

ISAIAH 1:18—
DECLARATION, EXCLAMATION OR INTERROGATION?

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“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” These words from the Authorized Version (1611) of the Bible are as familiar as any portion of the Old Testament except perhaps for Psalm 23. They have long been lovingly and fervently received, in what many scholars would insist is the *prima facie* sense of the passage, as an appeal to sinners to yield to God and receive full forgiveness of all their sins. In this day when many foundations of the settled religious life seem to be trembling I find no pleasure in disturbing a single person’s faith in the forgiveness of sins by the God whose name is Holy. This I do not propose to attempt. The doctrine of divine forgiveness has plenty of textual foundations on which to rest secure, not the least in Isaiah. I do, however, question the propriety of resting such faith in this particular text.

No standard English translation whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Jewish has come to my attention which varies essentially from the Common Version. Variations from the usual understanding of Isaiah 1:18 are not frequent even among the commentators. The *International Critical Commentary* takes note of some of these variations but commits its author to none of them. Two important modern works have agreed on one *alternate understanding*. They are *The New Century Bible*¹ and *The Interpreters Bible*.² Authors of both works feel that considerations of context and lack of any call to repentance or expression of it in a context of divine justice show that the sentences in question are ironical. *The New Century Bible* in bringing out this meaning translates “let them be white as snow!” etc. *The Interpreters Bible* (both authors concurring) affirms that the pair of conditional sentences “then, is the claim of the accused as summed up by the judge speaking in scorn. “Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow [!] though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool[!]” Not so! The judge will have none of such hypocrisy, nor condone glaring sin.” Duham and Marti have similar views. They “prefer to give the saying a sarcastic tone: though your sins were scarlet, of course they can easily turn white: of course you know how to make innocent lambs of yourselves.”³

The International Critical Commentary notes that certain writers have preferred to punctuate the two sentences with question marks.⁴

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1. Owen C. Whitehouse, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, i, 1905.
2. R.B.Y. Scott and G.G.D. Kilpatrick, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, 1956.
3. Cited by G.B. Gray, (*International Critical Commentary*) *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, I-XXXIX, 1912, 1928, p. 29.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 28, 29.

The two sentences are held to be ironical questions to which the answer is, No! In either of these cases the meaning of the verse takes on drastic change.

So there appear to be three main interpretations with shades of difference among those favoring each. (1) The verse is a simple affirmation of divine forgiveness; (2) it is a sarcastic or ironic exclamation of disgust or surprise at perverse human supposition that sin could ever appear innocent in a divine court of justice; or (3) it is an unmasking of sin for what it is by raising the question, If sins are *red like crimson cloth can they ever* be snowy white like wool? I shall suggest a fourth view which is essentially a merging of the second and third.

My own interest in this text goes back to a time before *The Interpreters Bible* was published and when I had not read *I.C.C.* or heard of the reviews of Duhm or Marti, etc. As a freshman Old Testament and Hebrew professor and a diligent reader of the then new *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* I was captivated by an article by Professor Ovid R. Sellers of McCormick Theological Seminary entitled "Limits of Old Testament Interpretation." His burden is, in part, that the absence of a system of punctuation marks in the original manuscripts has made it difficult to determine mood and sense of many passages. He added that loss of much of the meaning of the Massoretic accentual system has made recovery of early Jewish interpretation of these matters difficult as well. Among several examples he cites Isaiah 1:18b, c and comments:

One may argue effectively that Isaiah meant exactly what he said or equally effectively that he meant the opposite of what he said. In the latter case he would have made himself clear by his tone of voice. The people who heard him would have understood, but the scribe who recorded his words would have been unable to indicate their ironic character. By the change of tone we can make a sentence mean the converse of what it means in plain print or in monotonous recitation.⁵

I proceed to present several evidences to the effect that the affirmative interpretation found in the standard translations should be laid aside in favor of ironic (or sarcastic) exclamation or ironic rhetorical question, or as I prefer, a combination of both exclamation and question.

1. The meaning of leading words in the introductory sentence of Isaiah 1:18 tends strongly to disallow that a simple affirmation of forgiveness follows. The words *l'kû nâ'*: ("Come now") are not in any way decisive.⁶ But they are suggestive of similar modes of stern address by

5. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. V, p. 89.

