

The Bible and Culture: The Role of The Text in Interpretation¹⁾

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It is now generally agreed among contemporary literary theorists that the reader plays a central role in interpretation. That is, texts do not just mean things on their own; meaning emerges in the act of reading. The significance of the reader in interpretation has become so clearly recognized that the interpretation of a text is commonly referred to as ‘a reading’. Since there are many readers of any given text, it has become widespread practice to speak in the plural about ‘readings’. A text is recognized as having not a single meaning but a plurality of meanings emerging out of multiple readings - not only by different readers but also by the same reader. As a consequence the meaning of a text is said to be indeterminate.

This discussion of the role of the reader has arisen in general literary theorising about textual meaning. The roots of the discussion were in post-structuralist theory and were generally seen as arising from the linguistic theory of Saussure.²⁾

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1) This essay is a revised version of my presidential address to the Australian/Korean Theological Conference held at the University of Queensland on 4 August, 2000.

2) For a good overview of the emergence of the reader in non-biblical literature see Stefan Collini, “Introduction: Interpretation Terminable and

This literary theory about textual meaning has been increasingly seen as important in biblical hermeneutics.³⁾ It is not unusual for literary theorising to influence biblical studies; over the centuries biblical interpretation has always been influenced by cultural practices and theories of the time. When the historical-critical approach to the study of the Bible was gaining popularity in the late nineteenth century, the predominant Romantic literary theory associated the meaning of a text with authorial intention. Following this understanding of meaning, historical critics set about looking for authors: searching for meaning by seeking to discover author intention. The Yahwist, the Deuteronomist, Second Isaiah, Trito-Zechariah, the Chronicler and others were all identified by historical critics as ‘authors’ to whom intentions could be attributed in order to arrive at textual meaning. By focusing on authorial intentions, historical critics argued that the biblical text should be interpreted just as any other text was interpreted. ⁴⁾ Post-structuralist theory and reader response criticism are making a rather late arrival to biblical studies; this can be explained by recognising that the historical-critical reading of

Interminable,” S. Collini, ed., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-22. As these theories relate to biblical studies see Edgar McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader: an Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

3) See Stephen D. Moore, “Negative Hermeneutics, Insubstantial Texts: Stanley Fish and the Biblical Interpreter,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986), 707-719.

4) See David Gunn, “New Directions in the Study of the Hebrew Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987), 65-75.

the Bible has come to have a canonical status among many biblical scholars, thus blocking the influence of the reader oriented theory that has now become widespread in the Academy.⁵⁾ To put this observation in another way, many historical critics have abandoned their earlier claim to read the Bible just as they would read any other text and have maintained that historical criticism is *the only* way to read the Bible.

Since I published *Reading Isaiah* in 1991,⁶⁾ my own approach to biblical studies has been reader response criticism. My commentary on *Zechariah* published in 1999 followed and developed in possibly a more radical way my application of reader response criticism.

Although critical response to both books has been favourable, those who disagree with what I have argued in these two books mirror what is undoubtedly the primary criticism of others both inside and outside biblical studies who follow an historical critical approach: the criticism that reader response theory is too ‘subjective’.

- Shouldn't we attempt to be objective in our critical endeavours?
- With reader response criticism, can't the text mean

5) See Edgar W. Conrad, “Changing Context: The Bible and the Study of Religion,” E. W. Conrad and E. G. Newing, eds., *Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays in Honor of Francis I. Andersen's Sixtieth Birthday, July 28, 1985* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 393-402.

6) This was published as part of the series *Overtures to Biblical Theology* by Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

anything anybody wants it to mean?

- Doesn't reader response criticism ignore historical background?
- Why bother reading if reading will only produce difference?
- Doesn't this endless plurality of meaning suggest the end of biblical studies as a discipline?
- If there is no single meaning, what is the role of the scholar?

