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'IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ'[1]

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The foregoing papers in this issue of the *Journal* address the question of what can be known about the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Their focus is the important underlying issue of why particular claims are made about the prophets and the prophetic books and how these claims can be justified. It is, I hope, clear from my essay that I found the original studies of Auld (1983a, 1984) and Carroll (1983) challenging in the best sense of that word. The idea that figures like Amos and Jeremiah were really not prophets seemed to me counter-intuitive, but forced me to consider the grounds for claiming that they were. I am therefore in debt to both Auld and Carroll for the stimulation that their studies have provided, as well as for the seriousness with which they have responded to the essay printed above. I am under no illusions that the following response will settle any issues, but I want to make a few observations, nevertheless.

Auld apparently considers biblical figures like Amos and Jeremiah to have been real historical persons, though they were poets, not prophets. The issue here is the role such persons played in Israelite and Judean society. Carroll goes a step farther, at least in the case of Jeremiah, whom he considers the fictional creation of some later compiler. This raises the additional issue of the historicity of individual persons mentioned in the text.

One part of my response to such claims goes roughly as follows. A systematic analysis of data from a variety of cultures suggests that the type of intermediation we can conveniently refer to as 'prophecy' entails a definite pattern of behavior.

This pattern is well known to members of the societies in which such figures are found. Despite some ambiguity in terminology, the 'classical' prohets of the OT are reported to have behaved in this manner. (These indications of behavior are, in my opinion, much more revealing than the presence or absence of certain terms by which the behavior is glossed.) Therefore, they were prophets, that is, they were recognized by at least some members of their societies as performing that particular social role.

Carroll claims that this argument is too general, that it begs the question of the role of figures like Jeremiah. I note, however, that his argument contains as an assumption one of the points under contention, namely that the identification of these individuals as prophets is a 'redactional ploy'. He asserts the belief that 'the figure of Jeremiah *as a prophet* has been generated by certain levels of the book's production', but what would be the *point* of such fictionalizing? It is obviously the case that we can identify 'ideological or propagandist purposes' in the book of Jeremiah, but it is not clear to me how the invention of a fictional prophetic figure (i.e. Jeremiah) can be said to contribute to these. Indeed, Carroll's recourse to modern novels and plays as a model for the fictionalizing of the figure 'Jeremiah' seems to me anachronistic in a way that my use of comparative materials is not.

What puzzles me is why someone would collect material and then assign it to a fictional character, 'Jeremiah' (Carroll), or alternatively, falsely attribute a real social role, 'prophet', to an historical person like Amos (Auld). The question is, How would the growing collection of materials which in its final form came to be called 'Jeremiah' have been understood? My remarks on 'genre' were meant to suggest one possible answer to this question. The point was not to recover the *ipsissima verba* of the prophets or, as Carroll imagines, 'to explain the biblical texts *as if* they were the productions of prophets' (notice particularly the last four words). Nor was it to propose a definitive reading of the text or any of its parts. The point was rather to suggest that there may be some warrant in the final form of the texts themselves for seeing in the collected traditions a reflection of the activity of actual prophets named Amos and Jeremiah. I am aware that

while calling the book of Jeremiah an 'anthology' suggests solutions to some problems, it raises others. However, to assert that 'the book as a whole cannot be said to be an anthology *per se*' implies a certainty about the definition of that genre that seems to me unwarranted.

On another matter, I think it incorrect to limit the term 'intermediary' to priests, as Carroll appears to do. Not only are those biblical figures we conventionally call 'prophets' intermediaries, but diviners are as well (cf. Overholt 1989: 117-47). Furthermore, to cite the 'false prophecy' pericopes in Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as evidence that prophets do not 'speak *for* anything or anybody', and therefore do not 'intermediate', is to miss an important sociological point. In whose opinion were these prophets not prophets? In the opinion of Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (and/or the editors of those collections), of course. I think it reasonable to say that in their own opinion and that of at least some of the people who heard them most of the prophetic figures of the OT were speaking for Yahweh. They were not, however, speaking with one voice. There was rivalry and conflict among them. This is common in societies which accredit 'prophetic' intermediation. One can see it today (cf. Overholt 1989: 163-83). But here is the main point: it is not particularly relevant whether Carroll or I or anyone else believes that a given figure is an intermediary (i.e. believes that a god exists who cares about and has the power to act in human affairs, that in this particular case that god has actually spoken through a human being to a particular audience, etc.). In point of fact, intermediation is real for those who acknowledge (authorize, accredit) it. I can recognize that persons in a given socio-historical situation acknowledged the existence of intermediaries without myself believing that such divine–human communication either has taken or could have taken place.

Carroll's complaint throughout is that my rather 'loose' reading of culture avoids a 'close reading' of the texts. It is not altogether clear what is being prescribed here, though I must assume, by his own account, that 'close reading' cannot refer to a method of studying the text which is privileged over all others. One gathers that a properly 'sophisticated' reading would be attentive to the contradictions and other problems

generated by the texts and constantly be on the look-out for 'hard evidence' outside the text which might be helpful in their resolution. I presume that many who study the biblical texts (including Origen) would claim they were engaged in a similarly 'close' reading. The argument is over what constitutes 'evidence' and 'sophistication'.

I don't know anyone, at least not in 'the Guild', who thinks 'the interpretation of the Bible is unproblematic'. The ferment in biblical studies over the past decade or so has provided more than one occasion to reexamine old positions, and reading the works of Carroll can be a particularly effective way of coming to conscious awareness of how precarious is our 'knowledge' about the texts we study. I am conscious of 'knowing' less than I used to, though I continue to have the feeling that Carroll, a scholar of broad and impressive learning, admits to 'knowing' too little.

NOTES

1. The quotation is from the beginning of Wallace Stevens's poem, 'Phosphor Reading by his Own Light' (*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Vintage, 1982], p. 267). The complete couplet: 'It is difficult to read. The page is dark. / Yet he knows what it is that he expects.'