

The Drama is Israel (and God is the Author)

by Lynn Andrew

The most important decision everyone must make is what to do with Jesus Christ. Of course much comes with that. The Bible, for example. If you have not come to terms with the Bible either directly or through some agent, you have nothing substantial on which to base your decision.

It is impossible to read the Bible without noticing that Israel permeates it. Therefore it is impossible to interpret the Bible without deciding what to do with Israel. The choices boil down to either accepting that Israel has a permanent role in God's economy or deciding that Israel's role was transitory.

The vast majority of Christians go with the transitory-Israel model. The only problem with that is the Bible disagrees. How could this be? You do not have to look far to discover one plausible reason for this unreasonable bias: all Gentiles are all born antisemitic, and it takes an effort to overcome that feeling, just as it takes an effort to mitigate one's own tendency to favor oneself above others. But antipathy toward Jews in the whole range of sins is in class by itself, as history shows. Quite obviously there is a diabolical incentive in it. These are very elementary facts. It is also indisputable that, historically, disputes between Christians and Jews over interpretations of the Jewish Bible are charged with jealousy on both sides, to put it mildly.

The expedient of denying Israel's central and permanent role in God's plan gets rid of the symptom, but it is like the expediency of remaining self-centered. Ultimately the sin must be dealt with, and only the God who made himself known to the world through Israel can do away with it.

The surge of dispensationalism was an evidence of just that; its eschatology freely recognized the continuing role of Israel as a special agent of God, in spite of historical interruptions. The opposition to dispensationalism is essentially the opposition to the literal future reign of Jesus Christ on earth—complete with the obsolete trappings envisioned by biblical prophets. While it is possible to envision a sterile Millennium free of Jewish influence, even using Scripture to make the case, the effort must include interpretations borrowed from the amillennial exegetic scheme that depreciates much of Bible prophecy.

So when you make your decision about what to do with Israel, you have made a decision about how the Bible is to be interpreted, which means you have made a decision about what the Bible is: you have adopted a theory of inspiration that you may not agree with. If you interpret the Bible in a way that expunges the future role of Israel, you have decided that God did not intend for it to always mean quite what it says, which may sound harmless enough, but what that implies is that you (through the expositors of your choice) have substituted your own inspiration where a more straightforward reading would have given more credence to the meaning that the authors intended. This is not necessarily a bad thing in principle, but if there is even an appearance of

demoting Israel, it frightens me. There is too much evidence that the devil is in that same business.

An example of amillennial exegesis is John D. Watts' revised commentary on Isaiah (Word Biblical Commentary series). An eminent scholar, Dr. Watts made a heroic effort to comprehend the book of Isaiah, and though he expresses his achievement in the tentative language of his profession, he makes it clear that he highly recommends the conclusions of this work that spanned much of his career and into which he put his heart and soul. Who wouldn't? While he struggled to get it all tucked into a comprehensive system, he succeeded in becoming recognized as a major contributor to the Isaiah literature. Many others have done this too, producing volumes of equal bulk, and have done it quite differently. Dr. Watts both stands on their shoulders and at the same time draws the whole "Vision" together in a way that no one else dared attempt.

This is where the profession of biblical scholarship inevitably leads. As with any other academic pursuit, a successful career is defined by recognition through publishing, and that requires creating something novel, if not useful. Hence we have an industry of "scholarly progress" finding new ways to read and comprehend the supposedly sacred texts.

Had I omitted "supposedly" in the previous sentence, it would have been kinder, but that word points directly to the thesis of this essay: there is a tension between comprehending sacred writings and their sacredness. When a progressive professional scholar comes to the end of his work, either he has "seen through

it" or he has more work to do. It is the same in any science. Dr. Watts has done to Isaiah what a biologist does to a human being: they have explained away the soul.

If both the biologist and Dr. Watts are right, it means the death of anything substantial on which to base one's faith, for the connection between Isaiah and the New Testament is so strong that reducing the dimensions of the former seriously undercuts the latter. The New Testament over and over again points to the prophets and Isaiah in particular as having foreseen very definite things about Jesus Christ, using the language of "fulfillment." It is impossible to honestly say that the New testament writers pointed to Isaiah as an example or a model or even a foreshadowing of events in the first century AD. They definitely regarded Isaiah's prophecies as predictive of what had recently transpired. There are many examples of this. Seeing them gathered in one place makes it all the more clear that to tamper with Isaiah is to weaken the whole edifice of Scripture.

- And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)
- And he said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms concerning me." (Luke 24:44)
- And there was delivered to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and re-

covering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say to them, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4:17-21) Watts, after a lengthy effort to match this to the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the grace of the emperor of Persia, makes a one-sentence comment about Jesus applying it to himself: "Jesus identified himself directly with this role and this passage." Watts is not able to admit the truth of what Jesus said: "This day this scripture is **fulfilled**." There is a definite difference between being identified with the role of a past actor and fulfilling a prediction.

