The oracles of Zephaniah, like those of other Israelite prophets, capture the raw beauty of articulating, during a time of political strife and social disruption, a faith in a nobler future. Marvin Sweeney, one of today’s most perspicuous and astute commentators on the biblical prophetic corpus, offers here an analysis of Zephaniah that well represents both the details and overall artistry of the work.

Dating most of the book to the end of the seventh century B.C.E. (as per 1:1), and thus probably to the career of the historical Zephaniah, Sweeney finds possible later expansions only in 1:3, 4 and 3:20. While many scholars assign at least 3:14–20 to a postexilic redactor, Sweeney argues plausibly for dating even that pericope to the heady years of Josiah’s reform, when the return of deportees throughout the Assyrian Empire seemed an exciting possibility (196). He does recognize, however, that the superscription in 1:1 comes from an archivist or teacher who wished to present Zephaniah’s parenesis for his own purposes (9). Thus it is possible to contemplate a post-Josianic reinterpretation of the work.

Typically for the Hermeneia series, this volume begins with an extensive introduction to the literary history of the book (1–41). Somewhat innovatively, this introduction treats the MT, LXX, scrolls from the Judean desert, Targum Zephaniah (part of Targum Jonathan to the Prophets), the Peshitta, and the Vulgate as distinct literary works, not merely as resources for reconstructing a putative “original” text. Although Sweeney spends little time defending this approach, it appears to reflect the greater awareness of
the afterlife of texts that has emerged in recent scholarship, which constitutes a significant advance in biblical scholarship. On the whole, this approach offers significant new insights into the book’s changing meanings.

Sweeney properly gives most attention to the MT (which best reflects the oldest accessible version of the prophet’s composition), examining in turn the rhetorical and literary shaping of the text and its successive sociohistorical settings as part of a Masoretic Bible manuscript, as part of the Book of the Twelve, and as a free-standing composition. Again, the approach recognizes that an original text can be recovered only approximately and that for most of the book’s life Zephaniah has existed in multiple versions, each with its own integrity. His treatment of each version of the text is marked by careful attention to both the manuscript traditions themselves and to the uses to which communities of readers put them.

In the commentary proper Sweeney identifies two major sections (1:2–18 and 2:1–3:20), with each consisting of several tightly woven oracles (1:2–6, 7–18; 2:1–4, 5–7, 8–11, 12, 13–15; 3:1–4, 5–13, 14–20). Following the Hermeneia format, the treatment of each pericope begins with a translation, extensive text-critical notes, an overall introduction to the chief literary and historical issues, and then detailed commentary on each verse (which sometimes, unfortunately, essentially repeats the introductory material [see 145–48]). Sweeney takes pains to argue for the absence of later glosses (particularly emphasizing that references to the future need not be late or eschatological in orientation), emphasizing the connection between Zephaniah and Josiah’s reforms.

Again, a good example of the commentary’s quality appears in its treatment of 3:5–13, which Sweeney dates to the early reign of Josiah (171). Thus the arrogant become opponents of the king’s purges, and the reference to the tribute-bearing of the nations (especially Saite Egypt) anticipates Second Isaiah in signifying YHWH’s universal rule. Verse 5’s reference to the morning liturgy of the temple anchors the pericope in older notions of YHWH’s work in the world and reflects the practices of the monarchic period, not later utopian ideals (173–74). Verse 7 cites Jerusalem’s survival during Assyrian occupation to persuade a late-seventh-century audience of YHWH’s protection during the turbulent era of Assyrian imperial collapse (176). And so on goes the reading. Scholars who assume that references to future salvation must be relatively late will of course reject Sweeney’s interpretation, but he has made a strong case for an alternative sociohistorical setting.

Not everyone will accept this analysis, of course. Sweeney (like most scholars, in fact) offers no detailed criteria for dating prophetic oracles. The reference to the fall of Assyria could plausibly date to the late seventh century, but it could also date to anytime before
the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.E., an event that would doubtless have overshadowed references to the fall of Nineveh. Thus, the argument for dating these texts ante quem can never be truly airtight, even if an earlier date is preferable on grounds of evidentiary parsimony.

In assessing this commentary, a reviewer must immediately highlight the author’s considerable historical and linguistic erudition, the clarity of his argumentation, and the directness of his literary style. A worthy addition to the distinguished Hermeneia series, Sweeney’s detailed analysis of the book of Zephaniah as a work of the reign of Josiah will persuade many, particularly since the argument comes at a time of growing awareness clear that the experience of subalternity to the Neo-Assyrian Empire profoundly influenced the theology of Israel and Judah and thus the Hebrew Bible (minimalist literary-historical proposals notwithstanding).

Naturally, interpretations of specific verses will occasion discussion, such as the claim that 3:9 knows a tenth–ninth century tower of Babel story (183) or that 2:12 refers to a past defeat of Cush (145). More important, the insistence on a Josianic date for the entire book seems disputable at times. It is possible to regret the author’s lack of sustained attention to the literary interconnections of the book beyond pericope boundaries and (despite a sustained argument for the work as a unity) little attention to contemporary literary-critical strategies that might help elucidate the work synchronically as literature. But never mind. These quibbles do not seriously diminish the success of this work, which promises to be the standard commentary on an underrated prophetic book for a long time to come. We are all in Marvin Sweeney’s debt.