Merrill Morse

_Isaiah Speaks: A Voice from the Past for the Present_


Hélène Dallaire
Denver Seminary
Denver, Colorado

In _Isaiah Speaks_ Merrill Morse attempts to connect the social, economic, and religious world of the eighth century BCE, an “axial moment” in biblical history (66), with contemporary aspects of the world in which we live today. In his words, both worlds are full of “international intrigue, bloody conflicts, domestic rivalries, and deadly threats” (14). His chapter on “Axial Moments” is particularly explicit in presenting the connections between these two worlds. Noting the sea-change in the life of Israel during the eighth century BCE, Morse remarks that “the world today is experiencing a profound axial moment, given the extraordinary coalescence of technological advances in the last century,” and that “the tides of national histories are shifting again in this global age even more dramatically than they did in Isaiah’s day” (67).

_Isaiah Speaks: A Voice from the Past for the Present_ is not intended for scholarly research; rather, it is devotional, philosophical, and exegetical in tenor, designed for personal study and spiritual reflection. The thirty-six bite-sized chapters (three to five pages each) highlight one or two select verses from the book of Isaiah (1:1, 2, 11–17; 2:1–2; 3:13; 5:1a, 15–16; 6:1–3, 8; 7:2, 9b, 14; 9:1a, 8; 10:22b; 11:9; 12:3; 13:4b; 20:1–2; 22:13b; 25:1; 28:22b; 29:19a; 30:18a; 33:6a; 37:20; 38:3a, 17a, 20) and conclude with annotations in three main areas: (1) Questions for Discussion; (2) Assignments for Reflection; and (3) A Prayer written by the author. A smattering of hand-drawn illustrations appears throughout the book.
All chapters follow the same format. First, Morse introduces the chapter with a reflection (some quite humorous!) on personal experiences—in the USA, Israel, in Luang Prabang (Laos), Kathmandu (Nepal), Japan—and/or from classical literature (e.g., Shakespeare), classical music (e.g., Handel, Beethoven), popular movies (e.g., Casino Royale, Star Wars), famous paintings (e.g., Cranach’s “The Vineyard of the Lord”; van Leyden’s “The Last Judgment”; Hick’s “Peaceable Kingdom”), modern literature (e.g., The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, by Douglas Adams; The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, by Tolkien), and popularized songs (e.g., “Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog”). Morse uses these reflections to show direct connections between the modern world and the world of Isaiah, focusing primarily on issues of social justice, identity, divine judgment, estrangement from God, idolatry, globalization, and the like.

Second, Morse’s reflections are followed by an intricate interweave of historical events from the last two millennia (e.g., Roman rule; church history; Jewish diaspora; Reformation; European and Asian history; the Holocaust; slaughter of innocents in Cambodia, Darfur, and Rwanda; the Chinese cultural revolution of the 1960s; the Civil Rights movement; the 2008 collapse of world markets) and his exegesis of select verses from the book of Isaiah.

Third, Morse provides two or three Questions for Discussion. These are designed to cause readers to pause and reflect on the key issues discussed in the chapter.

Fourth, in the Assignments for Reflection, Morse offers practical ways in which readers can identify with the prophet and/or his message. For example, he asks readers to craft vision statements and identify the beliefs and values that guide their existence and interactions with others (ch. 1); examine a picture of Jerusalem and imagine themselves there until they feel its history (ch. 2); look at a family tree and reflect on personal identity (ch. 3); map the context of their lives—key events, individuals, places—and think about their intrinsic interdependence with others (ch. 4); go outside, look at the heavens, and think about the greatness and magnificence of the cosmos (ch. 5); set a time and place for silence and meditation and let God’s spirit speak (ch. 6); hold a small object in one hand and lift it as an offering to God with heartfelt devotion (ch. 8); make an inventory of people, events, and experiences that served as signs from God and share the list with someone (ch. 22); and so on.

Fifth, the Prayers found at the end of each chapter attempt to draw the reader into God’s presence by reflecting on the central ideas discussed in the chapter.

