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## **Argue your case (Isaiah 1:1–31)**

Isaiah was a skilled and effective communicator. When he composed this record of his preaching over a long and challenging lifetime, he did not preface it with an analytical résumé of all the themes he takes up throughout the book. Instead his introduction is a stark challenge to the self-satisfied religious consensus of his day. He presents God as instituting legal proceedings against the nation so that they have either to rebut his accusations as best they can, or else to repent and accept the divine verdict on their conduct. Isaiah is seeking to provoke the nation out of its spiritual lethargy and to induce it to engage in a radical reassessment of its position in the light of Yahweh's message to them.

The new superscription at the beginning of chapter 2 indicates

that chapter 1 is intended to be read as a unit. The various viewpoints to be found in different sections of the chapter suggest that the passages may have originated on separate occasions, but Isaiah has integrated them into a cohesive and formidable indictment. The description of the ravaged country and its capital (1:7–9) points to that section being composed in the period after Sennacherib's invasion, and so the chapter in this form dates from no earlier than the closing years of Hezekiah's reign.

## **Superscription (Isaiah 1:1)**

*1:1. The vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz [and] Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

As a trained scribe (2 Chr. 26:22), Isaiah entitled his work according to contemporary custom by indicating his personal involvement and by detailing the reigns during which he ministered (compare the headings of other prophetic books). For details regarding the kings mentioned, see the section in the introduction entitled 'Historical Background' (pages 10–18). Isaiah prophesied from 739 BC, the year Uzziah died, until after the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC. Hezekiah died in 687/6 BC, but the omission here of the name of Manasseh, his son and heir, need not imply that Isaiah died before Manasseh's reign began. It may rather be a dismissal of Manasseh as a true king of Judah.

The use of the term ‘vision’ should not lead us to suppose that everything recorded in this book originated in inner visual experiences. Indeed, only two passages are specifically described as visions (6:1–13; 21:1–10). However, the word is also used in a broader sense as equivalent to ‘prophetic message’ or ‘reception of divine revelation’, whether it came by vision or by word (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1; Ps. 89:19). Its use here as a collective noun covering the whole of the prophet’s message is a disclaimer that what follows is the product of Isaiah’s own thinking. On the contrary, what Isaiah proclaimed originated in what he, as the spokesman of the God of all the earth, had been privileged to perceive through divine empowerment (cf. Amos 3:7). The singular, ‘vision’, rather than ‘visions’, also points to the fundamental unity that pervaded all that was revealed to the prophet.

Mention of ‘Judah and Jerusalem’ is sometimes taken to indicate that this introduction was written only for chapters 1–12, since the following chapters deal with the destiny of other nations. But even there, other nations and the northern kingdom are referred to only as their affairs impact on those of the remaining portion of the covenant nation. For the prophet, as for Yahweh himself, it is the destiny of Judah and Jerusalem that is the focus of his message throughout the whole book.

## **Rebellious children (Isaiah 1:2–3)**

1:2. *Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,*

*for [it is] Yahweh who has spoken:  
 ‘Children have I reared and brought up,  
 but they have rebelled against me.’*

Although Isaiah does not explicitly mention the covenant by which Yahweh had formally constituted Israel as his people, his language and outlook are moulded by the covenant terminology and thinking of Israel’s ancient faith. Many expressions in this chapter reflect Deuteronomy 32 (see comments on 1:4,15,24,31). Invocation of ‘heavens’ and ‘earth’ recalls the ratification procedure for the Mosaic covenant (Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 32:1). Now the prophet, acting as the herald and ambassador of Yahweh, summons these witnesses from the realm of nature so that they may verify that Israel’s behaviour has infringed the covenant commitments to which they had subscribed (Exod. 24:3). What is at stake does not just concern the covenant people, because their destiny is of universal significance. Ultimately this will involve nothing less than the institution of a new heavens and a new earth (65:17; 66:22).

‘Yahweh’, the divine name used here, is an ancient one whose significance was specially revealed to Moses on Sinai (Exod. 3:14). It is particularly associated with God as the one who has instituted and entered into a covenant relationship with his people. Following the later Jewish practice of not pronouncing this name, it is conventional to render it as ‘the LORD’ in English translations. This obscures the fact that Yahweh is a personal name, and not a title. ‘Jehovah’ is a late medieval attempt to recover the original pronunciation, but modern scholarship considers Yahweh more probable.

