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Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55

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with Peter Marinkovic

**Response to the reviews by Reinhard G. Kratz, *RBL* 5 (2003),
and Benjamin D. Sommer, *RBL* 4 (2002); *JBL* 123 (2004).**

1. Reinhard G. Kratz's criticism raises questions that require discussion, for they are related to fundamental questions about historical-critical research, the presuppositions and consequences of which call for debate. Here we can follow the accepted "canon" of exegetical methods. But what has meanwhile crystallized into this "canon" has behind it a complex and extensive history, and knowledge of this history can be of help when we attempt to discern the potentialities and limitations of the methods involved. Today's globalization in the field of scholarship too has brought new methods and challenges, and through these above all the recognitions and acquisitions of these "European traditions" can be helpful.

These traditions begin with textual criticism and the comparison of manuscripts and translations. Literary criticism became necessary at the time when Herder's interest in popular traditions lent the biblical texts new importance as documents of Jewish tradition. With the *Aufklärung*, the laity no longer allowed themselves to be pushed aside through the interpretative monopoly of "professional" theologians. Theologians are as a rule primarily interested in the legitimating function of the texts, whereas the so-called laity need their communicative function as a way of finding a language for their own experiences (see the Psalms especially). This interpretative monopoly on the part of the theologians appears in teachings about the sacred character of the texts (the doctrine of inspiration, etc.) and in the narrowing down of biblical exegesis through a preoccupation

with dogmatic themes. Contradictions and doublets, such as Goethe gathered together in his West-Östlichen Diwan (and he was only one among others) have to be explained. Literary criticism was a theory that was able to explain them. But the model was profoundly influenced by the picture of the “writing-desk” professor or scholar, so that literary criticism was concentrated essentially on questions of authorship. What received little attention up to then was research into scribal traditions and scribal composition techniques in the surrounding oriental world. Here the function of the texts must also be noted. The limitations of literary criticism as a way of explaining gaps and tensions in the texts became more and more obvious and was increasingly recognized, so that other methods had to be developed. That was the origin of form criticism and research into tradition history. Here Gunkel’s catchword about the *Sitz im Leben* was of the first importance. It originated in quite different sectors—in Gunkel’s research into the fairytales and sagas in the Hebrew Bible. Brilliant though this term was (it was taken over untranslated into other languages as well), it must nevertheless be developed further in the light of modern viewpoints and methods. Here *the function of the texts in the context of recurring public occasions* is important. At the same time, the definition of the genre also affects the understanding of reality in the texts. When a fairytale begins “Once upon a time,” the “understanding of reality” and the function in the texts become evident. A genre will hardly ever be found in pure form but will be a construct (the “ideal type”). In actual practice, what we have are continually mixed forms (“historically occurring examples” of the genre). All exegesis in all its methods has to do with previous understanding (*Vorverständnis*) and with probability-results, in the sense of a consistent tradition history, which includes ourselves and our own understanding. In all sectors of the methodology, a historical-critical interpretation can only be more or less probable.

On the Genre of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55)

The awareness that in Attic drama comedy and tragedy are strictly separated is of fundamental importance. If we accept Aristotle’s definition, Attic drama is an exception and not the norm. I learned this above all from Oliver Taplin (*The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* [Oxford: Clarendon 1977]; *Greek Tragedy in Action* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978]). Our classical education has accustomed us to take the Athenian understanding of drama as the point of departure. But in the Greek-speaking world, very different forms of drama were developed. Shakespeare later offers an example of the mixture of tragedy and comedy, and it was because of this mixture that his plays were not accounted “elevated literature” in French and German literary circles.

