Yahweh and Israel/Judah. Israel/Judah were Yahweh's wives. In this reading, Isaiah ruminates on Judah's infidelity in the marriage. Not only has Judah been unfaithful to Yahweh but, through prostitution, she has been unfaithful with multiple partners—all of them false, idolatrous gods. The gross sin of idolatrous prostitution with multiply gods has given rise to myriad sins that, while less vile than idolatry, were nonetheless consequences of the original sin.

Keep in mind that the idolatrous gods with whom Judah cavorted were fertility gods. Judah worshipped these gods out of covetousness. These gods represented the nation's insatiable hunger and thirst for more wealth, more power, and more prestige. As these increasing became the goal of daily life and activities, indeed, the very reason for being, everything and everyone else was sacrificed in order to acquire the coveted wealth, power, and prestige. Others were dehumanized, objectified, and viewed as nothing more than tools to be used to gratify their insatiable ambitions.

Individuals were robbed through the legislative processes of governance. Individuals were cheated through immoral policies legislative bodies codified. Individuals were denied access to legal protections through inducements. Individuals were denied justice through bribery. Individuals were murdered through corruption. As always, it was the nation's leaders that engaged in such deviancy themselves and set the stage on which others could defile themselves in such deviancy. And, as always, the most vulnerable members of society were the most susceptible to being victims of the power elite's unholy enterprises. Such things could never be done, of course, to anyone who was deemed to be fully human and valued. Such things could never happen without a full capitulation to the covetousness inherent in idolatry.

Thus, when one observes such behaviors in society, often made possible and multiplied through legislative bodies and policies, one can be certain that society is guilty of the vilest of sins: idolatry. When one observes such behavior perpetrated against the most vulnerable segments of society, one can be assured that society has prostituted itself on the altar of idolatrous greed.

Upon observing American society today, one can be certain that Isaiah's charge of idolatry and of corruption among the ruling classes is as applicable to American society today as it was to Jewish society way back when.



Judah and Jerusalem's prostitution would have been one thing, one suspects, if they had been born into a family left impoverished by the absence or even death of a father with no one to step into the void and care for the family. Yahweh might have understood prostitution in such circumstances. But Judah had never been placed in such circumstances.

While, according to Ezekiel's imagination, Judah had been abandoned as a child, Yahweh had found the abandoned baby girl and commenced watching after and nourishing her. When she had grown into young womanhood with all the advantages of Yahweh's care, Yahweh married the young woman, continuing to lavish every gift imaginable upon the beloved bride. All He asked is that she remain faithful to Him. So, the nation's prostitution of itself with other gods, indeed, with many of them, was a particularly egregious form of infidelity. It would be met with the most stiff of consequences.

America likes to claim it was founded by God and upon godly principles. It likes to claim its constitution "inspired." It likes to think of itself as an exceptional nation. An indispensable nation. Thus, privileged America, with its head long dive into the putrid waters of covetous idolatry—a dive that its leaders have instigated, propagated, and enhanced through wicked governance and legislative fiat—along with the attendant dehumanization and oppression of its most vulnerable members, should expect no less than what ancient Judah got.

Absent repentance—deep, sackcloth-and-ashes repentance—America cannot expect to endure. It can expect the same dissolution as ancient Judah. How long does she have, this American prostitute? I don't know. By I do know that she cannot survive in the present environment of covetous idolatry and the injustices adherent in it. God has heard the cry of the vulnerable before. Many times. He will do so again. The dissolution will bring pain to all, including the innocent. But, hopefully, hearing the joyful shout of the redeemed will make the intervening pain worth it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### **Isaiah 3.**<sup>4-8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>And I will give children to be their princes,  
and babes shall rule over them.

<sup>5</sup>And the people shall be oppressed,  
every one by another, and every one by his neighbour:  
the child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient,  
and the base against the honourable.

<sup>6</sup>When a man shall take hold of his brother of the house of his father,  
saying, “Thou hast clothing, be thou our ruler,  
and let this ruin be under thy hand:”

<sup>7</sup>In that day shall he swear, saying,  
“I will not be an healer;  
for in my house is neither bread nor clothing:  
make me not a ruler of the people.”

<sup>8</sup>For Jerusalem is ruined,  
and Judah is fallen:  
because their tongue and their doings are against the LORD,  
to provoke the eyes of his glory.

### **m**editation

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In his first two chapters, Isaiah has identified institutions and individuals in which Israel sought security and wellbeing. These included economic, military/national security, political, and religious institutions and individuals such as political leaders, economic leaders, military leaders, and religious leaders. In looking to these institutions rather than to God, Israel has engaged in a form of idolatry and committed, essentially, treason against God. Though he warned Israel repeatedly, the nation continued its rebellious ways. In hopes of reclaiming Israel from its idolatrous attitudes and actions, Yahweh exposed the deficiencies of all these institutions and individuals, going so far as to remove His support and allowing them to fail under the weight of their own presumption. But we see in today’s reading that rather than “ceas[ing]... from men” who were not worthy of trust (See 2.<sup>22</sup>), and yielding themselves once more to God’s perfect governance, they continued to trust in the arm of flesh, even when those in whom they placed their trust were even less qualified to lead than their predecessors.

In identifying children, woman, uneducated, and family members as classes of citizens to whom Israel looked for leadership in its desperation, Isaiah focused on the inexperience and incompetence of the new leaders (In identifying woman, Isaiah is not being sexist, but is simply reflecting the reality that in his society, unlike our own, woman were not educated or trained in ways that would qualify them as effective leaders). But when God withdraws his support, human leaders, competent or incompetent, cannot repair the damage done to society by even the most competent of human leaders.

We would do well to heed Israel’s experience, so wisely and graciously preserved for our benefit. We would do well to refuse to trust in the arm of flesh and place full trust and confidence in God alone. For, as the Psalmist bore witness,

“It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man.  
It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes” (Ps. 118.<sup>8-9</sup>).

Otherwise, we will find out the hard way that, as Isaiah warned, “Yahweh alone shall be exalted in that day.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### **Isaiah 3.**<sup>9-11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The shew of their countenance doth witness against them;  
and they declare their sin as Sodom,  
they hide it not.

Woe unto their soul!

for they have rewarded evil unto themselves.

<sup>10</sup>Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him:  
for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.

<sup>11</sup>Woe unto the wicked! It shall be ill with him:  
for the reward of his hands shall be given him.

### **m**editation

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Though a century and a half separated the ministries of the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Israelite society, whose behavior they critiqued, was in many regards remarkably similar. Fast forward two- and a-half millennia and travel to the opposite side of the globe and we find an American society remarkably similar to those two distant Israels.

In the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Isaiah charged Judah of being shameless. Like Sodom, the prototypical reflection of a corrupt and corrupted society, 8<sup>th</sup> century Judah, with its citizenry, was awash in sin. And like its sister Sodom, Judah's citizens made no attempt to hide their sin. Rather, they openly spoke of it, asserting that what the prophet called sin was actually appropriate and righteous. Anyone with discernment could easily witness their sinful state of mind by gazing upon the proud look on their faces.

Observing the same society 150 years later, Jeremiah asked, "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?" The prophet did not wait for an answer, but immediately answered his own question: "Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush..." (Jer. 6.<sup>15</sup>). Indeed, like Isaiah before him, he saw the evidence of this shamelessness on the very faces of his people. They "refusedst to be ashamed," possessing, what Jeremiah called a "whore's forehead" (Jer. 3.<sup>3</sup>). This "whore's forehead" probably refers to some type of mark/ Tattoo that signaled that she/he was for sale, available to the highest bidder. Today's short butt-cheek high minidress worn by prostitutes on city streets might be an equivalent.

As usual, our interest in these matters is more than antiquarian. I have thought of these two prophets' observations often as I have watched 21<sup>st</sup> century American political leaders and citizens. The nation's 45<sup>th</sup> president boasted of molesting women, has proudly defrauded business partners and the federal government. He has brazenly lied about everything under the sun. Corruption and lying seem to have become the past time of the political class. Politicians lie with a straight face and with false claims of righteousness that are a marvel of theatrical skill. They refuse to acknowledge sin and present the most patently clear falsehoods as truth or "alternative facts." Even when caught, sometimes on tape and film, they will look straight into the eye of the public and claim that what the tape or film just proved is false. Never is there the slightest blush or embarrassment. Just arrogant bravado. A doubling down on sin and shamelessness. One can hardly read of the "whore's forehead" without thinking of one such as Roger Stone with his ridiculous top hats and designer sunglasses that broadcast his shameless pride in corruption.

Millions of Americans embrace these political whores, while, in their personal lives accepting and propagating the most absurd, outlandish, irrational lies and conspiracy theories without a hint of shame. By the millions, the nation's citizens know no shame in behaving during a pandemic in ways

that endanger the health and life of their fellow citizens. They shamelessly present their ignorance, narcissism, and rebellion against righteousness as noble and patriotic.

The list of shameless American thought and behavior is too long to catalogue. For, increasingly, its citizens refuse to blush at sin. They feel no shame at their wickedness. It is one thing to sin and know it and then to acknowledge it for what it is. It is a whole other ballgame to sin and refuse to know or acknowledge it. It is one thing to blush red when caught in sin, it is another to turn red-faced in adamant and shameless defense of shameful sin and wickedness.

If Isaiah and Jeremiah are to be trusted, we must be worried about America's future when we gaze upon its citizens' countenances with their obstinate stares, their brass brows, their whore's foreheads, and their stiffened necks of iron sinew (See Is. 48.<sup>4</sup>). How long can it be before, like Israel and Judah before it, the nation that imagines itself exceptional and indispensable suffers the consequences of its shameful misdeeds so shamelessly committed? How long can it be before no balm can heal the deep lesions of a people who shameless exult in shameful wickedness? How long before the cancer is stage four, and the patient is pronounced dead?

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

# Isaiah 5

## Meditation 1 — isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>

*a song about the dashed hopes of love*

**<sup>1</sup>Let 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.

<sup>2</sup>He 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*

<sup>3</sup>And now, you inhabitants of Y<sup>e</sup>rûšālayim, and you people of Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ;  
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.

<sup>4</sup>What 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?

<sup>5</sup>So 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.

<sup>6</sup>I 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*

<sup>7</sup>In like manner, Yahweh Šebā'ôt's vineyard is the nation of Yisrā'ēl,  
and Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ'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” (2 Ne. 25.<sup>1</sup>). 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

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...’” (See 2 Kg. 3.<sup>15-16</sup>). 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” (See 1 Sam. 10). 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.<sup>1</sup>

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” (DC 8.<sup>2-3</sup>). 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” (DC 6.<sup>15, 21</sup>). 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 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 (See DC 9.<sup>8-9</sup>). Here, again, is the combination of mind/thought and heart/feelings—emotional and intellectual faculties working in tandem to perceive truth and receive revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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!

(*edition: december 31, 2023*)

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## m editation 2— isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>

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*a song about the dashed hopes of love*

<sup>1</sup>Let 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.**

**<sup>2</sup>He 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*

<sup>3</sup>And now, you inhabitants of Y<sup>e</sup>rûšālayim, and you people of Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ;  
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.

<sup>4</sup>What 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?

<sup>5</sup>So 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.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 20.<sup>2-4</sup>, Jeremiah 13.<sup>1-10</sup>, Jeremiah 27.<sup>1-2</sup> and Jeremiah 28, Ezekiel 5.<sup>1-4, 11-12</sup>.



<sup>6</sup>I 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*

<sup>7</sup>In like manner, Yahweh Šebā'ôt's vineyard is the nation of Yiśrā'ēl,  
and Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ'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 (Is. 1.<sup>1-4</sup>). No one reading the metaphor could avoid being heartbroken over the child's rebelliousness. Certainly, God was heartbroken.

Now, in Isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>, 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 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 brow 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?’*” (Moses 7.<sup>28-31</sup>).

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” (See Is. 53.<sup>3</sup>). At one point in his life, his sorrow was so intense and so very heavy that he thought it might be “unto death” (See Matt. 26.<sup>37-38</sup>). An angel informed King Benjamin that Jesus suffered “even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death” (Mosiah 3.<sup>7</sup>).

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” (2 Ne. 4.<sup>17-19</sup>).

