



ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS

COMMENTARY ON
ISAIAH

Theodoret of Cyrrhus

TRANSLATED AND
EDITED BY
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PART ONE (1:1-31)

1:1 *The vision which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw, which he saw against Judah and against Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, and Jotham, and Ahaz, and Hezekiah, who reigned over Judah.*

He calls the foreknowledge of future events a vision. For just as the eyes of the body, if they are healthy, see what lies in front of them, so the perception of the mind, enlightened by the divine Spirit, sees as present things that are not present. Thus he says that he has seen ominous things against Judah and Jerusalem. He calls Jerusalem the capital, and “Judah” the cities and villages subject to it. He also reveals the time of the prophecy by mentioning the kings. He began in the reign of Uzziah and continued into that of Hezekiah.¹

1:2 *Hear, O heaven, and hearken, O earth, for the Lord has spoken,*

The great Moses also invoked the same witnesses when he was ordered to do so. For having heard, “Go down and call the heaven and the earth to witness to me,”² this is how he began his declaration: “Listen, O heaven, and I shall speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.”³ Before going on further, he added, “Because I have called on the name of the Lord.”⁴ He bore witness before the people and threatened them with all kinds of punishments

if they transgressed the law given to them. The prophet Jeremiah, or rather God through him, also condemned the unfaithfulness of the people and added, “Heaven was astonished at this spectacle, and earth trembled even more, says the Lord.”⁵ After these things had been accomplished the God of all recalled in these words, spoken by the tongue of the prophet: *Hear, O heaven, and hearken, O earth, for the Lord has spoken.* He said that it was not a man who spoke but God who spoke through a man. He called heaven and earth to bear witness, not as animate beings but because they encompass the entire visible creation and have existed from time immemorial. We find that Jacob and Laban erected a pile of stones and called it a witness. But they gathered the stones as a monument, although they were not animate beings. Instead, they entrusted the true witness to the guardian of all.⁶ Thus he too called these great elements as a witness. And he confirmed the words by deeds, for when the Jews nailed the Savior to the cross the earth shook in witness, and heaven, unable to give people the same feeling because of its elevated position, displayed the sun that traverses it shorn of its rays, and produced darkness as a witness to their unfaithfulness.⁷

“I have begotten and reared up children, but they have rebelled against me.”

“Not only did I bring them into being, but I endowed them with all kinds of blessings and glorified them with all kinds of favors, but they became ungrateful to their benefactor.” It follows that in condemning their ingratitude

¹Uzziah (791 BC–739 BC), Jotham (751 BC–732 BC), Ahaz (736 BC–715 BC), and Hezekiah (729 BC–686 BC) overlapped with their predecessors. We know that Isaiah was active from about 740 BC to 700 BC, and perhaps somewhat later.

²Ex 19:10, 21; Deut 31:28.

³Deut 32:1.

⁴Deut 32:3.

⁵Jer 2:12.

⁶Gen 31:44-53.

⁷Mt 27:45-51; Mk 15:33; Lk 23:44.

he focuses on heaven and earth because it is from them that they have reaped all kinds of benefits. Heaven provided them with manna for food from above: “He gave the order,” he said, “to the clouds above and opened the gates of heaven, and it rained on them manna to eat, and he gave them bread from heaven.”⁸ In the desert the earth supplied their need for water, and in Palestine it gave them an abundance of all kinds of fruit. They were the first to be deemed worthy of the inheritance of sons, which is why God graced them with the name of his first-begotten son, as he said, “Israel is my first-begotten son.”⁹ But he could not persuade them to adopt an attitude of thankfulness. This is why he went so far as to compare them with animals, because they were even more lacking in reason. As he said:

1:3 *“The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel does not know me, and the people have not regarded me.”*

The beasts may lack reason and a mind, but they know who feeds them, and because they benefit from his care they are thankful to him who gives it. The ox knows his owner and comes to him at the sound of his voice, and the ass runs to his usual trough, but those who have drunk the well of good things dry have not been willing to acknowledge the source of these water springs. So in Jeremiah’s words he compares them to birds and judges, that they are even more mindless. As he says, “The turtledove, the crane, and the swallow know the times of their migration, but my people does not know the judgments of the Lord.”¹⁰ I am amazed at the goodness of the Master who loves mankind, for he calls them not just a people but adds that they are his own. For it is not the ungrateful people who say “My God,”

but the man-loving God who says, “My people.”

What follows next expresses his inexpressible mercy. He composes laments for those who do not want to be saved, and laments are the work of those who love, not of those who hate.

