



The
THEOLOGY of the
BOOK of ISAIAH

John E. Goldingay



The Theology of the Book of Isaiah

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John Goldingay helps us make sense of this “book called Isaiah” as a tapestry of patterned collages, parts put together in an intentional whole. The Theology of the Book of Isaiah studies the prophecies, messages and theology of each section of the complex book, then unfurls its unifying themes. Like a program guide to Handel’s Messiah, Goldingay helps us see, hear and understand the grandeur of this prophetic masterpiece among the Prophets.

“Life and Death, Truth and Lies, Insight and Stupidity” in the Book of Isaiah

Isaiah has a comprehensively different perspective on politics from his contemporaries. They sincerely believe they are pursuing the best policies for Judah. They know that Assyria is a great danger. It threatens the death of the nation. If Judah is to be preserved alive, the wise policy is an alliance with Egypt, the great power to the south, which will deliver protection.

Isaiah knows that this policy is misguided at every point. Judah’s leaders have made an alliance or a covenant with death, not with life (Is 28:15). Part of the background to this phrase may be the Egyptians’ well-known preoccupation with death and the afterlife, of which the pyramids are a symbol. Another part of the background may be the fact that Egypt had a prominent goddess called Mut, whose name was conveniently similar to the Hebrew word for death, *mot*, and thus to the name of the Canaanite death god, Mot.

The Judahites are thus treating something that is false and empty as if it could be a refuge, shelter, protection or source of help (Is 28:15; 30:2-3). The use of these words makes for a telling contrast with Psalm 91, which describes Yahweh as refuge, shelter, protection, source of help and object of trust. Judah is sending envoys off on a hazardous and costly mission to Egypt, but the mission will be futile (Is 30:6-7). Isaiah here neatly calls Egypt “Rahab sitting down.” Rahab is another name for the monster also known as Leviathan (Is 27:1), the embodiment of dynamic power asserted against God (the name is different from that of the Rahab in Joshua, which is spelled differently in Hebrew). Rahab is a poetic term for Egypt in Psalm 87:4. But this so-called Rahab is like a monster that has gone to sleep, or like Leviathan reduced to a pet monster (Ps 104:26). Rahab/Egypt is going to be of no use to Judah.

In a particularly effective formulation, “Egypt is human not God, their horses are flesh not spirit” (Is 31:3). In the Old Testament, “flesh” does not carry the connotation of sinful, as it does in Paul; it simply designates human beings and animals as characterized by the weakness that attaches to something created, which does not carry dynamic life in itself. Conversely, “spirit” denotes the dynamism and power that is characteristic of God and can be shared by God with created beings, yet does not exactly become their possession. How foolish, then, for people to rely on human beings and animals rather than on God.

Judah’s leaders think that their policies are so wise; they don’t recognize that Yahweh’s policy making is so much more insightful than theirs (Is 28:29). They go through the motions of being committed to Yahweh and submitting themselves to Yahweh, and they go to the temple to pray for Yahweh’s help and to seek Yahweh’s guidance, but once they are back in the palace they formulate their policies on the basis of their own so-called insight (Is 29:13-

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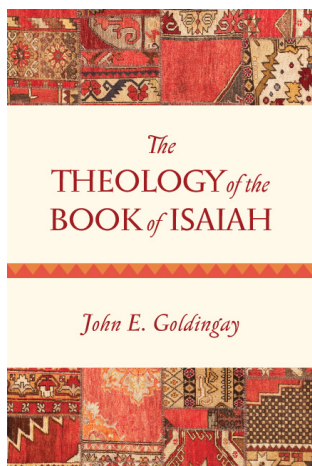
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14), in the way that Christian meetings usually work. They might necessarily be secretive in formulating their policies in connection with making an alliance with Egypt; Isaiah's comment about secretiveness (Is 29:15) is paralleled by the desire attributed to Hezekiah's staff that the Assyrian field commander should shout his message to them in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew so that the ordinary Jerusalemites can't understand (Is 36:11). But the confidential nature of these proceedings would then make for a contrast with what went on when they all went to the temple. Without realizing it, they're like clay telling the potter that they know more about pottery than he does and that they can form themselves into pots on their own (Is 29:16). Without realizing it, they are like people telling their prophets to shut up, or at least to give the people encouragement in their needy situation rather than always being negative. Without realizing it, they want the prophets to stop talking about Israel's Holy One. They want a more encouraging God (Is 30:10-11). It's as if Yahweh has made them unable to see sense (as Is 6:9-10 said), and specifically as if he has deprived the prophets and seers of their capacity to see, or rendered them unable to read plain truth (Is 29:9-12).

– Taken from chapter three, "Isaiah 28-39"



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John E. Goldingay is David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. His books include *Models for Scripture*, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, *Walk On* and commentaries on Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel. He has also authored an Old Testament theology in three volumes for InterVarsity Press and The Old Testament for Everyone series for Westminster John Knox Press.

“A theological reading of Isaiah that can inform contemporary faith.”

“With the dust beginning to settle on fresh efforts to read the book of Isaiah as a whole, Goldingay here provides a clear and engaging reintroduction to Isaiah and its theological testimony. Written with his customary wit and flair, and with sensitivity to the literary flow of this ambitious masterwork, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* will profit beginner and expert alike. An impressive accomplishment for a publication of this length and a tribute to Goldingay's clarity of purpose and Isaiah's vision both.”

—**Christopher Seitz**, Toronto School of Theology, Wycliffe College

“John Goldingay lucidly and accessibly illuminates both the parts and the whole of the book of Isaiah. He incorporates the best insights of modern scholarship while nimbly dancing ‘round the complexities of scholarly debate. Here is a theological reading of Isaiah that can inform contemporary faith.”

—**Walter Moberly**, Durham University

“Based on decades of concentrated analysis of the details of this key prophetic work, John Goldingay's volume highlights those golden threads that wind their way throughout Isaiah, glistening in the light of illumination. The strength of this work is its sensitivity to the thematic emphases of the major sections of Isaiah as well as the book as a whole. It is a helpful guide for those seeking to discover order in the midst of the creative intricacies of the book of Isaiah, whether before they tackle a detailed study of the book or at the end of a period of patient exegesis.”

—**Mark J. Boda**, McMaster Divinity College, McMaster University

“Just the book for Bible readers who feel lost reading Isaiah! Goldingay proves an engaging, reliable guide, leading us through Isaiah's parts, showing its overall coherence and reviewing its treatment of key theological topics at the end. The result is a readable guidebook to the Isaiah masterpiece, and I'm pleased to recommend it.”

—**Robert L. Hubbard Jr.**, professor emeritus of biblical literature, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago

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