

Perspectives



Dancing with Isaiah

ONE OF THE MAGNIFICENT TWELFTH-CENTURY WINDOWS IN THE CATHEDRAL OF Chartres depicts the four evangelists—no great surprise in a church. The surprise is the gymnastics: the evangelists are hoisted on the shoulders of the four great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Like a good window should, this one preaches. The evangelists are impossible, it says, without the prophets. The New Testament sits firmly on the shoulders of the Old.

Biblical scholarship is no different. Despite our tendency to anoint the “newest” method as the one that at last brings truth, our work always rests on the shoulders of the previous generations. Some methods may, of course, prove more helpful than others, but no responsible work will be without its lasting value.

Exegetical work on the book of Isaiah makes the point well. The once “assured” results of source criticism—three Isaiah—have given way to new interest in the shape and message of the whole book. Still, there is something different about the material in chapters 40-55. It does make sense to think about how and why. But I will do that now with different tools than the ones I employed in Heidelberg in the '60s. At the same time, my present literary and redactional interests will retain the insights gained from the dreaded German critics, even the now often castigated Bernhard Duhm.

When we tend to think too highly of our most “modern” readings (be they ever so post-modern), it might be useful to recognize that learning exegesis is nothing other than learning to read and that insightful readers of every age have always had a sense of what was required.

If any would read the holy prophet Isaiah with profit and understand him better, let them not ignore this advice and instruction of mine, unless they have better advice or are themselves better informed. In the first place, let them not skip the title, or beginning, of this book [Isa. 1:1], but learn to understand it as thoroughly as possible.¹

Amazing! To understand the prophet, says Martin Luther, read carefully the actual words on the page, and take seriously the history of which they speak.

Two things are necessary to explain the prophet. The first is a knowledge of grammar, and this may be regarded as having the greatest weight. The second is more necessary, namely, a knowledge of the historical background, not only as an understanding of the events themselves as expressed in letters and syllables but as at the same time embracing rhetoric and dialectic, so that the figures of speech and the circumstances may be carefully heeded.²

¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the Prophet Isaiah* (1545 [1528]), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 273. The quotation has been changed from singular to plural for the sake of inclusivity.

²Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, *Luther's Works*, vol. 16, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969) 3.

So, now Luther has set up for us all the coming ventures into textual analysis, historical-critical exegesis, and the various literary and form-critical investigations. And why do all this?

What profit there may be in reading Isaiah, I prefer to let the readers discover for themselves, rather than to tell them here. For those who do not, or will not discover it for themselves, there is not much gained by speaking about it. The book is truly full of living, comforting, tender sayings for all poor consciences and miserable, disturbed hearts. There are also plenty of words of threatening and terror in it against the stubborn, proud hardheads—if that may be of any help.³

Egad, reader response! Is nothing new under the sun? And what will we make of this?

The prophets must be read in such a way that we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.⁴

A theological reading—more, a confessional reading—reading, as Christians must, everything in the light of Christ.

Luther's counsel for readers of Isaiah is remarkably prescient. No responsible investigations, pre-modern, modern, or post-modern, seem not to have been anticipated by Luther's concerns. Know the history, know the grammar, appreciate the literary features, follow the argument, acknowledge your own response, read in the light of canon and confession, read to place yourself before the God proclaimed by the text.

The point of using Luther as example is simply to remind ourselves that every generation has had folks who have learned to read the Bible carefully and from whose work we can profit.

As Christian readers, we share Luther's goal—to prepare ourselves and our people for the coming of Christ. Chartres got it right: the evangelists sit on Isaiah's shoulders. Isaiah's words, "fairly dancing with promises,"⁵ happen to us as we work at them; as we interpret the text, it interprets and enlivens us. We cannot force the text to let us alone until we are done with our exegesis, nor can we disown our critical questions because now we are doing homiletics. We come to the text and the text comes to us, and neither we nor our methods can fully control that process.

Articles in this issue of *Word & World* will help us understand history and redaction and language and structure. But they will also make theological claims, inspire homiletical thought—sand perhaps even invite our hearts and our feet to join Isaiah's own dance of promises.

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³*Preface to the Prophet Isaiah*, 278. Again, the quotation has been set in the plural.

⁴*Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, 3.

⁵*Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, Luther's Works*, vol. 17, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972) 3.