

Lesson 3 Isaiah 1:10-31 Covenant Lawsuit Prophecy

Introduction

Alec Motyer titles Isaiah 1-5, *"The Preface. Judah: diagnosis and prognosis."* He picks up on the image from our last lesson of the man so damaged in his rebellion that his body is covered from the sole of his foot to his head with bruises, welts and raw wounds. Those wounds are not cared for, not bandaged, not softened with oil. Why is the nation of Judah so sick and faint? Through his first five chapters Isaiah provides a diagnosis, explaining the spiritual disease of Judean society. Isaiah also provides prognosis. That is where the disease will take each person if left untreated.

Verse 1 gave us a historical reference of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The vision of Isaiah took place during the reigns of those kings. That reference is for whole book of Isaiah. We will not get another specific historical reference until chapter 6, verse 1. In the year of Uzziah's death, Isaiah responds to God's call to ministry. It is probably right to view these first five chapters as describing the societal situation of Judah concurrent with that vision in chapter 6, or even a little after that vision. That's why we are calling this, the preface. These chapters set up the state of Judean society at the beginning of Isaiah's ministry, as described in this book.

Chapter 1 consists of three poetic passages. We covered the first in our last lesson. Judah was described as a rebellious child that does not know God. That child despised his father and showed it in his behavior, becoming as unlike his Holy Father as possible, wicked and corrupt. That's prognosis, a description of the state of Judah. We were also told that, in spite of Judah's beaten-up state, things would get worse. The land would get overrun and Jerusalem besieged. That's prognosis. That's where this spiritual disease is headed.

Isaiah continues in the next two passages of chapter 1, addressing the religious and social sickness of Judah. We receive the religious diagnosis in verses 10-20 and the social diagnosis in 21-31.

Diagnosis of Jewish Religion in Isaiah's Time (1:10-20)

First, the middle passage of the chapter. Isaiah 1:10-20.¹

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| 10 | Hear the word of the Lord,
Give ear to the instruction of our God, | You rulers of Sodom;
You people of Gomorrah. |
| 11 | "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?"
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. | Says the Lord.
And the fat of fed cattle; |
| 12 | "When you come to appear before Me, | Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? |
| 13 | "Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies— | Incense is an abomination to Me.
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. |
| 14 | "I hate your new moon festivals
and your appointed feasts,
I am weary of bearing them. | They have become a burden to Me; |
| 15 | "So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
Your hands are covered with blood. | I will hide My eyes from you;
I will not listen. |
| 16 | "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Cease to do evil,
Seek justice,
Defend the orphan, | Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
17 Learn to do good;
Reprove the ruthless,
Plead for the widow. |
| 18 | "Come now, and let us reason together,"
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
Though they are red like crimson, | Says the Lord,
They will be as white as snow;
They will be like wool. |

¹ See the appendix for notes on how the formatting for the verses is determined and why formatting the phrases side-by-side is helpful for study (though not as easy for reading).

God's Willingness to Cleanse

Moving on to verse 18, we enter into the second sub-section of the passage indicated by a repetition of the phrase, "Says the Lord." We have heard God's rejection of the perverted national religion practiced by Judah that assumed cleanliness could be obtained by ceremonial ritual, without any attempt at trying to love one's neighbor. This second sub-section begins,

¹⁸ "Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord,

It's our second "says the Lord". The Lord has something else to say about the matter. He does not leave it with the admonition to wash yourself clean. That is a beginning. The desire and attempt to live in line with the moral character of God is an expression of faith. It is a beginning. But we must reason together with God. We know or will soon realize that we cannot satisfy God's holy standard on our own. We do need a way to be cleansed. God is willing to do it.

Though your sins are as scarlet,	They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,	They will be like wool.

These words continue in the imagery of sacrifice. Isaiah reminds me of my brother Bill. He knows his colors. He uses three words to suggest blood: scarlet, red, and crimson. White as snow, like wool, connects us to the wool of a lamb. So, at the same time that we are reminded of the blood of sacrifice we also remember the blood on the hands of the worshiper: the stain of sin. When the throat of a lamb is cut, the red seeps into the wool. God says He will make it white again. We might picture standing in a woolen robe ruined by the stain of blood, somehow perfectly cleansed to a state of gleaming white wool.

