

## Isaiah

John F. A. Sawyer

The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible

*Edited by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland*

Print Publication Date: Jan 2011

Subject: Religion, Literary and Textual Studies, Judaism, Christianity

Online Publication Date: May 2011 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199204540.003.0005

## Abstract and Keywords

The Book of Isaiah is one of the longest in the Bible. Isaiah played a major role in the literature and theology of the Qumran community, and in the NT he is far more frequently alluded to or quoted, often by name, than any other prophet. It is no exaggeration to say that for 2,000 years there is hardly any aspect of western culture to which the language and imagery of Isaiah has not contributed something significant. What was it about Isaiah that produced this unique phenomenon? What are the Isaianic themes and images that played so prominent a role in the history of Christianity that he was to become known as the ‘fifth evangelist’? In seeking answers to these questions, this article looks first at Jewish and Christian perceptions of Isaiah, and then at some of the results of modern research.

Keywords: Book of Isaiah, Bible, fifth evangelist, Isaianic themes, Christianity, Qumran community

THE Book of Isaiah is one of the longest in the Bible. Jeremiah and Chronicles are about the same length but have had far less influence on the subsequent history of Judaism and Christianity. In Jewish lectionaries there are twice as many passages from Isaiah as there are from Jeremiah. Isaiah played a major role in the literature and theology of the Qumran community, and in the NT he is far more frequently alluded to or quoted, often by name, than any other prophet (Blenkinsopp 2006: 89–221). While apocryphal legends grew up around Jeremiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, and other ‘Writing Prophets’, and there is the whole *merkavah* mystical tradition based on Ezekiel 1, there is nothing to compare with the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, particularly in its elaborate Christian (Ethiopic) version (Knibb 1985: 143–76). It is no exaggeration to say that for 2,000 years there is hardly any aspect of western culture to which the language and imagery of Isaiah has not contributed something significant (Sawyer 1996). Only the Book of Psalms is longer and arguably even more popular and influential (Gillingham 2008). What was it about Isaiah that produced this unique phenomenon? What are the Isaianic themes and images that played so prominent a role in the history of Christianity that he was to become known as the ‘fifth evangelist’? In seeking answers to these questions, we shall look

first at Jewish and Christian perceptions of Isaiah, and then at some of the results of modern research.

### (p. 53) I

According to the rabbis, Isaiah was unique among the prophets and second only to Moses in that he saw God face to face (Isa. 6:1; cf. Deut. 34:10). This is a reference to the account of Isaiah's heavenly vision in chapter 6, which introduces several of the most distinctive features of the book that bears his name. First, the words of the seraphim beginning 'Holy, holy, holy' (6:3) had a prominent role, probably from very ancient times, both in Jewish worship as the *Qedushah* in the *Amidah* or 'Eighteen Benedictions' recited three times daily (Elbogen 1933: 37–41), and in the Christian liturgy as the *Sanctus* in the West and the *Trisagion* in the East (cf. Rev. 4:8) (Spinks 1991). But they also echo throughout the book in the distinctively Isaianic title 'the Holy One of Israel' (twenty-four times) or 'the Holy One of Jacob' (29:13) or simply 'the Holy One' (10:17; 40:25; 43:15), together with references to God's 'holy mountain' (seven times, from 11:9 to 66:20); his 'holy city' (48:1; 52:1), only here in the Prophets (cf. Neh. 11:1, 18; Dan. 9:24); his 'holy people' (62:12; 63:18); and even his 'Holy Spirit' (63:10, 13), only here and Psalm 51:12. The ethical significance of the name is made clear by the prophet's reaction ('Woe is me...for I am a man of unclean lips!', 6:5) and elsewhere spelt out with uncompromising clarity in the context of his attacks on social injustice: 'But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness' (e.g. 5:16; cf. vv. 19, 24). In this respect as well the rabbis compared Isaiah to Moses, as the prophet who reduced the number of commandments to two: 'keep justice and do righteousness' (56:1; tMakk. 24a).

