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Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah

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This book is a revision of the author's doctoral dissertation supervised by Paul D. Hanson. The main task of the book is to make an "exhaustive study of justice (*mišpāt*) in the book of Isaiah that is sensitive to both literary and historical [and theological] concerns" (9). Intersecting through the entire book of Isaiah, this term is carefully examined in each occurrence for its correlated and divergent implications "on the understanding of justice itself and on a key theme in a major prophetic book" (15). Other related terms such as "righteousness" (*šadāqā*), "salvation" (*yəšû'â*), and "instruction" (*tôrâ*) are also examined.

The result of this study entails that "justice" in the book of Isaiah contains diverse yet correlated implications in the three divisions of the book: Isa 1–39; 40–55; and 56–66. The concept of justice in Isa 1–39 is closely associated with the sociocultural implication, whereas in Isa 40–55 it is linked to the theological issues of YHWH's sovereignty. Isaiah 56–66 then recapitulates the implication of social justice and yet with a shifted focus on the observance of the covenant. Thus, this diverse meaning of justice is defined in terms of the unique literary, historical, and theological functions. At the same time, however, it is precisely this concept of justice that links divergent contexts and contents within the book of Isaiah through the symbiotic complementarity between religious practice and

social responsibility, between divine initiative and human response, between divine salvation and judgment, and the like.

The book starts with an “Introduction: Justice Now and Then.” In this short but forceful introduction, Leclerc addresses the indispensability of justice both in the contemporary society and in ancient Israel. In various contexts ranging from the courtroom trial to television series to economic systems, all concerned people ask the question, “Will justice prevail?” (1). Likewise, in the Hebrew Bible it is not difficult to find the ubiquitous presence of the issues of justice, so often connected to the characteristics of God. Hence, the author sets out to examine justice in the book of Isaiah.

In chapter 1, “The Study of Justice in the Bible,” the author offers good rationales for undertaking this study. Despite the interest in the study of the concept of justice, “the very abundance of material creates its own problems” (7). Accordingly, Leclerc keenly adopts Rolf Knierim’s call for a systematic study on the multivalent connotations of this term in the Hebrew Bible—in Isaiah, for this case. Furthermore, the meaning of this one term varies in relation to the literary and historical implications of each occurrence. Consequently, Leclerc intends to consider sociopolitical, ethical, and legal aspects of justice. Additionally, this study can offer the theme of justice as another “connecting thread” for the increasing attention toward the unity of the book of Isaiah (15). With these rationales, Leclerc introduces a brief but insightful feature: “The term *mišpāt* is found twenty-two times in First Isaiah, eleven times in Second Isaiah, and nine times in Third Isaiah, for a total of forty-two occurrences in the book” (14).

In chapter 2, “Isaiah: The Prophet(s), the Book, the Commentators,” Leclerc takes a short detour to the compositional issues of the book of Isaiah. In so doing, he offers a wonderful service to readers concerning recent scholarship on Isaiah. This survey is succinct and informative. Addressing the complexity of the diverse approaches on the formation of the book of Isaiah, Leclerc rightly asserts the necessity and advantage to engage in a thematic study through both diachronic and synchronic analyses, with both historical-critical and literary-critical approaches. Leclerc then adds another perspective, liturgical concern, for which he will further include interpretations on the lectionary texts of Isaiah.

In chapter 3, “Isaiah 1–39,” the study focuses on the passages where *mišpāt* occurs. In light of the lexical, historical, and literary aspects, the author offers a specific meaning of the term *mišpāt* in each passage: Isa 1:10–17 (“justice” in terms of “defending the *orphan* and the *widow*” [34]); 1:21–28 (“social justice” [41]); 2:2–4 (YHWH’s sovereign role as “Judge of all the earth” [49]); 3:1–12 (judicial impartiality executed by the royally appointed civic leaders [51]); 3:13–15 (“the actual procedural action taken in court,”

where YHWH stands as both prosecutor and judge [52]); 4:2–6 (“judgment” with its parallel notion of “burning” [55]); 5:1–7 (“social justice” [56]); 5:8–24 (“social justice” [61]); 8:23–9:6 (Eng. 9:1–7; “social justice” as expected of a new king’s “acts of kindness and mercy on behalf of the weak” [64]); 10:1–4 (“social justice” [67]); 11:1–9 (“judging” as “the protection of the underclass” by the king [69]); 16:1–5 (“social justice” of the king extended to “the fugitives and refugees from Moab” [71]); 26:7–10 (“ordinances” in the plural form [72]); 28:5–13 (“justice” and “the exercise of justice in an official decision-making capacity” [77]); 28:14–22 (“social justice” [78]); 28:23–29 (semantic expression of “right instruction” [79]); 30:18–26 (God’s justice as both “punishment” and “compassion” [81]); 32:1–8 (“social justice,” especially for “the afflicted and the poor” [83]); 32:15–19 (“social justice” by the righteous king [84]); 33:5–6 (“social justice” [85]); 33:17–24 (“judging” as one of the duties of the offices of royal authority [85]); 34:5–17 (“punishment” for Edom [87]). Thus, in addition to the specific meaning of *mišpāt* in each passage, the study further displays the consistent emphasis on social justice within “the realm of human activity” rather than on “the abstract theological qualities of God” in Isa 1–39 (44).

