

## OSWALD T. ALLIS AND THE QUESTION OF ISAIANIC AUTHORSHIP

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The fundamentalist-modernist conflict in American churches has become a fashionable subject in scholarly studies of late.<sup>1</sup> Several of these studies are concerned with the more visible social and doctrinal issues. This paper is an attempt to examine one of the less well-investigated issues of biblical interpretation that was debated in scholarly circles during the early twentieth century but that also filtered down to popular audiences through magazines and Bible study materials. The question of the authorship of the book of Isaiah became a virtual shibboleth on both sides of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict. Oswald Thompson Allis, professor of Semitic philology at Princeton Theological Seminary, editor of *The Princeton Theological Review*, and sometime professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, argued vigorously for single early authorship of the book of Isaiah, in the midst of increasingly overwhelming opposition. Here we will place O. T. Allis in his historical moment during an unsettled era in the life of the Presbyterian Church and consider his arguments for the “unity” of Isaiah as a contribution to the conservative cause in the church. Finally we will assess Allis’s argument for the unity of Isaiah in the light of his other OT contributions to highlight some of his methodological inconsistencies and propose some reasons why Allis may have stopped short of significant conclusions that would have placed him closer to his opponents than he may have liked.

### I. OSWALD T. ALLIS AND THE PRESBYTERIAN CONFLICT

H. L. Mencken once described the fundamentalist scourge by saying, “They are everywhere where learning is too heavy a burden for mortal minds to carry, even the vague pathetic learning on tap in the little red school houses.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the genius of Princeton Theological Seminary’s J. Gresham Machen attenuated even Mencken’s contempt for the cultural and intellectual backwardness of the fundamentalists. Machen, however, was not the only “Doctor

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Darryl G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994); and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism* 188.

Fundamentalism.”<sup>3</sup> Machen’s contemporary, O. T. Allis, son of the distinguished Philadelphia physician Oscar Huntington Allis, matched Machen’s academic work in depth and breadth. Before beginning his scholastic career, Allis obtained degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton University, and an earned doctorate in Assyriology from the University of Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Allis had a pedigree that few American religious scholars, fundamentalist or not, could match.

In the United States, a chasm divided the fundamentalists from the modernists or liberals. Machen explained the difference from his point of view, when he set out the purpose of his popular work *Christianity and Liberalism*: “We shall be interested in showing that despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.”<sup>5</sup> This perceived cleavage caused Machen, Allis, and their colleagues to view themselves as the praetorian defenders of orthodoxy. By the early twentieth century the fundamentalist-modernist debate had reached explosive conditions in the Presbyterian Church, and Princeton Seminary became the main battleground. As long as the conservative professors such as Machen, Allis, Robert D. Wilson, and Benjamin B. Warfield held Princeton, they held the high ground. The battle over seminary control became strategic; nonetheless, important tactical skirmishes were fought at the level of doctrine and hermeneutics.

The doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ, for example, was a veritable litmus test for orthodoxy, and similar disputes arose in OT interpretation. As professor of Semitic philology at Princeton, Allis concerned himself especially with the conflicts that had raged for some time in Europe over the authorship of the Pentateuch and Isaiah. Higher criticism emanating from Germany treated the Bible as ordinary human literature, and in so doing many of the traditional beliefs and interpretations of the Bible were abandoned. In his inaugural address at Princeton on October 10, 1922, Allis outlined what he saw as the two basic canons of critical scholarship. First, “The documents of the Old Testament, especially those dealing with the early period, are all more or less unreliable, and frequently cannot be accepted at their face value or in their obvious sense.” And second, “The materials contained in the Old Testament must be tested, sorted, supplemented, and the

<sup>3</sup> Mencken mourned the death of J. Gresham Machen in an elegy entitled “Doctor Fundamentalism” for *The Evening Sun*, and at the same time was able to continue his harangue against fundamentalists by comparing Machen to William Jennings Bryan: “Dr. Machen himself was to Bryan as the Matterhorn is to a wart.” Quoted by Darryl G. Hart, “‘Doctor Fundamentalism’: An Intellectual Biography of J. Gresham Machen, 1881–1937” (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1988) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Galbraith T. Hall, “Oswald Thompson Allis,” in *The Law and The Prophets* (ed. John H. Skilton et al.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974) 8–11.

