

A COMMENTARY SURVEY ON ISAIAH 11:1-16

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Introduction

The section before us from the hand of the prophet Isaiah is one of the most enchanting in the Old Testament. It is also in our day a focal point for a much discussed controversy: the millenium. Does Isaiah speak in Chapter 11 to the times of Jesus the Messiah on earth? Or to His present reign from heaven? Or to His future millennial reign? Or to the new heavens and the new earth in the eternal state? In an attempt to reach some consensus on the matter, this study has been prepared surveying a number of Biblical commentaries. This paper will outline the main feature of each author on the chosen passage, and attempt to discover how each viewed its significance and its interpretation. We note that regardless of the hermeneutical direction taken, Isaiah 11 holds great encouragement for the believer of Christ in this age, and generates excitement about being with Him in the age to come.

The Passage

Isaiah eleven is outlined as follows:

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| Isaiah 11:1-3 | Establishment and attributes of the Branch from the Stump of Jesse. |
| Isaiah 11:4-4 | The Righteous Reign of the Branch |
| Isaiah 11:6-9 | Effectual Characteristics of Earth in the Reign of the Branch |
| Isaiah 11:10 | The Gentiles will turn to the Branch |
| Isaiah 11:11-16 | The Remnant will be restored to the Branch |

The context of the first twelve chapters of the book of Isaiah deals primarily with God's judgments through the hands of the Assyrians on the sins of His people. Chapter 11 then describes the reign of Messiah to come. And the chapter describes His reign in most peculiar language, indicating that during the reign all nature will be affected anew. The chapter interfaces hermeneutically with Chapters 65 and 66 where Isaiah describes God's call on the Gentiles for salvation, His creation of new heavens and a new earth, and the consummation and true restoration of the true worship of God.

Eschatology is not a simple subject. Reaching back 2,700 years to this Hebrew prophet, tying it in with the New Testament, and all from the platform of the twentieth century is not easy. It is with this task in mind, however, and on the passage before us specifically, that we embark on a commentary survey to find help, and the spectrum of available interpretations.

The commentators are J. A. Alexander, Albert Barnes, John Calvin, Franz Delitzsch, G. B. Gray (ICC), Matthew Henry, H. A. Ironside, F. C. Jennings, Otto Kaiser, William Kelly, H. C. Leupold, ~~William~~, C. Von Orelli, and Edward J. Young, and will be surveyed in that order. Also, the comments on Isaiah 11 by J. Oliver Buswell (A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion), Hobart Freeman (An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets), R. Laird Harris (article in The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible), Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Toward an Old

Testament Theology) and George E. Ladd (A Theology of the New Testament) were consulted and will be noted where applicable.

The Commentators

1. The commentary done by J. A. Alexander is a good example of a scholarly work on Isaiah. He deals with the Hebrew text some and makes a few exegetical comments. He interacts with other classic authors (i.e., Calvin, Hengstenberg, Vitringa, etc.) and approaches somewhat from a polemical, apologetic viewpoint. His work exhibits a keen familiarity with details of Old Testament background material. His comments are direct, using a verse-by-verse outline. The synthetic material he does provide comes in the form of an introductory paragraph.

He makes an interesting note on the Hebrew of 11:3a (NAS), "And He will delight in the fear of the Lord." Alexander states that the only sense of this word "delight" actually confirmed by usage is "to smell". Therefore, His "smell" is in the fear of Jehovah, that is, "His power of perception, with a seeming reference to the pleasure it affords him."

As to the interesting third section of the chapter (vss. 6-9, the Effectual Characteristics on Earth in the Reign of the Branch), he expounds well the effects that will take place. But at the conclusion of the chapter, he does not attempt to time when this kingdom occurs, other than to say it is one of gradual fulfilment.

2. Albert Barnes' work is a very complete one. The treatment is generally exegetical and mildly polemical. It is verse by verse with a fair amount of comment on each verse. It treats the Hebrew text directly quite often, as well.

Barnes prefers not to fix an eschatological schedule for the vision Isaiah saw. Instead, he says the reference is to the actual facts of the reign, "only in that future time when the gospel shall be everywhere established on the earth." It is clear through, that Barnes does not see it as church age fulfilled. Like many commentaries of his time, it does not seek out a hermeneutical finality for the passage, but sticks to details.

