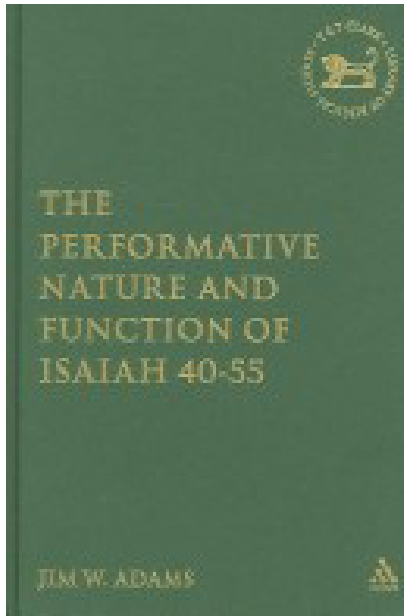


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Adams, Jim W.

The Performative Nature and Function of Isaiah 40–55

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Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer
University of Aberdeen
Aberdeen, United Kingdom

This interesting and challenging book, a revised version of the author's doctoral thesis from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2004, explores the uses of speech-act theory for interpreting Isa 40–55. The book falls into four main parts, with the addition of an introduction and a conclusion. In his introduction, Adams introduces the reader to speech-act theory and, more specifically, to illocutions: utterances that *count as* doing. In order to familiarize the reader with this concept, Adams discusses several common English illocutions. The utterance “I do” in the marriage ceremony is a good example, as the actual *utterance* of these words *performs* an action. In other words, rather than describing the marriage, the words bring the marriage into being. Expressed more technically, certain utterances include a so-called illocutionary force that personally involves a speaker and/or a hearer in extralinguistic actions. Adams further advocates the use of speech-act theory as an exegetical tool. In his view, if used critically and carefully and in conjunction with other exegetical tools, speech-act theory can refine the interpretive process. In particular, it can identify performative utterances or strong illocutionary acts in a text.

Adams further outlines his approach to Isa 40–55, a text that he has chosen owing to its visionary character, as well as its varied images, identities, and voices. Throughout his

study, Adams restricts his investigation to the final version of the text. Although he is well aware of the various theories pertaining to the historical development of the Isaianic text in general and of Isa 40–55 in particular, he consciously chooses to interact with the final version and all its accompanying ambiguities and contradictions. In Adams’s own words, “reading the final form of the text allows one to embrace these tensions and consider them intentional” (213). Adams is equally open to the possibly changing geographical setting of Isa 40–55. Even though he leans toward exilic authorship, he is aware of the possibility of a Judahite setting of at least parts of the texts. In his view, Isa 40–55 addresses concerns relevant to both the exilic and the Judahite communities.

The first chapter deals with the basic notions of speech-act theory. Adams provides a concise and easily accessible introduction to the theory. He covers key theorists such as J. J. Austin and J. R. Searle, as well as the contributions of more recent scholars. His discussion is centered on the distinction between illocutionary acts (a type of utterance that counts as doing something) and perlocutionary effects (the effect that a certain statement may have on its audience). He further offers succinct summaries of the works of D. D. Evans, A. C. Thiselton, and R. S. Briggs on speech-act theory and the notion of self-involvement, that is, the stance that the speaker adopts toward a particular state of affairs. In his view, these three scholars provide a sound framework for understanding the hermeneutical significance of speech-act theory for biblical research. Adams finally declares his own standpoint: he endorses, with certain reservations, the ideas of illocutions operating along a spectrum of strengths, with the constative and performative lying at each end.

The second chapter discusses the few scholarly works that have applied speech-act theory on biblical texts. He discusses briefly the relevant works of, among others, N. Lohfink (Deut 26–29), A. Wagner (e.g., Gen 1:29; Deut 26:17–19; Ps 2:7), T. Mettinger (e.g., 1 Sam 10:24; 1 Kgs 1:35; Isa 42:1), D. Patrick (e.g., Exod 3–4), R. P. Carroll (prophetic speech in general), W. Houston (prophetic judgment speeches), and T. Polk (the prophet as depicted in the biblical text). While these scholars’ works have furthered the use of speech-act theory in biblical research, Adams notes that (too) much of this research has been limited to applications of Austin’s theory. As a result, the differentiation between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects has often been blurred. In particular, many studies have focused on the perlocutionary effects of certain statements, that is, their persuasive aspects, rather than focusing on the actual illocutionary acts. As a result, these studies have not done full justice to the uses of speech-act theory. Furthermore, Adams observes that several past studies have merely outlined the potential of speech-act theory for biblical studies rather than exploring its usefulness for biblical exegesis in any greater detail. Given this state of affairs, Adams sets out to define in what ways speech-act theory can and should be used. In his view, speech-act theory can enhance the interpretation of a

given passage, but it is a tool to be used with discretion. In the fourth chapter of his book, Adams further demonstrates its immediate use for interpreting specific texts within Isa 40–55.

