## Canonical Readings

## John Goldingay

Interest in canonical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures emerged in the late twentieth century as one alternative or complement to the historical-critical interpretation which had dominated scholarly study for the previous century.

The adjective “historical” points to interpretation that focuses on historical questions, and the adjective “critical” points to a critique of traditional approaches to interpretation and of the results of such approaches, if not a critique of the contents of the text itself. With regard to the scroll of Isaiah, historical-critical study established that Isa 40—66 came from a period much later than the time of Isaiah ben Amoz. In connection with Isa 1—39, historical-critical study was especially interested in identifying the elements that actually derived from Isaiah ben Amoz himself, which it viewed as the “authentic” material within the scroll and thus took to be more important than later material that did not come from Isaiah.

The historical-critical conclusion that Isaiah 40—66 derived from a prophet or prophets who worked during the Babylonian period or afterwards contrasted with the prima facie impression conveyed by the scroll (and for Christians, by the New Testament) that the whole scroll came from Isaiah ben Amoz. Further, historical-critical study concluded that passages which Jews and Christians had taken as messianic (and which the New Testament interpreted in this way) did not refer to the Messiah. For Christians, the idea that Isa 52:13—53:12 referred to the Jewish people or to some individual in the prophet’s day was especially troublesome. In most Jewish and Christian circles which viewed these writings as their Scriptures and were interested in them for the insight they offered on an understanding of God and of life, historical-critical interpretation seemed at best irrelevant. Most scriptural study thus continued through that century as if historical-critical study had never happened.

But in scholarly circles in the late twentieth century there developed renewed interest in the Isaiah scroll in the form in which it appears in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Such renewed scholarly interest in the text itself reflected movements in the wider Western cultural context of the late twentieth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Methods of biblical interpretation have consistently mirrored approaches to the interpretation of other texts; it was so with allegory in the first millennium and with the approaches characteristic of the renaissance and then of modernity, including historical-critical methods themselves. Ironically, whereas historical-critical study saw itself as committed to an objective understanding of the text, unhindered by the tradition of ecclesial and devotional interpretation of the Scriptures, it replaced that tradition by another culture-relative set of concerns that differed from those of the text itself. The subsequent application of feminist and post-colonial approaches to scriptural interpretation (for instance) followed the development of such approaches in connection with literary interpretation generally.

In this context, a useful distinction came to be made between a focus on what lies behind the text that we have (what it refers to or where it came from), what lies within the text (what the text itself says), and what lies in front of the text (what its readers bring to the text or what it points to).[[2]](#footnote-2) Although reading regularly combines all three foci, whether or not it is aware of the fact, the distinction is a heuristically useful one.

There were thus two backgrounds to the emergence of canonical readings of Isaiah. On one hand, some scholarly work in the Humanities in general was reacting against historical-critical or “behind the text” readings, and on the other, within Christian scholarship there was a desire for an “in front of the text” reading that enabled scholars to interpret the Scriptures as Scriptures. In both connections, an “in the text” reading such as canonical interpretation seemed a step forward. The dual parentage of canonical reading, in the secular Western cultural context and in the religious concerns of some readers, is one factor that has generated confusion over the nature of canonical interpretation, though much of this confusion is more a matter of language than of substance.

In this chapter we consider some examples of the way canonical readings are preserved within the Isaiah scroll, the sense in which the scroll itself is a canonical document, and some of the ways the scroll itself has been read as a canonical document.

## Canonical Readings within the Isaiah Scroll

Isaiah 40—66 has its historical background in the Babylonian and Persian periods and it addresses those contexts. It is the work of prophets and/or preachers and/or pastors and/or theologians and/or scholars living in those contexts—for convenience, I will refer to them as theologians. Sometimes they work by saying things that seem novel: their describing Israel as YHWH’s servant is an example, as is their designating a foreign king as YHWH’s anointed and their bringing an encouraging message for eunuchs (41:8-9; 45:1; 56:1-8). Sometimes they work by using terminology and images that would be quite broadly familiar to their audience, such as the idea of turning to YHWH or of the need not to be afraid. But sometimes they work by taking up phrases that have a distinctive link with particular passages earlier in the Isaiah scroll or elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Isaiah 40—66 begins with an example, in its declaration, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (40:1). This exhortation recalls the ending of the first sequence of chapters in the Isaiah scroll, Isa 1—12, with its promise of a time when people would be able to proclaim that YHWH’s anger has turned away and that he has comforted his people (12:1). In 40:1 the promise becomes reality; the motif of comfort recurs in 49:13; 51:3, 12; 52:9.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the protests and prayers in Lamentations have also grieved over the fact that Jerusalem has no comforter (1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21; 2:13), and in Isa 40:1 YHWH also takes up that remonstration and responds to it.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet further, through Hosea YHWH had declared that “you are not my people and I am not your God,” but had also promised a time when he would “say to Not-my-people, ‘You are my people,’ and it would say, ‘My God’” (Hos 1:9; 2:23 [25]). YHWH is also fulfilling this promise.