<sup>5</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923) 7–8. Notably, Machen did not intend the term “un-Christian” as he applied it to his Modernist opponents as an opprobrium. He acknowledged Socrates and Goethe as “[towering] immeasurably the common run of men,” yet he urged that fact in no way made them Christian.

real history reconstructed, in so far as this is possible, by means of a comparative study, guided and controlled (where necessary) by the theory of evolution.”<sup>6</sup> Allis contended that as a consequence of employing these canons critical scholarship destroyed OT religion. Allis remained a presbyter in the Presbyterian Church of the U.S. his entire life, and even when the war in the Presbyterian Church had been quelled, Allis refused to lay down his arms. Years after he had left Princeton, Allis remained resolute in his convictions regarding higher criticism. The title of his 1949 article in *Christianity Today*, “Believe the Bible! or Believe Its Critics!” reveals that the fundamentalist-modernist chasm remained unbridged in Allis’s mind.<sup>7</sup>

In that article Allis reaffirmed his understanding of critical principles, and he exposed, in popular language, the various results of the critical method applied to Scripture in the case of the newly published *Westminster Study Edition of the Bible*. Allis was particularly displeased with the *Study Edition’s* handling of prophetic literature. He faults the editors of the *Study Edition* for affirming three different authors of Isaiah, suggesting the presence of later editorial redactions in Isaiah and Ezekiel, and restricting predictive prophecy particularly in the case of Isaiah. Before Allis, Joseph Addison Alexander, the precocious son of Princeton’s first professor Archibald Alexander, had made the clearest defense in English of the authorial unity of Isaiah.<sup>8</sup> Allis, taking Elijah’s mantle, laid out his most sustained attack on the *Study Edition* and on critical views of prophecy in general in his volume *The Unity of Isaiah*. This short but incisive apologetic not only gave the traditional arguments for the unity of Isaiah, but it provided lucid exegetical evidence that the Cyrus poem of Isa 44:24–28 could only be properly understood as a prediction of distant future events.

## II. ADDISON ALEXANDER AND THE CRITICS

Alexander’s work became the foundation upon which Allis would build by establishing the rules for orthodox interpretation of prophecy. Alexander did not leave behind a systematic and “definitive statement of his own principles of exegesis,” but the introduction to his commentary on Isaiah does provide some insight into the *Wunderkind’s* hermeneutical axioms.<sup>9</sup> Alexander was not so naïve as some conservative commentators who thought that prophecy must be, by the nature of the case, predictive: “It has been shewn

<sup>6</sup> Oswald T. Allis, “The Conflict over the Old Testament,” *PTR* 21 (1923) 79–115.

<sup>7</sup> Oswald T. Allis, “Believe the Bible! or Believe Its Critics!—The Inescapable Issue in Christian Education,” *Christianity Today: A Presbyterian Journal* (May 1949) 2–13.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah* (New York: Scribner, 1867; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> James H. Moorhead, “Joseph Addison Alexander: Common Sense, Romanticism and Biblical Criticism at Princeton,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 53 (1975) 56. Moorhead points out the *lacunae* in Alexander’s scholarship, although Marion Ann Taylor thinks that much can be learned from a careful analysis of Alexander’s lectures, diary notes, and published material. Mary Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School (1812–1929)* (San Francisco: Mellon Research University Press, 1992) 101–2.

already, by a historical and philological induction, that the scriptural idea of prophecy is far more extensive, that the prophets were inspired to reveal the truth and will of God, in reference to the past and present, no less than the future."<sup>10</sup> Nor did Alexander think that all those prophecies that did foretell the future had only one referent: "All predictions, or prophecies in the restricted sense, are not specific and exclusive, i.e. limited to one occasion or emergency, but many are descriptive of a sequence of events which has often been realized."<sup>11</sup> Alexander goes on to explain principles of interpreting metaphor, types, and genre, but under all these principles stood two standards of interpretation on which everything else must depend: faith and reason, in that order. "The laws of interpretation," explains Alexander, "may be well defined to be those of common sense, *controlled* by a regard to the divine authority and inspiration of the book, considered as a fact already established and received as true."<sup>12</sup> Princeton Seminary had been born from the marriage between Old School Presbyterianism and Scottish Common Sense Realism, and Alexander's hermeneutics resembled both parents: orthodoxy and empiricism. For the Princetonians, this combination meant recognizing both the divine and human qualities of Scripture. Alexander did not utterly reject the tools given him by the German higher critics, and his work has been explained as an uneasy rapprochement between nineteenth-century orthodoxy and criticism and, correlatively, the underlying realism and romanticism.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Alexander's fundamental critique of higher criticism, which Allis carried on after him, was both its confusion of the priorities of faith and reason and its disregard for the divinity of Scripture. The higher critics "appeal to their *critical feeling* as the ultimate ground for their decisions," rather than to the rule of faith.<sup>14</sup> This manifested itself according to James Moorhead in "the basic conviction of the contemporary German scholars—that religious truth had been and still was refined in history—(which) he dismissed as the most fundamental error of these 'new lights.'"<sup>15</sup> Moreover,

