

An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 1:10-20

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1. The Text and Translation of the Passage

- 10 Hear^a the word of Yahweh, O rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the instruction^b of our God, people of
Gomorrah!
- 11 “What does the abundance of your sacrifices mean^c
to me?” says Yahweh; “I have had enough of burnt
offerings of rams and the fat of fed animals; and in the
blood of bulls, lambs, and goats I take no pleasure.
- 12 But^d you come to appear^e before me, trampling my
courts; who has required this of you?
- 13 Bring worthless offerings no longer; the smoke of
sacrifice is an abomination to me. I cannot endure
new moon and sabbath, the calling of sacred
assembly--hypocrisy and worship!^f
- 14 I hate your new moons and your appointed feasts;
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of
bearing [them].¹
- 15 So when you spread out your hands,^g I will hide my
eyes from you; even though you multiply prayer, I will
not listen; because^h your hands are full of blood!
- 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove
the evil of your deeds from my sight; cease to do evil,
17 learn to do good; seek justice, relieve the
oppressed²; defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
- 18 “Come, let us reason together¹,” says Yahweh,
“though your sins are as scarlet, they can³ be made as
white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they
can become as wool.
- 19 If you submit and obey, you will eat the good of
the land;
- 20 But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured
by the sword; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.”
- שְׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה קָצִינֵי סֹדִם הָאֲזִינוּ 10
תּוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִם עֲמֻרָה:
לְמַה־לִּי רַב־זְבָּחֵיכֶם יְהוָה 11
שְׁבַעַתִּי עֲלוֹת אֵילִים וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם
פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׂים וְעִתוּדִים לֹא חִפְצָתִי:
כִּי תִבְאוּ לְרְאוֹת פָּנָי מִי־בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת 12
מִיִּדְכֶם רִמְס חֲצֵרִי:
לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת־שָׂוּא קִטְרֵת תּוֹעֵבָה 13
הִיא לִי חֹדֶשׁ וְשַׁבָּת קְרָא מְקַרָּא
לֹא־אוֹכַל אֲוֹן וְעֶצְרָה:
חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם שְׁנֵאָה נַפְשֵׁי הָיוּ 14
עָלַי לְטָרַח גְּלֵאִתִּי נִשְׂאָ:
וּבְפָרְשֵׁיכֶם כְּפִיכֶם אֲעֲלִים עֵינַי מִכֶּם 15
גַּם כִּי־תִרְבוּ תִפְלָה אֵינֹנִי שְׁמִיעַ
יְדֵיכֶם דְּמִים מְלֹאוּ:
רַחֲצוּ הַזּוֹפוּ הַסִּירוּ רַע מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם 16
מִנְּגַד עֵינַי חִדְלוּ הָרַע:
לְמַדּוּ הַיֵּטִב דַּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרוּ חָמוּץ 17
שִׁפְטוּ יִתּוֹם רִיבוּ אֱלֻמְנָה: ס
לְכוּ־נָא וְנוֹכַחַה יְהוָה אִם־יְהִיוּ 18
חֲטָאֵיכֶם כְּשָׁנִים כְּשֶׁלֶג יִלְבִּינוּ
אִם־יֵאָדִימוּ כְּתוֹלַע כְּצֶמֶר יְהִיוּ:
אִם־תֵּאָבוּ וּשְׁמַעְתֶּם טוֹב הָאָרֶץ תֹּאכְלוּ: 19
וְאִם־תִּמְאָנוּ וּמְרִיתֶם חָרֵב תֹּאכְלוּ כִּי 20
פִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר: ס

^a Because of its close connection in this context with “word [דבר] of Yahweh” and “instruction [תורת] of our God,” the word “hear” [שמע] conveys more than physical hearing. It also includes the idea of responding to or obeying what is heard. To really “hear” the word of Yahweh is to obey it. This dimension is also emphasized in verses 19-20 where the same Hebrew root (hear/obey [שמע]) is paralleled to “submit” (be willing[אבה]), and contrasted to “refuse” [מאן] and “rebel” [מרה].

^b The precise nuance of תורת here is much debated. It has been understood in connection with wisdom instruction (Jensen), as the totality of “law” (Beecher), in connection with priestly usage or as “priestly torah” (Begrich, Westermann), as a synonym for the prophetic word (Lindblom), or related to cultic or secular legal procedure (Harvey, Limburg). It seems best to understand the “instruction,” especially in context with דבר, as prophetic instruction modeled on priestly instruction (cf. Mal 2:7-9). However, the impact of the two terms together does not

emphasize the authority of the prophetic (or priestly) office as much as it simply points to the importance of the content of what is to follow. The ambiguity of the term also allows it to pick up the overtones of wisdom instruction. The prophetic “instruction” comprises the true essence of wisdom which comes from Yahweh in contrast to the popular misconceptions and false practices.

