Prophets is one of seven volumes scheduled to appear in a set of folio reproductions of the illuminated manuscript of the Christian Bible sponsored by Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, under the direction of British calligrapher and illuminator Donald Jackson. It includes roughly one-fifth of the total work (ca. 232 of 1,150 codex pages). Other volumes already in print include Pentateuch (vol. 1), Psalms (vol. 4), and Gospels and Acts (vol. 6); yet to come are Historical Books (vol. 2), Wisdom Literature (vol. 3), and Letters and Revelation (vol. 7). (A review of Pentateuch by Walter A. Vogels appeared in RBL; see http://bookreviews.org/pdf/5412_5706.pdf)

Like the Pentateuch volume, Prophets features the text of the NRSV, Catholic edition, including textual notes in the margin. A distinction appears in this volume, however, between translations of the Hebrew Bible and what are labeled “Apocryphal additions,” such as the book of Baruch and the additions to Daniel. Pages with text from the Hebrew Bible have the title of the respective book in English at the upper left and in Hebrew at the upper right, while apocryphal/deuterocanonical texts have English at the upper left and Greek at the upper right (or both Hebrew and Greek in cases where a given page has a mixture of the two). Prophets includes the books that are traditionally reckoned as “prophets” in Christian Bibles in the usual English order, that is, the “Major” Prophets...
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel (with Lamentations and Baruch appearing after Jeremiah), followed by the twelve “Minor” Prophets.

The production values of the volume are first-rate, including heavy, acid-free paper and a sturdy binding. As to this portion of original manuscript itself, the calligraphers seem to have benefited from their prior experience: there appear to be no scribal lacunae of the kind that required later insertions in earlier books, whether of a few words (as at Gen 1:21) or of an entire line (as at Mark 3:20–21).

From the first, Prophets reminds us that manuscripts in the medieval tradition treated the biblical text as an object of both art and interpretation. The very text itself—exclusive of any ornamentation—is an extraordinary work of calligraphic art. Even the arrangement of the text necessarily entails interpretation, as when Isa 44:9–20 is set as prose, in contrast to the surrounding lines written in the stichometry of poetry (cf. BHK versus BHS)—although this specific distinction is entailed in the copyright of the NRSV. But what sets this volume (and its companions) apart as both art and interpretation are the illuminations, which combine the beauty and occasional whimsy of the medieval manuscript tradition (as with the assorted beetles, crickets, and flies that appear here and there) with profound theological reflection that is, in many cases, deeply informed by the modern world. Thus, for example, the double-page that contains the “Valley of the Dry Bones” pericope (Ezek 37:1–14) is bracketed at the top by a series of bright, intersecting arcs with colors in the “ROYGBIV” sequence of the rainbow, while at the bottom of the page is a dark strip of grays and black depicting not merely disarticulated bones (as literally in Ezekiel’s vision) but also a pile of eyeglasses (reminiscent of the Holocaust), skulls (calling to my mind, at least, memorials of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and of the genocide in Rwanda), and shattered windows and junked cars (a montage recalling, again at least to me, both Kristalnacht and more recent acts of terrorism). Nearly all such illuminations contain a snippet of text, as well; in this case, it runs in a band across the bottom of the lower illumination: “I will place my spirit within you and you shall live.”

There are two other large “partial-page” illuminations in addition to that just described, including the call of Ezekiel (ch. 1) and what the Christian Gospels read as the prophecy of Palm Sunday in Zech 9:9. In addition, there are several colorful settings of selected textual excerpts (e.g., Isa 1:16–17; 2:4; 40:1–5; 66:12–13; Jer 1:4–10; and Amos 4:8) and some smaller pictures without texts, such as the depiction of the prophet Ezekiel literally eating the scroll of God’s Word in 3:1–3.