This sounds like atoning grace, somebody taking our place apart from our own works. And we would not be wrong to read that into this declaration of cleansing. We don't have to wait for a New Testament theology in order to understand substitutional atonement. Isaiah would have understood substitutionary atonement from Moses, but he doesn't develop that line of thinking here. He declares God's willingness to cleanse, but he keeps his focus on the moral obligation required of a people claiming Covenant fellowship with God.

¹⁹ "If you consent and obey,	You will eat the best of the land;
²⁰ "But if you refuse and rebel,	You will be devoured by the sword."

Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The Role of the Covenant Lawsuit Prophet

We began with a call to "Hear the word of the Lord." We end with "Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Here at the end, Isaiah has communicated using a Covenant blessing and curse formula. Obedience brings blessing. Rebellion - curse. I will read it again.

¹⁹ "If you consent and obey,	You will eat the best of the land; (blessing)
²⁰ "But if you refuse and rebel,	You will be devoured by the sword." (curse)

It would be easy to take that as a basic statement of legalistic religion. If you do good, you are accepted. If you do bad, you are rejected. But that simple theological view, while in line with Job's friends, fails to capture Old Testament theology. For starters, we have to put Isaiah's words into a correct Covenant context. Even though Isaiah does not use the word "Covenant" here, he is using the language of Covenant.

I deal with Near-Eastern covenant extensively in my podcast on Interpreting the Pentateuch. I'll keep it very basic here just to clarify Isaiah's language and to set up an issue for us to look for later on in the book. Near-Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties at the time of Moses contained seven standard elements. A suzerain is a king of kings. A vassal is a lesser king that has sworn allegiance to a king of kings. God is King of kings over all peoples. Israel is a special vassal people among whom He has built His Temple and He has given them His law, which is His Covenant with them. The seven standard elements of our Near-Eastern covenant can be seen in Deuteronomy, which was a renewal of Covenant that God made with the second generation out of Egypt.

- (1) The 1st element of a 2nd millennium suzerain-vasal treaty is the Title – such as, “I am the Yahweh your God” in Deuteronomy 5:6a.
- (2) The 2nd element is the Historical Prologue – such as the very short, “who brought you up out of Egypt,” also in Deuteronomy 5:6b or the longer historical recap of Deuteronomy 1-3.
- (3) The 3rd element is the Stipulations, including
 - (a) basic stipulations – such as the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:7-21.
 - (b) and detailed stipulations – such as the long list of laws in Deuteronomy 12-26.
- (4) The 4th element is the Deposition and regular reading – that is the placing of the Law in the Temple and the command to read that Law regularly, found in Deuteronomy 31:9-11.
- (5) The 5th element is Witnesses – such as the call to Heaven and Earth in Deuteronomy 30:19.
- (6) The 6th element is Blessings – such as those listed in Deuteronomy 28.
- (7) And the 7th element is Curses – such as those listed in Deuteronomy 27.

In verse 2 if you remember, Isaiah called Heaven and Earth as witnesses to his condemnation of Judah. I read last week the corresponding example of Witnesses in Deuteronomy 30:19. I’ll read it again, since it also includes language of blessing and curse, like we have here in verse 20.

Deuteronomy 30:19,

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

That language of blessing and curse is what we have just read in Isaiah 1:20.

¹⁹ “If you consent and obey,

You will eat the best of the land;

²⁰ “But if you refuse and rebel,

You will be devoured by the sword.”

So, we are putting that into Covenant context. There is an agreement made, a Covenant entered into with the King of kings, and if you are faithful to the King with whom you have entered into Covenant, you will receive blessing, good consequences. If you are unfaithful to your King, you can expect curses, bad consequences.

Now, there are two natural questions that must be asked regarding the Covenant. The first question is, “What is the basis for my relationship with my King? Is it my bloodline? Is it my great behavior? Is it my wisdom? What is the basis that allows me to enter into and stay in relationship with my King?” The second question is, “How should I live once I’m in Covenant relationship with my King?” We are going to find, especially this first question has a very different answer in Biblical Covenant than it did in ancient Near-Eastern covenant. That is because our King is holy. Our God is holy, and He demands holiness as a requirement for relationship. That is something that we cannot attain. God must accomplish it for us.