^c For this sense of the interrogative [לְמָה], see Amos 5:18. It is also possible to understand the question as “why?”--“Why [offer] an abundance of your sacrifice to me. . .since I am full. . .and take no pleasure. . .?” For this sense, see Jere 6:20.

^d Most writers take this construction [כִּי תִבְאוּ] as temporal: “When you come. . .” The LXX understood it this way, translating the phrase as *ουτὴ ἐὰν ἐλθῆσθε*. However there are some problems in taking this as a temporal clause. With what action or event should this phrase coordinated? The LXX recognized this difficulty by inserting a coordinating negative, *ουτε*. This relates the clause back to “I take no pleasure [לֹא תִפְצְתִי] [ou]boul omai] of the preceding verse. This does not seem to be the sense of either verse. The majority of those who take this as a temporal construction coordinate the introductory phrase with the following question and verb: “When you come. . . who requires. . .?” However, this approach makes it difficult to relate the last of the verse (“trampling of my courts” [רָמַסְתָּ הַחֲצֵרִים]) to the rest of the sentence. Most relate this last phrase back to the relative pronoun “this” [זֶה] in the previous phrase. However, this implies that the “trampling of my courts” was required, a meaning obviously foreign to the context. The issue in the passage is not the appearing before Yahweh or the trampling of the courts, but unacceptable sacrifices. The question, and especially its relative pronoun (“Who has required this of you?”), must refer to the sacrifices of verse 11.

I have suggested understanding the introductory clause of verse 12 [כִּי תִבְאוּ] as adversative. This usage of כִּי following a negative is well attested. An almost identical construction is found in Psa 44:7-8. While most adversative constructions using כִּי in Isaiah involve contrasting actions of the same subject (10:7, 28:27, etc.), this use with two subjects is not excluded. By understanding the verb “trampling” [רָמַסְתָּ] as an infinitive of attendant circumstance, the sense becomes: “I have had enough. . .I take no pleasure. . . but you come anyway, trampling my courts. . .” This allows the command of verse 13 (“Bring worthless offerings no longer.”) to have even greater impact. Also, this understanding allows the relative pronoun to refer, not to the trampling, but to the whole cultic sphere of verses 11-12, and then by implication, to what follows in verses 13-14.

^e As explained in the preceding note, the sense of the infinitives “to appear” [לִירְאוֹת] and “trampling” [רָמַסְתָּ] with “come” [תִּבְאוּ] should be: action (*come*)--purpose (*to appear*)--attendant circumstance (*trampling*). They could also be seen as: action (*come*)--attendant circumstances (*appearing* and *coming*), or as: action (*come*)--purpose (*to appear*)--result (*trampled*).

^f It is difficult to determine how to relate the last two phrases in verse 13 to each other and to the context. Some scholars simply delete the last two words in v. 13 (“iniquity and solemn assembly” [וְעֵצְרָהּ] [אֲוֹן]) as additions. However, this seems too expedient (see the textual note here). The LXX understands these two words (*nhsteian kai argian*) with the following verse as direct objects of “I hate” (*misei* [שָׂנְאָה]). This leaves “new moon and Sabbath, the calling of sacred assemblies” as the object of “I cannot endure.” This understanding of 13c is correct. However, since the last two words in v. 13 are singular and without suffixes, while the objects in v. 14 are plural with suffixes, these words should also be seen as relating to the main verb in v. 13 (“I cannot endure”). Thus the final two words of v. 13 become emphatic rhetorical summaries of what God can no longer endure.

The term “iniquity” [אֲוֹן] seems out of place here, and was changed by the LXX [*nhsteian*]. However the semantic range of the word includes treachery, falsehood, deceit, or even self-deception (cf. Zech 10:2, Psa 7:14, Isa 59:4). With these overtones, it is not at all out of context in this passage. In fact, it is precisely the point of the passage, as suggested above! The problem the prophet is addressing is the hypocrisy of the people in offering sacrifices with no concern for what they signify. Rather than reflecting a garbled text, as some suggest, this “awkward” construction underlines this as a focal point.

^g There is no reason to include the LXX’s interpretive expansion of this verse, which provides an object [*ouketi aphisw taj amartiāj u(mw)*] that is lacking in the MT and sets up a connection with verses 18-20.

^h The word “palm” [כַּף] is used to emphasize that the palms are outstretched in prayerful supplication.

ⁱ This statement is clearly causal, against NASB. Note LXX’s use of *gar* here.

^j Reading קָמוּץ (“oppressed”) with the LXX [*ajikoumenon*] and other versions rather than the קָמוּץ (“oppression” or “oppressor”) of the MT. This fits much better in the context of “defensive” social actions, rather than the more aggressive “reprove the ruthless” of NASB.

