1 Introduction

CHRISTOPHER B. HAYS

Few writings have shaped the world as much as the book of Isaiah has – its lyricism, imagery, theology, and ethics are all deeply ingrained into us, and into our culture. From this standpoint, perhaps it needs no introduction.

The prophet Isaiah and the book in his name became paradigms in the biblical tradition relatively quickly. Other prophetic books were modeled on it in their processes of formation. In Jewish tradition, the Babylonian Talmud called Isaiah a lawgiver on the level of Moses (b. Mak. 24a), and about half the haftaroth readings in Jewish synagogue liturgy are drawn from Isaiah. In more recent times, the book has been considered one of the greatest works of literature ever produced, the founding document of widespread monotheism, and a taproot of the Christian Gospels. It merits ongoing attention for the impact it continues to have, and for the enduring mysteries it still contains.

Isaiah can also be overwhelming. It has connections to a huge span of history and intertextual links to a wide array of literature from across the ancient world, as well as much of the biblical canon. As such, reading it well demands knowledge of the history of the Bible itself and the numerous methods and approaches involved in studying it. Thus, from a different standpoint, Isaiah desperately needs introduction – a set of starting points from which one can begin to explore.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

With any book, one should ask why it needs to exist: What is its purpose? Some would say that the genre of Companion or Handbook is a tired one. Often these are enormous compendia of essays from every imaginable angle, and are presumably most at home in reference libraries. There is much to be said for this approach – not least, the editor has the chance to employ all his or her friends and make some new ones. Part of me would have liked to produce such a volume, and is even

jealous of those who have. From the start, however, I decided on a more concise approach to this volume, based on three motivations.

First, it seems to me that a Companion should be an introductory work – albeit an introduction intended for relatively engaged advanced readers. This Companion is built to accompany the student who is beginning to explore Isaiah more deeply, perhaps a student in a first exegesis course, or a scholar in an adjacent field. And so I exhorted the contributors to write for that audience, and not for the few dozen specialized scholars who have strong enough opinions about Isaiah to disagree on certain details. There are certainly fresh and creative ideas and perspectives represented here, but we have tried above all to keep the writing clean and clear, and the footnotes to a minimum.

Second, I teach the book of Isaiah, and I wanted a book that would be useful in my teaching. We work in a digital age in which even books nominally bound between two covers are regularly sliced up, sold, and read piecemeal. Access is easier than it ever was, and diverse readings can be pulled from numerous sources and posted on course websites. The goal of "comprehensiveness" in a handbook seemed less important when most professors and teachers prefer to assign readings from various sources anyway. This book is meant to serve as a basic and cost-effective foundation for whatever an instructor wants to add to it.

Third, I've grown wary of assigning commentaries. Partly this is because of the commentary genre itself and the current state of humanities education: Too often students do not know how to engage with a commentary critically, and so quote it as the absolute truth. In other cases, they find commentaries alienating, so they ignore them rather than disagreeing with them. And, of course, every biblical commentary is a monument to a certain time and place, and to the background of the scholar who wrote it. For all the erudition and interesting conversation among commentaries, I have not found one that serves my students especially well here and now. Admittedly, I'm preparing a commentary of my own so that I can join that dusty pantheon, but perhaps a more diverse group of voices will serve better in the classroom. This volume is designed to provide students with the basic information that interpreters can begin from: information about history, literature, themes, and theologies. Hopefully, it equips its readers to join the conversation.

Variety of perspective is valuable in itself, but in addition, every chapter of this volume is written by a scholar who would be recognized by anyone in the field of biblical studies as a leading expert in the area. They are also experienced teachers of the material. One could imagine

the end product of their labors as an opportunity to attend a symposium on Isaiah by the very best team of lecturers imaginable.

