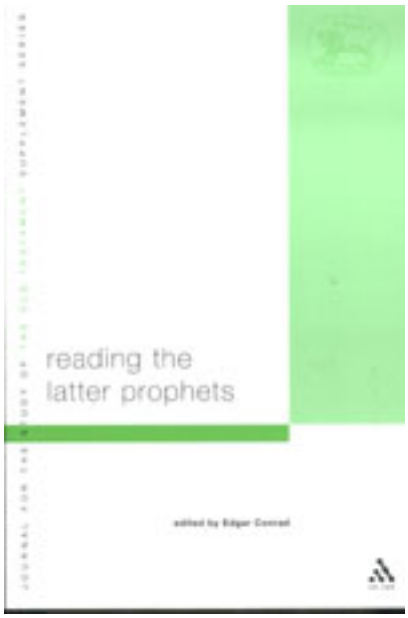
RBL 03/2005



Conrad, Edgar, ed.

Reading the Latter Prophets: Towards a New Canonical Criticism

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 376

London: T&T Clark, 2003. Pp. xii + 287. Paper. $49.95. ISBN 0567084523.

Mark J. Boda
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON L8S 4K1

Over the past two decades Edgar Conrad has contributed several books and articles to the study of Hebrew prophetic literature. His two commentaries, *Reading Isaiah* (OBT, Fortress) and *Zechariah* (Readings, Sheffield/Continuum), have provided helpful examples of his particular approach. The present volume not only provides further insights into Conrad's approach but also reveals continuing developments in his hermeneutic.

The first two chapters set the tone for the volume as Conrad argues for a semiotics of reading based on the approach of Umberto Eco (ch. 1) and then for a new approach to form criticism (ch. 2). The first chapter provides insights into Conrad's personal hermeneutical journey, a journey that is described in dialogue with Gunkel and Muilenburg. Although appreciative of these two giants of research, Conrad highlights their weaknesses and ultimately leverages the semiotic theory of Umberto Eco to argue for a balanced text-reader approach. One will find fascinating parallels between Conrad's journey and that of Eco himself in the same period. Both have an initial attraction to radical reader response, which is then tempered by later reflection on text limits. In the second chapter Conrad reveals his approach to history and the relationship between history and the text of the prophets. Again honestly expressing his own journey

hermeneutically, Conrad sides with the "minimalists" in the enduring debate over the use of the Bible for reconstructing the history of Israel. For Conrad, historical-critical approaches are deeply ideological and linked to a triumphalist ideology where Israel is at the center. Conrad's approach is antitriumphalist, a view where the Bible is not only one sacred text among many but where reconstruction of history of the prophets and their lives is impossible. Lest he be accused of being anti-historical, Conrad does admit interest in history. That interest, however, is focused on the prophets as books which "are textual constructions of whatever the real world was at the time these books were composed" (38). This final point leads Conrad to his proposal for a new form criticism, one that focuses on "the way some ancient author (scribe) or group of authors (scribes) constructed prophetic worlds by producing prophetic books" (43), and it is this world that he seeks to enter as a reader.

In the following chapters Conrad then shows the results of approaching the text with his particular hermeneutic. The first couple of chapters are more global in character, dealing with issues related to the Prophets (Former and Latter) as a collection. Chapter 3 ("Ordering Prophetic Books") consists of interaction with both Childs and Davies on the role and genesis of canon, and in the process Conrad justifies his reading of the prophetic books in their present form and in the order identified in the rabbinical sources (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, The Twelve). In Chapter 4 ("Opening Prophetic Books") he focuses attention on the role that superscriptions play in prophetic books (both Former Prophets and Latter Prophets), in particular, the codes they provide for the reader. The focus is not merely on the way these superscriptions provide signals for reading the individual books but more so on how they provide a signal for reading the Prophets as a canonical division that takes the reader on a journey from the time of Moses to that of Darius, a journey that is rooted, however, in the world of words where the temple is often the center of activity.

The remaining chapters of the book then provide more focused attention on sections of the Latter Prophets, employing intertextual strategies to bring the various books under discussion into conversation and highlight key themes. Chapter 5 reads Amos and Jeremiah together, both of whom are identified by Conrad as "unconventional prophets" whose words emerge in visual imagery and are brought to the temple from the outside. This trend of reading one of the larger prophetic scrolls in light of one of the prophets of the Twelve is found also in chapter 6, which reads Ezekiel in light of Jonah, two prophets who share the distinction of being prophets in a foreign land. In chapter 7 Conrad reads the major scroll of Isaiah in conjunction with what he calls the other prophets of vision, prophets whose vision is closely linked with the temple: Joel, Micah, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. These prophets are more concerned with the future, initiating a period of waiting as they announce comfort and consolation; thus, in the prophetic

collection "their role is seen as moving the history beyond the time of destruction to the time when Zion/Jerusalem will be rebuilt." In chapter 8, having brought various books from the Book of the Twelve in conversation with the larger scrolls of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, Conrad finally deals with the Book of the Twelve as a unit and grants more attention to those prophets among the Twelve which had not been mentioned (Hosea, Haggai–Malachi). He concludes that the Book of the Twelve is distinctly (though not exclusively) northern in focus. Hosea is thus a fitting introduction, not only due to its northern tone, but also because as a literary unit it stands out from the other prophetic books. Joel–Zephaniah all emulate genres of prophetic books found in the major prophets. The Book of the Twelve ends with the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who are focused on period of temple restoration.

