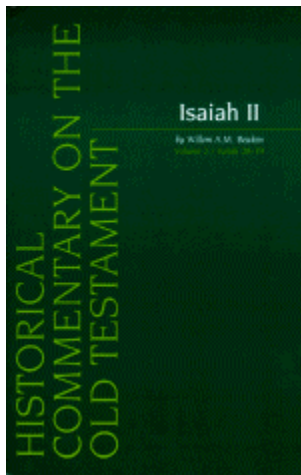


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**Beuken, Willem A. M.**

***Isaiah: Vol. 2, Part 2: Isaiah 28-39***

Translated by Brian Doyle

Historical Commentary on the Old Testament

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Willem Beuken is especially well-known for his four volumes of commentary on Isaiah 40-66 in the Dutch series, "De Prediking van het Oude Testament" (1979-89). Unfortunately, these volumes have not been translated. The appearance of the first of his projected two-volume commentary on Isaiah 13-39 in English is therefore all more welcome. The decision to assign the commentary on Isaiah 1-12 to another author is unusual, and it is apparently based on the view of the editorial board of the "Historical Commentary on the Old Testament" series that Isaiah 1-12 constitutes a distinct collection within the book of Isaiah. Although chapters 1-12 do function as a sub-unit within the larger book, critical discussion of these chapters at both the synchronic and diachronic levels has demonstrated repeatedly that they are closely tied to the present form of the book of Isaiah at large as well as to its compositional history. Indeed, scholars are increasingly recognizing that it is difficult even to separate chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66 in the interpretation of the book. The decision to separate chapters 1-12 is even more difficult to defend. The absence of these chapters from Beuken's projected commentary is regrettable, particularly since many elements of these chapters must be considered in relation to chapters 28-39.

This does not prevent Beuken from offering a thorough and penetrating commentary on Isaiah 28-39, although his methodological focus prompts great strength in the diachronic understanding of these chapters. He states at the outset of the volume that the series "proposes to examine the relationship between the genesis of a text and its final form, between the centuries-old history of exegesis of a text and its contemporary expressions, determined as they are by a faith awareness rooted in the Enlightenment, and

between the classical literary-historical approach and the methodologically multi-faceted exegesis of the present day" (p. ix). After stating appropriate warnings about the difficulties involved in attempting to reconstruct the compositional history of the book, particularly in eras prior to the Babylonian exile, he follows those who have argued for a seventh-century Josian or Assyrian redaction of the text. His understanding of the present literary form of the text tends to focus on colometry or verse structure and semantic features of the text. His understanding of the overall literary structure of the text, however, tends to be determined by his redaction-critical views rather than by purely synchronic considerations.

Beuken's redaction-critical presuppositions are evident in his introduction to chapters 28-39. He maintains that it is justifiable to view Isaiah 28-39 as "a unified whole" or "an autonomous segment" (p. 2) on several grounds: 1) Isaiah 24-27 constitutes a relatively independent collection within the book; 2) there is a caesura at Isaiah 28, even though this chapter has many associations with the oracles against the nations in Isaiah 13-23; 3) there is another caesura after Isaiah 39 since Isaiah 40 "transports the reader into a completely different world" (p. 2). He analyzes the structure of the text from a redaction-critical standpoint, i.e., the basic text appears in chapters 28-33, which comprise six woe oracles directed against Israel (Isa 28:1-29; 29:1-14; 29:15-24; 30:1-33; 31:1-9) and a foreign oppressor (Isa 33:1-24). The first original five oracles were reworked and expanded by an appeal to go into mourning (Isa 32:9-14) as part of the Assyrian/Josian redaction. This collection and the other original Isaian collection in Isaiah 2-12 were worked into the larger complex of chapters 1-39 prior to the exile. The so-called "minor Isaiah apocalypse" in Isaiah 34-35 were added during the final phases of the formation of the book where they now play a role in linking chapters 13-23 and 40-48 among other sections. Although Isaiah 36-39 owe much to the Assyrian/Josian redaction, they also now play a role in linking the major segments of the book. At the redactional level of the text, chapters 28-32 presume the fall of Jerusalem. They therefore stand in tension with chapters 36-39 witness to YHWH's fidelity to Jerusalem in averting destruction and deportation. The narrative serves as both warning (of judgment) and encouragement (for impending restoration). And yet the tension is not so much of opposition between judgment and restoration. Insofar as Isaiah 36-39 take up both YHWH's deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib and the impending Babylonian exile, the tension appears to lie between judgment and the expectation of restoration that is not yet realized. Indeed, that tension appears throughout the book and even at its end where images of the corpses of the wicked follow upon the depiction of the return of exiles to Jerusalem.

To a large extent, Beuken's understanding of the tension appears to lie in his own relatively rigid hermeneutical perspective. He views judgment and restoration in opposition to each other, i.e., judgment entails the loss of land and must be rooted in the pre-exilic period whereas salvation comes after the (Babylonian) punishment and must be rooted in the exilic or post-exilic period. And yet it is striking that the book of Isaiah never calls for the loss of land or the destruction of Jerusalem, even though much of the book is explicitly or implicitly aware of the Babylonian exile. Restoration and judgment

are inextricably linked throughout Isaiah--restoration necessarily follows judgment, both at the synchronic and the diachronic levels. This is the perspective, for example, of the allegory concerning the processing of grain in Isa 28:23-29; grain must be beaten to remove the chaff so that it might be used for food that sustains life. In the present form of the text, this passage plays upon the images of the "crown of beauty" and "right judgment" in vv. 5-6 (which B. regards as a later addition) and of the foundation stone mentioned in v. 16, which look forward to Jerusalem's leading role over northern Israel once the corrupt northern leadership has been removed. Such a perspective hardly requires a redaction-critical separation between vv. 23-29 and the rest of the chapter. Judgment of the northern monarchy and the role that Jerusalem or the southern monarchy will play in northern Israel's future fits well with the interests of the prophet, who supports the righteous rule of the house of David in the late eighth century B.C.E. And yet Beuken is forced to conclude that the situation of oral preaching does not provide an explanatory framework for this passage. Despite its Isaian vocabulary, he maintains that Isa 28:23-29 is a wisdom text that calls for judgment. A far too rigid assessment of genre and a failure to recognize fully the links between a sub-unit and its larger literary context prompt him to dismember this text and to miss its overarching concerns.

Beuken's treatment of Isaiah 33, on the other hand, is a high point of this work. Based upon his own earlier study of the intertextual relationships between this chapter and the rest of the book, he argues that it is a "mirror text" that looks upon Isaiah 1-55 as a narrative whole. Its own progression from judgment to salvation prefigures the transition from Proto-Isaiah to Deutero-Isaiah in relation to divine judgment, G-d's kingship, lamentation, the tent metaphor, divine purpose, etc. Similar observations may be made about his treatment of Isaiah 34 and 35, both of which serve bridging functions between the first and second parts of the book.

Although one might posit a change in Beuken's perspective between the first portion of his commentary and the later portions, the change appears to be rooted in his focus on the posited authorial intent of any given passage, i.e., he focuses on the intention of the prophet or the later redactor/composer. He discusses redactional intent and perspective as well, but the author's intent tends to govern his reading of a text.

Despite the criticisms mentioned above, this is a rich commentary that provides the reader with a wealth of textual, linguistic, and literary discussion. Readers will look forward to Beuken's next volume on Isaiah 13-27, and perhaps even to a translation of his earlier commentaries on Isaiah 40-66. One may hope that he will also find a way to treat Isaiah 1-12.