As Isa 40—55 then unfolds, it incorporates a series of declarations and exhortations that take up further declarations and exhortations from within Isaiah 1—39 and elsewhere. Isa 40:1-11 more broadly recalls Isa 6,[[5]](#footnote-5) and when 42:18-25 speaks of Israel as deaf and blind, it recalls 6:9-10 (cf. also 29:18; 35:5).[[6]](#footnote-6) It both recognizes the truth in YHWH’s earlier words and also declares that they do not mean that YHWH has nothing more to say to his people. Passages such as 41:22 and 42:9 take up proclamations such as 8:23 [9:1], declare that they have been fulfilled, and on that basis challenge people to believe in some new proclamations.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nor does such canonical reading start only with Isa 40—66. Within Isa 7—11, for example, a canonical process has been discerned as Isa 7 speaks of the birth of a son whose name will testify to God being with Judah, Isa 9 declares that a son has been born who will embody God, and Isa 11 speaks of a Davidic Messiah.[[8]](#footnote-8) In turn, 60:1-2 also subsequently takes up 8:23—9:2 [9:1-3] and 65:25 takes up 11:6, 9.[[9]](#footnote-9) The process of canonical reading thus continues in Isa 56—66, which relates to Isa 1---55 in a way analogous to the relationship of Isa 40—55 to what precedes.[[10]](#footnote-10) Isa 58 takes up 1:16-17[[11]](#footnote-11) and a voice speaks in 61:1-3 in a way that utilizes wording from 40:9-10; 42:1; 45:1; 48:16.[[12]](#footnote-12) More broadly, Isa 65 has suggested a “canonical-agrarian reading” of a theme running through the scroll as a whole.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Isaiah scroll thus includes a number of passages where theologians pick up earlier prophecies and rework them in canonical readings which reformulate the prophecies in a new context. In each case there is an interaction between the meaning of a text and the approach or question or convictions that a theologian brings to it. In the reworking one can perceive the influence of text, context, inspiration, and experience.

The theologians who speak in these passages thus work in a different way from Isaiah ben Amoz or Hosea. One background factor would be simply chronological: Isaiah and Hosea could not have referred to earlier prophetic texts (at least, to any that are known to us), whereas Isa 40—66 could do so. And these theologians might have felt that they were glad to and/or that they needed to and/or that they were obliged to.

The examples noted above suggest several further observations. First, they point to the usefulness of making a distinction within canonical interpretation between canonical exegesis and canonical reading. Modern interpreters engage in canonical exegesis of passages within Isa 40—66 when they seek to analyze these theologians’ work. The theologians themselves were engaged in canonical readings of the earlier texts when they were reworking them; they were not simply exegeting them. Modern interpreters engage in a further canonical reading if they ask how the new text impacts their own beliefs and lives.

The examples also illustrate several aspects of the ambiguity of words such as canon and canonical. Etymologically those words suggest something that has the authority to determine belief and behavior, but within Isaiah the authority of the passages which the later texts take up is not of a quasi-legal kind. While the character of the Torah would give it a natural role in determining proper behavior in a quasi-legal way, most prophetic messages do not take a form that would imply their assuming this kind of canonical function. Their main focus does not lie on laying the law down; prophets were not in a position to do so. They have rather that other dynamic kind of authority that some people attributed to Jesus (Matt 7:28-29). The kind of authority that attaches to a prophetic message expects a person of insight and moral commitment to respond with acceptance and submission on the basis of the content of the message rather than on the basis of the position of the person who proclaims it. Further, it is an authority that nevertheless leaves the later theologian free to say, “You have heard it said, but I say to you” (e.g., Matt 5:21-22).

To put it another way, the canonical reading within the Isaiah scroll illustrates the overlap and the distinction between the notions of Scripture and of canon. In a classic formulation in the New Testament, 2 Tim 3:16-17 speaks of the “sacred writings” or “Scriptures” (that is, roughly, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings) as *theopneustos*, “God-breathed”; it is what makes them instructive. Other New Testament references to the link between the *pneuma* of God and the Scriptures also imply the assumption that this link underlies the Scriptures’ extraordinary capacity to speak beyond the context in which they were originally given. In this connection the term “Scriptures” is more open-ended than the term “canon.” But 2 Tim 3:16-17 goes on to refer to these Scriptures’ consequent usefulness for reproof, correction, and training in doing right, which suggests that they not only inspire insight but also make mandatory demands.

For the theologians whose work appears in Isa 40—66, the messages which appear in earlier prophecy thus inspire further insight and can hardly be ignored. Yet they need to be understood in a new way in a new context and need not be assumed to have said the last word. In the text from which we began, 40:1, a common feature of canonical reading appears. It takes up earlier “texts” from Isa 1—39, Hosea, and Lamentations in order to say “It might have been true then but it’s not true now.” There is thus something paradoxical about these earlier texts’ canonical status. One could almost say that the canonical reading of them is anti-canonical. Simply to repeat the canonical text would have amounted to indulging in false prophecy, in that a true prophet is someone who can “distinguish whether a historical hour stands under the wrath or the love of God.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The theologians whose work appears in Isa 40—55 know that comfort has replaced wrath.

