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Book Review: Prophecy and Hermeneutics

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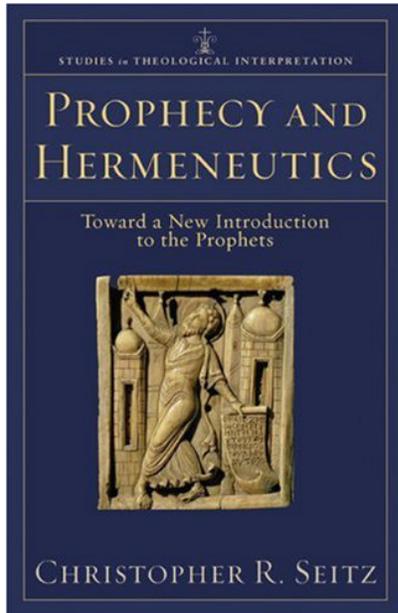
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Seitz, Christopher R.

Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets

Studies in Theological Interpretation

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007. Pp. 272. Paper. \$22.99. ISBN 080103258X.

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Christopher Seitz has been a leading voice for some time now among adherents of canonical and theological approaches to interpretation of the Prophets, particularly through his work in Isaiah. Seitz has sought to give due attention to the figural character of the prophetic materials as they stand in their final form. In his most recent contribution, the thesis is that “theological reading of the prophets means reading them in such a way that history is properly appreciated, on the terms of its own biblical presentation” (247). In other words, a truly historical investigation cannot stop short of recognition that the present shape of the biblical text has a legitimate historical dimension.

In the first chapter, Seitz observes the consistent tendency among past representations of the prophets to reorganize the biblical text according to a reconstructed temporal sequence. The prophetic literature has been read primarily in terms of times and authors, with the result that the lives and “original” words of the prophetic personalities have become the object of study—to the neglect of the arrangement of the texts themselves. Thus, the first part of *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* explores the history of the genre of introduction to the Prophets. According to Seitz, too high a price has been paid in efforts to recast the biblical presentation of the prophetic materials, which makes its own

historical and theological statement: “In its final form, it is not a raw product requiring manipulation and then baking in a special oven before it can yield the product some are convinced has the best kind of nutrients” (90).

Seitz, however, does not seek to repudiate older historical interests. Rather, his concern is to contend that a canonical approach also merits the term “historical.” Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament, which appears to be based on the present canonical shape of the text and not on a reconstructed history or tradition-history. The patterns of affiliation and cross-reference in the Prophets are signs that the texts have been composed in such a way that they are intended to be associated with one another.

In part 2, Seitz takes the Book of the Twelve as a special case study. He begins with an expression of great appreciation for the monumental work of Gerhard von Rad. His main critique is that von Rad never took account of the full literary presentation of the prophets in its final form. For von Rad, the context of interpretation consisted of the traditions and events of the prophets, whereas newer approaches view the literary shape of the final form of the canon as the primary context.

The final two chapters provide examples of how the Book of the Twelve can be read as an integrated and intentional final composition. Seitz does see value in the Septuagint of the Twelve, but he prefers the order of the Masoretic Text simply because a move from the Septuagint order to that of the Masoretic Text has defied explanation. The last chapter, which is a revised form of an earlier article by Seitz, specifically addresses what Seitz calls the “valorizing of man over text.” In a striking comparison and contrast of the approach of George Adam Smith with his own, Seitz comments:

Smith could move from the world of the prophets to the pulpit and bring alive the man Amos for his audience. A canonical reading of Amos among the Twelve gives us a world of reference and identification no less bold and no less enclosing of us and our world than that; *and it does it on the terms of its own deliverance*. We are made to stand before the Twelve and see the word go forth, address generations, enclose the prophets in a history larger than themselves, and then reach out and locate us in its grand sweep—in judgment and in mercy—before that same holy God. (245)

The influence of Hans Frei looms large here, and Seitz readily admits this influence elsewhere.

Along with Brevard Childs, Rolf Rendtorff, and others, Seitz has made an important contribution not only to the study of the Prophets but also to research into the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Here Seitz has demonstrated that the final form of the text is a legitimate historical object of study. Introductions to the Prophets can no longer be content with historical reconstructions. An account has to be given for the network of relations that exists within the texts as they stand.

What Seitz does with this final form is quite a different matter. Not everyone who is interested in the final form of the text agrees on how it arrived and what should be done with it. Even the keen observations that Seitz makes about the Book of the Twelve are brought to different conclusions by different interpreters. Perhaps this is the time to reevaluate composition and authorship in the Hebrew Bible. Seitz, like so many others, falls back on the all too comfortable pillow of editorial activity. The catch-all drip pan of redaction fails to explain the very evidence presented by Seitz, evidence that points to the presence of a single ordering mind over against a committee, school, or editorial process. Is it not possible to ask if the putting together of larger and smaller pieces of text into a structural and theological whole is the business of authors rather than editors? To tie this down would be to disambiguate what is to be done with the relations that hold within the final form.

It is hoped that Seitz's *Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* will soon become a full-fledged introduction to the Prophets. In his conclusion, the only subsequent volume promised by Seitz is one on the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament. But those who have felt a void in the older introductions to the Prophets will certainly find this present volume to be of great value.