They also found in Isaiah's vision a corollary to the holiness of God and his demand for justice and righteousness. Of all the prophets Isaiah had the reputation for being the most cruel in his verbal attacks on his own people. According to a well-known ancient Jewish midrash, the reason why one of the seraphim burned his lips with a coal from the altar (Isa. 6:6–7) was to punish him for this (Ginzberg 1975: 612–13). Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets utter many bitter prophecies of judgement against their people, but none directs them so explicitly and personally at the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem as does Isaiah (cf. 1:1; 2:1). Sad to say, Isaiah's ferocious polemic against his own people was frequently used by Christian writers and preachers, especially in the early church and the Middle Ages, as scriptural authority for some of their bitterest attacks on the Jews. If one of their own prophets could accuse them of being blind (6:9–10) and stubborn (65:2), behaving like drunkards (29:9), and having blood on their hands (1:15; cf. Matt. 27:25), then so could they. For those who believe the Jewish people have been rejected, a sentence like 'Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen' (3:8) lends itself all too easily to a supersessionist interpretation (Sawyer 2003 a).

(p. 54) He is also known in the rabbinic literature, however, following a tradition already present in Ben Sira (Sir. 48:24), as 'the prophet of consolation' (tBer. 57b). The rabbis contrasted Moses's stern words of warning (e.g. Lev. 26:38) with Isaiah's prophecies of

salvation, and the pedestrian language of Ezekiel with the regal elegance of his prophecies of comfort for those in distress (Hag. 14a). Although we do not have evidence for Jewish lectionaries much before the Middle Ages, we can be sure the rabbis had in mind passages from chapters 40–61, which contain the eight ‘Consolation’ *haftarot* (readings from the Prophets). These are traditionally recited on the eight Sabbaths following the Fast on the Ninth of Ab, in the summer, when the destruction of the temple is commemorated: e.g. ‘For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places’ (51:3; cf. 49:13; 52:9) (Berlin and Brettler 2004: 861, 2116). To these we might add three poignant verses from Isaiah which conclude the ‘prayer in the house of mourning’, printed at the end of the *Authorized Daily Prayer Book* and beginning: ‘As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you’ (66:13; cf. 60:20; 25:8) (Singer 1962: 324).

Not only does Isaiah contain these and many other ‘comfortable words’, but the structure of the book is designed to highlight the theme of comfort after disaster, forgiveness after judgement, hope after despair. This is by no means confined to Isaiah: the Book of Amos is another conspicuous example (9:11–15), and it is characteristic of the Deuteronomistic literature (Joshua–Kings) to structure history in a way that highlights some hopeful sign after disaster (e.g. 2 Kgs 25:27–30) (Alt 1991). But nowhere is the point so consistently and elaborately made as in Isaiah. In chapters 1–12 prophecies of judgement are balanced by prophecies of hope (e.g. 2:1–4; 9:1–7; 11:1–9), culminating in a Song of Thanksgiving beginning: ‘I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, for...thou didst comfort me’ (12:1). The prophecies against the world’s nations (11–23) are followed by the so-called Isaiah apocalypse (24–7): ‘He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces’ (25:8), and the whole book ends with the vision of a new heaven and a new earth (65:17–25; 66:22–3), where ‘the wolf and the lamb shall feed together’ (65:25).

Most striking, however, is chapter 40, beginning ‘Comfort, comfort my people’, which introduces a sequence of passages where the theme is developed in new images and new arguments so distinctive as to suggest a change of author (‘Deutero-Isaiah’) and a different historical context. While in chapter 39 Jerusalem is still standing, albeit under the threat of Babylonian invasion, in chapters 40–55 the city is in ruins (44:26–8) and the people in exile (43:5–6). The opening verses of Deutero-Isaiah introduce two of the most powerful themes in the book. First, the audience—that is to say, all those who had given up all hope and are now to be ‘comforted’—is defined in parallel as ‘my people’ (masculine) and ‘Jerusalem’ (feminine) (40:1–2). This anticipates much of the rest of the book, which is taken up with memorable poetic accounts of the suffering, rejection, and final redemption of these two ‘characters’, Israel (or ‘Jacob my servant’) and Jerusalem (or ‘the daughter of Zion’) (Sawyer 1989). There are repeated appeals to them individually to ‘fear not’ (e.g. 40:9; 43:1, 5; 44:8; 54:4) alongside promises (‘I will not forget you’, 49:15; cf. 44:21) and reassurances (‘I love you’, 43:4; cf. 54:10), until finally ‘he will share the spoil with the strong’ (53:12) and ‘she will put on her beautiful garments again, Jerusalem the holy city’ (52:1).

