

Foundation for
Ancient Research &
Mormon Studies

P.O. Box 7113 Univ. Station Provo, UT 84602

HUGH NIBLEY ARCHIVE

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Great Are the Words of Isaiah

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GREAT ARE THE WORDS OF ISAIAH

Hugh W. Nibley

Hugh W. Nibley was born in Portland, Oregon, and is married to the former Phyllis Draper. They are the parents of eight children.

He received a B.A. in history at UCLA in 1934 and a Ph.D. in ancient history at the University of California at Berkeley in 1938. He has taught at Scripps College, Pomona College, Claremont Graduate College, and the University of California at Berkeley.

Brother Nibley has always been active in Church functions, serving as a teacher through the years in various organizations. His publications in the fields of history and religion are extensive, seeming almost to be "without number," and he has had many articles published in professional journals as well as LDS Church magazines.

Dr. Nibley is interested in almost all phases of life, being a diligent student of languages, history, religion, politics, geography, philosophy, music, the arts, and other areas. He manifests abundantly the characteristics of a true scholar, faithful Latter-day Saint and defender of the faith.

I have reached the stage where I have nothing more to say. As far as I am concerned the scriptures say it all. "Behold, I say unto you that you ought to search these things, yea, a commandment I give unto you that you search these things diligently for great are the words of Isaiah. For surely he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the

House of Israel. Therefore, it must needs be that he must speak also of the Gentiles. And all things that he spake have been and shall be even according to the words which he spake" (3 Nephi 23:1). That quotation alone spares us the trouble of an apology for Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is a tract for our own times; our very aversion to it testifies to its relevance. It is necessary to remind us of its importance, however, because his message has not been popular, and he tells us why. The wicked do not like to be told about their faults. Every society, no matter how corrupt, has some good things about it--otherwise it would not survive from year to year. Isn't it much pleasanter to talk about the good things than about the bad things? The people of Zarahemla, said Samuel the Lamanite, wanted prophets that would tell them what was right with Zarahemla not what was wrong. There is a great danger in that: the many things that are right with any society can hardly damage it, but one serious flaw can destroy it. One goes to the physician not to be told what parts are functioning well, but what is making him ill or threatening him with the worse.

But, says Isaiah, the people of Israel want to hear smooth things; "Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things.." (30:10). And ever since the process of interpreting Isaiah has been one of smoothing him out. Consider some conspicuous examples of this.

1. The idea that Isaiah is moralizing, not talking about doctrine. Yet he starts out (1:2) calling Israel God's children; he insists on this all along--God is their Father. It is the First Article of Faith. But they won't see it (1:3), they want nothing of the doctrine (1:4). They don't see anything that they don't want to see says Isaiah. They are functionally blind. They have deliberately cut the wires, and complain that they get no message. Isaiah is full of obvious things that nobody sees, especially for Latter-day Saints. The rabbis have always made fun of the suggestion that he is actually referring to Christ. But we go further than that. We see in Mormon, even the particular calling of the Prophet Joseph. And who is to say that we are wrong?
2. The idea that the God of Isaiah is the savage, vengeful Old Testament God of wrath, the tribal God. This means that we do not have to take him too seriously. It lets us off the hook. But Isaiah's God is kindness itself. "Come let us reason together he says, "though your sins were as scarlet yet they shall be as white as snow." There is nothing authoritarian about him, he is constantly willing to discuss and explain. His most threatening statements are instantly followed by what seems a reversal of mood and judgment. He is always willing, ready, waiting, urging, patiently pleading; it is Israel that will not hear, it is they who break off the discussion and walk away turning their back upon him and asking him to please be quiet.
3. The idea that Isaiah is addressing special groups. Indeed he talks about good people and bad people--but they are the same! Wo to Israel! Good tidings to Israel! One and the same Israel. And not just to Israel but to all mankind; he addresses the nations and their leaders by name. And not only to his generation does he speak but to all. Nephi applied the words of Isaiah to his own people in the desert "that it

might be for our profit and learning (1 Nephi 19:23)". Six hundred years later Jesus Christ called upon the Nephites to do the same thing and the angel Moroni handed the same message over to our generation. Isaiah has just one audience because he has but one message. He is addressing whatever mortals upon the face of the earth happen to be in need of repentance. This takes us to our next point.

