



Texts to Transform Life: Reading Isaiah as Christians

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THE CHURCH HAS HISTORICALLY USED SCRIPTURE TO TRANSFORM LIFE. WHAT A wondrous and important task! Yet it seems to me that there is a prominent gap between the use of scripture to transform life on the one hand and the primary goal of the mainstream scholarly approach to the interpretation of the Bible on the other.

During Advent, when Christians hear that “to us a child is born, a son is given,” that “the government will be upon his shoulder,” and that there will be no end of peace “upon the throne of David” (Isa 9:6-7), they hear these words pointing to Jesus as messianic king. But a large number of biblical scholars will argue that this text originally envisioned a just and righteous political ruler who would rule as Davidic potentate.¹ Or when the prophet speaks of a suffering servant by

¹See, for example, H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 398-410; M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 180-187.

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The descriptive work of historical criticism is necessary but insufficient for the church's use of scripture. Later generations require a performative hermeneutic to permit ancient texts to transform the lives of contemporary hearers.

whose stripes others are healed (Isa 53:5), the text, according to a vast majority of biblical scholars, speaks of Israel or a prophet or a king or yet some other figure who would have fit the horizons of ancient Israelite thought. But the church hears this text fulfilled in Jesus.

Few biblical scholars or well-educated pastors seriously doubt that everything in the book of Isaiah was originally formulated to address ancient Israel. They recognize that interpreting Isaiah in terms of Jesus Christ involves *re-interpretation* of texts which were originally concerned with life in Israel prior to any consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth as savior. Is the church's need for interpreting Isaiah for the sake of the life of the church fundamentally incompatible with a scholarly approach to Isaiah? Or is the tendency of biblical scholars to focus on original meaning too narrow a conceptualization of the task of biblical interpretation? Has modern biblical scholarship too readily jettisoned intellectual reflection about the work of the Spirit in the interpretation and use of scripture in the present-day church?

I believe the latter to be the case. Interest in original meanings of biblical texts has so dominated modern biblical scholarship that a concern for how to use the Old Testament to shape the life of the church is frequently not seen as a significant part of a Christian Old Testament scholar's intellectual task.

Let me be clear that I see great merit in historical-critical study of books like Isaiah. The church has always seen God at work in the life of Israel. It is therefore theologically important to be able to interpret Old Testament texts as reflecting a relationship between God and Israel in a context in which Jesus Christ was not yet part of the discussion. But to limit Old Testament interpretation to explanation of texts' original meanings is problematic, for New Testament writers and many post-biblical Christian interpreters have reinterpreted Old Testament texts for the sake of transforming the life of the *Christian* community.

I. WHAT IS A PERFORMATIVE HERMENEUTIC?

David Clines once articulated a hermeneutic for Isaiah 53 which involves interpreting it for purposes other than its original function during the Babylonian exile.² For Clines, the language of Isaiah 53 can be understood more as *doing* something than as *talking* about something. By this he means that language does not merely *refer* to something; it can *create* a symbolic world into which a reader may enter and become a participant. One can read the text about the unnamed servant, not simply as a spectator who does nothing more than describe what the text has to say, but rather as a participant in the world which the text bids the reader to enter. The text can do something; it can shape or reshape the basic identity of those who read it.

²David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983).

When Philip uses Isaiah 53 to proclaim Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), he does not describe what Isaiah 53 might have meant to its author or to the sixth-century audience that first heard it. Instead he uses it transformationally—to reshape the religious identity of the Ethiopian to whom he speaks.

Why doesn't the book of Acts confine itself to the so-called "original meaning" of Isaiah 53? Why does the book of Acts seem to be so free to reinterpret, to create a new meaning? Why did redactors of many biblical texts feel free to create new meanings for older texts by juxtaposing them with texts with which they were not originally associated, never bothering to explain to the reader the differences between the earlier and later meanings of these various texts? Did they not consider that they were violating the important rules of interpretation that we so carefully teach our students to follow in their exegesis courses?

