Responses to Isaiah Papers: John Goldingay

I’m grateful for all four papers, each of which expresses stimulating ideas.

John’s interesting analysis of the symbolism of water provokes questions such as these. What is the significance of the fact that water symbolism is more broadly prevalent in Isaiah, I think, than in Jeremiah and Ezekiel? Psalms and Job also use this symbolism more broadly, though obviously in different connections from Isaiah. But my hunch is that the similarity reflects the fact that Isaiah is a more poetic book. Are there indications that a particular prophecy was playing with several related aspects of the symbolism? Does the symbolism in its multi-faceted nature help the poet make a point? How does it contribute to the rhetorical effect of the prophecy? For readers, does one instance of recourse to the symbolism evoke other aspects of it? To put it another way, does the unity of the symbolism imply a unity about the realities that are the poet’s direct concern? Is there a theological significance in the unity of the symbolism?

Blake nicely brings together examples of garden pathing. I wasn’t sure whether he was leading us up the garden path when he said there was a category of wordplay called garden pathing. But anyway, it’s an apposite metaphor. The paper illustrates what a skilled rhetorician Isaiah was. The entertaining and the prophetic aspects to Isaiah’s rhetoric are related, and I think there’s a prophetic aspect to the question about ambiguity that Blake raises. Isaiah’s startling statement of his purpose in chapter 6 relates to his aim of making his prophecies not come true. He tells Judahites that Yahweh is blinding them in order to get them to open their eyes. In the garden pathing in chapters 29 and 31, the prophet is offering Judah alternative scenarios. The ambiguity is not merely to be resolved exegetically. The Judahites will resolve it by the way they respond to the prophecy.

I like the suggestion that Isaiah invented a new meaning for the verb *palat*. It coheres with the possibility that he invented the word *mispah* in 5:7 as a wordplay on *mishpat*, in a comparable rhetorical context. New usages of words or new words make listeners think hard and thus make them engage with the poem or prophecy.

The rich detail in Archibald’s paper raises the question of the relationship between oral and written in considering how the rhetoric had its effect. What is the difference in the dynamics of poetic devices according to whether a poem is written or spoken aloud, read in a text or heard? I picture Isaiah ben Amoz delivering his poems in the temple courtyard. Were people expected to pick up the subtlety of the rhetoric as they heard him? Did he hope they would notice there was something odd here and go away pondering it? One can imagine that being so with Blake’s examples. But is one to imagine that by its nature Hezekiah’s prayer would hardly have ever been part of Isaiah’s own oral preaching? Does its only public life setting lie in the Isaiah scroll? Yet Archibald makes Intriguing points about the prayer’s position in relation to the rest of the book – not least in the black humor of the comparison and contrast between what happens to the Assyrian king when he shows up in his temple and what happens to the Judahite king when he (implicitly) shows up in his temple. Is one to imagine that the Isaiah scroll would have been read out? Would the rhetoric work differently for listeners and for the readers of a scroll? I liked the point that the “we” at the close of the poem embraces the readers of the poem. Are we to imagine Hezekiah sharing his prayer with people?

The question of oral and written also arises in connection with Hee Suk’s paper, which provides further evidence that at some level Isaiah 65 responds to Isaiah 63—64, an aspect of the text that would come out for someone reading in a scroll, but one can imagine people listening to the scroll read out might also get it.

The chapters’ movement between different speakers, pronouns, and forms of the verbs cohered for me with a feature that distinguishes Isaiah 56—66 from Isaiah 1—55. Brevard Childs argued that Isaiah 40—55 lacked the concrete historical references that appear in Isaiah 1—39. It was an odd claim, because Isaiah 40—55 has a number of historical references, to Babylon and to Cyrus. In contrast, Isaiah 56—66 does lack such historical references. This characteristic underlies the disagreement about whether the chapters’ background lies in the sixth century or the fifth. While Isaiah 1—39 invites us to read it against the background of eighth-century kings and Isaiah 40—55 invites us to read it against the background of Cyrus and the fall of Babylon, rhetorically Isaiah 56—66 issues no analogous invitation. It does not suggest that readers see it against a particular historical background but against that of the ongoing experience of waiting for Yahweh to act in fulfillment of his promises. It thus closes the book in an a-temporal way. While it must have a historical context, its rhetoric presupposes the ongoing situation when judgment has happened, restoration has partially happened, and the readers live in a kind of in-between time until the ultimate End comes.