It may seem invidious and perhaps presumptuous to add, that this unsafe and two-edged instrument could scarcely be entrusted to worse hands than those of some late German critics, who, with all their erudition, ingenuity, and show of philosophical *aesthetics*, are peculiarly deficient in that delicate refinement and acute sensibility of taste, which a less profound but far more classical and liberal training has imparted even to inferior scholars of some other nations, and especially of England.<sup>16</sup>

According to Alexander, the critic's naturalistic presuppositions defied not only historic Christianity but artistic elegance to boot. This basic commit-

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, *Isaiah* 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 28 (emphasis mine).

<sup>13</sup> Moorhead, "Joseph Addison Alexander" 63.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, *Isaiah* 15.

<sup>15</sup> Moorhead, "Joseph Addison Alexander" 59.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, *Isaiah* 20.

ment to empiricism and divine inspiration continued in Allis's censure of the critical rejection of the "obvious sense" of Scripture and the critical commitment to comparative religion, as mentioned above. Thus, Allis furthered his predecessor's critique, albeit in a less acerbic manner.

### III. ALLIS'S CONTRIBUTION

Allis and Alexander identified the rejection or at least suppression of supernatural futuristic prediction as the material error resulting from the critical investigation of Isaiah.<sup>17</sup> On that basis, Allis prefaces his argument for authorial unity of Isaiah with two chapters explaining the basic and irreconcilable differences between "Prophecy According to the Critics" and "Prophecy According to the Bible." The "empirico-scientific" world view of the critics caused them to alter illegitimately one of two aspects of biblical literature. Either the situation of the prophecy must be reevaluated ("the prediction must have really been uttered much later than is stated"), or the scope of the prophecy must be reinterpreted ("the prediction did not originally refer to a far distant event . . . it was a general, vague, and indefinite utterance which dealt primarily with current or proximate events").<sup>18</sup> Allis quotes A. B. Davidson of the University of Edinburgh—one of his favorite opponents—to illustrate the critical attitude: "The prophet is always a man of his own time and it is always to the people of his own time that he speaks, not to a generation long after, not to us. And the things of which he speaks will always be things of importance to the people of his own day, whether they be things belonging to their internal life and conduct, or things affecting their external fortunes as a people among other peoples."<sup>19</sup> Allis admits that Davidson does not rule out prediction *in toto*, but his perspective does tend to minimize the predictive element in prophecy. Moreover, as Allis points out, Davidson does not see prediction as an essential aspect of prophecy. Allis's fear is realized in Davidson's conclusion that large portions of the book of Isaiah could not have been written by the son of Amoz because they do not speak directly to the historical situation in which the eighth-century prophet lived.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the critical emphasis on "original meaning" severs the significance of the prophet's words for his own generation from the significance of his words for later generations, thus making the prophet "a moral philosopher, whose predictions become little more than maxims which are applicable *mutatis mutandis* to every succeeding age."<sup>21</sup> Allis believed that if the book of Isaiah could be shown to have been written entirely by the

<sup>17</sup> O. T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), preface. Cf. Alexander, *Isaiah* 24. Both authors point out this perceived problem very early in their writing.

<sup>18</sup> Allis, *Isaiah* 3–4.

<sup>19</sup> A. B. Davidson, "Prophecy and Prophets," *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* 4:118. Quoted by Allis in *Isaiah* 2; see also "Believe the Bible!" 8.

<sup>20</sup> A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905) 245.

<sup>21</sup> Allis, *Isaiah* 21.

eight-century prophet, then both predictive prophecy and its ongoing relevance for all generations could be preserved.

