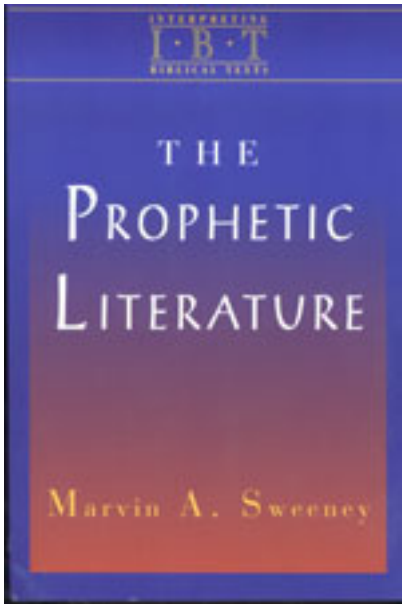


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Sweeney, Marvin A.

The Prophetic Literature

Interpreting Biblical Texts

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Marvin Sweeney's Ph.D. was received from the Claremont Graduate School in 1983, and his dissertation was published as *Isaiah 1–4 and The Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* (BZAW). His name is well known among scholars of the Hebrew Bible. Sweeney, along with Roy Melugin, has served in the past as joint chairman on working group entitled The Formation of the Book of Isaiah Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature. A prolific author in the field of the Hebrew Bible, Sweeney has written numerous commentaries, monographs, and articles. A sampling of his works from the last decade reveals that Sweeney has written *Isaiah 1–39, with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL); *The Twelve Prophets* (with David Cotter, Jerome Walsh, and Chris Franke; Berit Olam); *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (co-editor with James Nogalski; SBLSymS); *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel; Ezekiel, Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile; Zephaniah* (Hermeneia); *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (co-edited with Ehud Ben Zvi); and *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature*.

The Prophetic Literature is a work in the ongoing series Interpreting Biblical Texts. Gene Tucker and Charles Cousar, co-editors, note “The aim of the series is clearly pedagogical. The authors offer their own understanding of the issues and texts, but are more concerned

about guiding the reader than engaging in debates with other scholars” (12). A cursory reading of the work reveals a connection with major scholars in the guild of Hebrew Bible studies. This work is to be read in conjunction with commentaries and other specialized works on the prophetic literature. In order to facilitate reading, the work employs endnotes, which makes for a “clean” body of the text for the student. Sweeney clearly interacts with other scholars in the field of the Hebrew Bible. This is evident not only in the superb content of the material presented but also in the very helpful bibliographies after each chapter. For example, at the end of the first chapter, “The Prophets in Jewish and Christian Scripture,” the author has ten excellent articles and monographs related to the significance of prophecy and its shape in the canon.

Sweeney quickly delineates the bounds of his research in the first chapter. He notes that his method of inquiry is concerned with investigation into the prophetic corpus in its entirety. The second chapter, “Reading Prophetic Books,” further elucidates the reader as to the direction for the impetus of this book. First, one is treated to a cursory overview of “prophecy” in the ancient Near East. The materials from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria are examined. This material is set in comparison with the prophets portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Sweeney does his readers a service and begins in the historical books/Former Prophets, his identification of prophets including people such as Deborah, Samuel, Ahijah, Shemaiah, Elijah, and Elisha. The genres of the prophetic literature are subsequently examined. Form-critical analysis is one of Sweeney’s strong suits, and as such this portion of the book is packed with very helpful information. Elements such as “superscriptions,” “compositional arraignment,” “prophetic vision report,” “symbolic action,” “prophetic legend,” and “prophetic announcement” are all treated with skill for the reader. Most helpful for the reader are the copious references given for each element. A concise three-page bibliography is appended to the end of the second chapter.

The heart of the work is contained in the subsequent three chapters. As this is a book on the prophetic literature, a majority of the material is concerned with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Sweeney does an excellent job of giving the reader a general overview of the book of Isaiah. He details the life of the eighth-century Isaiah of Jerusalem, or Isaiah ben Amoz. In keeping with modern critical scholarship, Sweeney notes a tripartite division of the material. Isaiah 1–39 is identified with Isaiah ben Amoz, 40–55 with an anonymous exilic prophet, and 56–66 as simply the work of anonymous writers. Yet Sweeney helpfully goes on to detail a two-part synchronic reading of the book. Thus he notes that chapters 1–33 look forward to the scenario of judgment and restoration of the Day of Yahweh for Jerusalem and Israel/Judah. In contrast, chapters 34–66 no longer project judgment but instead presuppose that the Day of Yahweh has taken place against Babylon and Assyria (48–49). Sweeney uses the entirety of this chapter to focus on each of the major components of the book. Specifically, he examines both the synchronic

literary function within the received form of the book and its diachronic dimensions in relation to the history of the book's composition (54). On the surface, Sweeney seems to have a difficult task at hand; however, a reading of the work shows how he is at home making the difficult seem facile. For instance, in his summary of Isa 56–66 he tersely notes all three major schools of thought concerning authorship (e.g., a single prophet, Trito-Isaiah from the late sixth or fifth centuries, or multiple writers from the same period). Yet after surveying authorship Sweeney notes that, if the pericope is read synchronically, what emerges is a literary unit fundamentally concerned with defining the expectations of the restored people in Jerusalem (80). In the span of three pages he adroitly summarizes the three main blocks of material in chapters 56–66. He notes that 56–59 is mainly concerned with the proper observance of Yahweh's covenant and his willingness to forgive those who repent. The nature of inclusivity in the covenant community is discussed via the nature of both eunuchs and foreigners who are observant to Yahweh's covenant. With regard to chapters 60–62, Sweeney notes that the fundamental feature is restoration of Zion by Yahweh. The last block, chapters 63–66, concerns the final measure of restoration. Particularly interesting is the element that anticipates the period of violence and struggle that will take place as the wicked are punished prior to the full restoration. Intertextually, this block makes use of material that has come before in Isaiah (e.g., 2:2–4; 11:6–9; and 60:1–7).