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” (2 Ne. 4.<sup>34</sup>).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: january 2, 2024)

## **m**editation 3— isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>

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*a song about the dashed hopes of love*

<sup>1</sup>Let 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.  
<sup>2</sup>He 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*

<sup>3</sup>**And now, you inhabitants of Y<sup>e</sup>rûšālayim, and you people of Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ;  
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.**  
<sup>4</sup>**What 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?**  
<sup>5</sup>**So 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.  
<sup>6</sup>I will make it desolate.  
It will not be pruned or hoed.  
Thorny weeds and scrub brush will come up.  
I will direct the storm clouds  
not to rain a drop of rain upon it.**

*Interpretation*

<sup>7</sup>In like manner, Yahweh Şebā’ôt’s vineyard is the nation of Yiśrā’ēl,  
and Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ’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).

In Isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>, 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.<sup>8</sup>, 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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 Ne. 11.<sup>29-30</sup>).

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” (Mormon 4.<sup>5</sup>).

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: january 6, 2024)*

## Meditation 4— isaiah 5.<sup>1-7</sup>

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*a song about the dashed hopes of love*

<sup>1</sup>Let 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.  
<sup>2</sup>He 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*

<sup>3</sup>And now, you inhabitants of Y<sup>e</sup>rûšālayim, and you people of Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ;  
you decide, if you please, the case between me and my vineyard.  
<sup>4</sup>What 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?  
<sup>5</sup>So 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.  
<sup>6</sup>I will make it desolate.  
It will not be pruned or hoed.  
Thorny weeds and scrub brush will come up.  
I will direct the storm clouds  
not to rain a drop of rain upon it.

*Interpretation*

**<sup>7</sup>In like manner, Yahweh Šebā'ôt's vineyard is the nation of Yiśrā'ēl,  
and Y<sup>e</sup>hûdâ's people, plantings in which he delighted.  
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.<sup>7</sup> 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 [*š<sup>e</sup>dāqâ*].

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” [*š<sup>e</sup>‘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 *mišpāṭ* 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<sup>e</sup>dāqâ* but got its opposite, *š<sup>e</sup>‘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” (Is. 5.<sup>20</sup>).

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” (See DC 49.<sup>20</sup>).

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 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 LBGTO 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” (Mormon 8.<sup>35</sup>). 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” (Mormon 8.<sup>36-37</sup>).

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: january 10, 2024)*

## **m**editation 5— isaiah 5.<sup>8-10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>Into my ears, YHWH Š<sup>e</sup>bā’ôt speaks:

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

Large and profitable ones will be without a single occupant

<sup>10</sup>such 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.<sup>1-2</sup>) commemorating God’s love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.<sup>1-4</sup>). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.<sup>5-6</sup>). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard’s owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.<sup>7</sup>). 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Hudson's “And Forgive them their Debts,” for one discussion of this perspective.

“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” (10.<sup>1-2</sup>, author’s translation).

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.

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” (DC 49.<sup>20</sup>).

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” (Ps. 73.<sup>4-9</sup>).

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” (Ps. 49.<sup>12-15</sup>).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: december 29, 2023)*

## **m**editation 5— isaiah 5.<sup>8-10</sup>

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 you 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” (Jer. 12.<sup>13</sup>).

“...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?” (Jer. 16.<sup>19-20</sup>).

“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.  
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” (Jer. 2.<sup>11-13</sup>).

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” (Mt. 7.<sup>16-20</sup>).

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” (Mat. 13.<sup>22</sup>).

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” (Moses 7.<sup>33</sup>).

Sad. Tragic. Fruitless. Wasteful. Ruinous.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: )*

## Meditation 6— isaiah 5.<sup>8-10</sup>

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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.<sup>2</sup>

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” (See, Hel. 13.<sup>1-17</sup>).

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

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<sup>2</sup> See, our homily entitled, “The Slippery Slope of Materialism,” based on Helaman 13.

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: )*

## meditation 7— isaiah 5.<sup>8-10</sup>

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<sup>c</sup>bā’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 (See 1.<sup>2-6</sup>).<sup>3</sup>

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” (Isaiah 1.<sup>7-9</sup>).

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>2-6</sup>



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” (7.<sup>17-20</sup>).

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” (See Hel. 13.<sup>8</sup>).

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 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 (See DC 19.<sup>7</sup>). 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” (3 Ne. 11.<sup>30</sup>).

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” (Morm. 4.<sup>5</sup>).

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 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: )*

## **m**editation 8— isaiah 5.<sup>11-17</sup>

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- <sup>11</sup> What a tragic warning! There are those who rise early in the morning,  
pursue drunkenness until nighttime,  
wine inflaming them,  
<sup>12</sup>lyre 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.

<sup>13</sup>So then, my people are exiled  
because of the lack of understanding.  
Also, the nation's reputable die of hunger;  
its boisterous parched with thirst.  
<sup>14</sup>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.  
<sup>15</sup>People will be brought low.  
and individuals humiliated,  
and the confident bearing brought down.

<sup>16</sup>But YHWH Šebā'ôt is exalted because of His justice  
and the incomparable God is seen to be preeminent because of His rectitude.  
<sup>17</sup>Lambs 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.<sup>1-2</sup>) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.<sup>1-4</sup>). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.<sup>5-6</sup>). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard's owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.<sup>7</sup>). 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.<sup>8-25</sup>). 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.<sup>8-10</sup>).

The present meditation on Isaiah 5.<sup>11-18</sup> 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.

As I understand the second warning found in Isaiah 5.<sup>11-18</sup>, 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

that 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” (DC 104.<sup>18</sup>).

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: )*

## **m**editation 9— isaiah 5.<sup>11-17</sup>

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.<sup>1-7</sup>). 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.<sup>8-25</sup>). 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.<sup>8-10</sup>).<sup>4</sup> 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 will see, 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 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” (Ezek. 16.<sup>48-50</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> See my four meditations on these verses.

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. An older contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, 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 Dāwid, invent for themselves musical instruments,  
drink wine by the bowl full,  
apply the best of perfumes,  
while remaining unaffected by the nation's collapse” (Amos 6.<sup>3-6</sup>, author's translation).

While the world of ancient finance and real estate is the domain of the man, 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” (Amos 4.<sup>1</sup>).

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.  
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” (Ps. 10.<sup>4-7</sup>, author's translation).

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” (Ps. 1.<sup>1-2</sup>).

Among other things, God’s word and law serve, as the Psalmist bear’s witness, to “warn” (Ps. 19.<sup>11</sup>) 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.<sup>8-10</sup>, 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 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” (Matt. 13.<sup>22</sup>). 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” (DC 104.<sup>18</sup>).

May God in His mercy protect us from our 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 better things.

“Moreover by them is thy servant warned:  
and in keeping of them there is great reward” (Ps. 19.<sup>11</sup>).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: )*

## meditation 10— isaiah 5.<sup>11-17</sup>

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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.<sup>1-7</sup>). 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.<sup>8-25</sup>). 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.<sup>8-10</sup>).<sup>5</sup>

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 consequences. As we have noted in many places, including in our meditations on Isaiah 5.<sup>8-10</sup>, 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” (Amos 6.<sup>7-8</sup>).

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

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<sup>5</sup> See my four meditations on these verses.

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” (Al. 10.<sup>17-18</sup>).

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.

“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’ ôṭ 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” (Micah 3.<sup>2-3</sup>).

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:* )

## m editation 11 — isaiah 5.<sup>18-19</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>1-2</sup>) commemorating God's love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.<sup>1-4</sup>). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.<sup>5-6</sup>). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard's owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.<sup>7</sup>). With this, Isaiah launches into six blistering warnings. Each warning should not only be read in light of the injustice lamented in 5.<sup>7</sup>

"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.<sup>7</sup>, 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.<sup>8-10</sup>. 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.<sup>11-17</sup>. Here Isaiah condemns the luxurious lifestyle of the wealthy landowners who live on the same estates described in the first warning.<sup>6</sup> 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,

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<sup>6</sup> See my meditations on these two warnings for additional details.

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.

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.<sup>9-10</sup>), starvation, thirst, humiliation, exile, and death (5.<sup>13-17</sup>).

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 (Al. 30.<sup>17</sup>). 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 (Al. 30.<sup>48</sup>).

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 words of Alma” (Al. 30.<sup>49-50</sup>).

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: )*

## m editation 12— isaiah 5.<sup>20</sup>

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

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

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

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

Isaiah directs his first warning against those who accumulated large, landed estates through predatory laws and actions (5.<sup>8-10</sup>). We understand his second warning to be directed at those same landowners and the carefree and decadently luxurious lifestyle they live on their fraudulently acquired estates (5.<sup>11-17</sup>). Similarly, we understand the third warning to be directed at these same landowners, who are now portrayed as skeptically challenging God to act, as Isaiah claims He will do, against the injustices he alleges against them (5.<sup>18-19</sup>).

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

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

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

In a much-maligned passage, Paul asserts that “the love of money [and who does not love money?!] is the root of all evil” (1 Tim. 6.<sup>10</sup>). In a similar vein, those who cannot discern the nature and evil of economic injustice are likely to find it increasingly difficult to discern the nature of any evil or any evil.

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

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

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition:* )

## **m**editation 13— isaiah 5.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>What 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.<sup>1-2</sup>) commemorating God’s love for His vineyard and the disappointment He felt when it yielded poor quality grapes (5.<sup>3-4</sup>). Isaiah then describes the ravishing and destructive consequences that would come upon the vineyard as a result of its poor yield (5.<sup>5-6</sup>). Isaiah then interprets the song. God is the vineyard’s owner, Israel is the vineyard, and the poor quality yield represents the social injustices of which the nation is guilty (5.<sup>7</sup>).

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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.<sup>31</sup>). 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? (Jer. 5.<sup>26-29</sup>, author’s translation)

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” (73.<sup>4-12</sup>, Author’s translation).

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.<sup>7</sup>

“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

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<sup>7</sup> See my homily on 1Nephi 8.<sup>26-27, 33</sup> and my meditations on 1 Nephi 11.<sup>34-36</sup> for extended discussions of this building with its meaning within the context of Nephi’s visions and its meaning in human culture and society.

great and spacious building was the pride of the world..." (1 Ne. 11.<sup>35-36</sup>).

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 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!



## Isaiah 9.<sup>3-7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Thou hast multiplied the nation,  
and ~~not~~ increased the joy:  
they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest,  
and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.  
<sup>4</sup>For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden,  
and the staff of his shoulder,  
the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.  
<sup>5</sup>For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise,  
and garments rolled in blood;  
but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.  
<sup>6</sup>For unto us a child is born,  
unto us a son is given:  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:  
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor,  
The mighty God,  
The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup>Of the increase of his government and peace  
there shall be no end,  
upon the throne of David,  
and upon his kingdom,  
to order it, and to establish it  
with judgment and with justice  
from henceforth even for ever.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts  
will perform this.

## **m**editation

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There may be few things in the history of human civilization more common and pervasive than war. This is certainly true of ancient Israel, which sat on one of the world's major fault lines of conflict and corridors for marching armies, this way and that. Over and over again, Israel felt the violent aggression of some would-be conqueror and his brutal armies. Few depict this human occupation—or should we call it “preoccupation”—better than John the Revelator with his depiction of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

So, Isaiah's promise of a king that could and would stop the beating of the oppressor, remove Israel's yoke of defeat and bondage, and end the drumbeat of incessant warfare was good news, comforting news indeed. Though we modern westerners have difficulty appreciating the imagery, Isaiah promised that the end of warfare would bring a joy such that could be likened to the joy felt at a bountiful harvest, itself a happy and sure guarantee of survival over winter months.

In depicting the end of warfare, Isaiah calls forth a highly evocative image. While verse five has caused translators problems, the New International Version of the Bible provides an effective translation.

“Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.”

At its most basic and historical level, the promised king seems to have been Judah's King Hezekiah. The army turned away and defeated was that of the Assyrians. As the story goes, this victory was won, not through the intervention of Judah's army, but through the direct intervention of Judah's God.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Isaiah accurately predicted,

“The zeal of the LORD of hosts  
will perform this.”

But this victory and the ensuing peace were short lived. The human occupation of war continued. Eventually, Judah was defeated, first by the Babylonians and then again by the Romans, and then disappeared as an independent nation. So much for Isaiah's promises and hopes.

But there have always been and still are those who believe that “the zeal of the LORD of host” has a plan for a greater end of war and a more enduring peace; that however zealous and “skillful” humankind is for and at warfare, God is even more zealous and skillful for and at peace. But, God cannot and will not, we believe, bring lasting peace through violence. He cannot live by the sword any more than humans can live by the sword.<sup>2</sup> So, how does he accomplish this peace?