4. The idea that there is more than one Isaiah and that they all tell different things. Since there is only one message and one audience this is a mere quibble. The message is a happy one: "REPENT--and all will be well--better than you can ever imagine!" Only to those who do not intend to repent is the message grim. Isaiah does not distinguish between the good and the bad but only those who repent and those who do not. He does not ask where we are--he knows that--but only the direction in which we are moving. Of course only those can repent who need to, and that means everybody--equally. Does not one person need repentance more than another? Ezra and Baruch protested to God that while Israel had sinned the Gentiles had acted much worse, and asked why they should be let off so much more easily. But God was not "buying" that argument. You can always find somebody who is worse than you are to make you feel virtuous. It's a cheap shot: those awful terrorists, perverts, communists--they are the ones who need to repent! Yes indeed they do, and for them repentance will be a full time job, exactly as it is for all the rest of us.
5. The Doctors, Jewish and Christian alike, love to labor the idea that for Isaiah the supreme and unforgivable sin was the worship of idols. Well, he says that's foolish and irrational but never that it is the unforgivable sin. The darling illusion of the schoolman is that as modern enlightened rational thinkers they have made a wonderful discovery: that wood or metal dolls or images cannot really see or hear, etc. They labor the point to death. But the ancients knew that as well as we do. That is exactly why they patronize the idols. There is the famous story of the Eloquent Peasant from the Middle Kingdom in Egypt that tells how the rascally manager of an estate when he saw a peasant passing by on his way to the market with a load of goods cried out "Would that I had some idol that would permit me to rob this man's goods." A dumb image would offer no opposition to any course he chose to take. That was the beauty of idols. As impersonal and unmoral as money in the bank--the present-day as well as the ancient equivalent of a useful idol.
6. This is matched by the idea that the greatest of moral and intellectual virtues was the acknowledgement of the One and Only God. Again, that was another ancient commonplace. Isaiah does not denounce polytheism as the greatest of sins. Indeed, a number of researches have shown that polytheism as such is nowhere condemned in the Bible. But Isaiah does lay heavy emphasis on oneness. There is to be no compromise. There is only one way for a person to go, ONE God for Israel or the one human race to serve. To defuse this uncomfortable teaching the doctors have converted it into a theological exercise for the schools.
7. The idea that Isaiah is denouncing pagan practices before all else. But it is the rites and ordinances which God gave to Moses and which the people were faithfully observing that Isaiah describes as an exercise in desperate futility.

The quickest way to get an overview of the immense book of Isaiah is simply to read the first chapter. Scholars have long held that this is not part of the original book but a summary by a disciple. That makes it nonetheless valuable and indeed it is remarkable that this, the most famous chapter of Isaiah is never quoted in the Book of Mormon. Let's take it verse by verse.

2. Israel are God's children--he is their Father. This is the doctrine they have forgotten and they will be in no condition to receive it again until they have undergone the moral regeneration which is the burden of Isaiah's preaching.
3. That doctrine they have rejected: They refuse to hear it.
4. Because they can't live with it in their sinful state; they have run away from it.

This is inexcusable; God does not look upon it with forbearance. He knows that they are quite capable of understanding and living by the Gospel. He is more than displeased accordingly, he is angry.

5. Yet it is not he who has been giving them a hard time, they decided to go their own way, openly revolting against him. And their system is simply not working. They are not able to cope with the situation mentally nor do they have the spirit to carry it through. Men on their own are a pitiful object.
6. The whole thing is sick, sick, sick. Every attempt to correct the situation fails miserably. Nothing works.
7. The result is internal depression and international disaster.
8. God's chosen people are holed up, trusting in their miserable defense, trapped by their own walls.
9. The reason they survive at all so far is that there are still a few righteous, a small remnant of honest people among them.
10. So it is time they were considering the alternative, which Isaiah herewith offers them.
11. You are not going to appease God by trying to buy him off, by going through the pious motions of religious observances, your meetings and temple sessions.
12. It is not for you to decide what to do to please God--it is for Him to decide and he has not required all this display of piety from you.
13. Your most dedicated observances even following my ancient prescriptions if done in the wrong spirit are actually iniquity--not to your credit but to your loss.