The book of Jeremiah is set in its historical context within four pages. As with any critical introduction to Jeremiah, one must deal with the shape of the MT versus the LXX. Readers will not be disappointed with Sweeney's clear presentation of both versions of the textual materials in Jeremianic studies, since he offers an outline of Jeremiah for both the LXX and the MT. For the remainder of the material on Jeremiah he follows the MT's presentation. Sweeney notes of Jeremiah,

In sum, the book of Jeremiah portrays the struggle of the prophet to discern the divine will in relation to the decline and ultimately the collapse of Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. as the nation witnessed King Josiah's attempts at religious reform and national restoration following the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, Josiah's unexpected death at the hands of Pharaoh Neco of Egypt in 609 B.C.E., the subsequent subjugation of Judah first to Egypt and then to Babylon, the invasions of Judah by the Babylonians in 597, 588, and 582 B.C.E., and ultimately the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587–586 B.C.E., and the exile of much of the surviving population. (123)

Sweeney presents the figure of Jeremiah in favorable light, noting the blending of both prophetic and Levitical traditions.

A tripartite outline is briefly considered but largely dismissed for the book of Ezekiel. Sweeney deftly surveys the pitfalls of trying to grasp the book of Ezekiel both text-critically and theologically. He groups the visions of Ezekiel in a helpful table (see 131), in a brief outline format. Likewise, his excursus on Ezekiel as priest and prophet is quite enlightening. While it is well known that the Hebrew Bible has many who served as both priest and prophet (e.g., Moses, Samuel, and Zechariah), Ezekiel's role is unique. Sweeney notes Ezekiel's struggle with portraying Yahweh's *kabod*, noting, "The expression (*kevod Yhwh*) appears throughout Ezekiel's visions to describe YHWH's presence in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in Ezek 1–11 and the reestablishment of the Temple at the center of creation in Ezek 40–48" (133). It is argued, rightly so, that although the book of Ezekiel represents a prophetic worldview, the priestly elements inherent in the theology cannot be separated. Interestingly, Sweeney notes that the idealized temple was never achieved. Rather, he argues that it represents a programmatic rationale for the restoration of the land and people of Israel centered at the temple in Jerusalem (136). As Sweeney understands Ezekiel, the sum of the prophet's theology is concerned with attempting to interpret the fall of Jerusalem and the temple as well as their anticipated restoration. Ezekiel does this type of theological introspection via the lens of the Zadokite priesthood. Consequently, the temple becomes the center of creation while the divine presence resanctifies it and all of creation.

The Book of the Twelve takes up the last portion of Sweeney's work. He notes the order and disorder of the Twelve, preferring to see them not chronologically but rather thematically ordered. Broadly, the elucidated theme of Yahweh's judgment (e.g., God's metaphorical divorce of Israel in Hosea and his reconstitution of Israel in Malachi) is seen in the Day of Yahweh. A concise review of the LXX version of the Twelve is juxtaposed with the MT presentation. As would be expected, Sweeney notes that the two differences in "sequence and hermeneutical perspective in the two versions of the Twelve raise questions concerning the diachronic formation of each" (170). He then draws the conclusion that the perspective of the LXX comes from late monarchic, exilic, and early postexilic periods. During these times the nation was trying to come to grips with the theological significance of the loss of state and the nature of Yahweh's judgment, as seen by the threat poised by Babylon. However, the MT version of the Twelve appears to reflect Judahite elements during the Persian period, especially from the time of the rebuilding of the temple through the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (171). Sweeney does an excellent job in the rest of the chapter introducing enough of each of the Twelve to whet a student's appetite. No one prophet among the Twelve is examined in detail, but each is given a very good introduction. Sweeney notes,

To a certain degree, the book of the Twelve engages in debate with the book of Isaiah, which offers a similar reflection. But whereas Isaiah envisions a scenario

in which Israel will join the nations at Jerusalem in submitting to YHWH and will accept Persian rule as an expression of the divine will, the book of the Twelve Prophets collective that YHWH will raise a Davidic messiah who will play a role in enabling YHWH to defeat the nations that oppress Jerusalem, thereby prompting them to recognize YHWH's sovereignty. (208–9).

A helpful short bibliography is offered on both the Twelve as a whole and the individual prophetic books among the Twelve.

Lastly, probably one of the most helpful chapters in this work is the epilogue. In this short chapter Sweeney does a bit of praxis with the material that he has discussed. He brilliantly takes the raw theology and the introspection that the first six chapters detailed and mixes with it a practicality that is quite refreshing. For instance, he notes,

Our treatment of the Prophets emphasizes the impact that the Prophets were expected to have upon their own societies and the events of their day. Without dispensing with the concerns for the future articulated in the Prophets, it is also essential for us to consider the impact of the Prophets for our own times. To ignore such a dimension potentially marginalizes the Prophets in our thinking about the present when in fact they have important insights for the contemporary world. (216–17)

While one would not necessarily expect to find such a gem in the survey of the prophetic literature, it is nonetheless refreshing to find it here. I highly recommend this work for both college and beginning graduate students in Hebrew Bible. The theological introduction to each book as well as the bibliographic materials is quite helpful and handy for the student.