Isaiah Then and Now: Reflections on the Responses to *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*

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A response to presentations during the November 2015 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I hope the response makes some sense separate from the presentations.

I’m grateful to the respondents for their thoughtful comments on this little book. In the context of a Society for Pentecostal Studies group and of a meeting of the American Academy of Religion, it makes sense that questions about method are especially prominent in the responses, and I therefore focus on those.

All the respondents wonder if I am inconsistent in what I say about method compared with what I do and with what I say here and elsewhere. I don’t know whether I acknowledge that I am inconsistent, but two or three witnesses have said so and I therefore have to take the possibility seriously.

I’ve done my fair share of writing about method, but I only half-believe in method, and maybe that vacillation lies behind any inconsistency. The New Testament writers didn’t have a method for perceiving the significance of Isaiah. They leapt intuitively to seeing the significance of the Scriptures. In light of insights the Holy Spirit gave them, they jumped from some question they needed to answer or some experience they needed to understand to a scriptural text that answered the question or illumined the experience. Thus when they referred to Isaiah’s prophecy about a young girl who will have a baby whose birth will lead people to say that God is with us, they did so not because they were wondering how to understand Isaiah 7:14 but because they knew a girl who had had a baby when she was still not married and they knew that in this baby when he grew up they had seen God being with his people. The verses from Isaiah helped them affirm and understand how that could be so. They didn’t have a method of interpretation. They had the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals should find that easy enough to understand and accept!

In what follows, I discuss the relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology in connection with the study of Isaiah, the importance of listening to the meaning of Isaiah in its historical context, and the way I work with that meaning as a preacher.

# Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

I’m sorry if I gave Christopher Green the impression that I am against Systematic Theology, but again, he’s not the only person who has formed that impression, so evidently I must also accept some responsibility for giving it. But it’s not so, and neither do I have any aversion to trinitarian dogma. I say the creed without any mental reservation twice every Sunday.

I take systematic theology to involve the formulation of a reflective understanding of Christian faith in a context other than that of the Middle Eastern world in the time of Old and New Testaments, and an understanding that seeks to articulate the nature of Christian faith in terms of the categories of such a new context and in a way that works in dialogue with the questions, needs, and insights of this new context.

My way of identifying the difference between biblical theology and systematic theology is to see biblical theology as an attempt to formulate the nature of biblical faith itself in its own terms. Now I acknowledge that a biblical theologian will also be working in light of the categories and questions of his or her context, whether the theologian realizes it or not, and Dr Grey notes that the fact pokes through in this book. But the focus of biblical theology is nevertheless different. Maybe systematic theology and biblical theology belong on a spectrum, so that there is theological work that sits closer to understanding the Scriptures in their own right and theological work that sits closer to making a statement for today. And possibly this distinction is related to the one that Dr Grey makes when she asks whether biblical theology should start with a reconstruction of the biblical text or start with the concerns of the actual contemporary reading community (and my answer is that it can do either).

In effect Dr Moore suggests that my beginning with revelation and ending with Yahweh’s Day in the second half of the book may be an example of my own being influenced by systematic theology, and he asks why I settled on the thirteen topics that I did. The answer to that question is that I jotted down what I suspected were the key topics in the book of Isaiah, then reworked through the book to put material under the headings, adapting or extending the headings when I realized that material didn’t fit. I have used the same approach to writing a Biblical Theology, which should come out in 2016. Now I wouldn’t actually mind if beginning with revelation and ending with Yahweh’s Day did reflect the influence of systematic theology, because I recognize that systematic theology can enable us to see things that are there in the Scriptures. But actually there was another dynamic behind that sequence of themes. Thomas A. Smail, the Church of England’s great charismatic theologian, persuaded me (out of the background of his own study of Karl Barth) that themes such as revelation and authority were not the place to start in laying out a theology. As we would put it now, such an order mistakenly presupposes a foundationalist approach to theology. And in the Biblical Theology that I have now written I start with God. In this presentation of the theology of the book of Isaiah, I didn’t plan to make revelation the first of the thirteen themes. But then I noticed, as Dr Moore does, that the book of Isaiah starts there. And of course Yahweh’s Day or the new Jerusalem does come at the end, both of Isaiah 1—12 and of the book as a whole.