14. God is not impressed, but disgusted by it.
15. Even when you pray I will not hear you. Why not? Answer: because there is blood on your upraised hands.
16. The blood and sins of this generation are on you in the temple. What blood and sins? Your evil ways.
17. What evil ways? What should we be doing? Answer: dealing justly, relieving those oppressed by debt instead of collecting from them, giving a fair deal to the orphans, and assistance to the widow, i.e. showing some thought for people without money.
18. God is not being capricious or arbitrary. He is eminently reasonable. Is his way the only way? Let him tell you why, and then see if you do not agree: "come now let us reason together saith the Lord." Then a surprising statement: "Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow..." Plainly God does not take pleasure in these rebukes, he does not gloat as men would (Eg. Thomas Aquinas) over the punishment in store for the wicked; he loves them all and holds forth the most wonderful promises for them. There is a way out and that is why Isaiah is speaking, not because he is a puritanical scold.
19. Have they had enough? They only need to listen and to follow advice and all will be well.
20. But you cannot go on as you have been and are now doing. You will be wiped out by war if you do. "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it." The "consumption decreed" (D&C 87) is another quotation from Isaiah.
21. You can do it--because you once did. And then you lost it all. . . went over to unbridled sex and murder.
22. And for what? Property and pleasure, for silver that is now as worthless as garbage and wine that is flat.
23. The leaders set the worst example. They work with crooks, everybody is on the take; "Everyone loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards, "while the poor don't get a break in court and a widow can't even get a hearing.
24. God wants nothing to do with such rascals; he is going to get rid of them. They have made themselves His enemies.
25. This calls for a thorough house-cleaning. All that dross must be purged away.
26. To bring back the old order, "To restore the judges as at the first" (quoting the well-known hymn). It is still possible, and God is going to bring it about. There will yet be the city of righteousness, the faithful city."

27. There is going to be a Zion redeemed with many of these same sinful people living in it, along with a lot of converts from the outside.
28. All the rest will have to go, but not because God chooses to throw them out. They will walk away from safety right into destruction; with eyes wide open they shall forsake the Lord and be consumed.
- 29-31. These verses are the only references to paganism, popular cults which will wither and be burned up. Not destroyed, however, because they follow pagan manners for forms as the doctors, ministers, and commentators love to tell us, but because they were part of the cover-up for avaricious, hard, and immoral practices.

For the rest of the time I want to talk about those human qualities which Isaiah describes as pleasing to God and those which he despises. They both come as a surprise. As to the first, the traits and the behavior which Isaiah denounces as the worst of vices are without exception those of successful people. The wickedness and folly of Israel do not consist of indolence, sloppy dressing, long hair, nonconformity (even the reading of books), radical, liberal unrealistic ideas and programs, irreverence toward custom and property, contempt for established idols, etc. The very wickedest people in the Book of Mormon are the Zoramites. A very proud, independent, courageous, industrious, enterprising, patriotic, prosperous, people who attended strictly to their weekly religious duties with the proper observance of dress standards. thanking God for all he had given them and bearing testimony to his goodness. they were sustained in all their doings by a perfectly beautiful self-image. well, what is wrong with any of that? There is just one thing that spoils it all and that is the very thing that puts Israel in bad with the Lord according to Isaiah. The Jews observed all the rules that Moses gave them with strictest regularity--and yet. . . (Alma 31:27f). . . they cry unto me as they should and yet. . ." They are really thinking of something else. Behold, Oh my God their costly apparel. . . all their precious things... their hearts are set upon them, AND YET they cry unto thee and say, 'We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people. . ."

