

BOOK REVIEW

Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators

Robert Louis Wilken (translator and editor);¹ with Angela Russell Christman and Michael J Hollerich (*The Church's Bible series*)

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To a large extent, patristic and medieval modes of exegesis and interpretation of Scripture remain an unfamiliar and inaccessible world for most faith communities. The Church's Bible commentary series attempts to change this situation, and is designed "to present Holy Scripture as understood and interpreted during the first millennium of Christian history." (p. x) As such it wants to disseminate the richness of the Church's classical tradition of interpretation to a broader church based audience. This objective is commendable, but one might gain the impression that the nature of the book's content does not quite gel with its supposed audience – particularly since the scope of its supposed audience is not entirely clear. To date this series also includes volumes on *The Song of Songs* and *1 Corinthians*. Apart from the main commentary section, the *Isaiah* volume also includes rather short introductions to the interpretation of the Old Testament in the early church, as well as the Christian interpretation of *Isaiah*. Also included is a preface to the commentary section on *Isaiah*, which entails some excerpts from introductions to ancient commentaries on *Isaiah*, New Testament passages, and references to *Isaiah* in early Christian writings. Two appendixes (authors of works excerpted and sources of texts translated), and indexes of names, subjects and Scripture references complete the volume.

The centrality and reception of the book of *Isaiah* in the life of church during the first millennium A.D. are well illustrated in this volume. At an early stage

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Jerome (ca. 342-420 A.D.) argued that Isaiah “should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that you would think he is compiling a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come.”² In view of such perceptions and Christological appropriations of Isaiah, it is not surprising that it became known as the “fifth gospel” in the early church. This designation clearly attests to its perceived importance. Due to the vastness of patristic and medieval interpretations of Isaiah, the compilers of this volume are quite eclectic in their approach. A chapter for chapter commentary on Isaiah is not offered, but rather excerpts from a selection of early Christian and medieval interpretation on selected Isaiah chapters. Resultantly, various chapters of Isaiah (17-18, 21-23, 27, 30-34, 36-39, 47, 57-59) are not dealt with at all. The compilers motivate such eclecticism in view of the aim and purpose of the series, i.e. to “provide excerpts for spiritual reading and resources for the theological appropriation of the Bible...” (p. xxv). Unfortunately readers are left with the task of dealing with such excluded passages.

The method and procedure of this Isaiah volume is clear, but not without difficulties. First a translation of an Isaiah chapter is given. The translation is based on the Septuagint, since early Christian and medieval interpreters utilised the LXX and Vulgate. Of course, these translations also present instances of interpretation, but the present volume does rather little to illuminate the impact hereof on patristic and medieval interpretations of Isaiah. Yet there are instances where the volume indicates how the reading of the Septuagint assisted Christological interpretation. So e.g. the LXX of Isa 25:6 reads “wine and myrrh,” which were subsequently seen as figures of the Eucharist and Baptism (p. 209). The translation of an Isaiah chapter is followed by a cursive survey of the main features of this chapter dealt with in early Christian interpretation. Subsequently this is illustrated by means of citing excerpts from longer and shorter passages commenting on or utilising the Isaiah text. Firstly, passages are cited from the New Testament where Isaiah is explicitly referred to. Secondly, passages are cited from the four complete commentaries on Isaiah from the early church, namely that of Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret of Cyrus. The commentary of John Chrysostom, preserved in an Armenian translation, offered little of value according to the compilers of this volume, while Origen’s commentary on the first thirty chapters of Isaiah has been lost. Thirdly, the compilers recount passages from instances where Isaiah has been cited in sermons and homilies on other biblical books, in theological and polemical writings, and in spiritual and devotional works. This includes the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Ephrem the Syrian, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, etc.

As stated, the compilers of this volume are eclectic in their approach. This applies to Isaiah chapters included in this volume, but also to the selection of early

² JFA Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

Christian and medieval commentary on these chapters. In view of the intended purpose of this commentary series (see above), it is rather troubling that the compilers offer no, or very little comment, on the selected passages. From a pragmatic point of view this is understandable, but the mere listing of excerpts without sketching a context will provide little enlightenment to readers introduced to this mode of exegesis and interpretation for the first time. One may even envision a few fraying tempers at some local Bible study groups. But such is the dynamics of biblical interpretation and this volume has much to offer interested readers. Yet, an annotation of the selected excerpts would have added greatly to the value of this work.

The compilation of excerpts from various early Christian and medieval interpreters highlights the spiritual nature of biblical interpretation in the early church. Isaiah, as most of the Old Testament, was essentially interpreted Christologically, governed by allegorical and typological interests with only the occasional interest in the literal or historical meaning of the text. Yet, engaging with patristic and medieval biblical interpretation reminds us that Scripture can be read as a book of faith, instructing Christian life and thinking. It does not have to be relegated to the status of an antiquarian document to be dissected for the mere purpose of scholarly gains. But we are also reminded of the dangers involved when Scripture and its interpretation become enslaved to dogma, lacking the necessary critical awareness and willingness to be informed by those who have a different point of view. One of the most interesting and troubling aspects of tracing the trajectory of Isaiah's *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the early church is the loosening of Isaiah in the church from Isaiah in the synagogue, and the role it played in the rise of anti-Semitic tendencies. In this regard church-based audiences have a lot to learn, or indeed to unlearn, by means of orientating themselves concerning the impact that early Christian interpretations of Isaiah had on the life of different faith communities. As such the Isaiah volume in The Church's Bible series is of particular historical interest, which is a gain, but also places a small question mark behind the series' supposed intent.

While it is easy to take a critical stance toward early forms of biblical interpretation and exegesis as pre-critical, uninformed, fantastical or irresponsible, this volume on Isaiah can be appreciated for its attempt to engage with patristic and medieval interpretation on a different level. It does not argue that the *regula veritas* should dislocate Scripture from its central place in the church, or that a critical reading of Scripture should make way for a pre-critical. Rather, it argues that the role of Scripture in the life of the church can be enriched by a greater awareness of the elaborate tradition, both positive and negative, of which our reading of scripture forms a part. For this reason interested parties can gain much from this volume, which is gladly recommended.