In his introduction Morse speaks of the confident, divinely inspired, and convincing language of Isaiah, language “that could intimidate kings, enrage the rich, and frighten
just about everybody” (2). Morse quickly establishes the credibility of the prophet, through whom God spoke to the religious, social, and political world of his day. He compares the spiritual condition of the Israelites with that of the Christian church today, where individualistic and traditional forms of worship are often bereft of spirituality and devoid of intimacy with God—as it was in the eighth century BCE. He asks questions related to the relevance of Isaiah’s prophetic visions for modern life. Morse calls Isaiah, who prophesied during the reign of no less than four kings, the “Billy Graham of the eighth century BCE” (10).

According to Morse, the emotional language of Isaiah is often disturbing, as it reflects God’s rejection of the worship and sacrifices of his people. Furthermore, Morse points out that Isaiah’s behavior is at times troubling and would be considered offensive and unacceptable in a modern society. Morse notes that, “if the prophet Isaiah were to return today and engage in some of the same behaviors he pursued in his own day, he would be arrested for indecent exposure [e.g., in Isa 20:3, Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years], committed to psychiatric care, and probably branded as a sex offender. Appearances would dictate consequences. Form would trump substance, as if [sic] often does in contemporary culture” (134). Morse asserts, however, that the message of the books of Isaiah is ultimately “a love story, a dramatic, vivid family saga about estrangement and betrayal, the offspring’s misdirected, doomed struggles for independence, contrasted with God’s intense desire for reconciliation and new beginnings” (26).

Morse openly speculates on the real world of Isaiah. For example, he wonders if Isaiah was a member of the high society of Jerusalem, had access to kings or nobles in positions of leadership, was called a quack by other prophets of his day, and so on. He imagines that Isaiah’s son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, may have been called by a (possibly mocking) nickname by his peers. Although the author ponders these thoughts, he refrains from providing conclusive interpretations on these assumptions.

Throughout the book Morse asks pointed questions designed to provoke readers to think more deeply about Scripture (e.g., “How can God be both loving and judgmental?” [51]; “Do angels have sex?” [60]; “If an experience of God is less than completely ‘supernatural,’ is it therefore untrue?” [72]; “How far can believers go in determining God’s will in national and global affairs?” [87]; “Could we not imagine Miriam today as a popular televangelist with a large, devoted following?” [122]; “Was Isaiah the Francis of Assisi of the Old Testament, a man keenly attuned to the animal kingdom?” [139]). Although these questions are appropriate for this type of textual study, their answers could only be speculative and not conclusive.
Morse questions whether our modern understanding of God’s prophetic voice or modern-day divinely inspired visions proceed from the living God or from other sources. He proposes that the “consistency criterion”—the global wisdom of the international community of faith—must be taken into consideration in our interpretation of modern prophetic voices. Morse asserts that, without applying the consistency criterion,

the Bible can be used to support almost any position we want it to, for example, to support slavery, apartheid, the subservience of women (as it has been in the past), or to support a host of political and theological positions in today’s world. Our only real hope for certainty … is to test contemporary prophetic voices against the views and experiences of the faith community as a whole. (5)

In conclusion, the book is at the same time humorous and serious, entertaining and thought-provoking. It differs from most devotional books in that it is both profound in its exposition and reflective in its content. It is well-crafted and at times gripping. Its Questions for Discussions and Comments for Reflection would no doubt create stimulating discussions in a small-group setting. This said, answering Morse’s copious questions does not guarantee that the reader will understand Isaiah better after reading the book, since the questions point to no particular answer, nor do they lead the readers back to the scriptures for answers. Morse admits that “to fully appreciate the book of Isaiah, one would need to be well-versed in Near Eastern history and culture, biblical composition, the nature of prophetic writing, competing schools of theological thought in Israelite tradition, the historical progression of kings in Israel and Judah, etc.” (13). Morse’s book is recommended for thoughtful readers who wish to pause and reflect on important themes in the book of Isaiah in light of modern societal issues.