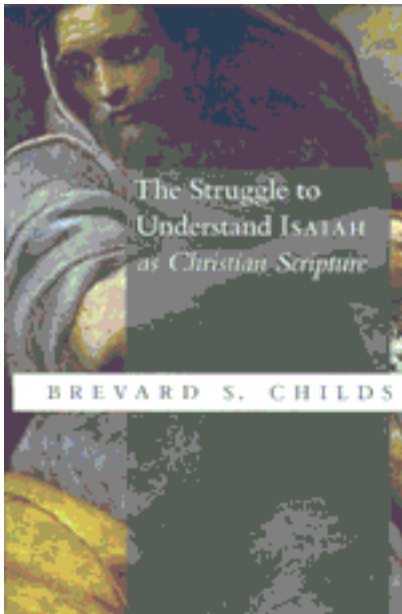


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Childs, Brevard S.

The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture

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Brevard Childs's study of the struggle to understand the book of Isaiah as Christian scripture presents us with an examination of various approaches to the interpretation of Isaiah from the second century C.E. down to the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is also a chapter on the treatment of Isaiah in the Septuagint and in the New Testament. The research by Childs shows that there has been great diversity among Christian interpreters of Isaiah. But is there at the same time some kind of unity? Or as Childs puts it, "Is there a 'family resemblance' that emerges from this analysis of many generations of Christian biblical study? Are there any parameters that identify exegesis as Christian?" (xi).

Before we turn to Childs's question as to whether there are certain parameters that might be considered "normative" for Christian interpretation of "Old Testament" books such as Isaiah, let us first explore Childs's analysis of the diversity of Christian interpretation. The apostolic witnesses in what is now called the "New Testament" exhibit considerable diversity in using Isaiah to speak in Christian terms; yet to employ Isaiah to explicate the gospel was for them a widespread practice. Justin Martyr, too, before there was a "New Testament" as such, assumed that the Jewish scriptures, together with the apostolic tradition, were authoritative as revelation.

By the time of Irenaeus, however, there was talk, not simply of apostolic tradition, but of a written New Testament consisting at the very least of four Gospels, Acts, and apostolic letters—to be joined with the Jewish scriptures as revelatory text. Moreover, Irenaeus appealed to a “rule of faith,” that is, a summary of the church’s story. And in reciting the story from creation through conquest, Irenaeus presented almost entirely a literal reading of the narrative. Only when he came to the prophets did he turn to clear *Christian* interpretation of God’s purposes. Yet as Irenaeus wrote further, he spoke typologically by contrasting the first Adam with the second, Eve with Mary, and the tree in the garden with the cross.

Lack of space prevents full rehearsal of Childs’s history of interpretation of Isaiah. I can only point superficially to his discussion of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Cyril of Alexandria to show how “literal” or “historical” or “plain” senses of what Christians commonly call “Old Testament” were supplemented in a spiritual way by interpretations sometimes called “allegorical.” Moreover, I do not have room to show in detail how Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome differed from the Alexandrian interpreters by understanding spiritual meanings as emerging from the more basic “historical” sense. Nor have I space to develop in detail Childs’s discussion as to how the Antiochene John Chrysostom considered allegory to be legitimate only when the language of the text itself indicated its presence—or how Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus understood the “spiritual” sense in terms of historical fulfillment of prophecy or in terms of typology.

Furthermore, Childs’s detailed discussion of Martin Luther’s letter-spirit/law-gospel duality cannot be fully explained here. Certainly for Luther, these dualities were not primarily to be located literarily in Old and New Testaments respectively but were instead different existential realities, both of which were present in both Testaments. Childs’s discussion of Calvin is also too complex for a sound byte-size presentation here. Thus I will mention primarily Calvin’s almost complete focus on the “plain” sense of scripture. Although the storyline of Christian scripture extends from creation at the beginning to eschatological consummation at the end, all of it was included in the “literal” sense of scripture. Literal sense for Calvin was not divided into “spiritual” and “carnal.” Indeed, “literal” included the spiritual (the work of the Spirit) and was not a separate level of meaning (see Calvin, e.g., on Isa 5:2; 19:1; 63:1). While there were indeed two covenants (old and new) with typology playing a significant role in the relation between the Testaments, there was no difference in substance between the two. There were only differences, Childs tells us, in the administration of the divine will, such as Old Testament promises expressed as earthly blessings, while the New Testament pictures blessings as heavenly.