I’m grateful to Dr Moore for his outline on the theme of the raising up of children*,* but I’d call that topic a theme that can be taken from the book rather than an aspect of its particular theology. It seems to me likely that the authors of the book had thought about topics such as revelation and holiness and Yahweh’s day, but not that they had thought about the raising up of children. I’d thus call Dr Moore’s outline a Spirit-inspired suggestion about the Spirit-inspired significance of the book of Isaiah, rather than an aspect of its own meaning.

My own commitment is to biblical theology rather than systematic theology, but I have no problem with the systematic theology enterprise. Dr Green referred to my *Old Testament Theology*, and you would be able to see from its footnotes that I’ve read the *Church Dogmatics*, and Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology*, and most of Moltmann’s works, for instance, and not just in order to disagree with them. As I’ve noted, systematic theology can (for instance) enable us to spot and articulate things that are there in the Scriptures but that we might otherwise miss. Likewise I like Dr Moore’s comment that it may be his Pentecostal interest in testimony that made him sensitive to the significance of the testimony material in Isaiah 7—8 and 36—39 in the structure of the book as whole, and I can see that his observation about these passages supports and is supported by my two-column outline of the book, to which he refers, in which the sections to which these passages belong (chapters 1—12 and 28—39) are parallel.

If systematic theologians are making statements about Christian faith that claim to be biblical but that seem to me not to be so, you may find me disagreeing with them, though more often you will find me simply ignoring them. What I urge is that it’s worth preserving that difference between systematic theology and biblical theology and that we should be wary of systematic theology consciously or unconsciously determining the meaning of the Scriptures. And I am passionate about the point. I appreciate Dr Green’s observation that you shouldn’t let the accessibility of my prose and the sparseness of my footnotes fool you. I once commented that my friend Walter Moberly writes with an iron hand in a velvet glove, and in effect Dr Green is saying that I do the same, except that in my case it’s a tough heart inside a playful t-shirt. I hadn’t realized it, but he’s right. So yes, beware.

So I urge the need to distinguish systematic theology and biblical theology because systematic theology can read into the Scriptures convictions that come from our context. An example. In our context there is a theological perspective called classical theism and a theological perspective called open theism. Adherents of both may claim to be articulating truths from the Scriptures. In my view both do justice to some aspects of the Scriptures but ignore other aspects. A biblical understanding of God needs to avoid subordinating the Scriptures to philosophical convictions from our context.

I am indeed interested in what Dr Green calls “dogma-free readings of Scripture.” I want the theological significance of the Scriptures to be determined by the Scriptures not by Christian dogma. I grant that we need to take seriously the convictions the church has come to about Christian truth and the interpretation of the Scriptures and to be wary if we come to different conclusions from those of our Christian forebears. But Pentecostals at least as much as anyone know better than to be finally constrained by those convictions.

Dr Davies asks whether there is a role for faithful resistance to the text of the Scriptures. As an example, on might take the summons in Isaiah 40 to “comfort my people.” That was the message of false prophets in the time of Isaiah ben Amoz himself. In discussing false prophecy, Eva Osswald described a prophet as someone who knows what time it is. In some contexts one would need faithful resistance to Isaiah 40, in light of other texts that seem to address one’s context in its time. As another example, an emphasis on trusting God and doing nothing is a characteristic feature of the entire book of Isaiah. There might be contexts where faithfulness means resisting that text in light of other texts that seem to address one’s context in its time. On the other hand, if Dr Davies’s question implies that there might be texts that one would always resist, then the answer would depend on broader questions about how one sees the status of the Scriptures. There are texts in Isaiah that stand in tension with one another, such as texts about the significance of the temple or about messianic hope, but it seems wiser to assume that this fact reflects the complexity of truth and the need to say different things in different contexts rather than that some are to be accepted and some always resisted. There are texts in Isaiah that I don’t like and that I wish were not there, but I have several reasons for abjuring the idea that I can faithfully resist them. To choose or to resist seems to be in conflict with the status of the whole book of Isaiah for Judaism in Jesus’s day and thus for Jesus and subsequently for the church, and it risks my assuming that I know better than the book of Isaiah does, whereas it seems to me wiser to assume that the problem lies with me in the context of my culture.

