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Isaiah



Childs, Brevard S.

Isaiah: A Commentary

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Brevard Childs' new commentary on the book of Isaiah constitutes a landmark in the modern critical interpretation of the book in that it is one of the first major critical commentaries to treat deliberately the book of Isaiah as a coherent, literary whole (see also John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* [WBC 24; Word: Waco, 1985]; *Isaiah 34-66* [WBC 25; Word: Waco, 1987]). It thereby joins the growing number of works by scholars who are now rethinking some of the older, diachronically-based interpretative paradigms by which the book has been interpreted throughout the twentieth century in relation to newer, synchronically-based models. Indeed, Childs is one of the early pioneers, together with Peter A. Ackroyd, Ronald E. Clements, René Lack, and others, in interpreting Isaiah as a single work. His treatment of Isaiah in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 311-338) called for an integrated reading of the book that would recognize First Isaiah's words of doom as an expression of G-d's continuing eschatological plan for Israel in all ages, i.e., sinful Israel would be punished and repentant Israel would receive salvation. In this fashion, the divine word would be fulfilled in history as Deutero-Isaiah's references to "the former things" were to be understood as First Isaiah's earlier prophecies, and "the new things" referred to the salvation yet to be realized.

As a result of this early discussion and the subsequent work that flowed from it, the regnant Duhmian paradigm of a First, Second, and Third Isaiah is now coming increasingly into question insofar as scholars have recognized the interrelationships between the three parts of the book and the influence of late-monarchic, exilic, and post-

exilic writers in chapters 1-39. This does not entail a naive rejection of the diachronic postulates of modern critical scholarship or the contention that works of Isaiah ben Amoz, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, and other writers (some of which are collectively known as Trito-Isaiah) are present in the book. After all, Isaiah provides one of the clearest examples available of a biblical book that is the product of a long history of composition, interpretation, and rewriting, that extends over the course of several centuries as the book is read and reread in relation to its various socio-historical and literary settings. Rather, it calls for new ways of conceiving the relationship between the two methodological stances in the interpretation of biblical literature. How does synchronic literary analysis free itself of the presuppositions of historical criticism so that it can function with integrity in approaching the interpretation of biblical literature as literature *per se*? How does diachronic literary analysis take account of the synchronic literary character of a biblical book without reverting to pre-critical modes of interpretation in reconstructing the literary-historical process by which the book arrived at its present form? How does the interpreter incorporate both perspectives into a single interpretative work so that both the synchronic and diachronic sides can accomplish their respective goals without compromising each other? Although some mistakenly see the two stances as diametrically opposed and antithetical, modern interpreters must learn to integrate both into their analyses. Biblical literature is, after all, both the product of its writers who produced it according to their own concerns in relation to their own socio-historical settings and its readers who construct the text and its interpretation in relation to their respective socio-historical settings—whether in the ancient or the modern world—as well. Although interpreters may face difficulties, sometimes insurmountable, on both accounts, they are not absolved from the responsibility to account for both of these dimensions of the text insofar as they are able to do so. In the case of Isaiah, one must account for its character as a single, coherent, and unified literary composition that can function as such regardless of historical setting, and its character as a composite book that comes to us from the pens of writers who lived and worked over the course of four centuries or more.

Childs notes the advances that have taken place since his 1979 treatment of Isaiah: studies of the structure of the book of Isaiah; recognition of the textualization of biblical literature; the unity of the book as a whole; and the redactional character both of the whole and of its major components. He expresses some reservations about the newer directions of research, and contends that his interpretation represents an "exegetical" approach to Isaiah rather than "a theological or hermeneutical tractate" (p. 3). He defines five areas of concern. First is his concern with the unity of the book, although Isaiah's failure to appear again after chapter 39 calls for "a much more subtle and profound theological reflection" that "will do justice both to the unity and diversity of the biblical corpus" (p. 4). Second is his reservation that a successive definition of redactional layers fails to come to grips with the final canonical form of the book as an authoritative witness to G-d's ways with Israel. Third is the recognition of the role played by intertextuality in the interpretation of the book. Fourth is his reservation concerning those who adopt a

narrowly structuralist or an exclusively synchronic approach to the book. He contends that the meaning of biblical literature is not self-contained, but points to the substance (*res*) of its witness to G-d's ways in the world. Fifth is his concern to account for Isaiah in relation to the New Testament while recognizing the task of interpreting the Old Testament in its own discrete voice and theological integrity. In an effort to trace the impact of scripture on the church, he considers the great Christian interpreters as well.

