

Reviews



FIRST ISAIAH: A COMMENTARY, by J. J. M. Roberts. Edited by Peter Machinist. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015. Pp. 554. \$69.00 (cloth).

J. J. M. Roberts begins this volume by noting, “My friends like to kid me that I have been working on this commentary on Isaiah 1–39 for even more years than the eighth-century BCE prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, remained active as a prophet” (1). And Isaiah was active for between 38 and 52 years! The long wait for this commentary has been worth it.

As the editor notes in an untitled foreword, “Roberts has now given us his magnum opus, the Hermeneia commentary on First Isaiah.” Roberts follows what he terms “the classic historical-critical method” (2). Roberts believes that the authorship, date, and life setting of many of the prophetic messages in Isaiah 1–39 can be reconstructed with confidence and accuracy. Roberts believes that most, but not all, of Isaiah 1–39 dates to Isaiah of Jerusalem. With most critical scholars, he believes that 40–55 date to the Babylonian exile and 56–66 to the postexilic period. Roberts also dates 12–13, some of 14, 24–27, 34–35, and of course the deuteronomistic narrative in 36–39 (which is related to 2 Kings 18:13–20:19) to after Isaiah of Jerusalem’s death. The vast majority of the remainder of the text—1–23 and 28–33—Roberts believes is original: “far more of it can be attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem than is often admitted” (4). Roberts focuses most of his formidable talent and energy on these authentic oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem. In his introduction he briefly discusses the prophet’s historical context and theologi-

cal influences; he omits a similar introductory discussion for the material he regards as originating from later than the prophet.

Roberts argues that many of the authentic messages of Isaiah can be dated to three major crises of the 8th century BCE: to the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis of 735–732 BCE (when Syria and Israel waged war against Judah), to the Ashdod crisis of 715–711 BCE (when Judah considered joining a revolt against Assyria led by the Philistine coastal city of Ashdod), and to 705–701 (when Hezekiah revolted against the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib, leading to Sennacherib’s famous invasion of Judah).

Roberts makes extended use of the concept of the self-extended prophetic message. He believes that Isaiah would often dust off prophetic oracles that he had given earlier in his career and refine and reuse them again in later contexts. For example, Isa 28:1–6 consists of a message originally spoken during the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis of 735–732, while 28:7–22 consists of an extension in which the prophet edited and then reapplied the original oracle to the new context of Hezekiah’s revolt in 705–701. Roberts often refers to the “secondary interpretations” of a passage, by which he might mean either the reuse of old material by the prophet himself or by later editors.

Roberts at times reconstructs what he believes to be the original sequence of certain prophetic messages that were somehow disturbed in the transmission process. For example, he argues that Isa 8:1–4 originally was followed by 8:16–18, and that “8:5–10 and 8:11–15 represent secondary intrusions in the

context" (139). Or again, 9:7–20 + 5:25–30 are a single unit (157–163).

Most pericopes begin with a brief historical introduction. Then follows a rigorous translation with very detailed textual notes that address the text and translation. The commentary for each pericope then follows, which mainly addresses historical context, the semantic meaning of the passage, and often includes theological observations. A comprehensive bibliography concludes each pericope.

The translation, textual notes, and historical-critical remarks are the volume's primary achievement. Roberts employs his mastery of the ancient languages, ancient Near Eastern history and literature, the textual witnesses, and the interpretive debates. His unrivaled philological and textual work establish this volume as the standard for understanding the text of First Isaiah.

Even a magnum opus such as Roberts's commentary cannot be all things to all people.

So what else might I have wanted in the commentary? In a word, "More." It is not too often that I put down a 550-page book and wish that it were even longer. The nine-page introduction, for example, could have benefited from a historical survey of Judah and Israel in the 8th century BCE. The introduction might also have included a more detailed discussion of the theology of the Zion Tradition (also known as Judean royal theology) that Isaiah received and of the contributions he made to that tradition. Selected engagement with the iconography (artistic depictions) of the ancient Near East would also fit under "more." Roberts has extensive knowledge of iconography (see his discussion of Isa 6:1–13), but no images are presented.

Roberts's writing is clear, concise, and neither polemical nor tendentious. He shaves with Occam's razor, favoring the most direct argument, which he does not decorate with frivolous rhetoric. His frequent summaries are

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to the point and helpful. His theological observations are direct. Roberts has given us his lifetime work: the new, standard, historical-critical commentary on First Isaiah.

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PAUL AND THE GIFT, by John M. G. Barclay. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. Pp. xvi + 656. \$63.00 (cloth).

