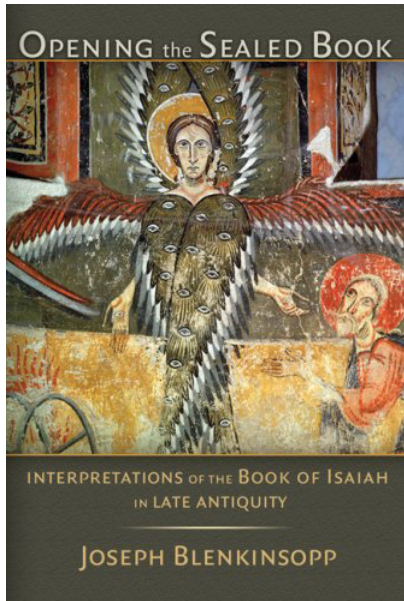


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**Blenkinsopp, Joseph**

*Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*

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When Joseph Blenkinsopp was working on his three-volume commentary on Isaiah in the Anchor Bible series, he could not include the rich and interesting material of its early reception history. Therefore, he decided to devote a separate monograph to the impact that the interpretation of the book of Isaiah had on sectarian Judaism and early Christianity in the Second Temple period. In the first two chapters, he discusses the many layers and traditions of which the book of Isaiah consists. He argues that the disciples of the historical prophet Isaiah have collected and arranged his pronouncements and prophecies and that they added their own comments in glosses. Later disciples subjoined more prophecies in his name, which makes Blenkinsopp compare the composite character of the book of Isaiah with the book of the twelve Minor Prophets. He points to the contrasting profiles of Isaiah in the first chapters, where the prophet severely criticizes the political and religious establishment in the way of Amos, and his role of a gentler “man of God” in the narratives in Isa 36–39, which correspond with 2 Kgs 18–20. The title of this monograph refers to the “sealed book” mentioned in Isa 29:11–12, which Blenkinsopp interprets as a reflection from the Second Temple period echoing Isaiah’s prophecy in 8:16. The characteristic of his collected prophecies as a “sealed book” points to a third profile: among Isaiah’s later disciples the prophet was considered an apocalyptic seer whose prophecies were bound to come true in the future. It is shown that—apart

from Qumran and the New Testament—the reception and interpretation of prophecies in Isaiah’s name appear in, for example, the book of Daniel, the Enoch cycle, and 4 Ezra. The reception of Isaiah as a person comes to light in Chronicles, Jesus ben Sirach, the Lives of the Prophets, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, and the like.

One of Blenkinsopp’s interesting theses is that the book of Isaiah testifies to the rise of Jewish sectarianism already in the century following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. In his third chapter he interprets many verses from Isa 40–66 as testimonies to the existence of a radical minority that consisted of the disciples of the “Servant of the Lord.” He argues that other indications of such a radical current can be found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This means that the rise of sectarianism within Judaism should be dated much earlier than, say, the second century B.C.E., which is often considered as the period in which apocalyptic sects originated. Blenkinsopp tries to bridge the gap between the fifth and the second centuries B.C.E. by ascribing the date of Isa 65–66, for instance, to this period.

The fourth chapter gives a survey of the reception and interpretation of Isaiah in Qumran. The author seems a bit less inspired in this chapter, for it consists mainly of a collection of the relevant material. Chapter 5 deals with the way in which Isaiah has been received in early Christianity, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. It is clear that in the New Testament the book of Isaiah is very often quoted and alluded to in view of Jesus. This is also true for Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. For this reason, it was even characterized as “the Fifth Gospel.” Blenkinsopp reads the Gospel of Matthew as a sectarian text comparable to those of the Qumran sects. Because of some similarities in their use of Isaiah (e.g., 40:3, on the way of the Lord that must be prepared), he thinks that John the Baptist may previously have belonged to a branch of the Qumran sectarians or that he had decided to go his own way, taking their eschatological teaching and the message of repentance out into the world to anyone who would listen. Matthew’s use of Isaiah is discussed extensively and compared with the prophet’s reception in Qumran. These different branches of Jewish sectarianism are examined in more depth in the sixth chapter, which discusses Isaianic titles in Qumran and early Christianity. These titles include Qumranic and early Christian self-descriptions and concepts such as the many, the way, the righteous, the elect, the servants of the Lord, the saints, the poor, and the penitents. It is shown that to an important extent these titles originated from the book of Isaiah, although other occurrences, such as in the Psalms, are acknowledged as well. The seventh chapter discusses the exile, the remnants of Israel, and the return from exile in the Isaianic interpretative tradition that has been preserved in Second Temple Jewish texts in a broad sense—not only in Qumran—and in the New Testament. Blenkinsopp concludes that the emergence of sects in the late Second Temple period, including the Christian movement, can be traced back to the refusal of the first generation of prophets,

in the first place Amos and Isaiah, to confer absolute validity on contemporaneous political institutions. The last chapter is a rich discussion of the many faces of the Servant of the Lord in the period under discussion. According to the author, texts in Jesus ben Sirach, the book of Daniel, and the Wisdom of Solomon have been inspired by the Isaianic description of this Servant. This is also argued for the fragmentary Self-Glorification Hymn from Qumran, which is discussed extensively as a testimony to the life, death, and heavenly exaltation of the Teacher of Righteousness. The book concludes with a comparison between the Teacher of Righteousness and Jesus of Nazareth as “Servant Figures.” Blenkinsopp thinks it is possible that, after the death of John the Baptist, Jesus became aware that his own death was foreordained and that, like the Suffering Servant in Isa 53, he had to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

The author may be praised for this interesting book, which convincingly shows the impact of Isaiah and his disciples on Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. His analyses of different layers and glosses within the book of Isaiah may sometimes seem fairly hypothetical, but the author seems well aware of this, so that he presents his interpretations as possibilities. The cogency of his argument on the reception of Isaiah would be reinforced, however, by a systematic comparison of the impact of Isaiah with the books of other prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. According to Matt 16:14, people thought Jesus was Elijah or Jeremiah, and in Jer 11:19 Jeremiah compares himself with a lamb led to the slaughter—texts to which Blenkinsopp does not pay attention. Ezekiel is repeatedly called “son of man,” and the Lord appears to him like a man; how important is this for our understanding of Jesus as the Son of Man? Even though a first glance at the indices of prophetic texts in the Qumran scrolls and in the New Testament shows the predominance of the use of Isaiah, it may yet be a bit artificial to isolate this book from the other prophets. In any case, for Isaiah this research has now been done and presented in a clear and well-readable book.