ABOUT THE CHAPTERS

The opening section of the book is on the historical contexts of the book of Isaiah and its formation over time. The earliest texts in Isaiah were written more than 2,700 years ago, in the eighth century BCE, and other texts that make up the book continued to be written for approximately three centuries. The earliest *extant* manuscripts and translations of the book are centuries later still; they begin to be attested around the beginning of the second century BCE. No informed interpretation of the book can afford to ignore these data; they tell us when the book began to be written and the point by which it must have been completed. Investigations of the historical contexts of the composition and formation of the book have thus been one of the major interests of critical scholars.

In the early days of modern scholarship, there was a particular fascination with the prophets as historical figures – their personalities and the words they actually spoke. Whether this was based on a belief in direct verbal inspiration by God or because of a sense that they were religious geniuses, this orientation toward prophetic personalities often led to a sharp distinction between "authentic" utterances and everything else. This sometimes led to an impoverished appreciation of the multilayered nature of the book of Isaiah. Then again, in other corners of the field, scholars demonstrated excessive confidence in their ability to identify numerous stages of editing within single passages. Based on their presuppositions, they divided up texts into many redactional layers, without empirical models of the way scribes functioned in the ancient world. Therefore, while critical scholars generally agree on the broad contours of the book's formation, there is little consensus on various finer points.

A realistic historical approach to a prophetic book's formation takes account of both the possible complexity of the prophet's thought and also the realities of scribal production in the ancient world. An eighth-century BCE prophet such as Isaiah was not a writer – he may have occasionally scratched out a single phrase (8:1), but more generally he would have relied on the scribal skills of followers to record and transmit his messages (8:16); those early records, in turn, would have been recopied and recompiled in later periods. We can see this process concretely, albeit over a very short period of a few

years, in contemporaneous Neo-Assyrian texts in which prophecies delivered in one historical situation were taken up again and applied to a new one.

In the case of Isaiah, it is clear that the process of formation continued over centuries. Not only are there explicit references to events and figures of the Persian Period in the book, but the later writings also look back on the Babylonian Exile, and are distinguishable from pre-exilic texts given the use of late features in their Hebrew language. In order to introduce all this, the volume begins with chapters on each of the major periods of Isaiah's formation.

In **"The Book of Isaiah in the Neo-Assyrian Period"** (Chapter 2), **Michael J. Chan** offers an overview of the centuries of Assyrian dominance in the Levant, and he takes five exegetical case studies, spanning the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, that demonstrate the historical and literary impact of that Mesopotamian power on the rest of the ancient Near East, as reflected in the writings of Isaiah and his successors. In particular, he observes how Assyrian imperial propaganda was subverted by the prophets in various ways.

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (**"The Book of Isaiah and the Neo-Babylonian Period,"** Chapter 3) investigates the "black hole" in the book that is the Babylonian Exile. She examines texts from all sections of the book and notes how the experience of suffering under Babylonian rule casts a shadow over them. At the same time, very little material in the book of Isaiah was composed during the Neo-Babylonian period, and nothing necessitates the conclusion that any of its authors and audience lived in Babylon.

Lucas L. Schulte takes on a large task in **"The Book of Isaiah in the Persian Period"** (Chapter 4), since this was a crucial time in the book's overall development. He shows how Persian emperors were able to enlist scribal elites in various subject nations and win their support. The well-known Cyrus Cylinder from Babylon may be the most prominent example, but Isa 40–66 also reflects its own interpretation of this international Persian Royal Propaganda Model. This chapter also shows how the later parts of the book of Isaiah interacted with religious and sociopolitical issues in the postexilic Persian province, comparing and contrasting it with the viewpoints of Ezra and Nehemiah in particular.

The textual transmission of the book of Isaiah was relatively stable. The structure of the book in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, based on Jewish manuscripts from about 1000 CE, is common to all the major ancient witnesses and translations. This is a very different situation

from other prophetic books, such as Jeremiah, which is much shorter and arranged differently in the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew text; or Ezekiel, which had at least three variant editions in circulation in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Isaiah's form was apparently fixed earlier than that of other prophetic books; this may reflect something about its perceived authority and date of "canonization." Despite the lack of variant editions, the earliest manuscripts of Isaiah and the translated Versions still preserve numerous readings that diverge from the Masoretic Text, some of them certainly older. These other textual witnesses are the subject of the next two chapters.

