

PROPHETS

Isaiah 1:13-14

“Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing *them*.”

From time to time, the Prophet Isaiah’s word, “Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies” (NIV), will be quoted to Messianic people, with the conclusion drawn that God Himself reached a point in the ancient past where He was frustrated beyond end with the Torah-prescribed seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times. The only answer for solving the problem of this seeming “abomination,” was for institutions like the Sabbath and appointed times to one day be abolished. And indeed, as is seen and can be documented, there were early Christian figures who quoted Isaiah 1:13-14, for this very purpose. More responsible Bible readers, however, have to consider what Isaiah 1:13-14 communicates, in light of the wider context:

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah. 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. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? **Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing *them*.** So when you spread out your hands *in prayer*, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:10-17).

It is entirely reasonable to deduce how the condemning statements associated with the seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times in Isaiah 1:13-14, are not isolated from other behaviors and attitudes which are also condemned. English readers of Isaiah 1:13-14 can surely detect that there has been a wide amount of injustice and gross sin on the part of the audience, the Southern Kingdom of Judah (1:1)—which has likely not just been tolerated or permitted, but which has been encouraged on the part of many.

Why are Torah institutions such as the New Moon, the Sabbath, and appointed times mentioned? Is the intention of the Prophet Isaiah to indicate that the God who established these for His people, has a future intention of seeing them eliminated from His people? Far from this being the intention of what Isaiah says, there are commentators who will not only stress that interpreters need to pay attention to the larger issues at hand, but that a conclusion of the Prophet opposing all forms of outward religion and ritual is not what is intended. Noting the inquiry of 1:12, “When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling

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of My courts [*chatzeirai*, חֲצֵרַי?], J.A. Motyer directs, “If Isaiah were denying that the sacrifices as such lacked divine authorization he would not here describe the temple as *my courts*. The Lord claims the house of sacrifice as his while at the same time rejecting the current sacrifices as something for which he never *asked*.” John N. Oswalt further indicates, how for Isaiah’s ancient audience,

“[W]hen surrounded by religions that promised automatic propitiation and blessing without commitment or ethical change, it was very easy for the Israelites to slip back into the mode where precision of ritual and careful attention to type and numbers of sacrifices made it possible for people to feel, think, and do whatever they wished.”²

When Isaiah 1:13-14 is approached with some reserve and temperance, placing the Prophet’s statements about the Sabbath and appointed times in context, one finds that these are remarks clearly directed against an abuse of outward religion.

1:13 There is a very firm condemnation, in which Torah institutions such as the New Moon, Sabbath, and appointed times are involved, in Isaiah’s statement, “Stop bringing worthless grain offerings! They are like disgusting incense to me! *Rosh-Hodesh, Shabbat*, calling convocations—I can’t stand evil together with your assemblies!” (CJB). There is notably some variance of translation in the clause *lo-ukal aven v’atzarah* (לֹא-אֶכָּל אָוֶן וְאַצְרָה): “I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly” (RSV), “Assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide” (NJPS), “I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity” (NRSV), “not I-can-bear evil and-assembly” (Kohlenberger).³ Far be it from the focus of these Torah-prescribed and God-originated institutions being the honoring of God—it is instead *aven* (אָוֶן), “trouble, sorrow, wickedness” (BDB).⁴

What does the mentioning of *chodesh v’Shabbat qero miqra* (חֹדֶשׁ וְשַׁבָּת קְרָא מִקְרָא) signal for the scene rebuked by Isaiah? Motyer, whose Reformed tradition has widely held to a high view of the Sabbath institution (even if incorrectly believed to be transferred to Sunday in the post-resurrection era), appropriately concludes that “The inclusion of the Sabbath shows that Isaiah is condemning not the thing itself—how could he dismiss the Sabbath as lacking divine authority?—but its misuse (see his own commentary in chapter 58).”⁵ Indeed, it is not the fault of the institutions of the New Moon, Sabbath, or appointed times described by Isaiah, but instead limited human beings going through religious motions—falsely believing that outward religious conformity would be enough to appease God. Oswalt goes as far to call this “religious sin”:

“Of what use to God were sacrifices and festivals, sabbaths and blood, if they were not accompanied by the kind of devotion that manifested itself in lives lived according to holiness...What God cannot bear is ‘religious sin.’ The fundamental contradiction between the two terms is obvious, the more so because of the way Isaiah has juxtaposed them. It is religion which leaves iniquity unchallenged and

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 46.

