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The struggle to understand Isaiah as Christian scripture

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Another irritation in all four books is not Blenkinsopp's fault: it is the cost-efficient printing of the Hebrew and Greek letters in transliteration. To illustrate the typical class reaction of professor and students to this practice, we at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, are pleased to paraphrase Is 29:11-12 itself: "When they hand it to one who knows how to read Hebrew or Greek, saying, 'Read this please,' s/he replies, 'I can't, for it is transliterated.' When the book is handed to one who can't read, with the request, 'Read this please,' s/he replies, 'I don't know how to read Hebrew, Greek, or transliteration.'"

Joseph Blenkinsopp is Professor emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of Notre Dame. In addition to numerous articles in a variety of journals and Festschriften, he is the author of a great many other earlier noteworthy books, such as *Prophecy and Canon* (1977); *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (1988); *Ezekiel* (1990); *The Pentateuch* (1992); *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament* (1995); *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (1995); and *A History of Prophecy* (1996).

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The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture

Brevard S. Childs

Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

332 pages, \$35.00 USD Hardcover

The purpose of this book is to trace through the centuries the different ways in which representative Christian theologians have struggled to understand the book of Isaiah as Christian Scripture. Following the opening chapter regarding the early reception of the Hebrew Bible in the Septuagint and the New Testament, the sixteen chapters that follow deal with the interpretative methodologies of such Christian notables as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret of Cyrus, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Martin

Luther, John Calvin, selected 17th and 18th century interpreters (Grotius, Calov, Cocceius, Vitranga, Lowth, and Calmet), selected 19th and 20th century interpreters (Alexander, Knabenbauer, von Hofmann,, Delitzsch, Cheyne, Davidson, Driver, Skinner, and Smith), and postmodern interpretation, as epitomized by Walter Brueggemann.

This study continues the tradition begun by Childs in his *Old Testament Library* commentary on Exodus (*The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* [1974]) and his OT Introduction (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [1979]). In his Exodus commentary Childs not only provided textual, literary, tradition-historical analysis, and verse by verse interpretation, but unlike most commentaries he added a brief but discerning history of the exegesis and post-biblical use of the Exodus pericopes. In his broader OT Introduction he spoke passionately about reclaiming the OT/Hebrew Bible as a vital half of the scriptural canon of the church. All too often the OT had seemed to have become a humanist plaything of the academy.

By the author's own admission it became a personal struggle for him to write and research the struggle over the ages to interpret Isaiah. The reason was simple: not every past theologian left a commentary on Isaiah for the author to assess. Moreover, some of the extant remains of older Isaianic commentary are today judged to be of doubtful authenticity (such as some of the work of Basil the Great of Caesarea). Also what does exist as legitimate stands surrounded by much scholarly debate and uncertainty. Added to all this is the fact that the span and scope of potential interpretive candidates was simply overwhelming. This must be one of the reasons, whether we like it or not, that a great many worthy ancients (such as Tertullian, Augustine, Zwingli) and some not so ancient individuals (Döderlein, Duhm, Procksch, Mowinckel, Eichrodt) get completely ignored in the overall assessment as well as almost all significant and/or representative moderns (such as Muilenburg, North, Westermann, Wildberger, Beuken, Steck, Vermeylen, Croatto, Seitz, Lau, Melugin, Conrad, Williamson, Sweeney, and Blenkinsopp). Of those who get treated, some get very short shrift (Clement, Chrysostom), while others longer treatment, perhaps for some not long enough, in view of their range of publications (Luther, Calvin, Aquinas).

The closing chapter of the book furthers Childs's well-known "canonical" agenda. Here Childs states the seven features he has gathered out of his survey of two millennia of Isaianic interpretation as characterizing a "family resemblance" within his chosen list: (1) the authority of Scripture; (2) literal and spiritual senses; (3) the church's Scripture as constituting two Testaments; (4) divine and human authorship; (5) christological content; (6) the dialectical nature of history; and (7) the importance of the final, canonical text. One wonders critically whether the inclusion of a much broader slate of modern Christian scholars (including narrative critics, reader-response critics, poststructuralists, feminists, and liberationist interpreters) would have yielded such a uniform outcome of features. The "family resemblance" seems quite at home in historic and traditional Calvinism with its emphasis on *tota scriptura*. Lutheranism, on the other hand, has traditionally always been more interested in the heart and thrust (Gospel) of the Scriptures than the letter. Luther did speak of *sola scriptura*, but never apart from *sola gratia* and *sola Christi*. For obvious reasons, Childs seems to prefer Calvin over Luther in his exposition of the two Reformation heavyweights. In his presentation on Martin Luther, Childs unfortunately missed an opportunity to note that Luther/Lutheranism actually founded its all-important Law/Gospel dialectic on a passage in Isaiah, Is 28: 21 (see Tappert 189.51; 207.158; 479.10; 560.11).

I believe Childs's treatment of Walter Brueggemann as the postmodern "bad guy" is a bit misguided. Brueggemann is a committed Christian in the same Calvinist/Reformed tradition yet he rightly holds that the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is not a Christian document in and of itself. Christian interpretation comes to the ancient text after the fact just as Judaism reads its own *raison d'être* into the same Hebrew text via the Mishna and Talmud. While postmodern interpretation is not of one camp and has often applied what I would call Heisenberg's "principle of indeterminacy" to its interpretation of Scripture, and yes, much postmodern interpretation of Scripture today is more about a struggle for power than about servanthood and submission to God, there is nonetheless truth in Brueggemann's claim that the Hebrew Scriptures are neutral and open to different interpretations by both Christians and Jews. If Christians use the fact of the Incarnation and the NT witness to get where they are, Jews use their rabbinic tradition encoded in the

Mishna and Talmud. To read the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible today from the light of Christ, however, cannot simply mean repeating and repristinating the methodologies and assumptions of the Christian past. Even Childs must resort repeatedly in his analysis in this book (and in his other books) to what he calls “the ontological” factor, that is, seeking out the similarity of “substance” rather than the letter of the Hebrew text to validate Christian fulfillment of ancient scriptural promises.

For Childs, who values so highly the canon of the sacred writings of the church, it is strange that 99% of the time the noun “Scripture” in this book is never capitalized! More precision might also have been made in transliterating the Hebrew (both *almah* and *mishpat* are incorrect). Two sentences are also in need of slight correction: “none of the gods of the nations *has* delivered them” (120) and “and *this* concern is much in evidence” (192).

On the whole, the book of Isaiah turns out to be a good choice for such a helpful survey. A great many of the crucial and exegetical problems over time surrounding the relationship of the Old Testament to the New and to Christianity find good focus in Isaiah, as many former exegetes themselves added Isaiah as a Fifth Gospel to the NT. Likewise, in a study of this nature concentration on a single book excuses the author from needless repetition and inconsequential generalities. Another of the great strengths of the book is how it offers pointed direction for further personal research and reflection, as each chapter, including the Preface, contains its own current specific bibliography of primary and secondary resources. One cannot read the individual chapters without coming away with a grasp and evaluation of the latest findings, key articles and books, and top scholars involved. For quick reference, there are also helpful indices of authors and subjects at the end of the book.

Prior to his death in 2007, Brevard S. Childs was professor emeritus at the Yale Divinity School. In addition to a recent commentary on Isaiah 1-66 (*Isaiah. A Commentary* [OTL; London: SCM — Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster, 2000]), Childs published a number of other books heralding the Old Testament as the Scripture within the Christian confession: *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970); *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (1974); *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979); *The New Testament as Canon* (1984); *Old Testament Theology in a*