Allis began his apologetic by explaining the classic proofs for authorial unity, most of which had been passed down from Alexander and other conservative scholars. These proofs may be summarized as follows. First, every one of the fifteen "Latter Prophets" commences with a heading, yet no distinct headings can be found anywhere within Isaiah. It would, therefore, be contrary to analogy for a group of prophecies to begin without a heading, as the critics claimed to be the case with Isaiah 40–66. Second, for twenty-five centuries of scholarship no one doubted the authorial unity of Isaiah (except for an obscure medieval Jewish scholar). Third, the NT authors, when quoting from diverse parts of Isaiah, always regard Isaiah as the author. Finally, Allis adds a proof unknown in Alexander's day. The recent discovery of the second-century BC "Isaiah Scroll" among the Dead Sea Scrolls gives no indication of division between chapters 39 and 40, the clearest case of an authorial break according to the critics. For Allis, the basic question then became not how many authors may have contributed to Isaiah, but simply whether there was more than one author at all.<sup>22</sup> The situation and scope of Isaiah 40–66 was the theater in which Allis launched his own offensive.<sup>23</sup>

Within these latter chapters of Isaiah, Allis believed the Cyrus prophecy was the watershed issue between orthodox and critical interpretation: "The two great themes, or we may say, personalities in Isaiah 40–66 are Cyrus and the Servant of the Lord."<sup>24</sup> Based on critical presuppositions, Isaiah's prophecy of King Cyrus could not have been written some 200 years before Cyrus appeared on the scene, as would have been the case if eighth-century Isaiah had written of the Assyrian king's sixth-century defeat of Babylon. If the critical assumptions regarding scope and situation were right, then a prophet would have no reason to write about events so distant from his own generation. These are assumptions, however, that Allis concluded were based on the naturalistic presupposition of the impossibility of precise prediction of remote future events.

Allis's response to such critical conclusions was his most significant and original contribution to the debate over the unity of Isaiah. He carefully argued from the literary context and structure of the Cyrus poem in Isa 44:24–28 that the author clearly intended to be understood as foretelling events. The poem was situated within a group of chapters intended "to comfort Israel by declaring and demonstrating the true character of the God of Israel," especially his transcendence over all other foreign gods.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the prophet's audience would expect a sign of such transcendent power, which the promise of a future redemption at the hands of a foreign king in verses 24–28 would meet. Allis demonstrated that the verbal structure of the poem has an undeniably chronological movement from the past, through

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 39–43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 48–50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 62–63.

the present, to future events, so that the poem climaxes in the prediction of the Lord's salvation through King Cyrus. He concluded: "We submit that if it was the aim of the prophet to represent Cyrus as belonging to a distant future and the mention of his name as highly significant and memorable for that very reason, he has accomplished his task with consummate skill. . . . If this argument be so, the mention of Cyrus by name ceases to be an argument against the unity of Isaiah but becomes an argument in favor of it."<sup>26</sup> This conclusion satisfied two very important purposes of Allis's work. First, Allis had shown that prediction was essential to the prophetic message, even central. He found Davidson's thesis—that prophets were only men of their own times—wanting. Second, Allis had safeguarded the apologetic value of predictive prophecy for the Christian faith. The Lord, through his prophets, revealed what was beyond the vision of humans. Clarence McCartney stated in the Foreword to Allis's book, "the fulfillment of Prophecy proves that Christianity is a divine revelation."<sup>27</sup> However, a much more important corollary to the prediction of Cyrus still needed to be addressed: the prediction of the Servant of the Lord.

According to Allis, supreme importance in Isaianic interpretation must be granted to the Servant passage of Isaiah 53. Traditional interpretation understood Isaiah 53 as a prediction of the future Messiah, namely Jesus, and it consequently maintained that Isaiah 53 constitutes certain evidence of the unity of OT and NT religion. Allis articulated his basic concern in just this vein: "[W]hether there be any vital connection between the Old Testament and the New, whether the great historic events of which we read in the Gospels can really be said to be the fulfillment of predictions in the Old Testament."<sup>28</sup> However, recent critical interpretation downplayed the predictive element, and the Servant song was understood to refer not to Jesus but to one of the writer's own contemporaries. Therefore, many of the critics concluded that the Church only later applied the Servant prophecy to Jesus of Nazareth, and this application cannot be called true predictive fulfillment because the original reference was not futuristic. According to Allis, however, if the Cyrus poem demonstrated the reality and centrality of prophetic prediction, then the predictive value of Isaiah 53 could no longer be minimized by dismissing prediction from the entire prophetic ministry.

