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NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS ISAIAH: BACK TO THE FUTURE

A twelfth century manuscript of Jerome's commentary on Isaiah in Durham Cathedral Library shows Isaiah with a scroll in each hand. On one is written *Ecce Virgo Concipiet* and on the other *Secretum meum mihi, secretum meum mihi, vae mihi* (my secret is with me, my secret is with me, woe is me -Isaiah 24:16). Jerome is looking up and exhorting him "*Dic tu Isaias, dic testimonium Christi* (Go on Isaiah, tell them about Christ)."ⁱ But modern scholarship would question whether Isaiah necessarily tells us about Christ at all. And is it Isaiah talking, or are we listening to some anonymous scribe in Babylon? And just how many authors have written this manuscript? There is probably no more mysterious book than Isaiah in the Bible. Its depth, its enigmas, its scope, and its tensions have left theologians hopelessly in disarray for over a hundred years. Evangelicals have often felt isolated, as they struggle to defend the integrity of the book. So, I begin with what I perceive to be the principal point of discussion: is there one book of Isaiah or two or three?

THE UNITY OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

It was not uncommon for ancient books to be divided into two parts. The reason was not just stylistic: making the individual scrolls shorter would be a considerable advantage. It is hardly surprising, then, that from early days commentators would see a natural division in the book of Isaiah around chapter 40. Not only that, but in the second century AD Moses ben Samuel Ibn Gekatila even attributed the chapters 40-66 to a different author, an unknown Second Temple scribe, a view also expressed by Inb Ezra (1092-1167). However those were minority views, and most scholars endorsed the belief in one author, but would agree with, for example, Luther that "we rightly divide (it) into two books."ⁱⁱ

All this changed in the modern period. J.C. Doderlein (1775) and J.G. Eichorn (1780-83) were among the most notable in developing a comprehensive view of dual authorship. They argued that the historical setting of 40-66 reflected the Exile, the language style and ideas differed markedly from 1-39 and that it would be unreasonable to expect a prophet to make detailed prediction of events 150 years in the future. At the end of the nineteenth century the debate moved further forward when Bernhard Duhm published his commentary in 1892. He argued persuasively that only chapters 1-39 can be attributed to Isaiah, and even these chapters are a complex literary collection of writings some of which he believed came from the Maccabean era. Only a few prophecies came from Isaiah himself (6:1ff, 7:2-16, 8:1-18, 28:1-30).ⁱⁱⁱ Although Duhm did see some unity in the finished book, the tendency in the immediate aftermath was to divide the book firmly into two or three sections written by First Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah and (usually also) Trito-Isaiah. The majority of modern scholars would still broadly follow those divisions while acknowledging that there is a core of Isaian material with additions from different periods. They would, however, admit that there is rather more connection in the material of the three sections than those earlier critics recognised. There also remains a smaller conservative element among theologians who believe that there is a much greater unity in the book than usually acknowledged.

A trawl through the introductions to the different commentaries on the shelves of the Bangor University Library will furnish you with many of the arguments for dividing the book into sections. There is, for example, no prose in chapters 40-66 where Jerusalem and Judah are only mentioned together once in comparison to their frequent mention in 1-39. In the second half of the book the suffering servant appears 19 times, and God as Father six times, while these do not occur at all in the first part. The term *God of Hosts* comes 56 times in 1-39, but only six times in 40-66; the *Spirit of God* only once in 1-39 compared to over twenty times in 40-66. While 1-39 is full of clear, distinct, historical references, these are nearly absent from 40-66, except for Cyrus and a general context of the exile.^{iv}

Doubtless the book of Isaiah falls naturally into two sections, and there is no question about the large number of different styles, contents and subjects in the prophecies from beginning to end. I have to agree with B. S Childs that “the recognition of the remarkable diversity within the book of Isaiah, the presence of literary seams, and the signs of redactional reworking are not to be gainsaid, but welcomed by anyone seriously concerned with understanding the biblical text.”^v However, we need not reject the essential unity of the book in its canonical form as we do so.

There are reasonable grounds to identify unifying elements in the book. The New Testament frequently quotes from and alludes to all three sections of the book of Isaiah: 50 times from chapters 1-39, 168 from chapters 40-55 and 89 from chapters 56-66.^{vi} Jewish and Christian tradition attribute the whole book to Isaiah. There is no evidence whatsoever that either 1-39 or 40-66 ever circulated as independent books. While there is certainly a difference in some of the content between 1-39 and 40-66, that is not unusual for a literary work which is divided into two parts. It is not proof that the two halves had independent origins. We must acknowledge that while there are differences, there are also plenty of similarities of language and concepts. The more I read the book of Isaiah the more I am struck by the links between the two sections.

