The Title (Isa 1:1)

Verse 1 implies that the whole book of Isaiah is a single prophecy, described as a ‘vision’ seen by the prophet during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. In this way the human element in the process is minimized: the prophets’ ‘words are divine oracles and their writings have come down from heaven’ (Chrysostom). Jewish tradition compares Isaiah’s vision to

References to verse-by-verse commentaries, listed separately in the Bibliography, are by author’s name only.

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that of Abraham (Mann 1971: 1, 112–113). Prophets are called ‘seers’ (1 Sam 9:9), a word denoting weakness and humility: the prophet sees; the people hear (cf. John 3:11) (Luther). In the ‘vision’ we confront not Isaiah but the speech of God (Seitz 1988: 117–118).

The use of the word ‘vision’ (Heb. ḥazon) to refer to a collection of visions, however, is without parallel, and it may be that it originally referred only to chapter 1 (Lowth) or chapters 1–12 (Duhm; cf. Rev 1:1), with the more usual title reserved for the beginning of chapter 2 (cf. Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1). Some traditions have ‘against Judah and Jerusalem’ (LXX, Eusebius), and there is a rabbinic tradition that of all the Hebrew words for ‘prophecy’, ḥazon is the harshest (cf. Isa 21:2) (Rashi); and this certainly applies particularly to chapter 1. The book includes prophecies about Babylon, Moab, Damascus and other places (13–19), not only Jerusalem and Judah (Rashi), but Ibn Ezra points out that the greater part of Isaiah's prophecies do refer to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. Indeed one of the most distinctive themes running through the whole book is ‘the larger sweep of God's dealing with Zion in both judgement and mercy’ (Williamson 1994: 242).

Since Ibn Ezra, major stylistic and historical differences between 1–39 and 40–66 have been noted (U. Simon 1985). Aquinas divides the book into two parts, and since the late eighteenth century there has been widespread agreement that the whole book cannot be by the same author. Large sections were probably composed during and after the Babylonian exile. But the literary fiction implied by verse 1 that the whole book is made up of Isaiah’s prophecies reflects numerous signs of continuity evident throughout the book and has increasingly been appreciated by modern scholars (Jones 1955; Rendtorff 1984; Vermeylen 1989; Tull 2006: 279–314). References to the deaths of Uzziah (Isa 6:1) and Ahaz (Isa 14:28) imply that most of the prophecies were delivered in Jerusalem during the ‘Golden Age’ of Hezekiah (2 Chron 29–32), after which the prophet was put to death by the evil king Manasseh (see commentary on Isa 1:10; 50:4–9) (Rashi).

The Ox and the Ass Have More Sense ( Isa 1:2–9)

Isaiah’s first prophecy is one of his bitterest attacks on the people of Judah. In Jewish tradition, part of this chapter (vv. 1–27) is the haftarah read on the Sabbath before the Ninth of Ab, the fast commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Known as ‘the Sabbath of (Isaiah’s) vision’ (shabbat ḥazon), it is intended as a day to reflect on why the Jewish people lost their land and the holy city of Jerusalem and is followed by the seven ‘Sabbaths of consolation’ when the haftarot neḥamah (readings of consolation) from chapters 40–66 are read, beginning with Isaiah 40:1–26 (Elbogen 1993: 145, 425–426). In Christian
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tradition too verses from chapter 1 are read in churches at the beginning of Lent (ORM, RCL), supplemented in Orthodox tradition in the following weeks with some equally bitter judgement oracles from chapters 2–14 (OSB).

Many of these verses were cited by Justin, Chrysostom, Isidore of Seville and others as scriptural authority for the use of all manner of anti-Jewish rhetoric hurled at a ‘sinful nation’ (v. 4): they did not recognize the Messiah in the manger (v. 3), their beloved city had been left by alien invaders ‘like a booth in a vineyard’ (vv. 7–9) and they have blood on their hands (v. 15; cf. Matt 27:25) (Sawyer 1996: 109–115). Of course Isaiah was addressing the people of ancient Judah, not the Jews of Christian Europe, and in modern times the Churches have made strenuous efforts to disown such anti-Semitic interpretations of scripture (cf. Rom 11:11–32; Flannery 1975: 741).