It is part of the Christmas testimony that God sent His only begotten Son into a world racked by war to proclaim and establish peace. Throughout his life, this Jesus, this Prince of Peace was faithful to his call, as he expressed the night of his death.

“Peace I leave with you,  
my peace I give unto you:  
not as the world giveth, give I unto you.”<sup>3</sup>

But, if world peace is to be achieved, it will come one human heart at a time. The human occupation, even preoccupation with war is not to be conquered until the planet's inhabitants give individual entrance to the Prince of Peace, who, only, can calm the troubled, divided heart of a species turbulent and insecure in its own skin. This human occupation of war will see no end until the inner war that rages within each individual is finally ended; for no oppressor is more zealous than self against self.

“I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin... O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”<sup>4</sup>

In coming to earth, Jesus, Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor, came to put an end to this private war, thereby hoping to put an end to all societal, national, and global war. As each individual personally learns the way of inner peace through Jesus' ministrations, they can and must join in the ministration of peace with those still at war. They must “renounce war and proclaim peace”<sup>5</sup> at all levels—private, societal, national, and global. Only by finding inner peace through Christ and becoming a peacemaker with him in the lives of those still at war can we hope to achieve lasting and expansive peace so as to truly “be called the children of God.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 36-37

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 26.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>3</sup> John 14.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 7.<sup>22-24</sup>

<sup>5</sup> DC 98.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5.<sup>9</sup>

And when we finally conquer that spirit of war with the spirit of peace we will see and acknowledge as Isaiah did that it is “the zeal of the LORD of host” that has “perform[ed] this.” Then we can sing hallelujah and shout praises to our God and King.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **Isaiah 40.**<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Comfort ye,  
    comfort ye my people, saith your God.  
<sup>2</sup>Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,  
    and cry unto her,  
that her warfare is accomplished,  
    that her iniquity is pardoned  
for she hath received of the LORD's hand  
    double for all her sins.

### **m**editation

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To begin our Advent and Christmas meditations, we take up a text already beautify as penned by Isaiah, and further beautified by the skilled work of the composer, Handel. These words not only begin Handel's Messiah, but begin a new focus of the great Hebrew Prophet, Isaiah.

Isaiah began his work with a series of often brutal and devastating oracles critical of Israelite society as it existed in Isaiah's day (chapters 1-12). The sorry state of the nation was made all the more tragic when one contemplates the high expectations and hopes God had in calling Israel as his servant to the nations. Israel's failure to fulfill its calling devastated God. Isaiah's opening critique of Israelite society was followed by the famous "Oracles against the Nations" (13-23). The devastation that comes upon Israel's neighbors might rightly be seen, in part, as a consequence of Israel's rebellion against God and its failure in its call to evangelize among the nations. Next comes what I call "The Apocalypse of Isaiah" (24-27). In chapters 28-39, the prophet returns to his criticism of Israelite society. This is accomplished both through oracle and historical evaluation. Finally, with chapter 40, we come to what I have called "The Book of Comfort" (40-66) in which God comforts both Himself and the failed servant with hopes for a brighter future in which Israel lives up to the divine expectations as servant to both God and the nations.

Isaiah's "Book of Comfort" brought comfort to sixth century B.C. Jews living in exile. Surely, this was the original context and principal focus. But, later, these same words brought comfort and meaning to first century Christians who enjoyed the appearance of the long-awaited Messiah. They might very well yet bring comfort to a future generation of Jews awaiting Messiah, and Christians awaiting Messiah's return. The comfort found in these chapters are certainly appropriate to the Christmas season, as Handel realized.

The opening words of today's text, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," are repeated over and over again in this later portion of Isaiah.

"Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth;  
    and break forth into singing, O mountains:  
for the Lord hath comforted his people,  
    and will have mercy upon his afflicted."<sup>1</sup>

"For the LORD shall comfort Zion:  
    he will comfort all her waste places;  
and he will make her wilderness like Eden,  
    and her desert like the garden of the LORD;

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 49.<sup>13</sup>

joy and gladness shall be found therein,  
thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”<sup>2</sup>

“Break forth into joy, sing together,  
ye waste places of Jerusalem:  
for the LORD hath comforted his people,  
he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup>The LORD hath made bare his holy arm  
in the eyes of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God.”<sup>3</sup>

“Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her,  
all ye that love her:  
rejoice for joy with her,  
all ye that mourn for her:  
That ye may suck, and be satisfied  
with the breasts of her consolations;  
that ye may milk out, and be delighted  
with the abundance of her glory.  
For thus saith the LORD,  
Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,  
and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream:  
then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides,  
and be dandled upon her knees.  
As one whom his mother comforteth,  
so will I comfort you;  
and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup>

How appropriate, then, that according to Luke, Jesus used the words of Isaiah to open his earthly ministry and describe what he saw as his mission.

<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me;  
because the LORD hath anointed me  
to preach good tidings unto the meek;  
he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;  
<sup>2</sup>To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all that mourn;  
<sup>3</sup>To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,  
to give unto them beauty for ashes,  
the oil of joy for mourning,  
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;  
that they might be called trees of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD,

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 51.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 52.<sup>9-10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 66.<sup>10-13</sup>

that he might be glorified.”<sup>5</sup>

These few passages only scratch the surface of the comfort that is offered in this last portion of Isaiah. They hardly scratch the surface of the comfort Jesus can and does bring to those who come to him. During the Christmas season, we are appreciative of God’s ability to comfort his people in whatever time and circumstances they may find themselves. And, of course, we are most appreciative of the comfort that can come to us this very Christmas season as we remember, think on, and make appeals to the greatest comforter of all, the King of peace, even Jesus Christ.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 61.<sup>1-3</sup>. The difference between this and Luke’s reading can be explained by Luke’s use of the Septuagint. I have expanded slightly on Luke’s reading as it was common practice to refer to a smaller portion of text with the expectation that the smaller portion would bring the entire portion of scripture to mind.

**Isaiah 60.**<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arise, shine; for thy light is come,  
and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.

<sup>2</sup>For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,  
and gross darkness the people:  
but the LORD shall arise upon thee,  
and his glory shall be seen upon thee.

**M**editation

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In recent years, it has brought me no end of pleasure to see the look of delight that spreads over the face of my grandchildren when they see me, grandpa—whether I am visiting them or they are visiting me. While I am no great man in either appearance or stature or character, their faces seem almost aglow with the joy they feel in seeing me. It is difficult to describe the joy of watching them run to close the space between us and leap into my arms. I think of this every time I read this passage.

Unlike me, God is a Being of great, greater, the greatest appearance and stature and character. I hear the invitation to “Arise, shine, for thy light is come” as being directed at me. God, my light, is coming. He is always coming. He is always ready to enter our lives. The thought of His approach sets my heart to pounding with joy. My face glows with the pleasure of His presence. All darkness is chased away. All is light for “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.”<sup>1</sup>

However brightly my countenance glows at His approach and the prospects of His presence, when He is near, when He has arrived, when He is present, He magnifies the glow a thousand-fold until not only my face by my entire being is warmed and filled with joy beyond words. That is my truth. I hope it is yours too.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1.<sup>5</sup>

## Isaiah 61.<sup>1-3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me;  
because the LORD hath anointed me  
to preach good tidings unto the meek;  
he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;  
<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all that mourn;  
<sup>3</sup>to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,  
to give unto them beauty for ashes,  
the oil of joy for mourning,  
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;  
that they might be called trees of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD,  
that he might be glorified.

### Meditation

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From the moment of its composition and utterance, this beautiful passage undoubtedly served as comfort and encouragement to every “meek,” every “heart broken;” to all “captives” and “prisoners,” who heard the promise. These and many other vulnerable populations had been abused and belittled and oppressed by their persecutors and prosecutors for as long as the historical record runs. Perhaps even worse, these vulnerable populations all too often yielded to their oppressors’ propaganda, coming to believe themselves to be of little worth and filled with insecurity, and a sense of inferiority.

But, through Isaiah, the Lord had “good tidings” for such beleaguered souls. Isaiah told of a time of healing and liberty and opening; “a time of the Lord’s acceptance;” a time when God would accept and value all those rejected and discarded by this world and its twisted values.

Luke reports that immediately after his forty-day ordeal in the desert, Jesus traveled to his home town of Nazareth where he visited the synagogue, and, according to his habit, read a passage of scripture—on this occasion choosing to read these verses from Isaiah. Upon completing the reading, Jesus announced,

“This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”<sup>1</sup>

With Jesus’ endorsement of the passage and his adoption of its values as guide to his ministry, the promised comfort and encouragement of the passage surely expanded to include many more similarly vulnerable individuals and populations with which this world abounds.

Jesus would reveal as no other before or after him the vast extent of God’s appreciative and accepting character. This would come as especially good news to those so long accustomed to belittlement and abuse. Imagine how they felt after their long winter of insecurity and suggested inferiority! Imagine the utter and complete reversal of fortune. Imagine the comfort of casting off the sackcloth that had so long chafed their souls, and having their seared consciences clothed in the softness of pure linen. Imagine the newfound sense of tree-like strength because of the husbandman’s care and skill. Imagine

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4.<sup>21</sup>



the praise they offered to God because of his acceptance of them.

Actually, it is to be hoped that we are not under the necessity of imagining the accepting nature of God that brings such healing and liberation. Hopefully, we number ourselves among the fortunate unfortunates who have felt and experienced the accepting character of a God who cannot be praised or glorified enough.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **J**eremiah 5.<sup>1-5</sup>

### *yahweh's invitation*

<sup>1</sup>Roam through Jerusalem's streets.  
Please, have a look.  
Become familiar with and search its squares.  
If you can find any,  
if there be one who acts justly;  
one who seeks what is real,  
I will forgive it.  
<sup>2</sup>If they swear, "YHWH lives,"  
they are certainly swearing in bad faith.

### *jeremiah's response*

<sup>3</sup>Yahweh, is not your sight set on what really is?  
You have beat them, but they have felt no wound.  
You have laid them waste, but they refused to take the correction.  
They have made their faces rock hard.  
They have refused to turn back.  
<sup>4</sup>As for me, I thought, "These are the underprivileged.  
They are unlearned  
such that they do not understand YHWH's principles  
or their obligation to their God.  
<sup>5</sup>I'll go personally to the privileged  
and speak with them.  
Surely they understand YHWH's principles,  
their obligation to their God."

### *jeremiah's discovery*

But these, as one, have broken the constraints;  
shredded bonds that tie (Author's translation).

## **m**editation 1

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It is a famous story... the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. And one much misused. We can't help but think of that story as we read Yahweh's invitation to Jeremiah found in this reading. Do you see the connection? Probably you do. But, just to make sure...

Three angels visited Abraham and, among other things, informed him of God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Apparently, this got Abraham to thinking. Would God "destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Thus began Abraham's famous bargaining with the Lord, for which he repeatedly apologized and asked for the Lord's indulgence. What if there were 50 righteous? Would God destroy the city? What if there were 45? How about 40? 30? 20? What if there were but 10? (See Gen. 18.<sup>23-33</sup>). Well, as we all know, though the Lord assured Abraham each time that if the prescribed number of "righteous" could be found in S&G, He would spare the cities, the two cities were, in the end destroyed, thus letting us know that 10 righteous could not be found.

Not unlike Abraham, Jeremiah was assured that if he, Jeremiah, could find just one person in Jerusalem who was interested in justice and truth, then God would forgive the city and let it continue. After a diligent search, Jeremiah came up empty. Rich and poor, uneducated and educated, powerless and influential... all of them, regardless of class, were wicked.

In other words, Jerusalem was *worse* than Sodom and Gomorrah. A hundred years earlier, Isaiah had called Judah's leaders, "rulers of Sodom" and the nation's citizenry, "people of Gomorrah" (Is. 1.<sup>10</sup>). He had complained that Judah was as shamelessly proud of its sins as Sodom had been of its sins (See Is. 3.<sup>8-9</sup>). A younger contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, went further, suggesting that Sodom, likened to Judah's "younger sister," had not sinned as grievously and consistently as Judah. Indeed, Judah could teach Sodom a thing or two about sin. Judah was, in fact, far the superior whore. (See Ez. 16.<sup>44-50</sup>).