ⁱ The single word Niphal here [וְנִיכְחָדוּ] is better seen as reciprocal (*let us reason with each other*) rather than as reflexive (*let each of us reason within ourselves*). This sense is made more clear by the phrase “says Yahweh,” which identifies who the other party to the first person plural subject is.

^j The English subjunctive fits better with the conditional constructions of verses 19-20. The idea of possibility better reflects the idea of reasoning together. Some read these as questions: “Since your sins are scarlet, can they [ever] be white as snow?” While grammatically possible, this reading does not fit with the tone of the passage. It is usually determined by particular views of the overall meaning of the passage in light of certain theological presuppositions. There is nothing in the passage that compels such an understanding.

2. The Literary Context, Structure, and Composition

A. The Limits of the Unit

The limits of this particular literary unit are defined by several structural and rhetorical features. First there is the double use of the ‘envelope’ structure or *inclusio* where particular words or phrases are repeated at the beginning and end of a unit. In verse 10a the attention of the hearers is directed to the “word” of Yahweh. This is paralleled in careful AB-BA construction with “instruction of our God.” This call to attention using the two imperatives “hear” and “listen” indicates that what follows will be the “word” of God. In verse 20c the phrase “for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken [His word]” is an affirmation that what has proceeded is indeed the “word” of God. These two occurrences of the same Hebrew root (דבר, “word” pointed as a noun, and “speak” pointed as a verb) frame the entire Yahweh speech. This is reinforced by the fact that the root “word/speak” does not occur elsewhere in the passage.

The phrase “says Yahweh” occurs in two places in the passage, verses 11 and 18. Since these are not really part of Yahweh speaking, some have used these phrases to define distinct units, especially at verse 18. They see these phrases as remnants of messenger formulae. However, both of these occurrences function in the same manner within the larger Yahweh speech (11-20). The first “says Yahweh” in verse 11 clearly identifies the referent of the first person singular pronominal elements (to me, I am full, etc.) This clearly marks the separation of the call to attention spoken by the prophet (10) from the beginning of the oracle ascribed to Yahweh (11). Likewise, in verse 18, “says Yahweh” serves to establish clearly who is included in the first person plural forms (“let us reason”). The intention is to confirm that it is not the prophet who wishes to reason, but God himself.

A second inclusion can be seen in the use of “hear.” In verse 10a “[all of you] hear” introduces the call to attention directed to the people. The object of the hearing is the “word of Yahweh” whose meaning is expanded by the parallel “instruction.” It is important to bear in mind that the range of meaning of “hear” also encompasses “obey.” In verse 19a the same verb takes on this nuance of meaning: “If you [all]. . . hear/obey. . .” In this verse hear/obey occurs in the protasis of a double conditional sentence: if-then, but if not-then. The implicit objects of the four conditional verbs of verses

19-20 (submit, obey; refuse, rebel) are the imperatives of verses 16-17 (wash, make clean, remove, cease, learn, seek, relieve, defend, plead). Within the structure of the Yahweh-speech these imperatives are the content of the “word of Yahweh” and the “instruction of our God.” Therefore, the object of “hear” (what the people are supposed to hear/obey) is effectively the same in both verse 10 and 19. The effect of the inclusio becomes: “do what I am about to tell you” (v.10); “now do what I have told you” (v. 19).

A further rhetorical use of “hear” (v.15) serves to bind the passage together and outline its theme. The object of “I will not listen” is the multiplied prayers of the people. The declaration by God that he will not hear is in contrast to the command and appeal for the people to hear (vv. 10 and 19). Taken together, the sense of these three uses of “hear” within the context of the passage is: “You had better hear (obey) because I will not hear (respond to your prayers) until you truly hear (obey).” God is not hearing them because they are not hearing God. As the passage goes on to express graphically, hearing God means certain very specific actions on the part of the people.

A second feature which marks the end of the unit is the abrupt shift in style and subject beginning in verse 21. The tone of these following verses is very different, introduced by the lamenting exclamation “How!” Too, the subject is different in these verses, with various words referring to the city of Jerusalem. “Faithful city” forms an inclusion of verses 21 and 26, and refers to the subject “Zion” which is further referred to in verses 27-31, as well as the following chapters.

This same characteristic shift in subject matter also marks the beginning of the unit under consideration (1:10-20). While the two cities Sodom and Gomorrah are used as catch words to tie this unit with the preceding one (1:4-9), they are used with very different frames of reference. In the preceding section, the two cities are used as symbols of destruction. In this section, the two cities are used descriptively to refer to the sins of the people and the leaders of Judah.

