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Williamson, H. G. M.
Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah

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Williamson's study provides the basis for the Didsbury Lectures, which he delivered at the Nazarene Theological College, May 6-9, 1997. He begins by noting that modern study of the book of Isaiah has undergone a tremendous transformation over the past few years in that scholars are now beginning to read Isaiah, not as three or more separate textual blocks that have relatively little to do with one another, but as a literary unity that was progressively composed over the course of several centuries. Indeed, his own earlier study, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), has contributed significantly to that transformation. He expresses his surprise that the topic of messianism in the book of Isaiah has not been given sustained attention in this new critical context, particularly since the topic commanded primary attention in earlier pre-critical discussion of the book. He of course does not maintain that scholars should return to such a pre-critical reading of Isaiah, but he asserts that the topic deserves to be explored.

To a certain extent, Williamson seems to take the importance of this topic to be self-evident, especially since he argues near the end of the book that "we too should approach these texts (from Isaiah, see below) from a Christian perspective" (p. 207). One might observe that recent study of Isaiah has identified Jerusalem or Zion as the primary concern of the book (Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah. A Reassessment of Isaiah 36-39* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991]), and that the issue of kingship (or messianism) plays a secondary or subordinate role to this concern. To justify his focus on messianism or kingship, Williamson notes that the lexemes related to kingship are distributed throughout the book. Especially important are his observations that, apart from formulaic references in Isa 1:1 and 6:1, YHWH is the first major figure in the book to be identified as king and YHWH's kingship emerges as a fundamental concern in those portions of the book that come from the exilic period or later. Although earlier portions of Isaiah in chapters 1-32, including the traditional messianic texts, emphasize human kingship, the book as a whole signals its concern with divine kingship at the outset and points ultimately to the manifestation of YHWH's kingship in the world throughout the latter portions of the book. The focus on YHWH's

role as king then provides the basis for an important theological point in Isaiah, i.e., that YHWH will bring down judgment upon the haughty and arrogant within Jerusalem who because of their failure to exercise proper leadership have permitted the city to degenerate from its ideal past to the present doleful condition as portrayed in the book of Isaiah. The model is likewise applied to the nations, such as Assyria and its king, who have failed to exercise proper justice in the world. On this basis, Williamson observes that "something...about human kingship must have been present in the work of Isaiah from the very start" (p. 29), and he therefore proposes to examine the messianic passages of the book in order to see whether they may be integrated into Isaiah's overall theology.

Four successive chapters then turn to an examination of the various Isaian texts pertinent to the study of messianic concerns. The first takes up four texts from the first part of Isaiah: Isa 9:1-7; 11:1-5; 16:4b-5; and 32:1-5. The "Immanuel" passage in Isa 7:14 is left for extended treatment in the next chapter. Although Isa 9:1-7 (Hebrew, 8:23-9:6) explicitly mentions human kingship, the passage is ultimately concerned with G-d's activity on behalf of the people as indicated by the concluding statement, "the zeal of YHWH of Hosts will do this." Nevertheless, the human monarch does play a role in the divine scenario as one who will bring about justice, righteousness, and peace in human society, although it is apparent that the rod of the oppressor will play a role in disciplining him when necessary. The passage reflects Isaiah's middle years when his expectations for imminent change gave way to fulfillment in the indefinite future. Isaiah 11:1-5 was likewise written by the prophet, and it reflects the prophet's expectation that a human king will bring about justice in society. In order to justify his argument for Isaian authorship, he takes the metaphorical portrayal of YHWH's judgment against a king in Isa 10:33-34 entirely out of context to assert that these verses were originally directed against the Judean monarch. Unfortunately, this results in a somewhat lopsided view that Isaiah could only have been concerned about judgment against Judah and that judgment against Assyria must reflect a much later concern. Isa 16:4b-5 is inadvisably deemed post-exilic because of the priestly association of the motif of asylum and the tent of David, but this interpretation accepts a somewhat warped Wellhausenian view of the development of Israelite religion and fails to recognize that Moab may have looked to Judah for support when faced with the threat of Assyrian invasion in the late eighth century. Isaiah 32:1-5 stems from Isaiah, and reflects the prophet's views concerning an ideal human monarch. Altogether, the three Isaian passages represent the prophet's "blueprint" for ideal kingship, not a prediction that such kingship would arise.