That is why God walked through the pieces of Covenant sacrifice in Genesis 15. It is why God provided the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. It’s why God established the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. It’s why He raised up the bronze serpent in Numbers 21. It’s why He promised restoration after exile in Deuteronomy 31. God foreshadowed, through ritual ceremony, that He was going to handle our sin problem. Somehow, in the future He had an answer. That is why the Old Covenant answers the first questions of Covenant in exactly the same way the New Covenant answers that question. What is the basis for relationship with a holy God? 0% works you do, and 100% the grace God gives. You can only receive it by faith. If it’s based on your works at all, you will fail.

Now, the Old and New Covenants do not answer the second question the same way. That question, “How then shall we live?” is defined by the Covenant you are under. There is overlap between the Old and New but there are also major differences. So, we have to keep that in mind when we’re reading Isaiah. The people of Judah were bound to live according to the Covenant they were in with God, and we are bound to live according to a different covenant: the New Covenant. So that’s how we answer, “how shall we live?” but the foundation, the basis for Covenant relationship, the first question is, “by grace through faith.” That is no different for us and them.

So, what is Isaiah doing by invoking the language of blessing and curse?

Isaiah is performing the role of Covenant lawsuit prophet. He is not a covenant mediator prophet. There are not many of those. That would be like Abraham, Moses, Jesus. Isaiah is not establishing a new covenant for the people of God. He is applying the Covenant that exists, the Mosaic Covenant, to Judah. He finds Judah in rebellion against that Covenant. He declares their guilt, and he calls them to repentance. That is the role of a covenant lawsuit prophet. Assessing the behavior of Judah, he declares to them to have violated the Covenant. In a sense, he is bringing a lawsuit against the nation. And he is declaring the ongoing consequence of disobedience - curse, and the consequences of repentance and obedience - blessing.

There are moral consequences to how we live out the Covenant. Now, there are two things for us to be on the lookout for in Isaiah. First, does he develop more the idea of salvation by grace through faith? Will Isaiah make clear a distinction between the two questions of Covenant, between the basis for Judah's relationship with God and the commands that Judah ought to follow? He has not made that distinction, not yet. We get just a taste of that. He promised to cleanse, to remove the stain of sin. But how? What does that look like? We don't have much here yet. So, we're going to wait to see does Isaiah develop those concepts in his book.

We also need to watch out for language that distinguishes between the faithful of Judah and the rebellious of Judah. In one sense, all Jews are God's promised people, Israel. That designation applies to everyone born into one of the twelve tribes, every daughter or son of Jacob. But it is also true that most of the Jews through most of Old Testament history are depicted as rebellious and faithless. There is a smaller group, a spiritual Israel within the nation of Israel that is called, a remnant. These do not keep the Law perfectly. But they have truly believed in Yahweh, are trusting Him for salvation, and seek to live for Him. So, it's going to make a difference for us in how we understand the curses that are declared by Isaiah, or the judgment. Does this apply to the whole nation of Israel? And if so, what of the believing remnant inside of Israel? Does the curse apply the same to those who believe and those who don't believe?

We will see an example in our second passage, so let's move on to 1:21-31.

Diagnosis of Jewish Society in Isaiah's Time (1:21-31)

In our first passage, Isaiah described God's perspective on hypocritical worship in His Temple. This passage repeats the charges of that passage, but it focuses not on the Temple: it focuses on the city Jerusalem. This is Isaiah 1:21-31.

²¹ How the faithful city has become a harlot, Righteousness once lodged in her,	She who was full of justice! But now murderers.
²² Your silver has become dross,	Your drink diluted with water.
²³ Your rulers are rebels Everyone loves a bribe They do not defend the orphan,	And companions of thieves; And chases after rewards. Nor does the widow's plea come before them.
²⁴ Therefore the Lord God of hosts, "Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries	The Mighty One of Israel, declares, And avenge Myself on My foes.
²⁵ "I will also turn My hand against you, And will remove all your alloy.	And will smelt away your dross as with lye
²⁶ "Then I will restore your judges as at the first, After that you will be called the city of righteousness,	And your counselors as at the beginning; A faithful city."
²⁷ Zion will be redeemed with justice	And her repentant ones with righteousness.
²⁸ But transgressors and sinners will be crushed together,	And those who forsake the Lord will come to an end.
²⁹ Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks which you have desired,	And you will be embarrassed at the gardens which you have chosen.

