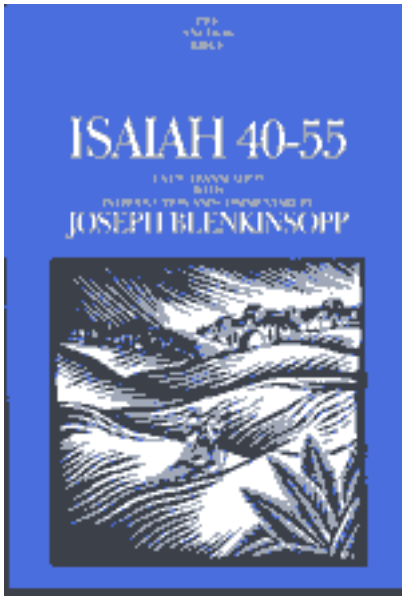


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**Blenkinsopp, Joseph**

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

Anchor Bible 19A

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The second part of Joseph Blenkinsopp's Anchor Bible commentary on Isaiah maintains the high standards of the first. It is concise, judicious, thorough, and well-written. Isaiah 40–55 has perhaps been less affected by the paradigm shift in studies of Isaiah than Isa 1–39; nonetheless, Blenkinsopp carefully, and always sensibly, sustains a balance between new approaches and traditional scholarship. The commentary proper consists of brief notes on the text and exegetical comments on the background, argument, and ethical and theological significance of the passage in question.

As one might expect from its demarcation, Blenkinsopp maintains a conservative view of the integrity and distinctness of Deutero-Isaiah. He resists the tendency in recent scholarship to argue for the unity of Isaiah on structural or theological grounds; in fact, he sees rather little continuity between Isa 1–39 and 40–55. He is equally unconvinced by the dissection of Deutero-Isaiah into numerous editorial strata, characteristic of recent German scholarship. He ascribes the whole sequence to a single author, albeit with minor addenda, perhaps as edited and abstracted by a disciple. He suggests, however, that Isa 40–48 is different in tone and content from 49–55 and represents an earlier stage in the prophet's career. Chapters 49–55 have been fragmented by insertions from a scribe associated with Trito-Isaiah and partially rewritten. He argues that Isa 55 is a transitional chapter that both anticipates Trito-Isaiah and concludes Deutero-Isaiah. However, he

disagrees with Odil Steck that Isa 35 was written as a bridge between the first and second parts of the book; instead, he holds that it emanates from the final stages of composition.

Blenkinsopp is cautious, too, in discussing the place of composition. He opts, finally, for a Babylonian context, based on the author's familiarity with the liturgy of Marduk, but recognizes that the evidence is entirely inconclusive. He argues, too, that the identity of the servant of the "servant songs" changed in the course of composition and correctly notes that, whatever they are, they are not songs (209). In the first song (42:1–4), the servant is Cyrus; following the failure of Cyrus to meet his expectations, it became the prophet, while the last servant song (52:13–53) was written following the prophet's death by one of his disciples.

Blenkinsopp devotes considerable space to the ideas and literary context of Deutero-Isaiah. He contends that, in contrast to Trito-Isaiah, "servant" does not have sectarian connotations; instead, it identifies the subject with the prophetic tradition. Only at the end of the fourth servant song, and in 54:17, do we find the beginnings of a sectarian consciousness. Similarly, Jerusalem/Zion is an empirical city that does not yet represent a "true" Israel against a false religious and political establishment. The rhetorical appeal of the sequence, which Blenkinsopp effectively describes, is directed to the whole community and not simply the converted. The servant in the fourth song introduces the dangerous idea of vicarious suffering, as a development of the traditional intercessory role of the prophets. Its corollary, however, is what Blenkinsopp calls the "breakthrough idea" of the servanthood of Israel and prophet for the world (116).

The commentary is divided into brief but comprehensive textual notes and exegetical comments. Blenkinsopp is to be commended for not losing the wood for the trees; as in the first part, he carefully guides the reader through the argument of the text, explicating interpretative difficulties, exploring rhetorical figures, and clarifying historical background. He is ethically critical, for instance, of the idea of Israelite domination, which is often mistaken for universalism; his judgment, however, is always sensitive to the nuances of the text, its tensions, and its historical context. His is not a pious reading and certainly not a canonical one; nonetheless, he does not lose an opportunity to discuss the text's often fraught afterlife in Jewish and Christian tradition. As in the first part, Ibn Ezra is a favorite resource. A sharp critique of canonical criticism is to be found, incidentally, on page 55; Blenkinsopp points out that Isa 40–55 "never functioned canonically."