1:4 *Ab, sinful nation, a people full of sins, an evil seed, lawless children: ye have forsaken the Lord and provoked the Holy One of Israel.*

Symmachus has translated this more accurately: “They have abandoned the Lord and slandered the Holy One.” For not only have they abandoned their Maker and offered the worship due to God to idols instead, but they insulted and mocked the One who became a man to accomplish the salvation of all mankind. Sometimes they called him a deceiver and demon-possessed and sometimes a Samaritan.¹¹ They even provoked him, saying, “Aha, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, come down from the cross.”¹² In calling them an “evil seed” he was not insulting their ancestors but attacking their own wickedness. In the same way John the Baptist called them the offspring of vipers, and the Lord called them an evil and adulterous generation, because they had not maintained the nobility of their ancestors.¹³

He goes on to imitate the behavior of a man who is annoyed at somebody else and who in turn addresses both that person and himself, saying, *They have cut themselves off from me and gone backwards.*¹⁴ In other words, they have abandoned me and gone after my enemies. He says the same thing elsewhere: “They turned their back to me and not their face.”¹⁵

¹¹Mt 7:63; Jn 8:48.

¹²Mk 15:29-30; Mt 27:40; Jn 2:19.

¹³Mt 3:7; 12:39; 16:4; Lk 3:7.

¹⁴This is a paraphrase of the text being commented on.

¹⁵Jer 2:27.

⁸Ps 78:23-24.

⁹Ex 4:22.

¹⁰Jer 8:7.

1:5-6 *Why should you be smitten any more, transgressing more and more? The whole head is pained, and the whole heart sad. From the feet to the head, there is no soundness in them;*

He calls the kings and rulers the “head” and the priests and teachers the “heart.” What the heart is to the body, the priests and teachers are to the people, and what the head is to the body, the kings and rulers are to their subjects. He deplores their hardness of heart—“What further punishment can I inflict?” he says. I have inflicted all kinds of punishments, and you are still suffering from incurable ailments. The sickness has extended to all your members—head, heart, and feet—which is why I am refusing to save you.

neither wound, nor bruise, nor festering ulcer are healed: it is not possible to apply a plaster, nor oil, nor bandages.

Symmachus renders this more accurately: “There is nothing healthy in it, but only wounds, bruises, and sores that do not heal and that oil does not soothe.” He says the wounds are so great that they defeat the power of drugs.

And because he has asked the question, “Where else can you be afflicted, you who add one iniquity to another?” he goes on, quite rightly, to list the different forms of punishment.

1:7 *Your land is desolate, your cities burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is made desolate, overthrown by strange nations.*

“This is the list of evils I have inflicted on you, and you do not want to learn what has caused them.” These evils came upon them when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon,¹⁶ waged war against them, but it was the Roman emperors who inflicted the final blow after the Savior’s crucifixion. And we still see today that

foreign nations dwell in their cities and occupy their land.

This is what he says about Judah before prophesying the destruction of the city:

1:8 *The daughter of Zion shall be deserted as a tent in a vineyard, and as a storehouse of fruits in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city.*

He calls Jerusalem “daughter of Zion.” Just as he calls men “sons of men” and prophets “sons of the prophets,” so he refers to the “daughter of Jerusalem” and the “daughter of Zion.”¹⁷ It flourished in the past, when the vine produced its fruit in due season, but after the harvest it was deserted like a hut in the vineyard.

Vinedressers surround their vines with dry stones and enclosures when they are laden with fruit and set up elevated huts in which they sit and guard the fruit, but when they have gathered it they destroy the huts and leave the vineyard unguarded. In the same way the vineyard of Israel, as long as they possessed the blessing announced to the nations, benefited from every kind of care, but when the blessing was harvested and those who had put their trust in it had been carefully set apart, it was deprived of its enclosure and deprived of its temple, and the distinguished house was left in the state in which passersby now see it.

1:9 *And if the Lord Sabaoth had not left us a seed, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been made like Gomorrah.*

When God consumed Sodom and Gomorrah by fire, none of its inhabitants was saved. Only Lot escaped the destruction, because he was unrelated to any of them.¹⁸ And many thousands out of Israel were saved when the Roman generals and emperors conquered it, setting fire to their cities and killing the majority of

¹⁷This is a Semitic idiom common to Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic.

¹⁸Gen 19:16-25.

¹⁶605–562 BC.

their inhabitants with javelins, enslaving those who were left. For the Lord had forewarned the holy apostles and those who came to faith through them what would happen, and in his goodness he advised them to seek safety. He said, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its destruction is near,"¹⁹ and again, "Then those who are in Judaea must flee to the mountains, and the one who is on the housetop must not go down and take what is in his house."²⁰ Those who believed in the Lord owed their salvation to their faith in him, and the seed God used to proclaim the blessing to the Nations prevented the memory of the Jews from being wiped off the earth in the manner of Sodom and Gomorrah.