# The Importance of the Scriptures’ Own Meaning

A second reason for not surrendering the distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology is that there is vast theological potential within the Scriptures that we miss if we read them with spectacles that come from outside them. It has happened with study of Isaiah that seeks to read it in a trinitarian framework. First, such study has noted with appreciation the references in Isaiah to God being father; but in Isaiah, God is not the Father of the Son but the father of his people, and the book called Isaiah works out the implications of that fact in significant ways. Second, Isaiah makes promises about the root from Jesse’s stump, promises that illumine an understanding of Jesus; but if we read Jesus back into Isaiah by talk of its foreshadowing him or witnessing to him, we miss what Isaiah itself has to say. And regarding the third person of the Trinity, Isaiah has significant things to say about the spirit of God, but much of the material that relates to the work of the Holy Spirit does not use the word *ruaḥ*. When Isaiah speaks of God’s hand or arm or face, it’s talking about the work of the Holy Spirit, and focusing on its specific references to the spirit of God or on its distinctive use of the actual expression “Holy Spirit” means missing most of the material on the Holy Spirit.

About Isaiah 6, I’m puzzled that Dr Green says he wishes I had explained how Isaiah could have seen the divine nature without recognizing God personally. The fact that I do not relate the vision to the Trinity does not mean I imply Isaiah didn’t recognize God personally. I don’t know if Dr Green has inferred that Isaiah was not recognizing God personally when he portrays God’s “distinctively supernatural, dangerous, almost frightening, divine nature, which should make people bow their head simply because they are creatures—let alone because they are people polluted by their wrongdoing.” On the contrary, he was recognizing God personally as that kind of personal God, though the chapter also goes on to make clear that he recognizes God as one who cleanses of sin and who sends Isaiah off with a message that sounds devastating but is an expression of love in that it is designed to win people to repentance, and (not incidentally) that he recognizes God as one who does work on his own but who works within the context of his cabinet.

My point is that the threefold-ness of the seraphs’ proclamation is not in itself trinitarian in the sense that it implies the threefold-ness of the one the seraphs acknowledge, and that to focus on it in this connection is to lose the actual theological significance of the acknowledgment. By interpreting Isaiah 6 trinitarianly we lose the theological point about the chapter without gaining much, because we know those things about God as Trinity anyway. The seraphs’ “Holy, holy, holy” actually makes a different theological point. In Hebrew as in English you repeat a word for emphasis. Only rarely do you repeat it twice; there are only two or three examples in the Old Testament, and this is one of them. As Alec Motyer, one of my first Old Testament mentors, used to put it, Yahweh is not only once holy, and not only twice holy, but holy to the power of three. Yahweh is indeed to a remarkable degree supernatural, dangerous, almost frightening, in his divine nature. And we know from the previous chapter that Yahweh’s holiness needs to be understood by being related to his authority and to his faithfulness, so this acknowledgment underscores what was said there. But by linking the threefold “holy” to the Trinity, we lose the Holy Spirit’s point in the context of Isaiah. It is particularly regrettable because in circles in which I move, people think God is their buddy, and the seraphs have something to say to that assumption.

That point links with a broader one about seeking to perceive the significance of Isaiah by starting from questions out of our culture. I indeed allow for biblical theology that consciously starts from questions out of our culture, but the downside to that form of biblical theology is that it short-circuits the important dynamic whereby our world, in my case the twenty-first century Western world, and the world of Isaiah are set over against one another in a realistic way. Within the twenty-first century Western world the relational Trinity and issues such as homosexuality are important, and we therefore have to handle them. But neither of these matters were important in the context of the book of Isaiah, and we should be wary of assimilating the book of Isaiah to our culture-relative agenda.

The Scriptures portray for us an alternative world, the real world of God. Twice each Sunday I leave our church as the service is about to begin, go through the church gate, ring the bell to tell the neighborhood that God is being worshiped here, walk up the street past the cars and buses and fire trucks and across from the people buying tamales and the kids playing soccer in the park, and I walk into the main door of our humble but graceful church with its candles and cross and baptismal font and communion table and lectern, where the people of God are already singing God’s praise, and as that bit of singing stops I welcome them to this celebration of Jesus dying for us and Jesus rising for us. Stepping in from the street outside always feels a bit like Alice in Wonderland going down the rabbit hole into a different world. While those two worlds have to come together, it’s also important to recognize that they are two different worlds, and that the world inside the church building is the real one. It used to be the case in the United States that the two worlds were much closer, but they are now very different, and the church has not yet recognized that its vocation is to embody a radically alternative world. Something similar applies to our relationship with the Bible. The world of the book of Isaiah is a different world from our world, and I might see my aim in this book of mine as to help people make the journey from our world to the world of the book of Isaiah. They indeed need to bring those two worlds together but there are advantages in focusing for a while on their stark difference.

