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# SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES: A PROPHECY AND ITS RECEPTION (ISAIAH 2.2-5)

Göran Eidevall

## 1. *Introduction*

This article can be seen as a small contribution to a vital and expanding field of biblical scholarship, namely the reception history of the book of Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> It deals with one particular passage, Isa. 2.2-5 (par. Mic. 4.1-4), which has nowadays become closely associated with efforts to achieve global disarmament. This is largely due to the motif of turning ‘swords into plowshares’ (Isa. 2.4). However, this prophecy has been understood in divergent ways through the centuries. I intend to demonstrate that major shifts in its interpretation can be linked to significant political changes. The aim is not to cover the history of interpretation in its entirety. Such a project would have required the format of a monograph. I shall focus mainly, but not exclusively, on various Christian interpretations. I have selected a few representative examples, ranging from the patristic era to the era of the Protestant reformation, which may serve both as illuminating backgrounds and as thought-provoking contrasts to tendencies within modern reception of this prophecy.

## 2. *The Text*

It is a curious fact that the prophecy studied in this article, with its vision of divine instruction emanating from Mount Zion and apparently bringing about world peace, is found in two versions (with only minor differences)

1. It is dedicated to Antti Laato, who has made major contributions to this field, especially in his monograph *Who Is the Servant of the Lord? Jewish and Christian Interpretations on Isaiah 53 from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Studies in Rewritten Bible, 4; Turku: Åbo Akademi, 2012).

in the prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible: in Isa. 2.2-5 and in Mic. 4.1-4.<sup>2</sup> Due to the great importance of the book of Isaiah within both Judaism and Christianity, this study will primarily focus on the reception history of Isa. 2.2-5:

<sup>2</sup> In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.

<sup>3</sup> Many peoples shall come and say,  
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

<sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (NRSV)

Within this passage, I will primarily focus on interpretations of v. 4, with a particular emphasis on the motif of turning swords into plowshares.

### *3. A Theme in Modern Reception: A Call for Disarmament and Pacifist Activism*

From the nineteenth century onwards, the prophecy from Isa. 2.4, and especially the words about beating 'swords into plowshares', has often been cited as a call for action, in order to accomplish global peace by means of disarmament. During the last decades of the twentieth century it served as a source of inspiration for several radical pacifist groups. The

2. For an insightful discussion of historical issues pertaining to the relation between these two versions, see, e.g., H.G.M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27. I. Commentary on Isaiah 1–5* (ICC; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006), pp. 173-79. For an intertextual analysis, see Irmtraud Fischer, 'World Peace and "Holy War"—Two Sides of the Same Theological Concept: "YHWH as Sole Divine Power" (A Canonical-Intertextual Reading of Isaiah 2:1-5, Joel 4:9-21, and Micah 4:1-5)', in R. Cohen and R. Westbrook (eds.), *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations: Swords into Plowshares* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 151-65.

most well-known example is probably the Plowshares movement. It was launched in September 1980, when Daniel and Philip Berrigan, together with six other pacifist activists, attacked a missile facility in Pennsylvania, using hammers to damage nuclear warhead nose cones, and pouring out blood on documents on the site. In the decades that followed, similar symbolic actions directed against military industries were carried out in several other countries, including Sweden, by various branches of this movement. In many cases, the activists were arrested and put in jail.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, the most emblematic sign of this prophecy's significance within modern international politics is found in New York. The words from Isa. 2.4 are inscribed at the entrance to the United Nations headquarters, and in front of the building there is a statue, made by the Russian sculptor Evgeniy Vuchetich, which was donated by the Soviet Union in 1959. The title of this work paraphrases Isa. 2.4 in the form of an exhortation: 'Let Us Beat Our Swords into Plowshares'. This monument represents the biblical motif in the style of social realism. A strong man, a classical worker hero, is beating a sword with a large hammer.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, there are many other peace monuments and memorials in various parts of the world that cite and/or represent the prophetic vision in Isa. 2.2-5.<sup>5</sup> In my opinion, the most fascinating art object of this kind is the so-called 'peace plow' that was displayed in 1876, at the Centennial Exposition in Pennsylvania. This plow was literally made of swords—of discarded and 'recycled' swords that had been used in the American Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

Let us now turn to biblical scholarship. The popular understanding of this prophecy as a call for action to attain disarmament, exemplified above, is rarely discussed in modern exegetical commentaries on Isaiah. This is far from surprising, since the aim of most commentaries is to illuminate

3. For a detailed survey of this movement's history, see Sharon E. Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 29-58, 116-202.