² John N. Oswalt, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 97.

³ Kohlenberger, 4:2.

⁴ BDB, 19.

⁵ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 47.

unchanged that the prophet and, more importantly, God detest. This religion is in fact a support for the continuation of iniquity.⁶

1:14 There is a unique usage of language present in the further rebuke, “Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them” (TNIV). Here, it should be apparent for the reader what these Torah-prescribed institutions have developed, or some might say, devolved, into. The text specifically says “I hate **your** new moon *festivals* and **your** appointed feasts,” *chodshei'khem u'moadei'khem* (חֲדָשֵׁי־יָכֶם וּמוֹאֲדֵי־יָכֶם). Specifically, what God is saying is that He could not stand how the people were celebrating *His* feasts, and so He called them “**your** New Moons and **your** appointed times” (ATS), putting the responsibility on the people for the wrong they have done.

God placing the burden of proof on His people is not something unique to the Tanach. In Exodus 32:7 He told Moses, “Go down; for **your people** [*amekha*, אֲמֶכָּה], whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.” As Moses reminded the Lord, “O LORD, why does **Your anger** [*afekha*, אֲפֶכָּה] burn against **Your people** [*amekha*, אֲמֶכָּה] whom **You** have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (Exodus 32:11), indicating that although the people have sinned against Him, He was still the One who led them out of Egypt.

Recognizing how 1:14 uses the possessive pronoun “your,” Motyer astutely concludes, “Isaiah is challenging current abuse not the validity of the sacrificial system as such. Hence he decries *your* festivals—the festivals as you practise them. They had replaced the principle of conformity to the will of God with the principle of practising what was acceptable and helpful to themselves (*cf.* Am. 4:4-5).⁷ When God says that something He established for His people to keep—like the Sabbath or appointed times—is “yours,” it can often be with the intention of chastisement for abusing them. Immediately after this, the Lord criticizes the prayers issued to Him by people whose hands are covered with blood (1:15), yet the institution of prayer is not at fault, and one day something to be abolished. The same is true of the Sabbath and appointed times, as when misused, they can mean very little.

Isaiah 1:13-14 application While a text- and setting-conscious reading of Isaiah 1:13-14 would recognize that the rebukes present are not issued against the institutions of the New Moon, Sabbath, appointed times, or even animal sacrifice—but instead their abuse by Isaiah’s ancient audience—this is not always the approach that has been witnessed throughout Christian interpretation of these statements. There are indeed remarks witnessed in the emerging Christianity of the Second and Third Centuries C.E., which made reference to Isaiah 1:13-14, so that Christians could dismiss the institutions of the seventh-day Sabbath and appointed times:

“Finally, he says to them: ‘I cannot stand your new moons and sabbaths’ [Isaiah 1:13]. You see what he means: it is not the present sabbaths that are acceptable to me, but the one that I have made; on that sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of

⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah* 1:39, 97.

⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 47.

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another world. This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven" (*Epistle of Barnabas* 15:8-9; late First-early Second Century C.E.).⁸

"The Holy Spirit upbraids the Jews with their holy-days. 'Your Sabbaths, and new moons, and ceremonies,' says He, 'My soul hateth' [Isaiah 1:14]. By us, to whom Sabbaths are strange, and the new moons and festivals formerly beloved by God, the Saturnalia and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented" (Tertullian *Apology* 70; late Second-early Third Century C.E.).⁹