I’m quite prepared to believe that Isaiah saw Jesus. But it doesn’t look as if Isaiah knew he was seeing Jesus. If he did know, the Holy Spirit didn’t inspire him to share that fact with the people to whom he was ministering when he gave his testimony. And it’s worth seeking to learn from what God was communicating to his people through Isaiah and not having that obscured by insights that came later.

This comment implies an answer to Dr Davies’s question about why we should bother with the historical context of the material in Isaiah. The Holy Spirit was speaking via the prophet in a context, and knowing the context helps us understand what the Holy Spirit was communicating. This assumption does not exclude the way the Holy Spirit uses the same text to say different things in other contexts, but it seems a shame to ignore what the Spirit meant in that context. Sometimes we cannot know the precise historical context of the prophecies in Isaiah, but we can be confident about the material’s broad relationship with three periods, first that of the ministry of Isaiah ben Amoz, then the time when Babylonian rule is about to be terminated, and thirdly the subsequent time when God’s promises have been partly though not entirely fulfilled (a periodizing which in broad terms was accepted long before the rise of historical criticism and is thus not dependent on its changing theories). Reading the book of Isaiah historically is not so impossible.

Over the question what John meant by declaring that Isaiah saw Jesus and what are the implications of that declaration, it’s illuminating to compare what John says about Isaiah 6 with some comments in his previous chapter where he reports Caiaphas’s astonishing declaration that it’s better for Jesus to die than for the whole nation to perish. Caiaphas “didn’t say this from himself,” John comments (John 11:50). He was prophesying that Jesus would indeed die for the nation, in a more profound sense than Caiaphas meant. “He didn’t say this from himself.” Well in one sense of course he said it from himself. He decided to say it and he knew what he meant. He wasn’t like someone who has God put a prophetic message on their lips in a way that means they don’t know what it is until they listen to the words coming out of their own mouth. I don’t imagine John would dispute that Caiaphas said what he said because he worked out what to say and said it. But John knows there must have been more going on than Caiaphas realized. In Isaiah’s vision, too, with hindsight John can see that there was more going on than Isaiah may have realized, but it’s a shame for us to ignore what Isaiah’s words would mean in their context, because that was what God wanted his people to understand. We are privileged to listen in on God talking to his people. Isn’t that a terrific privilege? Why forgo it?

My desire to enable people to overhear God speaking though the Isaiahs provides an *a posteriori* rationale for writing a book on the theology of Isaiah that stops where it does. The practical reason why I stopped where I did was that I had the material for the book that I wrote and I had a window of opportunity for writing it. Admittedly I think Dr Grey was clever to suggest that my willingness to include material on messianic interpretation of Isaiah ought to have meant that I was willing to say something about interpreting Isaiah in light of contemporary concern about justice and other ethical issues. I am annoyed that she is right and annoyed that I didn’t think of doing so, because I have material I could easily have used. So by the time these reflections appear in print I hope I shall have blogged on the subject a few times at johngoldingay.com.

But a further subconscious reason for writing the book I wrote was my conviction that the church needs to read the Old Testament itself as God’s word to his people. If Dr Moore is right that “the net effect of John’s finding new ways to translate old terms is that, through this rhetorical tactic, he is constantly facilitating an encounter with the biblical text that is new, renewing, and true to the newness of the word that is alive in this text,” then I’d say I have fulfilled my vocation and my passion, and given expression to my contribution to Christ’s body. Do you think it might be possible to have the spiritual gift of a theological exegete but not necessarily to have the spiritual gift of a prophetic interpreter or a systematic theologian? Whereas Dr Green suggests that I ought to do biblical study in a way that corresponds to what interests him, to his vocation, to his spiritual gifting, may I turn that suggestion around and ask him to believe that being a theological exegete in my sense might be a charisma?

Or might is be the case that discerning the significance of the Scriptures for us is the vocation of the people of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit rather than of an individual exegete? Once a month or so instead of preaching or having someone else preach, I sit in front of our congregation (there are only thirty or so of us, so we can do something that you couldn’t do in a bigger church) and I ask them what stood out for them in the four passages from the Scriptures that we have just read together, and how these Scriptures might speak to us. It always issues in some significant sharing.

