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# The fifth gospel: Isaiah in the history of Christianity

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focused form of the kind of listening and attending that is the stuff of pastoral ministry. The final chapter, to my mind, demonstrates the value of his careful contextual thinking by relating elements of sermons to his previous investigations, demonstrating the contextual work done within them, and identifying how such attending may bear much fruit in the pulpit.

Despite my praise for this book, I do have some concerns. Although Nieman is quite careful to distinguish several elements of context, the examples used in the book, especially toward the end, tend to reduce contextual thinking to the personal and the interpersonal. While this very pastoral orientation is itself useful, it plays into the predominant chaplaincy model of a lot of mainline Protestant reflection today. Could it be that context actually invites us to deeper and more interesting modes of solidarity that also connect our context to broader contexts which in turn even impinge on ours? I think so. I also think this is an emerging feature of church life that needs to be a more consistent feature of the hitherto overly centripetal view of context we tend to buy into as a result of CPE type experiences.

Nevertheless, I do recommend the book heartily. I expect it will show up on a required reading list for one of my courses! Pastors who wish to press matters of context more deeply and more intentionally will find a wonderful friend and guide in James Nieman and his book.

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### **The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity**

John F.A. Sawyer

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996

281 pages, \$56.50 Softcover

This book is a must-read for anyone preaching or teaching Isaiah. One will come away enlightened, perhaps even shaken by the misuse and misapplication of Isaiah down through the centuries. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century a great many different people and groups — laypeople, scholars, clergy and bishops, artists, musicians,

missionaries, feminists, peace-activists, and environmentalists — all have found something of significance in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah as a book, once untethered from its original, historical moorings, has flowed downstream in Christian territory to become a fifth Gospel, alongside the other four Gospels, in its own right.

The idea of Isaiah as a “fifth Gospel” goes back to Jerome (342-420), Augustine (354-430), Isidore of Seville (560-636), and the influential 13<sup>th</sup> century exegete Hugh of St. Cher. By such, Isaiah was viewed as more an evangelist than a prophet, as it seems he anticipated and spelled out most Christian essentials in the 66 chapters associated with his name. The book of Isaiah, Sawyer notes, is more often quoted or alluded to in the Gospels, Acts, Paul, and Revelation than any other part of Scripture, with the possible exception of the Psalms. For the earliest writers, such as Clement of Rome around the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, “Scripture” meant the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, especially the book of Isaiah, and the Writings. In the Christian tradition the canonical status of the Fifth Gospel may even be said to have *antedated* the status of the other four, since the book of Isaiah was recognized as canonical before the other four Gospels.

It is also necessary to remember that before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Christian parlance, there was always only one Isaiah, with no talk about any “Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah,” “Isaiah Apocalypse” or so-called “Servant Songs.” The Old Testament Bible in its newly adopted Christian context had also ceased, with a few exceptions (Jerome), to be read, studied, or quoted anymore in Hebrew, with the Old Testament rather in Greek and Latin becoming the regular and popular Christian text for all practical, ecclesiastical purposes. Thus the “virgin” of Is 7:14 or the identification of Jesus as “the Suffering Servant” after nearly 400 years of use had become so widely accepted into Christian church tradition that it became near impossible for such views to be questioned or revised in favor of a more ancient Hebrew construal.

It must also be said that most if not all of the commentaries on Isaiah written over the last 200-300 years have said little or nothing about the uses made of Isaiah by Christians since the first century. Most commentaries have either sought out original historical settings and primary authorial intentions, or have focused, as recently, on the final, received canonical text-setting as important.

In this monograph Sawyer seeks to provide us with a full-fledged third alternative, a detailed, panoramic commentary on the wide range of post-biblical and post-canonical Isaianic interpretive developments since the first century within Christianity. To combat the sheer volume of such a task, Sawyer chose three guiding principles to curtail and arrange the massive material before him: 1) to divide the material broadly into historical periods around a number of selected themes; 2) to follow a “text-led” discussion, i.e., to lay out a variety of interpretations documented for the same given text at a given historical time; and 3) to have a strong empirical dimension, where a good deal of space would be given to theoretical questions touching general aim and method of interpretation utilized within a given historical period.

