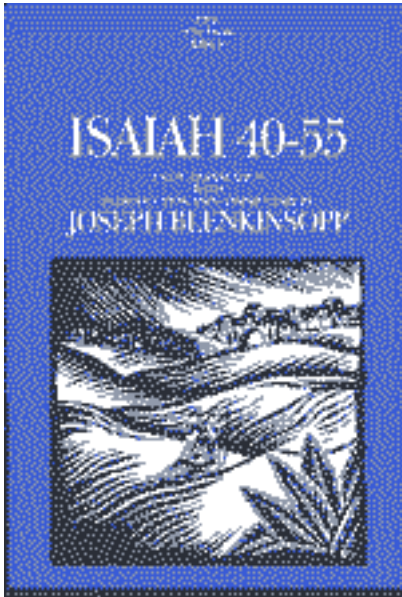


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Blenkinsopp, Joseph

Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary

Anchor Bible 19A

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In recent years there has been a proliferation of commentaries on the book of Isaiah. A storm of articles, essays, and monographs precipitated a sea-change in Isaian studies and has touched shore in some of the most recent commentaries. Earlier commentaries enshrined the critical consensus that the book of Isaiah was obviously the work of different authors whose contributions could confidently be divided into clear components. Consequently, editors parceled out chapters 1–39 and 40–66 to different commentators, who treated the two sections of the one book as two different works. Thus, the Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster) produced separate volumes by Otto Kaiser (*Isaiah 1–12*, 2d ed., 1983; *Isaiah 13–39*, 1974) and Claus Westermann (*Isaiah 40–66*, 1975); more recently, the Interpretation series (Louisville: John Knox) published volumes by Christopher Seitz (*Isaiah 1–39*, 1993) and Paul Hanson (*Isaiah 40–66*, 1995). Moreover, the disparate components of Isaiah were thought to be so distinct that a host of commentators chose to write either on First Isaiah or Second Isaiah with little attempt to address the entire “vision of Isaiah.”

In recent years, voices arguing for the unity of the book emerged and have grown more insistent. The appreciation of the book of Isaiah as a unified literary work found expression, for example, in the work of John W. D. Watts, who published a commentary

on the entire book of Isaiah in two volumes, chapters 1—33, 34—66 for the Word Bible Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word) in 1985–87. In 1998, Walter Brueggemann also produced a two-volume commentary (1–39, 40–66) on the entire book of Isaiah for the Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox). Most dramatic is Brevard Childs’s 2001 commentary for the Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox): in one volume, written by one author, the entire book of Isaiah is treated as a single work. From separate volumes with different authors, to a single volume written by one author, commentaries on Isaiah have come to an old place that is strikingly new.

Against this backdrop, the work of Joseph Blenkinsopp straddles two worlds. His Anchor Bible commentary on Isa 40–55 is the second of a projected three-volume set on the entire book of Isaiah. The unity of the book is taken seriously both in that Blenkinsopp himself is discussing the entire book of Isaiah and that he explicitly addresses the issues of unity that are of such concern today. Though he maintains the threefold division of the book that has dominated scholarship since the days of Bernhard Duhm (Isa 1–39; 40–55; 56–66), he is at pains to discuss how the various parts relate to one another. Thus, this volume begins with a consideration of such issues as the relation of Isa 40–55 to Isa 35 and to Isa 36–39. The discussion expands to consider Isa 40–55 in relation to Isa 1–39 and, even more broadly, in relation to the Former Prophets. He is particularly attentive to the Deuteronomists, with whom, Blenkinsopp maintains, Isa 40–55 shares a certain similarity of perspective and theology; this is especially evident in the “prophecy and fulfillment” pattern that shapes the entire Deuteronomistic History and is found throughout Isa 40–55 in the frequent references to the “former things.”

In terms of structure, Blenkinsopp argues that Isa 40–48 (the Jacob/Israel chapters) are unified by a similarity of style and by such themes as the mission of Cyrus, the departure from Babylon, and the polemic against cult idols. By contrast, Isa 49–55 (the Zion/Jerusalem chapters) take no note of the aforementioned themes. Further, the style of Isa 49–55 has more in common with 56–66 than with 40–48; he suggests that Isa 49–55 have undergone “a partial rewriting or overwriting by a scribe associated with the minority group, whose voice is heard in 56–66” (80–81). Chapter 55 serves as a transition between 49–54 and 56–66 (368–69).

In the course of considering how 40–55 came to be, he engages a discussion of the so-called “Servant Songs.” He notes—one senses that he notes it wistfully—that “Duhm dedicated only about 1 1/2 pages to a general discussion of his *Ebed-Jahwe-Lieder*” (76). Blenkinsopp contributes over fifty pages on these passages throughout the course of his commentary. He proposes that “the Servant of 42:1–4 is Cyrus and that the remaining twelve uses of the word in 40–48, all singular, denote Jacob, ancestor and representative

of the people of Israel” (118). Because this servant is Cyrus, Blenkinsopp insists that *tôrâ* in 42:4 be translated “law,” such as would be imposed by a ruler (210). This is problematic. Of its 223 occurrences in the Tanak, *tôrâ* is associated with the “instruction” of the wise (including mothers and fathers), priests, and prophets and with the law of Moses and of Israel’s God; it is not used to refer to the “law” of any ruler or king, whether Israelite or foreign. A use such as Blenkinsopp proposes would be unique.

