



a devoted parent, a rebellious child, and a brutal beating:
metaphor for a nation's rebellion

Isaiah 1.²⁻⁶

²Listen, O skies, and lend an ear, O earth;
for YHWH has spoken.

"I raised children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³A cow knows its owner,
and an ass its owner's feeding trough.

Yiśrā'ēl does not know,
my people have no such discernment."

⁴A warning!^a It is a criminal^b nation,
a guilt laden people,

a wicked offspring,
ruinous children.

They have forsaken Yahweh.

They have spurned Yiśrā'ēl's Incomparable One^c.

They have turned their backs.

⁵Why do you continue to be beaten?

Your defiance continues!^d

The head is given over to delirium;^e
the heartbeat grows faint.

⁶From head to toe,

there is not a healthy spot to be found;

only bruises and welts

and open wounds

that have not, in any way, been treated^f or bandaged

or soothed with ointment (author's translation).

Introduction

I understand Isaiah 1.^{2-2.5} as an introduction to the book of Isaiah. This introduction takes the form of a chiasm. I structure the chiasm as follows:

The
Present Disappointment

a 1.2-9 The Rebellious Child
b 1.10-15 Condemnation Of The Cult
c 1.16-20 The Redemptive Effects Of Justice
d 1.21-23 A Faithful City turned Harlot

The
Future Hope

d' 1.24-26 A City Faithful Once More
c' 1.27-28 The Redemptive Effects Of Justice
b' 1.29-31 Removal Of The Cult
a' 2.1-5 Walking in Yahweh's Light

Yahweh called Israel as His servant, an ambassador to carry His renown to the nations. Israel was to “be a blessing” whereby “all families of the earth [would] be blessed.”¹ However, through its own defiance and infidelity to Yahweh, Israel² failed repeatedly and consistently in its calling.

In the first half of his introductory chiasm (vs. 1.¹⁻²³), Isaiah describes Israel's disappointing infidelity in Isaiah's day. The second half (vs. 1.^{24-2.5}) describes the hope of a better future and how Yahweh would bring that better future about. The entire Book alternates between honest and brutal critiques of Israel's present defiance, and hopeful views of a better future. No matter how pessimistic Isaiah may have been about the present, he never gave up on Yahweh's commitment to the nation, God's ability to redeem the nation, His willingness to reissue the call to the nation, and His ability to help the nation fulfill its divinely appointed calling.

Isaiah, like all the Hebrew prophets, was both prophet and poet. As a poet, he utilized literary devices such as metaphor, simile, analogy, etc., on a regular basis. Often, these are short and pithy, often confined to a line or two of verse. Isaiah began his Book with an extended metaphor that extends from verse 2 through verse 6. In it, Isaiah provides a tragic, unsparing, and brutal introduction to God's present disappointment occasioned by Israel's willful defiance and God's response to it.

¹ Genesis 12.²⁻³

² While Yahweh called all Israel as his servant, Isaiah's calling was principally a call to serve the southern kingdom of Judah. In speaking of “Israel,” Isaiah will sometimes be referring specifically to the northern kingdom of Israel. At other times he will be including Judah within its scope. Where a clear distinction seems important, we will speak of “the northern kingdom of Israel” and “the southern kingdom of Judah.” Otherwise, we will simply speak of Israel.

In Isaiah's opening extended metaphor, the nation of Israel is likened to a child. God is likened to a devoted parent. Yahweh has loved and nurtured His child. But after all His dedicated nurturing of the child, the child has grown old enough to make and be accountable for its own choices. But the child's choices demonstrate deep defiance against God. In an attempt to correct the child's rebellious nature, the parent has struck and then beaten the child. But the correction has been to no avail. The child has remained defiant. The correctional beating has left the child seriously wounded.

The devoted parent

Before we turn to the tragic, we should have a look at the sublime. The sublime is found in Isaiah's endearing imagery of Israel's God as a parent who has devoted Himself to raising and nurturing His child, Israel.

“I raised children and brought them up,

Isaiah is not alone among the Hebrew prophets in using this imagery of God as devoted parent. Hosea, an older contemporary of Isaiah, also utilized the imagery of Yahweh as a devoted parent, and Israel as His child.

