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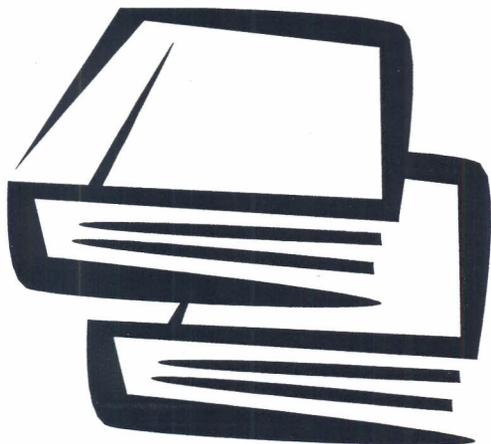
Recent Literature on the Book of Isaiah

MARK W. HAMILTON

The book of Isaiah contains material spanning at least three centuries, embracing several genres and even outlooks on the world. From the grim visions of chapters 24-27 to the exuberant hope of 40-55 to the chastened realism of 56-66, we see in this gemlike book all of scripture writ small. The prophetic words, even as they challenge us as interpreters, continue to provide us with language powerful enough to address the weightiest subjects of Christian theology: the nature of community, the importance of ethical living, and—most of all—the complex nature of a God who both attracts and repels us.

Fortunately, a large collection of commentaries, histories, and special studies exists to help us understand the masterpiece before us. Here I focus on works that are accessible to preachers and teachers in the church, but which also seriously and reliably engage biblical scholarship. So magnificent technical works such as Hans Wildberger's *Isaiah 1-39* (3 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991-2002), or the excellent collection of essays edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael Floyd, *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), or of J. van Ruiten and M. Vervenne, *Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (FS Willem A. M. Beuken; Leuven: University Press, 1997) do not receive the attention here that they deserve; nor conversely do the many books of sermons on Isaiah. Readers may, according to their tastes, pursue these works on their own.

In evaluating these volumes, one finds several major themes emerging. The most obvious is the extent to which older scholarship's tendency to fragment the text has given way to a renewed search for unity. This is not unity in the old sense of a belief in a single author, a view that has little merit in fact, but unity in the sense that the editors of the book worked in a tradition and that they shaped the document as a whole into something readable and relatively coherent. The ancient theological fashioning of the book has become increasingly evident and has triggered new ways of thinking about the prophetic message's meaning for today.



A second trend is the great interest in language, that is, in Isaiah as poetry. For preachers, this emphasis seems very helpful, sensitive as we all try to be to the power that language has in forming communities of faith. And a final trend is a renewed attention to the role of Isaiah in the synagogue's and church's ongoing interpretive life. The older scholarly notion of a self-contained, pristine text that we can recover by vaulting over subsequent interpretations has given way to a more subtle appreciation of the fact that Isaiah belongs to a liv-

ing stream of readers of which we are all part. Ours is a good time for the church to be engaging this book afresh.

In building a library on the Old Testament, several kinds of works serve a purpose, including commentaries, works on prophetic ethics, on ethics, and on history, as well as books that draw out the theological implications of the Bible for us today. Let us consider each in turn.

COMMENTARIES

Scores of commentaries on Isaiah exist in English. Here we can consider only a few.

The first, and arguably the best, I will consider is that of Brevard Childs, *Isaiah*, (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001). Though well aware of the historical-critical issues surrounding the development of the book, he seeks to read it as a well-wrought theological whole, attending to the shape of the book and its place in the larger biblical canon. Although some elements of his reading strategy are controversial, on the whole, his work will prepare the educated preacher to engage the biblical text in an informed way. Childs's sustained attention to the theology of the biblical text marks a serious advance over older volumes in the same series (especially those of Otto Kaiser) and serves as a model for what can be done to help contemporary readers appropriate the religious teachings of the ancient text.

Much the same is true of the contributions of Gene Tucker and Christopher Seitz in the *New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 6, pp. 27-552; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). Tucker and Seitz write on Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 respectively. Each commentary includes an introduction to the chapters covered. For each major section there is an overview, and material for each unit includes the biblical text from both NIV and NRSV, detailed scholarly commentary, and theological and homiletical reflections. While the retention of the Duhmian division of the book after chapter 39 can perpetuate the sense of its disunity, the authors do a good job of indicating links across the divide. They model well the move from historical-critical exegesis to theology, so that preachers could hardly do better than this volume.

John Goldingay's *Isaiah* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001) examines for the benefit of the preacher or general reader the main issues of each paragraph of the text. Its almost 400 pages do not enter too much into technical problems, but the theological introduction to the book as a whole (pp. 1-22) helpfully emphasizes the entire work's theme of Yahweh as the Holy One of Israel and the subordinate themes relating to that. Goldingay works this out in the commentary proper. Moreover, his constant focus on theology and his accessible writing style make this a work one can almost read straight through.

Peter Miscall, in *Isaiah*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) offers what he calls a non-historical reading of Isaiah as a whole that interprets the book as a post-exilic vision of time past and present. Avoiding questions of literary development and historicity, Miscall nevertheless (rightly) sees a break between chapters 39 and 40. His brief treatments of each chapter offer insight into the rhetorical dimensions of the text and techniques such as word play, but the volume probably works best as a complement to more historical-critical works.

John D. W. Watts wrote a two-volume commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary (*Isaiah* [2 vols.; Waco, Tex.: 1987]). Like all the volumes in this distinguished series, Watts's includes extensive bibliographies, textual notes, and comments on the details of the text, as well as theological sections that will prove valuable to readers of this journal.

