With this slim volume, Karolien Vermeulen and Elizabeth Hayes have made a meaningful contribution to scholarship on literary approaches to the Bible. Based in cognitive stylistics and linguistics, the book explores the how of reading the Bible as literature. Vermeulen and Hayes break down reading into its constituent parts, moving from the “bits and pieces,” in other words, words (ch. 1) to the big picture of “text worlds” (ch. 12). How do readers move between these, and what happens in the mind as they do? Each chapter applies insights from literary theorists following the cognitive turn at the end of the twentieth century; Vermeulen and Hayes argue that drawing on their work can take interpreters of the Bible further than (the more generalized) literary approaches.

The book is organized into three parts. Part 1, “The Bits and Pieces of Reading,” includes five chapters addressing words, prototypes, attention, perspective, and grammar, respectively, and outlining the value of a cognitive approach to each. Particularly impressive aspects of part 1 include their explorations of how the meaning, semantic domain, and poetic value of words are intertwined and how deftly they move between micro- and macro-levels of meaning and interpretation. At the same time, there are also occasions when the cognitive approach is not as helpful as Vermeulen and Hayes claim. For example, in their study of prototypes, sketches of “radial structures” are used to analyze the opening of Ps 93, resulting in the conclusion that “some lines are clearly parallel, others sort of parallel or even vaguely parallel. Otherwise put, parallelism comes in various forms” (27). In my view, while it is not harmful to construct these models, neither
is it this necessary to reinforce the widely accepted notion that biblical authors employed multiple forms of parallelism. A second example of this is the discussion of the opening of the book of Amos (61–62). Further, in chapter 5, which deals with “cognitive grammar,” Vermeulen and Hayes distinguish their topic from “traditional grammar,” describing the former as a “boost” to the latter because it understands the difference between lexicon definition and a “usage event” without offering a clear definition of a “usage event” (69). Still, the first part of the book is a strong opening and includes numerous careful and thoughtful insights that warrant revisiting.

Part 2, “Mapping Corresponding Dots,” includes four chapters wherein the focus widens to schemas, mental spaces, metaphor, and metonymy (chs. 6–9, respectively). The discussion of schemata—and the background knowledge they require—in the proliferation of folk tales and the development of ancient Israel is particularly interesting, as is the robust discussion of context through this lens (86). In this section, the reader gets a sense that cognitive linguistics is having a parallel conversation to literary interpreters of the Bible, though the touchstones are different (for example, referring to Frederic Bartlett, the founder of schema theory, rather than Vladimir Propp’s morphology). Vermeulen and Hayes do reference major concepts in literary interpretation of the Bible, such as Robert Alter’s typescenes or Meir Sternberg’s treatment of “gapping,” and refer to the practice of “close reading” although it is not clear why this is only included in the section on mental spaces theory (ch. 7) when these interpreters could be referenced in many other places.

Part 3, “The Process of Reading a Text,” is the least technical but the most dense with theory. In this section, three chapters approach the big picture of reading, dealing with context, imagination, and world building (chs. 10-12, respectively). Here, nonspecialists owe a debt of gratitude to Vermeulen and Hayes for providing excellent primers on matters such as Possible Worlds Theory (PWT) and Text World Theory. The absence of a conclusion seems unusual, given the argument that the book is making for embracing new methodologies, but the inclusion of a glossary for those unfamiliar with the vocabulary of literary theory—and particularly of cognitive approaches to language and reading—is a thoughtful choice.

Two of the greatest strengths of this book are: (1) the immense work that Vermeulen and Hayes have done to condense vast amounts of scholarship and theory into a readable and accessible handbook for nonspecialists; (2) the thoughtful structure of each chapter, which presents a topic and moves on to brief treatments of relevant examples, a short history of the theory behind the topic, (where possible) existing points of contact with biblical studies, a case study, discussion questions, and suggestions for further reading. Those looking to expand or refresh their education in literary approaches to the Bible will find this to be a resource that opens up several avenues of exploration. Specialists might find more that they wanted each section to address, but this book is not for specialists. Nor is it really for beginners, though it is not difficult to read. It is a good resource for an advanced beginner or intermediate student, whether in biblical studies or literature,
serving as an introduction to more sophisticated questions about how the biblical text constructs meaning and how readers participate in that process.

Reading about reading can often be stultifying, but literary approaches to the Bible have frequently been criticized for lacking a method. A cognitive approach to language and style purports to counter that criticism. That cultural context, experience and embodiment determine how we construe meaning is both tantalizing and true; that this process is more complex than how a reader responds when encountering a text is a helpful contribution of this volume. Even if one might initially be put off by the number of charts, graphs, and acronyms, this is a book that is committed to leaving space for the individual reader. It is a user-friendly introduction to cognitive linguistics for the majority of biblical scholars who have had little exposure to it. For this reason alone, I am grateful to have it on my shelf and will refer back to it regularly in honing my approach to teaching biblical literature.