# Four Reflections on Isaiah and the Imperial Context

Reflections on a book of this title to come out in 2013.

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I have enjoyed and been informed and stimulated by this collection of papers. I emerge from reading them with four sets of reflections or questions.

(1) The experience of being a subaltern people is an illuminating context for studying the book of Isaiah, and indeed for studying the Old Testament as a whole. It’s worth noting that a people doesn’t have to be a colony or ex-colony to benefit from postcolonial thinking. Israel was never a colony in the sense of having in its midst a significant settlement of people from the imperial centre who controlled its affairs on behalf of that centre. But Israel was regularly subject to the domination of an imperial power within its region. The title of this collection thus usefully refers to Judah’s living in an imperial context rather than its being a colony or a postcolonial entity.

My colleague Christopher Hays notes that lay readers of the Old Testament are conditioned to understand ancient Israel as itself an imperial power, and scholars are conditioned in the same direction. Most scholarly Old Testament interpretation from the renaissance onwards (and much of it before) has been undertaken by Christians belonging to European powers and then to the United States. Even in this volume, the contributors from Australia and New Zealand are people of European background (David Ussishkin is the nearest to a non-Westerner in the volume). Our natural instinct as such scholars has been to identify with Israel and to think of Israel as a nation like the ones we belong to. Yet Israel was never an imperial power, except perhaps for a short period in the tenth century. Even the book of Joshua, which provided European settlers with a model for looking at their takeover of land in North America and South Africa, does not portray the Israelite invasion of Canaan as the act of an imperial power. Then and later, Israel was nearly always in the position of less powerful peoples in our world, such as Sri Lanka, Algeria, Haiti, and Mexico. But the political position of most scholars and ordinary people, who wanted to identify with Israel, led us to see Israel as a nation like ours. In due course that dynamic backfired, when Old Testament Israel came to be subject to critique on the assumption that it was a major power, even a quasi-imperial power. The current political situation in the Middle East further encourages that perception.

When biblical criticism was invented, its concern was to critique the church’s tradition of biblical interpretation so that the text could speak for itself, but it rapidly became critique of the text and not merely of its interpretation. There is a parallel ambiguity about postcolonial criticism. On one hand, it aims to unmask imperial interpretation. On the other, it aims to unmask imperial instincts within the text, on the basis of the dictum that Judith McKinlay quotes from R. S. Sugirtharajah:

Anyone who engages with texts knows that they are not innocent and that they reflect the cultural, religious, political, and ideological interests and contexts out of which they emerge. What postcolonialism does is to highlight and scrutinize the ideologies these texts embody and that are entrenched in them as they relate to the fact of colonialism.

Something paradoxical issues: even the writings of the colonized are affected by imperial thinking. Mark Brett’s chapter embodies this conviction, illustrating issues on which Mark and I have engaged in friendly discussion in the past. One unease I have is that Mark is inclined to a suspicious reading of the text, where its ambiguity makes such a reading possible but not necessary. An example is his comment about Isaiah 63:16, where he simply assumes the view that “Abraham” stands for a group within the community that does not recognize the group to which the prophet belongs. This is neither a necessary understanding, nor (I think) the majority scholarly understanding, but it suits a reading that is looking for social conflict in the text. Likewise it’s not self-evident that the work of Gentiles on the farm is inferior to the work of Israelites in the temple or that Isaiah 60—62 thus implies a hierarchy in which Israel is above the Gentiles. Indeed, it puts Gentiles into what the Torah sees as the same position as the eleven other clans in relation to Levi as the priestly clan. Levi’s “profane” labor isn’t inferior to the other clans’ “sacred” labor. I’m not sure I would prefer the Levites’ jobs in the sanctuary to working on the farm.

My related unease concerns the basis for critique of the biblical text. For postcolonial criticism, postcolonialism provides the key framework for thinking about texts (or other things). This framework provides the norm for truth and the basis for deciding between good and bad. It thus parallels convictions (one might say ideologies) such as those of feminism. There are feminist Christians and Christian feminists. Feminist Christians are people for whom Christian faith is their fundamental commitment; feminism nourishes or nuances their Christian faith. Christian feminists are people for whom feminism is their fundamental commitment; Christian faith nourishes or nuances their feminism. In a similar way there are scholars for whom the Bible is fundamental and postcolonial insight is a means of resourcing biblical study and critiquing our understanding of Scripture, and there are scholars for whom postcolonial insight is fundamental and the Bible is a means of resourcing postcolonial commitment. In the work of many people who are especially committed to postcolonial biblical scholarship I don’t see much evidence of the Bible being allowed to answer back. To put it another way, postcolonial scholarship easily takes an imperial stance in relation to the Bible, harnessing it to its own concerns without letting the Bible have a voice of its own.