Second, there is the notion that their suffering had been disproportionate to what they deserved: '(Jerusalem) has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins' (40:2). This goes beyond divine forgiveness to a new appreciation of the exceptional severity of what had befallen Jerusalem and her citizens, and is developed later in the astonishing image of God as an apologetic husband (54:6–10). He admits that he lost his temper with her, 'in overflowing wrath for a moment' (54:8), and promises never to do it again: 'For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you' (54:9–10). There are obvious parallels with the story of the Suffering Servant in the previous chapter, in that God takes full responsibility ('it was the will of the Lord to bruise him', 53:10), the suffering is not simply punishment for sin (53:9), and, most comforting of all, it is over (49:5; 53:10–12).

Finally, Jewish tradition has always viewed Isaiah as the prophet of Jerusalem *par excellence*, and, particularly in modern times, found inspiration in Isaianic language about Zion (Sawyer 2003 *b*). Isaiah's focus from beginning to end is the city of Jerusalem. What little biographical material there is in the book locates Isaiah and his prophecies firmly in Jerusalem (cf. 1:1; 2:1; 7:3). There are detailed accounts of his role in the story of Jerusalem's miraculous escape from Sennacherib's army (36–7), Hezekiah's recovery from illness (38), and the arrival in Jerusalem of envoys from Babylon (39). But it is the accumulation of epithets and images, many of them unique to, or uniquely developed in, Isaiah that is so striking. The earliest occurrences of the phrases 'holy city' (48:1; 52:1) and 'faithful city' (1:21, 26) are in Isaiah. The only place where Jerusalem is called 'the city of David' outside the historical books is in Isaiah (22:9; cf. Luke 2:4, 11), and the epithets 'city of righteousness' (1:26) and 'Ariel' (29:1, 7) are unique to Isaiah. The word 'Zion' occurs more frequently in Isaiah than in any other book of the Bible, including Psalms, as does the phrase 'Mount Zion'. Not surprisingly, a number of place-names in the modern State of Israel are derived from Isaiah, including Mevasseret Tziyyon ('O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion', 40:9 AV) and Rishon le-Tziyyon ('first to Zion', 41:27 AV).

Again, there are two images of Zion especially prominent in Isaiah. First, the image of the 'holy mountain' or the 'mountain of the Lord' is at the centre of a number of Isaiah's best-known prophecies: 'the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains' (2:2); 'they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain' (11:9); 'on this mountain the Lord of hosts will...swallow up death for ever' (25:6–8) (von Rad 1965). Second, there is the personification of the city as a woman, sometimes named as 'the daughter of Zion'. (p. 56) Her sinful behaviour is compared to that of a harlot (1:21) and her destruction and exile to the plight of an abandoned wife (49:14; 50:1; 54:6) or a mother bereft of her children (54:1); but these are contrasted with images of her defiantly tossing her head in the face of foreign aggressors (37:22), throwing off the chains of slavery (52:2), and, miraculously, becoming once more a loving mother (66:7–14) (Sawyer 1989).

## II

In the prologue to his Latin translation, Jerome (c.342-420) explains why Isaiah should be considered more an evangelist than a prophet: 'for he records all the mysteries of Christ and the Church (*universa Christi Ecclesiaeque mysteria*) so clearly that you would think he was describing what had already happened, rather than foretelling the future' (Weber 1994: 1096). He also singles out two themes to which he says Isaiah pays particular attention, the mission to the gentiles and the coming of Christ (*de vocatione gentium et de adventu Christi*), and warns against Jewish falsification of scripture (*de falsitate scripturarum*). Such Christian perceptions of Isaiah go back before Jerome, to Paul, the other four evangelists, the apologists, and the early Church Fathers, and this is how the book was almost universally interpreted by Christians down to the advent of historical criticism. Let us look in turn at Jerome's three points, beginning with the last, Jewish falsification of scripture.

