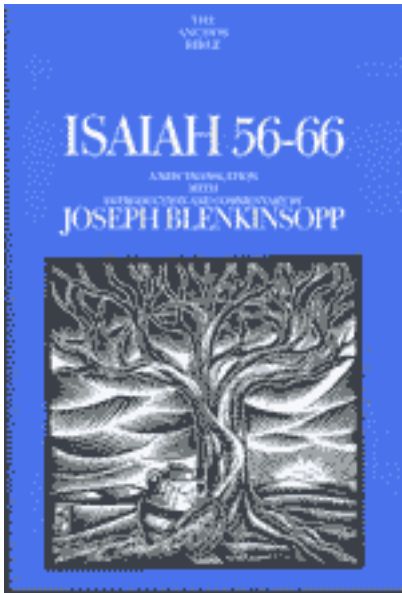


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Blenkinsopp, Joseph

Isaiah 56–66

Anchor Bible 19B

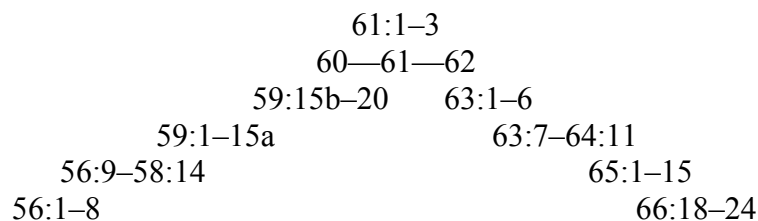
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Joseph Blenkinsopp's Anchor Bible commentary on Isa 56–66 is masterful. Blenkinsopp combines insightful analysis with an encyclopedic knowledge of the literature on Third Isaiah to produce a commentary that is sensitive to textual, literary, and historical issues. As such, this volume serves as a fitting companion for his earlier Anchor Bible works on Isa 1–39 and 40–55.

There are several issues that face scholars of Trito-Isaiah. What is the literary structure of this section of the canonical text? What historical context (or contexts) best account(s) for its message, and how should it be dated? How is it related to the earlier sections of Isaiah? What textual traditions from the Hebrew Bible was its author (or authors) interacting with and reflecting on? What was the shape of the community to which it was addressed? Blenkinsopp answers these types of questions (and more) in his extensive introduction and returns to many of them throughout the body of the commentary. The introduction is comprised of seven parts: (1) "Isaiah 56–66 as Part of the Book of Isaiah"; (2) "The Literary Character of Isaiah 56–66"; (3) "Isaiah 56–66 in Its Historical Context"; (4) "The Formation of Isaiah 56–66"; (5) "Text and Ancient Versions"; (6) "Chapters from the Early History of the Interpretation of Isaiah 56–66"; and (7) "Aspects of the Theology of Isaiah 56–66."

Blenkinsopp proposes that Isa 60–62 form the central core of Isa 56–66 and identifies a triangular or pyramid-like structure for the book. At the apex of the pyramid is Isa 61:1–3, where we hear a “first-person declaration of the prophetic author’s identity and mission” (61). In this passage the prophetic figure (a disciple of the Servant of Isa 40–55) claims to have received the “Spirit of the Lord” and proclaims, among other things, “good news to the poor . . . freedom to the captives, release to those in prison.” In addition, the prophet proclaims that the year of YHWH’s pleasure has arrived and will bring consolation to those who mourn and joy to those whose spirits are “drooping.” These, Blenkinsopp suggests, represent a response to the very real challenging economic conditions of the Persian period (he draws upon Neh 5:1–5 and various passages within Isa 56–66 as indicating an impoverished community; see 218–27). Here, and elsewhere, Blenkinsopp sees a theme of reversal of fortunes at work for at least a portion of the Judean community. The rest of the book’s structure may be outlined as follows:



In these parallel passages we find the following central themes (respectively): YHWH is a warrior and vindicator; community laments; critiques of heterodox practices and general community religious practices; a positive assessment of Gentiles, proselytes, and others who were previously rejected, such as eunuchs (61). Blenkinsopp demonstrates throughout the commentary numerous connections with the rest of Isaiah. In his view, the linkages between 40–55 and 56–66 are quite strong, and these two sections existed together as a unit before being connected to 1–39. However, he understands the final verses of Isa 66 as reiterating some of the themes of Isa 1 and therefore as an editorial link, a type of “envelope structure” that brings the entire book together as a canonical unit (62–63, 293, 316–17).