Adams outlines his own proposal in the third chapter. He suggests reading Isa 40–55 as a call to return to YHWH. This call runs through all the chapters, directed both to Jacob-Israel (Isa 40–48) and to Zion-Jerusalem (Isa 49–55). At present, YHWH's people are self-inflicted with blindness and deafness, caused by their own idolatry. Returning to YHWH can be done by forsaking sin, acknowledging and confessing YHWH as God alone, and embracing the role of his servant.

Adams further suggests that the text invites the audience/readers to take a stand for YHWH and to witness to themselves about YHWH's sovereign power. Those who confess YHWH and thus accept the role of his servant will become his people. They will thus form a confessional community realized by their personal confession. In more technical speech-act language, Adams suggests that one of the unique features of many texts in Isa 40–55 is that YHWH and the audience/readers utter the same illocution whereby they place themselves under particular obligations to fulfill that utterance. In other words, by uttering the illocution the audience/readers *constitutes* YHWH's illocution.

This chapter also contains a discussion of the so-called Servant Songs. Although they are clearly distinct in content from the surrounding texts, Adams points out that their poetic style resembles that of the rest of Isa 40–55 and that they do not display a separate, unique genre. It is therefore optimal to read them as part of their present literary context.

The fourth and final chapter deals with four key texts (Isa 41:21–29; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). In each case Adams demonstrates the use of speech-act theory as an exegetical tool. Adams begins his discussion of the given text with a translation, followed by detailed and extensive textual notes. He then outlines the structure of the text and discusses its genre and overall interpretation. After this he goes through the text verse by verse, thereby demonstrating how a careful use of speech-act theory enhances and deepens our understanding of the text.

To illustrate Adams's exegetical method, let us look at a few representative examples. In the case of Isa 41:21–29, Adams argues that the interpretation of verses 22b–23a benefits from the insights of speech-act theory. This text is normally understood as a matter of prediction: the people's utterances predict what will happen. In contrast, Adams argues that what is really taking place is a declaration and, through that declaration, an *actualization* of the future. By declaring a future event, a transformation is brought about.

Adams further argues that the rhetorical questions in 41:26 about the Cyrus event are best understood as self-involving: they involve the audience directly, if they are addressed, or they create tension that then requires resolution. Through these types of questions, the speaker asserts something. The hearer, in turn, responds, either through self-involvement or by offering a contrasting assertion. The desired effects of these questions are thus to bring about, confessionally, assent to the implied biased assertion. The same type of language is also used frequently in Isa 52:13–53:12 to demonstrate that the audience identify themselves with and/or as the Suffering Servant.

In the case of Isa 52:13–53:12, Adams argues that speech act theory sheds light upon the identification of Servant's sacrificial death as an **קָטַף** (53:10–11aa). He accepts Milgrom's (*Cult and Conscience*) theory that a verbal confession reduces intentional sins to one committed by mistake, thereby rendering it eligible for sacrificial expiation. In view of this, Adams suggests that, as the sacrifice of the servant cannot be completed unless accompanied by a confessional component, the preceding Isa 53:1–11aa constitutes that confession. Further, while the servant's death as **קָטַף** is the provision of forgiveness, the accompanied speech act of confession transforms the speaker as forgiven. In other words, though the self-involved confession of sin, a speaker separates himself or herself from sinful acts and receives forgiveness of that sin.

In conclusion, this is a clearly written and well-structured monograph that can be highly recommended. It illustrates well that speech-act theory can be used successfully as a complementary exegetical tool. Furthermore, Adams's reading of the selected four passages in Isa 40–55 through the eyes of speech-act theory offers a fresh view of the text. Adams's book is also an easily accessible introduction to speech-act theory and its various applications for a better understanding of the biblical text.