We can assume, nay, more, we can know with certainty that Judah's sins were of the grossest kind and vile beyond those of Sodom. It is a common misconception that Sodom's chief, vilest sin was, well, sodomy. Homosexuality. There is no solid evidence for this. To say that the evidence for it in Genesis 18-19 is scant is an understatement. There is no reason to believe homosexual was even on the author's radar.

Furthermore, I suggest, the prophetic inclination to compare Judah to Sodom is evidence against this understanding of Sodom and its sin. For, I challenge you to read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Ezekiel, et. al. and find one clear word about homosexuality. It is not among the long, long, long, long list of sins for which the prophets charge either Israel or Judah. Judah, and Israel before it, were guilty of far, far worse and real sins. Indeed, Judah, symbolized by a female prostitute, was very much interested in male clients for whom they parted their legs (See, for example, Jer. 3.<sup>13</sup>).

American "Christianity" has come to define itself almost exclusively by its anti-gay and anti-gay marriage stand (and, of course, its anti-abortion and pro-gun stands). It can hardly conceive of sin outside the narrow parameters of sexuality. We do not bring this up simply out of interest in accurate scripture exegesis or historiography. We bring it up because this false myopia is more than tragic. It is downright dangerous.

There are sins out there—horrible and deadly sins, that are far worse than the alleged sin of homosexuality. There are horrible and deadly sins that were responsible for Judah's destruction. If we cannot recognize those same sins in our society, either because we don't want to or because we have become distracted by questionable sins, we run the risk of repeating those same destructive sins until, like Jewish society, our society disappears in dust clouds of destruction.

If I may, then, I strongly suggest that those of you who are hearing or reading this meditation have a closer look at Jeremiah and all his fellow Hebrew prophets. I suggest that you examine more closely the sins against which these inspired individuals railed. I suggest that you look more honestly and scripturally at the society in which you live and compare it to those of ancient Israel and Judah. I suggest that you do more than avoid yourself the sins of which Judah was guilty. I suggest that you warn, speak out against, and resist society's attempts to call their sins something else—something good—and to distract the gaze from its very real sins. I suggest that you resist society's practiced attempts to divert the gaze from its own sin to the imagined sins of those whom it chooses as scapegoats.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **J**eremiah 5.<sup>6-9</sup>

*(Warning: this passage with its accompanying questions and meditation contains strong adult language.)*

<sup>6</sup>Therefore, a lion will attack them out of the thicket.

A jackal out of the wilds will ravage them.

A leopard will stalk their cities.

Anyone who leaves them will be torn to pieces  
because their rebellions are many  
their apostasy massive.

<sup>7</sup>How, given this, can I possibly forgive you?

Your children forsake me

and devote themselves to those who are not gods

Though I fully satisfied their need, they commit adultery,  
and cram whorehouses.

<sup>8</sup>Stallions, aroused, erect,

they are men who moan with other men's wives.

<sup>9</sup>Should I just ignore such things?

An oracle of YHWH:

“With a people such as this,  
should I not be avenged?” (Author's translation)

### **m**editation

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It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of context in the interpretation of scripture. Context is no less important when one attempts to liken scripture to themselves. Today's reading is an excellent example of the importance of context in interpreting and applying scripture.

The greater context for today's reading is, of course, 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Judah. The closer context is the search of Jerusalem that Jeremiah conducted at the behest of Yahweh. Jeremiah was to explore the city, street by street, square by square, in search of individuals who remained faithful to Yahweh and had not engaged in idolatrous love for other gods. His search came up empty. He could find no one faithful to Yahweh: not among the wealthy and educated and not among the poor and uneducated. But the sin that Jeremiah discovered was more than personal and individual. It was not simply that there were lots and lots of sinners. Rather, the sin was societal. It coursed through the entire society and its foundational structure. Society was awash in sin.

One can ask, “How does sin become not simply about individual and personal moments of misjudgment and weakness, but about the deviance of an entire culture, a way of life, an accepted societal *modus operandi*?” One answer, anyway, is “redefinition.” Sinful attitudes and behaviors are redefined as “not sinful.” Like fish who do not know they are swimming in water for the naturalness of it, everyone is swimming in sin that society tells them is not sin. It cannot be sin, surely, if it is simply part of the natural order and of the foundational societal structure.

One feature of Jeremiah's preaching style is that of quotation. Jeremiah quotes words that his audience throws back at him when he offers critiques of Jewish society.

“I am not polluted,  
I have not gone after Baalim” (Jer. 2.<sup>23</sup>).

“Because I am innocent,  
surely his anger shall turn from me...  
I have not sinned.” (Jer. 2.<sup>35</sup>).

Such words represent more than individual assertions and private sentiments. They represent the prevailing mood of the entire society. It is such delusion in the face of vile sin that Jeremiah unearthed during his search of Jerusalem’s streets. Today’s reading is Yahweh’s response to Jeremiah’s report concerning the sin and delusion he found everywhere he looked.

In His response to Jeremiah’s report, Yahweh warns that the nation’s sin is so extensive that it would be unjustifiable to forgive. Rather, a terrible and violent national disaster looms in its future. God resorts to violent metaphor to portray the extent of the looming national disaster. It will be like being stalked, hunted, captured, torn to pieces, and eaten by wild, ferocious predators—lion, jackal, and leopard. He also resorts to metaphor to portray both the depth of Judah’s sin and the strong feelings that that sin stirs in Him. The metaphor is sexually graphic with allusions to prostitution, sexual arousal, and the ecstasy of sexual intercourse.

How, then, do we “apply” such a passage to ourselves and how does the historical context control and direct our application?

First, we must note that the critique is societal not personal. The sin is societal. The impending disaster is societal. While individuals are inevitably caught up in any national disaster, the pronouncements of disaster were not directed at any single individual but at society at large. Thus, in applying this passage, individuals must not only or primarily ask questions about their private life but about their public life. Indeed, the interrogation must be that of the entire society. Individuals and society at large must ask questions such as, “Is the culture of society idolatrous?” “If so, how deep is the societal rot?” “Is society such that devastation would be appropriate, not only to individuals here and there, but to the entire culture?”

It would be inappropriate for an individual or society that is imperfectly striving to please God to liken the criticism and threat found in today’s reading to themselves. It would be inappropriate for any individual or society that is imperfectly striving to please God to lash themselves with the idea that they were beyond God’s power or willingness to forgive. It would be inappropriate for an individual who is engaged in willful sin but lives in a society that is striving to please God to liken such criticism and threat to themselves. At the same time, it would be inappropriate for any individual or society immersed in the sort of willful societal sin as Judah is here to apply comforting passages about God’s willingness to overlook sin and forgive. Those striving to follow God should not allow themselves to be dis comforted by dis comforting passages. Those who are willfully making no attempt to follow God should not allow themselves to be comforted by comforting passages. Not only must we strive for correct understanding and interpretation of scripture. We must also strive for correct application of scripture.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **J**eremiah 5.<sup>10-13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Climb up the city's terraced vineyards and lay them waste,  
though not utterly.

Remove their branches,  
for they are not YHWH's.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>11</sup>For they have acted with extreme infidelity to me,  
both Yisrā'el and Yehūdâ.

An oracle of YHWH.

<sup>12</sup>They lie about Yahweh, and assert,  
"He wouldn't do this."

Also, "Disaster cannot come to us.

We will not experience military threat or hunger."

<sup>13</sup>And, "The prophets are hot air.

The truth is not in them.

So, this shall be done to them" (author's translation).

## **m**editation

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We often read of Laman and Lemuel's rebellion against their father, Lehi, and imagine that we are witnessing some form of teenage rebellion. However, a closer reading of both their reasonings and the responses of Jeremiah's audiences toward him and his message might persuade us that something much more sophisticated is going on between Lehi and his rebellious sons. Laman and Lemuel's rebellion against Lehi is in line with that of the population of Jerusalem and their response to Jeremiah. Laman and Lemuel's response to Lehi and Jerusalem's response to Jeremiah were based on a well-established, though false, theology.

The negative response to Lehi and Jeremiah's warning of an impending destruction of Jerusalem was built upon these theological beliefs, among others.

- Jerusalem was God's city with God's temple in its midst. God could not and would not allow any harm to come to His temple.
- Jews were God's chosen people. They were exceptional. They were indispensable to God's plan.
- The people of Judah were righteous, meticulous in their observance of temple ceremonies and observances.

We hear such theological arguments in Laman and Lemuel's arguments such as the following.

"Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets" (1 Ne. 2.<sup>13</sup>).

"And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them..." (1 Ne. 17.<sup>22</sup>).

We hear the theological arguments against Jeremiah's warning of destruction in today's reading.

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between the author's translation and that of the KJV is found in the text used. I have translated from the Hebrew Masoretic text, whereas the KJV translated the Septuagint.

“God wouldn’t do this,” they testify—and make no mistake, this assertion was pronounced in the spirit of sacred and “true” testimony. God would not allow “disaster” to come upon his people or permit them to “experience military threat or hunger.” Elsewhere, we hear them testify, “I do not transgress (2.<sup>20</sup>), “I am not polluted,” “I have not gone after Baalim” (2.<sup>23</sup>), “I have not sinned, “I am innocent, surely his anger shall turn from me” (2.<sup>35</sup>), “We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us” (8.<sup>8</sup>). In addition, the people make appeal to the presence of the temple. “The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these” (7.<sup>4</sup>) as reason to reject the message of impending doom.

In the minds of Judeans, and, likely, Laman and Lemuel, declarations that, “We will not hearken” to Jeremiah or any other pessimists masquerading as prophets are not offered in the spirit of rebellion but in the spirit of faithfulness to an unconquerable God who always stands by his people. However, Jeremiah will have none of it. All such testimonies and declarations amount to nothing but lies. Lies about God.

Today’s America regurgitates the same false ideologies of exceptionalism and indispensability and self-righteousness as ancient Judah while it wallows in the same societal ills. These false ideologies have become articles of American faith. They are as much lies about God as they are lies about the nation. Inasmuch as we have history to forewarn us, we might be excused for concluding that the latter-day lie is worse than the ancient one.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Jeremiah 5.<sup>14-19</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Therefore, this is what YHWH, 'ēlohê Šēbā'ôt says:

Because you utter such things,  
understand that I am turning your words into fire  
and this people into the wood it consumes.

<sup>15</sup>Understand that I am leading against you a distant nation,  
O nation of Yiśrā'ēl.

An oracle of YHWH.

It is a nation of long standing,  
a nation with a long past,  
a nation whose language you do not understand  
so that you cannot comprehend what they say.

<sup>16</sup>Their weapons are like an open grave.

All of them are valiant.

<sup>17</sup>The force will consume your crops, and devour your food  
meant for your sons and daughters.

It will consume your flocks and herds.

It will devour our vineyards and your fig orchards.

It will bring impoverishment to your fortified cities—  
the very ones in which you put your trust—violently

<sup>18</sup>Nevertheless, at that time—an oracle of YHWH—

I will not completely obliterate you.

<sup>19</sup>And when you ask, “For what reason has YHWH, our God, done all this to us?” you are to say to them, “Because you forsook me and served foreign gods in your own land. So, we will serve foreigners in a land not your own (author’s translation).”

## meditation

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We can sometimes struggle to understand the writings of the Hebrew prophets found in the Old Testament. However, Nephi is of the opinion that “the Jews” understood the Hebrew prophets and that, in fact, “there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them” (2 Ne. 25.<sup>5</sup>). He offers several reasons. The Jews were entirely familiar with locations mentioned in the texts, for example. They were aware of historical references. In addition, and importantly, they were familiar with the “manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Ne. 25.<sup>1</sup>).

There are many features or “manners” to Hebrew prophesy. Its poetic structure is tantamount among them. Central to poetry, is its pervasive use of imagery. If one is to understand the Hebrew prophets, one must first put their imagination to work by taking note of and visualizing the imagery and then consider how the imagery is like the reality it seeks to describe. As Nephi says, there are plainer ways to communicate truths. But there may be none more effective. Imagery, observed and imagined, grabs us intellectually, emotionally, and spiritual. It leads us to deep appreciations of profound truths.

Jeremiah’s use of imagery is pervasive, imaginative, and, often, earthy. So far in this fifth chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet has asked us to consider the impending Babylonian attack on Judah by visualizing the terror and threat represented by a lion, a wild dog, and a leopard that comes charging out of its natural environment to attack and feast upon the ripped flesh of unsuspecting and ill-equipped city dwellers. He has also asked us to consider the utter depravity of Judah’s idolatrous love of false gods by inviting us to imagine a whorehouse packed with aroused men moaning with the pleasure of erections as large as those of a horse.