The producers of biblical texts didn't follow our modern western rules for exegesis because, of course, they weren't modern western persons. They didn't follow the post-Socratic philosophical tradition that language must describe reality accurately if it is to be regarded as language that is reliable.³ Biblical writers instead used different "rules": They were more concerned with *performative* or *transformational* use of language,⁴ i.e., how language could shape or transform the community of faith, than with how accurately language used words to explain reality. Just as the words, "I pronounce you husband and wife," create a marriage and, in so doing, transform the lives of the woman and the man by placing them in a new covenant relationship, so also Philip transforms the identity of the Ethiopian by his interpretation of Isaiah 53. Just as a marriage ceremony creates a marriage instead of explaining a marriage, so also Philip uses Isaiah 53 to shape a life rather than to explain the meaning of a text in its original context.

II. ISAIAH AND A PERFORMATIVE HERMENEUTIC

It is my contention that in our interpretation of the Bible we recapture an ability to interpret it for transformational purposes and not limit ourselves to questions of what it meant to its earliest audiences. Admittedly we should take seriously the fact that Isaiah was a prophet in antiquity. The church indeed confesses that God was at work in Israel in the eighth century B.C. But we must also recognize that the redactors of the book of Isaiah used the early Isaiah traditions in a performative way. They took the Isaianic message that God's judgment would be expressed in the form of military conquest by Assyria (Isa 7:20; 8:5-8; 10:5-15) and reinterpreted that judgment in terms of the Babylonian exile (Isa 39:1-8; 42:18-25; 43:22-28). Yet the Isaianic redactors did not explicitly distinguish for the reader the differences between "original" and "reinterpreted" meanings. They simply added

³J. H. Ware, Jr., *Not With Words of Wisdom* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981) 9.

⁴For performative language theory, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), and J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970).

texts that suggest to the reader that the entire book of Isaiah sees the Babylonian exile as a part of God's larger plan of judgment and deliverance. They did so, in my judgment, primarily for transformational purposes, i.e., to re-use earlier Isaianic traditions to shape the community's life in the context of the later Babylonian, and even Persian, periods. Even later the book of Isaiah was reinterpreted by New Testament writers for the performative purposes of shaping Christian identity and behavior. And as the centuries went by—in the patristic period, in the reformation, and in subsequent centuries—Isaiah continued to be reinterpreted for the sake of transformation of communities of faith.

Let me illustrate by a brief examination of Isaiah 1.⁵ It has often been argued that Isaiah 1 consists of a collection of several originally independent units which were later brought together by one or more redactors. However true this might be, Isaiah 1 can now be read as a unified text by means of which a faith community could hear itself addressed by words of judgment and grace which could decisively transform the community's identity and behavior in relationship with God.

Isa 1:2-3 enables an interpretive community to imagine itself as children of God put on trial. Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses: "Hear, O heavens, give ear, O earth, for Yahweh has spoken" (v. 2). Then follows the accusation: "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me." These rebellious sons are also foolish: the ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib, but Yahweh's foolish children don't understand (v. 3)!

In vv. 4-9 (a new formal unit, for Yahweh is no longer the speaker), Yahweh's children continue to be condemned for their folly. They are so foolish that they continue to rebel, continue being beaten as chastisement for their sins (v. 5). Indeed, they are wounded from head to foot, with bruises and sores and bleeding wounds (v. 6), yet they stupidly keep coming back for more chastising blows. Have they not experienced chastisement as the alien invasion of their land, leaving daughter Zion alone like the sole remaining booth in a vineyard or lodge in a cucumber patch? Why did these foolish children fail to recognize that, had Yahweh not left a few survivors, they would have been completely destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah?

A new unit begins in v. 10 with Yahweh as speaker—a speaker who claims to take no delight with their sacrifices. Yahweh is indeed completely full to overflowing with the meals that they have brought for their God to eat. The foolish children who, unlike ox and ass, didn't know the source of their food (v. 3)—and who as a consequence suffered the consequence of aliens eating their land (v. 7)—bring sacrifices that Yahweh does not want to eat. Yahweh instead wants justice, the defense of the orphan and the pleading for the widow (v. 17).

⁵R. F. Melugin, "Figurative Speech and the Reading of Isaiah 1 as Scripture," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 214 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 282-305.

