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Authorizing an End: The Isaiah Apocalypse and Intertextuality

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Dr. Hallvard Hagelia
Associate Professor
Ansgar School of Theology and Mission
Kristiansand, Norway

The author of this book is an independent scholar from Richmond, Virginia. The book is a revised version of his Ph.D. dissertation, completed at Duke University in 1997 under James Crenshaw. Sections of this work have been previously published in their earlier versions.

The monograph consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction that bears the title "Framing the Question." Chapters 2 through 5 examine Isa 24, 25, 26, and 27, respectively. Chapter 6 summarizes the discussion under the title "Authorizing an End." The book concludes with a bibliography and an index.

The book is so comprehensive that it is impossible to discuss it in any substantial manner within the frame of a limited review. A few observations, however, are possible.

The introductory chapter is essential for an understanding of the thesis. First, Polaski addresses the conditions for the development of Jewish apocalyptic literature. A variety of ways to apocalypticism is discussed, and the chapter

includes a history of research on apocalypticism and intertextuality. Concerning the origin of apocalypticism Polaski writes, "Perhaps ... we should see apocalyptic as growing in the open spaces created by prophecy's slowly dying forest.... apocalyptic reworks rather than replaces prophecy" (7). Then Polaski discusses the relation between text and context. Different theories of the origin of intertextuality are discussed at length. Every text is part of an intertextual web. To what degree, then, is an author really an author, and what is the role of the reader? Polaski comments, "To limit the intertextual field using the concepts of 'author' or 'reader' is fraught with difficulty and does not fit especially well with the purpose of my project" (45). Polaski's words are consistent with his post-modern angle. He uses "an intertextual approach informed by New Historicist sensibilities" (358). Then Polaski moves to the Isaiah Apocalypse itself. He characterizes Isa 24–27 as "proto-apocalyptic" (rather than late prophetic; see 358) and places them into the intertextual web of early Restoration culture. His interest is "in a particular period of Israelite history in which the text in question had its origin. Thus my reading has a dual focus: a particular text and a particular culture" (46). Such an approach requires a close reading of Isa 24–27.

But are these chapters apocalyptic? The Apocalyptic Group the Society of Biblical Literature created in 1970 advanced the following definition of an "apocalypse": " 'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (51). According to this definition Isa 24–27 is not an apocalypse, according to Polaski. He sees, however, "a powerful connection" between these chapters and "apocalyptic modes of thought" and will therefore use the phrase "Isaiah Apocalypse," though it is neither an apocalypse nor from the hand of Isaiah.

As mentioned, Polaski associates these chapters to the early Restoration culture (i.e., the period between the late sixth century to the third quarter of the fifth century B.C.E.). But he is not particularly concerned about dating them precisely, because he finds little of geographical or historical relevance in them. The text itself is undoubtedly composite, without one particular point of origin. "But rather than assert a particular redactional history for the text, I will instead consider the text as a unity.... the text as a whole possesses a kind of unity" (57). Further, "Rather than divide the text into discrete units which would then be related to a particular historical situation, I will read the text in a more 'synchronic' way, examining how the pieces of the text fit together and are thus

related to the historical context in which they were assembled” (58). With Marvin Sweeney, he asks for “an intertextual reading not tied to the personas of author, redactor or reader” (70).

It looks like a manifesto for the whole investigation when the author claims at the very end of chapter 1: “It is now time to enter into that cacophony of texts and voices called Isaiah Apocalypse, seeking to determine where the text sits at the intertextual seminar table” (70).