In today's reading, Jeremiah thinks of his prophet word as fire and Judah's citizenry as wood. We are invited to imagine a stack of wood crackling, smoking, glowing red, turning to grey ash as the yellow and orange fire consumes its fuel. We are invited to consider the devastating pain Judah is about to endure because of its hasty and thoughtless dismissal of Jeremiah inspired calls to repent. Then too, Jeremiah introduces us to the Babylonian army and its bold and brutal soldiers with their latest in military hardware and invites us to look into the maw of an open grave. We see Judah's citizens die one after another, falling limp and pale into freshly dug graves prepared for the rebellious.

God has given Jeremiah a warning to be faithfully and uncompromisingly delivered. But Jeremiah has the freedom to choose the "manner of prophesying" he thinks best. While Nephi, with his personal preference for what he calls "plainness" in prophesying, might have simply said, "The Babylonians are coming. Their army will defeat you and put an end to your nation and society," Jeremiah chooses the more involved genre of poetry with its powerful and evocative imagery.

Both have their place in the economy of God. Both can get the job done. Nephi's approach has the advantage of easy access and simplicity. The poetic approach of the Hebrew prophets has the advantage of depth. For my tastes, the poetic imagery is a whole lot more fun. It permits me far more agency as my imagination opens up with multiple meanings, lessons, and possibilities. And it encourages an understanding and acceptance that the things of God are not acquired through lazy and inconsistent efforts, but through concentrated and disciplined study, thought, and prayer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **J**eremiah 5.<sup>26-29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>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.

<sup>27</sup>Just as a bird cage is full of birds,

their houses are filled with deceit.

This is how they have become powerful and wealthy.

<sup>28</sup>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.

<sup>29</sup>Should I not level a charge against these?—

an oracle of YHWH—

Should I not take vengeance on a nation such as this? (author's translation)

## **m**editation

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Some words seem more “pregnant” with meaning than others. In scripture, words like “redemption” or “justice,” or “wicked,” or “righteousness,” or “temple,” or “miracle” grab all the headlines. We spend time analyzing and defining them. There are other words we hardly notice, as if they were but supporting actors. But sometimes these supporting actors can take on a starring role.

In this reading, the word, “therefore” (“for this reason,” “as a result”), my “this is how,” should be given a leading role. It carries a powerful punch, and contains one of the punch lines of the passage. The “wicked” or “ungodly” we are informed, are loaded. Their wealth allows them to eat well—so well that, unlike most of humanity for most of human history, they take on added weight. As they grow portly, their skin stretches to cover the additional area causing it to take on a certain “shine.” The “therefore” reminds us how they achieved their wealth and the comfort and even extravagance it provided. Their “good fortune” comes through deceit and corruption practiced against the vulnerable—orphans and the impoverished in this case.

As is so often the case in the Old Testament, the wealthy are portrayed here as predators who think of and act toward their prey as if they were something less than human. As a bird catcher captures birds with a trap, the tool the wealthy uses to fill their houses with vanities is deceit and fraud. But, with his imagery of a cage full of birds, Jeremiah reminds us that the materialistic gains the wealthy acquire through fraud are as trifling as their fraud is wicked. For, what, really, is more trivial than a cage full of birds? The wealthy inflict great harm on humans for the frivolous pleasure of the echo of chirps.

The false mythology of American style capitalism would have us believe that wealth comes to the virtuous—the more wealth, the more virtue. That virtue may take many forms, but one of its most common virtues, so the myth goes, is hard work. The fact is, in this world, as Cain discovered at the earliest stages of human existence, wealth is most often accumulated through violence against others. Capitalism's false doctrine cannot silence or undo this Biblical truth, emphasized and illustrated over and over again in the sacred text.

“Therefore,” in today's text, is, therefore, the bearer of a time-honored Biblical truth that has been under assault throughout its long career. Those who profess belief in and claim to honor the Bible must resist the siren song of capitalism's myth of innocence and inevitability. They must not only

resist its lies individually but must agitate in such a way as to make society uncertain of capitalism's false pretensions of virtue.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **J**eremiah 5.<sup>30-31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>An appallingly horrid thing  
has occurred in the land:

<sup>31</sup>The prophets utter oracles with intent to deceive,  
the priests rule as their power allows,  
and my people love it this way.

How do you imagine this will end? (author's translation)

### **m**editation

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Jeremiah complained a great deal about the numerous prophets that surrounded him and filled the nation. As in this reading, Jeremiah and the Lord are on the same page when it comes to their estimation of the false prophets' character and actions. The prophets, "prophesy lies in my name" and "prophesy unto you a false vision," complained Yahweh, "even though "I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them." All this they did out of "the deceit of their heart"<sup>1</sup> and out of covetous desires.

"For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them  
every one is given to covetousness;  
and from the prophet even unto the priest  
every one dealeth falsely."<sup>2</sup>

We can see from this that the prophets prophesied lies out of more than poor insight and a twisted personal imagination. They also prophesied lies out of a perverted interest in fame and fortune. They wanted to be well liked and well compensated. This suggests, as Jeremiah observes, that their audiences were pleased by what they heard. The false prophets simply put their finger to the wind, determined what the people wanted to hear, and then parroted the peoples' desires. Thus, the lies the prophets told really came out of the minds of the people who listened to them, honored them, and paid them. As culpable as the prophets were, they were no more culpable than their audience.

And what was the audience after? The audience was more interested in being told pleasant lies than unpleasant truths. They wanted to hear what they wanted to hear and they would stand to hear nothing else. And so, the prophets obliged.

"Sword and famine shall not be in this land,"<sup>3</sup> they lied.

"Ye shall not serve the king of Babylon,"<sup>4</sup> they lied.

"Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house shall now shortly be brought again from Babylon."<sup>5</sup> they lied.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 14.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 6.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 14.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 27.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 27.<sup>16</sup>

“For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly,  
saying, ‘Peace, peace;’  
when there is no peace.”<sup>6</sup>

They lied.

The reality is that true prophets arise most often when public opinion is most united behind lies that are reinforced by false prophets. Prophets may or may not be the most personally “spiritual” among their peers. But they are the most clear-eyed about societal realities to which the masses are blinded, and to which the false prophets will not voice.

As Jeremiah observed, it was horrifying to see the citizenry’s lust for false assurances and securities. It was horrifying to watch the false prophets stroke their audiences’ lust for false assurances and securities. And it was horrifying to see the citizenry pleased at being lied to so that they might hear their false assurances and securities parroted back at them.

And where, Jeremiah finally asked, would all this lead? He does not leave us wondering.

“By sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; and they shall have none to bury them, them, their wives, nor their sons, nor their daughters: for I will pour their wickedness upon them.”<sup>7</sup>

“Therefore will I give their wives unto others, and their fields to them that shall inherit them...”<sup>8</sup>

“At that time, saith the LORD, they shall bring out the bones of the kings of Judah, and the bones of his princes, and the bones of the priests, and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, out of their graves: and they shall spread them before the sun, and the moon, and all the host of heaven, whom they have loved, and whom they have served, and after whom they have walked, and whom they have sought, and whom they have worshipped: they shall not be gathered, nor be buried; they shall be for dung upon the face of the earth. And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of them that remain of this evil family, which remain in all the places whither I have driven them, saith the LORD of hosts.”<sup>9</sup>

“The lion is come up from his thicket,  
and the destroyer of the Gentiles is on his way;  
he is gone forth from his place  
to make thy land desolate;  
and thy cities shall be laid waste,  
without an inhabitant.  
For this gird you with sackcloth,  
lament and howl:  
for the fierce anger of the LORD  
is not turned back from us.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 14.<sup>15-16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>1-3</sup>

And it shall come to pass at that day, saith the LORD,  
that the heart of the king shall perish,  
and the heart of the princes;  
and the priests shall be astonished,  
and the prophets shall wonder.”<sup>10</sup>

“I beheld the earth,  
and, lo, it was without form, and void;  
and the heavens,  
and they had no light.  
I beheld the mountains,  
and, lo, they trembled,  
and all the hills moved lightly.  
I beheld, and, lo, there was no man,  
and all the birds of the heavens were fled.  
I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness,  
and all the cities thereof were broken down  
at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger.”<sup>11</sup>

But the people did not want to hear this truth. “God wouldn’t do this,” they said of Jeremiah’s threats of destruction. “Disaster cannot come to us,” they claimed. “We will not experience military threat or hunger.” With such lies invading their hearts, the finally accused Jeremiah and his ilk of being nothing but windbags.

“The prophets are hot air.  
The truth is not in them.”<sup>12</sup>

All this is more than history, and of more than antiquarian interest. Our society has been plagued by the same horrific phenomena. Many among us want only to hear comfortable lies. Many will not bear criticism of or prophetic warnings against our society and the myriad injustices of which it is guilty. This unholy desire for lies and unwillingness to face uncomfortable truths has created fertile ground for the most ridiculous and dangerous conspiracy theories imaginable. Those who propagate them are modern false prophets. Some of them, self-named Christians, even go so far as prophecy in the name of Jesus. They have uttered any number of false predictions only to continue to be honored and paid by foolish and beguiled followers.

Yes, we have and do witness the same type of “appallingly horrid thing” in our land that Jeremiah observed in his. We need not imagine how it will end. It has been witnessed over and over again in cultures and societies that have long since died. Can we bring ourselves to repent before it is too late? The answer lies in each of us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 4. 7-9

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah 4. 23-26

<sup>12</sup> See Jeremiah 5. 12-13; author’s translation

## Jeremiah 6.<sup>1-5</sup>

### *the prophetic voice*

<sup>1</sup>Seek refuge, you children of Binyamin,  
outside Y<sup>c</sup>rûšalāyim.  
In T<sup>c</sup>qôa' sound the alarm,  
and over Bêyt-ha<sup>k</sup>erem raise a smoke signal  
because something bad menaces out of the north,  
a tremendous disruption.

<sup>2</sup>To an attractive and beguiling woman  
have I likened the daughter of Šiyyôn.

<sup>3</sup>They come to her, shepherds and their flocks.  
They pitch their tents against and all around her.  
They bring disaster with their power.

### *the attacker's voice*

<sup>4</sup>“Engage her in holy war.  
Arise and attack at high noon.  
Unfortunate for us that the day passes away,  
that evening shadows stretch out.

<sup>5</sup>Arise and attack at night.  
Let us destroy their strongholds” (author’s translation).

## **m**editation

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It is common for Jeremiah to report his oracles as if they were conversations. For example, in Jeremiah 5, the prophet records Yahweh’s request that he conduct a search for any righteous among Jerusalem’s citizenry (5.<sup>1-2</sup>), Jeremiah’s report concerning the results of his search (5.<sup>3-5</sup>), and Yahweh’s response to Jeremiah’s report (5.<sup>6-31</sup>). The entire 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> chapters can be read as a back and forth between Jeremiah and Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 6 can be similarly structured and understood, with different voices heard.

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 6. <sup>1-3</sup>   | The voice of Jeremiah or Yahweh.                |
| 6. <sup>4-5</sup>   | The voice of an attacking army.                 |
| 6. <sup>6-9</sup>   | The voice of Yahweh                             |
| 6. <sup>10-11</sup> | The voice of Jeremiah                           |
| 6. <sup>12-23</sup> | The voice of Yahweh                             |
| 6. <sup>24-26</sup> | The voice of Jeremiah (representing the people) |

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- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <sup>1</sup> 14. <sup>2-6</sup> | Yahweh reveals an inspired lamentation with Jeremiah                                      |
| 14. <sup>7-9</sup>              | Jeremiah responds to Yahweh as Judah’s advocate   |
| 14. <sup>10-12</sup>            | Yahweh replies to Jeremiah, informs him not to advocate for Judah                         |
| 14. <sup>13</sup>               | Jeremiah replies to Yahweh, justifying his advocacy                                       |
| 14. <sup>14-16</sup>            | Yahweh replies to Jeremiah  |
| 14. <sup>17-18</sup>            | Yahweh shares another lamentation   |
| 14. <sup>19-22</sup>            | Jeremiah responds to Yahweh, again as Judah’s advocate                                    |
| 15. <sup>1-9</sup>              | Yahweh again tells Jeremiah to cease his advocacy; reiterates Judah’s sins and punishment |
| 15. <sup>10</sup>               | Jeremiah responds to Yahweh by bemoaning his life   |
| 15. <sup>11-14</sup>            | Yahweh replies to Jeremiah  |
| 15. <sup>15-18</sup>            | Jeremiah responds to Yahweh by bemoaning his life   |
| 15. <sup>19-21</sup>            | Yahweh replies to Jeremiah, promising his support for Jeremiah                            |

In this reading, then, we hear the voice of Jeremiah/ Yahweh and the voice of the attacking army. With the opening prophetic voice in verses 1-3, we return to a theme that was introduced in the second of Jeremiah's recorded visions that accompanied his call. In that vision (1.<sup>13</sup>), Jeremiah saw a boiling pot of water that was tipped over so that its scalding contents flowed south into Judah. The image is shocking, as one is forced to consider the horror of boiling water scalding human flesh. With the vision's accompanying interpretation (1.<sup>14-16</sup>), we learn that this scalding water is a metaphor for the destruction Judah will experience when the aggressive and threatening Babylonian army comes swooping down out of the north.