Isaiah’s preface is in the form of a trial-scene (Smith). Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses (v. 2), recalling Moses’ words when he prophesied that his people would ‘soon utterly perish from the land’ (Deut 4:26; cf. 32:1) (Ibn Ezra; cf. Luther, Calvin). The story of how God brought up his people like children, freeing them from slavery in Egypt and leading them to safety through the wilderness (v. 2b), is cited to condemn their ungrateful, rebellious behaviour: ‘the fuller and more abundant the grace of God which has been poured out on us, the higher will be the ingratitude of which it shall convict us … and the severer the punishment we shall deserve’ (Calvin). Recent commentators with ecological concerns find in the involvement of heaven and earth here, a reference to the divinely ordained world order which Israel had chosen to ignore (Marlow and Barton 2009:210).

Even the ox and the ass have more sense (v. 3): John Chrysostom compares this with Jeremiah’s ‘even the stork in the heavens knows her times’ (Jer 8:7) and Solomon’s ‘Go to the ant, thou sluggard’ (Prov 6:6). The ox and the ass are valued domestic animals who, in recognizing the hand that feeds them, show more sense than the people (Jerome). But it is also uncannily appropriate that the ‘Fifth Gospel’ should begin, like Matthew and Luke, with a reference to the Nativity of Christ: the ox and the ass ‘at their master’s crib’ have been present in Christian representations of the nativity scene from patristic times down to the present day, despite the scornful comments of Calvin (‘an absurd fable … by which they have shown themselves to be egregious asses’) and the consensus of modern historical-critical scholarship.

Isaiah’s reference to the ox and the ass adoring the baby Jesus, along with a prophecy of Habakkuk (Hab 3:2 LXX) (Coggins and Han 2011: 75–76), appears in the eighth-century apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (14:2), and in the thirteenth century, St Francis of Assisi invented the popular custom of recreating the humble nativity scene at Christmas time, showing the child in a manger, complete with hay and an ox and an ass standing by (Bonaventure 2010: 86).
But the tradition goes back much earlier. From the fourth century the ox and the ass appear in Christian iconography, sometimes standing alone by the manger without any human figures in the scene (Schiller 1971: 59) (Plate 1). Some identify the ox as the Jews, bearing the burden of the law, and the ass as the gentiles tainted by idolatry (Jerome): thus all humanity, Jews and gentiles, ‘all came to the one manger and found the fodder of the Word’ (Augustine, *Sermon 375.1*). Augustine calls upon Christians to identify with the ass: ‘Don’t be ashamed of being the Lord’s donkey. If you carry Christ, you won’t go astray’ (Augustine *Sermon 189.4*). Sometimes the ox represents Christian faith and obedience, while stubbornness, disobedience and materialism, usually Jewish, are represented by the ass. Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* (c.1500) in the National Gallery, London, is a good example, where the quiet obedience of the kneeling ox is contrasted with the behaviour of the ass who is standing up and disrespectfully chewing a mouthful of straw.

The two animals, without any ethical or political associations, are frequent in Christmas literature. Christina Rossetti’s ‘Before the Paling of the Stars’ (Rossetti 1904: 217) contains a typical nineteenth-century English example:

> Let us kneel with Mary maid,  
> With Joseph bent and hoary,  
> With saint and angel, ox and ass,  
> To hail the King of Glory.

Rudyard Kipling in his poem ‘Eddi’s Service’ imagines a midnight service in seventh-century pagan England attended only by a priest and the two animals
They also figure in a good many Christmas carols from the anonymous thirteenth-century French ‘Entre le boeuf et l’âne gris’ (SNOBC 289) to ‘Good Christians All Rejoice’ where ‘ox and ass before Him bow’ (CH4 322, AM 65; cf. CH2 58; GtG 132), and ‘The Little Drummer Boy’ (1941), popularized in the film The Sound of Music (1955), where they keep time to the drumbeat.

