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Holladay, William

Unbound by Time: Isaiah still speaks

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This is a book written for ordinary people in the pew by an eminent scholar. Such books are very much wanted. Biblical scholarship is often far above the heads of ordinary people in the congregation. A professor and a pastor often talk different languages. The professor teaches academically from the lectern within the walls of the university. The pastor talks a homiletic language from the pulpit within the walls of the church. Too often these forae are like two different worlds. This is a pity, since most theological students intend to be pastors and preachers, mediators of the word of God. Most people in the pews have just a scant knowledge of the Old Testament, often limited to certain "good" verses or well-known stories or other particular units.

Biblical scholarship is not usually reflected in sermons in a successful way. There may be different reasons for this unfortunate situation. One reason may be the clergy's reluctance to use scholarly knowledge, either because of ignorance or lack of confidence on how to present such complicated material to a congregation. Biblical scholarship might reveal opinions and facts that are strange to the congregation. How will they react? Will conservative Christians accuse the pastor

of being a liberal? Or will the pastor be accused of lecturing instead of preaching? Or will the congregation be interested in biblical scholarship at all? There is even the strange paradox that otherwise well-educated and enlightened people retain simplistic ideas of theology and the Bible, having never grown out of their simple, childhood faith. These observations bear on the question of how preaching functions. Is it just pious talk, lacking substantial knowledge and teaching? My own experience from a Norwegian Free Church context is that there is a profound need of basic theological and biblical knowledge.

Professor Holladay's book is an attempt to bridge that gap between biblical scholarship and the congregation and to make the Bible come alive. Let it be said immediately: it is an excellent attempt! Holladay is a professor well at home in both church and university. He knows very well biblical scholarship as well as the people in the pew. Previously he has written similar books: *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

This book's concept is to follow the pericopes from named Protestant and Catholic Church lectionaries through the book of Isaiah, analyzing the actual texts in their context. His first focus is the thoughts and words of Isaiah of Jerusalem, Proto-Isaiah. His second focus is Deutero-Isaiah. He follows the proposal by H. G. M. Williamson "that the material from the original Isaiah was edited and to some degree rearranged by the latter in the service of his own message" Williamson's opinion is set forth in his brilliant book, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). A third focus is the selection of lectionary readings primarily from Deutero-Isaiah.

Holladay is critical of the delimitation of pericopes when they omit "bad" or difficult parts of a unit. This is a disservice to the text, as we will not have a complete impression of a text if something substantial is deleted. He also misses important texts from the book of Isaiah in the lectionaries—there is the same problem with the Norwegian lectionaries.

In chapter 1, Holladay discusses the problem of prophetic foretelling. This is a basic chapter. Traditional opinion has been that the prophets foretold in a concrete way the coming of Jesus and the modern readers' own time. But that is an unhistorical way of reading the prophets, who were actually speaking to their own generation. The prophets' sayings were time-bound and should be

read in the context of a particular historical circumstance. "The Old Testament prophets were not primarily in the business of predicting the far future but rather understood themselves to be called by God to diagnose the predicaments of their own generation, particularly in times of national emergency" (8). The meaning of a biblical text is not given once and for all. In a historical interpretation the different prophets and their different texts stand out as individuals and their speeches as different messages, each with their particular historical context and address. They had also a more sublime message that can be applied to different times and situations. This is the core of the text the modern preacher should detect and formulate in his message.

In chapters 2 through 6 Holladay investigates different parts and aspects of the book of Isaiah. The backbone of chapter 2 is the exegesis of central pericopes of Isa 1–12, presenting Yahweh as the High and Holy One in contrast to the disobedience of Israel against Yahweh's covenant, such as Isa 6; 2:6–22; 10:1–4; 1:10–20; and 5:1–7.

In chapter 3 he focuses on Isaiah's message to Israel against the background of the Assyrian crisis. Assyria, the contemporary superpower, was a historical instrument used by Yahweh to punish Israel for their disobedience. But Assyria exceeded in their cruelty and would in their turn be punished themselves. Therefore, a "remnant" would be saved. Here we are presented with such pericopes as 7:1–17; 10:5–14; 28:14–22; 9:2–7; and 11.

In chapter 4 Holladay moves to Deutero-Isaiah and the theme of homecoming from exile in Babylon. Central is the exodus motif; as the Israelites formerly went out from Egypt, they will now be led out of Babylon. These are words that immediately speak of hope to Christians. In this chapter he also treats later expansions to Proto-Isaiah, such as 2:1–5 and chapter 35, along with 40:1–11 and 21–31; 41:17–20; 43:1–7; 45:1–7; and 51:9–11.

In chapter 5 the theme is the incomparable God as Creator, as creation is a very central theme in Deutero-Isaiah. Here the focus of attention goes to 43:8–13; 44:9–20; 45:20–25 and chapter 55.

Chapter 6 is reserved for three different topics: the Servant Songs, the content of Isa 56–66 (which Holladay ascribes to Deutero-Isaiah), and "a few passages that were added to the book of Isaiah in the decades after the addition of those eleven chapters [56–66]" (100). On the identification of the historical "servant," he concludes, "if he did not leave a specific identification, he intended the

identification to remain veiled" (104). The four "songs" are treated shortly and individually. In Isa 56–66, "the locale is no longer Babylon [as he thinks it was in 40–55] but Jerusalem." "Some of these passages offer fretful invective against a coterie of corrupt and insensitive religious leaders" (115). Here he comments particularly on 56:1–8; 60–62 and some single verses from chapters 63–66. The late additional passages are commented upon just shortly.

In the last two chapters Holladay documents briefly how Jews have read the book of Isaiah through the centuries (ch. 7) and how it is understood (ch. 8) in the New Testament by Jesus and the New Testament authors, in the Christian tradition. As for Jesus, Holladay concludes "that Jesus' understanding and proclamation of the kingdom of God were grounded in the Prophecy of Second Isaiah" (164). He also has an afterword on Islam.

Each chapter is supplied with adequate scholarly endnotes for further investigation. This brings the book up to date in relation to the scholarly debate.

On the technical level a few remarks should be made. The layout of the book cover is not quite successful. It is beautiful, but replacing the letter "o" in the title-word "Unbound" with a clock's dial results immediately in reading "Unb und," which looks like something German, even if the symbolic use of a clock in itself is alright and matches the title: *Unbound by Time*. The book also has too many misprints. This is the publisher's responsibility.

The book is well written. It should be easily accessible also for people without basic theological education. The book is a sort of a preacher's workshop. It does not go particularly into homiletics, but it should be very helpful for preachers when it comes to sermon texts from the book of Isaiah, as it relates directly to church lectionaries. The texts' historical background and message are explained in a way that is easy to grasp. The book may serve well for individual reading as well as for use in Bible study groups.