“When Yisrā'el was young, I loved him,
and summoned my son out of Egypt...
But it was I, I who taught 'Eprayim to walk,
Lifting him by the arms.
But they did not appreciate that I tended to them.
I drew them to me with human ties;
with loving attachment.

I was to them as one who lifts a nipple⁸ to their mouth,
and, leaning down, fed them.”³

Some eight hundred years later, Jesus would utilize this imagery to good effect, inviting his listeners to think of and approach God as “Father,” “Papa,” “Daddy.”

“After this manner therefore pray ye: ‘Our Father which art in heaven...’⁴

For his part, Isaiah spends a good portion of his book describing the hopes and dreams that God had for this child that He so lovingly raised. But, alas, the Israel of Isaiah’s day has laid waste God’s hopes and dreams. Tragically, the child is rebellious, unable or unwilling to acknowledge Yahweh’s parental devotion or its grateful obligation to Him.

The rebellious child

It is with the notice of willful rebellion that Isaiah’s oracle turns unsparing. The child’s rebelliousness shows it to be no more intelligent than an ox. Or, to put it more crudely, exposes the child as a dumb ass. But Isaiah is only getting started.

The child is criminal, God charges. The weight of the child’s guilt is heavy. The child’s behavior is atrocious, wicked, and ruinous. But describing the child with such adjectives is too passive for Isaiah. So, he turns to verbs. Active verbs. He piles one upon another. The child has actively “forsaken” God. He has “spurned” God. He has “turned his back” on God, showing God his backside. The child might as well have hitched up his robe and mooned God.

The repetition in verse four is like a club, hammering away at Israel’s deeply troubling rebellion against the only One who ever loved it. After all that God has done for the child in

³ Hosea 11.^{1, 3-4}; author’s translation

⁴ Matthew 6.⁹

nourishing him into adulthood, this is the thanks He gets. But, the child *is* Yahweh's. Yahweh, being Yahweh, cannot stop loving His child. He is unwaveringly committed to the child and its welfare. Therefore, Yahweh does what every good parent does. He disciplines and corrects the child.

We have, to this point, been with Isaiah. One hundred percent. Cheering him on. We very much like what he says about God. "Yes, God is a loving and caring Father." "Amen." We even agree with his estimation of the rebellious child. "Israel's behavior is scandalous." "The child needs and deserves correction." "Amen." However, we might not have anticipated the ugly turn the metaphor takes, for at this point the metaphor definitely turns from being simply unsparing to downright ugly and brutal. We might be inclined to take issue with the how God corrects his wayward child.

the brutal beating

"Why should you be stricken any more?"

Our reading of scripture can often be lazy and take on the flavor of caricature rather than reality. If we are not careful, the King James' "stricken" might cause us to minimize or even miss the intensity of God's feelings about and reaction to the child's defiance.

"Why do you continue to be beaten?"

We catch the tone better, perhaps, if we read, "Why do you continue to be beaten? you ask?"

The answer is immediate. "Your defiance continues?"

The metaphor is clear. "Stricken" is more than an affectionate or even not-so-affectionate pat to the backside. In God's attempt to discipline the child and bring him to his senses, God struck the child. When the child's behavior did not improve, one strike turned into two, then

three, then... it turned into a beating. Because the child proved impervious to correction, the beating went on and on.

Isaiah portrays a beating that is severe and brutal. The child is beaten senseless. He is delirious. The child's heartbeat is faint. Is he dying? The child's body is covered from head to toe with bruises and cuts and welts. God has not allowed the child's weakened body to be treated. The wounds remain open and weeping.

Of course, this is but metaphor. In the following verses and chapters, Isaiah leaves metaphor behind and describes the nature of Israel's real-life rebelliousness and the misfortunes that have and will befall Israel as a consequence of its defiance. That said, we might see messages in the metaphor's symbols.

Isaiah has already done much of the interpretative work for us. Israel is the child. Yahweh is the loving parent. The nation has rebelled against the principles by which Yahweh asked it to live. It has been severely chastened. But it has refused to admit guilt or mend its ways. The nation has been brought to the cusp of death. The northern kingdom of Israel will soon expire, cease from being a recognizable and independent nation. Judah will only barely survive, and that only for a few more years.

The "correction" has and will take many forms: famine, plague, economic depression, internal divisions, foreign invasion, exile, etc. Isaiah interprets all these societal disasters as manifestations of Yahweh's correction and attempt to reclaim the nation.

