

Reflections Towards an Interpretation of the Old Testament

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Is there a need for an Old Testament Introduction, and what purpose does it serve? As a matter of course, in attempting to answer this question there will also be discussion of issues concerning the particulars of the Pentateuch and Isaiah. These books (among the others) have certainly offered the critical scholars many opportunities for variegated proposals about matters related to the issues of the Introduction, particularly with regard to authorship and composition. However, an impasse was created between those of the “conservative” and “liberal” camps who would simply volley back and forth against one another. Could any proposal possibly bridge the impasse and broker a treaty?

Purpose of an Old Testament Introduction

The purpose of an Old Testament Introduction is essentially to lay the ground work of discussing the state of study of the Old Testament as a whole as well as individual books within that whole. Though some would set the first Introduction earlier, Brevard Childs gives credit for the first critical Introduction to Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. “The division within Eichhorn's Introduction established a basic structure which has continued ever since in its main lines. It includes a discussion of canon, text, and the development of the literature. Eichhorn also divided his material into general and special introduction. To the former he assigned canon and text; to the latter the treatment of the individual books.”¹ Discussions of such matters as authorship, composition, literary analysis, and theological issues which are considered pertinent to the genre of the Introduction are dealt with as needed. Literary-critical questions are pursued in the “special Introduction” section which may or may not include discussions of form-critical and traditio-critical matters. While this basic outline has been followed by all such Introductions, one must still ask themselves the rather pointed question of Dillard and Longman: “What does it

1 Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 36.

mean to write an introduction from an evangelical perspective?"² For that, we must wait until we have examined what sorts of contributions overall have been made in the field of Introductions with particular emphasis upon the Pentateuch and Isaiah as our case studies.

Literary-critical Contributions on the Pentateuch and Isaiah

While by no means a “new” theory, the documentary theory of Wellhausen (commonly called 'JEPD' because of his particular arrangement of the proposed author/redactors) allowed for a certain “critical consensus.”³ “Long after the early confidence in the classic documentary theory had disappeared, critical scholars continued to work with Wellhausen's source analysis largely because of the lack of any new consensus by which to replace it.”⁴ Later, Hermann Gunkel led to a shift in focus from literary strands to “oral traditions lying behind the sources” of the text of the Pentateuch (called the form-critical method).⁵ Several of Gunkel's students pursued his line of thinking and developed it further. Gerhard von Rad proposed the Hexateuch and Martin Noth took his teacher's studies in the direction of *Überlieferungsgeschichte* or the traditio-critical method.

The many variant attempts at separating and distinguishing sources among JEPD, while noble as such for recognizing the layers of tradition that are apparent in the text itself, fail on several counts not least of which are offering overly specific dates for composition, authorship/redactorship, and sources. This becomes apparent when one compares the various proposals of such recreated literary histories. The text has been composed in such a way as to mostly obscure any redactors/authors as such, the date of composition, and the sources.

However, the note of Brevard Childs with regard to ignoring the work of these studies is worth

2 Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 19.

3 Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 132.

4 *Ibid.*, 114.

5 *Ibid.*

recounting: “Any attempt to offer a different approach to the study of the Pentateuch which does not take into account the achievements of historical critical scholarship over the last two hundred years is both naïve and arrogant.”⁶ In other words, one must take into account these studies and carefully weigh the evidence, but also recognize that we are beholden to speak only what we actually know, and to not speak what we don't actually know. “The final form of the Pentateuch, which cannot be simply derived from the combination of literary sources, gives evidence of a canonical reading of the whole united by means of cross-references, either to the promises of the past or to an anticipation of the future. In sum, a theological force which reflects a knowledge of the whole Pentateuch has given it a final order.”⁷

The literary-critical investigation into the book of Isaiah also suggests multiple layers of tradition that have been compiled into the volume which has been passed down to us.⁸ It has been recognized that there are at least two if not three possible “Isaiahs” that were separate units of composition which were later joined into a single unit. The first portion (Isa.1-39) is confessed to be the work of “Isaiah son of Amoz”, while the rest is the work of an unnamed author or authors. “Of course, many of these problems have been recognized by scholars from within the critical discipline of biblical study, and the efforts of form criticism and tradition-criticism have sought to establish a sense of continuity between the different ages and levels of tradition. The attempt to find meaningful patterns in the compositional stamp of the book has at times recovered a sense of the book's wholeness and checked the endless process of atomization.”⁹

However, the critical Introductions have more often than not tended towards atomization than towards the recognition of wholeness. With fractured texts by a multiplicity of authors from

6 Ibid., 127.

7 Ibid., 132.

8 Ibid., 316-32.

9 Ibid., 324.

different contexts (many unknown), how then should one proceed to work towards the idea of the Introduction from an evangelical perspective and beyond the impasse of the conflicts that resulted from those who rejected the multiple-authorship theories in favor of Mosaic authorship for the the Pentateuch and Isaiahic authorship for Isaiah?