The question for Childs then is the extent to which he is able to account for both the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions of Isaiah throughout the course of his interpretation. In this reviewer's estimation, he has taken some important steps forward by attempting to interpret Isaiah both as a single book and as the product of a long redactional process, but he falls short in both his synchronic and diachronic treatment of the book by failing to grasp the full dimensions of their interrelationship in contemporary exegesis. On the one hand, he is unable to break free of the older diachronic Duhmian paradigm in his synchronic assessment of the literary character and theological message of the present of the book insofar as he basically juxtaposes the so-called First, Second, and Third Isaiahs in relation to each other. Fundamentally, texts in Childs' Isaiah function as relatively autonomous entities, whether they are major components of the book (e.g., Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah) or individual oracles, that despite his commendable recognition of the importance of intertextuality in the book, remain tied to their compositional conceptualizations even when they are read in relation to their current literary context. On the other hand, he is reluctant to pursue questions of historical interpretation as fully as modern critical tools might allow. There is insufficient engagement with text criticism, philology, and comparative Near Eastern studies as Childs prefers to pursue literary and theological concerns in the interpretation of the text. Unfortunately, the theology at times rises from the context of Childs as modern Euro-American Protestant reader rather than from the various Isaiahs, such as the ancient Judean prophet of the eighth century, the writer of the sixth or fifth century, and the uncountable redactors and later writers who performed their tasks at various times and with various agendas. Insofar as Isaiah functions as sacred scripture in Protestant churches, this is not entirely inappropriate, but interpreters must always be aware of their capacities to impose their own ideas onto a text and to ascribe them to its author(s). No matter how hard we try, none of us may escape from that charge.

These considerations may be illustrated by reference to some of Childs' own above-noted concerns in writing this commentary. The first is the question of literary structure. Although Childs well recognizes the importance of pursuing the question of unity in the present form of the book of Isaiah, his understanding of the structure of the book remains firmly rooted in the older Duhmian paradigm that posits First Isaiah in chapters 1-39, Second Isaiah in chapters 40-55, and Third Isaiah in chapters 56-66. He likewise follows Duhm in breaking down First Isaiah into sub-sections, including chapters 1-12; 13-23; 24-27; 28-35; and 36-39. Childs' discussion of each unit and sub-unit of the book comes

complete with its own introduction, which takes up both diachronic issues of form and setting and synchronic issues of function in relation to the book as a whole.

Nevertheless, this is an extremely problematic understanding of Isaiah's structure. Childs' discussion of Isaiah's structure represents his attempt to come to terms with at least one aspect of the synchronic literary character of the book, and yet it is based almost exclusively on diachronic grounds. Fundamentally, Duhm's structure represents a model for understanding the literary-historical growth of the book rather than the literary structure of its final product apart from the historical settings of its composition. Childs begins with the fundamental Duhmian recognition that Isaiah does not appear after chapters 1-39, which therefore marks the basic literary division of the book. The later definitions of chapters 40-55 and 56-66 are of course based on the clear Babylonian background of the former with its references to Cyrus, etc., and the portrayal of the returning exiles to Jerusalem and the land of Israel in the latter. This distinction likewise marks chapters 1-39 as the territory of First Isaiah, although Childs well recognizes (as did Duhm) the influence of later writers and redactors. The various sub-divisions of chapters 1-39 are based on the usual diachronic grounds of form, genre, historical setting, theme, etc. Altogether, Isaiah's presence in various historical settings characterizes the first half of the book, and his absence together with the portrayal of very different historical settings mark the second half as fundamentally different from the first.