Von Rad emphasized the impossibility of separating the speech forms from the *Sitz im Leben* in which the form had originally been located. We must treat each prophet individually and acknowledge that they possess strong regional and historical elements in their work.^{vii} Isaiah, of course, is the great spokesman for Zion. Themes such as those in Psalm 46 or 48 are at the heart of his prophecy. If in 40-66 Zion is projected as a theological ideal in some eschatological context, it has its basis in the man who defended its integrity during his years as a prophet. From his bruising and disappointing encounter with Ahaz on the road to the Launderer’s field in chapter 7 to the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem in chapter 37 we find Isaiah insisting on God’s special interest in the city. Clements argues that the Zion of 40-55 is a fusion of the remnant concept and Zion in 2 Kings 19:31/Isaiah 37:32: “For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this”(NIV).^{viii} Many of the great eschatological leaps of 40-66 are also to be found in 1-39.

Alec Motyer points out another important linking element: “The broad theological unity of the Isaianic literature is secured by its almost exclusive claim to the title “The Holy One of Israel”. When we consider that such a distinctive insistence on the particular, national God is not in the least suited to a prophecy with such a universalistic message as chapters 40-55 we have to ask, not why but, how a prophet other than Isaiah could have decided to use it.”^{ix} While “The Holy One of Israel” is used more frequently in 1-39, the fact that it appears in both sections of the books points to their unity. Motyer concludes that Isaiah is not a near-random collection of texts by editors who did not understand them, but a literary unit which reflects the message they wanted to transmit.

To argue for the literary unity of the book does not oblige us to fix its creation in the eighth century. Clements feels that defending the unity of 8th century origins is like the tail wagging the dog, as we would be forced to ignore the most obvious reading of texts which clearly refer to the period of the Babylonian Exile.^x While I would date the book in the time of the Exile I cannot find any evidence or argument strong enough to convince me that chapters 40-66 were a later bolt-on to 1-39. For example, it is impossible to identify the servant with any figure in 1-39 but far from proving that the servant passages belong originally to an entirely different corpus of documents, their inclusion in the second half of the book points to some future fulfillment. Israel, the historical people from Isaiah to the exile is a flawed, failing servant, so some new servant who hears and obeys the word of God must appear. The suffering servant has to wait until Israel has been exposed and judged before he can appear as the true servant. He could not have made an entrance in chapters 1-39. The two sections of the book quite deliberately take different subject matter and milieu, but that does not destroy its essential unity.

THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

I have deliberately dealt with the unity of the book first, because once that is established we can better decide who wrote it. It will be clear from the above that I cannot bring myself to believe in a First, a Deutero and Trito-Isaiah, although its formation may well have been more complicated than that. I do not believe that Isaiah

was responsible for the final canonical shape of the book. Clement maintains that to believe in the non-Isaian authorship “appears to challenge the widely accepted assumption of evangelical scholarship that the biblical ascriptions of authorship reflect directly upon the understanding of its authority.”^{xi} Like Clements I am unsympathetic to this view, for we must allow our doctrinal affirmation of the inspiration of scripture to include the editors who wrote the books in their canonical form. We do this all the time with the Gospel accounts of what Jesus said. Although he spoke in Aramaic, we have a literary version of those discourses and dialogues in Koine Greek. It is this version of his words which is authoritative to us, not the original Aramaic words which were not recorded except in translation. As evangelicals we need to focus our claims of authority on the biblical text as we receive it, not as it was originally delivered. So, it is Isaiah’s words as they are presented in the Book of Isaiah that become our primary interest as authoritative Scripture. We cannot know for sure how many of his original words we possess. This does not mean that the original words were not also inspired, but we do not have direct access to them.

Exactly how Isaiah’s words have been filtered down to us is not clear because we are unable to compare them to his original work. He appears in the book as an historical character, in the third person. There is a little bit of first person text in 1-39 (his vision being the obvious example) and perhaps another in Isaiah 48:16: "Come near me and listen to this: ‘From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there. And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, with his Spirit.’” (NIV)^{xii} Although chapters 40-66 are usually assumed to be written from Babylon there is surprisingly little direct reference to that city. It is cited just four times: as a place of captivity (43:14), as a city doomed to fall (47:1), as a locus of divine punitive action (48:14), and as a point of departure of the returnees (48:20). And Cyrus is named as its conqueror in 44:28 and 45:1.^{xiii} As Whybray states: “When we search for evidence of the prophet's residence in Babylon, we are surprised how hard it is to find any that is convincing.”^{xiv} The exiled Jews would have found new meaning in Isaiah’s original prophecies, even if he had not addressed a Babylonian exile as such. A redaction would have taken place which accommodated them to the new reality.^{xv}