Blenkinsopp considers Isa 40–55 to be diasporic literature, whether or not it was composed in Judah or Babylon. It is pervaded by a sense of "profound discontinuity" (200) and dependence on the wider Babylonian imperial culture, exemplified by the

inversion of Babylonian liturgy and the claim to supremacy of Marduk in the insistence on YHWH's incomparability and his sole responsibility for creation. The poet sought to overcome the rupture by finding reference points in the past for his community's dislocation and aspirations, notably Abraham, Jacob, and the exodus. Indeed, Blenkinsopp considers these texts to have been edited in their present form during or after the period of Deutero-Isaiah's composition.

The sequence is also a reflection on prophecy and the irrevocability of the divine word, with which it begins and ends (40:8, 55:10–11), despite the disillusionment of the community and the death of the prophet, described in the fourth "servant song" (53:8). The servant songs, in particular, introduce a self-referential dimension to the text, which is rare in prophetic literature (319–20). This, however, is related to another "fundamental issue" (315), the nexus linking power to powerlessness. The commission to act as YHWH's anointed passes from Cyrus to the prophet to his disciples. The most dispossessed and desperate of peoples, the worm Jacob (41:14), is the pivot round which the salvation of the world turns and will experience a miraculous transformation (201). This motif corresponds to the satire on imperial pretensions that Blenkinsopp rightly perceives as being a major theme in First Isaiah.

Isaiah 40–55 is less controversial than 1–39, and hence Blenkinsopp gives less of an impression of walking on eggshells. Nonetheless, his attempt to mediate between competing views and methodologies will not satisfy everyone. There are several issues that I think could have been explored further. A very significant omission from the bibliography is Antti Laato's monograph *"About Zion I Will Not Be Silent": The Book of Isaiah as an Ideological Unity* (Stockholm: Gleerup, 1998), which makes a strong case for the unity of the book from the perspective of an ancient reader and the dense interconnection of the different parts of the book. Given his rejection of the excessive atomization of the text, Blenkinsopp's attribution of the anti-idolatry polemic in Isa 40–48 to a secondary level of composition seems insufficiently supported, since it counterpoints the triumphalist rhetoric of the omnipotence of YHWH. Both Patricia Tull Willey and Benjamin Sommer have recently argued for the influence of Jeremiah on Deutero-Isaiah. For Blenkinsopp, however, correlations between Isa 40–55 and other prophetic books are incidental, certainly in comparison with the narrative tradition.

Blenkinsopp chooses, in keeping with the aims of the Anchor Bible commentary series, to foreground historical criticism over literary criticism (126). However, his discussion of the latter struck me as cursory and tendentious in the extreme. The only literary critic he addresses is David Clines, whose *I, He, We and They* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976), while brilliant, is nearly thirty years old. Edgar Conrad, Jan Fokkelman, and Peter Miscall are entirely neglected. Moreover, his treatment of literary criticism is punctuated

by an irrelevant quotation from Hamlet whose point would seem to be that it is entirely arbitrary. As any literary critic knows, this is very far from being the case.

Every commentary has its limitations, and it would be unfair to criticize Blenkinsopp for what he was not attempting. Each commentator has his or her favorite set of fellow-commentators, such as, for Blenkinsopp, Westermann, Hermisson, and Duhm. However, his approach does result in a certain disregard for the poetic qualities of Isa 40–55. Indeed, as in the first part, he doubts whether it could be appropriately characterized as poetry. The consequence is that much of the verbal richness and allusive density of the text is ignored. The puns, metaphors, and repeated phrases and motifs, such as “calling by name” in the first chapters and *mehollal* in the last, through which the language acquires its baffling, labile, and paradoxical quality, receive little attention. In this connection, the juxtaposition of concealment and revelation in 45:15–19, which Blenkinsopp mentions in passing as an attempt “to clarify a possible misunderstanding” (259), would require further exploration. As the late Robert Carroll argued, mystery and “blindsight” are of the very nature of Isaianic poetry, as of visionary poetry in general.

These reservations aside, however, Blenkinsopp’s second volume, like his first, is a tour de force of common sense, clarity, and erudition, and it will be an indispensable tool for scholarship on Isaiah for many decades to come.