#### IV. ALLIS'S OTHER WORK

The hermeneutical connection between the prediction regarding Cyrus and the prediction of the Suffering Servant is understandable from Allis's perspective. The critical assumption that prophets spoke to their own historical milieu undermined the traditional predictive messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53, which ultimately called into question the validity of the doctrine of supernatural divine inspiration, a doctrine that was at the core of the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 79–80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Foreword.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

fundamentalist-modernist conflict. During a period of such massive ecclesiastical conflict and doctrinal upheaval in the Presbyterian Church, Allis felt compelled to defend the traditional interpretation. For Allis and his colleagues, the ultimate stakes of prophetic interpretation were higher than mere intellectual bragging rights. In Allis's eyes, the vitality of historic orthodoxy was slowly bleeding away.

Allis took the critics to task over their exegesis and methodological presuppositions. An Assyriologist by training, he knew the value of comparative religion, but he questioned the normativity of extra-canonical evidence in interpretation. Like Alexander, he argued that the critics, though adept at addressing the humanity of Scripture, did not adequately account for its divinity. Allis also skillfully applied his expertise in OT exegesis to the problem of Isaianic unity. His penetrating analysis of the Cyrus poem could not be hastily dismissed, but it is debatable whether Allis himself achieved the hermeneutical consistency for which he strove. In the light of the full spectrum of Allis's OT work, we see that like many of his predecessors at Princeton, Allis judiciously appropriated many of the critical methods. However, Allis did not always apply these tools evenly to his task, and, further, Allis and his critics both adopted many of the same assumptions.

Initially, we must inquire into Allis's understanding of Isaianic authorship. Allis reminded his readers of the point that Alexander had made before him: the NT quotes Isaiah by name at least twenty times as the author of every part of the prophetic book, and, therefore, "such evidence indicates with sufficient clearness that none of the New Testament writers 'dreamt' that the name Isaiah was of doubtful or ambiguous meaning. Such facts as these should carry great weight with every Christian who values the testimony of the New Testament."<sup>29</sup> Allis wrote another highly polemical OT study entitled, *The Five Books of Moses*, in which he argues against the Graf-Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis for "substantial Mosaic" or "essential Mosaic" authorship of the Pentateuch.<sup>30</sup> In this argument for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Allis also called upon the inspired and infallible NT as his star witness.<sup>31</sup> The NT authors all consistently testify that the Pentateuch is the work of Moses. However, in this analogous prosecution Allis objected to those who argued that Moses wrote or dictated every word in the Five Books, because, to give one example, the account of Moses' own death could not have been written by the man Moses himself.<sup>32</sup> This raises a question about Allis's conclusion regarding Isaianic authorship. If the NT authors assert that the Pentateuch is from Moses even though he did not write every word, then is it possible that NT ascriptions of Isaianic origin do not necessarily imply that the eighth-century prophet wrote every word? In his defense of authorial unity, Allis never addresses the possibility that the

<sup>29</sup> Allis, *Isaiah* 42–43.

<sup>30</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1949) 12–14.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.* 8–9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 12. This view of "essential Mosaic authorship" was not new at Princeton with O. T. Allis. See Peter Enns's recent article on William H. Green's formulation of "essential Mosaic authorship" in "William Henry Green and the Authorship of the Pentateuch: Some Historical Considerations," *JETS* 45 (2002) 385–403.

book of Isaiah could have contained redactional insertions just as he believed the Pentateuch probably did, nor did he address the apparent inconsistency between his handling of the Pentateuch and his handling of Isaiah. Given the gravity Allis assigned to the Isaiah question and the intensity of the ecclesiastical situation, it is not surprising that Allis did not address this issue. Possibly, he did not object to minor redaction in Isaiah, but he felt that this would, in the eyes of some, tip him down the slippery slope towards Liberalism, and so the point was better left buried. This leads to a further question regarding the harmony of Allis's conclusions on the Pentateuch and on Isaiah.