The prophet angrily describes the people as ‘sinful … laden with iniquity … they have forsaken the Lord … they are utterly estranged’ (v. 4). ‘Seed of evil-doers’ (v. 4 AV) is taken literally by some to refer to Israel’s pagan ancestry condemned by Ezekiel (cf. Ezek 16:23) (Ibn Ezra), and by others to imply that they have been disowned by their ancestors and can no longer claim to be the ‘seed of Abraham’ (Isa 41:8; cf. 61:9) (Eusebius; cf. Calvin). The term ‘Holy One of Israel’, which occurs very frequently in the Book of Isaiah, is especially appropriate in this attack on God’s ‘holy people’ (Deut 7:6) (Rashi): their rebelliousness against the source of their holiness is all the more ungrateful and ‘barbarous’ (Calvin). Patristic commentators take the ‘Holy One’ in this context to be referring to Jesus (Chrysostom, Jerome), and in the fourteenth-century Biblia Pauperum the words ‘they have blasphemed against the holy one of Israel’ (v. 4 Vg) accompany illustrations of the crowd mocking Christ (Matt 27:27–31; 26:67) (BP 94).

Verses 5 and 6 envisage a disobedient slave beaten repeatedly by his owner (Childs) or a rebellious son disciplined by his father (Blenkinsopp; cf. Prov 10:13; 13:24). Applied to the ‘sinful nation’, the words ‘from the sole of the foot even to the head’ may be interpreted as referring to the whole people, from the poorest at the very bottom of the social scale to those with wealth and authority at the top, all equally deserving punishment (Rashi, Cyril). The image of an unnamed individual, bruised, wounded and bleeding, is developed later in the book, notably in the ‘Man of Sorrows’ poem in 53 (Duhm), and was used by Christian interpreters to add some gruesome details to representations of Christ’s Passion. In one example from late mediaeval iconography, verse 6, coupled with Job 2:7, is illustrated by a scene of Christ’s tormentors working ‘from the sole of the foot even to the head’, so that they could see that every inch of his body had been beaten before it was covered with blood (Marrow 1979: 48).

Some commentators see a glimmer of hope in verses 7–9. Paul finds prophetic authority here for his teaching on ‘the remnant’ of the Jewish people, saved by the grace of God (Rom 9:29; cf. Isa 11:10–11). On the size of the remnant (‘few survivors’ RSV), Calvin cites the words of Christ (Luke 12:32) and admits that the number of the godly may be small: it is only hypocrites that are ‘proud of their numbers’ (cf. Henry). Of course the bare survival of Jerusalem in 701 BCE is interpreted as a miracle later in the book (Isa 36–37). In the present context, however, there is little sign of hope, and most commentators...
take it as a description of the situation referred to in Sennacherib’s Annals where Hezekiah was shut up ‘like a bird in a cage’ (Childs), and Judah was utterly devastated like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19; cf. Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19; Matt 10:15).

**Blood on Your Hands (Isa 1:10–20)**

The next prophecy begins where the previous one ends, by comparing the sins of the people of Judah to those of Sodom and Gomorrah, defined elsewhere as ‘pride, surfeit of food and the oppression of the poor and needy’ (Ezek 16:49; cf. Isa 3:9) (Kimhi; Miranda 1977: 96). There is a tradition first recorded in the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* that it was this particularly bitter attack on Judah’s leaders, in which he calls ‘Jerusalem Sodom … and the princes of Judah Gomorrah’, that was the main reason for his execution under Manasseh (*OTP* 1.160). His condemnation of ritualism and hypocrisy (vv. 11–15) is followed by an appeal for repentance and social justice (vv. 16–20).