Jesper Høgenhaven ("The Book of Isaiah at Qumran," Chapter 5**)** offers a concise overview of the texts related to Isaiah that were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The book's importance for the Qumran community is attested not only by the large number of copies that survived, but also by various other genres of sectarian literature that drew from and reflected on the book, including the pesher commentaries and even the Community Rule (1QS). The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^{a}) is the longest biblical scroll found at Qumran. It is both an important witness for reconstructing the oldest text of the book and subtly reflects some of the earliest interpretive decisions about it.

In **"Early Versions of Isaiah as Translations and Interpretations"** (Chapter 6)**, Ronald L. Troxel** analyzes the Greek and Syriac translations that are among the earliest witnesses to the book. He shows that the translators didn't just offer equivalents to Hebrew words, but sometimes shaped their versions to accord with their faith communities' interpretations of the book. Such interpretive renderings can make it difficult to reconstruct the Hebrew text. The challenge facing textual critics is to discern whether the differences were the translators' own interpretation, or if they arose from different Hebrew words in the translator's manuscript. Troxel's chapter cites examples of these conundrums, and illustrates how scholars attempt to reason about their origins.

With these overviews of the history of the book and its textual traditions as background, **Marvin A. Sweeney ("The Formation of the Book of Isaiah,"** Chapter 7**)** analyzes the history of scholarship about the editorial processes that gave rise to the Hebrew text as we have it. As scholars have long done, he takes Bernhard Duhm's nineteenth-century commentary as a starting point, but then shows the myriad ways in which more recent scholars have challenged his presuppositions and greatly improved on his findings. In the process, he identifies many

of the themes and features in the book that have led him and other interpreters to perceive a redactional shaping of the book in four major phases – broadly one per century in the eighth through fifth centuries BCE. Sweeney's most significant contributions to the study of Isaiah, reflected here, have been his demonstration of the Davidic covenant in the final form of the book and his refinement of our understanding of the Josianic layer from the late seventh century BCE.

Part II shifts to various approaches to understanding the book of Isaiah in its historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Isaiah reflects the surrounding world in many ways, and it also testifies to the ways its authors helped to shape that world.

Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah were not the only ones speaking words on behalf of the gods in the ancient Near East, nor was spoken prophecy the only form of divination practiced. **Jonathan Stökl** (**"Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and the Study of Isaiah,"** Chapter 8) locates the book of Isaiah within this larger world of ancient prophecy and divination. Texts and accounts of prophecy from Syria and Mesopotamia shed light on the likely balance between oracles of comfort and judgment in the prophet's actual career and on the role of gender in prophecy. Stökl also scrutinizes the theory that collections of Assyrian prophecy provide empirical examples of how the earliest layers of the book might have been compiled from reports of Isaiah's own oracles.

Like religious leaders in any period, the prophets functioned within a religious world that was broader and more diverse than a surface reading might suggest. My own contribution (**"The Book of Isaiah in the History of Israelite Religion,"** Chapter 9) analyzes various religiohistorical aspects of the book, such as the role of writing and symbolic action; the supernatural images of the divine throne room; the book's role in developing ideas about death and afterlife; its central role in the formulation of biblical monotheism, including its polemics against idols; and its relationship to the Jerusalem Temple and its priests.

