

11-1-2008

# Anti-cultic theology in Christian biblical interpretation: a study of Isaiah 66:1-4 and its reception

Roger W. Uitti

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Uitti, Roger W. (2008) "Anti-cultic theology in Christian biblical interpretation: a study of Isaiah 66:1-4 and its reception," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss1/22>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

that that ancient texts like Isaiah might well have a meaning to and of themselves, even though we moderns may not all find such meanings very meaningful. I wonder whether most readers of this monograph might conclude that what has become meaningful to so many past and present Christians in the Isaianic text is a jarring injustice, if not an outright affront, to the book of Isaiah. But read this provocative, intriguing, and far-reaching book to judge the matter for yourself. I assure you that you will not be the same person on the last page you were when on page one.

Roger W. Uitti

Professor of Old Testament emeritus

Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

### **Anti-Cultic Theology in Christian Biblical Interpretation: A Study of Isaiah 66:1-4 and Its Reception**

Valerie A. Stein

Studies in Biblical Literature 97. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007  
161 pages, \$62.95 Softcover

This monograph is a revision of a 2004 Harvard dissertation that was supervised by professors Paul Hanson, Jon Levenson, and François Bovon. While open to both possibilities, the author elects to translate the opening Hebrew expression ‘*e-zeh* within Is 66:1b in terms of *location* rather than *quality*: “*Where* is the house you would build for me? *Where* is my resting place?” Stein argues that the Temple envisioned in Is 66:1-4 is not some future eschatological structure nor some more distant edifice (Mt. Gerizim, Elephantine, Babylon, Herod’s Jerusalem temple) but the post-exilic Second Temple completed under Zerubbabel in 516/5 BCE.

Stein’s specific interest in this study, however, is to document how Patristic and later exegetes of the Reformation (in particular, Martin Luther) interpreted Is 66:1-4. These forenamed theologians typically heard Is 66:1-4 as basically anti-cultic, as part of their broader agenda pitting Christianity over against Judaism as well as against other contemporary groups judged to be wayward or heretical. Stein holds that this perspective grew out of their vital

Christian emphasis on justification by faith, a perspective that by definition must oppose all perceived expressions of religious ritualism and works-righteousness. Stein herself views Is 66:1-4 in actuality as not against the Jerusalem temple or cult per se but against the growing syncretistic and apostate practices present at the time. Accordingly, she views the anti-cultic interpretation of Is 66:1-4 as interpretation unjustly imposed from the outside on an originally more positive text.

Following a brief introduction presenting her translation of and historical perspective on Is 66:1-4, Stein documents how Acts 7 and numerous Patristic works (especially the Epistle of Barnabas and Justin Martyr) employed Is 66:1-4 to attack Jews and Judaism of the day, or when not doing that, to bombard others such as Marcionites, Gnostics, Monarchians, and Arians, in the struggle over how to define God's being and personhood properly. Indeed, the book of Isaiah figured very prominently as a foundational resource in early Christianity for such purposes, being cited in the NT and Patristic fathers second only to the book of Psalms. In order of appearance and importance, Is 66:1-2 in Stephen's speech in Acts 7 led the way, with Stephen's words thereafter being interpreted either in an anti-cultic way or as proclaiming God's transcendence over anything made by human hands. In the end, Stein concludes that Is 66:1 mostly likely did function in Acts 7 as a proof-text for the condemnation of the Jerusalem temple cult. Still she contends that, while Stephen's speech was anti-temple, it was not anti-Jewish.

It is in the third chapter of her study that Stein details how Luther used Is 66:1-4 also to condemn, but this time to castigate a sizable number of contemporary opposition groups: Jews, Enthusiasts, Antinomians, radical Reformers, and Roman Catholics. Luther himself as an OT professor (in today's terms) lectured a number of times on Isaiah between 1527 and 1544. In his subsequent publications, Luther cites or alludes to Is 66:1-4 at least 38 times, not including his commentary on Is 66. In point of fact, Is 66:1-2 comes out as one of the top twenty verses of Isaiah most quoted by Luther in all his writings.

