

Reading Isaiah 1:2-20 A History*

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Abstract

A common approach to a biblical text involves drawing out the lines of the implied dimensions of the text, in particular, the author, historical background, and audience to which the text bears witness. Another dimension of the text is represented by its history of interpretation. The latter may also be described as an extension of the text insofar as it represents as it were the text's ability to embrace new worlds across time and space. The history of interpretation of Isa 1:2-20 is the focus of this essay. That history is surveyed by means of an investigation of the text's use in public assembly in the religious traditions which have conserved it.

1. Preliminaries

Elsewhere I discuss the poetry and rhetoric of Isa 1:2-20. It is shown that Isa 1:2-20 forms a prosodic unity and displays a panoply of parallelisms throughout. Its poetry conforms to a text model of ancient Hebrew verse worked out over a large portion of the extant poetic corpus. The rhetorical plot and substance of Isa 1:2-20 are consistent with the view that it reproduces a speech delivered by a prophet we may, following tradition, refer to as Isaiah. There is no reason why the parts of 1:2-20 could not have formed a whole from the start.¹

2. Isaiah 1:2-20 in the History of Interpretation

Isa 1:2-20 came to be understood as a text to recite in public assembly on religious occasions. If it was poetry in origin, poetry it remains, should one choose to take note of it. No less than in origin, when the text was intended for a specific audience in connection with a specific set of circumstances, it

¹ "The Prophetic Poetry of Isaiah 1:2-20: A Programmatic Essay," and "The Rhetoric of Isaiah 1:2-20: An Exploration," online at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com. H. G. M. Williamson argues instead that Isa 1:2-20 is a redactional construct whose component parts were once located elsewhere in the Isaianic corpus (). The pros and cons of the two positions, and others still, need not distract us here.

is logical for the text to be read and heard as poetry in its more recently adopted contexts.

Reading and understanding the Hebrew Bible is a preoccupation of the religious traditions of Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. The history of a particular text's interpretation is most often desumed from translations of the text and quotations, allusions, and comment on it in other authoritative texts. An alternative tact is taken here. A primary locus of biblical interpretation, as already noted, is the context of religious assembly. The reading and hearing of excerpts from the Bible characterize both Jewish and Christian worship. Recontextualization of the Bible through appropriation of its contents within a specific meta-narrative provides the categories through which religious readers and hearers of it seek to understand the world around them and give meaning to their place in it.

Isa 1:2-20 is a case in point. Part of the haftarah reading (Isa 1:1-27) to *Devarim* (Deut 1:1-3:22), the text is recited on the Sabbath preceding the fast of Tisha b'Av, a Sabbath of the "Three of Rebuke" that anticipate the mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem associated with the fast. In that context Isa 1:2-20 is heard as a prophecy of doom from the point of view of Jerusalem's latter ends. It is read not on its own but in the context of an expectation that the final outcome of judgment will be, as 1:21-26 makes clear, salvation. 1:27 concludes the reading: "Zion will be saved by [God's] judgment, her repentant ones, by [God's] justice."² In the "Seven [Sabbaths] of Consolation" following Tisha b'Av, passages that promise Zion's restoration figure prominently (Isa 40:1-26; 49:14-51:3; 54:11-55:5; 51:12-52:12; 54:1-10; 60:1-22; 61:10-63:9).

The sense of loss upon Jerusalem's destruction and adhesion to the promise of Zion becoming once again the point of origin of God's saving work are evident in the New Testament (Luke 13:34-35; 19:41-44; Rom

² The translation of Isa 1:27 offered here reflects the sense Rashi and Ibn Ezra gave the text. Sermons for the "Three of Rebuke" are found in early rabbinic anthologies. See Lewis M. Barth, "The 'Three of Rebuke and Seven of Consolation' Sermons in the Pesikta de Rav Kahana," *JJS* 33 (1982) 503-15; Barbara Elka Abrahamson, *The Three Sermons of Rebuke: A Comparative Analysis of the Pesikta de Rav Kahana and the Pesikta rabbati* (Thesis; New York: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1985); Elsie R. Stern, *From Rebuke to Consolation: Exegesis and Theology in the Liturgical Anthology of the Ninth of Av Season* (BJS 338; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004). For an interpretation of Isa 1:1-27 in terms of its deployment on *Devarim* in the Jewish calendar, see Michael Fishbane, *Haftarot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation [and] Commentary* (JPSBC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002) 270-77.

11:25-29; and Rev 21:1-2, 22-24). After Judaism and Christianity parted ways, the sense of loss and adhesion to the promise were not always maintained in the latter.