God sums up the cause of anger against Israel in one word: "for the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me, and was wroth." With what affect? It didn't phase the guilty, "But he went on forwardly in the way of his heart" (57:17). Like the Zoramites, covetous Israel was quite pleased with itself just as in these last days. Modern Israel was put under "a very sore and grievous curse" because of "covetousness and... lined words," i.e. greed and hypocrisy (D&C 104:4). By far the commonest charge Isaiah brings against the wicked is "oppression" 'ashaq'. The word means to choke, to grab by the neck and squeeze, grasp, or press, to take the fullest advantage of someone in your power, in short, to maximize profits. It is all centralized in "Babylon. . . the golden city, the oppressor," (4:4). Which gives us instant insight into the social and economic structure of Isaiah's world. It is a competitive and predatory society, "Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough. And (leaders) they are shepherds that cannot understand (they do not know what is going on): because everyone is looking out for himself--"they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter" (56:11).

The charge applies to our own day when ". . . every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great which shall fall." (D&C 1:16). Babylon had flourished long before Isaiah's day and it was to flourish long after. At that particular time it was on the way up again but the word is used throughout the scriptures as the type and model of a world that lived by "the economy." Its philosophy is no where better expressed than in the words of Korihor: ". . . 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. . . and whatsoever a man did was no crime." (Alma 30:17)

The successful people are living it up in Isaiah. It is as if they said, "Come, I will fetch wine and we will fill ourselves with strong drink. We'll have drinks and a part at my place. And tomorrow more of the same, but even better, even richer." (56:12) The economy looks bright, all is well. Isaiah has a good deal to say about the beautiful people in words that come uncomfortably near to home:

1. Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine.
2. Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong wine . . . which shall cast down to earth with the hand.
3. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim shall be trodden underfeet. . . But they also have erred through wine . . . they stumble in judgment . . . (28:1).

He describes the party-people, the fast set: "Wo unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!" (5:11) Stupefied by the endless beat of the Oriental music which has become part of our scene: "And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands." (5:12) And of course the total subservance to fashion: "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go" -- in the immemorial manner of fashion models. An instructive list of words from the boutiques that only the fashion-wise will know, tells us that "The Lord will take away . . . their caul, their round tires like the moon, chains, bracelets, mufflers, bonnets, leg ornaments, head-bands, tablets, earrings, rings, nose jewels." (3:18-21) and of course clothes "the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples, and the crisping pins. The glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods, and the veils" . . . "girdles, stomachers; (3:22) their beauty-aids will defeat their purpose as hair falls out and perfumes are overpowered." (3:24)

Naturally there is the more lurid side of sex, the more reprehensible: "Hear the word of the Lord ye rulers of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah, how is the faithful city become an harlot?" (1:10) Just as Nephi "did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning," (1 Nephi 19:23), so right at the outset Isaiah here not only likens Jerusalem to the long vanished cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but addresses them directly by name as actually being Sodom and Gomorrah -- showing us that we may not pass these charges off as not applying to us because we live in another time and culture. Is the scene so different?

The costly fashions reflect a world in which people are out to impress and impose themselves on others, everyone is after a career, everyone is aspiring to be a VIP: "The mighty man of war, the judge, the prophet, the prudent, the elder, the captain, the honorable man, the counsellor, the cunning craftsman, the eloquent orator . . . (3:2-3) What about them? "I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them." (3:5) So much for their authority -- and why? Because everyone is out for himself in this game of one-upmanship: "And the people shall be oppressed every one by another, every one by his neighbor (there's competition for you!): the child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient (what else can you expect?) and the base against the honorable" (3:5). Everything will get out of control. A man will take hold of his brother saying, you have clothes, so you be our ruler; you be responsible for this mess! But he will refuse the great honor, saying, "Don't try to make me a ruler -- I'm flat broke!" (3:6-7) Because everybody will be broke, Isaiah continues 3:8: "For Jerusalem is ruined. . ." All because they stubbornly think they can go it alone: "Wo unto the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel but not of me, that cover with a covering but not of my spirit, that add sin to sin by justifying themselves at every step. The rebellious people, the lying children which will not hear the law of the Lord. The law of God have they rejected, they reject the law of sacrifice." O yes, they sacrifice, but they do not do it the way the Lord wants them to -- "Have I required this thing at your hands?" They have violated the law of chastity for Israel is a harlot. They have violated the law of consecration for they are idolators -- coveting for themselves is now their consecration. They have rejected the law of God for they will not do things his way as they covenant (see chapter 60).

