

Isaiah as the 'fifth Gospel'

By [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators

Robert Louis Wilken, ed. and trans.
Eerdmans

This extraordinary volume is among the first in a new series of commentaries from Eerdmans that invites attention to the history of church interpretation of the Bible in precritical modes. The editor and translator of this volume on Isaiah—Robert Louis Wilken, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Virginia—is also general editor of the series, of which many more volumes are to come.

The production of these works is essentially a historical exercise, perhaps with the editors operating according to the conviction that biblical interpretation is too important to be left to exegetes, especially critical and postcritical exegetes. The offer of an early Christian reading of the book of Isaiah is especially to the point of the new series, for Isaiah—more than any other Old Testament book—lends itself to a christological reading, so much so that the early church referred to it as the “fifth Gospel.” The assumption of the series, surely correct, is that the church has much to learn from the history of interpretation in the early period before church interpretation engaged historical criticism, which exhibited the problems in the text and began to distance the text from the claims of the gospel.

The collection presents quotations from early commentaries without any editorial comment, assessment or interpretation. Wilken leaves the record as it is, though obviously the selection process is itself an act of interpretation. For the most part the selections are from the early period of the church, with Augustine the most frequently cited. Selections from later periods include writings of Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas. While here and there we might read the commentators’ observations as modestly historical critical, the intent and weight of interpretation is consistently christological: “Christ was the key to the interpretation of the Old Testament.”

The commentary is based on the Greek translations (with reference where appropriate to the derivative Latin versions), for that is the text used in the early church. From a modernist perspective, some of the interpretive comments are quite remarkable, or at least interesting and suggestive. Thus for example:

- The song of the Seraphim in Isaiah 6:3 is taken to refer to the “mystery of the Trinity.”
- When writing of the “vision of God,” the commentators use considerable energy to deny that God is seen or has bodily form.

- The interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 concerning birth to a virgin quickly refers to the birth of Jesus.
- With reference to the plea “turn in your heart” (46:8), a commentator makes a connection to the prodigal son, who “came to himself”—that is, to his heart.

Once one accepts the premise of christological interpretation, which was unquestioned by precritical interpreters—who embraced allegory, typology and figurative reading—then much of the commentary is not surprising or exceptional. Indeed, Jerome offers a caustic verdict on those who do not read christologically:

Those who interpret the text in this way use every means at their disposal to turn the prophecy away from Christ and misunderstand it by distorting its interpretation. Even if this passage is taken to refer to Isaiah, there are many other passages that refer to Christ so clearly that they shed his bright light on the eyes of everyone (50:2-3).

These commentators skip over some chapters of Isaiah, probably because the early church did not linger over them or find usable material for comment. This most notably includes chapters 21-23 and 36-39. The omission of these latter chapters is quite in contrast to current canonical study. As Christopher Seitz has shown, these chapters have pivotal importance for the formation and shape of the book. But the early commentators had no such interest in view.

We may wonder what the intent of this series is other than to invite readers to ponder the interpretive practice of the early church. The book itself makes no strong advocacy for the early-church mode of interpretation. My own judgment is that although this commentary is of enormous historical interest, it is not likely that today’s church readers will very readily follow in the early-church tradition; the gains of historical criticism cannot be undone, and scholars in many quarters would not want them to be.

The rise of historical criticism amid the Reformation and at the beginning of the modern period addressed contextuality and understandably distanced the text from uncritical, absolutizing modes of interpretation. To be sure, historical criticism has resulted in a relativization of the authority of the text by locating the text contextually and by focusing on the work of authors and traditionists in particular times and places. But for all of that there are many examples of teachers, notably

John Calvin, who carefully utilized historical criticism without allowing it to lead the text away from faith.

Perhaps the work of this series is to cause us to be more self-conscious about our reading habits, more aware of the danger of allowing historical criticism to become a reductionist ideology rather than a method, more inclined to a “second naïveté” that does not linger over the critical but reads and interprets within a horizon of faith. Such a second naïveté is sustained by a self-conscious awareness of what one is doing that is not generally evidenced in the practice of the first naïveté.

There is another matter of concern here. The entire enterprise of early-church interpretation was inherently supersessionist and anti-Jewish, so a contemporary reiteration without sober assessment causes me to wonder. This does not mean that we should not know about this interpretive practice. It did not occur to early-church readers that alongside passionate Christian reading of the text, scripture might have a quite different, equally legitimate reading for Jews. Wilken knowingly acknowledges the anti-Jewish polemics in this practice of interpretation:

These polemical passages, particularly those directed at the Jews, posed a dilemma during the preparation of this commentary. Since the purpose of this series is to provide excerpts for spiritual reading and resources for the theological appropriation of the Bible, and not simply to offer a representative cross section of early Christian biblical interpretation, it seemed advisable not to include many of the sharply polemical passages.

Where Wilken does include such material, he suggests how it is to be understood in historical context—that is, he provides critical location.

No doubt Christians will read in faith now as they did then. And serious Jewish readers have no problem with that as long as Christians recognize that they are reading *as Christians*; thus the title of the series: “The Church’s Bible.” But such a reading in faith now is perforce knowing, self-aware, self-critical and on notice about other readings. The second naïveté is not to be practiced in a completely naive way.

This erudite and rich offering is a welcome one when it is taken as a historical and heuristic opportunity. We cannot undo or rewrite our interpretive history. The church does, however, have much to unlearn about its interpretive practices. Wilken and his colleagues of course know this. But they don’t deal with the problem adequately simply by acknowledging the most polemical passages. Readers are still left with the

hard work of faithful, even confessional reading that is not exclusive or triumphalist.

This commentary can be an invitation to a bold act of reading. But it must be reading that is done in the present. Brilliant interpreters such as Augustine, Eusebius, Gregory and Origen were passionate teachers and preachers for their own time and place. The book reminds us to ponder how we enact our own passionate faithfulness in reading that requires of us something different from what was required of them, something for our own time and place. We may be instructed by these commentators, but such instruction need not be an invitation to imitate them.