In the tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church, Isa 1:16-20 is read twice on the eve of the Theophany, at the Third Hour, and during Vespers. Along with other passages from the Torah and the Prophets that describe gifts of water and plenty, Isa 1:16-20 is understood as a promise to which Jesus becomes heir by acceptance of the divine call. Note Isa 49:8-15 with which Vespers concludes. The washing of 1:16 is simultaneously literalized and remythologized in the baptism to which Jesus submits. The liturgy of the church of Jerusalem preserved in Georgian tradition for the same day deserves note. The sequence of readings: 4 Ezra 5:22-30; Ps 51:9; Ps 51:3; Luke 3:1-18; Ps 141:1-2; Ps 29:3-4; Isa 1:16-20; 1 Cor 10:1-4; Mark 1:1-11; Ps 77:17; Ps 51:9; Ps 51:3; Isa 12:4-6; Ps 114:3; Mark 1:9-11. Literalization and remythologization once again go hand in hand. In the 5th cent. Jerusalem Church, Isa 1:16-20 was the first of 19 readings by which baptismal candidates were to be instructed. In the Armenian Church, Isa 1:16-20 is read on the First Day of the Great Lent. As admonition and offer of forgiveness, Isa 1:16-19 is read together with Jas 1:2-12 and John 1:1-14 during the First Week of Lent in the Hispano-Mozarabic tradition.³

³ For a first look at a variety of lectionaries, see Kevin P. Edgecomb, "Lectionaries Old and New," at www.bombaxo.com/lectionaries.html. For the lectionary of the Greek Orthodox Church, see *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993) 771-80. For the lectionary tradition preserved in Georgian, see Michel Tarnichsvili, ed., *Le grand lectionnaire de l'Église de Jérusalem (Ve-VIIIe siècle)* (CSCO 188-89, 204-205; Scriptorum Iberici 9-10, 13-14; Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1959-60) 188:9-10; 204:13-14. For further bibliography, see Michael Fraser, "The Georgian Sources: A Select Bibliography," at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/geobib.html>. For the liturgy of the 5th cent. Jerusalem church preserved in Armenian, see Athanase Renoux, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121. I. Introduction aux origines de la liturgie hiérosolymitaine, lumières nouvelles* (PO 35/1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1969); idem, *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121. II. Édition comparée du texte et de deux autres manuscrits. Introduction, textes, traduction et notes* (PO 36/2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1971). Isa 1:16-20 and the other readings that served as points of departure for the catechesis of candidates for baptism are found in the prologues to the catechetical lessons of Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catéchèses mystagogiques [par] Cyrille de Jérusalem* [ed. Auguste Piédagnel; tr. Pierre Paris; 2d ed.; Paris: Cerf, 2004]). For a discussion, see Charles Renoux, "Les lectures quadragesimales du rite arménien," *Revue des Études Arméniennes* NS 5 (1968) 231-247, online: www.eglise-armenienne.com/Articles/Liturgie/Divers/Lectures_quadragesimales.pdf, 3. For the calendar of the Armenian Church, see http://www.eglise-armenienne.com/Liturgie/Calendrier_2006.pdf. For the lectionary in the Hispano-Mozarabic tradition, see Justo Pérez de Urbel and

As a cautionary tale of the consequences of disobeying God's law, Isa 1:1-9 is read along with Ezek 18:20-32; Hos 4:1-11, Deut 6:1-13, Jas 3:13-4:5, Rom 3:9-26, and Matt 5:17-37 in the Indian Orthodox tradition on the First Friday of Lent. Through Lent, Isaiah as a whole is read, along with Genesis and Proverbs, in the Greek Orthodox tradition.⁴ The readings for Monday of the First Week of Lent are: Isa 1:1-20; Gen 1:1-13; and Prov 1:1-20. In apparent dependence on Jewish tradition, the East Syrian church reads Isa 1:1-11; 1:11-21, and 1:21-31 on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of the Apostles, respectively, in conjunction with Deut 1:3-18; 1:16-34, and 1:33-2:2.⁵

As a call to works of humble service, Isa 1:10, 16-20 is read together with Matt 23:1-2 on Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent in Catholic tradition. Isa 1:10-17 is read with Exod 1:8-14, 22 and Matt 10:34-11:1 on Monday of Week Fifteen in the Weekday Lectionary. As admonition and offer of forgiveness, Isa 1:10-20 is read with Ps 32:1-8, 2 Thes 1:1-5, (6-10), 11-12, and Luke 19:1-10 on the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost once every three years by Anglicans. Isa 1:10-18 is read with Ps 32:1-7; 2 Thes 1:1-4, 11-12, and Luke 19:1-10 on the same Sunday after Pentecost once every three years by Lutherans. Isa 1:1, 10-20 is read with Ps 50:1-8, 22-23; Hab 11:1-3, 8-16, and Luke 12:32-40 on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost once every three years by those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary. The deployment of excerpts from Isa 1:2-20 in traditions which do not adhere to a cycle of readings also deserves note. For example, sermons #2 and #3 by the Puritan John Dod in *Ten Sermons on the Worthy Receiving of the Lord's Supper* are based on Isa 1:16-19 and 1:17-19, respectively.⁶

Atilano González y Ruiz-Zorrilla, ed., *Liber Commicus* (2 vols.; Monumenta Hispaniae Sacra: Serie litúrgica 2-3; Madrid: CSIC, Escuela de Estudios Medievales, 1950-55).