(2) The papers imply some unresolved questions about the significance of questions concerning the historical origin and reference of the material in Isaiah. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, for instance, notes the thinness of the explicit evidence for assuming that the Judahites addressed in Isaiah 40—55 are in Babylon. In considering such questions, the issue is not merely what are the right answers to these questions, but whether and how the answers matter. David Ussishkin illustrates how external data can indeed illumine texts. The point is not that they prove the Bible right nor that they clarify the text’s meaning but that they enable readers to know more of what the text refers to and of what might have been taken for granted by author and first audience.

The contributors assume the classic critical conviction that the book of Isaiah reflects both the work and words of Isaiah ben Amoz and also the ministry of later figures in the context of the exile and the Second Temple period. Further, they accept the current critical conviction that the book’s three main parts are not separate units glued together but part of something that is in some sense a coherent whole. That assumption raises intriguing questions about the interpretation of individual units in the book. Andrew Abernethy comments that the foreigners in Isaiah 1 are surely the Assyrians, but that leaving them unnamed “facilitates the chapter’s function as an introduction to the entire book and the identifying of the foreigners with later attackers.” Given that Isaiah 40—55 makes its spectacular references to Cyrus, it was strange that Brevard Childs said that the concrete historical references had been eliminated from the chapters to facilitate their application beyond the exilic context.[[1]](#footnote-1) But the lack of concrete historical reference in Isaiah 1 does have that effect, as is the case in Isaiah 56—66 (I prefer to speak of effect rather than intention, because convictions about intention would have to be more hypothetical). That comment on Isaiah 1 thus encourages a reading of the passage at two levels. Tim Meadowcroft raises the same question in noting how 55:10-11 with its origin in the exile is set in the context of a book that came into being in the Second Temple period, when the community’s relationship with the imperial power is different both from that which obtained before the exile and that which obtained at the time this prophecy was uttered.

Judith McKinlay comments that someone in Babylon publishing poems like the ones in Isaiah 40—55 would be both unsafe and unwise. Yet the way the chapters unfold suggests that the poet did operate in this unsafe and unwise fashion. That is why the poet was flogged and shamed (50:4-9), and despised, persecuted, and threatened by death if not actually killed (52:13—53:12) (I take it that the poet-prophet speaks in 49:1-6 and is the subject of 52:13—53:12 but other interpretations need not make a difference to the fact that persecution of an “unwise” speaker lies behind the passages; and prophets were inclined to be unsafe and unwise). Further, the chapters imply that the poet’s ministry issued in opposition from the Judahite community itself and not just from the imperial authorities, so it doesn’t look as if the poet could assume membership of a “self-trusting community.” It seems that the poet did not heed the wise principles about public and hidden transcripts articulated by James Scott. The chapters are not a “hidden transcript.” The significance of postcolonial theory at this point is then to bring out the distinctiveness of the text by contrast with what the theory would make one expect.

Judith McKinlay comments that Isaiah 40—55 is clearly a political text, which “exists in the service of a particular sociohistorical context” (Tod Linafelt). But like Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, she also notes that we can’t be sure of the particular sociohistorical context. As a consequence, interpreters may fill in the gap by utilizing modern sociological or anthropological theories, and this may be effective, but it risks circular argument. Further, while Isaiah 40—55 may have been a political text in origin (though the idea that these chapters ever existed as a discrete entity is contested), in the context of the book of Isaiah it is not so obvious that Isaiah 40—55 invites a political reading. Admittedly, we know even less about how the complete book of Isaiah might have functioned politically than what we might infer about the material in chapters 40—55 in their exilic context. But when the book of Isaiah as we know it came into being, it was at least as much a religious text, designed to tell people about God and to resource their relationship with God, and it is a plausible view that it came into being at least as much for religious purposes as for political ones. It would be anachronistic to separate the political and religious as if Judah not only believed in the separation of church and state but practised that separation, but it is equally misleading to assume that religious motivations can be ignored in favor of the political. Postcolonialism’s suspicion of religion thus limits its capacity to read the text.