In today's reading, the army, having marched south to Jerusalem, has arrived. Cities further south—T<sup>o</sup>qôa' and Bêyt-hakerem being two mentioned—are to raise the alarm, presumably in hopes of avoiding Jerusalem's fate. The alarm signals the need for citizens to leave fortified locations, including Jerusalem. Their preparations against the Babylonians will prove to be vain. Indeed, Judah's defenses and population will be as helpless as an attractive woman in the grasp of her rapist. The refugees will likely do as so many had done before them and go out into the mountainous and other secluded regions to hide from the army and its plundering destruction.

With a flare for the dramatic, and likening the Babylonian invaders to shepherds, Jeremiah allows the enemy to speak. Their voice, found in verses 4 and 5, dashes all hopes that the population might be delivered.

The invaders are committed to their cause. It is holy war in which they are engaged. Their attack is relentless. They attack all day. Their zealotry in battle leaves them disappointed to see the approach of evening. They do not wish to stop. They meet success at every turn. So, as night falls, they continue to fight. They will fight all night if they must. They will not stop until they have reached their goal of complete victory.

The Babylonian victory, of course, entails the utter destruction of Judah and the complete disruption of Judean life as it had existed for hundreds of years, just as Jeremiah warned. Yes, Judah's citizens will feel as though someone poured scalding hot water over their heads, leaving the body politic to die in excruciating pain.

It is little wonder that Jeremiah was unpopular. No nation wants to hear that its end is near; that its enemy will be jubilant in its defeat of the nation. Rather than give heed to his calls for justice and equity, Judah continued its unjust ways. But time proved Jeremiah to have seen the nature of the needed societal reforms clearly and to have discerned Judah's undoing accurately if it refused to reform.

The nation's injustices, its refusal to reform, and the disruption that came to society as a result are a warning to all who read the inspired work Jeremiah left for posterity. Here's hoping that we today, so similar in our societal injustices and stubborn refusal to reform, wake up and feel the heat of the roiling and boiling water before the pot gets tipped over leaving the life we all cherish dead and dying from burns that cannot be healed.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!



## Joel 2.<sup>12-14</sup>

- <sup>12</sup>Therefore also now, saith the LORD,  
turn ye even to me with all your heart,  
and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:  
<sup>13</sup>And rend your heart, and not your garments,  
and turn unto the LORD your God:  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and of great kindness,  
and repenteth him of the evil.  
<sup>14</sup>Who knoweth if he will return and repent,  
and leave a blessing behind him...

## meditation

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I have always been intrigued by the question Joel asks in verse 14. “Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing” (NIV). This question follows on the heels of Joel’s list of Divine attributes. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, extraordinarily kind, and is inclined to relent. It is only this list of Divine attributes that makes the question possible. It is only this list of Divine attributes that allows for a positive answer, “I think He will. I think He will relent and bless rather than curse.” God does relent. It is in His DNA. There are times when His majestic attributes bring Him to relent, independent of any outside factors. The Psalmist knows this and counts on it.

“Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies  
and thy lovingkindnesses;  
for they have been ever of old.  
Remember not the sins of my youth,  
nor my transgressions:  
according to thy mercy remember thou me  
for thy goodness’ sake, O LORD” [on account of the fact that you are good] (Ps. 25.<sup>6-7</sup>).

Sometimes, He relents for the simple reason that we asked Him to. There was a certain and particularly reckless debtor who owed millions of dollars. As he was being carried off to debtor’s prison, he pleaded with the loaner to forgive the debt. What else could he do? There was no world in which he could ever acquire the resources to pay off the debt—one wonders why the loaner didn’t cut off his funds long before. Unbelievably, the loaner canceled the debt. Later, the loaner explained his actions.

“I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me” (Matt. 18. <sup>32</sup>).

Of course, in this parable, the loaner is God. And just see how our desires impact him! He cares and responds to our desires. There are other times, as in today’s passage, when he relents because we have repented. Sometimes that repentance is wrenching. Sometimes it requires that we tear ourselves to pieces. But such rending is not masochistic. It is always performed with our faces turned to God. We only rend ourselves because we know that He will reassemble us better than before.

But whether God is relenting because of His own inner desire to do so, or because He values and responds to our humble desires, or because, having rent ourselves, we are in need of repair, God relents because of His own largeness of soul. Because he is gracious and merciful. Because He has a long-fuse and is not easily or quickly angered. Because His kindness is as expansive as the universe itself.

So, go ahead. Rend your heart during Lent. But be sure you are not doing it to be seen of others. Be sure, even, that you aren't doing it in the mirror, to allay your own wounded conscious. Be sure you are fully facing God. Be sure to do it so that He knows you want to be made new and that you are absolutely sure that only He can and will renew you. Then, truly, Lent will be followed by Easter, the time of renewal.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: february 20, 2024)*

## **Amos 5.**<sup>10-13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>They hate those who call for justice in governance.

They abhor those who speak truthfully.

<sup>11</sup>Therefore, because of your plundering of the vulnerable

by the grain taxes you extract from them,

you have built the most luxurious of homes,

but you will not live in them;

you have planted cherished vineyards

but you will not drink their wine.

<sup>12</sup>For I am well aware of the magnitude of your criminality,

and the vastness of your corruption:

oppressing the innocent, taking bribes,

and deny the impoverished a hearing.

<sup>13</sup>The one prospering in such times remains mute,

for such times are depraved.

## **m**editation

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Amos was a brave man and faithful, honest messenger of God. We must honor him by being equally brave and honest. Indeed, he lamented the wickedness of cowardly and self-serving silence during depraved times such as ours. Such cowardly and self-serving silence is, in very truth, a sign of personal depravity—one that deepens societal depravity. Here, then, is his lament and warning.

The one prospering in such times remains mute,  
for such times are depraved.

Those who are prospering because of societal depravity, going unscathed by its wickedness, must not remain silent and inactive.

So, what sorts of times can be called, “depraved”? Amos describes some of them in this reading. For starters, in speaking of the wealthy and powerful, Amos charged,

“They hate those who call for justice in governance.  
They abhor those who speak truthfully.”

This “justice in governance” takes in more than justice in our criminal justice system. It most certainly includes justice in legislative laws, policies, and programs. But it does most definitely include criminal justice. So, here is my breakout from muteness.

Recently, a sitting member of congress, Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas, complained in all seriousness and on camera before an audience of perhaps millions, “If you're a Republican, you can't even lie to Congress or lie to an FBI agent or they're coming after you.” Just let that sink in. A sitting member of congress is incensed that one cannot lie with impunity; incensed that liars might be held accountable.

This bit of depraved indifference to justice was spewed in response to the arrest of Peter Navarro against whom a grand jury of peers, after being presented with evidence, issued a two-count indictment for contempt of congress. In spite of having openly expressed his contempt for congress on camera before millions, Navarro has expressed outrage that he was arrested and handcuffed. Oh, the nerve of treating him like every other criminal! Don't they know who he is?

You see, both men think that the rich and powerful such as themselves should not be held accountable for their criminal behavior. Just like ancient Israel's wealthy and powerful, they attempt to establish one set of laws for the ordinary Joe and another set for the high and mighty. Gohmert, Navarro, dozens and dozens of U.S. representatives and senators, and a certain treasonous former president despise justice and truth. They despise it as a basis of governance. And they certainly despise it as a basis for holding the wealthy and powerful accountable for their depraved indifference to justice.

Tragically, this American depravity is eerily similar to that which Amos observed in 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Israel and described in verse 10. But this is not the extent of 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Israelite depravity. Unfortunately, it is not the extent—not even close—of America's 2022 depravity. As Amos goes on to describe further and deeper depravities, we will follow Amos' example of truthfulness in the face of depravity in subsequent meditations.

We would love to compose only light and happy fare filled with naught but “the pleasing word of God... which healeth the wounded soul” (See Jac. 2.<sup>8</sup>). But, we, like Amos, live in depraved times. We will not be complicit in the depravity through self-interested silence and cowardly inaction. We will, rather, like Amos, remind those whose conscious has not yet been completely “seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4.<sup>2</sup>) that the word of God warns and informs; that sometimes, before it can comfort it must discomfort, sometimes with the sharpness of a “two-edged sword” (Heb. 4.<sup>12</sup>). With its piercing warning, it can liberate us from the values and principles of the ungodly, the unethical, the corrupt, and the anti-social. It can liberate us from the depravities of our time and nation. It can guide us toward a society that is healthy and enduring. It can guide us into the kingdom of God.

So, yes, we are so bold as to invite others to avoid the muteness that has so often been found among those who have prospered in the midst of depravity; among those who dared not risk that which “moth and rust doth corrupt” (Matt. 6.<sup>19</sup>). among those who have, themselves have not felt the pinch of injustice that so many have and do. Let's not fall prey to same muteness of Amos' day.

The one prospering in such times remains mute,  
for such times are depraved.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **amos 6.**<sup>3-6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ye that put far away the evil day, obstruct the day of consequence  
and cause the seat of violence to come near; promote a violent reign  
<sup>4</sup>That lie upon beds of ivory,  
and stretch themselves upon their couches,  
and eat the lambs out of the flock,  
and the calves out of the midst of the stall;  
<sup>5</sup>That chant to the sound of the viol,  
and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David;  
<sup>6</sup>That drink wine in bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the chief ointments:  
but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.

## **m**editation

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Here, Amos continues his indictment of Israel's political leaders. They promote violent forms of governance and obstruct all attempts to hold them accountable for their personal and institutional crimes. As can be seen from their comfortable and profligate lifestyle, they have been extraordinarily successful at escaping justice. They recline on the most expensive divans as they feast upon the choicest cuts of meat while washing it down with copious amounts of the finest wine. In addition they are massaged with the finest lotions while live music fills the air. While the populace suffers, the political leaders' care nothing for the pain they cause as their daily lives remain unaffected by others' suffering.

It is difficult to read Amos' description of the moral depravity of Israel's power brokers without the thought forcing its way into our consciousness, "My goodness. This sounds an awfully lot like 2022 America. There is one big difference, however. Ordinary Israelite citizens were powerless to do anything about it. Today, American citizens can reject such depraved political leadership through the ballot box. Yet, we do not. We countenance their behavior, returning them to office over and over again, while we wish that we too could live the "good life"—in actuality an evil life masquerading as good—imitating them in whatever humble ways we can. In this way, Amos' ancient critique rest on all of us, not only the political elite.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **Micah 6.<sup>6-8</sup>**

<sup>6</sup>How should I approach YHWH?

How should I bow in worship to my exalted God?

Should I approach him with a fully burnt offering?

How about with new-born calves?

<sup>7</sup>Will YHWH be satisfied with thousands of rams?

How about with countless channels of olive oil?

Should I offer my firstborn for my willful defiance?

How about my offspring for less serious private infractions?

<sup>8</sup>He has already told you, man, what is good.

What does YHWH want from you

but to do justice,

and love compassion,

and be willing to live like your God? (author's translation)

## **m**editation 1

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*"How should I approach YHWH?  
How should I bow to my exalted God?"*

For all the love and respect Christians express for the Bible, they pay precious little attention to but a very, very tiny portion of it in their personal study and meditation (and, perhaps, even less attention to even less of it when it comes to their personal life for, surely, no Biblical oriented person could vote as tens of millions did in the 2016 and 2020 American presidential elections). The tendency to ignore large swaths of sacred text is particularly prevalent in what they call the Old Testament.