⁴ For the lectionary of the Indian Orthodox Church, see www.stgregorioschurchdc.org. For the lectionary of the Greek Orthodox Church, see *The Orthodox Study Bible*, 771-80.

⁵ For the East Syrian Lectionary sourced here, see Arthur John Maclean, *East Syrian Daily Offices* (London: Rivington, Percival & Co, 1894) 264-281.

⁶ For the First Readings of the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Revised Common lectionaries, see www.bombaxo.com/rcldcomp1.html. For the Weekday Lectionary of the Catholic Church, see Donald Senior, gen. ed., *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990) 460-466. For the Puritan sermon collection sourced here, see John Winston, ed., *Ten Sermons tending chiefly to the fitting of men for the worthy receiving of the Lords Supper . . . The six first, by J. Dod. The foure last, by R. Cleauer* (London: William Hall for Roger Jackson, 1609).

The task of avoiding the damage done by one-sided supersessionist thinking is a work to be undertaken by every generation of interpreters. In the Christian tradition, if Isa 1:2-20 were read together with Ps 137, Luke 13:34-35, and Rom 11:25-29 on a given Sunday, an occasion for mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and affirming God's promise of its restoration would be created. On another Sunday, Isa 2:1-5, Ps 87, Luke 19:41-44, and Rev 21:1-2, 22-24 might be read together.

3. *Conclusions*

This overview lays bare a recurrent weakness of the Christian reading tradition. Isa 1:2-20 is rarely read as a unit. More often, it is merely excerpted. If the arguments for the poetic and rhetorical integrity of Isa 1:2-20 are valid, the case for reading it as a unit in the liturgy is strong. Even if the rhetorical unity of Isa 1:2-20 is judged to be a consequence of redactional activity carried out long after its putative original author passed from the scene, the integrity of the passage as it now stands deserves to be respected in liturgical reading.

Although the Torah reading in Jewish tradition and the Gospel reading in Christian tradition are normally the center of exegetical attention in public assembly, a text like Isa 1:2-20 is ill-suited to an ancillary role. Isa 1:2-27 is topical to the ninth of Av season to a degree that the corresponding Torah reading is not. The possibility exists that the impact of the former will outweigh the latter. Conjoint readings of Isa 1:2-20 with gospel and other texts such as those suggested above would likewise create an opportunity for Isa 1:2-20 to speak loudly and clearly.

A full appreciation of the history of interpretation of Isa 1:2-20 would require an investigation of the commentary and sermon traditions. A bit of spadework has been done. Much more might be undertaken.⁷

In a recent contribution to the history of interpretation of the book of Isaiah, Brevard Childs identifies six basic hermeneutical markers by which traditional Christian interpretation of Isaiah may be characterized: a commitment to "the authority of scripture, its literal and spiritual senses, scripture's two testaments, its divine and human authorship, its christological content, and the dialectical nature of history."⁸

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⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 322.

A similar list might sum up the chief characteristics of traditional Jewish interpretation of the book of Isaiah: a commitment to the authority of *miqra* as heard within the context of the rabbinic meta-narrative, its literal and aggadic senses, its human authorship in response to the *bat qol*, the horizon of messianic hope to which it is a primary witness, and the conviction that God's purposes work themselves out in history.

The Jewish interpretive tradition of the book of Isaiah is carried on today by Michael Fishbane. He situates his exegesis within rabbinic tradition, relates each text to the occasion and to other texts to which it has traditionally been linked, and simultaneously draws from a vast breadth of modern scholarship.⁹

One is hard pressed to name analogues on the Christian side with the same ability to combine and appropriate past tradition and modern critical insights for the express purpose of enabling a reader today to find joy and sustenance in the sacred text.¹⁰

⁹ Michael Fishbane, *Haftarot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* [and] *Commentary* (JPSBC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002). The Haftarot readings from Isaiah: Isa 1:1-27; 6:1-7:6; 9:5-6; 10:32-12:6; 27:6-28:13; 29:22-23; 40:1-26; 40:27-41:16; 42:5-43:10; 43:21-44:23; 49:14-51:3; 51:12-52:12; 54:1-10; 54:11-55:5; 55:6-56:8; 57:14-58:14; 60:1-22; 61:10-63:9. 66:1-24.

¹⁰As Benjamin D. Sommer points out, "[Fishbane's] commentary is one of the few genuine works of canon criticism that any modern biblical scholar has ever written" (review of M. Fishbane, *Haftarot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), in *JHS* 4 (2002-2003), www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/reviews/review114.htm).