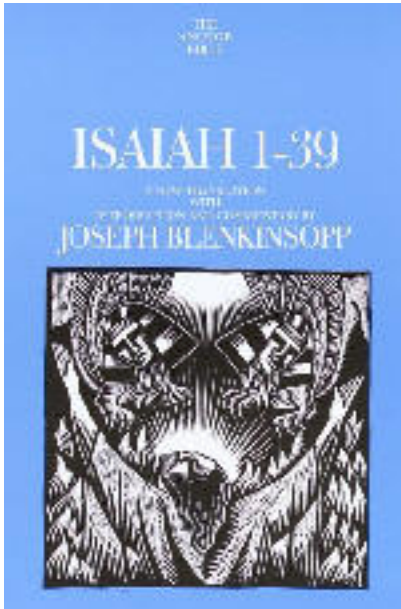


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**Blenkinsopp, Joseph**

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

Anchor Bible 19a

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Joseph Blenkinsopp's commentary on Isa 1–39 is something of a surprise for readers of the Anchor Bible, since it is succinct, judicious, and accessible. There is hardly a word out of place; Blenkinsopp always writes pleasingly and sometimes brilliantly, with a delicious sense of humor. He does not lose the wood for the trees; I came away from this volume with a sense of how Isa 1–39 is constructed, how it works as literature, and what its major themes and ultimate value actually are. That is an extraordinary achievement, as anyone who has worked with Isaiah will appreciate.

Blenkinsopp remarks at the outset that “writing a commentary on Isa 1–39 in the middle of a paradigm shift has not been easy” (73). The shift has been from a received wisdom that divided Isaiah into three self-sufficient parts and saw its task as the recovery of its redactional history to one that regards the whole book as a Second Temple composition, in which the search for an original nucleus is futile. Blenkinsopp carefully adopts both points of view; he sees “no reason to disallow a significant eighth century B.C.E. Isaianic substratum” (74), and he is very interested in how successive generations have shaped the book, which he sees as a literary construct analogous to the Book of the Twelve. He is aided by a critical awareness of our limits; repeatedly, he informs us of the variety of dates proffered for a passage and the of circularity of evidence for each attribution.

Blenkinsopp has a fine sense for the literary qualities of Isaiah. He tells us that these have been neglected in recent scholarship in favor of macrostructural issues; he often points out alliterations, wordplays, parodies, and the complex embedding of metaphor within metaphor. For example, he suggests, citing Ibn Ezra (a favorite resource), that *hōy* in *hōy gōy ḥōṭē*, “Woe, sinful people,” in 1:4 is there principally for the alliterative and staccato effect it produces (182). He is always informative, imparting background without being overwhelming. There is rarely a sentence that does not contribute substantially to the reader’s insight and knowledge. His summary of scholarship on the Helel ben Shahar passage in 14–15 and its mythological context (288), for instance, is both concise and suggestive.

On the basis of his attentive reading of individual passages Blenkinsopp develops persistent themes and preoccupations in the book, from which it derives its permanent value. The most important of these is the critique of empire and human pretensions. “One of the most consistent features of Isaiah is the refusal to accept any institutions, political or religious, with absolute and unconditional seriousness” (280). Second, Blenkinsopp stresses Isaiah’s ecological sensitivity and its contemporary relevance (e.g., 191, 261–62), in contrast to Assyrian pride in their destructiveness. But he also traces the transformation of these themes and motifs in the book. For instance, the figure of the archantagonist is transposed from Assyria to Babylon to Edom (e.g., 451), though each persists, if only as a symbolic cipher. Another example includes ethical terms such as *ṣēdāqā* and *mišpāt*, which, in the compositional history of the book, tended to lose their precise human significance and to connote divine salvation. This corresponds to the historical trajectory from the political traumas and exigencies of the eighth century to the sectarian struggles and apocalyptic expectations of the third, to which Blenkinsopp tentatively assigns the final stages of composition (86).

Another very valuable contribution of the commentary is its integration of early Christian and Jewish interpretation. Blenkinsopp shows the continuities between these exegetical traditions and the compositional history of the book, which developed through reflection on and reapplication of earlier materials. In other words, he is as interested in how later religious movements and contentions were produced by the text as in how they exploited it.

Blenkinsopp is pessimistic about his prospects for satisfying either traditional or radical scholars of Isaiah (74), but in fact his is an irenic approach, in part because he is sensible in stressing the limits of our knowledge. It is not a highly controversial commentary. He does, however, reject the view, propounded by Steck, that Isa 35 was composed as a bridge between First and Second Isaiah; instead, he attributes it, together with its complement, Isa 34, to the very last stages of composition and to the intellectual and

lexical milieu of Third Isaiah. Concomitantly, he regards Isa 32–33 as a matching diptych, with Sweeney and Beuken, but contrary to many scholars, for whom Isa 33 is a supplement.

A commentary of this nature and size has its limitations, and it would not be right to criticize Blenkinsopp for what he was not attempting. I do have some questions and issues, though. The first is the nature of the discourse. Blenkinsopp eschews the term “poetry” to characterize most of Isaiah (with notable exceptions, however, such as Isa 13–14), preferring “recitative.” By this he means a high rhetorical style, often marked by parallelism but lacking metrical consistency. This seems to me to limit the term “poetry” to what can formally be described as verse, a very contentious issue in biblical studies. If, however, by poetry we mean a certain orientation toward verbal art and density of language, then Isaiah could be considered intensely poetic.

Second, Blenkinsopp is often, and understandably, repulsed by what he reads. Much of Isaiah is violent, ethnocentric, and crude. However, for Blenkinsopp this repulsiveness is an aesthetic and ethical criterion for judging the quality of the texts in question. He writes of 25:10–11: “we can only record with dismay the grotesque and deeply offensive image of a man being deliberately drowned in a cesspool and pushed back into it while trying to avoid an extremely ugly death” (364). I do not, however, think it enough to say that it is offensive and indeed pornographic, for violence is a very important aspect of the Isaianic, and human, imagination and experience. Excremental fantasy is repeated in the book (e.g., 4:4, 28:8) and needs to be examined in its total symbolic context. To judge the book ethically, especially given its orientation to ethics, is an urgent task. It does, however, necessitate very close reading.

These two issues give rise to a third. The poetry of Isaiah is not only complex and frequently violent, but it is also baffling and paradoxical, as in the commissioning scene in 6.9–10. Blenkinsopp is sometimes too clear, too sane, in his readings. He rarely, for instance, takes account of the ambiguity of many passages. One of the most important contributions to Isaianic scholarship in recent years, in my view, is that of Robert Carroll, especially his article “Blindsight and the Vision Thing: Blindness and Insight in the Book of Isaiah” (in Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* vol. 1 [Brill: Leiden, 1997], 79–93). Carroll argues that to understand (or apperceive) Isaiah one must have a visionary imagination, akin to that of the book, which he compares repeatedly to the work of William Blake. Blenkinsopp mentions Carroll’s article but has not, I think, taken it fully into account. The poet, as Heidegger says, brings the “unsayable” into language.

As one might expect, in a book of this size there is the occasional editorial infelicity. Twice we hear that Isa 63:1–6 caused Franz Delitzsch to give up on the Old Testament (364, 452). An important omission from the bibliography is the work of Peter Miscall. On the whole, however, this is a superb contribution to the burgeoning field of Isaiah studies.