4. See further John Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 232 (and plate 34).

5. An impressive survey, with illustrations, is provided at [http://peace.maripoc.com/p\\_swords.htm](http://peace.maripoc.com/p_swords.htm) (accessed 2020-18-11). A few examples are also mentioned in John Sawyer, *Isaiah through the Centuries* (Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 21-22.

6. See Patricia Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 96. See also Appelbaum's discussion of some other examples on pp. 89-109.

the text's function in its original historical context. There are, however, a few exceptions. Thus, Joseph Blenkinsopp's commentary on the unit Isa. 2.2-5 contains the following reflection: 'In view of our own sad and guilty knowledge of the violence we continue to visit on one another, on other creatures, and on the environment in general, the eschatological horizon of the abolition of war...is one of the most poignant motifs in the book'.<sup>7</sup>

The editors of a scholarly anthology dedicated to discussions of political aspects of Isa. 2.2-5, in ancient as well as modern contexts, admit that it would probably be anachronistic to view the prophet Isaiah as a pacifist, or to read this prophecy as 'a practical manual for bringing peace to a strife-ridden planet'.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless they aver that 'Isaiah, the predecessor of Plato, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, was the originator of a vision that continues to inspire us'.<sup>9</sup>

In the words of John Sawyer, the irenic vision in Isa. 2.2-5, with its famous image of swords being turned into plowshares, 'is nowadays, after two world wars and the subsequent East-West arms race, among the most universally familiar biblical images'.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, worth noting that this elevation of 2.4 above many other passages in the book of Isaiah is a rather recent phenomenon. As noted by Sawyer, 'the "swords into ploughshares" motif' was 'given little prominence in early and mediaeval Christianity'.<sup>11</sup>

Summing up so far, modern reception of Isa. 2.2-5 tends to treat this prophecy as a call to take political action in order to achieve disarmament and global peace. Is this interpretation an innovation, an exclusively modern phenomenon? Or is it possible to find traces of an activist-pacifist reading at earlier stages in the passage's history of reception? The following survey seeks to answer these questions.

#### 4. *Apologetic Peace Propaganda: Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*

A tendency to foreground several other aspects of the book of Isaiah, while downplaying the theme of abolition of war, is visible in the New Testament. A large number of passages from Isaiah are quoted in the

7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 19; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 191.

8. Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, 'Conclusion: Swords into Plowshares Then and Now', in Cohen and Westbrook (eds.), *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations*, p. 238.

9. Cohen and Westbrook, 'Conclusion', p. 239.

10. Sawyer, *Isaiah through the Centuries*, p. 21.

11. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, p. 223.

NT writings, but the following passages, containing irenic visions, are conspicuously missing: Isa. 2.2-5; 9.1-6 (Eng. 9.2-7); 11.6-9.

This would soon change, however. Several patristic authors commented on Isa 2.2-5. For Justin Martyr, it was evident that this prophecy had already come true, with the advent of Jesus Christ. This is clearly stated in his *First Apology*:<sup>12</sup>

And that this has happened you are able to ascertain. For men twelve in number went out from Jerusalem into the world, and they were unskilled in rhetoric, but through the power of God they signified to the whole human race how they were sent by Christ to teach the word of God to all; and we who formerly were slaying one another not only do not fight against enemies, but die gladly in the confession of Christ, in order not to lie to nor to deceive those who examine us.

Justin's interpretation was formulated in a polemical context. In some respects, it is decidedly anti-Jewish, since it presupposes that the Christian church, as the new Israel, has replaced the Jewish people. Thus, according to Justin, the words of instruction emanating from Zion (Isa. 2.3) should be equated with the Gospel preached by the unlearned disciples of Jesus. Further, the vision of a future when 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation' (2.4) is applied on the alleged transformation taking place in the Christ-believers. They are, collectively, depicted as persons who love their enemies and are willing to become martyrs. The latter point, concerning the pacifist lifestyle of the Christians, is spelled out in more detail in Justin's comments on this prophecy in *Dialogue with Trypho*: 'And we who delighted in war, in the slaughter of one another, and in every other kind of iniquity, have in every part of the world converted our weapons of war into implements of peace—our swords into ploughshares, our spears into farmers' tools—and we cultivate piety, justice, brotherly charity, faith and hope, which we derive from the Father through the Crucified Savior'.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that rather than encouraging his fellow Christ-believers to change their behavior and strive for a more peaceful future, Justin claims that the Christian movement of his time is already perfectly non-violent, and therefore represents a true fulfilment of Isa. 2.2-5 with its vision of a peaceful world.

12. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 39:2-3. Translation cited from Denis Minns and Paul Parvis (eds.), *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 183.

13. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 110. Translation by Thomas Falls, cited from *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr* (The Fathers of the Church, 6; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), p. 318.



In a similar vein, Irenaeus applies the words of this prophecy to the Church, described as a community of peacemakers. He describes those among the nations who have converted to Christianity as persons who are always ready to turn the other cheek to the one who strikes them, in accordance with the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.39).<sup>14</sup>

These two early patristic readings of Isa. 2.2-5 (par. Mic. 4.1-4) have several aspects in common. Perhaps most remarkably, both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus argued that the fulfilment of this prophecy had already taken place. Most likely, this line of interpretation was facilitated by the fact that at the time, the second century CE, Christians tended to abstain from service in the Roman army.<sup>15</sup> In other words, they would not carry swords. However, in order to be able to read the prophecy in Isaiah 2 (par. Mic. 4) as a prediction of their own time, Justin and Irenaeus had to make a number of hermeneutical manoeuvres. These include: (1) reading Mount Zion as a reference to the Church, (2) equating the words of ‘instruction’ (*tôrâ*) in Isa. 2.3 with the message that Jesus is the Messiah, (3) reinterpreting the motif of the pilgrimage of the nations as a metaphorical description of conversion among the Gentiles, and (4) downplaying the notion of global disarmament within the realm of international politics, while emphasizing peaceful attitudes on the level of individual ethics instead.<sup>16</sup>

### 5. *Pax Romana as Fulfilment: Eusebius*

From the reign of Constantine onwards a radically new interpretation of Isa. 2.2-5 (par. Mic. 4.1-4) gained wide support among Christian theologians. According to this view, the vision of an ideal future when nations should cease to wage war against one another had received its fulfilment

14. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, book IV, 34:8.

15. Thus Gerhard Lohfink, “‘Schwerter zu Pflugscharen.’ Die Rezeption von Jes 2, 1-5 par Mi 4, 1-5 in der alten Kirche und im Neuen Testament’, *TQ* 166 (1986), pp. 184-209 (193): ‘Im Hintergrund steht...eine bis Konstantin durchgehaltene kirchliche Praxis, die es den Gläubigen untersagte, Soldat zu werden’. However, it would be incorrect to assume that there were no Christian soldiers before the time of Constantin. There is evidence that Christians served in the Roman army as early as 173 CE. See Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 68.

16. For a more detailed discussion of Justin’s Christological hermeneutics, applied to Isa. 2.2-5, as well as some other prophetic passages, see Matthew W. Bates, ‘Justin Martyr’s Logocentric Hermeneutical Transformations of Isaiah’s Vision of the Nations’, *JTS* 60 (2009), pp. 538-55.

in the state of (relative) peace that prevailed within the vast empire, the so-called *pax Romana*.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most influential advocates of this interpretation was Eusebius of Caesarea, a contemporary and personal friend of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. According to Eusebius, to defend the empire was to defend the faith. There can be no doubt that Isa. 2.2-5 was a cornerstone in his construction of a theological justification of the new symbiotic relationship between the Church and the Roman empire. In his writings, Eusebius quotes v. 4 ('they shall beat their swords into plowshares...') no less than 17 times.<sup>18</sup> A detailed exposition of this prophecy is offered in *Praeparatio evangelica*. Here Eusebius explains that Isa. 2.4 predicts a major shift in human history, marked by two events that coincided: the rule of the emperor Augustus, who initiated the era of *pax Romana*, and the birth of the savior of humankind, Jesus Christ. He claims that the cessation of battles between cities, peoples and regions within the empire ought to be regarded as a divine miracle.<sup>19</sup>

There is, in my opinion, one great flaw in the interpretation delivered by Eusebius (and adopted by many others). Whereas a literal understanding of the words 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation' (Isa. 2.4) is defended, a correspondingly literal and practical interpretation of the motif of beating swords into plowshares is apparently rejected. Eusebius fails to mention that the *pax Romana* had to be upheld by means of political repression and military violence. This celebrated state of relative peace within the empire was achieved at the cost of constant conflicts at its borders. Instead of abolishing the swords, or abstaining from using them, Constantine and his successors relied heavily on the power of the swords.