Shifting Ground in Old Testament Canonical Studies – Brevard Childs

The work of Brevard Childs exploded on the scene of Old Testament studies, but the shock-waves continue to be felt. His canonical proposals concerning the Old Testament became a significant way forward for those who embraced a critical view of authorship and composition as well as a conservative view. While admitting to the similarities of the Pentateuch to ancient Near Eastern texts and cultures he also confessed, “[T]he study of the ancient Near East is a different enterprise from studying the form and function of the Pentateuch in the shape accorded it by the community of faith as its canonical scriptures.”¹⁰ This meant that the community of faith, though free to study the text's layers as such, should always receive the text within its canonical form. The Pentateuch was received as a unit, and as the work of Moses it was passed down and so it should be received as such, even while admitting that there are layers to the present work.

On the book of Isaiah, Childs wrote, “It is a basic misunderstanding simply to disregard the present context as a historical fiction. Rather, the present non-historical setting into which the canon has placed these traditions is a highly reflective, theological context. Moreover, it was considered so important that the original historical context of Second Isaiah – whatever it was exactly – has been totally disregarded by those who transmitted the material.”¹¹ “When Second Isaiah is separated from its canonical context, then the essential connection between prophecy

¹⁰ Ibid., 128.

¹¹ Ibid., 325. He further writes that “the loss of an original historical context has given the material an almost purely theological shape,” 326.

and fulfilment [sic] within the book is lost.”¹² He goes on to note that “the force of much of the imagery of both Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah is missed unless the connection with First Isaiah is recognized.”¹³

Dillard and Longman's question about the evangelical perspective of writing an Introduction finds its answer in the proposal of Childs to both overcome the impasse between many “conservatives” and “liberals” and reconcile their differences by recognizing that the evangelicals must treat “the text as the church has received it.”¹⁴ While this is not an answer to everyone's issues, it certainly seems to offer a clearer path forward than other Introductions...and a way that leads forward...together.

Personal Reflections on the Pentateuch and Isaiah

Moses is the self-confessed author of portions of the Pentateuch (Exo.17:14; Num.33:2); certain laws (Exo.24:4; 34:27); a song (Deut.31:22ff) and later appeal is made to him as the author (Josh.1:7, 8; 2 Chron.25:4; Ezra 6:18; Neh.13:1; and in the NT see Matt.19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:23).¹⁵ However, there are certain portions of the Pentateuch which clearly remain outside of the direct authorship of Moses: the narration of his own death (Deut.34); the questionable self-acclamation (if he actually wrote it) that Moses was “the most humble man who ever lived” (Num.12:3); the historically clarifying additions about the “Chaldeans” (Gen.14:14) and “Dan” (Gen.32:32); as well as other such additions for clarification likely included by some later hand(s).¹⁶ Dillard and Longman are certainly correct

12 Ibid., 328.

13 Ibid., 329, 330. Here he sets out the forgiveness of 40:1 against the anger of 1:5ff; 3:1ff; 42:25; 57:16; the forsakeness of Jerusalem in 1:7ff as the city of joy in 62:4; the false worship of First Isaiah contrasted with the true worship of 58:6ff.; the fulfillment in 65:25 of 11:6, 9.

14 Ibid., 19.

15 He is also regularly called/spoken to by YHWH in such places as Lev.1:1; 4:1; 5:16; 6:1, 8, 19, 24; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1, 33; 15:1; 16:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1; 24:1; 27:1; Num.1:1; 2:1; 4:1; 33:1, 2.

