
Probably no single figure in Old Testament scholarship in the past century can equal the influence of Gerhard von Rad. In terms of lasting influence and immediate effect on the direction of the discipline, von Rad stands above other Old Testament scholars and must be dealt with in any serious study, especially one on the prophets. In his work *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets*, Christopher Seitz, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Wycliffe College (University of Toronto), recognizes von Rad’s influence and makes interaction with von Rad’s work a central part of the development of his thesis. Despite his obvious respect for von Rad’s work in many respects, Seitz proposes in this work a radical change from von Rad’s approach to the prophets, one that has dominated the discipline since the publication of the second volume of his *Old Testament Theology*. Against the common practice of first ordering the prophets, particularly the minor prophets, according to their assumed historical situation, Seitz argues that canonical order itself attests to the history better than so-called historical reconstructions. He aims to show that the canonical form is a better starting point for introductions to the prophets for the simple fact that the “final canonical form is also a piece of history, belonging to decisions made in the past about how an ancient prophetic witness is finally to be heard” (233).

**Summary**

Seitz organizes this work into an introduction and two primary parts. In the introduction, Seitz provides a survey of the typical methodology for writing an introduction to the prophets. Here he outlines the process of assigning an historical date to each of the minor prophets and reordering the prophets according to these assigned dates. It is from this foundation that the
introduction to the prophets can proceed “historically.” Part One, consisting of chapters two through five, aims to “examine in greater detail where study of the prophets came from and how such study will of necessity change if newer accounts of the status of the canonical form are allowed to register their full impact” (33). This task begins in chapter two with the curious manner in which the prophets have maintained a relative unity and thereby allowed for introductions, whatever the methodology, to thrive. He focuses on how the prophets have largely been agreed upon as a corpus of Scripture, while even the foundation “Pentateuch” itself has been challenged. He notes examples of von Rad and others speaking of the Hexateuch, while yet others argue for Deuteronomy as the beginning of the historical books, thus implying a Tetrateuch. If the “Torah” itself, replete with JEDP questions and arguments over Tetra/Penta/Hexa-teuch is too volatile for any significant introductions, one would not expect much hope for the other sections. And yet, not only are introductions to the prophets possible, but they flourished in the twentieth century.

In chapter three, Seitz explores “the way the traditional view of prophecy came undone in the nineteenth century” (75). Two key issues that Seitz addresses in this chapter are the overemphasis on forthtellers versus foretellers, and secondly on the “necessity of determining the life and times of individual prophets as the major first step in interpreting the canonical books” (82). He ends the chapter with a hint at where he is heading, suggesting that “one might have seen the historical proximity preserved by the witness as itself historically significant and worthy of reflection and assessment” (92). Chapter four carries on this hint and begins to explicate what he means by “prophetic associations in the canonical form.” Seitz suggests that the common task of placing prophets in their historical sequence, besides being difficult to do, does not allow the canonical form to speak on its own terms (96-97). Instead, Seitz suggests that if one were to read
the prophets in their canonical form, then one would begin to see how the final form “contributes to our understanding of God’s accomplishing word across the two Testaments of Christian Scripture” (97). Most simply, this is because the New Testament itself speaks of and relates to the prophetic corpus as a canonical reality, not as a “reconstructed tradition-history” (111). In chapter five, Seitz begins to apply these conclusions to the minor prophets themselves. He notes that one important difference between his proposal and other proposals is what to do with those books that have no superscription. For the historical reconstructionists, these books pose perhaps some challenge in dating, and they are then summarily reordered to their “appropriate” historical sequence. In his approach, however, it is precisely the fact that the canonical form maintains the lack of superscriptions that leads him to respect and attempt to interpret the logic behind their position (119). In the rest of the chapter, Seitz begins to examine how Hosea through Jonah demonstrates canonical relationships that may explain their position quite well.

In Part Two, consisting of chapters six through eight and the conclusion, Seitz more directly applies his insights to the task of reading the Twelve as a canonical unit in association. Before doing so in earnest, however, Seitz takes time in chapter six to discuss von Rad’s achievement as well as his failings. Seitz identifies five achievements of von Rad’s approach, which he identifies as the existential (156-158), comprehensiveness without uniformity (158-159), primary and secondary (159-160), history subservient to prophecy as a theological reality (160-162), and Old and New Testament and Israelite prophecy (162-163). Despite these achievements, Seitz notes five limitations of von Rad’s approach, which he identifies as selectivity and the complete literary record (163-165), tradition and geography (165), tradition-history and change (166-168), typology and tradition-history (168-169), and ostensive reference and intratextuality (169-171).
Chapter seven, “Prophecy and History,” is the chapter in which Seitz most clearly develops his thesis that the Twelve ought to be read as a unit, and this type of canonical reading itself retains and accentuates aspects of history lost in other approaches. He argues that “the final form is ‘the lesson that history teaches us,’ when it has had its say and when all is said and one” (194). Seitz highlights three problems with the normal ordering in light of the canonical form. First, no order of the Twelve has been found with Amos in the signal position, yet nearly all historical surveys begin from this assumption. Second, there is no linear collection of fifteen books; rather, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are “large collections that exist independently of the Twelve” (202). Third, while the dated books of the Twelve do follow in chronological sequence, the undated books are unexplainable by such criteria (203). In contrast to these historical reordering, Seitz goes on to demonstrate a consistency that is evident within a canonical arrangement. He briefly outlines five points that emerge from a canonical reading of the Twelve as a whole. First, one sees “God’s history as a providentially ordered whole” (214). Second, there is an emphasis on how Israel and the nations have a different, yet parallel, place in God’s economy (214). Third, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Joel are shown to be models of prayer and obedience, which fits well when one recognizes the end of Hosea as interpretive for the whole book of Twelve (214-215). Fourth, tradition-history as evidenced in the Twelve is “of necessity a partial historical portrait” (215). Finally, the Twelve show God’s character to be patient and yet not without limit (216). In chapter eight, Seitz then builds upon these conclusions to argue that a canonical reading, far from removing the prophets experiential world, rather rightly “teaches us where to stand and where to identify our proper place in that history” (245).
Critical Evaluation