6. It is carried over into the New Testament as an Hebraism. See James 4:13; 5:1 *ageh nun* for *laku nah*. "The introductory *lakah* or *lakoh* expresses various emotions, and is used by persons of different positions, as (1) by one equal to another. Gen. 31:44, 19:32; 1 Sam. 20:11; 2 Kings 14:8; (2) by a superior to an inferior, e.g., Jg. 19:13, 1S 9:10, 14:1; or (3) by an inferior to a superior, Jg. 19:11. Other instances are Gen. 37:20, 27; 2 Kings 7:4; Neh. 6:2, 7; Ps. 83:5; Isaiah 2:3; Ca. 7:12. The phrase commonly introduces a proposal for the mutual benefit of the parties, or, at least of that party addressed." G. B. Gray, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

God to his people in calling them to judicial reckoning elsewhere in this book: “Let us come near to judgment” (*yaḥdaw lammiš pat niqrabhah* Isaiah 41:2); “Produce your cause, saith the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the king of Jacob” (*qar^{ab}hû rîbh^{ek}hem yo‘mar y^{eh}wah haggišû ‘atsumôthêkhem y‘omar melek ya‘aqobh* Isaiah 41:21); “let us plead together: set thou forth thy cause, that thou mayest be justified” (*niššaphtah yaḥadh šapper ‘attoh l^ema‘an titsdaq* Isaiah 43:26); “Hear, O ye mountains, the LORD’S controversy, and ye enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD hath a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel” (*šim^e‘û harîm ‘eth-rîbh y^{eh}wah w^eha‘ethanîm mišedê ‘arets kî rîbh layhwah ‘im ‘ammô w^e‘im yisra‘el yithwakkah* Micah 6:2). The last Hebrew word in Micah 6:2 (“he will contend”) is especially significant for it is the same Hebrew word (*yakha‘h*) as that rendered “reason together” in our text. Here the usually reflexive Hithpael is used while in Isaiah 1:18 a reflexive Niphal is used.

The word *w^eniw^{ak}ehah* (Nihal, first person plural imperfect with cohortative suffix *h*) is from *yakhaḥ*. This verb is employed in Hiphil 44 times in the Hebrew Bible, never in the Kal. In none of the 49 other appearances of this word in the Hebrew Bible does the context indicate the mild exchange of opinion or argument involved in mere discussion or gentle reasoning one with another. These include 45 Hiphil, one Hophal, one Hithpael, two Niphal. There is no important variation in meaning between the various stems. Over 40 of the 50 Old Testament uses are translated reprove, chasten, rebuke, judge, correct, or plead (in judicial sense). The others are dispute, argue, maintain (cause), convince, etc. It is hard to remove the judicial or quasi judicial flavor from most of them. The commentators have not missed this. One “old reliable” after surveying the lexical and concordance evidence observes on *yakhaḥ* in this context:

Here it denotes the kind of contention, or argumentation, which occurs in a court of justice, where the parties reciprocally state the grounds of their cause. God has been addressing magistrates particularly, and commanding them to seek judgment, to relieve the oppressed, to do justice to the orphan and widow; all of which terms are taken from courts of law. He here continues the language, and addresses them as accustomed to proceedings of courts, and proposes to submit the case as if on trial.⁷

He then goes on (strangely, I think) to employ the usual interpretation of the two latter sentences. Another old favorite, Franz Delitzsch, does about the same. In fact this is the usual pattern.

But is it consistent to find the language and figures of the Law court underlying this verse and then suppose that the subject of forgiveness of sin—especially when no mention of repentance and amendment are present—is the message of such a vehicle? Hardly. Courts may, and do,

7. Albert Barnes, *The Prophet Isaiah*, Vol. I, 1855, p. 81.

administer justice with an admixture of mercy. But courts, like policemen, are involved (at least until very recently!) in the application of and enforcement of law. *Yakhaḥ* in this context is a forensic or legal term not one of evangelism. In no context does it have reference to mere exchange of opinion. It relates to justice, not grace. To speak Lutheran language: it belongs to Law, not Gospel.