1:10 *Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; attend to the law of God, thou people of Gomorrah.*

But although they did not suffer a punishment comparable to that of the Sodomites, because their ancestry prevented it, they were nevertheless rightly classed as Sodomites and inhabitants of Gomorrah. For since they boasted of belonging to the root of Abraham but did not care to imitate Abraham's faith, they were justly thrown out of his family. In the same way, the inspired John the Baptist cried: "You brood of vipers! Who advised you to escape from the wrath to come? Produce fruits worthy of repentance and do not boast that Abraham is our father. Truly I say to you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones."²¹ Likewise, God told Ezekiel to say to Jerusalem, "Your seed and your birth is from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite, and your mother was a Hittite."²² And once again he calls Sodom her

sister.²³ It is only fair that they should have received the same designation as those whose wickedness they had gone after.

1:11 *"What is the abundance of your sacrifices to me?" saith the Lord.*

Here we learn quite clearly that God takes no pleasure in the sacrifices he had decreed they must offer but that he knows their weakness. Brought up in Egypt, they had learned to sacrifice to idols, and they wanted to profit from that training. So in his desire to take them away from that error, God put up with sacrifices and musical instruments to support them in their weakness and to direct their still immature mind to himself. But here, many years later, he disallows the entire worship prescribed by the law. For he says:

I am full of whole burnt offerings of rams, and I delight not in the fat of lambs, and the blood of bulls and goats, 1:12 Even if ye come with these to appear before me,

With these words the prophet, or rather God speaking through him, rejected the sacrifices for misdemeanors and those for sin, along with those for consecration and burnt offerings.²⁴ In the first cases, they offered the blood, the fat, the kidneys, and the lobe of the liver; in the last, they burned them completely. Next he shows more clearly how futile their sacrifices were:

for who has required these things at your hands?

I put up with them for your sake but have no need of them myself.

Ye shall no more tread my court.

After the Romans destroyed the divine temple, they passed a law making it inaccessible to Jews.²⁵

¹⁹Lk 21:20.

²⁰Mt 24:16-17.

²¹Mt 3:7-9.

²²Ezek 16:3, 45.

²³Ezek 16:46.

²⁴Lev 4:1-2; 5:1-26; 6:10, 17-25; 7:1-6; 8:22-35.

²⁵Theodoret is mistaken here. The temple was destroyed in AD 70, but it was not until after the second Jewish revolt in AD 132-135 that the law he mentions here was passed.

1:13 *Though ye bring fine flour, it is vain; incense is an abomination to me;*

These are more kinds of sacrifice. The effrontery of the Jews made it necessary to mention them, so they could not say, “He does not want us to offer this, but he will accept that instead.” Likewise, in a later passage he says by the mouth of the prophet: *Thou hast not brought me the sheep of thy whole burnt offering, neither hast thou glorified me with thy sacrifices. I have not caused thee to serve with sacrifices, neither have I wearied thee with frankincense. Neither hast thou purchased for me victims for silver, neither have I desired the fat of thy sacrifices, but thou didst stand before me in thy sins and in thine iniquities.*²⁶ Furthermore, he says by the mouth of the prophet David: “I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on the mountains and the oxen. I know all the birds of heaven, and the beauty of the fields is mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?”²⁷ Then he teaches them what the sacrifices that are pleasing to him are. He says, “Offer to God an offering of praise,” and “A sacrifice of praise will glorify me.”²⁸ And then the blessed David says to him, “Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; burnt offering and sin offering thou didst not require.”²⁹

I cannot bear your new moons, and your Sabbaths, and the Great Day. 1:14 Your fasting and rest from work, your new moons also, and your feasts, my soul hates;

Here are all the well-known feasts—the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Tabernacles, not to mention the Feast

of the Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. He calls the great feasts the “Great Day” and the Day of Atonement a “fast.”³⁰ Generally speaking, he says he hates every feast and every Sabbath, and he says why:

ye have become loathsome to me; I will no more pardon your sins.

I have taken an extreme dislike to you and I am turning away from you completely because of the excesses of your sins.