Childs is correct to note that chapters 40-66 differ from chapters 1-39, but one must ask whether this understanding of historical setting constitutes the fundamental criterion by which the book of Isaiah presents its structure to the reader. First, as theologically conservative scholars from both Christianity and Judaism have long recognized, the book of Isaiah presents itself entirely as "the vision of Isaiah ben Amoz" (Isa 1:1), i.e., the book defines its presumed historical setting entirely in the lifetime of the eighth century prophet. There is no superscription in Isa 40:1 or 56:1 identifying a different prophet or setting for the following material. This does not undermine contentions for the historical settings in which chapters 40-55 and 56-66 were *composed*, but it does define a very different understanding of the setting in which these chapters are *presented* to the reader, i.e., the book clearly displays an argumentative or persuasive interest in contending that Isaiah ben Amoz envisioned the oracles that constitute the whole of the book. Furthermore, following Ackroyd, scholars have long recognized an interest in presenting contrasting visions of Isaiah's interactions with Ahaz and Hezekiah at times when Judah suffered invasion in chapters 6-9 (more properly 5-12) and 36-39 respectively. Insofar as the encounter with Ahaz points to judgment and subsequent restoration, and the encounter with Hezekiah points to deliverance from Assyria and subsequent Babylonian exile, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that each narrative sequence is designed somehow to be read in relation to the other and to characterize each half of the book. The issue is compounded by repeated contentions that chapters 34 and 35 were composed by Deutero-Isaiah or a disciple and the thematic and lexical parallels that exist between chapters 1 and 34. Indeed, the intertextual relationships between chapters 33 and 34-35

and the other elements of the book point to the significance of Childs' third concern with intertextual studies with implications far greater than he recognizes. He dismisses the redactional significance of such interconnections and speaks generally of their role in integrating the book, and yet they point squarely to the other major structural components in Isaiah that define the literary structure of the book as a whole (e.g., Isaiah 1; 2; 13-14; 27; 63; 65-66). When taken together with the contrasting presentations of chapters 6-9 and 36-39, this emerges as one of the criteria by which to assess the roles that chapters 33 and 34-35 play in Isaiah's synchronic structure. Both ancient (1QIsa^a) and modern authors contend that chapters 1-33 and 34-66 constitute the fundamental divisions of the book in which the first half looks forward to judgment and ultimate restoration for Jerusalem/Judah and the second half anticipates exile among the nations that will result in the return to Jerusalem and ultimate fulfillment of the world-wide scenario of peace articulated at the outset of the book (Isaiah 2-4). Isaiah appears in both halves of the book in this reading, but the second half envisions a future beyond his own lifetime. That this pattern was deliberately imposed upon the book is evident in the intertextual references to other portions of the book and in the command in Isa 34:16-17 to read the book of Isaiah, and to discern its future fulfillment. But Childs limits his reading of these verses only in reference to the fate of Edom rather than in reference to the claims of the book as a whole.

It would seem that the book of Isaiah is designed to claim that Isaiah ben Amoz knew from the beginning the process of punishment, exile, return, and restoration that Jerusalem and Judah would undergo as part of the divine plan articulated throughout the book. In essence, it represents a theological view of history that contends that some four hundred or more years of historical experience were absolutely necessary to divine purposes for the world. Such a claim may be made for Isaiah on synchronic grounds, but it cannot be made on diachronic grounds. It also represents an argument that G-d is the absolute sovereign of the world, as Childs and many others have recognized throughout all portions of the book whether diachronically or synchronically conceived. Perhaps Childs recognizes a danger in giving up the historical paradigm for the development of the book to a position that resembles too closely some of the claims for authorial unity of the book that modern critical scholars throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fought so hard to suppress, but the claims of the text must be respected in assessing the synchronic structure of the book even when they are rightfully rejected in assessing its diachronic formation. Synchronic and diachronic structure are not always the same, and yet both appear and play their respective roles within the same text.