The result is a treatment around a variety of topics: discussion of how the early church found in Isaiah the fullness of Christian theology and Christology (ch 3); the contribution of the book of Isaiah to the cult of the Virgin Mary (ch 4); Isaiah’s influence on the preoccupation of the Middle Ages upon the image of the Man of Sorrows (ch 5); Isaiah’s role in Christian anti-Semitism (ch 6); Isaiah’s legacy to the Reformation (ch 7) as well as to the Evangelical tradition (ch 8); Isaiah’s presence in literature and music (ch 9); Isaiah’s role in the development of the historical-critical method and beyond (ch 10); Isaiah’s place in feminist theology (ch 11); and Isaiah’s impetus to the peace-movement (ch 12).

In these chapters we discover that the utopian use of Is 11 by Edward Hicks in his many portraits of the “peaceable kingdom” was a Quaker affair, that the familiar language of “beating swords into plowshares” is a quite modern interest and application unknown to the ancients, that the axiomatic use of Is 40:8 with reference to the Bible (as the abiding, eternal Word) was a Reformation innovation, and that Is 6:9-10 provided biblical justification to early Christians for the ill-treatment and persecution of Jews.

If the book has one major problem it is the somewhat choppy nature of its commentary. There is simply too much material crowded into too little space. One moves from one pertinent and illustrative item to another in almost mind-boggling rapidity and artistic range. One indeed wonders whether the problem was ever avoidable given the multiplicity, historical periods, and thematic subjects chosen. Yet perhaps a second edition might tackle this problem and attempt to

pinpoint and identify more substructures and subthemes within the diverse historical periods and topics. A sequential edition might also correct a number of typos [“ancient near east” (page 10), “consitute” (12), “semitic” (13), “judgement (41), “pasages” (208), “elemnts” (236)] and undo the recurrent misspellings of “anti-Semitism.” The statement in ch. 9 that “the highly successful musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1976) by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber contains a setting of ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’ (Isaiah 40:3 AV)” should be corrected to credit the true source of this musical setting. The “Prepare ye” setting (as pointed out to me by LTS seminarian Michael Macintyre) actually comes from the musical *Godspell*, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, based on the book by John-Michael Tebelak (1970). A future edition might also add to the “peaceable kingdom” chapter 12 and to the book’s final comprehensive bibliography the recent work by Daniel Berrigan, *Isaiah: Spirit of Courage, Gift of Tears* (1996).

The book makes a good argument that more attention should be given to post-biblical and post-canonical developments and data as a theological subject in its own right worth studying. Indeed it is most fascinating to discover what an inexhaustible resource for artistic imaging, sculpture, architecture, theological and political agendas, and creative inspiration the book of Isaiah has been to Christianity. Such a descriptive study as this one is both essential and rewarding.

Yet one question arises after all is said: while later reflection is important, is there a danger that we give such reflection too much value? Dare one suggest that such post-biblical interpretation take any precedent over more primary, more original intentionality? In the interpretation of the book of Isaiah, who are the good and who are the bad guys and gals, the purists (those who insist on or attempt at recovering the more original thrust and setting of the Isaianic texts, wherein lay primal prophetic authority and impact) or the postmodernists (those who insist on the plurality of meaning, and yet by and large usually limit the better meanings to what they find socially meaningful or in need of correction from a post-Marxist perspective)? Sawyer makes much of post-biblical developments and interpretations as worthy of our time and energy.

Still the question remains: Are Sawyer and a great many other contemporary interpreters guilty of too readily equating “meaning” and “meaningfulness”? Hermeneutically speaking, one could argue