The critical method of reevaluating the prophetic situation explained away any predictive elements, so Allis said. According to critical reasoning, since the prophet was a man of his time, if he prophesied about Cyrus, then the actual person Cyrus could not be far removed in time from the prophet himself. Foretelling distant future events did not occur simply because it was not the prophet's concern. In order to safeguard the divinity of Scripture, the burden as Allis saw it was to prove that prophets could and did foretell future events by divine inspiration, however relevant such prophecy may or may not have appeared in the prophet's own situation. Both Allis and the critics assumed that a given prophecy could have only one originating situation. The critics assumed that the prophecy must be relevant to the prophet's immediate situation, and Allis assumed that the relevance of predictive prophecy was not necessarily obvious in the prophet's immediate situation.

Not only did Allis reject the Documentary Hypothesis but he also dismisses the other extreme, a mechanical view of inspiration that insists that every word must have been directly dictated from God to Moses as "unnecessary and even irreverent": "Moses doubtless knew the oral traditions current in his day; and he may also have had access to written documents of great antiquity."<sup>33</sup> Obviously, Moses did not experience the events recorded in the book of Genesis first hand. Yet, as the writer of the Pentateuch, he had somehow acquired knowledge of these historical accounts, and Allis thought it no strain on the doctrine of inspiration to allow for Moses' use of sources, therefore making Moses at least partially a redactor, though an inspired redactor to be sure. The hyper-conservative view that said Moses could only have received historical information immediately from God "confuses the important difference between revelation and inspiration."<sup>34</sup> In other words, Allis allowed for the possibility of a historical discrepancy between the original situation of Moses' source (whether spoken or written) and the situation in which Moses wrote. Thus, in the case of the Pentateuch, Allis allowed for a dual-situation document. The early Genesis accounts must have had an original historical situation in which the stories were formulated as well as to a secondary situation in which Moses compiled and redacted the stories into the first five books of the OT. However, in his work on Isaiah Allis does not account for the possibility of redaction and compilation in prophetic literature

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

as he does in Pentateuchal history. It is unclear why Allis never mentioned the possibility of inspired redaction in the case of Isaiah, but probably he felt this would ultimately destroy the validity of prediction. In fact, such an account probably would have made for a more formidable defense as well as accounted for some of the critical concerns regarding the diverse situational intimations in Isaiah.

A second assumption shared by both Allis and his rivals concerned the scope of prophecy. Allis was fond of quoting Davidson's statement that prophets were men of their times speaking only to men of their times.<sup>35</sup> Allis realized that Davidson's supposition did not absolutely destroy the possibility of prediction, but it certainly obscured it. In one place Davidson writes, "least of all can it be pretended that the predictions are only apparent, being in fact, written *post eventum*," yet later he writes that "prophecy was in the main an ethical instrument, directed to the conduct and the religious life of the people, and not to any great extent occupied with the future, *at least not with minute occurrences of the future*."<sup>36</sup> Allis and his Princeton colleague Geerhardus Vos did not know quite what to do with Davidson's ambiguous statements, and sensing a mild equivocation in Davidson on the point of prediction, both ultimately concluded that Davidson's view of prediction was vacuous.<sup>37</sup> Davidson's program required him to interpret the referents of the prophetic message as historically proximate to the prophet himself. Allis argued against Davidson that, "by reducing the *scope* and the definiteness of its [prophecy] reference to future event, the predictive element can be largely made to disappear from Old Testament prophecy."<sup>38</sup> Allis consistently maintained that the scope of true prediction was necessarily oriented toward the distant future: "In this discussion of prophecy the word 'predict' is used in its ordinary sense of *foretell*."<sup>39</sup>

Allis and Davidson assumed that the lens of prophetic prediction was *either* near-sighted (Davidson) *or* far-sighted (Allis) in the case of Isaiah; in other words, the historical scope of prophecy must be either recent history or future history. Yet, this either-or tension is not consistent with Allis or Alexander's interpretation of other passages. As mentioned earlier, Addison Alexander stated as one principle for prophetic interpretation that "all predictions, or prophecies in the restricted sense, are not specific and exclusive, i.e. limited to one occasion or emergency, but many are descriptive of a sequence of events which has often been realized."<sup>40</sup> Alexander provides an example of just such a prediction: "The promise of a prophet like unto Moses, in the eighteenth of Deuteronomy, according to one of its most plausible interpretations, comprehends the promise of a constant succession of inspired men, so far as this should be required by the circumstances of the

<sup>35</sup> Davidson, "Prophecy" 4.118. Quoted by Allis, *Isaiah* 2; see also "Believe the Bible!" 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Prophecy* 120 and 245 (emphasis mine).

