In this monograph Douglas Estes examines the novel topic of the questions Jesus asks in John’s Gospel. In chapter 1 Estes observes that most readers of the gospels examine what Jesus says rather than what he asks because Western readers are biased against questions. Estes traces the modern Western thought process as being predominantly propositional back to Aristotle. While many thinkers in antiquity (including Aristotle) valued questions, Aristotle promoted propositions (statements) over questions. However, questions are more primordial because any meaningful proposition is usually preceded by a question. Estes contends that the logic and rhetoric of questions can often convey more truth and meaning than propositions. While propositions are focused on information content (data), questions are focused on information exchange (development). Hence, the aim of the book is to examine the questions of Jesus in John in light of their logical, rhetorical, and linguistic virtues.

In chapters 2–3 Estes develops a theoretical framework for studying Jesus’ questions in John. First Estes looks at ancient Hebraic and Greek approaches to questions, arguing that questions in antiquity were often used for rhetorical purposes; that is, speakers used questions to persuade and influence their audiences. Modern questions, in contrast, frequently emphasize the answer to a question (a proposition) more than the question
itself. In addition, unlike propositions, modern questions cannot be true or false, since they do not make statements. A final aspect of modern questions is the assumption that a question must be asked to be considered valid, thus ignoring implicit or unstated questions. In chapter 3 Estes explores how questions work. This is the most abstract part of the book, dealing with erotetic and interrogative logic, that is, the theory of questions and interrogatives. I wonder whether all this theory is necessary to analyze Jesus’ questions in John. Besides, Estes does not always explain how a particular section or theoretical aspect contributes to the larger picture, making this chapter seems somewhat haphazard in its approach. Perhaps the most useful part is where Estes distinguishes the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of questions, in which the semantic and pragmatic qualities of questions determine the function or role of the question in the text.

In chapter 4 Estes moves to John’s Gospel and explains that the questions of the Johannine Jesus serve two purposes. First, they inform the dialogue Jesus has with other characters. Often, Estes argues, dialogue in narrative is defined by its argumentation and questioning. The second purpose of the questions of Jesus is to persuade readers. John’s Gospel is a rhetorical work aimed at influencing and convincing readers to believe in Jesus (see 20:31), and Jesus’ questions are part of this rhetorical enterprise—to ask readers about the divine in order to persuade them of the divine. Estes classifies Jesus’ questions into five types—open questions, reflective questions, decisive questions, responsive questions, and coercive questions—which are further explained in chapters 5–9. In these chapters Estes divides each of the five question types into further subcategories, and readers may feel a little overwhelmed by the technical and theoretical deluge, but I would like to point out the value of Estes’s approach.

In the category of open questions (questions that do not suggest an opinion or answer), the set question is one where a set of possibilities limits what is being asked. An example is Jesus’ question to the crowd in John 8:46a, “Which of you convicts me of sin?” Jesus is not asking the crowd just to name any possible person who could potentially convict him of sin (that would demand the question “Who convicts me of sin?”); the “which of you” indicates that Jesus challenges the crowd to name a specific individual among them who can come forward to speak on this issue. This also implies that Jesus’ question does not refer to sin in general but more specifically to the sin of false witness. If the crowd is unable to come up with legitimate evidence of Jesus’ dishonesty, then why do they not believe him (8:46b)? At the level of narrative, the reader is challenged to ponder whether one can prove Jesus a false witness; if the answer is no, the reader should believe.

In the category of reflective questions (those that cause someone to stop and think), the indexical question is one where its meaning is influenced by the presence of an indexical or demonstrative. An example is Jesus’ question to Martha in John 11:26b, “Do you
believe this?” Following his declaration in 11:25–26a, Jesus does not simply ask Martha whether she believes but whether she believes this—not seeking affirmation, but reflection, understanding, and commitment. Martha’s reply is not meant to be a simple yes or no but one that indicates reflection and understanding. Jesus’ aim is to challenge Martha to produce a thoughtful answer about her faith. At the level of narrative, Jesus’ question challenges readers to consider what they believe and to decide whether they believe this or not.

In the category of decisive questions (questions that prompt someone to select one or more options), the deliberative question is a question asked of oneself, such as the one we find in John 18:11b, where Jesus asks, “Should I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” Scholars tend to regard this question as either a confident declarative or a rhetorical question, though it is neither. It is a question Jesus asks himself, one that reveals his internal struggle. Instead of the confident, all-knowing Jesus marching to glory, Jesus’ use of a deliberative question shows him conflicted about his fate. Many commentators contend that by omitting the prayer at Gethsemane John rejects the Synoptic portrayal of Jesus’ intense struggle. Estes, however, shows that John’s account complements the Synoptic account. “John, in his simple, powerful prose, reduces the Synoptic experience to one question—a tragic question devised to portray the very real struggle Jesus faces” (127).

In the category of responsive questions (questions that elicit some type of response), the opposing-turn question is a question in response to someone else’s question. An example is Jesus’ question to Nicodemus in John 3:10, “You are the teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?” in reply to Nicodemus’s question in 3:9, “How is it possible for these things to be?” The erotetic logic of Jesus’ question to Nicodemus is complex. Jesus does not give the answer Nicodemus asks for; instead, Jesus asks a question back. Contra modern opinion, Jesus’ question is not primarily a rebuke. This is a classic opposing-turn question where Jesus confronts Nicodemus in order to persuade him to turn on his brain. Instead of providing more information, which is what Nicodemus seeks with his question in 3:9, Jesus wants this famed teacher to wake up and start thinking. At the level of narrative, the question also provokes readers to examine their own understanding and respond.

Estes concludes from his study that Jesus’ many questions in John’s Gospel can be distilled into two fundamental questions: “Whom do you seek?” and “Do you believe in me?” Jesus’ questions are all part of John’s persuasive discourse scheme summed up in 20:31. The Gospel of John is both dialectical and rhetorical, as it “purposely uses a repetitious scheme of questions with varying degree of rhetorical quality between the
narrator and reader in order to push and persuade the reader into believing Jesus is the Christ” (168).

I commend this innovative study in an uncharted area of New Testament studies. Scholars have seemingly neglected the topic of questions in John’s Gospel, and Estes’s study is timely, rigorous, and challenging. I do wonder, however, whether Estes overstates his case in an attempt to topple the hegemony of propositions and elevate questions. According to Estes, propositions do not “pick fights,” whereas questions do, and the Johannine Jesus takes full advantage of this (63). However, it appears that it is Jesus’ propositions that challenge and provoke his opponents (e.g., 2:19; 3:3, 5; 5:17; 6:35–40, 51; 7:28–29; 8:58). I would suggest that Jesus was arrested and killed not for his questions but for his claims/propositions to provide divine life, to be on a par with God, and to be the authorized broker between the divine and human reality. Or would it prove that I am still blinded by the propositional hegemony?