Making a distinction of this kind between Scripture and canon helps to illumine a disagreement between the two chief advocates of canonical reading in the United States, James Sanders and Brevard Childs—though they do not make the distinction in this way. Sanders thinks of canonical reading as designed to facilitate the community’s identity formation, and the canonical reading incorporated in Isa 40—66 does function to that end in the context of the crises and questions of the Babylonian and Persian periods. Sanders speaks in terms of canonical criticism in order to draw attention both to a similarity and a difference over against speaking of tradition criticism; both terms describe a human process.[[15]](#footnote-15) For Childs, one of the points about using the word “canon” is to emphasize that this canonical reading which takes up God’s earlier words brings new words from God on the basis of the earlier words. The Isaiah scroll is not merely an expression of the faith of Israel; it is a message from the God of Israel.[[16]](#footnote-16) Whereas redaction-focused study can (e.g.) analyze the material in Isa 56—66 as the result of a human author’s exegetical work on material in Isa 40—55 and earlier in the scroll,[[17]](#footnote-17) canon-focused study has in mind the results of God’s speaking to his people. So Sanders is interested in the canonical process, in the activity of interpretation, which can help subsequent interpreters with their practice of interpretation. Childs is interested in the normative theological results of the canonical process.

Yet the difference in focus between Sanders and Childs does not actually imply a need to postulate a disjunction between the Scriptures as humanly formulated and as divinely given. Isa 36—39 illustrates the point. These narratives present themselves as human formulations giving an account of events in Hezekiah’s day. While they include words dictated by YHWH to Isaiah, the narratives as a whole are human compositions devised by someone other than Isaiah. If the version in 2 Kings is the original upon which they are based, presumably they themselves become an exercise in canonical reading. But either way, within the Isaiah scroll they have same canonical status as words dictated by YHWH. As it is regularly the case that messages presenting themselves as dictated by God come via the personality of the prophet, so (conversely) narratives presenting themselves as composed by a human author come to be recognized as having a divine imprimatur. Outside Isaiah, the Nehemiah narrative is a useful example, while in the New Testament Luke’s Gospel provides a spectacularly explicit one. Canonical reading can be both Israel witnessing to its own self-understanding before God and God enabling it to hear from him and about him. It can issue both from Israel’s seeking and from divine coercion.

The examples we have noted illustrate how canonical reading in Isa 40—66 is not confined to a reading of material in Isaiah 1—39. As well as Hosea and Lamentations, Isa 40—66 especially takes up texts in Jeremiah, which Second Isaiah “reversed, confirmed, repredicted, and recontextualized.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This fact draws attention to the existence of overlap but difference between an interest in articulating the nature of the unity of the Isaiah scroll (and the redactional process that issued in it) and the process of canonical reading which has no reason to focus exclusively or especially on links within the scroll.

It is to be desired that future study will see more work on the dynamics of the canonical reading within the Isaiah scroll.

## Canonical Reading of the Isaiah Scroll

Canonical reading is thus a process within the Isaiah scroll; the scroll incorporates canonical readings of earlier material that now appears within the scroll and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is (among other things) the deposit of a process whereby theologians in Israel came to ask what the proclamation of Isaiah ben Amoz and other texts had to say after Isaiah’s day and after Jerusalem had been devastated and then during the Second Temple period.

Its process of growth over several centuries issued in slightly varying forms, in the Masoretic version, the version in 1QIsa, the version in the Septuagint, and so on. Determining which should be seen as the canonical version is thus a tricky theoretical question.[[19]](#footnote-19) Yet it is less tricky as a practical problem compared with the equivalent question about (say) Jeremiah or Esther or Daniel, because the different versions of Isaiah vary only on small points. They compare with differences between modern translations of the Scriptures, which also make it problematic in theory to say which Bible is the really canonical one, but are not very problematic in practice.

By a process we cannot trace, the Isaiah scroll that issued from this process of growth came to be part of the Torah and the Prophets, part of the canon of the Scriptures. And as a work having this canonical status, the scroll itself came to be subject to canonical interpretation—to canonical exegesis and to canonical reading.

Was the final form of the Isaiah scroll shaped in such a way as to mark it as designed to have a canonical function, so that becoming part of a canon was also the last stage of a process rather than a move alien to it?[[20]](#footnote-20)

The final form of some scrolls was perceptibly designed to claim for them something like a canonical function. The Psalter has a five-part structure analogous to that of the Torah. Ecclesiastes has a double framework that both affirms its questioning and safeguards against readers giving too unequivocal affirmation to this questioning thrust. Are there indications of such canonical shaping in the Isaiah scroll?

