

11-1-2008

## Opening the sealed book: interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in late antiquity

Roger W. Uitti

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Uitti, Roger W. (2008) "Opening the sealed book: interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in late antiquity," *Consensus*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: 10.51644/YZEK1564

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss1/14>

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).

human dignity consistent with the ideals of universal human dignity that would be capable of making a positive contribution to the global struggle for human rights alongside other religious and moral traditions.

Finally Newlands and Amesbury co-author the postscript in which they proffer ten action items all of which soar at 50,000 feet. There is nothing down-to-earth here nor is there anything new. I've heard it all before and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. With these ten steps they end the book abruptly, and I was tempted to stop paying attention as quickly. However, on second thought, perhaps the authors have built a skeleton upon which readers are challenged to hang flesh that is relevant to them.

This booklet would be a good resource for congregational study groups. Although the lay reader may need a refresher course in philosophical methods and a good dictionary to absorb some parts of the book, I recommend it. The issues it addresses are of profound importance to the human community and the principles it elucidates provide a foundation on which universal standards of justice and peace could be built. Human rights are a crucial matter, and this book provides a thoughtful and thorough overview from a Christian perspective.

Marge Watters Knebel  
Toronto, Ontario

### **Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary**

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Anchor Bible 19. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000

524 pages, \$50.00 USD Hardcover

### **Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary**

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Anchor Bible 19A. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2002

411 pages, \$45.00 USD Hardcover

## **Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary**

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Anchor Bible 19B. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003

348 pages, \$45.00 USD Hardcover

## **Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretation of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity**

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2006

315 pages, \$25.00 USD Softcover

If you desire an up-to-date summary of most everything about Isaiah in recent scholarship, in three separate, dedicated volumes, plus how Isaiah as a book came to be interpreted later in the intertestamental period, at Qumran, and in the NT, you will want to own or at least to investigate the four books cited above.

Blenkinsopp's three AB volumes on the book of Isaiah are impressive in their completeness and range. Within the Introduction to each of the three volumes cited there is a discussion of the text of Isaiah and ancient versions, canonical considerations, literary and structural characteristics, formation theory, relation of individual parts to other Isaianic units (for example, how Is 40-55 is related to Is 1-39 and to Is 56-66), history of interpretation in Judaism and early Christianity, historical context, aspects of Isaianic theology, select bibliographies, translation, plus notes, and most important of all, detailed individual pericopal commentary. The three AB volumes each also conclude with helpful indices of subjects, of biblical and other ancient references, and of key Hebrew terms.

The commentary itself mediates a respectful balance between the extremes of historical-critical and post-critical exegesis. Unlike more popular treatments Blenkinsopp enters the nitty-gritty of how we got to where we are now in Isaianic research. Such circumspensive and circumstantial analysis, while very welcome and acceptable to classical mindsets, admittedly may not be so to the more romantic types among us, as set forth in Robert Pirsig's classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). Romantic-inclined individuals might prefer the "don't give me all the background," more pastor-friendly volumes by Walter Brueggemann, in the Westminster Bible

Companion series, *Isaiah 1-39* (1998) and *Isaiah 40-66* (1998).

One may not be totally comfortable with all the interpretive positions taken by Blenkinsopp in these three excellent, comprehensive commentaries. Problem areas of interpretation in the first volume might include his suggestion that the “prophetess” of Is 8:3, made pregnant by Isaiah, was most likely not his wife but some officially recognized member of the *nabi*’ class, perhaps some member of the Jerusalem temple staff. Equally at challenge might be Blenkinsopp’s understanding of Is 9:2-7 as a royal birth rather than a royal accession (with accompanying throne names), or Blenkinsopp’s openness to Judean leaders making a necromantic/occult covenant with Death rather than a real Egyptian military alliance, characterized by Isaiah as one that could only end up in Judah’s death.

What Blenkinsopp does add brilliantly over most other commentators on Isaiah is his recognition of the pervasiveness of the concept of faith throughout First Isaiah and the centrality of the deliverance (without human agency) of Jerusalem in 701 BCE from the Assyrian forces of Sennacherib. Such Isaianic preoccupation with the need for trust in YHWH for deliverance rather than upon some ancient Near Eastern NATO force is especially clear in the synoptic prose narrative material borrowed from 2 Kings 18-20, where King Ahaz, a man of unfaith, is contrasted with King Hezekiah, a man of faith, as both meet their moments of decision in the same place and situation (Is 36:2; 2 Kgs 18:17; Is 7:3).

Blenkinsopp’s second volume is devoted to the treatment of the Deutero-Isaianic traditions. Most praiseworthy is the emphasis herein given to the often unnoticed regular alternation of apostrophes to Jerusalem/Zion (feminine imagery) with passages dealing with the Servant (masculine imagery), setting forth the relationship between the people of Israel and YHVH (Blenkinsopp regularly prefers to read the Hebrew consonant *waw* as *vav* along with contemporary synagogal practice). The author also does a good job of catching the spirit of the individual residual genres met in these chapters, as the Gospel of Restoration gets spelled out in so many different ways: via disputation, song, mock-trial speech, polemic versus idols, prophetic/priestly reassurance, announcement, and eulogy.