It is abundantly clear that, at least through the sixteenth century, Childs sees a certain commonality (a “family resemblance”) in the great diversity of hermeneutical approaches to Christian interpretation of Isaiah (and, indeed, the Old Testament as a whole). First of all, the Old and New Testaments were both “universally” used throughout the church as Christian scripture (301). Only near the beginning of the Enlightenment and afterward did “new scientific knowledge . . . along with philosophical rationalism” lead to serious questioning of the “divine authority” of the Christian Bible (301). Furthermore, in the diversity of Christian interpretation Childs sees a “family resemblance” in widespread acceptance of a fundamental relationship between the two Testaments, commonly seen as involving both “literal” and “spiritual,” however differently these two were understood. Moreover, there was a broadly shared understanding of scripture as containing *two* Testaments, however differently the relationship between the two might be perceived. In addition, there was widespread belief in both Testaments as divine revelation and a broadly accepted understanding that both Testaments are related to God’s activity in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, I cannot rehearse here Childs’s fascinating discussion of various attempts to maintain an understanding of the Old Testament as Christian scripture during the Enlightenment and in the period immediately preceding. It is abundantly clear that Childs considers the Enlightenment’s assumptions about rationality and its reduction of meaning to a history of religions approach as a serious impediment to theological interpretation of the Bible. Although both history of religions and theological approaches are legitimate, the differences between their appropriate functions must be clearly understood.

Childs turns also to postmodern interpretation: “Working on the assumption that all literary interpretation is an activity involving an imaginative construction of the author in shaping a text, postmodernism denies that there is only one determinate sense of a text, but rather postulates meaning as an ongoing creation of the reader in dialogue with a given composition” (292). Here Childs focuses on Walter Brueggemann’s Isaiah commentary (*Isaiah 1–39, Isaiah 40–66* [Westminster John Knox, 1998]) as presuming, in a postmodern way, that there are unlimited possibilities of meaning in Isaiah, depending on the biases of its interpreters. Brueggemann rejects any claim that the book of Isaiah predicts or anticipates Jesus Christ. Such talk not only distorts Isaiah itself, according to Brueggemann, but is also disrespectful of Jewish readers (see page 6 of both volumes of Brueggemann’s commentary). Brueggemann often discusses citations in the New Testament, but he considers them to be imaginative construals that have read *Christian* interpretations back into the Isaiah of the Jewish scriptures. For Brueggemann, Childs says, “there is nothing besides Israel’s speech that undergirds the Hebrew scriptures” (Childs, 294; see Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* [Fortress, 1997], 723).

Near the end of his book, Childs argues vigorously against the proposals of Brueggemann and Rolf Rendtorff “that the church should hear the voice of the Hebrew Bible on its own, independent of the New Testament” (Childs, 306; see Brueggemann, *Theology*, 733ff.; Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology* [Fortress, 1993], 31–45). Even though in one sense Childs acknowledges that Brueggemann is quite accurate that the “rule of faith” widely appropriated in Christian interpretation is as much a construal as is Brueggemann’s own postmodern reading, nevertheless, says Childs, Brueggemann “mounts his case in the language of a secular, history-of-religions analysis” (Childs, 315). Yet, for Childs, “appeal to a rule of faith rests on a theological argument” (315), which functions quite differently from a history of religions approach.

The importance of Childs’s book should not be underestimated for those interested in usage of the Hebrew Bible as Christian scripture. Indeed, Childs’s study of the history of Christian interpretation of Isaiah allows him to make a strong case that, despite the diversity of Christian interpretation, there is a strong “family resemblance” among Christian interpreters in their seeing “Old Testament” books as theologically related to the New Testament in terms of a two-Testament witness to Jesus Christ. To be sure, the books in the Christian Old Testament were not written to speak explicitly of Jesus Christ, but such a history of religions understanding (accurate though it is) is quite different from the historic *theological* usage of a two-Testament canon in the Christian community. Since the fundamental connections between the Jewish scriptures and Jesus seem to be a part of the very earliest confessions in the church, I see no good reason to disagree that there is a *theological* importance for Christians to explore ways of interpreting the Old Testament in relationship with the testimony of the Christian canon.

I am somewhat perplexed, however, by Childs’s apparent categorical rejection of postmodern hermeneutics (290), on the one hand, and his partial embrace of Brueggemann’s use of it, on the other: “This postmodern hermeneutical hypothesis is not to be easily dismissed; indeed, it expresses much that is true” (316). While I understand that Childs says this in criticism of Brueggemann’s presumed failure to understand arguments in favor of a rule of faith, Childs nevertheless seems to exhibit a degree of appreciation for postmodern hermeneutics. In my thinking, New Testament rereadings of Israelite biblical texts involve creative readerly activity that is, in some respects at least, similar to common postmodern views of the role of readers in the construal of textual meaning. Furthermore, I would ask, what analogies might there be between talk of the role of the Spirit in (re)interpretation and usage of scripture, on the one hand, and, on the other, postmodern understandings of creativity on the part of readers in the interpretation and usage of texts?

Finally, though I understand the limited focus of both this volume and also of Childs's understanding of his 2001 commentary called *Isaiah* (Westminster John Knox) as a technical scholarly commentary, I think there is still need for a study of Isaiah as Christian scripture that focuses in more depth on the interpretation and usage of particular Isaianic texts in the existential realities of modern life and in the faithful shaping of Christian praxis.