
In his latest book, *The struggle to understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, Brevard Childs, the Sterling Professor Emeritus of Divinity at Yale Divinity School, utilizes the book of Isaiah as a case study of the endeavour of the Church throughout its history to understand the Bible and specifically the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. His purpose in writing the book is not to offer yet another approach to the Bible, but rather to understand how Christian theologians throughout the ages have struggled to understand Isaiah as a vehicle to communicate the Christian message. His primary concern in the book is not to present us with another history of interpretation, but to focus on hermeneutical issues.

He has chosen to focus on Isaiah because several of the greatest Christian theologians have written extensively on Isaiah; secondly, because many, if not most, of the complicated exegetical problems concerning the relation of the Old and the New Testaments have centred on Isaiah; and thirdly, by limiting the extent of his investigation to one book, he was able to penetrate more deeply into the subject at hand.

Childs approaches his task by focusing on a different Christian age in each chapter, using the commentaries and other treatises of key figures within each age to illustrate the development of the Church’s interpretation of Isaiah. In the first chapter he investigates the role of the Septuagint to understand the exegetical techniques applied by individual New Testament authors and to understand the hermeneutical problem of the New Testament’s use of the Hebrew Bible.

After this opening chapter, he then turns his attention to commentaries and treatises from the patristic, Reformation, and modern ages. Key figures such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret of Cyrus, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, each has a chapter devoted to his understanding of Isaiah.

As could be expected, each of these scholars interpreted the book of Isaiah from a Christological perspective. Two chapters are devoted to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Childs shows that despite a huge diversity with regard to time and culture, all these works present a similar theological understanding of Isaiah. That does not mean that traditional methodologies were never refined or corrected, but they all display a similar Christological reading of the text.
Critical scholars of the early nineteenth century such as Gesenius, Hitzig and Ewald, are largely dismissed by Childs as falling outside the scope of his study, namely the struggle to understand the book of Isaiah as Christian Scripture. This is for me, one of the weaker points of Childs’ analysis. It seems to me that for Childs, reading the book of Isaiah as Christian Scripture means that it must be read Christologically. Although these three scholars’ works do not follow the Church’s tradition in interpreting the book of Isaiah, I cannot agree that their reading of the book from a non-Christological perspective means that they did not understand the book as Christian Scripture.

Childs also ignores the late twentieth century in his analysis. Not only that, but he only devotes six pages to a post-modern interpretation of Isaiah. Walter Brueggemann’s Isaiah commentaries and his Theology are the only texts referred to in this very disappointing section. The struggle to understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture continues more than ever before in these post-modern times and one would have expected a more thorough analysis than what Childs has done. Again, Childs leaves one with the impression that Isaiah can only be understood as Christian Scripture when read with Christological glasses. I cannot agree with that.

In the final chapter of his book Childs draws some implications of his analysis for continued debate over the role of Scripture in the life of the Church today. In the end he has tried to show that there are characteristic features within Christian exegesis of the Old Testament that constitute a family resemblance. These characteristics include the authority of Scripture, the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, Scripture’s two Testaments, the relation between divine and human authorship of Scripture, the Christological content of the Christian Bible, and the dialectical nature of history.

The struggle to understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture is a valuable book. It prides the reader with a clear picture of the hermeneutical issues involved in understanding the Bible, especially the Old Testament as part of the Christian canon. However, to my mind Childs’ seemingly narrow understanding of what it means to understand a biblical book as Christian Scripture detracts from its value. More conservative readers will probably be in complete agreement with Childs and thus appreciate his approach more.

I picked up one typographical error. On page 116 the numbering should be d, e, f, instead of d, 5, f.

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