In chapter 4, “Isaiah 40–55,” a study on *mišpāt* in light of pertinent passages follows. Again, the term is scrutinized with regard to the linguistic, historical, and literary implications of each passage: Isa 40:12–31 (the path[s] of “justice” [98]); 41:1–5 (“judgment” in the courtroom trial [102]); 42:1–4 (“both the formal outcome of the legal proceeding [verdict] and the consequent reality of YHWH’s universal rule [sovereignty]” [109]); 43:22–28 (“judgment” in the courtroom trial); 49:1–6 (the servant’s “cause” [114]); 50:4–11 (“the accuser”; “the one who declares guilty” [116]); 51:1–8 (“verdict announcing God’s just sovereignty” [120]); 52:13–53:12 (“due process of law” [123]); 54:11–17 (“judgment” in the courtroom scene [126]). Therefore, Leclerc concludes that “the concern for social justice is entirely lacking in Second Isaiah” and that “justice has taken a distinctly theological turn and functions now as an attribute of God’s sovereignty” (129).

In chapter 5, “Isaiah 56–66,” the study continues with the focus on the meaning and significance of *mišpāt* in the relevant passages: Isa 56:1–8 (“social justice,” also as “a précis of covenant obligations” [138]); 58:1–14 (“justice of God” with punishment-compassion dichotomy, and “ordinances,” respectively [140]); 59:1–20 (“social justice” in 59:8, 9, 15 and “judgment” as “punishment” in 59:11 [148–49]); 61:4–11 (justice as “proper, ethical conduct in the social realm,” i.e., “both a state of social relationships marked by ethical conduct and social structures that support community life” [154]); 66:6–16 (YHWH’s sovereign role as “Judge of all the earth” [157]). From this thorough analysis, Leclerc aptly notes a thematic shift: “The theological deployment of the theme

of justice by Second Isaiah yields to the more pressing social conditions of a community beset by strife, conflict, and injustice [in Isa 56–66]” (158).

In the concluding chapter, “Justice in Diachronic and Synchronic Perspectives,” Leclerc first summarizes the linguistic and thematic development in the diachronic study of the book of Isaiah. In Isa 1–39, justice is primarily understood within the social scope, especially with the leadership class as the target for their just treatment toward the marginalized and the poor. In Isa 40–55 of the exilic setting, “justice is related to the theological issues of incomparability and sovereignty [of YHWH alone] rather than internal social concerns” (163). In Isa 56–66, justice is linked to “the theological and social aspects in such a way as to enjoin the doing of justice as an obligation of the covenant, but with an expectation that justice can be fully realized only by a divine intervention” (165). Finally, by means of a synchronic reading, Leclerc compares the meaning of *mišpāt* with other major themes of Isaiah such as Zion, Torah, “the Way,” the Servant, and the like.

This study offers many insightful contributions. First of all, an exhaustive study on the concept of justice within the book of Isaiah is a major achievement in itself. Most commentators neglect a holistic and careful examination of this term both because they have to make comments on many other aspects and because the term *mišpāt* is itself multivalent. Leclerc’s study successfully champions the need for a systematic understanding of justice both throughout the book of Isaiah and through the lexical, historical, and theological analyses. Furthermore, Leclerc’s study not only builds on the insights of major scholars such as Moshe Weinfeld, Marvin Sweeney, and Christopher Seitz on those related issues but also comes up with its own discoveries and observations. The interpretive insight borrowed from Weinfeld’s works on the hendiadys of “justice and righteousness” is a prime example of achieving a further scholarly development on the present topic. Additionally, the book is well-written, clear, and persuasive both to the trained and general readers, along with being a superbly edited work, with only a very few typos (e.g., the biblical reference in the subheading no. 3 should be 40:14 instead of 42:14 on p. 96, and the word “be” should be inserted into the sentence, “Alternatively, it may be due to the literary structuring of the book” on p. 162). At least one reservation still lingers. The author’s discussion of the lectionary texts is enlightening. However, the way it has been formatted seems to be not so effective. It is as if eating the main meal and dessert simultaneously or reading and watching television at the same time. One may wonder whether it would be more coherent to realign all the portions on the lectionary texts to the back. Last but not least, whereas this book certainly makes a major achievement on the study of “justice” in Isaiah with its diachronic analysis, its synchronic approach seems to be noticeably lacking in comparison. Rather than a simple comparison of key themes with the concept of justice, it would be even more fruitful to read how the

concept of justice functions in the intra- or intertextual connections within the book of Isaiah and thereby what further insights this understanding may offer on the unity versus diversity of the book of Isaiah. All in all, this study of the concept of justice in Isaiah offers a major contribution not only with its penetrating literary and historical assessment and discoveries but also with many in-depth thematic and theological interpretive insights. In consequence, scholars and general readers alike will surely find this book an indispensable and enlightening dialogue partner.