It was Isaiah in Greek that played such a central role in Christian origins and the subsequent history of the Church. The Hebrew original had little impact on the development of Christian tradition, despite the occasional efforts of Jerome and others to apply their knowledge of Hebrew to biblical interpretation. Even though most of the Christian Bible was originally written in Hebrew, there were rarely ever more than a handful of Christian Hebraists before the Renaissance (McKane 1989). Hebrew remained the sacred language of the Jews, however, and the insights of Jewish scholars, infinitely better qualified to handle the Hebrew text, were treated for the most part with contempt by Christians. This helps to explain why traditional Jewish and Christian perceptions of Isaiah are so different, and why the book became such a battleground in the stormy relations between Jews and Christians down the centuries (Sawyer 2003 *a*). Jerome's selection of the mission to the gentiles and the coming of Christ as the two most distinctive features of Isaiah's prophecy nicely illustrates this.

No other prophet emphasizes the worldwide implications of his message more frequently and more eloquently than Isaiah. The 'ends of the earth' are mentioned (p. 57) in Isaiah and Psalms more than in any other book of the Bible, while the distinctively Isaianic term 'coastlands' (RSV; 'islands' AV), in texts like 'Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken you people from afar!' (49:1; cf. 41:1; 42:4), is rare outside the Book of Isaiah (van Winkle 1985). The notion that one day all the nations of the world will come to Jerusalem is expressed repeatedly in different terms, from 'out of Zion shall go forth the law' (2:3, cf. Mic. 4:2) and 'the wealth of nations shall come to you' (60:1-9; 66:12), to the revolutionary idea that the temple will become 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (56:7; cf. Mark 11:17) (Beuken 1990).

It is therefore no surprise that it is his words and images on the role of the gentiles in God's plan that are most often quoted in the NT. Matthew cites Isaiah 42:1-4 in full (in a Greek translation) because it refers twice to the Servant's mission to the gentiles. The phrase 'a light to the gentiles' (42:6; 49:6), quoted by the aged Simeon (Luke 2:32) and Paul (Acts 13:47; cf. 26:23) is a striking example. Language used in a different context

later is quoted in the NT in support of Christ's mission to the gentiles: thus, the passage beginning 'the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light' (9:1 MT) is cited, not because of what follows ('For to us a child is born ...'), but because it comes immediately after a prophecy believed to be about Christ's ministry in 'Galilee of the nations' (Matt. 4:15–16). Similarly, Paul cites 'the root of Jesse', not in relation to Christ's Davidic ancestry (11:1), but because it 'shall stand as an ensign to the gentiles: him shall the nations seek' (11:10, cf. Rom. 15:12).

Oracles against the foreign nations are a regular part of biblical prophecy (cf. Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 24–32; Amos 1–2), and Isaiah is no exception (13–23). His colourful and influential description of the descent of the king of Babylon into the underworld is well known (14). But even here Isaiah twice introduces a generous element which is rarely present elsewhere. First, his oracle against the Moabites contains not only cries of sympathy for their plight (15:5; 16:11), but also a remarkable appeal for justice and the humane treatment of outcasts and refugees (16:3–5). Scholars have sought to remove the anomaly in various ways: for example, by pointing out that the appeal is rejected in subsequent verses: 'therefore let Moab wail...' (vv. 6–7) (Childs 2001: 131–2). The language is hardly typical of Israel's enemies, however, and is better understood as an isolated—but in Isaiah by no means unique—call for justice and peace. The other astonishing exception concerns Egypt and Assyria. Isaiah prophesies that one day these two traditional enemies of Israel will be united and worship together (19:23), and then ends his 'Oracle concerning Egypt' with a blessing: 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage' (19:25). Scholars argue that this was no doubt influenced by events in the Second Temple period, when prosperous Jewish communities were established in Egypt (cf. 19:18) and Mesopotamia (cf. Jer. 29:1–7), but it is nonetheless consistent with the distinctive Isaianic concern for the gentiles (cf. Blenkinsopp 2006: 129–37).