Dr Green and Dr Grey both note my distinguishing between the meaning and the significance of texts. In making that distinction, I hold to an old-fashioned position on the nature of interpretation. Nowadays it’s common to say that meaning emerges in the interaction of text and interpreter. It’s the result of that interaction that I would rather call significance. I assume that the reason why Isaiah and some of Isaiah’s hearers preserved some of his messages was because they knew they had significance beyond their immediate context, but they knew it was the case because they knew the *meaning* of the messages. These messages began as acts of communication between God and his people, and their meaning derives from there. The compilers of the book of Isaiah recognized that they had much to say beyond that context. And 2 Timothy 3 helps us to think about the way that works, especially when set in the context of other New Testament references to the activity of the Holy Spirit in bringing the Scriptures into being. The writings that we call the Old Testament were preserved and became the Scriptures because the people who did the preserving and the acknowledging recognized that they had things to say beyond their original context. Second Timothy formulates that fact in a direct way. I have sometimes formulated the point in terms of the Holy Spirit enabling us to see things that were in the back of the Holy Spirit’s mind in inspiring the text in the first place. But the reality and the importance of that dynamic does not mean that the things that were in the front of the Holy Spirit’s mind when the prophets spoke lose their importance.

Dr Green asks whether my theory of textual meaning predetermines for me what the biblical texts can mean. Or does my attempt to free the Old Testament from Christian theology in effect muzzle its witness to Jesus? My answer to the first question is that it does the opposite. It frees the biblical text to say more. It doesn’t limit it by determined its meaning on the basis of the New Testament or of Christian theology. My answer to the second question is then that it indeed lessens the extent to which the Old Testament text can witness to Jesus, for the very important reason that it frees the text to give its witness to God. Jesus is not all that God has to say. Jesus’s aim is to hand over the kingdom to God the Father, so that God may be all in all. The Scriptures and Christian faith are not christomonist; they are not even christocentric. They are theocentric. But much of the church is christocentric if not christomonist. Dr Green distinguishes between patrological, christological, and pneumatological ways of speaking of God, and sees the central one as holding the others together. That might be his and my basic theological disagreement.

I don’t have any objection to systematic theologians looking for the significance of the book of Isaiah in our context—in fact I am enthusiastic about their doing so. But please don’t oppose attempts by other people to discover the meaning of Isaiah in its own right, because learning to inhabit the world that the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets to portray could be wildly creative for our own day.

# Isaiah in the Pulpit

Most Sunday mornings I preach twice. Dr Green can’t see how I would preach on Isaiah if I approach the book the way I do, though he does refer to a published sermon of mine on Isaiah 53 which illustrates one aspect of the answer. Christians are inclined simply to assume that Isaiah 53 is a prophecy of Jesus. If one asks what the Holy Spirit was seeking to convey to people in the context in which Isaiah 53 was written, that’s not the answer, though exegetes disagree about what is the answer. I take Isaiah 53 to be a third-person testimony, the prophet’s own testimony to the price he has paid for exercising his ministry. He speaks of his accepting the challenge to turn his paying that price into an offering to God that might compensate for the rebelliousness of his people, and he expresses his confidence that God will restore him. In the sermon I relate the significance of that testimony in its context and then point out how the testimony enables us to understand what Jesus was doing, but also to understand what it means for us to be God’s servants—because the New Testament doesn’t just apply Isaiah 53 to Jesus, it applies it to the church. (One could say that there is a typological rather than a prophetic relationship between the text and Jesus, and that this is the case with many texts where the New Testament’s appropriation of them looks odd to us, but in my view this explanation provides a modern rationale that satisfies us moderns rather than a rationale that underlies the text itself, and it’s a rationale that Pentecostals don’t need.)

Another sermon on my website expounds another testimony by God’s servant, in Isaiah 49. I preached the sermon at an ordination, and I took the testimony as a pattern to apply to the woman who was being ordained. She, I believed, had been called by God before she was born. God had been involved in all the tough experiences that had brought her to this point. God had given her a sharp sword to confront people—which in her case more often means declaring that there is hope even when it doesn’t look like it. She had been called to be a servant, and called to embody what it was supposed to mean to be Israel. She was challenged and invited to maintain hope where there was reason for discouragement. And it wouldn’t be surprising if she, like the prophet, eventually had a much bigger ministry than the one she envisaged at the moment.