Religion and politics were thoroughly interwoven in the ancient world, and in **"Isaiah and Empire"** (Chapter 10), **Shawn Zelig Aster** considers how the authors of the book reacted to and against imperial propaganda. Focusing on the well-attested rhetoric of Neo-Assyrian kings, he shows through various specific case studies how their claims were contested in the early prophecies of the book. Isaiah is, in a very real sense, some of the earliest resistance literature in world history: The prophet and his tradents consistently sought to reorient the thinking of their audiences, to relativize and undermine the absolutizing boasts of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The book of Isaiah reflects many of the population movements that took place in the period of its formation. Much biblical scholarship focuses on "*the* (Babylonian) Exile," but as **C. L. Crouch** (**"Migration in the Book of Isaiah,"** Chapter 11) points out, mass population movements were carried out in the sphere of Israel and Judah by the Assyrians long before the Babylonians overthrew Jerusalem. She also calls attention to the migrations experienced by other nations, and to forces of displacement other than deportation, such as warfare, famine, and natural disasters. She analyzes the literary reception of these numerous involuntary migrations, and the ways in which the prophet and his audiences made sense of them.

Part III of the book turns to considering the book of Isaiah as literature. From the beating of swords into plowshares in chapter 2 to the soaring eagles' wings of chapter 40 to the new Jerusalem of chapter 65, Isaiah has been a touchstone for authors and artists ever since. The great literary critic and poet Matthew Arnold famously professed to have received more "delight and stimulus" from Isaiah than from the greatest authors of his own native English such as Shakespeare and Milton.

J. Blake Couey (**"Isaiah as Poetry,"** Chapter 12) begins with the basic fact that nearly all of the book is written as poetry, and encourages readers to approach it as such. He surveys its erudite vocabulary, its creative use of sound, and its parallelism and larger strophic structures. He closes with an extended appreciation of the "imaginative worlds" evoked in the book through the use of imagery and metaphors. He observes of its poetic vision that "its scope is nearly boundless."

One of the poetic features of Isaiah is its intertextuality. Previous chapters noted its incorporation of rhetoric and texts from the surrounding world. It is also well established that the authors of the later portions of the book worked with attention to the existing Isaianic texts, so that the book as a whole is woven together by common themes and vocabulary. Furthermore, the book is full of allusions to other biblical books, and was itself eventually a touchstone for later biblical authors. (Sometimes it is even uncertain which text came first!) **Hyun Chul Paul Kim** (**"Isaiah in Intertextual Perspective,"** Chapter 13) analyzes the book at each of these levels, and then looks forward to "points of intersectionality" between Isaiah and the modern world.

As the foregoing chapters indicate, there are essentially endless ways to look at Isaiah from a literary standpoint, but this section closes with two in-depth case studies. **Hanne Løland Levinson's "Gendered Imagery in Isaiah"** (Chapter 14) looks at one of the most significant and striking features of Isaiah: its repeated use of feminine imagery for God.

She begins with an advanced yet accessible discussion of how metaphors work, then goes on to analyze how the use of imagery comparing God to a pregnant woman, a midwife, and a breastfeeding mother – alongside more widespread masculine imagery – combines to challenge and transform the ways in which readers perceive God. In conclusion, she points out the importance of female god-language in a world in which gender continues to be a basis for inequality and exclusion.

J. Todd Hibbard's "Divine and Human Plans in the Book of Isaiah" (Chapter 15) follows the occurrences of a Hebrew root that means "to plan, advise, counsel" through the whole book, bringing to light one of its central themes. He shows how Isaiah's theological rhetoric begins with a plan against Judah that involves foreign nations, but eventually undermines the plans of those nations as well. As with feminine imagery in the book, it is possible to identify a kind of episodic narrative running through the book in relation to certain themes in a way that holds the book together despite the historical ground that it covers. The divine plans for Judah and nations eventually come together and culminate with the summoning of Cyrus as messiah.

The introduction began by noting the enduring impact of Isaiah. As one of the greatest and most widely read religious and literary texts produced in antiquity, it has been the subject of ongoing reflection ever since. Without any pretense to comprehensiveness, **Part IV** looks at the book's legacy from various angles.