Continuing with his analysis of Isa 49–55, he notes that seven of the eight references to the servant are found in the three passages identified by Duhm. This servant takes over the apparently failed mission of Cyrus. In 49:1–6 the servant, in his own voice (first heard in 40:5), describes the growing opposition he faces from his own people (300); his voice is heard again in 50:4–9. The account of the servant’s suffering and death (52:13–53:12) is an interpretation by “a convert to the Servant’s person and teaching, offered either in his own name or that of the group to which he belonged” (350). Blenkinsopp summarizes: “All of the indications therefore point to the conclusion that the three passages in question (49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12) represent aspects of or phases in the career of one and the same individual” (349). Further, the servant of these three passages “is none other than the author of the core of these chapters, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah” (356). But the significance of these servant passages transcends their reference to an individual, whoever he may have been; taken together, they articulate a rudimentary biography of a prophetic martyr, inspired by the great Deuteronomic “protoprophet” and “Servant of God” nonpareil, Moses. Hence, Blenkinsopp proposes that the initial ambivalence that attends the meaning of “servant” in these chapters gradually resolves “in the direction of a purely prophetic profile” (247). The implications for the development of the Christian gospel are clear.

As to where these chapters were composed—Babylonia, Judah, or elsewhere—Blenkinsopp assesses the evidence as inconclusive (“a standoff”), though there is perhaps a slight tip toward the Babylonian Diaspora (104). Nevertheless, throughout the course of his commentary, Blenkinsopp is conscientious in pointing out passages and interpretations that either favor a Judean provenance or call into question the assumption of a Babylonian origin.

The book includes the features that are standard in such works. There is a detailed table of contents, a 45-page “select bibliography,” and three indexes: subjects, biblical and other ancient references, and key Hebrew terms. Commentary is not strictly line by line but unit by unit, with particular attention to a unit’s inner coherence—its “unity of conception, theme and style” (245)—and its relation to surrounding material.

Text-critical notes are consistently complete yet concise, striking a judicious balance between saying too little and overwhelming with detail. Though not all of his suggestions will find acceptance, his notes are a helpful and informative contribution. He makes extensive use of 1QIsa^a but perhaps overinterprets some of the mute features of the text. For example, in discussing Isa 54, he observes that 1QIsa^a “sets off v 17b ... with a gap almost a line long, indicating that this final statement serves as a summary of the passage as a whole” (360–61). This is key to his understanding of structure and to his suggestion that Isa 55 serves as a hinge text between 40–54 and 56–66. But another explanation of the gap is possible and, indeed, more likely. Blenkinsopp himself notes that the second half of MT 54:17a is omitted from 1QIsa^a. A closer examination of the 1QIsa^a manuscript reveals that there are dots above and below the final consonant of *yšlh*, which is the last word before the blank space. We know from other texts (e.g., Isa 40:8) that such dots often indicate a textual disturbance. In the case of Isa 54:17, Frank Cross suggests that the text from which the copyist was working was defective and so “the scribe left a blank space to be filled in later—and never got back” (for details of the analysis, see Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 194 n. 38). In other words, Blenkinsopp’s conjecture of editorial intent is a heavy burden for a blank space to bear.

Blenkinsopp takes aim at a number of conventionally held interpretations. He refutes the commonly held position that the setting of 40:1–8 is the divine council, dismantling the assumptions and analysis on which the argument rests. Those who hold to the divine-council interpretation will be required to make response to his trenchant critique, even if they do not accept his alternate interpretation, namely, that God is addressing a company of prophets; the alteration between singular and plural forms of those addressing and being addressed is accounted for by the group and the individual, whom Blenkinsopp takes to be the author (180). As for Second Isaiah’s alleged “universalism,” so often celebrated by modern scholars, Blenkinsopp notes that the only universalism that the prophet asserts is the worldwide sovereignty of “Yahveh” and the consequent subjugation and abasement of foreign rulers and peoples (e.g., 45:14; 49:7; 54:3). “The universalism in question is therefore the claim of universal jurisdiction and dominion advanced on behalf of Yahveh and based on his creation of the world and direction of the course of history” (262). He also dismisses Eissfeldt’s theory of the “democratization” of the Davidic promises, claiming that such an interpretation “goes some way beyond what the author says” (370).

Some of Blenkinsopp’s sources—and lack of sources—are puzzling. Given the prophet’s pervasive use of legal terminology and the frequent use of the courtroom setting for so many disputations, Blenkinsopp is disappointingly vague on the legal proceedings. His first detailed treatment of forensic terminology comes in his discussion of 50:4–11

(321–22). He might have profitably consulted Pietro Bovati's 1994 monograph, *Re-establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible*. In his many references to the *Enuma Elish*, Blenkinsopp refers to two rather dated editions: Alexander Heidel's *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) and E. A. Speiser's translation in *ANET*. A newer translation is available from Stephanie Dalley (*Myths from Mesopotamia* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 1998]). The 1998 two-volume commentary by Brueggemann is omitted from his bibliography.

Translation is a tricky business. One wants to avoid a mindless consistency that results in a wooden translation, yet one should try to communicate to the reader a consistent range of meaning. In this translation, the line between *šedāqâ* and *yěšû'â* is often blurred. Blenkinsopp translates both terms as "victory" (*šedāqâ* in 45:8; *yěšû'â* in 52:7, 10) and as "deliverance" (*šedāqâ* in 46:12; *yěša'* in 51:5). Oddly, in 45:14 he translates *'el* as "the Almighty" (255), but "God" in his translation of the same verse on page 18. The potent term *mišpāṭ* is rendered by the anemic translation "just order" in 42:1, 3, 4.

There are a few incorrect references (*inter alia*, on p. 325 "salvation" is found not in 51:2 and 3 as indicated, but in 51:5, 6, 8). Italics are confused on pages 87 and 163. Such glitches in no way detract from the significance of the present work. Even senior researchers and specialists will read with profit this important and learned contribution to Isaian scholarship.