My standard response to these questions always has been to say that reader response criticism does not propose that meaning is plural, indeterminate and reader-dependent only for reader response critics. Reader response criticism is not a method for reading but the insight that whenever texts have been interpreted, the interpreter, as a reader, has always been actively involved in constructing textual meaning. What is new with reader response criticism is this recognition of the central role of the reader in the production of meaning. In my book *Reading Isaiah* I analysed historical critics as readers. I looked at historical criticism in general and particularly at Georg Fohrer as an historical-critical reader of a biblical text who, in a community of historical-critical readers, was actively involved in constructing textual meaning.⁷⁾

To describe historical critics as readers is not difficult to do.

7) Conrad, *Reading Isaiah, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). see especially pp. 3-33. I also pointed out that the 'pre-critical interpreters' to whom historical critics were reacting also brought their theological agenda when they read the Bible so that its meaning was pre-determined.

In fact the so-called father of historical-criticism, Julius Wellhausen, clearly depicts himself as a reader in his famous book *Prologomena to the History of Ancient Israel*. He records his reading experience toward the beginning of the book as follows:

It may not be out of place here to refer to personal experience. In my early student days I was attracted by the stories of Saul and David, Ahab and Elijah; the discourses of Amos and Isaiah laid strong hold on me, and I read myself well into the prophetic and historical books of the Old Testament. Thanks to such aids as were accessible to me, I even considered that I understood them tolerably, but at the same time was troubled with a bad conscience, as if I were beginning with the roof instead of the foundation; for I had no thorough acquaintance with the Law, of which I was accustomed to be told that it was the basis and postulate of the whole literature. At last I took courage and made my way through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and even through Knobel's *Commentary* to these books. But it was in vain that I looked for the light which was to be shed from this source on the historical and prophetic books. On the contrary, my enjoyment of the latter was marred by the Law; it did not bring them any nearer me, but intruded itself uneasily, like a ghost that makes a noise indeed, but is not visible and really effects nothing. Even where there were points of contact between it and them, differences also made themselves felt, and I found it impossible to give a candid decision in favour of the priority of the Law. Dimly I began to perceive that throughout there was between them all the difference that separates two wholly distinct worlds. Yet, so far from attaining clear conceptions, I only fell into deeper confusion, which was worse confounded by the explanations of Ewald in

the second volume of his *History of Israel*. At last, in the course of a casual visit in Göttingen in the summer of 1867, I learned through Ritschl that Karl Heinrich Graf placed the Law later than the Prophets, and, almost without knowing his reasons for the hypothesis, I was prepared to accept it. I readily acknowledged to myself the possibility of understanding Hebrew antiquity without the book of the Torah.⁸⁾

It is useful to make some comments on Wellhausen's analysis of his reading experience in light of contemporary reader-oriented literary theory. Wellhausen acknowledges in his examination of his own reading that he is not reading as a solitary reader. He brings to his reading strategies for interpretation, i.e., he is a member of what Stanley Fish would refer to as a community of interpretation.⁹⁾ It is this community that helps him to identify what to look for in his reading. This community is made explicit in Wellhausen's comments. He refers to 'aids accessible to me,' books such as Knobel's *Commentary* and Ewald's *History of Israel*, and contact with Ritschl. Indeed, as one reads Wellhausen's account of his reading experience, it becomes apparent that the issue of the priority of the Law was a community issue. His misgivings

8) J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1985; repr. as *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* [New York: World Publishing, 1957]), 3-4.

9) See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). For a discussion of the implications of Fish's approach for biblical study see my *Reading Isaiah*, 3-33.

about the law as ‘foundation’ when it seemed more like a ‘roof’ to him were grounded in the community of German Lutheran tradition. It was Wellhausen’s own world, not the world of ancient Israel, in which the Law was discredited. To speak of the Torah as Law and to see Law in opposition to, for example, the prophets, is to reflect his own Christian world in which a clear distinction was made between the Law and the Gospel; it fails to appreciate the significant role of the Torah as seen in Judaism.¹⁰⁾ When Wellhausen reads, he may peer through the text to find a clear vision of the past - the history of Israelite religion – but this is not possible. It is not the biblical text but his own cultural context that gives him the perspective that two separate worlds existed in Israelite religion: the world of the Law and the world of the prophets.

