Isaiah 1:1,10-20

The Book of Isaiah is a composite of writings from three distinct periods in Ancient Israel’s history. The writings were compiled from about 700 BCE to about 300 BCE.

Chapters 1-39 are called “First Isaiah” and are the words of a prophet (one who speaks for YHWH – translated as “LORD” in all capital letters in the NRSV) who called for Jerusalem to repent in the 30 years before Jerusalem came under siege by the Assyrians in 701 BCE. “Second Isaiah” is Chapters 40 to 55. In these chapters, a prophet brought hope to the Judeans during the Exile in Babylon (587 to 539 BCE) by telling them they had suffered enough and would return to Jerusalem. “Third Isaiah” is Chapters 56 to 66 in which a prophet gave encouragement to Judeans who had returned to Jerusalem (which was largely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE) after the Exile had ended.

Today’s reading is from First Isaiah and is an indictment of Israel (and particularly Judea) for religious infidelity. The first verse sets the time period as being from 735 BCE (the ending years of the reign of Uzziah – also known as Azariah) to the 14th year of the reign of Hezekiah (701 BCE – when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem). This was a time of the ascendancy of the Assyrian Empire which conquered Northern Israel in 722 BCE and threatened Judea during all this time.

The balance of the reading is a strong prophetic statement condemning worship divorced from social justice (vv. 10-17), a theme also found in Amos, Micah and Jeremiah. Sodom and Gomorrah (v.10) were commonly used symbols for divine judgement on immorality. In Genesis, the evil done by those cities was not showing hospitality (a high value) by threatening to commit sexual violence upon visitors to Lot’s home (Gen.19:5).

The verses then shifted from condemnation to a legal argument (v.18) in which YHWH offered forgiveness if Judea repented, but said Judea would be “devoured by the sword” (v.20) if it did not repent. Except for a short period under King Josiah (640 to 609 BCE) Jerusalem did not repent, and it was conquered by the Babylonians – the successors to the Assyrians – in 597 BCE. The Exile began in 587 BCE.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

The Letter to the Hebrews was an anonymous sermon to both Jewish and Gentile Jesus Followers, urging them to maintain their Faith and Hope in the face of hardship. The letter developed a number of important images such as Jesus the Christ as the High Priest.

Today’s reading presented faith as insight into a sacred world of reality, and spoke of faith as a concrete reality by using words such as “assurance” and “conviction.” An example of faith was Abraham’s obedience to leave his homeland and travel to Canaan (Genesis 12). His faith was rewarded by his being the father of numerous descendants. In some manuscripts of Hebrews, Sarah’s faith is paralleled to Abraham’s and she is also presented as a heroic person of faith.
Isaiah 5:1-7

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“Second Isaiah” is Chapters 40 to 55. In these chapters, a prophet brought hope to the Judeans during the Exile in Babylon (587 to 539 BCE) by telling them they had suffered enough and would return to Jerusalem. “Third Isaiah” is Chapters 56 to 66 in which a prophet gave encouragement to Judeans who had returned to Jerusalem (which was largely destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE) after the Exile had ended.

Today’s reading is part of First Isaiah and characterizes itself as a “love song” (v.1) for the prophet’s “beloved” – identified in verse 7 as YHWH. In ancient poetry, a vineyard was often a symbol of someone who is beloved, and YHWH’s beloved is identified as “the house of Israel and the people of Judah” (v.7).

Because the vineyard yielded wild grapes (v.4), the prophet stated the vineyard would be trampled down and made a waste (vv.5-6). This occurred when the Assyrians conquered Northern Israel in 722 BCE and Babylonians conquered Judea in 597 BCE.

Like many other prophets, Isaiah criticized injustice in Israel and Judah. Using clever word plays in Hebrew, the author noted that where YHWH expected justice (“mispat”), there was bloodshed (“mishpah”). YHWH expected righteousness (“tsedaqah”) but heard a cry (“tse’aqah”) (v.7).

Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

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In today’s reading, the author asserted that it was “faith” that enabled (or caused) a large number of notable events that are recounted in the Hebrew Bible (vv. 29-38).

All the Christian Scriptures were written in Greek, and the Greek word for “faith” in the Letter is “pistis” – a word that has an active connotation, and can fairly be understood as “faithfulness.” Faith is not presented in the Letter as an intellectual assent to a series of propositions (as “Faith” is sometimes understood today). Instead, as stated in the beginning of Chapter 11, Faith is action based on “the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

The reading concluded with the view that although the faithful persons in the Hebrew Bible were “commended” (v.39), they could not be made “perfect” (or complete) without Jesus as the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (12:2).