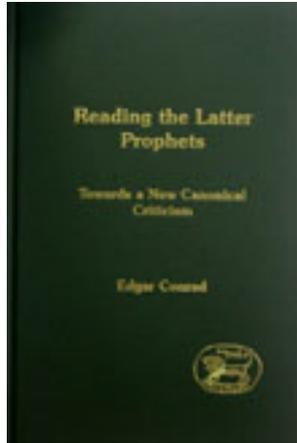


○ REVIEWING EDGAR W CONRAD'S *READING THE LATTER PROPHETS: TOWARD A NEW CANONICAL CRITICISM*

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Peter Miscall reviews Edgar W Conrad's *Reading the Latter Prophets: Toward a New Canonical Criticism* (London and New York: T & T Clark International; 2003. JSOT Sup Series 376).



This is the latest in a long series of books and articles in Conrad's ongoing and developing readings of prophetic literature. It is a rich book with many insights into specific passages and issues and with a challenging new perspective on the Latter Prophets as a group. He reads the four prophetic scrolls (counting the Twelve as one scroll) in their placement in the Hebrew Bible following directly after the Former Prophets, Joshua through Kings, and in the order given in the Talmud: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve. Conrad works with the rabbinic rationale of that order. Both Jeremiah and the end of 2 Kings present the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah and the beginning of the Exile. Ezekiel, amidst the exiles in Babylon, pictures God's departure from the Jerusalem temple but ends his book with a vision of restoration and consolation. Isaiah presents scenes of destruction but emphasizes restoration and consolation even more than Ezekiel. The Twelve repeat the movement from destruction to consolation and end, as Isaiah does, with the disappearance of prophets and the appearance of messengers signaling a new stage in God's dealing with the people.

Conrad approaches each prophetic scroll through its superscription. He takes the superscription's details seriously and does not regard it as one of the last redactional elements added to the scroll, an element usually taken as largely irrelevant to reading the scroll it is attached to. 'The words of Jeremiah' introduces Jeremiah who speaks a harsh message of denunciation and a prediction of defeat and exile. His message is for his generation from Josiah to Zedekiah but is written down to serve as a future witness to Jeremiah, a 'true prophet' whose words come to be.

Throughout his readings of all four scrolls Conrad consistently focuses on all explicit and implicit references to writing and to scrolls. The scrolls may present their prophetic characters preaching but the scrolls present themselves as written works meant for future readers after the times listed in the superscriptions and in the scrolls.

This is a decided rejection of the historical critical concern with an original oral presentation of the prophet's message and with the subsequent redactional stages that eventually led to the present shape of the scroll. For Conrad it is impossible to use a prophetic book in itself to reconstruct either the history of Israel portrayed in it or the supposed history of the compilation of the book. The prophets themselves are literary characters who cannot be taken unproblematically as actual historical personages. For him history is important since these scrolls have survived from the past to be read again in the present. What and how they communicate are his concern.

Ezekiel begins with a narrative introduction 'and it happened' (*wayehi*) and the book describes more what happened to and with Ezekiel than the 'words of Ezekiel.' Ezekiel is in Babylon where the book of Jeremiah left the Judeans. He witnesses in visions the Lord's departure from the Jerusalem temple but moves beyond condemnation and devastation to foresee the restoration of temple, city and land and the Lord's return to the temple. Even for future readers Ezekiel's closing vision is still for the future.

According to the superscription, Isaiah received his vision (*hazon*) in the reigns of Uzziah through Hezekiah and, although he does speak about the northern kingdom, it concerns Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah follows upon Ezekiel to the extent that his vision is received in the temple although this is the past temple, not the restored temple of the future. For Conrad a vision, a *hazon*, is received only in the temple and it is received over a lengthy period of time. Isaiah's vision presents both what the Lord has said and what he will say; his eighth century vision includes God's future promises of restoration. The vision is written and clearly meant for a future readership looking back on past destruction and return and hoping for an even brighter future.

The scroll of the Twelve contains the words, visions and stories of a group of prophets, not of one character. Conrad deals with several of them in connection with the preceding scrolls, e.g., Amos and Jeremiah and Jonah and Ezekiel. The scroll is structured roughly like Isaiah and it moves from eighth century denunciations of Israel, the northern kingdom, to the restoration of the temple. It is also written and meant for a present and a future readership.

Conrad prefaces his readings of the four scrolls with a two-part discussion of method and history. Both have elements of a critical biography as Conrad traces his development from a historical-critical teacher in a seminary to a literary-focused teacher in a university department that includes religious studies. In method the trajectory goes from Gunkel to Muilenburg to Fish and Eco. Conrad discusses Eco's semiotics of reading at length with considerable attention given to the notions of code and the Model Author and Reader (abstract not real categories). Conrad considers himself aligned with the minimalist position in contemporary debates about the Hebrew Bible and the history of Israel or the history of the biblical text. Noth and Barstad are two exemplars of contrasting views of the relation of the biblical text to history.

The discussions, in their length and content, are misleading introductions to the book that only seldom refers to semiotic codes and the Model Author and Reader and that says very little, pro or con, about the relevance of this reading of the scrolls for reconstructing the history of Israel. The introductions address issues and problems that are perhaps from another time and place in

Conrad's critical career, a time and place that he has moved beyond in his work on the Latter Prophets.

What Conrad does share with Eco and that is a present concern is the desire to hold together and in tension the reader and the text. They want to avoid the extreme positions of either an objective text that yields meaning to a passive reader or an active reader who creates meaning from a text that imposes few if any restrictions on the reader. This desire takes them from the either/or of many hermeneutical debates to the both/and of both reader and text. For Eco and for Conrad in his wake this is a troubling zone since it threatens to lead to readers making whatever they want of a text. Both respond with heightened concern for the limits of interpretation, limits imposed by the text and limits that a reader needs to recognize and respect.

However, contra Eco and Conrad, any such limits come more from an interpreter deciding methodologically what textual aspects – words, structure, genre, characters, imagery and on and on – are central to interpretation. The interpreter then reads the actual text guided and limited by these interpretive decisions. And it is a particular text that is read. Whatever decisions are made, whatever textual aspects are focused on, Isaiah is different than Jeremiah, and the differences will manifest themselves as they are read with a certain interpretive approach. But the text, the words-on-the-page, of either prophet does not prescribe its own interpretation before and separate from the interpretive decisions of an actual reader.

For Conrad these limits come from the order and arrangement of the four scrolls, the fact that they have a compilational, not a modern authorial, unity and the superscriptions that provide a general frame for reading the book. The large-scale structure of the Latter Prophets and of the individual scrolls is central to Conrad's interpretation. He does offer some readings of select passages that highlight his approach, but close reading is not part of his agenda. Indeed, the concept of compilational unity would appear to restrict any extensive close reading of the scrolls. These closing comments are not to disparage Conrad's considerable achievements in this book but to focus on the assumptions and application of his method, both its strengths and its limits. Order and arrangement are crucial to his reading, but another can read the same material from a different perspective ignoring order and arrangement and yet offering new insights.