In making these observations, I am suggesting that Wellhausen was a product of his own time just as all of us are necessarily shaped by the ideological worlds in which we live. We need perhaps to be more like Wellhausen in being candid about our feelings when we read the text. What I do want to argue is that all readings, including Wellhausen’s, necessarily

10) A number of scholars in the past have pointed out the influence of German Lutheran tradition on Wellhausen’s thought. See, for example, Jon D. Levenson, “The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism,” R. E. Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 28-34; and Friedemann W. Golka, “German Old Testament Scholarship,” R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden, eds., *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London; Philadelphia: SCM; Trinity, 1990), 258-260.

reflect the world of the reader. To have allowed Wellhausen's reading—a reading that is a product of Wellhausen's nineteenth century interpretive community—to have become normative for subsequent Old Testament scholarship is to deny the biblical text a plurality of meanings resulting from encounters with new readers as it moves into new contexts. To read the Pentateuch exclusively as source critics guided by nineteenth century readings is an attempt to control the text—to rob it of new life.

The recognition of the role of the reader in interpretation was an exciting development. In this excitement, however, the role of the text has sometimes gotten lost in theory about meaning-making. In the process of restoring the reader's role and unveiling what had always been a spurious exercise in objectivity, leading to a singularity of meaning, the text has sometimes been demoted and denied any role to play in reading.

Indeed, at the radical extreme of reader response criticism there are those who have limited the role of the text to little more than simply the printed marks on the page. This is true, for example, of the philosopher Richard Rorty. He makes this point in response to Umberto Eco in a debate we will take up shortly.

Stanley Fish's well-known book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*¹¹⁾ also renders the role of the text in meaning-making as more less significant than had conventionally been the case. The question that forms the title of the book, 'Is there a text in

11) See note 9.

this class?’ was asked by one of Fish’s students during a class he was teaching. His answer to the question is:

‘there is and there isn’t.’ There isn’t a text in this or any other class if one means by text what E.D. Hirsch and others mean by it, ‘an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next’...but there is a text in this and every other class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force.¹²⁾

Fish’s answer, then, suggests that a text at all does not exist apart from a reader who brings to it strategies for reading or interpreting it.

Like Fish and Rorty, I have also emphasised the role of the reader in interpretation. Texts cannot be read in the detached objective manner that the quasi-scientific approach of historical criticism has advocated. However, the text has played a more significant role in my strategies of interpretation than it has for either Fish or Rorty. In the remaining part of this article, I want to reflect on the importance of the text in my own strategies for interpreting prophetic books.

In my study of prophetic books I have concentrated on reading them as literary wholes. For example, I have read Isaiah as one prophetic book-not as three Isaiahs. In understanding Isaiah as a prophetic whole, I have also distanced myself from redaction critics and canonical critics such as

12) Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, vii.

Brevard Childs who have advocated reading Isaiah as the end process of a development through time. Both redaction critics and canonical critics such as Childs are interested in the ‘final form’ of the text. To understand this final form implies discussion of stages of the text’s development before it became final, and, in this way, these scholars build on historical-critical inquiry rather than replace it and continue to speak of First, Second and Third Isaiah. My strategies for reading Isaiah have been to read it as it is, not to trace its development through time to reach its final form. In *Reading Isaiah*, I wrote,

My reading . . . assumes the text is something as a whole and seeks to discover what that whole is. I am therefore interested in relating parts of the text not to a world external to it (its historical background or its history of literary development) but to the literary world of the text itself. I will be dealing with the so-called final form of the text, but I will be focusing on the form itself, not on the process by which it became final.¹³⁾

Likewise in my commentary on Zechariah, I was interested not only in reading Zechariah as a literary whole but also in reading Zechariah as part of a larger literary whole, the scroll of the Twelve Minor prophets. This meant that I was not interested in reading the scroll as twelve independent books or in reading Zechariah according to the standard historical-critical custom of breaking it down into Proto- and Deutero- and Trito-Zechariah. As I say in the in the commentary,

13) Conrad, *Reading Isaiah*, 29-30.