It is a beneficial rendering of the passage though, mingling scholarly background information with something of a pietetical view to the future.

3. As with many of his commentaries, the work on our passage by John Calvin is classic. He begins with examination of whether the passage refers to Hezekiah, Josiah or Christ, as do many of the writers, and plainly chooses the latter. The treatment is expositional, with pertinent exegetical remarks given from time to time. Calvin is quite gracious in his handling of other viewpoints and retains balance as to what is most important among differing opinions.

As would be expected, Calvin's treatment represents the most primitive (delightfully so) kind of puritan writing. He always emphasizes the supremacy of Messiah and reads the Scripture

through that set of glasses. He seems to view the passage as speaking of the time in the future when all the world shall be restored--the time of the New Heavens and the New Earth. He is not too concerned with the timing, except that it shall surely occur. Calvin expounds the passage in the context of predominant Romanism and views it from that set of polemics (though actually the commentary is not primarily defensive in posture).

As with all other of his works I have yet read, Calvin's commentary is of the finest I have seen. He is not pedantic, but complete and alive. He almost always writes with a view towards the Christian's life. He is very usable, and very fresh. It is hard to believe that it is sixteenth century material.

4. The work by Franz Delitzsch is noticeably exegetical in nature. It is typical in style of later nineteenth century conservative writers, and is mindful of classic writers. It is very much interfaced with other Scriptures, also.

He does not see the critical verses 6-9 as symbolical, as Luther, Calvin and Vitringa, nor as literal, merely as in a beautiful dream (modern rationalism), but rather sees the events as literally realized in Messiah's future reign, "The realization of which is to be expected on this side of the boundary between time and eternity, and, as Paul has shown in Romans 8, is an integral link in the predestined course of the history of salvation."

The commentary is valuable in that it relates solid exegesis well in the discussion of hermeutics. It does not seem particularly pietistic, but is not barren of spiritual value either. I would recommend it highly.

5. The I. C. C. work of G. B. Gray in many ways is typical of that series. It is highly exegetical in format, with occasional hermeneutical comments. It does not seem particularly respectful of the unity of Scripture nor much of authority. Gray feels that the "golden age" idea of verses 6-9 is drawn by Isaiah from a more ancient oriental idea (as does Virgil). He does see this age as that of Messiah, and not free from sin (vs. 4), as distinguished from heaven. He opts to believe that various features were added by annotators (in vs. 6). The work is weak on synthesis, not surprisingly, since it is not convinced at the outset that synthesis is unified.

However, the exegetical remarks are of value, as are the textual remarks. And he does give some helpful background information. His knowledge of Hebrew grammar is also evident. But on the whole, Gray seems to offer little that other more conservative writers have.

6. The commentary by Matthew Henry is one of the more pietistic on the passage before us. Though not unaware of technical features, he does not write on these aspects, but comments on paragraphs (11:1-9; 10-16) in a straight expositional fashion. As with other writers, Henry does not feel constrained

to fix a place in eschatology for the reign here described, except to place it in the future. He is a thorough Calvinist, and therefore also seeks to place his vision of Christ as high as possible. His particular comments are edifying, enjoyable, and it is not surprising that he has been one of the most popular commentators for over two centuries. He writes for the general populace and views all doctrine as binding on the Christian's life. Beyond this, his strength is in the clear flow of his writing and commenting. He is succinct, but not overly brief. Each section has an introductory synthetic paragraph.

7. The work by H. A. Ironside is the first strictly dispensational interpretation I have encountered on the passage from Isaiah. It was compiled from wire recordings made in 1949 at Dallas Seminary by Ray Stedman. The work is very brief (Chapters 11 and 12 are covered in seven pages). But it is valuable from a pietistic standpoint. Indeed, the Holy Spirit applied the Scripture differently and alike to all Christians. Ironside is enjoyable to read. The style is straight exposition, commenting on the two paragraphs of Chapter 11 and the one in in Chapter 12. He does attempt to speak to the kingdom problem briefly, but clearly his purpose in the lecture was only to give a kind of synthetic overview. Ironside is one of those very popularized writers whose readers greatly love. What he offers is in the from of his own application and encouragement.