We LDS study the Bible in two out of every four year's cycle of scripture study. The "study" is more catechism than exploration. We teach "Mormon Doctrine" mingled with scripture. The same proof-texted scriptures are examined year after year to bolster truth claims and shape behavior inside a very narrow and provincial framework. Much is ignored.

Happily, this passage from Micah is one that both traditional Christians and Mormons seem to appreciate and spend a little time with. It could, however, use a bit more consideration. It is worth each individual's attention as they consider their personal lives and their relationship with God and those around them. It is worth society's attention as it considers the policies and procedures by which its members are directed and governed, and as it considers whether those policies and procedures are such as to create and maintain a society that is secure and enduring.

Not quite Socratic in nature, Micah poses a series of questions in order to make his point. The first two questions are general and introductory in nature, while the next six are more specific and developmental. The ninth and final question finally comes to the point. The first two general questions reveal the nature of Micah's interest found in the passage.

"How should I approach YHWH?  
How should I bow in worship to my exalted God?"

There are many important questions that the religious must ask themselves as they consider their faith, their beliefs, their conduct, and their relationship with Deity. Among these, one of the questions that must surely be front and center in the mind of every believer is "How do I appropriately approach and worship God?"

Much rides on the answer to the two questions Micah poses here.

These two questions might be thought of in reference to entering Judah's ancient temple. "What is the appropriate manner of entering the temple to commune with God?" But these questions have a broader application than that of temple worship.

We approach God from many places—from our bedrooms, from our dinner tables, from our pulpits, from our secret places. At all such places, we surely wish to find Him. Wherever we hope to find God, we approach Him with interests, needs and requests both for ourselves and others. These needs need not be selfish, but we do not approach God simply to be in His vicinity. We hope to receive some benefit from our proximity to Him, even if it be only a sense of peace and love.

As we consider approaching Him and wonder if and how we might reasonably expect a positive response, we often consider our personal lives and whether or not they are in harmony with God's expectations of us. So, Micah's question could be understood to go something like this: "What must I do to obtain a favorable response from God when I approach Him?"

Micah's first two general questions invite us, then, to consider our relationship with God. They invite us to consider not only the role God plays in and the contributions He makes to the relationship, but the role we play in and the contributions we make to the relationship. This is not to deny God's unbounded mercy and grace. He consistently provides far more than we "deserve" based upon our spiritual capacities and performance. Still, Micah's question is an acknowledgement that we are a contributing partner in and to the relationship between ourselves and God. Our contribution may be small, but it is, nonetheless, important to God. God respects us and honors our contribution to the relationship, meager and flawed as it is. He does not demand perfection, but he does ask that we strive to contribute all we can to the relationship.

Every sincere and committed disciple of God longs to know the answer to Micah's opening questions. But, before answering them, Micah asks another six questions. These six address how *not* to approach God. We will examine these in our next meditation.

We must respect the prophet's sense that a description of how *not* to approach God will help clarify that all important answer to that most vital of questions: "How do I acceptably approach and worship God so as to receive the desired benefits of that approach and worship?" I, for one, do hunger for His presence. The experiences I have had with Him are unparalleled. He is magnificent beyond words. Perhaps you hunger too. Perhaps you too want to approach Him and experience His beauty. Micah has much to say about how to satisfy that hunger.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## **m**editation 2

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In Micah 6.<sup>6-8</sup>, the prophet asks a series of questions. His first two questions are general in nature.

"How should I approach YHWH?  
How should I bow in worship to my exalted God?"

Surely, these two questions are of great interest and importance to every believer who wishes to

maintain a healthy relationship with God.

As we suggested in the first meditation on this passage, these questions might be restated to read, “How do I acceptably approach and worship God so as to receive the desired benefits of that approach and worship?” Obviously, Micah’s two questions are open ended, calling for more than a simple “yes” or “no” response.

Utilizing something akin to the Socratic method, Micah begins to answer his first two questions with six additional questions. These six questions relate to the first two. However, rather than asking the question “how to?” they ask the question “how *not* to?” Unlike the first two questions, these six questions are posed in such a way as to elicit nothing more than a simple “yes” or “no” response. As the prophet proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear that the six follow up questions are rhetorical in nature, the answer being an expected and resounding “no” to each.

“Should I approach him with a fully burnt offering?”  
“No!”

“How about with new-born calves?”  
“No!”

“Will YHWH be satisfied with thousands of rams?”  
“No!”

“How about with countless channels of oil?”  
“No!”

“Should I offer my firstborn for my willful defiance?”  
“No!”

“How about my offspring for less serious private infractions?”  
“No”

It might be helpful to say a bit about these questions. First, they are all associated with some form of ritual. The first question relates to a rather common and traditional form of animal sacrifice: the sacrifice of an entire animal. Though it is common and traditional, it is not the easiest or least costly form of acceptable sacrifice. The poor, for example, are permitted on occasion to offer doves when approaching God. Some offerings require only *portions* of an animal rather than the whole of it. So, while the offering of an entire animal is traditional, it is not without personal cost and self-sacrifice. It is a step up from the simplest and least expensive authorized offerings.

But, the prophet announces, this kind of offering and level of self-sacrifice is not what the Lord requires of those who would approach Him expectant of a positive response.

The second question relates to the offering of “new-born calves.” This too represents a step up from the minimum. There is much potential in the new-born calf. She has the potential to bear many more calves. In offering a single “new-born calf,” therefore, one is in a sense really offering several calves at once. Obviously, then, the offering of a new-born calf is a costly affair, one that requires an increased level of self-sacrifice.

But even this souped-up offering with its suggestion of a ratcheted-up level of self-sacrifice is not what the Lord wants of his people.



Micah's next two questions involve something more than the *quality* of the sacrifice. They involve *quantity*. Rams and olive oil were both acceptable offerings in approaching God. A single ram and rather small amounts of olive oil would suffice. But here the prophet asks if God is pleased if and when one goes well, well beyond the call of duty. Surely He would be impressed by and responsive to the offerer who came with thousands of rams or with streams and streams of olive oil. Surely this demonstrates a level of dedication and self-sacrifice that God would be hard pressed to ignore.

But, no, even this extra helping of self-sacrifice is not what the Lord craves from his people.

With the next two questions, the prophet really ramps things up to a whole new level. Surely there are few greater proofs of one's love for and willingness to sacrifice to and for God than to offer one's firstborn child (who knows if there will be another?) or one's many children—indeed, the sacrifice of one's own life is the only sacrifice that might top this one. Need one have this level of commitment to approach God, asks Micah?

No. Even this extreme form of self-sacrifice is not what God is looking for.

Now, before moving on, we should pause to say a word about these last two questions. We might imagine that the lack of divine enthusiasm for these human sacrifices is the consequence of the fact that God does not want or accept human sacrifice. It is certainly true that Israel's God did not condone human sacrifice. And yet, one suspects that the preservation of Abraham's memory for all these years has something to do with his willingness to offer his only son, Isaac, as a display of his commitment to God.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet's dismissal of human sacrifice as a means of really impressing God is about something other than the moral rejection of human sacrifice. Instead, his point is that sacrifice, even the type that is extreme and deeply self-sacrificing, is not the path to God. It is not what He will be anxiously looking for as He examines us upon our approach to Him.

This, then, is the point of Micah's six follow-up questions. As we consider how to approach God in hopes of receiving some benefit from the approach, we can dismiss all idea of coming to him with an offering and indications of self-sacrifice. God wants something far, far more profound than offerings and self-sacrifice.

We might find ourselves growing impatient as we wait for Micah to finally answer the two initial questions positively and clearly. But, again, we must respect the prophet's sense that describing "how *not* to approach God" is important if we are to understand "how *to* approach God."

We might just sense a hint of impatience in Micah as he leaves his interrogative mode for the first and only time in this passage in order to make his sole declarative statement. The answer to the "how to" question, the prophet feels, ought to be obvious. It is found anywhere and everywhere God is found to speak.

"He has already told you, man, what is good."

It amazes, perhaps angers the prophet that he must state what has already been stated thousands of times. Still, he patiently restates the how of approaching God. In doing so, Micah returns to the interrogative mode.

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<sup>1</sup> We have a different take on the near-sacrifice of Isaac than the traditional. But that is for another time and place.

What does YHWH want from you  
but to do justice,  
and love compassion,  
and be willing to live like your God?

That's less than a dozen Hebrew words used to describe that thing which is of paramount importance to every believer: "How do I acceptably approach and worship God so as to receive the desired benefits of that approach and worship?" But those scant words describe a lifetime of living.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### **m**editation 3

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In our first meditations on this passage, we considered the prophet's two opening questions.

"How should I approach YHWH?  
How should I bow to my exalted God?"

We suggested that these questions could be restated, "How do I acceptably approach and worship God so as to receive the desired benefits of that approach and worship?"

We found that before answering his own questions, the prophet asked six other follow-up questions. These answered the question how *not* to approach God. These six follow up questions considered various forms of temple offerings and levels of self-sacrifice that were commonly viewed as effective means for approaching God to receive desired benefits. The prophet made clear through his six rhetorical questions that, in his view, the temple offerings deemed in his day so essential for one's approach to God had little to commend them. Even those offerings that had the appearance of the greatest commitment, dedication, and self-sacrifice had little to commend them. Such offerings and signs of self-sacrifice were not what God looked for when he examined the approaching supplicant.

We have suggested that we should respect the prophet's sense that answering the "how *not* to" question was vital to answering the "how to question." It is sometimes necessary to directly dismantle deeply held and false biases before building upon the firm foundation of truth. In light of the prophet's intuition, it seems appropriate to spend a little time considering his attitude toward the temple and its offerings in more depth.

Right out of the gate, Micah made known his own feelings about Judah's ancient temple and its ordinances. In his mind, Jerusalem's temple was nothing more than a *bāmâ*, a "high place," an unauthorized, illegitimate, and idolatrous shrine. The temple and its ordinances were, to his way of thinking, a reflection of Judah's open and willful rebellion (*peša*) against God (See Mic. 1.<sup>5</sup>).

This could not have been a popular viewpoint. But the fact is, Micah was not the only one who confronted his culture and its religious mores with this unpopular perspective toward the temple and its ordinances. Most of the Hebrew prophets agreed with him that the temple was responsible for as

much badness as it was goodness.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah, for example, made statements about the temple and its ordinances very much in accordance with those suggested by Micah's six follow up questions. He found his people's anxious temple activities to be, at best, distractions from what was really important—justice, compassion, and godly conduct in everyday life. First, here are Isaiah's feelings about the people's anxious temple activities.

“Why do you offer your many sacrifices to me?  
asks Yahweh.  
I have had my fill of ram offerings,  
and the fat of specially prepared sacrificial animals.  
As for the blood of bulls and lambs and goats—  
I find no value in any of it.  
When you come to present yourselves to me, who has asked this of you?  
It is merely the sound of trampling feet in my courts.  
Do not continue to bring such meaningless tributes?  
The odor of your sacrifices is abhorrent to me.  
New moon, šabbāt and calling of assemblies—  
I cannot stand the iniquitous assembly.  
Your new moon festivals and your other sacred times—  
my soul hates.  
They rest upon me like a burden.  
I am weary of bearing them.  
When you lift your hands to me,  
I shall turn my eyes away from you.  
Though you may multiply prayers,  
I won't be there listening” (Is. 1.<sup>11-15</sup>, author's translation).

Then, immediately, Isaiah spoke of the justice and compassion from which the temple activities served as distraction.

“Wash yourselves!  
Clear yourselves!  
Remove your evil deeds from my sight.  
Stop doing evil.  
Learn to do good.  
Seek after justice.  
Set things right for those treated unjustly.  
Take the side of the orphan.  
Plead for the widow.  
Come! Let us reason together,  
says Yahweh.  
Though your sins be as scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow.  
Though they are as red as scarlet died fabric,  
they shall be as wool” (Is. 1.<sup>16-18</sup>, author's translation).

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<sup>2</sup> This subject, itself, is well worth an in depth look. However, this meditation, already bordering on too long, would turn into a book if we were to launch into an examination of the Hebrew prophets' attitude toward the temple and its ordinances.

In the same spirit, Jeremiah would later find the people's anxious temple activities to be more than distraction. He would understand what they did inside to be a strategy by which the guilty hid from God and the just punishment of the lawlessness they practiced outside the temple—the absence of justice, compassion and godliness.

“Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD” (7.<sup>11</sup>).

Isaiah, then, taught that justice and the proper treatment of others, especially the vulnerable, was the key to being clean and clear of sin and guilt. Such cleanness and clarity was essential to approaching God. No offerings, no matter their quality or quantity, could do what justice and proper treatment of others could do for one's approach to God. Isaiah, that most famous of all the writing prophets, completely agreed with Micah about the ineffectiveness of the temple and its offerings when it came to finding a welcome reception when approaching God.

We would go further, however, and suggest that Micah's rejection of offerings, whatever the quality or quantity, as the way to approach God also reflects the prophet's skepticism/ rejection of the very idea of sacrifice itself. I know this might seem shocking. The necessary deeper discussion about sacrifice will have to wait for another time. For now, I will offer just a couple of observations.

Based on the Bible, all indications are that religion with complex and essential forms of ritual almost inevitably weaken the moral and ethical standards of the community. The more ritual the less justice, compassion, and godliness. The complex question of how and why this is so must also wait for another time.

Then too, sacrifice, including that which dresses itself in the guise of self-sacrifice, is often a matter of grand-standing, something Jesus recognized and warned about.

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven”

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward [in that they were seen] (Mt. 6.<sup>1,5</sup>).

Today, we can, perhaps, best see the undermining of moral and ethical treatment of others and the grandstanding that is found in self-sacrifice as we watch Muslim extremist violently sacrifice themselves in the attempt to win a war, win a few virgins in the next life, and, so, approach and win over God.

In the Lectures on Faith written and delivered in Kirtland Ohio by, presumably, Joseph Smith, we read,

“Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things, never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things: it was through this sacrifice, and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life; and it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things, that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God. When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has, for the truth's sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice,

because he seeks to do his will, he does know most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not nor will not seek his face in vain.”<sup>3</sup>

I will just say that this sounds an awfully lot like the attitudes and practices that Micah is resisting. Approaching God successfully and beneficially isn't based upon the type, the quality, or the quantity of offerings or the degree of self-sacrifice one brings to the table. Thinking otherwise just seems like more self-promotion.

One who approaches God wants to do so appropriately. They are aware that though God is merciful, he does and will examine them. They will want to pass the examine. The key to passage is not the quantity or quality of one's self-sacrifice. Rather, it is bound up with how we treat others. It is bound up with justice and compassion and discipleship. It is bound up in how much of Himself God finds in us.

If the Lord's desire for justice and compassion and true discipleship feels to us like a sacrifice, it says more about our humanity, or our inhumanity, than about anything else. We would be nice if we could say that the basic human decency that God looks for is simple. However, we are clear-eyed enough to see how very difficult and rare it is in this world that the temple calls a “lone and dreary world.” However difficult and rare Micah's prescription might seem, though, it is worth a look. and, more, our heartfelt attempt to realize it, however flawed and inadequate our attempts might be.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

#### **m**editation 4

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This passage begins with Micah asking the question that is of utmost importance to every believer: How do I approach and worship God? Or, as we have suggested, “How do I approach and worship God so as to receive the desired benefits of that approach and worship?” Before answering the “how to” question that he, himself, posed, Micah asked six more questions. These all focused on “how not to” approach God. These six questions, all rhetorical with an expected answer of “no,” assert that when one approaches God, He will not be looking at the offerings we have made or the self-sacrifice we have displayed as He determines whether and how He will respond to our approach. What will He look for?

What does YHWH want from you  
but to do justice,  
and love compassion,  
and be willing to live like your God?

God will examine our treatment of others. He will examine whether our treatment of others is just, is compassionate, and is consistent with His own character and behavior. We should have a brief look at the three things Micah identifies as determinate in how we approach God and how He responds to our approach.

Jesus once reduced the countless Jewish commandments down to two: Love God and love your fellow beings (Mk. 12.<sup>29-31</sup>). Micah comes very close to this same conclusion. What God will be looking at as we approach Him is the state of our relationship with others. What He wants to find in

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<sup>3</sup> Lectures on Faith, 6:7

those relationships is justice, compassion, and godliness. He wants to find us treating others as He, Himself, would treat them if He were present. He wants to find us representing Him in the lives of others.

Now, He wishes this for every single relationship in which we find ourselves, from the closest, most beloved family member to the least known and most distant member of the human race. But, He seems to take a particularly close look at how we treat those least like us and most vulnerable in society. This is clear throughout scripture. It was clear in the passage from Isaiah that we quoted earlier. After denouncing the activities found in Judah's temple—activities that were observed at a near fetish level—Isaiah reminded his audience what really constituted worship of God. It was justice and compassion toward others. In in Isaiah's conception, it was justice and compassion targeting very specific groups.

“Wash yourselves!  
Clear yourselves!  
Remove your evil deeds from my sight.  
Stop doing evil.  
Learn to do good.  
Seek after justice.  
Set things right for *those treated unjustly*.  
Take the side of *the orphan*.  
Plead for *the widow*.  
Come! Let us reason together,  
says Yahweh.  
Though your sins be as scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow.  
Though they are as red as scarlet died fabric,  
they shall be as wool” (Is. 1.<sup>16-18</sup>, author's translation).

Here, we are reminded of another of Jesus' teachings. It was delivered in what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus reminded his audience that the “Father which is in heaven... maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5.<sup>45</sup>). He followed this up with,

“For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so?” (Mt. 5.<sup>46-47</sup>).

It is anticipated that we will naturally love those who love us; those who look like us; those who think and act like us; those who look good on us; those with whom we are naturally connected to and related. We should expect no great reward for such natural affections. God is far more interested in how we treat those who do not look, think, and act like us; those whose experiences and lot in life is very different from our own. Do we treat them with justice and compassion. Do we treat them as God does? This, really, is the point of Jesus' final word on this subject.

“So, be as expansive [all-inclusive] as your Father who is in heaven is expansive [all-inclusive]” (Mt. 5.<sup>48</sup>).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The KJV translation with its use of the word, “perfect,” is as unfortunate a translation choice as any of the many found in the entire Bible. There are a half-dozen better English word that could represent Greek *téleios*. It is also unfortunate that these final words in chapter 5 are seen as covering the entire chapter

Jesus' admonition that we take God as our model brings us back to the final line of this reading from Micah.

“And be willing to live like your God?”

This rendering departs significantly from the traditional rendering, “and walk humbly with your God.” We should, then, say a word or two about our rendering.

First, the concept of humility has been so thoroughly domesticated in modern usage as to render it false to the Biblical idea of humility. In modern usage (a usage that may have its origins in the intertestamental period) humility is a virtue one voluntarily chooses and imposes on oneself. This conception of humility is unknown in the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, “humility” is not a virtue in the traditional sense of the word. Nor is it voluntary and self-imposed. Rather it is an experience and feeling imposed on an individual or group from outside. It is almost universally a negative state. Its ancient nuance is something far closer to “humiliation” and “oppression” than modern usage recognizes or accepts. The translation, “walk humbly with thy God” simply will not do for a modern reader with domesticated notions of humility.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the Hebrew root translated, “humble” (*śn*'), is found only two times in the entire Hebrew Bible. Thus, we lack meaningful context to establish the root's basic meaning from its use in the Bible. In addition, etymological studies have yielded little fruit in establishing its basic meaning. The translation, “humble” is built on an unstable foundation.

Third, the Septuagint offers a different rendering that completely eschews the idea of humility in any formulation—ancient or modern. Our translation reflects the Septuagint translation. Our translation also comports with Jesus' admonition to those present at the Sermon on Mount that they imitate God in how they treat others. It also comports with admonition Jesus gave his new world disciples after his resurrection.

Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Ne. 27.<sup>27</sup>).

This, then, is Micah's counsel to Israel. This is Micah's counsel to all of us. This is how he teaches us to approach God. This is how we must approach God. As we approach him, we need not concern ourselves with the kind or level of self-sacrifice indicated through offerings. We need not display heroic deeds of self-sacrifice. We should, we must, however, concern ourselves with how we treat others. We must be just. We must act rightly toward others. We must be compassionate toward others. We must be especially diligent in our treatment of those who are vulnerable; those who are not like us and with whom we have no natural association. Again, none of this is meant to suggest that we “earn” our right to approach God and receive a welcome reception. God is generous toward us far out of proportion to our “earnings.” But, in acting justly and compassionately as God acts, we show ourselves to be true disciples. We become agents of God in a world that very much needs Him; in a world that very much needs examples of how to live a happy, secure, and enduring life. There can be

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rather than the last section comprising verses 43-47. God is expansive and inclusive in his dealings with human beings. We should be equally expansive and inclusive in our treatment of others. We note how close Luke's comes to this understanding with his, “Be as merciful as your Father is merciful.”

<sup>5</sup> Modern translation often translate, “modest.” This word, too, comes with the problem of modern usage, as it is most often, for some exclusively, related to matters of sexuality. “Sex” is most emphatically not on Micah's radar anywhere in this passage.

no happy, no secure, and no enduring life either in the here and now or in the great beyond without justice, without compassion, and without beings who think and feel and act as God does.

Thank you, Micah, for your insight. Thank You, Lord Almighty for revealing it! Thank You, Oh God, for inviting us to participate in Your work and the challenge of growing to both know and imitate You, the Greatest of All.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!



## **Micah 7.** <sup>18-20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity,  
and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?  
he retaineth not his anger for ever,  
because he delighteth in mercy.

<sup>19</sup>He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us;  
he will subdue our iniquities;  
and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

<sup>20</sup>Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob,  
and the mercy to Abraham,  
which thou hast sworn unto our fathers  
from the days of old.

## **m**editation

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Maybe you know someone whom you think of as extraordinarily forgiving. Maybe you marvel at them. But they don't hold a candle to God. Hence, Micah's

“Who is a God like unto thee?  
Who pardoneth iniquity like thee?”

As in all things, God reigns supreme in this characteristic. In fact, if you compared the most forgiving individual you know and their willingness to forgive with God and His willingness to forgive, it would be like comparing the light of the faintest of stars on a not-so-clear night with the brightest mid-day sun void of all obscuring conditions. But, Micah contends, God is more than willing to forgive. It is part of His character. It is one of His absolute greatest delights.

“He delighteth in mercy.”

Maybe you know something, too, about delight. One goes out of one's way to experience that in which they find delight. No search is too onerous. So, as one of His delights, merciful forgiveness is something that God goes out of His way to experience and bestow. He doesn't go around hunting for reasons to withhold mercy and blessed forgiveness. Any little excuse He can find, and off He goes, forgiving, even, as Joseph Smith once said, at the first and slightest *intimation* of repentance.

Of course, Micah knows something else that you and I know. It is one thing to *want* something. It is a step up from *wanting* to *delighting*. But all the wanting and delighting in the world is not enough unless one has the power. Well, no need to worry about God's *power* to forgive. He, Micah boasts, “*subdue[s]* our iniquities,” thrusting them away from us and into the sea with such force that they sink to the “depths of the sea,” never to be seen again. Now, that's dominance and power!

Now, tell me. Have you ever seen anything like this? Not here. Not on earth. Not now. Not ever. And herein is one of the major difficulties. Having never seen or experienced anything like it in our daily lives, we find it difficult to wrap our brains around the reality of God's willing, delighted, and powerful mercy and forgiveness. We read of His forgiveness in the lives of others and think, “Oh, how wonderful for him or her.” But, really, we question whether we can experience such a wonder in our life. In all my studies and in all my living, I have found very few individuals who have shown greater insight into the psychology of the religious mind than the early Protestant reformer, Jean Calvin. I might question some of his doctrine, but I have learned to trust his observations about human religious psychology.

“There are very many who so conceive God’s mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them.”

Yes, indeed. I have seen this in many. I have seen it in myself. Having described this too common form of faithlessness, Calvin goes on.

“This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith....

“There is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation.

“Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls ‘peace’... Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God’s judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbed alarm, and almost torn to pieces” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 561).

If you have been reading our Lent readings with their accompanying *meditations*, then you know what comes next. Lent is a good time to re-examine scripture’s witness of God’s willingness, delight, and power to forgive. During it we can, perhaps, plead with extra energy and faith that He exercise His willingness, delight, and power to forgive us. Those who shared their own experience with God’s forgiveness in scripture did so for more than antiquarian interests. They intended their readers to graft their experience into their own lives. They ask their readers, “If He did it for me, why not for you too?” A good question for the present Lent and Easter Season.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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