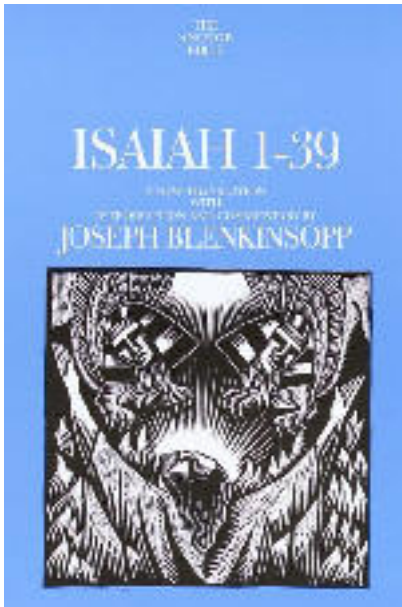


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**Blenkinsopp, Joseph**

*Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*

Anchor Bible 19a

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In this ably written commentary, Joseph Blenkinsopp sets out to explain Isa 1–39 “in the middle of a paradigm shift” (73). The result is a text that is very much in the middle. Blenkinsopp is cognizant of the difficulties with attributing material to the historical Isaiah, yet he does hold out hope that Isaiah was a real figure and that a fair amount of the book originated in the eighth century B.C.E. He also does not adopt one particular reading method, preferring to read the text at any number of levels: as a reflection of events of the eighth century, as a product of numerous hands employed in an Isaian tradition, as a completed work showing a complex interaction of its component parts, as a text interpreted as Scripture in Judaism and Christianity, and as a book with a long history of critical interpretation in the academy. But this is no “buffet-line” approach. Blenkinsopp is clear that, in his view, the formation of the text, its production by numerous hands and minds, is the key feature: “Theological reflection on the book as a whole should follow critical study of its formation not substitute for it” (76).

This commentary is also “in the middle” in at least one other way: it is the first volume of a projected three-volume set by Blenkinsopp covering the whole book of Isaiah. Blenkinsopp walks a fine line between arguing strenuously for

readings to be presented later while allowing the reader enough information to accept his reading of the present text as plausible. In some instances, Blenkinsopp does not quite succeed. For example, he claims that sectarians in the Hellenistic period were the book's final editors but does not argue the case, pointing to his upcoming commentary on the last few chapters of Isaiah (86). The nature (or even existence) of such groups is far from certain, but their supposed work features extensively in Blenkinsopp's analysis of many texts. In addition, this approach seems to encourage a certain looseness in the use of the term "apocalyptic," allowing its traces to be found in texts that seem less than deserving of the term (e.g., 10:25; 11:16).

There are, of course, occasions on which Blenkinsopp must argue his case presently on matters that will affect his later readings. An especially good example here is his treatment of Isa 34–35. Blenkinsopp argues strenuously, and in my view largely successfully, that these texts are designed to be read as a diptych (450–51). Such a reading opposes the common scholarly practice of attaching Isa 35 to 40ff. Thus the "result" of Blenkinsopp's reading here will inform, in this case in a restrictive way, the links he can draw in his second volume.

Blenkinsopp rightly emphasizes a theology of history, or, as he more often puts it, a "theopolitics," as a unifying element of the Isaiah tradition. Isaiah's critique of Assyrian imperial authority (the Assyrians are under the authority of YHWH and derive their power from YHWH's changeable will) later expands to cover Babylonian expressions of power and, finally, any and all "exercise of arbitrary political power" (105). Blenkinsopp links this theological viewpoint with that which he calls a "tradition of protest," exemplified in numerous points of contact between Isaiah and Amos (107). While Blenkinsopp can, at times, overplay the connections (e.g., the use of lions [221–22]), his demonstration of the links here is generally restrained and persuasive.

