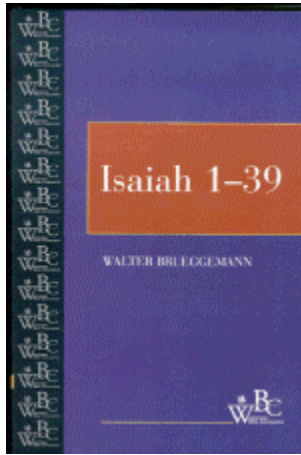


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Brueggemann, Walter

Isaiah 1-39

Westminster Bible Companion

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Stephen T. Hague
Newville, PA 17241

Brueggemann calls his canonical method of treatment an "open-ended" theological interpretation. Each subsection begins with a helpful geopolitical, historical, and theological summary, followed by running commentary structured according to his outline. He generally assumes that historical contexts and theological meaning of the texts are often only loosely linked, due to the perceived, rigorous "reshaping" of the historical material. He attempts to resolve disputes about dating by noting a canonical arrangement that involves a single, bifocal theological affirmation of exile and homecoming or judgment and deliverance of God.

Texts traditionally understood as prophetic and messianic he generally interprets as "Christian imagination" or "rereadings": for example, the "great light" promised in 9:2 is simply "relief from oppression" not predictive. Isa 4:2-6, about a future age of the Branch of the Lord, reflects postexilic redacting of future themes back into the early chapters. Regarding the Branch in 11:1-16, he says, "We are here not to think of the later trinitarian categories of the church. . . ." Isa 9:1-7 is often taken as a "rehearing" of the story in the light of Jesus, but it is not in any way predictive. Further, the depiction of the Righteous King in Isaiah 11 is a public policy statement ("social possibility") for earthly kings and leaders, although it did become Jesus' own standard of righteousness and justice, and thus the cause of his death. (See similarly on the Servant in Isaiah 52-53, pp.13, 42, 140-150.) Although Brueggemann disparages "predictive" readings, he proposes that multiple meanings/readings are warranted. He regularly makes note of divergent interpretations and readings of particular texts, in which he often offers a third position (for example, the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7 has been read either historically or christologically, but he suggests we focus on the offer of faith. That is, with faith in Yahweh there can be a

future. He does, on the other hand, often set the stage for deriving principal applications which draw on Christian understanding, although he insists that there is no one "correct reading."

In deriving contemporary themes from Isaiah, he employs to varying degrees a spiritualizing/exemplarizing hermeneutic in which modern analogies to ancient realities are sought so that theological applications can be made. This is especially prevalent in regard to particular actants: for instance, as part of Isaiah's "bifocal vision," Ahaz represents "failure to obey" and Hezekiah represents a metaphor for trust in Yahweh, while Babylon represents our present "ideology of free-market consumerism and its required ally, unbridled militarism." Further, he relates "preexilic/postexilic" to modern problems of personal/social displacement/restoration. That is, God acts in "disruptive ways" (judgment) and "embracing ways" (return). For example, the "sweep of the history of Jerusalem" is royal prosperity, exilic displacement, and modest rehabilitation. He stresses that the theological concerns of Isaiah take precedence over geopolitical concerns, proposing that themes of judgment/hope arise from the prophet's difficulty in accepting that Yahweh will terminate the city, and from later editorial work. Also, he warns us moderns that, as in Isaiah's day, evils gone unnoticed may lead to "a supernatural swoop of nullification directly from heaven."

Some modern themes he addresses include consumerism, conspicuous consumption, the "wanton exhibitionism of the wealthy," "shameless luxury," exploitation of the vulnerable and resourceless, covetous agribusiness of "avaricious landowners," self indulgence, injustice, urban decline, hypocrisy, militarism, social exploitation, geopolitics of superpowers, and nuclear waste. He uses modern language well to describe biblical realities: "terrible againstness" for God's judgment, "commodity fetishism" for the spiritual force of silver and gold that illustrates the self-deception that things can secure. In light of these themes, Brueggemann often writes as a preacher or prophet himself. So, for example, concerning the judgment announced in Isaiah 8, he says, "We ourselves are now members of churches so secularized that Isaiah's rhetoric sounds obscurantist, if we hear it at all."

Brueggemaun is widely known to be an excellent writer with a winsome, engaging, and "personal" tone, though not in any way sentimental or manipulative. His language flows as if from a deep well of thoughtfulness and reflection. In sum, the articulation of his thoughts on the book of Isaiah bristles with imaginative, poetic language and modern application (though often over spiritualizing). Canonical readings are a welcome respite from the plethora of polarized readings of dialectical "tensions" which have been the long-standing métier of much OT theology. Brueggemann has further highlighted our widespread longing for scripture to speak coherently and cohesively a message from God.

He does, however, appear to assume the knowledge and acceptance of certain ideas on the part of his readers, such as "the Yahwist," "Isaiah tradition," "postexilic editors," "Yahwistic believer," "impossible possibility," "historical-critical," "old myths," "determined Yahwism," "strangeness of Yahweh." This raises the question as to whether the claim of the series for "laity" Bible study classes is accurate. On his treatment of prophetic elements, I am uncertain that his approach adequately explains the predictive elements, nor that in themselves they are problematic once the proposition of God's personal and covenantal presence with OT Israel is accepted. His proposal of multiple readings does not resolve the unnecessary either/or of two dominant readings. Rather, I feel that this undercuts the longstanding Jewish and Christian claim that the Messiah was clearly predicted in Isaiah, as in other OT prophets, despite the fact that Christians and many Jews differ on interpretation. It is not necessarily a "preemption" to claim that the Messiah whom Isaiah speaks of is Jesus, nor is it "a failure to respect Jewish readers" to hold such a belief.

Lastly, his frequent and sweeping condemnations of "market capitalism" may be a "protesting too much" and straining the analogies, considering the difficulty of quantifying such blanket charges in an age when market economics have lifted countless economically oppressed heads. Contrarily, it can persuasively be shown that Marxian economies have brought the greatest suffering and destruction of any "system" known in history. I would rather we affirm with Isaiah that no system or person is exempt from the standards of God's justice.

Commentary-writing on Isaiah is indeed not for the faint-hearted, and Brueggemann has produced a bold and challenging statement. Regardless of one's view of his interpretations, it can be affirmed that this is no feeble accomplishment.