

REVIEW AND RESPONSE TO *THE UNITY OF ISAIAH: A STUDY IN PROPHECY*

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Oswald T. Allis. (1980) *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy*. Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.

Introduction

In *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study of Prophecy* the author, Oswald T. Allis, the late Professor of Old Testament and Exegesis at Westminster Theological Seminary, argues that there is a connection between how we view the authorship of the *Book of Isaiah* and how we view the reliability of biblical prophecy. Oswald maintains the traditional view that the entire book comes from one author. In his estimation if chapters 40-66 are the product of one or two more additional authors then the content of these chapters that seem to make the claim that YHWH God is superior due to his knowledge of future events is seriously at stake. If YHWH God did not predict the events depicted in these chapters then it is begging the question to assume that YHWH is superior to the idols in any meaningful way since YHWH didn't foresee anything anymore than the idols.

Oswald expresses concern with the view of his contemporaries that certain passages must be dismissed prepositionally because something like the prophet Isaiah foreseeing the rise of Cyrus of Persia and naming him two centuries before the event seems outrageous. Similarly, he is discontent with the idea that the only true value of prophetic literature is the moral/ethical insight provided (pp. 1-3).

These are valid concerns. In order to show what is at stake Oswald goes through various biblical texts displaying the importance of the prophetic element (pp. 4-21). He shows that prophecy is more than just moral or ethical insight, but it is often predictive. It provides foresight into events that have not yet happened (pp. 22-38).

In the next part of the book he presents his argument for a unified authorship. He presents several reasons to affirm singular authorship: (1) the designation of Isaiah, son of Amoz, as the author in 1.1; (2) uniform manuscript evidence for a singular book (i.e. there is no manuscript that would hint of a time when 1-39 and 40-66 were two books); (3) there is no memory of any historical figure who

would have written 40-66 (which Bryan E. Beyer finds problematic in *Encountering the Book of Isaiah: A Historical and Theological Survey*, p. 158) because this would postulate that an author with more eloquence was forgotten while the less eloquent writer, the prophet Isaiah, was credited with a later work; (4) extra-biblical writers attribute the work to the prophet Isaiah; (5) New Testament authors do the same (pp. 39-43). Then he goes on to explain the views of critical scholarship (pp. 43-50) before showing why their views are problematic when one examines things like the prophecy about the rise of Cyrus of Persia and the presentation of YHWH as a God who foresees.

Strengths

While Allis gives *many good arguments* for the unity of the text he only gives one *great argument*; namely, that if 40-66 are written after the rise of Persia and the end of the Babylonian exile (or maybe even toward the end?) then this challenges the internal claims of these chapters that YHWH foresaw, predeclared, and acted in sovereignty to bring Judah/Israel home. In what sense can one say YHWH is better than idols if he doesn't act in history in a way that displays this superiority? In what sense can it be said that YHWH declared Cyrus' rise beforehand if it was not beforehand? Anyone with a high view of Scripture must consider these concerns to be valid.

The other arguments are strong additional supporting points, but not impenetrable in themselves. It is important to recognize manuscript evidence has not shown us any thing that hints at dual authorship (though one acquaintance has recently pointed out that 1QIsa.a may show “textual development”, but this is something that I am not qualified to affirm or deny) and that until recently tradition has unanimously understood this text to be the product of the prophet Isaiah (though this is a secondary point at best). It would seem that the statements that the prophet Isaiah is the author of the book are important, especially when used of New Testament authors, but that precludes debates on the meaning of “authorship” as well as the ongoing discussion in the area of philosophical hermeneutics as to whether authorship should be understood differently than it has been understood in recent centuries. Again, these are debates that I am not qualified to address at this point so I must remain semi-agnostic

in my conclusions.

So all in all it should be said that the greatest strength of this book is that it asks us to take seriously the nature of prophetic Scripture. It does not allow the conservative reader of Scripture to ignore the implications of blindly following critical scholarship into the view of a dual or triple authorship. This does not mean this demands that the prophet Isaiah penned the entire work, but it does mean we must think deeply about what the alternative theory means for our view of this text and its truthfulness.