With its many voices that are joined together, Isaiah is akin to a massive choir or symphony, and it sometimes strikes dissonant notes. **Matthew R. Schlimm's "Theological Tensions in the Book of Isaiah"** (Chapter 16) looks at a number of different themes on which the book contains contrasting testimonies: God is portrayed as both a loving savior and a wrathful punisher; God is said to be a mighty sovereign, and yet humans frequently do not act according to his will; God is universal and transcendent, and yet also portrayed as intimate with his people, particularly Zion; humans are sometimes seen as pervasively sinful, but are exhorted to do good; the creation, too, is sometimes good and blessed, and yet elsewhere seen as corrupted; and the same leaders and empires are alternately condemned and used as divine agents. Schlimm reflects on the way in which these complexities press readers beyond simple answers.

One of Isaiah's most forceful messages concerns justice, and the sociopolitical conditions necessary to support it. In **"The Ethical and Political Vision of Isaiah"** (Chapter 17), **M. Daniel Carroll R.** looks at the fundamental themes and vocabulary of the book's moral vision and surveys approaches that seek to better understand the socioeconomic

injustice and politics it condemns. These sins include the greed and malfeasance of governing elites in ancient Judahite society, systemic socioeconomic abuses of agricultural and trade systems, and decisions leading to catastrophic war. At the same time, this prophetic text looks forward to a messianic age of justice and peace under a Spirit-filled king/servant. In closing, Carroll looks at how Isaiah's ethical messages have been received (and resisted) in the pursuit of justice, peace, and ecology.

Isaiah was also arguably the most influential book of the Hebrew Bible for the authors of the New Testament. It was the most frequently quoted book, apart from the lengthier book of Psalms, but as **David W. Pao** points out in **"Isaiah in the New Testament"** (Chapter 18), it also supplied language and structural models for significant theological themes of early Christianity. He analyzes the role of Isaiah in New Testament themes such as eschatology, Christology, obduracy, and universalism. Then he looks at the way in which whole New Testament writings were shaped by Isaianic influence, including all four Gospels, Acts, Romans, and Revelation. All this illustrates why Isaiah has been called "The Fifth Gospel."

Joshua Ezra Burns' "Impressions of Isaiah in Classical Rabbinic Literature" (Chapter 19) turns to the reception of the book in postbiblical Jewish tradition. He notes that, like other classical interpreters, the sages did not feel constrained by the historical horizons of the text, but found in it words that spoke to later situations as well. The sages did not systematically idealize Isaiah, however, for example criticizing him for being overeager to be called by God (Isa 6:8). Some were fascinated by the prophet's role in Hezekiah's court and elaborated on the limited details found in Isa 36–39. In other cases they took his promises of restoration to apply to the Second Temple after its destruction by the Romans. Finally, Burns looks at the diverse ways in which the book of Isaiah did (and did not) figure in the Jewish messianic interpretations.

The final chapter, **Brennan Breed's "The Reception History of Isaiah"** (Chapter 20), takes a single theme attested in just a few verses (Isa 8:16; 29:11; and 30:8) and shows how it has been reinterpreted by readers ceaselessly across the centuries, all the way from later biblical authors to modern times, in response to everything from sectarian divisions to African-American slavery to the trauma of the Holocaust. These verses refer to the words of the prophet being sealed, especially to those who are ignorant, until the time comes for their meaning to be revealed. This theme brings into focus the ways in which Isaiah has been used polemically, but it also points to the texts' power as a seemingly inexhaustible well of meaning.

Breed's essay is a fitting note on which to end this introduction, in that the many arcs of interpretation that it identifies extend into our own times and will continue into future generations. These many threads are profoundly interwoven through the cultural tapestries of the past, to the point that history is less comprehensible without an awareness of them. The book of Isaiah stands at the center of various biblical traditions that continue to shape a great percentage of the world's inhabitants. We will continue to understand Isaiah better in the future; and in light of the ethical, social, and historical perspectives explored in this book, it will continue to help us understand ourselves. Like all of the world's greatest works of literature, it serves as a particular mirror on humanity.