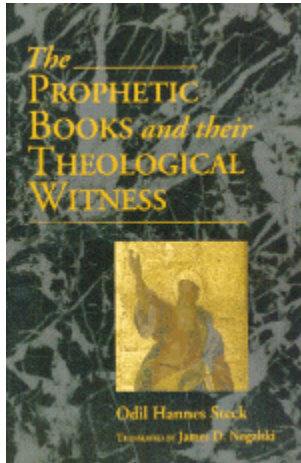


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Steck, Odil Hannes

The Prophetic Books and their Theological Witness

Translated by James D. Nogalski

St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000. Pp. xvii + 246, Cloth, No Price Available, ISBN 0827229577.

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In this two-part volume, Steck makes a sustained argument for reading prophetic books as a whole. He distinguishes this project both from traditional redaction criticism, which seeks “swift access to the prophet” (p. xi) and also from a myopic concern with the final form of the text. His own interest is an “historically inquiring synchronic reading of the entire book” (p. 20); that is, Steck aims to consider the legacy of redactional tradents and particularly the way in which they present God’s work in history.

In Part 1, “Transmitting Prophetic Books,” Steck argues the merits of his approach, providing occasional examples of its application to the book of Isaiah. According to Steck, readers should process prophetic books sequentially in an attempt to uncover the intended reception of the book, following the reading instructions of the final hand. Such a reading process, as in the case of Isaiah, presents a God’s eye view of history and encourages readers to see their own stories as continuous with the historical path of God’s people. In Part 1, Steck does suggest how redactional layers might be discerned (providing long lists of diagnostic questions), but his focus clearly remains on the end of the redactional process (which he calls “reception history”) the final shaping of the material with an eye to the unity of an entire book or series of books.

Part 2, “Prophetic Exegesis of the Prophets,” reproduces part of a Zurich lecture series, previously published in German. Here, in style that is more readable and confessional than Part 1, Steck explores the theological components of the tradents’ work. He claims that the tradents envisioned their own task as the uncovering of meaning

hidden in ancient prophetic materials: their work is “prophetic” exegesis not merely because they interpret prophetic materials but primarily because they read the material prophetically, looking for the meaning that it holds for the present. In Part 2,

Steck also traces the implications of his method for contemporary (Protestant) theology, suggesting that the prophetic books testify to a God who is known not in timeless sentences but in the process of transmission, in time and in experience.

I found Steck’s style, especially in Part 1, difficult to engage. He offers general instructions about how “one” should read, including long series of questions that one should put to the text, followed by brief (often one-sentence) examples of how these might play out in Isaiah or other prophetic books. He refers the reader to his other publications for details, but I would have found much more helpful a sustained exploration of how his method opens up a prophetic text. His insights about Isaiah and other prophetic books valuable as they are—are buried in page-long paragraphs of questions (see p. 38 as an example).

Steck’s insistence on seeing God’s revelation as unfolding in temporal experience stands in tension with his own equal insistence that the texts “should” be read in particular ways and that the text “determines” readings. Throughout, he restricts “appropriate” readings to the volition of the text, what the text “wants” or “wishes” to say, what the tradents “think” they are doing.

An explanation of Steck’s confessional aims would have benefited the volume. He often slides, without comment, between descriptions of how the prophetic books present God and how God “really” is. A book’s metahistorical presentation is equated with God’s understanding of history, which in turn is assumed as relevant for the contemporary reader. Steck’s comments on the significance of the historical advent of Jesus for the metahistorical trajectory Israel were unsettling to me, chiefly due to their brevity; I was left puzzled, for example, over the identity of the “Israel” to which he refers.

In many ways, Steck’s volume highlights the gap between continental and North American scholarship. The atomizing redaction criticism against which he rails does not dominate current American prophetic scholarship, where final form readings (which he also opposes, though with less frequency and fervor) pose the greater challenge to his project. Prophetic scholars should be grateful to Steck and his able translator Nogalski for attempting to bridge the chasm between these two scholarly spheres, even if we might hope that future efforts will strive for a style of presentation that engages more compellingly actual prophetic texts and their readers. Sadly, Steck’s recent death from cancer means that others will need to carry on this important work.