Paul and the Gift constitutes a substantial contribution to the contemporary conversation regarding Paul's understanding of divine grace and its relationship to Second Temple Judaism. John M. G. Barclay advances this scholarly debate primarily by nuancing the discussion with a comprehensive reevaluation of the category of grace, using the broader anthropological frame of *gift*. In order to both refine and problematize the concept of grace, Barclay engages in an extended conversation with cultural-anthropological studies of gift-giving in various cultural settings. The result of this sustained exploration is a revision of the category of grace that demonstrates its multiform character across context and culture. By reconfiguring grace in this way, Barclay launches a creative, lengthy, and consequential rereading of Second Temple Judaism and the Pauline epistles on the matter of God's grace.

Barclay's work is comprehensive, and he spends a significant amount of time providing a preliminary history of gift-giving. By exploring non-Western contexts, the Greco-Roman world, ancient Israel, and the development of modern, Western construals of the gift, Barclay discloses the divergent character of the various accounts that prevail in different cultural settings. Having contextualized the variegated character of gift-giving, Barclay delineates six different "perfections" (or configurations) of the gift that resonate with-

in the various cultures he explores: (1) superabundance, (2) singularity, (3) priority, (4) incongruity, (5) efficacy, and (6) noncircularity. By demonstrating the polyvalence of the gift, Barclay establishes the foundation for a reevaluation of the history of Pauline interpretation, the Second Temple literature, and Paul's own theology of grace.

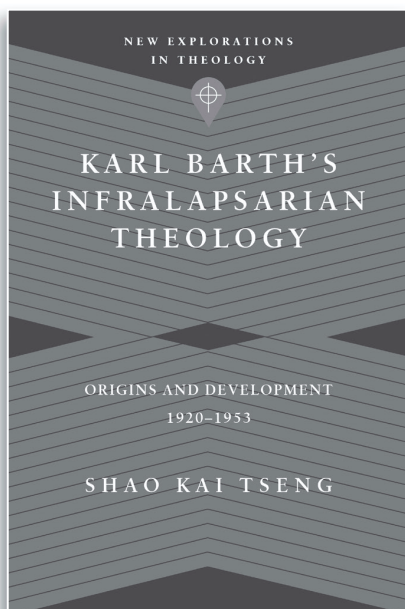
Barclay's history of Pauline interpretation shows both the consequence and the gravity of Paul's epistles for the history of Christian thought. By far the most influential interpreter of Paul, Augustine is foundational for Barclay's history, after whom he proceeds to discuss Protestant interpretations of Paul in the writings of Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bultmann, Käsemann, and Martyn. This provides the needed backdrop for Barclay's description and assessment of the current debate over Paul's theology. According to Barclay's telling of the story, both traditional and revisionist readings of Paul are plagued by an unhelpful reductionism that configures grace in overly simplistic terms. What is needed to advance current debates over the nature of grace in Paul's writings, he suggests, is an adequately nuanced description of grace—one that accounts for the multiple ways it may be interpreted.

The remainder of the book's argument is laid out in two movements. The first is a new reading of the Second Temple Jewish literature in light of the multiple ways that grace can be perfected. By examining several important texts—such as *The Wisdom of Solomon*, Philo's writings, the Qumran *Hodayot*, and *4 Ezra*—Barclay shows that the Second Temple literature by no means interprets grace in a uniform fashion. This contradicts the oversimplified picture of Second Temple Jewish soteriology advanced by many revisionist readers of Paul (such as E. P. Sanders), and reveals that Jews during Paul's time punctuated their descriptions of grace with a variety of different features.

By problematizing the typical portrait of



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JOEL D. S. RASMUSSEN,
University of Oxford

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Second Temple Judaism that has been advanced since at least the late 1970s by the new perspective on Paul, Barclay initiates the second movement of his argument in the form of a sustained engagement with the Pauline epistles. Because Galatians and Romans are the primary sites of controversy in the scholarly debate over what Paul means by grace, Barclay's extended reading of Paul focuses on these two epistles. Barclay's claim is that Paul configures grace as incongruent with the worthiness of its recipients. By perfecting the *incongruity* of grace, Paul—on Barclay's reading—views the Christ event as a fundamental recalibration of antecedent systems of value. By divesting the law of its ability to determine righteousness or worth, both Jews and Gentiles become recipients of God's mercy in Christ in an identically incongruent way—one not premised upon obedience to the law.

