

An Exegete Interacts with Church Fathers on Isaiah

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The Hebrew Language—Church fathers can't help us understand the Hebrew wording.

Church fathers can help us work with Isaiah theologically and bring it into the pulpit.

Positives

1. The church fathers approached Isaiah as Sacred Scripture, the Fifth Gospel, within the context of the Church.
2. They attended to the literal and historical dimension of the book but did not leave it in past history. They considered it as still speaking God's Word to them.
3. Church fathers saw theological patterns between BC Scriptures and what the New Testament reveals about Jesus and the Church. From BC Zion to Heavenly Zion/Church. Connection with Pax Romana?
4. The church fathers freely made associations with the Lord's Supper: the coal of Isaiah 6 and the banquet of Isaiah 25.
5. The orthodox church fathers dealt with the BC Scriptures in a serious way against heretics. Example, Isaiah 42:8, "My glory I will not give to another," was spoken against idols, not against the Son.
6. Church fathers dealt with troubling texts in a theological way. Example: In Isaiah 45:7 God says, "I am the one who has prepared light and made darkness, who makes peace and *creates evils*; I am the Lord who does all these things." Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, Augustine. The church fathers can clarify a passage with cross references to other passages.
7. Fresh and stimulating comments. Example: Isaiah 6, "Woe is me, for I am silent." "Here am I, send me."

Negatives

1. Their practice of associating passages solely on the basis of an individual word. Example, Isaiah 35:1-2 promises that “The wilderness and the thirsty land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the lily.” God communicates in, with, and under the everyday commonalities of human language, in this case the Hebrew language. Not every word is some lofty sermon. The basic level of discourse is the sentence and paragraph.
2. The church fathers along with rabbinic exegesis did not recognize poetic parallelism with its built-in redundancy. Isaiah 42:5 says of the Creator that he “gave breath to the people upon (the earth) and spirit to those who tread on it.” Here “breath” and “spirit” were simply being used interchangeably as a word pair in poetic parallelism.
3. The way church fathers used Isaiah’s invectives against the Israel and Jerusalem of his day as polemics against all Jews of their day. Simply unfair. Our mother church was the Jewish church in Jerusalem. Note Romans 1:16-17; 9:1-5.
4. The church fathers did not always appreciate the “incarnational and sacramental” moves of God in ancient Israel’s history. God was revealing and doing theology in, with, and under ancient Israel’s BC history in ways proleptic of the age to come, both the now and the not yet. The analogy used by Melito of Sardis of a preliminary sketch. Consider the analogy of a miniature train set that anticipated the big trains to come. I would want to download levels two through four of the Medieval four senses more tightly into level one. That is not “historical-critical,” but it is also not simply the Medieval four senses.

Positives

1. Follow their practice of preaching through entire books of the BC Scriptures.
2. Consider starting a clergy Bible class with non-Lutheran clergy in your area. Include the church fathers in the discussion. We have the Scriptures in common and the early church fathers.
3. The church fathers knew that the Holy Spirit works through the Word.
4. How deeply the church fathers loved the BC Scriptures as an essential part of their working Bible.
5. It looks to me like the orthodox church fathers were working with a mentality of *sola scriptura*, at least in a *de facto* sort of way. To the Scriptures, all the Scriptures, and take along the church fathers.