B. Internal Structure

This unit readily divides itself into five sections: 10, 11-12, 13-15, 16-17, 18-20. As noted, the first section (10) is structured as two inverted parallel elements (AB-BA). Since it stands outside the Yahweh speech that follows, it serves as an introduction to the unit.

Verses 11-12 are framed by two rhetorical questions: “What does . . . mean?” and “Who has required. . .?” While the internal structure of these two verses is difficult to establish, it is best to see the focus of the first question (abundance of sacrifices) as also the focus of the second question (this from you; literally “this from your hand,” referring to the sacrifices and all aspects of religious worship). This specific rejection of sacrifice is then expanded in the following section to include all areas of worship.

The section of 13-15 is composed of two distinct parts marked by differences in structure, but related to the beginning of verse 15 (“so”) which functions here to relate cause (vv. 13-14) to effect (v. 15). Verses 13-14 are difficult to analyze because their structure is not clear. However, verse 15 is highlighted, not only by a precise structure (AB-AB-C), but also by a double negation of sight (“I will not see what you do”) and hearing (“I will not hear what you say”). This, combined with the earlier observations of the rhetorical function of “hear,” serves to place verse 15 in a key position in the passage. Verse 15 not only closes this particular subsection (13-15), it also divides verses 11-15 from what follows. Also, since the last phrase in verse 15 is causal, it provides the ground and reason for what has been said in the preceding verses. So while verses 11-12 and 13-15 are distinct units, they function together in the larger passage.

As would be expected from the observations already made, there is a marked shift in structure in verses 16-17. The terse imperatives bear no formal relation to the preceding sections and have their own internal structure. This shift clearly marks a distinction between the present circumstance (11-15) and what ought to be (16-17). It also lays the groundwork for the conditional statements which follow. However, the connection and relationship with the previous section is clearly established by the imperative verbs “wash” and “make clean” which begin in verse 16. The unclean hands which are the symbol and symptom of the problems of verses 11-15 must be made clean.

We should also note the rhetorical connection between the blood of sacrifice in which God takes no pleasure (v.11) and the hands full of blood which are the cause of the rejection of the sacrifice (v.15). There is an implicit reference to religious purity here, in that the hands stained with blood were not fit ritually to offer sacrifice until they had been cleaned. The symbolic use of blood will be dealt with below.

After the initial line of verse 18a, which focuses attention much as verse 10a does, the section of verses 18-20 returns to the same precise structure seen earlier in verses 10, and 15 (parallelism: AB-AB). The conditional statements of verses 19-20 also demonstrate this parallel structure (AB-AB), except in these verses opposites are paired for contrast. This entire last section is tied together both structurally and thematically by the repeated use of a single Hebrew word, “though” or “if” [אִם], although the meaning of the word is slightly different in verse 18 (concessive) than it is in verses 19-20 (conditional). The focus of these last three verses is “your sins,” which is the subject of all four verbs in verse 18. The connection with the previous sections is made by identifying the sins as red stains, directly relating to the declaration of guilt associated with blood in verse 15. The close connection between the conditional nature of this section, which is actually an appeal to action, and the imperatives of the previous section (vv. 16-17), suggest that these two sections should be understood as closely related parts of a larger unit.

Thus, the analysis of the internal structure of the passage has yielded three major divisions:

- I. Appeal for hearing (10)
- II. Reality of the Present (11-15)
 - A. Insufficiency of sacrifice, 11-12
 - B. Guilt of hypocrisy, 13-15
- III. Possibility for the future (16-20)
 - A. Conditions for purity, 17
 - B. Call to repentance, 18-20

C. Literary Context

We should briefly take note of the manner in which this section is related to the sections around it. The lack of understanding of the people, alluded to in 1:3, is made explicit in verses 11-15. The purity that forms a central part of this section, especially verses 16-18, can also be seen in relation to the sickness of verse 5 and to the process of smelting referred to in verse 25. The promise and threat of verses 19-20 relates directly to the desolation of the land pictured in verse 7. The guilt and sinfulness of the nation is seen throughout the chapter (4, 15, 18, 22f) and the commands of verses 16-17 relate directly to the sins enumerated in verses 22-23. So while this section forms a complete and independent unit, it is closely tied both formally and thematically to the rest of the chapter.

An analysis of this passage in the structure of the entire book of Isaiah is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, scholars generally recognize that Isaiah 1:2-31 serves as a prologue or introduction to the entire collection. The repeated superscription in 2:1 reinforces this perception. If this is at all valid, the canonical shaping of the book of Isaiah has placed both the guilt of the people, the threat of judgment, and the call to repentance found in this section (1:10-20) and throughout the first chapter as governing themes for the entire collection of Isaiah traditions.