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix II in Allis, *Isaiah* 127; and Geerhardus Vos, review of A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, PTR 4 (1906) 115–20.

<sup>38</sup> Allis, *Isaiah* 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 126.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander, *Isaiah* 29.

people, of which succession Christ himself was to be the greatest."<sup>41</sup> According to Alexander, the scope of the Deuteronomy prophecy included fulfillment in the prophet Isaiah but it also included an ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In this manner the prophecy had a dual scope, if also a multi-dimensional scope that included the fulfillment in all the prophets of Israel from Moses to Jesus. Allis concurred with Alexander's interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 in his Pentateuchal theology text, *God Spoke by Moses*. "This is a prophecy," he writes, "which has its complete fulfillment in Jesus Christ. . . . But verses 20–22 indicate quite clearly that it also refers in a very real, though lower sense, to that great succession of prophetic voices, whose supreme function was to point Israel to the Prophet, Priest, and King who was to be the Saviour of Israel and of the world."<sup>42</sup> Allis and Alexander understood that Deuteronomy 18 was neither far-sighted nor near-sighted, but it was a wide-angle lens that captured in vivid detail both the foreground and the background. Although Allis recognized that the Deuteronomy prophecy had successive or episodic fulfillments, he never suggested a similar interpretation of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In this way, Allis differed little from his critical counterparts, many of whom only understood the Suffering Servant to be a personification of exilic Israel.<sup>43</sup> Why did Allis not see the inconsistency in his hermeneutical method? Would applying the notion of successive fulfillment to Isaiah 53 have weakened the OT's witness to Christ in Allis's mind?

#### V. CONCLUSION(S)

The diverse Isaianic interpretations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical hermeneutics offered little succor to those searching for a secure underpinning for biblical authorship. O. T. Allis wanted to articulate a learned defense of the traditional interpretation of Isaiah. His primary concern, as well as that of Addison Alexander and the older Princeton school, was to safeguard the divinity of the Bible, or in systematic theological terms, the doctrine of inspiration. The unity and continuity of OT and NT religion, the lifeblood of Christianity in Allis's mind, depended on this. One way of safeguarding inspiration in the case of Isaiah was to preserve the real predictive nature of the prophetic voice, since prediction of future events was obviously the prerogative of God alone. True prediction must have a singular provenance and a definite future referent, which strongly implied a single author. The result for Allis's analysis of Isaiah was that authorship and inspiration were collapsed into one. Yet he did not carry this methodological presupposition into his studies in other biblical literature, namely, the Pentateuch, where Allis's understanding of inspiration accommodated redaction, compilation, and post-Mosaic insertions as well as episodic prophetic fulfillment.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>42</sup> O. T. Allis, *God Spoke by Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1951) 145.

<sup>43</sup> Allis names Moffat as one such interpreter; see *Isaiah* 91.

It is as difficult to say exactly what caused this inconsistency in Allis's work as it is to pry into the psyche of anyone from a bygone generation, but several suggestions may move us toward an answer. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy, in which Allis's mind was shaped, likely had a pervasive impact on his life's work. Allis seemed to carry into all his work Machen's dictum that Christianity and liberalism were irreconcilable. One way that this assumption manifested itself was Allis's inability, or at least unwillingness, to recognize the subtle differences between various critical positions. In his mind, they all equally led down the path of infidelity; even moderates like Davidson could not be trusted. Allis, however, was not feeble-minded, and it would be an oversimplification to attribute his conclusions merely to rash presumption.

H. H. Rowley criticized Allis in a 1951 review: "The author completely ignores the nature of the argument for Deutero-Isaiah, which is that here we do not have a prophet's announcement to an eighth century [*sic*] audience of things that should be in the distant future, but that we have a prophet's assumption that he and his hearers are in a sixth century [*sic*] background."<sup>44</sup> Many of the critics were not concerned with the question of whether the prophets *could* predict the future by divine inspiration, but rather whether the prophets *would* predict the future, especially in a manner that seemed to disregard their contemporary situation. Allis dismissed the substance of this critical question by assuming that an *a priori* rejection of supernaturalism was at the root of the problem.<sup>45</sup> Since only God could know the future in such detail, to demur that the prophet offered such a view of the future obscured and therefore denied the supernatural element. Allis failed to ask what it means that "Isaiah was intended for a particular readership (Israel) but that its message had non-Israelite implications (for 'the nations')." <sup>46</sup> It seems necessary on Allis's view to say that prediction held little significance for the prophet's own generation, particularly since the present generation would never be able to apply the prophetic test of Deut 18:21: "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken presumptuously." Ironically, this tends to sever the significance of the prophet's words for his own generation from the significance for later generations—exactly what Allis accused the critics of doing.