 (3) Several papers bring out or hint at our modern unease about violence. One striking aspect of David Ussishkin’s paper was its portrait of the harsh reality of an event such as the siege of Lachish. Over the past century, the cultural circles within which most of us belong as scholars have become uneasy about violence, and this fact is reflected in scholarly work. The way “cultures have their own orthodoxies that inhibit questioning” (Hays) affects postcolonial thinking as well as imperial thinking; in our context, it is countenancing violence that is “*heterodox*, and indeed *heretical*.” People who are interested in non-violence are partial to Isaiah because it shows less interest in encouraging Israel’s violence and more interest in peace than some other books. But if we want our Christian and human and scholarly understanding to be broadened and deepened, we will not want to study texts because they may resource convictions we already hold and function in a proof-texting manner. We will want to learn from texts when their thinking seems scandalous, from books such as Deuteronomy and Joshua. The same point emerges from Joy Hooker’s consideration of divine sovereignty, conflict, and order. I do not see the Old Testament as so different from other aspects of ancient near Eastern thinking on this subject. Its difference lies in saying that if there is anyone who acts violently to achieve order, it is Yahweh rather than other so-called gods.

The nature of the exercise of violence in our context may mean we have good reason for our unease (if, for instance, war is more horrific than it was in the ancient Near East, though my point about Ussushkin’s paper qualifies that possibility). But our understanding of violence has become undifferentiated; violence is by definition bad. Yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines violence as “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property,” and this definition does not carry moral connotations. It leaves open the possibility that there can be proper violence as well as improper violence (as there can be proper mercy and improper mercy). In the cultural circles to which most of us belong as scholars, the idea of proper violence is likely to seem odd nowadays. Yet paradoxically, our belonging to democratic war-making nations means that we are complicit in war-making to a greater extent than our forebears. These cultural factors affect our approach to the Old Testament and threaten to skew our understanding of it.

One way they do so is in making us write as if violence is an issue in Isaiah as it is for us, when this is not so. The Hebrew word most often translated *violence* is *ḥāmās*, which does carry moral connotations; it refers to improper violence, though its meaning overlaps with that of violation. Neither the noun nor the related verb come in Isaiah 1—39, though the noun does occur in 53:9; 59:6; 60:18. Yet Isaiah 1—39 is clearly against *ḥāmās*, though not against violence when exercised by Yahweh either on Israel or on other peoples. The fact that Isaiah speaks of Yahweh exercising violence on Israel because of its internal violence puts a question mark by the idea that Isaiah adopts “a perspective that identifies ‘Israel’ as ‘us’ and ‘Assyria’ as ‘them’” (Hays). Its assumption that Israel is subject to, deserving of, and victim of Yhwh’s violence indicates that in this sense Isaiah does not go in for “othering.”

In Isaiah there is indeed virtually no reference to or encouragement of violence on the part of the people of God. The nearest (Andrew Abernethy notes in a comment that didn’t make it into the book) is 11:14-15, though even there the violence is a matter of plundering rather than (say) killing, and even there the reference presupposes a repointing of MT (see BHS and Wildberger’s comments).[[2]](#footnote-2) The chains in 49:14 may be imposed by the Judahites, but the context points rather to Cyrus (49:13), and the point about the chains is to indicate that the rulers’ sovereignty is over. The book of Isaiah is intriguingly similar to the book of Psalms. Psalms protest long and often about the human violence of which the community and individuals are victims and keep urging Yahweh to act against attackers and to do so violently, but they never imply that the protestors are to take any action (except in some royal psalms) until the very penultimate psalm which declares that Israel is to wield a sword to implement redress on the nations and to bind their rulers in chains—again to indicate that their sovereignty is over.

I myself find it theologically and ethically significant that while the book of Isaiah speaks approvingly about violence on Yahweh’s part it does not speak approvingly about violence on Israel’s part. Yet I am not sure that the difference in attitude to divine and human violence is important for the book of Isaiah in the way that it is for me. While there is a difference in attitudes to divine and human violence in the book, when we focus on this difference, we do so because of the importance of the issue to us (the situation is the same with appeals to Jesus’ non-violence, in my view, but that’s another story). The book’s own category is different. The issue in Isaiah 1—39, at least, is lack of trust, not violence. The key verbs are *’āman* and *bāṭaḥ* not *ḥāmas*. “Trust me, don’t trust Yahweh” is the Assyrian king’s challenge (Abernethy). The point links with Joy Hooker’s comment that one of the ways Isaiah uses Zion symbolism is to present a concept of God’s sovereignty and order that challenges the ancient Near Eastern concept of empire as the primary understanding of reality for the ordering of society.