Weaknesses

The first great weakness is that over the last three decades since this book was published many evangelicals who have a high view of Scripture have sought to reconcile what they understand to be a given that there were at least two contributing authors to the work now known as the canonical *Book of Isaiah* and the idea that 40-66 remain prophetic. Some have suggested that it was someone who stood in the tradition of the prophet, yet who was close enough to see Cyrus of Persia come to power so that he had a name while remaining prophetic in that he declares Babylon's demise before the event. Others have postulated a oral source with additional glosses that name Cyrus while the actual prophecies may have been a tad more vague. Whether or not one finds these proposals convincing they do show that Allis' either-or approach (either one author or the denial of biblical authority/inspiration) may be a false dichotomy.

A second weakness would be Allis' very nuanced, unilateral reading of various prophetic texts. An example would be his handling of 7.14 where he argues that unless the person born at the time of the prophecy was born *of a virgin* then there is no defense against the argument that Jesus wasn't born of a virgin. This makes little sense. What would he do with Mt. 2.15 which sees Jesus' departure from Egypt as a boy to be the "fulfillment" of Hos. 11.1 because "out of Egypt I have called my son" is applicable to both Israel and Jesus. Yet we know Hos. 11.1 is not forward looking in context, but backward looking. If texts must be forward looking oracles to be "fulfilled" then there will be many

texts that are problematic. Rather, we should understand many “fulfillment” passages in light of the Christological-hermeneutical paradigm provided for us in passages like Lk. 24.13-33 where Jesus shows that all Scripture points toward him and therefore we can rightly declare Jesus to be the fulfillment of Israel's entire history.

The final weakness, as hinted above, is that many of his arguments are easily rebutted by critical scholarship. Yes, tradition postulates one author, but how do we know tradition is right? Yes, there is no manuscript evidence for multiple authors, but what about internal evidence and what is Qumran documents hint at an evolving book. Yes, extra-biblical and New Testament authors refer to the prophet Isaiah when quoting from 40-66, but what prevents the concept of “author” from transcending one historic personality, especially if the text itself does not make the same claims regarding singular authorship from the first word to the last? Finally, even the strongest argument, that this text makes strong claims about future events, doesn't phase critical scholars who feel no obligation to affirm a high view of Scripture. If this book is convincing it is because the reader shares the basic premise that Scripture is inspired and authoritative for the church.

Conclusion

I personally found this book challenging because I do share a high view of Scripture. I do affirm Scripture as inerrant, infallible, inspired, and truthful. Therefore, I cannot share the affirmations of some critical scholars that 40-66 was written in retrospect after the fall of Babylon.

Similarly, I affirm that YHWH God is the true God and a foreseeing God. It is not beyond God to name Cyrus by name centuries prior to his rise to power over Medio-Persia. It would make sense that if God is real we may see something like this in history.

That being said, I am likewise not convinced that 40-66 *must be from the prophet Isaiah*. I am comfortable with the theory that it was written by another based on the oral tradition going back to the prophet. I am comfortable with it being written by another exilic prophet in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah who saw his final attachment as being in the “line” of the prophet to whose book he attached his

ending. I am not opposed to the idea that the prophet Isaiah said a ruler would rise up to free Israel and that a later scribal gloss indicated that this is to be understood as Cyrus of Persia so that later readers would understand who it was that fulfilled the prophet Isaiah's older oracle.

Any of these solutions, as well as the traditional view, satisfy me. As long as the solution upholds the truthfulness of the message of 40-66 and the prophetic nature (even if to a lesser extent). I cannot affirm the critical views that suggest this text was written after Cyrus unless it is argued that it was merely the recording of an authentic, prophetic oral tradition. That being said, all this is lost to history and as someone like Brevard S. Childs may argue, what matters for the church is the “final form” in the canonical context. This is what God preserved for us.

This is important to discuss and ponder because it will impact how we understand the nature of Scripture, but it is secondary to Scripture's place as holy text and as christological witness. As long as Scripture points to Christ we can rest assured that it has accomplished its purpose; it has reached its *telos*. There may be some things about the development of the biblical texts that we will never know, but we do have the text as it is now and that is sufficient.