I find unconvincing the frequently cited theory that the book of Isaiah was assembled by a school of his disciples. There is not the remotest trace of evidence for such a school, and it is hard to believe that a school of his disciples would continue for 150 years. There was a school of theologians who assembled the canonical books in their final form, but I do not believe they were specifically disciples of Isaiah, although they owed him a huge debt and respect. Clements, commenting on Herman Barth, states, “Isaiah’s messages had been primarily responsible for providing a religious interpretation of Judah’s situation during the Assyrian assaults upon the Judah and Israel in the years from 735 to 701BC, his sayings would also offer a key to when the time of Assyrian domination would end.”^{xvi} This is true enough, and his prophecies would have been an even greater consolation at the time of the exile. In whatever form they were handed down through the generations,^{xvii} they were given new depth and vision by the tragedy of 587 BC and it is after this date that we must set its final redaction.

One argument put forward by the most conservative scholars runs along the lines that if Isaiah did not pen chapters 40-66 then they must have been written by a theological genius. How could such a man remain anonymous? “If this unknown individual had actually been all that was claimed for him by Duhm and others, and is to be regarded as one of the greatest, if not the most notable of the Hebrew prophets, it would indeed be most surprising if every trace of this eminent and talented man had been so completely erased from Hebrew tradition that not even his name had managed to survive”^{xviii} It is impossible to refute this argument, but arguments from silence are never satisfactory.

To summarize my position: I believe that a large section of the prophecies of the book of Isaiah stem from Isaiah himself, but have been adapted and reinterpreted down the years until, under inspiration of the Spirit of God, they were embedded in the book which now forms part of our canon.^{xix} While I agree with Clements when he states that “alongside the literary currents that gave rise to the prophetic books, there took place a larger work of forming a prophetic corpus of writing that now constitutes the *neb'im* – the second (Hebrew) part of the OT canon,” I believe that this book was written consciously as canonical Scripture.^{xx} Those who formed the canon did not find this book ready-made and include it. It was purposely written for our enlightenment and encouragement.^{xxi} So then, what does the canonical shape of the book tell us?

THE CANONICAL PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

It is not theologically naive to insist on beginning with the final, complete text rather than to dismantle it, trying to find its sources. Clements argues “We must first ask questions as to the type of literature that it is and the purposes that it was intended to fulfill. We may go on to ask whether it should be regarded as shaped to fulfill such intentions from the outset, or whether it has simply been adapted to do so.”^{xxii} So let us look at the shape of the book.

The contrast between the first and second sections is dramatic. Chapters 1-35 are rooted in the history of Jerusalem in Isaiah’s troubled times. Hezekiah, for all he was a godly man, saw his nation ransacked by Sennacherib, the treasures of the temple handed over in tribute and then Jerusalem saved at the very last minute by divine intervention. Throughout this section of the book, however, there are eschatological passages hinting at some future when Zion will draw the nations in holiness and homage to Yahweh. We would expect a similar historical footing to buttress the Babylonian section. But it does not happen. Instead, after an historical bridging section (chapters 36-39), there are almost no historical references in 40-66. The question left hanging in the air is ‘If God delivered Jerusalem in 701 why not in 587?’ The effect, as Childs notes, is that the prophecies have been set free. Even though Isaiah is addressing an exilic or post-exilic future, the message has become eschatological: a “continuing message of God's plan for his people in all ages.”^{xxiii} The return of the exiles is not going to usher in the age of God’s kingdom. The book of Isaiah performs its characteristic leap from the now to the “not yet” of unrealized eschatology. It is a theological environment in which the New Testament also has its existence. The material of chapters 1-35, no less than 40-66, has been adapted and reinterpreted to suit the overall purpose of the book. The first chapters drive home the transient power of the nations, and establishes Zion as the focus of present and future divine activity. But the final purpose of God is broader. The canonical authors appreciated that the exile and the return from Babylon only pointed weakly to something far more glorious. Motyer highlights three messianic portraits which stand out in the book: The King (9:6,7; 11:1) The Servant (38-55) and The Anointed Conqueror (56-66). They stand in time and space, and beyond. In fact they are the same person, endowed with word and Spirit, righteousness at the heart of his character and his work bringing the promises to David to a climax, embracing Israel and the gentile world. All are human and yet enshrine divine attributes.^{xxiv} The troubled history of Jerusalem proves to be the springboard for something inestimably glorious. A distinct case of “Back to the Future”.