Jerome's other observation on Isaiah was that he was particularly interested (*omnis ei cura*) in the coming of Christ. Prophecies about the coming of a royal saviour who 'will judge the poor with righteousness' (11:4; cf. 9:7; 16:5; 32:1) are not (p. 58) in themselves distinctively Isaianic (cf. Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 34:23–4). The one exception is the Greek version of the 'Immanuel prophecy' in 7:14. The Hebrew original had very little impact on its Jewish readers, and the name Immanuel is never found as a messianic title in Judaism. But the Greek version cited at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel with explicit reference to the Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:23) is by far the most often-quoted verse from Isaiah in Christian art and architecture as well as literature, liturgy, and theological discourse, and had the effect of putting Isaiah in the forefront of OT heralds of Christ. If Isaiah could foretell the exact nature of Christ's coming so accurately in this verse, then there must surely be many other examples, and Christian interpreters turned with particular enthusiasm to the Book of Isaiah. Indeed, they found it was possible, with very little exegetical imagination, to find Isaianic references to almost every detail of the Gospel account of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as some details not given in the Gospels (Sawyer 1996: 49–50).

But Jerome noticed another feature of the Isaianic tradition which has no parallel in the other prophets. A number of passages describe the coming of a saviour in the past tense, as though it had already happened. On the one hand, there is the celebration of the birth of a royal heir: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given' (9:6), while on the other there is a sequence of passages in which the prophet tells the story, all in the past, of an individual appointed by God to 'bring forth justice to the nations' (42:1), who suffered persecution (49:4; 50:6; 53:3, 7, 8–9) and gave his life for his people (53:12). Whatever the explanation of this phenomenon, it is unique and, with the Immanuel prophecy, accounts more than anything else for the special role played by the Book of Isaiah in the history of Christianity.

### III

Modern biblical scholars focus on the Hebrew text rather than the ancient versions, and on the original historical context or contexts of the book rather than its role in Judaism and Christianity, the assumption being that the true meaning of the text cannot be established without first determining who wrote it and in what context. One effect of this is to rule out many of the traditional Christian interpretations as scientifically impossible. The Immanuel prophecy, in the original Hebrew, for example, says nothing about a virgin (7:14), and, if the date of the Servant Songs is fixed in the sixth century BCE, then they cannot refer to Jesus. Yet for humanist and other non-Christian scholars Isaiah remains one of the most discussed books in the Bible, while for Christian scholars, although *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* becomes more difficult in the 'post-Reformation (p. 59) period' (Childs 2004: 230–64), Isaiah continues to occupy a central position in their research. The reasons for this must be different. Let us look at three different modern approaches, the historical, the canonical, and the postmodern.

By the middle of the twentieth century the historical-critical analysis of the Book of Isaiah had reached a consensus that, while some passages reflect the eighth century BCE and the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, (7:1; 14:28; 36:1), if not those of Uzziah and Jotham, as the title claims (1:1; cf. 6:1), most of the book comes from much later, particularly the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century. It was no longer possible to speak of a single prophet, be he the 'prophet of consolation' of Jewish tradition or the 'fifth evangelist' of Christian interpreters. Instead, it contains a number of individual voices, each one reflecting, to a greater or lesser extent, its own social and political context. For example, most scholars would attribute some of the most powerful language and imagery, particularly in chapters 1–12, 28–31, and 36–9, to an original eighth-century prophet called Isaiah, who witnessed the Assyrian destruction of all Judah's neighbours and the unexpected survival of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. He was one of the great eighth-century prophets, whose 'ethical monotheism' (5:16) and attacks on cultic institutions (1:10–11) for many scholars, especially Protestants, marked them out as a high point in OT theology, but he towered above them as the founder of an 'Isaianic tradition' with its distinctive focus on Jerusalem and the holiness of God (Bright 1981: 286–7).

