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Mayfield's "Unto us a child is born: Isaiah, advent, and our Jewish neighbors" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Mayfield, T. D. (2020). *Unto us a child is born: Isaiah, advent, and our Jewish neighbors*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 192 pp. \$19.99. ISBN 9780802873989

Unto Us a Child Is Born is divided into three main parts: Part I, an introductory section, shows how Christians have viewed Isaiah through the years prophetically as Jesus being foretold as the Messiah. Many Christians believe that Christianity has superseded Judaism, an error called supersessionism, according to the author, which has led in many cases to anti-Judaism, an attitude which was responsible for the Holocaust. In Part II, Mayfield covers Isaiah's "messianic" texts, which include parts of Isaiah 7, 9, 11, and 61, and Part III, Isaiah's visions of the future, which include parts of Isaiah 2, 35, 40, and 64. Within each section of Isaiah readings, Mayfield, a professor of Old Testament at Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, gives a history of how Christians have interpreted these passages over the past two thousand years, what our contexts are today and what he calls a bifocal look, which includes how Jews read the same passages with completely different interpretations.

For example, Matthew in Matthew 1:23 says, "Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel (Emmanuel means 'God with us.),'" connecting Isaiah 7:14 with Jesus' virgin birth. Jews, however, prefer to think of the child in the passage as referring to King Hezekiah who did grow up to be a wise king of Judah, and since *almah*, the Jewish word translated "virgin" can also mean "young woman," they understand this passage historically as referring to the wife of King Ahaz and Hezekiah's mother, Abijah, rather than eschatologically.

Mayfield also asks the question, "Who is the 'us' that Isaiah speaks of in Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace," the words of Handel's Messiah that are sung at Advent? Does "us" mean only Christians, or the Jews, also, to whom Isaiah was speaking? So this book is suitable for mainline Christian and Jewish university professors of religion and not so much for the typical believer in the church or synagogue pew.

This academic work is difficult to read. With footnote references to academic theological experts on just about every page, a seven-page subject and name index, a seven-page bibliography plus a scripture index to keep it all straight, only the most persistent reader will get through this book. Librarians on limited budgets may want to wait for the forthcoming book on Isaiah by Westmont College Professor Dr. Sandra L. Richter to be called *The Fifth Gospel: A Christian Entry into the Book of Isaiah* to be published by InterVarsity Press.

Reviewer

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