Reading the Latter Prophets is a very helpful book for tracing key hermeneutical shifts in the study of prophetic literature over the past century. By not providing an exhaustive history of research and instead focusing on key conversation partners, Conrad has made his book accessible to a breadth of readership. His honest personal reflections on his journey through three decades of scholarship not only provide an example of the very hermeneutic he is espousing (with reader sensibilities) but invites others to reflect on their own hermeneutical journey. Such vulnerability is to be applauded.

Four issues, however, need to be addressed as we consider the validity of Conrad's approach. It is obvious that his early dalliance in radical reader-response theory was dissatisfying for Conrad and led him (following Eco) to the more solid ground of textual limitation where reader and text are in conversation. Throughout the book, however, there is a constant concern to communicate that he has not abandoned the "historical" dimension in his hermeneutic. One may say that he "protesteth too much"; that is, there appears to be a deep sensibility that one must have a secure foothold in history in order to have some controls in the interpretive enterprise. Interestingly, Conrad consistently finds this historical dimension and control in the scribal community responsible for the final form of the text. It is interesting that, having undermined the historical-critical enterprise of uncovering the original author and its historical context, he appears quite confident that he is able to make comments about a historically situated scribal community. For instance on page 38 (in a paragraph that begins with the protest: "This disagreement with the practice of historical-critical inquiry does not mean that I have not interest in history"), in an attempt to shift the focus from the reconstruction of the world of some legendary prophetic figure to that of the text, he claims: "What we find in prophetic books are textual constructions of whatever the real world was at the time these books were composed." Here we see Conrad making an historical claim that he denies other historical critics. That is, he displays just as much confidence in the ability to discern a "real world" as other historians; he has just shifted the focus from author to final redactor

(or, as he calls it, scribal community). Thus he admits: "I am assuming that prophetic books are something like a collage that has been organized and given an organizational unity by a scribal community" (62); and "The way some scribe(s) in the past ordered materials is important" (91).

A second problem is his choice of a particular canonical order, especially considering that the order of the books in the text is so important to much of Conrad's reading of the Latter Prophets. He does this because he wants to "pay attention to the order of prophetic books as they have come to us," that is, to "understand these books as a whole, as they are" (61). Of course, the question here is what he means by "as they are" or "as they have come to us." The order he cites is the one from rabbinic sources and one that does not always agree with the actual scribal traditions that have now come to us (see his own admission on 244 n. 1). It would seem more consistent to have chosen a particular and extant manuscript or manuscript tradition and then perform his interpretive enterprise on that tradition in which the order and shape of the biblical text would be the same. This would entail a slightly different agenda, for he would need to unpack the world of the scribal community of that particular manuscript, rather than an imagined scribal community that first assembled the book as a whole.

Third, Conrad focuses considerable attention and energy on the superscriptions in the prophetic books, arguing that they provide keys for reading the books; that is, they serve "as codes addressed to a Model Reader signaling how to read the collection that follows" (65). Nine of the fifteen books of the Latter Prophets begin with superscriptions with a historical reference, signaling the importance of historical location for the reading of the material recorded in the book that follows. Conrad does note this aspect but is only willing to leverage this historical data as relative data within the canon; that is, the superscriptions show that the Latter Prophets continue the story of the Former Prophets. In many cases, however, these superscriptions appear to signal a very particular historical context that is important for understanding the prophetic messages contained within the book. Those responsible for the creation of this book were so concerned with this historical context that they recorded it at the outset. Books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and especially Haggai and Zechariah show careful attention to precise dates using not only years of a king's reign but also precise day and month. The superscriptions as reading codes leads us back to the historical-critical task that Conrad tries to abandon (see my reference to Conrad in "Terrifying the Horns," *CBQ* 67 [2005]).

Finally, in his closing chapter Conrad makes the claim: "Because my own community of interpretation is not a theological one, although I learned my historical criticism in a Christian community, I do not feel compelled in my work to read these texts from the perspective of either Judaism or Christianity" (269). This comment is interesting and

helps the reader understand further the hermeneutical journey and social location of Conrad as he writes. However, one wonders if a reader can truly understand a textual form and order that was honed within a deeply Jewish context by adopting a hermeneutical stance that is opposed to that context? If Conrad wants to work with a rabbinic order and access a model reader and possibly a model author, is this possible when one is reading against the grain of the very tradition presupposed by this ancient text? In the same way that historical critics were guilty of taking a text and reshaping it according to their own conventions of reading against the grain of the text in historical ways, is not this new reader critic doing precisely the same thing by refusing to read within the bounds of a model reader conceivable to an ancient Jewish scribal community?

None of these issues, of course, are somehow limited to the work of Edgar Conrad but rather are topics that need to be addressed within the broader context of hermeneutics in the twenty-first century. What I find in Conrad's work is a daring admission of his own hermeneutical journey, a courageous act that one hopes will bear fruit in the emerging generations of interpreters of Bible and religion.