The scroll is clearly structured; its arrangement is more evidently deliberate than that of Jeremiah though not than that of Ezekiel. Isa 1—12 was the subject of an early exercise in explicitly canonical reading,[[21]](#footnote-21) Isa 13—23 is then an organized collection of material that rhetorically addresses individual peoples, Isa 24—27 expands the horizon to the world as whole, Isa 29—33 reverts the focus to Jerusalem and Judah, and so on; one can argue about some of the details of the scroll’s structure, but in general the outline is clear. Yet the possession of a careful structure is no indication of having canonical aspirations. Studying the structured form of the Isaiah scroll comprises a canonical exegesis of it in the sense that it works with the text in the form that became canonical; it aims to understand the text’s shape and its function for the community. It does not presuppose the conviction that the scroll was shaped to function as canon, or that it is a canonical text for the person undertaking a study of it in its canonical form. Such an analysis of it is descriptive; it is not designed to imply that anyone must submit to the scroll’s theological or behavioral implications. In this sense it is not a canonical “reading.”

An extreme version of the reaction against scholarship’s dominant focus on getting behind the final form of the text to the history it refers to and the stages of its growth could imply that studying the scroll’s final form is not merely one proper focus for study but is the most important such focus. The question would then be, “important for what?” If readers want to investigate the history of Israel and of Israelite religion or to know what God was doing with Judah in (say) the eighth century, they need to go behind the final form of the scroll. Neither the latest nor the earliest version of the proclamation in Isaiah is necessarily the most interesting or the most authoritative. But (to be tautological), discovering the implications of the scroll for the community that accepted it as part of their canon requires a focus on the form that they accepted.

Brevard Childs makes an explicit claim about canonical shaping in connection with Isa 40—55. First, these chapters are set in the context of 1:1, which one can indeed see has a canonical significance in the sense that it provides instruction on how readers should approach the scroll, instruction analogous to those opening and closing notes in Ecclesiastes. In an exercise in a “new canonical criticism,” Edgar Conrad notes the designation of the Isaiah scroll as a “vision” in its opening verse, which he sees as inviting readers to understand the scroll eschatologically and links with the paucity of reference to the prophet himself in the scroll, compared with the Jeremiah and Ezekiel scrolls.[[22]](#footnote-22) But it seems a big jump to suggest that 1:1 either designates the entire scroll as “eschatological” or instructs readers to derive the entire scroll from Isaiah ben Amoz—especially when Isa 40—55 gives a contrary impression. Childs links his inference with what he describes as the removal of historical references from Isa 40—55, and draws a contrast between these chapters and Amos or Jeremiah in that (he suggests) they have no real historical context once they are removed from their present canonical setting within the Isaiah scroll.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rolf Rendtorff similarly declares that “the text of the book itself gives no indications that the various parts come from different periods…. The composers of the final canonical version were not interested in making the reader aware of this.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Such statements seem exaggerations. Isa 40—55 makes clear that it addresses people in the Babylonian period who need a message of comfort and an assurance that YHWH has not abandoned them. The chapters’ form differs from that of Isa 12, where the prospect of comfort lies in the future. Further, these chapters do include a number of explicit historical references, to Babylon and to Cyrus. While Isa 40—55 does relate to the “redemptive plan of God for all of history,”[[25]](#footnote-25) it does so because the events of which it speaks relate to that purpose, not because the message does not relate to those events (in his commentary, Childs gives surprising prominence to noting the significance of Isa 40—55 in the community’s sixth century context).[[26]](#footnote-26)

In one sense, the final form of the Isaiah scroll is simply the result of a last level of redactional activity, and “it seems highly improbable that the process of 'canonization' had anything at all to do with the reasons why the book of Isaiah acquired its present shape.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Might the purpose behind that redaction have been (for instance) simply a desire to preserve the traditions of the Judahite people, like some modern Jewish and Christian desire to preserve a religious heritage even when the preservers do not personally identify with the material they preserve? Yet the scroll’s talk about God and its offer of a perspective on life cohere better with a desire for its readers to trust it and adhere to what it says. Its lack of indications that it was designed to be a canonical text does not rule out its being designed to demand the trust and submission of its readers. If one asks why prophets (and/or people who heard them and believed in the importance of what they had to say) wrote down their messages, the reasons surely included the conviction that people needed to take notice of these messages in the future, whether or not they did so in the prophet’s time. The same assumption would apply to the theologians whose insights also appear in the Isaiah scroll. The scroll was designed to be a synthesis of Judahite traditions that were associated in some way with Isaiah ben Amoz, a synthesis whose compilers likely hoped would shape the thinking of the Judahite community.

