Meier, Samuel A.

*Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*


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With this engaging study, Samuel Meier explores the ways in which both the prophetic message and its mode of delivery changed over time through an examination of their recurring themes and motifs. Meier does this by tracking these motifs through an interlocking series of chapters that weave the different elements considered together. While doing so, he also argues, not only that the prophets differed within themselves in their message and presentation of it, but also that the exile represented a decisive point of change that prepared the way for apocalyptic and thus for the general decline in the importance of prophecy in Israel’s later history. All of this is presented with a light touch that refuses to obfuscate complex issues but rather seeks to clarify them in a way that many will find highly accessible. At the same time, he refuses to be distracted by issues associated with the putative development of various prophetic texts, arguing that the themes can best be appreciated by taking the texts within a broad consensus for dating the various prophets. Although this approach generally serves him well, there are points where it may result in some questioning his conclusions.

Meier begins by considering a cluster of themes associated with revelation and how it is that the prophet knows what Yahweh has said. He notes that earlier prophets such as Amos were conscious of standing in the divine council, a theme that is developed by
Jeremiah, while other preexilic prophets such as Isaiah were able to speak confidently of what they saw in God’s presence, a presence in which there was an element of give and take between God and prophet because the future was not absolutely determined. Similarly, earlier prophets show great awareness of what God causes them to see so that they are not overwhelmed by the experience. Yet by the time of Ezekiel there has been a change so that Ezekiel must simply accept what Yahweh has announced. After the exile, no prophet is portrayed in God’s presence, so that by the time we come to an apocalyptic text such as Daniel, the seer is separated from God, and though he can see the divine throne room in a vision, he is separate from it. Similarly, where a prophet like Amos is able to understand the content of his visions and even debate with God through them, by the time we reach Zechariah the prophet is consistently unable to interpret what he sees, requiring angelic explanation. Indeed, as Meier notes, no preexilic prophet receives his message through an angel. The general movement of the argument works well, even points where Meier notes he could be accused of arguing from silence, but his “broad consensus” approach to the dating of material leaves him open to counterclaims. For example, many scholars have argued that Amos 3:7, which makes explicit reference to the divine council, is a later insertion into the text, though how much later than the eighth century is disputed. If this is an exilic insertion, does this indicate that the transformation was not as marked as Meier suggests? I believe his general point still stands, but anyone looking to check this through the texts he cites might still need to consider the possible impact of such textual developments. That is, although his argument is vulnerable to methodological criticism from those who might not share his broad consensus at the level of each individual text, the weight of the evidence he presents is such that his conclusion still stands. Indeed, in the case of a text such as Amos 3:7 this might even offer a counter-argument in favor of an earlier date.

A closely related set of themes is concerned with how we came to have the prophetic literature we now possess and how their form changed over time. Here Meier notes a significant change in the presentation of the prophetic message. Where the earlier prophets display a close interplay between Yahweh and prophet such that it is often impossible to separate them out, later prophetic texts are at great pains to distinguish which words belong to Yahweh and which originate with the prophet. He also notes a general shift from poetry to prose as the preferred method of proclamation. At the same time, he emphasizes the fact that prophecy was originally an oral medium that was only subsequently written down. In terms of his overall argument, it is significant that it is in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (both prophets associated with the beginning of the exile) where we begin to find extensive directions to write down their message. With Ezekiel especially there is a significant effort to date the origin of an oracle, a theme that develops further in texts such as Haggai and Zech 1–8 after the exile. Along with the various prophetic
sources mentioned in Chronicles, Meier argues that this demonstrates a gradual shift where prophecy moved from an oral context to a written one. Again, the general contours of his argument are sound, but there are points where his method leaves him open to potential critics. As part of his broad consensus, Meier regards Isa 40–66 as originating toward the end of the exile and the period after, yet here we find an emphasis on poetry and points where the prophet’s words and Yahweh’s are frequently fused so that it is difficult to separate them out (e.g., Isa 51:1–8). Conversely, the absence of dating formulae has long raised issues in interpretation. Meier acknowledges this to some extent, but his case might have been strengthened had he drawn on the work of scholars who have interpreted these chapters as a conscious attempt to continue and interpret the tradition of Isa 1–39 in the exilic and postexilic community, thus explaining the apparent exception. Slightly more troubling is that in Amos there is a conscious effort to identify Yahweh’s words, a factor that is not addressed (e.g., Amos is omitted from the table looking at formulae identifying Yahweh’s words on 71). Provided we understand his development of these themes as a general contour, his argument stands, but attention to the apparent exceptions would have helped.

A further set of themes are primarily associated with prophetic figures recorded in the Deuteronomistic History, though Meier demonstrates that there is a crossover into the writing prophets. Here he examines miracles, prophets as king-makers, and the chariots of humans and God. Many of the prophets mentioned in the Deuteronomistic History are set historically before the writing prophets, so Meier examines figures such as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha as witnesses to an earlier model of prophetic activity that was notable for miracles, although he notes that some of these elements are picked up in the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament. There are clear changes between these figures and the writing prophets, so it is certainly possible to track changes in emphases, though there is a consistent emphasis in both groups that Israel’s security is not found in the possession of chariots. Again, his observations are sound, but the question of how we are to interpret this needs further reflection, given that Joshua–Kings has certain emphases it wishes to develop, whereas the books associated with the writing prophets have rather different concerns. Given Ahab’s complaint that Micaiah never prophesied anything good about him (1 Kgs 22:8), one could argue that these earlier prophets were also preachers but that these traditions were, for some reason, not passed down. Conversely, to take the example of miracles, it is not the concern of the prophetic books to demonstrate any miracle-working activity. Again, I do not disagree with his overall conclusion because it seems reasonable to assume that an emphasis on themes such as miracles or king-making in the traditions associated with these prophets suggests that these were primary aspects of their ministry. Rather, closer attention to methodological issues would place these conclusions on a sounder footing.
As well as the changes that took place over time, Meier also notes certain points of continuity that recur in both the Deuteronomistic History and the writing prophets. He notes in particular that prophets did not enrich themselves through their ministry, that they were usually bearers of bad news, and the important question of whether or not the prophet’s announcement came to pass. In spite of the other transformations in prophecy within the Old Testament, these three themes are particularly constant. Yet in these he also discerns an important factor that contributes to the eventual decline in the prevalence of prophecy, because hearers could not always discern genuine prophecy when they encountered it, and the presence of counterfeits eventually reduced confidence in it. Again, the basic contours of the argument are sound, but the integration of the different types of prophetic literature still raises methodological problems.

The concerns raised here over methodology need to be balanced with the type of readership envisaged for this book. It is not primarily aimed at the scholarly community but rather to those who are beginning their journey in the study of the prophets. For such readers, this is a book that can be warmly commended, and many of them will no doubt be glad not to be caught up in a morass of methodological issues. Moreover, even though he is clearly aware of the significant literature in the field, Meier still manages to write with a lightness of tone that makes this an easy book to read and enjoy. I will, accordingly, be encouraging my students to read it, not least because the themes he raises go beyond the normal questions of introduction. However, I will also encourage them to reflect on important questions of method.