My reading of Zechariah in this commentary is literary. The figure of Zechariah is understood as a character in the text, and the text of Zechariah is interpreted as part of a larger literary whole: the scroll of the twelve ‘minor’ prophets.¹⁴⁾

I go on to distinguish my reading from that of redaction critics by emphasising (1) my role as a reader, and (2) my focus on the text as a whole rather than as the final form of literary development. I say,

I would agree with redaction critics such as Terence Collins that the composition of prophetic books ‘had much in common with the modern art form of collage, in which the juxtaposition of varied, even dissimilar terms, is cultivated as a matter of style’. However, I will adopt a strategy for interpreting this literary collage that differs from that of redaction criticism, which has focused on diachronic history. My aim will be to understand the Twelve in much the same way that one approaches a collage as a work of art in its own right apart from tracing its sources or development. Just as a contemporary collage requires the observer to configure the parts, so a literary collage, such as the Twelve, necessitates the participation of the viewer/reader in its reception.¹⁵⁾

My strategies for reading prophetic books, then, have both

14) Edgar W. Conrad, *Zechariah*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 11.

15) Conrad, *Zechariah*, 16-17. The quotation from Collins is from his book, *The Mantle of Elijah: The Redaction Criticism of the Prophetic Books*, The Biblical Seminar 20 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 29.

emphasised the necessary involvement of the reader in interpretation and advocated a focus on prophetic books as literary wholes. My reasons for reading a prophetic book as a literary whole grow out of my disagreement with historical criticism. I understand that it is far more difficult to construct the historical background of biblical texts and the literary history of those texts themselves than traditional historical-critical inquiry has assumed. Language does not simply re-present the past so that we can look through the text as a window into what went before.¹⁶⁾ Previous critical studies have not recognised that the portrayal of Israel in the biblical text is a *construction* of a past. Here I am in agreement with scholars such as Philip Davies in his book, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel.'*¹⁷⁾ I make this point in my commentary on Zechariah:

This historical analysis of the growth of a prophetic book such as the Twelve raises problems similar to those in connection with the historical Zechariah. Diachronic studies of the book of the Twelve are often mapped out against the story of Israel depicted in the Hebrew Bible. This charting is problematic at a time when it is becoming increasingly clear that the Israel depicted in the biblical text is the construction by a later community of its past. Just as many have become critical of the conception of an Israel encoded in the sources of the historical narratives, conscious of itself, and writing its history as it evolved through time, so we need to become

16) "Reflections on Biblical Reflections," *Australian Religious Studies Review* 8 (1995), 1-7.

17) Philip Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

critical of the conception of the Book of the Twelve as encoding its own redactional history.¹⁸⁾

My reasons for reading prophetic books as literary wholes has a more positive side to it than is sometimes clear from my critique of the historical-critical approach. I choose to read prophetic books as literary wholes because of my interest in the cultural background of these texts. Or, to put it another way, part of my motivation in reading Isaiah and the Twelve as prophetic scrolls, as they are, without reconstructing an underlying development through time, is, I think, also the best way to understand them as texts from the past-to understand their historical and cultural background.

Perhaps, the best way that I can explain my position is to join a discussion of two contemporary critics, neither of whom is a biblical scholar: the semiotician and well-known author of fiction, Umberto Eco, and the pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty. The debate between these two scholars is found in the book, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*,¹⁹⁾ which contains the ‘Tanner Lectures(1990)’ delivered by Umberto Eco at Clare

18) Conrad, *Zechariah*, 16.

19) Eco, Umberto with Rorty, Richard, Culler, Jonathan, Brooke-Rose and Christine, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, S. Collini, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Eco’s three lectures are printed in this book, “Interpretation and History”(23-44); “Overinterpreting Texts”(45-66) and “Between Author and Text” (67-88) as well as his ‘Reply’ to the respondents(139-151). I expand on my used of Eco’s semiotic theory in *Reading the Latter Prophets: Toward a New Canonical Criticism*, JSOTSS 376 (London: T and T Clark International, 2003), 5-29.