Seitz’s work is an in-depth analysis of the current state of prophetic introductions and the historical roots of the movement that led scholars away from the final form and to the present emphasis on historical reconstruction. There are few weaknesses in Seitz’s approach, but two are worth mentioning on account of the possibility for misunderstanding. One such weakness is Seitz’s statement that “a fascination with authorial intention is the legacy of naïve nineteenth-century understandings of prophetic personality at the center of religious foundational genius” (99). What Seitz seems to be criticizing here is not so much authorial intention as it is the overemphasis on prophetic personality and the school of thought that the prophets were merely religious geniuses, essentially creating a new monotheistic religion in contrast to the polytheistic worldviews of the day. It is not Seitz’s criticism of this view that is problematic, but rather that he may position some readers to reject authorial intention entirely on the grounds that it is the legacy of such an approach. While this approach can and likely did lead to a fascination with authorial intention in the manner he identifies, there are responsible appeals to authorial intention that do not accept the naïve position of nineteenth century criticism. In failing to distinguish between responsible and irresponsible appeals to authorial intention, Seitz leaves the reader unclear as to how much authorial intention ought to influence interpretation. He allows that each book of the Twelve maintains its own unique portrait, and also that the editor/redactor of the Twelve, like the redactor of the Pentateuch, ought to be understood as the “teacher” who contextualizes meaning (194). It seems, then, that Seitz does not want to limit all appeals to authorial intention, only those based on poor foundations, yet this is unclear in his writing.

A second weakness is the lack of support for his appeal to the canon. He argues that the canonical form shows a remarkable achievement of association (chapters seven and eight
especially), yet he does not develop fully whether or not it is legitimate to speak of canon in the manner he suggests. He begins along these lines in the conclusion, but he leaves questions unanswered. For example, he does not deal adequately with which canonical form one ought to use in recognizing these associations. Is it wrong to use the English or LXX order, or merely less enlightening? Should Jeremiah lead the major prophets, as in *Baba Bathra*, or Isaiah? Where should Joel be located, since it is in different locations in some collections? Though Seitz’s argument does not hinge on answering such questions, the application of his method is hindered until one is clear on how these questions can be clarified.¹

Despite these weaknesses, Seitz’s work is overwhelmingly convincing. He provides numerous examples of how a canonical reading helps one understand various aspects of the Twelve. For example, the conclusion to Hosea (Whoever is wise, let him understand these things…) becomes a dominant theme in the Twelve, and its placement as the first book of the Twelve helps accentuate this point. In a similar manner, Seitz shows how the similar themes in Hosea and Malachi, such as marriage and divorce, love and election, and false worship, parallel the way in which Isaiah 1 and 65-66 bracket the book of Isaiah (213). Still another example is the introduction of an accusation against Edom in Amos 1:11 that finds its judgment in the following book, Obadiah (209). These are but a few of the many examples that Seitz identifies to support his case that a canonical reading makes better sense of the order than historical appraisals.

Another point that is particularly strong, as well as extremely intriguing, is his argument that the final form itself is historical. When one recognizes the two-fold fact that the prophets

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¹ The benefit of reading this text four years after publication is knowing that Seitz has answered these questions, and convincingly at that, in his subsequent book, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).
were circulated in this order early on (referencing Sirach, 217) and that the Twelve were recognized as a single work that rivaled Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in scope and impact, Seitz’s appeal to the canonical form as evidence of historical circumstances becomes highly probable. The so-called historical appraisals of the prophets, while finding some insight into the history of the time, is in fact severely limited in its historical scope because it neglects the obvious historical fact that the individual books were collected and circulated as a unit. On the other hand, Seitz’s canonical approach, rather than eschewing the importance of history, seems to be capable of embracing history more fully because he extends the scope to its canonical form, recognizing that act as in some ways interpretatively significant.

**Conclusion**

In *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, Christopher Seitz has provided strong supporting evidence for a promising new proposal for how to read the prophets. By means of a thorough analysis of von Rad and other who have proposed an historical reconstruction for prophetic introductions, Seitz is able to identify some of the problems and limitations of current approaches. Moreover, by emphasizing how the final form itself was an historical “event,” Seitz is able to provide a new interpretation of the prophets that respects the canonical form and gives added understanding to the manner in which the prophets, especially the Twelve, can be understood as historical. This work is commendable in many other respects and ought to be a required text in any graduate level class dealing with the prophets. Yet far from being merely a required text, one hopes that it will effect the kind of change needed to shift the methodological presuppositions that currently dominate the field.