Yet such features need not imply a universal claim or an aspiration to canonical status. Within the New Testament, statements about the aims of Gospels in Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:30-31 and statements in some of Paul’s letters indicate that these documents aim to be prescriptive, but it was when the church made them part of its Scriptures that they became canonical in a trans-historical sense—or one might prefer to speak in terms of the church coming to recognize that God was requiring it to treat them as part of its canon. There are no parallel statements within the Hebrew Scriptures, but the same assumption makes sense in connection with most or all of its writings. Their authors were composing something prescriptive but they did not know or hope that they were writing something that would become canonical.

So there is a distinction between the shaping of the text to fulfill a canonical function and the use of the text to fulfill a canonical function. In the former case the study of canonical shaping is an aspect of the study of genre or form; in the latter case the study of the text amounts to a canonical reading. To put it another way, a canonical reading could be an exegetical attempt to understand the scroll’s dynamics or it could be a reading with a background in an acceptance of the scroll as within the Scriptures and an openness and commitment to shape one’s thinking by it. People with power in the Judahite community during the Persian or Hellenistic period may have used their power to encourage the influence of the scroll on people; there might have been political motivations for the acceptance of Isaiah within the community. Canonical readings of the scroll presuppose that this possibility need not rule out the idea that the scroll deserves to be normative independently of that consideration. The reading of the Isaiah scroll as a canonical document is indeed an act of reading rather than an act of exegesis.

In this connection, the comments by Childs, Conrad, and Rendtorff point to a different insight from the one they themselves suggest. The shaping of the Isaiah scroll into its final form was a historical process undertaken as part of the life of the Judahite community, and it would be nice to know the nature of the process and the nature of the community. But the scroll gives us no direct information on these matters, and any suggestions as to the community’s nature and the aims of the scroll’s production can be only guesses. For good reasons or bad, the shapers apparently wanted to point away from themselves to their work, and the community that accepted the scroll into its Scriptures apparently assumed that it could do so without knowing what their aims were. Even if it is possible to uncover aspects of the process that lay behind the production of the Isaiah scroll, interpreting the canonical significance of the scroll in its final form is more of a literary than a historical investigation.

Given the careful arrangement of the scroll on the macro scale, one might have expected that its careful arrangement would have issued in a document that lacked rough edges of a literary or theological kind. And one might have expected that such order and coherence would be even more characteristic of the Isaiah scroll if it were designed to fulfill a canonical function. In fact, it is not such a document.[[28]](#footnote-28) Nevertheless, an aspect of its distinctive nature is the comprehensiveness of its theological perspective, which relates to the comprehensiveness of its historical background in the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods—or rather, its theologico-historical background in the time of the first temple, the devastated temple, and the restored temple, or the time when the Davidic monarchy ruled, when the Davidic monarchy had been removed, and when the Davidic monarchy was in limbo.

“There is no canonical Amos, and no other canonical prophet either, who speaks a radical ‘No” over Israel.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Isaiah ben Amoz did come close to such a declaration from time to time (see 5:1-7; 6:1-13). But generally the canonical Isaiah ben Amoz held back from such finality, as even 6:1-13 likely implies by incorporating its enigmatic final phrase, “its stump [is] a holy seed.” Certainly the Isaiah scroll in its final form sets the “No” that appears in its first part in the context of a longer-term “Yes.” In such connections, a canonical reading of Isaiah as a whole corresponds to "the canon's intention,”[[30]](#footnote-30) an intention that it should be read as a theological whole in which the various parts cohere and function meaningfully. The canonical text does not "intend" that the message of divine judgment found in the first part should be read by itself; it should rather be read in connection with, and from the standpoint of, the message of divine grace and forgiveness which appears in the latter part. But the converse is also true. And one aspect of the challenge of a canonical reading of Isaiah involves perceiving whether a particular moment is one when one especially has to hear the “No” or the “Yes.”

There are other aspects to the scroll’s holding together themes or attitudes that stand in tension. Isa 1—39 affirms YHWH’s commitment to “the household of David” and in light of the prospect of its demise promises its revival. Isa 40—66 refers to no such commitment except in the context of seeing it as shared with Israel as a whole, which becomes YHWH’s servant, and it transfers the description of royal shepherd and anointed to the Persian king. More broadly, the three main parts of the scroll suggest a comprehensive perspective on the key prophetic concern with *mišpāṭ ûṣᵉdāqāh*, the exercise of authority in a way that implements what is right. Isa 1—39 protests at the community’s failure in this connection and implicitly explains that the collapse of Judah issued from this failure; Isa 40—55 promises that YHWH will take action to implement *mišpāṭ ûṣᵉdāqāh*; Isa 56—66 renews that promise and renews the challenge to the community to implement the principle in its life.[[31]](#footnote-31) Isa 56—66 lays before its readers passages which envisage the humiliation of Gentiles and passages which envisage their joining in the worship of YHWH, and perhaps the latter kind were designed to correct the former, but the chapters do not indicate a gradual movement towards a more inclusive position, and the result in the canonical form of Isa 56—66 is to place before Gentile readers the choice of humiliation/death or conversion.[[32]](#footnote-32)

A canonical reading of the scroll as a single theological whole does not mean a simple reading that gives the impression of no antimonies or tensions. The scroll rather preserves them. It is to be desired that future study will see more work on the theological significance of the scroll as a whole with its broad horizon and its diversity.

