

Isaiah 1:2-3 and Luke 2:7

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In an excursus to the post entitled “Compare and Understand: The Use of Translations in the Study of Biblical Literature: Isaiah 1:2-3 as a Test Case,” I point out that the traditional image of oxen and donkeys gathered around a manger with their Lord Jesus in it is the result of allowing Isa 1:2-3 to interpret Luke 2:7 and Luke 2:7 to interpret Isa 1:2-3. This amounts to what one might call an arbitrary textual codetermination. How might we react to this kind of interpretation? Shall we rule it out of bounds, or follow suit?

For reflections on this subject, see Stephen L. Cook, “Isaiah 1:3 and the Creche Scene,” online at <http://biblische.blogspot.com/2006/12/isaiah-13-and-creche-scene.html>.

I would answer: neither one nor the other. The imaginative construal of the biblical witness by past tradition, even when it depends on the conflation of disparate texts, is not a gift to snort at. The conflation comes across as arbitrary from one point of view, but from another, it is not. In terms of the metanarrative that triggered it, the conflation serves to reiterate a number of theological points. The conflation becomes an icon of those points. In the context of the metanarrative, the construal is not arbitrary at all.

If interpretation that takes its cue from a metanarrative is to be welcomed, are we also justified in being as arbitrary as premodern interpreters in our acts of interpretation?

The almighty reader of our postmodern age seems to think so. This reader accepts, rejects, or subordinates a text in accordance with a pre-established ideological framework. There is in fact no essential methodological difference between premodern and postmodern biblical interpretation. Only the metanarrative governing the choice of intertextual operations is changed.

Another kind of interpretation is possible. The task of reconstructing the sense the text had “once upon a time” is also worth undertaking. The goal of historical interpretation is to bring to life the text as it would have been understood *then*, not the text as it came to be understood in some other time and place, or as I the omnipotent reader construe it based on the world view I espouse.

Historical interpretation, for it to succeed, must be fiercely in love with the otherness of the text as it once would have been construed. It operates on the premise that the text of old is yet able to speak through the words it contains. Those words are still able to pose a danger to the status quo, and still able to enhance our lives.

The degree to which we interpreters censor the text should not be underestimated. I remember being invited to preach at my aunt's church in Edina, Missouri. I relayed the scripture I would preach on and the title of my sermon. The text was Ezekiel 16. Overwhelmed by the text, my aunt's pastor, bless his heart, told me on arrival that he would read the text before I preached. He chose to read from the King James. That way, people would miss the original's blatant use of sexual imagery.

But I had come prepared with a translation of my own from the Hebrew. I read Ezekiel again. All was quiet. You couldn't hear a pin drop. I had their full, flushed attention. I'm sure Ezekiel garnered the full attention of his audiences too.

We are all prone to censor Scripture. A text depicting an angry God disturbs the postmodern conscience. We are abashed by its contents. We know of no place for anger in our lives. We know of no acceptable outlet for it.

But perhaps there is a time for anger, as there is a time for war, and a time to make love. The planet "Mars" cannot and should not be removed from Holst's "The Planets." I wouldn't want to listen to the violent episodes in Ralph Vaughan Williams' symphonies every day. But Williams was right to embrace anger and violence in his music.

Scripture is like a grand edifice built over the centuries by many and diverse hands. Its very disharmonies and rough edges contribute to its grandeur. Those who remove them commit an act of vandalism.