- Search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. (John 5:39)
- That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "... The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." (Matt 4:14) In commenting on this (Isaiah 9:1-2), Watts summarizes his interpretation of messianic prophecy: "The brunt of the Vision's [Isaiah's] message is actually antimessianic, projecting a future for Jerusalem and God's people, but not for the Davidic dynasty. What the OT, including Isaiah, can only record is promises and ideals that contrast starkly with human reality, the NT invites the Christian to expect to see fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Son of David and Divine King of Heaven and Earth, at the end of the age." After blowing away the scholarly smoke, what this says is that New Testament writers re-

cycled the language of certain (OT) scriptures to foster a vision of the return of Christ. This is a far cry from "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet."

- **Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matt 5:17-18)**
- **That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "Himself took our infirmities, and bore our sicknesses." (Matt 8:17) Remarks about Watts' treatment of Isaiah 53 appear later in this essay.**
- **That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "Behold my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth justice to victory. And in his name shall the Gentiles trust." (Matt 12:17-21) (Cited from Isaiah 42:1-3) After Watts' explanation that the servant is the emperor of Persia, he makes a brief comment on how the "servant role" also applies to Jesus: "The NT has caught the royal as well as the Mosaic implications for the servant role and related them to Jesus."**
- **And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: By hearing ye shall hear and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see and shall not perceive. (Matt:13:14)**
- **Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, "This people draws nigh to me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." (Matt 15:7-9)**

- But all this was done that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. (Matt 26:56)
- As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us. (Luke 1:70)
- And he said to him, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." (Luke 16:31) Obviously (and sadly for Dr. Watts) Jesus had a much more concrete view of prophecies concerning himself than Dr. Watts did, who thought nothing of disagreeing with the inspired Word.
- For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" (Matt 3:3)
- Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (John 1:45)
- It is written in the prophets, "And they shall be all taught of God." [Isaiah 54:13] Every man therefore that has heard and has learned of the Father comes to me. (John 6:45)
- That the saying of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, "Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe because that Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart that they should not see with their eyes nor understand with their heart and be converted, and I should heal them." These things said Isaiah when he saw his glory and spoke of him. (John 12:38-41)
- And when they agreed not among themselves they departed after Paul had spoken one word: "Well spoke the Holy Ghost by Isaiah

the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say, Hearing you shall hear and shall not understand, and seeing you shall see and not perceive. For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and should be converted, and I should heal them.'" (Acts 28:25-27)

- But those things, which God before had shown by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he has so fulfilled. (Acts 3:18)
- Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:21)
- Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days. (Acts 3:24)
- To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believes in him shall receive remission of sins. (Acts 10:43)
- And Philip ran to him and heard him read the prophet Isaiah and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, except some man should guide me?" And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth. In his humiliation his judgment was taken away, and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the earth." And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I pray thee, of whom speaks the prophet this? —of himself or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached to him Jesus. (Acts 8:30-35)

- But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah said, "Lord, who hath believed our report?" (Rom 10:16)
- And again, Isaiah said, "There shall be a root of Jesse and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in him shall the Gentiles trust." (Rom 15:12)

Dr. Watts must discount all of this since his implied theory of inspiration rules out predictive prophecy. It also rules against typology as being an intention of the Holy Spirit. Therefore any connection between Isaiah and events that occurred after it was written must be by way of what is commonly called application—or referencing as a similarity, or citing as an example—which lies outside the domain of scholarship.

He does point out that Isaiah 53 has made an important contribution to the understanding of Christ as a suffering servant. The gospel writer Matthew agrees: "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.'" (Matt 8:17.) But Watts does not agree with Matthew about the direct connection to Jesus as the suffering servant. In Dr. Watts' view, "The importance of chap. 53 lies in showing God's attitude toward and use of innocent death to accomplish peace and healing for the community." But he cannot ignore the massive attention that has been given to Isaiah 53 regarding its predictive prophecy. Yet personally he cannot go further than to say, "So there is ample precedent for using the words of Isa 53 to confess the Christian faith." To solve this problem he enlists Calvin to give him words for an exhibit that he apparently includes in his commentary volume to shield him from criticism

for ignoring what is built into not only traditional Christian doctrine but the New Testament itself. If Watts cared for that point of view, he would have written it himself.

In his dramatized translation of Isaiah 53, Dr. Watts has Darius, the Persian emperor, be the subject of verse 2, and it is Darius speaking in verses 7-9, which ordinary Bible readers attribute to the Holy Spirit speaking through Isaiah. He takes verse 10 as speeches from three sources: "Heavens," YHWH, and "Earth," YHWH speaking to Darius. The suffering servant in his view is probably Zerubbabel. This is an example of the lengths Dr. Watts goes to make the book of Isaiah the work of a post-exilic author. In order to do that he must minimize the predictive successes of Isaiah. Really it is the other way around: it makes more sense that liberal scholars have sawed Isaiah asunder in order to explain away his predictive success. This is not a necessary characteristic of amillennial scholars, however, for there are in that camp those who allow Isaiah to be the author of his entire book. But they must ignore what appears to apply to the future resurrection of Israel; if they were to do a thorough job of it they would have to come up with something similar to what Dr. Watts has done.