2. That the speaker (God) is thinking in terms of justice rather than of grace and consolation is indicated by the connection of verse 18 with verses 19 and 20. This connection is indicated quite unmistakably by the Hebrew text—so unmistakably that it can be removed only by a most radical reconstruction of the text, something quite *aus der Mode* today. God challenges the “sinful nation” (*vid.* v. 4) to come to court in the first line of verse 18. Then follow four balanced two-member sentences each introduced by the word *’im*. It is the obvious intention of the poet-prophet to link these four parallel lines together. The four sentences demonstrate the same Semitic parallelism found in all Hebrew poetry and in much exalted prose, especially the Prophets. The third and fourth members of this quatrain constitute verses 19 and 20 respectively. They are presented here with translation: *’im-to’bhû ûsema’tem tôbh ha’arets to’khêlû* (v. 19), If ye be willing and obedient ye shall eat the good of the land: *w^e’im-tema’anû ûmerîtem ḥerebh t^eukkelû kî pî y^ehwah dibbêr* (v. 20), but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

It appears to take a considerable amount of wishful thinking and perhaps special pleading to make these lines an offer of gracious forgiveness for past sins. They are nothing of the sort. As they stand, they are announcements of the divine law of sowing and reaping in the spiritual realm. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). The connection of verse 18 with verses 19 and 20 is unmistakable; the sentiments of verses 19 and 20 relate to justice and divine law. This weighs heavily against understanding verse 18 either as an offer of divine forgiveness or a declaration of it.

3. Of greater force, if not quite such certain connection, is the preceding context (vv. 2-17) and the more remote following context (vv. 21-31). Verses 2-15 constitute a series of indictments of the people and their leaders. They are said to be rebellious (2 and 3); corrupt (4); chastized but not repentant (5-9); hypocritical (10-15). There follows an admonition to amendment and improvement (16, 17): “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.” These words: “justice” (*mišpaṭ*), “judge” (*šaphaṭ*), “plead” (*riḇh*), etc. are indeed as noted by Barnes (above) and many others “all . . . terms . . . taken from courts of law.” He “continues the language, and addresses them as accustomed to proceedings of courts.” This is especially appropriate in view of the fact that he brings forth the “rulers” (v. 10) and addresses them particularly.

What is more fitting than that verse 18 should immediately follow with a summons to court? “Come now, let us plead this case” etc. Verses 21-23 continue the strident accusations. The “faithful city” is now a “harlot”; her former fine quality is now corruption; her leaders are venal. For this judgment (punishment) has been determined. Perhaps these verses are intended as a kind of formal verdict. There follow promises of inevitable chastisement and restoration (25-31). These considerations of context, then, also militate against receiving verse 18 as an offer of forgiveness, much less a declaration of it. To declare forgiveness in such circumstances is contrary to everything we know of Biblical religion.

4. On closer examination, the language of the two last sentences of verse 18 does not really express forgiveness—or, if it does so, only by almost incredibly grotesque use of language. The two sentences with translation are: *'im-yihyû h^ata'êKhem Kaššanim Kaššeleg^h yalbînû*, If your sins be as scarlet they shall emit whiteness as snow. *'im-ya'dîmû Khattôle' Kats tsemet yihyû*, If they emit redness as crimson doth they shall be as wool. Let the two sentences remain without punctuation for the moment. Franz Delitzsch⁸ calls attention to the fact that in Hiphil verbs for color mean *to emit* a color not to be a color and corrects Gesenius (53.2d) at this point. But whether understood as *emit* color or *be* color, the notion that “scarlet...red” sins can ever truly become “white as snow...like wool” on any basis whatsoever is foreign to Scripture thought and idiom. This would be to “draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, and sin as it were with a cart rope” (Isaiah 5:18). In fact Isaiah, himself, specifically repudiates such an abhorrent doctrine shortly: “Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). Sinners may become white but not their sins. Sins will always be just that—sins in the sight of God. “For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord GOD” (Jeremiah 2:22).

When Hebrew Scripture does employ the figure of color in connection with forgiveness of sins the language itself exposes no moral ambiguity. In agony of stricken conscience David cries, “Purge me with hyssop and I [note “I,” not “my sins”] shall be clean: wash me and I [again “I,” not “my sins”] shall be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). Where the sins themselves and their forgiveness are represented in the Hebrew Bible they are said to be (1) lifted up (*Nasa'*, Psalm 32:1, *šûr* [Hi.], vid. Leviticus 16:20-22); (2) covered (*kašah*, Psalm 32:2); (3) not imputed (*Lo' hašabh*, Psalm 32:2); *lo' zakhar*, Isaiah 43:25); (4) blotted out (*maḥah*, Isaiah 43:25); (5) moved away (*rahaq*, [Hi.] Psalm 103:12). There are still other representations of God's treatment of sin repented of (Micah 7:19 furnishes several) but to represent forgiveness as a change in the color of *the sin* is certainly without Scriptural parallel.