All of this seems clear. However, the metaphor may reveal additional insights. For example, Isaiah writes that "the whole head is sick," or, as we have it, "given over to delirium." In speaking of the "head," might Isaiah be utilizing the literary device known as metonymy⁵—the head signifying political leadership? The political leaders—of questionable morals to

⁵ Metonymy substitutes one thing, an image, for another thing that is actually the intended subject. The name metonymy comes from the Greek words, *meta* and *onoma*. Together, the two words indicate "naming," *onoma*, one thing "with," *meta*, another. We will see what is for me a classic example in Isaiah 2.¹²⁻¹⁶

begin with, as shown by the need for correction—grows ever more and more desperate in the face of correction, resorting to all sorts of delusion. Becoming ever more divorced from reality, their governance becomes increasing erratic, extreme, and ineffectual—what, for example, could be more erratic, produce more extremism, and become more ineffectual than the sort of nationalism to which Jeremiah will later point and to which nations so regularly turn in times of societal distress?

Similarly, we can understand “the whole heart faint,” or the “heartbeat growing faint” as signifying, perhaps, the weakening of religious influences and religious leadership. Ever susceptible to the idolatrous draw of this world’s affections, peoples follow religious leaders who, desperate in the face of a collapsing society, grasp at ever more meaningless and ineffective forms of religiosity—substituting, for example, theologies of election or ineffective systems of ritual and legalistic behavior for the sort of moral and ethical behavior that truly influences the trajectory of nations. Isaiah, like his contemporaries such as Amos, Hosea, and Micah, has much to say about the sham religion and unethical behavior that dominated the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel before and during his ministry.

The ever weakening political and religious institutions, of course, impact the entire population. No one is exempt from the negative consequences. All of society suffers.

“From head to toe,
there is not a healthy spot to be found.”

The entire body politic, the entire “church,” is unsound and unhealthy—from the least powerful and influential to the most powerful and influential. The delusion, the corruption, the ineffectiveness, the unsound ideologies and theologies infect the entire body. Society’s rich and poor alike are spiritually and morally impoverished. The wounds become so great that there is, indeed, no balm in Gilead strong enough to heal the wounds. Death becomes unavoidable.

We will read of all of this and much more as we continue our journey through Isaiah.

According to their language and understanding

However informative the metaphor might be, we must admit that it is brutal and ugly. The metaphor of brutal physical beating was brutal and ugly when it was penned and remains so today when we read it. The imagery can be extremely difficult and uncomfortable for modern, 21st century readers. I confess that I, myself, am sickened by physical abuse, corporal punishment, or whatever you want to call it. It is especially egregious when used upon vulnerable and helpless children. I do not believe that God is a child abuser or that He condones the beating of children.

So, yes, the portrayal of Yahweh and His divine actions toward Israel is such as to make us squirm. We are not sure we like or can like the God who is portrayed in the troubling metaphor. We are tempted to divert our gaze, close our eyes, and look away. We are tempted to explain away the ugliness and conjure up happier images of a more compassionate God whom, we are assured, we can love and admire.

But we must not divert our gaze from or explain away the imagery. We must not allow our modern sensibilities to get in the way of understanding the Lord's message as delivered through Isaiah. Yes, we must look and learn. We must learn from Isaiah's brutal honesty, lest we find ourselves in the same ugly situation as ancient Israel. To do so, we must not only put away our modern sensibilities. We must become familiar with what Nephi calls "the manner of the things of the Jews" or "the manner of prophesying among the Jews."⁶ Indeed, we must become familiar with the "manner of prophesying" that all ancient poetic prophets utilized.

So, in considering Isaiah's brutal imagery of the beating of a child, we should remember that the Lord always speaks to people "according to their language and understanding."⁷ It is virtually certain that in Isaiah's day children (wives too, for that matter!) were disciplined in physical ways that, though they offend our sensibilities today, would not have so much as caused a raised eyebrow then—Isaiah's imagery would have offended the sensibilities of his

⁶ See 2 Nephi 25.^{1,5}

⁷ See, 2 Nephi 31.³

ancient audience, not because of the imagery of beating, but because the prophet had the gull to suggest that the “righteous” nation of Israel was deserving of correction, any correction. Thus, in providing an analogy that uses violent corporal punishment of a rebellious child, Isaiah used an analogy that drew from something that was part of ancient Israel’s everyday way of life. He spoke to his people in a language they understood—though, as things turn out, the message went unheeded.