For the rabbis the key to this apparent wholesale rejection of the Temple cult is to be found in the references to ‘iniquity’ and ‘evil’ in the speech itself (vv. 13–17), and in statements from elsewhere in the Bible such as ‘the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination’ (Prov 22:27) (Rashi). They also deduced from the array of religious practices listed by Isaiah (vv. 11–15) that ‘prayer, which comes last in the list, is superior to sacrifice’ (*RA* 357). The Church Fathers also argued that ‘prayer alone conquers God’ (Tertullian, *On Prayer* 29) and true sacrifice is ‘giving alms and kindness to the poor’ (Augustine, *Sermon* 42,1). Calvin understood the passage as saying that ‘our actions are of no value in the sight of God, when they do not proceed from a good conscience’. Some Christian commentators noted that the Sabbath is included (v. 13) and deduced from this that the passage advocates the total abrogation of the old Covenant, not just the Temple cult (*EpBarn* 15:8–9; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 12), while others, including many Protestant scholars with a historical-critical interest, used passages like this to show that the spirit of eighth-century prophecy demanded an alternative to the ritualism and sacrifice-based religion of the Pentateuch (cf. Amos 5:14–15; Mic 6:8) (Smith, Gray). From the same period, the old beggar Edie Ochiltree in Sir Walter Scott’s novel *The Antiquary* (1816) quotes part of verse 13 as a comment on the ‘grand parafle o’ ceremonies’ that used to fill the churches before the Reformation (Moffatt 1924: 238).

The reference to bloodstained hands (v. 15) is normally understood as referring to murder and blood-guilt in general, perhaps intended to include the intention to kill as well (Henry), but the Church Fathers saw here an explicit reference to the Jews’ killing of the prophets sent to them time and time again
(Matt 23:29–39) (Jerome), and also to their willingness to accept the blame for Christ’s death: ‘his blood be upon us and on our children’ (Matt 27:25) (Chrysostom, Cyril). Tertullian distinguishes the scarlet blood of the prophets from the crimson blood of Christ, which is brighter (Against Marcion 4:10). Taken with Isaiah 66:2–3 it has also been applied to the blood of animals (v. 11) and interpreted as a scriptural recommendation of vegetarianism (Skriver 1990:100).

The appeal for repentance in verses 16–20 (cf. v. 27) is rare in Isaiah (Sommer), but much commented on. Jewish tradition found in the passage explicit allusions to the Day of Atonement. Thus the ten imperatives (‘wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil . . . ’) correspond to the ‘Ten Days of Repentance’ between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur (Rashi), while verse 18 is cited as biblical authority for a tradition recounted in the Mishnah that on Yom Kippur a thread of crimson wool tied to the door of the temple turned white when the scapegoat reached the wilderness. This was a signal for the high priest to start reading from the Torah (Lev 16; 23:26–32) and then pronounce the eight blessings with which the atonement ritual concluded (mYoma 6:8; cf. mShabbat 9:3). Clement of Rome, paraphrasing Ezekiel with words from Isaiah 1:18, points out that the repentance of a sinner is what God wants, not his death (cf. Ezek 33:11–20) (Letter to the Corinthians 8:1–9:1).

The appeal to ‘Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean,’ alongside the images of bloodstained hands and scarlet sins becoming ‘white as snow’ (vv. 15–18), is cited by the Church Fathers, along with Ezekiel 36:25–27, as scriptural authority for the sacrament of baptism (Justin, First Apology 61; Jerome). The popular evangelical notion of being washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14) also finds biblical expression here, as in the refrain ‘I’ve washed my robes in Jesus blood / And he has made me white as snow’ (SBSA 359), and in the popular hymn ‘Rock of Ages’:

Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power. (CH2 413; GtG 438) (NCHB 4,731–2)