This is not to say that there is no use in scholarship. If we are serious about our faith, we take it to be part of the same reality that is discovered by exploring everything. So the information that a researcher such as Dr. Watts gathers and organizes and presents in readable form (as he does) is indeed valuable. But most of that information can be found elsewhere, and it hardly

begins to tame the book of Isaiah. As mentioned earlier, scholars tend to assume that it is their job to comprehend Scripture: it is merely a logical extension of their research. Fortunately Dr. Watts did not succeed in taming the prophet. If he had, it would have been the end of the road of faith for some of us who depend on a high view of inspiration.

In a nutshell what Dr. Watts has attempted to do is encompass all the writings that we find in the book of Isaiah in a framework detached from any major eschatological significance. Further to holding these unruly Scriptures more firmly in their historical context, he has arranged to comprehend virtually all of Isaiah's prophecy as being non-predictive, which is a considerable feat to the extent that the text is seriously addressed. No doubt it was great fun, but it clearly is not an entirely honest effort when things that don't fit are minimized or not addressed seriously. Ultimately he oversimplifies the Scriptures, which make him the editor along with his imaginary redactor. In spite of the scholarly tone of humility, he is taking upon himself a major responsibility for the end product. But it is done well, and it is very nice.

Dr. Watts makes a show of being strong on the sovereignty of YHWH, but it is clear that he wants to make sure that the Davidic dynasty will never be reestablished in any literal way, which means having God modify his plans—or what it seemed that he had said about his plans—for the nation Israel. Both Dr. Watts and God must want to do this, for it would never do to have the expositor at odds with the One who is presumed to be the author. But when the expositor takes responsibility for comprehending

Isaiah in such a limiting system, he has to encroach on ground that belongs to the Holy Spirit. By forcing his interpretations to keep Israel out of Dr. Watts' own future, he makes himself the secondary author. Fortunately for the rest of us it is plain to see that his radical system does not work. If it did, I would throw away my Bible.

Curiously it is the anti-dispensation crowd who accuse us of imposing a system on Scripture when in his interpretation of God's purposes, Dr. Watts sets up his own little dispensations in order to end the national importance of Israel. There is drama, to be sure, but the drama is Israel, and the author is God, not John Watts. We must let the Bible tell the story and not make up another one. But the question, which still has to be answered, is "Why Israel?"

Consider that if God wanted to tell the entire world—all humankind who had become dull of hearing—about his character and expectations and plans, he would have to put it in a form that the entire world could be made aware of. It could not be so invasive that every individual person would "just know," like programmed robots—though for certain devout seekers it could be almost that. The witness of creation—of nature—speaks generally of the Creator, but there was much more to say than could be conveyed by that means. Tales and truths encoded in legends and the stars were a start, but they were subject to corrupting influences.

In order to withstand the corrupting influences of the enemy it would have to be in a permanent written form generated by inspiration and protected as sacred and holy by some agency that

would survive the ravages of time and war on earth. It could not be in the keeping of one man, even if he lived 150 years. It could not be in the keeping of the priests of a religion, for religions are unstable, spontaneously corrupting themselves and splintering into warring factions. It could not be in the keeping of an international guardian, for then it would be rewritten for the common denominator and become nothing. It could not be in the keeping of a nation strong enough to withstand all her external enemies, for such nations always decay and disintegrate from decadence within. The only possibility remaining was for his written Word to be in the keeping of a weak nation, a race bound together by blood and persecution—or an even weaker remnant of such a nation—that would persevere forever and maintain a sacred book as a testimony to the fact that the God who revealed himself to them is not only the God who directs history but also one who inspires poetry and prophecy about himself.

In order to encourage the persecuted custodians there would need to be incentives: the prophetic writings would have to promise them a special reward. But the purpose of writing in the first place was not for the benefit of one nation or of any nation; it was for all people, a revelation of God himself, of his love and his design to lift corrupted human souls to a restored place of fellowship with himself. So the guardian nation would have to make that known, and what better way than to be itself a model of the personal relationship with God?—thus transcending the provincial, favoritism-laden character of the writings.

If the life of this weak and inevitably stumbling race could be

seen as an analogy to one's own life, it could endear the writings to individuals of any race and nation. We are all Jews in that sense, but that is not all. While the nation must remain a symbol, it is also a real entity. To make the symbolic intent clear, the name of the nation would be the name of a man. To make the promises to the nation true, the capital of the nation would remain in the eye of the world and would be the focal point forever of Israel's and everyone's relationship to Israel's God.

The prophets promised that out of Israel would come a Savior who would rule not just a small empire as David did, but the entire world. When he was revealed in the flesh, he changed the world, and the calendar started over to mark his birth, but he has yet to fulfill the prophesies that puts him on a throne in Jerusalem. Jesus is thoroughly Jewish. The world may hate the Jews, but God loves them, for he is Jewish himself. It was his sacrifice and is his joy and his condescending grace today to continue grafting us Gentiles in to his Jewish family. The drama of Israel goes on; God is the author and has cast his Jewish son in the leading role.

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