

BOOK REVIEWS / BOEKRESENSIES

Wilken, R. L., ed. *Isaiah. Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*. The Church's Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 590 pages. Hard cover. Price not mentioned. ISBN 978-0-8028-2581-0.

The Church's Bible is a series that has as its aim to bring the rich classical tradition of biblical interpretation to life. The volumes in the series draw extensively from early and medieval commentators. In doing this, the series illuminates the Bible as it was understood during the first millennium of Christian history. It serves to lead contemporary readers into the spiritual and theological world of the early church and its interpretation of Scripture.

In this volume, the book of Isaiah, the subject matter constitutes the manner in which the book has been read and interpreted by the Early and Medieval Church. However, neither all 66 chapters of Isaiah, nor every verse in the book is treated. A very notable omission, for instance, is Isaiah 36-39 about Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian king Sennacherib during king Hezekiah of Judah's rule. This is due to a problem with regard to space in this publication, but also due to the fact that early interpreters themselves did not necessarily treat all parts of Biblical documents the way modern day commentators do.

This volume starts off with two introductions, so to speak. Under the heading *Interpreting the Old Testament* the editor of this volume comments on how the Old Testament in general has been interpreted by the Early and Medieval Church and what texts of the Old Testament they have used. The church fathers simply interpreted the Old Testament the way the New Testament writers did and with regard to Isaiah, it "spoke with uncommon clarity about Christ" (p. xiii). As is common knowledge, the Early and Medieval Church did not use the Masoretic Text, as is customary today. With regard to the Old Testament they used a Greek translation and later even a Latin translation for both the Old and New Testament. In this commentary therefore, the translations of the different chapters from Isaiah is a modern English translation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah.

Thereafter follows an *Introduction to the Christian Interpretation of Isaiah*. To early Christians Isaiah was the "most beloved, the most esteemed, and most quoted" ... "His book contained all the mysteries of the Lord, his birth from a virgin, his miracles, his suffering, death and resurrection, as well as prophesies of the Church's mission to the nations" (p. xx). For the early interpreters Christ was the key to the interpretation of the Old Testament. Indeed there are passages where the church fathers applied historical interpretations. More often than not this historical information was gained from the biblical text itself and not from external sources as well. That being said, the frame-

work of interpretation for the church fathers remained the Church's faith, practice and teaching.

The commentary as such commences with a *Preface to Isaiah* where excerpts from introductions from ancient commentaries on Isaiah, several passages from the New Testament, as well as occasional references to Isaiah in other early Christian writings have been put together. These include excerpts from Origen, Chrysostom, Eusebius and Augustine, to mention but a few. The main part of the commentary, namely a selection of early and medieval scholars' commentary and other writings on the Book of Isaiah, follows this preface.

The arrangement of the material within each chapter is as follows: A modern English translation of the Septuagint text of the particular chapter from Isaiah is provided, followed by an editorial comment that briefly discusses the central themes of the chapter and highlights particular features of the interpretation. Then follows a passage from one of the four complete commentaries on Isaiah by the church fathers Eusebius, Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus. After the commentary shorter excerpts from one of the other commentaries are added. To conclude, excerpts from other writings like sermons, treaties, devotional works and liturgical texts, chosen at random, are provided.

This volume conclude with two appendixes, one dealing with authors of works excerpted and the other dealing with sources of texts translated and three indices, dealing respectively with names, subjects and Scripture references.

This series as such and this work in particular is an important source of information with regard to early Christian literature. Of particular value is the opportunity to "listen to" the church fathers speak for themselves and to see for oneself how they interpreted particular texts. As scholars of our day we shall do well to remember where we come from and keep on reflecting on the works of those who interpreted the text before us. They remain an important part of our tradition. Having said this, however, there is no way that any responsible exegete today can return to this mainly Christological reading of either Isaiah or the Old Testament.

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