Some modern commentators argue that verse 18 does not follow on from the preceding verses but begins a new section with a question, challenging the audience to an argument and asking them ironically whether they think a serious sin can just disappear: ‘if your sins are coloured scarlet, can they become white like snow?’ (Blenkinsopp; cf. Clements): ‘a murder is a murder even when it is forgiven’ (Duhm). The heretic Pelagius, on the other hand, quoted verses 19–20 to prove that divine forgiveness is not unmerited (Augustine, Perfection...
in Righteousness 40.42) but a response to a prior decision by the sinner, while, according to Calvin, the papists twisted the passage to support their doctrine of free will. Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the verse, also separates it from what precedes, and he observes that the verse is about sins, not sinners. He interprets it as an analysis of two different types of sin and how they can be cured: ‘scarlet’ sins caused by burning desire (amore incendente), which can be cured by putting snow on them (cf. Job 9:30), and those that are ‘crimson’ (L. vermiculus ‘worm, crimson dye’), caused by mortifying fear (timore mortificante), which can be cured by applying pure wool to them (cf. Dan 7:9).

In a short poem entitled ‘Beyond Knowledge’ (1901) the English Catholic writer and suffragist Alice Meynell (1847–1922) notices that the passage is not about washing away sins and making the believer white as snow or about challenging sinners to face up to their responsibilities. On the contrary, what the words actually say is that, however scarlet the sin, it can be changed into something white and pure, although unlike Aquinas, she envisages this as something that happens after death. Perhaps thinking of Paul’s description of the resurrection of the dead, when ‘we shall all be changed’ (1 Cor 15:51), she imagines a time when what is an abomination in this world will be transformed into a thing of great beauty in the next. There will be no hell where evil is disposed of but rather a new heaven and a new earth where even sins can be ‘rescued’ (Meynell 1927: 93).

But the passage begins by addressing the ‘rulers’ (v. 10) and later directs the main thrust of the speech towards ‘princes … judges … and councillors’ (vv. 21.26; cf. 10:1–2), and the obvious inference, although little noticed until the late twentieth century, is that this is not about individual morality but an attack on corrupt government institutions, the law courts and property owners. Ordinary people, like widows and orphans, are their victims (vv. 17, 23). This is how the liberation theologians of the 1970s and 1980s understood such passages (Miranda 1977; Lohfink 1987; Tutu 1991: 21–22).

The Faithful City (Isa 1:21–31)

The prophet’s attack continues in the form of a lament (cf. 2 Sam 1:19–26; Lam 1), and again commentators have ignored the fact that it is about corrupt ‘princes’ (v. 23) and ‘judges’ (v. 26), not individual morality: Jerome, for example, interprets ‘the faithful city that has become a harlot’ (v. 21) as an individual, formerly righteous, but now inhabited by murderous demons. ‘The faithful city’ (vv. 21, 26) is a striking phrase, recalling the golden age of David and Solomon (Luther) as well as prophecies about the role of Zion in the future (Isa 2:2–4; 40:9; 66:20). The Septuagint actually adds the word ‘Zion’ in both verses. More specifically,
in Hebrew, the choice of a poetic word for 'city' (qiryah) recalls passages like 'Ho Ariel, Ariel, the city [qiryah] where David encamped' (Isa 29:1) and the so-called Zion songs in the Psalter (e.g. Ps 48:2). 'Faithful' in Hebrew no doubt refers to 'firmly established' as well as to a 'city of righteousness' (cf. v. 26), 'faithful in conduct and piety' (cf. Isa 7:9; Clements), although Calvin interprets it more precisely as 'chaste', applying it to the 'spiritual chastity' of the Church as well as of the Jewish people: 'once faithful to the marriage contract, she has now become an harlot'. The radical feminist writer Mary Daly cites this verse as a good example of the biblical prophets' 'tiresome propensity for comparing Israel to a whore' (Daly 1973: 162: see comm. on Isa 47:2–3).

