



Williamson, H. G. M.

***A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27:
Volume 1: Commentary on Isaiah 1-5***

International Critical Commentary

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The first part of Hugh Williamson's projected three-volume ICC commentary on Isa 1-27 lives up to the high standards one expects of the series and from the author's long engagement with Isaiah, exemplified by numerous articles and his books *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) and *Variations on a Theme* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997). Despite its length, the commentary never seems prolix. It is clear, informative, well-judged and sound, characterized by careful and exhaustive scholarship, interesting reflections on the background and growth of the text, and a command of incidental detail. Williamson writes economically and precisely, often condensing arguments elaborated at greater length elsewhere.

As is typical for the series, the commentary is divided into four parts for each segment of text: (1) literal translation; (2) textual and philological comments, often occupying several pages; (3) the form, integrity, setting in the wider context, and possible historical reconstruction of the passage as a whole; (4) verse-by-verse exegesis.

The textual and philological comments are especially valuable. Williamson conveniently summarizes problematic issues; compares MT with the various Qumran Isaiah scrolls and the versions; notes relevant proposals for emendation; and provides his own suggestions.

He is fully immersed in the secondary literature, going back to the medieval rabbinic commentaries and to Lowth and Houbigant. He is especially interesting in discussing how alternative versions may have arisen and how they are evidence for early interpretation. While he usually supports MT, he is not afraid of emendation, even without textual witness, though he does stress the conjectural nature of these proposals.

The third section is primarily historical-critical. While Williamson discusses matters of rhythm, poetic balance, and form, it is clear that he is most concerned with how the book of Isaiah was constructed from poetic and prose fragments, many emanating from the historical Isaiah. For instance, he sees Isa 1 as having intentionally been composed as an introduction to the book, using material drawn from elsewhere. Accordingly, he looks for places from which our text may have been extracted. Many of his suggestions are ingenious. The *hoy*-oracle of 1:4, which he separates from the following description of the land's devastation, originally framed the sequence of *hoy*-oracles in 5:8–24 and matches its summary conclusion. Isaiah 1:5–9 is taken from 30:15–17, where it was part of a dialogue of Isaiah with his audience (57–59). Other sections, such as the invocation of heaven and earth in 1:2 or the concluding polemic against those who worship in gardens, correlate directly with Isa 65–66 and may be attributed to the final redactor, who composed Isa 1 as a summation of the dynamic of the book, in which a call to repentance leads to the ultimate division between the righteous and the wicked.

The fourth section, the verse-by-verse commentary, gives detailed attention to issues of interpretation, philology, and rich historical and cultural background. For instance, on the parable of the vineyard in 5:1–7, Williamson informs us about viticultural practices, the meanings of the rare verbs in verse 2, and the main exegetical approaches, as well as the rhetorical twists and turns of the plot. Inevitably, there is some overlap between this section and those that precede it, since the interpretation often depends on textual decisions and the overall comprehension of each passage.

There is no general introduction to the commentary, since, as Williamson explains (1), that would most appropriately be deferred until after all three volumes have been completed; nor is there an index. It is accordingly difficult to comment on Williamson's general views on the conception and growth of the book, its ideologies, its relation to other historical books, Williamson's own position in the interpretive tradition, and so on. Williamson is constrained, too, by the demands of the series, with its very strong emphasis on textual and historical criticism, and in particular by the example of George Buchanan Gray's magnificent 1912 ICC commentary, of which this is a self-aware twenty-first-century updating. Williamson is never afraid to say what he thinks, but there is a certain modesty about this work, a profound respect for his predecessors. One notices a particular regard for his teacher John Emerton, whose lexical proposals on Isaiah have

been perennial, and an extraordinary depth of critical consciousness. He does not foreground recent commentaries, such as those of Blenkinsopp, Beuken, and Sweeney, over those of previous generations, though he may feel an affinity for Marvin Sweeney, especially his first book, on Isa 1–4, since he often cites him with approval. Like Sweeney, Williamson is very interested in redactional processes.