The one who sets the supreme example for the people is that most inspiring and ambitious of all spirits. "How art thou fallen Lucifer son of the morning. How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thy heart, . . . I will exalt my throne . . . I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation . . ." (14:12). He is out to rule the world, which he does, with disastrous effect; the result is depression and ruin: "Behold the Lord maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth the inhabitants abroad. And it shall be with the people so with the priest; as with the servant so with the master . . . as with the buyer so with the seller; as with the lender so with the borrower; as with the one who charges interest so with the one who pays interest. The land shall be utterly empty and utterly spoiled for the Lord hath spoken." (24:1ff)

Isaiah knows how to describe a world in total collapse, and we have a rich and very ancient Lamentation literature both of the Egyptians and the Babylonians appearing periodically over a span of thousands of years along with abundant business documents, letters, and ritual texts to confirm that such conditions actually did prevail in the world from time to time exactly as Isaiah tells them; always with the same combination of social, economic and political hysteria. Notice the strong emphasis on economy and finance in the passage just cited. "You do always remember your riches," says Samuel the Lamanite, "and for that very reason you will lose them." They are cursed and will "become slippery" is the way he puts it, and Isaiah has a comparative expression, "The Land shall be utterly spoiled, it shall fade away, because they broke the law and covenant and changed the ordinances to suit themselves. "Therefore has the curse devoured the earth, few men are left, everything is desolate, there are crops, it doesn't rain; therefore many people are gone into captivity because they have no knowledge, and their honorable men are famished, the multitude is dried up with thirst. For it is a people of no understanding. Therefore he that made them will not have mercy. And he will show them no favor."

Plainly men are held responsible by God for showing some sense. Self-deception costs dearly: "He frustrateth the tokens of the liars and maketh deviners mad, he turneth wise men backward and maketh their knowledge foolish. Because ye despised his word, and trust oppression and perverseness and you persist in it." These are very tough-minded people. They hold out to the end, "therefore you shall be like the breaking of a high wall." They will hold out in their ways with great tenacity, nothing will move them like a high dam when it breaks it breaks all at once. (This is the principle of "the 29th day") First the wall begins to budge then everything goes: "The breaking cometh suddenly and instantly. He shall not spare even a shard." The smash up is quick and complete.

All this because everything is out of line. No one can trust anyone else in this freely competitive society. "None calleth for justice or pleads for truth. They trust in vanity and speak lies. The act of violence is in their hands. They shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are the thoughts of iniquity." This reads like a prospectus of TV fare. Such a course can only leave a trail of distrust, "the way of peace they know not. They have made them crooked paths. (Speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood. . . Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey." (59:13) It is profitable to break the rules only as long as there are people simple and gullible enough to keep them. And if you don't play the game you can expect to become a victim. Isaiah does not applaud such realism: "Wo to thee that spoilest and thou wast not spoiled, and dealest treacherously, and they did not deal treacherously with thee." The Lord goes even farther in our dispensation telling us that we have no right to cheat even those clever people who are trying to cheat us: "Wo be unto him that lieth to deceive because he supposeth that another lieth to deceive. . . ." (D&C 10:28)

Naturally Isaiah takes us into the law courts: "Wo unto him that calleth evil good and good evil," that being the rhetorical art the art as Plato tells us "of making good seem bad and bad seem good by the use of words," which in the ancient world came to its own in the law courts. "Wo unto them that are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight . . . which justify the wicked for a reward and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him." Which recalls how the Gadanton robbers when they finally got control of the government and the law courts, "when they did obtain the sole management of the government," at once "turned their backs on the poor and needy. . ." (Hel. 6:39) filling the "judgment seats" with their own people (Hel. 7:4), "letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money. . ." (7:5). "They justify the wicked for a reward," says Isaiah, and he warns them in their own legal language that God "will bring charges against the elders of Israel and the princes thereof, for you have eaten up the vineyard the spoil of the poor is in YOUR houses!" The stuff that is in your houses really belongs to them. "What mean ye to break my people to pieces and to grind the faces of the poor?" "Wo unto them that decree unrighteous decrees," and in their untouchable authority" and write grievous things which they have prescribed" -- serving their own interests by the laws and regulations which they make, "or turn aside the needy from judgment, and take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!" (10:1-2)