8. *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. from German by the Rev. James Martin, Edinburgh, 1877.

These are some of the evidences for rejecting Isaiah 1:18b, c as simple affirmation or declaration of forgiveness. Succeeding arguments and evidences are in support of alternate views. There is strong possibility that the two sentences are questions. Evidence against receiving them as declarative, of course, leaves that as a possibility, perhaps probability.

5. As questions they harmonize with the context. The context has already been surveyed. In that court room (or at least *forensic*) setting it is thoroughly fitting that God should clear away the sinner's pretenses by asking two such rhetorical questions to which the answer is a resounding, No! If your sins are as scarlet, will they appear as white as snow—in court? No! If they be red like crimson cloth will they be like wool—in court? No!

6. Hebrew usage is perfectly consistent with treating these sentences as questions (provided context supplies sufficient reason) even though none of several common formal devices to indicate questions is present. These are chiefly several adverbs regularly translated How? When? and Where?, several pronouns regularly translated Who? What? For whom? etc. as well as the prefixed particle. But there are innumerable cases in which in the absence of any of these the translators are compelled to treat sentences as questions. Furthermore, in Hebrew, to an extent not true of European languages, where word order usually serves to indicate questions, the inflection of the voice was important in indicating questions. Many first rate grammarians have held that the nature of Semitic pronunciation causes interrogative frequently to be omitted before question clauses, the initial letter of which is a guttural.⁹

Modern Hebrew language-makers have found no pattern in written Biblical Hebrew for indicating questions. Haiim B. Rosen¹⁰ states simply, "Any sentence can be presented as a question by raising the pitch towards its last stressed syllable; no change of words or of order is necessary." I could find no advance on Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar* in Bergstraesser¹¹ in regard to syntax of interrogative sentences. Neither did an examination of Sperber's historical work on Hebrew grammar¹² yield further information.

7. There may be special reasons why the interrogative particle *h^a* was omitted at Isaiah 1:18. Attention is directed to the aforementioned article by Ovid Sellers. He states:

The late Hinckley G. Mitchell made an exhaustive study of the so-called omission of the interrogative particle and in the summer of 1913 presented his conclusions to a class in the University

9. Gesenius, Kautzsch, Cowley, *Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed., 1910, 1963, p. 498 (P. 150.1.b); also 2nd American ed. of Mitchell and Price. Repudiated in 1910 American Edition.
10. *A Textbook of Israeli Hebrew*, Chicago, 1962, p. 13.
11. G. Bergstraesser, *Hebraeische Grammatic*, I teil, II teil, Hildesheim, 1962.
12. Alexander Sperber, *A Historical Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Leiden, 1966.

of Chicago. According to his findings, the particle was omitted in ironical questions [We are suggesting that Isaiah 1:18b, c are ironical questions.] For instance, when Samson's wife tearfully entreats him to let her know the answer to his riddle, he says, "Behold, my father and my mother I have not told, and thee I shall tell" (Judges 14:16). The English versions translate "Shall I tell thee?" or "Should I tell you?" With our conventional punctuation marks this is the only way to convey the meaning of Samson's words; but in the Hebrew sentence there is nothing to indicate an interrogative. By the tone of his voice, when Samson said "thee I shall tell," he let his wife know that he had no intention of doing anything of the kind.¹³

C. Douglas Young in his recent work on the grammar of Biblical Hebrew quotes R. Dick Wilson on conditional sentences (such as these in Isaiah 1:18): "Almost every possible combination of verbal or nominal sentence (without particle) in protasis and apodosis may be found in Hebrew. In all cases it is the part of the reader to seek to give each form of expression an appropriate meaning."¹⁴ Elsewhere Young writes on modal uses of the imperfect (Both verbs under discussion here, *yalbînû* and *yihyû* are imperfects): "In clauses it expresses potentiality or contingency. It may be permissive or interrogative."¹⁵

This feature of Hebrew has puzzled the translators. R.S.V. following A.S.V. renders Proverbs 6:30 as a question, apparently on the basis of the following context which seems to favor it: "Do not men despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry?" (v. 30) "and if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold. . ." (v. 31). Psalm 121:1, 2 is another. Several different possibilities of interpretation are available, but for theological reasons (among others) R.S.V. and A.S.V. must be regarded as preferable in that they place a question mark at the end of verse 1. "I will lift mine eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?" (v. 1). "My help cometh from the Lord. . ." (v. 2)—not from the pagan Gods of the hills.