A significant strength of Barclay's reading is his sensitivity both to the historical circumstances that prompted Paul's epistolary correspondence as well as the wider theological ramifications. Thus, Barclay largely agrees with the new perspective's proposal that Paul's reflections on grace, righteousness, and the law are located within a specific, historical conversation amongst Christians about law observance, God's giving of righteousness in Christ, and the relation between Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, by reading Paul's theology of grace in terms of its incongruity with the worthiness of its recipients, Barclay is also able to extend the logic of this historically situated argument in a way that is more consonant with classic, Reformation readings of Paul.

By no means does *Paul and the Gift* relieve all of the tension between the new perspective and Reformation readings of Paul's writings. Nevertheless, Barclay accomplishes much by nuancing the terminology of grace and gift in the Second Temple and Pauline literatures. While many Lutheran readers will want to accent Barclay's insights by highlighting the performative dimensions of the external

words of law and gospel and sharpening the emphasis on justification as the event of God's incongruous pardoning of sinners, there is much that can be learned from Barclay's study. Regardless of what perspective one takes, this book is indispensable for anyone interested in the theology of the Apostle Paul and the contemporary debates that surround his writings.

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THE LOVE OF GOD: DIVINE GIFT, HUMAN GRATITUDE, AND MUTUAL FAITHFULNESS IN JUDAISM, by Jon D. Levenson. Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. 235. \$29.95 (cloth).

Love is a two-way street, but in the economy of love between humanity and God, the flow of that love and the level of mutuality is complexly contested. In biblical perspective, love is articulated early in Scripture in primarily covenantal terms, embedded in particular social relations. As understandings of love shift and change through the Middle Ages and into the modern period, so our reading of God's love and its implications for love of neighbor also shift.

So, for example, Levenson argues early in this book against the misperception that the love of God is primarily sentiment, and so a private matter. Love in Near Eastern treaties is quite unsentimental—it is, in fact, “the proper stance of the lesser party toward the greater” (xiii). Levenson takes great pains to establish this definition of love as founding semantic context for the term, and the argument is helpful, because it explains, for example, why even as late as the formation of the Lutheran Small Catechism, Luther can coin the felicitous turn of phrase, “We are to fear and love God so that...”

Jon Levenson's work focuses on the inter-

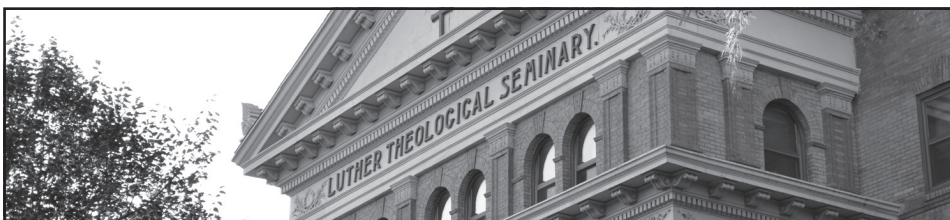
pretation of the Hebrew Bible, including its re-interpretations in Second Temple Judaism and rabbinic midrash. He is a frequent interlocutor with Christian theologians, and has written extensively on resurrection in particular. In addition, one of his current courses at Harvard Divinity School deals with the use of medieval Jewish commentaries for purposes of modern biblical exegesis, and another focuses on central works of Jewish theology in the twentieth century. All of this type of hermeneutical and historical work is on full display in *The Love of God*.

Levenson, however, does not leave love languishing in the historical relationship between suzerain and vassal. He also states, “Although the God-Israel relationship in the classical Jewish sources is asymmetrical, as any relationship with God cannot but be, it is thoroughly mutual, as any relationship among personal beings inevitably is” (xiv). Levenson establishes the validity of this second point

through an extensive reading of the love of God in classical Talmudic literature (chapter two), the Song of Songs (chapter three), the Jewish-Muslim cultural symbiosis of medieval Spain, Moses Maimonides in particular (chapter four), and twentieth-century religious thinkers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (chapter five).

Levenson’s book opts against an exhaustive treatment of the love of God, and instead attempts to evoke the power of the classical Jewish idea of the love of God. This makes the book highly readable and engaging. Levenson’s lifelong scholarship, like that of the best of popular theological writers, has refined his ability to write theologically rigorous books accessible to the lay reader.

As a reader, I found the early chapters of the book especially compelling. I had never really considered love as a cover term for acts of obedient service, but upon hearing that definition, was able to think of the widely varied places



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where that kind of love is still both expected and practiced.

This kind of love can be commanded. It is a love that is expressed in loyalty, in service, and in obedience. Understanding love in this fashion makes much sense of the love commands, as well as such places in Scripture where Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” and then commands, “Feed my sheep.” This is not sentiment. This is obligation. Yet it is love.

