

Nose Job

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Isa 11:3

(BHS)

וְהָרִיחַוּ בְּיִרְאַת יְהוָה
וְלֹא-לְמַרְאֵה עֵינָיו יִשְׁפוט
וְלֹא-לְמִשְׁמַע אָזְנוֹ יוֹכִיחַ:

(Jub)

and shall make him of quick olfaction in the fear of the LORD;
and he shall not judge according to the sight of his eyes,
neither reprove according to the hearing of his ears

Yikes the English is wordy. “In the fear of Yahweh” is straightforward.

Note the parallelism between lines 2 and 3.

And-not	what-is-seen	his-eyes	he-will-judge
And-not	what-is-heard	his-ears	he-will-decide

He won't judge by sight or sound—but by another sense. Take a look at the first word, rendered “delight” in many versions (see yours). The same verb is found in Amos 5:21, glossed “smell” in KJV. “His power of perception ... is graphically expressed as His sense of smelling” (Young 1965, 383). The verb is related to *ruach* (wind, breath). But in our messianic verse, that seems so unsuitable (“And his smelling in the fear of the LORD”) that translators opt for a metaphorical sense (rather than cense). Commentaries suspect dittography. This essay is inspired by Ian Ritchie’s 2000 article; email me for my Isaiah bibliography.

In modern parlance, when explanations are not persuasive or there seems to be self-serving contradictions or gaps, we say “that story doesn’t pass the smell test.” I don’t have to whiff much to perceive if a student’s paper is any good. But some practice this more literally. According to Ritchie, some African Christians smell people to see if their motives are good or ill. In Jewish lore, Tobit burned a fish beside his bride to drive away a tenacious demon. [B. Sanh. 93b](#) records that a 2nd century Jewish community executed a man claiming to

be the Messiah, because he couldn't adjudicate by scent. Isaiah suggests that the Messiah will establish justice by smelling out the truth.

Think of all the effort that goes into offering a sacrifice. God could have appreciated how Noah's altar looked or the prayers he offered or the time he spent building it. But God was moved by its bouquet (Gen 8:21). Since Yahweh's places of worship had to smell just so, they featured the exactly correct kind of incense (Ex 30:35). Aaron's sons' offering smelled wrong (Ex 30:9; Lev 10:1), so they perished. The same metaphorically goes for the people's behavior. Disobedient Israel reeks (Isa 65:5).

The church also is emblematically odiferous. John likens the prayers of the saints to incense wafting up to heaven (Rev 5:8). The church symbolically emits a sweet perfume associated with life and salvation, attractive and pleasing. But Paul takes this metaphor and adds an aspect of confrontation to it. With Paul's use of the image, only those who believe in Jesus can "smell" things correctly. Since unbelievers are spiritually dead, their olfactory sense is perverted and they confuse the fragrance of life with the fetor of death.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. (2 Cor 2:14 – 16)

To unbelievers with a smell disorder (parosmia), the good and faithful people of God, being persecuted for doing good works and worshipping aright, stink up the world. There is a never-ending practice of finding fault with the community of faith. But to seekers and saints, the church smells like home, like life and health, especially in the midst of persecution. Thank God that the Messiah has a nose for justice, equity, humility, and righteousness (Isa 11:4 –

5). The wicked will not stand, when Messiah whiffs the world. It is the duty of every Christian to ensure that our behavior and witness under pressure wafts the aroma of life in the community and the world, uncorrupted by the stench of pride or greed or cowardice or compromise or selfishness.

Because when he comes, he will sniff you too. Despite the outward garb that covers the tenor of your life, he will smell underneath to what you keep hidden from view. Will he detect selfish ambition? Will he breathe in the love of money? Will he get a noseful of your conceit or sloth or complacency?

Have you caught the world's parosmia, so these things don't make you hold your nose? Isa 11:3 is a call to examine ourselves and smell if there is anything noxious in us. While we have breath, let us promote what is right and good. Let us be gracious and generous to all.

Then we will smell like Jesus.