Caution in application

Another caution is perhaps in order. The intense brutality of the metaphor might lead us to draw false and unwarranted conclusions about God and His character. We might think of Him as having a short fuse and being subject to indignation and violence. We might, then, feel terrorized by Him. Both this conclusion about God and this reaction to God would be wrong.

In reading this metaphor, and, indeed, all scripture, we should keep a couple of things in mind.

First, Isaiah is speaking to a nation, not to individuals. By Isaiah’s day, God had patiently cared for and nourished the nation of Israel for many, many generations, and many hundreds of years. He had patiently cared for and nourished Israel even though the nation had been rebellious from day one. Speaking of Israel’s rebellion through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord charged,

“This hath been thy manner from thy youth,
that thou obeyedst not my voice.”⁸

⁸ Jeremiah 22.²¹

“Yet my people have forgotten me
days without number.”⁹

That same prophet later made this confession for his people.

“We have sinned against the LORD our God,
we and our fathers,
from our youth even unto this day...”¹⁰

So, whatever consequences came Israel’s way, they were national in scope and most definitely not the consequence of God suddenly and impatiently flying off the handle. He had stuck with Israel much longer than any of us might have supposed or might have done if we had been in his shoes.

Second, we must remember that, at least by Isaiah’s estimation, Israel was ripe in iniquity and ripe for destruction. This is seen in Isaiah’s going so far as to compare Israel’s rebellion to the archetypical wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom;
give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah.”¹¹

“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.”¹²

This passage, then, must be read in its historical context. Corporal punishment of children was part of the culture. Israel began its rebellion against God from the moment they met. It had been rebelling for centuries. God patiently endured the rebellion century after century.

⁹ Jeremiah 2.³²

¹⁰ Jeremiah 3.²⁵

¹¹ Isaiah 1.¹⁰

¹² Isaiah 3.⁹

God finally sought to correct the child. First, a verbal warning. Then physical discipline. Then a smack. Then a strike. Then a beating.

Individuals today who are trying to do better, probably ought not to apply this message to themselves. A people, society, nation, that is trying to be better probably need not worry about God acting in a similar manner. But an individual or society that has been repeatedly warned and has repeatedly spit in the face of deity... well, they may want to prepare themselves for a brutal beatdown.

Conclusion

In Isaiah 1.²-2.⁵, the prophet introduces the principal themes of his entire work. We catch a glimpse of these themes in Isaiah's opening metaphor.

God loved Israel. He watched over it as a devoted parent watches over their beloved child. Indeed, as the "Incomparable One," God was a parent unlike any other, loving His child when no one else would love him. God had high expectations of and even higher hopes for the nation. As his chosen representative to the world, it would be a world-changer. But, Israel responded to God's nurturing love with willful rebellion, defiance, and infidelity, rejecting both God, Himself, and His call.

As if turning from Yahweh were not enough, the nation turned to other gods, which were not, in fact, gods and did not have Israel's interest at heart. The nation's idolatry caused its citizens to forget that they were all of one, related through Yahweh. This forgetfulness caused citizens to act unjustly; to compete and hate and oppress one another for their own selfish purposes. In all this infidelity toward Yahweh and fellow citizens, the nation's ability to fulfill its divine commission to be a blessing to the world through precept and example stalled and then ceased. Israel became, as the prophet will later bear witness, a mute servant, who was stubbornly blind and deaf to its own sins and failures—sins and failures against itself, its citizenry, and the world.

Isaiah was brutal in his critique of the nation's stubborn defiance and infidelity. And God, well, he was pained that after all the care He had given to the nation, it defied Him and turned its back to Him. So, God offered correction. But Israel, like a rebellion child, would not yield. Would not repent. So, one corrective blow became two, and two blows became three, and three blows became a beating. It was a brutal and ugly beating. Still, the nation would not yield. And so the beating went on and on. The consequences of Israel's rebellion were brutal and debilitating. The entire society teetered on the cusp of collapse and annihilation. Only repentance and reform could change their fate.

