

Reformation History

7. Isaiah

For the Protestant reformers Isaiah was the great prophet, and with good reason. The highly Christ-centered (or Christological) manner in which they read the Hebrew Scriptures made Isaiah, with his prophecies of the advent and sacrificial death of the messiah, a foundation for their belief that the New Testament was the fulfillment of the Old. Many of the key passages so important for the reformers are known to us through George Frederic Handel's great oratorio, the Messiah. We hear the familiar words from chapter 40:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. [Isa 40:1-2]

Again:

In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together. [Isa 40:3-5]

But the texts are by no means known only from music. For many Christians, the passages from Isaiah are frequently heard in sermons, hymns and in worship. Perhaps best known is the suffering servant from Isaiah 53, whom Reformation interpreters took as unquestionably referring to the life and death of Jesus Christ:

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

For many of the Protestant reformers, including Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin, Isaiah was the princeps, the prince, of the prophets. That estimation was based not only his prophecies of Christ, but on the beauty of his poetic voice, his command of the language, and his political authority. He was considered the most learned of the prophets, a towering figure, an Erasmus of the Old Testament. He was also the prophet who

rebuked the princes for their ungodliness, becoming a model for Protestant political preaching of the Reformation.

The reformers' reading of Isaiah was grounded in their understanding of the text as historical, by which they did not mean our modern sense of the historical-factual, but rather how all the events and prophecies of Isaiah point to the coming of Christ. It is salvation history. For the reformers, biblical history is the history of the people of God that reveals God's redemption of Israel and the nations. Prophecy is not primarily about predicting future events, but in showing how God acts in the human realm. The literal sense of the text, about which we have spoken, sees the events described in Isaiah as past, present, and future, revealing God's action in human history for the salvation of humanity. The reformers were insistent that this understanding of the Bible, when apprehended through faith, was fully clear even to the uneducated.

Martin Luther, followed by the other Protestant commentators, acknowledged that the book of Isaiah consists of three parts, although the reformers did not wholly agree on the nature of the divisions and offered slightly different interpretations. For Luther, the first part deals with the chosen people with two clear themes: the prophet rebukes the Israelites for their idolatry, and, secondly, he prepares them for the coming of the kingdom of Christ. Luther argues that rebuking and promising formed the pattern of the prophetic admonitions, with Isaiah providing the supreme example. The reformer follows the traditional Christian interpretation to see Isaiah 7 as an account of the Mother of Christ and how she shall conceive in her virginity.

The second part of Isaiah concerns the empire of Assyria and the king Sennacherib. In this part of the book, according to Luther, the prophet tells of how the

king will subdue all the lands, including the kingdom of Israel and bring great misfortune to Judah. However, he will be stopped at the gates of Jerusalem. Luther attributes this miracle to the faith of Isaiah himself.

The third part of the book pertains to the Babylonian exile, which Isaiah foretells. Luther refers to the third as the greatest part of the book because the prophet does not allow the people to fall into despair. “For he is concerned altogether with Christ,” Luther writes, “that His future coming and the promised kingdom of grace and salvation shall not be despised, or be lost upon His people and be of no use to them, because of unbelief or great misfortune and impatience; and this would be the case, unless they expected it and believed surely that it would come.”

Luther believed that the role of the prophet was to preserve the faithful in the anticipation of Christ’s coming, the message of good news to be delivered in their preaching. The prophet was not primarily about predicting future events, but to bring before the people an account of God’s deeds of salvation. The people should eagerly await the arrival of their messiah. What distinguishes the true prophet from the false, a theme that greatly concerned the Protestant reformers, was that only those chosen by God spoke through the Holy Spirit.

