

ISAIAH

ISAIAH 57:3-4, SONS OF A SORCERESS

The sad fact is that the primary problem Israel has, past and present, in terms of its relationship with Yahweh, was idolatry, spiritual apostasy. Whether that was the overt idolatry of worshipping pagan gods prior to the Babylonian captivity in the past, or the stealth idolatry of wealth, business, academics, and legalistic religion in the modern, contemporary world we inhabit today, idolatry is still a problem. God addresses this issue through the prophet before the Babylonian conquest.

In the following verses, the prophet will condemn a long list of sinful activities in which the Israelites have been engaging and which serve to separate and remove them from the God who created them to be His people. This is all very foolish because these things serve no useful purpose and are, in fact, detrimental to one's well-being. They are certainly destructive in terms of the nation's relationship with God. This is a long list: sorcery or witchcraft, idolatry and its associated practices and sacrifices, rebellion against God, deceit, and even child sacrifice. If the Israelites continue on this path and fail to return to God, He is going to impose the more serious elements of His divine temporal disciplinary program on the nation. As always, the righteous believing remnant will enter into the Kingdom covenant blessings (v. 13).

Isaiah 57:3 ³“But come here, you sons of a sorceress [עֲנִי], Offspring of an adulterer [בְּצַרָה] and a prostitute [זְנוּיָה].

In verses 1-2, God was dealing with the righteous; now He turns His attention to the unrighteous, those who had departed from Him, or, more likely, those who were never with Him in the first place. Sadly, that was the majority of the Israelites and almost all, if not all, of the nation's leadership—political and religious. Remember, Isaiah's words were written nearly 200 years before the Babylonian captivity. In Ezekiel 8, the prophet was given a vision of the abominations in and around the Temple in Jerusalem shortly before it was destroyed. Through this vision, God revealed that idolatry was so rampant that it had even invaded the priesthood and the house of God, the Temple. This situation is not the result of benign neglect that simply allowed the people to run rampant; this is the result of the leadership not only allowing, but participating in these rebellious, sinful, and pagan activities. In Ezekiel 10, the prophet recorded God's departure from the Temple just prior to its destruction.

We know that after the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites did not revert back to the same kind of overt, pagan idolatry in which they engaged prior to the Babylonian captivity. Instead, they became extreme Mosaic Law legalists and in so doing departed from the God's intentions for the nation as it lived under the terms of the Mosaic Law. They did not fulfill the mandate for which they were created which was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). After AD 70, they largely became a people of agnosticism and atheism. Those who practice the religion today do so to varying degrees of observance and belief ranging from the ultraorthodox, who live in a legalistic manner according to the Law just as the Pharisees did and who are, in fact, the successors to the

Pharisees, to thinking and living life according to a spectrum of thought, theology, and worldview, to the Reformed who are essentially political liberals in a Judaistic format. They still practice idolatry in various ways, just not in the overt, idol worshiping, pagan god observing ways that they did before the Babylonian captivity.

God commands the people to come near to Him because what He has to say to them is very important concerning their relationship with Him. What He has to say to them is also very unpleasant. "But you come" sets up a contrast between the faithful ones of verses 1-2 and the unfaithful Israelites revealed in the following verses. One would think it would get the attention of the people, but history reveals that they rejected God's words as they were spoken through not only the prophet Isaiah, but all the other prophets as well. In spiritual terms, not only did they not come near to Him; they continued to move away from Him.

The Israelites were so far from God that He identified their behavior as that of "sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute." These were obviously not kind words to be used in reference to one's parental lineage. When you considered the nation's true lineage, Abraham and Sarah which God reminded them of in Isaiah 51:2, this represents a disgraceful fall from grace and from the position they had standing before God that no other people and nation had. Someday, they will recover the knowledge of their true lineage and be faithful to the calling that God placed on them as a nation, but that day awaits the end of the Tribulation and the inauguration of the Messianic Kingdom.

Sorceress, *שֹׁדֵדִים*, is "a verb meaning to practice soothsaying, fortunetelling, divining, magic. While it is clear from the contexts and the versions [i.e., the various translations of the word] that this term is used for some type of magic or witchcraft, its etymology is unclear. Therefore, the specifics of the practice it connotes are equally unclear. However, it is clear that it was strictly forbidden, and the one who practiced this act was detestable to God. Isaiah appears to use the term figuratively to demean the idolatrous Israelites (Isa. 57:3)" [Baker and Carpenter, s.v. "*שֹׁדֵדִים*," *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, 854].