## Canonical Reading from the Isaiah Scroll

We have noted that etymologically, the word “canon” suggests something with quasi-legal authority. The Greek word *kanōn* denotes a rule in the sense of a standard—something by which one measures things, literally or metaphorically. It comes with this meaning in Gal 6:16; Phil 3:16. It is likely related to the word *kanna* meaning a reed, which in turn is likely related to the Hebrew word *qāneh* meaning a reed.In Christian circles the word “canon” came to be used in the context of theological debate in the church to describe the Scriptures as the documents that define what counts as legitimate or proper within Christian faith, and in this context the word also came to suggest a list. As a canon, the list would need to be defined and delimited, though it need not necessarily be closed and unalterable; in the modern world, churches have “canons” or church rules that can be revised and supplemented.

“Canon,” then, suggests an officially recognized delimited collection of scrolls that have normative status for a religious community. In a number of ways these connotations confuse discussion of “canonical” interpretation of the Isaiah scroll or of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. Judaism did not refer to its Scriptures as a canon and it’s not clear that there was ever some authoritative body that decided which scrolls counted as a defined, delimited, and closed canon; this way of thinking presupposes a back-projection from later Christian deliberations and history. Indeed, at earlier stages the accumulation of the scrolls which came to comprise the New Testament may have simply happened rather than being organized by anyone. The definition and delimitation to which Athanasius refers in the fourth century when he uses the word “canon” (in his Festal Letter of 367) is a late phenomenon associated with a desire to tidy up edges.

For the most part, likewise, the collection of scrolls that comprises the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings may simply have happened. While questions of power again likely entered into the process at some stages, we know of no body that authoritatively decided on the list of works that count as the Hebrew Scriptures. Specifically, we know of no body that decided to put Isaiah on the list. The development of scriptural canons can be illumined by the development of the “Western Canon” of great literature. Questions of power entered into the process, but hardly in such a way that (e.g.) gave a place to Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Chaucer, and Shakespeare when they did not deserve it.

In a Second Temple or New Testament context, then, the application to Isaiah of the word “canonical” should not suggest inclusion as opposed to exclusion, nor is it a quasi-legal term. It does suggest that the scroll has a kind of moral authority, but one more like the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Chief Rabbi than that of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*. And the dynamics of a canonical reading of the Isaiah scroll then need not have been very different from the dynamics of the canonical reading of Isaiah ben Amoz by the theologians whose work appears in Isa 40—55. It is in this sense that the combination of stability and adaptability is of the essence of canon,[[33]](#footnote-33) even if the form of the text itself is now less malleable.

The first readings of Isaiah in each of the Gospels illustrate how Isaiah functions canonically in this way. Isa 7:14 helps an understanding of how Jesus was born of a virgin girl and how he embodied the presence of God (Matt 1:23). Isa 40:3 helps an understanding of the role John the Baptizer plays in preparing for Jesus’s appearing (Mark 1:3; John 1:23). Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6 help Jesus understand his own role (Luke 4:18-19). The moral authority of the Isaiah scroll does give it the capacity to imply normative expectations regarding how people should think or live if they wish to belong to the community of people that believe in Jesus: see e.g., 1 Peter 2:18-25; 3:14. But more often the Isaiah scroll is seeking to encourage and to inspire, and the New Testament reads Isaiah in a way that enables it to articulate insight and answer questions: see e.g., 1 Peter 1:23-25; 2:4-8. In the context of its general use of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as a key resource for understanding Jesus, the gospel, and the church, the New Testament made more use of Isaiah than of any other book in the Hebrew Scriptures.[[34]](#footnote-34) Isaiah is close to being a canon within the canon for the New Testament. The implication is not that the function of the Scriptures, and of Isaiah among them, was simply to provide backing for already-held convictions—to provide poof texts. It was rather to provide insight on questions.

Like the canonical reading within Isaiah, such canonical readings of Isaiah issue from an interaction between text, new context, inspiration, and experience. They are not polemical in the manner of (say) Isa 40:1 in its relationship to the texts it takes up. They do characteristically ignore the Isaianic context of the passages they take up. “Jews don’t read books”: traditional Jewish interpretation reads a verse in light of the Scriptures as a whole, but not in light of the book in which it comes, as the use of Isaiah in Pesiqta deRab Kahana illustrates.[[35]](#footnote-35) The same applies to the Jews who came to believe in Jesus, and it continues to apply to the equivalent Christian liturgical reading of Isaiah in a season such as Advent. In due course Christians and Jews did come to read books. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the first commentary on Isaiah known to us, Jerome made use of it in writing his commentary, and so did Cyril of Alexandria. In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Qimchi read Isaiah as a book. But the earlier canonical readings of the Isaiah scroll did not work in light of the scroll’s own structure or even in light of its own overall perspective.

