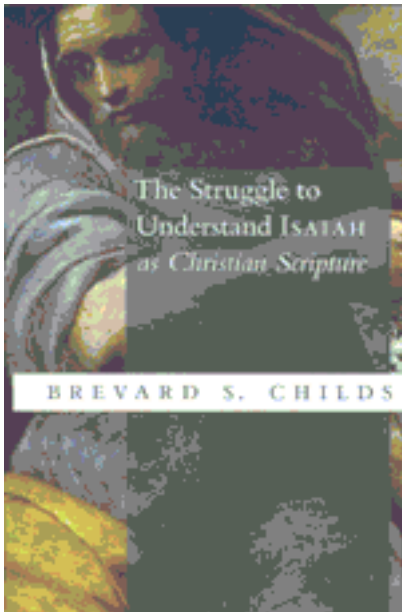


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**Childs, Brevard S.**

***The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture***

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Following his 2001 commentary on the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament Library series, Childs has now placed us further in his debt with this absorbing survey of and reflection on the history of the book's interpretation within the Christian church. Whereas the earlier work of J. F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), was a genuine reception-historical study, so that it drew on a wide range of sources both profound and ephemeral, Childs avowedly restricts his focus to those who have sought to work with the book as part of the church's canonical scripture, and that means above all commentaries.

Of the book's eighteen chapters, thirteen are devoted to individual commentators or other writers, from Justin Martyr to Calvin. Indeed, half the book is taken up with the patristic period alone before we jump from Theodoret of Cyrus, who died in 460, to the great medieval scholar, Thomas Aquinas, and thence via Nicholas of Lyra to the reformers Luther and Calvin. Thereafter, Childs moves more briskly through a selection of commentators of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Grotius, Calov, Cocceius, Vitringa, Lowth, and Calmet) in chapter 16, then nineteenth and twentieth centuries (with George Adam Smith's commentary of 1888–90 as the most recent) in chapter 17, before finally glancing at some postmodern interpreters (principally R. Rendtorff and

W. Brueggemann). As “bookends,” the first chapter treats the Septuagint and the New Testament’s use of Isaiah (the former not strictly Christian, of course, but reasonably included because of its pervasive influence), and the last chapter reflects more discursively on the “family resemblances” between all these interpreters under such headings as the authority of Scripture, its literal and spiritual senses, its form as two Testaments, and so on.

The breathtaking range of Childs’s vision is such that no one will read this book without learning much and having preconceived notions challenged. In the patristic period, for instance, he demonstrates how the usual characterization of the distinction between the Alexandrian (allegorical) and Antiochene (historical) schools is far too simplistic; in the eighteenth century it will surprise some to find a major effort at the rehabilitation of Calmet’s reputation, and so on. As Childs admits, there may be many scholars who are more deeply acquainted with one or another of the individual commentators treated here, but it would be surprising if anyone else writing today were in a position to encompass the whole so authoritatively. And just to underline the point still further, not the least useful aspect of the book is the bibliography that follows each chapter, providing full details both of the primary sources and in a separate section of the major secondary discussions.

Almost inevitably there will be some names that surprise by their inclusion or, more probably, by their omission. Among the latter, I note especially that no attention is given to the great rabbinic commentators (they are just mentioned in passing a couple of times). Of course, Childs will respond that they have no place in a history of Christian interpretation. But in that sense, neither does the Septuagint. Their influence on Christian interpretation was far more extensive than is generally realized, however, for while the Reformers were busy polemicizing against the Jews on the one hand, they were on the other more or less dependent upon them for their knowledge of Hebrew and for the interpretation of textually obscure passages (as witness eventually the Authorized or King James Version). The situation was no different in this regard from Jerome a millennium before; his dependence upon Jewish informants is well acknowledged, but that did not prevent him from anti-Jewish polemic either! In fact, Christian debt to these scholars may well have gone beyond the philological, for there is at least something of a family resemblance between Christian concern for the literal and spiritual senses of scripture and the rabbinic distinctions between *peshat* and *derash*.

Another gap which I regret is any attention Hugh of St. Victor and his school (there are just a couple of passing mentions), which might have helped bridge the gap from the patristic to the medieval periods. Indeed, we would hardly realize in this long story that for much of its history the Christian church had no knowledge of Hebrew, and some

reflection on the hermeneutical consequences of the choice of language in which the Bible was studied would have been welcome.

