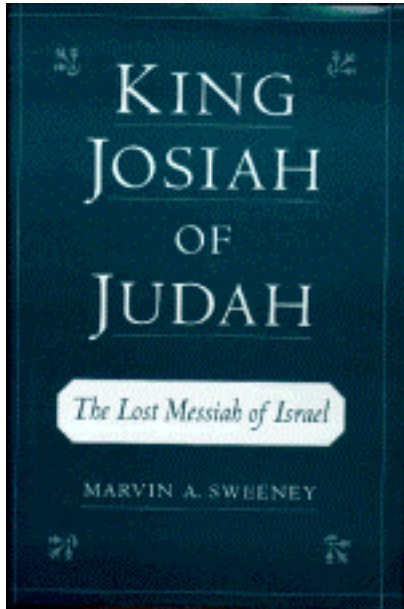


RBL 02/2003



Sweeney, Marvin A.

King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 350. Cloth. \$60.00. ISBN 0195133242.

Steven L. McKenzie
Rhodes College

This volume attempts to show that Josiah was a key figure in the composition of the literature of the Bible and a model for the postexilic expectation of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy over united Israel. The book consists of two main parts dealing, respectively, with the Deuteronomistic History and with certain prophetic books. The first part contains chapters on various portions of Kings: the period following Josiah (2 Kgs 23:31–25:30), Josiah's reign (2 Kgs 22:1–23:30), Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1–18), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18–20), the northern kingdom (1 Kgs 12–2 Kgs 17), and Solomon (2 Sam 9/11–24 + 1 Kgs 1–11), in addition to chapters on David, Saul, and the judges; Joshua; and Deuteronomy. The second part treats Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Habakkuk.

An introduction to part 1 outlines the case for a Josianic edition of the Deuteronomistic History (and for an even earlier Hezekian edition). The chapter does not attempt to offer new arguments but is synthetic in nature. The author is more nuanced than some in presenting the case for a Josianic edition. He begins with the final form of the Deuteronomistic History and shows how it would have been read in the exile. He then describes how certain texts would fit within a Josianic or Hezekian edition. But his initial caution seems to dissipate, such that by the end of part 1 a Josianic edition is treated more as a certainty than a possibility and a Hezekian edition as a likelihood. There are other

problems as well. Sweeney expresses his agreement with Van Seters that the “Succession Narrative” is anti-Davidic, but he continues to regard it as integrated into the Deuteronomistic History along with the account of the Bathsheba affair, in contrast to Van Seters’s view that the “Succession Narrative” is a post-Deuteronomistic addition. Some contend that the David of 2 Sam 11–12 contrasts markedly with his depiction elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History. How can David the adulterer and murderer be used as a standard of comparison for later kings (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:5; 2 Kgs 16:2)? The issue merits more detailed attention than Sweeney affords it.

Still, there are real strengths to Sweeney’s discussion in part 1. In contrast to scholars who have queried the appropriateness of the book of Judges in the Deuteronomistic History, Sweeney makes a compelling case for its role there, observing that it draws a contrast between the northern tribes and Judah that sets the stage for the stories of Saul and David and the subsequent divided kingdom. I also found Sweeney’s treatment of Deuteronomy to be helpful. Again, in contrast to some treatments of the book that contend that it serves to limit the power of the monarchy, Sweeney argues that when considered as a whole, the book actually enhances the political and socioeconomic authority of the Davidic king.

Part 2 places the prophetic books in various categories vis-à-vis their relationship with Josiah. Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk were composed during his reign. Isaiah attests a Josianic redaction. Amos was reworked in Hezekiah’s reign (1:1; 7:1–17; 9:11–15) and then reread, along with Hosea and Micah, in support of Josiah’s effort to restore Davidic rule over the north. Jeremiah (esp. Jer 2–4; 30–31) supported Josiah’s religious reforms early on, but as an Elide priest he rejected the Davidic ideology of an eternal temple and dynasty in favor of obedience to the Mosaic law.

The strongest elements in this part of the book are the treatments of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The treatments of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk are solid and helpful but not novel. The claim that Amos, Hosea, and Micah were read in support of Josiah cannot really be substantiated and hence does not advance the book’s thesis that Josiah’s reign was formative for the Hebrew Bible. The interpretation of Amos 9:11–15 seems especially forced. The references to the fallen booth of David and the remnant of Edom in 9:11–12 are typically understood, for good reason, as presupposing the audience of exiled Judah. While 9:14 does refer to Israel, Sweeney does not give adequate consideration to the possibility that it refers to Judah alone as the remnant of the united kingdom. This is a shortcoming of the book’s treatment of other texts outside of Amos as well.

While this review has focused on criticisms, I do not want to leave the impression that my reaction to this book is entirely negative. In many ways it is an enlightening and

provocative read. Perhaps the best way to assess it is to summarize Sweeney's own assessment of Josiah's reform efforts: ultimately not entirely successful but stimulating and influential nonetheless.