

Isaiah's challenge (Isaiah 5:1-7)

God's indictment of ancient Israel raises hard questions for Christian readers today.

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"I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. ... For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel." Sometimes the prophets extend assurances of blessing, and sometimes their judgments are harsh. Put Isaiah 5 in column number two.

Down through the centuries, we Christians have struggled to find an appropriate response to ancient Israel's prophecies. Historically speaking, it's been far too common to read a passage like Isaiah 5 as condemning Israel forever, opening the way for Jesus and the church to replace God's covenant people. That way of reading the prophets has brought us a parade of horrible outcomes.

Alternately, some Christians read their own nation onto Israel. Unfortunately, that mode of interpretation tends to erase Israel, and Judaism by association, from our imaginations. The pattern is especially prominent in the United States, where preachers across the political spectrum have assigned prophetic judgments to our national faults. We may recall Jeremiah Wright's "God damn America" refrain, which nourished a political furor because Barack Obama was one of Wright's parishioners. Meanwhile, rightwing preachers have attributed phenomena such as the AIDS plague and Hurricane Katrina to God's judgment. There are American Christians both on the left and on the right who identify the nation with Israel. This feeds into the phenomenon we know as Christian nationalism, the idea that the United States enjoys a distinctive relationship with God that can lead to blessing or judgment.

We biblical scholars tend to emphasize the historical gap between ancient Israel and Judah and our own contexts. The idea is that Christians may overhear God's word through its ancient settings. We routinely apply this model to Paul's letters. The Hebrew prophets addressed Israel with notes of both assurance and judgment. This week's passage primarily applies judgment to the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, a verdict mixed with grieving. After all, Israel and Judah are God's planting, a vineyard carefully tended. God's response is not merely to step away from the relationship but to enact punishment: "I will make it a wasteland" and "command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it."

We could overhear Isaiah not so much as a judgment or warning but as a challenge. God's indictment of Israel raises hard questions for Christian readers today. If we restrict ourselves to verses 1-7, the challenge presses us to ask, "What wild grapes are preventing the church from pleasing God?" And if we press beyond these verses, the indictment unfolds. Our Christian nationalism movement has produced some seriously wild grapes.

Truly, churches today are disenfranchising the poor and endorsing violence. Some Christians have even identified a new sin: the so-called "sin of empathy." They call Christians to suppress any compassion we might feel for people who are impoverished, not to mention for people who do not conform to patriarchal standards of gender expression. Likewise, the movement has endorsed "mass deportation now" as millions celebrate the cruel treatment of immigrants across the country. As much as we may distance ourselves from these atrocities, their biggest cheerleading comes from churches.

The judgment Isaiah describes largely involves a withdrawal of God's blessing. Dangerous forces surround Israel. Babylon approaches Jerusalem's gates. All God has to do is remove the hedge and bring down the wall, and the Holy City perishes. It requires no particular prophetic gift to appreciate the dangers facing free societies today, along with the faith communities that should serve them: "Sheol has enlarged its appetite" (5:14).