Finally, the modern period is dealt with scantily, but this will surprise only those who fail to appreciate Childs's purpose. The great nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentaries that pass unmentioned (Dillmann, Duhm, Marti, Gray, Procksch, Westermann, and Wildberger, to name but a few), though written by professing Christians, do not struggle with the text as part of a two-Testament scripture but limit themselves to a severely historical exegesis. And although he does not say so, Childs is unlikely to set much store by the attempt to overcome this by tacking on a section entitled "Ziel" in the *Biblischer Kommentar* series.

Why that is so becomes plain from the whole drift of the discussion, in which it is not difficult to detect the commentators who come closest to Childs's own ideal. Of all the family resemblances which he detects, it is that which is characterized as the struggle to bring together the literal and the spiritual senses of scripture that commands most attention. The permutations here are many and subtle, and one senses an impatience with some older as well as more recent commentators who emphasize either at the expense of the other. Thus Jerome (initially to my surprise) does not come out too well, despite full credit for his philological learning ("too narrow a view of biblical history" [97], and he "never adequately resolved the problem of the relation between the two levels" [101]), whereas John Chrysostom the preacher "remains a model for every successive generation in rendering the scriptures faithfully and with inspired imagination" (108; but note that this should not be confused with the imagination of the postmodern Brueggemann, which comes in for severe censure toward the end of the book).

Judged on this basis, it is hard to escape the impression that Calvin is as near the pinnacle as any, though Luther's solution via a dialectic of letter and spirit, law and gospel, comes close insofar as it seeks to furnish a hermeneutical approach to both Testaments in a way that allows each its own integrity as a vital witness to Christian truth by holding the physical and the spiritual together in unity. Calvin, however, took this to the furthest limit. His humanistic training ensured that he would give proper scholarly attention to what would later become the concerns of the historical-critical method, but because he held that the text also reflected the intention of God himself, operative through the Spirit, the spiritual meaning derives directly from the literal as part of an organic whole, not by way of arbitrary allegory, as was often the case previously, nor by way of pious addition (as I suspect the *Biblischer Kommentar*'s "Ziel" might be characterized), but rather by using "his exegesis to provide an explicit link with Christian doctrine" (225). Herein lies the clue too to the rehabilitation of Calmet as well as the brief dismissal of Gesenius, Hitzig, and other such early historical-critical pioneers (265).

The question that all this raises for the contemporary scene—a question that Childs does not tackle directly, so far as I can see, but that has been put firmly on the agenda by the so-called “theological exegetes”—is whether any exegesis that is not confessionally Christian is automatically deficient. To address the issue personally (and it is difficult to know how else to do so), I approach the Old Testament as a professing Christian, and in preaching and some forms of my writing I too struggle with it as part of Christian scripture. In that guise, I recognize all too well the issues that Childs is raising, and I benefit from his insights into an appropriate hermeneutic. But does that mean that when I am asked to write in a narrowly academic context, addressing fellow scholars of a different faith or of none, my work is impoverished by working only at the level of the “literal” (to use Childs’s description)? There are times (though not so much in this book) when Childs has seemed to many to imply so. The alternative perspective, to which I want, at least, to adhere, is that such work is valid on its own terms, and although it does not express itself confessionally, it may nevertheless be of service to those who write in that vein (and indeed to myself when I do so separately). To use explicitly Christian theological language, it reflects an incarnational approach to scholarship, something that goes along the kind of line in Calvin of which Childs so evidently approves but that also moves beyond it by not wearing its doctrinal consequences on its sleeve. Such scholarship may not be all that is to be said of a text, but if unity of knowledge (including Christian knowledge) goes for anything, then it is as wrong to decry such work as inimical to Christian scripture as it would be to move off in the gnostic direction, so laudably opposed by Irenaeus early on in this long story (see ch. 3). As I have said, Childs does not address this issue directly, so for all we know he may heartily agree. But whether he does or not, we are deeply in his debt for raising such profound issues for reflection in our own day just as he has so brilliantly shown that they have accompanied the church in its struggles with scripture for nearly two millennia.