ISAIAH IN THE PULPIT

So how do I expound this book to the church? You may well be accusing me of double standards at this point. Having fought tooth and nail to preserve the unity of the book, I have chosen to limit myself only to chapters 40-55. To some extent I plead guilty as charged, but with the mitigating circumstances that the book is simply too long to preach through in one series. Some selection is required and I take the choice to concentrate on the eschatological vision of this section of the book. It is firmly supported by chapters 1-39, but they shall have to be taken as read.

I am able to be selective without disrespecting the integrity of the book because its canonical shape demands that we seek its fulfillment, not in the post-exilic community but in the messianic King, the Suffering Servant, the Anointed Conqueror. Contrast this with the post-modern commentaries which assert that there is no correct interpretation of an Old Testament text. Whatever you read into it is valid for you. I selected pretty much at random a section from Bruggemann’s commentary on Isaiah 52:14-15, “Just as there were many who were appalled at him-- his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness-- so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.(NIV)”. He says “although it is clear that this poetry it does not in any first instance have Jesus on its horizon, it is equally clear that the church, from the outset, has found this poetry a poignant ... way to consider Jesus.”^{xxv} I heartily refute this affirmation. The scriptures claim to be inspired and authoritative and that demands our obedience to its message. If the canonical authors chose to guide our line of vision away from the exile to the messianic kingdom, then we have no right to look anywhere else but to Christ. Bring it on, then Isaiah. Tell us about Christ!

Peter James Cousins
Bangor, May 2009

ⁱ John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.1. The quotation is from the Vulgate version and is a good example of what this delightful book is about, namely, the use and abuse of the text of Isaiah in the Christian Arts down the centuries. While I do not agree with his post-modern sentiments that whatever you read into the Biblical text is valid for you, this is still a very enjoyable tome if you want to while away a rainy afternoon in the Bangor University library.

ⁱⁱ M. Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 40-66* ed. J. Pelikan and H.C. Oswald (St. Louis, Concordia 1972), p.3

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin A Sweeney, "On the Road to Duhm: Isaiah in Nineteenth Century Critical Scholarship", pp. 243-261 and Roy F. Melugin, "Form Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism and Beyond in Isaiah," pp. 263-278 in Claire Matthews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds. *As those who are taught* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006)

^{iv} Jean-Pierre Prévost, *How to Read the Prophets*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1996), p.56f

^v Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 324

^{vi} Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass: Eerdmans, 2004), p.5

Childs is sometimes criticised because of his stress on the final form of the book, leading some opponents to suggest that he ignores the different sources which combine to form the final redaction. But, as he argues in this book, it is the theologians' task to identify the different sources and then observe how they have been adapted to fit the canonical shape of the book.

^{vii} Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 2: The Theology of Israel and Prophetic Traditions* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965)

^{viii} Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p.16

^{ix} J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p.29

^x *Op. cit* p.6.

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} Donald E Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.147

^{xiii} Motyer, p.28

^{xiv} R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (Oliphants, 1975), p.176

^{xv} This presupposes that Isaiah could utter prophecies that held deeper truths than those of which he was aware. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* (1.1.10) stated "God is the author of scripture, yet human authors are used as vehicles of the instrumental cause." Thus a text could have different layers of truth which go beyond what the writer envisaged. Cf. Childs, *Struggle* . . . , p309.

^{xvi} Clements, p.8

^{xvii} 2 Chronicles 32:32 "The other events of Hezekiah's reign and his acts of devotion are written in the vision of the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel." (NIV)

^{xviii} R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1970), pp. 790f

^{xix} Other material was included. Just how much stems from Isaiah will never be known by us. For example: compare Micah 4:1-5 and Isaiah 2:1-5. How did essentially the same prophecy end up in two different books?

^{xx} Clements, p. 10

^{xxi} See Clements, p 80, where it seems to me he parts company from the canonical theology of Childs, believing that it was incorporated ready-made when the canon was being formed. I would beg to differ. I believe that it was written consciously as Scripture.

^{xxii} Clements, p11. See also Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) and E. W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) Both stress that the final form of the text is our principal concern rather than what lies behind – which is mainly scholarly hypothesis.

^{xxiii} Childs, *Introduction*, p. 327

^{xxiv} Motyer, pp. 13f

^{xxv} Walter Bruggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.147