Then Yahweh summons the audience to join in legal dispute: “Come, let us plead together” (v. 18a). “If your sins are as scarlet,” Yahweh asks, “can they be as snow? If they are as crimson, can they be as wool?” Of course not, those who dispute with Yahweh must surely conclude. Thus there remain but two alternatives: “If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword” (vv. 19-20).

Whatever the original purpose of any of these speech-units before a redactor organized them in their present form, there is little need to reconstruct their prior history of usage. The text as we now have it could be used by Israel to construct a symbolic world which they could enter and by means of which their identity and behavior could be transformed. The world to be constructed is clearly a *symbolic* one.⁶ At both beginning and end there is figurative language concerning legal speech between Yahweh and Israel; Yahweh calls rebellious Israel to trial (vv. 2-3) and beckons Israel to participate in legal dispute as to whether scarlet sins can become as white as snow (vv. 18-20). Furthermore, parent-child metaphors depict the relationship between God and Israel. And metaphors of eating appear throughout.

Entry into this symbolic world is clearly for performative or transformational purposes. The intent is not primarily to explain something but rather that Israel’s behavior will be transformed, that Israel will be “willing and obedient” rather than “refusing and rebelling” (vv. 19-20). Description of reality admittedly occurs—a figuratively-depicted reality. But description of reality is secondary to transformational intent.

The construction of a symbolic world that is concerned with social justice appears in a number of places in Isaiah. In Isa 1:21-23, Jerusalem is depicted metaphorically as a once-faithful bride turned harlot, as a bride once filled with justice now filled with murderers, as a city whose princes have become rebels and companions of thieves—people who take bribes and fail to seek justice for widow and orphan.⁷ God will punish, but the punishment involves a purification of the city that became impure, a restoration of the harlotrous city to her original role as faithful bride (vv. 24-26). The symbolic world to be constructed by users of this text would be one in which a just social and political order will prevail. The same is true of the messianic texts in Isa 9:2-7 and 11:1-9. The child who is born will sit on David’s throne and establish it in “justice and righteousness” (9:6-7). The “shoot from the stump of Jesse” will be a king who will judge the poor with righteousness (11:1, 4), and a utopian society will be the result (11:6-9). The symbolic world promoted by these messianic texts involves a royal rule of justice and righteousness—a world of social justice that is compatible with the vision of the restoration of a just

⁶P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 25-44, esp. 36-37.

⁷See K. P. Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 137-40.

social and political order with just princes, judges, and counselors in the text about the bride turned harlot (1:21-26).

III. ISAIAH IN A MODERN-DAY SYMBOLIC WORLD

The Isaianic texts discussed above seem designed to function performatively to construct a symbolic world by means of which ancient Israel's life can be transformed. There is certainly nothing in any text in Isaiah that speaks directly about Jesus Christ or the Christian community. But if scholarly exegesis remains focused almost exclusively on meanings for ancient Israel, can a Christian scholarly community which limits itself to historical criticism possibly be fully responsible to its calling? Cannot Isaiah 1 speak transformationally to later communities up to and including our own?

Let us suppose that an all-white congregation in an inner city had within it a remnant that endeavored to live in faithfulness by means of a symbolic world that had been constructed by careful study of Isaiah.⁸ Most of their members had fled to the suburbs when poor people, mostly African-American, moved into their neighborhood. Many had joined other churches, and most of the rest who remained in the congregation were not interested in ministering to the community of poor people who had come to live in the neighborhood. The small but dedicated remnant, whose identity was shaped decisively by Isaiah, might see the entire congregation as stubborn and rebellious children who, unlike ox and ass, did not know or understand, as a declining community of worship whose wounds failed to heal as they ran away from the challenge precipitated by the "aliens" who moved in to "eat" their land. Indeed, if no remnant had remained, the church might have totally disappeared (see Isa 1:2-9).

This church's faithful remnant could understand their congregation as a community whose eucharistic meals and pious prayers God rejects because they have not ministered to the poor (the "widow" and "orphan") in their midst. Yet this remnant could hear itself as exhorted to become clean by looking to the cause of the poor in their neighborhood (see Isa 1:10-17).