There is also broad agreement on the dating of chapters 40–55 ('Second Isaiah' or 'Deutero-Isaiah'), which, unlike most of the rest of the book, show a remarkable unity of style and structure, very different from the earlier chapters, and make specific reference to historical conditions and events in the middle of the sixth century, such as the appearance on the political scene of Cyrus (44:28; 45:1). Very striking is the repeated formula of explicit monotheism ('besides me there is no god', 44:6; cf. 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22; cf. Deut. 4:35, 39), which may reflect a more exclusive theology facilitated perhaps by the actual destruction of all rival sanctuaries, including Assyrian ones, and the nationalist, centralizing reforms of Josiah (2 Kgs 22–3) in the last decades of the previous century (Beuken 1974). Some radical, even subversive, references to the temple in chapters 56–66 ('Third Isaiah' or 'Trito-Isaiah'), notably 56:7 ('my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples') and 66:1–3 ('Heaven is my throne...what is the house you would build for me...?'), probably reflect controversy surrounding the role of the Second Temple in the late sixth or early fifth century BCE (Smith 1995: 128–72).

No such consensus exists, however, on the dating of many other parts of the book. It has been suggested, for example, that 'Josianic redactors' had a significant role in shaping some of the earlier chapters, particularly those describing the destruction of the Assyrians and the ideological mythology of Zion, but there remains disagreement on exactly which passages to attribute to them (Barth 1977). References to a flourishing Jewish community in Egypt (19:18–25), together with the possible mention of Aswan (49:12 1QIsaA), may reflect conditions there in fifth-century BCE Elephantine (Childs 2001: 144–5), while some of the language and imagery of the so-called 'Isaiah Apocalypse' (24–7) may be even later, according to some commentators (Kaiser 1974: 177–9). Literary parallels in the Ugaritic literature confirm the great antiquity of some of it (e.g. 27:1) (Gordon 1966: 1–9), but tell us little about its date and composition. Thus, questions about the date and composition of the Book of Isaiah became extremely complex, involving the fragmenting of the text, not only into three 'Isaiahs' (1–39; 40–55; 56–66), but into numerous short passages, each with its own provenance and prehistory. Attempts to find solutions to such historical puzzles still take up much space in most of the numerous commentaries on Isaiah, and undoubtedly constitute one of the chief reasons for its continuing fascination for scholars.

For many Christian scholars the book is part of the canon, and therefore, in some sense, the 'Word of God', whatever the conclusions of their historical-critical endeavours. Thus, for example, the quest for an original Isaiah led to the discovery of the 'genius' of an eighth-century prophet (Driver 1891: 263) and a 'hero of faith' (Skinner 1896: p. xlii), whose experience of the holiness of God, involving religious awe as well as an ethical imperative, together with faith in the special role of his city Jerusalem and a Davidic 'messiah', speaks directly to the Church today, without the need for elaborate typologies or christological interpretations, or a belief in the miraculous powers of the prophets to foretell the future. Thus, 'when lifted to a more transcendent and ultimate plane some of the motifs of the Zion ideology may be held to be eternally true' (Clements 1980: 88–1). The same goes for parts of 'Deutero-Isaiah', particularly the four 'Servant Songs', interpreted as exilic compositions rather than prophecies of Christ. The notion of vicarious suffering

may be found in the story of Moses offering to die for his people (Exod. 32:32) and in the scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), but nowhere is it described in such detail as it is here in chapter 53 (vv. 4–6; 10–12). The chapter is thus ‘linked dogmatically to Jesus Christ in terms of its ontology’ (Childs 2001: 422), not because a sixth-century BCE prophet foresaw the coming of such a saviour.