This word is much more frequently used to mean clouds. Perhaps it is connected with reading cloud patterns to predict something just like reading the stars (astrology) or entrails or tea leaves or palms and so on that are used by practitioners of the dark arts to predict future events. Used in the way Isaiah used it, it appears only 11 times in the Bible. The interpretation of this word used in various translations is all over the place. In the English translations I routinely consult, it is translated omen reader (NET Bible) and soothsayer (LEB); otherwise, they all use the word sorceress to translate it.

In whatever form it took, it was a strictly forbidden practice for the Israelites living under the Mosaic Law.

Leviticus 19:26 ²⁶You shall not ... practice divination or soothsaying.

Deuteronomy 18:10, 14 ¹⁰"There shall not be found among you anyone ... who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer ...

¹⁴“For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so.

Practicing the dark arts was an offense that was so serious in God's sight that He imposed the death penalty on those who practiced it.

Exodus 22:18 ¹⁸“You shall not allow a sorceress [כַּשֵּׁף] to live.

This is a different word, כַּשֵּׁף, meaning to practice magic, to practice sorcery, to use witchcraft making it a synonym to sorceress, כַּשֵּׁפָה in Isaiah 57:3.

“The term *sorcerer*, from the Lat. *sors*, ‘a lot,’ ‘one who throws or declares a lot,’ would assign it initially the more circumscribed sphere of augural prognostication [a sign of what will happen in the future; an omen or the interpretation of an omen]. But the term, as commonly employed, includes one who practices in the whole field of divinatory occultism. As such, it comprehends a necromancer, who may be classified as a certain type of sorcerer. Sorcery is the practice of the occult arts under the power of evil spirits, or demons, and has been common in all ages of the world's history” [Merrill F. Unger, s.v. “sorcerer, sorcery” *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1212].

The call to “you come here” is being made to a people who are in rebellion against God in the worst way. They have turned away from Him and turned to false, evil gods who are used as tools of Satan to lure people away from God and become immersed into Satan's world system. They are being called to receive an important message. Just as the righteous ones among them will “enter into peace” (v. 2), the unrighteous ones will face judgment (v. 13).

Adulterer and prostitute are used as metaphors for spiritual offenses against God. These words are often used together as a figurative reference to Israel's unfaithful, spiritual behavior. “This is similar to preexilic terminology associated with the sexual perversity rampant at the Baal temples as well as the terminology that describes the nation's spiritual and political unfaithfulness to God” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 550]. I am not sure why this theologian would refer to this as being similar to “preexilic terminology” because it is preexilic terminology. Isaiah wrote these words nearly 200 years before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and took the people into captivity.

“Throughout the Bible, idolatry and adultery are linked, because both focus on the priority of the individual's needs, the attempt to gain power, and the devaluation of submission and trust.... Sorcery is ultimately an attempt to circumvent the normal chain of cause and effect, obtaining a blessing with a minimum of effort and without either surrender to, or trust in, God” [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 476, 476, n. 28].

Hosea 4:12-14 ¹²My people consult their wooden idol, and their *diviner's* wand informs them; For a spirit of harlotry has led *them* astray, And they have played the harlot, *departing* from their God. ¹³They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains And burn incense on the hills, Under oak, poplar and terebinth, Because their shade is pleasant.

Therefore your daughters play the harlot And your brides commit adultery. ¹⁴I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot Or your brides when they commit adultery, For *the men* themselves go apart with harlots And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes; So the people without understanding are ruined.

Adulterer, masculine gender, and prostitute, feminine gender, relate to father and mother. This represents the fact that this is taking place within the parameters of the marriage covenant between God and Israel.