The details of her behaviour are spelled out in graphic language and imagery. She is accused of murder, robbery, bribery and corruption at the highest level and the neglect of orphans and widows. What had once been as pure and bright as silver has become dross, and what had promised to be a good wine has been spoilt by the addition of water. Jerome and Cyril see here a reference to the wrong interpretation of scripture, citing a Psalm where 'the promises of the Lord are pure ... as silver refined in a furnace' (Ps 12:5), and they identify the 'innkeepers mixing water with wine' with scribes and Pharisees. For Luther dross is a worthless metal that looks like silver and so provides an image of hypocrisy, familiar among the bishops and political leaders of his own day. For many English-speaking Christians 'dross' in this passage (vv. 22, 25) came to be synonymous with human sin and, no doubt partly because it rhymes with Cross, figures regularly in evangelical hymns such as John Wesley's 'O Thou to whose all searching sight' (1738), which contains the lines 'Wash out its stain, refine its dross / Nail my affections to the Cross'.

The 'faithful city' poem, however, which starts as a dirge bemoaning the seemingly irredeemable wickedness of Jerusalem, ends with the return of good judges and counsellors and the restoration of the 'city of righteousness' (v. 26). The turning point is the intervention of 'the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel' who promises he will avenge himself on his enemies and, in another metalworking metaphor, smelt away the dross and produce pure, fine quality silver again (vv. 24–25). Some Christian writers since Jerome follow the Greek version of the text of verse 24, which has 'Woe to the mighty of Israel' instead of the 'Mighty One of Israel', and interpret these verses as addressed to Israel's leaders in New Testament times, recalling Christ's words 'Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees' (Matt 23) (Eusebius). Verse 26 is cited in the weekday Amidah (ADPB 84–85) and in modern times Zionist extremists have used it as scriptural authority for the reconstitution of the Sanhedrin: 'I will restore thy judges as at the first' (Ravitzky 1996: 91–92).

In the description of Jerusalem as 'full of justice' (v. 21), the word 'full' is spelled in a slightly unusual way in Hebrew (mele' ti), and, by gematria,
provided scriptural authority for a rabbinic tradition that there were 481 synagogues in Jerusalem in which ‘righteousness lodged’ (Rashi). Many Christian commentators apply the poem about the decline of the ‘faithful city’ (vv. 21–26) to Jerusalem in the first century CE, highlighting prophetic references to the treachery of Judas (v. 23), the corruption of the authorities (v. 23), the emergence of the apostles (v. 26) and the faith which created the Church after the Passion (v. 26) (Eusebius, Cyril, Jerome). The ‘faithful city’, or ‘the city of the righteous one’ (civitas justi Vg), like ‘the city on a hill that cannot be hidden’ (Matt 5:14), is obviously the Church (Jerome). In a sermon on verse 21, entitled ‘Hypocrisy in Oxford’, John Wesley applied the poem to the current state of the Church, specifying the sins of the clergy and divinity students in great detail, including wearing immodest clothing, frequenting taverns and not studying Hebrew: ‘how is the faithful city become a harlot!’ (Sermons 4.392–407).

Verses 27–31, are written in a very different style from the preceding poem, although continuing the theme of the redemption of Zion. A striking new element in these verses is the addition of the worship of idols to the long list of the city’s crimes (see comm. on Isa 2:6–22). The passage also anticipates later chapters by separating the sheep from the goats when judgement comes (cf. Isa 65:13–14). It is as though a remnant has heeded the calls to ‘wash yourselves: make yourselves clean’ earlier in the chapter (vv. 16–17) and shall be rewarded, while the ‘rebels and sinners … and those who forsake the Lord’ shall be destroyed (v. 28) (Eusebius, Jerome). The city will be saved not be divine intervention but by people who practise righteousness (Rashi), that is, by the spirit and by faith (Luther). As we have already noted, repentance is rare in Isaianic tradition, and the word translated ‘those who repent’ (RSV), ‘converts’ (AV) or ‘the repentant ones’ (Childs) in verse 27 is taken by some to refer to ‘those who return’, that is to say, the returning exiles (Calvin). The verse was quoted by Chaim Weitzmann, the first President of the State of Israel, at the opening of the first Israeli parliament in 1948: ‘Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those who return by righteousness’ (v. 27).