Everything is rigged, everybody is on the take, "The harlot city is full of murders, the princes are rebellious, companions of thieves, everyone loveth gifts and followeth after rewards. They judge not the fatherless nor the cause of the widows." (1:23) Even when right is plainly on his side the poor man doesn't stand a chance, for "the churl . . . deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words, even when the needy speaketh right," (32:7). "For the vile person will practice hypocrisy and utter error to make empty the soul of the hungry and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail." Real estate is a special province for such people and the ancient record is full of the slick and tricky deals by which they acquired their great estates, from the earliest of Greek preachers, Hesiod and Solon to the last of the Roman Satirists including the terrible modern Petronius. "Wo unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till no place is left, till they be alone in the midst of the earth, and own it all themselves."

Isaiah has a lot to say about trade and commerce, "the burden of Tyre, the crowning city whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honorable men of the earth. The Lord intends to stain the pride of all glory and bring into contempt the honorable men of the earth." THEY are a restless lot, these enterprising people, "Peace speaks to him that is far off and to him that is near, saith the Lord. But the wicked are like a troubled sea. And when it cannot rest its waters cat up mire and dirt" -- Lehi's "filthy waters." "There is no peace saith my God to the wicked." Babylon is at once restless and busy, selfish and carefree, "None seeth me," she says, "there is none beside me." She has all the technical and commercial know-how at her command. All the experts are working for her -- the charms, the astrologers, the expert analysts, the skillful accountants --

and all will be burned as stubble. In the 13th chapter we see the burden of Babylon, the vast activity, the noise, the bustle, the self-importance, the consuming hunger for profits in this great world center which is also another Sodom, a sink of moral depravity.

By a great miracle King Hezekiah of Judah was snatched from death and given 15 more years of life. In an outburst of joy and gratitude he voiced his thanks and his infinite relief at knowing that God was able to give whatever one asked of him even life itself; what is the security of all the world's wealth in comparison to that? And then a significant thing happened. Ambassadors arrived from Babylon and Hezekiah simply could not resist showing them through his treasury displaying his wealth and power.

Then came Isaiah the prophet unto King Hezekiah, and said unto him, that said these men? And from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, "They are come from Babylon." Then said he, "What have they seen in thine house?" And Hezekiah answered, "All that is in mine house they have seen." . . . Then said Isaiah to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord of Hosts: Behold, the days come that all that is in thine house. . . shall be carried away to Babylon. . ." (39:3ff) The man couldn't resist showing off and by his vanity he only whetted their greed. They liked what they saw and came back later to fetch it. He had played right into their hands.

Isaiah is very much into the international picture in which the fatal flaw is the assumption that things are in the hands of the great men of the earth, while in fact there are no great men, but just ordinary guys with disastrous delusions of grandeur. Haughty is a favorite word with Isaiah.

And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible (Isaiah 13:11).

I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir (Isaiah 13:12).

The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day (Isaiah 2:11).

Behold the Lord, the Lord of hosts shall lop the bough with terror: and the high ones of stature shall be hewn down, and the haughty shall be humbled (Isaiah 10:33).

The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish. The earth also is polluted. . . Therefore a curse shall devour the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few people left. (Isaiah 24:4).

What makes a nation great? Power and gain is the answer we give today, the thing is to be number one in military and economic clout. They thought so in Isaiah's day too, "Wo unto them that rely on horses and chariots because they are powerful. But look not to the holy One of Israel. The Egyptians are men and not God. And their horses flesh and not spirit." No real security is to be gained by alliances, "no sword either of the strong or of the weak power shall overcome Assyria," the Lord had His own plans for Assyria and no one could have guessed what they were. Where does security lie? In digging the defenses of Jerusalem you are merely digging your graves! The only true defense is the calling of the priesthood in the Temple. If you play the game of realistic power politics you can't expect any but the usual reward. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot be "in the world but not of the world"--the only scripture that uses that expression is 3 John "Whatever is in the world is not of the Father but is of the world." The only answer to that is the gathering, "Come out of her of my people. . ."