Adulterer, זָנֵה, means to “commit adultery, i.e., have sexual intercourse with other than a spouse as a married or betrothed person ... note: in some contexts this refers to religious adultery, usually in which Israel is viewed as the unfaithful female spouse to the LORD in a covenantal marriage contract” [James A. Swanson, s.v. “זָנֵה,” *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*]. Adultery represents the breaking of the marriage covenant which is an act of reneging on one’s loyalty to one’s spouse. Swanson suggested in this definition that adultery was a problem “generally, [of] a person of low social status,” but that is a very foolish thing to say. Does he really believe that those of a high social status don’t commit adultery? Adultery is a product of the sin nature and it is a societal problem that affects people across the spectrum of social status. King David, who was certainly not of low social status, comes immediately to mind in terms of adultery (2 Sam. 11:1-5). Social status has nothing to do with mankind’s rebellion against God, except perhaps in the fact that it seems to be even more difficult for very wealthy people to recognize their need for a Savior and subsequently believe (Mt. 19:23-24). Satan is an equal opportunity destroyer of people’s faith and their relationship to and with God.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, among other prophets, also connected adultery with idolatry.

Jeremiah 3:9 ⁹“Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees.

Ezekiel 23:43–44, 49 ⁴³“Then I said concerning her who was worn out by adulteries, ‘Will they now commit adultery with her when she is *thus*?’ ⁴⁴“But they went in to her as they would go in to a harlot. Thus they went in to Oholah and to Oholibah, the lewd women.... ⁴⁹‘Your lewdness will be requited upon you, and you will bear the penalty of *worshipping* your idols; thus you will know that I am the Lord GOD.’”

Prostitute, זָנֵה, means to be a harlot, a prostitute referring to a sexual encounter with a partner to whom one is not married for some form of payment. In this context, it refers to being unfaithful by acting as a prostitute and being unfaithful to a person or a principle and therefore being unreliable in behavior as a figurative extension of sexual promiscuity on the part of a spouse that is in a covenant relationship with another person. Figuratively, it represents entering into an illicit relationship which amounts to switching loyalties from one person to another. This situation was expressly prohibited. This word is often translated “harlot.”

There are two aspects to the concept of prostitution. “[Prostitution is] a term connoting, in the broadest sense, the turning of an object or process from its rightful or natural use to

a base one. In the narrower sense, it is the term for sexual relations engaged in outside of marriage for professional reasons, either mercenary or religious" [J. Oswalt, s.v. "prostitution," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:910]. Israel's involvement in prostitution encompassed both aspects of the issue. The term "prostitute" is obviously used in a figurative sense by God through the prophet Isaiah to represent Israel's unfaithfulness to the nation's husband, Yahweh. Israel's unfaithfulness was not only represented in the act of engaging in idolatry. It was also represented by trusting other nations for national security rather than trusting in Yahweh for protection and, it was represented in their disobedience to the Mosaic Law. The symbolism here represents a national consciousness that is in rebellion against God in several ways. Limiting the symbolic use of "prostitute" as it appears here to only idolatry is far too restrictive.

Idolatry, sorcery, and prostitution are all linked together, and the Bible especially uses them to highlight the spiritual nature of Israel's national idolatry. We just cannot restrict the meaning to those issues alone. "Behind every form of idolatry is the occult and the worship of the demonic world. Unlike the righteous, the wicked began worshipping other gods through the occult and thus became guilty of spiritual adultery. Their unfaithfulness to God proved them to be the offspring of adulterers and prostitutes" [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Isaiah: Exposition from a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, 605]. Certainly, this is all quite true and idolatry is a primary element for understanding what prostitution means in terms of the nation's relationship with Yahweh, but isn't relying on other nations for national security equally unfaithful? Isn't that really a plot by Satan to subvert Israel and lead the nation to destruction? Isn't the nation's deviation from the Mosaic Law in all aspects an attack on the nation to separate the Israelites from Yahweh and destroy them? Aren't these basically spiritual issues as well? I think so. Nevertheless, spiritual adultery and prostitution is obviously very connected with idolatry.

Exodus 34:14–16 ¹⁴—for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God— ¹⁵otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, ¹⁶and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods.

Hosea 4:17–18 ¹⁷Ephraim is joined to idols; Let him alone. ¹⁸... They play the harlot continually ...