If it is asked why elements of tragedy are included in Deutero-Isaiah, we have to point to the recognition that in Deutero-Isaiah the “figure of Moses” is newly interpreted (with appeal to the pentateuchal tradition). Is Moses’ biography then not a tragedy (as is the

“biography of Jesus” as suffering servant of God)? He leads the people out of Egypt; he is the servant of God but is not permitted to enter the promised land. He dies beforehand. Remembrance of the dead belongs to drama, both in Egypt and in Greece. If in Deutero-Isaiah a whole series of scenes probably takes place in the underworld, it must be pointed out that the cult of Dionysus as god of the underworld also plays a part in remembrance of the dead.

It is obvious that there are elements of comedy in the presentation of Zion-Jerusalem and in the polemic against idols. We may compare the parodies in Aristophanes: in his plays we are continually astonished by the knowledge he presupposes in the audience. The wit in the comedy depends primarily on the ambiguity. We understand this only in part—with the help of scholiasts and historians. But the comedy knows its audience. It is in the highest degree didactic and topical, especially in what is said and in what is left unsaid. Our translations often soften the provocative element.

The role of word play in antiquity should also be noted. Martin Buber talks about “word seriousness” (*Worternst*) instead of “word play” (*Wortspiel*). There are word plays that depend for their effect on sound and that are thus designed for illiterate listeners. And there are “literary plays” that can only be understood by scribes, and that means the specialists, and thus the initiated. “Word plays” have a particular role in biblical prophecy, in wisdom texts, and in Egyptian writings, where the cult is interpreted with their help. In Egypt, too, especially in the dramatic texts, text and pictures are often linked (as in modern comics); see, for example, the sarcophagus texts (Book of the Dead literature, etc.).

In Greek drama as well there are hardly any stage directions. We owe most of them to the scholiasts and to modern editors. If there are only two or three actors, apart from the chorus, on the stage, it is easy enough to identify the speakers. This is probably also the case in Isa 40–55.

2. The criticism that Benjamin D. Sommer puts forward is very different in kind (see also the publication in *JBL* 123 [2004]:149–53). He has taken the trouble to read attentively and has carefully followed up the theses presented in the interpretation of Isa 40–55. It is strange, however, that he does not mention the starting point of my discovery, that Deutero-Isaiah is a kind of festival scroll for the speaker (comparable to the texts in Egypt). A feature of his criticism is that he mentions specific texts and describes my interpretation of Isa 40–55, even though he cannot share the conclusions. But a discussion with him would be profitable and worthwhile.

It is only surprising that he cannot go along with the starting point for the definition of Deutero-Isaiah as a liturgical drama, which is the heart of the argument. For it is this that explains the scenic structure and the attempt to separate the different scenes. Each of the individual acts has its own theme. It is only as a whole that this leads to the conclusion put forward in the commentary.

But in Mesopotamia in the “*akitu* festival” too there is a connection between the temple and its different functions, with processions (i.e., the public part of the festival) and a feast-day calendar. There is an interaction between myth and festival. This is true above all where the great epics are concerned: the Epic of Creation (*Enuma Elish*), Atrahasis, and Gilgamesh. From the Akkad and Sumerian era onward there was a constant shift between standardization–canonization–expansion and renewed standardization. Cities, even cities remote from one another, can have the same traditions but also different ones. The question about the Ur-text is therefore problematical (see also N. F. Marcos, “The Septuagint on Spanish Ground,” in *Im Brennpunkt: Die Septuaginta* [ed. Siegfried Kreuzer and Jürgen Peter Lesch; Studien zur Entstehung und Bedeutung der Griechischen Bibel 2; BWANT 161; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2004], 164–76).

The Gilgamesh Epic was first standardized and canonized in Syria rather than in Mesopotamia itself.

In the Persian period the Pentateuch became the Torah of Moses. Following the primal history and the Abraham story, it is also the biography of Moses, from Exod 1 to Deut 34. The occupation and distribution of the land as it is reported in the book of Joshua would have been impossible, because that would have been far too dangerous politically. The Persians were vitally concerned to have peace in this area and above all to sustain their connecting ties with Egypt. At the same time, it was undoubtedly known, even in antiquity, that Moses is an Egyptian name, and it was revolts in Egypt, encouraged by Greek-speaking cities, that posed the greatest problem for the Persians. It is understandable that anyone would have had to be cautious about hailing as liberator someone with an Egyptian name.