It is not clear from this commentary whether Williamson still holds, as proposed in *The Book Called Isaiah*, that Deutero-Isaiah was responsible for the idea of the book of Isaiah and composed the first edition of Proto-Isaiah as a preface to his own work. The sample is too limited and Deutero-Isaiah's intrusions too unobtrusive. He is also indifferent to precise historical dating. There is very little if any mention of the so-called Josianic edition, as proposed most forcefully by Hermann Barth, followed, for instance, by Ronald Clements and Sweeney. There is no attempt to identify particular literary strata with clearly differentiated ideological positions, as is common in contemporary German scholarship. Instead, he assigns the text to the historical Isaiah, to an early preexilic edition, to exilic or postexilic periods, on rather broad grounds, such as harbingers of the Babylonian destruction or the prediction of final restoration. For instance, he thinks that 3:26 reflects the "outlook of Lamentations" (297). In general, he sees a movement toward greater universalization in the course of the book, as in the insertion of 5:15–16 in the *hoy*-oracle of 5:11–17 (366–67), and from the immediate political/ethical situation to the ultimate division between the righteous and the wicked, characteristic of Trito-Isaiah.

Williamson is certainly no minimalist; many passages are ascribed to Isaiah, even to early and late stages in his career. One has the impression that Williamson is interested in the personality and development of the prophet and his contribution to the thought of ancient Israel. At the same time, he is very cognizant of the fallacy of regarding Isaianic authorship as a criterion of authenticity and of the importance of *relecture* in the development of the text (8). In particular, he thinks that a major structural shift resulted from the addition of 2:2–5 and 4:2–6 in the late exilic or postexilic period, which bracketed the oracles of judgment in chapters 2–3 and disrupted the original continuity between chapters 3 and 5.

It is clear that this is a major contribution to the study of Isaiah, and I look forward eagerly to the remaining volumes. However, I do have some questions from my perspective as a literary critic of the Hebrew Bible, and Isaiah in particular.

Williamson consistently downplays issues of gender and the feminist critique of the prophets. For instance, he insists that the satirical portrait of the daughters of Zion in 3:16–24 is not indicative of misogyny, since it illustrates Isaiah's condemnation of pride (289). This is of course true, but it does not address the problem that Isaiah is employing

pervasive cultural stereotypes, as Williamson himself implicitly recognizes. Why should women be such easy targets, except that they do not allegedly conform to their proper place in patriarchal society? He deals with the women's shopping list in verses 18–23 by assigning it to a different author but does not ask what it is doing. On the image of Zion as a prostitute in 1:21, he simply says that it refers to the catalogue of social ills (136). But why precisely that image? He rejects the interpretation of 5:1–7 as a love song, arguing, for instance, that “vineyard” is not used as a sexual symbol in the ancient world before Isaiah (335), as well as the incongruence of erotic imagery with the rest of the passage. This, however, underestimates the effective use of incongruity in the parable, which Williamson appropriately emphasizes in his further discussion.

Williamson dedicates little attention to metaphor and other poetic figures. His discussion of the literary aspects of the text confines itself, by and large, to rhythm, judgments of poetic quality, and the occasional notation of alliteration. Consequently, much of the subtlety, as well as humor, of the text is overlooked. I will give but one example. At the very end, in 5:29–30, the enemy is compared to a lion and then to the sea. Williamson assigns the two verses to two redactional levels and comments on the reapplication of the metaphor of the lion to the cosmic dimension (409). However, the lion and the sea thereby become metaphors for each other, linked through the common attribute of “roaring.” Double metaphors and similes are extremely frequent in Isaiah, as has been noted, for instance, by Cheryl Exum. Lion and sea are complementary figures for bestial and cosmic violence, like the eagle and the river in 8:7–8. Why, then, should we necessarily assign them to different levels, since they form a natural pair? The question of course raises the larger one of synchronic versus diachronic reading, for which I, for one, have no answer.

Williamson has written a masterly commentary on Isa 1–5, for which students of Isaiah will be forever grateful, and, I hope, others too.