However, the real glory of this volume lies in its five full-page illuminations: the Trisagion verse from Isaiah’s call narrative in 6:2; a combination of Isaiah’s “messianic” prophecies
in 7:14 and 9:6; the “suffering servant” poem in Isa 53:3–7; the floor plan of Ezekiel’s new temple and Jerusalem in chapters 40–48; and the apocalyptic “son of man” passage in Dan 7:13. The materials and process involved in the production of the illuminations is well described in a separate volume: Christopher Calderhead’s *Illuminating the Word: The Making of the Saint John’s Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), especially in chapter 7, “The Page Comes to Life.” (While this latter book deals explicitly only with the *Pentateuch*, *Psalms*, and *Gospels and Acts* sections, the description of planning and execution of the illuminations, using materials such as hand-ground inks, gold, silver, and platinum, applies fully to the volume under review as well.) Above all, on these five pages the work of Jackson and company must be adjudged an unqualified success.

With the arguable exception of Ezekiel, all five of these passages were clearly selected for their significance in the Christian theological and liturgical traditions. At times such significance is transparent; for example, the “one like a human being” who is depicted from Dan 7 is a thoroughly traditional representation of Jesus Christ. At other times the illumination complicates and enlarges on the traditional Christian reading, demonstrating a modern (or postmodern) openness to inclusivity and multivalence.

Thus, of the five passages that were selected for full-page illuminations, the most controverted, at least in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation, is surely Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song. On the one hand, the illumination features straightforward christological references such as the overall cruciform shape of the picture that is bracketed by the text, an equilateral cross in gold at top and center, and, just as in medieval depictions of the crucifixion, a skull at the base of the cross. But on the other hand, the illumination creatively and movingly lifts the reader’s eyes beyond a solely traditional, referential Christian reading. The skull, for example, it is to all appearances not a human skull—not the skull of the First Adam—but that of an animal, perhaps a lamb or ram. More significantly, in the midst of the picture stands a rear view of a dark, emaciated child with a metal collar about his or her neck, and the background of the entire picture (including the text down either side) shows overlapping sections of chain-link fence. Again, the Holocaust comes to mind, but so do the enslavement of Africans and the twentieth century’s many horrors of starvation and internment camps. In view of the overall iconography, a christological application of the text remains foremost, but the modern reader is at least reminded of how many people both before and since have suffered at others’ hands and how much of the burden that the Servant bore truly was *our* (as in our own time’s) transgressions.

Given such magnificent stimuli to reflection and devotion, it is difficult to avoid regret that even more passages in the prophets were not selected for similar treatment. By
contrast, by my count, the Gospels and Acts volume has twelve full-page illuminations (including one at the beginning of each biblical book), fifteen partial-page illuminations, “carpet pages” at the end of each Gospel, and numerous decorative “incipit” texts in the margins. (For the Pentateuch volume, my count is two full-page illuminations and ten partial-pages, plus incipits.) Yet even given the extraordinary generosity of the underwriters of this project, doubtlessly choices had to be made, and those choices reflect the theological and liturgical priorities of the Benedictine community and the larger church who will be the primary users of these volumes.

The attentive reader is also reminded of the Benedictine roots of the project by the occasional appearance of a cross bearing five nail marks, plus the initials “RSB” (for “Rule of Saint Benedict”) in the margins of the text, followed by a chapter and verse reference (e.g., Isa 42:3). The corresponding passage then bears the same cross siglum. A librarian at St. John’s University has kindly informed me that these notes were added with the permission of the copyright holders to the NRSV to mark “parts of scripture that were Saint Benedict’s inspiration when he was writing his rule.” (See also Calderhead, Illuminating the Word, 97.)

Thus, in ways large and small The Saint John’s Bible reminds us that all interpreters of the biblical text stand in a long tradition of those seeking to bring forth something old and something new (cf. Matt 13:52). Donald Jackson, his collaborators, and his Benedictine sponsors merit the highest commendation for their efforts to allow this particular set of ancient texts to speak with power to a new millennium.