## 6. An Eloquent Jewish Retort: Nahmanides

Despite great differences, in particular regarding their attitude to military service, the early Christian interpretations discussed above had something important in common. Based on two premises, (a) that Isa. 2.2-5 is a messianic prophecy and (b) that Jesus from Nazareth was the promised Messiah, they claimed that the words about swords being beaten into plowshares had already been fulfilled. Arguably, this was a rather risky line of interpretation, since it seemed to imply two bold empirical

17. See Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, pp. 86-88.

18. Lohfink, 'Schwerter zu Pflugscharen', pp. 195-96.

19. See further Lohfink, 'Schwerter zu Pflugscharen', pp. 198-99.



statements: (1) that the advent of Jesus Christ inaugurated a lasting era of universal peace, and (2) that Christians are more peaceful than those who belong to other religious communities. During the era of the crusades, as is well known, Jews and Muslims became the victims of an extremely militant form of Christianity. This must have given rise to criticism of the traditional interpretation of Isaiah's (and Micah's) irenic vision.

The following episode from the Jewish-Christian debates in Spain during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is therefore worth retelling in this survey. In 1263 king Jacob I arranged a disputation between a Dominican friar, Pablo Christiani, and a Rabbi, Nahmanides (Moses ben Nahman).<sup>20</sup> When Pablo claimed that all the messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah, including 2.2-5, had been fulfilled, and that this proved that Jesus was the Messiah, Nahmanides objected. He could not believe that the Messiah had arrived, because it was obvious that the words in Isa. 2.2-5 concerning global peace had not yet come true. Nahmanides presented his arguments with great rhetorical skill, as shown by the following passage: 'Yet from the days of Jesus until now, the whole world has been full of violence and plundering, and the Christians are greater spillers of blood than all the rest of the peoples...and how hard it would be for you, my lord king, and for your knights, if they were not to learn war any more'.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, Nahmanides shared one of his opponent's central presuppositions, namely that this prophecy depicts the messianic era.<sup>22</sup> However, by insisting on a political, pacifist interpretation, he managed to refute Pablo's argumentation.

### *7. Spiritualizing Interpretations in the Reformation Era: Luther and Calvin*

There is a certain resemblance between the era of the crusades and the era of the Protestant reformation. Both were periods of intense religious warfare. Yet there is one crucial difference. The identity of the allegedly unfaithful enemy had changed. In the battles fought during the first decades of the sixteenth century, the soldiers on both sides defined themselves as Christians. Swords were used in order to defend the reformation. Hence,

20. For an English translation of Nahmanides's account of the disputation, with detailed comments, see Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; London, 1993), pp. 102-46.

21. Quoted from Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, p. 121.

22. For a similar analysis, see the brief discussion in Sawyer, *Isaiah through the Centuries*, p. 23.

both Martin Luther and Jean Calvin had to accommodate their theological and ethical reasoning to the fact that they were dependent on allied military forces, in order to maintain their position as religious leaders.<sup>23</sup> This becomes evident in their interpretations of the prophecy in Isa. 2.2-5.