The canonical approach to OT interpretation involves another modification in the historical-critical process. While acknowledging the overwhelming historical probability that its many separate parts were originally composed at different times, in different contexts and by different people, particular attention must be paid to the canonical shape of each book (Tull 2006). Thus, a correct understanding of Isaiah 24–7, for example, whatever the date of its original composition, requires the recognition that its reuse and redevelopment of themes and images from earlier chapters (1–12; 13–23) marks a growth and deepening of thought, entirely missed by a more atomistic historical-critical approach (Sweeney 1988). The words of God to his heavenly court, overheard by the prophet at the beginning of chapter 40 (‘Comfort my people’) recall Isaiah’s heavenly vision in chapter 6, but substitute comfort for judgement (Seitz 1990). Such a holistic approach would also note how the analysis of suffering in chapter 53 picks up and transforms the words of 1:5–6, and how the use of key motifs like ‘the Holy One of Israel’ and ‘Zion’, (p. 61) which recur throughout the whole book, can be studied in terms of a literary or theological development.

One other canonical issue concerns the relationship between Isaiah and the NT. Both are in the same canon and few would dispute the fact that the Book of Isaiah played a crucial role in Christian origins (Blenkinsopp 2006: 129–221). Whether or not this goes back to Jesus himself, and his own personal use and interpretation of the book, it is impossible to say (Hooker 1998). Surprisingly, there is only one passage in the NT about vicarious suffering where Isaiah 53 is quoted (1 Pet. 2:24–5) and none in the Gospels, but the Book of Isaiah as a whole is, after Psalms, the most-quoted OT book, and Isaiah is mentioned by name in the NT more often than any other prophet apart from Moses and Elijah (fourteen times in the Gospels; eight times in Paul and Acts). The OT quotations in the NT, however, are never in the original Hebrew, so that how the NT interprets the OT is no more helpful in the quest for the original meaning of the text than is the LXX or the other ancient versions. So long as the goal of OT interpretation is the meaning of the canonical Hebrew text, the NT evidence must remain, like the LXX, an early stage in the book’s reception history. In fact, the evidence of the rabbinic literature is in many ways more relevant, semantically, than that of the ancient versions, including NT Greek quotations.

This brings us to the last of our three modern approaches, postmodern interpretations. The term is widely used to denote a reaction against some of the characteristics of historical criticism, particularly the privileging of one meaning, whether a reconstructed original meaning or a canonical meaning authorized by the Church (Aichele 2001: 1–12). Central to all varieties of postmodernism is the role of the reader in the interpretive process, and the notion that meaning is a function of the interaction between reader and text. In this respect postmodernism represents a return to a pre-critical age when, for example,

the Church Fathers were well aware that texts have more than one meaning, and believed that the literal meaning may often be less important, for the Church, than a spiritual, moral, or allegorical interpretation. It is a simple fact that millions of Christians can and have read Isaiah 53 as an account of Christ's passion, and this is evidence that that is what the chapter means in certain clearly defined homiletical, liturgical, and devotional contexts. They have also read the book, for hundreds of years, as a single literary work by a single author and made good sense of it.

Clearly a Christian interpretation is not the only meaning the text can have—there are many others, including Jewish interpretations and a variety of reconstructed originals. But if any is to be privileged in a Christian context, then arguably it should be a traditional christological interpretation of the Greek or Latin or English version. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Jewish interpretations, which are usually based more closely on the Hebrew text (Berlin and Brettler 2004: 780–916). Modern historians, philologists, and archaeologists will continue to focus on ancient meanings in the context of eighth-century Jerusalem or sixth-century Babylon or the Second Temple period, those amongst them who happen to be Christians rejoicing in the many signs (p. 62) of continuity between the Testaments (Childs 2004: 304–9). But their monopoly of the Book of Isaiah has now been broken, and its extraordinary afterlife in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and western culture in general can now be studied with the same degree of scientific rigour and sensitivity as the original Hebrew.

## Works Cited

### Works Cited

**AICHELE, G.** (2001), *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International.

**ALT, A.** (1991), *The Deuteronomistic History* (orig. *Die deuteronomistische Geschichte*, 1943). Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

**BARTH, H.** (1977), *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit* (WMANT 48). Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.