In her final two chapters Stein observes that the Protestant anti-cultic theology is still much alive in the modern era and therefore in need of revisitation for bias and prejudice. The doctrine of justification by faith by nature seems to invite either anti-Semitic or

anti-ritualistic polemics. In a great many ecclesial circles there seems to persist a predilection for prophetic and Deuteronomistic content over Priestly material. Historical/post-critical reading within much of Protestantism today continues to enjoy a degree of subtle animosity toward certain forms of worship. If the original point of Is 66:1ff. was to contrast the divine with human nature, not cultic with spiritual worship, there is need to rethink much of past Trito-Isaianic interpretation. In addition, the author rightly observes, Jewish-Christian relations would greatly benefit when one group strives to understand the other on the other's own terms rather than its own. Christians would then realize that First Covenanters do not understand their obedience to Torah as an effort in works-righteousness but as a joyous response to a relationship already given and created for them by YHWH; Jews would then realize that Christians believe that since the Messiah has now come, that there is no need to live in the covenantal past but in the "mystery" long hidden but now revealed (Eph 2:1-3:12; Col 1:25-29; Gal 3:6-14).

In fairness, in a study of this kind, rather than just criticize Christian exegesis of Is 66:1-4 over against Jews, one might have been given more balance, i.e., to have received some assessment of Jewish exegesis of Is 66:1-4 over time, as well as that of Is 56-66 as a whole, over against Christian interpretation. One thus might have been given some assessment of W.A.M. Beuken's claim that Is 66:1-4 was never interpreted as an anti-cultic text in Jewish tradition, or be introduced to Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the second Edom passage (Is 63:1-6) as predicting the destruction of Christianity.

The work is very readable, clear, and direct. Yet the monograph does exhibit some tell-tale signs of the price paid for speeding to publication, as there are ample stylistic inconsistencies: the word "scripture" is/is not capitalized a couple of times, even on the same page (71); the word *nhk* is printed incorrectly for *nkh* (13); "namely," is sometimes and sometimes not followed by a comma; there is also rampant punctuation inconsistency over whether or not quotation marks should follow or precede a period or a comma. These are matters that might drive a former editor nuts, but apparently not a promising, young scholar.

As a further aside, there is a minor shortcoming in that within her whole discussion of Acts 7 Stein never even brings up the idea that Stephen might have been a Samaritan, as his recital of OT narrative

events follows the detail of the Samaritan Pentateuch, not that of the Greek Septuagint or Hebrew MT. Such an observation would have strengthened her anti-temple argument. For a discussion of the possible Samaritan connection, see Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31, Appendix V, "Stephen's Samaritan Background" (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 285-300. This is a work cited by Stein in her dissertation bibliography but apparently not read to the full.

Likewise, with reference to her examination of the thrust of Luther's exegesis of the OT one might object to Stein's use of the adjectives "Christological" and "Christocentric" almost interchangeably. In fairness to Luther there was a uniqueness to his approach. As H. Bornkamm points out in his book, *Luther and the Old Testament*, which Stein also cites as having utilized in her dissertation bibliography, Luther's uniqueness lay not in his use of allegory, typology, senseless literalness, nor even salvation history, but in his idea that "whenever God turned his face toward men, be it ever so veiled," there "was the face of Christ" (Bornkamm, pp. 247-260). In the Postscript to this book, Bornkamm adds that, while much of Luther's Christological exegesis might be suspect today, his *Christocentric* understanding remains intrinsic to Christian exegesis. Indeed, one should add that if we do not support some retrospective Christocentric exegesis of the OT as legitimate and vital to our enterprise and proclamation we may all just as well leave our churches for the local synagogue.

In her publication Stein shows her dissertational wisdom in delimiting the subject and material investigated. Too often dissertations attempt to accomplish too much or cut too wide a swath. Yet, despite the limited textual scope undertaken and permitted by her degree-granting institution (only four Isaianic verses!), the work is an eye-opening contribution to both Protestant-Catholic and Jewish-Christian relations. Her choice of subject and interest reveals the author's own Lutheran background and conscience. Valerie Stein is currently an assistant professor of religion at the University of Evansville in Indiana.

Roger W. Uitti  
 Professor of Old Testament emeritus  
 Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon