

BOOK REVIEWS

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Landy, Francis. *Poetry, Catastrophe, and Hope in the Vision of Isaiah*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. xiv + 483. Hardback £120.00.

Francis Landy’s *Poetry, Catastrophe, and Hope in the Vision of Isaiah* is the result of a long career of a close reader of the Hebrew Bible, particularly of the book of Isaiah. These days, when the daily news generates a struggle of optimism against pessimism, we ask for a biblical realism that can truly guide us amid conflicts. The book of Isaiah has a preeminent position in speaking hope to generations. But it is also a book that pushes the reader into bewilderment, as its various perspectives and leaps pose a significant challenge to any reader trying to detect patterns and systems of thinking. It is in this

landscape Landy brings the reader along, not so much to clear up the confusion as to explore the confusion in itself.

The book is not a commentary on the entire book of Isaiah but "in-depth forays into particular chapters" (p. 1; see also pp. 39, 380). He freely admits that there are "huge passages I have not touched, questions I haven't engaged with" (p. 387). The main focus is on close readings of selected sections in Isa 1–39, moving into the second part of Isaiah only in the book's last chapter.

Chapter one begins with general reflections about what constitutes a book, what a poet is, and shamanic poetics (see, e.g., pp. 10–11). He explains how his particular interest is in "issues of gender, kingship, poetics, and exile" (p. 30). In chapter two, he points out that there is a movement through the book of Isaiah from Zion being a daughter, spouse, and mother to Zion being a wife and mother in Isa 62–66 (p. 53). He sees the central issue at stake as "the presence of God in his Temple and the secure world order for which it stands" (p. 58). Chapter three is a reflection on death, especially as presented in Isa 5 and 28. He even claims that "YHWH or death, or YHWH as death, is the ultimate question of the book [of Isaiah]" (p. 389). Chapter four aims "to examine the motif of depression in the prophetic 'burdens,' or *maššā'ôt*, in Isaiah 13–23" (p. 126). He writes at the end of the chapter that "the poems ... thematize fragmentation, and attempt to impose structure on the violence and anarchy they depict" (p. 160).

Chapter five is the center of Landy's discussion, doing a close reading of what he calls the "constitutive enigma," found especially clear in the commission of Isaiah in Isa 6. He sees Isa 6 as "structurally and thematically key to the book" (p. 162; see also p. 1). He defines the "constitutive enigma" as "the injunction in Isaiah's initiatory vision not to understand, and, moreover, Isaiah's task of preventing understanding. This is the metacommunicative key to the book. If we understand, we have failed to understand, or at least to obey; moreover, Isaiah has failed to make us do so" (p. 36; see also pp. 15 and 162). He also pays special attention to Isa 29:1–14 and 7:14–25 in this chapter. Reflecting on Isa 29:11–12, he finds that the book juxtaposes what we can call the theologian versus the prophet: "The expert reader is easily identified as the sage, who represents the worldly wisdom which is the object of satire in this chapter [Isaiah 29] as well as in chs 5 and 28, and is the opposite of the true wisdom communicated by the prophet" (pp. 191–92). Therefore, it is hope in the prophet writing, suggesting "the possibility that the message may be deciphered" (p. 225). For him "the images of blindness and deafness ... pervade the book, as well as the promise of supernatural light" (p. 15).

In chapter six, Landy moves into a discussion of the child-king in Isa 7–11; 32, juxtaposing Isa 11 and 32 as presenting “an ideal and transformative image of kingship” (p. 234). The “democratization of kingship” (p. 393) he finds in Isa 32 introduces the theme in chapter seven. Chapter seven follows with a discussion of Isa 33, “one of the most difficult and strangest chapters in the book, and one that is often seen to be a key to it, because of its central position” (p. 285). Here, he juxtaposes two approaches to Isa 33, one seeing it as a mirror-text summarizing Isa 1–39 and introducing Isa 40–66 and the other seeing it as a liturgy (p. 393). He sees a “dialogue” between the two approaches (p. 289). He states that if Isa 33 is a mirror-text, then v. 13 is found in the middle of the mirror and therefore “the very centre of the book” (p. 292, see also p. 321). Seeing Isa 33 as a mirror text also invites a more holistic reading of the book as a whole (pp. 36 and 322).

Chapter eight ventures into the theme of exile in the second part of Isaiah. Here he explores “the displacement of the Davidic role on Cyrus, Israel, the servant and the prophet/poet,” as well as “the emergence of female images for God” (p. 395). He finds a chasm between Isa 39 and 40, and explores this chasm in the chapter (p. 328), primarily focusing on Isa 45:1–13 and 49:14–21 (p. 332). He shows how the common scholarly consensus that the so-called Second Isaiah is postexilic is tentative, and agrees with Goldingay and Payne in seeing it as “carefully constructed” (p. 332). The final ninth chapter summarizes and reflects on some of the perspectives already mentioned above.

When I picked up Landy’s book I had expectations that it would bring me to a clearer understanding of what Isaiah as a book truly is about. But early I experienced frustration and disappointment—even irritation. I am not as much interested in Landy’s thoughts, as in reading the book to get a better understanding of Isaiah itself. But again and again, I felt that Landy’s discussion became a foil, eclipsing the text of Isaiah itself. Landy is versed in contemporary critical theories and often flirts with authors like Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, etc., but I seldom found these to be very helpful in really understanding the Isaianic text. Landy’s book leaves the reader understanding less than they thought they did before picking it up. And this seems to be exactly Landy’s purpose.