16 On these likely later additions see: Gen.35:31; 40:15; Num.32:34-42; Deut.2:10, 11, 20, 23; 3:9, 11, 13b, 14; 10:6-9; 34:1, 6, 10.

to propose that the “best interpretation of the data admits to the presence of sources and indications of development without dogmatically delineating their scope or date.”¹⁷

While historic grounding for the initial authorship (of portions) of the Pentateuch and perhaps even the majority of its composition, the theological authorship of the text is not beyond the purview of the community's understanding nor my own personal interpretation of Mosaic authorship. “The claim of Mosaic authorship...functioned theologically within the community to establish the continuity of the faith of successive generations with that which had once been delivered to Moses at Sinai.”¹⁸ The danger has been for differing parties to make the authorship of the Pentateuch a matter of historical inquiry when it is not a matter of historical inquiry.¹⁹ “In the final analysis, it is possible to affirm the substantial Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in line with the occasional internal evidence and the strong external testimony, while allowing for earlier sources as well as later glosses and elaboration.”²⁰

The need for the contemporary Church to move beyond disputes over the authorship and composition of the Pentateuch is paramount. Those who have posited a sort of historical inquiry (whether from a “conservative” or “liberal” perspective) have too often made the Scriptures subject to the modern prejudices of historical inquiry. The questions which have been asked are not even those questions which can be ascertained with the scientific certainty that many seem to think essential. This is not to suggest that on the one hand the Church has “faith” and the other “history” as science in the 'secular' life, but to suggest that such matters as authorship and composition are only answered in part by the Scriptures themselves and lay beyond the ability of our tools to answer without any remaining questions. So we are left to accept, or better yet to

17 Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 47.

18 Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 135.

19 “History is an important medium of God's activity, but history receives its meaning from the divine word, and not *vice versa*. Fulfilment [sic] is not measured by a correspondence theory of historical truth, but in terms of the entrance of the reality testified to by the prophetic word.” Ibid., 337.

20 Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 47.

freely embrace the testimony as it stands and the claims of the Scriptures as they have been passed down to us.

Also, the Church has the need to move beyond such questions which focus upon the formation of the texts of the Pentateuch which actually lay beyond us and instead to focus upon the texts as they have been preserved. This facilitates the faith and obedience that the texts themselves seem to demand and create within the respective community of faith that was and is constituted by the Pentateuch (and later by the one who is the fulfillment and being pointed to by the whole *Torah* – Matt.5:17-18; Luke 24:44; John 1:45). Instead of focusing upon peripheral issues, the Church would be better served to work together in the process of its common confession in studying the text more thoroughly as it has been received (but not without the due consideration of the historical-critical studies as well).

Concerning Isaiah, the first portion of Isaiah is clearly attributed to the author “Isaiah,”²¹ and by default whoever has appended (if indeed the many critical studies upon this book are correct) the second (and/or third) portion of the book to the first has intentionally created a diverse yet unified whole without identifying any other author or specific context of composition. Any other authors of Isaiah have intentionally left off any note of their own concerning who they were, their historical context, and intentionally written this as a compendium of sorts to the work of the first Isaiah. As such, it has been received as the work of Isaiah and should be taken in this manner. Though “Isaiah is not mentioned in the second half of the book...the reality of prophetic inspiration is not thereby eliminated,” and so it may be concluded that the ministry of Isaiah is continued in the work of the book attributed to him.²²

The significance of the critical study of Isaiah for the Church concerns the application of

21 Isa.1:1; 2:1; 7:3; 20:2; 37:2, 5, 6; 38:1, 4; 39:5

22 Ibid., 275.

the particular message of each portion to a different situation. “First Isaiah spoke mainly of judgment to pre-exilic Israel. Conversely, Second Isaiah's message was predominantly one of forgiveness. But in their canonical context these historical distinctions have been frequently blurred in order to testify to a theology which was directed to subsequent generations of Israelites. Sinful Israel would always be the object of divine terror; repentant Israel would receive his promises of forgiveness. To assure this theological understanding, the redaction of the book as a whole also assigned promise to First Isaiah and judgment to Second (and Third) Isaiah.”²³ The unity of the texts helps to consider these themes together.

Instead of diverging over matters of historical verifiability (as with the Pentateuch), the Church is far better served by confessing that we must speak of what we know and not speak of what we do not know. We do not know who or precisely when the latter portion of Isaiah was written. We do know about the first portion. We also know that the text as we have received it has been passed down as a unified text and as such should be studied and believed and lived. Each portion has a message for different places and times. We must hear the messages of judgment and of forgiveness. Perhaps there is a time and place for each to be predominant as there was for the canonical Isaiah.

Bibliography

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- Dillard, Raymond B., and Tremper. Longman. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.

²³ Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 327.