In this context, the concept of prostitution seems to relate to the mercenary form of prostitution, because a different word was used to refer to a pagan, cult prostitute. קדושה is the feminine form of the word meaning a temple or cult prostitute referring to a female shrine prostitute who is a person engaging in sexual acts related to worship of the pagan gods or other cultural reasons. "Although the term refers to a person that was holy or sacred, it is necessary to know what they were holy to. When referring to a pagan temple cult, it connotes a woman set apart for pagan temple service, namely, female prostitution. It is also possible that this term was used as a general term for prostitution (Gen. 38:21, 22) because of its parallel usage with *zā·nā(h)*. However, its at the same time possible that *zā·nā(h)* was merely the more general term for a prostitute, while

qā dē šā(h) was the exclusive term for a shrine prostitute" [Baker and Carpenter, s.v. "קדושה," *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, 983].

The masculine form of the word, קדוש, refers to a male pagan, cult prostitute working in a pagan temple.

None of this was new to Isaiah's audience. Calling them sons of a sorceress and the offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute is a figurative way of saying that each generation of Israelites has been following in the footsteps of its unfaithful progenitors. This situation was going on for a long time in the nation, and was not going to stop until the Babylonian conquest was finished. While the overt idolatry stopped after that, other forms of idolatry that were just as dangerous and rebellious, but less overt, took hold and continue to this day. It is interesting to note that the few faithful kings of Judah who attempted to do away with idolatry must have failed at changing the idolatrous mindset of the majority of the people. Once a righteous king passed from the scene and was succeeded by an unrighteous king, the people immediately returned to false gods, but in the end, the unfaithful won out over the faithful which resulted in the imposition of God's divine temporal discipline that culminated in the destruction of the Temple and in exile into Babylon.

For example, faithful King Hezekiah was succeeded by his son, the unfaithful King Manasseh. The last faithful king in Judah was Josiah, Manasseh's grandson.

2 Kings 18:3–6 ³He [Hezekiah] did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. ⁴He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. ⁵He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. ⁶For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses.

2 Kings 21:2–7 ²He [Manasseh] did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel. ³For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. ⁴He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My name." ⁵For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶He made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD provoking Him to anger. ⁷Then he set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house [of Yahweh, the Temple]

The unrighteous people in the nation were arrogant in their rebellious attitudes toward the righteous people in their midst and toward God. Even if this verse is not referring to specifically, personally, mocking God, and that is unclear, mocking those who belong to Him is to mock Him as well. Mocking the righteous is a sign of rebellion against God.

Isaiah 57:4 ⁴“Against whom do you jest [ענג] ? Against whom do you open wide your mouth And stick out your tongue? Are you not children of rebellion [פִּשְׁעַ], Offspring of deceit [שָׁקֵר],

Jest, ענג or ענג, means to be delicate or to take delight. It has the sense of making merry which, in this context, refers to jesting at someone. In this verb form, which is intensive, it means to mock, to make sport of, i.e., verbally ridicule and scorn another as an extension of exploiting the sensitivities of another through ridicule. Literal reading: “Against whom [do] you yourselves (intensely) jest?” “The usage of ‘ng in Isa 54:4 [sic; this must be 57:4 which is the only place the word is used in this manner] appears to stand alone. It carries the sense mock, flirt with, act in a familiar way” [Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., s.v. “ענג,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 3:444]. “... used in a bad sense, to deride any one, followed by על [against] Isa 57:4” [H. W. F. Gesenius, s.v. “ענג,” *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, 641].

Some theologians do not believe the word is being used here in a unique way, and it means to delight as in delighting in another god. “According to the NIV translation, the second accusation relates to the arrogant and contemptible attitude of sneering, mocking, or jeering. Several commentators believe these wicked people sneer and laugh at the righteous in 57:1-2, but in all other examples the root ‘ānag has the positive meaning of ‘delight.’ Thus the question posed is: ‘Concerning whom do you delight?’ In other words which god/God do you enjoy following and serving? Where does your sense of satisfaction come from? This question prepares the way for later questions about their worship of pagan gods in 57:4-9” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 550].

The preponderance of theologians; however, go with the mocking, jeering concept of the word as used in this verse. “While they actively committed spiritual fornication, they also actively made fun of God, mocking Him. They sneered at Him and stuck out their tongues at God” [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Isaiah: Exposition from a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, 605]. “The mockery by the wicked of the godly is extremely vulgar. They contort their faces, stick out their tongues, thus showing their utter contempt for God and for His servants” [Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 439]. Both of these men are Messianic Jews who I presume are familiar with the finer points, the intricacies, and the idiomatic peculiarities of the Hebrew language; therefore, I would defer to them in understanding the words in this verse.