Other more technical works include the three Anchor Bible volumes of Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah* [New York: Doubleday, 2000-2003]) and the even more massive four volumes (so far) of the *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* by Beuken and Koole (Leuven: Peeters, 1997-). Marvin Sweeney's volume on *Isaiah 1-39* in the Forms of the Old Testament Literature series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) describes the genre of each paragraph of the first part of the book of Isaiah, examining also important literary devices and other stylistic elements. Sweeney's theological reflections are also first-rate.

In the Restoration Movement, scholars have contributed at least two valuable commentaries on all of Isaiah. John T. Willis's *Isaiah* (Austin, Tex.: Sweet, 1980) broke important new ground for our fellowship because he brought serious scholarship where there had previously been little. He also sought to understand the book as a whole, a move that was somewhat ahead of its time for scholarship at large. He has updated this work in a shorter commentary to appear in the forthcoming *Restoration Bible Commentary*. Meanwhile, Terry Briley (*Isaiah* [2 vols.; Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 2000, 2004]) continues this tradition with a commentary on the NIV text. Both of these works downplay historical issues, though Willis has since moved into more mainstream scholarship. Each work will be useful to preachers and teachers.

STUDIES OF PROPHETIC ETHICS

In addition to commentaries, a good library should include works on the ethics of the prophets, for possibly the greatest contribution of the prophets in general and Isaiah in particular is their firm linkage between the character of God and the moral lives of human beings. The book of Isaiah offers a multilayered reflection on the ethical commitments of the people of God. Thomas Leclerc, in his work *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), traces the evolution of the notion of *mishpat* ("justice, equity") and *tsedaqah* ("righteousness, fairness, loyalty") in the book and draws from this study theological conclusions about the nature of Yahweh and thus the nature of the covenant people. Though technical in places, this work deserves the attention of church leaders, especially as our congregations increasingly struggle to avoid becoming middle-class ghettos.

On a broader scale, numerous excellent surveys and detailed studies of the ethics of the prophets and other biblical writers exist. Two deserve especial mention just now. Enrique Nardoni's *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004) explores the Bible's search for justice, but his sections on Isaiah provide especially pungent insight into the prophetic call to a just society. The entire book should be required reading for ministers and other Christian leaders. David Pleins has written *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), which surveys the ethical teaching of the entire Old Testament. The sections on the prophets (pp. 213-416) work out the books' visions of the just society and show how the multiple voices of Israel contribute to the rich whole. He draws on sociology (especially Max Weber) and writes in a clear and engaging way.

ISAIAH AS POETRY AND IMAGINATION

The rich interplay of imagery and ideas in the book demands attention. Peter Quinn-Miscall (formerly Peter Miscall) explores, as he puts it, what Isaiah thinks, imagines, speaks and acts, all leading to the "Lord's Holy Mountain" in *Reading Isaiah: Poetry and Vision* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001). Such themes as evil and good, justice and righteousness, and the remnant lie side by side with nature imagery and pictures of light and darkness in the book of Isaiah.

To a greater degree than in his earlier work, Quinn-Miscall captures the richness of the prophetic book. Preachers who seek to use language to persuade and enrich their hearers would do well to learn from this book how the Bible itself does this.

ISAIAH THROUGH HISTORY

In attending to the language of the book, we are joining a centuries-long parade of Jewish and Christian exegetes. John F. A. Sawyer catalogues some of the countless ways in which preachers, commentators, artists, and poets have understood the work. His work, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) traces the interpretation of Isaiah from the first century to modern times, looking at numerous aspects of the tradition, not just the scholarly commentaries.

Thirty-eight photographs illustrate the text, helping making Sawyer's explanations come alive. This work is important, not only because of Sawyer's immense learning but also because he illustrates how bibli-

cal texts enjoy rich lives in the community of faith. This fact needs serious attention from those of us who are tempted to try to leapfrog over history to the so-called original meanings of the text.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the history of interpretation reminds us, many ways of appropriating the Bible exist. Theology that uses the Bible (as opposed to purely descriptive biblical theology) also engages the contexts of the theologian, and accordingly, looks different under different circumstances. Isaiah, in particular, precisely because it offers so richly imaginative a view of the world, can elicit a wide range of theological responses.

Thus we find Daniel Berrigan, the perennial antiwar protestor, writing *Isaiah: Spirit of Courage, Gift of Tears* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). In this meditation on selected texts from Isaiah, he calls us to challenge the American church's easy accommodation of national power in the name of a God who transcends all times and places. The ancient prophet would have liked his modern counterpart, I think, even if he might question some of Berrigan's interpretations of the biblical texts.

CONCLUSIONS

The prophetic book we call Isaiah moves through time from the chaos of the late eighth century to the relative peace of the early fifth. Throughout the vicissitudes of history, it nevertheless offers a singular invitation to Israel to seek God and the ways of God in order to find healing.

The soaring strains of chapter 40, "Comfort, comfort my people," though sung amid the imperfect world in which exile is becoming a memory and a warning, leads the reader to a world in which it is possible, as chapter 6 has it, to see a God who wishes to speak to a people even of unclean lips. And, as the book's movement from warning to destruction to restoration to practical existence reminds us, the God who is present throughout human history can purify the lips and hearts of a repentant people.

May it be so for us as we read this work from God's prophetic people.

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