D. Rhetorical and Literary Features

Several of the literary features have already been mentioned in the examination of structure. The use of “hear” in both ranges of its meaning in Hebrew (hear/obey) focuses attention at the beginning (10), indicates God’s displeasure (15), and calls the people to obedience (19). The imagery of blood indicates the people’s guilt (15) that must be cleansed (16) because it is like a stain on the people (18). Parallelism focuses attention at key points (10, 15, 18, 19-20).

The imagery of blood has another more subtle dimension in this passage. It is clearly a symbol for guilt. This is not so much a forensic guilt needing a legal remedy, but culpability that has betrayed relationship. In this sense, the imagery of blood functions much like the symbol of nakedness in Genesis 2-3. In both cases, some action is needed to correct the unacceptable situation. But the imagery of blood here is a much more violent symbol. It would seem that the guilt of the people described by the symbol of blood would be the result of violent horrible deeds, such as murder. In fact, the strongly emotive language used throughout the passage suggests atrocious crimes committed by the people. Yet, there is no list of horrible atrocities that the people have committed. The call to repentance does not call the people to stop murdering each other. It calls for simple social justice: taking care of orphans and widows, defending the oppressed. The “good” that the people are called to do (v. 17) is defined in terms of taking the side of the weakest, the most powerless members of their society. The implication is that the “evil” they are doing (v. 16) is the neglect of these things.

The “blood” dripping from their hands may well imply heinous crimes against humanity and God. Yet the effect of the metaphor is to define what it means to be the people of God in terms of care for other

people. There is no outright rejection of the cult and religious practices here; those things are simply subsumed under the larger rubric of justice practiced by God's people. There may even be the implication that worship of God, even cleansing from guilt, is accomplished in proper service, as God's people, to helpless humanity. This idea is staggering in its implications, and goes far beyond what can be accomplished in this paper. However, the idea does occur again in a slightly different frame of reference later in the book of Isaiah, in chapters 52-53!

There are some other rhetorical features which help pull the reader/hearer toward the message of the passage. One of these is the building of tension and conflict within the passage. This is begun by the strong statements about the rejection of sacrifices (11). This is followed by a series of sharp rebukes for which no immediate reason is given. The very things which were supposed to have been given by God for proper worship of Him He now rejects in increasingly strong language. The explanation for the sharp rebuke is not given until the climax of the first section of accusation in verse 15.

This climax of accusation is closely tied to the use of the word "hands" in the passage. The movement toward verse 15 can be seen as follows:

12 Who requires this [sacrifice] from your hand?
15a When you spread out your hands I will hide my eyes.
15c Your hands are full of blood!

This indicates that Israel's practices of worship are abhorrent to God because the people who worship are doing so with bloodstained hands. They bring their sacrifices to the altar at the same time that they are not ritually clean. But the problem goes far beyond ritual defilement. The rituals are clearly understood here in a larger symbolic context. The imagery of blood stained hands referring to ritual impurity is here applied to the moral condition of the people. This is made clear in verses 16-17. But the tension is built into the passage early, and the reason for God's rejection of sacrifices that He himself had mandated is not known until verse 15.

This tension is further evident in the emphasis on the persons involved, the contrast between God (first person pronominal forms, I, my) and the people (second person plural pronominal forms, you, your). Notice that it is *your* festivals, and by implication *your* sacrifices, *your* offerings, *your* assemblies,

your worship, and finally *your* hands and *your* prayers which God rejects. Again, this builds to the reason in verse 15: it is *your* hands that are blood stained. This tension between the people and God also sharpens the impact of the appeal for mutual action that is part of the call to reconciliation: Come let **US** reason together!

E. Literary Form and Genre

There is considerable debate among scholars concerning the composition of the passage and the entire chapter of which it is a part. Most of the recent debate centers around identifying the genre to which this section belongs. And even those who accept the majority opinion and place this in the genre of “disputation speech” are divided as to the original setting (cultic, legal, international treaty, vassal treaty, etc.) and function (anti-wisdom polemic, rejection of the cult, wisdom instruction, etc.). As would be expected, this diversity of viewpoint has led to a wide range of opinions to how the chapter should be divided, how it is structured, and how it should be interpreted. Rather than enter into this debate, with questionable outcomes at best, it seems more profitable simply to make some observations of the nature of the passage.

The passage can be considered “messenger speech.” While it lacks the more conventional formula (“thus says Yahweh”), there is a Yahweh-speech in the first person addressed to hearers in the second person plural, traits of more formally structured “messenger speech.” This speech is introduced as the “word of Yahweh” and is framed by a call to attention and a pronouncement that God has spoken (cf. Isa 40:1-5). This, at least, characterizes the passage as a prophetic word delivered to the community. While there is also debate over the occasion of the speech, there seems to be ample evidence to argue for a setting associated with worship: sacrifices, burnt offerings, appearing before Yahweh, the courts of the Temple, prayers, ritual purity, etc. Some have painted a picture of the prophet rising to give his oracle amid the commotion of the offering of sacrifices on one of the great feast days, at the time the priest would read from the Torah. While this is no doubt becoming fanciful, if the passage must be assigned to a particular occasion this is probably the most likely. However, it is just as important to recognize that the final form of the passage is a *literary* composition, whatever the oral background of the original speech.