It is thus confusing to speak (for instance) of the New Testament’s “exegesis” of Isaiah; to speak of the New Testament’s “reading” of Isaiah keeps things clearer. In this connection, the account in Acts 8 of Philip reading Isa 53 uses a fortuitous formulation. A Sudanese diplomat asks who the passage refers to, and Acts reports not that Philip told him it referred to Jesus but that Philip started from this passage and told him about Jesus. The formulation leaves a space between the text and the reading. It compares with the favorite New Testament formula which speaks of events “filling out” or “filling up” texts such as 7:14, 9:1-2, 42:1-4; 53:4 (Matt 1:22-23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21); the conventional English translation of the verb *plēro-ō* as “fulfill” gives a misleadingly precise, narrow, and technical impression of the verb’s meaning. In general, the thesis that a canonical reading of the Scriptures as a whole will focus on the one story that they tell and will use typology as a key to interpretation[[36]](#footnote-36) works less well with Isaiah than it might with Exodus. But if Isa 52:13—53:12 describes a servant within the contemporary community, then typology provides a plausible approach to a canonical reading of the passage.[[37]](#footnote-37) Making a distinction between exegesis and reading also clarifies the way scholarly work may speak of the “interpretation” of passages such as Isa 62 or 63:1-6 or 66:24 with their focus on Jerusalem or with their violence, when this “interpretation” is essentially critical of the substance of the text; it is a scholarly “reading” rather than a scholarly “exegesis.”

In discussing “The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning,” Roy Melugin has argued that “meaning which we see in texts is always in large measure the result of what interpreters do.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The existence of different scholarly “readings” of Isaiah illustrates his point. Yet scholars seek to convince one another about their readings, which suggests the need to note Melugin’s qualifying expression “in large measure.”[[39]](#footnote-39) It is possible and important to preserve the difference between (on one hand) the inherent meaning of a text as an act of communication on the part of an author with would-be readers and (on the other hand) both the new significance of the text when read in another context and also the limited grasp of that meaning on the part of someone reading in a different context.

“Canonical interpretation of Isaiah” implies a reading of the scroll in its final form. But this reading might or might not proceed by taking into account the redactional process whereby it reached this final form. It might assume that this final form is canonically shaped or it might assume that its becoming canonical was a later development rather than something built into the aspirations of the text. In light of the scroll’s theological emphases, it might focus on its understanding of God and of God’s relationship with his people, or it might focus (for instance) on its sociological implications. It might imply reading the scroll in its final form in isolation or it might imply reading it in the context of the Scriptures as a whole. It might be a purely exegetical operation or it might imply the aim of seeing how its canonical authority impinges on the reader. It might imply taking into account the structure of the scroll as a whole or it might imply focusing on the illumination or obligation that emerges from particular passages read independently of their context. It might imply a theological reading that uses Isaiah (for instance) to provide answers within the framework of systematic theology (“Childs’ theology is dogmatic rather than biblical”),[[40]](#footnote-40) or it might seek to develop a theology whose framework reflects that of the Scriptures themselves.[[41]](#footnote-41) It is to be desired that future study will see more work done by way of canonical reading of the Isaiah scroll that articulates its significance for the twenty-first century world.

## References

Ackroyd, Peter R., 1978. “Isaiah i—xii.” In J. A. Emerton et al. (eds.), *Congress Volume: Göttingen 1977*, 16-48.VTSup 29. Leiden: Brill.

Albertz, Rainer, 2003. *Geschichte und Theologie*. BZAW 326. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Barr, James, 1999. *The Concept of Biblical Theology*. London: SCM.

Barton, John, 1984. *Reading the Old Testament*. London: DLT. Revised ed., 1996.

Brett, Mark G., 1991. *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?* Cambridge: CUP.

Childs, Brevard S., 1979. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM.

-- 2001. *Isaiah*. Louisville: WJK.

Clements, Ronald E., 1985. “Beyond Tradition-history.” *JSOT* 31: 95-113.

-- 1998. “Who Is Blind But My Servant?” In T. Linafelt and T. Beal (eds.), *God in the Fray* (W.BrueggemannFestschrift), 143-56. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Conrad, Edgar W., 2003. *Reading the Latter Prophets*. London: Clark.

Fishbane, Michael A., 1985. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Gignilliat, Mark S., 2009. *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Goldingay, John, 2014. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56—66.* London: Bloomsbury.

-- 2008. “Isaiah 53 in the Pulpit.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 35: 147-53.

-- 2005. *The Message of Isaiah 40—55*. London: Clark.

Gray, Mark, 2006. *Rhetoric and Social Justice* *in Isaiah*. London: Clark.

Janowski, Bernd, 2005-6. “Canon et construction de sens perspectives vétérotestamentaires.” *ETR* 81: 517-41.