The second concern is the question of reconstructing multiple layers of redaction for the book. Like many contemporary scholars, Childs expresses reservations about the ability of modern critical scholars to reconstruct with precision redactional layers in a text. And yet it is striking that his view of the literary structure of Isaiah is based precisely on such a redaction-critical postulate. Even at this fundamental level of analysis, it becomes apparent that material in chapters 1-39 must be read in relation to at

least two historical and literary settings, one of which purportedly presupposes the historical setting of the eighth century B.C.E. and whatever literary form the oracles of Isaiah would have appeared in at that time, and the other of which purportedly presupposes the historical setting of the sixth century B.C.E. (or later) in which it is read in relation to the material ascribed to Second Isaiah. If one distinguishes between Second and Third Isaiah (whether or not one considers Third Isaiah to be an individual or the work of several writers), a third level of historical and literary context appears against which the material of First (and Second) Isaiah must be read. Childs expresses his reservations concerning the possibility of reconstructing a late-monarchic Josianic or Assyrian redaction of the text, but even if such a possibility is eliminated he still must contend with at least three levels of historical and literary context for the reading of material in First Isaiah. It seems unlikely that interpreters should assume that a sixth or fifth century reader, who presumably would encounter the work of Second Isaiah in relation to First Isaiah, would read material from Isaiah ben Amoz in the same way that an eighth century reader would. An eighth century reader would understand the royal oracle in Isa 9:1-6 in relation to a Davidic monarch, whether it be Ahaz, Hezekiah, or a figure yet to be born, but a sixth century reader would have some difficulties in relation to Second Isaiah's contention that Cyrus is YHWH's chosen monarch and the historical reality that a son of David does not sit on the throne in Jerusalem. Childs' argument that the royal oracle must be read in relation to the so-called "servants" among the people of Israel (see Isaiah 55) misses an essential point, i.e., servants serve the king, and in this case, YHWH states that the king is Cyrus. Certainly in the years following Cyrus' rule, after the impending collapse of the Persian empire became clear, the oracle would be read differently, especially in relation to Trito-Isaiah's contention that YHWH is the king (Isaiah 66). Indeed, the contention that YHWH is king would remain relevant throughout the nearly two millennia of Judaism's exile from the land of Israel, both to Jews and to Christians who would read the book of Isaiah in relation to their respective understandings of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. and the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 C.E. The specification of redactional settings for the reading of Isaian literature does not detract from reading the oracles of the book in relation to the whole; it shows something of the hermeneutics and the historical circumstances by which the book was read and by which it came to be a whole.

Childs charges that such work overly politicizes or historicizes the book; he is correct in this charge insofar as he well recognizes that, like all texts, the book stands apart from and beyond the circumstances and concerns of its composition. But such work not only entails consideration of the political and historical circumstances in which the book is composed; it also entails consideration of the political and historical circumstances in which the book will function beyond the setting of its composition. This raises Childs' fourth concern that biblical literature is not self-contained, but functions in relation to the substance (*res*) of its witness to G-d's ways with the world. It is precisely at this point that historical and political context become crucial. Unfortunately, Childs adopts the position of many interpreters that G-d's ways with the world are to be defined in relation to a

