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BOOK REVIEW

David W. Baker. *Isaiah*. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. xiii + 227 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780310492092.

Baker's *Isaiah* provides a helpful commentary aimed at laypeople. The focus throughout is on providing background information to illuminate various figures of speech and historical references in the text. One feature that contributes to making this series particularly accessible is the abundance of colorful photographs and illustrations throughout. Not only do they lend a nonthreatening feel to the book, they provide a tangible link to the past that can be particularly helpful for children and adults alike who struggle to relate the biblical storyline to history. Turning through the pages, one is greeted with a carving of Sennacherib and his inscription detailing the siege of Jerusalem (pp. 122–23), a photograph of the Edomite capital Bozrah (p. 118), and a painting of Egyptian deities copulating (!) to bring about the creation of the world (p. 141).

Special mention should be made of the superb manner in which Baker deals with the background issues of authorship and dating. While much controversy exists over the possibility of multiple hands over a period of time contributing to the text of Isaiah as we know it today, Baker manages to avoid the twin dangers of silence and critical excess by instead offering a lengthy overview of the political events in the ancient Near East from the eighth to the fifth centuries, thus equipping the reader to situate the text of Isaiah at any point throughout this time period. An endnote comprising nearly a quarter of a page cites a number of additional articles and monographs that the interested reader can consult for more information on the source criticism of Isaiah.

Readers hoping to be enlightened in their understanding of Isaiah will not be disappointed. Throughout the commentary, one is treated to insights such as an explanation of why King Ahaz refused to ask for a sign (Isa 7:11–14). While royal appeals to divine guidance were commonplace in the ancient Near East (Baker cites several primary sources to support this point), there was also a generally prevailing notion that certain omens inevitably led to future events; therefore, Ahaz's reticence to have a sign was likely because he believed that the appearance of the sign would make the connected event inevitable. Also helpful is the discussion of the anti-polytheistic polemic contained in some statements about God that could be missed by a modern reading audience. For example, the assertion of Yahweh's international divine plans in 14:26–27 would contrast sharply with the impossibility of such an edict in a polytheistic society, where the multiplicity of gods would simply be mentioned in a statement portraying their continual clashing with each other.

As the historical accuracy of the Bible is a perennial issue of contention, Baker deserves much praise for treating in particular detail the historical materials bearing witness to the characters and events described in Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. Similarly fascinating is the diversity of parallels adduced by Baker between Isaiah's description of the future restoration of paradise in 65:17–25 and promises of kingly provision and golden age mythology in Akkadian and Sumerian texts.

However, there are several recurring features that make for flaws in an otherwise fine volume. As is often the case in the identification of background parallels, one is sometimes at a loss to understand how the information given truly illuminates the text. How does knowing that the phrase "bread of adversity" (30:20) also appears in a Ugaritic curse contribute to understanding its meaning? Also, for a commentary aimed at laypeople, the vocabulary is at times cumbersome. The discussion at 41:9 references Babylonian "extispicy" texts, with no clear cues from the context as to what these might be (extispicy is the use of animal entrails to predict the future). Also, since the book contains much repeated phraseology and recurring imagery, discussions are often cross referenced. While this is not a

problem in itself, at times the cross referencing is insufficient, so that someone utilizing the commentary for one verse may miss a more in-depth discussion of a particular concept elsewhere. For example, although the substantial section on ships in 2:16 references 23:1 and 60:9, the discussion of neither of these later passages provides a link back to 2:16. This could potentially result in someone missing some of the information in this book due to inadequate organization.

Another area of weakness is the bibliography supplied at the end. While adequate citations are supplied in the endnotes, the short reading list for those wishing to go deeper includes no less than five untranslated German works that would be inaccessible even to many serious students. Finally, while the scope of the issue is far wider than Baker's *Isaiah* or even the entire Zondervan Background series, it must be mentioned that the impulses within the larger evangelical movement as a whole that equate novelty with profundity and scattered pieces of information with genuine enlightenment are probably to blame for the tendency in this volume (and series) toward data dumping. One can readily imagine well-intentioned laypeople at a Bible study believing they had been given truly great insight into the meaning of a text when supplied with one of the scattered parallels of phrasing that fill these volumes. Of course, Baker himself can hardly be held responsible for this phenomenon.

In conclusion, *Isaiah* is probably the best one can hope for in such a background commentary aimed at laypeople. Its few shortcomings are relatively minor when examined in light of the immense elucidation it has to offer those willing to acquaint themselves with the world of the text.

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