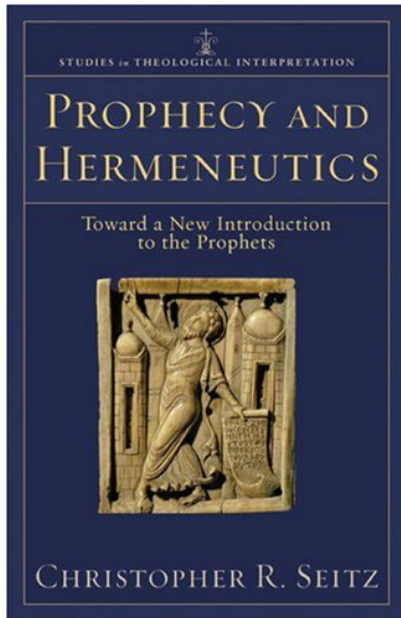


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Seitz, Christopher R.

Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets

Studies in Theological Interpretation

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In this volume Christopher R. Seitz, professor of biblical interpretation at the University of Toronto's Wycliffe College, provides a prolegomenon to an introduction to the Prophets. Consistent with the attention to canonical approaches that has marked his career as well as that of his teacher Brevard Childs, Seitz insists that the Prophets be understood in light of their canonical presentation rather than according to any purported chronology of individual prophetic figures.

Although the style of the volume is occasionally uneven and repetitious (due to the fact that Seitz has drawn upon previous public lectures and publications), his arguments for reading the Prophets in canonical form are evident. The first is most clearly articulated in a chapter entitled "What Is an Introduction to the Prophets?" in which he explains the origins, assumptions, and fallacies of presenting prophets as "historical" individuals best understood against the backdrop of their particular time periods. According to Seitz, such a presentation affords no consideration of the final forms of books: students who learn what First, Second, and Third Isaiah meant in their distinct political and social contexts rarely are encouraged to investigate the nature of the book of Isaiah as a whole. The inordinate attention that historical critics have devoted to the individuality of the prophets fails to take seriously the complex composition of the books themselves.

Second, Seitz claims that presenting individual prophets chronologically constitutes only one type of historical inquiry, and a limited one at that. He insists that study of how the canon presents the prophets equally deserves the label “historical,” in that the canon attests to a particular understanding of Israel’s history with God. To support his contention, Seitz draws heavily from recent arguments for the unity of the Book of Twelve by scholars affiliated with the SBL Formation of the Book of the Twelve program unit (such as James Nogalski, Aaron Schart, Paul House, and Barry Jones) and from efforts to demonstrate the unity of the book of Isaiah by scholars such as Marvin Sweeney. He does not engage the details of this scholarly work (or contrary academic arguments); his concern, he explains, lies instead with considering what the intentional shaping of prophetic materials means for how these books should be read.

More precisely, Seitz seeks to demonstrate the significance of the Prophets for Christian theology. He argues that the theological orientation into which the prophetic canon has been molded takes a decidedly Christian shape. In its depiction of a God of both judgment and mercy, the Prophets portrays the God most fully known in Jesus: “He [God] makes known those two great dispensations of his character—final judgment and final mercy—in his only Son, that we might at last by his grace identify even with him and see through the judgments of our day into the eternity of his purposes” (245). Echoing the language of Gerhard von Rad, Seitz claims that the New Testament does not simply refer back to the Old: rather, the Old Testament in general and the Book of the Twelve in particular push forward into the work of Jesus: “Israel’s history as depicted in the Twelve is a type or figure of a larger history, and a story that takes two Testaments to tell. Amos is a man among Twelve, and the Twelve are men related to one man—Jesus Christ” (242).

In Seitz’s interpretation, the hand of the redactor(s) becomes the hand of God, moving the text forward toward its fulfillment: “The very notion of a canonical process assumes a doctrine of inspiration that spills out from the prophetic word once delivered, as God superintends that word toward his own accomplishing end” (240). Canonical intention is divine intention.

Because Seitz’s project is so clearly confessionally oriented, it would have benefited from more explicit articulation of his assumptions and perspectives. For example, are Christian traditions of reading canonically *equally valid* with other approaches, or are they *superior*? At times, Seitz argues for the former, legitimating canonical readings alongside historical critical treatments: “Canonical reading is *a* species of historical reading” (10, emphasis added). “[My argument] is not a repudiation of 150 years of work in academic contexts, but a request that we examine texts mindful that other views of history and reading have animated previous generations of Christian readers” (199).

Elsewhere, however, he asserts the *superiority* of reading canonically, since canonical reading alone takes seriously the full history of the prophetic materials. This vacillation in tone is typified in his statement: “Those who claim that their reading is more historically appropriate—a reading in which the individual prophets are isolated from one another, recast according to date, and placed in a reconstructed temporal context—are actually the ones who are *not reading the prophets sufficiently historically*, for final canonical form is *also a piece of history*” (233, emphasis added). Is final canonical form one piece of history among others or a superior historical reading?

Also deserving of explanation is his limited range of conversation partners. While Seitz is to be commended for rich engagement with the thought of Gerhard von Rad, Brevard Childs, and Rolf Rendtorff, as well as the historical legacies of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Heinrich Hävernick, Julius Wellhausen, E. B. Pusey, George Adam Smith, and numerous others, he devotes his attention only to particular strands of the Christian tradition. Missing from his consideration are the concerns of feminist, ideological, and Jewish scholars and of those working outside of Europe, Great Britain, and the United States.

Many readers will appreciate Seitz’s claims for the divine wisdom embedded in the current shape of the canon and his description of the organic unity of the Testaments. Not all those who call themselves Christians, however, will find his claims self-evident. Particularly those who value Jewish understandings of the Prophets will want further explanation of his insistence that the truths of the Twelve become clear *only* in the light of Jesus. In my judgment, speaking confessionally requires speaking *explicitly confessionally*, explaining and situating one’s theological convictions. For that reason, I longed for Seitz to name more specifically his understanding of the Christian faith and of the Bible, as well as how the final shape of the Prophets matters to both.