One of the features of the commentary that is particularly impressive is Blenkinsopp’s sensitivity to issues of intertextuality. Since Blenkinsopp sees the traditions in Isa 56–66 as originating in the Persian period, he also sees connections with much of the biblical materials that presumably were known by the tradent(s) of Trito-Isaiah. He is able to draw explicit parallels with some of the traditions that originated in the Persian period itself, such as Haggai-Zechariah and Malachi, which one might expect. He also draws direct parallels between Isa 56–66 and portions of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Deuteronomic

tradition (broadly conceived), the ancestor stories of Genesis as well as the primeval history. At the same time that he makes these connections he warns that “the mere recurrence of a word or phrase does not by itself constitute a case of conscious and deliberate modeling or, much less, of intertextuality” (306).

As important as the literary shape of Isa 56–66 is its historical context. Commentators have assigned dates for these traditions ranging from late Neo-Babylonian/early Persian to Hellenistic periods. Blenkinsopp recognizes well the “poverty of our knowledge” (42, and reiterated throughout the commentary) concerning the province of Yehud in the Persian period, yet he succeeds in combining the relevant textual and archaeological data available to reconstruct an historical context that at once explains and is informed by the traditions within Isa 56–66. Blenkinsopp would date the bulk of the materials to the early- through middle-Persian period (i.e., roughly 540–450) and sees several important connections between Third Isaiah and the Ezra-Nehemiah traditions. And, while he sees within Isa 56–66 evidence of internal schism within the Judean community, he rejects out of hand the sharp distinction drawn by Hanson between the “hierocrats” and “visionaries.” The bulk of the material, he argues, does not fit the pattern of apocalyptic literature; it lacks a clearly defined dualism, does not periodize history, and lacks mythic motifs, and its revelation is not mediated by a supernatural being (88–89). While it does contain imagery often associated with apocalyptic literature (249–50, 307–8), it is best characterized as eschatological in nature, which explains why Third Isaiah was heavily drawn upon by later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writers.

According to Blenkinsopp, there is a shift in emphasis from the earliest to the latest texts of Isa 56–66 and, further, in texts from Second and Third Isaiah. While Isa 40 opens with a declaration of comfort for the entire (exiled) Judean community, in Isa 56–66 the prophet offers consolation only to a portion of the community. Some of these texts offer a more universal or inclusive attitude (allowing eunuchs and Gentiles to be part of the covenant community) and show the importance of Sabbath observation for the community. Others condemn all sorts of heterodox practices (see, esp. Isa 57:3–13; 65:1–7; 66:3–4), ones that were common at the end of the monarchy and many scholars had presumed ended with the exile. These practices, Blenkinsopp proposes, were under the direct control of the temple authorities. He suggests that the strident tone of these passages indicates that by the middle of the Persian period the separation between the competing communities was irreparable. He believes that the prophet saw himself and his supporters as legitimate descendants of the Servant of Isa 40–55 and compares them with those who tremble out of reverence for YHWH’s Word (cf. Isa 66: 2, 5 and Ezra 9–10). The *haredim* and *‘abadim* (Blenkinsopp understands these two terms as referring to the same group of people) of Isaiah had been excommunicated by their adversaries and, in turn, sought divine vengeance against them and thus a reversal of fortunes. Their

shunning, therefore, contributed to an eschatological orientation common to sectarian communities. Blenkinsopp also rejects the typical juxtaposition of legal and prophetic impulses and assumes a certain commonality between prophetic word and legal tradition: “It is fundamentally erroneous to assume an opposition between the prophetic and the legal; witness the insistence on observance of the covenant and Sabbath in 56:1–6 and 58:13–14 by a writer who indubitably thought of himself as a prophet” (299). He likewise questions the common assumption that the tensions reflected in Isa 56–66 represent a differentiation between the “Judeo-Babylonians” (i.e., the *golah* community) and the native Judeans, as Ezra 9–10 indicts some of the “Babylonian” priests with committing “abomination” (300).

Blenkinsopp’s commentary marks a substantial contribution to our understanding not only of Isa 56–66 but also of the historical and religious dimensions of the Judean community during the Persian period. It is marked by consistently exhaustive and erudite scholarship, a sensitivity to theological and social issues, and a widespread use of later Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions concerning this short, but important, prophetic work.