Polaski’s main focus in chapter 2—on Isa 24:1–20, which he treats as a unit—is the broken eternal covenant (24:5). He discusses at length the identification of this covenant and the paradoxical idea of breaking an eternal covenant. His understanding can be summarized in the following statement:

“The *berit ’olam* in Isaiah 24 has Davidic echoes, but these echoes do not serve to build support for a David redivivus. Instead, the text ends with YHWH’s glory made manifest at YHWH’s throne, Zion, with his elders’ attendance. Although the precise political significance of these figures is not clear, it is evident that the world envisioned in Isaiah 24 is not hostile to sacerdotal concerns. The Davidic covenant broken by the inhabitants of the earth is redeployed in worship on Zion before YHWH’s *kabod*. (142)

But he also sees echoes of the Sinai covenant and priestly covenants, which establish continuity with the past, while echoes of the Davidic covenant establish continuity with the future (145).

In chapter 3 Polaski studies 24:21–25:12. He finds the following chiasmic structure:

A The punishment of the kings/start of YHWH’s reign (24:21–23)

B Hymn thanking and praising YHWH for his acts (25:1–5)

C Banquet on Mount Zion (25:6–8)

B’ Hymn rejoicing over YHWH’s salvation (25:9–10a)

A’ The punishment of Moab (25:10b–12)

This structure focuses in particular on the banquet. This banquet has been interpreted in different ways. Polaski summarizes three main interpretations (164 n. 71), namely, coronation meal, pilgrimage and sacrificial meal, and covenant

meal. He further elaborates three aspects from the angle of the banquet (משתה), finding intertextual evidence for all three of them. The concept of משתה is treated as a key word in this chapter, and he sees a possible covenant meal in verses 6–8.

Polaski reads Isa 26 as a “retelling” of Isa 24 and 25. He reads Isa 26 “with the previous two chapters as the dominant intertexts in consideration” (218). He divides the chapters as follows: 26:1–6 (Praise As a Form of Differentiation), and 26:7–21: (Lamentation As an Expression of Survival).

Chapter 27 “stands as one of the most difficult chapters in the book of Isaiah, if not the entire Hebrew Bible” (280). Polaski presents a reading of this chapter “which stresses the possible unity of its diverse parts, looking for themes and verbal correspondences which draw it together.” In his view the chapter “describes a world which YHWH liberates from the power of chaos and places under his orderly rule.”

On the interpretation of Isa 24-27 in general, Polaski says: “But the Isaiah Apocalypse presents neither a uniform nor a sequential view of the future. Rather, we encounter, especially after 25:12, a series of eschatological impressions describing YHWH’s future intervention in the world which are not as logically rigorous as modern theologians might wish” (211). “Isaiah 24–27 reflects the concerns of a group which holds power in society; it reinscribes the dominant ideologies of culture” (359), and Polaski concludes that “Isa 24–27, as an active participant in the intertextual web of early Restoration Judaism, intervened in society, making certain social arrangements appear natural and incontestable, especially arrangements around the temple” (360). He considers that his investigation leads to the conclusion that “the Isaiah Apocalypse can be said to make two basic ‘moves’ regarding the texts: it both redeploys and controls them” (364).

I have some objections to the organizational structure or lack thereof of the book’s headings, which appear to be somewhat confusing. There is insufficient difference between the fonts of superior and subordinate headings throughout the book. The book has four levels of headings, as far as I can see. Main chapter headings are distinguishable because they are written in capital letters. But the other levels are not so easily distinguishable. Consequently, a reader constantly has to turn back to the table of contents to be sure on which level of headings he or she is. This makes reading the book somewhat confusing.

This kind of intertextual reading is very important, as it traces threads between different parts of the biblical literature, thereby revealing subtle interconnections not easily seen. Literary similarities do not necessarily imply direct literary interdependence. Some might just be literary conventions that do not establish direct literary relations. However, literary conventions are also important. They reveal a particular jargon used at particular times or in particular social circles. What is literary dependence, and what is just convention? This question should probably have been discussed more explicitly. Polaski's study has placed more stress on assumed intertextuality, as such, than on dating intertextually related texts.

On the whole, the book is well argued and well written. Writing a book such as this one demands a broad orientation, not only on what is written about (in this case, Isa 24–27), but also on other texts referred to. The author appears to be very well informed in this broad field. His book will be an important reference book for the study of Isa 24–27.