Hall, Cambridge University. Rorty was one of the respondents to these lectures and his response, 'The Pragmatist's Progress',²⁰⁾ is also printed as a chapter in the same book.

I have time only to summarise the debate as I have read it, and in doing so I will undoubtedly gloss over some subtleties of argument. Both Eco and Rorty think of themselves as reader response critics. They agree that an author's intention cannot be determined from a written text, and both agree that the meaning of a text involves the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. But this is where their agreement ends. Rorty, the pragmatist, argues that interpretation is limitless while Eco, the semiotician, maintains that there are limits to interpretation.

Rorty represents the extreme end of reader response criticism. There are no limits to interpretation and, because there are no limits, Rorty maintains there can be no overinterpretation of texts. Texts are nothing but marks on a page and their meaning is solely dependent on the reader. The following comment from Rorty makes this point:

So I should prefer to say that the coherence of the text is not something it has before it is described, any more than the dots had coherence before we connected them. Its coherence is no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks or noises-some way of describing those marks and noises which relates them to some of the other things we are interested in talking about.²¹⁾

20) Collini, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 89-108.

21) Rorty, 98.

For Rorty, then, the meaning of a text is subject to whatever use the reader makes of it because the reader determines the meaning. There is nothing about the text that limits interpretation. The pragmatic Rorty says that meaning arises out of the *use* of a text in interpretation and that the way to use a text is unlimited.

In arguing this point Rorty is responding to the main contention in Eco's lectures that, even though the meaning of a text is reader dependent, there are limits to interpretation; and to go beyond these limits is to overinterpret a text. Eco maintains that common sense tells us that there can be overinterpretation. He illustrates this by the following outrageous example:

...if Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, I suspect that many reader-oriented critics would be inclined to think that he read Saint Luke in a pretty preposterous way.²²⁾

For Eco this scenario clearly indicates overinterpretation and suggests that there are limits to interpretation. But how do we define these limits, and how do we identify overinterpretations that are not this absurd? For Eco the identification of limits of interpretation is a not a simple matter of reverting to the notion that a text has a single meaning, for he also maintains that textual meaning is reader-dependent. While wanting to maintain limits of interpretation, he continues to argue that the meaning of a text is reader-dependent and indeterminate.

22) Eco, "Interpretation and History," 24.

To deal with the dilemma of combining the limits of interpretation with reader-dependent indeterminacy, Eco proposes that a distinction should be made between the *interpretation of a text and the use of a text*.²³⁾ He is making this distinction to accommodate in his argument deconstructionists and pragmatists such as Rorty. One can be quite clever in using a text to do an infinite number of things as Rorty maintains,²⁴⁾ but, according to Eco, to use a text is not necessarily to interpret it.

For Eco the interpretation of the text has to do with ‘the intention of the work’(*intentio operis*). He distinguishes this from the ‘intention of the reader’(*intentio lectoris*). Both the ‘intention of the work’ and the ‘intention of the reader’, he argues, are involved in the production of a text’s meaning. To ‘use’ a text, is not to ‘interpret’ it because to use it ignores the text’s intention. He goes on to say that while it is much easier to understand what is meant by the reader’s intention, it is more difficult to determine what is meant by the text’s intention. In biblical studies we can see reader intention clearly; for example, biblical studies has come to recognise feminist, liberationist, post-colonial, Asian and a whole host of other interpretations that are reader-dependent. But what does Eco mean by the ‘intention of the text’?

It is significant that Eco understands the discovery of ‘the

23) This point is spelled out perhaps more clearly in an article of Eco that does not occur in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. See his “*Intentio Lectoris: the State of the Art*,” *Differenti* 2 (1988), 147-168.