Such a use of Isaiah of course involves a new interpretation for our own time. The traces of our cultural situation are readily observable in the ways in which our hypothetical inner-city church interprets and uses this text for the transformation of its own life. This church's hermeneutic and exegesis should by no means be facile; that faith community could indeed benefit greatly both from a sophisticated literary analysis of the text's figurative speech and from scholarly reflection about the enterprise of constructing and inhabiting a symbolic world—even though that symbolic world will be a hybrid of elements from antiquity and from our own cul-

⁸For earlier discussion of such a hypothetical congregation see Melugin, "The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. C. C. Broyles and C. A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 51-54, and "Isaiah in the Worshipping Community," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Graham, McKenzie, and Marris (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, forthcoming).

ture. To try to interpret it only in its ancient contexts would be to fail to use it as scripture. It would represent a failure to appropriate a hermeneutic of reinterpretation to which this text's redactors were themselves committed. The proper task of theologically oriented study of a text such as this must therefore include a kind of scholarly analysis that prepares the way for the performative use of scripture in Christian communities in our own time.

IV. ISAIAH AND CHRISTIAN MESSIANISM

If, as scholars generally believe, the messianic texts in Isa 9:2-7 and 11:1-9 (also 32:1-8) were originally understood in ancient Israel as expectation of an actual king who would sit on the Davidic throne for the purposes of governing his kingdom with justice, how can these texts be read in the Christian community as fulfilled in Jesus, who never was king over an earthly kingdom? Let us begin with the observation that these messianic promises, like other promises, are not necessarily construed as fulfilled in precisely the ways that they were originally articulated.⁹ A promise is a performative word that can be seen as fulfilled in ways that differ to some extent from what was envisioned at the time the promise was given. If, for example, a husband promised his wife shortly after their marriage in the 1950s that he would be amenable to her having a career of her own, fulfilling that promise in a new feminist age in the 1970s might well require something different from what was both envisioned and expressed when the promise was first made.

The expectation of a just ruler over Jerusalem, which the messianic promises in Isaiah 9, 11, and 32 seem to envision, can quite appropriately be reinterpreted to include the portrayal of a messiah who rules God's kingdom without ruling over an earthly political entity—as one who rules in servanthood and suffering for others. Yet a simple *substitution* of the politically powerless and suffering messiah for the Isaianic depiction of a messiah who exercises justice in a political realm would represent an unnecessary reductionism in the biblical messianic visions that the church could use for shaping its life and behavior. Our hypothetical inner-city church, with its calling to minister to the poor and oppressed, could gain great insight into its particular calling by living in a symbolic world shaped by Isaiah's vision about justice in the realm of power politics, while also embracing the messianic vision of the one who rules through self-giving and suffering. *Both* messianic visions can function in the Christian community with transforming power. It is likewise unnecessarily reductionistic to require that the church interpret Isaiah 53 in a univocal fashion.¹⁰ Whether the first audiences of Isaiah 53 would have regarded the suffering servant as a messianic king or as Israel personified is by no

⁹For an essay arguing that fulfillment of promises often is significantly different from what was originally envisaged, see W. Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfillment," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann (Richmond: John Knox, 1963) 89-122.

¹⁰R. Melugin, "On Reading Isaiah 53 as Christian Scripture," in *Jesus and the Suffering: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. W. H. Bellinger, Jr., and W. R. Farmer (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) 55-69.

means certain. It is certainly quite possible for the church to employ it as a text which illumines the suffering and death of Jesus. But it may also be profitably employed for the performative purposes of shaping the identity of all Christians as a community called to be a community whose stripes are the means by which others are made whole (Isa 53:5). Isaiah 53, read in combination with traditions of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, may even be fruitfully reinterpreted as illumining the beatings, bombings, and assassinations which African Americans suffered as acts of suffering for the sins of their white oppressors. To insist on one meaning and one meaning alone for the use of Isaiah 53 in the church would rob that rich text of much of its potential transformational power.

This essay represents an attempt to propose a performative hermeneutic for the interpretation and use of the Bible in the church. Historical criticism's search for meanings in antiquity is useful indeed, but there is a critical need for more. It is my hope that the church's biblical scholars will increasingly see the need to develop interpretive paradigms for the performative use of scripture for the shaping and re-shaping of the church's life in our own time. What I have written here and elsewhere on the use of Isaiah as scripture represents at best a beginning of a larger task that needs to be undertaken by many. ⊕