The Assyrians guaranteed security. They were the top nation militarily. So along with us they said to Jerusalem (and Isaiah has preserved their letters) and you will be safe. And they say to Israel you are fools. How can God deliver you if you have no army? You need us. God is on the side of the big battalions. This is what is called Realpolitik, which has repeatedly destroyed its practioners in modern time. When Isaiah says "Trust God and not Egypt," the people say that that is not realistic! So here came the Assyrians, those super realists, with their irresistable might--and they were wiped out in their camp as they were sleeping. The great nations? "Behold the nations are as a drop in the bucket and counted a small dust of the balance. . . all the nations before him are as nothing and they are counted to him as less than nothing and vanity "because they pretend to be something" (10:33). "Tophet is ordained of old" and is waiting for them right now--(a prison have I prepared for them" the Lord tells Enoch) "Yea for Kings, it is prepared, for ASSYRIA. He hath made it deep and large. The pile thereof is fire and much wood and the breath of the Lord is like a stream of brimstone that kindles it." Don't be impressed by "the mighty man and the man of war and the judge and the prophet." There is only one in whom you can put your trust. Assyria vanished overnight and was never heard of again while lesser nations as ancient as Assyria who could not afford to gamble for supremacy on the winning of battles are still with us.

As surprising as the traits Isaiah despises are those which he prizes. not drive, initiative, industry, enterprise, hard work, thrift, piety--none of the Zoramite virtues, though they are truly virtues when they are not vitiated by selfish motives or a morbid obsession with routine. And let me observe in passing that work is after all not a busy running back and forth in established grooves, though that is the essence of our modern business and academic life, but the supreme energy and disciplined curiosity required to cut new grooves. In Isaiah's book the quality which God demands of men are such as our society looks down on with mildly patronizing contempt. Isaiah promises the greatest blessings and glory to the meek, the lowly, the poor, the oppressed, the afflicted, and the needy. What! Is being poor and oppressed an achievement? Are we encouraged to join the ranks of the down-and-outers? What possible merit can there be in such a negative and submissive stance? Well, there is virtue in it and it is the presence of Satan in the world which is the deciding

factor. In Zion, we are promised there will be no poor. That is because Satan will not be present there with his clever arrangement of things. But he is the prince of this world. Freely permitted for a time to try men and to tempt them--here he calls the tune.

And how does he try and tempt us? In the worldwide mythology of the human race the devil is the Lord of the underworld. Who sits on the treasure of the earth in his dark kingdom; he is Pluto the god of wealth who by his control of the earth's resources dictates the affairs of men. Aristophanes' last play, the *Plutus*, is one long bitter commentary on the kind of people who succeed in this world. Indeed, "the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes" is a stock theme of the world's literature from the Egyptian story of the Two Brothers through Lazarus and Dives to the vicissitudes of the Joad family in the *Grapes of Wrath*. If we believe Isaiah, the Son of Man himself was "despised and rejected. . ." From which one concludes that to be highly successful in this life is hardly the ultimate stamp of virtue. For Satan's golden question "Have you any money?" has a paralyzing and intriguing effect that enlists all but the noblest spirits in the great conspiracy: "Judgment is turned backwards," says Isaiah, and justice stands afar off. For truth is fallen in the streets and equity and fair play cannot enter. Yea, truth fail eth, and he that departeth from evil maketh himself the prey (59:14). Whoever refuses to put up with this sort of thing, into their words, must expect to take a beating. "The Lord saw it," continues Isaiah, "and it displeased him that there was no judgment." Everybody is cheating and God does not like it all. "Behold the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no one. . . and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to this ungodliness." Such were the opening words of the Lord in this dispensation spoken to the Prophet Joseph in the grove (BYU Stu 9, Spring 1969, p. 280f). The words "the world lieth in sin," call for a more particular statement in the manner of Isaiah, and we find the same expression explained in D&C 49:20 ". . . it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, WHEREFORE the world lieth in sin." Mammon is a jealous God; you cannot serve him and any other master. To escape the powerful appeal of the things of this world and the deadly threat that hangs over all who do not possess them takes a meek and humble soul indeed--and a courageous one.