Judah is to refrain from military activity not because violence is wrong but because this refraining leaves the action (and thus incidentally the violence) to Yahweh. Part of the background is that very fact that Judah is a little, quasi-colonial people, not a big, imperial power. Its vocation is not to enter into covenant relations with big powers in order to safeguard its freedom but to rely on its covenant relationship with Yahweh (compare comments on covenant by Abernethy, Hays, and Hooker). The difference in position between an ancient Judahite and a modern Westerner again becomes significant here. Our membership of powerful nations that choose their own governments gives us a different relationship with our nations’ decision to engage in violence.

It also means I am not clear that we can view ourselves as “in exile,” the idea Tim Meadowcroft takes up. I have noted that the contributors to this volume, like most biblical scholars, are citizens of democratic nations, most of us with an imperial present or an imperial past. We are not in exile; we are simply people who have been outvoted, literally and/or metaphorically. Exile happens to people who are not citizens and are not members of imperial powers. We can’t use the image of exile to let ourselves off the hook of responsibility for the violence our nations undertake. Further, it’s surely not the case that most Christians see themselves as increasingly on the edge, at odds with the empire, or in exile from their culture—you might even suggest that the problem lies in our not seeing ourselves thus. I don’t think that most Christians in (say) Uganda or the United States think in that way. Further, while Europe and countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada are post-Christian, most of Africa and the rest of the colonial/postcolonial world is not, and neither is the United States (which is of course a postcolonial entity, with the appropriate love-hate relationship with its European forebears). In the United States, I like to say we are living in the time of Josiah, not the exile.

 (4) I am similarly intrigued by the question of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human decision-making. Andrew Abernethy notes that Isaiah 1 counters the Assyrian assumption that the Assyrian king is sovereign over land and food resources by presenting Yahweh as sovereignly using Assyria’s imperial tactics of food confiscation and destruction to punish the people, while also asserting himself as the one who can provide them with food if they obey. Admittedly, Sennacherib’s provision will not be as generous as the one he enjoys himself. The inequality he presupposes is one accepted by Israelite kings, and also by the most if not all the contributors to this volume, who live better than other people in their country and certainly better than people in the colonial world that we supposedly care about.

Tim Bulkeley interestingly demonstrates the prominence in Isaiah of the description of Yahweh as “Lord”, which it’s easy to miss because we’re used to substituting the word *Lord* for the name *Yahweh*. The importance of this divine lordship is also expressed in the claim in Isaiah 41 concerning Yahweh’s arousing the conqueror from the east and the claim that Yahweh thereby manifests a sovereignty that other deities cannot manifest. Yet Judith McKinlay notes in connection with Lamentations that while it is accepted that Yahweh is behind the disaster that has happened to Jerusalem, and while the city’s cries rise up to heaven imploring Yahweh to look and see the city’s misery, it was the Babylonian army that actually caused the mayhem, acting with devastating brutality. Likewise it’s Cyrus the Persian whose army will take Babylon and commission the Judahites to go home to build the temple. Malcolm MacDonald comments that the linking of creation and redemption together, in so far as they contribute to a single symbiotic concept, reaches maturity in Isaiah 40—55. But a big difference between creation and redemption is that Yahweh created the world without anyone’s help (as 44:24 points out), whereas redemption would not have happened without Cyrus.

It might be logical to infer with Judith MacKinlay that the challenging question is, do we thus get led to praxis? Yet Isaiah points us to another paradox in this connection. It believes in the significance of human action and sees Yahweh working through human action. But the people who undertake the human action through which God works don’t do so deliberately and don’t know that this is what they’re doing (in Cyrus’s case, at least, Yahweh hopes that Cyrus will recognize Yahweh as a result of being conscripted into Yahweh’s service, but he doesn’t recognize Yahweh at the time). In Isaiah, the people who acknowledge Yahweh aren’t people who are called to do anything, with two exceptions. One is to put their own lives right, which again issues a challenge to people like us scholars who occupy privileged positions in privileged nations. The other is to proclaim or explain what Yahweh is doing, in the manner of the servant figure in Isaiah 42 and the prophetic speaker in Isaiah 61 (neither of whom *do* anything but speak); or perhaps to sing (MacDonald).

1. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1979), pp. 325-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1—12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 487. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)