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Isaiah



Childs, Brevard S.

Isaiah: A Commentary

The Old Testament Library

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Brevard S. Childs has long been recognized as an advocate of canonical theology. In this new commentary on Isaiah, he now demonstrates how his particular approach to canonical theology works out in terms of this prophetic scroll. Childs wants to be clear that he affirms both synchronic and diachronic dimensions in critical textual study. His reservations about postmodern literary analysis come from the fact that so many of those studies seem to be too restricted to synchronic analysis and are "theologically inert at best, and avowedly agnostic at worst" (4). On the other hand, Childs is also critical of those studies that are primarily diachronic, seeking to discover earlier redactional layers within a text. His own contention is that canonical authority is found not in earlier redactions but only in the preserved final text of the prophetic collection, where it becomes "a coherent witness in its final received form to the ways of God with Israel" (4). Childs has long contended that the Isaiah scroll provides the classic example of an extended redactional process, involving repeated revisions or changes over a long period of time. He has reminded us that some material in Isa 1-39 clearly seems to be as late as material in Isa 56-66. He poses the important question: Why is postexilic writing consciously represented in the scroll as the writing of the eighth-century prophet? Childs answers this question by declaring that these texts have been consciously disconnected from their original historical settings by postexilic redactors precisely so that they may be held up and preserved as the living word of the Lord—given to the prophet in his vision, but now preserved for a new audience. The writings are at this point "sacred scripture." The word of the text is not simply testimony about past events. It is a now a word about judgment and salvation for people in any age.

In many ways, this new Isaiah commentary is a monumental work. Like recent critical commentaries by Sweeney and Williamson, Childs reviews a broad range of recent scholarship on Isaiah and provides extensive bibliographical material at the start of each section. While he affirms interpretation of the final form of the text, strangely Childs still honors the traditional terminology and the classic divisions of the book first set forth by Bernhard Duhm in 1892 (1-12; 13-23; 24-27; 28-35; 36-39; 40-55; and 56-66); he regularly refers to First, Second, and Third Isaiah and has a wonderful grasp of scholarly work done on Isaiah in the past century. In each chapter, he begins by reviewing the work of form-critical scholars (whose work he largely rejects primarily because of their tendency to "atomize" the text and then make judgments about what is "authentic" and what are "later additions") and redaction critics (whose work he finds suspect because their diachronic judgments seem so often to be made on highly subjective grounds). In each section, Childs then offers his own insights in a section that he calls "Exposition." At times, though, it almost seems that his final insights would not be meaningful without the earlier discussions.

I find this volume to be a provocative and welcome addition to the current canonical debate and conversation about the Isaiah scroll. I find myself in fundamental agreement with Childs that a primary task of interpretation today should be that of discovering the theological intent of the postexilic editors and the theological meaning of the final editions of this ancient scroll for later Jewish and Christian communities of faith. Challenging later communities of faith with the message of this scroll certainly seems to have been the primary reason for preserving the scroll as sacred canon.

There are a number of places, however, where I have questions for Childs, both in terms of his approach and his final goal. How are we to understand the theological message? While critical of many other interpreters, Childs expresses deep appreciation for the work of Christopher Seitz (his former Yale colleague, to whom he dedicates this work) and, in particular, for the recent work of the Dutch scholar, W. H. Beuken, who has devoted particular attention to "intertextuality." With Beuken, Childs suggests that the larger composition of Isaiah has been shaped "by the use of a conscious resonance with a previous core of oral and written texts" (4). He contends that this perspective indicates how "the editors conceived of their task as forming a chorus of different voices and fresh interpretations, but all addressing in different ways, different issues, and different ages a part of the selfsame, truthful witness to God's salvific purpose for his people" (4).

My first question comes precisely here, however. As important as "intertextuality" has been for helping us sense the unity of the scroll, I wonder if it may not also become a distraction. Can we become so fascinated with the manner in which poetic themes or rhetorical expressions are repeated within a canonical text that we miss the intended message of a particular text? Can a preoccupation with the discovery of repeated patterns of rhetoric detract from the weighty matters of social justice and righteousness?

My second specific question has to do with the scope of canonical theology envisioned by Childs. To be fair, he does express caution about moving from the prophetic text to discuss how Isaiah was understood by New Testament writers. But I found his forays into New Testament interpretation (see particularly pp. 46, 337, 420-23, and 507-8) both arbitrary and somehow distracting. One example may suffice. At the conclusion of his discussion of the "song of the vineyard" in Isa 5, Childs speaks of the manner in which the vineyard theme is picked up in Jesus' parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants (Matt 21:33-46). Ideally, Childs suggests, the interpreter who takes seriously the witnesses of both Testaments should see that the exegetical task requires theological reflection on the relation of the two. He writes: "More is required than simply describing a history of interpretation, or of analyzing features of literary continuity. Rather, the task lies in relating the theological substance of both" (46). But how far afield can this approach lead? At what point does this broad definition of canonical theology then preclude Jewish and Christian theologians from pondering together what the theological message of Isaiah was, apart from and before the Christian era? Even when I acknowledge my own conscious and unconscious Christian biases, I am not ready to give up the historical quest of hearing "what the book of Isaiah meant" or "what it means" today on its own terms, quite apart from the New Testament.

This concern leads to my third question and primary criticism of Childs's approach. Childs seems to be in search of a truth about God that is detached or "divorced" from the historical, military, political, and social turmoils of an ancient era of history. At one very telling point, reflecting on the message of the parable in Isa 5, Childs critiques Bernhard Anderson, charging that he "has fallen back on unconvincing sociological theories of prophetic counter-cultural attacks on the 'establishment,' which are then anachronistically imposed on the text, according to leads offered by W. Brueggemann" (44). But how are we to make sense of the "parable of the vineyard" if it does not in some way involve a critique of established powers or institutions? My own conviction is that the postexilic editors wanted to preserve a vision that arose from deep prophetic involvement in political intrigue. The vision proved trustworthy through successive eras of political intrigue. I sense that the postexilic editors were also involved "in the fray" of political and religious struggles in their own time. The vision that they preserved was not intended to lead people out or away from the pains and troubles of the world. The vision stands today as it did in the late postexilic era; it is an invitation to new communities of faith—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—summoning people to walk in the ways of the Lord and to affirm the realities of justice, righteousness, and mercy in new eras and places in history.