We do not have Mitchell's data and I have not done his work again after him. But we do have his conclusions in the above approving notes and memory of Dr. Sellers. It lends strong support to the view that in our text we do indeed have two ironic questions. I have taken the trouble to check the questions in the A.S.V. of the first 35 chapters of Isaiah, finding 23 of them. Eight of them are indicated by *h^a* (10:8, 9, 11, 15; 14:16-17; 23:7; 28:24, 25); five by the interrogative pronouns *meh* and *mî* (2:22; 6:8; 14:27; 23:8; 29:15); one by the interrogative or exclamatory adverb *'êk* (Litteris text *'êkha* in B.H.K.K.) "How! or?"; by the conjunction *'im* (if) used as an interrogative particle three times (10:9, twice, 10:15); by the interrogative adverb *'ayyêh* "Where" (three times

13. *Op. Cit.*, p. 88.

14. *Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 201.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

in 33:18). Significantly there are three that have no indication of any sort. There are two at 14:10 and one at 29:16.

It is well to hold in mind in examining this sort of data that our grammatical categories whereby we classify sentences as declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, etc. and parts of speech are adverbs, nouns, etc. have only relative significance outside the European languages for which they were invented. The presence of *'im* (if, whether, or, though, if not, except) does more than make certain passages "conditional" as we say. There is often the element of doubt introduced. And as its occasional use as an interrogative particle indicates, the uncertainty becomes something like negation. Sometimes it means "if not" etc. It may very well be that some sentences have a mood between question and exclamation and that Isaiah 1:18 falls in this class. The upper section of *Interpreters Bible* indicates this by use of exclamation points put in brackets.

But back to Isaiah's three question clauses without any interrogative mark of any sort—at 14:10 the dead say to the king of Babylon on his arrival in the grave, *gam attah hullêtha Khamônû*. Also you have become like us *'êlênû nîmšalta* to us you have been made like.

The versions use a question mark but either or both question mark and exclamation point would be appropriate even though not elegant English usage. Harking back to Mitchell as reported by Sellers, note the presence of irony and the absence of *h^a*.

In 29:16, a very complicated sentence, the versions and most translations in commentaries render with a question mark, though Delitzsch does not. The common version reads, "shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?" Again either exclamation points or question marks or both are appropriate and the sentence is ironical.

These facts are all relevant to the problem of sentence mood in Isaiah 1:18. For reasons detailed mainly under items 1-4 above Isaiah 1:18b, c should not be regarded as declarative sentences. Under 5 and 6 it has been shown that Hebrew usage does indeed allow these sentences to stand as questions. Under 7 it has been shown that certain ironic sentences combine elements of interrogation and exclamation. They are intended to convey both doubt (or denial) and surprise. Isaiah 1:18 falls neatly in this category. The sentences under consideration are ironical and they are quizzical exclamation.

An interpretive paraphrase will serve as conclusion: Come now, you nation of rebellious (verses 5-9), hypocritical sinners (verses 10-15). Since you will not respond to my admonitions (verses 16, 17) we are going to have a law court like show-down on our relations to one another as divine Lord and His professed people. If your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow—in court? Of course not! If they are red as crimson cloth they shall be as wool—in court? Of course not! (verse 18).

If you expect to enjoy the fruits of righteousness you will have to perform the deeds of righteousness (verses 19 and 20).

What is the doctrine of Isaiah 1:18?—that there is a God of righteousness who always sees things as they really are and acts in justice according to what he sees.

There are many texts from which the preacher may declare the grace of God and the forgiveness of sin after repentance and on the basis of atonement but it is doubtful in extreme if this text is one of them. On the other hand nothing is more characteristic of the message of the Hebrew Prophets on the ethical rectitude of God and of his just requirements than this verse.