What does Isaiah say that God demands of those who would be justified? First of all, they must be clean of all defilement: "Wash your hands and make you clean," he says in the first chapter. Don't make your prayers when your hands are covered with blood. And the person with clean hands, says the psalmist, and "he that hath clean hands and a pure heart," is one "who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" (Psalms 24:4). Isaiah agrees; it is "he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil" (Isaiah 33:15). The people fasted as God had commanded and asked Isaiah in perplexity why God had not heard them. In reply he tells them, "Is not this the fast I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness? To undo the heavy burden? To let the oppressed by debt go free? And that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal bread to the hungry? Bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? Cover the naked? And then shall I break forth." This is a reminder that our own fasts require an offering for the poor. God is not impressed by the magnificent temples they

d for him--he owns it all anyway, (66:1-2). "But to THIS man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my words. they go on justifying themselves--"yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations" God will not curtail their agency; he will give them all the rope they want: "I also will choose their delusions . . . because when I called none did answer. . . they chose that in which I delighted not" (66:4).

After describing the way of Israel, the burden of Damascus, the burden of Egypt, the burden of Babylon, and of Assyria, in short the world as it is, and it should not be, Isaiah in glowing terms depicts the world as it should be. as it was meant to be and as it was created to be. "He created the world not in vain. He formed it to be inhabited." Under his rule, "I am the Lord and there is none else. Unto me every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. and in that day the fruit of the earth shall be excellent. All that remain in Zion and Jerusalem shall be called holy. Everyone that is written among the living in Jerusalem. And the Lord shall have washed away the filth from the daughters of Zion and purged the blood of Jerusalem."

With Babylon gone from the scene a huge sigh of relief goes up, at last the world is quiet and at rest. "The golden city, the oppressor is no more. the whole earth is at rest. "Good tidings to the meek. He hath sent me to bind up the broken heart. Proclaim liberty to the captives, open the prison to the bound (12:15). "Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders. . ." (60:18). On the contrary with righteousness shall he judge the poor and reprove with equity the meek of the earth. "Where is the fury of the oppressor? Ho, he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you go around spending money for that which is not good at all? Come to me and hear and your souls shall live." Wonder of wonders in that day "a man will be worth more than gold"--a complete reversal of values. At the same time the forest return and the trees rejoice, "No feller comes up against them." Isaiah often equates the growing wickedness of the world with the brutal and wasteful exploitation of nature, which has reached an alltime climax in the present generation. We all know his most poetic lines: "The leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the young lion, the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed, their young ones lie down together. the lion shall eat straw like the ox." In my school days this was the prize illustration of the unrealistic Isaiah, zoological nonsense. It was not the "nature red in tooth and claw" of our own neoDarwinian world. Since then a lot has been learned about the true nature of certain savage beasts. "They shall no more hurt or destroy in all my holy mountains. For the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea. The wilderness and the solitary places shall be glad for them. The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. And shall blossom abundantly. In the wilderness shall waters break out as streams in the desert; parched ground shall become a pool, the thirsty land a spring. That they may see and know and consider that the hand of the Lord has done it." Now is the time to buy in and make a killing.

And this happy world is for everybody, even as Isaiah's message of warning and promise of forgiveness is for everyone. "The sons of the stranger, taking hold of the covenant. . . even them will I bring to my holy house." They will

come to the temple which will be called "The House of Prayer of all People."
"The Lord God which gathers the outcasts of Israel and all the beast of the
forest." He says there won't be any watchdogs to frighten them off anymore,
it will be a happy time of man and beast. "Great are the words of Isaiah!"
We have been commanded to search them, study them ponder them, to take them to
heart, and to understand that the calamities and the blessings therein are
meant for our own generation. May we be prepared for them by the words of this
great prophet, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sidney B. Sprrry Symposium January 28, 1978

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