The next chapter focuses entirely on the so-called "Immanuel" passage in Isaiah 7:14. Williamson's discussion is primarily a refutation of Karl Budde's classic interpretation of Isaiah 6:1-8:16 as the Isaian "*Denkschrift*" or "memoir," insofar as Budde understood these chapters to constitute the prophet's autobiographical reflection on his role in relation to Ahaz and Judah during the Syro-Ephraimitic War. Budde's position is based in large part on the first-person formulation of this material, although Williamson correctly rejects his contention that a later scribe altered chapter seven so that it now appears in

third person form. He contends instead that chapter 7 must have been written by a later author who sought to compare the presentation of King Ahaz in Isaiah 7 with the presentation of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37. The affinities of Isaiah 7 with Amos 7-8 and the Deuteronomistic literature indicate that the Immanuel figure in Isa 7:14 constitutes a basis for exilic reflection on the fall of the house of David to the Babylonians and the expectation that YHWH will raise the house of David once again. Why judgment and restoration must be read in relation only to the Babylonian exile and not in relation to the events of the eighth and seventh centuries is not clear, although Williamson's critique of Budde's "*Denkschrift*" hypothesis is well-taken.

The chapter on "Israel, the Servant, and the Nations," takes issue with a great deal of past scholarship that presupposes Duhm's isolation of Deutero-Isaiah from the context of the book as a whole and the so-called "servant songs" from the rest of Deutero-Isaiah. Based upon his earlier work, Williamson contends that Deutero-Isaiah was familiar with an early form of the first part of the book although there are no explicit citations. He focuses especially on Isaiah 55:3-5, which transfers the covenant of David to the people of Israel. Whereas the former Davidic conception posited a relationship that moved from G-d to the king and then to the people, Deutero-Isaiah posits a relationship that moves from G-d to the people and then to the nations. Noting the difficulties involved in identifying the "servant" of Deutero-Isaiah, Williamson argues that a contextual reading of the "servant songs" indicates that they "designate" rather than "identify" Israel as the servant so that Israel's task is to mediate ideal justice to the nations just as David was to mediate ideal justice to Israel. Of course, the contention that the nations would experience ideal justice in the form of Davidic rule likely justified Davidic notions of empire from early times. Quite simply, all that changes in Deutero-Isaiah is the elimination of the Davidic monarch. Even without a human monarch, Isaiah is a thoroughly Davidic book.

Finally, the disparate Trito-Isaiah traditions build upon the work of the earlier sections by way of citation and allusion, although they are free to disagree with the earlier material. The "servant" figure reemerges in Isa 61:1-3 to take up the themes that introduced Deutero-Isaiah, i.e., to "bring good news," to "proclaim," and to "comfort." This figure no longer addresses the nations, however, but focuses instead on Zion/Jerusalem, or those within the community who will function as G-d's "servants," in order to establish justice and righteousness within Israel. Although foreigners will have the opportunity to become part of the community, Williamson seems not to recognize that the required Sabbath observance, etc., entails what may be anachronistically known as conversion to Judaism. At what point does the identity of the Gentile merge into that of the Jew (and not vice versa) at the end of Isaiah?

Various details of Williamson's discussion may be questioned and perhaps modified as indicated above, particularly some of his redaction-critical arguments for the first part of Isaiah, his conceptualization of the shift in Davidic ideology in Deutero-Isaiah, and his

understanding of the interrelationship of Gentile and Jew in Trito-Isaiah. Nevertheless, most of the objections are relatively minor when considered in relation to the overall portrayal of a developing prophetic tradition that is in dialogue with itself and the historical and social circumstances in which it is conceived. Williamson's study deserves widespread attention, particularly because of its sober and insightful assessment of the conceptualizations of kingship/messianism within the book of Isaiah and their relationship to the compositional history of the book as a whole.