In his exposition of Isa. 2.2-5, Martin Luther reused several key features in the hermeneutical strategy developed by Justin Martyr and others in the Patristic era (see above). Thus, Zion stands for the Church, the words emanating from Zion are equated with the proclamations of the apostles, and so on. However, whereas Justin Martyr interpreted the motif of abolition of warfare quite literally, there is a strong spiritualizing tendency in Luther's reading. He opined that Isa. 2.2-4 speaks figuratively about the elevation of the church and the gospel, and about the state of inner harmony within the individual believer. With regard to v. 2, Luther made the following comment: 'Out of a physical mountain the prophet makes one that is spiritual and a kingdom that is spiritual'.<sup>24</sup> Further, he maintained that this spiritual kingdom 'is not established by force'.<sup>25</sup> This might sound rather pacifistic. On a closer examination, however, Luther managed to avoid the controversial question whether war against fellow Christians could be justified altogether. His interpretation of Isa. 2.4, the verse containing the words about beating swords into plowshares, is almost completely detached from such realities as physical weapons or military battles. The prophetic vision is read as a description of the attitude of 'true' Christians who despise everything 'carnal and worldly':<sup>26</sup>

This is a figurative and periphrastic way of speaking. It means that they will return to complete harmony and peace, and there is no better way to get rid of disagreements than that which Christ uses. In one statement he declares that at the same time all are condemned and that everything is full of sins before God. For those who hear and believe this, for what will they contend? If my property, wisdom, and righteousness are of no avail before God, why should I fight it out for them? In the world there is continual war. The self-righteous fight with one another for their righteousness. The godly condemn their own righteousness and accept the verdict of condemnation; false Christians are altogether carnal and worldly, and for this reason they are the instigators of factions and disagreements. True Christians are in beautiful agreement, because they hold even everything in contempt for the sake of Christ alone.

23. See further Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, pp. 136-47.

24. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 16: Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 1-39* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), p. 28.

25. Luther, *Luther's Works*, p. 29.

26. Luther, *Luther's Works*, p. 32.

In his commentary on the book of Isaiah, Jean Calvin offered an interpretation that likewise combined spiritualizing and literal traits.<sup>27</sup> Modifying the bold declarations made by Eusebius (see above), Calvin suggested that the *pax Romana* prevailing at the birth of Jesus could be seen as a partial fulfilment of the irenic vision proclaimed in Isa. 2.4, whereas he treated its final realization as an eschatological event. According to Calvin's exposition, all Christians are called to be meek, and to strive for peace. Apparently, however, he thought that this principle of ethical conduct only applied to the private sphere. Calvin did not encourage his readers to abstain from warfare. On the contrary, he 'argued against those who say this passage means it is unlawful for Christians to use the sword'.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the following quotation from Calvin's commentary on Isa. 2.4 is noteworthy: 'Some madmen torture this passage to promote anarchy, as if it took away from the Church entirely the right to use the sword'.<sup>29</sup> This remark reveals that a radical pacifist interpretation of this prophecy actually had some advocates in the sixteenth century, and that it had become popular among some groups. However, a treatment of the Anabaptists and other movements that are sometimes referred to as the 'historic peace churches', lies beyond the scope of this study.<sup>30</sup>

### 8. *Concluding Reflections*

As shown by this survey, the irenic vision in Isa. 2.2-5 (par. Mic. 4.1-4) has been subject to widely divergent interpretations throughout the centuries. Interestingly, early Christian commentators tended to regard this prophecy as already fulfilled. However, the actual shape of the fulfilment was understood differently, depending on the historical context. Whereas Justin Martyr and some other patristic writers apparently took for granted that their fellow Christians practiced a pacifist lifestyle, Eusebius, at the dawn of the Constantine era, encouraged Christians to become soldiers in the Roman army. According to Eusebius, God used the Roman empire as an instrument, in order to put an end to war. The weaknesses inherent in these lines of interpretation, with their shared emphasis on universal peace as an empirical fact here and now, were eloquently demonstrated by a Jewish sage, Nahmanides, in the thirteenth century. During the era of the Protestant reformation, with its many armed conflicts between Christians,

27. Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. I (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1850), pp. 64-72.

28. Sawyer, *Isaiah through the Centuries*, p. 23.

29. Calvin, *the Prophet Isaiah*, p. 71.

30. See Bainton, *Christian Attitudes*, pp. 152-72 (quote on p. 152).

both Luther and Calvin wrote spiritualizing commentaries on Isa. 2.2-5, focusing primarily on the Church and the inner life of the pious individual. At the same time, they distanced themselves from the idea (apparently entertained by some of their contemporaries) that this prophecy referred to the abolishment of real weapons, and of war as a means to solve political conflicts. Against this background, the widespread use of the words from Isa. 2.4, ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares’, as a source of inspiration for pacifist activism aiming at global disarmament, stands out as a modern phenomenon.

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