At Baccalaureate three or four years ago I preached on the verses from Isaiah 57 and Isaiah 66 about God being high and holy but with the lowly. First I urged graduates to remember that God is not their buddy or someone with whom they partner or just someone who lives inside them. God is the high and holy one. What good news it is that God is not built to our scale! But then second, what further good news that God is with people who are crushed and low in spirit like those people in Jerusalem in the prophet’s day and like many seminary students. And God is also with people who tremble at his word, either because his word is tough, or maybe because it’s hard to believe. Then third, there is the further good news that you can’t build a house for God. Or to put it in our terms, you can’t build a kingdom for God. We love the idea that we build God’s kingdom. God rolls his eyes and shrugs his shoulders but stays the holy one who is with the people who are crushed and who tremble at his word.

Those three sermons on Isaiah arose from unusual circumstances. The sermon on Isaiah 53 arose because that passage came up in the lectionary and I thought it was time I tried to give expression to how to preach on the passage in light of my revisionist understanding of its origin. The sermon on Isaiah 49 arose because of an experience a bit more like that of the New Testament writers in that I was asked to preach at the ordination, wondered what passage spoke to that context, and found Isaiah 49 coming to mind. The situation with the third sermon was similar; I told the congregation that each year as I’d listened to Baccalaureate sermons I’d wondered what on earth I might preach on if I were ever asked, and I’d never known what was the answer. But of course I hadn’t needed that information in the past. When the invitation came, I was working on those particular verses in Isaiah 56 – 66, and I knew immediately that they were the subject for me to take up.

The more regular process whereby I seek to move between the text’s world and our world is as follows. Each week the lectionary blesses me with a selection of four passages from the Scriptures: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel. I let them roll around the back of my mind for a while, to open up the possibility that the Holy Spirit will generate a spark between a passage and something that happens in the world or in my life or something that someone says to me. (I should explain that I usually preach for five minutes after each of three of the passages rather than for fifteen minutes at the end of them, so I need three sparks, and I usually get them). I have no method for making this happen, but of key importance is the assumption that in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament and in the New, the God whom we know is relating to people like us in a way that is not so different from the way he does or could relate to us. They are different worlds, but they are the same world.

In this connection there’s an aspect of Isaiah that I have found myself preaching on more than once and that relates to Dr Davies’s wondering how writing this book affected me. Actually, writing this particular book didn’t really affect me, because it was a kind of distillation of material issuing from my teaching and research over a period, but I can say something about the effect of doing that work. Dr Moore has noted that I see Isaiah 40—55 as working in linear fashion and Isaiah 56—66 as working chiastically, going round in circles. Isaiah 40—55 gives the impression that the consummation of God’s purpose is imminent. Isaiah 56—66 lives the other side of the historical events that Isaiah 40—55 heralded, but it knows that they had not brought the consummation of God’s purpose. Further, Isaiah 40—55 had a basis within its purview for its announcement, the imminent conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian, who would indeed let the Judahites go home to rebuild the temple. Isaiah 56—66 has no such events within its purview. One cannot accuse the prophet or prophets whose work lies behind Isaiah 56—66 of some failure of nerve. There really were no such events for them to point to. So Isaiah 56—66 is prophecy for the time in which nothing is happening, in which all the prophet can do is reaffirm God’s promises and reaffirm God’s expectations and model the kind of prayer one prays in such a situation and thus seek to equip the people of God for the long haul.

In studying that ministry, its importance has come home to me as most significant for us in our context. Isaiah 1—39 promised the coming of a reign of peace and justice, and Isaiah 40—55 promised the consummation of God’s purpose, and the New Testament declares that in Jesus God has fulfilled those promises. Seven hundred years passed from the time of Isaiah ben Amoz to the coming of Jesus. Three times as many years have passed since the coming of Jesus, and (as 2 Peter 3:4 puts it) things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. Jesus’ coming has meant that a countless host all over the world has come into a relationship with God and are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, but here in this world Jesus’ coming has made little difference. As Jesus put it, wars and rumors of wars continue. Slavery on a vast scale continues. Poverty on a vast scale continues. Isaiah 56—66 was designed for a time like our time. It reminds us to hold onto God’s promises, to recommit ourselves to God’s expectations, and not to give up on prayer like that of the woman troubling the unjust judge in Jesus’ parable. That’s the big Isaianic idea that has come to mean a lot to me.