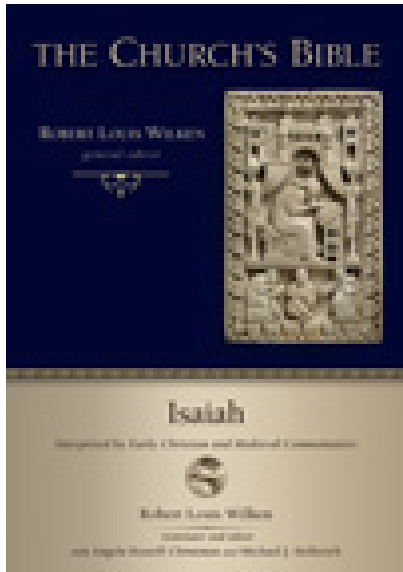


RBL 03/2008



Wilken, Robert Louis, trans. and ed.; with Angela Russell Christman and Michael J. Hollerich

Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators

The Church's Bible

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. 618. Cloth. \$45.00. ISBN 0802825818.

J. David Cassel
Hanover College
Hanover, Indiana

The book of Isaiah was a particular favorite of early Christian authors. In its prophecies and images they saw frequent references to the coming Messiah, and they were absolutely convinced that these prophecies were unmistakably fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. The New Testament authors recounted the story of Jesus using Isaiah as one of their primary interpretive lenses. In fact, as John Sawyer has pointed out, the early Christians saw Isaiah more as an evangelist than a prophet, and the book of Isaiah assumed a role in the preaching and teaching of the early church that was parallel to that of the New Testament Gospels (*The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* [Cambridge, 1996], 1). Augustine's *Confessions* also demonstrate the emphasis the early church placed on the book of Isaiah. Shortly after his conversion, Augustine sought guidance from Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, and asked what he should read in order to be made "readier and fitter to receive so great a grace" (*Conf.* 9.5). Augustine says that Ambrose encouraged him to read the book of Isaiah, "because more clearly than others he foretold the Gospel" (*Conf.* 9.5).

Because of the priority placed on the book of Isaiah, it became the subject of a large number of early commentaries and was quoted frequently in early Christian apologetic texts. Among those who wrote commentaries on Isaiah are Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 393–ca. 460), Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340), Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), Jerome (ca.

345–420), John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), and Hesychius of Jerusalem (fifth century). Unfortunately, none of these commentaries has been translated into English, and much of the rich insight they provide has been inaccessible to the general public. For this reason, the Isaiah text in *The Church's Bible* series published by Eerdmans provides a much-needed point of access to the highlights of the interpretation of Isaiah by early Christian and medieval commentators.

This volume offers brief introductions to early Christian interpretation of the Old Testament and to Isaiah in particular, then proceeds seriatim through the text of Isaiah. Each section focuses on one chapter of Isaiah and begins with Moisés Silva's translation of that chapter from the New English Translation of the Septuagint. The text then includes a series of translations of extended portions of the most important and interesting early Christian and medieval interpretive comments made about the chapter under consideration. In addition to these translations, the volume includes two very helpful appendices. The first appendix provides short biographical sketches of each of the fifty-seven or so authors whose work has been included in the volume; the second gives bibliographic information pointing to the exact location where each of the translated sections can be found in its original language. The volume concludes with thorough indices of names, subjects, and scriptural references found within the text.

Four elements of this volume stand out and make it an exceptionally valuable contribution both to scholars and to the reading public: (1) the inclusion of the Septuagint translation; (2) the breadth of the sources included in the text; (3) the extensive length of the portions of interpretive material included; and (4) the clear and readable style of the translations.

The editorial decision to include the Septuagint translation of each chapter of Isaiah is a crucial, positive aspect of this volume. Many of the ancient commentators were reading and interpreting this Greek text, and some of their comments make little or no sense without an understanding of the peculiarities of the translation upon which they were commenting. Since the Septuagint text is included, however, the reader is able to follow each interpreter's train of thought in relation to the text he was addressing without difficulty.

Since there are so many references to Isaiah in the early church and during the medieval period, it is hard to be conversant with all of them. Wilken and his co-translators Angela Christmas and Michael Hollerich, however, have done a remarkable job of amassing a vast variety of sources and sifting through an astounding number of interpretive comments in order to find, translate, and include the most cogent and helpful perspectives of the ancient commentators. The extent of the work of this translation team can be seen by comparing what is included in this volume with what Johanna Manley

included in *Isaiah through the Ages* (Monastery Books, 1995). In that volume's discussion of the first chapter of Isaiah, Manley offers translations of excerpts from the commentaries of just two ancient authors (5–20), while this translation team offers excerpts from thirteen different authors' comments on Isa 1 (17–29). One of the most difficult aspects of reading a compilation of excerpts from various sources regarding a common text is trying to understand the context in which each author is operating. Wilken, Christman, and Hollerich have done an excellent job of addressing this issue by including excerpts that are of sufficient length to provide internal context for the comments being made by each author. For example, in reference to Isa 43, this volume has almost six pages of comments from Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on Isaiah. This extensive quotation allows the reader both to see the richness of the ancient commentator's interpretive wisdom and to understand the internal logic of his approach to the text.

Perhaps the most outstanding element of this volume is the skill that is evident in the translations. These texts in their original languages are sometimes obscure and difficult. Lionel Wickham, for example, suggests that Cyril of Alexandria's literary style was "distinctive in its abundance of rare words, archaizing form and regularly repeated epithets" and has "all the studied ugliness of the Albert Memorial or Second Empire furniture" (*Cyril of Alexandria: Selected Letters* [Oxford, 1983], xiv). In spite of the obstacles the members of the translation team faced, they did a remarkable job of capturing the essence of the ancient texts in clear, unadorned English prose.

In short, this volume is an outstanding addition to the field of Isaiah studies and can be useful for both scholars and lay readers alike.