**BERLIN, A. and M. Z. BRETTLER** (eds.) (2004), *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**BEUKEN, W. A. M.** (1974), 'Isaiah LIV: The Multiple Identity of the Person Addressed', *OTS* 19: 29–70.

— (1990), 'The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah: "The Servants of YHWH"', *JSOT* 47: 67–87.

**BLINKINSOPP, J.** (2006), *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans.

**BRIGHT, J.** (1981), *A History of Israel*, 3rd edn. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

---

**CHILDS, B. S.** (2001), *Isaiah: A Commentary*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox.

— (2004), *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans.

**CLEMENTS, R. E.** (1980), *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem: A Study of the Interpretation of Prophecy in the Old Testament (JSOTS 13)*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

**DRIVER, S. R.** (1891), *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

**ELBOGEN, I.** (1933), *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive Liturgy* (orig. *Die judische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 1913), trans. R. P. Scheidlin). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

**GILLINGHAM, S.** (2008), *Psalms Through the Centuries*, vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

**GINZBERG, L.** (1975), *The Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

**GORDON, C. H.** (1966), 'Leviathan: Symbol of Evil', in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

**HOOKE, M. D.** (1998), 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53 to Interpret his Mission Begin with Jesus?', in W. H. Bellinger Jr. and W. R. Farmer (eds.), *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah and Christian Origins*, 88–103. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International.

**KAISER, O.** (1974), *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary*. London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Westminster.

**KNIBB, M.** (1985), 'Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah' in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1. 143–76. London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

**MCKANE, W.** (1989), *Selected Christian Hebraists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**SAWYER, J. F. A.** (1989), 'Daughter of Zion and Servant of the Lord in Isaiah: A Comparison', *Journal of Studies of the Old Testament*, 44: 89–107.

**(p. 63)** — (1996), *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— (2003a), 'Isaiah and the Jews: Some Reflections on the Church's Use of the Bible', in C. Exum and H. Williamson (eds.), *Reading from Right to Left: Essays in Honour of David Clines*, 390–401. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

— (2003b), 'Isaiah and Zionism', in P. R. Davies and A. G. Hunter (eds.), *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Biblical Prophecy, Ideology and Reception in Tribute to Robert Carroll*, 246–69. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

**SEITZ, C. R.** (1990), 'The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah', *JBL* 109: 229–47.

**SINGER, S.** (ed.) (1962), *Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations*, 2nd rev. edn. London: Eyre & Spottiswood.

**SKINNER, J.** (1896), *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**SMITH, P. A.** (1995), *Rhetoric and Redaction in Trito-Isaiah* (VT Supp. 62). Leiden: E. J. Brill.

**SPINKS, B. D.** (1991), *The Sanctus in the Eucharistic Prayer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**SWEENEY, M. A.** (1988), 'Textual Citations in Isaiah 24–27: Toward an Understanding of the Redactional Function of Chapters 24–27 in the Book of Isaiah', *JBL* 107: 39–52.

**TULL, P. K.** (2006), 'One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving of Isaiah's Polyphonic Message', in *As Those Who Are Taught: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL*. Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature.

**VAN WINKLE, D. W.** (1985), 'The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah XL–LV', *VT* 35: 446–58.

**VON RAD, G.** (1965), 'The City on the Hill' (orig. in *Evangelische Theologie*, 8 (1949), 211–15), trans. in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 232–42. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd.

**WEBER, R.** (ed.) (1994), *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, 4th edn. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

## Further Reading

Probably the most useful single-volume commentary on the whole book is that of the late Brevard Childs (2001). Important studies of parts of it include Marvyn Sweeney's *Isaiah 1–39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, in the *Forms of Old Testament Literature* series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), Hugh Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56–66* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House 1982). *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. Roy Melugin and Marvyn Sweeney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1996), is an interesting collection of essays by members of the SBL 'Formation of Isaiah' Seminar, and valuable examples of modern reading strategies are Ed Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress

Press 1991), Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox 1994), and Peter D. Quinn-Miscal, *Reading Isaiah: Poetry and Vision* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2001).

### **John F. A. Sawyer**

John F. A. Sawyer is Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.