1:15 *When ye stretch forth your hands I will turn away my eyes from you, and though ye make many supplications, I will not hearken to you, for your hands are full of blood.*

Having gone through all these things, especially the abolition of the law and the destruction of the temple, he taught them the nature of the sin for which they suffered the full range of punishments. He does not accuse them of worshiping idols, nor of committing adultery, nor of giving in to covetousness, but of the stain of a murder. Their rage against God was worse than any unfaithfulness or transgression. This is their voice: “His blood [be] upon us and our children.”³¹ This blood has deprived them of their former happiness; this blood has made them the outcasts of the world.

But being the Lover of people, he shows them the way of salvation:

1:16 *Wash you, be clean;*

Lest they think that he is prescribing the washings of the law, he has to add:

remove your iniquities from your souls before my eyes,

I know your secret thoughts, and none of your wicked desires escapes me, so purify your souls by the washing of regeneration.

²⁶Is 43:23-24.

²⁷Ps 50:9-13.

²⁸Ps 50:14, 23.

²⁹Ps 40:6.

³⁰Theodoret is confused here. The Great Day is the Day of Atonement, but it is also a fast.

³¹Mt 27:25.

cease from your iniquities

It is not enough to reject past sins; you must also avoid repeating them in the future.

1:17 *Learn to do well,*

It is not enough to abstain from evil to achieve perfection; you must also learn to do good works.

diligently seek judgment, deliver him that is suffering wrong, plead for the orphan, and obtain justice for the widow. 1:18 And come, let us reason together, saith the Lord,

Nevertheless, to prevent them from being frightened by the reproaches they have just heard, he promises an abundance of good things:

and though your sins be as purple, I will make them white as snow, and though they be as scarlet, I will make them white as wool.

He says, “When I bring you into court, I shall not demand punishments for your outrages, but when I see your repentance I shall do what the dyers do. By the bath of most holy baptism, I shall change the color of blood and I shall not allow you to carry the mark of the stain of murder forever. For my knowledge is not like that of others. Where dyers color fabrics in pink, in yellow, in violet, or in purple, I shall turn red into snow white.”

Next he promises them the enjoyment of the good things of this life, thinking they are standing open-mouthed before them.

1:19 *And if ye be willing and hearken to me, ye shall eat the good of the land*

On the other hand, he threatens the disobedient:

1:20 *But if ye be not willing, nor hearken to me, a sword shall devour you,*

And to indicate that these words are not his but those of the God of all, the prophet added:

for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken this.

Even when he was nailed to the cross, the Master displayed the same love of mankind, for he said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”³² After the cross, the death, the resurrection, the ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the extraordinary miracles performed by the apostles, he deems that those who believed are worthy of salvation. Among them were the three thousand and the five thousand whom the fisherman’s net of the first apostles had hauled in.³³ Also among them were the numerous thousands whom the divine James had pointed out to the inspired Paul, and among them was the blessed Paul himself.³⁴ Like a wild beast he had scattered the Lord’s flock, but he was deemed worthy of the divine calling, and he endured with joy what he also accomplished with joy. These the Master deemed worthy of salvation in line with his own promise, but the rest he delivered up to the sword in accordance with prophecy.

1:21 *How has the faithful city Zion, once full of judgment, become a harlot! Wherein righteousness lodged, but now murderers.*

Because he saw them backsliding and disobeying, unwilling to purify themselves and obtain salvation, he laments and deplores their turn for the worse. For [the city] had been faithful in the days when kings David,³⁵ Jehoshaphat,³⁶ Hezekiah, and Josiah³⁷ had governed it in a godly way but had become a harlot, and instead of righteous people had murderers for inhabitants. And when the bridegroom came, far from welcoming him, she killed him like a wild animal and turned red with his blood.

³²Lk 23:34.

³³The image is taken from Lk 5:10. See Acts 2:41; 4:4.

³⁴See Acts 21:20; 9:1-22.

³⁵King of Israel from about 1010 BC to about 970 BC.

³⁶He ruled Judah from about 874 BC to about 849 BC.

³⁷He ruled Judah from 640 BC to 609 BC.

1:22 *Your silver is worthless; thy wine, merchants mix this wine with water.*

He does not accuse either the merchants or the moneychangers but the priests and teachers who adulterate the divine law by mixing their own doctrines up with it. In the holy Gospels too, the Lord accused them: “Why do you transgress the commandment of God in the name of your tradition?”³⁸ The man who mixes gold or silver with another metal corrupts and devalues them, just as the man who dilutes wine with water spoils the quality of the wine. In the same way, the Jewish teachers corrupted the divine law by adding their own interpretations and their invented traditions to it.