24) He also uses this distinction between ‘use’ and ‘interpretation’ to distinguish his approach from deconstruction.

intention of a text' to be reader-dependent. He says,

The text's intention is not displayed by the textual surface ...One has to decide to 'see' it. Thus it is possible to speak of the text's intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention.²⁵⁾

For Eco, then, 'intention of the text' is reader-dependent and has nothing to do with discovering the author's intention. For Eco the intention of a text has to do with the production of what he calls 'a model reader' who makes conjectures about the 'intention of the text'. But how is the reader to validate the conjectures about textual intention? Eco answers this question by saying,

The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.²⁶⁾

For Eco, then, the meaning of a text is reader-dependent; but what he calls 'the intention of the text' is a check on the limits of interpretation. I should hasten to add that Eco does

25) "Overinterpreting Texts," 63.

26) "Overinterpreting Texts," 65.

not believe that this approach to reading texts will lead to singular and unanimous agreement about textual meaning. Meaning remains reader-dependent. But such an approach suggests that there are limits to interpretation. I address the implications of Eco's 'the intention of the text' in my book, *Reading the Latter Prophets: Toward a New Canonical Criticism*.

Clearly my brief summary of Rorty's and Eco's positions has reduced the complexities of their arguments. However, I think I have said enough to locate a discourse in critical theory against which to reflect on the role of the text in my own reading of prophetic texts. The first thing I want to say is that I agree with Rorty that a distinction cannot be made between the 'use' of a text and the 'interpretation' of a text. Whenever a text is read and interpreted, it is 'used'. Readers use texts when they read to produce meaning. However, I do not agree with Rorty that texts are simply 'marks on a page' that need to be strung together by the reader to produce a text in reading. Clearly they are that, too, but I think they participate in the constraint of meaning. When I begin to string together an English text, I already bring with me a structure, a grammar that helps me string together words to produce sentences, paragraphs and whole texts, a language that informs my reading and the meaning of the text.

I can myself do this to a lesser extent with Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, German and, to an even lesser extent, with Ugaritic and French. When I come to a Korean text, I can't do this at all. For me the Korean text is (sadly) simply marks

on a page. As readers we approach texts with a grammar that informs and limits our reading of the marks on the page. Grammar in all languages is something about which we must as readers continue to make conjectures. There is no determinate grammar. We all know that debate still rages about the meaning of the waw consecutive in classical Hebrew, and in the recent volume of the *Journal of Biblical Literature* an article appeared about the proper way to translate the conjunction in biblical Hebrew.²⁷⁾ The conjectures we make about the grammar we construct for using a language can be tested against the language (not marks on a page) that we encounter in texts.

The manner in which grammar limits the way I connect marks on the page - and the way in which marks on the page constrain my use of grammar - makes Eco's theory about the limits of interpretation appealing in the approach I have taken to reading prophetic books. But rather than make the distinction between 'use' and 'interpretation', I want to talk about different ways in which a reader can use a text in the production of meaning and the role of the text in this meaning-making. When I come to a prophetic text, I use the text differently than do source critics such as Georg Fohrer, redaction critics such as R.E. Clements, and canonical critics such as Brevard S. Childs. Prophetic books were sometimes rejected by historical critics as unreadable²⁸⁾ because they did

27) "Does the Biblical Hebrew Conjunction-Have Many Meanings, One Meaning, or No Meaning at All?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000), 249-267.

not fit the cultural codes of Western culture. These historical critics *used* prophetic books to address issues that reflected the culture of the interpreters. They used the texts to do things that I think are impossible. My arguments countering these historical critical approaches are twofold. First, I do not think that we have the data to carry out the kind of studies these scholars do in a way that makes them convincing. We have such little access to the history of ancient Israel that to *use* the texts for historical inquiry into prophetic activity behind the texts or to use them to trace the history of a prophetic text through all its redactional stages is highly problematic. (2) Second, and more importantly, I use prophetic books because I am interested in prophetic books themselves, not in prophets behind the text or in the diachronic development of a text to reach a final form. The only prophet we can encounter is the prophet portrayed in the text; additional information about particular prophets cannot be re-constructed. I want to read prophetic books as they are; I do not have any interest in