Intriguingly, although this is not a Christian or christological account of love, there are aspects of it that parallel Christian doctrine, the concept of imputedness. Levenson notes that in Hosea, in its description of the marital intimacy of God and Israel in chapter two, “righteousness,” “justice,” “goodness,” “mercy,” and “faithfulness” are gifts with which the Lord endows Israel in exchange for her exclusive fidelity to him. “They constitute at once what the groom contributes to and expects from the relationship” (105).

Furthermore, Levenson points us to a synthesis of love and law sorely lacking in much of Christian theology. Christian theology, in particular after the Reformation turn, has understood law primarily according to two uses: to condemn sin and order life together. Law in this account is either a threat or a burden. But law in Jewish tradition is much more than this, and more beautiful. Understanding the fulfillment of law as love is the way forward.

First, there is an invitation to recognize, together with Franz Rosenzweig, that God “has sold Himself to us with the Torah” (192). This is to say, the Torah, among other things, is God’s form of falling in love with God’s people. If the Torah is such a divine gift, then those who receive such a gift have more options. “The choice does not lie between rote observance of the law as an impersonal, unfeeling reality, on the one hand, and the rejection of law as incompatible with the being of the loving God, on the other. There is a third position—a principled stance of openness to the

Torah as the medium for encountering the loving and commanding God of Israel” (192).

In this sense, law becomes a commandment, commandment as event, and that event is election, the divine and mutual gifting of God with the community that maintains such an open posture, that makes the gift of the law and human gratitude for it one and the same thing—the love of God.

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FOOL’S TALK, by Os Guinness. Downers Grove: IVP, 2015. Pp. 272. \$22.00 (cloth).

Here is a book meant to stir up one’s mind—and heart. The author writes that it is the product of “forty years of thinking,” and it should probe the best efforts of any reader. He affirms that “we have lost the art of Christian persuasion and we must recover it” (17). The believer in the faith must be an apologist, in the best sense of the word. Our writer wants the reader to be aware of the many good books available on the subject, and to interact with authors of all sorts. You will hear from Christians, but also from non-Christians. You will be informed and challenged by discussions and arguments from the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, early church fathers, a variety of Reformation and Enlightenment leaders, and a plethora of modern authors.

The title of the book at hand—*Fool’s Talk*—is based on the work of the Reformation scholar Erasmus, where the role of the court jester is described. There is a time to laugh and a time to feel sorrow. Both the “fool” on display and his audience knew that well enough, and so must the believer today. But, to be sure, there are different types of “fools” in society, among Christians and non-Christians alike, and we need to be aware of the differences.

To aid us in this, our author points up three

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kinds of “fools” noted in the Scriptures. The first is the kind of person who boldly affirms “there is no God” (Ps 14:1). Then there is the one who is willing to be regarded as a fool “for Christ’s sake” (as Paul was considered by the Roman governor, see Acts 26:24, or by the Corinthians, see 1 Cor 4:10). And there was our Lord himself, a “fool bearer,” as he was accosted by the high priest and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Finally, the third type of fool is “the foolmaker,” portrayed by God himself, “shaming and subverting the world’s wisdom through folly, the world’s strength through weakness and the world’s superiority through coming in disguise as a nonentity” (72).

How should a believer proceed in his way of life, and in his contact with people daily? He/she should avoid using a sledgehammer approach, seeking to quell any nonbelieving friends or passersby with one mighty blow. We are not here simply to “win arguments.” We are called to be witnesses and sharers of the good news. One approach is to tell stories. Remember the case where the prophet Nathan confronted King David with the story of a rich man who took his neighbor’s sole lamb for a feast (when he had plenty of lambs of his own, 2 Sam 12). The point was evident, and David was readily judged guilty of sinning against the Lord. Or, consider the parables told by Jesus. In most cases no explanation was necessary; the point was self-evident.

Another approach is to ask questions. Our writer gives two reasons why questions are powerful. First, they are indirect; second, they are involving (163). God asked questions (to Adam and Eve: “Where are you?”). Jesus asked questions (“Who do you say that I am?” Mark 8:29). Our questions ought to direct people to the One who has the answers. But what about the seeker’s journey? Here the apologist ought to become a helpful guide for the seeker. A starting point might be called a search for meaning, or “a world-and-life view.” Why are we here and where are we going? Once we have

discerned meaning, the next step is to search for an answer. The answer must, in turn, satisfy the question, or questions, that we have. Does the key fit the lock? Then we must look for evidences. Whether we talk about “justification” or “verification” or “checking it out,” we need to be convinced of the truth, namely that God is a God of truth, whose word is truth, and that the people of God are called to be people of truth. Now faith needs to become “personal and experiential”—we do not simply know about God, but know him in reality.

