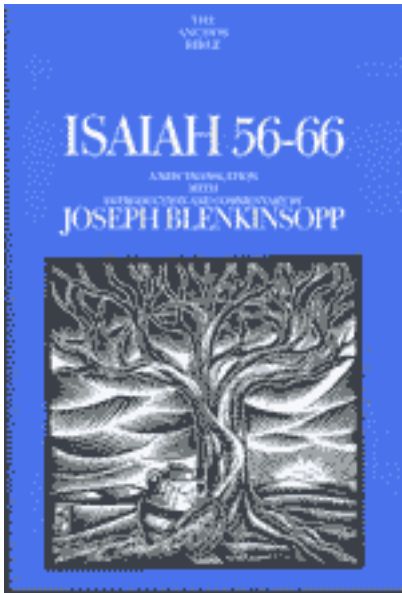


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Blenkinsopp, Joseph

Isaiah 56–66

Anchor Bible 19B

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In the preface to this the final volume of Joseph Blenkinsopp's three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on Isaiah, he apologizes for having written the volume in the space of only one year. An apology is unnecessary. This commentary is a polished and deeply coherent work written by a master scholar in command of his subject matter.

What kind of writing is Isa 56–66? “Isaiah 56–66 does not constitute what most people today would recognize as a literary work. . . . It is what we might call *extreme* writing, a product of critical situations of which it was a part and to which it contributed. . . . Whatever opinion we form on their literary quality, it remains true that these chapters are not *belles lettres*. They fall into the category of polemical writing, produced to advance particular causes and to make an impact on the course of events” (37, 41). A significant component of Blenkinsopp's commentary is devoted to an explication of the relationship between Isa 56–66 and earlier prophecy (especially Isa 40–55) and to the development of a plausible hypothesis to account for the polemical aspect of these final chapters of Isaiah.

In spite of occasional but persistent challenges to the contrary, Blenkinsopp argues that it still makes the most sense to speak of Trito or Third Isaiah, although he finds no authorial unity in Isa 56–66. Numerous authorial hands can be detected, and the chapters are best understood as an example of *Fortschreibung*, or “ongoing writing.” Chapters 56–66 are

distinct but nevertheless closely related to 40–55, and the authors who produced these chapters are identified as “the bearers of the Deutero-Isaianic prophetic tradition.” The relationship to chapters 1–39 is not nearly as strong. The continuity of 56–66 with 1–39 is in terms of the great general themes of the book of Isaiah, but the specifics of 56–66 reveal much closer knowledge of Jeremiah, especially Jer 1–12, than of Isa 1–39. Here Blenkinsopp argues directly against Childs and Seitz. In terms of setting, Blenkinsopp reads most of Isa 56–66 against the general historical background of the first century of Persian rule in Yehud, roughly 522–424 B.C.E., and his summary of the Persian period (42–54) is exceptional. The book of Isaiah does not reach its final form until the Hellenistic period, and 1:27–31 and 66:17–24 date to this point. These twin passages are part of a “bracketing or enveloping editorial procedure,” designed to unify the book of Isaiah “*in some sense*” (35).

Blenkinsopp argues at length that, though lacking authorial unity, Isa 56–66 has not been thrown together haphazardly but rather reveals an intentional pyramid-like structure: a-b-a. The corresponding chapters are 56–59; 60–62; 63–66. Chapters 60–62 (which also have the closest affinity to 40–55) are at the top of the pyramid and describe the ideal community scenario, while 56–59 and 63–66 describe the actual conditions within the postexilic community. The central section, 60–62, also reveals an a-b-a structure: 60:1–22; 61:1–3; 61:4–62:12. This makes 61:1–3 the “exact center” of 60–62, and “61:1–3 is, in effect, the signature of the prophetic author of chapters 60–62” (39).

As is so often the case in Blenkinsopp’s work, he is interested in reconstructing the social reality both reflected and concealed by the biblical text. Behind Isa 40–66 he posits an original charismatic prophetic individual (“the Servant”) who attracted disciples (“the Servants”). These disciples then formed something like a prophetic and scribal school in the wake of the death of the leader, and this school would eventually develop into a full-blown sect. This social and religious phenomenon Blenkinsopp regards as a recurring feature of Second Temple Judaism, directly analogous to what would later go on at Qumran and in the early Christian movement. Blenkinsopp’s overarching thesis with respect to Isa 56–66 thus looks like this: Isa 56–66 is the work of a Deuteronomistically influenced prophetic-eschatological sect of mid-fifth-century Yehud. The roots of the sect are to be found in the anonymous prophet responsible for the core of Isa 40–55, whose death is described in Isa 53 and perhaps alluded to in 57:1. This group came to be highly antagonistic toward the religious authorities in charge of the Jerusalem temple and would eventually be excluded or excommunicated from the cult community.