As their covenant King, Yahweh ‘has spoken’ to voice his dissatisfaction with the conduct of his subjects and is now conveying his complaint to them through the ministry of the prophet. This

procedure resembles the contemporary Assyrian practice whereby emperors, ever mindful of the expense of going to war, might not immediately use military force to quell a rebellion, but would instead send a messenger/ambassador to upbraid the insurgents for their failure to meet their agreed obligations, to warn them of the dire consequences of further disobedience and to urge them to amend their behaviour. Such ‘covenant lawsuits’ have been extensively studied and provide an illuminating background to the argument of this chapter.<sup>1</sup>

Yahweh’s complaint centred on the lack of gratitude shown by the people whom he had called to himself and for whose well-being he had made special provision over the years. Divine blessing had been especially evident in the times of David and Solomon, and the more recent reigns of Uzziah and Jotham had recaptured something of the former prosperity of the nation. ‘Reared’ (literally, ‘made great’, reminiscent of the use of ‘great’ in the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:2) and ‘brought up’ point to Yahweh’s fatherly care for his family as they matured. However, those who had been so blessed ‘have rebelled’ (the verb is repeated in 66:24). The underlying metaphor is basically political, taken from a situation where subjects disregard their king’s directions and decide to go their own way in defiance of his authority.

But Judah’s behaviour was not simply a matter of political revolt; it was a breakdown in family relationships. Mention of ‘children’ (literally ‘sons’, but the plural may be used for children of both sexes; cf. 30:1,9; 51:18; 63:8) shows that the bond that was instituted was intended to be of an even more personal nature than that of king/subject or overlord/vassal. The Old Testament was sparing in its employment of ‘Father’ to describe God because that metaphor was prevalent in surrounding pagan religions to imply a physical relationship by which human beings became divine (cf. 63:16).

Instead, the Old Testament usage focuses on divine adoption of the people to become Yahweh's first-born son (cf. Exod. 4:22–23; Deut. 14:1–2). The language of parent and child reminded Israel that their existence as a community was not primarily an ethnic or linguistic or political phenomenon, but the product of divine grace which brought every individual in the nation into a special relationship to Yahweh. It was therefore all the more crass and heinous that they had rebelled against him.

1:3.     *'An ox knows its owner,  
and a donkey its master's feeding-trough;  
Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.'*

The stark juxtaposition of two well-known facts of animal behaviour with the conduct of the people brings out their folly and ingratitude. There is also a note of divine poignancy that matters had degenerated so far. The word translated 'feeding-trough' may also be understood as 'stall'. In either event it indicates that a domesticated animal recognizes its owner and regularly returns to the one who cares for it. But Israel (here used not of the northern kingdom, but of Judah as the remaining representatives of the covenant people of Yahweh) does not even rise to that level.

Although 'know' is used absolutely, it does not point to an absence of all intelligent thought, or even to their lack of acknowledgement of the external facts of their situation. The word is more probably used in its extended Hebrew sense of recognition of the status of an overlord, of what should have been their intimate and cordial relationship with him, and of the provision he made for them (cf. Hosea 2:8). The crisis facing them had arisen because in

practice they had forgotten their true status as those whom Yahweh had been pleased to designate ‘my people’.

## **Reflection**

In the early part of his prophecy Isaiah uses a wide variety of Old Testament terms to describe disobedience against God. To ‘rebellion’ (1:2) he adds sin, iniquity and evil in 1:4. This emphasizes not only the prevalence of sinful misconduct among mankind, but its inevitable consequence in fracturing our relationship with God. Humanity has an innate tendency to minimize how heinous sin is and to ignore its spiritual impact. The prophet knew that people must be made to face up to the full reality of their sinful character and conduct before they will appreciate their need for salvation and how wonderfully that has been provided for by God himself.

This passage exposes the spiritual rebellion and ignorance of those who ought to have known better because it was their privilege as Israelites to have ‘the adoption’ (Rom. 9:4). So there continues to be a solemn reminder to those who are sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty that we must strive to bring holiness to completion out of reverence for God (2 Cor. 6:16–7:1). A key motivating factor in this is the remembrance with thankfulness of all that he has done for us by Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:24–25; 2 Tim. 2:8; cf. also Ps. 22:27; 143:5). In this way we will be impelled to turn from the world and all that is in it and show true love to the Father (1 John 2:15–17).