Gradually I begun understanding what he is attempting, I think. Especially chapter five and his discussion of the “constitutive enigma” is essential to understanding Landy’s project, and it helps to be patient till you get there. Landy’s focus is primarily upon the literary dimensions of the text, and more specifically upon the poetic, and precisely the metaphor (pp. 39,

396, 399). In deconstructionist readings, he resists closure of the text, keeping open an endless interpretation and indulging the enigmas of the text. At the end of the book, he explains what I sensed all along in the book, namely, a lack of direction: "One problem that my readers sometimes have is that they cannot see a logical argument. That is because at every point there are innumerable lateral as well as linear connections. A passage may have a structure, proceeding from beginning to end, as does the entire book, but at every stage there will be byways, linkages with other texts near and far, an intertextual universe.... My work is like that of an art critic, analysing a painting or sculpture, in which every part might reflect every other" (p. 401). The reason his book appears to lack directionality, I would ascribe to his understanding that his analysis "is exploratory, in that I have not known quite where I was going" (p. 399).

And at the same time, he has a direction, defined by what I would call more contemporary perspectives. I think this is what obscures his book for me. In one sense, he reflects his way through close reading, trying to follow the text wherever it takes him. On the other hand, he has a fondness for contemporary issues and spotlights these whenever he gets the chance—obscuring the close reading (see his "queering" of Isaiah on p. 32 and his frequent reflections on the transgender as examples).

Landy does not see it as his task to bring his readers to the original meaning, as he says, "because I am sceptical that there was any single audience to which the text was addressed, and in part because I do not think the contemporary audience should have priority over any other one" (p. 398). He is skeptical of historical reconstructions as the basis for how to read the text (pp. 399–400). It reminds me of Benjamin Sommer's criticism of pseudo-historicism, where scholars with overconfidence associate historical periods with thematic elements in a text, as the basis for the compositional history. Landy is "reluctant ... to ascribe everything to the Persian period." Rather, he sees good reasons for taking many texts as "contemporaneous with the events on which they comment," mentioning the Egyptian embassies of Isa 30–31 as examples (p. 4). He is critical to "ascribing all prophecies of doom to the pre-destruction era, and prophecies of restoration to the post-destruction one" (p. 5). But the question of dating is not central to him. Instead, his "concern is how history is transformed into literature, the various ways in which history is imagined" (p. 5).

This also highlights another aspect in his presentation. He ends chapter two by stating that "only if one really knows the text, as ancient readers surely would have done, does one know how mystifying, obfuscatory, and

exorbitantly rich it is" (p. 71). But it is paradoxical that Landy, from the outset, still does not show interest in how ancient readers might have understood the text. He reads it almost solely from a modern perspective. To me, it is not clear how it is possible to *really* know the text, if we do not understand what was meant by the author and how it was likely understood by the initial readers in their historical context and with their literary conventions. Landy does not come across as really "knowing the text"—and even does not appear too interested in it—given how he often is satisfied when he has explored the obscurity of the enigmas.

Related to this is his "close reading and internalization" (p. 71). While it is clear to me that he is an eminent close reader, at least of the literary aspects of the text, I wonder what he means by "internalization." I do not see a transformation of the reader in what he is writing, but more how modern reading strategies neutralize and mute the biblical text. I am reading Landy and see that he tries to make the text fly poetically, but I feel he seldom really makes it take wings. He says a lot about the text, and still I feel I need to be patient between each time I read something that really makes the text come alive. Admittedly, it might be that Landy's interest is the poetic, but mine is different.

Landy's approach also raises the question of whether close reading itself may lead to confusion rather than understanding. Close reading can also lead to confusion—either in the end or as a means of gaining true knowledge. Landy's point that understanding must come with "supernatural light" (p. 15) challenges much of the theological guilds as it is practiced these days (see p. 37). Landy's book is itself a struggle with words to express reality, and an imitation of the struggle he finds in the book of Isaiah itself: "Writing is difficult, a struggle against the impossibility of understanding our world, our selves, the catastrophes and hopes which constitute our lives, of which the book of Isaiah, and hence my book, are one expression" (p. ix).

He writes: "I am inveterately atomistic. That is why I have covered relatively little of the text. What I lack in breadth I perhaps make up in depth" (p. 398). I would say that the main value in Landy's reading is found in his analysis through close reading, rather than synthesis. As mentioned, he tends to resist the latter. My favorite sentence from the book is where Landy defines his method as holding his head in his hands till the text begins to make sense: "I am often accused of being obscure by historical critics. I don't see my task as one of paraphrase and simplification. It is too easy to do. Instead, I respond to the strangeness and obscurity of the text. I sometimes say that my only method is to hold my head in my hands until the text begins to make sense" (p. 400; see also p. 2). Many can resonate with his open

reflection: "Hours are spent looking at a text which resists interpretation, and I castigate myself for wasting my time so profitlessly" (p. 401). All said, I still want to credit Landy for his close readings. Again and again, he points out dilemmas and enigmas that cannot be solved by easy answers. He writes: "All deconstruction invites reconstruction, which is the task of the second half of the book, on the other side of the disaster" (p. 230; see also pp. 20 and 404). It is fully understandable that Landy was not able to cover everything in this one volume, but I do hope his prospect of writing another book on the reconstruction in the second part of Isaiah will materialize and complement this volume (p. 39).

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Mueller, Ekkehardt, and Elias Brasil de Souza, eds. *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*. Silver Spring, MD: Review & Herald, 2022. Pp. xvii + 608. ISBN 978-0925675-34-7. Paperback \$25.00.

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Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective, edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, offers a thorough examination of sexuality through a Seventh-day Adventist biblical framework. As the second volume following *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, this 608-page work features contributions from multiple scholars across 20 chapters. It explores a wide range of topics, including marriage, cohabitation, polyga-