Throughout the commentary, Blenkinsopp resists traditional misleading dichotomies such as priestly/prophetic, universalist/integrationist, legal/eschatological, legal/prophetic, and so forth. He reminds the reader that sectarianism, prophetic-eschatological consciousness,

and legal rigorism often go together. This is crucial for Blenkinsopp, for he draws a direct connection between the “Servants” referred to in several places in Third Isaiah and the “Tremblers” of Isa 66: these are one and the same group. In addition, the “Tremblers” of Isa 66 and the “Tremblers” of Ezra 9–10 are also one and the same group. These Servants/Tremblers combine in one and the same group two things that have often been considered mutually exclusive: rigorist legal interpretation and intense expectation of an “imminent and catastrophic divine intervention in human history” (52). Though Isa 65–66 and Ezra 9–10 refer to the very same group, the texts reflect different stages in the history of the group, for the Servants/Tremblers are persecuted and out of power in Isa 65–66, but the Tremblers of Ezra 9–10 are in power and in position to dictate policy in the community. Blenkinsopp considers it possible that the exclusion or excommunication of the Servants/Tremblers from the community, as reflected in Isa 65–66, may have resulted from the negative reaction on the part of the “priestly and lay aristocracy” to Ezra’s “drastic solution to intermarriage” (54). Together with 56:1–8 (which reflects opposition to Nehemiah’s program), chapters 65–66 represent the latest material in Third Isaiah (excepting 66:17–24), as well as the latest stage in the development of the group that can be detected.

These “bearers of the Deutero-Isaianic tradition,” to whom we owe Isa 56–66, were characterized by “fierce opposition to any kind of syncretism” and by “an uncompromising ‘YHVH alone’ theology” (37). Blenkinsopp regards these characteristics, as well as the redefinition of the prophets as “servants of YHVH,” as the surest evidence that the group has been thoroughly influenced by “post-disaster Deuteronomists” (79).

With regard to the overall outlook of Isa 56–66, two questions have been hotly debated in Third Isaiah scholarship: (1) Is Third Isaiah antitemple? (2) Can Third Isaiah be described as apocalyptic writing? To the first question Blenkinsopp answers with a resounding no. On the whole, Blenkinsopp views Third Isaiah’s attitude toward the temple as consistent with that of the Deuteronomists. On the specific issue of 66:1ff., he argues that “the gravamen was . . . not against the temple itself. . . . it was instigated by opposition to those who controlled, or were about to control, the operations of the temple” (296). The issue being opposed in 66:1ff. is the same as that opposed elsewhere in 56–66: “the involvement of temple personnel in syncretistic cult practices” (297), an involvement that was a carry-over from known preexilic practices.

With regard to the apocalyptic character of 56–66, Blenkinsopp provides a nuanced answer. On the one hand, Isa 56–66 lacks many of the fundamental attributes of apocalyptic texts such as Daniel and *Enoch*: clear dualism, belief in two ages, periodization of history, a narrative framework, mediation of revelation through a supernatural being, mythical motifs, and pseudonymity. On the other hand, “everything

in 56–66 is decisively oriented to the future” (89), and the future that is anticipated is sharply discontinuous with the present. Thus, “the world view of chs. 56–66 is best described as that of prophetic eschatology but with elements that serve as material for the divinely scripted apocalyptic dramas of the Greco-Roman period” (89).

Blenkinsopp’s style is clear and concise, which is a major accomplishment in itself, given the nature of the texts that he is interpreting here. He is never mean-spirited in his dialogue with other scholars, whether living or dead. The commentary satisfies all of the standard and mundane requirements of a biblical commentary as well as provides numerous examples of truly brilliant exegesis of difficult passages (see, e.g., 57:1–2). In addition, Blenkinsopp formulates bold hypotheses that will shape Third Isaiah studies for the foreseeable future.