The military language of “Lord God of hosts” and “Mighty One of Israel” rightly applies in the Jewish mind towards God’s avenging wrath against foe and adversary. Isaiah declares that this same wrath will be turned against Jerusalem. Just as God turns away from the hypocritical worshipers of our previous passage, He will also remove Covenant protection from His capital city. They will feel the wrath of God in the same way as wicked, pagan enemies like Sodom and Gomorrah, already referred to, but actually not exactly like Sodom and Gomorrah. There is a difference here. And this is interesting. God’s fire destroyed both of those cities. There was no coming back from that. The fire of wrath described here has a purifying element. When God turns His hand against Jerusalem, it will be like precious metal heated up. The dross will be burned away, and the precious alloy removed for use.

So we get this word of future hope after this purification in verse 26.

²⁶ “Then I will restore your judges as at the first, And your counselors as at the beginning;
After that you will be called the city A faithful city.”
of righteousness,

God’s purifying fire will restore Jerusalem back to what she had once been. Maybe we are to imagine Jerusalem during the best of David’s reign, a place of just judges and wise counselors, a righteous and faithful city. The language has been emphasizing a breakdown at the top. The judgment covers all levels of society. But there was a special mention of rebellious rulers. And this restoration depicts a new kind of judges and counselors that lead the city in righteousness and faithfulness. The need for righteous leadership is a theme of Isaiah. It does not discount the responsibility of every individual, but it does suggest this need we have, or the need that society has, for good, just, wise leadership.

Isaiah develops the idea of purifying or redemptive wrath in the final sub-section of the chapter, verses 27-31. This is where we first notice two kinds of people in Judean society. And there is a difference between a repentant remnant and a rebellious majority.

²⁷ Zion will be redeemed with justice And her repentant ones with righteousness.
²⁸ But transgressors and sinners will be And those who forsake the Lord will come
crushed together, to an end.

The just punishment to come will result in the redemption of Zion and then the repentant ones in Zion. Zion is another word for Jerusalem. That is the minority remnant. The punishment will not be redemptive for those who persist in rebellion. They will be crushed. They will come to an end. That is the language Isaiah uses for them. So, the curse, the punishment that is coming on Jerusalem has a different effect depending on whether we are talking about the remnant or the majority, and we have to keep that in mind as we go through Isaiah. Isaiah continues his prognosis speaking of the rebellious majority. These are the final three verses of the chapter.

²⁹ Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks And you will be embarrassed at the
which you have desired, gardens which you have chosen.
³⁰ For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away Or as a garden that has no water.
³¹ The strong man will become tinder, His work also a spark.
Thus they shall both burn together And there will be none to quench them.

The reference to oaks and gardens is a reference to places of pagan Canaanite worship. These trees and these special gardens, that is where you go to worship Baal and Asherah, the pagan gods and goddesses. This is the harlotry that was referred to in verse 21. Jerusalem has become like a harlot because of her people. The majority have gone away to these other gods. There are always spiritual options in society. There are always sources apart from God where people go to seek out significance, or control, or pleasure. All other religions, all substitute spirituality, all idols of the heart ultimately fail to provide true life and abundance. The oaks and the gardens that these people chose over Yahweh are going to leave them ashamed and embarrassed. A people that has put their faith in false sources of significance and false sources of life: Jerusalem will look like an oak in the winter

Appendix: Why and How are the Poetic Phrases Formatted on the Same Line?

Why Format Phrases Side-By-Side?

Bibles format poetic verse vertically, sometimes with just one column of text on a page and sometimes with two columns of text on a page. You read down the column phrase by phrase (verset by verset). This is more natural to the eye than the layout I am using in my preparation and transcription of the lessons.

I picked up the practice of setting phrases side-by-side on a horizontal line from Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. I now find it a more helpful way to study the text. Reading the poetry vertically, it is not immediately apparent which phrases go together to form one line. You especially do not see if there is a third phrase in the line. And even when you do see the two phrases, your mind is not encouraged to compare the two phrases carefully as you need to do when studying the detail of Hebrew poetry.