We can see from Aeschylus’s *Persians*, for example, that in the Persian period there was also a Cyrus renaissance. There were similar developments in Egypt. The favorable description of Cyrus is simultaneously a criticism of the contemporary Persian administration and its taxation policy (see, e.g., Neh 5). These processes are still evident in the Septuagint, if they are not viewed only as a quarry for textual criticism. Deutero-Isaiah was familiar with both Aeschylus and Sophocles (see Klaus Baltzer and Peter Marinkovic, “‘Größe und Grenze des Menschens’: Zum Verhältnis von Gott-Welt-Erde-Mensch in Jes 45,9–13 und im Chorlied der ‘Antigone’ des Sophokles. Beobachtungen

und Fragen,” in *Schriftprophetie: Festschrift für Jörg Jeremias* [ed. F. Hartenstein, J. Krispenz, and A. Schart; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004], 369–79). Speaking about the so-called third book of Maccabees, Albrecht Dihle writes:

Here the numerous quotations from Aeschylus’s tragedies are striking. At that time this poet was much less read than Euripides, generally speaking, if only because of his difficult language. The Jews seem to have been particularly drawn by Aeschylus’s idea about the justice of the government of the world, over which Zeus as the supreme God, disposes. Of the persons of Jewish origin mentioned in the papyrus documents, an unusually high proportion of those belonging to the Greek population have the extremely rare name Aeschylus. (*Griechische Literaturgeschichte: Von Homer bis zum Hellenismus* [3rd ed.; Munich: Beck, 1998], 346)

I am familiar with, and value, Michael Fishbane’s work, but I believe that this approach can be developed further. I myself have received an initial stimulus to such an enquiry from Krister Stendahl and his study *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1954; see also Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, Heinz Joachim Held, *Überlieferung und Auslegung im Matthäusevangelium* [WMANT 1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1960]).

We have to develop a much broader notion about the role played by the theatre in the ancient world. Of course there were performances in the huge theatres of the Mediterranean world. They required enormous expenditure. But the vase paintings in the museums (e.g., the Fine Arts Museum in Boston or the Pergamon museum in Berlin) indicate more modest stages too. Parallel to the great performances there was already a kind of “intimate theatre” (*Zimmertheater*) with the same plays performed as a kind of “read” drama. This is comparable with the development of the classics in European tradition. Thus Schiller and Goethe, for example, were staged in the theatre but were also read aloud in more or less private circles. This was common practice as late as Chekhov’s *Seagulls* and Bert Brecht. We get an idea of this practice in antiquity from archaeological excavations and findings in various places, for example, from the theatres found in private villas in Ephesus (see Kai Brodersen, *Antike Stätten am Mittelmeer*, *Metzler Lexikon* [Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler 1989], 488–503, esp. 495ff., with literature; see also Helmut Koester, ed., *Ephesus: Metropolis of Asia* [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995]).

Sommer finishes by saying, “While Baltzer did not convince me that Isa 40–55 was written as a drama, he does show that these chapters could be staged as one. The result

would probably be quite exciting” (*JBL* 123 [2004]: 153). To this I can respond only by saying that we acted and filmed texts from the “idol parody” with the seminar in Munich.

As was already clearly stated in the introduction to the Deutero-Isaiah commentary, the exegetical task required of us cannot be fulfilled by individual experts but only through joint and interdisciplinary study. It is of concern to people in synagogues and parishes, in churches of varying traditions, but it is also important for everyone interested in “European” culture and its world-wide influence.

Finally, attention may also be drawn to the review of this Deutero-Isaiah commentary in *CBQ* 66 (2004): 113–14. Here Carol J. Dempsey, University of Portland/Oregon, gives an excellent account of the commentary’s concern, approach, and implementation, as well as the results of the investigation.