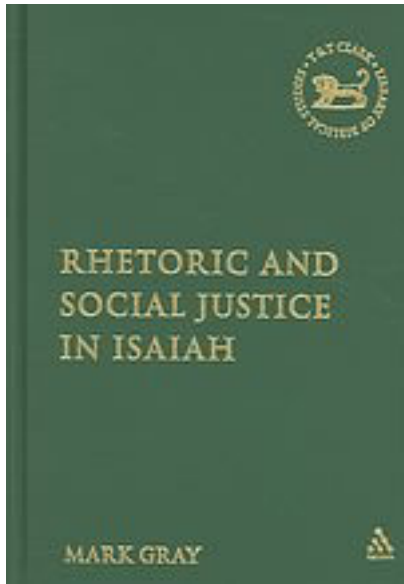


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Gray, Mark

Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah

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This book is a revision of Mark Gray's 2003 doctoral thesis of the same name from Queen's University, Belfast, U.K. He offers a text-based rhetorical reading of the book of Isaiah that explores the theme of justice, in particular with respect to Isa 1:16–17 and 58:6–10. His stated aim is to follow the contours of the text itself rather than external frames of reference such as classical Greek rhetoric. He defines his rhetorical method as “a close-reading technique focusing on words within an identified passage, both collectively for their shape, pattern and structure in a literary context, and individually for the resonance they have primarily in the work as a whole, but also intertextually within the canon of the Hebrew Bible” (6). While primarily concerned with the world of the text, Gray is also interested in exploring how it may be appropriated and extended to “the world in front of the text,” that is, the contemporary world. He describes his study as a postcolonial work orientated toward social transformation and favorably disposed toward liberation theology.

Chapter 1 discusses the concept of justice, beginning with the Hebrew word *mishpat* and moving quickly to articulate Gray's own definition of “authentic social justice,” which draws on contemporary definitions and includes tackling underlying causes of poverty and injustice as well as satisfying basic material needs. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an investigation of the type of justice implicit in Isa 1 and to compare it with

that portrayed in chapter 58. Gray's detailed textual study of 1:16–17 draws on the uses of key vocabulary from this passage in Isaiah and other (mainly prophetic) texts, before suggesting ways in which "Isaiah articulates an atrophied version of social justice." This includes the apparent powerlessness of the widows and orphans, who are to have justice "done" to them (v. 17), the appeal to self-interest as a motivation (v. 19), and the failure to include alien along with widow and orphan. Gray's conclusion is that Isaiah was part of a conservative social milieu and was unable accurately to perceive or adequately to confront the problems of gross injustice. The chapter then draws connection between Isa 1 and 58, drawing attention to the "recurring association of defective religious observance with the practice of social injustice" (68).

In chapter 2 Gray turns to Isa 58 with the aim of exploring whether its rhetoric provides a better solution to the problems of social justice than did that of Isa 1. Following a discussion of the content of social justice outlined in 58:6–7 and exploration of the effect of the exile experience on the prophetic rhetoric, Gray concludes that Isa 58 articulates an alternative understanding to that of chapter 1, one that "marks a deepening and a development of the conception of social justice initially extrapolated from 1:16–17" (88). He explains this in terms of the chronological trajectory between chapters 1 and 58, during which the group underwent the traumatic exile experience. As far as the final form narrative is concerned, these people have a memory of this event that those in chapter 1 do not possess. The pivotal position of the "cry for help" in 59:9a emphasizes a theological message of solidarity and the embrace of pain as means toward justice.

Gray continues to read against the grain in chapter 3 and questions the concept of God's justice by looking at the rhetoric of punishment in Isaiah. His particular focus is Isa 9:17, which describes a punishment inflicted on widows and orphans arguably at variance with the call for justice for them expressed in 1:17 and 10:2. Picking up the term "godless" in Isa 9:17, Gray analyzes its use elsewhere in the Old Testament, particularly in Job, a book that in Gray's words "probes the nature of divine justice" (154). Drawing on Job's debate with his friends, Gray suggests that the idea of total guilt encompassing all expressed in Isa 9:17 is similar to the arguments of Job's friends. Further discussion of this verse in its immediate context leads him to conclude that "the rhetoric of punishment casts doubt on the efficacy of divine justice" (172).

Chapter 4 considers the issue of trust in an attempt to understand the character of God in Isaiah and to relate this to the subject of social justice. The injunction to turn away from humanity in Isa 2:21 is, somewhat enigmatically, "rendered unstable," Gray argues (186), by Job's struggle to maintain his innocence in the face of his accusers, both human and divine. Gray then discusses the rhetorical impact of the contrast between trusting in God or in humankind, especially as it is articulated in Isaiah. His particular concern is with the

apparent divergence between Isaianic expectations and reality concerning trust in God, particularly as the book moves from unconditionality (Isa 40–55) to conditionality (Isa 56–66). This shift, according to Gray, depicts God as making promises that remain unfulfilled and hence as potentially unreliable. The question over God’s character is elaborated by a study of Isa 40:1–2 and 54:6–7, both of which raise interpretive questions for “high” Christian theology (218). The chapter ends with a brief critical dialogue with three contemporary scholars in the fields of biblical hermeneutics, doctrinal theology, and missiology, respectively.

Gray’s study is an interesting one that covers a considerable amount of ground and highlights some important aspects of the text. His stated intention to follow Brueggemann’s advice and to “move between a credulous fideism and a knowing, suspicious skepticism” (262) produces readings against the grain that are both insightful and challenging. However, there are some serious shortcomings as well as minor niggles that detract from the book.

First, it is not clear whether Gray is reading the text through the lens of modern criteria of justice (as outlined at 23–25) or exploring how the final redactor of Isaiah might have understood or questioned divine justice. His brief discussion of *mishpat* draws almost exclusively on Knierim’s somewhat narrow definition and does not engage with Gossai’s contention that the functional locus of *mishpat* is “relationship.” Gray makes little reference to the word pair “justice-righteousness” and omits the work of scholars such as H. H. Schmid on this subject. Neither does he tackle the question of whether the poor can ever be guilty of unjust and exploitative practices (either in the ancient world or now). Second, I have some concerns about the limits of Gray’s rhetorical methodology, since he seems primarily concerned with intertextuality, not with other rhetorical tools, such as repetition, assonance, wordplay, hyperbole, and the like. Indeed, it is questionable whether he adequately follows his own rhetorical method (cited above), since his exegesis seems to focus exclusively on individual words and their reuse in Isaiah and the wider Old Testament, not on the collective shape they give to the text.

Third, at times Gray’s use of intertextuality and the rather vague concept of “resonance” leads him to read more into the text than is justified and to overinterpret it. Although Gray admits that some of his readings are tentative, his assumption (at times) that direct correlation of meaning exists in word use results in oversimplification. More minor criticisms include his tendency to accept other commentators’ interpretations without explanation or critique and the excessive use of short quotes from secondary sources, especially in the introductory and concluding sections. Each individual chapter would have benefited from a clearer outline of its overall structure, together with a summary of conclusions. Nevertheless, the book is worth reading, since it addresses an issue of major

concern, raises provocative questions about the text of Isaiah, and affirms the importance of human engagement in the quest for justice.