In the third way of reading Hebrew poetry that I recommended in the previous lesson, I gave a brief summary of two principles from Alter. Those were the principles of incremental repetition and intensification. To apply those two principles in your study, you need to see which phrases are paired in a verse.

Alter recognizes five types of relationship between parallel phrases. If you would like to see an example, I included one at the end of the article *The Study of Biblical Poetry*.

So, why line up the phrases side-by-side even though it is harder to read the text that way? It may be harder to read at first, but it helps you to study the text by making clear to your mind the poet's phrase by phrase structure of each line. (And by making clear when you have a third phrase, that tends to add emphasis or conclusion to a thought.)

How Do We Determine the Phrases in a Line?

How have I determined which phrases make up one line of poetry and when there are three instead of two?

For chapter 1, I did the formatting of the text myself, taking hints from the format in my NASB version of the Bible. As I was formatting the text of Isaiah 2 for the next lesson, I was reminded how difficult it can be sometimes to identify where a new line starts and how many phrases or versets are in that line. The bottom-line answer is that I have turned for help to Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019). Alter is a professor of literature at Stanford University. His ethnicity is Jewish. He is not a Christian and does not hold to the infallibility of Scripture as God's inspired Word. He does love the Bible. And he is an expert on both the Hebrew language and poetry. I am also using John Oswalt's NICOT commentaries on Isaiah to check the formatting.

The formatting in most Bibles is helpful, but still leaves open some questions. I wanted consistent help from some experts for this study.

Different Bible versions format the poetic structure differently. For example, some versions will capitalize the first word of each phrase or verset. That is what I see in both my NASB translation and in my Croatian Kršćanska Sadašnost translation, though not in my ESV or NIV translations, which keep to the more grammatically correct practice of only capitalizing at the beginning of a sentence. (I say "my translation" because I do not know if different printings of NASB or ESV use different formatting.) Here is an example.

Another more helpful way to see the phrases is to understand how your Bible indents. My NASB only has two levels of indentation for poetic verse. Each phrase or verset is lined up on the left but when that phrase runs over to the next line in the text, it is indented. All the indentation in my NASB is showing that the text is still one phrase. This helps me see the phrases but does not help me pair the phrases together in one line.

1:11 “What are your multiplied
sacrifices to Me?”
Says the Lord.
“I have had enough of burnt
offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the
blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

The intention is only showing you that the phrase is too long for the column. The full first phrase is “What are your multiplied sacrifices to me?” Every phrase is lined up on the left, starting with a capital letter. Notice that there are five phrases. Either one of these phrases pairs with a phrase in verse 10 or verse 11 or you have a line of three phrases. Which is it? Can you tell? You can look in the format of this lesson to see what I think.

In my ESV every phrase or verset belonging to the same line is indented. The first phrase of a line will be lined up on the left. And the second phrase will be indented under that first phrase, making it easy to see the grouping of two phrases. If there are three phrases to the line, the first phrase is lined up on the left but both the second and third phrase are indented. If one of the phrases runs too long then it is indented even further over, so that you know the text belongs to that same phrase. This is a very helpful way of formatting the text to see the phrases. I do not know if all ESV printings do this the same way.

I did notice in providing this example that my ESV have six phrases in Isaiah 1:11. That is another issue. The Hebrew manuscripts do not show the division of phrases either. Sometimes scholars disagree with one another over the right division. So, the ESV breaks the last phrase in verse 11 into two phrases, so that we have three lines of text with two phrases each.

1:11 “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”
says the Lord;
“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

Notice how the second phrase of a line is indented under the first phrase. Also notice how each phrase is not capitalized as in the NASB. Verse 15 provides an example of a three-phrase line formatted in the ESV.

15 “When you spread out your hands,
I will hide My eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Setting the phrases side-by-side yourself and trying to see the way the poet is moves from one to the other is a helpful skill in the study of Hebrew poetry. You can often do this on your own. When you are looking at “An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger” the parallelism of the two phrases is apparent. You know you have one verse with two versets. And if you want to format that line out for personal study, you know to place those two versets side by side.

But sometimes we need help from scholars to identify the phrases and to determine how those phrases line up in the structure of the poetry. Sometimes the scholars are not sure. And that’s okay. We still get the main idea. Most often there is agreement and the scholars are helping us see something true to the poet’s intended communication.