The Protestant reformers’ interest in the historical events found in Isaiah was primarily focused on his prophecies about Christ. Yet, there remains a tension in their reading of the prophets between what was historical and belonged to Isaiah’s day, and what referred to coming events. In speaking about the messiah, the prophet, they believed, addressed his people in specific contexts about particular events using the language of judgment and promise. Luther argued that it was characteristic of Isaiah to

move between speaking about the kingdoms of the world in his age and the coming kingdom of Christ. Regardless of whether Isaiah is talking about worship, politics, or daily affairs, he constantly shifts between past and present, spiritual and physical. According to the reformers, this was an important part of their argument for the roles of temporal and spiritual authority in the state and church.

The historical meaning of the text was truly important for the reformers, and they read Isaiah as promising not only a salvation in the future, but one which applied to those faithful Jews who heard and obeyed God's commands. Luther and Calvin went to considerable effort to point out that the salvation promised in the future was already a reality for those Jews who believed and followed the law. They, being a remnant, already experienced the truth of Christ's redemptive work, for Abraham was the father of Christian faith.

What the reformers sought in reading Isaiah, as they did with all the prophets, was to move away from allegorical interpretations to take seriously both the spiritual nature of the text and its historical account. The past was to be recovered not only because it was an account of distant events, but because it speaks of God's judgment and promises for the present. Luther and Calvin, together with their contemporaries, read such chapters as 42, 53, and 61 of Isaiah in light of the message of Christ, a view that was largely discarded after the Enlightenment, but nevertheless formed the very heart of pre-modern biblical exegesis. In the preface to his commentary on Isaiah, John Calvin writes:

Hence, we may learn in what manner the doctrine of the word should be handled, and that we ought to imitate the Prophets, who conveyed the doctrine of the Law in such a manner as to draw from it advices, reproofs, threatenings, and

consolations, which they applied to the present condition of the people. For although we do not daily receive a revelation of what we are to utter as a prediction, yet it is of high importance to us to compare the behavior of the men of our own age with the behavior of that ancient people; and from their histories and examples we ought to make known the judgments of God; such as, that what he formerly punished he will also punish with equal severity in our own day, for he is always like himself. Such wisdom let godly teachers acquire, if they would wish to handle the doctrine of the Prophets with any good result.

John Calvin's interpretation of Isaiah differs from those of his contemporaries in several significant ways. Unlike Luther and others, Calvin was much less inclined to conflate the Old and New Testaments. He does not always look for the visible presence of Christ in the Old Testament, as we have noted in our discussion of the Psalms. Calvin was more inclined to say that the references were to David, not Christ, a position that earned the Genevan reformer the wrath of numerous opponents who claimed that he was "Judaizing" the text. Nevertheless, he shared with the authors of his age a willingness to adjust the meaning of Old Testament passages in order to harmonize them with the New. He projected back into the ancient texts a theological understanding that many today would say does not reflect the diverse origins of the original. Calvin would never have thought of his actions in such a way. He held to a theology in which there was a seamless union of the two testaments, that the church had one set of scriptures that revealed the Trinitarian nature of God and the redemptive work of Christ.

We spoke earlier of the role of the psalms in the worship of the church. Isaiah was one of the most important books of the Bible in the Reformation for preaching. The reformers were constantly attempting to take the message delivered by the prophet and apply it to their own times. This meant that while the reformers sought the historical

context of Isaiah's prophecies they also were looking to move beyond the specifics of those moments to find their homiletic application. The book of Isaiah was one of the most important and popular in the age of the Reformation because many believed that the turbulent and violent times through which they were living were accurately reflected in the prophet's words. Like the Psalms, Isaiah spoke to the whole range of human experience, from punishment for disobedience, the suffering and humiliation of exile, to the promise of future deliverance. One of the most important ways in which preachers and writers of the Reformation brought the Bible to life for their people was to show them how their world was reflected in God's relationship with God's ancient peoples. That was a great source of comfort.

Questions for discussion:

How did the prophecies of Isaiah serve the various needs of the reformers?

How did the reformers variously understand the function of biblical prophecy, and how do or might we understand it today?

Is it reasonable to read Christ or the New Testament back into the prophecies of the Old Testament?

For further reading:

Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 2004), Especially chapters 13 and 14.