1:23 *Thy princes are rebellious, companions of thieves, loving bribes, seeking after rewards; not pleading for orphans and not heeding the cause of widows.*

Criticizing them was also necessary. Faith is not enough for salvation; there must also be practical virtue. This is why, earlier on, after having invited them to draw near to saving baptism, he also enjoined the other forms of virtue on them.

After the accusation, he adds the threat of punishment:

1:24 *Therefore thus saith the Lord, the Lord Sabaoth: “Woe to the mighty men of Israel, for my wrath will not cease against my adversaries, and I will execute judgment on my enemies.”*

Symmachus and Theodotion both translate “Lord Sabaoth” as “Lord of forces,” and Aquila as “Lord of hosts.” But the meaning is the same because we are used to calling military regiments a “force.” The king of heaven possesses the invisible forces like an invincible army. He calls this same man the force of Israel because

he showed his own power by the astonishing miracles that he performed in Israel’s favor. Last, he calls them “adversaries” because of their constant opposition and “enemies” because of their hostility.

1:25-26 *“And I will bring my hand upon thee, and purge thee by fire to purify thee, and I will destroy the rebellious, and will take away from thee all transgressors. And I will establish thy judges as before, and thy counsellors as at the beginning”;*

If he has mentioned judgment once again and promised to purge by fire those who deserve it, this is not because he wants to reduce them to ashes but to make them excellent and valuable. Such is the grace of baptism. This is why the very divine John the Baptist also proclaimed: “I have baptized you with water for repentance, but the one who comes after me is more powerful than I am, and I am not worthy to loose the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and with fire.”³⁹ And when the most Holy Spirit came to visit the apostles on the day of Pentecost, “tongues that were said to be of fire” were “divided” among them.⁴⁰ This is why he promises purification by fire to those who have faith, whereas he threatens those who are proud enough to refuse with humiliation. [There is a gap here.] . . . those who have received the message, whom he compares to the holy prophets.

“and afterwards thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful mother city Zion.”

Neither grandeur, nor beautiful buildings, nor a large number of inhabitants are promised to her, but righteousness and faithfulness, because she is the mother of believers.⁴¹ This is also why all those who want to see not the grandeur of its walls, nor the height of its

³⁸Mt 15:3.

³⁹Mt 3:11; Mk 1:7-8.

⁴⁰Acts 2:3.

⁴¹See Gal 4:26.

towers, nor the beauty of its columns and stones but the Lord's tomb, the replica of the Lord's cross, and that small but ever so famous manger, run toward her.

1:27-28 *"For her captives shall be saved with judgment and with mercy. And the transgressors and the sinners shall be crushed together, and they that forsake the Lord shall be utterly consumed."*

He has tempered his justice with mercy. He has pardoned those who scorned the cross but then repented. He has welcomed their repentance and obtained salvation for them. He has not let them perish along with those who suffered these terrible punishments and were reduced to slavery, but he has delivered the others over to complete destruction.

1:29 *"For they shall be ashamed of their idols which they delighted in, and they are made ashamed of the gardens which they coveted."*

With good reason, even in relation to our present age, he has also recalled the memory of these practices. In fact, since it was because of their zeal in defending the law that they did not welcome Christ as their Savior when he came, he reminds them of how great their unbelief was. They filled their cities with idols; they planted sacred groves in honor of those idols; in the public squares, in their homes, and on their terraces they offered sacrifices to demons. In acting this way they did not feel that they were breaking the law, but when the Lawgiver himself came in person, believing in him was in their eyes an illegal act!

Next he returns again to the prediction of desolation:

1:30 *"For they shall be as a terebinth that has cast its leaves, and as a garden that has no water."*

He has ignored all the fruit trees to compare the desolation of the city to a terebinth, and what is more, to a terebinth that has lost its leaves.⁴² It is a tree planted in dry places, a tree with withered branches. He has also compared them to a garden without water because they no longer enjoy the water springs of prophecy and no longer receive the dew that comes down from above.

1:31 *"And their strength shall be as a thread of tow, and their works as sparks,"*

The thread of tow wax burns quickly. It is therefore natural that he should have compared their power to that thread and their wicked deeds to the fire, because wickedness deprives us of divine providence and consumes the power that has been given to us.

"and the transgressors and the sinners shall be burnt up together, and there shall be none to quench the fire."

When God punishes, who can resist? He expressed himself in the same way by the mouth of the great Moses: "I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, and there is none that can deliver out of my hand."⁴³

Given that we know this, it behooves us to fear and tremble because "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁴⁴ Here the prophet concludes his first vision. For our part, we are going to let the readers of this book take a short break by giving glory to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

⁴²See Is 6:13.

⁴³Deut 32:39.

⁴⁴Heb 10:31.

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