"And let the *parasceve* become a rigorous fast, lest we should appear to observe any Sabbath with the Jews, which Christ Himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, says by His prophets that 'His soul hateth' [Isaiah 1:14]; which Sabbath He in His body abolished" (Victorinus *On the Creation of the World*).¹⁰

While certainly not true of all Christians, many of whom have believed that a Sabbath-principle, incorrectly applied to Sunday, should remain steadfast for all generations of God's people—a **misapplied Isaiah 1:13-14** has been present in the thoughts and ideas of many Christians just the same. Such a misapplied Isaiah 1:13-14 has not only been taken to be a dismissal of the seventh-day Sabbath or appointed times, but also many forms of formalized worship, liturgy, and ceremony. It should not be difficult to see how various people in the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, for sure, could take a misapplication of Isaiah 1:13-14, and end up with a religious community that would frown on any and all kinds of formalized religion. Such sentiments have held sway over the thoughts of many, for far too long. Brevard S. Childs is right to conclude,

"The older hypothesis from the nineteenth century that the prophets were opposed to sacrifice in principle has been generally rejected as misconstrued...Violence and pious assembly (v. 13) are intolerable before divine purity. Then God's demands for a radical reversal are stated in blunt, straightforward language, the meaning of which Israel is assumed to know, since the commands are addressed to the will: 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good.'"¹¹

Messianic readers of Isaiah 1:13-14 do need to be aware of the anti-Semitic interpretations of these verses, which have been present in various sectors of historical Christianity. While not reflective of all Christians in all places and times, a misinterpretation of Isaiah 1:13-14 has contributed to various figures concluding that the God of Israel was done with the people of Israel. Susan Ackerman describes some of this in the excursus "Anti-Semitic Interpretations of Isaiah," appearing in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*:

"Because Christianity has embraced Isaiah as its 'fifth gospel'...some Christian interpreters have understood Isaiah as they understand the Gospels in the NT; namely, as texts that reject Judaism in favor of the Christian faith...Isisore of Seville...alleges that vv. 11, 13, and 16 point to God's rejection of the Jewish Sabbath and sacrificial system in favor of baptism...These interpretations violate the message

⁸ Michael W. Holmes, ed., and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 429.

⁹ *BibleWorks 9.0*: Schaff, *Early Church Fathers*. MS Windows 7 Release. Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2011. DVD-ROM.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp 19, 20.

of moral righteousness in the first half of Isaiah and the universalistic theme of chapters 40-66.”¹²

Fortunately today, one will seldom see Isaiah commentators draw the conclusion that Isaiah 1:13-14 puts an end to all formalized religious practices, and that God-ordained institutions like the Sabbath were some sort of “abomination.” Rather, commentators will instead rightly focus the attention of readers on the people of Isaiah’s time who were either going through religious motions of some sort—and how there are Christian people today who can certainly, and wrongly, do the same thing. John Goldingay addresses this:

“While the OT and NT make clear that the worship of God’s people is important to them and to God, they also make clear that this worship easily gains an undue importance. Here Isaiah comprehensively dismisses the people’s worship in its various aspects. Yahweh is force-fed unwanted food, and unwanted guests repeatedly invade Yahweh’s home. Sacrifice’s pleasant accompaniments are **detestable**, the technical term for loathsome religious practices or moral acts, and people’s visits for regular worship events are a burdensome nuisance. Lest Christian readers congratulate themselves on not being involved in the kind of worship that so offends Yahweh, Isaiah tells us that this offensiveness extends to prayer, to which Yahweh shuts both eyes and ears.”¹³

In the wider scope of Holy Scripture, if Isaiah 1:13-14 represents a misuse or abuse of the Torah-prescribed Sabbath and appointed times—**and not their intended nullification**—then it should not be inappropriate to also recognize how a misuse or abuse of the Sabbath, appointed times, and other Torah practices could be at work in other passages (i.e., Galatians 4:9-11; Colossians 2:16-23).

¹² Susan Ackerman, “Isaiah,” in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 959.

¹³ John Goldingay, *New International Biblical Commentary: Isaiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 36.