28) Hermann Gunkel makes this claim. He says, "The prophets were not originally writers but speakers. Anyone who thinks of ink and paper while reading their writings is in error from the outset. "Hear!" is the way they begin their works, not "Read!" Above all, however, if contemporary readers wish to understand the prophets, they must entirely forget that the writings were collected in a sacred book centuries after the prophets' wrote. The contemporary reader must not read their words as portions of the Bible but must attempt to place them in the context of the life of the people of Israel in which they were first spoken." See D. L. Petersen, ed., "The Prophets as Writers and Poets," *Prophecy in Israel: Search for Identity*, I. L. Schaaf, trans. (Philadelphia; London: Fortress; SPCK, 1987), 24; org. ed., *Die Propheten*, 34-70.

reading them at any stage of a hypothetical phase of development. Rather I need to make conjectures as a reader concerning what Eco calls the reader-dependent ‘intention of the text’. In *Reading Isaiah, Zechariah and Reading the Latter Prophets*, I want to know how to read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve as entire prophetic scrolls/books. In the work subsequent to *Reading Isaiah* I have begun to read prophetic books intertextually, that is, in relation to one another. I have done this because I think it facilitates the way I conjecture about reading prophetic books. It enables me to see similarities in the ways both Isaiah and the Twelve work as prophetic books. In both books prophets are portrayed as figures of the past. In an article, ‘Messengers in Isaiah and the Twelve: Implications for Reading Prophetic Books’,²⁹⁾ I have pointed out the similar ways in which messengers figure in the structure of both Isaiah and the Twelve. In *Reading Prophetic Books*, I continued this intertextual reading of prophetic books for the so-called ‘Latter Prophets’. By reading prophetic books this way, it is my intention as a reader to discover what Eco calls ‘the intention of the work’ (*intentio operis*). Initially, I look at how the opening words of prophetic books (sometimes called superscriptions) provide a clue to the intention of prophetic scrolls. The questions I raise are: What is the *intentio operas* of Amos and Jeremiah that begin with ‘the words of’ (דברי), with Jonah and Ezekiel that begin with ‘and it happened’ (ויהי), and with Isaiah along with Joel, Micah, Obadiah, Nahum Habakkuk

29) Conrad, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 91 (2000), 83-97.

and Zephaniah that are to be read as ‘vision’(חזון).³⁰⁾

What, then, is the role of prophetic books in interpretation? The role is reader-dependent, i.e., the role of the text is dependent on the use the reader makes of it. Some of these uses can be preposterous. I suppose that someone could say that the book of Isaiah was a recipe for making Kim-Chi, but I wouldn’t find that very convincing. My own interest in reading prophetic books mirrors in some ways what I have said about the grammar of Hebrew earlier. Grammar is a cultural code for understanding how a language works. We can bring this code to a text, and it gives us insight into how to connect the marks on the page. We can continually conjecture about a grammatical code and determine new ways of understanding the code. In a similar way we can make conjectures about how texts work as texts, checking them against the text as an object to see how it facilitates our reading. Texts (such as prophetic scrolls) are cultural products that are constructed utilising cultural codes. While these cultural codes are more clearly evident to us in societies in which we were born and educated, cultural codes of alien and ancient books, like the grammars of foreign languages, though elusive, can support reasonable conjecture. As readers, to cite Eco, we can make conjectures about how texts work as a coherent whole. To

30) In the case of these books my discussion is more complicated since only Isaiah, Obadiah, and Nahum are identified as חזון in their superscriptions. I also use a method that I cannot discuss in this limited space to explore how the formal structures of these prophetic books share features that are a clue to the intention of these works.

break up books and read them in parts is to shatter what I think is a key feature for understanding their intention as texts. In *Reading the Latter Prophets*, I contrast my approach of reading prophetic books as literary wholes with traditional historical-critical approaches:

If I were to compare historical criticism and my approach in this book, I might say that historical criticism takes a pot, breaks it, examines the shards, and often uses the shards to construct new pots. The approach I prefer is to examine the pot as a whole as I have received it. Even if to my eyes the pot seems somewhat distorted and misshapen in terms of my contemporary expectations of pots, I can look for shapes that may indicate whether it could have been used for cooking or pouring. I can compare it to other pots, looking for the similarities and differences, and discern in what may first appear to be a useless appendage a handle that allows me to hold it and to draw water. I do not claim that this pot is my own or that I could use it in the way it would have been used in an ancient culture. However, I can begin to learn something of the way it could have been used – and this seems to me to be of the greatest historical interest. When applied to texts, this metaphor suggests that historical interest is related to the literary form of the whole. A semiotic theoretical framework allows the reader to interact with the text in its received form with a respect for the differences between text and reader – but allowing the possibility of communication between them. Prophetic books that have been claimed to be ‘unreadable’ can, in this way, be read. There may be a plethora of readings growing out of this approach; but all help us to understand both the text and ourselves as readers.³¹⁾

Let me give an example from my experience of my first visit to Korea, which I think can help to explain how conjecture operates in determining the intention of prophetic books. For two weeks I ate Korean meals, and at the beginning it took a lot of conjecturing to understand how the meal worked as a meal. For example, on my Korean Air flight I ordered Bibimbap. That was the beginning of my conjecturing about eating. Like a good Westerner, I ate the seaweed soup first, as a first course, although I did notice that the Koreans sitting around me didn't do that. I then had to conjecture about how much chilli sauce to use. I thought a good compromise would be to use only half. When I arrived in Korea, I had to conjecture about when to use the metal chopsticks and the large spoon and when and how to use all the bowls of food around me. Let me tell you that all that conjecturing paid off. Although considerably more overweight when I left Korea, I did a lot less conjecturing when I received the pibimbap on Korean Air on the return trip.

Korean meals are cultural constructions. If you are born and raised in Korea, you know how to consume the meal. In similar ways prophetic books are cultural constructions from ancient Israel. When I read them, I must make conjectures about how to consume them as a reader. I can consume them as if they were a contemporary meal, but that would be like taking a knife and fork to a Korean meal and sneaking in a

31) Conrad, *Reading the Latter Prophets*, 271-272.

little vegemite to make it Australian. If I am going to read prophetic books as cultural products from the past, the best way to do that is to learn to consume them as they are, and to do that we must make conjectures about how they form coherent wholes-and to observe how other texts in the vicinity work.

As a scholar I look forward to the Korean contribution not only to new and exciting food but in developing further insights into consuming the meaning of the biblical text, which should never be limited to the readings of a cultural few. The intention of the biblical text in its full richness can only be savored when it is encountered in the plurality of its diverse cultural settings.

<주요어>

성경 해석, 본문의 의미, 본문의 역할, 본문과 독자

<Key Words>

Biblical Interpretation, The Textual Meaning, The Role of a Text,
The Text and The Reader

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<초록>

성서와 문화
-해석에 있어서 본문의 역할-

콘라드

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현대의 문학 이론은 독자가 해석에 중심적 역할을 수행하고 있다는데 대체로 동의한다. 본문은 그 자체로 무엇을 의도하지 않는다. 의미는 읽기의 행위를 통해 생겨난다. 해석에 있어서 독자의 출현은 너무도 중요하기에 본문의 해석을 “하나의 읽기”로 이해하는 것은 일반적인 추세가 되어왔다. 나의 최근의 예언서 연구(이사야와 스가랴)는 해석에 있어서 독자의 역할을 강조해 왔지만, 이 논문에서는 해석에 있어서 본문의 위치를 살펴보기를 원한다.

<Abstract>

The Bible and Culture:
The Role of The Text in Interpretation

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It is now commonly agreed in contemporary literary theory that the reader plays a central role in interpretation. Texts just

do not mean things on their own; meaning emerges in the act of reading. The emergence of the reader in interpretation has become so central that it has become common practice to refer to the interpretation of a text as ‘a reading’. While my own recent work on prophetic books (*Isaiah* and *Zechariah*) has emphasized the role of the reader in interpretation, in this lecture I want to consider the place of the text in interpretation.