Opening the mouth and sticking out the tongue furthers the idea that making sport of God's righteous people and, by extension, of God Himself, is the subject of this verse. It is not difficult to picture this symbolism representing that which is being used to mock God. These words simply overwhelm the reader with a picture of contempt. This seems to be an idiom for the expression of disrespect, derision, and ridicule. Other Scriptures bear this out.

Psalms 35:21 ²¹They opened their mouth wide against me; They said, “Aha, aha, our eyes have seen it!”

Lamentations 2:16 ¹⁶All your enemies Have opened their mouths wide against you; They hiss and gnash *their* teeth. They say, "We have swallowed *her* up! Surely this is the day for which we waited; We have reached *it*, we have seen *it*."

The unrighteous people who are acting in this way are showing to all that they are born of rebellion and deceit. Their lives are characterized by rebellion and deceit which is a situation that will not change unless and until they turn to the Lord and join the righteous. This is presented as truth, but it is introduced as a rhetorical question, "Are you not children of rebellion ...?"

"This rhetorical question is not really inquiring into this matter in order to gain information; it is actually making a statement about what is well known by using a question format. Is not their delight and are not their words of appreciation based on the fact that they are the children of 'rebellion' and the 'seed' of deceivers? The prophet is accusing them of these things; he is not really asking if this might be true. Rebellion against God and the acceptance of deceitful theological beliefs are associated with lying words and false statements about pagan gods elsewhere [in Isaiah and Jeremiah], so in light of the contextual reference to idolatry in 57:5-9, it is natural to conclude that the intent is similar in this verse" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 550-551].

Rebellion, מַרְדָּו, means rebellion and revolt referring to rising up in clear defiance to authority. The sense is that of evildoing by violating a law, a duty, or a moral principle. This word also means crime, sin, offense, fault, transgression in connection with what is contrary to a standard, human or divine, with a focus on the rebellious nature of the sin. This meaning is a subset of rebellion since sin is a violation of the Mosaic Law which is an element of rebellion. This word is primarily used to express rebellion against God and against the Mosaic Law.

You may have noticed that I have used the word "rebellion" throughout the study of Isaiah to describe the nation's activity that has caused Israel to be subjected to God's divine temporal disciplinary program. This is a strong word, and it is a very appropriate word to use as a description of the of the entire spectrum of the nation's behavior throughout its history.

Deceit, שֶׁקֶר, means deception, disappointment, falsehood or a lie. It is used to describe "words or activities which are false in the sense that they are groundless, without basis in fact or reality.... In whatever context or circumstances *sheqer* is used, God will not condone it, for he is the God of truth, reality, and faithfulness, and his people are also to be so characterized" [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. "," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 956]. In this context, the sense of the word is that of a breach of faith. "The 'rebellion' is the *adulterer* who has repudiated a sworn obligation; the 'falsehood' is the prostitute whose whole life is a lie. To turn from the Lord, then, is wilful [sic] disobedience, departure from the truth to the lie" [J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, 353].

Just in case anyone thinks this kind of thing is only a situation involving the Israelites, think again. Rebellion and deceit are deeply embedded characteristics of the sin nature. The

end of the Church Age will look much like the history for Israel with unbelievers, and even unfaithful believers, mocking and jeering both Israel and the body of Christ.

2 Timothy 4:2–4 ²preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Just as God used faithful prophets to proclaim truth to the Israelites and call them back to Yahweh, the Lord will use faithful pastors and evangelists to call unbelievers to the faith in times of rebellion and deceit. Both endeavors will not appear to be successful. The Israelites will not turn to the Lord until they are on the brink of annihilation at the hands of antichrist, and unbelievers living in the Church Age will continue in their rebellion with little response to the Gospel message. In addition to that, Christians will both fall away and dwindle in number until the Rapture of the Church. All of this is part of God's plan for history, but the situation is not of His making; in fact, it is contrary to His desire to see all of humanity saved.

1 Timothy 2:3–4 ³This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 ⁹The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.