Since there is no direct evidence of the “original” setting and any such setting depends on conjecture, it seems to profit little to depend on such reconstructions to interpret the passage.

There is some evidence to understand this passage as reflecting some sort of “disputation speech” pattern (רִיב). This would suggest that this passage should be seen as a form of legal pronouncement (Gemser, Limburg, Harvey). While there is disagreement among scholars whether a formal genre that can be identified as “disputation speech” even exists, there are enough occurrences of such a pattern to suggest at least some stylistic or metaphorical relationship with legal proceedings. Whatever the original setting of a posited disputation speech, for our purposes the important point is how such a genre, or such metaphorical language, is adapted to function in this passage.

As I have already pointed out, one of the main points of focus in verses 10-20 is the declaration of culpability (v.15). This is central to the passage, not only as the reason for the present circumstances, (vv. 10-15), but also as a basis for the declarations and appeal which follow (vv. 16-20). The legal overtones, whether related to religious, secular, or international contexts, are concerned with culpability in some form, either as a direct violation of stipulations or the failure to carry out mandated provisions. Although covenant is never mentioned in this passage, this legal language should be seen against the background of the concept of covenant between the people and God (Huffman). The function of the legal trappings here is to emphasize in the most dramatic way possible the magnitude of the people’s hypocrisy and their failure to fulfill their covenantal responsibility.

The problem facing Isaiah was a people who considered themselves “exempt” from any culpability (see below), not only because of their religious rituals but also because of the developing distortions of election theology with its corresponding ideas of unconditional blessing and promise (see below). The use of the legal overtones to pronounce the people blameworthy and to denounce the efficacy of their religious practices in light of that culpability would have particular impact.

It is also important to note that the legal language here does not end in the expected doom oracle of judgment, but in a summons to repentance (cf. Hosea 11:1-11). It is precisely this shift from the expected consequences of verses 11-15 to an appeal for repentance that makes the prophet’s point and directs attention to the heart of his message. While the Isaiah traditions would not hesitate to announce judgment

when appropriate, the emphasis in this passage is in a different direction (cf. Micah 6:8). This point has particular significance when this passage is understood as a major component of the introduction to the entire Isaiah corpus. In a crucial way, as noted above, this chapter serves as a “filter” through which to hear and understand the entire Book of Isaiah.

3. The Historical Setting

It is difficult, if not impossible, to place this passage with any certainty at any particular point in the ministry of Isaiah (742-*ca.*690 BC). However, it is helpful to recall the conditions prevailing in Judah at this time (cf. Bright for details). The threat of Assyrian conquest loomed ominously over Judah during the entire career of Isaiah. But it was to the religious attitudes and moral condition of the people in the face of this continuing crisis that Isaiah addresses some of his most impassioned oracles. Isaiah constantly found himself at odds with popular theological and political views fostered by an elaborate cultic system, a distorted sense of election, and a royal theology that eliminated responsibility. These all combined to promulgate the idea of unconditional promise and blessing from God. It was the task of Isaiah and his contemporaries to re-interpret the national-popular theology in the face of changing historical circumstances. Theologically, he communicated and interpreted to the people the imminent intervention of God into the affairs of the people.

There is little evidence to indicate in which period within Isaiah’s career to place this message, so it seems fruitless to make guesses. It is more helpful simply to place it within the general circumstances of Isaiah’s time, which, as Isaiah observes (6:9-13) do not really change all that much as far as the people’s attitudes are concerned.

It might be helpful if we could trace the growth and redaction of the traditions from Isaiah of Jerusalem as they are used in later historical contexts and interwoven into the larger fabric of the book of Isaiah. While many scholars have attempted this for over a century, so little consensus has emerged that the endeavor is questionable. It is likely that later editors in different historical circumstances have arranged the oracles of Isaiah, added their own framework, and used the Isaiah traditions to meet ongoing needs within the community of faith. However, since we have no reliable mechanism or methodology to

sort this out positively, it is best to focus on the canonical text as it is and rely on the general time period of Isaiah of Jerusalem as a historical frame of reference for Isaiah 1-39.

4. The Communication of the Text

The prophet opens his proclamation to the people in a style and with language associated with legal procedure, as a lawyer would read an indictment to a judge. But it is quickly apparent that this is not a case to be tried to determine guilt or innocence. The verdict is already in: the people are guilty. They have already been characterized as evil, corrupt, and rebellious in the first part of the chapter. Yet, their culpability is driven home to these people who see themselves as God's holy nation in a graphic way by referring to them as Gomorrah-people and to their leaders as Sodom-rulers. Few symbols would have stated the case as strongly as these two cities that had become a powerful metaphor for rejection of God and by God.