This view of Isaiah's "theopolitics" would seem to be in some tension with several texts from Isa 1–39, especially the narratives that view Isaiah as either well-connected at court (in the case of Ahaz) or the healer and confidant of the king (in the case of Hezekiah). Blenkinsopp makes use of the contrast in two ways. First, he does not deny its existence, preferring to see the book of Isaiah as having two differing opinions, one from Isaian tradition and the other from Deuteronomistic sources. Thus he claims 22:1–14 refers to the events leading up to Sennacherib's attack but also admits, "we are then left with an insurmountable contrast with the prophet's attitude towards the siege and its aftermath as described in chs. 36–39" (334). Second, because he is able to get beyond (behind?)

the portrayal of Hezekiah in Isa 36–39, Blenkinsopp can then read the Ahaz accounts in terms of their similarities to (as well as differences from) prophetic oracles from the time of Hezekiah’s ill-advised revolt (e.g., Isa 28–31). What emerges is a much more complicated notion of the political role of Isaiah and his tradition. That Blenkinsopp does not care to resolve the text’s uncertainties as to the Isaiah-Hezekiah relationship shows not a lack of ability to make a scholarly decision but a real sensitivity to the multivoiced nature of these texts.

Blenkinsopp’s treatment of text-critical issues is, for reasons of space, not extensive, but he provides sufficient detail to support (or at least explain) his readings of these often difficult texts. His emendations tend to arise from actual confusions in the text and have some textual basis (though not always, e.g., 1:25 [180]), though one can always find room for quibbling (is reading *zedim* for *zarim* in 25:2, 5 really necessary? [361]). His translation is careful, though some particular word choices seem ill-advised. Given the importance of the “remnant” as a theme in Isaiah, it is unfortunate that Blenkinsopp often uses the term “residue” instead. For me, this term refers to something that should have been removed but remains because of incomplete or ineffective cleaning. Perhaps Blenkinsopp means to say this—it does give a different theological spin—but I doubt it.

A more serious matter, in my view, is the rearrangement of passages to fit with a reconstruction of the text’s history. Blenkinsopp “reunites” the series of woes (10:1–4 + 5:8–24) and the “poem about the angry God” (9:7–20 + 5:25) that are presently interrupted by the Isaiah memoir (*Denkschrift*). He also gathers into one group the psalms included in Isa 24–27. In the body of the commentary, he provides acceptable rationales for doing so (although his argument for Isa 24–27 seems to me less cogent). There does not seem to be, however, a compelling reason to alter the order of the translation printed separately at the beginning of the commentary. In addition, the translations feature probable editorial additions in italics, glosses in square brackets, and words supplied by the translator in parentheses. This is an especially handy arrangement, but one not explained to the reader as part of the translation. The explanation finally appears in the notes to 2:6–22 (193).

Blenkinsopp writes carefully and well, able to turn a phrase with wry humor, as in his claim that “exegetes have worried over this brief verse [27:1] like a dog with a bone” (372) or that, regarding 30:26, “it is perhaps understandable that, in his enthusiasm, the author overlooked the inconvenience of a sevenfold increase in temperature, not to mention the ecological impact of doing away with the

alternation of day and night" (421). This is not to say the work is free of jargon or words that would challenge an educated but nonspecialist audience. "Hebetude" and "inspissation" sharing a page (404) is a bit much. Blenkinsopp also feels free to critique the text, especially regarding violence. Thus the oracle against Moab in Isa 25 causes him "dismay" with its "pornographic violence" (364), while the attack on court women (3:16–4:1) "does not make for pleasant or edifying reading" (201).

This commentary comes close to fulfilling the myriad tasks now assumed for that overburdened genre. It presents a new translation of a difficult text, speaking of the text's meaning from a variety of perspectives, in dialogue with readers as diverse as Ibn-Ezra, John Calvin, and Bernhard Duhm (to name three of Blenkinsopp's apparent favorites—an author index would help track these discussions). That Blenkinsopp has not sacrificed detail while writing concise, lucid prose is even more laudable. I shall, in keeping with the Isaian tradition, adopt an attitude of hopeful waiting, anticipating the next two installments.