As he concludes, our author emphasizes two approaches to our apologetic stance, the closed fist and the open hand. Not one or the other, but both are necessary and both are fruitful.

My conclusion about this book is that it is worthwhile and can be enjoyable to read. The author has a grasp of language that can carry the reader along in the flow of thought, and his acquaintance with multiple sources of literature and writers is striking. He is well aware of the issues and questions that may and do arise in the quest for life, and any serious, seeking reader should benefit from his counsel.

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THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD, by David Bentley Hart. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. 376. \$17.00 (paper).

David Bentley Hart’s latest book, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*, now out in paperback, likely escaped the reading lists of many upon its release by Yale in 2013. Hart, who can be found in the back pages of *First Things*, and most recently was a visiting professor at Saint Louis University, has written a book that really should be required reading in not only a pluralistic religious world, but for a professional clergy that is widely lacking in understanding of not only theism, but the



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multireligious prevalence of philosophical theism in the world. Hart's book, alternatively brilliant and frustrating, is one that requires a close reading and rereading. For those who give it time, *The Experience of God* rewards with beautiful prose, and a thesis that sings. That thesis, that most people are seriously confused when they speak about "God," forms the energy of the book, best summed up in the first chapter, where Hart writes: "to use the word [God] in a sense consonant with the teachings of Orthodox Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Baha'i, a great deal of antique paganism, and so forth—is to speak of the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things. . . . He is not a 'being' at least not in the way that a tree, a shoemaker, or a god is a being. . . . Rather, all things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite wellspring of all that is" (30).

In the first chapter of *The Experience of God*, Hart makes clear that he understands atheists and nontraditional religionists to be confused, particularly around God's (non)being. In fact, Hart argues, most of these antagonists are actually upset about what he terms the "demiurge," who is *not* the source of the existence of all things but "rather the Intelligent Designer and causal agent of the world of space and time," simply the greatest and wisest being in the hierarchy (35). With this basic thesis in mind, Hart turns to three words of Sanskrit, drawn from multiple religious traditions, to describe the God of theism: being, consciousness, and bliss. Hart draws on these terms throughout the rest of the book, not merely because they describe the nature of God, but because they are about how the reality of God can "be experienced and known to us" (44).

In the second chapter, Hart turns to supporting this thesis by explaining how the idea of "Intelligent Design" was an irresistible at-

traction to deism, which was fated to be laid bare by a cosmology that has no need for a designer. As Hart notes, "there was simply no longer any need for this ghost beyond the machine" (64). Instead, Hart argues convincingly that the conflict of our times that has led so many people in false directions is not a conflict between faith and reason, or religion and science, but instead a conflict between theism and naturalism. This naturalism, writes Hart, "is a metaphysics of the rejection of metaphysics." Most seriously, Hart asks us to consider that naturalism is irrationally creedal and confessional, and stands in opposition to our Christian catechisms and confessions, writing: "all that remains of naturalism is an irrational creed, sustained by a catechetical commitment to an insidious 'nothing but' or 'only': as in, 'You are *nothing but* your genes' or 'Reality is *only* molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles in motion'" (80).

In the remaining chapters, which make up the meat of the work, Hart turns towards being (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*) as the basic attributes of how we experience God. It's not necessary to rehearse that exposition here, as they are worth a much closer reading than can be provided in this space. At the center of Hart's work in these chapters is a multireligious exploration of standard metaphysical arguments for knowing and experiencing God. What makes Hart's argument unique, and most of the book powerful, is that beyond drawing from philosophical metaphysical tradition that argues that "the source of all things—God, that is—must be essentially simple," Hart draws from sources as wide as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's *Upanishads*, a Hindu theological exposition of metaphysics, to Muslims like Ibn Sina. It ceases to be merely a philosophical meditation, but instead a work of intersectionality among differing religious traditions that, as Hart argues, have remarkably consistent arguments about who God is.

One may certainly be unmoved by Hart's



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well-trodden philosophical arguments from metaphysics, and make a powerful criticism of the book on the grounds that the book just furthers a metaphysical tradition that needs to die (John Caputo and Richard Kearney come to mind here). In my mind, it is that multireligious exploration that makes the book so convincing and powerful, and is why I find myself continuing to return to it. It has been made even more powerful because of the recent controversy around whether Christians and Muslims worship the “same” God. Hart’s

book convincingly gives ground to the belief that they do in their theism, even if significant differences might exist in soteriology and Christology. Hart’s book is worth the work, and is an invaluable resource in an increasingly pluralistic world that is often hostile to *all* forms of religious belief, not just our own particular tradition.

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