The opening appeal to "hear" is at the same time an advance appeal to respond to what is heard. If God's people have become Gomorrah-people, the implication is that they have not heard God and obeyed. They must hear *now*; and if they really hear, then they must obey.

Along with the overtones of a legal procedure, the people would hear the instruction coming, not from a priest as it normally did, but from a prophet. Here the ambiguity of the term תִּוְרָה allows the message to function on two levels from the beginning. While תִּוְרָה can mean "law" in the most negative sense, it can also mean simply "instruction," especially in the things of God. While there is strong condemnation in the accusations, the groundwork is already being laid to move beyond judgment.

We can almost hear the response of the people to such an introduction. No doubt they would immediately profess innocence and object that they *have* been obedient. They have brought sacrifices and offerings, they have been faithful in coming to the Temple, they have prayed, they have observed the religious holy days.

But the prophet poses a penetrating question: What do the sacrifices matter? This immediately raises the question of priorities. God declares that He has had enough of their sacrifices. He makes it clear that "religion" is not nearly as important as the people thought it was. Then comes another question

designed to drive to the heart of the matter: Who has required them to bring the sacrifices and engage in all their religious activities? This question has an obvious answer from the people. There could only be one answer. Of course, it was God Himself who ordained the sacrifices and the feast days. They were part of the worship of God, mandated by God himself. Through them atonement for sin was made, or so the people thought. Through them God's favor and blessing were bestowed. They were the signs of God's choice of the people to be His special people. They were central because God had himself ordained it so!

But to the obvious, God answers, "No!" In terms usually associated with things diametrically opposed to God, He terms the smoke of the burnt offering, which should be a sweet smell to Him, an abomination. He declares the offerings as worthless, the holy days beyond His endurance, the religious festivals joyless and things to be hated. God can no longer tolerate the falsehood of their worship, the hypocrisy of a guilty people in worship. As a result, even their prayers will no longer be heard. At this, their last link with God has been severed. The message is clear: God will no longer tolerate things the way they are. Something must change.

Again one can almost picture the effect: people standing with mouths open in disbelief asking, "But why?" Such a response would be expected, for earlier in the chapter, Isaiah had accused the people of being insensitive to the things of God: "Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (1:3). The truth is then pounded home in no subtle way. It is because they have sinned, they have failed God, they have failed to be his people. It is not necessary for the prophet to list here the sins of which the people are guilty. It is enough to say, "Your hands are full of blood."

God rejected the sacrifices because they have been offered by a people who have not recognized their own unworthiness. The blood of bulls and rams are worthless coming from people whose own hands are dripping with blood. The sacrifices and religious observances cannot replace obedience to God. The sacrifices mean nothing in themselves. God does not want the sacrifices. He wants the obedience of the people. But it is not blind obedience to a set of rules or to an external system that God desires. He wants obedience to his word and his instruction. And that instruction, that *torah*, in this case is that His people would learn to care for others.

Sacrifice and worship have no meaning if the people do not feel themselves responsible to God under the relationship by which God had set up the ordinances in the first place. While God had approved the sacrifices and allowed them to be carried out in the process of worshipping Him, there was a mutual covenant undertaken which involved commitment to God. It was that commitment to listen to (obey) God that was then expressed in worship. But the people had now developed a perspective which allowed them to see the sacrifices apart from that commitment. They had divorced the worship of Yahweh from their own actions. Therefore, the worship had become empty. They were simply going through the motions without any true comprehension of what it really meant. They came to expect the privilege of being God's people without accepting any of the responsibility. They worshipped because it was commanded and expected, because it was part of their religious identity and culture.

But that was not what God had commanded. The sacrifices were never meant to be an end in themselves. Worship was not to be done for its own sake or for the sake of the people. Worship was an expression of who they were. And who they were at this point is exemplified by bloody hands!

There was no separating how God dealt with them from their actions. There was no unconditional blessing. God demanded purity, not in a ritualistic sense, but in intentions and actions. As the sacrificial animal must be pure when it is offered, so the people must be pure when they offer it. While they would no doubt go through the external requirements of physical cleanliness, their hands which they raised to offer worship to God was stained with the guilt of their sinful actions. Bloodstained hands must be washed, the stain of guilt must be removed, just as the nakedness of guilt must be covered.

The prophet gives examples of exactly what this kind of purity and washing involves. It means a redirection of activities toward those members of the community who cannot defend themselves. This involves both positive and negative dimensions. It is not enough simply to refrain from overt evil actions, although that is necessary. There must also be deliberate positive efforts. And they must not be abstract affirmations of ideals, but expressed in everyday living, in relationships with others. The context suggests that these examples are not all inclusive and that they are not delimiting. As the blood-stained hands evoke a much larger image of guilt and failure, so the reference to orphans and widows evokes a much larger image of righteousness and justice. **What is involved here is no less than an attitude, a**

lifestyle, that produces, not bloody hands, but rescued oppressed ones, defended orphans, pled-for widows, a people who have learned to do good and to seek justice, a people who have become clean.

God continues to speak through the prophet and affirms, still in legal imagery, that their guilt can be removed. Other prophets, such as Amos and Micah, and even Isaiah at other times, would proclaim that guilt requires punishment, as had fallen on Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet here, to a people who are no less guilty and no less deserving of that punishment, God offers the possibility of repentance before that punishment is carried out. The guilt of sin that has occasioned the rejection of sacrifices and that the prophets portray in such violent and sinister metaphors can be made clean, can be forgiven.

It is God who makes the appeal for reconciliation because the people have deceived themselves into a false security. Though He has rejected their efforts at worship as unworthy because they were not presented with a right motive, yet He makes it clear that no matter how guilty the people are, they can be forgiven. The implication is that if the people would submit themselves to the responsibilities of God's word and instruction, if they would reorient their priorities before God, if they would turn back to a dependence upon God, then once again the sacrifices would be acceptable as valid expressions of worship offered to God with "clean hands and a pure heart" (Psa 24:4).

But there is a condition imposed here. It is the condition of submission and obedience. An example of the implications of what that obedience entails is given here as defending the weakest and most helpless members of society. Evidence of a proper attitude of submission and obedience to God will be expressed by focusing attention, not just upon the concern with one's own status before God, not just on performing the proper rituals, but also, and perhaps primarily, on the needs and concerns of others.

God has held the verdict of "guilty" before the people, not in order to exact punishment, but that they might be reconciled to him; that their worship might have meaning; that they might live a life worthy of who they are as God's people, as God's holy nation; that they might serve God by serving their fellow human beings.

5. The Significance of the Text

Through the centuries since the time of Isaiah, through the teaching of Jesus, the writings of Paul, the work of the Reformers, the Christian church has come to realize very clearly the truth that reconciliation with God comes as His free gift. We cannot earn it and we do not deserve it. This is implicit even in Isaiah's passage, and is repeated throughout the Old Testament prophets. But with the affirmation of salvation by grace alone comes the danger of lapsing into the same kind of attitude that characterized Isaiah's day. The danger is in believing that religion itself, whether defined in terms of proper actions or "orthodox" beliefs, is a guarantee of right relationship with God. As long as the sacraments are observed, the liturgy performed and the creed read, as long as a person can point back to a time and place where there was an experience with God and the "fire fell," then salvation is assured. As long as the Bible is affirmed to be inerrant, as long as abortion is opposed, and as long as homosexuals and other sinners are denounced, then can relationship with God really be in question? Few Christians in the Church today would articulate these positions; they just practice them. The message of Isaiah is that it is not so!

Isaiah's message to this presumption is twofold. There is more to serving God than obeying the "law." And obedience to God must be characterized by, and expressed in, proper actions. This gives both a personal and an ethical dimension to serving God. It is also a warning to both extremes that face the Christian church today. On the one hand, the tendency toward formalism and excessive structure threatens to lead people to a point where religion and worship become ends in themselves, lacking that element of submission and obedience to a higher calling. This danger is not limited to "high-church" formalism and mainline liturgy. The danger is just as real in "charismatic" style churches where "freedom" is so formalized that it can become the end of worship, or in evangelical churches where the number of persons at an altar service can become the formalized criteria of spiritual vitality.

On the other hand, the tendency toward experientially oriented religion threatens to produce a generation of people who are too concerned with their own piety to realize that service to God must be expressed in service to humanity. Today, as in the time of Isaiah, the people of God must hear the summons to come before God with clean hands and a pure heart. While there was the suggestion that proper service to God in serving the needs of others as His people constitute authentic worship (note Isa.

58), and even the implication that it might provide cleansing from guilt, it is clear that religious practices in themselves are not the means to earn salvation or the favor of God. It is not by the proper performance of religious duties such as sacrifices, or even by correct belief, that produces a clean hands and pure heart, but by offering worship that is worthy because it comes from a people who have submitted themselves to His teaching and instruction, and because it comes from a people who have learned how to do good by expressing that submission and obedience in service to the outcasts of a hurting world.

Isaiah called the people from their misconceptions of what serving God involved back to a truer understanding of the priorities of obedience and submission. In our modern self-centered society, we need more than ever to hear (obey!) Isaiah's message.