As excellent as this second volume is, it also is not without some debatable interpretation. Not all may agree with Blenkinsopp’s interpretation of Is 40 as a call addressed to prophets in general or to

a specific prophetic group, rather than the more customary view of a commissioning of an individual prophet, much like Is 6. Also creatively different is his view that the processional way to be prepared in Is 40 is not for the return of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem but for the coming of YHWH to Babylon. But much more serious is Blenkinsopp's claim that the original identification of the Servant in Is 42:1-4 was once King Cyrus of Persia. The harsh military feats and prowess of Cyrus hardly seem to suit the meek and patient character of the Servant of Is 42.

Equally questionable is his added suggestion that the identity of the Servant within the three remaining so-called Servant Songs was most likely the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, whose innocent death supposedly was heralded as redemptive in the tribute (Is 53) composed by one or more of the surviving disciples. In my personal view, the identity of the Servant of Is 49/50 and Is 52:13-53:12 is more likely the people of Israel personified as YHWH's Prophet to the nations. In the Fourth Servant Song this salvific role of Israel is acknowledged in the confession of the "we" chorus of Is 53:1-9. As the "Gentile nations" are most directly addressed in the first two Servant Songs (49:1,6; 42:1, 4), it makes some sense to see a Gentile contingent speaking here led by its representative kings (Is 52:13) rather than some chorus of disciples. The "we" chorus, accordingly, made up of Israel's former oppressors, is thus envisioned as one day reevaluating Israel's place in their world. As the verbs describing suffering and death in Is 52:13-53:12 all stand in the past tense, there is envisioned thus no more suffering or humiliation but only Israel's exaltation. Israel once "dead" in exile is to be restored to her land, to become once more in time the chosen redemptive vehicle of God for the world (Gen 12:1-3). Israel's exculpation for former sins committed, one could argue, is a past event, as her ransom, to begin with, already seems fully or even "doubly" accomplished (40:2; 43:3-7; 44:22; 48:9-11, 20; 52:9-10). The astonishing truth of the confession of the "we" chorus is then confirmed in the anonymous prophetic, clarifying, and interpretive debriefing (Is 53:10-11a) which follows: in retrospect, we are told, the Servant's innocent self-giving and death has/will have served the purpose and function of an *'ašam*, i.e., a guilt offering and sacrifice of reparation, i.e., the removal of (Gentile) guilt and liability for encroachment on what/who was sacred and holy to YHWH. YHWH's opening (Is

52:13-15) and closing (53:11b-12) pronouncements justify this martyr Prophet's exaltation and praise.

Blenkinsopp's third AB volume on the Trito-Isaianic traditions is an especially welcome addition to the heretofore limited number of English language commentaries devoted exclusively to Is 55-66. Previously we had only the efforts of Douglas Jones (1974), Elizabeth Achtemeier (1982), George Knight (1985), or Grace Emmerson (1992).

In this third volume we witness a very commendable job of delineating the miscellaneous and chronologically-diverse material contained within these chapters. Notable is the author's laying out of the primal literary core Is 60-62, with its own center in Is 61:1-3, surrounded on each side by literary and thematic parallels (59:15b-20/63:1-6; 59:1-15a/63:7-64:12E; 56:9-58:14/65:1-16) and ideological bookends (56:1-8/66:18-24). On the whole, the eleven chapters appear more the outcome of redactional than authorial activity, more the work of a writing scribe than that of a speaking prophet. Blenkinsopp also demonstrates well how earlier Isaianic and other prophetic material is reworked to fit a new theological environment. He also notes how more familiar and classical prophetic genres seem to be breaking up to give place to longer, less structured, almost sermon-like discourses. Blenkinsopp also makes a credible attempt to uncover the internal theological/political and socio-economic tensions as well as historical clues within these chapters. Historically speaking, the material dates from the post-exilic period where the community recently returned from exile is at work seeking to redefine its identity either as an open or a closed community of faith. Trito-Isaiah belongs to the open community. One detects a strong antagonism at work between centrist opponents who control the Jerusalem temple/priesthood and a marginalized/excommunicated group struggling to stand up for and expand its constituency. Their animus seems directed more against cultic personnel than against the temple itself; their principal accusation is a protest against irregular and syncretistic practice. In the ideal community of Trito-Isaiah there was to be a place for the outcast, the eunuch, and the proselyte.