future eschatological ideal beyond normal human experience in which the utopian claims of the book are to be realized as the presence of G-d is manifested throughout the world. This represents one view of theology, i.e., the witness to G-d and the world beyond this, that plays such an important role in much of Christian theology. But one must ask whether Childs' self-avowedly theocentric focus indeed represents a means to escape from or to deny the realities of this world. However ideally that res might be conceived, it is understood only in relation to the realia of human beings, themselves rooted in the historical circumstances and perspectives that define their respective world views, who attempt to apprehend that res. This inevitably entails consideration of the setting of the reader. Does Childs' theocentric approach entail the abandonment of human responsibility to act in this world to bring about the ideal? Christians and those of other religious traditions well know that such eschatological images function as an ideal from beyond that calls for earthly transformation in the form of hard political and historical action in this world, i.e., biblical theology can not isolate itself from the political and historical world. It must be both theocentric and anthrocentric. Childs will know this function well from his teacher Karl Barth, who pointed to divine kingship as the antithesis to the Nazi regime of World War II, with the implicit call for Christians to resist the evil in their own political and historical world. (In this context, it is noteworthy that Hedwig Jahnow, a student of Gunkel whose dissertation on the dirge in biblical literature Childs cites in his commentary, was murdered by the Nazis in 1944 at Theresienstadt because her father was Jewish.) One may point also to other politicized and historical attempts to implement the ideals of Isaiah, such as the early Zionist pioneers, Korean Christianity's resistance of the Japanese occupation in World War II, the activists of the Soviet Jewry movement, those who build houses for the Habitat for Humanity program, and countless others. Of course, no interpreter can anticipate the many ways in which the ideals of Isaiah may be acted upon, but this highlights the point that the witness to the substance of G-d's ways in the world cannot be constricted only to an eschatological ideal--we all want peace, but what does that mean? Rather, it must be considered in relation to the political and historical realities in which that substance is expressed. Thus the reality of historical and political contexts in the past points to those of the future which Isaiah will also address. It also points to the changing conceptions of what the statements of Isaiah mean.

In this respect, it should also be noted that the usual expressions understood in reference to eschatology, "and it shall come to pass in the latter days," "in that day," "the day of YHWH," etc., only achieved their eschatological understanding by means of their rendition in the Septuagint and in the later contexts of Judaism's expectations for the restoration of the Temple and the land of Israel or Christianity's understanding of the eschatological significance of Christ. Fundamentally, they refer simply to the future when the punishment and restoration of Jerusalem will take place. Do modern biblical scholars and theologians need to wait for the eschaton to begin implementing the ideals of Isaiah? Or should they follow the example of the admittedly hypothetical writers of the book and begin that implementation in the present?

Finally, Childs' concern with the substance of theology raises a question that he does not ask, and it demands to be posed in the aftermath of the Shoah (Holocaust) and in relation to Isaiah's own assertion that G-d hides the divine face (Isa 8:17). This is the question of divine evil. As noted above, the book of Isaiah is designed to contend that YHWH is the divine sovereign whose plan for the world guides the course of world events. In short, Isaiah at first glance appears to be designed to assert divine righteousness. Alternatively, it may be considered that the book is designed to defend divine righteousness against the claims of those who asserted that YHWH was dead or defeated or absent or unwilling to act in the face of the national destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Modern interpreters must remember that, much like modern Jews, ancient Judeans faced the possibility of national and cultural extinction and the unavoidable theological questions that would follow in the wake of YHWH's failure to keep the long-held promises of the eternal rule of the house of David and the security of Jerusalem. It is noteworthy, therefore, that YHWH calls upon Isaiah to prevent the people from realizing their sins and repenting from them unless they would be saved and thwart the divine plan (Isaiah 6). It is also noteworthy that Ahaz is condemned by Isaiah after he piously states that he would not challenge YHWH (Isaiah 7), and that the book ends with the corpses of the wicked strewn about rather than the ideals of world peace articulated at the outset of the book (Isa 66:24; cf. Isa 2:2-4). Such portrayals raise the possibility that the authors of Isaiah, whether the prophet himself or the later writers, wrestled with the problem of divine evil in relation to the suffering of Jerusalem and Judah in antiquity. The book thereby emerges as a form of theodicy in that their answer was that Jerusalem and Judah were the wicked parties who were at fault, not G-d. Surely, this question deserves consideration in the context of a commentary that is concerned with the substance of G-d's ways with the world.

There is obviously much more to discuss in this commentary, and the issues raised here should not be taken as a condemnation of Childs' work or the significance of his considerable achievement. It represents the fruit of the mature thought, in relation both to exegesis and theology, of a scholar with a reputation for the relentless pursuit of truth who has long grappled with the interpretative issues posed by Isaiah. In this respect, Childs' commentary on Isaiah, like all biblical scholarship, must be regarded as a starting point for discussion and action. Readers will be in his debt for decades to come for the insights that he places in our hands.