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# Knowing the context: frames, tools, and signs for preaching

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the essential significance of Isaiah within the NT. If one were to go by the 27<sup>th</sup> edition of Nestle and Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece* (1993), however, complete NT representation would have included at least seven more potential Isaianic allusions in 1-2 Thessalonians, four in the Pastoral epistles, three in Philippians, two in Colossians, and one each in 1 John and Jude. Up for consideration too might be the link between Is 65:17/66:22 and 2 Pet 3:13, plus up to a dozen or so possible allusions in Ephesians. Cf., for one example, the article by Roger D. Aus, "God's Plan and God's Power: Isaiah 66 and the Restraining Factors of 2 Thess 2:6-7," in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 537-553.

The writers and editors behind this monograph represent an international (five Brits, three Americans, two Dutchmen, one German, and one Irishman) team of experts, with articles, dissertations, and/or books published in their assigned areas. The editors, Steve Moyise and Maarten J.J. Menken, reside and teach in Great Britain and the Netherlands respectively: Moyise at University College in Chichester, UK; Menken is currently a member of the newly amalgamated Faculty of Catholic Theology, at Tilburg University, in Utrecht. This book is the second to appear in the series *The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel* by these same two editors. *Psalms in the New Testament* (2004) was their first joint project; *Deuteronomy in the New Testament* (2008) is their third and certainly not last editorial project together.

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### **Knowing the Context**

James R. Nieman  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.  
93 pages, \$13.00 Softcover

Nieman's book is a welcome contribution to understanding the importance of context for Christian preaching. He clearly understands the superficial ways in which context is often deployed

in preaching and desires instead to push preaching more deeply into the contexts in which it takes place. In the process preachers learn various tools that will enable them to think more theologically about contexts. Toward the end of the book, we see how Nieman's own approach plays out in a series of sermon excerpts that seek to connect word and context more deeply.

The meat of the book is in chapters 2-4. Here Nieman lays out the elements of doing contextual reflection. Chapter 2 considers how the interpreter frames a context. A frame selects a certain aspect of a context out for study and reflection. Within that, Nieman sees frames operating in three ways: as a border (allowing us to see what the frame contains), as a support (the structure within something we are studying), or as a mind set (here frame is viewed as more of a subjective disposition). When we study context, we necessarily delimit what we are looking for — frames help us to focus the scope of that which we wish to understand contextually. Chapter 3 looks at useful tools for exploring contexts. While considering several such tools, Nieman divides them chiefly into two categories: tools that focus on practices and tools that focus on products. The tools that help understand practices in a context are things like participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The tools useful for looking at products are artifact and place study and document analysis. In the brief description of these tools Nieman helps to see how and why they might be useful to a parish pastor. Chapter 4 looks at signs that are helpful for studying contexts. Here we look at how representation happens within a context. Using the language of index and icon, Nieman shows that such signs sometimes simply point to what they mean, while others invite a kind of participation. Signs that are unusually powerful on the iconic end of the continuum Nieman calls "strong" signs. Sometimes signs can be used to mirror reality, exposing what really is. Sometimes signs are used to open up something not yet seen – which Nieman describes in terms of the metaphor of the window.

Although this cursory description of the above chapters might lead a potential reader to think that the book is unduly technical, it is not. Throughout the book, Nieman is keenly aware of the need to locate the use of these skills within pastoral ministry itself. In fact, the beauty of Nieman's book is that it invites pastors to do more deeply what they are doing already. Contextual interpretation is a more