To call all of this “disappointing” is a tremendous understatement. It was tragic. Yahweh possessed such hopes for Israel. It was gifted with such potential. It is little wonder, then, that Isaiah began his work with the tragic and brutal metaphor concerning Israel's correction at Yahweh's hands. It is not a pleasant picture. As we contemplate Israel's stubborn rebellion and the consequent correction, we might remember something Jesus said during his earthly ministry.

“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”¹³

He would later amplify this warning in a way that explains Yahweh's rough treatment of Israel as portrayed in Isaiah's brutal opening metaphor.

“For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation.”¹⁴

It is impossible, it seems to me, to read Isaiah, or the other Hebrew prophets for that matter, without finding American society on every page. Like Israel, America, though flawed from its very beginnings, possessed great potential for good. Like Israel, America has dabbled with idolatry and the societal perversions it brings with it. It has mooned God on more than one

¹³ Luke 12.⁴⁸

¹⁴ DC 82.³

occasion. It has accepted, here and there, the call to repent, humbled itself, and sought to correct its perverted ways sufficient to live and see another day. God has been most patient.

But, it seems, America has entered a period of deeper defiance and infidelity. We see many of the same signs of rebellion against God that we see in Isaiah. We see, it seems to me, signs that God has taken up his whip to correct the wayward child. We see deep gashes in the fabric of American life. Sadly, we see little indication of repentance.

Rather than accept correction, we see entrenchment in the same sort of rebellion as ancient Israel. We see it seek to justify its rebellion, claim that sin is righteousness, call evil good and good evil. Rich and poor alike follow political and religious leaders in yielding to delusion and lies. Without deep and sincere repentance, we fear that the beatdown will continue. If the defiance continues, it is difficult to see America's fate being anything other than that which was ancient Israel's. The time seems short. Let's hope the nation is not past feeling.

So, today is as good a time as any to consider, without avoidance or excuse, the direct warning that Isaiah's introductory metaphor represents to all those who would think of themselves as disciples and ambassadors of the true and living God. It is as good a time as any to set aside all stubborn rebellion and all stubborn refusal to be corrected. It is as good a time as any to ask what kind of citizens we are. What kind of national citizens are we. What kind of global citizens are we? What kind of citizens of the greatest of all kingdoms, the Kingdom of God, are we?

Today is as good a time as any to repent. There is no guarantee that we will be given another chance. God will not be mocked. Israel, northern and southern kingdom together, finally yielded to death's insatiable appetite for this world's kingdoms. One fears that Americans have thrown their windows and doors wide open, giving entrance to the same insatiable death that has devoured so many nations and peoples before it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

^a Hebrew, *hōy*. It is often translated as “woe” or “alas.” According to *TDOT*, the “word takes on the meaning of a threat” in the prophets (Vo. X, p. x). “But we also find prophetic invective introduced by *hōy* without any associated threat” (Vo. X, p. x).

^b Hebrew, *hātā*’.

^c Hebrew, *qādōš*., traditionally, “holy.”

^d This line could be translated, “Why does their rebellion continue?” Here, however, I have taken it as answer to the question posed in the preceding line.

^e Heb., *h^l*, means ‘to be sick, or faint.’ When the head is “sick” it is feverish and delirious.

^f Hebrew, *zūr*, literally, “to press down, to compress.” The wounds are still open and, because they have not been treated or had pressure applied, are still raw and bleeding.

^g The root *’wl* means to feed. The noun, *’ul* means “a nursing baby, suckling.” Though I have not found lexical evidence, it does not seem such a huge stretch to assume that there is a noun related to this root that means “nipple,” the “suckling” being “the one at the nipple.” It seems that the context almost demands some such understanding—certainly the idea of a yoke being removed completely destroys the running parental imagery. With scripture almost universally portraying God as the ultimate in masculinity, it is easy to understand why imagery portraying God as offering a nipple would have caused translators some discomfort. Indeed, the texts, “I was to them as one” rather than, “I was to them the one” seems to reflect a certain discomfort. As the LXX and the variety of modern translations attest, the entire passage is difficult. One wonders if the difficulties arise from the discomfort of this concept and then work themselves backward from there. But, the fact is, that much of what God is portrayed here as doing for Israel in its infancy and youth is precisely what one expect from a mother, less from an ancient father.