Blenkinsopp's text-critical work throughout these volumes is thorough, drawing on Qumranic textual MSS beyond 1QIsa and b, in particular the Isaianic fragments and commentary from Caves 3 and

4. Understandably some text-critical and other miscellaneous errata have entered in, a great many no doubt at the publication level: thus one should read in vol I: *dmm* for *dmh* (I, page 223); *haqodeš* for *qodeš* (I, 226); read *veqore't* (Qal feminine singular participle) instead of the proposed 3<sup>rd</sup> person feminine Qal perfect *veqara't* (I, 229); read “deified ancestors” for “gods” (243) [see Ex 21:6; Gen 31:30, 34, 37]; read “Zebulun” for “Zebulon” (247); add “are” to precede “part of the prophetic stock-in-trade”; read “MT *yipreh*” for “MT *yipreH*” and “10:32-34” for “10:32-33” (263); read “fathers’ guilt” for “father’s guilt” (284); read *bera'oh* for *bero'ah* (387) - since *berit* is feminine it cannot be the subject of the sentence in the translation given (391); read “among” for “amont” (411); read “accommodating” for “accomodating” (413/416); read “land” for “lands” in the translation of Is 36:20 (463); read “2 Kgs 8:19-20” for “2 Kgs 8:9” (487). In volume II: read the very opposite of what is there, namely, “presupposes *tehillato* for *MT tehillato*” and also substitute *šrH* for *šrh* (213); read “since the tense is imperfect not jussive” for “since the tense is perfect not jussive” (223); read “44:5” for “45:5” (230). In vol III: read “66:22-23” for “16:22-23” (62); read “Niphal participle” for “Niphal active participle” and “MT” for “MTMT”(130); read “one has read” for “on has read” (156); read “a case of dittography” for “a case of reduplicated second and third radicals” (219); read “others” before “(Neh 5:1-5).” (224); correct the translation of Is 64: 5 to “our iniquity bear us off” and add “O YHVH” to the translation of 64:5 (253); and under footnote cc, correct to “MT *veaatta*” (256); and finally, correct “56:8” to 56:18” (311).

The fourth book, Blenkinsopp’s monograph, *Opening the Sealed Book*, takes its cue from Is 29:11-12: “The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed book. When they hand it to one who knows how to read, saying, ‘Read this please,’ he replies, ‘I can’t, for it is sealed.’ When the book is handed to one who can’t read, with the request, ‘Read this please,’ he replies, ‘I don’t know how to read.’” Blenkinsopp sees in these two verses a commentary on the metaphorical blindness and spiritual stupor that confronted Isaiah’s preaching in his day. The sealing of a book had the purpose of providing irrefutable proof of its authenticity. Such a book could then one day later be unsealed, with its true meaning unfolded for those capable of hearing and understanding it. Blenkinsopp holds that

this unsealing, believed to have begun in the book of Daniel, continued unabated in the sectarian writings of Qumran, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and on into the NT.

In the eight chapters of this monograph Blenkinsopp details this unsealing along three interpretive trajectories, started in the Book of Isaiah itself: 1) Isaiah as a classical prophet; 2) Isaiah as an apocalyptic seer; and 2) Isaiah as a man of God who counsels, intercedes, chides, heals, and works miracles. The trajectory which receives most attention is the second one, which connects the inchoate apocalyptic eschatology of the book of Isaiah with Daniel, the Qumran sects, and early Christianity.

Of the eight chapters given pastors might be most interested in the last four: “Reading Isaiah in Early Christianity, with Special Reference to Matthew’s Gospel,” “Isaianic Titles in Qumran and Early Christianity” (The Many, the Way, the Righteous, the Elect, the Servants of the Lord, the Saints, the Poor, the Penitents, the Mourners, and the Devout), “Exile in the Interpretation of Isaiah,” and “The Many Faces of the Servant of the Lord.” The material presented in this monograph originally grew out of the work for the three AB books. To have incorporated all or even part of this material within the three Isaiah commentaries would have affected both their length and purpose.

In all four books Blenkinsopp’s vocabulary, while impressive, is at the same time something of a pedantic irritation. In reading him, get out your dictionary if you do not know the meaning of all the following words and expressions: In Is 1-39: protreptic, *oratio recta*, latifundia, insouciance, agglutinated, *relecture*, vituperated, *peripateia*, scholium, epigone, topos, de rigueur, autochthonous, etiolated, preternatural, hebetude, inspissation, peremptory, atavistic, *recitatif*, putatively, epigone, auto-da-fê, chthonic, jejune, keening, *setuma*, incubus, inconcinities, aporias, scrivener, parricidal, *de trop*, braggadocio, and *captatio benevolentiae*. In Is 40-55: diptych, apostrophe, ascriptive, theologoumenon, combination, hypocorism, oneiromancy, hepatoscopy, lecanomancy, extispicy, sobriquet, and panegyric. In Is 56-66: opprobrious, contumely, catafalque, theriomorphic, *improperium*, exogamous, encratic, ineluctability, and *Schadenfreude*. And in *Opening the Sealed Book: interpretandum, vaticinium ex eventu, Prophetenschweigen, arrière-plan, and sous-genre*.