



Isaiah – Tough Love

Background Notes 1

Use in conjunction with published notes.

Passage 1 - Isaiah 5. 1-7, 18-25

(JG) Isaiah starts off like a singer entertaining people with a love song, which he says he has composed on behalf of a friend. It's a song about a vineyard an image that love poetry often uses. But the love song veers off in a direction that is unexpected and then shocking. The vineyard produces no fruit; in other words, the man's courting gets him nowhere. He then turns from love to hate and destroys the vineyard. One might imagine other men listening to the singer-poet, sympathizing with him and with his action. But the imagery of a vine was also familiar in another connection, and people listening to a prophet might have guessed that there was more to his song than met the eye. They would be familiar with the vineyard as an image for Israel.

(WB1). Only later, in verse 7, do we learn that Yahweh is the speaker-singer. The landowner (Yahweh as owner of all the land) is deeply devoted to the vineyard and showers upon it rich attentiveness and much hard work, doing all the things necessary to maximise the productivity (i.e., the well-being) of the vineyard. That attentiveness of God for God's people and land is voiced in the verbs "dug, cleared, planted, built, hewed out." The verbs bespeak complete and demanding devotion. The vineyard owner expects something in return for all the effort. Of course, the owner expected fruit, good produce. That is the purpose of a vineyard. Almost tersely, we learn in verse 2 that the vineyard owner is disappointed, for all that resulted from the lavish care are pitiful, unwanted wild grapes.

As we read on, we find that the owner of the vineyard, in his disappointment, intends to destroy the vineyard.

Yahweh is disappointed in Israel, and that disappointment is laid out in verses 8-24. And yet, Yahweh is still ready to forgive, but Yahweh will strike if there is no repentance.

(JG) The intention of the poetry is to make the threat awesome and deeply unsettling by portraying the unnamed invader as massively and impressively as possible. It is "a

nation far away” that comes swiftly and speedily,” not what Jerusalem had asked when it asked for Yahweh’s plan to come with speed and haste (v. 19). This coming nation is indeed Yahweh’s “plan,” a plan to undo the Holy City. The enemy is powerful, strong, well equipped, irresistible, determined. The “nation from afar” is like a relentless lion that will “carry off” (= exile), leaving only ruin and devastation.

God is giving the Israelites a choice to live as the Law sets out, including caring for the poor and oppressed or losing the land.

Passage 2 - Isaiah 30. 1-5

The setting of this passage is the invasion of Sennacherib of Assyria in about 700BC. (JG) In the context of Sennacherib’s invasion, Isaiah urges the nation to it easy and relax, but this simple advice seems ridiculous (Is 28:11-13). They are convinced that they have to take responsibility for the city’s safety, but h action is calculated to have the opposite effect. The natural temptation of politicians is to scorn alternative plans such as ones that involve God (Is 5:19). Judah’s rebellion lies in making plans that do not come from Yahweh, and thus piling wrong on wrong.

(WB1) The community is identified as “rebellious children,” echoing the thematic indictment of 1:2. In that verse, the trouble is that, unlike donkeys and oxen, Judah fails to remember that it belongs to and relies upon Yahweh. Here as well, Judah operates independently of Yahweh by implementing its plan (foreign policy) of reliance upon Egypt as a protection against Assyria. Such a plan, however, is here taken to be against Yahweh’s intention and will certainly end in destruction.

Passage 3 - Isaiah 58. 6-12

We are now with the later writer in the Exile. This passage recalls the beginning of the first writer’s work looking for justice and righteousness, a common theme in many prophets.

(JG) The conventional English translation of *mišpāṭ* and *šēdāqā* is “justice and righteousness” so that we might say that when Yahweh looked for *mišpāṭ* and *šēdāqā* he was looking for social justice. The problem lies in the mismatch between two aspects of their outward lives. They are looking for Yahweh to act with *mišpāṭ* and *šēdāqā*, but they are not acting in that way themselves (Is 58:2).

Compare this passage with Matthew 25.31-46.