Finally, Allis's assumptions are also partly grounded in what we might call a "mechanistic view" of prophecy in general and of prediction in particular. Allis assumed that prediction must have an "obvious sense": objective,

<sup>44</sup> H. H. Rowley, review of Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah*, in *Eleven Years of Bible Bibliography* (ed. H. H. Rowley; Indiana Hills: The Falcon's Wing, 1957) 409.

<sup>45</sup> Recently, Christopher R. Seitz has suggested, "For a prediction to be valid, it must have been uttered meaningfully to contemporaries." "How Is the Prophet Isaiah Present in the Latter Half of the Book? The Logic of Chapters 40–66 within the Book Isaiah," *Word Without End* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 172; repr. from *JBL* 115 (1996) 219–40.

<sup>46</sup> Seitz, "Isaiah and the Search for a New Paradigm: Authorship and Inspiration," *Word Without End* 115.

non-metaphorical, and well-defined.<sup>47</sup> This may be a consequence of the realist-empirical atmosphere at Princeton, which also tended to view historical writing as an objective collection of facts. The critical question was also partially a genre question, which Allis neglected to address because of this assumption. How does the prophetic genre portray the future? Herman Ridderbos, the conservative reformed Dutch theologian, set forth a different understanding of the prophetic genre some ten years after Allis's Isaiah treatise appeared:

The function of prophecy is consequently not that of a detailed projection of the future, but is the urgent insistence on the certainty of the things to come. . . . Just as the time of the future is ultimately contracted to one point, so the world-space is to him [the prophet] a totality and not an accurately differentiated magnitude. We see that the prophets paint the future with the palette of their own experience and project the picture within their own geographical horizon.<sup>48</sup>

Ridderbos was certainly sympathetic to the same notion of inspiration that Allis was committed to, yet he did not see the need to interpret prophecy as woodenly predicting future events. Had Allis maintained a similar, more dynamic view of prophecy, he may have been able to engage the critical questions more deeply, as well as fortify his own apologetic.

Today, it is not uncommon for conservative scholars to accept some diversity of authorship in Isaiah, or for liberal scholars to accept the literary unity of the book.<sup>49</sup> Even in Allis's own day many did not come to the same conclusions as Allis did regarding the antithesis between critical conclusions and fidelity. H. H. Rowley once wrote in a personal letter to O. T. Allis's friend and fellow OT scholar Edward J. Young, "As I believe you know, I still adhere to the critical school though I am by no means tied to its results . . . [however] I do not start with any anti-supernatural assumptions or any evolutionary assumptions; and I do not think that the fullest and most critical study of all the evidence available to us threatens in the slightest degree the foundations of the Christian faith."<sup>50</sup> A fair consideration of scholarly evidence as well as a devotion to traditional orthodoxy will always be a tight-rope, however, and the vitality of biblical exegesis depends on self-conscious reflection in our interpretive forays.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Recall Alexander's demand that interpretation be in accord with the laws of "common sense" and "taste."

<sup>48</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962) 524–25.

<sup>49</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, some twelve years after Allis's volume, wrote, "In the opinion of the present writer it is acceptable to hold that chapters xl–lxvi contain an Isaianic core, upon which the prophet's disciples (men who felt themselves closely bound to him) later worked in the spirit of the original author." "Isaiah, Book of," *NBD* 573. Christopher R. Seitz has proposed a similar position in "Isaiah 1–66: Making Sense of the Whole," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (ed. Christopher R. Seitz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 105–26.

<sup>50</sup> H. H. Rowley, Manchester, to Edward J. Young, Philadelphia, April 29, 1949. Edward J. Young Archives, Montgomery Library, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

<sup>51</sup> I am grateful to Craig B. Carpenter of Princeton Theological Seminary for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.