Lindbeck, George A, 1999. “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation.” In C. R. Seitz and K. Greene-McCreight (eds.). *Theological Exegesis* (B. S. Childs Festschrift), 26-51. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Melugin, Roy F., 1997. “The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning,” In Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (eds.). *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* 1:39-55. VTSup 70. Leiden: Brill, 1997.

-- and Marvin A. Sweeney (eds.), 1996. *New* *Visions of Isaiah.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Osswald, Eva, 1962. *Falsche Prophetie im Alten Testanent*. Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religionsgeschichte 237. Tübingen: Mohr.

Rendtorff, Rolf, 1993. *Canon and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

*--* 2005. *The Canonical Hebrew Bible*. Leiden: Deo.

Ricoeur, Paul, 1980. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

-- 1976. *Interpretation Theory*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University.

Sanders, James A., 1980. “Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism.” *HBT* 2:173-97.

-- 1987. *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

-- 1982. “Isaiah in Luke.” *Interpretation* 36:144-55.

Sheppard, Gerald T., 1993. “The Book of Isaiah as a Human Witness to Revelation.” In *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers*, 274-80*.* Atlanta: Scholars.

-- 1992. “The Book of Isaiah: Competing Structures according to a Late Modern Description of Its Shape and Scope.” In *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers*, 549-82*.* Atlanta: Scholars.

Sommer, Benjamin, 1996a. “Allusions and Illusions.” In Melugin/Sweeney 1996, 156-86*.*

-- 1998. *A Prophet Reads Scripture*. Stanford: Stanford University.

-- 1996b. “The Scroll of Isaiah as Jewish Scripture.” In *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers*, 225-41. Atlanta: Scholars.

Steck, Odil Hannes, 1991. *Studien zu Tritojesaja*. BZAW 203. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Stromberg, Jacob, 2011. *Isaiah after Exile.* Oxford: OUP.

Stulac, Daniel J., 2015. “Rethinking Suspicion: A Canonical-Agrarian Reading of lsaiah 65.” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9:185-2000.

Tiemeyer, Lena-Sofia, 2017. “Death or Conversion.” *JTS* 68:1-22.

Williamson, Hugh G. M., 1994. *The Book Called Isaiah*. Oxford: Clarendon.

## For Further Reading

Childs, Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM, 1979.

-- *Isaiah*. Louisville: WJK, 2001.

Clements, Ronald E. “Beyond Tradition-history.” *JSOT* 31 (1985): 95-113.

Melugin, Roy F., and Marvin A. Sweeney (eds.). *New* *Visions of Isaiah.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Rendtorff, Rolf. *Canon and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

*-- The Canonical Hebrew Bible*. Leiden: Deo, 2005.

Sanders, James A. *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.

-- “Isaiah in Luke.” *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 144-55.

Sommer, Benjamin. *A Prophet Reads Scripture*. Stanford: Stanford University, 1998.

1. See Barton, *Reading the OT*; Brett, *Biblical Criticism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g., Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*; *Interpretation Theory*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 149-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*,497. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g., Albertz, *Geschichte und Theologie*, 239-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Clements, “Beyond Tradition-history.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See e.g., Williamson, *Book Called Isaiah*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Janowski, “Canon et construction.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 497; and further the comments on the study of these passages by Barth and by Childs in Gignilliat*, Karl Barth*, 79-95, and in Sheppard, “Book of Isaiah as a Human Witness,” 277-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Goldingay, *Isaiah 56—66*, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Stulac, “Rethinking Suspicion.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Osswald, *Falsche Prophetie*, 22; cf. Sanders, *Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See e.g., Sanders, “Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Childs, *Isaiah*, e.g. in his comments on Isa 1:2-31 and on 40:12-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. E.g., Steck, *Tritojesaja*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sommer, “Allusions and Illusions,” 172; cf. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Sanders, “Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism,” 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Childs, *Introduction*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ackroyd, “Isaiah i—xii.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Conrad, *Reading the Latter Prophets*, 182-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Childs, *Introduction*, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 737. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Childs, *Introduction*, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See e.g. the discussion of Isa 40 in Childs, *Isaiah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Clements, “Beyond Tradition-history,” 97; cf. Clements, “Who Is Blind?” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. As Rendtorff notes in *Canonical Hebrew Bible*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*,64. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Childs, *Introduction*, 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Goldingay, *Isiah 56—66*, 47-49, following Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 146-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Tiemeyer, “Death or Conversion.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sanders *Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, 9-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sanders, “Isaiah in Luke,” 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Sommer, “Scroll of Isaiah,” 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. So Lindbeck, “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation,” 28-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40—55*, on the passage; also Goldingay, “Isaiah 53 in the Pulpit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Melugin, “Book of Isaiah,” 50; cf. Conrad, *Reading the Latter Prophets*, 5-30; and the papers in Melugin/Sweeney *New* *Visions of Isaiah*). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. Sheppard, “Book of Isaiah: Competing Structures,” 558-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See. Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 415-715. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)